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The Lies of Saints

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You can enter God's Kingdom
only through the narrow gate.
The highway to hell is broad,
and its gate is wide for the many
who choose the easy way.
But the gateway to life is small,
and the road is narrow,
and only a few ever find it.

Matthew 7:13-14

PROLOGUE

A shaft of moonlight from the gymnasium's upper window speared the solitary figure of Anson Hanoway Saffron and threw onto the hardwood floor the sharp shadow of the cross that held him captive.

Anson Hanoway Saffron was seventeen, a first-year cadet at the Citadel, South Carolina's famed military college. He had entered the hallowed school in September with the burden of expectations that went with his name and heritage. As a further detriment, he was slim and quiet and gentle and sensitive—a terrible combination of traits for anyone to bring into a military training institute.

He'd endured five months, ten days, and roughly twelve hours at the Citadel since he'd waved good-bye to his mother at the gates and first stepped onto the grounds. The last half

hour of his time at the Citadel had been the most brutal . . . leading to this, a mock crucifixion.

He'd been placed on a chair directly below the basketball net, at the far end of the dark gymnasium. His wrists were held to the crossbeam not by spikes, but by duct tape. His feet supported his weight, for the upright beam ended just above his ankles. Although his feet were not bound to the cross, a rope knotted around his neck forced him to stand motionless on the chair. Above him, the rope was tied to the base of the metal basketball hoop, with enough slack that a small length of it rested on his left shoulder like the caress of a snake.

He wore only a pair of boxers and the duct tape across his mouth to keep him from crying for help. The moonlight showed his adolescent skin was smooth of hair. But not of smears of green and red paint.

In front of the chair, in the darkness beneath that shaft of moonlight, stood four of the Citadel's finest seniors. Their faces were hidden by black balaclava masks, and their squared shoulders showed the satisfaction of a job well done.

To place him on the chair, the four seniors had worked silently and smoothly, like a perfectly planned military maneuver. Their silence had been broken only by the slapping of their soft-heeled shoes against the hardwood of the gymnasium floor and by the plopping of excess paint that slid off the brushes onto the boy's body and then onto the floor.

As the seniors allowed themselves their brief satisfaction, a distant rattle came from the boiler-room pipes. When the rattle ended, the only other clear sound in the gymnasium

came from Anson Hanoway Saffron, as the air of his rapid breaths whistled faintly through his nostrils.

"It's not too late," whispered one of the four. "You know what we want from you. Just nod. That's all it will take. And we'll let you down."

"One simple nod," a second one said. "And we'll make sure that no senior touches you."

"Nothing like this will ever happen to you again," the third one whispered. "You'll be one of us."

"We'll become your protectors," the last one added. "Just nod. That's all we need from you. Then we'll understand you've made the right choice."

Anson Hanoway Saffron stared straight ahead. Tears began to trickle down his cheeks like tiny balls of mercury in the silver of the moonlight.

"That's it, then," the first cadet said. "We have our answer."

Each of the fine senior cadets gave Anson Hanoway Saffron a mock salute. Then, as one man, the four seniors turned and marched away in precise formation.

Anson knew who they were; the masks merely ensured he couldn't positively identify them to the authorities. Nor would he be able to tell anyone he had recognized any by their voices. In the time that it had taken to remove him from his dormitory room and prepare him like this beneath the net, none of the four seniors had spoken to the freshman in more than a whisper.

When they'd first burst through his door and surprised him on his knees at prayer beside his bed, they'd used whispers to tell him what they were going to do and why. Unless he gave them what they wanted.

Now as they left him alone to hang from the cross in silence, the seniors had no need to whisper again. They knew soon enough that their victim would understand how much they hated him. And all he stood for.

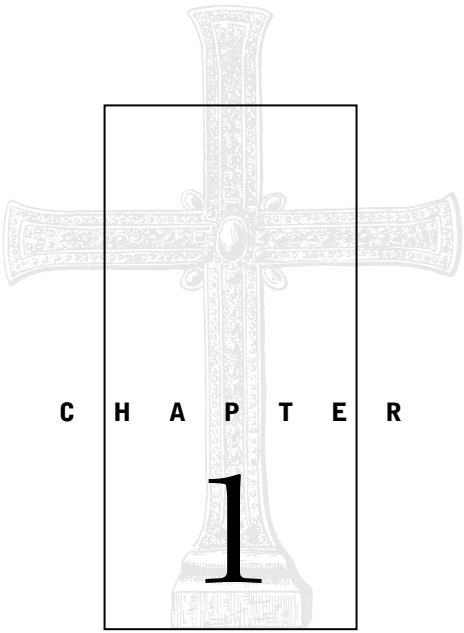
Anson Hanoway Saffron discovered how well they had done their work. He was unable to move from the chair.

If he tried to jump, the rope tied around his neck was too short for him to reach the floor with his feet. Nor, with his hands taped to the crossbeam, could he remove the rope around his neck.

That meant he would have to remain standing on the chair the entire night, waiting for the gymnasium door to open in the morning. Waiting for parents to stream in for the first basketball game of the weekend's tournament.

That left him the other choice.

To avoid the humiliation, he could kick the chair out from underneath him and let them find him hanging on his cross, his eyes deadened of any soul.



I was born Nicholas Thomas Barrett, and I grew up in an antebellum mansion in the world south of Broad Street, an east-west street that separates the barbarians north of it from Charleston's aristocracy, including my family of fifth-generation Charlestonians.

I, however, did not have a privileged childhood.

My mother, a waitress in a diner who looked like she had stepped out of an old-fashioned Coca-Cola poster, married into this elite family much to their disapproval. This disapproval was never spoken, but day after day she faced the menace of their silence. To them, she finally proved their judgment correct when I was born just after the beginning of the Vietnam War, long after nine months had passed since the departure of her husband for training and the early stages of the war, where he would die as a military hero.

Naturally, their disdain spilled over onto me, born as I was in and of sin. My situation worsened when, to all appearances, my mother abandoned me for reasons I would not learn until decades later upon my return to Charleston after a long exile. With her departure in the summer of my tenth birthday, I essentially became an orphan—an unwelcome responsibility for my dead father's brother and his family, a reminder of my mother's lack of character, and an affront to the memory of the war hero she'd betrayed. I was treated accordingly, so I lived within that menace of silence, an insidious punishment far worse than the occasional beating that I suffered. And, although I lived among the extremely wealthy, not even proverbial crumbs of bread were permitted to fall my way from the family meals; the only pocket money I held was money I earned.

During my early teens, I was desperate to escape as often as possible the mansion that was my prison then and, ironically, is now my home. In those years, I would walk north of Broad, lie about my name, and work any odd job that would allow me to squirrel away enough money to eventually purchase a replacement bicycle for the one that my uncle had taken away from me in the summer my mother disappeared. This new bicycle made it easier to continue to go north of Broad in search of odd jobs. There was a spot near the yacht club where I chained and locked that bicycle every day before walking the last few blocks to the Barrett mansion. I knew well that if I ever appeared at the mansion with the bicycle, it would have raised too many questions.

The work to earn it and the subterfuge to keep it, however, were well compensated by the freedom the heavy,

fat-tired Schwinn gave me. When I wasn't working, I roamed all of the boroughs of old Charleston.

I was often drawn to the square bungalows of the neighborhood near the Citadel. The Citadel is the almost sacred military school whose cadets fired the first shots of the Civil War. It is a place where generation upon generation of Charleston's elite have sent their sons to prove themselves. Those who graduate form an unspoken private club impervious to the opinion of the rest of the world.

Looking back, I believe I was drawn to the institution by longing and hatred. Longing first, because I knew the Citadel was destiny for many of the boys south of Broad, including my cousin Pendleton, older than me and living in the mansion with his father and mother, while I was the ignored outsider at the family meals. It seemed to me that becoming a Citadel graduate would give me respect in Charleston.

Yet often I hated it more passionately than I longed for it to become part of my own destiny. In my early years I'd believed the soldier my mother had married was indeed my father, and because of it had swelled with pride whenever the Citadel was mentioned. But the summer my mother left was also the summer I discovered I was illegitimate, and I would not discover for decades who had fathered me. Along with all my cherished misconceptions about my identity went the sense of ownership, the Citadel pride, swept away with nearly everything else that was important to me.

Since it was made clear to me that I, unlike Pendleton, would never attend the Citadel, it was a defense mechanism to hate the two Citadel possessions I had lost—pride in the school of a father and a chance to be part of the tradition myself.

During the afternoons, however, when the longing for it was greater than my hatred, I would drift on my Schwinn through the neighborhoods around the Citadel.

I envied the seemingly happy families I found there, their contentment worth far more than the isolated, cold hatred that filled the spectacular Barrett mansion, within easy riding distance but another world away. On those quiet streets, I would see mothers pushing carriages or strollers. I often watched, from a distance, other boys my age so engaged in games of street baseball that they didn't notice my yearning to be invited into their unrehearsed joy. I would see, too, men in sleeveless undershirts sitting on the porches, sweating out the late-afternoon heat with bottles of Dr. Pepper in their hands. I envied, too, that liberty. Where I grew up, sweat or sleeveless undershirts in public, or consumption of a beverage not served in a glass by a black maid was each considered verging on scandalous—the combination of all three was unthinkable. And cutting into this neighborhood was Hampton Park, for all practical purposes an extension of the Citadel. It was acres and acres of quiet paths among giant oaks, manicured lawns, and serene ponds. The same place, I found out later, that drew another young man the way the water of the ponds drew deer on foggy mornings.

Anson Hanoway Saffron.

I was just past forty years of age when Anson Hanoway Saffron first spoke to me. This was long after his death, but his poignant words crossed time and space to reach me. This, I believe, is one

of the greatest human accomplishments. That the abstract symbols of the alphabet can construct words that form pictures, and that these pictures made of words can speak across centuries and miles. So that when, for example, I read *The Jewish Wars,* the voice of Josephus speaks to me as plainly as if he and I were in the same room, and I relive with him the great tragedies of one of the most tumultuous decades in world history.

Anson Hanoway Saffron's diary, of course, held none of the importance to the rest of the world of any the great narrators throughout the centuries, nor did he write a work that would be published or celebrated. He wrote to please himself, in a journal. This same journal—a leather-bound diary of thick, parchment pages, with precise handwriting showing the whirls and blobs of a fountain pen—eventually reached me. It was easy to guess that his gentle, romanticized view of the world included the need to avoid something as modern and convenient as a ballpoint. Although close to thirty years had passed since he'd written his diary entries, his obvious bewilderment and innocence and yearning were not lessened by the passage of time.

This was his journal entry for December 15. At fifteen, he would enter the Citadel in September of the following year, and so would begin the chain of events that would lead to his death.

I am human, and I know I will die.

These are the words that keep running through my head as I lie awake at night.

I am human, and I know I will die.

Isn't that a curse? I don't think animals live with the knowledge that someday they'll die. I bet they just exist in each moment, chasing food or running away from being food for other animals, never aware that each day that passes is another day closer to their deaths.

I am human. I will die.

Maybe that's why people do animal things—so they can block that out of their heads. I see my parents and their friends and how they act. Eat and drink and be merry, for tomorrow is another day to eat and drink and be merry. Who can think about dying when they're busy eating and drinking and being merry?

But it takes courage not to live that way. If I could pray, that's what I would ask for. Courage to hope and dream and love someone even though I know that death will someday take them away from me.

I am human, and I know I will die. But I will face death with courage. Is that how I can define myself if I don't want to be Anson Hanoway Saffron, the son of the father? The boy who is supposed to follow the family's traditions?

I feel so alone. Maybe that's what it means to be human. To feel separated and alone. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to meet the right girl and

have her fall in love with me as much as I fall in love with her. Then I realize that no matter how close I might get to her, and no matter how close she might get to me, and no matter how much we love each other forever, I can't become part of her and she can't become part of me. We will still be separate humans. Always. All we can be is two alone people together. And that maybe will ease the aloneness, but each of us will still be alone.

I am human, and I know I will die. I will die alone.

Even if I have a wife and lots of kids and grandkids and even if they are gathered at my bed as I draw my last breath, I will still be alone, going by myself to the other side. Whatever that is. Wherever that is.

I guess then I will find out if I have a soul.

If I don't, what is there to question? I should just be Anson Hanoway Saffron, the son of his father. And I should eat, drink, and be merry like him and have a boy to carry on the family name, to become the son of his father and carry on the family traditions.

But what if I do have a soul? Why? How? Maybe that's the purpose of a human. To search for those answers.

I am human. I will die.

I doubt as he wrote those words that Anson Hanoway Saffron expected to die because of the Citadel. But then how many of us have the luxury of seeing the approach of our own death, the luxury of enough warning to decide the important matters of why we have a soul and where it will go?

He, at least, was asking the questions that each of us must.

I was thirteen years old in the fall that Anson Hanoway Saffron entered the Citadel.

Although I would have recognized his name—south of Broad is essentially a cloistered community—I did not know him by acquaintance. Did not know yet that he and I had solitude in common, each for our different reasons. Did not know yet his fondness for the open spaces and generous quiet of Hampton Park because of his desperate need for seclusion.

Did not know yet about his one fateful evening there.

Because old Charleston seems immune to time, that evening would have been the same as any early September evening now, with the air just before sunset so calm and still that the cadences from the Citadel vibrated from a distance; the long shadows so sharp and the light so tinged with substance that it was like walking into a landscape painting.

Perhaps that evening, on the bicycle I took pride in oiling so well that it was a silent ghost slipping through the lives of others, I passed Anson Hanoway Saffron. Maybe he was deep in his own thoughts as he walked down one of the park's many

paths, unaware of how that night would intersect with my life so many years later.

I was fortunate; my evening in the park changed nothing in my adolescent life.

For Anson Hanoway Saffron, however, that beautiful September night in Hampton Park would haunt and mark him, just as surely as his horrific night on the cross in the Citadel's gymnasium would alter and destroy the lives of too many others around him.

And then, much later, mark mine too.