

POWER IN THE BLOOD

by

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Creative Writing

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at George Mason University

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the only true God—whose love, mercy, and righteousness are beyond comprehension and without end—and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. To Him alone be the glory and honor forever and ever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	v
A Fundamental Flaw	1
Ecdysis	22
Dog Days	224
Downward Facing	41
Into the Light	59
One Who Submits	65
Resurrection	68
Crossing the Mekong	70
One Day Old	78
A New Creature	80
Upon the Housetops	86
Serpent's Nest	101
Pyramid Magic	113
Nothing Wavering	123
Our God is a Consuming Fire	132
Thine Arm Alone	138
Works Cited	149

ABSTRACT

POWER IN THE BLOOD

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George Mason University, 2015

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This thesis is a memoir depicting, through dramatized scenes, my spiritual journey through the occult and yoga and my subsequent, miraculous conversion to Christianity. The first third of the manuscript describes my spiritual search and struggles from age fourteen to twenty-three. The middle section focuses on the pivotal moments that turned me to Christ. The final third concludes with several essays illustrating my new life as a Christian with a particular emphasis on the working of the Holy Spirit. By my personal experiences, the thesis illustrates that if anyone is in Christ, he is dead to his old ways and born again as a new creature.

A FUNDAMENTAL FLAW

An artificial retention pond gleamed at the end of the cul-de-sac where my mother and her new husband Ivan built our house. The name of the community was Harbor Oaks, and it was one of those neighborhoods where the streets were named after the trees that had once grown there: we lived on Heritage Oaks Court. A smattering of those majestic trees lingered over the spacious, repetitive lawns. Caged pools hunched behind nearly every home except ours. A few years after we moved in one of our neighbors a few streets down was shot in the back of the head by his son while sitting in a reclining chair. The grandchild, a toddler, whom he'd been watching appeared a few hours later in a parking lot several miles away, wandering alone. I rode my bike up the hill to the house as soon as I heard about the murder. Helicopters circled overhead and journalists and news reporters gathered quotes. "It's one of those things that you hear about," I told one young woman with a spiral-bound flip pad, "but that you never expect to actually happen in your own neighborhood."

"Can I get your name for that quote?" she asked me.

"Uh, no, that's okay," I said.

"We can't use it without a name."

"No, never mind then." I was imitating what I thought my mother would do.

During what she called her "Polish" moments she would push apart the plastic panels of

the closed beige blinds with the tips of her fingers so she could spy on our neighbors. “Why do the cashiers always try to talk to me?” she would ask as we left the grocery store. “I don’t care what they have to say. I just want to get my groceries and go.” When she got home from work, she would ask, “Why do my co-workers always want to chat with me? I don’t care about their lives. I just want to get my work done.” It wasn’t until I lived in Senegal for five months at the age of nineteen that I stopped seeing socialization as abnormal.

Once when I was babysitting our next-door neighbor’s son and daughter I thought their son might have snuck out of the house and been eaten by the gator that dragged himself ashore from the retention pond. My neighbors arrived home close to midnight, half-drunk, and walked up to the edge of the pond with flashlights, calling, “Jacob! Jacob!” We later realized he’d fallen asleep underneath his bed.

I usually visited the pond in the afternoons, when the rays began to slant long and the heat evaporated into the air like a wet blanket. Every so often the gator would be there, belly sunk into the muddy bank. He’d stretch open his jaws and let his teeth gleam for hours. I was always grounded, more than any of the other kids I knew in my high school, for reasons that became increasingly frivolous. Once I thought about pilfering my parents’ keys and driving their Ford Explorer into the concrete wall of the garage just so they would have a legitimate reason to punish me. Internet phone records and spyware installed on my computer allowed Ivan to monitor all of my activities, which I know he did because he told me. Eventually the phone and computer were altogether banned, and my mom was no longer allowed to teach me how to drive. Ivan complained when I

practiced the piano, and one day I got home from school and discovered that he had taken the T.V. out of my room while I was gone. One night he took my suitcases out of the attic and offered to help me pack, to kick me out of his house. My mother stood by and said, "You know if you left it would break your poor mother's heart."

I resorted to walking the neighborhood streets for two hours at a time every day after school. Usually I imagined obituaries for myself like, "Depressed Teen Killed by Speeding SUV," cried, then returned home, wrote in my red binder for two hours, and took a bath. One afternoon I tried to pour myself a glass of my mother's fine gin, then realized that Ivan had poured out the bottle and filled it back up with water. I knew some kids at school who cut themselves. I tried it, but I didn't like it; instead I gained fifteen pounds from depressive eating. When I heard Ivan open the garage door in the morning to go to work I would try to smother myself with a pillow, but I could never stick with it long enough to fall unconscious. When I baked my own cake on my sixteenth birthday, Ivan tried to charge me to use the oven. He was fond of saying, "This isn't a democracy. This is a dictatorship." One evening he punched me in front of my mother. She didn't react. Later, she would knock on my bedroom door and tell me that I just needed to try harder to love Ivan.

Tony, my boyfriend, was the one who suggested that I pick a tree and visit it every day and keep notes in a journal. The first time we met he told me he was gay. He was dating the only other gay man in the school, a Spanish-speaking junior named Waldo. A shiny silver ball glinted from the middle of his tongue. I would watch him and

Tony kiss goodbye when the one-minute warning bell rang before class. “My tongue tingles when he kisses me,” Waldo would say.

We had a new principal that year who was dead set on branding Tarpon Springs High School as, “The Best School on the Planet!” This message was written in chalk on the sidewalks surrounding the nursery where students who were mothers could leave their kids during the day. Young girls slicked down the yellow slide while boys soared on swings. At least a quarter of the kids in my school were Greek and on Orthodox holidays my teachers wouldn’t even bother teaching because so many students were absent. The kids on my bus sometimes referred to our school as “Tampon Strings.” Our school mascot was a sponge-diver.

A few weeks after I met Tony he broke up with Waldo and told me that he had feelings for me. I was only a freshman. I’d never had a boyfriend or kissed anyone. My parents hated Tony. Like me, he was desperate for their approval. “Why does he wear so much cologne?” my mother would ask. “I thought you said he was gay,” Ivan said. By the time I started visiting the tree, my parents had refused to drive me anywhere, including seeing Tony. Since I’d transferred to Palm Harbor High School so that I could participate in the International Baccalaureate program, I almost never saw Tony. Palm Harbor High didn’t have nurseries, and I never ran into a pregnant fourteen-year old in the bathroom like I had at Tarpon Springs.

The tree grew on the side of the retention pond that butted up against the playground where empty beer cans warned me about the dangers of fetal alcohol syndrome. The first time I’d been to this spot I’d picked up a lily pad and recoiled in

horror from the fat, hairy rhizome plunging deep into the mud. There were plenty of trees in this area, but a kind of sympathy, or perhaps empathy, led me to choose the stubbiest looking one, which had apparently been cut down some time ago. A few feeble shoots erupted from its short, skinny trunk and were maturing into twigs. Its handful of leaves stretched eagerly towards the Florida sun. Each day I sat on the rough, dry grass in front of the tree and prayed that the tree would recover. I named her Hillary and imitated her growth, going through the grounding and centering process I'd learned in Christopher Penczak's book, *The Inner Temple of Witchcraft*. Once I wore a black cloak to chemistry lab and left that book sitting on my desk; during the experiment, the bottom of my glass test tube shattered violently without cause and the only Catholic student in my class shrieked, "She broke that with her witchcraft!"

Each day I would face Hillary, close my eyes, and sink my roots towards the molten core of the earth, opening my crown to the sky. My carefully measured breathing sought to open all seven chakras, to create a cycle of divine, white energy pulling down from the heavens and through me and deep into the earth's iron core and back up again. Sometimes I cast a magick circle around myself. I dug shallow holes next to the tree and buried offerings there, scraps of paper with words like "love" written on them.

Nearly every day a train of ducks floated past. One by one they would dip forward into the water and all-but vanish, their split rectangular tails shaking in silence. Where was their father? Eventually I would open the journal my grandfather had given me—I loved to push its squishy cover—and begin to write.

Tony moved to the United States in middle school from the island of Corfu. I'd never heard of it before and the first time I visited Tony's house I asked him to show me where it was. He led me to a wall map at the back of the house and pointed to a tiny island in the Ionian Sea. It was so far north that parts of the island were off the coast of Albania. "I miss Greece," Tony would tell me. One time he pulled out a photo album and showed me pictures of the apartments where his family used to live. Tony's older sister Josie, who now lived in Australia, smiled on a shore; behind her, colorful clothes fluttered on lines adorning otherwise plain rectangular concrete buildings. It seemed like the sun was just about to emerge from a clouded horizon. Tony said, "Everybody in Greece is poor, but everybody is happy."

Tony's father was named Emmanuel, which I didn't know meant, "God with us," and he barely spoke any English. His wife Stella called him "Manu" and called Tony "Adoni," short for his Greek name "Antonios." After my parents stopped driving me anywhere Emmanuel would come by my house at two o'clock on Friday afternoon and pick me up in his white construction van. Planks and tools so stuffed the interior that I often huddled on the edge of the passenger seat against the rumbling door. Every time I clambered into that van I imagined that my mother was in the den, spying through a slit in the blinds.

Later on, Tony would buy a brand new red Hyundai Tiberon. He didn't have a driver's license because he didn't have a social security number, because when his family had immigrated they'd all come under his father's tax ID. Multiple trips to different DMVs did nothing to remedy the situation. The car sat mostly unused in the family's

one-car driveway; only on rare occasions did Tony venture to pick me up in it, always driving below the speed limit.

Emmanuel would put the van into gear and head down route 19. Sometimes we tried to talk, but we could never understand each other, so we just smiled. After a few miles we left Pinellas County and entered Pasco County. Tony lived in Holiday, which is where my mother said all the beaners lived. Emmanuel would pull up outside the house and I would jump out, waving as he drove away. Tony's parents didn't mind leaving us alone. Stella spent most of her days gossiping with other women from Greece at the Sponge Docks.

A charming table with two chairs sat on the front porch, where Tony and I would sit when we got tired of being inside. My mother never sat outside and called people who did "porch monkeys." Tony opened the door almost immediately after I knocked, turned around, and stalked frantically to the hall closet next to his bedroom. He pulled open the doors and started going through the linens.

"There's something in the house," he said. A current of anxiety shot through my limbs and I broke into a sweat. Tony's breathing came heavy. He was on the verge of a panic attack.

"What do you think it is?" I asked, my eyes sliding to the framed print of an illustration of a young girl that hung on the living room wall. Not long ago Tony and I had taken down that picture, written all the letters of the alphabet and the numbers zero through nine on individual scraps of paper, and arranged them over the image of the girl. We placed a heavy metal candleholder in the center. It began to move and spell out

words. I knew I wasn't moving it—but was Tony? We felt a terrible presence in the room and stopped. Ever since then I'd felt something evil in the house; as much as possible I avoided looking at the picture of the girl.

“I was doing a ritual. I want to get it out.” He headed for the bedroom, which alternated between states of order and disorder. Today it was in a state of disorder. He lit a bundle of sage and started smudging. It wasn't long before the tiny house filled up with smoke. When Emmanuel got home later that night it would be like this, too, when he sat in front of the television, the volume too low to hear, and smoked cigarette after cigarette through the whole pack. The air in their house didn't circulate; thick grey tendrils hung in the air like Spanish moss, casting the T.V. into a blue haze. “Why do you always smell like smoke?” my mom would demand when I got home. “Tony's dad smokes in the house,” I'd say.

Tony started chanting a spell, then darted back into his bedroom and grabbed a notebook and pen. He scrawled something in black ink and finished casting the spell. “Let's go outside,” he said.

I liked the back of Tony's house. Trees that always seemed to be stroking one another in the wind lined the fenced yard, grassless, entirely covered in textured plaster. An uncovered, in-ground swimming pool dominated the space, which was modest in comparison to the acre of saw grass sweeping behind the house mom and Ivan had built. A round fabric canopy stretched over a cushioned bench to the right of the pool. When Tony and I celebrated Yule, we let down the cloth walls to make a kind of tent that trapped the thick smoke from the sage. We placed a small bowl of salt on the north

cardinal point, a feather at the east, a lit candle at the south, and a cup of water at the west. Beginning at the north and proceeding clockwise we invoked the guardians of each direction. Sometimes Tony would read a spell from a book; other times he would read from one he wrote in advance in the Book of Shadows he'd made, whose covers were solid, unfinished wood. By the time we celebrated Yule, Tony had purchased a foot-long dagger to use as an athame.

“Yule is a celebration of the Triple Goddess,” Tony said at the beginning. “The crone dies, and the maiden enters into her womb. She won't be born until Imbolc. We celebrate Yule on the shortest day of the year in honor of the crone's death. Her death is necessary for the Goddess's resurrection.”

Halfway through the ritual I was lying on the cushioned bench, wearing a red T-shirt that belonged to Tony. It was large: Tony was much taller than me, heavier than me. He was sixteen or seventeen, and I wasn't even done growing yet. He looked into my eyes and asked, “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you promise?”

“Yes. I love you.”

Every time I saw Tony I was in a state of bliss. I felt this independently of Tony's perpetually fluctuating emotions. All I wanted to do was lie with him, be with him. We were enamored. I desperately needed someone to love me unconditionally; though Tony failed at this, he came closer than anybody else I then knew. We were oppressed by the public school system, unloved, neglected or abused by parents. The love that we lacked

we sought in each other; without power and hope, we plunged into the occult, Wicca, pendulum magick, crystal work, meditation, tarot cards, psychic channelings and invocations. Our terror only grew as we became increasingly entrenched.

Tony believed he could control the wind. He taught me the method, which involved visualizing a certain number of drops of water falling into a puddle, rippling. The trees rustled on command. One afternoon we arranged a variety of crystals in a human-sized egg shape. The crystals had been purified in advance in the light of the full moon.

Tony smudged the area with sage. We cast a circle to keep out impure spirits. A great power and wind surged through the trees. Something happened. Halfway through the ritual, my boyfriend was no longer himself. He got up and walked into the house. I knew that the ritual had to be finished, the circle had to be closed. I began to circumambulate the crystal arrangement. My eyes were open, but I wasn't seeing things as they were. My tongue spoke nonsense on its own, uttering the words of spirits dwelling in an unseen realm of evil. At the same time, my self-awareness was both irrefutably present and detached from my body, an outsider, watching. I felt compelled to move crystals from certain locations to others, chanting without ceasing. The trees moved in the wind. Then, a sense of completion. Inside the house my boyfriend was lying on his bed, unmoving, his face towards the wall. I wrapped myself around him.

I witnessed the possession only once. The Book of Shadows is there, the sheaf of unlined paper hinged and screwed into wood. He has made the book heavy, difficult to open. We

sit on his bed. He lights a candle and holds a pencil above a blank sheet. Closes his eyes. Then, the shaking, the entire body. He falls against me. His voice, when it comes, is alien.

“I am Antonios’ grandfather.” The words sound like gravel rubbing into scuffed knees. I’m scared, I’m holding his body, and it’s talking. He isn’t pretending.

He writes something on the sheet. He prophesies.

“Your brother,” he writes.

“What about him?” I ask.

“He needs to be careful with his friends. The people around him.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Drugs,” he writes.

The situation should be laughable, but it isn’t. It’s terrifying. When I get home I ask my brother if any of his friends do drugs. He gives me a weird look. I ask him again. He’s fifteen. He’s never touched drugs. He doesn’t know anybody who has.

While my mom and Ivan were at work I would pour steaming salt water over a heap of amethyst, citrine, quartz, and hematite. At night, the crystals soaked up the light of the full moon from my windowsill. For rituals I arranged them on my desk, the altar, with the candles, tarot cards, incense, feathers, rocks, salt. Every day, my waking life grew less tethered: was I really awake? I opened my closet and found pajamas, usually folded in drawers, hanging. If I’d put them there, I didn’t remember.

Somehow, I conjured a spirit, Anubis: it lurked in my house for weeks, a blue-gray presence with the snout of a dog, terrifying, powerful, present even during the day, beneath my desk, the altar. Cast circles did nothing to ward him off. In the night I awoke, unable to move, trying to scream, but silenced. Terrified and paralyzed. The unseen realm was made seen, overlaying normal reality: on the window seat, grinning bears, watching me. To my right, just outside my closet door, the grim reaper, tall, far too tall, touching to the ceiling, shrouded, looming over my bed, watching me, waiting for me to die.

That first year I took a creative writing class with Mr. Lucy. On the first day we went around the room introducing ourselves. A thin, pale, dark-haired girl sitting in the back introduced herself as Stephanie and said, "I like thrifting." A few months later I saw her at the Renaissance festival wearing a pair of green fairy wings that glittered in the afternoon sun. Not long after that she and her friends were crossing the street on the way to a concert when Stephanie, lagging behind, was struck by a speeding SUV. She died on the pavement. For weeks I kept seeing her face in the faces of strangers in school hallways, in parking lots, in grocery stores. I wrote a poem about her, but I recognized it for what it was: vain and inadequate.

What did Stephanie think when, during one creative writing class, I wrote a furious note to Tony, ripped it into pieces, and slowly chewed and swallowed each one? "Are you okay?" Mr. Lucy had asked me. "I'm fine," I said. What might have happened to Stephanie if, instead of being absorbed in my own sorrow, I'd taken the courage to talk

to her instead, as I always wanted to? If I had been crossing the street with her, would I have said, “Let’s wait for this car to pass?”

In January I went down to the bayou to watch all the teenaged Greek men paddle out in kayaks, dive into the cold water, and fumble in the depths until one of them emerged gripping a dark wooden cross. They did this every year, on a holiday called Epiphany. “Why do they dive into the water?” I asked Tony. “It’s just a tradition,” he said. It wasn’t until I became a Christian nearly a decade later that I realized Epiphany celebrates the baptism of Christ. The results of the dive were published in the local newspapers. Whoever found the cross was promised a year of good luck, but the boy who’d found it the previous year had died in a car accident.

In the evenings I talked with Tony on AOL Instant Messenger. Sometimes there would be a ten minute delay, and then:

“This is Adoshi.”

The first time this happened I said, “Who is Adoshi?”

He told me that he was inside Tony, that he was trying to help Tony but that Tony was too weak to stand on his own, his legs were like broken stilts. After fifteen minutes of conversation he said, “I’m going to close the window. Then Tony will come back.” When I asked Tony about this he said he didn’t remember any of it but that he wasn’t concerned. He regularly attended psychic meetings where mediums would channel spirits with names like “Blue Eagle.”

In my sophomore year of high school I took an IB class called Theory of Knowledge taught by an old man with a white ponytail named Dr. Yarborough. He told

us to call him Dr. Y. When our class met he played videos about how it was physically impossible for the World Trade Center towers to have fallen from just airplane collisions and how Walmart was destroying local economies worldwide. He often stated, “*Isms* don’t do things. People do things.”

Oversized color-illustrated copies of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* leaned against the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. Periodically Dr. Y would demand, “Do you *really* believe we evolved from apes?” He challenged us with the irreducible complexity of the eye. Next to Darwin were many volumes by Zecharia Sitchin. Dr. Y would explain Sitchin’s theories about planet X and Nibiru and then interrogate us with unanswerable questions like, “Do you think that extraterrestrials were building the tower of Babel to launch space shuttles?” At least one student, usually a female, would break into tears during each class. When we talked to the other teachers in the school about Dr. Y they would say, “Don’t worry. He doesn’t believe everything he says. He just wants you to think.”

A shining cross hung on the wall to the right of Dr. Y’s desk but I never heard him say anything about Christ. Sometimes after class a few of the more bold students, usually boys, would talk to him for long periods in hushed tones. When the videos were exhausted, Dr. Y played clips of songs like “Stairway to Heaven” backwards so we could hear how they sang, “O Satan, Sweet Satan.” He told us that the “silver girl” in “Bridge over Troubled Water” was a heroin needle. He uncompromisingly refuted me when I emailed him saying that I thought it may have been referring to an older woman. After I

was born again I would try and try to find a way to contact Dr. Y to no avail. I didn't even know if he was still alive.

In French class, my sixty-year old teacher got in the habit of asking me to belly dance in front of the class. He had white hair growing out of his ears that looked like miniature clouds. Sometimes we had a substitute French teacher named Madame Bidegain, from France. She would hold up objects in the room and, when we didn't know what they were called in French, lament, "You can't even describe the things around you!"

Once a student asked her, "What's the difference between *adorer* and *aimer*? Don't they both mean love?"

Mme. Bidegain answered, "*Aimer* is the word used for most kinds of love. You would only use *adorer* if you were talking about loving God." That struck me as intellectually interesting, but I didn't understand it. On another day Mme. Bidegain showed us the movie *Indochine*. Near the end of the film a man named Jean weeps in a lake. "That represents John the Baptist," she told us. I'd never heard that name before. The classroom was dark and silent. I couldn't tell if Jean wept in joy or sorrow.

Dr. Brown, the principal, pulled me out of chemistry class one morning and walked me to the school guidance counselor. Rancid anxiety broke out in my body. Dr. Brown made small talk along the way and didn't tell me what this was about, but I knew. He escorted me to Mr. Bourke's room and left me.

Trembling, I walked in and sank into the oversized armchair that took up half the width of the tiny office. Mr. Bourke's desk occupied the other half. A black, rectangular

plaque on his desk announced his name and the words “Guidance Counselor.” Mr. Bourke was an enormous, exhausted, jaded man. At an awards ceremony he compared students educated in the IB program to a steamed artichoke being slowly unpeeled. I hated talking to him. Before I could say a word, he demanded, “Do you know why you’re here?” I lied and said no. I didn’t want to have this conversation. Mr. Bourke pulled out a sheet of paper from underneath his desk, set it down in front of him, then twisted it around and thrust it towards me with taut fingers. It was the email I’d sent to the art teacher last night. My mouth went dry and I suddenly felt like I had to pee. I sat on my hands and blinked rapidly. “Does this look familiar?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. I felt ashamed at seeing my own angry words in print. I felt even more ashamed by Mr. Bourke’s command that I confess to being their author. It didn’t occur to me to take the sheet, to claim or destroy it. After a few moments, Mr. Bourke took it away and looked at it. Then he said, “So there are some things in here I’m concerned about. When you write, ‘I’d like to kill my parents with a gun,’ do you mean that, or are you just upset? Would you actually like to kill your parents?”

I stared at the man and slowly said no. I started to cry.

Somehow the female guidance counselor had joined us in the room. She took up the whole front seat of the golf cart that she drove around the campus, loudly threatening nearby students. I was not a member of the privileged few who were allowed rides in the back seat. She wanted to call my mother. Mr. Bourke wanted to know if I wanted to continue the IB program. I was certain that I wanted to continue the program and passionately certain that I didn’t want anyone to call my mother. I said, “It will just make

things worse.” I rambled about how my stepfather had been in the South African military and had seen one friend run over by his own tank and another blown up with his own grenade. Something about this satisfied the female guidance counselor, and I was let off with a promise to “check in” with the counselors over the following weeks.

That year my mother forbid me from seeing Tony, and the white construction van rendezvouses ceased. The only way I could communicate with Tony was by emailing him from the computer in the school library. On weekends I would tell my mother, “I’m going for a bike ride,” and pedal two miles down the Pinellas Trail to the Sponge Docks where Tony worked for twenty hours each weekend at a tourist shop specializing in sponges and bars of olive oil soap. Dozens of these shops butted up against one another along Dodecanese Boulevard, which terminated in a dinky aquarium. Once Tony led me through the winding rows of houses nearby until we got to a small Orthodox chapel where candles burned for the dead.

Up until a hundred years ago Greek immigrants would dive for sponges in the brackish bayou on which the docks were built. Now, they imported the sponges from Greece and sailed a red pirate ship around the water instead. A black jolly-roger thrashed from the mast. The first shop where Tony worked lured its customers with a free sponge diving museum filling the back half of the building. An original sponge diver suit with the characteristic round helmet and air hose sat stuffed and propped behind the thick, dirty glass. The whole place was dark and dusty and hardly any of the tourists ever went in there.

A family feud moved Tony's employment to a large shop on the corner across the street selling many of the same items. Sponges could be used for cultivating air plants, applying makeup, washing cars, scrubbing backs, or household decoration. Alligator heads and sea stars and sand dollars as big as my face could be purchased at the shops about halfway down Dodecanese, near the Greek restaurants and bakeries and the single nightclub, Poseidon. The whole production struck me as slightly humiliating. I was always stunned when tourists would come in and say they'd travelled from across the country or even overseas to visit this place.

Tony always worked alone, and I usually stayed with him for four or five hours.

"Do you want to give me a blow job in the bathroom?" he asked me one day.

We'd never had sex or even touched each other's private areas. Florida health classes taught abstinence only. Sometimes Tony would ask me to sit on his lap and I would feel his boner.

"No."

"Really?"

"Really." I'd never done such a thing and imagined I never would.

"I've had guys give me blow jobs in the bathroom before," he said. On another occasion he told me, "I knew this one guy who could put a condom on me with his mouth. We did it on the playground once. Inside the slide." I could never tell when Tony was lying, but neither of these scenarios seemed out of the realm of possibility.

"I'm so confused," Tony told me once, when he was still working in the shop with the free museum. "I feel like I'm gay, but I love you. I don't know whether I'm

straight or gay.” Every few months he was telling me he couldn’t be with me, only to seek reconciliation days later. This went on the entire two years we dated. His uncertainty didn’t make sense to me. Perhaps the spirits from our rituals clawed into his body, slowly turning him away from women.

Sometimes on the way home from the Sponge Docks I would visit the Greek Orthodox St. Nicholas Cathedral. It was never locked, and I would pull open the tall wooden doors to a frankincense lingering warmly in the air. I liked to be alone in the cathedral. I would study the paintings of the saints near the altar, the stained glass, the murals on the walls and ceiling. Then I would sit in the pews and rest. I don’t remember seeing an English Bible there; by that point I may have already been too far gone to open it even if there were one. Yet I felt a holy peace in that place. It was the closest I ever got to feeling like I was home.

On Christmas Eve Tony and his parents attended the midnight vigil at St. Nicholas. “Can I go?” I asked.

“It’s in Greek. You wouldn’t understand any of it. Besides, would your parents even let you go?” Tony’s parents didn’t know much about his practice of witchcraft. They were content as long as he attended church services on major holidays and passed his classes. Tony was always straddling: loving men with loving women; worshiping God and conjuring demons; being Greek and being American. Why was he always so conflicted? I wondered, loving him.

Near the end of my sophomore year Tony called me during school lunch. As soon as I saw the number I knew something must be terribly wrong. Tony knew about Ivan's injunction, how he daily monitored who I called and how long we talked for. My hands shook as I flipped open the phone.

"I'm getting deported," Tony said.

"What?"

"It's a long story. When can I see you?"

When I got home I begged my mother to let me see Tony. It'd been two months since we met. "Why is he getting deported?" she asked.

"I don't know. He didn't give me all the details. He said something about a fundamental flaw in the immigration paperwork." My mother didn't believe anything so innocent could have happened, she didn't trust anything those Greeks said, those porch monkeys, those people who smoked inside their own houses. Finally, she relented. She agreed to let me go over there.

When I arrived at Tony's house everything was in uproar. His mother was lying in her bed, her blood pressure up, her pulse up, her cholesterol up. "It's the stress," my boyfriend told me. "She's worried about my father." His father was being held in a detention facility in Miami, had been there for two weeks, had agreed to be deported but hadn't been allowed to leave the facility. Tony told me they kept him in a cell, with bunk beds, with Cuban men who had been there for months.

"He drove down there to talk to the DMV," Tony said. He wasn't crying.

"Because the DMV here told him that he had to go there so that he could get the

paperwork so that I could get my license. But then they looked at his paperwork and told him it was wrong. They told him there was an initial error in his paperwork from when it was first filled out.” When I reported these details to my mother she still didn’t believe the story. I didn’t know what to believe.

“One of our friends is giving us sixty thousand dollars for the house,” Tony continued. A few months ago he’d painted his room red and installed black shelves. Now he loaded his books into boxes, small pieces of paper and plastic and trash strewn over the wood floor. Everything suddenly echoed.

“He’s going to sell the house for us, and then mail us the difference.”

“When are you leaving?” I asked.

“We have to be gone within a month,” he said. “We’re not going back to Greece. We’re going to Australia. I’m glad that I’ll get to see my sister.”

I thought of the photo album, the nostalgia, the stories of Tony and Josie “checking out guys together on the beach.”

“When are they going to let your father leave?” I asked, dropping stray books into the boxes. He told me to keep the ones he didn’t want, or that he thought I’d like. The books were about witchcraft.

“We don’t know.”

That’s it. His mother wailing from the bedroom, on the phone with somebody, a relative, a friend, babbling in Greek.

The memory ends. I have the sensation that I saw him again, that that wasn’t the last time, but it’s gone. The memory is gone and I have only the feeling.

ECDYSIS

“Psychedelics are the crowbar of spirituality,” my boyfriend Andrew told me shortly before we went camping on the dunes of Lake Michigan, ready to be transformed by sun and heat and sand and three hits of LSA extracted from Hawaiian Baby Woodrose. Sure, I thought, a transformation in consciousness, a way for me to integrate my shattered upbringing, an ecdysis. That’s when a snake sheds its skin. We tripped and played Tibetan singing bowls. Long after we stopped, I still heard them, ringing over the dunes. At night, terror and sorrow struck me, and I wept beneath a blanket while strangers sang vulgar songs around the fire and drank wine straight out of the box.

The day the camping trip ended we drove to Andrew’s parents’ house. It was Father’s Day. I hadn’t spoken to my father since I was fourteen years old, six years ago, but I sent him a text. He called, and I found the courage to answer. I talked to him on the phone for three hours, sitting on the house’s red deck, the koi pond whirring with insects on the warm June night. The call would drop and I would stumble with a buzzing mind into the basement woodshop where Andrew was working and narrate what my father had just told me. “My mom was cheating on my dad,” I blurted, the lies exposed, the pieces coming together, finally making sense. “Ivan wasn’t the first. My dad wanted to stay married and go through counseling, but my mom refused. When he tried to get full

custody of me and Jonathan the judge said adultery didn't make her an unfit mother, only an unfit wife."

Then my father would call, and I'd step back into the still night. One of the first things my dad did was break into tears and tell me to ask him anything, because there was nothing he could hide from me. When I first asked him about my mom, he said, "I can't say anything bad about your mother. She's your mother. I've forgiven her. It took me a long time. For the first year I was so angry with her. But not anymore. I forgave her." That stunned me. My mother was still angry at my dad. For years she'd referred to him as "your sperm donor," the one who "left you kids." She'd never apologized to me, or to Jonathan, or to our dad. She didn't think she needed to. After I became a Christian and shared the gospel with her, she said, "I've never sinned."

A fat, golden koi drifted to the surface of the pond and sucked a circle of air with its round mouth. My dad said that life is full of ups and downs, that's just the way it is. He asked if I believed in God. I gave him a fumbling answer about Buddhism and universal consciousness. "Well," he said, "You're Egyptian. You know we're Coptic Orthodox, you were baptized that way," and I knew he was telling me that he still loved me, that he would always love me. For hours on the deck I cried, the years of my own hostility, my own mistrust and avoidance, my own fear and anger, melting in the warmth of my father's grace.

DOG DAYS

I arrived ten minutes before nine on my first day at JPD Systems, where I would spend a summer editing academic articles translated from French to English. It was the day after Memorial Day; only two weeks earlier, I'd turned twenty-three. Already I felt and smelled the sticky tang under my armpits, a result of the labored breathing that had characterized the entire fifty-mile car ride from Fairfax to Fredericksburg. The speed limits had steadily increased the farther I got from Northern Virginia: 55, then 65, then 70. I'd had my license for five years, but I was practically a new driver. My mother and step-dad, citing insurance costs, had refused to let me get my license until a week before I moved from Texas to Michigan for college, and then I had only driven sporadically, when a friend needed me to. The last time I'd been behind the wheel was over a year ago, when I plowed my boyfriend Andrew's 90s Acura through a curve sign and into a ditch, severing one of the brake lines. Why Andrew had agreed to help me buy a brand new car to drive to Fredericksburg every day was beyond me. My fingers gripped the wheel as I sat stiff-necked and straight-backed, eyes darting from mirror to mirror. My tiny red car, radio off so that I could maintain my focus, felt strangely vacuous with only me in it.

An unlabeled, white semi-truck pulled up in the lane next to me. I hated driving next to trucks, the number of which increased in tandem with the climbing numbers on the speed limit signs. I feared that one of their dozens of tires would explode, shooting

high-speed rubber through the passenger-side window and sending me into the concrete barrier snuggled against the shoulder due to construction. To overtake the truck I sped up to eighty-five, convinced that I could feel the wind pushing my car from side to side, but didn't change lanes. In the rearview mirror, the semi appeared to hover uncomfortably close to the back of my car. A few minutes later it roared past. I swallowed and thought about the bottle of water in the cup rest next to me. I wanted to drink some, but I was too terrified to take my hands off the wheel or my eyes off the road.

The notion that driving was all about “maintaining distance” had somehow come to dominate my thinking, and I spent the whole hour-long trip trying to find the perfect person going at the perfect speed to follow at a set distance. I imagined using this as a metaphor for teaching freshman composition, which I would do for the first time after this summer was over, if I didn't decide to leave my graduate program and continue working full time. In spite of my frequent lane changes to avoid trucks and seek out the perfect car to follow, I managed to spend most of the drive in the center lane, where I could avoid both those merging into the right lane from the feeder and the sporty-looking cars decked with vanity plates that shot by in the left lane.

Clarisse, Jean-Paul's wife and the company's president—while her husband could schmooze just about anyone into cooperation, she was the one who knew how to handle money—was the only person in the office when I arrived to a locked glass door. I tried punching in a few random numbers on the key pad before knocking. My knuckles gave off a low-pitched sound, a little too hollow, a little too dull. Clarisse arrived in her low black pumps, smiling without showing any of her teeth. She led me halfway down the

hall, then took a left and walked me through a kitchen. We came out on the other side and walked to the back of the building. My office was the last room on the right.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

“John works in the room across the hall,” she said. “But he usually doesn’t come in until ten. Karen will be joining him in there next week. We just hired her as a proofreader. Jean-Paul will probably be here around eleven. Anne-Marie comes from Maryland and doesn’t get here until between nine and ten. She’s from South Africa.” Clarisse stepped into the hall and looked into the empty office next to John’s. “Anna should be here soon. She handles the project management and Russian translation when we need it. She’s from Russia. We also have an intern named Kathleen.”

Clarisse showed me where the office supplies were and printed out the company’s style guidelines. About an hour later Jean-Paul came in and told me to proofread the translation of a hundred-page Word document containing only academic article titles and their abstracts. Two hours later I’d only gotten through twenty pages.

“How is it going?” Jean-Paul asked, swaggering in unannounced.

“I’ve gotten through twenty pages,” I said.

“What! You need to be able to do at least two of these files per day to keep up with the production schedule.”

“How can anyone do that?” I asked.

“You don’t have to check every word,” he said.

“But who translated this? Look,” I said, highlighting a portion of the French. “It looks like it was translated correctly the first time, and then somebody changed it.”

“Hmm.” Jean-Paul opened Internet Explorer and checked some translation websites I’d never seen before. “We have a team in Ghana who does the editing. Ghana is one of the only African countries that speaks both English and French. We used to translate and edit the abstracts and titles here, but it was taking too much time and we were losing money. So my friend in Ghana put together a team.”

When I got home that night I laid on the couch and cried, wondering if I should quit. I had an extant offer to teach kids reading and writing part-time at a summer camp called Fairfax Collegiate. I would only make half as much money over the course of the summer, but how much money did I really need? Wouldn’t the extra time, the shorter commute, be worth it? Then again, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to teach. What if I wanted to go into a career of editing and translation? “You’re really going to hate that commute,” Andrew said when I asked him what he thought. Two days later I declined the offer from Fairfax Collegiate.

Soon a second desk was added to my office room and I was joined by a middle-aged woman named Lisanne who lived in Alexandria. After her repeated urging I agreed to meet at her sister’s house in Springfield so we could carpool. We both had small red cars and when Lisanne drove she locked her elbows and put her arms straight out in front of her, flipped on the cruise control, and set both of her feet on the floor. I told her once that if she crashed like that she would break her arms. “Really?” she said, relaxing her elbows for a few minutes before they crept back into position. The whole posture reminded me of a picture taken of my great-grandmother when she was a teenager, before she emigrated from Germany. Though my great-grandmother wasn’t smiling in the

photograph, a certain delicacy hovered about her face. She sat with her shoulders squared to the camera and her feet perfectly parallel. I doubted I had ever looked so dignified.

Lisanne told a story of how she and her friend, an artist, had taken a train from France to the Eastern Bloc in their late teens or early twenties. “We were supposed to meet one of her friends at the station. We spent all afternoon there. Then at night, my friend decided we should just go to his apartment. We were terrified. We had his address. When we got there, they refused to let us in. They left us standing in the hall. She had no sense. She was such an *artista*. I finally convinced her to get back on the train and go back to France.”

On another morning she told me about the “Frenchman” she’d dated for several years while living in France. “His mother didn’t like me,” she said. “He left me because of his mother. He’s married now. He has children.” Lisanne had never been married and didn’t have any children. As she told it, the man she’d been seeing for the past year was snatched away by a “Wall Street refugee” who fled from New York after the 2008 financial crash. “Women are always giving themselves to men,” she would say often. “We just give ourselves away. We’re so nurturing. And we don’t even think about it. We don’t realize how much we’re giving, how much power we have. We just give it away.”

“Where did you go to college?” she asked me one day while I was driving.

“Michigan State University.”

“Oh, me too!”

“Really?”

“Yeah! Go Green!”

“Go White,” I said.

“You know the Hannah Administration Building?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course.”

“I camped out there with a bunch of protesters once. We built shanties.” The next day Lisanne brought in a nylon green flag with the white Spartan “S” in the center and we hung it up from the ceiling in the corner next to my desk. University paraphernalia struck me as tacky and I didn’t own so much as a commemorative mug or T-Shirt; but that flag made me feel a little less lonely.

“So do you and your boyfriend live together?” Lisanne asked me during one drive. I felt uncomfortable telling people I lived with Andrew. In emails I would sometimes refer to him as my “partner,” as if this somehow made the situation appear more legitimate. Anytime somebody asked me I expected an interrogation that never materialized. Instead of concluding that I wasn’t under moral judgment, I reckoned that the judgment was just silent. I wished someone would confront me about it: that, at least, would have broken my anxiety.

“Yeah,” I said, bracing myself.

“How long have you been dating?”

“Um...about two and a half years.”

“Do you want to get married?” she asked. “Sorry I’m asking you so many questions.”

I laughed. “It’s funny,” I said. “I go through periods where I really want to marry Andrew. And then I go through times where I can’t imagine staying with him at all.”

“I know what you mean,” she said.

I soon learned that JPD Systems, which began as Jean-Paul working from his basement, had exploded when Jean-Paul wrangled a multi-year, multi-million Euro contract from the French government to translate social science, economics, and humanities articles for a scholarly database called Cairn. He spent most of the hours of most days in loud conversation on the telephone and Skype. Jean-Paul couldn't hire people fast enough to keep up with the output demanded; his solution was to pressure everybody to do more work in the same amount of time. The tension in the building became palpable as deadlines approached. By eleven o'clock all the white office doors would be shut, casting the hallway into a darkness through which Jean-Paul stalked. He would throw open a door without knocking, demand a progress report, and strut back to his office where he could be heard shouting in French with increasing volume. “There goes *le coq*,” Lisanne would whisper. Once she added, “Do you think this company is named after him?”

“You mean because his name is Jean-Paul Dailly?”

“Yeah. It must be named after him. What else could JPD stand for?”

Jean-Paul denied this theory at lunch a few days later. “No, it doesn't mean anything,” he said. “My son came up with the name. I thought it sounded good.” When I reported my findings to Lisanne, she said, “I don't believe that.”

“Can I talk to you in my office?” Jean-Paul asked me after one of our afternoon meetings.

“Sure,” I said, my stomach plummeting as my head got buzzy with anxiety. I followed Jean-Paul into his office. Immediately he marched behind his triple-sized, horseshoe-shaped desk and settled in his reclining plastic rolling chair. I closed the white wooden door behind me and didn’t take a step closer. Sunlight poured into the spacious office from the wall of windows. I never understood why, with all that light, he kept the fluorescents blazing, too.

“So I know that we talked about you working from home,” he began.

“Yes,” I agreed. “You said I would work from home three days a week and come into the office two days a week.”

“Well, the specifics aren’t important. But you see, it’s very important to have you here. It’s not just about you. It’s about what you contribute to everybody. It’s about the synergy. If everybody is here, everybody is there, we have no synergy. We cannot collaborate, talk about things, discuss together.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

“And besides,” he continued, “we agreed that we would pay you more when you work from the office.”

“Yes...It’s just that it’s really exhausting to commute here. It takes an hour to an hour and a half each way.”

“Where do you live again?”

“Fairfax.”

He typed a few things on one of his computers and came up with a Google Map.

“I used to live in Burke,” he said. “Why don’t you take Route One? I always took One when I came here. It’s much faster. And it’s more scenic. All the back roads.”

“It doesn’t matter what you take; it takes at least an hour.”

“Well,” he said. “That’s not that bad. Anne Marie commutes here from Maryland. Lots of people around here spend an hour getting to work.” I didn’t tell him that Anne-Marie had tried killing herself and was on anti-depressants.

Jean-Paul lifted up his hands and smiled at me. He’d already decided that I would give in. I looked into his face and watched my life erode. I headed back to my office in defeat, the promise of my contract going up in smoke. Later that afternoon I’d spend an hour and a half in an anonymous procession of cars glinting silver over the hills like the two rows of girls in the Madeleine stories my second-grade teacher had read us. I’d get home at 6:30, cook dinner, clean up, make lunch for the following day, and get blazed while petting my cat. When we ran out of pot a month later, I would realize that I had nothing else to fill the ravenous void between me and bitter insanity.

In the morning I would stumble out of bed, swish coconut oil in my mouth for fifteen minutes while I took a shower, and drink two milliliters of fermented cod liver oil in milk in an effort to heal a dental cavity. That was all I ate until lunch, which I worked out could be had in two, carefully meted out sessions: the first at 11 a.m., the second at 1.p.m., followed by a 3 p.m. drive to Starbucks for an iced coffee.

The discussion topics at these lunches ranged from Jean-Paul’s time working at the World Bank with “amoral—not immoral” men to Clarisse’s upbringing in the Democratic Republic of Congo to fertility cycle charting, which John had done with his

ex-wife and mother of his two children before they divorced and he started dating a man. “We tried it because it was the only birth control method endorsed by the Catholic Church,” John said. “But it didn’t work out at all. We only had one safe day per month.” I’d been charting for over a year and had never had that problem. I thought about saying something, but I decided to hold my peace.

During one lunch, Kathleen mentioned that she was vegan. A young lady, hired to help Clarisse with general office labor but who would only last a week, replied, “I thought about that, but, you know, lions kill and eat zebras and stuff and that’s okay. So why is it any different with me?” I didn’t say anything, but I thought that was the dumbest reason I’d ever heard anyone give for eating meat. The human conscience and our sense of ethics clearly separated us from animals. I’d been a vegetarian for a year, ever since a wild animal ripped my cat in half, and the violence of taking life became real to me. Perhaps an ethical argument could be made for eating animals, but I’d yet to hear it.

“In the Congo, where I am from,” Clarisse began in her slow, deliberate way, “we aren’t picky about what we eat. We never throw out food, like the children do here. You go to the McDonald’s and you see them, they eat only half of their food and throw the rest away. We do not do that where I am from. We believe that every mouthful comes from God.”

We nodded knowingly.

Fifteen minutes after lunch it was time for my hourly bathroom break, which meant I also got to step outside before heading back to my cold, dark office. I was

covetous of the warm sun, but wasps often lingered in the bushes surrounding the building. Sometimes I sat in my car and listened to a Cocorosie song about a five year old child married off to “the man with the black hat.”

Hope not too lonely, she sang. I watch the grass blow through the window. I'm a grass widow...They get along just fine without me, they're never lonely.

At least two days that summer tornadoes rolled through nearby cities. The sky would go black, the windows behind my desk would rattle, and we would all emerge from our offices like animals out of grottos and huddle in the center of the building, hoping for a power outage that never came, while the wind clamored and groaned. When golf-ball-sized hail was predicted, I parked my brand new car as close to the building as possible and covered the windshield with the thick plastic floor mats intended for winter. “Is it normal for it to thunderstorm every afternoon like this?” I asked Karen one day. “This is my first summer in Virginia.”

She thought for a moment, then answered, “Yeah, it’s pretty normal,” and continued proofreading. I grabbed a Dove chocolate from the metal basket on her desk and headed back to my cave.

Karen was about the same age as my mom, wore glasses like my mom, and had the same name as my mom, except that my mom spelled her name with an “i” instead of an “e.” She didn’t bother to take her lunch out of the Tupperware, but popped the whole thing into the microwave. While the rest of us sat at the round table between the refrigerator and the counter, Karen ate her Tupperware lunch at her desk. No doubt existed in my mind that she worked while she ate. She spoke no French, but by some

miracle her documents always came out fine. Sometimes she proofread three or four files a day. While the rest of us grumbled in resentment during our afternoon meetings, Karen maintained a quiet humility. She came in at seven a.m. so she could leave by three. “I don’t like to get home late,” she said. “I feel like the whole day is gone.” She lived just down the road. I envied her for that.

One afternoon Karen decided to eat lunch in the kitchen with us. I asked her how she came to work at JPD Systems.

“Well, all my kids are done homeschooling now. I homeschooled all four of them. My oldest daughter is an herbalist. She was actually just telling me about leaky gut syndrome.”

“I’ve never heard of that. What is it?”

“It’s disgusting. I won’t tell you about it. Just read about it yourself. Almost everybody has it.”

“Huh. What do your other kids do?”

“One of them is in South America. Another one is traveling and volunteering. My kids do the coolest things. I just stay at home, but they all go out into the world.” We ate a few bites. Then she added, “This is the first job I’ve had outside my house in over twenty years. It’s pretty weird.”

“Did you work from home?” I asked, chewing on kale and wheat berries.

“Yeah, I did proofreading and copy editing from home for years.”

“I’d like to be able to work from home,” I said.

“It’s nice,” she agreed. “But it’s also good to come in and have an office.” She ate the last few bites of her fish and rice and walked over to the sink with her Tupperware, squirting some soap onto the sponge. “I’m going to run over to my church and grab some raw milk. I get it from a lady who has a farm. It’s easiest for her to drop it off at the church so I’m just going to go run over there and grab it. This is the only time she can drop it off.” She rinsed out the soap and shook the container in the sink. “I’ll be back really soon,” she added.

“Oh, cool,” I said. “I’ve always wanted to try raw milk. My friend Kelly said it’s really good.”

“Oh, it’s the best. Once you get used to it you can’t go back to drinking the milk from the store. You can try some when I bring it back.” She put the Tupperware in the drying rack and went to grab her keys. I thanked her.

“I’ll be right back,” she repeated.

“Okay, see you soon.” I’d never seen her in such a rush before. I finished my soup and headed back to my desk. By this point in the summer my productivity had taken a sharp decline. I would spend hours cowering in my sweater in the cold, dark office reading David Wilcock’s blog, convinced of the imminent collapse of the United States economy. When the Edward Snowden files came out, I hoped earnestly that the evil, festering underbelly of the American government would be overturned and exposed, but the machine pressed on without a blip. I began to get spooked by auspicious numbers that showed up on the gas pump. In the windy, pre-storm gloom of one afternoon, I drove over two fallen American flags on the way home.

I closed David Wilcock's blog and headed back to the kitchen. A minute later Karen walked in carrying a glass half-gallon of pure white milk. "Did you want to try some?" she asked, already grabbing a glass.

"Yeah, thank you!"

I smiled and took a sip.

"It's good," I said. It didn't taste much different from the Organic Valley milk I usually bought, but I knew that raw milk was healthier.

Karen stashed the jug in the fridge, said something, and went back to work. I rinsed out the glass and returned to my desk. The Spartan flag hung to my right, looking less lively, more limp, than it had the day before. Lisanne squinted from behind her glasses and leaned forwards towards her twin monitors, focused and intent. I spent ten minutes in despair trying to fix a file of abstracts about Marxism. Then I opened the online archives of the *Law of One* channelings of a spirit named "Ra" through a young woman from 1981 to 1984. Inspired by these teachings, David Wilcock promised an imminent shift in planetary consciousness in which the most spiritual people would evolve to a higher, more God-like state of consciousness. We would lose our physical bodies and take on "rainbow bodies." Some people were more spiritual because they had better karma, and others were more spiritual because they were actually reincarnated from advanced extraterrestrials, who had genetically engineered humans fifty thousand years ago. Though Ra claimed that each person is "love/light," the *Law of One* and David Wilcock taught a spiritual Darwinism: forget helping your neighbors. If only the most spiritually fit are going to make it, you want to beat everyone else out. During one

episode of Wilcock's Gaiam TV show *Wisdom Teachings*, he said, "Jesus's most secret teaching is reincarnation. Bibles have mistranslated *gehenna*: it doesn't mean hell. It means reincarnation." I didn't know what *gehenna* meant, but I was suspicious of an argument that relied completely on a "mistranslation." Not even my freshman composition students dared to skate on such thin ice. Why even bring up the Bible?

In another episode he explained, "If a person is doing yard work and his arm gets sucked into a wood chipper, and it drags his whole body in and he gets chopped up and spat out, so what? He was probably a war general or something in a previous life." David laughed. "He deserved that. He's balancing out his karma."

I deleted my internet browsing history and cookies for what must have been the sixth time that day, then googled war tax resistance. I hated that the government was taking my money and using it for evil. Through the yogic teachings on the "sin of omission," I realized that by consenting to such taxation I was complicit in the government's violence. I found some forms that one could file for religious exemption from Social Security tax, but they required a signature from a pastor or other spiritual leader. I wasn't a Christian then, so I left off that trail. I looked up Garcinia Cambogia again. Traditionally used in soups in Southeast Asian cuisine, in pill form marketers touted it as a natural, safe, and effective way to lose weight. I ordered a hundred and twenty pills from Amazon and threw in a twelve-pack of coconut water. When the Garcinia Cambogia arrived later that week, I would take the recommended dose at work and be so off the wall that I shelved the bottle in the cabinet above my kitchen sink and forgot about it.

I deleted my cookies again and tried to stave off my gnawing fear by logging onto Anthropologie's website. Lately I'd been spending fifty to seventy dollars on a single pair of pants or a sweater from Anthropologie or American Apparel. We were in the dog days of summer and I was wearing sweaters. When I commented on the temperature of the office, Annemarie said, "I don't even bother unpacking my summer clothes anymore." This spending, over which I could not gain control, resulted in monthly credit card bills of two thousand dollars. In the final month of summer I realized that I couldn't afford to take any time off before school started up again without falling into debt, and Andrew and I abandoned our plans of going back home to see his family in Michigan. Every day I felt more and more like a caged animal.

In July, I started a WordPress blog called "The Year of Nonviolence." From my dark office, I sought to reach out to the world, to do something that would help others, to keep myself from suffocating in isolation. I wrote about corruption, ethics, power, and compassion from a new-age, spiritual perspective. In one entry about geoengineering and chemtrails, I posted:

But I would like to propose that we not harbor anger, resentment, or ill-will towards those involved in this project. These sentiments are not productive—they are, indeed, a form of *himsa*, or harm/violence. Instead, I believe that the earth is alive, and that it wants to heal itself, and that it can heal itself. Last night I included a prayer for the earth, and focused on sending it loving-kindness. I feel an overwhelming love for the earth, and it is this energy which I am directing towards it. I think that if enough people send feelings of love and healing to the

earth, that the earth will be able to cast off the evil and harm that is being done to it in the form of geoengineering, as well as other forms of environmental damage. From now on, I plan on including this prayer with the others that I am already in the habit of making each night. May we show as much love to the planet as it has shown to us.

I got up and wandered across the hall. John and Karen were talking about the Roman Catholic Church and homosexuality. I stood and listened to them for a few minutes, grabbed a chocolate, then headed outside. I kicked off my shoes and set the soles of my feet on the balmy concrete. Hot air blew through my oversized, loose knit sweater. A walk around the building, trying to find a place where I couldn't be seen. I did some squats, still shivering inside my sweater. Inside of me, the cold stone of despair refused to be warmed.

DOWNWARD FACING

“Do you want to go to yoga with me tonight?” I asked Andrew. This was my second or third time going to yoga class this week. I’d just finished my first semester of teaching college, and my goal was to take as many yoga classes as possible before I started teaching again at the end of January.

“What is it?”

“I’m going to yin yoga,” I said.

“What is that?”

“Most yoga emphasizes the sun and is strengthening and stimulating. It focuses on the muscles. Yin yoga is more of a restorative yoga. It’s called ‘yin’ because it emphasizes the feminine, moon aspects of yoga. The postures focus on the tendons and the joints instead of the muscles. You usually hold each posture for one to two minutes.”

“Uh, that’s okay. You can go.”

“Are you sure? You never go with me.”

“I don’t really like yoga.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, heading to the bedroom. I pulled on a wife beater and yoga leggings with pockets, then grabbed my green cotton mat bag in which my yoga mat and rug were rolled up together like a Swiss cake roll. Beth, my yoga teacher in Michigan, was Iyengar certified, which meant she emphasized correct posture. I had

carried on in this mentality, somehow convincing myself that my spiritual superiority was directly related to the precision of my poses.

During class, Beth would often teach us about the Hindu god, goddess, or historical figure honored in each pose. “This pose is called Hanumasana,” she said in one class, sliding into the front splits. “It represents the leap of Hanuman from India to the Himalayas. He was a devotee of Rama, an incarnation of the god Vishnu. He stretched his leg over the distance in a single leap.” On the symbolic nature of this pose, *Yoga Journal* writes, “Rama...wasn’t able to make the giant leap because he was earthbound in a human body. But Hanuman, with his intense devotion to Rama, could make the leap. This story shows that even a god cannot do what a human can when the human has true devotion in the heart” (Palkhivala). This exaltation of the self is at the core of yoga, which means “to yoke,” and refers to uniting with one’s “Higher Self,” or God.

Alongside the intense scrutiny of posture that began in Beth’s class, I’d developed an obsession with Ayurveda, sometimes called the “sister science” of yoga. The self-diagnostic dosha quiz results indicated that I had two leading doshas, or constitutions. Diet was key in balancing doshas. Which foods were appropriate for my constitution, and how did those change from season to season? The lists went on for pages and followed a logic I could not discern: why were sweet potatoes okay in the winter, but not potatoes? Why could I eat raw tomatoes but not cooked ones? To make matters worse, the lists of foods appropriate for the two doshas often contradicted each other. It got to be that I couldn’t eat anything without doing something wrong.

I walked back into the living room and pulled on my puffy down jacket and grey sheepskin boots, said bye to Andrew, and headed out to the car. Yet another night would I be driving to Vienna alone and in darkness.

East Meets West didn't emphasize physical exercise like most yoga studios: their classes included kundalini yoga, yin yoga, and yoga nidra. While other studios featured special classes for things like stress and anxiety management, the events at East Meets West were along the lines of gong baths and Tibetan yoga. I was zealously pursuing my New Year's resolutions to cultivate the eight limbs of yoga and to grow in my relationship with God, who I had identified as "Universe" and "Self" and "Spirit." Every morning began with oil pulling and nasal irrigation using my lotus-emblazoned neti pot. I looked up the required reading for yoga teacher training that I could not afford and bought the books instead. My collection swelled to include works on Ayurveda, multiple books by B.K.S. Iyengar, and the life of Buddha. Titles like *Science of Breath: A Practical Guide*, *Ayurvedic Healing: A Comprehensive Guide*, *The Yoga of Truth*, and *Yoga & Ayurveda: Self-Healing and Self-Realization* attracted me. The power of meditation hit home when one of these books pointed out that all yogic knowledge came to gurus in meditation. I began to study the circulation of prana and breath revealed to these yogis. The endocrine, adrenal, and nervous systems in the body could be controlled and altered using different patterns of breathing. Certain postures could stimulate the hypothalamus; others, the pineal gland. In all of this it never occurred to me that rather than seeking God, I was becoming increasingly self-absorbed.

One evening Andrew decided to go with me to a kundalini class, which uses different sequences of chants, breathing, and dynamic postures to awaken the kundalini, or coiled serpent, believed to dwell at the base of everyone's spine. The teacher wore white pants, a white shirt, and sat on an animal skin covered in five thick inches of white fur.

“Good evening everybody,” she spoke with a Spanish-inflected accent. “My name is Claudia. Today we will be doing a kriya to stimulate the adrenal system.” She stood and passed out single-sheet handouts. A few chants dominated the left side of the page; on the bottom right was a person-shaped diagram showing the seven chakras, indicated by colored, star-shaped stickers.

“Let's take a few moments to turn inward. Then we will chant together and begin.”

The other students followed along just fine in the chant. I tried to keep up, but I had no idea how to pronounce the words and I was distracted by trying to read the English translation at the same time.

“Let's begin in easy pose,” Claudia continued. We got into position, our arms stretched out to the sides, palms facing as if to press apart the walls. We proceeded with sixty seconds of canon breath followed by sixty seconds of breath of fire. Our left palms on our backs, just above the top rib, we stretched our right arms forward, and chanted “Har,” in sync with our breathing. I couldn't help thinking that we sounded and looked as if we were hailing Hitler. After returning to lotus pose, we pushed our hands into the ground and lifted up and dropped our bodies onto our mats for two minutes.

“Now,” Claudia said. “We will be holding downward facing dog for five minutes. If you feel like you need to stop at any time, go ahead and lie down.”

I stretched out my arms, rotating my armpits inward and arching the palms of my hands slightly as Beth had taught me. The body drops and breath of fire had loosened up my body, and my heels were almost able to rest fully on the floor. I focused on lengthening my spine and letting my neck and head fall in line with my back.

“Return to the breath,” Claudia prompted. I was obsessed with correct breathing. “If you lose your breath,” some yoga teachers said, “you’ve lost the yoga.” I inhaled deeply, filling not only my diaphragm but my back and side ribs. The whole cavity of my body expanded, going and going, more than I would have thought possible. It was always like this. Once I could not fit any more air inside me, I began to squeeze it out from the bottom of my diaphragm upward, through all the chakras, terminating at the crown. Though I inhaled and exhaled through the nostrils, I let the air filter through my throat, as if I were breathing fog onto a glass. My body began to heat up and my heels fell comfortably and firmly to the floor.

“We’re two minutes in,” Claudia stated. She turned up the volume on some music I hadn’t even realized was playing. Men and women chanted and sang in Sanskrit. Would today be the day when I awakened my latent kundalini energy? What was the defining moment that brought it on? A few nights earlier I’d asked the yin yoga teacher about a tingling sensation I had in my back. “It’s all up and down my spine,” I said. “It feels really hot. It’s almost uncomfortable, but not quite. It’s been happening for a while.”

“Does it happen all the time?”

“No, it’s mostly when I’m bending over. But it doesn’t happen when I’m doing yoga. Just throughout the day. I asked somebody at a Bikram studio and they said they thought it might be increased blood circulation.”

“I’ve never heard that,” she said. “But some students have said they feel an energy awakening along the spine. It could be that all your chakras are being opened and the prana can flow freely.”

Next to me Andrew was huffing and groaning. From the corner of my eye I could see his body shaking, and I realized mine was, too. With closed eyes I realigned my arms and focused on my breathing.

Suddenly, a great joy washed over me. My lips pulled back from my teeth as I laughed and smiled. Around me I heard other students beginning to laugh, too, and then even Claudia. I felt warm, light, buzzy. The sixty-second warning came and I knew I would make it. Five minutes were called, and for a moment I wondered how I would get out of that position. Gingerly, I rolled over and sank to my back. The lights went out. The music went out. The breathing of bodies around me fell away. I closed my eyes and nearly floated out of my body.

Five, ten minutes passed. The lights returned. More breathing. More postures. Then it was time for the elephant walk. We fell forward into uttanasana, one of the most common yoga postures, a bowing down in worship to the sun. We opened our palms and wrapped them precisely around our ankles and began to walk around the room, our heads fallen below our locked knees. We were all laughing, we all felt such joy, such silliness, such freeness.

“It is your birthright to be happy, healthy, and holy,” Claudia told us. That struck me so deeply that it would become part of my nightly prayer and meditation for months: *I am happy, healthy, and holy*, I would tell myself, as if by telling it to myself enough it would make it true, that this mantra could somehow wipe out the two nervous breakdowns, the months of bloating and abdominal pain, the years steeped in cursing and drug dependency and sexual perversion. Never, though, did I fully believe it was my birthright, that holiness was something I deserved, that I was entitled to happiness. My life could only deteriorate so far before I was forced to admit I’d been tricked by none other than myself.

We ended the class with a Sanskrit hymn and *Namaste*, meaning, “The light in me bows to the light in you,” a reflection of the yogic doctrine that God already lives inside each of us, that we are not utterly defiled, that we need no redemption. We placed our hands together in prayer over our hearts and bowed to one another. A feeling I thought was peace filled our spirits as we lifted our heads and gazed at each other with the type of love yoga teaches, that love for others springs from your love for yourself. After I became a Christian, I told my friend, “I was so proud before, yoga makes you so proud,” and he said, “Yeah, every time I saw you back then you wouldn’t even look at me, you were so high and mighty.”

“What was the name of the sequence we did again?” I asked the teacher.

“It was a kriya for the adrenals. There are thousands of kriyas. They each focus on a different system in the body. You can look them up online.”

After I'd gone to a few classes at East Meets West I bought a book from their studio called *Shakti Samadhi: A Translation of the Tripura Rahasya*. The title means, "The Mystery beyond the Trinity," and is so called because the teacher in the dialogues, Dattatreya, is believed to have been the three-fold incarnation of the deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Parashurama, to whom Dattatreya speaks, is seen as the sixth avatar, or reincarnation, of Vishnu. There is a parallel here: just as one incarnation of Vishnu teaches another, so does *brahmin*—the universal god consciousness—teach each individual *atman*, or the god in every one. The secret to these teachings is that *brahmin* and *atman* are the same: there is no difference in essence or identity. As the *Tripura Rahasya* puts it: "Ignorance lies in the feeling of differentiation of the creatures from the Creator" (16.72). All sense of separation is illusion. Yoga works to break down this illusion, to unite the individual with the inner god, to, essentially, become god. My slow reading of, and deep ruminations on, this parable-rich dialogue would have a huge influence in my thinking over the next four months. I'd finally gotten past the veneer of power yoga and vinyasa flow: here was the spiritual meat I'd been searching for, the genuine backbone and foundation of yoga. When I asked one of the East Meets West teachers if she'd read the *Tripura Rahasya* and she said, "No, I've never heard of it," I was stunned. How could even the very teachers of yoga philosophy and practice not have delved into its most essential underpinnings?

The last thirty-minutes of the yin yoga class were devoted to yoga nidra, which I quickly fell in love with. The teacher would instruct us to prop our legs and backs on bolsters, cover our bodies with blankets and our eyes with small silk pillows, and settle in

for thirty minutes during which our bodies would not move even an inch. She would take out a book with yoga nidra scripts and read visualization sequences designed to open our third eyes. “Sun setting over the ocean. Sun setting over the ocean,” she would say. Then: “Egyptian pyramids. Egyptian pyramids. Egyptian pyramids.” Sometimes I felt my body sink into the floor. Other times it felt like I’d put off my body altogether, as if my spirit were gently and weightlessly floating.

Once, Andrew came to the yin class with me. Before we began the yoga nidra section, the teacher said, “We are going to spend a few minutes focusing our *sankalpa*. This is a Sanskrit word for our intention in yoga nidra. We identify a particular intention that we would like to be manifested in our reality. This ultimately leads to self-realization, or awakened consciousness.” Andrew focused on an increased presence of love in the world. I focused on uniting with my Higher Self.

On the way home Andrew stopped at Home Depot. I waited in the passenger seat of the car. A sign on one of the Home Depot pillars stated, “No standing in Fire Lane. Unattended vehicles will be towed.”

“I’m just going to run in,” Andrew said. “It should be fine because you’re in the car. I’ve seen people loading and unloading here before. You can just move it if somebody says something.”

“Sounds good,” I said. I watched him walk through the automatic doors and then pulled out my phone. A few minutes later a car pulled up next to me. I looked over at the man driving it. He put his car into reverse and sidled behind me into the fire lane. He made no move to get out of his car. I went back to researching cavity cures or neti pots or

some other alternative health on my phone. Soon Andrew jogged back out of Home Depot and slid into the driver's seat with one fluid motion.

"All right!" he said, putting the car into gear. Before we could drive off the man in the car behind us was standing at Andrew's window.

"You're parked in the fire lane," he said.

"I was just running in," he said. "I'm not allowed to leave the car here?"

"No. If the fire department needs to get in, there can't be anyone here."

"Oh, okay. Next time I'll park then."

The man pulled out a heavy-looking, brownish-grey electronic device and started punching numbers into the keypad.

"Are you writing me a ticket?" Andrew asked.

"Yep," he said without looking up, heading back to his car.

Andrew and I looked at each other. Then he got out of the car and walked over to the cop. From the side-view mirror I could see him gesture passionately, then stand still in silence while he listened to the police officer, then return to his fervent pleas. About twenty minutes later Andrew got back in the car, which had remained all this time in the fire lane.

"Whew! He's not going to give me a ticket."

"That's great. How much was it going to be?"

"Two hundred dollars! That's how much I make in a week."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him I loved him. I was like, 'Why are you giving me a ticket? I love you'."

“Really?”

“Yeah. And I said that he shouldn’t just be trying to meet quotas for writing people up so he could please his boss, but that he should actually pursue justice.”

The cop pulled up in his car and indicated that Andrew should roll down his window.

“This guy should be a politician!” the cop shouted at me through the window. “He’s a great talker. He could get into office.”

We headed back to our apartment, which was just across the street from the Home Depot. “Next time I’m just going to park, unless I’m loading or unloading something,” Andrew said.

“That sounds like a good idea.”

That semester I taught two different undergraduate classes with no overlap in curriculum while taking three graduate classes. Before long I was referring to this time as “the semester to end all semesters.” Though I made rules for myself—I would not grade or plan after seven p.m., I would not check my email on weekends—I couldn’t stop thinking about my students. Before bed, I would be thinking about them. When I got up to shower in the morning, there they were. Once while I was turning on the hot water after another night of insomnia, I thought to myself, “This is ridiculous. I’m sure my students almost never think about me. Why can’t I get them out of my head?” The only way was to get so stoned that all thoughts fell away. I went from taking one hit of pot a few times a week to taking three in a row, every two hours, every night. I smoked again right before bed, and

without fail I woke up at two or three every morning after it wore off, thoughts of my students clawing at my mind. Some nights I would try deep breathing, meditation, going into child's pose, rabbit pose. After an hour I would admit defeat. The only solution was to stumble out of bed and head to the glass pipe in the living room. I didn't need to turn on the lights. I knew where it was. Two more hits was enough to get me until eight o'clock, when I would shower while mentally going over the day's lesson plans. I hated having to do this, hated how each month brought greater and greater reliance on cannabis. In spite of the medical marijuana community's claims to the contrary, I knew I was developing an addiction, and that this was wrong. I wanted to stop, but I couldn't. Nothing else could fill the void.

After I got blazed at seven in the evening I would draw a hot bath with Epsom salts and lavender essential oil. My mind would return to writing, which is why I had gone to graduate school in the first place, to write. One evening my thoughts turned to my mother, from whom I'd been almost completely estranged for three or four years. It suddenly struck me that I needed to forgive my mother. The thought had barely crossed my mind that I was of an unforgiving spirit: but there it was. I was angry at her. I couldn't love her. And this forgiveness ate at me from the inside, slowly and with great stealth killing me. I got out of the bath and began to write a letter to my mother.

My office hours were scheduled at Starbucks on campus for an hour before I taught every Tuesday and Thursday. Students rarely came to see me, and I used the time to grade. Slowly, my writing about my mother replaced grading. At night, I would write about her. In the mornings before I taught, I would write about her. My computer went

everywhere with me. Anytime I had a spare moment, I was writing, re-writing. It had been years since I'd written like this. A plateau of stagnation never hit; each time I read over the letter I could see what to expand, what to condense.

As I wrote, the splintered pieces of my life began to come together. The more complete and focused the picture became, the more disturbing and grotesque it appeared. How could my mother and step-father be so unethical? They'd slandered my dad while taking a thousand dollars from him every month, dissolved my college fund, and finally "loaned" the money from my dad to me with interest to pay for college. I recalled an instance when Ivan purchased a new air mattress, carefully opened the box to avoid breaking the seal, and stuffed in our old air mattress that had a hole blown out. He was so gleeful when he returned it to the store for a full refund, so delighted that he'd been smarter than everybody else, that he'd beat the system. I began to wonder how such evil could exist. How much of their plan of family extortion had been premeditated? How far ahead had their plans extended? At one point, I went so far as to wonder, "Did my mother make a pact with the devil?"

Ethics clamored ahead of my students in my thinking. When I stood in line at Starbucks, I agonized over the implications of ordering non-organic milk in my latte. Further conflict arose because organic milk wasn't available, and I found the company's policy of charging sixty extra cents for soy milk unscrupulous. Which was the greater evil? Was either evil? The dilemma continued in the pet food aisle, where I would spend half an hour reading the ingredients of every bag of cat food before leaving empty-handed. Could I justify purchasing pet food that had been produced with factory farmed

chickens, pigs, and cows? One of my undergraduate class's texts, *Eating Animals*, compared the treatment of chickens on industrial farms to the systematized murder of Jews during the Holocaust. I ordered a vegan alternative online, but my cats wouldn't eat it.

At restaurants my heart engaged in a silent war of judgment against the meat-eaters around me. When I saw that the only drinking straws Target carried had been shipped from China, I ordered reusable metal straws on eBay. My compulsive shopping led to distress over the moral ramifications of purchasing goods that hadn't been made in the USA. I heaped coveted clothes and shoes upon myself without giving a thought to the homeless who loitered around my neighborhood. No one's eternal soul interested me except my own. After all, their karma had gotten them there. Although I couldn't recognize that doing good and hating others were incompatible, I was able to see that I was becoming obsessed with an increasingly stringent standard of ethics that I'd created. I desperately wanted to do right, but there was a problem: there was no end to how finely tuned the standard could be. No one could hold to a law whose parameters were infinite.

Plus, how could I even tell *what* was right and what was wrong? The rule of nonviolence as I saw it was unforgiving and impossible to keep: if I drove a car, I committed violence against the ecosystem and other human beings with the carcinogenic gas fumes. If I ate only vegetables, I participated in the violence towards the animals who were killed by the automated harvesting equipment. If I smoked cannabis to ease my anxiety, I contributed to my own lung damage and drug dependence.

Six weeks into the semester, and then a second time, over halfway through, I broke down. Both times the space heater, set to the max, blared mere inches from my arms, hot from the shower. After half an hour Andrew came into the bedroom and asked if I was okay. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't. This had only happened once before, when I was fourteen, and my mother wedged a critical rupture between us that resulted in a laughing and crying fit of hysteria from which we had still never recovered. I wanted to say something, but what would I say? "I feel like I am staring into the face of death"? "I am sunk into a deep pit out of which I cannot climb?" Nobody wanted to hear that. Silence reigned. Andrew left the room after a few minutes. He returned an hour later and found that I hadn't moved.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked me.

After a minute I managed to say, "I don't know." And that was it.

After the second breakdown, the true despair set in. I would sit on the toilet for twenty minutes, weeping. *What is my purpose in life? Why am I on this earth?* I knew it wasn't an accident, that I hadn't evolved from an ape, that I'd been put on the planet for a reason. But what was it? In yoga they speak of one's dharma, or life purpose. I sought the Universe, asking, *What is my purpose? What is my dharma?* Every time, nothing. The more desperate I became, the more my questions fell into a void. The pot could no longer make me forget. I needed to know. I needed God. But who was God, and where could I find him?

Somehow during this time I managed to meditate and pray for close to an hour every night. After my bath I would read a page, sometimes a chapter, of the *Tripura Rahasya*, then lie on my back in corpse pose and pray to the Universe. As my reading of the text, which is considered Hindu scripture, progressed, I began to pray to “Self/Spirit.”

Sometimes I would look up from prayer and consider my hands. They felt so foreign to me. How could these be my hands? Looking around the room I would wonder, “Why am I here?” I studied the disorganized mounds of books and bags and all kinds of junk. Once this question struck me as laughable. Wasn’t I basically asking myself?

On one unusual evening I rolled out my yoga rug and set the wooden meditation stool, which I’d purchased from East Meets West, on it. I set my mala beads and Tibetan singing bowls in front of me, wrapped myself in a yellow meditation blanket covered in Sanskrit, and turned inward. After fifteen minutes I opened my eyes and saw myself in the mirror. It was jarring, to look straight into my own eyes like that. I tried to embrace myself in love, but I wanted so badly to look away. I smiled and watched my reflection smile back at me. Whatever I put into the world, that I would receive. As the Hindu scriptures said, the waking and the dream state were the same, totally shaped by consciousness. In that moment, I “recognized the fact that the world is simply an image on the mirror of consciousness” and began to “cultivate the contemplation of ‘I am’, [to] abide as pure being and thus give up this delusion of the reality of the world.” I believed I had complete control over my reality: that “the universe is only mental image, just as firm as one’s will-power” (*Tripura Rahasya* 14.92)

One day, in the spring, in the sun, I walked the short circuit in the courtyard behind my house. I considered the trees, the sky, the grass, and the veil that created the illusion of separateness. In recent meditations following my reading of the *Tripura Rahasya*, I'd sought to "become dispassionate and inhere as the Self. Such inherence is spontaneous (no effort is needed to inhere as the Self). It is realized after thoughts are eliminated and investigation ceases. Recapitulate your state after you break off from it, and then you will know all and the significance of its being knowable and unknowable at the same time. Thus realizing the unknowable, one abides in immortality for ever and ever" (15.85). Every time I did this, I felt like I was falling into a void. This void was terrifying. Just recently I'd read, in the same book, that only fools perceive the Supreme Being as a void: it is actually light.

My chest began to constrict, and at last I lay down in the grass, in a spot of sunshine, struggling to breathe, barely able to move. Why was I having such difficulty? If all misery was a result of the ignorance of Self—a result of falsely believing that I was separate from God—why did my attempts to "inhere" with the Self result in such terror? One of my neighbors walked onto her patio. She must have seen me lying there, but she didn't speak to me. Scuffling sounds from her concrete walk-out rebounded off the buildings on the other side of the courtyard. A few minutes later she went back inside. If "I" and "you" were the same, if there were no separation, if we were all transcendental consciousness, why were we all so preoccupied with ourselves? If I died, would anybody even notice?

I wondered, why was I so preoccupied with practicing yoga? The *Tripura Rahasya* was right in saying that I wasn't my body: the body was something I inhabited and used, but it wasn't who I was. But if I truly were the Supreme Being, and if the universal consciousness had truly created this body and chosen to inhabit it in order to experience itself fully, why was I in such despair? Why did all of my attempts to grow in love result in increasing contempt for myself and others? If I truly were the Supreme Being, why couldn't I connect with it? If I had complete control over my reality, why couldn't I break down the veil?

I got up and stumbled around the side of the building, laid down in another patch of grass, another glimpse of sun. Never before had I felt myself falling into the void like this while awake, during the day, without meditating. Terror seized tighter around my heart. Finally I went back inside. In the bathroom, I looked into the mirror, into my eyes, and felt such fear that I had to look away. Out of compulsion I began to chant the Gayatri mantra in Sanskrit: *Let us adore the supremacy of the divine sun, the god-head who illuminates all*. Continued chanting brought slight relief, but the dread was still there, deeply settled, comfortable, sunk deep into his favorite chair.

INTO THE LIGHT

“We’re mailing all your crap to you,” my mother said when I answered the phone. In the background, heavy cardboard slamming on heavy cardboard, Ivan’s huffing. “We’re tired of having it in the house.”

“All right,” I said. I knew the boxes were in the closet under the stairs, out of the way, out of sight. My mother’s house hardly had anything in it. It looked like a model home, like nobody lived there.

“We’ll let you know when UPS is supposed to drop it off.”

“How many boxes are there?”

“I think nine.”

“Andrew was just about to put some shelves up on the wall. Thirty-six feet of shelving.”

“Good, so you’ll have somewhere to put it.”

“I’m probably going to go through and donate a lot of it.”

“You can do whatever you want with it. We just want it out of here.”

The journal wasn’t in the first box I opened, or in the last one. It was somewhere in the middle, tucked between other journals, between books Tony had given me, books on nocturnal witchcraft and spirit guides and etheric anatomy. I’d known this journal would

be there, that I would have to read it, but I wasn't ready, wasn't ready to confront the past, the reality of who I'd been, of what I'd done. The journal went on the top shelf, next to the photo albums, never quite out of sight, never quite out of mind.

One night during my first year at Michigan State University, I met with my research project co-workers, all women, got wasted, and paraded down Grand River Avenue reveling and laughing as loudly as possible.

“I dated a man who claimed he was a psychic! He was crazy! He had multiple personality disorder. Then he got deported!”

My co-workers lingered a few steps behind me, probably just as drunk as I was, but making far less of a spectacle of themselves. I went on raving, glad I'd found an excuse, an avenue for denial.

I knew that when I read the journal I would no longer be able to suppress the truth. I would have to acknowledge that Tony and I had been involved in the conjuring of the demonic, that demons were not mental delusions but real spiritual beings, that I had done terrible things, things that could not be overlooked.

I was grading papers on my bedroom floor one evening when Andrew came in and said, “I've been reading Fritz Springmeier's book about mind control slaves.” He'd been a Christian for two days.

I put down my pen. “What did it say?”

“It’s pretty crazy. These mind control victims have their minds broken by people who are Satanists, who openly claim to worship Satan. They’re abused and tortured and forced to participate in Satanic rituals. Medically, doctors say that the victims suffer from associative identity disorder. So what the Satanists do is, they split people’s minds, and then they demonize the different parts.”

I didn’t say anything. The whole thing sounded like what had been going on with Tony, except with him it’d been self-inflicted.

“And the people healing them are Christians,” Andrew continued. “These victims are completely healed by deliverance in Jesus’ name.”

“How do you know they’re not just making it all up?” I asked. This is what I wanted to believe.

“What do you mean?”

“They just believe they’re worshipping Satan, and the Christians just believe they’re worshipping Jesus, and so because they believe it, that becomes their reality. But it’s not really reality.” Even I could hardly understand what I was saying.

“That’s definitely not happening. It’s real,” Andrew said, and walked away.

The next day I decided to buy a Bible. It now seems unusual that though I was almost twenty-four years old and held an English degree, I’d never owned a Bible or read even a single chapter. Once, when I was a very young child, I’d asked my mother if I could take the Bible from the drawer of a hotel where we stayed, but she said, “No. Somebody else might need it.” I put the Bible on my Christmas list but it didn’t make it into my presents. Shortly before my parents divorced I walked into the living room,

where my mother was watching a daytime debate between two men wearing suits. “These Christians think the earth is only 10,000 years old!” she exclaimed. “That’s because they’re brainwashed.”

I forgot about reading the Bible until the summer after my freshman year of college, when one of my housemates, an atheist, started reading the Bible for its historical and cultural value. On some afternoons we’d sit in the backyard next to the cold fire pit full of ashes from *Economist* back issues and he’d share difficult-to-follow summaries. After Andrew was saved, I thought of this friend. “I can read the Bible even if I’m not a Christian,” I decided. I looked up Christian bookstores and found one in downtown Fairfax, only a few miles from my house. One afternoon while Andrew was at work I drove there, parking my car in the gravel lot across the street from the house. I realized that I’d seen this shop before, but I’d never recognized it as a Christian store. An unobtrusive, hand painted sign read, “Joy Unlimited: Books, Music, Gifts.”

I felt like a stranger as I walked up to the white doors, an outsider, an imposter. Hanging from the round knob, a cross the length of my forearm. On the transverse beam, a single word: BELIEVE. Conviction cut to the heart. Why didn’t I believe? The question lodged deep inside me and wouldn’t be shaken.

A small, disheveled old dog with thinning white fur ran up to me as soon as I stepped inside. The floors sloped and creaked. The carpet and décor looked like they hadn’t been updated since the 80s. A tall, bland cashier’s desk stood in the center of the foyer. To the right, a very elderly woman perched in front of an outdated computer. “Good afternoon,” she said. “Please let me know if you need any help.”

“Thank you,” I said. I rarely asked for help in stores. My mother never had: every time, the same response, “No, I’m just browsing.” I didn’t know where anything was, but I didn’t ask. A hallway to the left of the desk led to the back of the house. The first room on the right had books. There I found the Bibles. I’d expected to walk in and just grab one: there was only one Bible, after all. Instead, a multitude of translations confronted me, each labeled with a mysterious acronym: ESV, NASB, NIV, KJV. Why were there so many translations? How was I supposed to know which one to buy? I started pulling them off the shelves and comparing the first few verses of Genesis. Some of them sounded fake. Every packaging description claimed to offer the most literal or readable translation. To my back, a free-standing shelf labeled “Spiritual Warfare” brought back uncomfortable memories of the journal. After half an hour I settled on a softcover leather New American Standard Bible with gilded pages.

“A lot of people like this translation,” the old lady said, sliding my Bible into a slim plastic bag covered with fish symbols and a verse from Philippians. I didn’t respond. What could I have said? I was an outsider, ignorant, a foreigner hoping that my silence could cover my shame.

At home, I lit a lavender scented candle, opened my pigeon-hole writing desk, and sat down with the Bible. To my right, a stack of printer paper, a rough pencil. Set to begin at the beginning. An hour and a half later I’d made it only ten pages, to just after the fall of man. Two and half sheets of paper, covered in observations and questions. “Why was man sent away?” Adam and Eve had to leave the garden because they were ashamed and afraid of God after they ate the fruit. And, “We must love God, without the knowledge of

good and evil, if we are to eat from the tree of life and live forever in his garden. We must be without shame at our nakedness, or fear—we must be unafraid before God. Otherwise, he cannot accept us, for we will be hiding from him.” And, last of all, desperately, with great investment, without an answer, “How can we be allowed back into the garden??”

ONE WHO SUBMITS

When I lived in Senegal for half a year I learned that “Muslim” means, “one who submits.” I’d never lived with a Muslim family before, in a country where ninety-four percent of people claimed to be Muslims, in a country with mosques on every corner, where people came out into the streets to pray five times a day, where cars rolled through neighborhoods blasting Islamic messages from megaphones drilled into the peeling roofs. My host-mother, yaay-boy, stockpiled heaping bowls of mangoes in her room until they rotted, verbally berated strangers visiting for the first time, and prayed five times a day. My mornings began at seven with mangoes smacking the courtyard concrete and my bedroom windows as my host-aunt beat the fruits off the tree, saying, “We have to get them before the bats do,” then hiding them in her room. Before I left for school in the morning my host-aunt would ask me to come to the side of the house, pass me a black bag of mangoes, and tell me to sneak out, to make sure yaay-boy didn’t see. “You shouldn’t be doing this,” I told her. “It isn’t right.” It didn’t matter what I said; at seven o’clock she’d be out there with the pole, beating the tree.

When I couldn’t stand to be in the house I went next door to my tailor, always smiling, boasting of his efforts to accumulate wives. When I visited his home, his pregnant wife refused to leave the kitchen. I watched her sweep the floor again and again in silent mourning. I spent weeks examining myself: did I only deny polygamy because

I'd been raised in America? I concluded that I believed on such a deep level that monogamy was right and polygamy was wrong that if I were to change this about myself everything would unravel.

On a pilgrimage to Touba, the largest mosque in West Africa, in the middle of a desert, nobody lives there. A million people visit each year for the Grand Magal, sleeping anywhere, against walls, outside the mosque, rows of people, women wrapping themselves in their embroidered and sequined scarves, covered in dust. In every street, in every house, animals slaughtered and drained, the bigger the better: camels, oxen, sheep, goats, cows. The blood, everywhere, the dust, so much of it, kicked up into the air, blotting out the sun for four days. For a month afterward I was coughing dust, sneezing dust. The men and women, always separated: the men, close to the teachers and prophets; the women, farther away, in a smaller area, behind a chain-link fence, in a cage.

At home in Dakar, riots in the university, students kicking out windows, police lobbing tear gas grenades. Selling peanuts on the side of the road, the wives in sorrow, working, breastfeeding, pawned off. In the marketplaces and taxis and buses and universities, the thieves and liars. In the streets, the five-year olds begging without shoes, holes in their clothes, noses and eyes flowing mucus. On the beaches, children squatting in concrete frames of houses, living in shacks where fish came out of the earth when it rained. In one of my classmate's homes, the nine-year-old maid who pulled on my classmate's hair and threatened her with a knife. Hanging over the tops of walls, the children with absent parents, taunting, "Toubab!" when I walked to school, lobbying "ching chang chong" whenever they saw a Chinese person, children who pissed in the

dust. Even then the idea of submitting to God appealed to me, but not the way they submitted, not to the god they submitted to, no, not him, no, never.

RESURRECTION

I was in the shower with Andrew when he surrendered to Christ. I didn't know that's what he was doing, he didn't tell me. We held each other underneath the spray of water. Andrew closed his eyes. A deep spiritual love rolled off him. We were silent. Andrew opened his eyes, weeping. "I wept for a week straight," he would preach on the streets, months later, in cold, so cold my toes lost feeling. That weeping struck me. "I can feel God's love any time I want," he said. That got to me. For the past five months that was all I'd been trying to do, and I'd gotten nowhere but breakdowns. And here was Andrew, a new person: gone was the man who plunged scissors into our wall in fits of rage, who smashed mugs with his bare hands, sending blood all over the hamper, the carpet, the walls. Overnight the four years of being non-stop high on pot ground to a halt. Out went the cursing, the road rage. A gentleness beyond imagination blossomed in Andrew. I began to be honest with myself. Andrew was at peace, and I was bristly and angry, a person I did not want to be. In spite of all my efforts to transform myself from the inside out, to progress spiritually, to evolve to a higher state of consciousness, I was only getting worse.

All day, late into the night, the Christian videos played from our living room projector: young earth creation, debunking ancient aliens, debunking New Age, debunking myths about the Council of Nicaea, the reliability of New Testament

manuscripts, things I had never heard before, things I had never considered, things that grated on me.

“How much longer are you going to keep doing this?” I demanded one afternoon.

“What? What are you talking about? I’m a Christian. This is permanent.”

“No, I meant the videos.”

“Oh. I don’t know. It’s just because I’ve never heard any of this stuff before.”

“Don’t you believe in many paths, one truth?” I asked. I’d gotten this idea off a yoga website, one with a diagram.

“No,” he said. “Jesus is the only way.” I was hostile, angry, saying many things of which I am now ashamed. “Why can’t I practice yoga and you practice Christianity?”

“I’ve felt God. I know yoga’s the truth.” Once, I asked, “Why Jesus Christ?”

“I don’t know,” Andrew said. “That’s just the way God decided to do it.” That didn’t answer the question, the question that I didn’t even know how to ask, which was to know the gospel beyond the Christmas carols: Jesus had died on a cross, but why? What happened on the cross? People said Christ had been resurrected: but was this true? If it were true, why did it matter?

CROSSING THE MEKONG

Three days after I read the first chapters of Genesis, I decided to read the journal. The night before I'd told Andrew, "I don't think I will ever accept Christ." He'd looked devastated, like I'd said the worst thing possible, like I'd plunged a knife into him. That look got to me, and that night I prayed and asked God to show me how to reach him: was it yoga? Jesus? At the same time, in another room, Andrew wept and begged God for my soul. When I woke up the following morning, I knew the time had come: today would be the day I read the journal, all of it, the day I looked honestly at who I had been, the day I forgave myself.

I waited until Andrew was at work. I hadn't told him any of this, anything about the journal. That afternoon I stood on the couch and slid the journal from its place on the top shelf, headed to the bedroom, and sat on the floor, the squishy book open in front of me, my computer to the side. On some level I knew to take notes, knew that I would burn or destroy or trash the journal after I read it, that the notes would be the only record.

Each page, revelations. I'd suppressed more than I'd realized, far more. Rubbing tarot cards over my naked body, my breasts, my inner thighs, all the while seeing visions, masturbating while seeing visions, the tingling in the spine that would not cease, the same tingling I'd felt from yoga. The author of the journal wrote, "I want a family." Just before

she turned sixteen, she wrote, “I want to Die. I want TRUE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE like I keep trying to GIVE but never RECEIVE.” This is what was learned—the failure of compassion, the impossible failure. She came to believe, “Let Love Die.” She wrote this idea, she embedded it, she worshipped it. After reading these things, I wrote in my notes, “I am no longer this person.” I wrote:

In my memory I am always sixteen. Of course I was fourteen, then I was fifteen, before I was sixteen. But sixteen defined everything. Sixteen devoured fourteen and fifteen.

I read yesterday that sixteen is one of the favorite numbers of Satan. That is represents love, and bliss. But we know that suffering, torture, pain, deceit can never lead to love, or to bliss. Never.

I love Marguerite Duras because in her story, *The Lover*, I see my own story.

I am on a river crossing the Mekong. My mother has cut my father out of my life. I am longing to go home; a longing I felt just last night. Today I read that the one teacher is always inside us. God. I say that I’ve accepted God. But this isn’t true. I think that I have accepted God. But I haven’t—I haven’t completely surrendered to God, even though that is the one thing I want more than anything. I don’t know how.

I am reading over the journal from when I was sixteen—though in fact I was fifteen—and I am embracing this self with compassion. I need to heal these wounds. I need to deprogram everything that was programmed into me—everything that I programmed into myself, that’s the word I used, programmed, frightening but it’s there—and that others programmed.

This is the story: When I was nine, my mother divorced my father through a terrible sin. My father was lost to me. I have always been uneasy with Christianity, because of the emphasis on the father. But I have longed for my father, and by God, returning to him has been the best thing that has happened to me.

This is the story: When I was nine, my mother divorced my father. It was sin. She lived in sin. She brought sin into our home. When I matured, sexually, spiritually, I had no one. I had no God. I had no father. I longed for God. I longed for my father. My mother was torn from me. She tore herself from me. I did not leave my mother. She left me.

That is the memory. I've always remembered it. Mom and Ivan, talking to me, in their bedroom, on their bed, that bed of sin. And they had me sleeping on Ivan's old bed, the bed from his apartment, on which, I suspect, they had committed adultery. Did my mother find it perverse, that I slept on this bed? Did she reason it as simply practical—

In that bed I experienced several episodes of sleep paralysis. I woke up in the dead of night, unable to move, unable to scream. One figure in the shape of a teddy bear sat on my window seat. Another, dark and tall and shrouded, loomed over my right side, waiting for me to die.

That is the memory. Mom and Ivan are talking to me in their bedroom, on the bed of sin. And I don't remember what they are saying. I don't remember anything. What I remember is the break. I feel the break, and I know it has happened. And so I break. I begin to laugh, hysterically. I can't help but laugh. Unstoppably. Somehow I am in their bathroom. Cold tile. The magazine rack, metal or metal plated. I am on their bathroom

floor, laughing, unstoppably. I am thrashing. My leg kicks the magazine rack. I see the toilet, the metal, the cold tile. I think it is my mother who removes me, who takes me to my bedroom, to the bed of sin. Laughing. Ivan tells me if I don't stop, he will take me to the mental hospital. Laughing.

That's when it happened. That break. That break I have never been able to fully comprehend, only to know that it was a break, permanent, unbearable.

I lost my mother in that break. But I did not leave my mother. This I now understand. I always believed I had left my mother, betrayed her. But now I see that she left me, she made my father leave me, then she left me.

Why would my mother do this?

In the journal I see the longing for a commitment. I have no father, no mother, no lover. I am longing for unconditional love and I cannot find it. This is Duras' story. The father, dead. The mother, gone. The mother left her. When Duras says she left her mother, we understand: her mother had already left her. Duras is only completing it, affirming it.

This sixteen year old projected that need for unconditional love into a man, Tony. And she longed for spirituality, but found it nowhere. Father, gone. Mother, atheist. Ivan, atheist. Tony, pagan. She finds Tony. Tony practices witchcraft. She practices witchcraft. It is the only way she knows how. She is only sixteen. She doesn't know. She doesn't know that at any moment she can turn to God, accept God, love God.

The mother has taught her that Christianity is bad. She mocks the "born agains," the evangelists, never any respect, always a mockery.

This is why Duras writes in the third person. She is no longer that person.

What happened to that person?

A strange plan, this plan. The mother, the father, gone. The daughter, abandoned. Alone. Forays into witchcraft. Forays into love. Sex. Sin. Sealing that away. Sealing it away, until I can look at it again. Now. Reading the journal. Embracing with compassion. A difficult plan to comprehend. Andrew's sudden conversion to Christ. Not conversion—acceptance. A difficult plan to comprehend.

I don't like this sixteen year old, who referred to herself as Kasha, Kasha Kalioros. An obliteration of identity. I don't believe in that.

This sixteen year old, who surrendered herself to her lover. What a mistake. Foolish. Calling him sensei. A lover, possessed by demons. A mistake. All of it, difficult to comprehend.

Of course, there are shining moments. The sixteen year old knows that love is truth. This is fundamental. Though the path was stray, the heart was set on truth.

In the journal the writer is always sick, always tired. She never has any energy. The craft gives her a boost, but afterwards, she always has a headache.

She wrote, "I want a family."

The mother said, "She would rather talk to a tree." The step-father said, "Move those snapdragons. They're hideous." The mother said, "Have you decided to grace us with your presence?" The sixteen year old wrote, "We got yelled at for sitting inside doing nothing instead of sitting outside doing nothing." The impossible expectations, the false standard, the lie, always the lie, never the truth.

Of the lover, she wrote: “The inside part of me wonders of Adoshi. Wonders of that pure, rainbow soul buried within. Wonders of the parallel demon.”

I remember my mother insisting I work; she wrote the opposite—“rents don’t want me to have one; I want it for self-commitment.”

I no longer understand this; I don’t know what it means—“self-commitment.”

She always writes of closing the third eye. “I don’t want to open it,” she says, “I firmly closed it.” I had forgotten about this, forgotten everything, forgotten that I even knew of a third eye, forgotten that I’d used it, opened it, closed it, loved it, feared it.

Once, she wrote, “holy hell.”

Once, the step-father said, “Cut the cord.”

I read the journal cover to cover without stopping. The entries ended just before my sixteenth birthday. Closing the journal, never to open it again. Contemplating, trying to come to terms, to forgive who I’d been. There was no denying it: the demonic was real. I’d experienced it, worked with it first-hand. I could no longer keep up the lie of multiple personality disorder, could no longer deny that Christians and Satanists were engaged in a spiritual war. I unrolled my yoga rug, bowed my face to the floor, and said, “I surrender to you, God.” Waiting, nothing, nothing happened. Then, a faint stirring. Rising from, forsaking the yoga rug. Afternoon sunshine on the leaves, dappling. The need to take a shower, to wash myself clean.

Beneath the water like hot rain, seated in the tub, my hands together in prayer, again, “I surrender to you, God.” There it was, the barrier, the wall, insurmountable,

impossible to be dug under or walked around. I was standing in front of a wall and God was on the other side. How could I get in there? Just saying “God” wasn’t cutting it. I needed to call on the one true God. I needed a name. Who was there to call on, besides Jesus Christ? There was no one. I didn’t know how that worked. I didn’t want Jesus to be the way. I wanted another way, a way that would mean I didn’t have to be a Christian, a way that didn’t include Satan and judgment and hell, but there was none other. My stubbornness had spent itself and I had reached my end. I simply could not go on living without God. Without God, I would die.

Almost in spite of myself, I gave up the fight, I took the leap, I said: “I surrender to you Jesus Christ. I accept you as my Lord and my Savior.” No way to pinpoint where the words came from, the necessity of both Lord and Savior, perhaps I heard them in passing, saw them on a tract I’d thrown out years ago, they came from somewhere, something, I knew, God put the knowledge in me, I came to him, he took me, immediately. Immediately I was on my back, arms crossed over my chest in a hug, paralyzed, thumbs tucked under outstretched fingers, and God was there. The barrier was gone forever. He poured out everything, all of himself, his being, his love. I was forgiven. I was loved by the Almighty.

I laid there, overwhelmed by the presence of God, so filled with joy I could only laugh. This was the meaning of the store’s name, “Joy Unlimited.” I knew, *These hands are his hands*, and, *I want to marry Andrew in a house of God*. I knew these things just as certainly as I knew my name. How long I lay there, I do not know. Thirty, forty minutes. Then, Andrew was there, pulling back the curtain, saying, “What are you doing in here?”

What could I say? God had seized my face. I still couldn't move. "Are you a Christian?" he asked.

Finally, I managed it: "I accepted Christ;" the laughter, the joy.

"Now you have a heart of flesh," he said.

Not many days later, I stepped out of the shower, and Andrew was watching a video, and I heard it: "on the cross Christ took the full wrath of God that we deserve, and his righteousness is imputed to us." It struck me, I heard, finally, I heard, I understood.

ONE DAY OLD

The day after I was saved, Andrew and I sidled into a burgundy-cushioned pew of Fairfax Baptist Church. Light poured into the airy sanctuary from all four directions. I realized it was Mother's Day, that I would need to call my mother. A dignified young woman played Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," on a black baby grand piano set on a slightly elevated wooden stage. In front of the pulpit a generous bouquet stood lushly between two lamps on a table covered in pristine white cloth. Gold embroidery declared, "Do this in remembrance of me." I wanted to remember Christ every second of my life. I felt his presence so keenly that I wept the whole service. We sang, and prayed, and sang. From the book of Matthew, the pastor read Jesus' instructions that Peter and Andrew would no longer be fishermen, but fishers of men. I'd never heard of this concept before. Was this, I wondered, what I was supposed to do as a Christian?

"I have a friend," the pastor continued, "with a real gift of evangelism." I stared at him through stunned and weeping eyes. Evangelism was a gift? My mother had always used "evangelist" as a bad word. I looked at the front table and thought about how I wanted to be as clear as the glass around those candles so that the light of Christ could shine through me. We prayed. The pastor asked all the mothers in the congregation to walk to the front and gave each woman a single rose. I stumbled through a song that I

would later learn is called the doxology and then the service ended. Andrew and I stood and mingled into the congregation. It seemed that everyone wanted to shake our hands. I looked into the eyes of each person and thought that this was the nicest group of people I had ever met. I let Andrew respond to every question. I couldn't say anything. I was only one day old.

A NEW CREATURE

One of my first thoughts after I surrendered to Christ was, “I can’t wait to see how yoga can bring me closer to Jesus.” But that thought and desire, just like the desire for pre-marital sex and the need for marijuana, soon fled without any effort on my part. Within weeks I looked on my library of yogic texts with disdain, at my mat and rug and mala beads and Tibetan singing bowls with disgust. Beth had taught me that every yoga pose honored a specific Hindu god or goddess, but I hadn’t realized that conforming myself to those postures was idol worship. To make matters worse, even Hindus admitted their gods were evil.

After a month I worked up the courage to listen to a testimony of a young woman named Purvi who had studied high-level yoga in India before coming to Christ. Andrew had sent me a similar, shorter testimony when he was trying to bring me to Christ, but I couldn’t listen to it then. Now I listened to as many as I could find. Purvi explained that yoga gurus are worshipped as men who have attained enlightenment and are therefore gods. She was taught that her guru could do no wrong. After going to India, Purvi practiced yoga every day, sometimes in extreme conditions, in her search for a spiritual awakening.

“I was getting so sick from doing yoga,” she explained. “I was twitching all night long. I remember the twitching was so horrific...that I would wake up in pain because the twitching was so intense.” She often felt like she was suffocating, and she had “digestive issues” which caused her to “roll in pain” when she ate. She resorted to “a very strict diet,” and her symptoms became so difficult to manage that she was forced to “not have hair.” Lab reports confirmed fungal, parasitic, and bacterial infections. When Purvi told her teachers how sick she was, they told her that she just had to keep doing more yoga. They also recommended that she take her guru’s picture, stare into his eyes, chant certain mantras, and anoint herself with a special ash that had been blessed by the guru. “I only now realize how crazy this was,” she said. “I thought it was normal.” Even when I’d still practiced Bikram yoga, I’d been uneasy with how much even the lowest levels of practice reminded me of a cult: hundreds of people gathered in a humid, hundred-degree room, in unison mimicking the bodily postures of a single man. Purvi’s testimony confirmed that, like all cults, yoga fosters a dependence on men instead of God.

I trashed my yoga mat, rug, singing bowls, and mala beads. Then I turned to my closet and realized I could no longer wear half of what I owned. Out went the pearl-encrusted necklines, the translucent maxi skirts and boho dresses, the four-inch leather heels and strappy platform sandals. I no longer wanted to dress for compliments or bodily attention; if people saw anything in me, I wanted them to see Christ. I loaded up three trash bags with clothing and carted them to the thrift store down the street. Even corduroys, jeans, knee-length skirts, and slacks I would have kept had to go, because they

were falling off me. Since coming to Christ, lust and anxiety no longer governed my eating, and I'd lost over ten pounds without even trying.

The books were next. I opened *Of Love and Other Demons*, which I had taught to my undergraduate students during the semester to end all semesters, and the early works of Charles Simic, and realized that passages which had previously seemed mystical and mysterious were blasphemous. "Their god is the size of a mustard seed," Simic wrote, "so that he can be quickly eaten." I pleaded to God that none of my students had been led astray in my class, then cleared off the shelves. Hundreds of books went to the thrift store, the used book store, and the dumpster; where they went depended upon the conviction I felt from the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus and his Father—who since my surrender to Christ was permanently living inside of my body. Instead of following the law of nonviolence, I followed the law that God had written in my heart. And unlike the law of nonviolence, I actually had the ability to keep God's law, because he put his spirit in me.

One morning I woke up and knew that I had to contact Tony. I had no email address, no phone number. A Facebook profile was my only link. I created a Facebook account and sent him a long message, four pages. I told him about reading the journal, yoga, and my reconciliation to God. I attached a video of a former lesbian who testified that since being born again, she was free from homosexual desires. The message ended with a plea that he would accept Christ. He never replied.

After two months, I said to Andrew, "I'm thinking about eating meat again." We were at a Lebanese restaurant, eating a vegetarian platter.

“Really? Why?”

“Well I’m just thinking about the reasons why I wasn’t eating meat; and it was all this guilt, because of the yoga teachings of nonviolence. But you know in Genesis, after the flood, God tells Noah to start eating meat. So God *told* us to do it. And the New Testament says that all creatures can be eaten with thanksgiving, and that all foods are sanctified by prayer.”

“Huh,” Andrew said. “Yeah, we can start eating meat. The only reason I wasn’t is because you always got really upset.”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah. You’d flip out and tell me I should watch an animal being slaughtered.”

“It is pretty brutal. That’s amazing that the only reason you weren’t eating meat was because of me.” We bought a pound of organic ground beef at the grocery store the next day.

The daze of being a Christian didn’t wear off for at least a month. I would be walking into the sanctuary with the rest of the choir to sing on Sunday mornings, and it would hit me: *I can’t believe I’m a Christian*. Of all the things I could have imagined happening in my life, this was the last possibility. At the moment of my conversion, my entire worldview was annihilated. Over the next several months, intense hours of daily prayer, ravenous reading of the Bible, and the Holy Spirit built a new worldview, one that was solid, one that was built on rock and not sand. When I thought back to Madame Bidegain, I finally understood, experientially, the difference between *aimer* and *adorer*.

When I adore God, I feel like my whole being is spilling out love. I press my face into the ground and seek Christ's face, because the Bible says that's where the knowledge of the glory of God, which is light, is found. When the Lord shines his face upon me, I don't see it, as in a vision. It's more like I sense Christ looking at me; he sees into me as if I were made of cellophane. There is nothing hidden about me. I wish I could know Christ as well as he knows me. He sees every piece of marrow, every blood cell, every sin. If Christ hadn't cleansed me in his own blood, I would be detestable to him. He wouldn't be able to look at me. But I have been reconciled to God through my surrender to Christ.

One day, it hit me: I was basking in the love of God, and the promise, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus," became real to me. All of the promises of heaven, eternal life, and the resurrection honed in on this one truth: nothing could separate me from the love of God. God would keep me in his love throughout eternity just as surely as he did now.

I confess, "I can do nothing without you." All of my life is tied up in you. With your own hands you knit together those who slew you. When you visited the world you had made, you were whipped with braided leather and fragmented bones. To your own people you spoke the truth, and they called you a heretic. They blinded you and beat you with their hands. You didn't say a word. They hanged you on a cross under whose weight you were crushed. You were reviled. In three languages, the accusation declared: King of the Jews. You survived only six hours. When they pierced your side, water and blood poured out of you like wine from an upended vessel. I was your enemy then, in the womb

of a womb, when you bore every instance of my wickedness in your own body. I offended you thousands of times. You let none of it stand in the way of loving me. My heart is molten, it is in the throes of love. When I sliced open my finger on a broken glass blender in high school it throbbed like this, the way my heart throbs now. And the dizziness is there, the same light-headed euphoria. But you don't make me feel wounded; you make me feel whole. You have made me bone of your bones, and flesh of your flesh. You have given me your life and your mind. I give you everything, and you love me. There is no condemnation, no wrath, no indignation in your gaze. You don't see me as I see myself—a struggling pile of flesh—but eternal, glorified, perfected. You don't love me because I am worth loving; you love me because you are love. Your affection and tenderness have staggered me, have reduced me to fondue. I cannot even get up off the floor.

And what have I endured? A devil clutches at my throat and I run to you. My body burns with fever and I weep at your feet. I take every need to you, because I am insufficient for even the smallest thing. It is a miracle that this pleases you. You always answer me, no matter how insipid my questions. You never leave me. No matter how far I stray, you always call me back in gentleness. You are always faithful. You cannot deny yourself. O my sweet and precious King, keep me in your presence all the day long. Preserve me in your love like a comb in honey. I have declared your name, and will declare it.”

UPON THE HOUSETOPS

The first time I evangelized on the streets I threw up three times and didn't pass out a single tract. "Can you pull over?" I asked Andrew on our way to meet Duane and José at Reston Town Center. I'd been reading gospel tracts, which I'd ordered for free online, out loud. My vision began to go spotty; reading the words became increasingly difficult. Finally I gave up, my breathing labored. Before Andrew could stop the car I'd thrown up all the water in my stomach into a plastic bag stashed in the passenger side door for when our cats got car sick. I was fasting and hadn't eaten anything since the night before.

At the town center, the four of us prayed on a street corner before heading to an open courtyard with a fountain. "Sir, can I leave you with something called 'The Good Test'?" Duane asked a fellow snapping on a helmet next to a bike rack. His boldness struck me: I'd never gone up to anyone in the streets like that in my life. Since the first week I'd been saved I'd desperately wanted to preach and pass out tracts on the streets and even on the DC subways, but I was terrified. It was hard enough for me to voice myself to my parents or in class. Going up to complete strangers and talking to them about Jesus seemed impossible. No matter how strong the dread, the desire in me to

evangelize was yet greater. Andrew and I had even switched churches so we could be at one with a street ministry team.

“So usually I’ll just ask people if they’d like something to read and tell them the title,” Duane explained. I eyed the nearby benches. A family of four sat to our right, eating ice cream cones. To the left a young woman wearing earbuds studied her phone. They all seemed so comfortable. Duane added, “Then sometimes you can get a conversation going and do some one-on-one witnessing.” Already José had moved to the family of four. He was so meek and calm that he blended in effortlessly.

I stood, motionless, while Duane passed out some more tracts to people walking by.

“I’m a Christian,” a grouchy, white-haired man said, brushing aside the tract.

“Are you born again?” Duane asked.

“Yes,” he grumped, limping on.

“You gotta examine yourself,” Duane said. The man was gone. Duane turned to me and explained, “I did an altar call back in the 90s. If anyone had come up to me on the streets like this I would have said, ‘Yeah, I’m saved! I’m born again!’ But I wasn’t born again until four years ago.” Duane would explain that at the age of thirty-nine, a friend loaned him a DVD called *The Truth behind Hip Hop*. “I was addicted to hip hop music then,” Duane said. While his wife lived in Virginia, he was working in Georgia where he was having an affair. After several days of watching this DVD, Duane said, “I realized that I’d been serving Satan without even knowing it.” Finally he fell to his knees in a hotel room, repented, and surrendered his life to Christ.

I watched as Duane continued passing out tracts. Then, Andrew passed out a few. Feeling slightly encouraged, I stepped over to the woman wearing the earbuds.

“Excuse me,” I squeaked. She looked up at me sharply. “Would you like something called ‘Absolutely Free?’”

“No,” she said, looking back down at her phone. Conversation terminated.

Nausea crept in again, and I wandered back over to Duane. A few minutes later a security guard came out and told us we were on private property and needed to leave. Duane gave him a tract and we started walking back to our cars. I made it only a few steps before I bent over and puked more water into a flower bed.

“She threw up on the way here, too,” Andrew said, rubbing my back.

“I’m fasting,” I said.

“Do you think it’s demonic?” Duane asked.

“Maybe,” Andrew said. We huddled into a circle and Duane prayed in the name of Jesus that any evil spirits would depart.

“Do you want to go to Lake Fairfax Park?” he asked afterwards. “It’s close to here. We can keep passing out tracts there. It’s public property.”

“All right,” we said. “We’ll follow you.” Andrew and I had spent a frigid night camping at that park during George Mason’s open house two years earlier, when I’d been trying to decide if I should accept the graduate school offer.

We made a circuit around the park, where it turned out several churches were having picnics. We headed back to the front and got people on the way in. Andrew handed a group of Muslims a tract called “A Muslim’s Best Friend.” They huddled

together in a circle, passionately discussing what they read, then turned and left the park. I watched this all from the sidewalk where I was sitting, too nauseous even to stand up.

“So how did you become a Christian?” I asked José.

“I was born again about nine months ago,” he said. “My wife was driving and she found a Bible in the road so she put it in her trunk. Then a few months later one day I just couldn’t keep sinning any more. It was weird. I quit smoking pot, cigarettes, drinking, and playing video games over night. And I told my sister and she does yoga and she was like, ‘Dude, you got enlightenment!’ And she told me to meditate. And so I was meditating and one day the thought came into my head, ‘If I’m not thinking about anything, how can I be thinking about God?’ So then I started reading the Bible my wife found. And I’m a terrible reader. I haven’t read a book in my entire life. But I was reading John, when Jesus talks about being born again, and I realized that’s what happened to me!”

“Wow! Is your wife saved?” I asked.

“No,” he said sadly. “Sometimes I read the Bible with my son, though. He’s ten.”

Two women in park uniforms came out of a shack.

“You’re not allowed to be soliciting,” they told us.

“Ma’am, we’re not selling anything,” Duane said. “We’re just passing out free tracts about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is that considered soliciting?”

“Yes,” they said.

“Isn’t this public property?” he asked.

“It is funded by taxpayer dollars, but the county legislates what can and can’t be done on the property. You could apply in advance for permission if you wanted to come out here.”

Duane left each of them with a tract and we headed to the parking lot. Dark clouds were rolling in and the wind was picking up.

“Rejoice!” José said. “We got persecuted!”

About ten feet from our car I bent over and hurled a puddle of water onto the asphalt. The road was slanted and the water ran downhill, spreading, creeping beneath our tires. Overhead, a group of black crows circled.

On Wednesday nights Andrew and I headed over to George Mason University an hour or two before my 7:20 class. The students loved taking our tracts: we’d pass out two hundred in half an hour, then preach from the courtyard outside the English building where my class was held. The first time I preached, I only made it a few minutes before I ran out of things to say.

“Keep going, sister,” a young black woman said to me in passing. Other nights, when it got colder, we took advantage of a wooden picnic bench butted up against the edge of the courtyard.

“God does not *want* you to perish!” I cried there one evening. “He wants you to *love him*.” A stubby young man got up and stood next to me on the table, peeling green. I turned and looked at him: he was silent and motionless. I kept preaching, wondering if I was about to get punched. After a few minutes he got down and started talking to

Andrew, who later told me the student was a Buddhist. Another student rushed up to me while I was taking a breather and said, “Thank you for your message. It was very passionate, very inspiring,” then hurried away.

Diagonally, to the right of the picnic bench, a Roman-faced clock perched on a skinny pillar the color and texture of the Statue of Liberty. To either side, low walls. Once, on one of those walls, a young man was passed out drunk, his arms stretched out to either side like the limp wings of an albatross. We slipped a tract into his hand and got him some help. Later, when the weather was warmer, I would be preaching from those short walls when a young man got up behind me and started shouting, “Praise Ganesh! I’m going to be reincarnated as a tree!”

Andrew often continued evangelizing on campus while I went to class, where my professor and colleagues denied the deity, and sometimes even existence, of Christ; the truth of the Bible; absolute truth; and the existence of demons. I submitted three essays for workshop that semester, each about Jesus. Every time, the professor opened the class discussion with, “So how can this narrator be less alienating to the general reader?” Each time the same few students, all atheists, would dominate the fifty-minute discussion by making suggestions about how I could be less intolerant. In one essay, I cited Pew Center statistics, a D.C. subcommittee briefing, and testimonies from torture victims showing that Christians are the most persecuted group worldwide. “I think you should evaluate your sources,” one student said. “I don’t really believe these statistics. I think that LGBTQ individuals are more widely persecuted than Christians.” His written comments on the draft were more direct and more hateful. When I revised the essay, I added, “I

have noticed that those who deny the persecution of Christians are usually the ones persecuting us.”

“Is there anything you’d like to ask the class?” the professor would probe after the discussion. “No, thank you,” I would say. Though I always felt beat up and exhausted during these classes, I was always blessed with the closeness and peace of God. One day it struck me that only six months earlier I had gone to parties with these folks, gotten drunk with them, smoked cigarettes and blunts and spliffs with them. I felt like a stranger, an alien, a foreigner. In being reconciled to God, a gulf, wider and deeper than I had ever imagined, now cut me off from my unbelieving classmates. Laid across that gulf, a single, narrow path, one-way, and shunned: the cross.

Meanwhile, only a few stories down, the power and truth of God was manifested as Andrew cast demons out of backsliding believers, preached the gospel, disputed with gainsayers, and encouraged everyone to read the Bible. One evening I walked up to the hill to the campus Starbucks at ten o’clock, tired and discouraged, and waited for Andrew to pick me up. After a few minutes a tall, young man stepped outside and lit up a cigarette. I was standing across the street. The Spirit pressed me to talk to him. We made eye contact and I crossed the road.

“Have you ever heard the gospel?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he said “I’m a Christian.”

“So do you know what happened on the cross?”

“Uh...Jesus died for our sins?”

“Yeah. So do you know how that works?”

“Uh...no. Can you tell me?”

“When Jesus was on the cross, he wasn’t just suffering physical pain. God put the full wrath of hell, for our sins, on Jesus. He’s called a propitiation, or substitute. So that means that when we believe on Jesus, our sins are viewed as having been punished on Christ. And since he’s a substitute, that means we receive *his* righteousness. So God views us as being perfectly sinless like Jesus was.”

“Huh. That makes sense.”

I pointed at his cigarette. “So the Bible says that we can’t continue in sin once we’re saved. Do you know what it says about people who do?”

“No. What?”

“It says we trample the Son of God underfoot.”

We looked at each other seriously.

“This is my husband, by the way,” I said, pointing to Andrew, who’d sat down on a low wall next to us.

“Oh. Nice to meet you,” the young man said.

Andrew preached the gospel for a bit and talked about holiness, regeneration, and the new birth. After a minutes he asked, “So you know smoking’s a sin, right?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” he said.

“So you either have to stop smoking or stop calling yourself a Christian.”

“But don’t Christians still sin?”

“We might sin by accident, but we don’t practice sin. We’re supposed to be dead to sin. What’s your name?”

“James.”

“James. Can I pray for you?”

“Sure,” he said. We each placed a hand on James’ shoulders and Andrew prayed that God would reveal the truth of the gospel to him and that he would repent and be saved. At the end he prayed in tongues for about a minute.

“What was *that*?” James asked when we were done.

“What? You mean at the end?”

“Yeah, it was like you were speaking in a different language.”

“That’s tongues,” Andrew said. “It’s one of the spiritual gifts God can give you after you’re born again.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

We left him with our card and prayed when we got home.

The third time that Andrew and I evangelized with Duane was in front of D.C. nightclubs on a Saturday night. Duane preached from the Word with the aid of a portable amplifier. Andrew and I passed out comic book gospel tracts with titles like, “This was your life!” and “You have a date!” I looked at the faces of everyone passing by; almost nobody could see me. I may as well have been invisible. The Spirit in me grieved for these souls. I told Duane, “This is the first time I’ve been out here since I’ve been saved. It’s a completely different set of eyes.” I wanted to explain myself further, but I saw that Duane already understood. We were seeing with spiritual discernment, the ability to distinguish between truth and error, to see the world from God’s perspective. While the people

milling around us saw pleasure, the three of us saw a world drowning without the hope of Jesus Christ. Only two years ago I had been one of these people, dancing in dark clubs to music my grandmother would be ashamed to overhear, high, drinking a little or not at all, looking for something valuable and precious. I wished somebody would have loved me and told me the truth then, that I would have been spared the misery, that those years could have been used to please God.

Long lines stretched outside of every club. Twenty, thirty people crossed the street and passed by us at a time. I held out the tracts without saying anything. One man shouted that Duane was a false prophet mother fucker nigger. Another man talked to me as if I were a member of a cult.

“You’re looking for something in these clubs because you feel empty inside,” Duane was saying. “I know. I used to be out here, too. I used to commit adultery and fornicate and it never satisfies. There is an emptiness in you that only God can fill.”

A blonde-haired, blue-eyed young man in a pink button-down leaned against a signpost near where Duane was preaching. For ten minutes he stared at Duane without saying a word. Duane asked if his message was speaking to him and the man nodded, putting his hands behind his back. A few minutes later Duane came up to me and said, “I think that guy might have a weapon,” and continued preaching. I made eye contact with the man a few times and smiled; his bright blue eyes were deep with evil. But I wasn’t worried or afraid. I knew that we were there on the Lord’s will, under his providence and protection, in his spirit of joy. A seventy-three-year-old man started talking to me and Andrew. “How do you know that God is real?” he asked us.

“How do you know your feet are real?” Andrew replied.

The man mulled this over for a while. Andrew asked if he had any brothers or sisters, and he told us that his youngest brother is a pastor who regularly prays for his conversion. “And now you’re talking to us,” Andrew said. “God is calling you!”

After the seventy-three year-old walked away with a tract, Andrew approached the man in the pink shirt and asked if he used to go to church when he was younger. He appeared thoughtful but didn’t say anything. A few minutes later he took a handful of tracts from Duane and started passing them out. “The inside part of me wants to give this to you,” I heard him telling one woman, “but the worldly part wants to punch you in the face.” I suggested that he not speak that way because we were representatives of Christ. He cried, “How can we represent Christ? How could we be like him? He is perfect!” My heart leapt for joy. I said, “If you’re born again, you receive the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit makes you like Christ.”

Duane stopped preaching and started handing out tracts. The guy in pink asked if we would pray for him. He said that he had been wanting to give his life to Jesus Christ but he was afraid. He wasn’t sure if the Lord would let him keep his job and he didn’t know how he would survive without it. He said that he’d been trying to get stronger, “but the enemy was always in the next room doing pushups.” He told us his name was John. We prayed for him. Afterwards, Andrew and I talked to him about how God is a real Father who will provide for his children. If John were to keep his eye single on the kingdom of God, everything he needed would be given to him.

Andrew added, “And you’ll have authority over all demons. You’ll be able to cast them out of people.” John asked if we’d cast demons out of him. Andrew, Duane, and I laid our hands on him and began to pray in a mix of English and tongues. “Out, demons! In the name of Jesus Christ. I bind the strongman. I torture you, demons. Go to the pit, where you belong!” A group of contemptuous women passed by. One of them scoffed, “The power of Christ compels you!” Afterwards John said he felt great. We invited him to church. I told him that John was the disciple whom Jesus loved, who rested on his breast at the last supper. We gave him a King James copy of the New Testament. When we parted ways at two o’clock in the morning, John lifted up the tracts and said, “I’m going to finish passing these out before I head home.” The three of us walked back to our car, bouncing on our toes and practically airborne, elated at Christ’s faithfulness.

It’s a Saturday night in mid-November when Andrew and I see the young man sitting on the ground inside our neighborhood’s bus shelter, his outstretched legs shaking. “We should see if he needs any blankets,” I say as we park. “And talk to him about Jesus.”

I huddle into my jacket as we walk to the bus shelter. It’s one of the coldest nights we’ve had, certainly below freezing. The Lamb Center, a Catholic organization, down the street draws a lot of homeless to our area, but I’ve never seen someone this young, this pale, this thin.

“How are you doing?” Andrew asks him. “What’s your name?”

“Devon,” he says.

“Would you like some hot tea?”

“Yeah, that’d be good,” he says, shaking.

“We have some blankets, too.”

“That’d be great,” Devon says.

Inside, I steep a pot of Oolong tea and pour it into a quart-sized glass mayonnaise jar. Andrew grabs a few blankets from off the top of the couch and I rummage through my drawers until I find a bright blue, acrylic hat. On our way out our neighbor across the hall steps out of his apartment.

“Where are you headed?” Michael asks.

“We’re just going to give this guy some blankets and hot tea,” I said.

“Oh. The guy in the bus shelter?”

“Yeah.”

“Well that’s great that you guys are such angels, but you gotta be careful. I saw him climbing a tree out front earlier and shouting at people. I think he might be on PCP.”

At the bus top, Devon pulls on the hat and thanks us.

Andrew says, “The tea’s really hot, so be careful. You might just want to sit with it for a few minutes.”

Devon sets the jar in his lap and wraps his hands around it. He starts telling us about how he used to be in the military down South. He’s hard to follow, his speech jumps around a lot.

“Do you know about Jesus?” Andrew asks him.

“*Jesus?*” he snarls. “I’ve got a mother-fucking nigger in my left arm and you’re talking to me about *Jesus?*” He jabs his right hand into his left arm, which has been most

immobile, stiffened and slightly curled in towards his body. “They call me Dino,” he says. “I seen a bunch of Christians get killed. Thousands of ‘em. All lyin’ there with ketchup all over their necks.”

Andrew and I share a little bit of the gospel. Somehow we get on the topic of casting out devils. “Do you want me to cast some out of you?” he asks.

“Go ahead,” Devon says.

We fix our eyes on him. Andrew orders the demons to leave in the name of Jesus. I follow along, praying in tongues. We stop after a few minutes. A sense of peace has fallen over Devon and I am moved with a sudden, full love for him.

“Can I give you a hug?” I ask him.

“Sure,” he says. He’s finally stopped raving, he’s quiet. I kneel down and hug him through his blankets. He squeezes me tightly for a long time. “Jesus wants you to come home,” I tell him. He doesn’t say anything. I rise and stand next to Andrew again, just outside the shelter.

A few minutes later Devon lights up a cigarette. Only a few puffs and the demons are back, raving in him. He spits, “You guys *are* Christians.” He works himself up into a fervor and stands, blankets falling like green ripples to the concrete. Standing up it’s more obvious, his left arm contorted and seized up, as if he couldn’t move it away from his side even if he wanted to. He’s cursing, raving, crossing the street with the quart of tea, headed towards the stepping stones between the flower beds. Then, the cry of one tormented, the bright sound of shattering, the glass everywhere, opaque steam drifting

towards us like a cloud. Andrew and I are silent, we walk back to our apartment, I fall on my knees, I pray.

SERPENT'S NEST

Andrew and I first encountered Cancun's Nichupte Lagoon on foot, hauling 150 pounds of luggage in the wrong direction due to a map error. A 3:30 a.m. flight from Detroit and a second plane brought us to Cancun International airport. There we'd met an American, Spanish-speaking missionary who'd tried to bargain with the taxi drivers for us, but they wouldn't go lower than thirty dollars a person. The airport only allowed "authorized" taxi drivers in, and they'd set up a price cartel. We gave the missionary five Spanish copies of a booklet containing the gospel of John and Romans before heading for the bus amidst throngs of extortioners. I was beginning to see how little the unconverted—which I had been only eight months before—were willing to help one another.

Two buses brought us to the mangrove-sequestered canal a few hours after sunset. A line of white gazebos cradled couples in hammocks. I would later learn that Cancun takes its name from the Mayan *kaan-cun*, meaning, "serpent's nest." I wondered if any of those nestling couples were honeymooners, too.

Andrew and I pulled our bags to the edge of the canal. To our left, two young people smooched on a white bench. Dirty water flowed into the lagoon from a PVC pipe set in the ledge wall. Andrew said, "I think they might be dumping sewage into it." We

soon reached an open concrete area where the path curved to follow the canal. Without bothering to take off my backpack, I released my suitcases and dropped to the ground. My hair ruffled gently in the breeze. I leaned back and gazed upward. In the sweep of clear sky, the stars declared the righteousness of God.

“Maybe you can ask those guys for directions,” I said, indicating two men on a nearby bench. “Let me give you a tract.” I pulled one out of my purse titled, “Esta Fue Tu Vida!” and watched Andrew speak halting Spanish just out of earshot. I knew zero Spanish. They told us to follow the path around the bend. The air moved quietly. Farther down we saw a pile of crushed grey shrimp husks abandoned on the concrete ledge. They looked eerily exposed and translucent in the orange light. We reached the end of the path, where the canal took a turn under a bridge and emptied into the Caribbean Sea. Several men were throwing out fishing lines. Only one man had a rod. “Do you think that’s it?” I asked, pointing to a dark building across the canal.

“I don’t know,” Andrew said. “I haven’t been here since I was really young.”

“Maybe you can ask those people if they know where it is,” I said, pointing at a young couple dangling their legs over the edge of the canal next to a cardboard box of canned beer. After the man said he didn’t know where it was, I remembered the tracts. Andrew walked back over to the couple to give one as a “thank you.” The young man looked at it for a moment, then jumped up in joy and began searching for the hotel using the maps feature on his iPhone.

“It’s the other way,” he said, showing us the map on his phone and pointing in the direction from which we had just come.

“How far is that? About a kilometer?” Andrew asked.

“Eh...what?”

“Kilo...kilo-metre?”

“Oh! kilometro. Si.”

“It’s about uno kilometro?”

The man zoomed out on his phone and then agreed. We thanked him and he sat back down while Andrew made multiple trips to carry our luggage up a nearby staircase leading to Boulevard Kukulkan. “People here love the tracts!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah,” he said. “Even though this is taking us a while, it’s good that we’re getting to talk to so many people and give out tracts.”

On the main road, an entrepreneurial taxi driver saw us struggling with our luggage, picked us up, and got us the rest of the way there; we left him with a tract, too.

The hotel looked unassuming from the outside. You would almost pass by without seeing it, only two stories tall and slightly set back from boulevard Kukulkan, its whitewashed, pebble-textured curves dwarfed by the surrounding skyscraper hotels that only get bigger and bigger the farther you go down the peninsula, the farther you get from town. There Mexico begins to disappear. Fifteen-peso street taco shops succumb to looming multi-story designers like Prada and Louis Vuitton and Puma. Farther down, almond trees and heady oleanders and shoreline mangroves and “PELIGRO! DANGER! CROCODILE!” signs evaporate like alcohol vapors, leaving a residue of mansion-sized, colonial yellow tequila stores and spacious cigar shops and American steak and seafood houses. But if you keep going far enough the hotels vanish, the narrow peninsula widens,

and Kukulcan enters a tangled land jungle giving way to still waters punctuated by mangrove islands. Kukulcan is the Mayan name for the god called Quetzalcoatl by the Aztecs, a winged serpent. For centuries, worshipping Kukulcan was the core of the state religion in the Yucatan Peninsula—though the Mayans served many gods, all of whom they believed were sinister, entire cities were built around massive pyramid temples dedicated to the worship of Kukulcan alone. The Mayans believed that after they died, they descended into a nine-level underworld where they were relentlessly tortured by the gods they had worshipped while on earth. When I told this to Andrew, he said, “That sounds like it was probably true.”

Inside the hotel lobby, veined white marble covered floors and walls. A solid, eight-foot slab of deep green granite with traces of red invited guests to speak with any of the four bilingual clerks who stood at the ready twenty-four hours a day. The only things on the slab were a four-foot high fresh flower arrangement and a hefty stone engraved with the words *Check Out 11 a.m. (One hour grace period)* and its Spanish equivalent. Two vigilant bellboys at the entrance-end of the granite slab stood at the ready in front of a massive, photoshopped advertisement depicting a group of gringos off-roading over massive boulders in front of a pyramid. “CAR RENTALS” announced the top of the advertisement. At the bottom, a blaze of hieroglyphic-style letters: “CHICHEN-ITZA”. The whole situation reminded me of a back-country camping trip during which Andrew and I spent a night in the midst of coyotes and black bears, seeing no one except a park ranger whose hiking recommendation was, “If you don’t like people, go in the morning.” The following day we trekked two miles to a waterfall, where throngs of tourists ate ice

cream cones and pushed toddlers in strollers. When I went into the bathroom to brush my teeth, I felt like an animal that had crawled out of the woods.

“Mom and Ivan have a timeshare,” I said. “But it’s nothing like this.”

“What do you mean?” Andrew asked. Before I could answer, one of the bellboys rushed over with a dolly and asked for our room number.

“It’s okay, I can carry it,” I said.

“No, no. What is your room number?”

“I can hold on to it.”

“Yes, but for the check-in. You will leave it here for the check-in.”

“It’s okay, I can take it.”

“No,” he said, grinning.

“We’re just going over there,” Andrew told me, pointing to an Italian-themed restaurant inside the lobby. “Then we’re going to come back for it.”

I didn’t understand, but they eventually convinced me to let go of the luggage we had carted all over town by bus and foot and taxi. In the restaurant, clusters of round metal roll-top chafers steamed above sternos. When the utilities at my dad’s house in New York were cut off for two years, he used sternos like that to keep from freezing to death in the winter. A young woman told us to have a seat while she printed out some information for us.

“We can eat this?” Andrew asked.

“Yes, it’s for you.”

“It’s free?”

“Yes, free buffet.”

A waiter came up and asked if we would like some drinks.

“Is it free?” Andrew asked.

“Yes, sir. We have Pina Colada, Martini, Margarita...”

“We don’t drink,” he said.

The waiter gave us a funny look before rattling off a list of soda names. We ordered two cokes. The woman left, and we piled our plates with chicken wings, fried fish, shrimp cocktails, fruit tarts, cream puffs, and miniature cakes in the shape of swans. The only thing we’d eaten since we left Detroit at three a.m. were airplane pretzels and peanuts, chocolates and beef jerky Andrew’s mom had made us take, and a hunk of steamed and deep fried Vietnamese bologna that we’d scarfed down while we waited in line to go through customs. I prayed over my food with deep gratitude, flabbergasted at God’s generosity and faithfulness in providing for us.

“I had no idea that your parents basically bought a timeshare at a five star hotel. I’ve never been in a place this nice.” I couldn’t fathom why the place only had a four star rating on Trip Advisor. “I can’t believe when you check in they give you free food. And it’s great food. And it’s not just a little bit.”

I looked over at the only other people in the restaurant. Half-empty mixed drinks surrounded a group of casually dressed adults who were deep into a sales pitch. Two kids wearing bathing suits came up to them, hung around for a few minutes, then left. I marveled that people would fly all the way out here to be waited on in such a fancy environment while wearing T-shirts and cargo shorts.

“I can see why people who stay here would just spend sixty dollars to have someone drive them here from the airport,” I said.

“You mean because they’re probably rich?”

“Yeah.”

The woman returned with some paperwork. “So are you here on your honeymoon?”

“Yes,” we said, smiling.

“Well, congratulations. So are you the owner of the timeshare?”

“No, my dad owns it. He’s just letting us stay here. But he and my mom are coming next week.”

“And how long will you be here for?”

“A month,” Andrew said.

“A month! Wow. Well, welcome. Are you interested in any tours while you are here, doing any sightseeing?”

“No, not really. Just relaxing.”

“Huh, okay. Well then you just need to sign a few things...”

The bellboy helped us take our luggage to our room, which was enormous. We left him with a tract but had no money on hand. He went away sorrowful. A few minutes later Andrew found a dollar, ran out front, and gave it to the man. We couldn’t figure out what time it was because all the clocks were wrong. It had been dark for some time and we were tired. We pulled open the sliding door and stepped outside.

“This is so crazy,” I said. “The lagoon is just right here. You just walk out of your room and it’s right there.”

“Yeah,” Andrew said. “It’s pretty great.”

A row of reclining chairs lined the lagoon. Each morning Andrew and I would settle into a pair, letting the sun warm our legs and the pages of our Bibles. The need to know the Word of God in its entirety pressed on me. By the end of the trip, I’d read Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, first and second Samuel, and first and second Kings. Reading the Bible actuated a beautiful cycle: the more I read, the more I knew about God. The more I knew about God, the closer I could draw to him in prayer. The closer I drew to him in prayer, the better I understood the Scriptures.

One day a woman sat in the chair next to me and started reading *The Case for Christ*. She seemed old enough to be retired. “Look,” I whispered to Andrew, surreptitiously pointing at the lady.

“Yeah, I saw,” Andrew said. I looked at her for a few moments. I didn’t want to interrupt her, but I thought she might look up. She didn’t, and I went back to reading the Bible. Later she rose from the chair and said, “What’s that book you’re reading?”

“The Bible?”

“No, the other one.” I looked down at the chair, where a small, thin volume sat on the green cushion in front of my crossed legs.

“Oh, that’s *Holy Spirit Power* by Charles Spurgeon. It’s good.”

“Oh, I love the Holy Spirit!” she said.

“That’s great!” I paused, then said, “I saw you were reading *The Case for Christ*.”

“Yes, it’s very good. He presents a lot of evidence for the historical existence of Christ.” The lady introduced herself as Kathy and her sleeping husband as Dave, then headed back to her room.

We continued to see them at the lagoon. One day I gave them a copy of every gospel tract that Andrew and I had written. The following day, Dave said he’d liked the tracts and that he’d gone to our website and sent us an email.

“Oh! We haven’t checked it yet,” Andrew said.

“I just put some thoughts in there and a website I thought you might like. It’s really encouraging to see the two of you so young and so far along,” Dave said. We asked him if he could share how he came to know Christ.

“I received the Holy Spirit at a naval base in 1976.” He told us. “This man who I’d never met before came up to me and started talking to me about Jesus. He had a Bible. And, I don’t know quite how it happened, but a few hours later we were in the chapel and I was saying the sinner’s prayer.” He continued, “But then I was immediately sent out on the aircraft carrier, and, sad to say, it’s not a very easy place to follow Christ. So I kind of fell away for a while.”

A few years later Dave left the navy and met and married Kathy. He explained, “It became apparent in our marriage that we needed to go to church. So we started going to this Seventh-day Adventist church. And they had a *lot* of rules. You couldn’t wear any jewelry at all, not even wedding bands. But you could wear a thousand-dollar brooch on your sweater, which some women in the church did. That hypocrisy and the legalism always bothered me.

“Well I was really high up in this church, I was an elder and I taught Bible studies. And I had all this pride, I was really proud of how much I was doing for the church. And I worked in the public schools, too, as an administrator. So I was always used to being in charge, and leading, and I was very proud. I had no idea how to serve. Even now pride is something I battle with, because I’m submitting to Christ, and I’m not used to listening to someone else. And the breaking point with the Seventh-day Adventists was, there was this young lady who taught one of the Sunday Bible studies with the kids. And she was a very godly woman. You could see it in her character. And they told me to tell her that she had to take off her wedding ring if she was going to be teaching the class. Because they didn’t want the kids to see her wearing it. And so I told her and she said, ‘I can’t do that. My husband won’t allow it.’ And so they made her stop teaching the class. At that point, I left the church.”

It wasn’t until they both retired years later that they joined a congregation belonging to the Church of the Nazarene, which emphasizes personal holiness growing out of individual fellowship with Christ, and devoted themselves fully to Christ. “I figured, once I retired, I had all this time. So I started getting really into the Bible. And really following hard after Christ. And now I do the evangelism team at our church.”

“That’s great. I’m happy to hear that you really started following Christ, even so late,” I said. “Sometimes I get discouraged because I think that the older people get the less likely they are to commit their lives to Christ. But your testimony shows that it can happen.”

“It really can. With the evangelism group, we talk about how, in daily conversations you have with people, you can move from talking about the everyday to sharing the gospel. And we believe that when a person is ready to hear the gospel, God will send someone to tell them. Like in Acts, with the eunuch. God had prepared the eunuch to hear the gospel, and then he sent Philip. So we’re not trying to jam it down anyone’s throats. We’re looking for fruit that’s ripe.” Dave got a kind of soft look in his eye. “I know the Bible says the way is narrow. But I feel like we could still fit everybody through there. Even though it’s narrow, if everyone got lined up...”

Andrew and I looked at him, smiling sadly. We all knew that the verse he referred to said, “narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (King James Version, Matthew 7.14). Even still, I recognized his desire, a sorrowing love I too had felt, pushing through crowds on the D.C. metro, in the national mall, crowds of people wandering, a tangled serpent’s nest. “This is so crowded,” I said to Andrew in despair. “Think how crowded it’s going to be at the judgment. All of humanity, every person who ever lived, going before the throne of God.” One afternoon, after hours in the streets, I sat down on the sidewalk and cried. I prayed. When I looked up I saw a young man standing next to me. “Would you like a tract?” I said, offering him one titled “Christ’s Resurrection: The Proof and Promise.”

“No,” he said. “I’m fine.”

I stared at him for a long time. “It’s so sad,” I finally said. “There’s so many people here, and almost all of them are going to hell, and they don’t have to.”

“Yeah,” he mused. “You’re probably right.”

“Do you know how to be saved?”

“That’s not something I’m really worried about right now.”

I stared at him, stupefied, for what must have been thirty seconds. Around us, women with bright blue hair walked around in Japanese cosplay outfits. Earlier that day, a young woman on the metro had spent twenty minutes talking about how her friends ate pretzels out of her mouth. I couldn’t understand how people could choose a lifetime of utter vanity over eternal reconciliation with a perfect, loving God. Their hardness of heart, their stubbornness, so grieved me that I wanted to give up, to quit the whole business of evangelism. But I couldn’t, because I loved them. Even when they cursed God and ignored me, when they assaulted me and ripped my tracts in half, I loved them. Once, I’d been one of them. I had to tell them the truth. Only God could save them, but I still had to tell them the truth. Finally, I opened my mouth.

PYRAMID MAGIC

Andrew visited Cancun in the early nineties, before two hurricanes swept through, sucking thousands of pounds of beach sand into the sea. He was in second grade, the youngest of four, all of whom were on vacation with their parents. The resort had not yet built the wall between the small beach and the lagoon, had not yet expanded the pool and put hot tubs on everyone's patios. The Caribbean Sea scattered conch shells the size of Andrew's head every few hundred feet, empty and heavy on the bright white sand. When he waded into the lagoon, shrimp swam away in fear. Once he caught one in his hands, but he thought it was gross and threw it back in. Sometimes Andrew would lie on the dock and push down dinner-plate-sized jellyfish with his hand. They were slimy and transparent, so that he could see all their insides. The jellyfish would sink down and then bob back up again, unperturbed. One day over twenty of them washed up dead on the shore. Few boats passed by. Andrew tried to go kayaking once, but after he got in he suddenly feared that the water would be too deep. He sat in the bobbing kayak, not daring to push off the dock.

One day of their family vacation was dedicated to a day trip to the ruins of Chichen-Itza, about one hundred twenty miles from Cancun in the Yucatan peninsula. The first stop on their tour was a seventy-nine-foot tall, four-sided stone pyramid rising

out of an empty green plain. It dominated the site, much of which had fallen into ruin since its construction fifteen hundred years before by the Mayan Itza people. Every hotel brochure and travel agency poster with a picture of Chichen-Itza showed this pyramid, the temple of Kukulcan, sometimes referred to as El Castillo. A ninety-one step staircase ran up the center of each face. Four faces, two for the equinoxes and two for the solstices; ninety-one steps, for the ninety-one days between each solstice and equinox. When added to the final step at the top of the pyramid, the number of steps from all four sides totals three and sixty-five. The nine main tiers that make up the pyramid represent the nine levels of the Mayan underworld.

“The stairs are very steep,” their tour guide said. “Don’t try to climb straight up the pyramid. Go in a zigzag.” Andrew looked at the staircase, which went up the side of the pyramid at a forty-five degree angle. The faces of each individual step were even steeper. A rope knotted at regular intervals cascaded down the center of the staircase.

He took a few steps closer. Both of the staircase’s walled sides terminated in a serpent head that lay flat on the green grass. Its mouth, large enough for Andrew to crawl inside, jarred open like that of the nine-foot-crocodile we would see sunning across the street from the supermarket when we visited Cancun on our honeymoon. Andrew peered inside. On the top and the bottom of the inside of the mouth, near the front, were four squares. Perhaps what now appeared as worn-out molars had once been fangs. A deep-set eye carved beneath a protruding brow ridge glared from each side of the snake’s head. In the corner of the serpent’s mouth, where a dimple might form, whorled a cabalistic spiral.

A flat tongue as long as the rest of the head, engraved with ridges like a xylophone, stuck out of the mouth.

“I don’t want to go up,” Andrew’s sister, Kim, said.

“What? Are you sure? This is the only chance you will have in your whole life,” their mom said.

“I’m not going,” she repeated, watching as her dad and brothers began their ginger ascent.

“Okay, wait here until Mom comes back down.”

Andrew angled his body sideways and began to climb. He kept the rope in view but didn’t grab it.

“Once you get to the top,” the guide continued, “there’s a part you can go in that leads to a second temple inside the pyramid. You can go in the top part, but don’t go down the steps. They’re slippery, and you could fall and die and nobody would even know you were in there.” When Andrew reached the top he looked into the entrance of the two-story temple leading to the inner pyramid. Laughter echoed amidst a series of flashing lights. Andrew got spooked. He didn’t know that while the outer pyramid was dedicated to the sun, the inner one was dedicated to the moon; and that inside lurked a statue of the god Chac Mool and a red-painted throne in the shape of a jaguar, inset with jade. He didn’t know that part of the reason the pyramid was so steep was because humans were sacrificed at the top, or that the plain surrounding the pyramid served a similar purpose. He didn’t know, either, that dozens if not hundreds of these pyramids existed throughout Mexico, constructed for sacrifices which persisted until at least the

1700s in the Yucatan. The late archaeologist Dr. Herman Smith, who lived in Belize for twelve years while studying the ancient Maya, wrote the following in an article titled, “Maya Human Sacrifice...say it isn’t so”:

The usual method of such a sacrifice was decapitation in a public ceremony. Aside from decapitation, the favored method in Postclassic times was a trick acquired from the Mexican cultures to the north, the removal of the heart. Women and children were sacrificed just as often as men. The intended victim was stripped and painted blue before being led to a courtyard or temple where the victim would be placed face-up over a convex altar-like stone also painted blue. The arms and legs of the victim were held by specially designated priests while a fourth, called the *nacom*, would penetrate the victim's chest with a flint knife just below the left breast. Reaching inside the chest cavity, the *nacom* would pull out the still beating heart and hand it to another priest, who would then smear the blood on that idol to which the sacrifice had been made. If the sacrifice had taken place on the top of a pyramid, the corpse would be thrown to the courtyard below where priests of lower rank would skin the victim except for the hands and feet. The skin would then be worn by the officiating priest who would solemnly dance among the spectators. If the victim had been an especially brave warrior his body might be butchered and eaten by the nobles and other spectators.

Smith goes on to describe an alternate practice involving a bow and arrow, in which the sacrifice was stripped, painted blue, and bound to a stake on the plain near the base of the pyramid:

According to a sixteenth century account, “The foul priest in vestments went up and wounded the victims in parts of shame, whether it was a man or woman, and drew blood and came down and anointed the face of the idol with it.” Dancers, all armed with bows and arrows, “began one after another to shoot at his heart...in this manner they made his whole chest...like a hedgehog of arrows.”

Andrew turned and looked down the steps he had just climbed; they were so steep that he felt like he was looking straight down. About ten years later, in 2006, climbing the Kukulkan temple would be forbidden after an eighty-year-old woman from San Diego stumbled while climbing down the pyramid, went over the edge, and fatally fractured her neck and skull after plummeting sixty feet to the ground. Andrew slid down the steps on his butt.

After reuniting with Kim, the family headed with the rest of the group to an east area of the site called Thousand Columns, an elevated plaza 250 feet in length filled with massive round and square pillars. The tourists were instructed to stand at a certain point and clap, or hoot, or shout. Andrew clapped his hands and the sound echoed back to him exactly seven times. If they had clapped at the base of the pyramid, the tall, shallow steps would have returned with a sound identical to the chirp of the quetzal bird, whose emerald tail feathers were more valuable than gold to the ancient Mayans. When perched, the bird appears splendidly fat. Its wings and face shine emerald iridescent; its back is clothed in blue, and what must be one of the most vibrant reds found in nature ruffles its stomach. The whole of its eye is perfectly black: there is no distinction between pupil and iris. It glistens like oil. The resemblance between the quetzal and a feathered serpent pops

out when the creature is in flight: its tail splays out like a fan, and two feathers, easily twice the length of the bird, drift behind it like ribbons.

The tour guide led Andrew's group west to the main ball court. Surrounding the court were sculpted walls depicting the nature of the games. In one panel, a man grasped the severed head of another man, presumably the loser of the game. Blood spurted from the decapitated man's neck in serpent-shaped fountains. Though some historians speculate that being sacrificed was an honor, I suspect that the ball games would not have gone on for days at a time if the players were keen on losing. If the loser wasn't decapitated in honor of Kukulcan, he would be offered to the rain god Chaac in the nearby Well of Sacrifice, which was the next stop on the tour. This cenote, or sinkhole, may be the source of the name of the site, Chichen-Itza: "chi," meaning "mouth," and "chen," meaning "well."

Three archaeologists who dove into this well in 1909 were surprised to discover that a sixteen-foot thick layer of blue pigment covered the bottom of the sinkhole. Innumerable copper bells, clay pots, and artifacts of gold and jade reached out from the semi-hardened, cracked sludge, like dozens of half-buried souls perpetually straining out from quicksand. Fifty years later these items would be dredged to the surface. One archaeologist discovered a pot bearing remnants of blue paint. Another pulled back a sheath of gold, perhaps expecting to expose a dagger, and found instead an inscribed bone.

Along with these objects, the skeletons of over one hundred and twenty-seven people have been dredged from the cenote. They represent both men and women, young

and old, though one recent study suggests that over eighty-percent of the remains may have belonged to boys between the ages of three and eleven. Some children were skinned or dismembered before being thrown in. Others were painted blue with a mixture of indigo, tree resin, and clay; adorned with jade jewelry; beaten; and heaved in alive. When adult men were sacrificed, their hearts were sometimes removed first.

Besides human beings, the Mayans would mutilate tools, scepters, weapons, and idols made of wood and throw them into the cenote; tear textiles and throw them into the cenote; and damage pottery bowls, jade necklaces, gold, and copper and throw them into the cenote. Archaeologists interpret this intentional damage as a way of “killing” the object before sacrificing it to Chaac in exchange for rainfall on their fields of maize. That people would render one of their largest freshwater sources undrinkable by polluting it with their slaughtered kin is doubtless perverse, and I am sure their consciences cried out against them. But even more than perverse, the practice is heartbreaking. Just last year I read an account of an Indian woman who drowned her firstborn son in the river Ganges as an offering to Hindu gods. When a missionary reached her only hours later and shared the gospel with her for the first time, she wept, and said, “How is it that you didn’t come sooner?” If we are slack in proclaiming the gospel to every creature, as Christ commanded, we will be just as much to blame for these modern-day atrocities as those who failed to reach the Mayans with the gospel fifteen hundred years ago.

Andrew was about the right age to be sacrificed when he visited the well, but by then it was cordoned off with yellow caution tape. Unlike the clear, blue water of the Caribbean Sea or Nichupte lagoon, the cenote water was an opaque, toxic-looking cross

between emerald and sage. The hole was massive, sunken into the earth, and deep. One of the tourists in Andrew's group, old enough to be someone's dad, stepped over the tape and headed towards a tree that bowed over the sinkhole. He turned to face the crowd, leaned against the tree, and grinned for a photo. Andrew slipped underneath the tape and edged towards the sinkhole. He kicked a few stones across the ground, then picked them up and began hurling them into the cenote. He was too far from the edge to see when they went in, to hear when they passed from air to underworld. He took a few steps forward. He'd always been susceptible to vertigo, but if he didn't get too close...

"Andrew!" his mom shouted. "Get back here! You're going to fall in!"

Andrew turned and hurried back to the other side of the tape. Soon after, the guide announced that the tour was over. The bus wouldn't be heading back to Cancun until evening, so the visitors had time to explore the area on their own.

"But," he divulged, "If you come back to the pyramid at eight o'clock tonight, there will be a light show. It will show the snake on the side of the pyramid. The snake is Kukulcan. Two times each year, in the spring and the fall, the sun makes the snake appear on the side. But since that is not today, we do the light show so you can see what it is like." He added, "Look at the bottom of the pyramid. There you will see the shadow meet the head."

The sun slipped out of sight, and night fell swiftly and totally. Andrew headed off with his mom to a large, canopied square. Vendors clustered table to table. Hand-embroidered handkerchiefs that said "Chichen-Itza" stood in neat stacks next to columns of bold magnets and woven bracelets. T-shirts with phrases like "Pyramid Magic"

swayed from crooked poles. After some haggling Andrew's mom bought two hammocks for thirty U.S. dollars. Another salesman sold her a miniature totem pole, a palm-sized adobe replica of El Castillo, and two demon-faced clay figurines holding pots in their laps. Ten years later, when Andrew and I were living together before we gave our lives to Christ, we would store our yarn needles in those miniature pots. Andrew's family returned to the plain, where rows of collapsible nylon chairs stood like a spellbound army gazing upon the north face of the Kukulkan temple. They found some seats near the front and waited.

If this had been the spring or autumn equinox, the phenomenon, known as the descent of Kukulkan, would have been at its height only hours earlier. It would have begun gradually, perhaps even going unnoticed for the first hour. The north side of the pyramid would have slowly fallen into shadow from the top downward. As the serpent's shadow began to descend, one triangle of light would appear on the side wall of the staircase, then a second, then a third. As the sun fell lower in the sky, a half-diamond pattern of light and shadow, reminiscent of a diamondback rattlesnake, would manifest on the side of the pyramid. After several hours, seven triangles of light in a narrow, thirty-four meter long strip would garnish the top of the side wall of the staircase. For forty-five full minutes Kukulkan's light body meets his stone head. During this time the Mayans believed that Kukulkan had descended from the heavens to meet mankind, blessing their harvests and fertility. As his body faded, the Mayans said, he slithered to the Well of Sacrifice. There he slipped over the edge, slinking through the murky pit into the underworld.

Andrew shifted in his seat. He wasn't sure what the guide had meant about the snake appearing: was tonight the special night, only once a year, when it could be seen? Where was he supposed to look? In spite of the attraction's protesting lights, the immense pyramid was nearly invisible in the darkness. Calls of unfamiliar birds soared over the singing of the wind through palms and trees that Andrew couldn't name. In my imagination, the reality that Andrew and his family are huddled in the depths of a thick, tangled jungle suddenly hits home. Who could say what creatures crept in this downy blanket of night? Who could say from what deep source the wells sprang, or to where the rivers returned?

All the lights went out. From the direction of El Castillo, the deep voice of a man bellowed in a Spanish peppered with Mayan. A heavy red suddenly threw the pyramid into relief. A traditional-sounding track of exotic birds, thundering drums, flutes, and stringed instruments drifted over the crowd as the man's voice deferred to that of a young-sounding woman. Andrew sat in the midst of camera flashes as an array of colors struck different areas of the pyramid. He peered at the ground, trying to discern the serpent, and failing. Men and women around him spoke in marvelous tones. The pace of the music increased, the texture growing more frenzied as increasingly complex patterns of light rotated like an accelerated arm of the galaxy across the nine stone terraces. Who could say, who could know, if the pounding they heard was from the beating of drums, or if blue-painted feet produced it as they stamped into dry earth, forming a pattering undercurrent that demanded rain? Who could say whether, overhead, there sailed arcs of well-aimed arrows, dancing in the fires of the night?

NOTHING WAVERING

One afternoon Andrew and I walked down the lagoon to the marina-side of the resort. The dried, woven palm fronds of a palapa nearly the size of our one-bedroom apartment rustled over the wooden dock. We heard the water lapping beneath our feet. I set my pink, geisha-covered, nylon backpack, which Andrew called my “female backpack,” on one of the rush lounge chairs beneath the palapa. Andrew sat down. I walked over to the edge of the dock. At this dock a few days earlier I had seen a fluorescent blue parrot fish and something resembling a needlefish. Another American at the resort said she’d seen a three-foot crocodile floating by here just the other night. The sun shone through the water to the dark brown sand punctuated with seaweed and more scraggly looking plants. No wildlife today. I walked back over to Andrew just as the small boat, which the hotel staff called the “water taxi,” we had been waiting for pulled up to the dock.

“Hola amigo!” Andrew said as we stepped onto the *Samantha*. “Tu ves los cocodrillos hoy?” We sat down on the side of the boat underneath the black collapsible canopy.

“Cocodrillos! No, not today. When the boats start they go to the other side of the lagoon. But if you want, I can take you to see them.”

“Oh, really? Maybe next time we can go see them?” Andrew asked.

“Sure, sure,” he said, adding, “The boats scare them.”

A few other tourists got onto the boat with us and we sped towards a narrow canal leading through a patch of mangroves to the east. Ten minutes later we arrived at a similar but smaller palapa, rectangular instead of circular in shape.

“Quieres un regalo?” Andrew asked the driver, offering him a copy of “Esta Fue Tu Vida!”

“Oh, gracias! Asta luego amigo.” Andrew left a tip in the jar and the man helped me off the boat. We walked to the other side of the street to the Sunset Royal, the high-rise sister hotel to the Sunset Club Lagoon. The lobby floors and walls were covered in large sheets of black marble. An aquarium with colorful, scale-less fish divided the room in half. We changed into our modest swimwear in the lobby bathroom and passed through the revolving door on the opposite end of the lobby. A dripping child carrying a hamburger and a stack of fries ran past us. Sunburned white folks with tropical-looking alcoholic drinks lay around a tiled and tiered pool. Everything seemed to sparkle.

“B Forty-Nine! B Forty-Nine!” We walked around the pool to a kiosk and exchanged two plastic cards for rolled, white towels. Plastered to the front of the kiosk was an advertisement for CocoBongo: Show and Disco. It read:

MONDAY: Wet T-Shirt Contest

TUESDAY: Bikini Contest \$3,000 Prize

WEDNESDAY: A Classy Evening

THURSDAY: Wet T-shirt Contest and Bikini Contest

FRIDAY: Party Lovers

SATURDAY: Electric Disco

About a week later we would have the misfortune of driving through the CocoBongo street after dark. The Ford pickup we were in, which belonged to a Mexican brother in Christ who sold pottery at the hotels, gave off a terrible odor of gasoline that seeped into my stainless steel water bottle for days. The downpour meant we could barely open the windows. Through the pattered panes we saw a row of rounded cages trapping dancing women who wore black thongs and bras. A sign outside had a quote from somebody famous saying, “PUTS VEGAS NIGHTLIFE TO SHAME!” Tickets started at sixty-five dollars U.S. A nearby club shaped like a Roman palace glowed purple and red. Their sign depicted three silhouetted women in front of a scarlet background; scrawled beneath it in Jurassic Park style lettering were the words: Red District Wednesdays.

All colors of flashing lights rotated over the open-air bars, open-air restaurants, and open-air souvenir shops surrounding the clubs. Young men and women thronged the streets. The lights colored the drops of rain on our windows. The gasoline was giving me the spins. There was nowhere I could look that wasn't revolting. I stared straight down until we passed through.

From the pool, we walked down a zigzag of stone steps to the beach. Red flags dotted the shore about every twenty-five yards. There were no yellow or green flags today—that meant the currents were strong. A few bold swimmers threw themselves into the oncoming waves, each at least eight feet in height. Andrew and I set our towels and

bags on a chair. A young man came up to us and asked if we wanted to buy tickets to CocoBongo.

“No, es pecado,” we said, meaning, *No, it's sin.*

“What! Es pecado? Dancing?”

“Si! Demasciado pecado.”

He walked on through the thick white sand.

Andrew and I left our clothes on the chairs and headed to the shore. I waded in a few steps next to a flock of gulls standing in formation, facing the sea with their heads tucked into their shoulders. The undertow sucked several inches of sand out along with the water; a swift succession of waves buried both my feet up to my ankles. The seagulls leapt as one into the air, soared over the shallows, and landed about two feet from where they'd started. The wind ruffled the sides of their heads and wings. They looked exceptionally fat. I wondered how such needle-thin legs could support them. “They must always have their knees locked,” Andrew suggested when I asked him. One of the waves rebounded off the shore and collided with an oncoming wave. They cancelled each other out, and there was a brief calm.

Some days when we visited the Caribbean Sea the water beckoned with a bright cerulean; on others it gestured towards aquamarine or even emerald. One afternoon the sun was so bright and the sea so crystal clear that I saw schools of deep grey fish, each the length of my forearm, dashing just inches from my legs. Glinting clouds of hundreds of shining white, smelt-sized flying fish would cascade from the rolling waves just before they broke. On days when I brought my goggles, I would duck under the waves and

watch as they punched into the sandy bottom, billows of fine sediment giving way to craters that were filled back in by the undertow only moments later. On other days the surface would be so flat that I laid on my back for five minutes at a time, gently rolling over the crouched crests and dipping into the shallow valleys. Sometimes a sandbar appeared about twenty feet off the shore, making a swift yet pleasantly mild current between, where I would paddle my arms and legs while floating on my back and sing, “Moving along, moving along, moving along, just moving along.” Eventually the current would start pulling out to sea and I would swim to shore, walk back, and start over.

Today it was a challenge to get into the sea. The sky was clear, the sun bright and warm, the water temperate, but the waves were dark. There was no sandbar today, and the water deepened quickly off the shore. I swam out, diving into and underneath the oncoming waves. Andrew, ahead already, always faster than me, was throwing himself backwards directly into the breaking waves. I stayed a little to the side so that if he got rolling we wouldn’t collide. I had grown up on the Florida coast and knew how to swim in the open water, but the sea today was particularly ferocious. I was reminded of a recurring dream I’d had for years. It was never exactly the same twice. But each time, I would be swimming in a large body of water—sometimes an ocean, sometimes a massive pool—when I would look down through the water clear as glass and suddenly realize the bottom was hundreds of feet away. A double whammy of terror and panic would hit me. I was so small: what was I doing in all this water? How had I gotten there?

Though this was not a day when the water was clear as glass, I was suddenly struck by the horrifying immensity of the sea. Who knew what lurked in the sunless

places, miles deep, where steaming water hissed and bubbled nonstop from the mantle's cracks and wounds? Who could say when a small shift would send skyscraper-high tsunamis to your shore? As you stood deadlocked in fear and regarded the inescapable oncoming wave, would you see sharks and sponges and swordfish roiling in the midst?

I was over chest-high into the water when a strong pull brought the level down to my hips. I knew a big one was coming. This wasn't a day when one could get past the breaks and float in the calm. Today, the waves were relentless. In Hawaii, I had come over a dune and seen surfers sluicing over rip curls the size of hills. I stopped heading towards the shore when I was still fifty yards away. These waves were nothing like that, but they were enough to punch me underwater and send me rolling. I tried to duck under before it hit, but it was in vain. It broke right on me. Water surged in and out of my ears as if they were tidepools. My forehead began to burn with saltwater that'd been injected through my nose. I kicked up off the bottom, praying I wouldn't hit a stingray, and soared into the breeze just in time for another monster to clobber me under.

I cast my eyes for the shore. The red flags thrashed ominously in the unrelenting wind. They looked like they would tear in half at any moment. The white wooden lifeguard chair remained unmanned. In the distance I saw Andrew, still smacking himself on the waves. I was getting pulled away. I set myself to swimming parallel to the shore in the direction I'd come, ducking underneath the breaks as best I could. My breath grew shallow. Dizziness and nausea crept in. I felt like I was on one of those simulator rides like they had at Busch Gardens that had always given me motion sickness. The waves beat, again and again, rolling me in all kinds of directions.

A few minutes later I looked up. I hadn't gotten anywhere. All I'd done was manage to stay in the place where I'd started. I suddenly realized that I needed to get out of the water. I took a deep breath and fought the urge to throw up. My strength was flowing out of me. I knew that if I got pulled out to sea I wouldn't be able to get back. The verse, a Christian who wavers in faith is "like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed," hit me (James 1.6). That tossing was more than tumultuous, more than disordered: it took everything out of you, left you exhausted and sick and with nothing to show for your efforts. I faced the shore, ready to ride in on the next swell. I failed. It pushed me under, sucked me out, and spat me slightly more towards the beach. As the water got shallower the breakers would thrust sand and small fragments of shells into my bathing suit. I finally managed to drag myself onto the hard, wet sand on the edge of the shore, where one last ambitious wave caught up with me. I had the spins. I headed straight back to our chair and collapsed. I tried closing my eyes, but all I could see were waves. I felt like I was still rolling.

A young man with long dark hair came up to me and asked if I wanted a drink.

"No, soy Cristiano," I said. I'd meant to say "Cristiana," but my Spanish was terrible. A week earlier I'd tried to tell a Latin American guest at our hotel that the Jacuzzi water was cold, but instead said, "I'm thirsty."

"Cristiana?" he asked.

"Si. Es pecado," I added.

"Huh," he said, then continued walking.

A day earlier Andrew's aunt, who was staying in Cancun for nine days with us, had asked if we wanted to visit a small Mayan temple called "El Rey," meaning, "The King." The ceremonial grounds and pyramid were far down the hotel strip, near the mangrove islands on Boulevard Kukulkan. She told us that other temples once existed around the Cancun peninsula, but they were demolished and replaced by hotels. I looked at the people around me: I was one of the only women who wasn't drinking or wearing a bikini. People still came to Cancun to worship, but their gods and their rituals had changed. Instead of cutting hearts out of men and women or drowning children in freshwater sinkholes to call down the rains, tourists from around the world sojourned to serve the god of alcohol, the god of wet t-shirt and bikini contests, the god of lust and excess, the god of vanity, and the gods of their bellies.

We had declined her offer with the same reason we gave for why we didn't visit Chichen-Itza: we didn't like that people were sacrificed there. I wanted to tell her that the Bible says to overthrow the altars of false gods, hew down their graven images, break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire, but my courage failed me.

I took my value, typo-ridden copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* out of my female backpack then realized I was still too dizzy to read anything and went for the water bottle. Water always made me feel less sick. My head lolled to the side of the chair. Squinting my eyes was a good compromise between the open-eye dizziness and the closed-eye wave tossed feeling. I thanked Christ that he was a rock. Andrew came up the shore dripping wet.

“Whew! That was fun,” he said, snatching his towel and shaking it out of its rolled up shape. “How are you doing?”

“When I close my eyes I see waves,” I said.

“Huh, really? I like it when they’re big.”

“It’s a little too intense for me.”

Andrew plopped on the reclining chair and scooted around until he got comfy.

“You still have your ring?” He asked this every time we got out of the water.

“Yep.”

“We should just leave them at the hotel next time.”

“Yeah, whatever you want.”

“It’s just if you lose it in there...you’re never getting it back.”

“Yeah, definitely not.” I stuck the water bottle in front of his face. “Do you want some water?”

“Sure.” He took a few gulps. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I love you,” he sang. “Wifey.”

“I love *you!*” I grinned. “Super hubs.”

We reached for each other’s hands and lay in the sun; calm, grounded, and free.

OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE

I pulled back the glass sliding door that opened onto our tiled balcony, where for the past three weeks Andrew and I had spent almost every night of our honeymoon soaking in the two-person hot tub nestled among rustling palm fronds. On those nights the resort would fall quiet, the only passersby the occasional employee wheeling carts of cushions from the pool area to be washed and stored until morning. Somewhere out of sight the jet skis and yachts, kayaks and speedboats, nodded in their docks, leaving the lagoon still as a sheet of glass. Even the hot tub jets were low and gentle in their murmuring. Small, red frogs ventured out of their bushes, and white, white ibises skimmed silently over the dark lagoon. The only creature to break the silence was unseen, splitting the air with an avian howl from somewhere behind the storm shutters which peeled back from our glass sliding door. We suspected a nest, but in the final days of our stay we discovered that a two-inch long golden orange lizard with pitch black eyes was the source. "I remember those from Vietnam," Andrew's mother told us after she heard it one night. "They always would make those noises at night." If it hadn't been for her testimony, I wouldn't have believed.

I closed the door behind me and stepped onto the green grass, softer than the Florida saw grass I'd known as a child. A half dozen steps brought me to the rust- and sand-colored paved pathway which circled the resort. I settled into one of the long,

cushioned beach chairs lined up facing Nichupte lagoon. The sun hovered several finger-widths above the mangroves that just covered the point where sky met water. Even so late in the day, it was difficult and uncomfortable to look directly into it. I marveled that the sun, a flaming ball of gas, could appear as such a perfect sphere. It put to shame the circles of orange construction paper I'd helped the second-graders at summer camp cut out. I thought of all the years I had spent writing, how desperately I wanted to craft something beautiful; and realized that nothing I could make could even approach the beauty that glazed all God's works. We could descend to sunless, sea-bottom mantle cracks hissing water and steam, and even there find bioluminescent creatures drifting in the light of their own bodies. The sweep of creation testifies of God's immensity; the nuance and precision of his intimacy. As one psalm says, "O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness."

Already, striking deep, neon fuchsia girded the undersides of the mauve-grey clouds hanging above the sun. They were so full and vaunted they looked like they could have come out of a whipped cream can. From those clouds to the water the sky radiated an uninterrupted orange. I knew then this would be a rare sunset. The clouds, able to evoke sprays of color lost in a clear sky, stayed high enough above the sun that its descent into the mangroves could be clearly seen. I imagined that when Christ returned, he might appear in the midst of such a perfect ratio of clouds to sky. My eyes began to water, and my gaze returned to the clouds. Patches of vision fizzed. Why had God made our eyes too weak to behold the light of the sun? Was it so we could grasp the concept of

the unbearable brightness of his glory? Christ's face had shone as the sun when he appeared to the apostle John in exile—seeing Christ, John fell on his face.

Not many nights before, I, too, had seen Christ that brightly in a dream. I was looking out a window when an angelic figure appeared, hovering in the air, clothed in white robes. Before my eyes he steadily grew brighter and brighter, so that his figure was lost in the brightness. The pure light became so intense that I had to look away, but there was nowhere that he could not be seen. In that moment I understood Christ's uncompromising holiness and the terror that attended it. Even stronger than the terror, the overwhelming beauty of that holiness struck me, a beauty I had tasted after I broke long fasts and Christ pulled me deep into his presence. Through the darkness I would gaze into his face, my whole being heaving in adoration. I would pray that Christ would make me able to bear him as the intensity of his love and beauty and holiness, like a consuming fire, drove me close to death. What I could not see during this waking communion I glimpsed in that dream, and it tore me from sleep in the pitch of night, my throat wailing vibrato. One day I would have to stand before Christ's judgment seat, and nothing marred by even a single sin would survive that blaze of holiness. In that moment I would fully know my sentence; and, finally knowing, I would glimpse the bottomless well of grace Christ poured out on me when he bore that very sentence in his own body on the cross.

The expanse above the mangroves began to flush with the phosphorescence of a coral reef fish, taking on a color that crossed the flesh of a red grape with the seeds of a pomegranate. I wondered if such intense colors existed only in sunsets. The sun could simply go down, but God had chosen to fling these colors across the sky every day

instead. Above, the azure deep swooned into sapphire. Enough light had faded that the brightest of the stars revealed that though they had hid in the radiance of the sun all day, they had not vanished or changed their courses.

On some days the pelicans would take occasion of the sunset to plunge, again and again, sharply though not vertically into the water from dozens of feet above. During the day, it was rare to catch them once; they would glide, adjust their wings just imperceptibly to catch a slight updraft, then suddenly pull them in and plummet into the lagoon. The black aninga dove even less frequently. Instead of tucking in his wings, he left them outstretched in perfect symmetry, like a butterfly pinned behind glass, the most unexpected position to adopt in a vertical fast-as-gravity drop. His neck, stretched only slightly downward, retained its characteristic curve. With cannonball splash he broke the flat water halfway between my side of the lagoon and the mangroves around the bend. I was always amazed that, diving like that, he could bounce back out of the water and shake off like a dog, not having broken a single bone. He never dove at sunset; only the pelicans, in twos and threes, rejoiced against that backdrop of lambent orange. But, perhaps in deference to the particular beauty of this sunset, the pelicans restrained themselves today.

My husband yelled from behind me. “Alex! Are you ready?”

I stuffed on my flip-flops and headed to the room. Inside, Andrew’s mom was typing in a hunch over her computer while her husband stood in the hallway with his straw hat and Teva sandals on. A few weeks earlier I’d asked her if she wanted to watch

the sunset and she'd said, "Why? It's always there." I looked at Andrew and then looked back outside, where the sun was nearing the mangroves.

"Just give Mom ten minutes," Andrew's mom said. "I have to send this email."

I prayed a silent, "Thank you" to God and headed back out to the lagoon, settling on the same chair. To my right an upper-middle-aged man wearing only a pair of shorts held up his iPad. He must have been in camera mode, because the screen was filled with the image of the sun setting over the lagoon.

"Look," he said in a British accent to the woman, presumably his wife, sitting next to him. "You can see it through here. It's not so bright." The woman beheld the iPad.

I studied the gradient from the horizon to the sky, trying to catch when the colors changed from one to another. The way the sky changed reminded me of a fiber-optic lamp I'd had as a child, stuffed with hundreds of thin, silky threads that morphed from one color to the next. Like the sky, the fibers of the lamp changed colors so gradually and seamlessly that it was impossible to pinpoint when orange became yellow, to explain how the deep purple had transformed into brighter-than-blood red. I turned my eyes back to the sun, which had already partly descended behind the mangroves. It had always seemed important to watch for the instant when the sun went out of view. If you missed that moment, it was as if you'd missed the whole sunset.

"Alex!" my husband shouted again. "We're going."

I stood up and walked halfway back to the patio, then turned to watch the final moment. The last sliver of the orange disc slipped effortlessly behind the mangroves that

appeared deep green in the approaching dusk. I wondered how much longer it would be before the sun was completely past the horizon, a moment I could not see. As we walked to the bus stop, I peered at the sky through openings in the mangroves. The colors no longer clustered around where the sun had set, but had bled to cover the whole length of the sky. From the bus, careening around the lagoon well above the speed limit, I craned my head behind me and looked across the aisle. Through the window I saw all the clouds cry phosphorescent, fuchsia top to bottom. The mangroves yielded to bigger and bigger hotels. There were so many of them of such great size that I couldn't imagine how they could ever be filled. Soon I could no longer see through the window; it became as a sheet of black mirror scrying out only the reflection of the inside of the bus. After twenty minutes we got off and headed down an alley to a family-owned restaurant whose name I couldn't pronounce. Waiters carried traditional Mayan food to tourists seated at plastic tables on a lawn next to a boat dock. I picked a vanilla and honey scented oleander while we waited for a table. My nose pushed into the faint orange center of the white flower and inhaled its perfume. A few moments later we were seated in the middle of the cool grass. With relief I lifted my eyes to the lagoon. Stars filled the dusky heavens. I listened to the breeze. In the midst of the darkened sky, a hush of blood orange blossomed just above the horizon.

THINE ARM ALONE

One afternoon after we got back from Cancun, while Andrew was at work, I fell on my face on the bedroom floor. Tears ran from my cheeks to the weathered polyester carpet, fibers pebbled like a beach. My whole body shook with the force of my weeping, my eyes squeezed in earnestness. “Father!” I wailed, and for a while could say nothing else. One preacher, Paul Washer, had cried unto God like this in a video I’d seen, when he said: “*Please raise up missionaries.*” It was the kind of prayer that shocked you, even on video: Paul, tall and lanky on the stage, upright, seized by a desperate importunity that shot out from the great deep of his being. That prayer had taken hold of his whole body. He stood before his God and cried with the dependence of a child: “*At all costs, please raise up missionaries.*”

When I could speak again, I found myself begging that same God to send me into the missions field. “I’ll go, Lord. Please send me. Send me into the place where there is the most desperate need for the gospel. Send me where there is nobody else to preach the gospel. Send me where nobody else wants to go.” And then, “Please equip me to go. I’ve only been a Christian for nine months. Please equip me to go. Establish me in your faith. Make me zealous. Increase my knowledge and understanding of you and your will and your gospel. Please get rid of my debt so I can go. Send me into the worst parts. I’ll do it for you. I’ll do it because I love you.”

At that moment, the Spirit reminded me of a passage in Scripture: on the way to Jerusalem, the disciples John and James asked Jesus if they could sit next to him in heaven, one on the right and one on the left. Jesus answered, “Ye know not what ye ask. Can you be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with? Can you drink the cup I will drink?” Like James and John, I needed to evaluate what I was asking, to recognize the gravity of it. The disciples had answered, “Yea, Lord.” If I answered that way, I knew Christ’s response to me would be the same as it was to them: “Indeed ye can, and ye shall.”

During dinner, I asked my husband, “Do you have the desire to sell everything you own?”

“No,” he said, a spoonful of black bean soup and rice half lifted to his face. “Do you?”

“I’d like to sell everything and be missionaries.”

Andrew squeezed some juice out of a lime wedge into his soup. “How would we pay for that?”

“That’s not up to me to figure out,” I grinned, dancing a bit. “That’s God’s job.”

We continued eating. A few minutes later, Andrew said, “Well, if we’re going to do that we should stop buying stuff.”

“Yes! I agree.”

We visited a new church that weekend, and during the worship service we sang, “Speed thy Servants,” an old hymn I had never heard before. By the time we got to the second

verse I was weeping: “Be thou with them! Be thou with them! Tis Thine arm alone that saves.” I thought of all the Christians around the world who had to meet in secret, dozens sharing a single, illegal Bible. I thought of the ones who fled daily for their lives, who had lost limbs and lived in jungles because they’d been robbed of all they owned. I thought of all the missionaries who toiled in obscurity, risking imprisonment and torture. All these Christians were my brothers and sisters, children of God, whose love was precious to God. How could I read the Bible in a cushy café and not think of the thousands of evangelists, living in tents, isolated from other believers, owning nothing, fasting often, beaten, jailed?

I looked into the face of the preacher, exuberant, singing. He was young, so young, maybe even younger than me. A sweet passion for Christ rolled from his face like heat off a cast iron radiator. He wept when he preached the gospel, and I loved him so fiercely in the Spirit that I would have died for him. The melody tugged, lifted, “Never leave them, never leave them, ‘Til thy face in heaven they see.” These verses would form the basis of prayers I began to make for the entire church, for everyone in the whole world who has been born again by the Spirit of God. I didn’t know who they were or where they were, but I loved them because Christ loved them, and had died for them.

Later that week Andrew and I made it to California Pizza Kitchen forty minutes before they closed. I grabbed a mini plastic pack of four crayons from the front when we walked in. Andrew and I rarely ate out, but his mother had given us pizza gift cards for Christmas.

“Can I start you off with any drinks?” our waiter asked.

I ordered hot water and Andrew got an iced tea. This was the third time we’d come here, and every time they didn’t have the heat turned up enough. Even the bathrooms were warmer than the dining area.

I glanced at the television mounted just below the ceiling near the kitchen. Two humungous black men punched each other in the face with foamy red and blue gloves. I looked in the other direction, but the darkness had made the window on the opposite side like a mirror.

“I can’t believe people just watch other people beat each other up,” I said.

The man returned with the drinks. I took Andrew’s straw wrapper and wrote, “Jesus is Lord” on it in red crayon. Andrew flipped it over and wrote, “Give your ENTIRE life to Jesus Christ” in alternating colors, then set it next to our drinks. The waiter brought me a refill of hot water, read the wrapper, and walked away without saying anything. A few minutes later the manager came over and asked how we were doing. His eyes scanned our table, lingering on the straw wrapper, before he smiled and headed back to the kitchen.

“I think he read the wrapper,” I whispered to Andrew.

“Yeah! They’re all reading it.”

I drank some hot water, excited and joyful.

A few minutes later, the waiter arrived with a pear and gorgonzola pizza half-covered in a small mountain of dressed greens. “Huh. That’s interesting,” I said. The white pizza looked pretty standard.

The restaurant was almost empty, so Andrew prayed out loud over the food. After the first piece I said, “So I’ve been praying lately that God will send me as a missionary where nobody else wants to go.”

“What? Why are you praying for that?”

“Because I love him! Christ paid such a high price for our souls. He loves us so much. We should be doing everything we can for him. And other people aren’t willing to do it, but I am.”

“You mean like a crack den? Why are you praying to go somewhere that people are deliberately avoiding?”

“I don’t mean somewhere that people are deliberately avoiding. Maybe they don’t know about it. Maybe they don’t want to go because they don’t even know there’s a need.”

“Oh, that’s something really different.”

“Yeah. But I mean, it could be somewhere really extreme. Like, I already accepted that I would die for Christ. But could I be tortured for his sake? Could I be separated from you? Could I watch a child be shot in the street and bleed to death? It’s pretty intense.”

Andrew put a second piece of pizza on his plate. “Yeah, that is intense. North Korea would probably be the place to go.”

“You want to go to North Korea?!”

“Do I *want* to go to North Korea? No. But it seems like they desperately need evangelists there.”

“You’re right. I think you can get killed just for having a Bible in North Korea.”

We fell silent. The cost of following Christ for those believers was sobering.

“You should pray and make sure this desire is actually from God.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We didn’t say anything for a few minutes. Then: “But you’re my husband, so God has to send both of us if we’re going to go.”

A gust of cold wind rushed through the double glass doors as the only other group of customers left the restaurant. The music and the television went off shortly afterwards.

“Hmm. Well yeah, that’s something I could pray for. That he would send us where there’s a desperate need for the gospel and no Christian witness.”

“Yeah. I mean, who knows. That could be downtown Detroit.”

I started on my third and final piece. Andrew already had half a pizza down.

“Don’t you just want to give up everything for Christ? Everything you have? Oh, it makes me so happy just thinking about it,” I said. I could feel a stupid grin plastered on my face, a brightness in my eyes.

“Uh, maybe? Yeah?”

“I’ve been praying for increased zeal, too,” I said.

“Well don’t out-zeal me!”

“Don’t worry. I’ve been praying for increased zeal for you, too.”

“Great.”

One of the employees turned on the vacuum cleaner. They didn’t seem concerned about us. We were still waiting on the bill and a take-out box.

“I love you, Andrew.”

“I love you.”

Just before our first Easter, I prayed that God would bless us with seeing someone come to Christ. He’s promised just as rain comes down from heaven to water the earth, bringing forth fruit and seed and buds, so the Word of God does not return void. Our faithful open-air preaching, one-on-one witnessing, and passing out tracts will not be in vain. I believed this, that God works through us in ways we cannot see, but I wanted confirmation: how could we be missionaries if we had not seen a single person come to Christ? From the living room, the phone rang.

“Hello?” Andrew said. He asked a few questions and then started to say things like, “Yeah, I wept like that too right after I was saved.” I jumped up and ran into the living room.

“Did somebody get saved?” I squealed in a whisper.

Andrew smiled and gestured to wait a minute.

“Amen! You’re a new creature. Praise the Lord.”

A larger-than-life grin peeled open my face. “Who is it?” I whispered. “*Who is it?*”

Andrew lifted the phone away from his face. “James. He met us on campus.”

I hesitated. “James. Was he the Asian guy? Or the atheist?”

“Asian, I think. By the Starbucks.”

A joy that I hadn't felt since I'd been saved hit me like a truck going a hundred and twenty miles an hour. I leapt into the air, sang, "His soul has been saved from death!" and fell on the floor, my legs bouncing up and down. "*Oh my God!*" I shrieked in reverence, in awe, in adoration.

"We should meet sometime," Andrew said.

"Can he meet right now?" I asked. It was ten o'clock.

"What are you doing now?" Andrew asked. "Yeah, we can meet you at the McDonald's. The one by campus, in University Mall?"

"They're open twenty-four hours," I said.

"All right, see you in fifteen minutes," Andrew said, hanging up the phone.

Immediately, I screamed, "What did he say?"

"He said he wanted to apologize for the way he was talking to me when we met. He was cleaning his room and he saw our card and decided to call us. He was like, 'Everything you were saying about God and his love is true. For the past month I've been a new creation. I can't believe how much God loves me!'"

"*Praise the Lord!*" I shrieked, running into the bedroom. I jumped a foot and a half into the air about ten times, ran in a few circles, changed out of my pajamas, and ran back to the living room. The whole drive to McDonald's, Andrew and I sang while I slapped my thighs in exciting improvisational patterns.

"We're gonna be with James forever!" I sang. "He's a jewel in the crown of Christ. We're gonna be with James *for-ever!*"

"James for-ever, James for-ever," Andrew rumbled in bass.

In the few dozen feet between the parking lot and the McDonald's, we witnessed to every person we saw, overflowing, on fire. I'd almost entirely forgotten about James, yet there he was, a new creature. If God had used our one conversation to help bring him to Christ, who else we spoke to would spend an eternity loving and praising Jesus with us in glory?

"We should be telling *everybody* about Jesus!" I exclaimed. "Who knows who God might save?"

We walked into the McDonald's like Meer cats, peering on our toes. At the very back, James had his head bent down towards an open laptop. We beelined, crying "Brother!" when we were still a few tables away.

"Brother! Sister! Brother!" James fumbled, jumping up to hug us. "Hi! It's good to see you!" He stepped back, looking back and forth at us, then at himself. "Wow, I'm a totally different person since the last time you saw me. Before, you know, I was hitting on your wife," he said to Andrew. He cast his eyes to the floor for a moment in shame, then lifted them back up to us. His whole face glowed. "But now everything's different. I've been preaching the gospel a lot. The school said they're going to expel me if I don't stop. And now they're saying that I have Asperger's. I think I need to be a little more rooted."

For four hours we studied Scripture, shared testimonies, and witnessed to James' friends who came into the McDonald's. James' doctrine jumped all over the place, and when he talked to people he became pushy and scattered. When the conversation veered off-course and became emotional, Andrew and I would bring the focus back to the

gospel. Afterwards we'd head back to the table, Andrew would review what had just happened and give James some pointers, and then he would talk to another person.

"We were probably like this when we were first saved," I said to Andrew as we refilled our sweet tea. "But there was just nobody around to see it." James stood to our right, entreating two of his friends, a couple. The young man said something I couldn't hear; then, James leapt forward and cried, "Why *wouldn't* you believe in the devil and hell?" It struck me that a Christian who is both zealous and mature is a rare blessing for the kingdom of God. I snapped the lid back on our Styrofoam cup of tea.

"Yeah," Andrew agreed, "like when I said God created Jesus?"

"Exactly."

"It's just because I didn't know."

We stepped over to James and his friends. "I just don't know what happens after we die," the girlfriend was saying.

"Before I was a Christian I felt that way, too," I said. "I didn't want to believe in heaven or hell or judgment. But God *is* just. Our sins are a crime against God. The good news is that God doesn't take any pleasure in condemning us." We preached the gospel for a few minutes, then James walked over to the register to pick up an order.

"I've seen James go through a lot of phases this past year," the boyfriend said.

"This just seems like another one."

"He's immature because he's a new believer," Andrew answered. His eyes surged with light. "But I can guarantee that in another year he'll still believe this, and he'll be

way more mature in the faith. It's because the Holy Spirit works in us, and when he starts a good work, he finishes it.”

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BIOGRAPHY

Alexandra Magida Ghaly graduated from Westchester Academy for International Studies in Houston, Texas, in 2008. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from Michigan State University in 2011, and her Master of Fine Arts in English from George Mason University in 2015. Since being born again on May 10, 2014, she writes and distributes gospel tracts with her husband and street preaches.