

The Book of Lom

A Modern Day Parable For The
Thoughtful
by
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A battered Country Squire station wagon made its way across the dry, dusty expanses of the desert southwest. Its occupants, one man, Harvey Willing, age 28, one woman, Jeanne Willing, 29, and their unborn son, Tom Willing, were on their way to a new life in a place they called Eternal City.

Eternal City was a different sort of city. It was a city of pilgrims, of self-made refugees, of entire families who had willingly given up life in places like New York and Los Angeles to escape, out of a fear deeper and more terrifying than the fear of war or plague. In an age where it seemed that moral decay was ever-present and all-encompassing, Eternal City was planned, from the very start, as a bastion of morality and good values. It was a place where God was king, and the only governing body, the city's Council of Elders, served only as co-regents to the kingdom.

Eternal City was the brainchild of Malcolm Barry, owner of the famous Clucker's Chicken Sandwiches restaurant chain. Barry was a major contributor to Reagan's campaign, as well as to numerous conservative Christian groups like Warriors for the American Family, a group known for its vocal stance against issues such as homosexuality and indecent media content. He had made a fortune selling his famous chicken sandwiches, and used the money to build a city in his image of what a Godly society should be. The Council of Elders had been selected from among the world of business and industry, an elite cadre of concerned conservatives who felt their influence and power made them necessarily the natural rulers of the world. Eternal City's mission statement made no secret of its long-term ambition: "Our goal is to extend the blessings of a Christian government ruled by wise and moral men to the whole of the United States and to the World. In a few short years all the flags of the different states, all the flags outside the U.N. Headquarters, all the banners and standards of all the world will be gone, and in their place, God willing, will fly the Christian flag."

Some of the city's residents had left very good lives of privilege for the chance to live in Eternal City, and their money served them well in the city's strained economy. The Willings, on the other hand, were nearly penniless. Among the items Harvey Willing had in hand for the reception committee at Eternal City was a bank statement proving he had the bare minimum amount of money to be granted entry- all of \$1500 in savings. This had taken about a year to scrounge, and he and his wife had given up cable TV, air conditioning, and dentistry to be able to afford it.

Harvey's neglected impacted wisdom tooth throbbed in the back of his mouth as he drove along, but he wasn't thinking about that. He was thinking about finally moving to a place where his son, his innocent, unborn child, could be born and grow up a true believer and be assured of a place in heaven. No negative influences would reach him in Eternal City; he would have only the Lord as his guide.

The old wagon's engine purred like a restless tiger under the sprawling deck of the hood. Harvey's neighbors, who had just bought a brand new Dodge Omni GLH, liked to joke about how many F-14s could land on that space. Ah yes, the neighbors. Always swilling beer and blasting loud music, and always having outrageous parties and fights. Then there was Zap, a young fellow with green hair, tattoos, and a leather jacket who often sold them sizeable bags of that had to have been thousands of dollars in cocaine. The husband, fashionably bisexual, and the wife, provocative and a constant flirt, embodied everything the Willings hated about the times.

This was 1984, a time of great promise, a time of impending doom. It seemed only Ronald Reagan and the budding religious revival of conservative America stood between the Godly people of this new promised land and the godless machine of the Soviet Union. In those days, when we looked at the world through polarized lenses, it seemed for all the world that it was either the cross and the eagle or the hammer and sickle that would win the day.

From the back seat, where she lay, leaning on a pillow propped up against the door, Jeanne stared out the window of the wagon. Her thoughts were less involved with the bigger picture of the times. They were the focused, gently resigned thoughts of a mother to be, that peculiar mix of love, fear, and uncertainty tinged with the acceptance of the fact that, ready or not, this child was coming into this world. She was 8 months, 3 weeks pregnant, give or take; little Tom was due within days.

She gazed across the vast dry lake bed. She recognized it as such from a large coffee table book about geology her mother kept on a shelf in the living room when she was growing up. They had passed a ring of mountains as they drove into it, but now the mountains were completely lost in the distance. This must have been a vast lake indeed in some long-ago time. Off in the distance, something shimmered on the horizon. Maybe it was some tiny puddle of residual water, or more likely a very convincing mirage. All around, tall columns of dust swirled around. These were dust devils, but nothing at all like the small ones Jeanne had seen back home in Portland. These were so much taller and more monstrous, almost full-on tornadoes, and they spiraled ceaselessly across this dry and desolate wasteland. Their undulating forms were at once beautiful and terrifying as they raged, sometimes coming within a few hundred yards of the road. She wondered if this was what hell was like, a parched plain where lone winds howled day in and day out, and lost souls wandered, searching for a way out, but finding only an endless horizon.

Hell... land of the damned... land of those who failed God. She thought of Tom's namesake. He could never know that he wasn't the first Tom Willing. He could never be told that Harvey's brother had the name first, but died of AIDS just a few short weeks ago. They had already chosen the name when it happened; they hadn't even known he was gay, let alone dying, and it came as a tremendous shock. Deep down they still loved the late Tom, but his life, which he had hidden until his deathbed, could not be spoken of. Jeanne was determined that this Tom would be born and raised in a world where absolute morality ruled, that he would never once set foot or mind outside that blessed cloister of

godliness, and that he would make the name worthy again. If he ever learned that the first Tom Willing was a homosexual, she feared that her son too might be cursed with that affliction and die a horrible, lingering death of AIDS. It seemed clear that God had spoken in this plague, and the dictum was clear: the love that dare not speak its name would soon be forever silent as those who embraced it withered like weeds.

The road suddenly began sloping upward. Ahead, a mountain pass came into view. The directions in the pamphlet they had been sent said that the pass just beyond the dry lake bed meant they'd be getting close to the road that led off the main highway and into Eternal City. Just ten more miles, and they'd find the road they needed.

Harvey stared back and forth expectantly between the road ahead and his odometer. He was doing 95, which was 30 over the speed limit on this two-lane desert highway, but the distance seemed to crawl by as if the highway had somehow become constipated beneath him. At last, a sign came into view on the horizon. He struggled to read it; it was just your standard green rectangle from this distance, no discernible writing yet. He instinctively rammed the throttle, the needle jumping to 100 on the wavering speedometer. Did the sign say... Yes! Straight and Narrow Rd. was only ½ mile away!

As the sign faded to a green blur in his peripheral vision, Harvey slowed down to 70, then 60, then 50. He didn't want to miss the road. Suddenly, he spotted it. If not for the small, battered sign sticking out from the corner of the two roads, it might have blended into the desert. The sign itself looked as if its existence was tenuous; it was bent and faded, its base showing signs of having been repaired numerous times as careless drivers had knocked it across the sands again and again.

Harvey put on his signal and turned onto the long, straight single-lane stretch of macadam. Although the road, formerly used by the military to service an air field during the second world war (the out buildings from which formed the original basis of Eternal City), was completely without bends or curves until it reached the valley, one could not see Eternal City from here thanks to a rise and dip over yet another gently-sloping pass. Only the hesitance from the car's engine indicated that the Willings were traveling uphill; out here, there were very few points of reference for that fact. All Harvey could see was the horizon, closing in fast, with a pillar of mountain standing tall on either side like the mythic Pillars of Hercules.

Rounding the crest of the hill, a magnificent sight came into view. Sprawling before them, ringed by snow-capped mountains, was a lush, green valley where neat, orderly streets crisscrossed to form newly-made city blocks. A few quonset huts converted into stores lined the main promenade, made from the former runway. Lots were still being cleared, houses being built, and stores taking shipments of food, clothing, and household goods. At the very center of it all, towering above everything else, was the Chapel of the Eternal City, the seat of worship and government for this ambitious experiment. It was a big, modern building built in a minimal, modernistic style, with a massive stainless steel cross standing in front. In the corner of the valley were fields, where the city grew staple foods to keep the need for food shipments to a minimum.

The road at last reached its first bend at the valley's edge, and the wagon wound down the narrow road carved into the side of the valley, Harvey sweating slightly as he negotiated the sharp hairpin turns at a cautious 20 miles per hour. Ahead was the welcome center, a small gray stucco building with a glass façade. It looked a bit like a bank, but with a much larger parking lot. This was where not only newcomers were received, but where dignitaries and the media were taken; the council had strict rules about not allowing the media into the city itself without supervision.

A few minutes later, they entered the visitor's center. Harvey and Jeanne were taken in by a woman in an ankle-length dress, who showed them to a desk inside a frosted glass cubicle and gestured for them to sit down.

"So, you're the Willings! We've been expecting you. Welcome to Eternal City!"

"Pleasure to be here," said Harvey. "It was quite a drive." "Oh, I imagine so! Goodness, you traveled all the way from... Iowa was it?" "Oregon... Portland, Oregon," Harvey corrected her gently. "Oh, I see," the woman said. "It's a good thing you came here. Right now Portland is home of over nine thousand practicing Satanists, and the focus of several homosexual groups looking to recruit children and teens. They're well-organized, too! The school district there is run entirely homosexual plants, and these are all unreported facts that the liberal media has totally denied! We estimate that by 1990, the birth rate in America will be less than 1 birth for every 1000 people, and more than half of the country will be infected with AIDS! Well, here's one precious child they won't get." She smiled at Jeanne, looking down at her swollen belly. Jeanne smiled back, patting the bulge of her child-to-be with tranquil satisfaction.

"Now, we do have a few questions we ask all our newcomers, just routine procedure, of course," the woman said. "I must warn you that if at any point you are discovered to be lying, you will be ejected from Eternal City. We take perjuring your soul seriously around here, so dishonesty will not be tolerated. First off, have either of you or a member of your immediate family ever been diagnosed with AIDS?"

The two looked at each other rather nervously, then in unison said "No."

The woman marked down a check box on a piece of paper on the desk. "Have either of you ever been a homosexual?" "No," both replied. "Are you or have you ever been a Satanist, witch, or practitioner of black magic, or consulted a fortune teller or necromancer?" "No," both replied.

"Have you ever voted Democrat?"

"No."

"Have you ever spent more than six weeks in Europe?"

"No."

"Have you ever seen, rented, or purchased a pornographic film or magazine?"

"No."

“Do you routinely watch films or television programs that preach anti-Christian values such as pluralism, idol-worship, and hedonism?”

“No.”

“Do you believe in Darwin’s theory of evolution?”

“No.”

“Have you ever used illegal drugs?”

“No.”

“Have you had alcohol in the last year?”

“No.”

“Would you be willing to sign an indefinite contract to abide, unconditionally, by any and all rules, regulations, restrictions, and endorsements as set forth in the Eternal City charter?”

“Yes.”

“Would you be willing to sign an indefinite contract naming your family as a subsidiary of Clucker’s Chicken Incorporated and subject to all the terms and conditions thereof?”

“Yes.”

“Do you recognize the King James Bible, and only the King James Bible, as the true and inerrant word of God, and the Council of Elders of Eternal City as the divinely appointed emissaries of the will of God as described in those holy pages?”

“Yes.”

“If you’ll just show us proof of financial eligibility and all of your forms and contracts signed and dated, we’ll see you to your new home.” With that, Harvey handed the woman a stack of papers. She thumbed through them, then smiled. “I’ll be right back, if you’ll just wait right here.” She nodded politely and left the cubicle, running off to an office on the far end of the building.

About two hours later, the Willings were on an open-air tram tour of Eternal City. Although it was one of those trams designed to pull a matching trailer, this one didn’t need it; they were the only ones touring that day.

The tram rumbled through a massive triumphal gate as they entered the city. It was decked out in precious and semi-precious stones like jasper and chalcedony, much like the gates in the Bible. As they entered the gate, a fanfare blared and they were amazed to look up and see seven trumpeters in white robes standing on a platform just beyond the gate inside the city. “In Eternal City, as in Heaven above, we rejoice when a new soul joins our ranks,” the guide at the front of the tram said. “At present, eighty-six believers, including you, sir, ma’am, and your child, have joined us since Eternal City opened in July of 1983, but we believe that as word of this magnificent godly kingdom spreads, more and more will come here, and we will eventually be able to bring a godly government to the whole country and to the world.”

The tram turned the corner, and the guide turned toward a big brick building. “This is our school, where we teach grades kindergarten through 12th grade. Our school applies self-paced Montessori learning techniques, with an emphasis on Biblical teaching.

No learning about trash like sex and Darwin here, this is a school for godly children to learn godly things. And over here is our state-of-the-art computer learning center, where kids and adults alike can learn on the latest and most advanced Apple and IBM...”

The guide’s speech was cut short by a scream, followed by Mrs. Willing panting and crying. “My water broke! He’s coming! Help me, Jesus, I’m having my baby!” Harvey leaned over and took her hand to try to comfort her, but she was visibly upset as blood and birth fluids began to spill onto the white vinyl of the shuttle’s upholstery.

The guide looked at the tram driver, who nodded knowingly. The tram suddenly sped up and turned around, heading the other direction toward a tall building at the far end of the city. “And just ahead of us is Eternal City Evangelical hospital, a state-of-the-art facility with a maternity ward capable of handling up to 600 deliveries a week. Up until now, they haven’t had a delivery. Mrs. Willing, your child will be the first ever born in Eternal City.”

“Did you hear that, honey? The first one born in Eternal City! Our little Tom is making history!” Harvey said to his wife, trying to comfort her. She just looked at him, screaming, tears streaming down her face as the shuttle raced toward the hospital.

Nine hours later, after what seemed like an eternity of agonizing labor pains, Thomas Harvey Willing was born on August 8th, 1984. His vitals were good, his weight healthy, and by all appearances was a beautiful, normal baby boy.



"To all members of the Council of Elders of Eternal City, shareholders of Clucker's Chicken Sandwiches, Inc, and all company personnel:

It has been confirmed as of 8:11 GMT, December 12, 1984, that Clucker's restaurant chain earnings have exceeded our goal of \$510M for the fourth quarter and are rising. Furthermore, savings on the cost of advertising and promotional materials for Eternal City through our church press kit program have allowed us to cut operating costs by \$8M. Further savings in labor costs by homologating foodservice, waste disposal, and construction divisions with the Hope of Mankind homeless shelter have saved an additional \$12M. Manufacturing of souvenir snow globes to be sold in the Eternal City visitor's center has been moved from Akron, OH to Jakarta, Indonesia. Despite a significant amount of capital in bureaucratic expenses to Pres. Suharto, souvenir production and sales has in fact posted a net gain of \$110K.

A champagne cork popped, flying across the room, a heady stream of bubbles pouring out lazily after it from the bottle of Dom Perignon. "Careful with that Dom, those bums worked hard for it!" Raucous laughter greeted the comment. "Not as hard as Suharto's boys. Indonesian peasants are another matter altogether. Those beady-eyed darkies... such children! They know nothing about the capitalist system! So nearsighted they can't see that their displacement was for the good of their country and economy. Why, we even offered them jobs they didn't deserve, and they still spat at our offer!" There were murmurs of agreement and fashionable disgust throughout the room as cigar smoke from about a dozen Cuban Cohibas began to grow thick in the richly-appointed room. "And, of course, they'll go whining to their government to feed them, because they're too weak and stupid to look after themselves," someone else chimed in. "Better that they did starve, that's what I say!" said another voice.

"Cute how they said that in the report. 'Bureaucratic expenses.' Everyone! A toast to Hicks, for making bribery sound classy!" The laughter broke out again, though no one took the suggestion for a toast. Malcolm Barry himself spoke up. "Keep it up and you'll be head of public relations, Mr. Hicks." The current head, a Mr. Osgood, smiled nervously. "Good one, Mr. Barry!" The gruff executive gave him a look of un-distilled annoyance. "That wasn't a joke, Mr. Osgood." The room fell silent.

Mr. Osgood looked like a wounded deer. "Sir, I've served this company loyally for ten years. I've written press releases that were the envy of the industry. I kept the press off your tail during that salmonella scare in '78. MaxiMillions magazine even did a feature on me! I've been your most trusted advisor since 1974. Sir, I'm an asset to this company! How can you cut me?"

Malcolm Barry returned Mr. Osgood's appeals with the steely gaze of one who had made up his mind and would not allow emotion to creep into the equation. "Mr. Osgood, you know as well as I do that in the business world, trust and loyalty don't mean shit. Mr. Hicks has fresh and innovative approaches that will help propel this company

past 1985 and into the 90s with confidence. You understand, I am only doing this for my own self-interest, it's nothing personal against you. I just feel Mr. Hicks is better qualified for the job. He deserves it more. That's the whole idea of a successful, strong system, one that rewards those who deserve it, not those who do not. Now, I was going to let you go with a good recommendation, maybe even keep you on if you proved that you could hold your own, but because you've been so ungrateful I'm going to make sure you never work in PR again. Hell, I'm going to do my damndest to make sure you never work at all. If you think you deserve otherwise, you're a delusional prick and that's all there is to it. Security!"

Two of Malcolm's personal strongmen dressed in black suits and shades came seemingly out of nowhere.

"See Mr. Osgood out the door. Oh, and give him the Greenpeace treatment."

The guards dragged him out the door before he could protest. The doors of the room slammed closed, and no one could hear the four sharp kicks each guard gave Mr. Osgood before leaving him in the snow, alive and not badly injured but in terrible pain.

"Now, who wants caviar?" Malcolm Barry grinned congenially. All those assembled cheered as a waiter with a massive gold dish of caviar strode into the room and placed it on the table. The brandy flowed and the cigar ashes piled high as the night wore on, no one giving a second thought to the unfortunate Mr. Osgood.

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"You do understand what we're all about here at Eternal City, don't you, Mr. Hicks?" said Malcolm Barry.

"A bold experiment in faith-based rule in hopes of re-inventing America as it was meant to be?" Hicks replied.

"You're cute, Hicks," said Barry with a warm smile. "Of course, you probably already know what this... erm... experiment is about. We've found through our studies that Southern Evangelicals are traditionally the hardest-working of all Americans. They hate unions and they despise special treatment. Their religious background tells them they're not worth anything beyond what the powers that be decide to give them. That's where we come in. We are the powers that be. So we set up a few factories to process chickens and produce a few other things to supply my restaurant chain, bring in a few disillusioned Evangelical Christians who feel like the outside world is going to shit, and put them to work. They'll put in 60 hour weeks without fuss, work without vacations, and even work on Sundays if our Council of Elders sanctions it. And because they live here voluntarily, it's all completely legal."

The two stood there in deathly silence.

"Now I know what you're thinking. It's wrong to use them this way, right?" said Barry, trying to keep the conversation alive. "But you have to start thinking like one of us. You have to realize that their primitive and superstitious beliefs are proof that they are our intellectual inferiors. We know the truth, that this whole thing is set up to get cheap labor. All they see is an Old-Testament style 'work hard, live honest' colony in the New Promised Land. But because they cling to these backward ideas, it proves that they aren't fit to self-govern anyway. It would be foolish to even try to break their delusional beliefs because it keeps them alive. Religion does have a use. It's a powerful tool for keeping the hands that build from turning on the minds that plan. You and I are the minds that plan, do you understand, Mr. Hicks? It's all in our self-interest, plus it helps in maintaining harmonious interactions with the community."

Hicks nodded quietly, sipping his coffee. "But is that ethical, Mr. Barry?"

Malcolm Barry sighed. "You're new... the new ones always have a ways to go. You see, ethics, by far and large, are just arbitrary constructs. The only useful ethics you need to pursue are self interest, mental enjoyment, individualism, and the accomplishment of your productive goals. Of course, you can always throw in 'harmonious interactions,' but we've already established that one. You just have to trust that it'll sort itself once you take care of everything else."

Hicks nodded once again, his coffee now mostly gone. "I see... I'd heard something like that, and I do tend to pursue my own interest more than anything else."

"Splendid! You're not wasting your energy on pointless altruism. You're a cut above those working stiff, there's no limit to what you deserve. The world is yours if you just reach out and grab it, Mr. Hicks. So, what does George Hicks want? A LearJet? A Lambo Countach? One of those nifty little portable phones? A pocket full of Krugerrands and Cohibas? A solid oak desk?"

Hicks smiled. "I want it all!" he shouted with boyish enthusiasm.

Malcolm Barry leapt up from his desk and gestured enthusiastically. "That's the spirit! And it's all out there waiting for you, my boy! Just go out and grab it! Grab it by the balls and it's yours!"

Three months later, George Hicks was dismissed. No reason was given, though there were whispered rumors of him seeming "too ambitious" for the project; other rumors circulated around the 1984 Corvette he drove to work every day being "too dated" for 1985. Whatever the case, he never darkened the doorway at Clucker's corporate headquarters or Eternal City Office of Justice again, and as far as Mr. Barry was concerned, that was that.

Three

“A Godly country must fight for Godly causes. That is why our president has sent soldiers to Iraq. This man, Saddam Hussein, cares only about himself and his personal gain, and the poor people of Kuwait are suffering.”

Nancy Olivier lowered her glasses and stared across the classroom. This was her domain, and insolence was not tolerated. Questions that led to her driving home an important point, however, were encouraged. Teachers in Eternal City were heavily trained to tell the difference between *asking questions* about what was taught and *questioning* what was taught, and she prided herself on her hawkish capacity to spot such out-of-line behavior.

A boy in a “Jesus is Awesome” T-shirt, a Whiz book bag still on the back of his chair, raised his hand.

“Yes, Isaiah?” the teacher said.

“Mrs. Olivier, Dad says most of the people in Kuwait are heathens. Why don’t we go and get them too?”

Mrs. Olivier was all too glad to answer this one. “Because there are Christians in Kuwait too. And Saddam Hussein wants to kill them, every single one. If we went after the Kuwaitis, even the Muslim Kuwaitis, it would be against God’s plan, because God wants to win Muslim Kuwaitis to his side through our churches and missionaries in Kuwait.”

A little girl in thick glasses and a Barbie hoodie raised her hand next. “Yes, Sarah?” Mrs. Olivier said.

“Mrs. Olivier, how does George Bush know that Katate is part of God’s plan?”

“It’s pronounced Kuwait, Sarah, and President Bush knows a lot of things that are hidden to us. Because we have chosen him to rule over our country, God has given him knowledge of things that are hidden to us, the deep mysteries of our plan that only leaders and rulers are meant to know, because if you knew them, it would be more than you could handle and you would die from confusion.”

There were a few gasps and nervous giggles from the children at this thought, that there were ideas that only kings and presidents had the minds to comprehend, that they would be confused beyond redemption to know. Surely a God who made men who knew these things was great!

A blue-eyed, blond-haired boy in a second-hand JimmyZ shirt, worn-out corduroy pants, and dingy off-brand tennis shoes raised his hand next. Actually, he’d had his hand

raised the whole time, though no one seemed to notice. “Yes, Tommy, what is your question?” said Mrs. Olivier.

“Mrs. Olivier, if God says ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ and Jesus says to ‘turn the other cheek’ when someone does you wrong, why isn’t war a sin?”

The class burst out laughing. “Children! Children! Enough!” Mrs. Olivier shouted, trying to get the class in order. “Well aren’t you a doubting Thomas! Tommy Willing! Of course war isn’t a sin! Don’t you remember our last lesson, how the Israelites crushed anyone who stood in their way in the name of God our Father? Don’t you know that it’s the duty of the Godly to press forward with the will of God? The armies of Satan are vast, sometimes the devil enlists entire countries and races to do his bidding, just like he did with the Midianites, and we have to be ready and armed to fight. War is part of that fight, isn’t it class?”

“Yes, Mrs. Olivier,” they all chanted in unison. Tom hated that. The way they all chanted in perfect unison, reciting every little thing the teacher asked them to regurgitate. When the teacher made a factual mistake, like the Declaration of Independence being signed in 1789 rather than 1776, they wrote it down as if it were absolute, unquestionable truth. Tom had learned early on that it was a huge mistake to correct the teacher, of course. Too many paddlings had ensured that he quietly wrote down the things he knew to be correct, then wrote down the incorrect answer the teacher had given him on the test to keep suspicions low.

Today, he was in no mood for dealing with such a view that made no sense to him. Now and then the urge within Tom to stand up and smash contradictions and cognitive dissonance was too great. “But Mrs. Olivier, didn’t Jesus bring us the New Law, where men wouldn’t have to fight and bleed and die to be forgiven? That’s what daddy says.”

Mrs. Olivier looked absolutely disgusted. “Tommy! How dare you misquote scripture and dishonor your father in this class! You will have no recess for the rest of the week, young man!” She picked up a clipboard and made a few marks next to his name, moving her pen with the gusto and satisfaction of one who wanted to make sure her charges were kept in line.

“Now, since Tommy has made such a negative statement about what scripture says about good Christians taking up arms against their enemies, why don’t we sing a song to tell him how we all feel about this war?” Mrs. Olivier said. Without even being prompted, the children began to sing in unison, crowding around Tom’s desk and sneering at him, some of them with their tongues out as they half-sang, half-chanted:

“Onward Christian sooooooldiers,
Marching out to waaaar,
With the cross of Jeeeesus
Going on befoooooore!”

They continued to sing the whole verse, with Tom finally burying his head on the desk and crying. Mrs. Olivier lifted his head up roughly by the hair and finished singing the verse along with the rest of the class just inches from his face, then let his head fall back onto the desk with a thump. By this point, Tom was absolutely bawling, and the other students were laughing loudly, throwing spit-wads and paper clips at him.

“For that disruption, young man, I’m going to have to have a talk with your parents!” said Mrs. Olivier.

“What disruption?” he sobbed through the tears.

“We’ve wasted several minutes with all this nonsensical questioning and dishonoring your father and your commander-in-chief, then you made the whole class get out of their chairs and sing for you. You’re a regular class clown! Well, you’re not getting away with it, young man!”

The lesson continued with Tom crying softly to himself, his head buried on his desk, the only movement the erratic heaving of his chest from the deep, heartfelt sobs that tore through him every so often.

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“Mrs. Willing, I understand that as a mother, you cannot control everything your child does or says. Children will be children, and their will is influenced by Original Sin no matter what we do to try to sway it,” Mrs. Olivier said, pushing her glasses up on the bridge of her nose. “However, you must understand that a willful child takes certain strong measures to deal with. I have a book I want you to borrow, Mrs. Willing.”

She reached into a canvas tote bag with a cartoon of praying children painted on the side and pulled out a copy of “The Strong-Willed Child” by Dr. James Dobson. “Dr. Dobson is excellent at dealing with children and raising them in a Godly way. I think you’ll find the suggestions in this book very helpful.”

Outside the empty classroom, Tom sat next to a young girl about his age. “Hi Heather, why are you here?”

“You promise not to talk about it?” Heather said.

“Yeah.”

Heather blushed, hiding her face with her long, brunette bangs before continuing. “I spent too long in the bathroom.”

“Oh...” said Tom.

“But I wasn’t doing nothing... I just took too long, and the monitor got real mad at me and made me report it to the teacher.”

At all the schools in Eternal City, an adult chaperone attended each and every bathroom. Paid a token wage, their sole job was to ensure that students were not touching themselves (or other students of the same sex, for that matter). If a student even spent too much time in a bathroom stall, it was cause for suspicion and reported immediately. Children who had too many offenses- even if nothing was ever proven- were often placed in remedial classes for “spastic” children.... “spastic” being a polite, council-approved euphemism, in this case, for masturbators. These classrooms had open stalls inside the actual classroom where the teacher could watch them carefully, and had a strong emphasis on Biblical lessons about self-control, so much so that most academic subjects were squeezed out altogether.

Tom turned to her. “I got called down because I don’t think war is right.”

“Well, of course it’s right!” said Heather. “God wouldn’t let grown-ups fight wars if it was wrong. He’d burn them all up just like Solomon Gabora.”

“It’s Sodom and Gomorrah. And what if the grown-ups really are wrong?” Tom replied.

“God gives grown-ups special tools to make sure they’re right when they need to be. That’s what Mrs. Olivier said,” Heather replied with a vacant look in her eyes.

Tom was so frustrated. Why didn’t she understand? Didn’t she know what it meant to wonder, to ask questions? If adults were never wrong, then wouldn’t that make them perfect? And if they were perfect, wouldn’t that mean the Bible was wrong, since only God is supposed to be perfect?

She seemed so blissfully happy, never once wondering if she’d be led astray by those she trusted.

Tom, on the other hand, was terrified.

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Tom was crying once again. He was laying on his mother’s lap. She set the belt down she had just used on him. At first it had been hard, using the belt on him. It hurt to see him hurt.

But Dobson had put it succinctly: “A spanking is to be reserved for use in response to willful defiance, *whenever it occurs*. Period!”

And so if little Tom wanted to watch “TaleSpin” when she wanted to watch “The Price Is Right,” he got spanked. If Tom tried to get the last word in during a conversation, or interrupted her, he got spanked.

Soon, she became desensitized to it. Spanking was a way to get him to do what she wanted him to do, and if that’s what it took, she was going to use it to her advantage. It was all for his own good anyway, right? You couldn’t take any chances with a rebellious child in a Godly household.

It often went beyond spankings, of course. Lectures were usually involved. If she told him not to do something and he said “Why?” he got spanked; even if he was only asking out of curiosity and intended to do what he was told, the spanking was inevitably followed with a lecture on questioning authority.

This particular evening, Tom had noticed the milk was bad the evening before. Jeanne had used the milk in some instant mashed potatoes, and Tom had not wanted to eat them because they tasted odd to him. Jeanne knew she could not let it escalate; the only way to raise him, to keep him whole and from becoming like the former Tom Willing, was to crush the argument before it started. So there he lay on his bed, crying, his rear end throbbing and his stomach growling, knowing he wouldn’t eat again until the next morning.

His father came into the room and stood in the doorway. “Son, you understand why we have to do this, don’t you?”

Tom just shook his head and buried his face in the pillow.

“Tom, look at your father when he’s talking to you. I said look at him!” his mother shouted, pulling him up by the wrist and turning his head roughly to face his father.

“Son,” his father continued, “You’re a strong-willed child, and strong-willed children grow up to be bad people. Did you hear about that man who stole a car from Mr. Sedgewick’s garage? His parents didn’t spank him. You see how he turned out. Taking other people’s things... it’s shameful.”

In truth, neither of them really knew how this mysterious car thief was raised or whether or not discipline was involved, but it seemed to drive the point home. And after all, if Dobson was wrong then that meant God was wrong too, and if someone who would steal a car was raised with proper discipline, that definitely made Dobson wrong. At least that train of thought *felt* right.

“But we’re not going to let you turn out like that,” Jeanne said. “Because we love you, and we want you to follow in the ways of the Lord. Do you understand, Tom?”

Tom nodded gently. “Yes, Ma’am,” he said in a soft, barely-audible voice.

His mother hugged him tightly and cried. "We only do this because we love you. Other parents don't love their children this much. I wish you could understand... one day you will, when you have a wife and children of your own. And you'll be someone we can be proud of because we did this for you." She kissed him gently on the cheek.

Now, say your prayers.

Tom obediently got on his knees and began to recite a prayer he had known all his life:

"God, thank you for making me,
and for giving me all I have,
and for blessing me
with so many wonderful things
and good health.
And God bless Mommy and Daddy
and all the people in the whole world.
Amen."

"Now get some sleep, son. You have school again in the morning. Good night Tom!" "Good night Dad, good night Mom!"

They closed the door, somehow feeling content that their son's soul was not beyond salvation after all. They went into the living room and turned on the set. The season finale of "Night Court" was on, and they sat and watched in contented silence.

Tom, meanwhile, couldn't really sleep. He was confused. He was puzzled. Why did they hit him for every little thing, then say they love him? Why did God want them to make him hurt just for asking questions? They didn't want him to question them any further, and he didn't... at least, not externally. But deep down questions brewed in his mind that he knew he could never ask, and might well never be answered.

* * * * *

The next day, as Tom stood by the detention wall where students who were misbehaving had to stand during recess, he felt a sharp tug at his ankles and fell hard on his back. He looked up to see four other boys standing over him.

"Fag!" one of them shouted, and kicked him hard in the groin.

"You gonna cry, fag?" shouted another.

"My daddy says boys who cry are all fags and you're all gonna burn in hell!" a third boy shouted, spitting in Tom's face. They continued their onslaught, kicking, punching, spitting, and taunting him as he tried desperately to get away.

“Mrs. Olivier! Help me!” he screamed, to his teacher who stood only 15 feet away, looking right at the scene, her arms folded. “Mrs. Olivier! Help me!” the boys parroted back in mocking tones and beat him that much harder.

Nancy Olivier just stood watching the scene. As hard as it was, she knew that sometimes the best way to bring a troublemaker back in line was to let the other children deal with him. She had to let them beat on him, to let him know that standing out or showing weakness would make him an outsider... his very soul may well depend on it.

At last, Tom ceased fighting back, but the boys continued their beating, picking up his limp form and slamming him against the wall. “Boys! Boys! Stop that! Leave him alone!” she shouted, fearing that they may well go too far this time. The boys ran in four directions, leaving Tom there, bleeding from his lip and unconscious. “We’ll come back to finish you off tomorrow, fag!” one of them shouted.

Mrs. Olivier motioned toward a janitor, who helped her carry Tom to the nurse’s station, where they laid him on a couch with a cold compress over his head.

There was never even debate about calling an ambulance; Eternal City’s schools had an impeccable record for being violence-free... but only because incidents like this were usually handled internally. A police report or a hospital admission would destroy that record, and the Council of Elders wouldn’t have it. Even fatal accidents were covered up; a student who was crushed under a bus a month before had been dragged 1500 feet to a shopping center next to the school before being pronounced dead.

The nurse sat watching Tom as he slowly came around, hours later. “My lip hurts,” he tried to say, but it came out as a series of inarticulate moans. Suddenly, Mrs. Olivier came in with his parents. “You have a lot to explain, young man!” his father said, anger seething in his voice.

* * * * *

“Mamma, what’s a fag?” Tom asked later that evening as his mother was washing dishes from dinner. She nearly dropped a casserole dish when she heard the question.

“Tommy, where did you hear such an ugly word?” she asked tersely.

“The boys who did this to me said I was a fag, and that I was gonna go to hell,” he replied sadly.

She quickly turned around, taking off her yellow rubber gloves, and put her hands on his shoulders, getting down on one knee to look him in the eye. “Tommy, listen to me. You are not a fag. There are no fags in this family, and we’re going to make sure you never become one,” she said, a slow, serious and deliberate tone in her voice. She turned around and returned to her dishes.

“But momma, what's a fag?” Tom persisted.

She turned to him. “A fag is something terrible that happens when a boy forgets he's a boy. This makes God very angry at them, and he punishes them the most among sinners because they forget how God made men and women to be together way back in the very beginning of time. That is all you need to know.”

Tom started to ask why it was a terrible sin for a boy to forget he was a boy, or how a boy could even forget something so important, but he knew better. If he asked “why,” that was questioning authority, and that meant another spanking.

He just sighed and returned to his room, pulling a case of Matchbox cars out and playing with them restlessly on the windowsill. He liked pretending the sill was a road.

He dug out a police car. He knew it was a British police car because of the way the steering wheel was, but he didn't care. He pulled out a Ferrari too. Maybe the driver of the Ferrari was one of these mysterious sinners he'd heard about, and the police were out to punish him? That might be fun to play.

He played on into the night, until it was time for bed, losing himself in his imagination, trying to forget how confused and depressed he really was.

FOUR

The rusty speaker in the corner of the lunch room crackled, signaling the coming announcement. "Attention all workers, as of tomorrow, you will now begin your shift at 6:30 AM and continue until 8:30 PM. Also, lunch will now be reduced from half an hour to 15 minutes. Also a reminder that June 9th is the company picnic, opening prayers start at 11:30 AM, please join us in fellowship. Praise the Lord."

The speaker fell silent. There were muted murmurs of disapproval here and there; the workers at the chicken plant already worked 60 hours a week with only Christian holidays off; 72 hour weeks were not unheard of if they were needed on Saturdays.

Now they would be working 72 to 84 hours a week, and with less of a lunch break than they already had. But within the mint-green walls of the lunch room, no one openly protested; they didn't dare. To do so was not just against the management, it was against God's plan. God made the leaders and he made the followers, and the followers, it seemed, had no choice but to do exactly as the leaders told them.

Harvey Willing agreed with this sentiment, but couldn't help but wonder if there was another way. One of his close friends, a man by the name of David Fletcher, had succumbed to the fatigue of a 12-hour shift and fallen asleep at his post just days ago, losing his balance on the catwalks over the plant and falling into the meat grinder that processed the chicken for Clucker's Famous chicken nuggets. The cleanup crew didn't even bother to remove what was left of his mangled body; they took out the remains of his uniform, helmet, and personal effects and simply re-started the machine, and a stern warning was delivered to all present that they too could end up like Mr. Jones if they spoke about what happened to his body. All his widow knew was that he was too badly mangled to be seen, and in keeping with the ruse, the local mortuary had conveniently prepared a coffin full of bricks for his upcoming funeral.

Harvey looked down sadly at his tray and plate. A mass of gravy sat there, within it a blob of watery instant mashed potatoes, large chunks of gratuitous onion, and a half-eaten patty of what, at one time, had been beef. This was typical lunch room fare; he'd been eating it for eleven years now, knowing his family wouldn't be eating much better back home on Hallelujah! Brand groceries, the generic brand carried by the company store. Even that was expensive; because Clucker's controlled the economy completely, many brands simply weren't available, and the few brands that were carried a premium price tag.

A box of Hallelujah! Brand macaroni and cheese cost \$3.50, but brand-name cost \$5.50. Considering he made about \$3.00 an hour average once the various dues were deducted to the company, this was a rare treat his family enjoyed only once a month.

It was hard, but this was the life he and his family had chosen, and the only one Tom ever knew. Young Tom was growing into a fine young man; in just a few years he'd

become a passionate Christian, standing for everything his family had raised him to believe. He knew enough to love Jesus and hate Bill Clinton, and that was all he really needed to know in his father's opinion.

Yes, this wasn't going to be easy. But then, Rev. Holloway always said it would be this way in the end times. Prices would skyrocket, especially in the places the Lord was worshipped. One day soon a loaf of bread would be worth a pound of gold, but by then he and his family would be whisked away to Heaven to be with Jesus, and they would wear the robes of vice-regents to the Kingdom of God. With the end of the century just five short years away, it seemed everyone's minds were on the end of days.

Harvey got up, dumped the remainder of his unpalatable lunch into the garbage, and put away his tray before going back to work. Yes, as bad as it was, it was all for the better, and they would see Jesus in the end while the whole world burned beneath them.

* * * * *

In the mountains just outside Eternal City, Tom stood restlessly in line as the counselor called roll. The Youth Army of God Troop 4 (YAG 4) were on an excursion to view the mountains outside the city, to discuss natural history- from a Christian perspective. Dr. Allen Brown, a former professor who had lost his post at a major university for saying that geology proved the world was only 6,000 years old, was their guest, and Mr. Beaumont, the counselor, stood by with a satisfied smile as Dr. Brown began his lecture.

“Now, how many of you believe that the world was formed in seven days, 6,000 years ago, by an almighty and powerful God?”

Everyone's hands shot up immediately at this.

“Good, but do you know that 95% of the world doesn't believe this any more? America is one of the few countries where we are free to know the truth about this earth and how it was formed. It's one of the few countries where the Bible isn't censored or banned. We are the last hope for this knowledge, boys! Now, can anyone tell me why the truth about this earth is such a scary thing for non-believers?”

Tom's hand shot up. “Yes, you there!” Dr. Brown said.

“It's because the liberals and Clinton are in league with the communists who still control Russia and most of Europe in secret. They want to create confusion about all the things that we know to be truth so we will be too weak to fight when the Soviet Union rises again under the guise of the European Union to persecute the Godly.” The line was rattled out in a stiff, verbatim style, exactly as he'd had it drilled into him so many times before both at school and with YAG 4.

“Exactly!” said Dr. Brown. “If it were understood that the earth really was 6,000 years old, then they could never deny the existence of God, and if they couldn't deny the existence of God, they would be defenseless. So, are we ready to begin?”

Mr. Beaumont gave a nod. “Lead on, Dr. Brown!”

The group walked along a narrow path along the mountainside. To their left, a sheer rock face rose a good 1500 feet, and to their right, Eternal City sprawled out in a nice, even grid.

They hadn't walked very far when Dr. Brown took out a pocket knife and stuck it in the side of the rock face, pulling out a crumbly mass of shells. “Now, the liberal masters of deceit will tell you that this is proof that the earth is very old, and that this layer is millions of years old, but take a look. This is a very modern clam shell, isn't it? And look how tightly they're all packed in here. This was the result of something catastrophic that buried these creatures in nearly an instant, not some buildup over millions of years. Let's move along.”

They came to a section where countless generations before, the mountainside had washed away into a wide gulley, the slope rising about 30 degrees from the edge of the trail on upward. Along it were strewn several large boulders.

“Now, the disciples of Satan will tell you that this is the work of a glacier,” Dr. Brown said authoritatively. “But take a look at these rocks. Just look at them! There's nothing like these anywhere near here! They had to have come from somewhere else. This wash was created by a massive global flood... more specifically, the flood of the Old Testament. And further along, we will see something that proves that none of this was very old when it happened!”

Dr. Brown continued walking along the path, to a pass where rock faces rose on both sides of the trail. Zeal shone in his eyes and voice as he pointed at the way the rock face curved in gentle contours on either side of the trail. “And here,” he said with the gusto of one who was sure of being right, “Is something that no liberal wants you to see! Here, take a look, the rock strata is wavy and ripply all the way to the top! All of these layers were as soft and malleable as clay 4,000 years ago... They were still like new! They hadn't even dried yet! Boys, all these things you've seen are incontrovertible proof that God created this earth, yet the deceivers would have you believe that this is proof of their absurd idea that this earth was formed by random chances!”

The boys reacted with the desired distaste at this idea. For once, Tom was among them. He had changed a good bit; his hair was now brown rather than the golden blond it had been when he was a young boy. But there were more fundamental changes. In the years since grade school, he had realized that fighting the system did no good. Then when he was 10 years old, he began to fear for his soul for all the things he had done. He suddenly got involved in youth groups, got baptized, saved his allowance to buy a Bible and read it for an hour every night. He read other books too, like “The Late Great Planet

Earth” and “Absolute Evil: Satan's Plan And How You Can Stop It.” His parents encouraged him fully in his pursuits, and he became extremely militant.

On the sash of his Youth Army of God uniform were badges not only for sports and camping, but for marksmanship, scripture recitation, and wilderness survival. He had made up his mind that he would stay with the YAG 4 until he made the rank of Ranger and became one of the armed guards that defended Eternal City at all hours. He believed, with all his heart, that Christianity was already more or less dead in the world beyond the city, and that soon a coalition of communists, homosexuals, and atheist intellectuals would invade Eternal City with the intent of wiping Christianity off the globe; He was convinced that this would be their last stand. He was only 12, but already eager to lay down his life as a martyr. In fact, he was obsessed with martyrdom; back home his book shelves were full of adventure novels of missionaries and crusaders who had met horrible fates in the name of their faith, and he thrilled to them almost as much as he did to the Bible itself.

Yet deep inside, something wasn't right. Deep down, there was some part of himself that screamed at him for what he had become, the questions he failed to ask, the things he believed simply because he was told, the things he did just to fit in and impress authority. Something just seemed all wrong to that one part of him, but he wrote that nagging doubt off as Satan trying to misguide him, and Tom the curious little boy stayed imprisoned within Tom, the militant warrior for Christ, slowly languishing within the hardened shell of his being.

The willful little boy was speaking through him again... Not good. He tuned him out just as Dr. Brown continued with his lecture.

“Now, here I have one of the weapons the deceivers have been using for generations to try to convince us that they're right.” He opened his back pack and pulled out a large trilobite fossil. “This is called a trilobite, and like the dodo, which existed within human history, it is extinct now. But the deceivers say that the trilobite, unlike the dodo, went extinct hundreds of millions of years ago. Well, how do they know this? They say they use what is called Carbon 14 dating, but how good is that? Did you know a live oyster was once dissolved in Carbon 14, and the results said it had died 300 years before? If it's that far off with a living creature, imagine how far off it must be with a creature that died even a century ago!”

But is it always off by the same number of years, or is it proportional? Would something dead a few thousand years still give a range of 300 years, or would it be a range of millions of years? The willful little boy asked inside Tom's head.

He tuned it out; that was no question to be asking, because if it wasn't proportional like Dr. Brown had hinted, that would mean God was wrong, and God couldn't be wrong because he was true to his word.

But who wrote down that word? Didn't someone have to put ink to paper? What if they made a mistake? The defiant little boy responded. Tom began a silent prayer against temptation to drown him out as Dr. Brown continued his lecture, hoping desperately to keep hellbound, rebellious Tommy from coming back to destroy him.



The day at last came, in the summer of 2000, when Tom and nine of his fellow YAG scouts were selected, based on the merit badges they had earned, to take the final test as Rangers. They would be taken by helicopter to a remote spot on the rim of the valley, where they would then separate, survive for six days in the wilderness, and then on the seventh day find their way home using only a compass, the sun, and the terrain to navigate. They were less than 5 miles from Eternal City, but the tough going made even such a short distance an all-day proposition.

They had three day's food rations, water purifying tablets, a small pup tent, plastic bags, a canteen, a sleeping bag, a survival knife, and an AR-7 survival rifle with only 25 rounds to hunt small game with if need be.

It was dangerous business; if they had not returned in 8 days, they would be searched for on the 9th, but more often than not, those who failed to return fell victim to the elements. The YAG lodge had a tall, rough-hewn stone with a single flat face where, every year, the one or two Eternal City Ranger trainees who failed to return were commemorated.

Assuming they did return late or were found alive by a rescue crew, as every so often a lost trainee would be, they would have failed the test and were generally given lowly blue-collar jobs, such as working in the chicken plant or the styrofoam cup plant, or becoming groundskeepers for one of Eternal City's four chapels. Although this was never confirmed publicly, whispered rumors said that many of them made use of their survival rifles and ended it all for fear of being disgraced upon their return.

As the helicopter, a Vietnam-vintage Bell UH1 with the seats removed to fit the first 5 of the 9 trainees, rocked back and forth hypnotically on the pad, Tom couldn't help but wonder what the next few days held for him. His stomach lurched as he felt his weight shift and saw the ground move away from him through the small window on the sliding door, grabbing the nylon straps put in place for the passengers to hold on to in lieu of seat belts.

It was only a few minutes before they arrived at the spot, a small plateau with the city just on the horizon, the mountains rising higher behind them and stretching out in a jagged incline before them. The helicopter left once again, this time to get the other 4 trainees, the counselor, and everyone's bags. The five trainees sat silently on the plateau, the wind whipping around them as they waited.

Hoping to get a better view, Tom clambered into the top of a short, stout bristlecone pine near the edge of the plateau. Another half-hour passed, and the helicopter came into view once more. It grew larger and larger on the horizon, finally announcing its nearness with a maelstrom of rotor wash as it neared the ground... then suddenly rose sharply, the rotor veering off to one side. Everyone on the plateau scattered, not knowing where exactly the helicopter would go. The pilot could be seen

struggling to control the craft, but the more he fought, the more the machine rebelled. At last the chopper rolled over sideways and spun downward into a gorge just in front of the plateau. A loud crumpling bang and the sickening slap of the rotor blades splintering on the rock walls could be heard, then silence.

The five remaining trainees climbed down the walls into the gorge to see if they could do anything, and to rescue their supplies before the helicopter caught fire.

They arrived to see the fuselage nose-down, the front plexiglass smashed and broken on a sharp rock. Someone was screaming, and it was then they noticed that the doors facing away from the rock wall were bent shut by the impact.

After some prying by the five trainees, the door finally gave with a metallic pop, and they were able to see inside.

Six faces, some slightly bloody, some pale with shock, and all wide-eyed with fright, greeted them... everyone had survived the impact. It still wasn't clear how badly they may or may not be injured, and they were carefully helped out of the ruined heap of the chopper.

A makeshift triage was set up, the first-aid training of the scouts proving useful. About an hour later, a second helicopter arrived.

The counselor, bruised and bloody but not badly hurt, and the pilot, his shattered arm now held in a makeshift sling, boarded the helicopter. A company of scouts carrying one of their more seriously-injured comrades approached, but the counselor turned them back.

“No, leave them here. This is about survival, about learning to take care of yourself so you can serve the interests of Eternal City more effectively. If anyone is offered an easy way out, that is cowardice! It's do or die for you all now!”

With that, the rescue crew shut the doors of the helicopter and the engine was started. Moments later the last hope of those injured boys was just a speck on the horizon.

Immediately, panic set in. The rest, who were not particularly badly injured, began fighting over the provisions belonging to the injured scout, then promptly retreated in all directions. Several shots rang out as three of the scouts began firing at one another, none hitting the others, but one of them using all of his single box of bullets.

Then all was quiet, and only two scouts remained on the plateau: the injured boy, a 17-year-old high school senior named Scott Harper, and Tom.

Tom knelt over Scott, who seemed to have a hard time breathing. “I can't believe they did that to you,” said Tom.

“It doesn't matter,” said Scott. “I'm finished. I won't make it another day,” Scott replied, his voice barely audible.

“Don't say that!” said Tom. “Look, after a week they'll come looking for us. I'll stay with you right here until it's time to go, then I'll personally carry you down the mountain. If we don't make it back in time to become Rangers, they'll find me carrying you, it'll be alright, you'll see!”

Scott shook his head. “Just go. I won't make it through the night. I'll be in heaven before long. Just don't try to make me feel better by saying I'll live. I'm cool with it,” he said with grim certainty.

Tom frowned. He didn't really know this boy, but his heart was heavy already. “Let me stay with you, at least through the night.”

Scott turned his head, a peaceful smile on his face as the sun set, casting red hues on his increasingly pale face. “Thanks,” he said.

Some time late in the night, as Tom slept a few feet away, Scott Harper passed away, his heart lightened by the final thought that in the end, someone had cared.

* * * * *

The next morning, Tom took several of the plastic trash bags included in his pack, tearing them open and stretching them over Scott's body, holding them down with rocks and tearing off a strip of orange cloth from a safety vest also in his provisions, setting it under one of the rocks to make the body easy to spot from the air. Of the three who would not return alive, only Scott would later be returned for proper burial, and his family would later quietly thank Tom for this.

He then set off toward Eternal City. It was a long hike, and he was uneasy about his prospects. Maybe it was wrong, but he decided, with the other scouts likely to steal his supplies and cut his throat, that maybe he should cheat and get a head start, camping out about a half mile from the edge of the valley.

It was toward the end of the day, as Tom was scaling a narrow ledge on a sheer rock face, that things went bad.

His foot slipped and the rock beneath him suddenly crumbled, about 800 lbs. of rock tumbling down the steep slope. Tom was saved from being pulverized by the falling rocks by holding on to an exposed root growing from the side of the hill, but the root cut into his hand, and there was nowhere else to go. He looked down at the slope. It was steep, and sloping about 60 feet down into a slot canyon, but a layer of loose gravel looked like it might break his fall.

He let go, tucking in his arms and legs and letting himself roll down the slope. Down he went, tumbling for what seemed like an eternity, increasingly bruised and battered as he fell. Finally, everything went black.

When Tom came to, his ears were ringing and his head hurt. The rest of his body wasn't in terrible shape, lots of cuts and bruises but nothing bad. But his head... It hurt terribly. Fearing a concussion, he staggered to his feet, only to find that his provisions were completely gone.

He looked around, checking the slope he had rolled down, the floor of the canyon, and nearly everywhere else nearby. All he found was a set of footprints leading away from him. His heart sank; another scout had his pack, and if he didn't get to the city soon, he wouldn't survive.

A small trickle of water ran down the center of the canyon; this one was apparently still active. He then took a look at the sides of the canyon wall and noticed the flood marks. His heart sank even more; all signs pointed to a risk of flash floods in this canyon.

Knowing he had no other leads, he followed the water where it led him. It had to eventually slope into the same valley as Eternal City.

He walked along, the blazing hot sun scorching his skin as his feet began to ache. Something else ached too: Tom's stomach. He hadn't eaten in about a day, and it was beginning to catch up to him.

Suddenly Tom noticed the water, which had just been a trickle down the center of the canyon a moment before, was suddenly up to his ankles and moving faster. His heart sank; he knew what was coming.

His pulse racing, he ran down the canyon as fast as he could, looking for a way out, but nothing but steep walls could be seen on either side. The water was now getting up to his shins, and threatening to sweep him away as he struggled to keep moving. He rounded a bend and cried out in despair at the sight that greeted him.

A massive, tangled heap of fallen logs and brush stood in his way, and soon this would be taken by the vast volume of water that was coming. If he risked trying to climb it, he could have it swept out from under him before he even got halfway up.

But if I don't risk it, I'm doomed, he thought. Taking a deep breath, he clambered up the loose, unstable heap, his hands and feet struggling to get a foothold. At last he saw a ledge with a small grotto just a few feet away. He leaped toward it, getting a hold on the ledge just as a wall of water swept away the massive pile of debris like twigs in a drainage ditch.

He clung to the ledge, not sure how long he could hold on. Then he noticed something odd. Inside the grotto above him, there was a clear black staining on the ceiling, like someone had set a fire there at some point. Then he remembered that it wasn't unusual to find traces of fires that were decades or even centuries old in this part of the Southwest. He felt his hands slip slightly, his weight sliding backward as he kicked and pushed with his legs to try to regain his footing.

Without warning, he felt a pair of hands grab him and hoist him to safety with stunning speed and strength. He lay there on the ledge, looking up. There stood an imposing man, all of 6 feet, wearing only a robe made from the skin of a bighorn sheep. His hair was long and his skin was dusty and weathered. If not for the look of genuine concern in his eyes, he would have been a terrifying sight.

“It's that time of year again. Flash floods. The storm clouds get hung up on those mountains, and it all comes out over here. Saw a scout a year or so ago, ended up in the same situation. Didn't have time to save the poor fool. Last I saw he got sucked under, probably ground to a pulp by all the debris.”

He said this with a strangely nonchalant air, as if the dangers of the desert were the sort of inconvenience a businessman might face on his commute to work.

Tom slowly got to his feet and gave him a quizzical look.

“Forgive me... It's not right to save a fellow's life and not introduce yourself, is it? My name's... Damn me, it's been so long I've almost forgotten it! Out here, you see, there's not much use for a name. When a fellow only has a cave full of books to keep his mind from collapsing, it's pretty dismally hard to remember his name. Hicks! George Hicks! That's it!”, he said, seemingly thrilled to remember his own name.

Tom took his hand and shook it thoroughly. “Tom Willing. I'm a scout with the Youth Army of God, in final training for a post as an Eternal City Ranger,” said Tom.

George frowned. “Tom, there's a lot you need to know about Eternal City. And about me,” he said, his voice heavy with a mix of caution and displeasure.



“So you're saying Malcolm Barry and the Council of Elders don't even believe in God? You're full of it, Mr. Hicks! Atheists are out to *destroy* Christianity, not build communities dedicated to its survival!”

“Tom, you don't understand! These people will do or say anything to get their way. If drawing in hard-working Christians and creating a community you'd be comfortable with is a way to get cheaper labor, they'll do it!”

“So you're one of those Godless communists who says religion is just some evil conspiracy to exploit workers? Nice try, comrade, I'm wise to you!”

The two continued their exchange, George becoming increasingly insistent, and Tom becoming increasingly angry and defensive.

“It's not that simple, Tom. It's more than that. These aren't people who have the greater good in mind, they just want the world to themselves.”

“World domination conspiracy theories? Great, I'm stuck in the desert with a crazy old man!”

“Tom, I should know all this. I used to be one of them. From December 1984 to March 1985, I was Malcolm Barry's personal assistant. I had it all, money, a great house, a fast car, a feature article in Fortune Magazine... I lost it because Malcolm Barry is a paranoid, vengeful, distrusting and hateful man.”

“Malcolm Barry's personal assistant? This kind of supports the theory that you're crazy.”

Without speaking, George climbed up through a natural sinkhole in the sandstone ceiling of the grotto. Tom noticed that a makeshift ladder had been placed in there. George was gone only a moment, then returned with a faded, crumpled copy of “Fortune” open to one of the feature articles.

He handed it to Tom. Although faded and battered, it was still clearly legible. “Copy Boy to Right-Hand Man: Clucker's Hicks Shows 'Em How We Do Things in 1985.” A picture of him could be seen in an inset next to the article, in a smart designer suit with his hair teased and locked in place with about two bottles of hair spray. There was no mistaking it was him, even if 15 years of total obscurity had taken their toll on the man that was George Hicks.

“I started out just doing inter-office memos. Then before I knew it, they liked the way I wrote something, and I became head of PR by the end of December. By February

Mr. Barry had taken me on as a protege... Then by March, I was fired with the injunction that they would make sure I'd never work again, for anyone."

Tom was stunned. "But why? Why would they do that to you?"

George Hicks sighed. "They never did explain that to me. Though I wasn't much liked in the world of business. Rumor was I wasn't loyal enough, had my sights set on the boss's job next, or that I was considered a brat who got lucky without really doing anything, or that I just wasn't "with it" as far as living a lifestyle in keeping with my new social circle. Whatever the case, even if I was good at my job, Mr. Barry couldn't have me around and couldn't risk his competitors getting hold of me. He betrayed me because he was terrified I'd betray him first. But that's typical of Malcolm Barry. The guy he had as head of PR before me ended up in a similar situation; I hear he died under an overpass in Seattle about 10 years ago. Froze to death."

"But how can you say he didn't deserve it? How do I know you didn't deserve it?" Tom asked, thoroughly annoyed. "There's plenty of work around, plenty of fast food places that need someone to work. You can't expect charity from those who earned the right to run a company when you've obviously worn out your welcome, you have to earn your meals. It's the way it has always been, since back in Abraham's time."

"Will you listen to yourself? A Christian all the way, yet that's not the Bible you're referring to. That's a modernized Puritan work ethic as adapted by modern laissez-faire sociopolitical thinkers and secularized into today's crooked, unjust system. What did Jesus say about the poor? What about the rich? And when have I heard a Christian quote those verses and actually help someone?" George said, equally exasperated.

"I don't understand... Look, if it's a hot meal and a bed for the night you need, I can get you..." Tom began.

"I need nothing," George interrupted. "I'm a survivor, and although I have less in the way of food or clothing or running water, I've got something you don't. Something I'm willing to share with you, Tom. Come this way."

With that, he began ascending the crude ladder once again to the cavern above.

Tom was hesitant. Here, a man whose line of thinking he could barely follow was trying to tell him everything he believed was wrong, and now he was inviting him into a grotto of unknown contents to show him something. He stood at the bottom of the ladder, looking up. "Well, come on! Books don't read themselves, boy!" George shouted.

Tom was an avid reader... But what sort of books could there be in this cavern? Anything he would read? Perhaps some strange Satanic tomes? A false Bible meant to lead believers astray? Liberal communist propaganda? Curiosity got the better of him, and he followed.

As he entered, George struck a tinder to an old-fashioned oil lantern and turned the wick up. What Tom saw left him in awe.

In every corner of the grotto, stacked high, were books of every shape, size, and type. There were even books in other languages, and none of them were titles he knew.

“My gift to you is the truth, Tom. You have a choice. You can wait to be rescued, or stay here and read for as long as you wish before returning to Eternal City. These books, like all good books, are a mixture of truth and falsehood, the missing pieces of the truth strewn across human consciousness. In each one you may find a precious fragment and hold it in your mind and heart, and be enriched by it.”

“But George, there is only one truth in this universe that matters. That's God's truth, the Truth found in the Holy Bible,” Tom replied, in a well-rehearsed delivery taught every week in Sunday School from the time he was barely old enough to walk.

“The Bible has some shards of truth itself, but not all of them, Tom. Here, take a look at this.” He picked up a copy of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and handed it to him. Tom opened it and read the first verses his eyes alighted on:

*"Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough
A flask of wine, a book of verse and thou
Beside me, singing in the wilderness
and wilderness is paradise enough."*

“I dare say, Omar Khayyam had Solomon beat hands down when it came to love poems,” George said, smiling at Tom's incredulous reaction. “There's more, though, so much more! Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, a whole stack of books by Stephen Hawking, every religious text from the Quran to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, it's all here, Tom, and all for you to read.”

Tom was absolutely in shock. “Where did you get these?” he asked.

George laughed. “When new families move in, they always have a few items the Council of Elders doesn't approve of. Naturally, the list of books they don't approve of is a long one, longer than the list kept by the Vatican during the Inquisition. I scour the garbage dumps of Eternal City by night, picking up any useful items, and always careful to take a few books with me. It breaks my heart that I can't take them all, Tom.”

He suddenly acted as if he remembered something, then reached into a pile and pulled out a battered book marked “Greek Mythology.” It still had a tattered dust jacket attached, and its cover design, angular and dated, suggested it was from the mid-1970s.

“You will not recognize this, but I'm sure someone you know would.” He handed it to Tom with the blank page just before the dedication open before him. An inscription in faded ink could be read:

To my brother Harvey, the best brother ever.

From Tom, Christmas 1976.

Below that, written in familiar handwriting, the name of the book's owner stood out in red ink, as if taunting him:

Harvey Willing

Tom was perplexed. “But... This can't be Dad. I never had an uncle,” he said.

“You should probably ask your parents about it. Maybe they never mentioned him to you because they never thought of it.”

Tom gave George a sideways look, trying to make sense of the comment. He set the book down. “I think I'll wait for them to rescue me. I've seen enough,” he said, sounding more than a little irritated as he climbed back down the ladder.

“Suit yourself, young Tom,” said George, who stretched out in a corner of his library, falling asleep peacefully between a stack of sex manuals for couples and books about Hinduism.

Tom was there for nine days. During that time, George was a generous host, though they rarely spoke.

Finally, Tom began to lose hope that the helicopters would ever scour the gorge for him. “George, I... wanna thank you for everything, but I need to try to find my way back to Eternal City now.”

George smiled at him, showing all eight of his badly-rotted teeth. “Why didn't you say so? Right this way!” George ran off toward a dark, narrow passage in the cavern that Tom had assumed was a dead end. The passage continued about 500 feet, then narrowed to a crawl space.

It was there that George stopped. “Just crawl through here, about another 100 yards, and you'll see daylight. This'll leave you right behind the Eternal City Sanitation Plant.”

Tom couldn't scowl at George because it was too dark to see each other anyway, but he let his voice show his frustration. “Why didn't you tell me this was here?”

George laughed. “Well, you're the one who wanted to wait for a rescue chopper, weren't you? Good luck, young man! Come back any time you're ready, these books aren't going anywhere.”

Around midnight, a very worn, battered, hungry, and dirty Tom Willing staggered through the front door of his house. No one was awake. In the living room, candles were burning around a picture of him, one he recognized as his most recent school picture. He walked over to the kitchen, grabbed a pack of Post-It notes and a pencil, and scrawled a short note. He stuck it on the picture frame and blew out the candles, then went to the bathroom for a nice, long, hot bath.

Harvey Willing woke up to go to work early the next morning, and noticed the candles had gone out. He saw something yellow and dirty on the picture of his son, smeared in filthy fingerprints.

I'm home. OK. Tired. Will talk later.



Tom never did talk about his time in the desert, or the mysterious man he had met out there. He tried to push the whole affair out of his mind; as far as he was concerned, no one had died that day four years before; no one had tried to make him question his beliefs, he hadn't come home to a memorial to himself in his own living room.

Tom was now a mechanic at Eternal City's only garage, working full-time and dating Heather Jones, his grade-school crush and now his long-time girlfriend. That fall, he planned to propose to her, and was saving to buy a ring.

Like most residents of the city, he didn't have the money to go to a good Christian school like Liberty University, and there was no way his family would ask for the government to help them; government assistance was just one of the snares the Democrats had laid before believers.

He had also failed to become an Eternal City Ranger. He had taken too long to get home, even though he had survived the worst Ranger Fitness Test in the history of the city without being maimed for life. Of those who set out, three had died and four had injuries that made it difficult for them to earn a living afterward.

But one Sunday in 2004 would change things. One single moment would make him remember all of the things that happened, all of the questions that had been in his rebellious young mind, and open the floodgates for a new, turbulent chapter in his life.

One day, as Tom and his family were exiting the now-aging central chapel of Eternal City, Heather approached him. "Tom, I need to talk... Can I see you a little later today?"

Tom was puzzled. "Why? What is it?"

Heather just sighed and shook her head. "It'll have to wait. Call me when you get home, I'll tell you where to meet me." Tom wasn't sure what to think, this wasn't like Heather. She was a good, church-going girl and hid nothing from her friends and family. What could she possibly want to talk about?

Later on, after a quick lunch of leftover meatloaf and Hallelujah! Brand potato chips, he picked up the telephone and called Heather.

"Hi Heather," he said, unsure of where to start.

"Hi, Tom," she said, sounding scared. "Listen, can you meet me over behind the old gas station on the edge of the valley?"

“Why there?” Tom asked, seriously confused.

“Just... Tom, it's important!”

Tom sighed. “Well, alright... I'll be there in a moment. Love ya, hon,” he said.

There was a pause on the end of the line. “Love you too.” A sharp click and a dial tone followed abruptly.

Tom got in his car and began driving toward the edge of the valley. When he had graduated high school, he had been given his father's old Country Squire. He'd had a few things added, the way teenagers often do; badly tinted windows with the tinting overlays starting to bubble on the edges, a new stereo, and a more modern set of chrome hubcaps had since been added to the battered old wagon.

About five minutes later, he pulled into the parking lot of the old gas station. Originally, Eternal City had two gas stations, but now a single, large gas station on the main boulevard with a curb market and Clucker's restaurant had taken the place of both.

Heather's pink Geo Tracker was already there, but she was nowhere to be seen; cautiously, Tom made his way around to the rear of the old station.

There was Heather, looking nervous and upset. Her hair, which had been perfectly groomed earlier that morning, was disheveled; she had put on a pair of jeans and an old shirt and was wringing her hands nervously.