



JESUS RAVES

Jordan Kisner

FIVE PM AT THE SLOPPY TUNA and the Christians are party ready. The house music started bumping around 11 AM—because it is Saturday in Montauk, and summertime—but five o'clock is the golden hour, when everyone is sundrunk and loose and beautiful. Girls in cutoff shorts and bikini tops throw their arms around boys in Wayfarers, and sway. The dance floor is jammed and everything is spilling, the effect being that it seems to be raining PBR, and the mixture of sweat and sand and other people's beer feels gritty and intoxicating on the skin. The light comes through the crowd slantwise because the sun is setting just past the railing that separates the dance floor from the beach, and while the heat and the stick and the pressing in of bodies is uncomfortable, the visual is stunning: a jungle of skin and light and air thick with energy that is not quite *joie de vivre* and not quite a collective, ecstatic denial of mortality but something ineffable and in-between.

Pastor Parker Richard Green is standing near the entrance, by the railing where there's a view of the water, drinking a beer. He's 26 and almost aggressively healthy looking. Tawny of skin, blue of eye, blond of crew cut, he looks like he's straight from the manufacturer, a human prototype intended to indicate the correct proportion of biceps to shoulders. His brow is square and his jaw is square, and maybe even his whole head is kind of square, but he's pulling it off.

Next to him is Jessi Marquez, also blond, also tawny. Her face is familiar from stock photographs of sunkissed girls with highlights—wispy hair, round blue eyes, a smile to please—but mysteriously hard to place, as though the lens tilted. Her chin is soft, not angular; her

teeth are slightly crooked. On her wrist she has tattooed GRACE, and her right shoulder reads AND THEN SOME, because she wants to remember that God will provide everything you need . . . and then some.

Parker and Jessi have managed to locate the girl in the dancing mass who seems most out of control. She's coke thin, maybe heroin thin, and dazey and wild, jumping up and down and waving her stick arms. They're discreet about it—they stand near her group of friends on the dance floor and catch her as she bounces back and forth—and because they don't invite her to church directly, and Parker, in his board shorts and sleeveless T-shirt, is no one's vision of a pastor, she doesn't realize. If she knew she were speaking to a pastor and his bride-to-be, she might not be screaming into his ear, "I love you so fucking much I'm going to jizz all over your fucking face no really I am Imma come and rub it all over your fucking face."

"You're like my new favorite person," Jessi tells her. "You're like a composite of all our friends. We're gonna be best friends. Give me your number." Cokethin stops running in circles for a minute and does this, and then shouts, "Text me you have to text me right now so I have your number too."

"I am," Jessi says. "I am texting you. You're gonna come out with us tonight and then you're going to spend all day with us tomorrow." Tomorrow, Sunday.

"I'm gonna text you did you text me you have to text me."

"I *already* texted you. I texted you two minutes ago."

Cokethin accepts the challenge. "I texted you an *hour* ago."

"I texted you *yesterday*."

"I texted you years ago."

"I texted you before you were even born! I texted you when you were in your mother's womb!" With this Jessi wins. Cokethin screams for good measure and then announces, "I'm going now but I'll see you guys later because you're my new best friends kbye," and whirls away off the dance floor and into the road.

They stare after her and then laugh. Satisfied, Jessi leans over and says to Parker, "Now *that's* how you make a Christian."

Parker laughs and shrugs. "Yeah," he says. "In Montauk, that's pretty much how it works."

IT WAS FACEBOOK that delivered me to Liberty Church. A friend from college posted a video that caught my eye; it looked like a trailer for a Sundance short or a promotional video for a well-funded line of men's accessories. I clicked, and was met with sweeping shots of the New York City skyline and two beautiful faces: Paul and Andi Andrew. They could be J. Crew models, but they are pastors, and the video was the story of their church, of how they left ministry positions at one of the most powerful megachurches in the world, Hillsong Sydney, and moved to New York, where they knew no one, because God asked them to.

I closed the video and wrote my friend an email. "Tell me about your church?" He responded immediately, because he is a good friend, and invited me to come check out Liberty for myself, because he is a good evangelical.

I used to be a good evangelical, too. I was 9 when I "got saved" at Bible camp, which is the evangelical way of saying I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and asked him to come live in my heart forever. For five years after that I prayed all the time; I read the Bible and had earnest if one-sided conversations with Jesus about it; I tried to make other converts. And then, more or less suddenly when I was 14, I stopped believing. It was upsetting for a while, and then high school took over in the way that it does, and I forgot about it.

I had roughly the same interest in "getting right with God" as in readopting my other pubescent passions—scrunchies, the Backstreet Boys—but I tagged along to services the following Sunday anyway. No one seemed to mind when I refused to pray and sat off to the side taking notes. "It's just great that you're here!" they said, and, "Have you eaten? Come grab dinner with us later!"

When Paul and Andi founded Liberty in New York in 2010, they "planted," or established, not one church but two: Liberty Church Tribeca, which launched at Tribeca Cinemas in 2010 and subsequently moved to the Scholastic Center on Broadway; and Liberty Church Union Square, which meets Sunday nights at the Union Square Ballroom. The Tribeca and Union Square communities will be joined by Brooklyn and London outposts in 2014. By 2020, the Andrews plan to have ten churches spread across New York City. This is, for the most part, the evangelical model: constant acquisition of souls, constant efforts to "grow the kingdom of God." Hillsong, the Andrews' old church, boasts tens of thousands of members spread over twenty-nine congregations

worldwide. C3 Church, which just opened on North 3rd Street in Williamsburg and is one of Liberty's closest contemporaries (the pastors are friendly, though the churches aren't officially affiliated), has 300 churches all over the world and pulls in roughly 100,000 worshippers every Sunday. By 2020, C3 is aiming for a thousand churches and a weekly attendance of half a million.

The Andrews are fond of saying that while each new church they plant will adopt the culture of its neighborhood, they'll all carry "Liberty DNA." The phrase leapt out at me when I first heard it: tracing lineage in modern evangelicalism is a convoluted, exhausting project. From the strict fundamentalism of the early 20th century to the birth of Liberty Church there have been too many inheritances and rebellions to count. Mutations in identity, politics, and theory multiplied as fundamentalism gave way to the charismatic Pentecostalism that swept glossolalia across the South, inspired a movement toward rigorous Christian intellectualism in the Midwest, and spawned hundreds of other subdenominations: congregationalism, neo-evangelicalism, global evangelicalism; revivalist communes and the Jesus People and Young Life youth ministry; the rise of the Christian right and Falwell's Moral Majority and antiabortion rallies in the '80s; holy laughter revivals in the '90s; the progressive megachurches and the not-so-progressive megachurches; the Michele Bachmanns of the world and today's startlingly liberal emerging church movement.

Despite all the dizzying bifurcation, contemporary evangelicalism comprises a broad but basically recognizable continuum of inherited doctrine, and it was easy to identify Liberty's theology as more traditional than cutting edge, a near relation to the woodsy California Bible camp where I memorized John 3:16 and prayed for the unbaptized. The pastors at Liberty believe that the journey to both righteous living and eternal salvation begins when you accept Jesus into your heart and "give your life to God." They preach from the Scriptures. They tithe. They consider themselves disciples of Christ, and refer to themselves as warriors for God in a war against Satan, who is not a metaphor but a very real demon intent on destroying each of them personally.

They also believe that grace is real, that peace is real, that everyone is deserving of love and forgiveness—and that those things are real because of and through Jesus. Liberty has an active volunteer organization and gives lavishly to impoverished New Yorkers and orphanages in

Zimbabwe, regardless of religious or political affiliation, so that everyone can know God's goodness. They "place his name above cancer." They perform healings, witness to miracles.

But there the traditionalism ends. The first time I went to Liberty I thought I'd gotten lost and stumbled into a concert: the house band was blasting anthemic power ballads in advance of the service. There was an iPad on the pulpit. The congregants I met were photojournalists and DJs and brand developers and models. They drink liquor and go clubbing and take notes during sermons on their phones and Instagram the service, which is allowed because all the pastors are doing it too.

Evangelicals have been debating for years to what extent one can be both "in the world" and "of the world." How to balance holiness with worldliness? It's the pastors who primarily define a church's culture, and Liberty's pastors relish the collision of Christianity and a kind of youth-oriented hypermodernism. Liberty has a Pinterest account and a Twitter account. Andi wears leopard-print jeans and quotes Kanye in sermons. Her younger brother Parker, who serves as Union Square's community pastor, knows how to dougie. Steve Trayner, who co-pastors Tribeca with his wife Rhema, works in fashion and rocks a leather jacket and a side fade; Rhema, who has the glossy bangs and punk-polished styling of a downtown gallerist, interrupted the call to tithe to ask the front row if they were into her black nail polish.

"It's adorbs," Parker hollered back.

Last May, Liberty popped up in my Facebook newsfeed again. This time it was a photo of a beach at sunrise: thick, white foam hugging a shoreline that stretched to the horizon, a mirror of slick-wet sand reflecting abundant cloudscapes. The image was sepia toned and dreamy, as though someone had run it through the Walden filter on Instagram. Underneath, text in a bold sans serif read:

Liberty Church Montauk

You're Invited

Join us every Sunday beginning May 26 for . . .

THE WORLD'S FIRST POP-UP CHURCH

Near the bottom, in print so small I had to look twice to see it, there was an asterisk: "DJ will start spinning at 1 PM."

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FUNNY THINGS, LUCKY THINGS started happening in the twenty-four hours before I left to visit the Montauk pop-up, things that should have gone wrong but didn't. As soon as I realized I wouldn't be able to make the trip without a car, a car materialized. I couldn't afford a hotel room at peak season rates, but with hours to spare, just as I was resolving to sleep in the backseat of the car, a friend of a mother of an elementary school friend appeared, with a big house and a spare bedroom only ten minutes from the bar that houses Liberty's pop-up.

I drove up with Leah, a 23-year-old songwriter and freelance videographer I'd met through Liberty in the winter. We were introduced at a friend's apartment and within minutes I decided that she was one of the strangest, most luminous people I'd ever know. She's physically striking—a former model, she is tall and lanky with long, dark hair and eyes so green that every time they focus on you your breath catches. There's a glowiness particular to people whose hearts are, to quote Psalms, secure in the Lord, and she's got it. She moves through the world expecting adventure and goodness and beauty, and mostly the world obliges: she met Ellie Goulding's bass player at a coffee shop and, four hours later, was hanging out with the band backstage at a concert; she gave a ride to a friend and wound up dancing all night with strangers in a candlelit barn in the middle of the forest; she struck up a conversation in a hotel lobby and found herself in a transcontinental courtship with a famous rock star. (First, she asked him if he was a follower of Christ. He was.)

The drive offered the opportunity for her to catch me up on the latest, which was primarily that she was freaking out about whether the rock star was sufficiently into her and that she'd received the gift of the Holy Spirit after a trip to California. Leah was worried that the rock star might be too nervous to kiss her for fear of violating their shared morals. "And I'm not really that way! I mean, I am, but I'm also like . . . down to hang out and make out." She gave a giddy little laugh and reached over to touch my knee conspiratorially. "You know?"

As she was talking, a pair of headlights appeared out of the darkness in my rearview mirror and grew steadily until, within seconds, the car was right on top of us. The road was deserted and there was room to pass, but the driver followed us this way for more than a mile, the headlights boring menacingly through the rear windshield.

"Go around," I said under my breath. "I'm already doing 80 in a 55. Go around." The car inched closer and closer until, now afraid, I

nudged us up to 85 and then pulled away into the next lane. When the car pulled even with us, the lettering on its side became visible: NEW YORK HIGHWAY PATROL.

“Oh god.” I pumped the brake.

“What?”

“That’s a cop. The guy who’s been tailgating us is a cop. I’m thirty over the speed limit.”

But the state trooper pulled away from us and disappeared into the dark, and that was all. “Whoa.” Leah’s voice was soft. A stillness fell over the front seat. The road’s white median lines continued to disappear rhythmically under the car like before, but the air felt altered, uncanny.

“What *was* that?” I demanded of no one in particular, and then, “What is going on today?”

Leah, more accustomed to this sort of thing, was too polite to answer.

AT LEAH’S REQUEST, we headed straight to Ruschmeyer’s, where Parker and Jessi and a few other Liberty congregants were already partying. Ruschmeyer’s is one of Montauk’s scener nightlfe spots, and accordingly is both a breathtaking idyll and a high-octane frat hellscape. The ocean is so close you can see moonlight glint off the water from the bar area; outside, paper lanterns dangle over a wide garden, hung from branches so curved they form a leafy ceiling. When we arrived the air was skin temperature and perfumed by the blooms on the nearby bushes, and young women in microshorts and breezy polyblend blouses stood like stalks around the lamplit lawn in their stilettos.

Inside, gin and tonics were flying. It smelled like college. No one could move because the dance floor was packed to the walls with aggressive fun-having and the only recourse was to throw elbows or simply give up and hump your neighbor. The DJ never played more than a third of a song before cross-fading to another, so Nelly slid into Usher slid into Kanye without ever risking a second of boredom from the dancing throng. In the line outside Leah had been telling me she hates the way modern dating commodifies love. “It turns people into products for consumption. You just try one out, like you’d try out a vendor, until you get bored and then go shopping for another one.” The girls ahead of us in line looked surreptitiously over their bare shoulders.

Once we gained entrance, Leah was not two steps onto the dance floor when an enormous linebackerish guy in a collared shirt appeared from nowhere and snatched up her hand, whirling her around and pinning her ass to his hips. “What’s your name,” he shouted.

“Leah!” she obliged him, smiling and throwing her arms in the air and swaying her pelvis in time with his in a way that was both compliant and neglectful. He was getting what he wanted, but for her, he might as well have been a lamppost.

The music swelled and the collared shirt took the opportunity to lean in closer and bellow “WHERE ARE YOU STAYING.” Leah smiled the smile of a woman practiced at gentle demurral. “With friends,” she answered, and delicately disentangled herself.

The linebacker shrugged and scanned the crowd for another. He didn’t have to look long, and neither would Leah, had she been looking. Men appeared hoping to dance, ready to buy cocktails she would later give away; men appeared and appeared. One roughly shoved a plainer girl out of the way when she obstructed his view of Leah dancing. We found Jessi and Parker and the rest of the crew smack in the middle of the dance floor, unperturbed by the pressing in or the stickiness of the drinks spilling everywhere. This was their element: a crazy party and, looked at the right way, an opportunity to minister.

It was mid-July, the summer’s apogee, right in the middle of the pop-up’s life span. Jessi and Parker worried a little about the ebb and flow of things: the weekend of Jessi’s birthday a week earlier, they had nearly forty people at the Sunday service; other Sundays attendance dwindled and they redoubled their efforts to reach people on the beach and in the bars. Not long ago, Jessi had seen a girl sitting on one of the picnic benches outside Ruschmeyer’s crying, and went over to her. “It was actually this kind of big moment for me personally,” Jessi told me. Her voice, high and slightly grainy with a young girl’s wide vowels and upward lilt, amplified a little. “Because I’d been doing a lot of questioning about what we were doing out here, and having doubts. And I’d said to God that day, Show me You want me here, and I will be obedient. And I saw this girl sitting on a bench crying and God was like, There you go.” Jessi asked what was wrong.

Boy problems. The girl seemed receptive to Jessi’s consoling, but her friends circled, suspicious. Eventually one of them came out and asked: Who are you? Why are you being so nice? “I said, I just know that

God wants you to be happy. We all go through this stuff so He just gave me a heart of compassion for you.” The girls were touched; for Jessi, the moment was a victory and a confirmation.

This particular Friday there was more dancing than ministering. Leah swung her bangs from side to side, twerking and spinning and, when the attentions of ambient men became too intense, putting others in the center of attention. “Go Parker, go Parker,” she encouraged, stepping back to nudge Parker toward the middle of the tight circle of bodies. Parker stepped forward, shuffling and preening good-naturedly as if to say, “Let me show you how this is done.” He paused a moment to work the spotlight, waiting for the beat to drop, and crooked a come-here finger at Jessi, who advanced toward him, grinning. He took her hand and spun her slowly until her butt came to rest against his hips. She leaned forward in her low-cut maxi dress and as the beat dropped her body hit a ninety-degree angle, her back arching in time so that her backward gyrating met his forward thrusting with a kind of breathtaking symmetry. No one could look away. As the whoops and hollers rose above the music, they began to laugh.

JESSI MARQUEZ GOT SAVED at four in the morning on St. Patrick’s Day, 2009. She’d been clubbing. At the time she was clubbing a lot, working as a promoter, and things were falling apart: a breakup, a crappy apartment, a pervasive sense of hopelessness. “I was doing cocaine and had really bad depression and was taking Xanax and Adderall and all these prescription drugs. I came home and started bawling crying. You know the kind of crying where you can’t hold it in? Where you feel like your guts are actually going to come out? It was like that. I felt like I couldn’t cry hard enough.” She crawled into her bedroom and lay on her bed wailing. Suddenly, she started crying out to God, though she’d never done that before.

“God,” she said, “if you exist, I hate you. Why are these the cards that I was dealt? I hate my life. You have to take the pain away.” Almost immediately, silence came crashing over her bedroom and the noisy midtown street outside her window. The sirens went quiet and a stillness came into the room. Abruptly, she stopped crying. “I was sitting there and I was trying to make myself cry and nothing would come out. I started laughing. And I just went to sleep.”

She woke up the next morning thinking, “Well, if God is real and He has relationships with people, then that’s all I want.” She quit her job, sold all her things, and left on a yearlong missionary trip with no plans to return. At the end of the year she accepted a ministry job in Australia and was readying to move when she started having dreams. Every night for more than twenty days she was haunted by vivid dreams about New York. “I was waking up bawling crying and—this sounds really weird—I could feel the pain of the people I was dreaming about. God said to me in a dream, ‘Would you go? I came into your room and saved you, now will you go and save them?’”

First she said, emphatically, no. “I was terrified about coming back. I had found all this joy and hope and I remembered what my life had been like here.” But God kept asking, and eventually she said yes. She returned to New York, connected with Liberty Church, and founded FreelyBe, an event-planning company that pairs nightlife events with nonprofits that receive a portion of each event’s revenue. She started integrating: old life, new life; partying, God.

“If you look at Jesus’s life, he did missional Christianity,” Jessi said. “He went where people were broken. It’s so cheesy, but what would Jesus do? I really do feel that Jesus would, like, be hanging out with the homeless in Union Square.” She inclined her chin toward me and smiled a little lopsidedly. “I think Jesus would be hanging out in the clubs.”

THE LIBERTY KIDS spent most of Saturday on the beach, listening to the new OneRepublic album and getting tan. When I arrived, it was like I’d stumbled across a group of extras from *90210*: Jessi, voluptuous and tan in her bikini; Jessi’s friends Gracie and Monica, bleached blondes with curled and lacquered eyelashes; Leah, with her waist-length hair and constellation freckles; assorted sturdily built boyfriends. Parker padded around in bare feet, aviators, and a muscle tee. “You look like you belong in the Hamptons, Parker,” Gracie said. “You look rich.” It was true.

When Leah saw me, she jumped up to give me a hug. “Jordan! I had an epiphany last night. I want to tell you about it.”

I plunked my bag in the sand and started stripping off layers.

“So last night,” she continued, beaming with excitement, “I realized that I think I’m a feminist.”

Jessi and Gracie let out groans. “Ugh, Leah, don’t say that,” said Monica.

“Leah, ew,” Jessi shook her head. “You are not a feminist.” Leah laughed, enjoying her small rebellion. I glanced around at the expressions of distaste.

“OK,” I said, “what makes you think you’re a feminist?”

“Well last night I was thinking again about the thing with this guy—”

“With the *rock star*,” Jessi interrupted, grinning.

Leah smiled and shrugged. “Anyway, I started thinking about why guys never want to make me their girlfriend. What is it about me that makes guys want to be really good friends with me but not date me? And so I started thinking about, like, the things in men that are universally attractive. The things that everyone wants in a boyfriend, like a guy who will pay for everything, or a guy who wants to take care of you—”

“Wait,” I interrupted, “but not all girls want guys to take care of them.”

Her face went blank. “What?”

“I mean, not *all* girls want that stuff, like a guy who will . . .” I looked around at the others for confirmation, but they looked mystified. Jessi squinted skeptically.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, lots of the girls I went to college with don’t like it when a guy insists on paying for things, and they don’t want to be taken care of. They want to . . . take care of themselves.”

“Maybe some girls feel that way,” Leah suggested diplomatically, “but to me that suggests that maybe they have some other . . . bigger problem with men, you know?”

I suggested we get back to the epiphany. “Right!” she said. “Anyway, I was thinking about the things that are universally, or”—she nodded deferentially in my direction—“that *basically* everyone finds attractive about men. And then I was thinking about what those qualities are in women, like what are the qualities in a woman that make her attractive to men. And like, I don’t have any of them.”

I stared at her. This was ludicrous. “Qualities like what?”

“Well, I don’t have that impulse to nurture or take care of people. I hate cooking, and I don’t really care about, like, house stuff. I just want

to make art and, like, think about things, and travel and talk to people.” She giggled, as though finding herself ridiculous.

At this, Jessi propped herself up on her elbows and shook her head. “But Leah, God doesn’t call all of us to be the *same*. Imagine how stupid it would be if we were all perfect domestic homemakers who liked to cook. God calls us to be individuals. You are beautiful and you are wonderful and someone will totally love you just the way you are. Like, just be Leah.”

Gracie tipped her head back and hollered, “Let Leah be Leah!”

Parker sauntered over, looking concerned. “Where’s the boom box? Did we bring the boom box?”

Jessi rolled over. “Parker, Leah thinks she’s a feminist. Will you tell Leah she’s not a feminist?”

Parker’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh come on, Leah. I feel like that might be a little extreme.”

One of the blondes said, “I feel like that might be a little *weird*.”

There was a pause.

“Does anyone want to come with me to get the boom box?” asked Parker. When no one moved from her towel, he shrugged and plodded away across the sand.

THE PLAN HAD BEEN to barbecue, but by four o’clock the burgers were still frozen and wouldn’t grill up right, so Parker dumped the scalding coals in the sand and the group prepared to scatter. Everyone was tired and hungry and sandy and thirsty, but agreed to hit up the Sloppy Tuna for a drink or two, “make some friends,” and then go home to shower and regroup before the nighttime round.

“We haven’t done much outreach this weekend,” observed Gracie.

“I know,” Jessi lamented. “We haven’t handed out any flyers or anything.”

We lugged the cooler and the grill back across the sand and stood around awhile in the parking lot, checking Instagram and waiting for the truck that was coming to ferry everything back to the hotel. Tired of waiting, Leah and I went to the café on the corner, Coffee Tauk, which offered spirulina-enhanced lemonades, organic health bars, and air-conditioning to the visiting Manhattanites.

We sat and sighed, brushing sand off. Leah pushed her bangs from her forehead. “Wait, have I told you about 365 Epiphanies?” She swiped

to unlock her iPhone. “It’s this file that I keep on my phone because I’m always having these epiphanies, like all the time, and I never have time to sit down and really write about them. So I started this file where I keep track of them, one for every day of the year.”

We did the math to see which day we were on, somewhere near 200, and then she told me about her latest entry, which was also about the rock star. “I was praying about it and I just realized, maybe I’m looking at this on entirely the wrong scale. We’re so used to thinking about relationships in terms of whether or not our desires can be fulfilled. Like: Does he want me in the way that I want him? Will I get what I want? But there’s just a much bigger plan at work. Maybe the value we’re supposed to bring to each other’s lives is huge—maybe I’ll say something that will inspire his work, maybe we’re supposed to bring each other closer to God—but I can’t see our purpose for each other because I’m fixated on my own idea of how it’s supposed to be. And that’s just such a narrow way to think about love.”

I groped for a response.

“It would be easier except I have Eros for him.” she sighed.

AT LIBERTY’S REGULAR SERVICES in the city, the sermon always ends the same way: the call for souls. The congregation closes their eyes while the pastors speak to the unsaved. They address themselves to anyone new to Liberty or new to Christianity, anyone who may have walked away from religion, or anyone hurting and desperate to change his life. And to those people they offer an opportunity: to get right with God, to give their lives to Him *right then*. This is, the pastor says, the biggest decision of your entire life, the passage to new life and eternal life, and all you need to do is raise your hands. Come on, the pastor says, just raise your hands right where you’re sitting.

All over the room, members of Liberty’s operations team—event staff who handle practical details, like setting up and tracking how many souls Liberty saves—watch closely over the bowed heads. As the hands go up, hesitantly, one after the other, the ops team scans the crowd and tracks them, pointing to blind converters: There’s one. There’s another. They look around at each other urgently, catching souls, counting and recording as a group who and how many.

There are hands going up all over the room, the pastor says, and it is so good. Come on, put your hand up. Now we’re going to pray together,

and as you pray this, Jesus Christ is coming to live inside your heart. You are connected to God after you pray this prayer, and it all changes.

The hands come down and, one phrase at a time, the pastor feeds the words to the assembled:

Lord God, tonight, I give my life to you.

I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again in my place so that I could have everlasting life.

Tonight I say I want to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, placed in community and flourishing.

In Jesus' name:

Amen.

And then they open their eyes.

The leopard-print jeans have everything to do with this moment. As does the iPad glowing on the pulpit and the fonts on the projector overhead and the choice of a venue with an enormous, shiny bar in the lounge area. Because if Liberty's success, both worldly and otherworldly, rests on its ability to deliver people to God, to "grow His kingdom," then its most important task is to become the kind of club that people want to join.

This is why the pastors refuse flatly to talk politics. When asked about gay marriage, Paul Andrew replied that he wants Liberty to be known by what it's for, not against. Rhema Trayner told a congregation in the spring, "Doctrine is not a point of unity, and no one will ever have perfect theology. I don't come to church because we agree on every single issue. I come to church because we are family." I asked my friend Tim, a member of Liberty's house band since the earliest meetings, if it was really possible that a church that believes in healings and premarital abstinence has no agenda about abortion or contraception or homosexuality. Tim, who works for Reuters and also DJs at clubs all over downtown Manhattan, suggested gently that I was missing the point. "To be fair, I don't know," he said. "But I do know that the only person never welcome to come to Liberty is someone who is physically dangerous," he told me. "That's the only kind of person not allowed in the building."

It's all so likeable. A church designed to make people feel comfortable, included, and inspired. A church that wants to demonstrate

at every turn that following Jesus will expand your life, not restrict it. Come on, they say. Just raise your hand.

I had a friend who underwent a dramatic and—to me—baffling religious conversion the year we turned 21. His Jewish ancestry, dormant for so many years, was suddenly rioting forth, and in a matter of months he'd acquired a yarmulke and tzitzit, begun keeping strict kosher, and had withdrawn from what had been his social life. He started hanging around the local Chabad house. A rumor circulated that he'd attended a ritual slaughter of a goat in Williamsburg.

We'd had an intimate, tumultuous friendship, and his conversion was bewildering for both of us, like body snatching. It also imposed an expiration date: if he hewed to conservative Jewish imperatives about male-female interaction, he'd be unable to spend time alone with me, or hug me hello or touch me at all. The door was closing. For several months leading up to that moment, he would come to my room in the evenings bearing one or another kosher dessert and try to explain what was happening to him. Sometimes he wanted to talk about theology, like the role of sex in a Jewish marriage, or why conversion was completely irrelevant to Judaism. ("You are either one of God's chosen people or you are not. There's no use in trying to be one if you're not, or in trying to reject it if you are.") Sometimes he wanted to talk about what he was leaving behind.

These conversations were lonely, a series of loving but hopeless attempts to map a barrier we couldn't see and wouldn't overcome. There were flashes, though, of the old intimacy. One night he arrived with honey cake wrapped in brown paper napkins and settled on my floor. He rested his back against the door, and confessed that he was feeling conflicted. Soon he would have to choose between the two communities and philosophies of Judaism he'd become involved with: Chabad and conservative orthodoxy. The orthodoxy, he explained, was a little more intellectual, more theologically rigorous. It felt to him, for whatever reason, like the more legitimate choice, the serious choice. But Chabad had joy, zeal, animus. He felt like he *should* join the orthodoxy, but he looked at me with pleading eyes and said, "But at Chabad, Jordan, they dance. They *dance*."

That was the last thing he ever said to me that I truly, instinctively understood.

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SUNDAY MORNING CAME mild and hazy. At the secluded beach a half mile from the bar where Liberty's service would take place, there was a minor miracle at around half past ten: the sky broke without ever darkening, yielding fat droplets that seemed to come down one at a time in the sunshine. The shoreline was deserted, and when the rain stopped again the sun kept shining, no evidence but a gloss on the stones that anything had happened.

Church was slated for 11 AM, but when I arrived at 10:40, the bar—named, rather baptismally, WashOut—was empty. Plastic cups littered the tables and the ground, abandoned mid-rager the night before. An empty pizza box sat near the door. Outside, an aboveground swimming pool draped in PBR flags incubated in the sunshine, beer mixed with rainwater in pools on the bar, and melted daiquiri in the spinner turned to hard candy.

As I picked my way through the back deck looking for a clean, dry place to sit, a black sedan with tinted windows drove up. The driver rolled down his window and called across the parking lot, "Are you all open?"

"I don't work here."

"Oh." We considered each other for a moment.

"They don't look open," I offered, squinting at the back window, trying to discern the shadowy passenger sitting there, "but there's about to be a church here."

The driver thought he'd heard me wrong. I confirmed that this morning WashOut was a house of God, and he conferred briefly with his fare. They sped away.

Parker, Jessi, Leah, and a few others arrived in a shiny black Escalade a few minutes before 11 and began arranging chairs and pulling water from the bar tap into plastic cups for the visitors. They seemed subdued but composed, clutching coffees and freshly showered. Jessi was wearing glasses for the first time all weekend; Parker looked tired but clean and calm in flip-flops and a pressed chambray shirt.

Cokethin was a no-show. Actually, very few people came to claim their waters: only a Midwestern couple on vacation and a local woman whose enthusiasm for the pop-up caught everyone off guard with its intensity. "I've been praying for you," she confided, opening her eyes wide. "I'm just hoping and praying for a revival in Montauk because the Devil has really taken hold here. It's gotten bad in the last few years."

Parker nodded, his eyes straying to the pile of individually wrapped Rice Krispie Treats Jessi was laying out on the welcome table. “Well yeah. It’s been hard planting here. It’s hard ground.”

She seized on this. “The Devil doesn’t want you here. He wants to *kill and destroy* you. And me and everyone else.”

Three people represented Liberty Montauk’s smallest crop yet, but if Parker and Jessi were disappointed they didn’t show it. Parker talked cheerfully about wanting to do Saturday night bonfires next summer, maybe services on the beach. And on the horizon, more pop-ups: spring break in Florida.

But there were beginnings here. Parker’s housemates in Montauk, for example, were “basically all Christians now.”

“How many is that?” I asked.

“Four, since the beginning of summer,” Jessi said, and I turned to Parker.

“So that’s four guys in seven weeks who are Christians now?”

Parker’s head listed slowly to the left, the words appearing to stall in his mouth. “They’re all starting to discover their faith,” he said, diplomatically.

Once they determined that no one else was coming, everyone shuffled around and sat down in the two rows of wooden chairs Leah had arranged. Jessi opened with a prayer, quoting Matthew 18:20: *Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I with them.* “You call us to be light in the dark places, Lord God,” she added, “and we know you have such a heart for Montauk.”

After thanking her, Parker settled himself on a stool, hooked one flip-flopped foot behind a rung, and took a breath. “A while ago, I had a job transporting kids who were addicted to drugs to rehab,” he said. “We used to wake them up at three in the morning and be like, ‘Surprise! You’re going to rehab.’ I didn’t stay at that job very long because I got a knife pulled on me, and a gun one time, but actually I really liked the car rides with those kids. I’d talk to them all night.”

He’d been thinking about that job since he got to Montauk. Watching the way the visiting summer crowd partied, the way they drank and used drugs and hooked up, reminded him of something he realized on those car trips. “The deepest human desire is to be known completely and also loved. What people display, the partying, the craziness, is not

the problem. It's a symptom. The problem is that they feel they aren't loved."

A few people nodded. "That's good," Leah encouraged him softly.

Parker spoke without notes, but in his hand he held a Bible, the one his mother had given him to carry as he shuttled the addicted teens. He flipped it open to First Corinthians 13 and read aloud:

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. . . . Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. . . . For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

He set the book down and looked around at the few of us gathered there. Then he said quietly, "Think about a love that is so powerful, so immensely powerful that it does not even need to exert effort to create a universe, because He *is power*. Now think about that kind of power, the greatness of the power that put the stars in the sky and spoke light into being before the sun even was, and now think about that power focused into love for one human person. You. God valued you so immeasurably much that He sent a king to die for you. The King died for you. And He adores you."

The room was still. Our eyes were fixed on Parker, who seemed to be radiating both vulnerability and ease, as though these words were at once the most intimate and the most self-evident he'd ever spoken. Imagine the way God loves you, he told us. You are completely and totally known. He sees the depths of your heart and your silliest foibles and your most monstrous thoughts and your most generous acts, and He takes it all and He delights in you and loves you, totally and finally.

Right then, something happened that I wasn't expecting, which is that I remembered what it feels like to be a Christian, or what it felt like for me. There's a membrane between imagining God's love as a thought experiment and experiencing it as absolute reality, and if you slip across it the entire known universe breaks open and then reorders itself to be

more whole and beautiful than you thought was possible. I had forgotten. It's a tragedy you can't truly explain what this feels like, the safety and wonder and rest and joy and shattering humility and crazy peace, because when you feel it all you want is for everyone else to feel it too. It's like you've been let in on the most magnificent secret and all you want is to bring everyone else along, because if everyone knew the secret it could solve every problem in the world. This is what Christians call, in a terrific understatement, "the Good News." This is also called grace. Sitting in that converted bar, I got maybe seven seconds of a vivid memory of grace, and the echo alone was enough to remember why people who know the Good News do wild things to spread it: they're filled up with a love so great it demands to be given away.

When the world clicked back into its familiar alignment, the bar actually looked different. The light was coming in softer, and the room glowed hopeful and clean. Parker was talking about miracles.

As soon as the sermon ended, Jessi and the other girls dumped the untouched waters in garbage bins and pecked at their iPhones. Everyone decided on burritos for lunch. The bar resolved, slowly, back into a bar. Before long, the Christians climbed back into their enormous truck and headed toward the coast. +

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