A MILLION MILES OFF

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The mountains above Colorado Springs rise in waves, from the reds of sandstone to verdant shades of aspen groves and evergreens. Patches of dark gray rocks dot rising peaks and then take over above the treeline, punctuated by a sliver of white. Our van had risen out of the reds and now clung to a narrow slice of road that etched up cliffs like a tear on an abandoned painting. We'd been assured the road had been graded, but the washboard sections that shook our old minivan like a maraca testified otherwise. In the back, my sister, brother, and I were getting tested. To my parents, who sat up front, getting this right was more important than any exam any of us would ever take.

The drive from New York to Texas had passed uneventfully. As we made our way to Colorado, though, my mom, her back-combed hair seeming to defy gravity, produced a pack of flashcards like they were a religious relic and gave us one of her hushed-tone lessons, another in her series on how to get into Heaven. My parents always emphasized the joys of being evangelical; they truly believed that life was only worth living as a follower of Jesus Christ. But even so, the Topical Memory System©, the flashcards my mom had purchased before leaving Texas, had its own plan, and that meant making sure we knew we were all fucked.

"'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' Romans 3:23." It was my turn. "Super. Next?" Mom's eyes shone as her lips curled. I wanted to see that smile again. "'The wages of sin is death,'" I recited, afraid to ask what *wages* meant. I continued, 'but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.' Romans 6:26." Up front, my dad's knuckles were turning white as he tried to prevent us from meeting our maker before we learned how to receive the gift of salvation.

"'*For* the wages of sin is death,' Mark," Mom corrected me. "These are the words of God. It's important that we commit each of them to memory, that we hide them in our hearts." But these weren't the words of God *exactly*. They were the words of a man named Paul who used to be named Saul back when he martyred early Christians and who, after allegedly being struck blind by Jesus on the road to Damascus, converted to Christianity and wrote most of the New Testament. And these particular verses had been printed on flashcards and sold in Christian bookstores and church lobbies as the Topical Memory System©, designed to teach theology

and rote memorization. Scripture was memorized like song lyrics, meant to stick with you throughout the day, the heavy weight of our transgressions replacing the melodies. The Topical Memory System©, like so many evangelical approaches to Christianity, sought to entrench the idea that our eternal salvation relies on repenting from our Sin–with a capital S, which is defined as a condition rather than a misdeed–and accepting Christ as our savior. Other denominations treat the bible more like a fortune cookie with a deeper meaning hidden inside tasty morsels of platitudes and exhortations to love one another. For them, there's no need to take everything literally. But my parents believed that every verse in the Christian bible was the word of God. So literally, we were all fucked (but for the grace of God).

As the youngest sinner in the van, I was only required to memorize the first few cards, but my sister and brother were subjected to further quizzing and more complicated theology. Their words washed over me like a fine mist, lingering for a moment before evaporating into fleeting thoughts. Before long my gaze was fixed outside and my mind elsewhere.

SUMMER OF 1990

Eagle Lake Camp lies nestled in the mountains above Colorado Springs on the shores of a lake shaped roughly like an eagle, from which it gets its name. It's run by an evangelical

Christian organization called The Navigators, headquartered in an honest-to-God castle outside the city. With an annual budget of $137 million, their aim is "To know Christ, make Him known, and help others do the same." Visit their website and you'll find dozens of ministries, mostly focused on international missions and, domestically, white people (if the pictures on their website are any indication). Eagle Lake is a relatively small part of The Navigator's multimillion-dollar mission, but each of the four summers I spent there plays an outsized role in my development as an evangelical Christian.

I remember seeing the Eagle Lake brochure for the first time, glossy and covered with pictures of campers having a blast. A zipline ran a quarter-mile across the lake. The blob, an enormous, multicolored cushion filled with air, floated off a dock on the west shore, with a tower on one end from which people could jump onto it and launch campers off

the other end. The kid on the brochure looked like he was 30 feet above the lake, something which terrified and thrilled me at the same time. They had horses, canoes, mountain bikes, and a ropes course. There were others getting even more extreme, riding BMX bikes off a ramp into the lake or spinning in a thousand different directions on a contraption called the gyroscope. The brochure was designed to communicate one message: being a Christian kicks ass.

The 1986 oil bust had left my family broke. The only reason we could afford to have so much fun being Christians that summer was that my first babysitters worked at the camp. Tim and Sheryl used to watch us when my parents were off spending the money they used to have on trips to Acapulco. They'd let us watch movies my parents had forbidden and always bought us candy my parents wouldn't let us eat. We'd stayed in close contact with Tim and Sheryl after they'd left Texas to work for The Navigators and we'd fled the south to live on some land my dad's father had left us in upstate New York. The summer after second grade, we loaded into our van to visit my surviving grandparents in Texas before swinging north to Eagle Lake Camp.

I have exactly three firm memories from that first week I spent at Eagle Lake; the rest are likely amalgamations of stories, pictures, and clearer memories from later summers. The first that stands out was before camp started. We'd just pulled up to camp and parked at Tim and Sheryl's cabin. They came out to greet us, Sheryl holding her infant daughter, Catherine. We went inside their cabin and Sheryl started changing her baby. My sister Hope followed her and watched as she removed the soiled diaper.

"Matthew, Mark!" Hope yelled, holding up the diaper to show us a yellow streak, brighter than anything I'd ever seen come out of a human body. "Look at this!" "Oh, the color is totally normal. We call it 'Little Catherine's Mustard Factory,'" Sheryl said, accentuating her midwestern accent. I backed away slowly before running outside to gasp at fresh air. I wouldn't eat mustard again for two decades and even now won't unless it's dijon.

The second memory is of flying. The blob, like so many experiences at Eagle Lake, is a distinct feature of summer camps. The first blobbers were US sailors who would leap onto portable rubber fuel tanks dragged behind their ships. A sports camp

in Texas bought one in the 1950s; Christian summer camps copied the idea to make sure kids could have some good, clean fun while learning about Jesus. A few days into camp, my two counselors convinced me to get "double blobbed". I remember resting on the end of the blob, feeling like I was lying on a giant water bed, and looking back to see both of my counselors towering above me. I heard them count down from three and then felt the blob lift. In the air I thought of nothing but the imminent impact with the icy water below, arms twirling as if to delay the inevitable.

The third memory took place over one strange night. Midway through the week, dinner had been served, and we'd made our way downstairs to the meeting room. The night began like the rest, but as the program began to wind down, destined toward another message about Jesus, Tim came rushing in and interrupted the speaker mid-sentence, whispering into his ear for all of us to see. I watched as I saw the speaker's face change from friendly to fearful, and as Tim walked back toward the stairwell, the speaker spoke into the microphone. "Eagle Lake, I have terrible news," he said, just above a whisper. "The Russians have launched a surprise invasion of the United States and have taken over Colorado Springs. We've just received word that troops are headed this way. They know we are Christians. They could be here any minute." The speaker told us that if we had faith and didn't deny it, like the apostles and early martyrs, we'd be okay. "There is an underground church somewhere in the woods nearby. When the Russians come, if the Russians come, try to find it. You'll be safe there." The speaker paused, allowing the murmurs to die down before continuing. "And if you are captured, remember your scripture. Use it. Maybe it will pierce your captors' hard hearts."

We started to sing worship songs led by an unplugged acoustic guitar. Midway through the third song, the stairway doors busted open and a stream of men in fatigues fanned into the room. In the mad dash for the door, I looked back to see some of the kids from my group being grabbed by the Russians. Somehow in the darkness I found my brother and he led me to the lakeshore. It was cold and I could see my labored breaths like fog in the night, but having my brother there calmed me down. We slipped between canoes suspended on either side of racks. "Those aren't Russians, Mark," my brother

said. “Look at them. It’s the counselors.” I immediately understood what this was: another game. We watched as the rest of the campers fled, our counselors chasing after them but clearly letting them get away. The few that were captured were rounded up and marched into the dark. When all seemed still, we slipped out from between the boats and scurried along the water’s edge to the marshy creek that fed the lake, disappearing into the night in search of the underground church.

That night as I struggled to keep up, I kept forgetting that it was a game. The trail along the creek is bordered by bushes and thick reeds, so we’d hide if we heard our counselors approaching. Eventually I lost Matthew after being chased by a group of counselors. Alone and away from my big brother, I ran a thousand scenarios about how it all could have been real. *What if the counselors were Russians all along? What if this isn’t a game?* Eventually I came across a small band of survivors who shared stories about “prisons” and how some had already found the underground church. There was a bonfire and a few people playing guitar, but it was raided and all the campers were rounded up and taken to a prison for processing. I understood it was a game, but the point wasn’t to escape. They wanted us to be caught, but why?

Coming out of a stand of trees, we crossed a dirt road and made our way back down toward the creek. I don’t know how long the counselors had been hiding, but they quickly surrounded us and led us to a dozen or more campers who’d been rounded up. I could immediately tell that the counselors had lost control. Kids were calling them commies, telling them to go to Hell. Eventually Matthew was brought to our group as well and we both joined the riot. I could tell the counselors were frustrated when they lined up some of the older boys, my brother included, against the cabin and pelted their backs with small rocks.

Eventually, a loudspeaker declared that the game was over. We went back to our teepees to debrief, but I don’t know what larger point they wanted to make that night. That memory, like so many others, was lost on me at that age. I just remember that later, after our counselors went to sleep, the rest of us stayed up talking strategy for the next time we came to camp and the Russians inevitably invaded again.

SUMMER OF 1993

My brother Matthew, named after my father, was always the black sheep in our family of six. Tall and skinny, he had long hair which stood out in our otherwise conservative family photos. He fought with my sisters when we all mostly got along, and as a kid he had a temper like the Old Testament God despite my parents' patient yet firm approach to parenting. Boundaries were clear and not to be crossed, and we knew that spankings were the inevitable result of pushing my parents' limits. None of us escaped my dad's cupped hand or my mom's blue spoon, but my brother felt their wrath the most. Still, for much of my life, he was my hero. I'd follow him anywhere, do anything he did.

It was three years later. We'd left New York about a year before, moving to Florida for just enough time to realize that my dad's new business partners, Christian men accused of defrauding investors, would likely end up in prison (they did). We limped back to Texas and lived in the half-finished home of a missionary family from our church. I remember my relationship with my brother changing after we got back to Texas. He was going into high school and, unlike me, still had some friends from when we'd lived in Texas before. I spent a lot of time alone then.

That changed after Matthew got caught smoking weed with his friends. I remember climbing the stairs that ended at my brother's room, my movements slow to keep from being heard. Through the door I could hear my parents talking about Sin and how each transgression made Jesus's pain on the cross worse. I didn't understand how someone's sin could hurt a man who was murdered 2000 years before, but obviously I wasn't going to ask my parents about it then. To them, every infraction was viewed through the prism of original Sin, connecting our actions to the sacrifice Jesus paid on the cross. They weren't heavy-handed with it the way camp speakers tended to be, but the point was made and the stakes laid clear before any worldly punishment was dolled out. In all things, my parents considered our eternal souls first.

Matthew was grounded because my parents couldn't wait until judgment day for him to learn whatever lesson they intended. With him stuck at home, we spent much of that summer exploring the woods near our house, riding bikes to the lake,

and playing NBA Jam at the corner store down the street. Midway through July, we loaded up the van and headed back to camp.

Like my first year as a camper, only a few things about that summer stand out. Eagle Lake was set up the same: divided into teams based on our age and gender, the boys sleeping in teepees and the girls in canvas tents (and never shall the two meet); most of the day spent competing against other teams in silly competitions; and most afternoons consisting of free time where campers could choose from an array of activities, from blobbing to canoeing, ziplining to spinning in the gyroscope, all if you had memorized enough verses. Every camper wore a laminated card with the numbers 1 – 50 along the borders. Every time you recited scripture, including the book, chapter, and verse number, your counselor produced a hole punch (which they somehow always kept handy) and tallied another notch on your tag. You had to have the tag to do any of the activities, and the staffer running it would inspect your verse count as if they were checking to see if you were tall enough for a carnival ride before letting you proceed.

Unlike before, I'd sensed expectations set on my brother and me. I may have been making it up, but it felt real. As an evangelical Christian born and bred, I'd accepted that an omnipotent deity had his all-seeing eye on everyone, so the belief that people at camp were watching my brother and me seemed a natural conclusion. Matthew, it would seem, had not noticed it. His team, the oldest at camp that week, dominated all of the games. Team chants were encouraged, but those they came up with were loud and obnoxious, crossing the ill-defined line between having fun and boasting, ergo a sin. For all they accomplished in the games, however, they had some of the worst numbers in the race to memorize the most bible verses, a fact made clear by our counselors lest we be tempted to follow their prodigal ways.

They were scolded for their attitudes, but no infraction compared to their making purple.

"Boys are blue and girls are pink, right?" Tim had said the first night of camp. "Mix them and you get purple. Our rule: no purple." The camp's main boundary for this was geographic: boys weren't allowed around the girl's tents. My brother and his friends were consistently caught crossing the line, though. Staff had a golf cart with a sign that said "Canoodlin' Patrol" in purple letters that consistently

tracked them down. Unspoken in these rules was the belief that our worldly desires could not be trusted and that we must resist our carnal urges. Jesus said "...with God, all things are possible," but clearly he didn't know how horny young men would get at summer camp in the twilight of the 20th century.

My clearest memory from camp that summer took place on that last night of camp when the speaker stood up to give his final message where he described, in minute detail, the crucifixion of Jesus. I'd heard the story countless times but never like I had that night. I'd been told that Jesus was whipped, but I'd never been shown a cat-o-nine-tails in order to imagine it tearing the flesh off a man's back. I knew that Jesus was forced to lie on wooden planks, but I had never seen a nail the size that would be required to pierce a person's flesh and still sink deep into the lumber below. I'd been pricked by plenty of thorns but never had one held up before me and allowed myself to imagine a crown of them, inches long, being forced down onto a man's skull, piercing his brain. I had never considered the jolt that Jesus's body must have felt as the cross dropped into that hole in Calvary. And I had never had explained to me the process by which one dies when they are crucified. "It's like you're suffocating," the speaker said, "but not because you can't breathe in. The pressure of your body dragging you down lets you inhale, but you can't exhale unless you push and pull your body up with your hands and feet–which are impaled with spikes." He paused, arms outstretched to illustrate the point. "This goes on until you can't pull yourself up anymore. And then you die."

The speaker paused again. The room remained silent except for the quiet shuffling of exhausted children and the occasional dispersed, muffled sob. I remember looking around the room at some point, scanning the faces of the people around me and gauging their varying responses. At last, the speaker continued. "Despite what the cross had done to Jesus, despite the weight of His betrayal and the pain from savage beatings, He managed to lift His dying body one last time to speak His last words... 'IT IS FINISHED!'"

I remember the message and the way those words echoed through the room, but I can't say how it affected me. Like my brother and sisters, I'd heard the story more times than I could count; adding props didn't change the fact that I was too young to

understand what they were trying to tell me about my need for salvation. It's the way I imagine kids feel when they hear about existential dangers like climate change or Donald Trump: an inherent understanding that something is amiss but no real clue as to how it affects them. But it would seem that my brother was ready to understand. He'd realized that he needed saving, and he'd asked Jesus to do it.

One day after returning home, I opened my brother's bible to find a note in his slanted script that I hadn't noticed before. *July 15, 1993. Today I made the decision to accept Jesus as my savior for myself. In everything I do, I will try to make Him happy.* The date was from the last night of camp that year. Despite everything that had transpired, all of the ways I felt my brother had gone astray, God had spoken to him. A few days after finding my brother's note, I looked in the bible again, and there, next to his inscription, was my mothers swirling cursive. *Matthew, I am so proud of you! Your father and I love you very much. Love, Mom.* I can't remember how my brother reacted to seeing that note, but I imagine his temper was on full display. He'd been clear that the decision had been his own; our mom's note had robbed him of the agency he'd tried to exhibit.

A decade later, at a bar in Port Aransas, Texas, Matthew ordered me a Lonestar and told me why he'd abandoned his faith. "Mom and Dad never gave us a choice, Mark." He was just back from Montana where he'd spent a semester in college before failing or freezing out. "They manipulated us. It was all a fucking lie." I thought about the notes in Matthew's bible. I understood why he felt the way he did, and I knew he was right, except for the last part. I didn't love the way my parents had pushed their beliefs on us, but I believed that I needed salvation and that it was found in Christ alone. I believed that I was called to spread the Gospel, which I was training to do. But I also never argued with my brother. I was too busy following his lead. I told him how I felt and we moved on. I didn't think about the two notes in his bible again until I was moving a few years ago and saw its brown, faux-leather cover, curling at the corners, at the bottom of a box of old journals and Christian books. I picked it up, let my thumb fan the pages, and stopped at the inside cover. There I saw my brother's note and, next to it, a section torn out like a piece of scrap paper.

SUMMER OF 1995

The stars spread across the night's sky in a million points of light, almost combining into a single, heavenly glow on a black canvas. Small peaks beyond the base of the lake obscured the dome of light emanating from the city in the valley below, and with every lamp and light in camp turned off and the moon not yet risen, the stars reflected off the still water before me and painted the cliffs on the far edge of the lake iridescent. I stood there transfixed, my mind reeling from what I'd just experienced. The crisp air had dried my tears, but I could still feel their tracks streaking down my cheeks, and with my neck craned to see the stars, my face felt taut, forcing my mouth open. Maybe I was simply in awe at what I imagined I was seeing for the first time. Eventually, Jacob, one of my counselors that week, approached me.

He hugged me and then looked up at the stars.

"You know," he said, pointing at a speck of light above the lake and the mountains, "stars are trillions of miles away. Your aim would have to be perfect if you wanted to travel to one. Mess up your calculations or aim even a fraction of a millimeter off, and you'll miss your mark by millions of miles." It wasn't clear to me at the time what my counselor meant by the analogy. Maybe it wasn't even an analogy. It's possible he felt awkward and that was the first thing that came out of his mouth. I have reason to believe that there was a deeper meaning, though. Jesus, I knew, spoke in parables. It was up to his disciples to figure out what he meant.

This was my third summer as a camper at Eagle Lake. I'd already spent a week at a Christian retreat in Gunnison, Colorado, called *The Great Escape*©. My sister Hope, a leader at a youth ministry back home in Texas, had convinced me to come along. Like countless Christian camps across the country, it followed a simple formula: fun and adventure during the day and Jesus stuff at night. They never go straight into the gospel, though. Not unlike a mixtape you might make to woo a love interest, getting down and dirty with the gospel has to be tempered. They'd start with skits and music, followed by an exceedingly cool and very funny speaker who could skillfully segue from hilarious, self-deprecating stories into related tales about Jesus or his followers. But as was the case with nearly every experience at Christian camps up to that

point, I could remember the fun activities, maybe even a skit or two, but I couldn't recall much of anything any speaker ever said.

The Great Escape© had little impact on me spiritually, and I remember that concerned me. Despite not having a choice as to whether I would go to Sunday School or Wednesday night bible studies, I wanted to be close to God. I watched my parents and other adults at church, listening to them pray like they actually knew Jesus, not just read about him. And I knew my brother had made his commitment to Christ two years before. In truth, that's all it might have taken for me to do the same, except I was expecting to feel a stronger tug from God. For the first time in my life, I was beginning to give voice to a sliver of doubt that had rooted deep inside, and it scared me.

Hope and I arrived at Eagle Lake a few days before my week as a camper would begin, so we stayed with Tim and Sheryl, who offered us a behind-the-scenes view of camp. Two years before, I'd felt watched, but this year I felt like I was a part of something bigger, even before I met my counselor Jacob. Introductions at camp are an awkward dance, but Jacob had an infectious personality and treated us more like peers than campers. He made every camp activity, from sailing off the blob to cleaning up after meals, as fun as possible. Deeply competitive, he pushed us to win every game, including verse memorization. After an hour drilling in our teepee one afternoon, our entire team had memorized Psalm 139. The last four verses have stuck with me: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

I've always been an anxious person, especially when it comes to my faith. Undoubtedly adding to that anxiety was my parents' consistent reminders that every time I sinned I had basically pounded a stake deeper into Jesus's flesh. But no matter how much that image was driven into my psyche, I had to admit that some sins felt worth it. I was 14 that summer, battling puberty like David taking on Goliath, except instead of slinging a stone at a giant, I was taking cold showers to try to stop erections. More often than not, I'd succumb to temptation, forcing my guilt down like a bitter pill. As much as I enjoyed the sins, I knew it was easier to follow Jesus sheltered in the mountains. I began to fear going home.

The last night of camp, like every last night at camp, we gathered in the meeting room beneath the dining hall and cheered while Tim announced the top teams' final point totals. As he'd done every year before, Tim started with the team in fifth place, working his way to the

winners while the cheers became louder. When my counselors emerged from the crowd last, we erupted to our feet, excited in a way that only exists in summer sleepaway camps. Soon, the camp speaker stood before us to give another talk, but this time, he minced few words. "You know what a callus is? We get them from doing things over and over again, like manual labor or playing the guitar." I scratched my thumb against the fingers on my left hand, desperate to feel calluses, knowing they were the sign of a guitar player–which, unlike my brother, I wasn't yet. "But our hearts get callused, too," he continued. "When we hear something again and again, like the story of Jesus's crucifixion, it starts to lose its impact. I challenge you to tear this barrier off your heart, to listen to this story of Jesus's love like it is the first time."

For an instant I felt like God had prepared me for that moment, that everything up to that point had served a singular purpose of getting me to sit cross-legged on the hard floor in the hot, crowded gathering room while a man I had never met asked me to pretend I had never heard the gospel. So I leaned forward, and even though it was the same speaker from before and the same gruesome retelling of Jesus's execution, it felt raw, like new skin beneath a scab.

As he finished, the speaker said there were counselors ready to talk to anyone who wanted to commit their life to Christ, and without thinking, I stood up and went outside. I sat alone for a while before a man sat down next to me on the rock wall. In the dark, I didn't realize that it was the camp speaker. I was nervous as soon as I did, but he was kind and asked questions without being too forceful. Between sobs, I told him about my struggles, my doubts, and how this was the first time I had decided for myself that I wanted to follow Jesus. We spoke for about 15 minutes before he hugged me and left me in the dark to find another sheep to shepherd. I found myself walking down to the lake, the lights above shimmering off the placid water. I stood there a while, staring up at the sky until Jacob approached me and perplexed me with his

musings about how easy it is to miss a target from so far away. I didn't think about it too

long that night, though. For the first time in my life, I knew what I was aiming for.

SUMMER OF 1997

I'd always been told that Satan's purpose for existing was to lead me astray. The two years since my calluses had come off had made me sure of this. I'd come home from camp that summer excited about my faith and with several small braids in my hair, a memento from my sister cabin (and braided in broad daylight, thank you very much). I remember the waves they left in my hair when I took them out–I'd kept them in long enough to freak out my parents–and how I left one in as a reminder of the commitment I had made to Jesus that summer. About the time that last rubber band slipped out, though, I found myself in a spiral of escalating sins and acts of contrition. My mom and dad were starting to worry after catching me sneaking out to get high with some girls from school (my parents were against purple *and* green).

I remember when they brought up Eagle Lake. At 16, I was too old to be a camper and too young to be a counselor, but there was Work Crew, a six-week, unpaid service opportunity. It promised to deepen your relationship with Christ by having you perform all of the functions that the camp would

have to otherwise pay employees to do. I was dubious at the prospect, but my parents talked me into it–or at least made me feel like I had a choice in the matter.

Eagle Lake housed it's male Work Crew in a tent on the south shore of the lake, about a half-mile from the main building, where we worked. The ladies slept in a cabin a half-mile in the other direction; Eagle Lake took their no purple proclamations seriously. Still, our Work Crew bosses split us into two groups with equal numbers of boys and girls and set us to sweeping, mopping, serving food, and scrubbing dishes, all content in the knowledge that this was what Jesus wanted us to do.

Stints spent on the outdoor crew provided much-needed variety. The rains had been heavy that summer, so we spent days carrying buckets of dirt up paths to fill in washouts, only to see them get washed out again in the next storm. After three days, my back ached and my hands had developed blisters. Our leaders woke us up before the sun one morning and told us to put on our worst clothes, implying we would be getting dirty. The red flatbed had rails in place and we were told to climb in the back. For the next two hours, as the sun gradually rose above the surrounding peaks, we visited every building in the sprawling camp to pick up trash. As the garbage gathered at our feet, we rode on top of the pile until it spilled over and buried us.

I can imagine few images that would better describe what I believed it meant to be a follower of Christ at the time: covered in the refuse of children having the best week of their summers, with a mixing of liquids and rancid smells as we laughed and wrestled in the back of the flatbed truck. It wasn't just that we were doing hard labor that we knew would be undone; it was that we had been humbled in the service of Christ. It's hard to be a martyr in America, but at that moment we felt some sense of sacrifice that we were confident made Jesus proud.

One night while sleeping on my top bunk, I felt myself getting shaken awake by our Work Crew boss. He hurried me out of our tent–he wouldn't even let me put on my contacts–and walked with me, silently, the half-mile to the main building where he handed me off to two men I didn't recognize. They hauled me in front of a judge, who told me that the wages of my Sin were death and then escorted me past a bearded man in a loincloth dragging a wooden cross. Men stood behind him

with whips, and without being able to see, the loud cracks and agonizing screams made me think the lashes were finding their marks. They directed me into a shed and stood guard while talking about my impending punishment. My captors removed me from the shed and ushered me back past the man in loincloths who was now splayed upon the cross he'd been forced to carry. They took me back to sit before the judge, and he informed me that someone else had taken my sentence, that an innocent man had offered himself up for my Sin. By then I was more awake and starting to be able to make out the different staff playing their various roles, but the impact was profound nonetheless. I had just seen a bright red line painted from my Sin to Jesus's crucifixion. I cried again like the night two summers before and promised to try my hardest to not add to any of the pain he endured on the cross.

The next morning, everyone was quieter than usual. When we finally spoke about what we'd experienced the night before, it was with hushed and revenant tones. As a Christian, I learned to mark the moments in my life that I felt were important to the development of my faith. They were mountaintop experiences, course corrections in my mission to spread the gospel. That morning as I finished my chores, I thought about how the previous night had to be one. And it was far from the last. My history as an evangelical is dotted with moments like those at Eagle Lake. The faith that had been seeded by my parents and nurtured by The Navigators would lead me onto city street corners and high school campuses, from service projects in Matamoras, Mexico, to undercover missionary work in China. For twelve years, I was driven by the belief that my calling, like The Navigators, was "To know Christ, make Him known, and help others do the same." And while I never returned to Eagle Lake after the summer of 1997, I went on to work for a youth ministry called Young Life and would spend many more weeks and months at camps in Texas and Colorado, until the last time I took kids to a Young Life camp in British Columbia.

SUMMER OF 2007

Malibu Club lies at the entrance to the Princess Louisa Inlet in an impossibly beautiful stretch of Earth that sees peaks towering the channel from 2000 feet below the water's surface to 4000 feet above. Originally serving as a resort for west coast millionaires to sail their yachts to in the summer, Young Life had acquired the property after it nearly went bankrupt following a polio outbreak and because it was very difficult to reach. It might have been too hard to get to for the weekend warrior, but no distance was too great when it came to saving souls. Malibu is a mythical place in Young Life circles. Getting there requires a flight to Vancouver, a chartered bus to Earls Cove, and then a three-hour ferry ride up the Jervis Inlet, making it their most expensive camp to attend as well. No price was too great when it came to saving souls, either.

In another life, the trip could have been a featured bullet point on the resume of an evangelical Christian leader. A week at Young Life camp provided the best chance of getting a high school kid to repent of their Sin and choose to follow Christ, and I had 43 of them lined up and ready to be saved.

Young Life has a saying: *You can't bore someone into Heaven.* During every week of the summer at over two dozen Young Life camps across the country, middle and high school students are promised the best week of their lives. According to Young Life's website, their primary goal each summer is "creating an environment where Young Life staff bring Christ to life by creatively presenting the complete Gospel of Jesus Christ." By "creative" they mean that campers are told of God's love for them and of the miracles Jesus performed. And then they're told about Sin, and how they're doomed to hell. Camps consistently schedule this message for an unusual morning meeting in the middle of the week. Then they wait 36 hours before telling campers that Jesus paid the price for their Sin by dying on the cross.

According to Young Life, it's vital that the full weight of Sin be felt in order to comprehend God's love. But I'd seen that game play out too many times, seen emotional scars, deeper than rocks or whips could produce, forged in too many people. I led kids into their own mountaintop experiences with the intent of them committing their lives to Christ. A few weeks before the trip, it occurred to me that I didn't want them to have the life I'd lived the

past twelve years. I wanted out, but I had no idea how to do it. Before I could find my way, though, I almost died a martyr.

The peninsula that Malibu was built on creates such a narrow opening to the inlet that powerful rapids are formed as water travels in and out of the waterway with the tides. This hydraulic phenomenon added to the mystique of Malibu, but it also created obstacles. You could watch the water churn from the deck of the camp's heated pool, boats waiting on either end of the opening until a slack tide made the passageway navigable. A few days into camp, I was out on the docks watching kids get blobbed into the icy inlet when an errant volleyball bounced past me and into the water. I'd seen this happen before but was surprised when one of the staff asked me to take one of the camp boats out to get the volleyball before it got pulled into the rapids. It sounded fun and easy enough, so I hopped in the John boat, yanked on the rope to the outboard, and motored out toward the ball.

I'll never forget the speed at which the water moved as the lowering tide rushed through Malibu Rapids. It reminded me of rafting trips I'd taken years before in Colorado, the way the water gained speed, curled, dipped, and swirled in what felt like random and violent intervals. The volleyball was moving quickly away from the docks and toward the churning waves, but I caught up to it and had it in the boat in just a few seconds. When I let go of the throttle, the engine cut out, but when I tugged on the rope this time, nothing happened.

I wish I could remember what went through my mind in the moments that followed. I can feel myself yanking repeatedly and frantically at the starter cord. I can hear the Malibu staff on the dock yelling at me, also repeatedly and also frantically, warning me about what would happen if the boat was pulled into the rapids. I can see the inlet narrowing as I approach the rapids. I can feel the boat beginning to rise and fall with the increasingly turbulent water. But what went through my mind besides the basic instincts engaged to keep me from drowning?

Did I pray? Did I beg God for my life? Your guess is as good as mine.

When the engine finally engaged, I spun around and twisted the throttle, whirling the boat around before straightening out. The current was strong but the engine cut through it, and I was back

on the dock within thirty seconds. In all, I'd been in the boat for no more than five minutes, but I could immediately catalogue all the ways I could have died in that brief time. A gaggle of visibly relieved staffers helped me moor the boat and slapped me on the back as they let out nervous laughs. I imagine there's a rule now about letting untrained staff drive the boats at the height of the tidal shifts, and if not, hopefully they have good lawyers.

In another life, that experience could have drawn me closer to God, full of gratitude for my deliverance and renewed in my faith. In that life, I would use the experience in camp talks, compare it to Jesus calming the seas, use it as a testament to God's power. Maybe I'd write about it one day in a book about evangelism, recounting how it helped me personally save all 43 souls that had come with me that week. In another life, it would be another mountaintop experience, but instead it was the last straw. I'd nearly died in the service of a God I was beginning to doubt existed. Had I died, there's no doubt I would have been memorialized for the work I did to bring people to Christ. People would have wept and mourned at my funeral while simultaneously envisioning the celebrations happening upon my arrival in Heaven. Perhaps Tim would have eulogized me; maybe Jacob would have sat near the front. It would have been bittersweet, and the irony would have been lost on everyone.

I left my job with Young Life after the trip and spent the summer traveling, from San Francisco to upstate New York where I stood on the banks of another lake far from the one where I'd spent all of those summers in my youth. Prayer still came easily back then, but I struggled with my words that day as I thought about what Jacob had said all those years before. I had dedicated most of my life to pursuing a goal I now knew was unreachable. I had pleaded with God for years to lead me in the way everlasting and asked him to help me live a life worthy of what Jesus sacrificed on the cross. That night at Eagle Lake I'd felt so strongly that Jesus was calling me, but twelve years later, I felt nothing. That last time we spoke, I said to God, "If you want me, come and get me." I'd missed my target, drifted a million miles off course, but I no longer wanted to find my way back.