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THE FREE AGENTS

DISSERTATION

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

LARA AVERY

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

An excerpt from a novel taking place at a small Christian college in Kansas.

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She'd tried running herself until she was tired before bed. She drank giant glasses of warm milk. She stopped taking the pills, thinking they might be the cause, and then Dr. Janoo said she couldn't just *stop*. She gave Tess new pills, instead, but those were also powerless.

Coach Rick was over the moon to bring Tess on. Those were his words, *over the moon*. Tess could feel God's approval shine down on her as she jogged across the parking lot to tell her parents. She'd done it. She still needed to fill out some paperwork, and her parents were going to have to write a check, but she'd done what God asked.

At approximately 11:30 last night, Tess had called out to Him for guidance for the millionth time, and in the same sort-of-exasperated-but-nice way Coach Finch would tell her to get her elbows out after a rebound, an obvious answer came. *Stick with me, kid*. The plan was to slam cans of Diet Coke to stay awake, pack up all her stuff, and sprint headfirst into a Christ-focused educational environment. *Stay close and hang on tight*. It seemed imperative to keep God in her everyday routine, to read the Bible with experts who would teach her how to fight and eliminate mental rot, and that meant attending Calvary College, the first and best Presbyterian college in Southeastern Kansas. *Like a frickin' training regimen*, Tess said to herself with wild Diet Coke relief. She'd felt better than she had in weeks. All summer there was the constant dread of having to tell her parents about the violent corner of her brain, nights of worry that her problem might be criteria enough to send her to an institution for girls with eating disorders and razor blade habits. Around 4:00 that morning, she'd conceived of a mostly true story about the dangers of a secular college environment, and, seeing Tess was set on Calvary, her mom had risen to help her pack. Her father questioned her decision, but Tess could be very persuasive. She'd already bought all new things for her dorm at Kansas State, so she was prepared. New twin bed sheets. A plastic adjustable reading light that looked like the Pixar lamp. Her very own purple stapler, for papers and lab reports.

Now, check-in for the Calvary orientation was held in the cafeteria, which had a Subway and a Panda Express. She'd be assigned a number, and then they would take an instant photo on a blue background, paste the photo on the filled-out ID card, laminate it, and hook it to the purple lanyard. Very cool. *Please let me have a super cool roommate*, she casually requested God, a message she presumed He would find later, kind of like a voicemail.

Once they were all checked in, students milled about on the lawn under majestic sycamores with their purple lanyards, waiting for the next phase to begin. Prayer groups formed. The circle next to Tess looked good. Confident. As a competitive athlete, Tess knew the power of doing things in a circle with one's team to intimidate your opponents. The SCA team used to count aloud while they stretched before games, switching from arm to arm, leg to leg, as a singular unit. The prayer circle was not too loud, but loud enough. They were all smiling with their eyes closed. Together, they said, "Amen."

"Amen," Tess echoed, and when they looked over at her, she waved.

On the spectrum between Phelps-level Christian not Christian at all, Tess would guess she fell somewhere in the middle. She wore tank tops and jeans to service. She didn't sing along to the hymns anymore, even when her mom nudged her. She didn't really like Jars of Clay or DC Talk or Creed. She liked compilations. Especially Jock Jams, and the pack of Decades samplers she got from the Barnes and Noble, including 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. She had friends from public school, girls she met on tournament teams and camps, so she knew a lot about the ways non-believers think, but she wasn't mean or pushy just because they didn't believe in the same things as her. She didn't wear floor-length denim skirts or stand by the side of the road near the Sonic Drive-In on Gage Boulevard, holding up neon colored poster boards that say God Hates F-words. In fact, she had a gay friend in middle school choir before she had to quit because of basketball commitments, and he told her she was really nice for a Christian. She also had two Jewish friends she met at Model UN before she had to quit that, too. And regarding the whole sex-before-marriage thing, if she was being honest, she would probably break that rule with Leo Dicaprio if given the opportunity, or with University of Kansas point guard Jeff Boschee.

After they got settled in the dorms, the Calvary incoming freshmen spent the afternoon playing icebreakers in small groups. Tess's group was the Red group, and they nicknamed themselves the Red Sea, which was hilarious, especially when the Welcome Crusade leader—a good-looking guy in a purple shirt—ran through them yelling, *I'm parting you guys, I'm parting the Red Sea!*

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VITA

Lara Avery is a writer. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Gay Magazine*, *The A.V. Club*, *ARTNews*, *Pollen*, and *Women In Clothes*. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Film Studies from Macalester College in 2010.