



FOGLIFTER

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 2 2021

You Win Three Weeks with Jesus

Jay had been to Florida just the one time before. It was the first of a series of gifts from his grandmother, and for the fourth time in their lives, the Harolds family packed their t-shirts and tanks and beach towels into suitcases borrowed from family friends and loaded themselves into an airplane. Took pictures of the dawn breaking over the whole world's cracked and thorny crown, tried not to be picky about the way people's seats piled right into their laps when the seats leaned back, and then they had visited that grandmother all the way down at the end of the world in Homestead, where she lived surrounded by birds and birdseed and her handful of friends who she called her besties. Jay had only seen his grandma in pictures before, and she was doing better off in Florida than Jay had known. It surprised even his mother, whose mother she was.

He remembered the gift store where they bought knickknacks and trinkets to remember Florida, and to remember her whenever she was gone. His grandmother said that to him as he stared down the barrel of a faux rifle, considered its faux heft, went on to survey the variety of snowglobes that rained down not in white flakes but in seaweed, in seahorses, in sand. He had barely met her, and already in the gift store, she was trying to say goodbye.

"Buy yourself something," she insisted, with a voice that was bigger than he had thought of his grandmother. When he had tried to imagine her on rare occasions throughout his childhood, he had seen a tiny figure of a woman sunken at the bottom of an old mason jar, like she was preserved in all her shrivel and her tininess. But this grandmother looked pink, gold, firmly holding to the thick reigns of her long and mysterious life. No one could ever get the truth out of her. But they could have snowglobes.

The second gift was even bigger than just a plane ticket, bigger than just a vacation. It was three weeks at a place called Boys Camp in Christ, as his grandmother explained over the phone in the last week of the school year, instructing him to write down the details for his itinerary. It would mean part of the summer in the swamps of South Florida, not far from where she lived. "You win three weeks with Jesus," his grandma said, her voice even but amused.

When Jay hung up the phone, he did not tell his mother the name of the camp, but he emphasized that it was for Christian youth development. She shrugged, said that if he must go he could do it, as long as she wasn't footing the bill. This time he traveled back to Florida alone, and the novelty of everything sang to him briefly as he tested the twisting knobs of the tray tables, the crunch of the spicy cookies he had declined on the last flight. He kept his hoodie up the whole trip. It was easier that way. People wouldn't stare.

When he landed in Miami International Airport, the warm baking of grab-n-go Cuban sandwiches greeting him, she picked him up in the circle pickup drive with her gleaming

blue Cadillac, and he felt the stab of thrill to be picked out of this crowd by the otherworldly beauty of her car. When he felt himself sink inches into the seat, he thanked her for this second present.

"I want you to be who god meant you to be, Jay," was all the reply that she said to him, using his chosen name, and he realized he had no idea who god was, and who god meant him to be, or what the grandma was getting at. The sentence itself seemed as if it was a loosened bookshelf, heavy with notions, but leaning with weight and bad nails, leaning far and seconds from toppling over. He felt the instinct not to put out a hand, not to ask her to tell him what she was driving at, to let it fall.

His grandma's house, small and yellow as a lemon, greeted him from the edge of a pond where other houses as small and pale as fruits stood proud around their view of water. Florida, land of water. Land of in-between.

The Boys Camp in Christ turned out to be less of a camp and more of a highly physical challenge in Christ, as the camp leaders were soon to explain to Jay and a dozen or so young men in their first morning briefing. Most of the boys, he found out, were locals, some of whom had volunteered, and the rest had been put to work as their families had so arranged. Youth service for boys who needed to serve, or else their hands would go elsewhere. That was all it was, on an acreage of what appeared to be the pastor's personal property. They said they were clearing the land for a new church building, but what more details Jay didn't care to hear or find out. He could have been asked to spread horse manure and he wouldn't have felt a difference. Boys who knew their way around a chainsaw could goggle up and start taking down the young slash pines that came between them and their vision. Boys who were less useful got shifts hauling chipped wood or splitting the rest. It looked as if they would pray sometimes in the mornings and afternoons and that would be the extent of the religious nature of the camp.

Before they put a mallet in Jay's hand to start splitting, they went around in a circle and did intros, and Jay's stomach threatened its hot contents at his throat when he heard himself say his name aloud, waiting for a reaction. Told them he was a visitor, staying with his grandma. A few youth group leaders all nodded in unison, knowingly, sanctifiedly, like they had not only secret spiritual knowledge but secret knowledge of Jay.

"Welcome, Jay, we appreciate your service," the leaders said, and most of the boys nodded once or twice, and some of them just stared at the dirt, and one of them smiled.

He had no good idea why the grandmother had dropped him off here, as he came to realize as the hours wore on during that first day and more days were to follow, and yet he felt almost shy about asking her for clarification during their lunchtime phone calls on a cell connection that cracked and broke and struggled to hold the life in their line, even though he was only, supposedly, seven miles away from the grandmother's home. He realized that he now suffered, had agreed and signed up to suffer, in the sweat and heat of this wild swamp place whose strangeness seemed almost incomprehensible.

He was taught how to wield the splitting maul by one of the youth leaders, a wide mustached man with a good looking chin and cheek stubble creeping its way practically up to

his eyeballs. Jay felt the joy of being held by the man as he showed Jay how to swing, and for the first time since his grandma dropped him off, he was glad.

"Here's you," said the man, helping him hold his grip on the maul, "and there's your goal." The man pointed with a nod of his thick-haired head. "It's not that you're trying to actually hit the wood, bud. You're trying to swing the weight up"—the man showed him with a swift heave of his thighs as the blunt blade arched into the air—"and then down. One good curve like that. You're not hacking, remember. You're directing the flow." The man spoke in an actively inflected tone, as if he had traveled to many dimensions of other planets and times, had even walked with Christ himself. Jay had never met anybody like him before, and he ate up long glances of him as he walked from camper to camper across the clearing, showing them how to perfect their work, their swings, their shoveling, their stacking. In time Jay grew jealous when the man, who went by Mel, lingered longer with the other campers than with him.

Every day it went like that. Jay sweat like a pig on the day of his own birth. He couldn't feel his hands by the end of it. They took a break only for lunch and prayer, where they sought a moment's shade and drank cool lemonade in the pastor's house, in his otherwise normal person's living room.

His grandma picked him up in her blue Cadillac at night, and every morning she would bring him back to the Boys Camp. Every morning, Jay surprised to wake to the smell of sap and her trailer's dust. He made a habit out of changing his clothes underneath his sheets, in case his grandma ever showed an inclination to open his bedroom door unannounced. Waking in the swamp house, shuffling into his boxers. His grandma feeding him hard-boiled eggs and biscuits with honey, eating with her silently on the formica table that creaked when you leaned your elbows on it.

"Makes a boy learn some manners, that way," his grandma joked. It was the first time she had said the word *boy*, used it to refer to him.

He took an extra long time splitting the wood the next day. Wanting to feel Mel get closer, to show him how, again and again.

One of the last nights in his three Florida weeks he slept badly, hearing the shriek of crickets foreboding some kind of weather under the slash pines. He got hot and then cold, pulling his grandpa's old clothes off and on. His grandma had given them for him to wear—far too baggy in the waist and belly, but he wore the green and red plaid just the same. He rose and stood in front of the bedroom mirror in the dark as the winds blew above the trailer, seeing himself transformed. He could not wear this in his parent's home. He savored it, the idea of who he could be.

Craving something, he found the refrigerator humming and voices trailing from the side porch. Through the screen window, the warm night air blew their voices towards him: his grandma and a woman he had seen walking through the neighborhood each morning, waving as they drove away. This woman touched his grandmother's arm. She was holding something enormous in the other one, and a shadow fell from it and fell across his grandma's face. A great

bird hung on the woman's arm, its wings flapping a warning like it would take flight before settling back again, certain that it would stay.

His grandma bent towards the other woman, cooing at the bird. Cooing at the woman. He was sure that he saw it when his grandma's lips bent forward, kissed the bird woman's cheek.

Jay turned away and went quietly back to his room, unsure if his grandma had seen him. He lay under the covers until it was time to chop wood for god another day.

Every now and again Jay would take a look around at his fellow campers—one who had called himself Beau, one whose name he hadn't heard, most whose names he had already forgotten. Chopping, stacking, cutting, grunting. They had no time to talk, and probably that was the idea.

"Yo *Jay*," one of them said to him at last as he came through the open field where Jay swung and missed at logs. "Get out the *way*," he said, looking smug with himself, but the rhymes didn't go far. A tall youth leader caught the snark, reminded them all to keep their eyes on their own races. The other boy scampered off with a gasoline can in his hand, refilling his chainsaw that lay dead in the grass.

Other times Jay would just stare out at the wild landscape of Florida, and then he would stare at his own hands, and then he would look back again at the scrub and pines. The strangeness of all that he saw those weeks in Florida—its alligators, breaking a river's edge; its heat and then cold; its monstrous storms—somehow made him feel more at home than he'd ever been.

"That's it," his grandma said one day as she woke him before dawn. His body aching from the wood. He had dreamed of Mel, in a field where Jesus hung above them and watched and nodded as they kissed, like Jesus was blessing their sacred union. It was uncomfortable for his grandma to appear above him suddenly, with the dream and with Mel's mouth only seconds behind him, vanished now from the blanks of his closed eyes. "We're playing hooky today," she finished, yanking back the shuddering blinds, where the forest light streamed in.

"No Jesus camp today?" he said.

"No Jesus camp today," she laughed.

She took his hand as they walked into the small town. They had hardly spent any time there, and here it was, only a few days until he would leave again for Ohio. He did not want to think of it, but instead he held onto her hand tighter, as if he was a child, suddenly afraid. He wondered what it must look like to these people, to see an old woman in a long purple skirt holding a teenage boy's hand. Of course, they might look twice, trying to figure out what they had just seen in Jay, if they had determined him right.

"I want to buy you a treat," she said. "Like I didn't get to when you were young," she said. She steered him hard into the ice cream shop, where children lined up for superman, rocky road, something on the sign that advertised bubble gum island.

He let himself do this for her. He let himself be her child. They ate a rocky road and a

bubble gum island apiece, swapping halfway through, just to show that they were family. They could eat each other's half-licked ice creams.

That night, he watched her peel potatoes the way she peeled potatoes. He sat on the top of her counter and watched her silently, as he could never sit on top of the kitchen counter in his parent's house. She had a peeler, but she used a knife that she moved beneath the skin of each potato, slow and firm like you pop a zit with steady pressure.

"Aren't you afraid you'll cut your finger," he asked her finally. She was peeling potatoes like it was for an army. A great red plastic bowl was piled with the yellow white cubes, far more than they could eat between the two of them.

"No," she said. "But I'm afraid of things that come along and make life too easy," she said, finishing off the last few brown orbs.

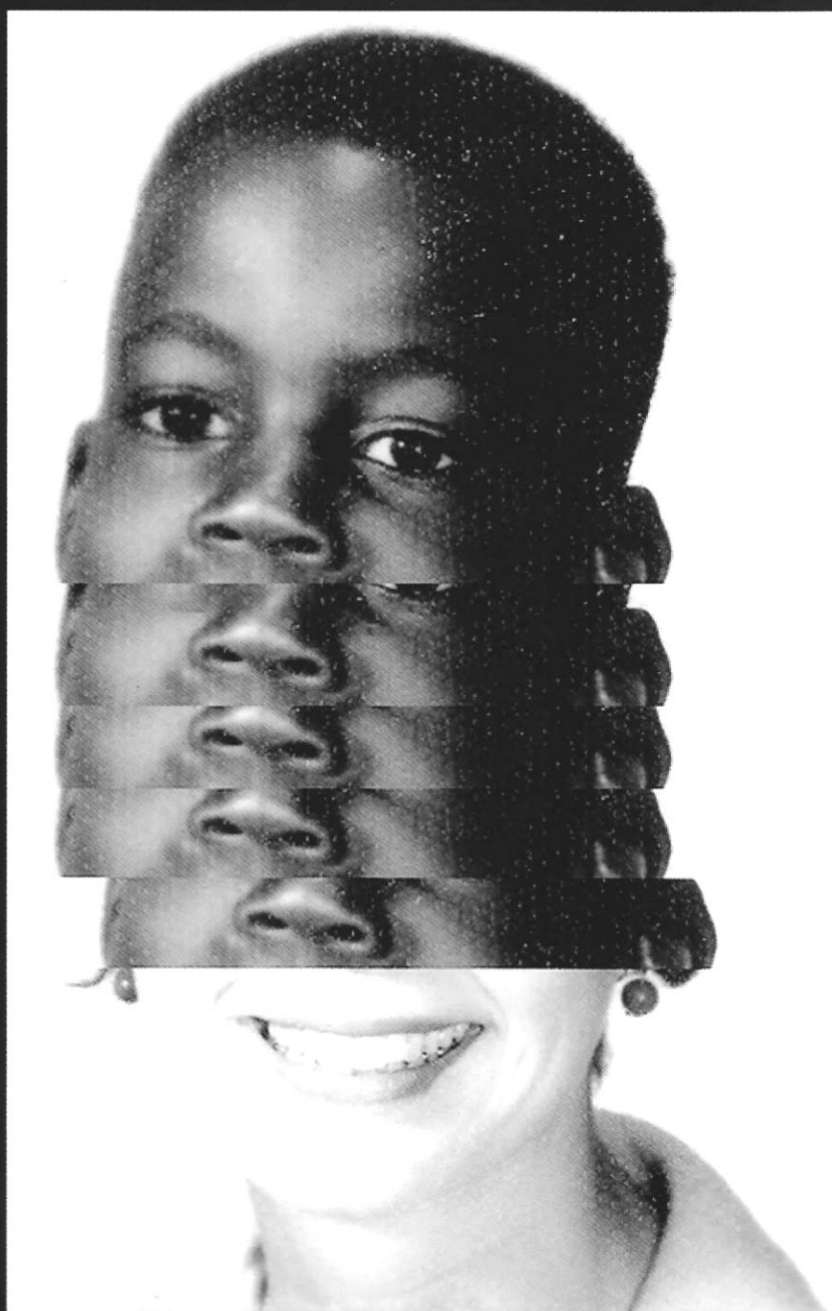
The Boys Camp in Christ said its final prayers of that Friday. Their backs, necks, arms aching. They said prayers every day, sang songs every day, and Jay forgot the words to them all immediately. He didn't come to think he was sent here for Christ, and he didn't think his grandma had sent him for that reason, either.

And yet Jay had taken a liking to him, that figure on the cross that they would pray to in a circle under the sky. He watched Christ's carved and wooden face, and it looked like it defied what Jay had known of him before. His sad face tender, yet strong. His body could have fought before he had been nailed to the cross, and yet he had not fought. He was, as far as Jay knew of the story, both god and human. He was both things at once, had been killed because this was too difficult to understand.

The boys all sang, something that ended in hallelujah. It often ended in hallelujah. The faces of the boys around him looked a host of expressions that ranged from unmoved to absent to bored to just sad. Jay had not made any friends here, nor had he cared to. He had not made enemies, and he had not been stalked, taunted, or hit, and that was all he needed right then. Just the quiet. Just the look of the man on the cross. A man who he did not exactly worship, did not believe in as he was meant to believe, but a man whose face he might come to like.

"You can stay," his grandma had nearly whispered, the hours draining down on his last Sunday in her trailer beside the Florida pond. He picked up the snowglobe she kept beside her overstuffed chair, gave it a few hard shakes. He watched the snow come down, in drifts, on top of the one lone house that stood at its bottom. His mother had given this to her, he knew, when his grandma had left Ohio many years ago. *To remind you of a place you'll never come back to*, his mother had said then, with a dark laugh he had never understood. He gave it a shake again, and he thought he saw, for an instant, the little house inside it disappear.

ANTHONY AGUERO
MARY ANGELINO
HONORA ANKONG
ÀKPÀ ÀRINZÈCHUKWU
NEFERTITI ASANTI
GWENDOLEN AUBE
LEMIA MONÉT BODDEN
CHERRI BUIJK
[SARAH] CAVAR
EM DIAL
TARIK DOBBS
SAÚL HERNÁNDEZ
SILAS JONES
KEI KAIMANA
Z KENNEDY-LOPEZ
KENDRA MACK
JARID MCCARTHY
MOLLY MCCLOY
FREESIA MCKEE
JOHN MORAN
NOOR
KYLE OKEKE
CANTRICE JANELLE PENN
XANDRIA PHILLIPS
DANI PUTNEY
JAMAL RASHAD
SAGE
ZAK SALIH
JASMINE SAWERS
GIA SHAKUR
RAJON STAUNTON
MAR STRATFORD
NICO TANGORRA
GWENDOLYN WALLACE
CANDACE WILLIAMS
SPENCER WILLIAMS
BESSIE FLORES ZALDÍVAR
TAUHEED ZAMAN



\$15.00
ISBN 978-1-7369045-3-4

