

A Certain Way Of Knowing

At campmeeting, before dawn, a young boy confronts doubt, sexuality, death, and affirmation.

by Chip Cassano

THE BOY SAT ON A SMALL FOLDING STOOL IN THE doorway of the tent, staring into the warm summer darkness. Reaching up, he pressed his hands against the thick roll of the drawn door flaps. The heavy canvas yielded to his touch, and he drew his hands away, restless. A tall boy, still awkward in his new height, he was continually startled when, reaching up, he found his fingertips brushing a low ceiling, or his hands catching the upper edge of a doorjamb. His father had died three years before, and it came to the boy, suddenly, that he was now taller, by several inches, than his father had been. The realization unsettled him.

The death of his father seemed, to the boy, to have been much more than the loss of a parent. Together, father and mother had formed a bulwark of certainty—of beliefs held, and truths absolute. With his father's death, the

bulwark crumbled, and God and man, life and death, were new and vast uncertainties.

Standing up, the boy ducked under the flaps and out into the summer night. The murmur of scattered conversations ran like an undercurrent below the tiny shrill of insects and the peeping of frogs. Fireflies blinked in slow punctuation. The old, canvas military tents were arranged in careful rows to his left and right, and, though hidden from view, before and behind him as well. He wondered if this small rigidity was a comfort to these Adventists, as he knew them. The warm nights and brassy blue skies of early July seemed to gentle them, somehow, allowing them to come together in peace and fellowship. For him, the effect was different; here, at camp meeting, in a field beside a quiet lake, right seemed less clear, truth less certain. Freed from the confines of severe chapels and stern sanctuaries, the very words of the sermons seemed to drift away, as insubstantial as dandelion fluff. Here, the boy's restlessness only grew.

Hearing footsteps behind the tent, he ducked

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inside quietly. His mother had returned from another midnight prayer vigil. It was the Landers boy again. The son of a woman from a neighboring church, the child had been diagnosed with leukemia only months ago, and had now gone into a coma. He was not expected to live out the week.

The boy heard the long, slow mutter at the back of the tent as the zipper was drawn and his mother entered, softly, so as not to wake him. He often slept poorly, but saw no reason to tell her. She would only worry.

The blanket she had hung to divide the tent rustled faintly, and the boy saw the long, pale shape of her plain cotton nightdress, and knew that she had come to check on him. She stood, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"Close the flaps, Stephen," she said finally, when she saw him. He shifted uncomfortably but did not move. His mother paused as if to speak again, then went quietly back behind the blanket. Three years ago she would have been insistent, but she had changed, too, since his father's death. Although he did not fully understand it, the boy sensed that it had shaken his mother in some deep way that went beyond simple grieving.

"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted," he said quietly, and shook his head. That was hardly enough.

"Stephen?" His mother's voice startled him. She had long since stopped questioning him when he talked to himself. He held his breath.

"They say he may die tonight—that Landers

boy." Her voice sounded muffled and far away.

The boy let his breath out in a long sigh. "Yes," he said. He felt the dull, grinding ache of frustration building inside him. He had heard his mother tell the woman in the tent next to theirs that the doctors expected the boy to die, adding that it was a particularly fast-moving, deadly form of leukemia. Yet he knew that to say this—to suggest that it was inevitable that the boy die—would be a betrayal. He knew, too, that he could not say the other, expected thing—not convincingly. Faith had not saved his father.

"I think it would have been good if you could have come tonight, to the vigil," his mother said.

The boy stood up, pressing his hands against the ceiling of the tent. The restlessness was growing, and he itched to find a wall he could push against as he twisted and stretched. "Mum," he said suddenly, "when did you learn about God?"

There was a pause, and the boy knew that his question had surprised her. He seldom asked her questions anymore.

"Your grandmother always took me to church," she said finally. "I was baptized when I was nine years old. You know that, Stephen."

The boy hooked his arm around the heavy wooden center pole of the tent. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, feeling his balance drift and catch. Stretching out his free arm, he began to turn in a slow circle around the pole.

A tall boy, still awkward in his new height, he was continually startled when, reaching up, he found his fingertips brushing a low ceiling, or his hands catching the upper edge of a doorjamb. His father had died three years before, and it came to the boy, suddenly, that he was now taller, by several inches, than his father had been.

"But, Mum," he said, "didn't you ever wonder if it was real? Didn't you ever wonder if things really happen the way they say in church?"

The pause was longer this time. "There are always things to test our faith, Stephen," she said quietly.

"But, Mum," he said, turning more quickly, "how do you know?" He felt something growing inside him, ready to burst. "How do you know, Mum? You prayed for Dad when he first got sick, but it was cancer. You thanked God for the lessons he was teaching us, and you prayed Dad would get better. You thanked God when the doctors thought he was getting a little better, and you thanked God when he got worse again." The boy was turning in reckless circles, now, swinging around the pole, and his voice began to rise. "You prayed for two years, and then he died, and you thanked God again, I don't know for what, and now you're praying for that Landers kid, and he's going to die, too. I want to know how you know, Mum; I *need* to know."

This time there was no pause. "You mustn't talk that way, Stephen." His mother's voice was firm, almost sharp, but the boy could hear fear in it. "We can only pray that the Lord's will be done."

The Lord's will be done. The boy's grip on the pole slipped, and he stumbled. The frustration inside him blossomed smoothly into a pure white anger. He straightened up unsteadily, and planted his feet. "The Lord's will *is* going to be done, Mum, if the Lord is the one doing it. The Lord's will right now must be that the poor kid die, because otherwise he wouldn't have gotten leukemia, would he? I went to the library and read about it. I learned that when Dad was sick. You just told me to pray—you wouldn't tell me what the doctors said—but it didn't matter, because it was all in those books. That kid's going to die, and not after two or three or four years. It's not the kind of leukemia most kids get. You know that, too.

He's going to die, soon, and you can pray from now until sunrise, every night until it happens, but it's still going to happen, and it won't be any later or any sooner because you prayed. Why can't you just admit that?"

The anger was gone as quickly as it had come, and the boy slumped down on the little cot beside the tent door. His head spun, and he felt ill. It had all come out as a rehearsed speech, although he never thought he would actually say those things to his mother.

When his mother spoke, her voice sounded choked, and he knew that she was crying.

"I don't know, Stephen," she said, "and I don't know what you want me to say. I don't know why your father died. Faith is all I have left, and I'm sorry if it's not enough. I'm sorry."

The boy stretched out slowly, face down on the cot, and dug his fingers into the pillow. There were still many times when the need to be cared for was almost painful, and this was one of those times. He longed, in some deep part of his soul, to leave this moment with all its complications to some larger, wiser being. He knew by now, though, that he could not.

"Mum," he said softly, "it's all right. It's OK, Mum. I didn't mean to say it like that. I'm just tired, is all. It's OK, Mum, really." It was the best he could do, and she seemed to sense this.

"I know, Stevie, I know," his mother said, her voice old and tired. "Try to get some rest."

Exhausted by his anger, the boy fell away into a tossing, murmuring sleep. The dream came quickly, a jumbled rush of images. It took him a moment to recognize the clearing where he stood as the field where camp meeting was held each year. Now it was lit with a fevered orange sun and cluttered with junkyard scrap—rusted washing machines, bales of old newspaper, the twisted frame of a tricycle—the ground churned into clods of mud and grass.

A battered card table, propped up by fruit

crates, sat near the center of the field. A thin, pale figure, dressed in a yellowed cotton hospital robe, sat at the table.

"Dad," the boy said, astonished.

The man nodded. "It's the judgment, Stephen," he said, and coughed.

The boy stood still. His father drew a tattered brown book from under the robe and began to read.

"And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven."

The man paused and looked at the boy. "You already know this part, right? Sure you do. Let's get to the good stuff." Turning back to the book, he searched for a moment and began again.

"And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, *and be* their God." The man got to his feet unsteadily. Closing his eyes, he raised the book over his head and shook it. His voice had grown steadily stronger as he read; now it rolled across the field like thunder.

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I . . . make . . . all . . . things . . . new." The words echoed and re-echoed, fading at last into the wind.

The man didn't move, and the boy shifted uncomfortably. "That's Revelation," he said finally.

His father opened his eyes slowly and nodded, blinking against the glare of the sun. "That's the script, Son. Good stuff, isn't it?" His voice was thin and tired again.

The boy didn't answer, and the man tucked the book back under his robe, and shuffled

around the table.

"Now what?" the boy asked awkwardly.

The man looked puzzled. "That's it," he said, "end of script."

"But what comes next?"

His father only shook his head.

"But what comes next?" the boy repeated, urgent. "You told me—you *told* me . . ." He could feel a tightness at the back of his throat, the grip of coming panic.

"Steve-O, my boy," his father said, patting him on the shoulder, "that's the end of the story. What's more, it's a happy ending. Never ask for something more than that.

"Now, give me a hand here." His father grabbed the edge of the card table, steadied himself, and flipped it over. He kicked at the fruit crates and stumbled, grabbing the front of the boy's shirt. "We put things back the way they were, nobody'll even know we were here."

The boy woke, trembling, his fists clenched on the sides of the cot. Standing up abruptly, he balanced himself against the rush of blood to his head, and stumbled out of the tent.

Outside, with no moon visible, the darkness was almost complete. The boy began to walk, heedlessly, waiting for the images of the dream to fade. The night was cooler now, and dew soaked his shoes. By the time he found himself at the far edge of the clearing, where it opened onto the lake, his feet were numb.

He hesitated for a moment, looking back toward the tents. The clearing was quiet now. The only sound he heard was the faint gurgle and lap of the water below him. Even the insects were still. Turning toward the lake, he picked his way carefully down to the water's edge and turned to the left. Behind him, the shore flattened into sandy beaches; ahead, smoky gray rock rose sharply from the water.

The boy had a destination in mind, and when he reached the broad outcropping, he

stopped to rest. Sitting down, he drew his knees up toward his chest and closed his eyes. The voice behind him startled him badly.

"You looking for somebody?"

He turned quickly. It was a girl's voice, young, and he saw her now, a dark shape huddled at the edge of the rock.

"No," he said. "I was just walking."

"You scared me," the girl said. "You nearly stepped on me. I thought maybe you were my dad."

"Sorry. I—I'm Stephen."

A match flared, lighting the girl's face. The boy recognized her from the day before, when he had noticed her in the main meeting tent. Her smooth, tanned arms and short dress—sleeveless, with tiny brown and red flowers—had stood in sharp contrast to the pale, scrubbed-pink necks and somber charcoal pinstripes of her father and younger brother.

"Well, Stephen," the girl said, "you ever smoke?"

"No."

"You going to tell somebody if I do?"

"No," the boy said again. He could feel his heart pounding high in his chest, his breath caught in his throat. He was newly aware of his own naiveté—his ignorance in matters of drinking and fighting, of soft talk and loud music, that occupied other boys his age. He felt now as though he had stumbled into an unfamiliar and vaguely threatening place.

"You mind if I ask what you're doing here? It's pretty late." The girl had stretched out on her back, and the glowing orange tip of the cigarette hung like a tiny lantern over her face.

"I—I had a bad dream, I guess, woke me

up." He immediately wished that he had called it a nightmare, or better, not mentioned it at all. He was afraid she would laugh.

"But why'd you come *here*?"

The boy hesitated. He wanted badly to be able to see the girl clearly, to know from her eyes if she was really asking, or only wanted him to go.

"I used to come here with my dad," he said finally, and, after another pause, added, "he died a couple of years ago."

There was silence after that, and he waited patiently for her to find a way to respond. He wasn't sure that she would, but eventually she spoke.

"Did you like him?" she asked quietly.

The question surprised the boy, and he thought for a moment before answering. "Yes, I think so. We were more of a family when he was around."

The girl was sitting up again, and he could feel her watching him closely. "Sometimes," she said flatly, "I don't like my parents. Sometimes I think they forget that I'm around,

unless I do something wrong. Mostly I just do whatever I want, and I ignore them."

"Is it better that way?" the boy asked. He already knew the answer. He could hear it in her voice.

"It's—*quiet*," she said.

The boy nodded. "Do they know you're out here?"

The girl stubbed the cigarette out and stood up. She shook her head. "You know that Landers kid—the one with leukemia? He died a little after midnight, I guess. They went to the hospital. They won't be back until lunch time."

Balanced at the edge of the rock, the boy spread his arms. He didn't know what lay beneath the surface of the water, but, he thought, this was certainly a way of finding out. For one frozen heartbeat he felt himself suspended, weightless, and then the shocking chill of the water closed over him with a crash.

The shock was greater than he had anticipated. "He died? They just had a prayer vigil for him last night."

"I guess it didn't help," the girl said. She said it lightly, almost carelessly, but something broken in her tone betrayed her. She looked down into the water. Silence filled the space left by her voice. The boy wished that there were something he could say to make it all more manageable, but had nothing to offer. He was relieved when she broke the silence herself.

"It's farther down than it looks," she said, still staring into the water. "You ever jump?"

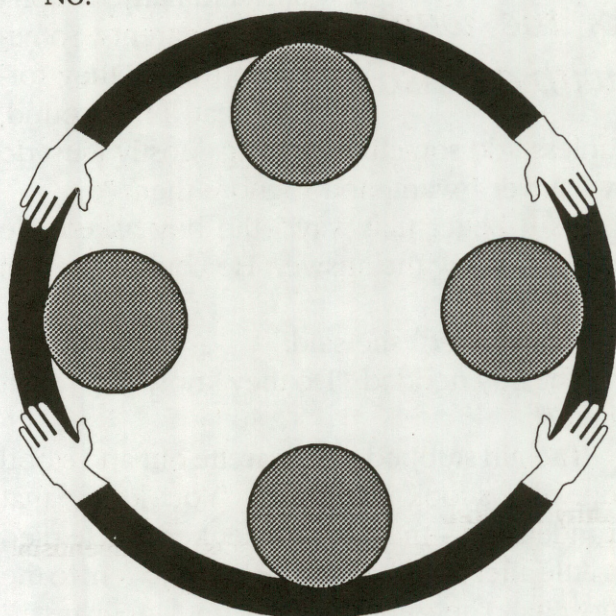
The boy shook his head. "I was always scared."

"Even now?" The girl was looking at him closely. He shrugged.

Turning, the girl began to walk along the edge of the rock, her arms held out for balance. The darkness was beginning to lift, but the shapes around them were still indistinct.

"That Landers kid," she said matter-of-factly, "couldn't have been more than 12 or 13." Pirouetting neatly, she started back along the edge. "That isn't long enough to figure everything out, is it?"

"No."



She turned to the boy abruptly and grabbed his hand. "Come on," she said. "Let's do it—let's jump."

He let her pull him to the edge, and looked down. The water stretched out below him, black as oil. He waited for the fear, but it did not come.

When he looked back, the girl was poised on the edge of the rock. A moment later she had leaped far out into the water.

Balanced at the edge of the rock, the boy spread his arms. He didn't know what lay beneath the surface of the water, but, he thought, this was certainly a way of finding out. The pull of gravity was insistent, and he let his balance shift. For one frozen heartbeat he felt himself suspended, weightless, and then the shocking chill of the water closed over him with a crash.

He came up gasping, and heard the girl's laughter. A wild shout exploded from deep inside him, and he dove under the water, kicking his feet in the air.

In minutes his body was numb from the cold. Turning, he moved back along the shore, looking for spot low enough for him to climb out. Reaching the edge of the rock, he felt the girl behind him, and turned. Water streamed from her hair, and her eyes were alight. She reached out and touched his face.

"Don't go yet," she said.

His face burned where her hand had touched it. Again he felt his heart pounding high in his throat, and he shivered. "I—I have to," he said. "I wish—I wish that . . . I have to." He turned to the shore, and scrambled up on the ledge. He hesitated.

"You should come back to the camp," he said. She shook her head. He thought for a moment, and nodded. Turning slowly, he began to make his way back along the shore.

"Stephen," she called. He turned. She had moved farther out into the water, and he thought that she looked small and lonely.

"Do you believe any of it, Stephen?" she

asked.

He rubbed his hand along his face, thinking. "I don't know," he said finally. He was confident that this was true. "I don't know yet—not really."

"Then you'd better go on back," she said, and turned to swim away from him.

"Hey," he called, "hey, I don't know your name."

Kicking lazily, the girl rolled smoothly onto her back. She waved. "Gabrielle," she said, smiling. "Gabrielle."

The boy hurried back along the lake shore, covering the distance more quickly now, in the gray light of early dawn. Back in the clearing, he skirted the camp. His dripping clothes were sure to bring bothersome questions, but he found that this no longer worried him. Once again he heard the murmur of voices, and wondered if it could really have been only a night that he had been away.

Back at the tent, he looked inside cautiously. His mother was gone, her nightdress hanging at the back of the tent, her bed neatly made. He dressed quickly in jeans and a clean shirt, and hung his wet clothes outside to dry.

Heading toward the main meeting area, he wondered who had finally told his mother of the Landers boy's death. He wondered, briefly,

how much longer she could endure the constant cycle of hope and disappointment.

The sound of voices from one of the small meeting tents drew his attention, and he looked inside. His mother knelt in prayer, part of a circle, her back toward him. He heard someone say "Landers," and he froze, horrified. They didn't know. They must not have heard.

Slipping into the tent, he knelt beside his mother, and touched her shoulder gently. "Mum," he whispered, "Mum, come on, you've got to come."

She did not open her eyes, but reached down and took his hand. He felt the ghost of the old frustration inside him, and he squeezed her hand urgently. "Mum," he whispered, "he died. The Landers kid—he died, and I'm sorry, but there's nothing more you can do. He died."

"We know, Stephen," his mother softly. "We know. We're praying for his family now."

Outside, the sun broke over the horizon, filling the tent with a golden glow. The circle had closed again, and he felt the warmth of arms around his shoulders. The boy heard the voices of those in the circle, distinct now, and he listened to their prayers. They spoke of hope and assurance, of life and life after death, this earth and an earth to come.

The words were only words, but the circle had power.