

Cold Lung

Being a kid was the best, thought Katherine. People only say meaningless stuff to you, and they never take you seriously. They might share a little bit, but overall they just don't pay attention to the fact that you notice things. Katherine sat on the grass in her church clothes, thinking about that.

Her church, Centerville Baptist, was tin on the outside with concrete floors on the inside. It was always too cold inside. The kids had to shiver until they were old enough to pick out their own clothes on Sunday morning. Katherine looked in through the glass doors and saw Mabel dancing around inside the church building. She danced past the metal folding chairs that they used for Wednesday night classes, and she danced past the gray walls that watched as the preacher shouted from behind the pulpit. Katherine did not understand why the congregation acted sad about things at church. They were the same lessons over and over, but they were simple. The congregation had heard them before. She did not think they needed to be repeated. It seemed like everyone only came back here to keep getting sad about those things.

She wondered if her parents knew how smart she really was, that she knew their marriage was failing and that her father would be the one to swap churches once they finally split up. Mom was nice, but she just could not tolerate differences. Dad didn't understand that, but then he never had many strong opinions. Sometimes that was bad too. Katherine's parents could get so confused, but nothing seemed that complicated to her. If they could make it work before, then why couldn't they fix it now? Anyway, she never saw them together anymore, so what were a few miles between houses going to change?

Mabel trotted up and sat beside her, out of breath from running around, being chased by Thomas Hensley's muddy fingers. He came up to her and held them out threateningly with an evil grin on his face.

“I’m on base,” Mabel said to him. “You can’t touch me now. You’ll have to wait ‘til I run away again.”

“You can’t say that,” he said. “What’s base?”

“Katherine’s base!” she said, eliciting a wrinkled, annoyed face from Thomas as he walked away to go torment someone else. This small development meant that Katherine would have to follow Mabel around as protection until the Hensley family left to go home. She did not mind it though; she had been looking after Mabel for a while now.

Katherine thought back to when she had first met Mabel. It was winter then, and if you ran around outside next to the church, then your lungs started burning with all the cold that got inside them. It was strange how when things get really cold, they start to burn.

Mabel and Katherine were outside, running around in the chilly air, pretending to be superheroes. Mabel always wanted to be Bubbles from the Powerpuff Girls TV show, and Katherine would pretend to be Blossom. This system worked well except that nobody was around to complete their trio by playing as Buttercup. They originally had asked Mabel’s cousin, Mary Grace, to play with them, but she was so bossy when she played that they eventually gave up asking her, and pretended instead that Buttercup was either sick with influenza or more recently, deceased.

Thomas Hensley was sick that day. He always got sick when winter came around. He’d stand behind the glass door, shivering from the cold that crept in underneath and chilled his toes. But he could not look away, because being trapped inside with all the grown-ups was the worst. Katherine knew he had a difficult time. While everyone else discovered how to get along all year, he only had nine months out of each year in which to do it.

Mabel clung to Katherine’s arm every time Thomas looked over at her from his game of four-square. Once they were safely inside, he would not be able to get them with the mud. Katherine felt sorry for Thomas. She knew he just wanted attention, but he could just be nice for a change. She waited patiently for the day it got cold again, so that Mabel’s little fingers would not always be hanging onto her.

The weather was sure to get colder soon. Sunday School had been over for a while, and the children were all getting called in for the morning service.

“Katherine, look!” Mabel shouted, running ahead and into the sanctuary. “There’s a bird.” She pointed up into the high open air of the room. Katherine scanned the ceiling and finally spotted the small creature flapping about from perch to perch among the many ledges.

First to the little ledges that held the dim lights far above where they could light anybody’s way. Then to the large cross that stood over the preacher as he preached against sin. Then to the hanging projector that put the words up on the wall for the worship time on Sunday services and Wednesday nights.

Katherine and Mabel wondered what they should name it. Thomas Hensley was the one who always came up with names, so they asked him. He said they could name the bird Jesus because he was always watching over them in church. That didn’t go over well once the grown-ups heard about it. They made them change it to something else, and Thomas suggested naming it Abel instead, and the two girls went along with it. But after the first name was gone, the kids all called the bird different names.

That night, she lay in her bed, thinking about Thomas and hoping he would get better. And then her parents’ voices echoed from the kitchen.

“Calm down,” Arthur said. “They can name it what they like. It’s just a bird.”

“It’s disrespectful,” Charlotte said. “It’s not a big deal anyway, I don’t know why you care so much.”

“I care because Thomas came up with the name. If it’s not a big deal then why can’t they let him have some fun while he has the chance?”

Charlotte’s voice rose. “You just have to go against everything Jason says because he’s the preacher.”

“Oh, stop,” Arthur said. “You know I don’t have any problem with Jason.”

“You could have fooled me. You’re always trying to undermine everyone above you.”

“He’s not above me. You just think that he is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Why are you always defending him?”

“God,” Charlotte whispered. “You’re so suffocating.”

Katherine covered her head with the blankets and tried to go to sleep.

In the following days, the weather got colder. School had been uneventful, but Thomas Hensley was absent on Thursday and Friday. Katherine wondered about him again. She hoped he was okay. Her father stayed out of the house. She knew that he did that to avoid her mother. Sometimes Katherine wished she could go with him.

On Friday afternoon, she told her mother, “Thomas wasn’t at school today.”

“Don’t worry sweetie. I’m sure he’s fine,” her mother said.

“He wasn’t there yesterday too.”

Her mother was silent for a moment. “He’s fine.”

Katherine knew that her mother was lying. “Okay,” she said, putting her hands into her jacket pockets. “It’s getting cold out. Do you think school might get cancelled soon?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. I hope so.”

On Sunday morning, Katherine rushed past the crowd in the foyer with Mabel. Nobody had gone into the sanctuary yet, probably. Katherine liked going in first because it seemed so much bigger and prettier without the crowd. The crowd changed every Sunday: the guests, the clothes. Too different all the time. She wanted to see Abel flying around. If there wasn’t a crowd, she could hear him chirp. She would not be able to hear him during the services either, even though the crowd got quiet, because the music was loud and then the preacher was loud. Abel flew around a bit, hiding near the warm lights on the little ledges close the ceiling. The crowd began to shuffle in, and she could not make out his chirps any longer.

She sat in the pew again and listened to Brother Jason while younger kids shifted restlessly and parents shushed them every few seconds. The message tonight was on the existence of hell. But

they were all at church, so Katherine wondered why anyone there would be unsure about hell. They obviously believed in heaven, and she was sure that really mean people didn't get to go there. She didn't agree with all the stuff about good people getting sent to hell for not hearing about Jesus. They couldn't help that, after all. Brother Jason told everyone that it was just God's plan for them to be damned, and that word wasn't bad when you used it at church. She wondered what other words weren't bad when you used them at church.

The preacher talked about the fire, and how it didn't consume anything or give off light. Katherine thought about fire and how she heard in school that people usually died from suffocating, not from getting burnt. You just fell asleep. Except in hell you weren't supposed to suffocate; you were supposed to get burned. Everyone said that Jesus had died from suffocating too, and that was a connection between him and people who were in fires, but not between him and people who didn't get to go to heaven.

The preacher said something about children who died before they got saved. That was the word they used, saved. The air was really stiff-feeling for a few seconds when he mentioned that. Even the little kids were quiet until the preacher made it clear that the Bible didn't say anything about it. Brother Jason ended with some nice words about how nice heaven would be and how life would be good one day when everyone got there.

The service ended with the hymn "I'll Fly Away," and Katherine went to see Mabel.

She heard her father's heavy black boots thumping on the hallway floor. "Hey, kiddo," he said, leaning into her room. "I need to run to the store before church. You want to go with me?"

He helped her button up her heavy brown coat later that night, the one that made her look like a teddy bear. She mentioned Thomas again. "The Hensleys weren't there today."

"Well, you know that Thomas isn't very healthy."

"I know. Is he worse?"

"Yes, he just has some trouble with his lungs, but he'll be okay," he

said, and Katherine knew Charlotte was listening and that she didn't like that Arthur was telling her this.

Walking around the store, holding her father's hand, Katherine thought again about Thomas's condition. She knew that God had to send him to heaven. But he was young, and Brother Jason said that the Bible did not say anything about kids who were not saved yet. Thomas could be annoying, but he was still good. And God was supposed to be good, and loving. She knew God couldn't be cold like that.

Katherine walked around the front row of pews and looked down. Her throat tightened at what she saw. Lying on the red carpet in front of the pulpit was Abel. A rush of pressure hit her forehead and throat as she tried not to cry. It was odd—she knew it was just a bird.

I want to cry about Abel, and I'm allowed to, she thought, feeling a tear roll down her cheek. She knew she had to move the bird. *You have to stop crying, Katherine,* she told herself.

She couldn't be troubled with these stupid eight-year-old emotions at the moment. She rushed over to Abel's side, stifling her tears. She needed to move the bird before the other kids found out. Mabel couldn't know. Her hands moved down slowly and scooped up the bird. It was so fragile and light, a creature designed to be almost weightless. Hollow bones, she thought, but its lungs were empty. It was awful, this little free animal dying here, having no breath and no warmth, and nobody even around to wish it well.

Except birds don't have souls, or so she had heard. Abel was gone. She'd never see him again. The thought brought on a fresh wave of sorrow. "Stop it," she whispered to herself.

After putting Abel in the tall grass behind the church, she went back to find her parents. Everyone was talking mutedly in the lobby, and her mother and the other ladies got quiet when she approached. "What is it, sweetie?" her mother asked.

"What's going on?" Katherine asked. They couldn't be talking about the bird.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you later. Go play for now."

Katherine glanced at Mabel, who was being hugged by her mother. She gave Katherine a confused look. Service was delayed,

but her mother would not tell her why. Everyone was quiet except the kids, and the preacher didn't talk long. She didn't pay much attention to him anyway.

"Abel died today," she told Charlotte as they left, passing by some children running around, playing together.

"Oh," Charlotte replied. "Was that your bird?"

"Yes. Abel."

"He probably got too cold."

"It is pretty cold in there," Katherine said, unsure.

Her mother smiled down at her sympathetically. "That's right, sweetie. When animals get too cold, they just pass out before they die. It's just like falling asleep."

"Like suffocating?"