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The Insurrection

Part One: Opening Salvo

The world's largest slingshot...

That was the phrase that pinged between our minds, skipped across our lips, that summer.

The goal: To build it. Sure, Toby and I were only sixteen, but we were already the Lead Counselors at The Open Arms of Christ Interdenominational Summer Camp. We knew we had the determination; all we needed were the supplies.

The tubing was easy – Toby's father worked in medical supply. He went home one weekend and returned to camp with a hockey bag stuffed full, all different lengths, colors. Unzipping the bag by flashlight, it looked as if we were cutting into the guts of some giant robot.

Carefully, surgically, we strung those guts together and slung them between two huge Oaks. The perfect pouch turned out to be a carved out kayak cushion; the perfect ammo, double-bagged water balloons. You had to climb a step-ladder just to load the thing, but once armed, we could send those balloons so high they were just specks in the sky, exploding across the ground over a half-mile away.

And all of this, of course, was done in secret. *Operation Holy Vengeance* had begun.

While all the other kids went home on the weekends, we stayed and honed our aim. Like a real mortar corp in a war, we communicated via walkie-talkie – Toby launching from up on the hill, and me at a forward position, radioing in adjustments, changing trajectories. On the final

morning of our mission, we knew we could hit the Lakefront Amphitheatre with deadly regularity.

It was 8:08 AM, and halfway into the final Friday Prayer Meeting of the girls' cabins, when I radioed to Toby: *Iceman. This is Maverick. Unleash Hell.*

Pandemonium! Water-bombs exploded across girls' backs, faces, legs – we were leaving welts, breaking glasses, one girl even had a bloody cheek. In our zealous preparations, Toby and I had failed to consider just how much these things could *hurt*. And yet, I didn't call off the barrage. Instead, said: *Round two, launch round two. Round two away? Ready round three...*

What were we thinking? What had turned Toby and I, previously model Christian teens, into sudden insurrectionists? Into summer camp saboteurs?

Part Two: Battlefield Background

Three weeks previous, we were laying out on The Rock of Eternity, baking every last bit of moisture off our meager teenage frames.

“Seriously,” I said, sitting up quick. “You and *Christy*?”

“Hold a sec,” Toby said, “what’s this business about you and *Anna*?” We both just smiled. It was hardly to be believed.

In comic book lore, The Rock of Eternity was the secret hideout of Captain Marvel – a magical island floating between the physical and spiritual planes. Our Rock of Eternity, named after his, was just a floating diving dock: six plastic barrels, covered with a slab of concrete, a faded blue slide bolted to its surface. Originally it had been moored in the swimming beach,

but one night, during our first summer here, we'd commandeered a midnight pontoon and drug the thing deep into the center of Lake Chippesawkee. As far as we could tell, no one had ever discovered the new locale. Certainly we were the only ones who could swim there.

Despite endless hours spent with free weights and pilfered packets of my older brother's protein shakes, Toby and I could never add more than a pound, maybe two, to our sad ectomorphic physiques. *Gumby-ish*. That's how we jokingly, bitterly, referred to ourselves, waiting futilely for our cruel hormonal clocks to deed us the bodies we wanted (which is just to say, the bodies we imagined *women* wanted).

But all our workouts did make us strong swimmers.

After over an hour of intense paddling, we'd make out The Rock on the horizon, the slide silhouetted like the crow's nest of some half-sunk ship. Exhausted Gumbies, we'd hurl ourselves onto the sizzling deck, gasping but laughing, rolling over to let the sun pound through our closed eyelids, turning the entire world a weird gurgling red, the inside of a lava lamp, a womb.

"Alright alright," Toby says. "Details."

"Well I think I'm gonna need some details here myself..."

Seriously, who'd believe it? Toby and I had each experienced our first makeout *ever* – with (yes) different girls and in different locales – but on the very same night.

I lied when I said Toby and I were the only ones who'd made it out to The Rock. The ghosts of many, many girls had made it out there, too. Stephanie, Rachel, Mandy, Lizzie, Mandy

(again) – and that was just *my* list. Toby had his own. Girls Whom We Loved But Didn't Love Us Back : The Rock's constant topic of conversation.

Modern Midwestern Christianity created a lot of PG-13 boys like us, boys who *were* truly nice – but sometimes 'nice' is just a synonym for 'harmless.' The Harmless pine away from afar, The Harmless become the best friend, then The Harmless are shocked (*shocked!*) when their beloved hooks up with a boy... who's not that harmless.

But the night previous, the cycle had been broken. Broken because, in the school year between last summer and this, for a period of a few months, Toby and I had lost our faith in God.

Yes, in context of Christian camp, Toby and I had become *dangerous*.

Part Three: The Peace Between Our Nations

Oh you should've seen us! Just last night, in all our glory! Toby and I on the stage of the Wendell T. Andersen Memorial chapel – a giant log cabin filled with over four hundred sweaty campers – with Toby and I delivering our Testimony.

Now a Testimony is just the story of how you came to Jesus, and ours was the second best kind you could find. The very best was the redemption of a great sinner – a Satanist, say, or a high school science teacher who taught evolution. But our kind of Testimony was nearly as good: Christians who had experienced great doubts but returned to the fold.

"Yeah, you all know us as the guys that lead your prayers, games, songs, all that," I said from the stage. "But do you know Toby and I almost didn't even come to camp this summer?"

Seriously! See, we'd been reading a lot of *philosophy*, and comparative religion, all this... *stuff*. We didn't know if we were even *believers* anymore. I'm serious! But you see, God always has a plan, and..."

On and on I went, when I should've shut up after a sentence or two. I was merely Toby's opening act. He and I had a sun/moon relationship – I was an effective reflector of charisma, but had little social light of my own.

In fact, had I been honest, my real Testimony would've been just three sentences long: *I got excited about Christ because Toby did. Then I had doubts because Toby did. And when Toby decided it was all true again, well then (surprise surprise) I did, too.*

Yet even if I had possessed such self-knowledge, I'm sure I would've kept it to myself. Why? Because of the way Anna was looking at me from the wings. Anna: this year's beloved. Tucked behind the rough-hewn wooden proscenium, cast in half-shadow, Anna was wearing this expression I'd previously only seen on the tri-toned faces of women rescued by comic book heroes:

Anna looked *enamored*.

Finally Toby took the mic, instantly winning, a natural public speaker, a comet of charisma, dragging objects of lesser gravity in the wake of his own quick orbit. He had this way of making you feel like you weren't the main character in your life's story, but rather a character in his – and you were totally cool with that because *his* story was more exciting. C'mon! You and he and Jesus were saving the world!

That very night, over forty kids accepted Christ. A great triumph, truly.

But what really launched *my* spirit was when Anna whispered on our way out of the hall, “Meet me later behind the life jacket shack.”

Anna, seventeen, with a widow’s peak. And below that, flinty eyes, and below that, her ever-present tank-top. We all tried so hard, unsuccessfully, to not envision what was beneath.

“No, I’m serious, you were great up there,” she was saying as we walked along the footpath off the beach. “I mean, Toby, it’s easy for him. But you? That was brave.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I even *believe* what I was saying. I was just caught up in the moment, emotion-“

“That was the Holy Spirit!” she said. “Speaking through you!”

“How do we *know* that?”

“I know,” she said. “I used to feel Him all the time. But... that seems like a really long time ago....”

And she started crying. Anna, just like Toby and I, was slated to be a camp leader that summer. But whereas Toby and I had been led astray by our minds, Anna was led astray by The Flesh. It was even rumored (but could hardly be believed) that she’d gone All The Way.

I pulled her in close, to comfort her, but then I too got misty. How hilarious our shame. She was just a teen girl who’d slept with a couple guys; I just was a teen boy who’d read some Bertrand Russell. Big deal. But in Christian camp’s rarified air, we felt ourselves to be tarnished veterans of the Spiritual Wars, allowed back into the Castle Keep to re-coop and regain allegiances. We were: The Heretic and The Harlot.

And that night, the Harlot dried her eyes, surfaced a sly smile, and said, “Um, you know I had a dream about you last night.”

“What?”

“It was, I mean most of it was just weird, but...”

“But...”

“I can’t.”

“Now you have to.”

“Well,” she said, “there was this one part where we were kissing.”

Toby, meanwhile, was cruising South in his old Volvo, Christy at his side.

Christy’s father, a Tennessee pastor, had been hospitalized. Bad mitral valve. It was uncertain whether this was a serious condition or not, and the family wasn’t going to take any chances. Just like with their Uncle Stephen’s lymphoma, it was time to gather around for an all-night prayer vigil. Christy was taking the Red Eye.

Toby, most trusted of all teen staffers, was tabbed to ferry her safely to MSP International.

On the drive, he listened to her tears, her insecurities – he wasn’t working an angle, was honestly concerned. But his car stereo played *Toad The Wet Sprocket*. A pretty forgettable band, sure, but to Christy they were something else: *Secular*. Strictly forbidden. Toby had picked up a taste for them (along with other unmentionables like Jane’s Addiction and the doubly blasphemous Nirvana) during his months of doubt.

So you see, to Christy, Toby was now both sensitive *and* edgy. Oh my.

By then, Anna and I were in the weeds by the beach. “We don’t have to do this,” she was saying, afraid she was corrupting me, afraid I was reluctant.

But I wasn’t, was just frozen. “I *want* to,” I managed. And she must’ve seen the italics in my eyes, because then her eyes went soft. Then they did something else entirely. And then, well, I guess you could say we were kissing. There were lips, tongues – but to describe it physically misses the point. This was new currency, a new form of communication which, yes, used the mouth but was far more effective than talking for the expression of intent and desire and need and it all seemed like a long time coming.

Something massively unsaid about life suddenly slipped into place.

A key would seem a strange object if you’d never seen a lock.

A hook without an eye.

A brick without a window.

Toby kissed Christy in the darkest corner of Short Term Parking. Then they went further than that. Then she rushed off for her flight.

I learned all this later, of course. Learned, too, that during the whole drive back to camp, Toby wondered how greatly he’d sinned, wondered if he might have condemned himself and Christy to Hell. And yet, the whole time, his speakers kept repeating one pre-Emo song, over and over, the singer’s too-plaintive sighs saying: *All I want / Is to feel this way / To be this close / To hear you say / All I want / Is to feel this way.*

I wasn’t ready to throw the brick.

After a short while – two seconds or two hours – Anna got bored, wanted something more. And I was so naïve that I couldn't honestly imagine what it could be – lifting her shirt seemed as likely as lopping off her leg. Instead, we simply stood. Brushed off the sand. "See you next Sunday," she said with a kiss, a promise.

I floated back to my cabin inflated with joy, only punctured once I fell back onto my mattress, an intensely-numb pain filling my lower abdomen and below. How could I have known what it was when I'd never even heard the term?

A boy's first case of blue balls.

I was still awake with the pain when Toby drifted in over an hour later. "Tell you on The Rock," he whispered, climbing up to his bunk. The muted sound of some song, repeating, drifted down from headphones.

Part Four: An Act of War

The next night marked the start of our mid-Summer break. Toby in Tempe, Anna in Brainerd. So strange, that era right before cell phones and email: It actually seemed natural that we wouldn't speak for a week.

Instead, I poured all my energy into writing Anna the perfect letter. It was witty and poignant, certainly, but what truly made it a masterpiece was the envelope. Using talents that Anna didn't even know I possessed, I ink-sketched the portrait of a dolphin (she might not remember telling me it was her favorite animal, but *I* did). Then, even better, I drew a speech balloon around the address, *as if the dolphin himself were saying it*. Hilarious! She'd love it.

She would get it on Saturday, and then on Sunday, there I'd be.

Aren't we all familiar enough with the rules of tragedy (or just plain *life*) to know what happens next? Must I really replay every detail, or can I just go with a highlights package, a Top Five, ala ESPN:

5. See me exit the camp bus, feeling triumphant, an astronaut exiting the crash capsule.
4. There's Toby, separating himself from the crowd, rushing me off behind the softball backstop to tell me something in private.
3. He can't even look at me as he says that Anna was discovered having sex with Eric from Maintenance, on the beach, just hours after my first makeout. Karl found them, and hasn't told Senior Staff, which is why Anna is even still at camp. But everyone knows.
2. I rush to confront Anna. She, too, looks down (*is this how it is now, no one will ever look at me?*) until I get really nasty. Then she looks up, pleading, "What is this? We weren't even dating! It was a *kiss*! I don't understand..." I stop listening as I see my letter, sitting on her milk crate end table, unopened. That anthropomorphic dolphin looks like the most stupid thing in the entire world.
1. I swim out to The Rock of Eternity.

I think I must have known, even then, that Anna was no villain, and that I was no wounded hero, either. But it was all too complicated, impossible – I had no ability to evaluate things

outside my Manichean mindset, outside strict categories of Good and Evil, the categories of comic books, the categories of Christianity...

And I didn't even know, yet, what had happened to Toby.

Part Five: Revolution!

I saw Toby's towel right when I climbed onto The Rock. His souvenir Epcot towel, pinned facedown with several small rocks. Toby himself was sitting atop the slide, knees to chest, surveying the skyline like some strange hermit.

"This Anna thing--" he started, but then stopped when he saw my look. "If you don't wanna talk, that's cool, too."

I turned my back to him. Sat on the edge of the dock, then nodded my head back at the towel. "What's that?"

"In Tempe..."

"What?"

"I spent a lot of time in the *library*."

"Oh Jesus," I said, not knowing whether it was a curse or call for help.

Libraries were trouble for Toby, what had *started* the trouble.

Early sophomore year, Toby was already in a Senior philosophy class. Mr. Melken was covering some basic arguments against the existence of God, standard curriculum, when Toby shot his hand up, stammering some weak logic. Melken mildly, kindly, crushed him.

But Toby's mind was already in the library, and pretty soon, his body was there too, almost every day after school. Devouring book after book, looking for rebuttals, doing opposition research – but the problem with opposition research is *you actually have to read the opposition*. The more he read, the more confused he became...

“No, you don't understand,” he said to me during a late night call, his voice uncharacteristically panicked, tight. “It's *not* that I've discovered that Christianity is false, per se, I've just found so many other things that could *also* be true, and I don't know how, how you pick or, or... *fuck*.” It was the first time I'd heard him swear.

Toby and I went up to Lake Chippesawkee that summer imagining we'd have to leave after a few weeks, once we confessed our lack of faith; instead, the comforting confines of Christian camp nourished our belief, brought us back—

And now, in an overly air-conditioned Tempe library, Toby's faith had fled once more. He couldn't take it anymore, the back and forth. That's how he devised the towel test.

“Did you ever read about Gideon?” he asked me from atop the slide.

Toby spit forth an elaborate explanation of Gideon's story in the Bible – even coming from Toby, it was boring. The gist was that Gideon was called to lead the Israelites into battle, but Gideon was unsure if he was really hearing the voice of God. So Gideon set up some tests where he laid this fleece outside his house, told God to make it wet one night, dry the next, etcetera – God complied.

Basically, Gideon tested God, and God verified His existence.

Gideon became a great general.

So the night previous, Toby had laid out his towel and prayed:

God, this is Toby. God, my faith is so weak. God, I'm so sorry, but I've read too much, got my mind too opened up, can't... I don't know if you're really there. I'm sorry, I'm unworthy, but.. if you're really there... will you give me a sign? Will you just put something in the center of this towel? Before I come back tomorrow? Anything, a rock, a leaf, a fish, whatever. Just let there be something in the center there. Then I'll know you're there and I swear... I'll follow you forever.

Toby arrived at The Rock a half-hour before me. The geodesic dome of Epcot was faint but visible, bleeding through the backside of the towel, forming a faded circle like some ancient rune.

The circle, the entire towel, was empty.

"You can't do that!" I yelled at him. "You can't—"

"What?"

"Test God!"

"I wasn't," he said, "and so what if I was? I asked Him, in his infinite power, to put a stupid twig on a stupid towel... and I'd give him *my entire life*. You see anything there?" He stood.

"Either He doesn't exist... or He just doesn't care." And he cannonballed off the slide.

I forgave Toby almost immediately – I'd have followed him to Hell and back (in a way, I thought I already had) – but he never should have told Christy. I cared about Toby as a friend, but Christy cared about his *soul*.

She prayed and prayed to God about it, and God told her to tell her father; her father went behind her back and told Senior Staff. And Senior Staff told Toby that he and Christy shouldn't see each other anymore – that they were a temptation unto one another – and that Toby was no longer to be in charge of any campers. The Senior Staff weren't trying to be cruel, were just trying to do what they thought best for the campers *and* Toby – but from Toby's perspective, he just felt triple-axed: God, job, and girl. All gone.

Toby still had one mission left to lead.

Part Six: Back to the Attack

When the bombs first started exploding, the girls scanned the rooftops and trees for their assailants – but at the distance we were firing from, the balloons seemed to drop straight out of the sky. As if by God Himself (perhaps a few of the more guilty girls had brief moments where they really thought this *was* Holy Vengeance).

Of course, I was watching just one girl. I imagined the balloon smashing across her face, her chest, her white tank-top suddenly translucent – she's sexualized, then humiliated.

Just as she had done to me.

I'm guessing Toby had similar thoughts about Christy. But, of course, Anna and Christy stayed completely dry (their kind, in a way, always do). The first barrage missed them completely, and then they hid out under the eaves of the Dining Hall. Yes, in a pattern that would continue into the future, we were punishing innocent girls for the crimes of the invincible.

Then the great mass of girls – stumbling at first, then running – began making their way toward Toby’s hideout on the hill. We’d kept the barrage going too long, they’d triangulated his position. I went running ahead, yelling into the walkie, *Iceman! Toby! Get outta there, move out!*

But when I arrived, he was still firing, firing. I saw his maniacal glee, knew I had it, too. Knew, also, that we would stick it out to the last – defeated but noble generals. Captains going down with ship. I just started tossing him more balloons.

Moments later, the two brothers that owned the camp, these big lumberjack-style Christians, arrived. They reluctantly wrestled us to the ground, right as all the girls’ cabins gathered around. Two days later, we were kicked out of camp.

“What were you thinking?” one of the brothers asked me.

I couldn’t answer then, but I think I can now, because to be honest I’ve had the exact same thoughts and emotions as an adult: *You were supposed to make things more complete, but instead have left them more empty. So tell me, where do I put all this disappointment and anger?*

And the simple problem was that Toby and I were too young to know that there’s *nowhere* to put it – you just have to wait around and hope to forget. And you don’t even want to forget, which means you don’t really want to get better, which is the worst part. It means that it’s something in *you*, as much your fault as—

Fuck all that, is what we were thinking. This is war, and we’re going to win.

Still, I remember asking Toby on the bus ride back home, “What’s next, Iceman?”

Even in the midst of his colossally gloomy mood, he smiled – I think we were both comforted by the exact same thought:

We honestly had no idea.