

SALVATION LAKE

“REPENT THEREFORE AND BE CONVERTED, THAT YOUR SINS MAY BE BLOTTED OUT, SO THAT TIMES OF REFRESHING MAY COME FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD.” —ACTS 3:19

By Annah Mackenzie

It was a sweltering Friday evening in July, the Pennsylvania sky stretching yellow and red across the forest, screaming for a storm. Even in the valley the heat hadn't broken all week. Sitting cross-legged in the grass, sunburned, with mud in our flip-flops and mosquito bites on our arms, my cabin mates and I pretended to listen to the Reverend Andy extolling the various blessings we would each accrue after inviting Jesus into our young lives. Restless, we ripped patches of earth from the ground, hurled them at each other and giggled, nervously anticipating the Seven Minutes in Heaven marathon we had planned for this evening behind Cabin Number Six at exactly midnight. Cheryl,

my sister and I, in our first acts of rebellion against our father, would take long and indulgently hot showers when our parents were away. Joyously spiteful, we basked in our soapy rebellion until the water ran cold, high-fiving each other as we passed in the hallway. We also ate butter.

My family has always spoken the language of free. The *Hills* department store on Route 15 had free hotdogs and cherry-flavored *Icees* every Saturday, and each week we piled into our baby blue hatchback, highway bound and hungry. Wednesday mornings at Mister Donut, children under twelve got six free

Spend a week in the forest with God, the brochure said.

who slept in the bunk beneath mine and had a reckless case of premature acne, had a pack of Newports, which she had stolen from her stepmother's glove compartment during orientation, hidden in a sock under her bed. We retained fragments of the impromptu sermon: free trip to Heaven ... commitment ... confession ... repentance. Apparently we could sin without abandon for the rest of our lives, and all we had to do was ask God for forgiveness and we were home free, guaranteed a one-way ticket to the Promised Land. Well, Hallelujah.

“CHILDREN, OBEY YOUR PARENTS IN ALL THINGS.”

—COLOSSIANS 3:20

The Wesley Forest United Methodist Youth Retreat was the first and only camp I had ever been to, more by circumstance than choice. My parents weren't so much religious as cheap. My father sometimes sat in the small yellow hallway between the bathroom and the kitchen with a bowl of Grapenuts in one hand and a stopwatch in the other, to ensure that our showers didn't exceed eight minutes. While some children may refuse to eat broccoli, or steal change from their mother's purse,

donut holes each with the purchase of one very adult coffee. My dad would shell out the sixty-five cents for his coffee, pinching two donut holes from my sister and me so that we would all have an even four. It was only fair, he said, and we went to school satisfied and smiling each Wednesday, smelling of stale cigarettes and cake.

There was a McDonalds in the next town over, and although we were generally not allowed fast food of any kind, exceptions were sometimes made on 39-cent cheeseburger day. I remember riding in the front seat with my father one afternoon, windows down, cruising for fifteen minutes alongside the Susquehanna, a Wagner cassette in the tape deck. *We'll have three 39-cent cheeseburgers and two waters*, my father shouted into the drive-thru window with a thick Boston accent and an alarming sense of urgency. *I'm real sorry, sir, but the cheeseburger special was yesterday*, a muffled voice replied from the speaker. My father thanked her, corrected her grammar, drove up to the pick-up window and kept going, straight back to our driveway.

So when I found a flyer in our mail slot one fateful afternoon in May, green and black and

screaming of summer and ice cream and flame-charred marshmallows impaled on twigs, I knew it would be an easy sell. Our church was prepared to fully fund any of its members for one week at a participating Bible camp, and I had been vigilantly schooled to never pass up a freebie of this magnitude. *Spend a Week in the Forest with God*, the brochure read, and what kind of self-respecting rural Pennsylvania parent could say no to their child's request to spend a week with the Lord in an all-expense-paid camping extravaganza? I could taste the smores already.

Seven days. We felt like savages, alone and wild in a world of cedar and lemonade, of berries you shouldn't eat and ridiculous songs you can't stop singing, louder and louder, obnoxious and smiling. We were eleven. Although we were hovering dangerously over the bottomless chasm of cynicism, some days we still believed in fantasy, or at least allowed ourselves to be talked into believing. We could still be ceaselessly entertained playing games like *House*, *Restaurant*, or my favorite, *BG*, which was code for boyfriend/girlfriend—a game similar to *House* but much more scandalous (hence the cunning use of only the first letters) and which often amounted, for sheer lack of resources, to *GG*, in which one *G* had to pretend to be the *B*.

Give me gas in my Ford, keep me truckin'
Give me gas in my Ford I pray,
Give me gas in my Ford keep me truckin'
Keep me truckin' till the break of day.

Give me oil in my Nova help me witness for Jehovah
Give me oil in my Nova I pray,
Give me oil in my Nova help me witness for Jehovah
Help me witness till the break of day.

We worshipped four times each day, not including mandatory Bible study during the hour and a half between arts and crafts and afternoon vespers. After Day Three I already knew the lyrics to nearly every song in the makeshift xeroxed songbook. I was a little Christian prodigy, Reverend Andy said, after I recited all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament in one breath. What he did not know, though, was that along with the twenty-third Psalm and the Lord's prayer, I could also recite the entire Sally Struthers commercial (*Do you want to make more money? sure! we all do...*), the quadratic formula (although it would be years until I

could make any sense of algebra), and complete songs in German that my father would make me sing in front of various houseguests and, on occasion, complete strangers. I had no clue what the words meant; I only understood the sounds they made.

It took three years for my piano teacher, who was also my church organist and about 113 years old, to understand why I always asked her to play each new piece before I attempted it. I was pounding out Tchaikovsky before my hands were big enough to play an octave. The day Ms. Stryker politely refused to play a piece I couldn't recognize by the title, my face turned to fire and I bit my lip so hard to keep from crying that it began to bleed. I was humiliated and ashamed, but mainly I was scared to death of disappointing grownups. I had been caught. I was a fraud. I could barely read music at all and had been faking it all along. The old woman placed her hand on my cheek, and then quickly got up to pour me a glass of milk. Her gaudy gold rings felt cool on my face and her sleeve smelled of attics and Chanel. For the next few months we focused on theory, but as I learned to relate notes on a page to the sounds



In the lake that night, an enormous cross floated in the water, bobbing lazily in the darkness. On the cross were a million tiny candles that somehow continued to burn despite the enduring balmy breeze. It was breathtaking. At the foot of the lake were eight men, counselors and visiting ministers, sitting cross-legged behind aluminum basins filled with warm water, a white towel on one side and a bar of soap on the other. One by one, we were invited to step forward and dip our feet in the buckets. I was sent to Z's bucket. Z, an ex-con I had met on the first day of camp, wore bright neon tank tops and had tattoos on every inch of his iron-pumping arms, the face of Jesus boldly emblazoned on his right shoulder blade, blood dripping from its forehead because of the intricately inked crown of thorns. Z had found Jesus, he explained, while serving time for armed robbery in a prison near Lewisburg a few years back. I felt strange having my feet scrubbed by Z, not only because there was about three months' of grime beneath my toenails, but also because I thought I might be in love with him and I was sure he knew.

I LIFT UP MY EYES TO THE HILLS - WHERE DOES MY HELP
COME FROM? - PSALM 121:1-2

I could tell that some of the adults were relieved when I finally *did* cry. It was dark out and our feet were clean as we sat by the lake swatting mosquitoes and singing. An old man we hadn't seen before played along with us on his black Gibson guitar. He was nearly bald but still somehow pulled off a ponytail, a single silver curl that seemed to sprout magically from the back of his neck.

*Have you seen Jesus my Lord?
He's here in plain view.
Take a look, open your eyes,
He'll show it to you.*

*Have you ever stood at the ocean,
With the white foam at your feet,
Felt the endless thundering motion,
Then I'd say you've seen Jesus my Lord.*

I didn't know why I was crying. The song was beautiful, though, and it made me think of my dad and the beach and the old house on the Cape with the pink bedroom and the broken lawn chairs. I *had* stood at the ocean, just before a fierce storm in August, when the sky seems purple and the waves swell silently,

losing their bearings and collapsing into one another. The sand turns to pellets as it smacks your skin in salty gusts, and as the tide creeps higher onto the shore you swear that it's trying to pull you in. So maybe I *had* seen Jesus?

I cried, too, because the singing was beautiful. A hundred voices chanting in unison in a forest of shadows and candlelight cannot but be stunning. But I also cry at cotton commercials when Aaron Neville sings the *fabric of our lives* bit. I cry during the national anthem before the Super Bowl. I cry when music sounds like life should feel, but usually doesn't.

As I wept and watched the water, I waited for the sky to open but it never did. I wanted my tears to be tears of revelation as I imagined everyone else's were—even my allies, the keepers of the cool, the ones I smoked cigarettes with by the showers when the world was sleeping. They were children of God now, graceful and glowing. My friends were crying because tonight they had been saved. I, on the other hand, wept because of the beautiful singing and the strangeness of the pink moon that seemed oblong and twisted as it shone off Salvation Lake.

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