PULPHEAD

ESSAYS

JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN
It is wrong to boast, but in the beginning, my plan was perfect. I was assigned to cover the Cross-Over Festival in Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri, three days of the top Christian bands and their backers at some isolated Midwestern fairground. I’d stand at the edge of the crowd and take notes on the scene, chat up the occasional audience member (“What’s harder—homeschooling or regular schooling?”), then flash my pass to get backstage, where I’d rap with the artists themselves. The singer could feed me his bit about how all music glorifies Him, when it’s performed with a loving spirit, and I’d jot down every tenth word, inwardly smiling. Later that night I might sneak some hooch in my rental car and invite myself to lie with a prayer group by their fire, for the fellowship of it. Fly home, stir in statistics. Paycheck.

But as my breakfast-time mantra says, I am a professional. And they don’t give out awards for that sort of toe-tap foolishness. I wanted to know what these people are, who claim to
love this music, who drive hundreds of miles, traversing states, to hear it live. Then it came, my epiphany: I would go with them. Or rather, they would come with me. I would rent a van, a plush one, and we would travel there together, I and three or four hard-core buffs, all the way from the East Coast to the implausibly named Lake of the Ozarks. We’d talk through the night, they’d proselytize at me, and I’d keep my little tape machine working all the while. Somehow I knew we’d grow to like and pity one another. What a story that would make—for future generations.

The only remaining question was: How to recruit the willing? But it was hardly even a question, because everyone knows that damaged types who are down for whatever’s clever gather in “chat rooms” every night. And among the Jesusy, there’s plenty who are super f’d up. He preferred it that way, evidently.

So I published my invitation, anonymously, at youthontherock.com, and on two Internet forums devoted to the good-looking Christian pop-punk band Relient K, which had been booked to appear at Cross-Over. I pictured that guy or girl out there who’d been dreaming in an attic room of seeing, with his or her own eyes, the men of Relient K perform their song “Gibberish” from Two Lefts Don’t Make a Right . . . But Three Do. How could he or she get there, though? Gas prices won’t drop, and Relient K never plays north Florida. Please, Lord, make it happen. Suddenly, here my posting came, like a great light. We could help each other. “I’m looking for a few serious fans of Christian rock to ride to the festival with me,” I wrote. “Male/female doesn’t matter, though you shouldn’t be older than, say, 28, since I’m looking at this primarily as a youth phenomenon.”

They seem like harmless words. Turns out, though, I had
failed to grasp how “youth” the phenomenon is. Most of the people hanging out in these chat rooms were teens, and I don’t mean nineteen, either, I mean fourteen. Some of them, I was about to learn, were mere tweens. I had just traipsed out onto the World Wide Web and asked a bunch of twelve-year-old Christians if they wanted to come for a ride in my van.

It wasn’t long before the children rounded on me. “Nice job cutting off your email address,” wrote “mathgeek29,” in a tone that seemed not at all Christlike. “I doubt if anybody would give a full set of contact information to some complete stranger on the Internet . . . Aren’t there any Christian teens in Manhattan who would be willing to do this?”

A few of the youths were indeed credulous. “Riathamus” said, “i am 14 and live in indiana plus my parents might not let me considering it is a stranger over the Internet. but that would really be awesome.” A girl by the name of “LilLoser” even tried to be a friend:

I doubt my parents would allow their baby girl to go with some guy they don’t and I don’t know except through email, especially for the amount of time you’re asking and like driving around everywhere with ya . . . I’m not saying you’re a creepy petifile, lol, but i just don’t think you’ll get too many people interested . . . cuz like i said, it spells out “creepy” . . . but hey—good luck to you in your questy mis-siony thing. lol.

The luck that she wished me I sought in vain. The Christians stopped chatting with me and started chatting among themselves, warning one another about me. Finally one poster on the official Relient K site hissed at the others to stay away
from my scheme, as I was in all likelihood “a 40 year old kidnapper.” Soon I logged on and found that the moderators of the site had removed my post and its lengthening thread of accusations altogether, offering no explanation. Doubtless at that moment they were faxing alerts to a network of moms. I recoiled in dread. I called my lawyer, in Boston, who told me to “stop using computers” (his plural).

In the end, the experience inspired in me a distaste for the whole Cross-Over Festival as a subject, and I resolved to refuse the assignment. I withdrew.

The problem with a flash mag like the Gentlemen’s Quarterly is that there’s always some overachieving assistant editor, sometimes called Greg, whom the world hasn’t beaten down yet, and who, when you phone him, out of courtesy, just to let him know that “the Cross-Over thing fell through” and that you’ll be in touch when you “figure out what to do next,” hops on that mystical boon the Internet and finds out that the festival you were planning to attend was in fact not “the biggest one in the country,” as you’d alleged. The biggest one in the country—indeed, in Christendom—is the Creation Festival, inaugurated in 1979, a veritable Godstock. And it happens not in Missouri but in ruralmost Pennsylvania, in a green valley, on a farm called Agape. This festival did not end a month ago; it starts the day after tomorrow. Already they are assembling, many tens of thousands strong. Good luck to you in your questy missiony thing.

I had one demand: that I not be made to camp. I’d have some sort of vehicle with a mattress in it, one of these pop-ups, maybe. “Right,” said Greg. “Here’s the deal. I’ve called around. There are no vans left within a hundred miles of Philly. We got you an RV, though. It’s a twenty-nine-footer.” Once I reached the place, we agreed (or he led me to think
he agreed), I would certainly be able to downgrade to something more manageable.

The reason twenty-nine feet is such a common length for RVs, I presume, is that once a vehicle gets much longer, you need a special permit to drive it. That would mean forms and fees, possibly even background checks. But show up at any RV joint with your thigh stumps lashed to a skateboard, crazily waving your hooks-for-hands, screaming you want that twenty-nine-footer out back for a trip to you ain’t sayin’ where, and all they want to know is: Credit or debit, tiny sir?

Two days later, I stood in a parking lot, suitcase at my feet. Debbie came toward me. Her face was as sweet as a birthday cake beneath spray-hardened bangs. She raised a powerful arm and pointed, before either of us spoke. She pointed at a vehicle that looked like something the ancient Egyptians might have left behind in the desert.

“Oh, hi, there,” I said. “Listen, all I need is, like, a camper van or whatever. It’s just me, and I’m going five hundred miles . . .”

She considered me. “Where ya headed?”

“To this thing called Creation. It’s, like, a Christian-rock festival.”

“You and everybody!” she said. “The people who got our vans are going to that same thing. There’s a bunch o’ ya.”

Her husband and coworker, Jack, emerged—tattooed, squat, gray-mulleted, spouting open contempt for MapQuest. He’d be giving me real directions. “But first let’s check ’er out.”

We toured the outskirts of my soon-to-be mausoleum. It took time. Every single thing Jack said, somehow, was the only thing I’d need to remember. White water, gray water, black water (drinking, showering, le devoir). Here’s your this,
never ever that. Grumbling about “weekend warriors.” I couldn’t listen, because listening would mean accepting it as real, though his casual mention of the vast blind spot in the passenger-side mirror squeaked through, as did his description of the “extra two feet on each side”—the bulge of my living quarters—which I wouldn’t be able to see but would want to “be conscious of” out there. Debbie followed us with a video camera, for insurance purposes. I saw my loved ones gathered in a mahogany-paneled room to watch this footage; them being forced to hear me say, “What if I never use the toilet—do I still have to switch on the water?”

Jack pulled down the step and climbed aboard. It was really happening. The interior smelled of spoiled vacations and amateur porn shoots wrapped in motel shower curtains and left in the sun. I was physically halted at the threshold for a moment. Jesus had never been in this RV.

What do I tell you about my voyage to Creation? Do you want to know what it’s like to drive a windmill with tires down the Pennsylvania Turnpike at rush hour by your lonesome, with darting bug-eyes and shaking hands; or about Greg’s laughing phone call “to see how it’s going”; about hearing yourself say “no No NO!” in a shamefully high-pitched voice every time you try to merge; or about thinking you detect, beneath the mysteriously comforting blare of the radio, faint honking sounds, then checking your passenger-side mirror only to find you’ve been straddling the lanes for an unknown number of miles (those two extra feet!) and that the line of traffic you’ve kept pinned stretches back farther than you can see; or about stopping at Target to buy sheets and a pillow and peanut butter but then practicing your golf
swing in the sporting-goods aisle for a solid twenty-five minutes, unable to stop, knowing that when you do, the twenty-nine-footer will be where you left her, alone in the side lot, waiting for you to take her the rest of the way to your shared destiny?

She got me there, as Debbie and Jack had promised, not possibly believing it themselves. Seven miles from Mount Union, a sign read creation ahead. The sun was setting; it floated above the valley like a fiery gold balloon. I fell in with a long line of cars and trucks and vans—not many RVs. Here they were, all about me: the born-again. On my right was a pickup truck, its bed full of teenage girls in matching powder-blue T-shirts; they were screaming at a Mohawked kid who was walking beside the road. I took care not to meet their eyes—who knew but they weren’t the same fillies I had solicited days before? Their line of traffic lurched ahead, and an old orange Datsun came up beside me. I watched as the driver rolled down her window, leaned halfway out, and blew a long, clear note on a ram’s horn. I understand where you might be coming from doubting that. Nevertheless it is what she did. I have it on tape. She blew a ram’s horn, quite capably, twice. A yearly rite, perhaps, to announce her arrival at Creation.

My turn at the gate. The woman looked at me, then past me to the empty passenger seat, then down the whole length of the twenty-nine-footer. “How many people in your group?” she asked.

I pulled away in awe, permitting the twenty-nine-footer to float. My path was thronged with excited Christians, most younger than eighteen. The adults looked like parents or
pastors, not here on their own. Twilight was well along, and the still valley air was sharp with campfire smoke. A great roar shot up to my left—something had happened onstage. The sound bespoke a multitude. It filled the valley and lingered.

I thought I might enter unnoticed—that the RV might even offer a kind of cover—but I was already turning heads. Two separate kids said “I feel sorry for him” as I passed. Another leaped up on the driver’s-side step and said, “Jesus Christ, man,” then fell away running. I kept braking—even idling was too fast. Whatever spectacle had provoked the roar was over now: The roads were choked. The youngsters were streaming around me in both directions, back to their campsites, like a line of ants around some petty obstruction. They had a disconcerting way of stepping aside for the RV only when its front fender was just about to graze their backs. From my elevated vantage, it looked as if they were waiting just a tenth of a second too long, and that I was gently, forcibly parting them in slow motion.

The Evangelical strata were more or less recognizable from my high school days, though everyone, I observed, had gotten better-looking. Lots were dressed like skate punks or in last season’s East Village couture (nondenominationals); others were fairly trailer (rural Baptists or Church of God); there were preps (Young Life, Fellowship of Christian Athletes—these were the ones who’d have the pot). You could spot the stricter sectarians right away, their unchanging antifashion and pale glum faces. When I asked one woman, later, how many she reckoned were white, she said, “Roughly one hundred percent.” I did see some Asians and three or four blacks. They gave the distinct impression of having been adopted.

I drove so far. You wouldn’t have thought this thing could
go on so far. Every other bend in the road opened onto a whole new cove full of tents and cars; the encampment had expanded to its physiographic limits, pushing right up to the feet of the ridges. It’s hard to put across the sensory effect of that many people living and moving around in the open: part family reunion, part refugee camp. A tad militia, but cheerful.

The roads turned dirt and none too wide: Hallelujah Highway, Street Called Straight. I’d been told to go to “H,” but when I reached H, two teenage kids in orange vests came out of the shadows and told me the spots were all reserved. “Help me out here, guys,” I said, jerking my thumb, pitifully indicating my mobile home. They pulled out their walkie-talkies. Some time went by. It got darker. Then an even younger boy rode up on a bike and winked a flashlight at me, motioning I should follow.

It was such a comfort to yield up my will to this kid. All I had to do was not lose him. His vest radiated a warm, reassuring officialdom in my headlights. Which may be why I failed to comprehend in time that he was leading me up an almost vertical incline—“the Hill Above D.”

Thinking back, I can’t say which came first: a little bell in my spine warning me that the RV had reached a degree of tilt she was not engineered to handle, or the sickening knowledge that we had begun to slip back. I bowed up off the seat and crouched on the gas. I heard yelling. I kicked at the brake. With my left hand and foot I groped, like a person drowning, for the emergency brake (had Jack’s comprehensive how-to sesh not touched on its whereabouts?). We were losing purchase; she started to shudder. My little guide’s eyes showed fear.

I’d known this moment would come, of course, that the
twenty-nine-footer would turn on me. We had both of us un-
derstood it from the start. But I must confess, I never imag-
ined her hunger for death could prove so extreme. Laid out
below and behind me was a literal field of Christians, toast-
ing buns and playing guitars, fellowshipping. The aerial shot
in the papers would show a long scar, a swath through their
peaceful tent village. And that this gigantic psychopath had
worked her vile design through the agency of a child—an
innocent, albeit impossibly confused child . . .

My memory of the next five seconds is smeared, but I
know that a large and perfectly square male head appeared in
the windshield. It was blond and wearing glasses. It had wide-
open eyes and a Chaucerian West Virginia accent and said
rapidly that I should “JACK THE WILL TO THE ROT”
while applying the brakes. Some branch of my motor cortex
obeyed. The RV skidded briefly and was still. Then the same
voice said, “All right, hit the gas on three: one, two . . .”

She began to climb—slowly, as if on a pulley. Some freak-
ishly powerful beings were pushing. Soon we had leveled
out at the top of the hill.

There were five of them, all in their early twenties. I re-
mained in the twenty-nine-footer; they gathered below.
“Thank you,” I said.

“Aw, hey,” shot back Darius, the one who’d given the or-
ders. He talked very fast. “We’ve been doing this all day—I
don’t know why that kid keeps bringing people up here—
we’re from West Virginia—listen, he’s retarded—there’s an
empty field right there.”

I looked back and down at what he was pointing to:
pastureland.
PULPHEAD

BUY THE BOOK NOW

Amazon
Barnes & Noble
IndieBound

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BOOK
macmillan.com