

# We Who Are Alive

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*Please note, this work includes content related to religious trauma, extreme isolation, and suicide involving a firearm.*

**O**n the day that the trumpet sounded and all of God's faithful and obedient children were welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven, I must have overslept.

The silence echoed. That was the first thing I noticed when I woke up that Sunday morning in July. It wasn't quiet; it was silent. No doves perched on telephone lines singing into my open window, no neighborhood kids playing baseball or make-believe in the street while their dads mowed pristine green lawns, no old gospel records drifting up the stairs from the living room. Just this terrible, oppressive silence from all directions. I would have feared I had spontaneously gone deaf, if not for the sound of my own breathing—steady and strong. My own thoughts had never sounded so loud.

It was the peak of summer, and the heat was thick and heavy in the air. The box fan I always kept running in the corner was silent, but this in and of itself wasn't unusual. The thing was practically older than me and it had a tendency for silently crapping out in the middle of the night, leaving me to marinate in sweat-soaked sheets for hours on end. However, on this particular morning, its stillness unnerved me.

There was no comfort to be found in its familiar rhythmic ticking as the old metal blades rotated hot air around the room. I briefly considered simply going back to sleep; attempting to forget the strange silence of the morning, but the alarm clock perched

on the edge of my bedside table caught my eye. 9:47.

Morning service started at 9:00 sharp, which meant I had to be up by 8:00 and getting ready to leave the house by 8:45. I *never* slept this late. If I wasn't in the bathroom with the shower running by five-after, Mom was yelling through the door about how punctuality was a virtue. I couldn't believe they had allowed me to stay in bed this long, and if the lack of noise was anything to go by, had already left for church without me. It was ridiculously unlike them, so much so I began to wonder if I had mixed up the dates, if today was actually Saturday and my parents were just off on an early grocery run or having coffee with the Petersons down the street.

But there was my Sunday dress, freshly steamed and hanging from the closet door, set out on Saturday night like my Sunday best always is. This particular dress was new, something Mom had found on sale last week. It was a baby blue color, but I knew from experience that those soft pastels were simply hiding a starch-stiff collar that would scratch at my neck the whole service, my fingernails scratching until they drew blood and Dad swatted my hands to my lap.

My knowledge of the date safely confirmed, I slowly eased my way out of bed, feeling the soft tethers of sleep attempting to keep me there fall away. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and began my trek to the kitchen. I descended the stairs, the last two steps squeaking as they always did, but now in

the silence the sound of it caught me off guard, and I jumped slightly.

“Mom? Dad?” The only answer was the windchime hung over the back porch and the blinds banging against the window as a warm breeze blew through. I quickly scanned the kitchen, trying to see if Mom had left a note sitting on the counter or stuck to the fridge door the way she sometimes did when she had to run out unexpectedly. Alas, everything was in its normal place. The counters were clear, the fridge door held only magnets from tourist spots and a week-old grocery list, even the paper calendar by the door where Dad kept track of doctor’s appointments and school concerts looked no different than it had the night before. *They must have really left without me.* Oddly, the thought doesn’t make me particularly offended or upset, just simply puzzled.

Suddenly, I hear what sounds like a car door slamming from outside. I cross quickly to the front door and pull it open, thinking my parents have returned to explain this whole mess to me. Only, when I look outside, the street seems completely deserted. Every driveway, including my own, is empty of cars. Each house is quiet and still, no shadows moving in the windows or TVs casting colors onto the walls. Again, I became aware of the silence. No birds taking off from tree branches or rabbits fleeing under bushes. I felt for a moment as if I was walking through some sort of dream, if not for how clear and vivid everything felt. The sun still beat down on my head, the bruise on my thigh from bumping into the countertop a few days before still ached. It was only the silence that felt unreal and otherworldly.

I slowly push the door shut, then turn to lean my body weight against it. It’s only then that I wonder where the sound I heard came from. More blinds hitting the window frame? A back gate left open finally swinging shut in the breeze? Or was it just a trick played by my own mind; wishful thinking

manifested? I’d noticed, quietly and secretly, that my brain did this sometimes. Hearing sounds that aren’t there, seeing things from the corner of my eye that vanish once I turn my head. It doesn’t happen often. Really only in the weeks where it feels harder to get out of bed, where sleep is impossible to find at night and impossible to escape during the day. The weeks where I have no desire for food or people or anything other than sitting in bed and listening to the radio, feeling my eyes glaze over as the music washes over my ears without ever really entering them. I’d considered telling Mom about the hearing and the seeing, about my mind playing tricks on me. But she would already lose much of her patience with me when I was in these “moods”, as she called them, and I wouldn’t have wanted to rile her up anymore. I wouldn’t have even considered telling Dad, if there was anything he hated more than laziness, it was having to talk with his teenage daughter about her feelings.

Still leaning against the front door, feeling the cold handle dig into the flesh of my back, I resign myself to the fact that not only had I slept through my parents leaving for church without me, but the entire block leaving their houses, packing up their cars, and setting off to the center of town. Even the Lemleys three houses down, whose 5 year old son Sam absolutely despised church, and made his family’s Sunday morning a production the entire neighborhood was audience to. He would scream bloody murder the entire way down the driveway, and once they reached the car, he would contort his little body in an attempt to make it impossible for his parents to load him into his carseat. My mother had once compared him to someone going through an exorcism with the way his neck craned back and stretched his little legs as long as they would go. Despite his efforts, poor Sammy was always bested, and spent most Sunday mornings red-faced and glum, quietly sniffing through the sermon.

I began to wonder what my next course of

action should be. I could simply stay home; wait for service to end and for my parents to come back. But the thing was, in all my 18 years of life, I had never missed a single Sunday service. From the day I was christened into the church to that fateful Sunday, through nearly two decades of head colds, school deadlines, and near blizzards, I had found myself seated on those wooden pews, head bowed and hands clasped together. Even in the last few years, when doubts began to quietly creep their way into my mind. Wondering if it was fair of my kind and loving God to punish so many for seemingly so little, if it was just to demand so much of his own children. These thoughts always landed heavy in my chest and made acid rise in my throat, so I did my best to banish them away as far as they'd go, but they kept finding ways to creep back in. So, despite finding myself in an unprecedented situation, I decided to do what I had done every Sunday morning of my life. I showered, put on an absolute sensory nightmare of a dress and some sensible shoes, and I went to church.



The walk from my childhood home to God's Hope Fundamentalist Christian Church was short enough to be doable, but just long enough to be inconvenient. Yet its path was still familiar to me, one of those I could have walked with my eyes closed. Ogden, Nebraska was a tiny town, with little more than a small residential neighborhood, a shopping district, and a trio of schools enough for all ages, all surrounding the church building at its center. The spire at the roof of God's Hope was by far the tallest point in Ogden, and it could be seen from any other place in town. In elementary school, we were told that if we ever got lost in town, all we had to do was walk towards the cross at the top of the spire, and we'd find help. That so long as we could find our way to Ogden's house of God, we'd be okay. Those childhood lessons found their way into

my head again on that morning as I walked through the desolate streets.

I had never thought about it before, but it came to me then that everyone I knew seemed to operate on the same schedule. The whole town went to school and work at the same time, all left for church together, all did their shopping on Saturday afternoons. I had never been this alone, because I was always where everybody else was. Ogden was an organism: all its little pieces worked in perfect harmony to keep everything running smoothly. And here I was, about to waltz into service over an hour late and disrupt the whole thing. I could already imagine the judgment I would receive as I walked in, could already feel the gazes of the whole town stuck to me as I shamefully found my seat. I tried in vain to comfort myself, to convincingly think that the embarrassment would quickly pass and no one would make a fuss, but the dread seemed to be making a permanent home in the pit of my stomach.

In an attempt to distract myself, I focused on enjoying my walk, a rarely enjoyed simplicity. I had been finding it difficult to do things such as walking around the neighborhood just for the sake of it. I usually only left the house when I needed to, and then I was so focused on where I was headed I didn't even consider the process of getting there. But the walk felt surprisingly nice. The breeze felt cooler outside, and the sky was one of those shades of blue so brilliant you have to take notice of it, even though it's the same sky you've seen a million times. The grass and trees were still holding on to their springtime greenness, though were close to wilting and yellowing in the summer heat. I had never seen the streets this empty, it looked like an advertisement for some gated community. Everything was so picturesque, I was again struck at the dreamlike uncanniness of the whole morning. I would have been tempted to pinch myself if not for the dress collar already rubbing my neck raw and the

stiff shoes carving blisters into my heels.

Before I could fall too deeply down the rabbit hole of considering the strangeness of the situation, I rounded the corner leading up to the church building. As the building became clearer, my eyes were drawn to the cars that filled the parking lot. Just as it was every Sunday morning, the lot was completely full of every family vehicle in town. The parking lot itself was a design nightmare, and many a near collision had occurred over Ogden's entire population all attempting to pull out of it at once. Normally the sight of the lot was enough to make my mind feel heavy and crowded, just knowing the nightmare it turned every post-service car ride. I should have felt relief seeing it now, knowing that everyone was exactly where I thought they would be. I even caught sight of my family's hideous yellow Station Wagon, complete with the wooden cross I'd whittled in Girl Scouts hanging from the rearview mirror and my sixth-grade honor roll sticker slightly peeling off the bumper.

However the knowledge of my tardiness, along with the continued silence coming from the building, had me hesitating before the tall oak doors. No one would have ever called us a lively congregation, but usually Pastor Andrew's strong voice boomed through the entire building, bouncing off of its high ceilings and reaching even those who had popped outside to grab a forgotten wallet or console a fussy child. But that morning, God's Hope was just as silent as the rest of the town. The trepidation I had been valiantly pushing down all morning had returned with full force, and I realized I had absolutely no idea what was awaiting me behind the doors I had walked through every Sunday of my entire life. Finally, I force myself to pull open the doors. As always, they are heavier than I am expecting, and I have to strain to get them open all the way, the old hinges screaming at me as they go.

Empty. Entirely empty. The pulpit where Pastor Andrews overlooks us all, the bench where the old organ player sits, each and every old wooden pew. It was as if every person I knew, the hundreds of people in Ogden I had been surrounded by all my life, all met up at church then disappeared entirely. I had no idea what to make of the sight. I had never, in eighteen years, ever seen that room empty. It seemed totally unnatural, like roaming the empty school hallways after-hours. For a long moment I simply stood in the doorway, like if I waited long enough, everyone would suddenly pop out from where they had been hiding just out of view and congratulate themselves on a prank well pulled. No such thing happened.

Still in a stupor, I slowly start making my way up the aisle, my awful shoes squeaking on the shiny, waxed floors. I reach the front row of pews, the coveted spots we were never early enough to snag, and gingerly lower myself into one. I am suddenly struck by an old memory. A collection of scripture lines I had found years ago as a kid, one I had grown obsessed with and practically memorized, then in childhood fashion eventually moved on from and forgot completely. Something about it had filled my younger self with an awful combination of wonder and fear that made me feel nauseous, but I couldn't stop myself from reading. Mostly from the book of Thessalonians, it spoke of God descending from heaven, the cry of a trumpet, the dead in Christ rising to heaven. Father Andrews called it "the end of days", when God would return and bring all the good servants of Christ up to heaven with him. The other kids my age, few of them as there were, called it the rapture, and made jokes about how when we were all taken up to heaven, we'd be naked, and piles of our clothes would be stuck on earth with all the sinners and heathens.

There were no piles of clothes here. Just me, and the terrifying idea that the end of days has come,

and I alone have been left behind.

Despite the knowledge that I had ingrained in myself since adolescence, I still found myself devastated by the revelation that God has deemed me unworthy of redemption. Those doubts that had lived as whispers in the back of my mind returned, now as screams that boomed and echoed and made my head ache.

*I thought my God was kind, that He loved all his children. Have I not repented? Have I not earned forgiveness for my wrongdoings? Why is it that this is part of His eternal plan? To abandon so many before they were able to find His light? Lord, please guide me, for I do not understand your will.*

Above all else, loneliness hit me hard and fast. I recognized that my childhood had been an insular one, but I had never been truly alone in such a way. The community was small but deeply connected, and I was always paired with some adult or another. This loneliness was unprecedented and debilitating. I had never thought anything could be as agonizing as being truly alone seemed to feel. The silence no longer frightened me, it mocked me. It reminded me of everything I had lost and would never have again. No more dove songs, no more neighbor kid's playful yells.

It struck me then how utterly childish I felt. I wanted to cry. I wanted my Mom. I wanted to collapse to the floor and bang my fists while sobbing like poor Sam Lemley being forced into the car. I wanted to crawl into bed and cover my head with the blanket and pretend that everything was fine. I wanted to hope and to pray so hard and so well that all the scary and awful things would just go away on their own, or by some divine miracle. But I wasn't a child anymore, and there were no mothers to go crying to.

After what felt like hours of agonizing reflection on the unforgiving wood of the pew, I wiped the tears that had managed to escape my eyes, and

choked down the sobs that threatened to breach from my chest. I raised my head and was greeted with the crucifix that sat directly behind the pulpit. A detailed, life-sized behemoth of a thing, Christ's bloodied hands and agonized expression had haunted many of my childhood nightmares. As I grew older though, I began to look upon the image of the crucifix with a strange sort of admiration. I always found myself closer to Christ than I did to the God of the Old Testament. The holy Son was gentle and forgiving where the Father was brutal and unflinching. I still found myself puzzled as to how the two could be one and the same. Christ, our great redeemer, immortalized in his final moments, willingly faced the greatest sacrifice of death in order to redeem the human race for our sins. With his sacrifice, we were all capable of being saved. I think also of the great martyrs like John the Baptist and Joan of Arc, whose faith was so strong it bridged life and death.

Death was something I tried not to think about, but usually failed. Where most were comforted by the assurance of eternal peace, I found myself consumed with the possibility of eternal damnation. But at that moment, death meant something different. It meant, if nothing else, answers. It meant an end to noises and figures that vanish if I focus on them too hard. It meant looking the divine in the eye and finally seeing all that had been hidden by the comprehension of the living. My congregation must have understood this. They must have, in some way, felt the end of days coming, and were confident in what they'd find beyond it. I wonder how they knew I'd be left behind.



I've known since I was 8 years old that I'd one day burn in hell. The guilt that filled me every waking second of my life since I was old enough to name it proved I had done something sinful for which I must atone. But this, to be the only living

thing unworthy of forgiveness, seems unreasonable even to me. I don't know why God left me, and seemingly me alone, behind. Part of me wants to curse his name, to scream myself hoarse until he hears me and is forced to listen. Part of me understands that I probably deserve it. After all, how could someone omniscient make such a mistake?

I have spent my entire life being surrounded by godly people. People who didn't cheat or lie or steal, people who didn't so much as swear or engage in premarital sex. People who viewed every issue broadcasted on the news through the eyes of God, deciding for themselves which side was righteous and which was wicked. I knew that compared to them, I was broken, I was wrong. I have all kinds of thoughts I'm not supposed to have about sex and violence. I gossip and I judge. I try to be a good person, a godly person. I really do. I pick up litter and hold open doors for everyone and say please and thank you. But for as long as I can remember there has been a voice in the back of my head telling me that no matter how hard I try, the evil and sin that lives in the core of my very being will never go away. That I will never be truly good. When I listen close enough, that voice tends to sound like Pastor Andrews'.

I left the church suddenly, with a confidence I can't remember ever feeling. I had come up with a plan, and I felt I had nothing left to lose. I passed through the empty streets and the green lawns and

the blue sky without really seeing them. Where they had been so beautiful in the morning light, they now meant nothing to me. They were earthly tethers that I would soon no longer be tied to. When I reached home, the first thing I did was slip off my shoes. The awful things had dug so deep into my heels that there was blood soaked into the insoles. I didn't bother wiping it off the bottom of my feet as I crossed through the house, deep red footprints leading a path up the stairs and into my parents room. I slide open my father's closet door, pushing aside his good work shirts to reveal the gun locker, the one with my birthday as the code. He had taught me to shoot the pistol, passed down from his own father, only a few years prior after seeing a news segment about home invasion. I'm sure he never imagined the decades-old weapon being turned against his own daughter, but there's much I'm sure my father wasn't capable of imagining.

I don't know if God will forgive me for this. Taking violence against one's self is a sin, and I know that. I repent in advance. But I need to know. I need to know what evil I invoked that cursed me to this fate. And quite frankly, I am not capable of being alone in this way. I'll go out seeking the same things I have spent my entire life seeking, whether I recognized it or not. Redemption, forgiveness, understanding. I don't know if God can give me these things, but I'll choose to believe that he can. That's all faith is, I suppose.