A SAMPLE CHAPTER

The Hollow Altar

A Confessional Lutheran Invitation to Weary Evangelicals

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunday Morning

The lights are low and the room is warm. On the screens, a young woman with her eyes closed is leaning into the microphone, and the band behind her has dropped down to a single held chord, the kind that hangs in the air like steam. The drummer is barely touching the cymbal. The bass is felt more than heard. A man two rows up has his hand raised, palm open, and his wife beside him is wiping the corner of her eye with the side of her thumb.

It is a beautiful moment. Anyone honest would say so.

He is sitting near the back, where the light from the lobby spills in whenever someone steps out for the bathroom or to take a child to the nursery. He has been coming here for almost three years now. He likes the people. He likes the pastor, who is funny and kind and clearly loves Jesus. He likes that his daughter has friends in the youth group and that his wife has a Wednesday evening Bible study where the women actually pray for each other. He likes the coffee, which is better than it needs to be, and the way the worship leader prays a short, unscripted prayer before the last song, and the way the lobby smells faintly of cinnamon rolls from the welcome table.

He is not a critic. He has never been a critic. He came to faith in a room a lot like this one, fifteen years ago, when a guest speaker said something at a Wednesday night service that he has never been able to forget. He owes his life, in a real sense, to a church just like this. He would say so out loud if anyone asked.

So he cannot understand why, lately, he leaves on Sunday feeling the way he does.

The chord resolves. The worship leader says something about how God is in this place, how He is moving, how if you can just lean in right now and surrender. The drummer comes back. The lights shift from amber to a softer white. There is a transition, smooth and well-practiced, into the sermon bumper video, which is about identity this month, and the pastor jogs up the side stairs to the stage with his coffee in one hand and his iPad in the other.

The sermon is good. It is always good. The pastor is a careful reader, and his illustrations land, and there is a moment near the middle where he says something about the father in the prodigal son parable that makes the man's throat tighten without warning.

He writes the verse down on the back of the bulletin so he can come back to it later. He means to. He probably will not.

At 11:43 the band returns for the closing song, and the worship leader invites anyone who wants to respond to come down to the front, where someone will pray with them. A few people go. The man stays in his seat, because he does not know what he would go down for. He is not in crisis. His marriage is fine. His job is fine. He is not wrestling with a particular sin he needs to confess, or at least not one he is prepared to drag to the front of an auditorium. He can see the pastor's wife at the keys, eyes closed, mouthing the words. She has been here since sound check. He wonders for a second what her afternoon will look like. Then the song resolves, and he is back in his seat. He just feels, underneath everything, the way he has been feeling for months now. Thin. As if Sunday morning were a meal he keeps sitting down to and rising from without quite remembering eating.

The benediction is warm and brief. *Go in peace. Love God. Love people. We'll see you next week.* The lights come up. The lobby fills. Someone he half-knows claps him on the shoulder and asks how the kids are. He says they're good. He means it. They are.

In the parking lot it is bright in the way only a Midwestern Sunday in late October can be bright. The air carries the faint smell of an open fire. His wife asks if they should pick up something for lunch on the way home. He says sure. He puts the car in reverse. The bulletin is folded in the cupholder. He has already forgotten the verse.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of The Hollow Altar is the invitation it opens onto.

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