

Appalachian Service

by J. D. Shraffenberger

The first service in my grandpa's new church was lit by the light of many candles—tapers and votives and pillars in sconces, tealights in kettle jars on the arms of pews and lined along the top of the walnut piano. Stained glass flickered, and the golden altar glowed like daylight. It smelled like carpet and jasmine and lilies.

The words of my grandpa's sermon came slow and low. He read from the bible with a pen light, wiped his forehead with a kerchief: it was spring and hot and damp, closed-up inside. We fanned ourselves with hymnals, and the AC wasn't running just yet, so the doors were propped open with cinder blocks. An occasional breeze made the candles stutter.

Grandpa told of Elijah lying under the juniper tree, despairing, saying *O Lord, take my life!* He spoke of the mighty army of the Israelites going into Canaan and the tiny village of Ai. The hearts of soldiers melted, and they became as water. Grandpa said isolation is a disease, and everyone agreed, these brothers and sisters,

everyone praised be, yes. We enter the world in the dark, Jesus—we want our ways to be lit. Women raised torn-up tissues over their heads. Then Ruth played the piano, and we stood up to sing. When the wind entered and circled us, flames fluttered and doused themselves to sleep, and the smoke detectors beeped and screamed.

They whistled and howled like dogs. We covered our ears with our palms as Grandpa tried to relight the candles, waved his bible at strands of smoke, but Ruth played on laughing, and we sang loud *Behold! He comes riding out on hastened clouds, shining, O shining, like the sun to the trumpet call.* We lifted up our voices to hear ourselves in the dark.