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My feet dug into the sand in resistance, but it was too late. Days before, I had signed the baptism registration form declaring my true love for Jesus Christ and desire to be cleansed. It was mid-August, the week before my sophomore year of high school, and the sun sat high in the sky. I was sitting in front of the congregation, dressed in a white robe that drapes over my thin 15-year-old frame. There was no turning back.

Church-attendance wasn't enough. Prayers of fixed attractions always proved unprofitable. Summer camps spent poring over scriptures and tiny red letters about Sodom and Gomorrah left me more confused than before. Baptism seemed like the only resolution to the riddles I couldn't seem to solve.

There was a kind of mysticism I associated with baptism: a roiling soul washed and replenished with the simple acts of submersion and confession. From darkness to light, like the flip of a switch.

I first started to consider baptism that June. It was 2014 and I was on the annual mission's trip to Chicago with my youth group. We weren't allowed to have our own phones on the trip, but the conference leader made us well aware of the sinful lifestyles that were now being accepted by our crumbling country. Gay marriage had just been made legal in Illinois on our first morning in the city. This had triggered my youth pastor to pull me aside and address the rumors he had heard about me being gay.

My tongue fumbled and my brain searched for a reasonable excuse to tell him, but finally I confided to my youth pastor that I had "struggled with same sex attractions." The words "I'm gay" held a certain weight and confidence with it, one that I was not ready for at the time. "Oh, there is nothing wrong with that!" he responded. For a quick second, I believed that my internal wrestling was done. I thought that he understood that I could not alter these feelings I had. My face lit up and I'm thinking for the first time in years that there was a God who loved me like this. It was the answer I was looking for. My youth pastor took a drink of his coffee and said, "As long as you don't act on it, it's not a sin." My head was filled with noise. He went on to explain how he could easily understand how people could be born with attractions towards the same sex, but how this was simply God's way of calling these individuals towards a life of celibacy. And I believed him. I gave myself two options: God would either make me straight or I'd be single for the rest of my life. The week we returned home from the trip, I signed up for the next baptism service.

Washed

Water

Two months later, I was sitting on a wooden chair beside a small man-made pond placed conveniently behind my church. My sun-dried eyes grew tired as the service droned on. The pastors call someone's name, they splash into the pond, cross their arms and plug their nose as they confirm that they would like to be cleansed from their old ways, and boom. It was finished. And the cycle repeated itself. I didn't know if the sin of homosexuality had any exceptions, but I believed that I would emerge from the water, where my tormented feelings would remain. I would be straight and solidified in faith with the good God above.

At the end of the row of chairs, a deacon waved his hand at me, signaling that it was my turn. As I maneuvered my way toward the shore of the pond, I whispered one final prayer for God to fix me, to make this all go away. The head pastor, Pastor Dave, stood off to the side with a mic in hand and watched as I got into position. The deacon gave me the final signal and I waded my way into the murky water. I made eye contact with the girl who was just baptized as she sloshed her way out of the water, her white robe hanging heavy off of her. I gave her a pleading look that asks, "Did it work?" but she rushed past me towards her loved ones who were waiting for her with wide hugs and joyful cries.

I trekked deeper and deeper until the water was up to my chest. I stood between two of the youth pastors. I pinched my nostrils and placed my other hand across my body, grabbing my elbow, to make a cross. After a brief introduction Pastor Dave turned to me.

"Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?" he asked. I nodded.

"Then in obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and upon your profession of faith, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

The freezing water rushed over my face and filled my ears. Before I knew it, I was jerked up to the surface, leaving whatever doubts I still had left in the gloomy water. I emerged to cheers and hollers from the congregation, as if they could see something I couldn't. Was I straight now? Did my newfound heterosexual spirit need a few minutes to get adjusted to my physical body? I looked around bewildered, not sure of what I should have felt. A deacon helped me from the pond and handed me a towel as family and friends surrounded me with hugs and smiles.

Deep down, I knew it didn't work. The days following my baptism were brutal. I felt dirty with the realization that I was stuck with these attractions forever.

I wrote in a journal "I can't live like this... I don't think God would love me." The years following were worse. I treaded my way through therapy appointments and supernatural healing sessions, anything to help me understand why God chose me to bear this burden. Lo and behold, I never got an answer. Two years post-ritual, I received a letter from one of my pastors in the mail. He wrote that God had told him that I was going down a dangerous path and I was giving into the Devil's lies. Last October in the booth of a Culvers (chicken tender in-mouth), my mom and dad asked if I was gay, a question I knew they had been on the brink of asking for years. I used my chewing and swallowing time to decide if I should save us all the trouble and lie or finally deal with the truth. I can't remember my exact words, but my parents got the point that I wasn't denying their question. This led to an interrogation in which they worryingly voiced their concerns of my soul and faith. I tried to be confident in my answers and rebuttals, like I had seen in countless coming out videos. But I could hear my voice shake as I confessed that I didn't know what I believed, but that I knew I couldn't change these feelings.

I believed that maybe if I just kept saying that, the words would start to fall off my tongue, a little more naturally. I wasn't for sure, but I was willing to try.

The wrinkled letter from my pastor and my unopened Bible accumulate dust on a nightstand beside my bed. I tell myself that I'll start reading it again soon, that I just need time. It's been 5 years since I was baptized and 3 since I've regularly attended a church. Some people call this a normal reaction to spiritual trauma. I think of this time more as a purgatory: a gray space between reality and religion. I'm okay with this place for now and I'm in no rush to leave it. Two weeks ago, I went to my first gay bar with my friends to celebrate finishing another semester of school. We got in a van and made the hour trek to the city. It was everything I thought it would be: a home, a sanctuary, a church almost. One where Cary Rice Jepson was leading the choir. And the congregation substituted their wine for screwdrivers and vodka waters. In 1 Peter, the Bible talks about baptism being a symbol of resurrection, of life being brought back to a decaying body. From the dancefloor of a strange but beautiful place, I would echo that metaphor.

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