

Morning rays slipped through the curtains, coaxing Micah from sleep.

"Breakfast," his mother called from the kitchen. "Bible study in an hour!"

He opened his green eyes and sighed.

Once dressed, he trudged down the stairs. Jacob and Bethany were already at the table, Bibles next to their bowls.

"Bethany, go make sure Gabe is awake please," Melissa said. "That kid sleeps too much."

"Yes, Mom," Bethany said, getting up.

When all four children were at the table, their father, Joseph, joined them. "Please, Lord, help me to grow in my faith and walk with you," the family prayed in unison, hands joined.

Micah sneaked a glance around the table, Jacob's eyes were open and he only mouthed the words. Bethany kept her head down and her eyes closed, while mumbling along. Gabe, still too young to question things, showed genuine enthusiasm.

While barely registering the bland taste of his oatmeal, Micah let his mind wander to the library, one of the few places his parents let him visit outside of church. He could read about Atheism and astrophysics all in one place.

"Can I go to the library today?"

"Of course," Melissa said. "After Bible study and chores."

"Alright, everyone," Joseph began when the table had been cleared and the dishwasher loaded. "Open up to Isaiah, chapter fifty-three, verse four."

The sound of pages turning filled the room as the four Asher children, and their mother, flipped through gold leaf pages. Every week Gabe and Bethany raced to see who could get there first. Gabe smiled in triumph and pointed across the table. "Haha! I found it first!"

Bethany scoffed and continued flipping.

"It's not a competition, kids," Joseph said, stone faced. He glanced around the table and pulled his glasses up to the top of his head. "Who read the verse last week?"

"Me, Dad," Jacob said.

"That means it's Micah's turn this week." Joseph turned to Micah and gave a slow nod.

Micah moved his fingers across the pages to find the exact verse, and read, "It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our sufferings that he bore, but we thought him afflicted, struck down by God and tormented."

Joseph gazed at his son, a permanent furrow etched into his brow, "And, what do you think that means?"

Micah shrugged, "I don't know. It's hard to know with no context, Dad."

"It means we can give all our suffering over to the Lord, Micah."

Micah stared out the window, watching ginkgo leaves blow in the breeze while his parents discussed various bits of wisdom that could be molded to fit any situation.

Once Bible study ended, he tackled his chore list with efficiency. *Taking out the trash? Well, grab the broom and sweep the sidewalk and driveway while you're out there. Clean the upstairs bathroom? Well, I might as well take my laundry and put it away when I go up there.*

He switched to autopilot while working, and made finishing the list his only priority. The freedom of the library awaited, his reward for doing what everyone expected of him.

What would happen if one day he just ... didn't? Would his Dad be angry if he didn't do his chores? Would Brother John and Pastor Ryan be upset if he didn't go to church? *It was*

*certainly our sickness and our suffering that he carried... but what about our doubts? What about our questions? What about when we questioned him?*

The musty scent of aged books greeted him like an old friend. He roamed through the aisles, glancing at the titles, on the lookout for Christian fiction and wholesome biographies his parents would approve of. He had to take something home to keep up appearances.

"Can I help you find anything?" the librarian caught Micah off-guard, making him flinch.

"Um," he stammered. "I was just looking for something different to read."

"Ah," she said, understanding dawning in her eyes. "Well, you mind being more specific?"

Micah looked around the room, trying to think of something, anything, outside his comfort zone. "Horror?"

"Of course," she said. "If you're interested in classic horror, I'd suggest Edgar Allan Poe or H.P. Lovecraft. For something more modern, Stephen King or RL Stein."

"Thank you."

Soon, his hand hovered over a book with a menacing cover, torn between his desire for novelty and the fear of his parents' disapproval.

"God, forgive me," he whispered under his breath before he grabbed the book and hurried to a secluded corner. Guilty and exhilarated, he opened it.

*Let's see what happens in the Pet Semetery...*

Micah fought the urge to look over his shoulder and make sure he wasn't being watched. Despite the anxiety that gnawed at his stomach, he couldn't close the book.

He thought about the girl next door to MacDougal's and wondered if she read horror, too.

Before leaving, he grabbed a generic Christian young adult novel by an author he'd never heard of. The other book sat heavy in his hand, a dangerous secret.

He shoved both books in his backpack before leaving to walk home.

The trees that lined downtown had just started sprouting new leaves. Downtown shops put their wares out on the sidewalk for spring sales. Colorful signs on every corner advertised the farmer's market that would start up soon.

He'd always imagined that from the air, his neighborhood looked like a model of a perfect neighborhood. Green carpet grass grew under white picket fences. Garden gnomes watched passers by from perfect flower beds.

His parents trusted him enough to not inspect the books he brought home. Since he never did anything wrong, he wondered what would happen if they caught him reading it.

That night, while everyone slept, he took the book into the bathroom, and read the first twenty five pages. In a few hours he'd have to be up for church.

Brother John's voice boomed through the hall as he passionately delivered his sermon about witnessing to the non believers.

"Can I get an amen?" he shouted, his arms raised to the heavens.

"Amen!" the congregation roared back, their fervor matching the man who led them. Micah hesitated, mumbling an obligatory amen. The church service pulsed with life, a living, breathing entity that demanded active participation and unity from all present.

As the service neared its end, Brother John urged everyone to gather around the altar for prayer. Micah's parents guided him and his siblings to the front. People spoke in tongues, their bodies shaking with emotion and faces lifted in ecstasy.

The people who surrounded him were at their rawest and most vulnerable, and no one judged anyone. What these people felt right now wasn't about reading the Bible, and following all the rules. They truly surrendered to something higher.

He remembered the night he "got the Holy Ghost." He'd just turned twelve, and everyone circled him, laying hands on his shoulders. They told him to let go and speak. So he did. But one secret he'd take to his grave was that he faked it.

He would've bet a few of the people around him were faking it now.

When the service ended, Micah was ushered to a small room with other teenagers for "teen talk" with Brother Ryan, the Youth Pastor. Today they were talking about teenage sexuality. He glanced at his siblings. Jacob, always the secretive one, wore a stoic expression. Bethany, on the other hand, showed genuine interest.

"Summer's right around the corner," Pastor Ryan began, his wife Leah by his side. "And when school lets out, there will be a lot of temptation—temptation not just for sex, but for drinking and other things you guys aren't ready for."

Micah shifted, uncomfortable in his seat.

"God wants us to stay pure," Leah chimed in, her voice soft yet firm. "It's important that we resist temptation and honor God with our choices. When you sleep with someone, you're really giving them your whole self. And that person should be your partner for life, not just somebody you kinda like."

"Okay, so let's talk about some things we can do to stay strong in the face of temptation?" Brother Ryan said, scanning the room for volunteers.

One by one, the teenagers offered their input, some confident in their words while others stammered. Micah listened, but kept his own counsel, unwilling to share his inner turmoil. He tried to mask his brewing resentment towards these expectations, a demand too impossible to reach.

"Micah, did you remember to take out the trash?" Melissa asked later on after church.

"Yes, Mom," he replied, his tone flat and practiced.

"Okay, well go help Jacob pull weeds."

As Micah moved through his chores, his mind kept wandering back to that girl. He didn't know her name yet. He referred to her in his head as "The girl who draws." The thought of her offered a flicker of color amid the dull gray around him. With each mundane task completed, the longing to return to Brian MacDougal's lawn grew stronger, an itch he couldn't quite scratch.

"Who am I?" he whispered, his voice barely audible even to himself. Every decision was dictated to him by parents and clergy who, likely, had no idea who they were, either.

Later, a shiver ran down his spine as he reached under his pillow and felt the book. Even if he never finished the book, it being there served as his own micro-defiance.

*Can't I just have this one thing?* he thought, frustration bubbling inside. *Is it wrong to want to know more?*

"God," he prayed, "please help me find myself."

Out in the world there were people who didn't live like him. People who stay out all night, and drink, and listen to loud music, and drive fast, and have never picked up a Bible. People who eat greasy food, spend money on unnecessary things, have messy houses, watch TV, and laugh, and feel connected to others.

Sinners, non-believers, people who'd lost their way. Did it count for people like him who were never given a choice? Was a lost soul still lost if they lived a happy life? Did GOD really want his followers to be miserable?

As Micah listened to the soft sounds of his brothers' breathing, she walked across the stage of his mind again--the girl who draws. She covered herself in black, a color of sin and mourning. Above all though, she had one quality he admired most--her freedom.