



Malcolm's work was done there. That was just the truth.

You can only go so far before you gotta pack up and move along, that was just the truth. He had come, and he had prayed for a blessing. Ask and it shall be given unto you. That's what his Father said. His Father also said that, sometimes, like it or not, you need to shake the dust off your feet and be on your way. It was just the truth.

Malcolm lifted the daughter he had carried all the way from the nurse's office up into the passenger seat of his truck, arranged her limbs, sat her up against the back, buckled her seatbelt. He closed the door and walked around the nose of the truck and got into the driver's seat, closed the door. Sometimes a girl needed her father to just come and take her home. Then everything would get better; he would make it so. That was just the truth.

Malcolm buckled, slid the key into the ignition. He turned to her. She was still unmoving. She was still unspeaking. He sighed.

Now he didn't know the ways of the Lord—no one did, that was just the truth. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts, that's what his Father said. He didn't know all the ways. But if Judith had stopped hanging around with those damn troublemakers, that rascal Shane and little Molly touch-me-please, he'd bet that would have prevented it. Birds of a feather flock together, that was the truth. And now Molly was sent home for acting like a damn harlot at a church camp. And Shane disappearing the same night Malcolm's own daughter spoke in the Devil's tongue. He didn't know it for certain. He didn't know the mysterious ways of God or of the Devil. But there was no such thing as coincidence. That was just the truth.

Malcolm looked at his cell phone to see if Linda had called. The signal was dead.

Malcolm turned the key in the ignition and, glimpsing at the chapel in front of him, backed out of the makeshift parking spot on gravel. He backed up rightwards, then proceeded forward down the road.

It would be okay. That was just the truth, or if it wasn't, he would make it so. She had her father now, and her Father, and as long as she kept by those two, she would be okay. Anybody who kept close to the Lord was taken care of, that was just the truth, and it's what his Father had said. Are not two sparrows sold

for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And you are worth more than many sparrows, that's what his Father said. And under his roof, Judith had been as modest and disciplined a teenager as he could make her be. In the outside world, now, that was when she had that rebellious streak, her daddy's stubbornness mixed with her mother's lack of foresight. It was something in her that made her act out and want to associate with the godless, and when she brought that attitude back into her father's house, that's when he made her modest again. Made her godly once more, shook the worldly influence off of her. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. That's what the good book said.

The Lord would provide. In this world he would have trouble, but his Father had overcome the world. No matter what happened, God would protect the Gray family, and He would make sure that they were okay and all in one piece, like a family of sparrows, no matter what Judith had done to bring this upon herself. He reigned with wisdom, power, and love, and nobody—not the Devil himself, not Satan, Lucifer, Baal, Beelzebul, whatever wicked thing his daughter had screamed out to the previous night—nobody stood a chance against Jehovah, that was just the truth. The church—Malcolm's church, too—was God's chosen people, and he would deliver them out of anything that entrapped them, just like Malcolm. He would deliver his child from anything that threatened her faith, her soul, whether or not she appreciated it, whether her or not she liked the way he did it, whether by means of his truck or by means of his fist. Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. That's what his father had said, and Malcolm's household would serve the Lord. Even if it took enforcing.

You can bring a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink, that was the truth. He couldn't help that she had chosen to run with the godless, the unconverted. He couldn't help what she had done to herself. All he knew was that the closer he pulled her into his house, the further away she wanted to get. But he was her father. That was just the truth. He was her father and so why was she running away? Why was she trying to evade him? Why did she hide from him in her closet when all he sought was to teach her the ways of the Lord?

Where did she want to go so bad?

Judith unbuckled.

The car door swung open, and before Malcolm's hand could pull her back in, Judith let herself fall from the car with effortless ease.

"Judith!"

Malcolm slammed on the brakes, sputtering up gravel in every direction, and scrambled out of the car into a sprint. Red stains were visible on Judith's knees and forearms, but she didn't seem to notice. She rose immediately to her feet and bolted full-forcedly back into the woods that shrouded the dark roads of that camp, holding out her hand as if she was holding someone else's, someone who wasn't there and had never been, followed by her father as they breached the brush.

All the while the clean, white, spotless truck continued to coast its way home, down the long tiresome road, rock by troublesome rock, slowly, slowly, slowly.



Sam sat where he had fallen in the playground. He stared at the gravel, the same gravel he had been staring at for nearly an hour. Unable to move. Unable to think.

He heard something.

The clouds were thick, dark, suffocating all light. Across the field, campers left their gender-divided classes, boys from the pavilion, girls from the chapel, headed to afternoon sports in places all over camp. The entire population of Camp Havenside was, for a brief interval of time, all in one place: the field at the center of the grounds. Sam straightened his glasses. Looked closer.

People were stopping, freezing in place. As each camper leaving the chapel or pavilion entered the field, they stopped, froze in place, until after just a couple minutes, everyone stood motionless. They were looking at something. Something in the very center. Sam couldn't see it from behind the bodies.

So he stood up. Walked toward the field. Walked past person after person, then saw it. And came no closer.

Three boys Sam didn't recognize, stood one beside another, naked from the waist down. With them, between them, going from one to another in turns, was Molly Hurst, dressed in a purple shirt and scarlet athletic shorts. She was on her knees, her head hidden by legs and hips. Her head moving.

Her face repeatedly thrust forward, twisting slightly, swallowing each in rapid gulps. The boys didn't move, didn't look capable of doing so. Their faces were haggard, hollow. Between turns, Molly looked up them and whispered.

“It’s gotten so cold here at Camp Havenside . . . looks like we’ll have to make our own heat.”

She put another in her mouth, held the testicles. Moving her tongue, she looked directly at Sam, without having to search. Her eyes were a vivid green.

Sam backed up quickly, bumping into someone. He turned. Calvin Sanders was behind him, and behind him, Dennis Reeves. They walked past him, up to Molly. Calvin turned to Dennis, whispered quickly and hoarsely. Then he stepped forward, spoke:

“Molly.”

She did not reply, did not stop what she was doing.

“Molly . . . what are you doing?”

Molly turned, pulling the boy from her mouth. She looked at Calvin with eyes that were not hers.

“Serving the Lord.”

Calvin inhaled, exhaled shakily. He clasped his hands.

“The lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. he guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no ev—”

“Evil-l-l . . .”

Molly seemed to giggle.

“Mmmm evil, evil, evil . . . wh . . . what is . . .”

“lord . . .” Calvin breathed in a shudder. “I pray to you now . . . that you release these teenagers from the powers of satan that have befallen them.”

Molly’s brow furrowed. She released the boy from her hand and mouth. She cocked her head, as though something had confused her.

“satan . . .”

Her face was somewhere between smile and frown. Her head bowed, an unmistakable smile stretching, and with it a laugh.

“sa-a-tan . . . wh . . . what is . . . what is *that* na-a-me . . .”

“lord, we p-p-pray . . . we pray for Molly, our sister in christ, that she be released from w-whatever . . . w-w-w-whatever bargain or trap she fell into with . . . w-with satan—”

Molly’s laughter redoubled.

“sa-a-a-a-tan! Wha-what even, what even is th-th-that? . . . I-I thought . . . I thought my name was *Molly* . . . I thought . . . I thought my name . . . was Molly . . .”

Molly’s body began to rock back and forth. Her hair hid her eyes. Her heaves shifted slowly into sobs.

“P-please . . . h-h-help me . . . help m—”

Her open mouth released a torrent, gushing plentifully from her lips in a red and white deluge. Sam watched as it coated the grass, a pool of the blood of god’s holy people, and the semen of those who bore testimony to jesus.

“Ple-e-ease! Somebody help me-e-e!”

Her head heaving up and down, Sam could see, between black strands of hair, her eyes. Molly’s eyes, hazel, familiar.

“W-w-why did you do this to me . . . why-y did you *do* this to m-me . . .”

“l-l-l-lord, p-please . . . we pray to you in humility, that you intercede for Molly’s soul . . . show her the m-mercy you’ve shown all of us by dying on that tree . . .”

Molly wept.

“Empower her to ov . . . t-to overcome the s-s-spirit that is inside of her, and release her from its prison. Free her with the power of your love . . .”

Molly wept, heaved.

“Let the light of y—. . . y-your mercy shine on her . . . shine on all of us who love her-r . . . and forgive her the sins she has committed, the involvement she made with this evil spirit-t—”

Molly heaved, heaved, laughed.

“You know, if god treasures and values my body so much, he should just come down here and fuck it.”

Molly looked directly at Calvin with half-lowered eyelids. She laughed and it was at him.

“Bring your preachers and your ministers and whoever else wants to drink-k of the love . . . to *eat* of the body . . . there’ll be no shortage of-f it, t-t-trust me . . . tell them there’s a demon or a devil or whatever you want to call It, but It’s only got one name, and it’s the same Name you’re all t-too afraid to say-y . . .”

Molly bowed her head, giggled eternally.

“A-a-and we pray . . . that you lead her, guide her, protect her soul in all of its beauty, protect her body in all of its purit—. . .”

Camp Havenside

Calvin's words trailed off. Everything was quickly, quickly darkening. There sounded a groan of thunder. Sam, with everyone else, looked up.

In the middle of afternoon, the sky above Camp Havenside was the color of iron. The ceiling of clouds was gapless, blotting out the whole sky with black. Clouds swirled, intertwined. Lightning emigrated from one to another. The whole sky was moving.

Sam looked back down.

Molly was looking at Calvin, smiling.

"My Lord comes now."

"... all of its . . . p-p-urity—"

A flash consumed Sam's vision. Screams shrilled from every direction. The charred, smoldering corpse of Calvin Sanders flopped to the ground.

Camp Havenside was scattered from thence upon the face of all the earth.

Sam ran, dodged and wove his way through sprinting campers coming from all directions. Shrieking bodies collided with each other. Campers knocked to the floor crawled over another, trampled each other. A young girl sprinted past Sam, hand stepped on, fingers bleeding and broken backwards. Distantly a boy stood screaming and screaming at Calvin's body, the lips singed and shriveled back from the teeth, as the boy shrieked perpetually until—

Another flash, this time near the pavilion, another chorus of screams, and the boy howled, sprinted away from the body, as everyone's speed tripled. They ran in every direction, clambering over playground sets, leaping over the log border, sprinting past the cabins and pavilion but all headed to the same place—the forest, wrapped thick around Camp Havenside.

Sam watched them flee. He watched them vanish into the trees. Trees he knew all too well.

He turned around—sprinted for the chapel.

He staggered through the door. He threw himself into the room of worship. The fluorescent lights flickered above him. The screams continued. The lightning, the thunder continued. Sam stumbled down the aisle between the pews. He came to the edge of the stage. He stared at the twig-stitched cross hanging before him, and fell to his knees.

I come to the garden alone—

—I will fear no evil for you are with me—

—shame bonded with thirst and created Something else—

"P-please . . ."

*—follow the will of god you cannot know the will of god you must follow the will of god—
—thou wore of the fig leaves before the animal skins—
“Please . . . have m-mercy . . . have mercy on me-e . . .”
—rituals of touch and zeal in the flesh of—
—flesh of god his side torn open for your sins, repent, repent, repent—
—for what?—
—repent, repent, repent—
—what sin have I?—
—repent, repent, repent—
“W-w-what sin have I?”
—repent, repent, re—
—pent up sin, overflowing wound, blood sliding over you—
—blood of the lamb, o, blood of the lamb—
—on the third day, rising from the grave of your shame—
—blood of the lamb, o, blood of the lamb—
—found bleeding and screaming and writhing in the garden from your L-! L-! L-!—*

The languages converged into a single word.

LIES!

Palms covered his eyes.

“Why can I not understand you?”

Light was nowhere. Sam saw nothing.

He heard something. A familiar voice. His voice.

He withdrew his hands.

Across from Sam, hung on the cross of twigs, was him. Spattered lightly with blood. Glasses askew on his face. Dead, mouth hanging open. Looking directly back at him.

A quiet cracking. Growing. Breaking. A thick snapping, multiplying.

Something was happening to the cross. The sticks bound together were twitching, shifting, shaking. Glints of blackened green were born on the bark. Extended into longer, serpentine vines. It accelerated, producing lengthy and scraggly lines of vegetation until they began to overlap, to intertwine, to weave

sprout over sprout. Branches thrust out through the chest of Sam's double, crawled and bent around his ribs, and weeds forced their way out his open mouth, more black than green. Wood formed claws where hands once were. Growth bound with growth, tangled, thickened, elongated into arms, legs, and, as the grass covered Sam's quickly rotting face, a head.

The avatar fell from the wall. It stood before him.

...

The artificial light of the chapel began to flicker, spark, then go out entirely.

...uuuuuhhhnnnngggghhhh...

It was his breath.

Sam swung himself around and sprinted. The darkness of the chapel was absolute, every light extinguished. He crashed through the wooden doors to the worship hall, turned towards the glass door—

Lightning struck outside, yards away. Its light silhouetted a Shape, a Shape inside the chapel, standing between the door and Sam.

Gilly extended Its claws.

...hhhgggoouuunnggghhh...

Screams drowned each other within him. He stumbled backwards over his feet, slipped to the floor. His limbs scrambled to lift his body, helpless, flailing, as immense footsteps quaked forth in the darkness.

...gggghhhhaaeeggghhh...

He fought to his feet, rushed to escape through the opposite glass door behind him—found it locked.

...kkkkkkkgkgkhhrrrlllggghhh...

He found the lock. He grabbed the lock.

...rrrrmmnnnnngggghhh...

The lock would not turn.

Rrrrgggllllkghkghkghh—!

His fingers slipped on the lock with cold sweat. He felt the exhalation chill his neck.

eeuuuuuuuuuaaggghhhrrrkkkgghhh—!—!—!

The lock snapped vertical, the door flew open, and Sam fell out into the blackness of a premature night, the havoc of an overdue nightmare.

Night was falling.



Timothy woke.

He rubbed his eyes, looked around him. Outside the window, the night was quiet. Undisturbed. There was no sound of anything.

Timothy stood up, stretched. He looked around the nurse's office, saw nobody. The nurse was nowhere to be found. He didn't see Thatcher either. He turned, saw the door to the second room of the nurse's office ajar.

"Thatcher?"

Nobody answered.

"Hey, Thatcher, are you in here?"

There was silence. Silence and a faint wheezing.

Timothy walked forward. Opened the door all the way.

In the darkness, he could see Thatcher's silhouette, sitting on a chair across the room. His features were indistinct. He seemed to have his head bowed.

"Thatcher, is that you?"

"..."

"Thatcher, are you . . . are you alright?"

"... abominable filth . . . abominable filth . . ."

"... Thatcher?"

"They're all going to the Garden, Timothy . . . they're all going to the Garden . . ."

Timothy tried to see through the dark. He couldn't make Thatcher out completely. What little he could see didn't look right.

"I . . . what, what's going on Thatch—"

"You don't want to go there, Timothy . . . you don't want to go there . . . but It's going to take you there . . . It's going to take *me* there . . ."

Timothy stepped forward into the room—then stopped. He choked, gagged. Something smelled awful in the room.

"Aghhh . . . Thatcher, what . . . what is goi—gosh, what is that smell?"

"Abominable filth . . . abominable filth . . ."

The closer Timothy got the more wrong Thatcher looked. Through tears beading from his gag reflex, he could see even less. He turned around, found the light switch next to the door, turned it on, turned around—

"Ohh, *oh my god!* Oh, oh-h-h my, oh my, oh my god, what the *bell has It done to you?*"

Thatcher was rotting as he stood. From his chest, black growth was cleaving its way out of him, clutching the better part of his torso with rotten wood. His entire right arm had been turned into that same wood, deformed and sharpened at the fingers, no longer recognizably human. Black blood dripped, oozed from the hole in his chest, puddled copiously onto the floor.

Thatcher looked at Timothy with bright, bright green eyes.

“Abominable filth . . . abominable filth . . .”

“Thatcher . . . Thatcher-r, p-please . . . don’t give in . . .”

Timothy stepped forward.

“Th-hatcher . . . pray with me . . . c-c-come on, man, *please* . . . just pray with me . . . god will save us . . . god will protect us, he cares about us . . . he *loves* us . . .”

Thatcher’s face was immobile, dead.

“Please . . . don’t you believe . . . d-don’t you believe in his love?”

Thatcher said nothing. Tears fell down his cheeks.

“I have to save us, Timothy. I have to save us the pain. I . . . have to save you. I told you . . .”

Thatcher reached out his wooden arm.

“I would do anything to protect you.”

Thatcher threw his hand back, punctured all five claws into his chest, blood shooting out from the impact.

“Thatcher!”

With ease, his hand searched, gripped, then, with a liquid groan, unearthed a throbbing, pulsating piece of black meat, beating furiously, hysterically, confusedly, struggling to understand what had been done to it.

Thatcher did rip his heart out for the kid.

His body fell to the floor.

“Thatcher, no!”

“Thatcher, wh**hhhh**— . . . please, wh**hhhh**—”

“Oh**hhhh** my god, oh**hhhhh** my god, N-*Thatcher*, n-*hykhh*! . . .”

Camp Havenside

“... hhhhugh ... hhhhhhhuengh ...”

“hhhhhhhhhhh*nykb—! nykb—! nykb—!*”

“hhhhhhhheugh ... hhhhheungh ... hhhhhhhhhh*yyyaaggghbbb—!*”

“... hhhhnnnggghh ... hhhhughh ... hnggh ...”

“... hhungh ... hnggh ...”

“..... hnggh *bnyagk!*”

“... ”

“... ”

“... ”

“..... ”