



CHAPTER ONE

My counselor at an East Texas summer camp stepped along the gravel ground, asking us if we wanted to accept the Lord Jesus into our hearts. As she worked her way down the line of girls next to me, I used the time to try to think of a better answer than “no”. Luckily, I was at the end of the group, seated on the edge of the picnic table where we’d been lined up like bottles in a carnival game. But our counselor was moving quickly.

She planted herself in front of my friend Jessica, who’d also come to camp with me and a big group of fifth graders from our neighborhood. Jessica was from one of the rare families that didn’t go to church every Sunday, so I watched the exchange intently. Surely, she would take one for the team and tell this religious nut to back off.

The counselor, whom we knew only by her nickname, “Tippy”, took a deep breath before speaking. She placed her hands on Jessica’s bare knees, just below her flowered Jammer shorts. “Jessica”, she said. “Jessica, do you want to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

All the other girls leaned in, their heads cocked. Jessica looked at us, then at Tippy.

She started to say something, but faltered. I nodded in sympathy.

This wouldn't be easy. "I . . . yes! I'm ready! I want to make Jesus the Lord of my life!" she cried. The other girls erupted into squeals and applause, everyone clobbering Jessica with hugs and pats on the back.

Then they looked at me.

"Jenny", Tippy said. The other girls' celebration died down to wait for their next victory. "Look me in the eyes, Jenny."

I looked up. Her eyeballs glistened with emotion; her chin quivered.

"Jenny, are you 100 percent certain you're going to heaven when you die?"

"That's a big question . . ." I tried to buy time. I squirmed and shifted under the pressure of the other girls' gazes.

Though it was of no use to me at that moment, I couldn't help but fixate on the fact that advertisements for Pine Grove summer camp specifically said that you didn't have to be a Christian to attend—which is the only reason my parents let me go in the first place. The slick pamphlets my friends handed me at school boasted color pictures of smiling children water skiing and horseback riding. There were no photos of religious interrogation in the brochure.

"Has the Lord been speaking to your heart?" Tippy wanted to know. There were so many confusing things about that question that I didn't even know how to begin to answer. I was pretty sure that "the Lord" referred to Jesus, who was a guy who used to live in the Middle East, but then it was also sometimes used to refer to God, who was the invisible ghost who lived in the sky. It was impossible to keep the details of their mythology straight. On top of that, I had no idea how one would go about speaking to a person's heart. I considered suggesting that the Lord speak to my ear in the future, but this was no time for jokes.

"He, umm, I'm not really sure . . ." I said. I averted my eyes, looking off toward the towering pecan tree over her shoulder.

"Do you want to get saved?"

"See, I, uh . . ."

She stepped into the path of my gaze. "If you do not get saved, you will not go to heaven. You will end up in hell. Forever. You don't want to go to hell, do you, Jenny?"

Another tough question. I needed more information about this place before I could make an informed decision. I didn't believe in heaven or hell, but even if I were to pretend that I did, I wasn't sure that

hell sounded all that bad. Several religious people had assured me that my family and I were going there, and they said it was a terrible place. But so far the only thing I knew about it was that people like them weren't there. For all I knew, I might like it.

I glanced at Jessica, who was leaning against the girl next to her, overcome with the emotion of her big moment. Traitor.

"This is it, Jenny", Tippy said. "Will you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

I would've been happy to lie and give the answer that would be most likely to increase my popularity within the cabin, but it might backfire. I was afraid she'd start quizzing me about the details of how I'd been communicating with Jesus, and I'd screw it up. My friends seemed to use their imaginations to picture that Jesus gave them detailed instructions about their daily lives, but I didn't know what the boundaries were for those kinds of fantasies. Could I say that Jesus wrote me a note? Or that he left a message on our answering machine? I didn't know. It would be better to try to worm my way out of this one.

"Can I think about it?" I offered hesitantly.

One of the girls gasped. Another shook her head and turned away.

Tippy held her gaze firm. "I've never had a girl in one of my cabins not get saved." She made one more glassy-eyed appeal, assuring me that she was deeply concerned about my burning in hell for eternity.

I could feel blotchy red spots breaking out all over my face. Mostly, it was from embarrassment. But there was something else fueling it as well: an angry certainty that this counselor should be ashamed of her belief system. I was a good person, more or less. Sure, there was that time I snuck into the classroom at recess and poured glue into a classmate's desk, and then let a kid I didn't like take the blame for it. In general, though, I was at least as nice as anyone else sitting on that bench. I might have been only eleven years old, but even I could recognize that worshipping a deity who sends nice people to hell is nothing to be proud of.

Tippy eventually came to the conclusion that I was beyond saving and announced that it was time to go back to the cabin. The next day was Jessica's big moment. She and Tippy left to go do whatever was involved with "getting saved", and when they returned, everyone flooded out-side to celebrate the world's newest Christian. I stayed in my bunk. The bedding had been stripped since it was our last

day, so I lay on the bare plastic mattress. The racket of the old window air conditioner unit wasn't quite loud enough to drown out my cabinmates' squeals and giggles outside.

Before that moment, I'd never defined myself by my views on religion. I grew up aware of the obvious fact that the physical world around us is all there is, and it never occurred to me that such a normal outlook even needed its own word. But as I listened to the giggles and yelps of the girls through the closed cabin door, I realized that my beliefs differed so radically and fundamentally from other people's beliefs that it would impact every area of my life. For the first time, I assigned to myself a label, a single word that defined me: atheist. The concept settled within me as perfectly as puzzle pieces snapping into place, and for the first time in days, I broke into a broad, exuberant smile.



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