

An Education on Wandering

by

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*To Mom and Dad, who have always been well pleased*

Yes

“And YOU are WALKING in DEATH right now,” the pastor screamed, his scruff covered face red with passion. “You keep turning back to the things that give you death, the things that cause death inside you.

The congregation roared. The round woman next to me threw her hands in the air, letting out a moan of agreement or perhaps confession. She closed her eyes tightly, cinching them shut while keeping her hands raised frantically. A young man in front of me wearing black skinny jeans and an oversized sweatshirt sat down, placing his thin face between his knobby knees, his body wracked with sobs.

I watched in fascinated confusion. It was only my second or third time at this new church near Brown University. I looked at my new lacrosse teammate, Bri. Her brown eyes were locked on the stage, her wispy dip dyed hair swaying around her face like light itself. She told me the church had hippy vibes, but I hadn’t been expecting this level of strange.

I felt myself questioning my decision to join her that morning, as the woman next to me began to rock back and forth in quiet sobs. *This is such bullshit*, I thought. I myself was somewhat of a reformed Christian, I suppose you could call it. I still went through all the ceremonies of Christianity, and I showed up to college with the intention of going to church every Sunday in order to instill a routine consistent with my childhood. I had intended to sit in the back of a stuffy church, count the number of blondes vs. brunettes in the audience, and let my mind wander as some eighty-year-old balding pastor delivered his eighty-year-old message. I hadn’t realized that at Sanctuary Church, where I stood that morning, audience participation was somewhat of an expectation.

“It is time to get reborn today,” Pastor Andrew continued through my doubts. “It is time to be reborn into what you were always meant to be. Enough turning back, keep your eyes up, keep your eyes on Him.”

He pointed upwards towards the massive painting of Jesus above the stage where the musicians stood, keyed up to start the Christian rock again. This is the Jesus I now imagine, when I picture or dream of him. He is thin and pale with layers of lean muscle. His eyes are looking up, his face soft with peace. A light grin is pacing across his lips, a golden sheath of holiness behind his bearded head. Serene, he looks back at me, mirroring what I already know to be true.

*Oh the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God*

*Oh He chases me down, fights till I’m found, leaves the ninety-nine*

*I couldn’t earn it, I don’t deserve it, still You give your love away*

*Oh the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God*

An African-American woman with short-cropped hair and a floor length cardigan belted the lyrics to this famous Christian Rock song, “Reckless Love,” as the guitarist and the keys and drums went nuts behind her. All the while, Pastor Andrew kept on preaching. It was a cacophony of love, overwhelming me with both tranquility and excitement.

The tubs next to Pastor Andrew suddenly took center stage. I hadn’t given them much thought, but as the deacons shuffled behind him to dump in buckets of water, my eyes became glued to the translucent, coffin-sized bins.

“You need to kill something in order to be alive.”

A hush fell over the whooping parishioners. The band quieted down, just the keyboards playing long chords and tones to build up the tension. The woman next to me secured her flailing

hands to her side. My new friend Bri stood to my right. She scribbled furiously in her church notebook.

“Are you going to kill what is dead? Are you going to pick up the cross today?”

The hush grew a little noisier. Still very much a hush, but a certain buzz began to pick up. Bri’s scribbling hit double time.

“Are you going to kill FEAR? And kill SELFISHNESS? Are you going to love your fellow MAN? Are you going to say goodbye to what is dead? Are you going to bury it today?”

Andrew’s raspy tenor revved up, redness creeping from under his groomed blonde beard. He took off his jean jacket, chucking it to the edge of the stage.

“Who is going to say YES to Christ today? Who is going to be baptized today in the name of our Father? Who is going to say yes to LIFE? Who is going to say yes to eternal KINGDOM, to having eternal favor with the Father who loves you? Who has always loved you! Who breathed your first precious breath of life into you! Who is going to say yes today?”

The church shook. Screams of “Yes” permeated past my eardrums, directly into my brain, vibrating the organ with such fervor I thought I might explode. Women and men scampered from their seats, tears flowing gently down their cheeks. They stood in a line wrapping around the staircase, saying silent prayers, looking out at us.

An elderly woman caught my eye. She stood frailly in the tub of water. It lapped around her skinny ankles. Andrew placed a hand behind her head as deacons helped dunk her below the surface. A few eternal seconds passed, the shouts dulling to soft exaltations.

Her head broke the water’s sheen, grey hair slicked back, a smile etched so permanently onto her wrinkled face. I couldn’t tell what was tears, what was water, or what exactly it was running down my own cheeks. I touched my face gently, a steady stream of teardrops dripping off my chin.

She stood triumphantly, and yet meekly. Her expression a mix of both pride and humility. Perhaps embarrassed to be receiving a baptism in her old age, perhaps immensely impressed with her own bravery. I didn’t know, I didn’t know her. I just knew how she made me feel.

The woman had to be the same age as my grandma. She announced to the church in a sweet voice, full of excitement, touched with wonder, that she had never been baptized. That she was ready to give the remainder of her days to Christ. That she was reborn.

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I don’t even remember my baptism, I was so young. I know the pictures, I know I was in a little white dress with lace and a little baby bonnet and I know my Godparents are my aunt and uncle, but I don’t *know* what it was to be baptized. I couldn’t even say the word *Amen*.

What does it mean to say yes to Christ? To come to the church, to sit, to listen, and to say yes?

The song “Reckless Love,” the song that was belted so beautifully by the band the morning I saw the baptisms in church, is about the parable of the lost sheep. The parable appears in both the Gospel Luke and the Gospel Matthew. The book of Luke says Jesus told his followers:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes home. He calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them ‘Rejoice with me, for I have

found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:1-7).

He *rejoices* over the one sheep. The shepherd is so filled with joy at the *one* sheep that he goes to tell his friend about it. If I was the friend, I would scold the shepherd for leaving behind the ninety-nine so foolishly. Luckily for Christians and people and humanity and the universe, I’m not Jesus.

Jesus is so overwhelmingly and recklessly in love with humans and humanity that he is willing to risk the ninety-nine to go get the one. This parable interests me because the sheep doesn’t wander back to the shepherd. The shepherd deliberately goes and finds the sheep, the shepherd lays the sheep on his shoulders, and the shepherd takes the sheep home.

It’s easy to stray- in anything, not just the religious sense. Easy to stray off a hiking trail when you see a prime view on the other side of the path. Easy to stray away from the rest of your homework because your friends are having a few beers instead of studying. Easy to stray away from relationships when someone more interesting comes along. Easy to stray away from the church when sleeping in sounds better.

It is easy to get lost from God, to lose your way because you don’t understand something. It is easy to get lost because you don’t understand how He could love you, or why. It is easy to stray from Him when you aren’t sure He would ever come looking for you anyways.

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The elderly woman stood, still soaking wet. Pastor Andrew covered her in a puffy white towel, flashing a million-watt smile towards the crowd.

“Isn’t God so good?”

A few people nodded, a few people waved their hands.

“C’mon guys. I know it’s early, I know Starbucks was probably a little too crowded this morning,” Andrew laughed, placing a hand on the old woman’s back. “I said, ISN’T GOD SO GOOD?”

His voice reverberated in the large chapel, echoing. We echoed back at him.

“Yes!” I heard my own voice among the shouts, shocked at the strength in my yell, confused where it came from.

*Where did that come from?* I thought to myself, both shocked and perhaps a bit disgusted. I felt like a phony. I didn’t pray anymore, I didn’t believe in God anymore, I certainly didn’t believe in this yelling and shouting brand of Christianity. I believed in the safety of my church at home, the Presbyterian Church of Upper Montclair (PCUM).

Sanctuary was a group of eccentric oddballs led by a pastor who wore more skinny jeans and leather jackets than pastor robes. I started attending Sanctuary with Bri because church always reminded me of home. This felt nothing like home. There was shouting and yelling and stomping and passion.

But something had resonated with me, try as I might to resist it. Even without the classic church stained glass windows. Even with the hipster string lights strung above the ceiling. Even with Pastor Andrew, who couldn’t have been more than 30 years-old, with his combat boots and tendency to step on stage with the band to belt out a few songs. I had stepped into unfamiliar territory, and was hit with such a wave of familiarity I had to sit down in the pew my first visit during a few of the songs. It was a familiarity I didn’t understand. Like realizing you should have

been dating your best friend all that time. A familiarity that was right on my nose but I couldn't describe. And try as I might, tears wouldn't stop spilling from my eyes the first Sunday I went with Bri. I didn't know why I was crying, but I couldn't stop.

But I was on my second visit, the morning of the baptism. Watching these adult sheep coming into the fold. It took everything in me not to stand up, scooch past Bri, and dunk myself vigorously in the tub.

I showed up to Brown feeling I'd misplaced my map on how to live meaningfully. I'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, I was sure of it. I convinced myself that as soon as I stepped foot on the Ivy League campus as a student, I would find out what road map I'd misplaced. I would find out why I was so exhaustingly unhappy. Why I could barely stomach the sight of my face in a mirror, or hear my own voice in a recording. I thought I needed the right friends, which of course I would make at Brown. I needed to excel in the classroom and on the lacrosse field. And it would all come together, and finally, after all the privileges and blessings I'd been afforded in life, I would be happy.

My relationship with God would, of course, have nothing to do with that. We'd long since gone separate ways, my ties to Christianity more of a symbol of family and tradition than a real connection. I only agreed to go to church with Bri in the first place because of the normalcy of it. I didn't know what Sunday would be without two hours in church. It was about maintaining my schedule in the unfamiliar territory of Brown, and Providence. Not about God, not about Christianity, things I had disconnected from having any real meaning or significance in my spiraling life.

Sitting in that pew, watching women and men one by one submit themselves to the unknown, I wondered what it would be to say yes for myself this time.



### The Richest Man in the World

One of my dad's favorite stories is the tale of the richest man. He heard it delivered in a church service once, and tears up nearly every time he retells it. His voice starts to crack at the climax, he looks away, usually gives a short little laugh, and only the truly observant listener will notice tear droplets fall from his eyes.

The first time he heard the story, he says it was an answer to a prayer. I was an infant, and our family was living just outside of New York City. My dad was working insane hours on Wall Street. He was miserable, and on top of it, had the crushing understanding that he was missing out on my sisters and I, and the short time period we had left as babies. He left for the city before five in the morning, and rarely got home in time to see us before bed. He was considering leaving Wall Street and moving our family out to Denver to begin a business venture of his own with my uncle. It was extremely financially risky, and he felt completely lost. So he left it to God. And whilst in the middle of this intensely tumultuous time period in his life, he heard this story during a sermon. We moved out to Denver shortly after.

I don't know where the story comes from. It's not biblical, strictly speaking, so it isn't a parable. It's more of an allegory, I guess? It goes something like this. A long time ago, there was a village set on the bottom of a hill. The village was home to many working-class families, mostly considered peasants. On the top of the hill lived a very rich man. His house was practically a castle, and he lived alone with his staff of cooks and butlers and maids and other types of servants. The rich man had the finest luxury items. All of his sheets were made of silk and he wore many fine robes with beautiful colors and intricate designs threaded throughout them. The rich man was a fine man, and was generally well-liked throughout the village. He was a benevolent employer, and did not look down on the peasantry. For this reason, the rich man was not surprised to open the door one morning to see the poorest peasant in the village on his doorstep. After all, he was a respected man known for his ambivalent kindness to the villagers.

"Hello sir, please excuse my intrusion," the poor man said. He wiped dirt and sweat from his forehead, his balding head shining under the sun. He was far too old for labor. Nonetheless, the poor man worked himself to the bone in order to feed his notoriously large family.

"Not a problem, my friend. Please come in," the rich man answered, opening his door to the peasant. He glanced nervously at the peasant's muddy feet on his soft red rug, but ashamed by his own displeasure, snapped his attention back to the peasant. "What can I do for you? How is your family?"

"Oh, they are wonderful," the peasant's blue eyes shone through the grime on his face, his expression desperate to elaborate. He caught himself though, and his face clouded with concern. "But they're not the reason for my visit today. I came here to talk about you, sir. I am worried about you."

The rich man stifled a guffaw. "Oh? And why would that be?"

The poor man stared down towards his feet hesitantly. "It may sound like nothing, but I had a dream last night. A nightmare, really," he began. "An angel came to me in a dream. And he told me that tonight, the richest man in the village was going to die. I had to come warn you, you see. You have always been kind to my family, and are an important member of our village. I hope you have the sense to go to a doctor, sir. It would set my mind at ease to know you are in good health."

The rich man took a moment to reflect, touched by the peasant's well wishes and his commitment to hike up the hill just to offer a warning. "Thank you. That is very thoughtful of

you. Do not worry, I am in perfect health,” he started, but seeing fear in the peasant’s eyes, added, “And I will immediately consult the top physician in the village.”

The poor man sighed a breath of immense relief, and hugged the rich man tightly, despite his fine robes and his clinking jewelry.

“Oh, thank you. I wish you the best, thank you,” the poor man grinned from ear to ear, revealing his crooked brown teeth. He left the palace, and walked down the green grassy hill back to the small house he lived in with his many children and a wife he loved.

The village’s top physician was immediately called to the mansion. He poked and prodded every inch of the rich man’s body, testing him for any and all possible ailments. “Well sir, you look to be in perfect health to me,” he concluded.

“That’s fantastic! We shall celebrate!” the rich man insisted, and called upon his servants to bring them the finest wine in his cellar.

They drank through the night, and toasted to the rich man’s health at midnight, which signaled the end to the night in which the peasant had predicted the death of the village’s richest man.

“I suppose sometimes, a dream is just a dream,” the rich man laughed at the folly of the kind peasant, topping off his goblet with an extra splash of wine for good measure.

Just as he was taking another sip, a frantic knock came at the enormous front door of the mansion. A young boy entered, and begged for the physician to follow him. The rich man recognized the boy to be the peasant’s youngest son.

“Please, you’ve got to help. My father is dying,” he pleaded. The physician scrambled from his chair, and the pair raced down the hill towards the poorest man’s tiny home.

The rich man sat back, aghast. He called for his servants, desperate to understand the series of events that had unfolded. However, most of his staff members were either asleep or too groggy to properly converse, and the rich man found himself quite alone in his grief. And it occurred to him that he had never been the richest man in the village. It occurred to him that he was very far from it.

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My parents met at Myrtle Beach just before graduating from college. My dad went to Yale, my mom to the University of Virginia. They met at a joint party and hung out for the remainder of the trip.

“Imagine telling our grandkids this story,” my dad apparently said to her. I used to think that was disgustingly creepy of him, but I find the older I get, the more romantically endearing the story becomes to me.

They wrote letters on and off to each other afterwards. My mom loves adding that my dad wrote all his letters in pencil, which she found to be sloppy and somewhat blithe. My dad is both of those things. They got married quite young. My mom was 24, my dad 25. They look like children in the photos. My mom is beautiful, in an off the shoulders long white dress that is so white it manages to make her pale skin look tan. My dad is rail thin but handsome, his blonde hair is on the longer side and sweeps off his forehead in a boyish way that reminds me of my younger brother. Their teeth are so white and they look awkwardly uncomfortable with all the attention being foisted upon them, but simultaneously mad with happiness. They honeymooned in St. Johns, and battled fruit rats and lizards in their open-air rental home. My favorite picture of them is from their honeymoon. My mom is sitting on my dad’s lap in some sort of beach chair, and they look like they’re having the trip of a lifetime, like they are shocked that someone could

be so happy and so in love. I stole the picture from the hallway desk when I was nine, and placed it on my nightstand because I liked the idea of them being near me while I slept.

They always wanted a big family, and they popped all four of us out in quick succession. My oldest sister Savannah was only six when the youngest of us, baby Bo, was born. My mom was just 32 by the time all four of us were toddling around.

They knew they wanted a big family, and they knew they wanted to bring us up as Christians. We were all baptized as babies, and attended Sunday School religiously (pun intended). I was a very happy child, and I remember my childhood as fondly as I think perhaps possible. I think that my happiness was of course, in large part due to my parents and their ability to comfortably provide for us. But I think even more so, my joy was due to my three best friends, Savannah, Kayla, and Bo, the three people of which most of my happiest memories have been made.

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“Oh, Rob. Maybe we just get away with reading a few verses instead,” my mom suggested softly, despite the strength behind her blue eyes. Blue eyes, a feature shared by all six of us. My dad, Mom, me, and my three siblings.

He grunted, two hands raised from his hips into the air. This I could see, even from the doorway, where we crouched in anticipation. “Okay, it’s whatever you want, I guess.”

She smiled, still in her classic nightgown. It has a cheetah lounging lazily on the branches of a safari-esque tree. The cheetah is sleeping, the words underneath her demanding “Don’t talk till coffee.” We got it for her from the gift shop at Disney World a few years prior.

“Come on in, guys. No church today,” she announced.

I was probably around nine-years-old, making Savannah twelve, Kayla eleven, and Bo six. It was late Spring, almost summer time. I remember because we rarely went to church in the summer, so this felt like we were getting out of school a couple weeks early. We padded towards the giant King-sized bed in the middle of the room, warily victorious smiles plastered on our faces, making sure not to make eye contact with Dad.

“Reading a few passages isn’t the same as actually heading to church,” my dad chastised, but bookended the left side of the bed after the rest of us piled in. Puffy white pillows and my parents’ uncovered white duvet insert fluffed around us. Like a little cloud, all six Bigelow’s floating blissfully above the rest of Montclair. Right over the church.

“Your elbow is stabbing me,” I whispered to gangly blonde Kayla. I didn’t even bother to comment on the wisps of her blonde hair floating into my face.

“Yeah, well your leg is on top of mine,” she threw back at me.

My mom glanced up from her enormous, multi-interpretation/language Bible to give a stern look. “Okay, so that’s what we’re *not* going to do. If I hear any bickering, we’re loading up and heading straight to church. So, let’s just cut that out from the start.”

She knows the Bible forwards and backwards, my mom. She knows the New Testament better than a musician knows his favorite song. The only difference is that the musician may not require the sheet music, after a while. My mom keeps after it. She is relentless, always enrolled in a new Bible study or church group.

“Well, have you prayed about it?” That’s was and will always be her answer to any complaint or struggle or issue. “I know it sounds trite, I know it’s not what you want to hear, but you need to send up a prayer.”

Mom grew up religious. She had one sister and one brother, and they went to St. Paul's Lutheran Church in a Philadelphia suburb most Sundays. It just made sense to me that she would make us do the same.

She put her arm around me, snuggling me closer. We do this sometimes. Very occasionally, we'll skip church, and cuddle in bed while my mom reads us some passage from the Bible. Then we talk about it for a bit, and go downstairs to watch cartoons. I wonder every time, how long until we're too big to fit? My parents had a big bed, but Bo has always been the tallest kid in his class. How long until he's as big as Dad, and we can't fit in the big white bed?

But that morning, we fit. Light poured in from the window next to Mom's side of the bed, casting the shadow of a slanted rectangle on the light green rug. I watched it move and shift as the sun changed directions, burrowing deeper into Mom's arm, listening lazily to whatever passage she read. I'd be lying if I said I remember. To my left, Kayla snuggled into me. To her left, Savannah, Bo, and Dad formed their own trio.

Dad looked slightly miffed, even with an arm around Savannah's shoulder. He was still wearing a baseball hat over his messy brown hair, his Patagonia vest still on over a brown "Black Dog" waffle tee. Probably was on his way to pick up Starbucks for my mom. Before church. He doesn't like missing, he thinks it's sort of a waste of time to do this version of fake church.

Dad grew up in Denver Colorado, and went to church fairly regularly with his own parents. Up until about 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Then, they stopped going for a while. It wasn't that they didn't believe, they just didn't necessarily feel the need to huff it over to church every Sunday. That all changed in high school after he started going to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It was then that my dad asked his own father to start taking him to church again.

I pictured my father sitting in a pew with Grandpa, the blonde, skinny boy I had only met through photo albums and retold memories. I looked at him in the bed. The image I'd created of my dad as a kid poured through him as I stared. Like sand filling a vase, filling it up, adding texture and perhaps color. The small frown he had worn all day suddenly made sense, and a stone rumbled across my tummy as I contemplated my own insistence that we stay at home in the cozy bed

Five minutes later, my mom shut the Bible.

"Okay. You're free," she sighed conclusively, releasing herself from her pastor duties. "Go downstairs and watch cartoons. Daddy is going to go get bagels, I'll make scrambled eggs."

It was like a snow day, these mystical moments during the school year when we were able to miss church and Sunday School. The pebbles of guilt that had dropped in my stomach had all but dissipated once cartoons were offered. The four of us leapt from the cloud we'd snuggled into for twenty minutes, and shuffled down the stairs towards the television.

"I wish we could skip stupid church every day," Bo smiled at the table once we'd attacked the bagels and eggs with the ferocity of dogs who haven't been fed in days. He said it as though my parents were as trapped in the routine as the rest of us, as if they themselves were being compelled to go by some guardian who wouldn't hear otherwise.

"Well, we're going next week," my dad said. His baseball cap was slightly askew on his head, his messy brown hair poking out in spikes and juts.

In grade school, I used to pray for snow days.

*Please, Dear God, let us have no school tomorrow.*

That night, cuddled in my own cloud bed, I said a different prayer.

*Thank you for Mom letting us miss church.*

I think God must have had himself a laugh at that one. If we're made in His image, I'm almost sure he did.

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Savannah was the quiet one when we were kids. She was reserved. Smiley and polite with strangers and adults, soft-spoken and gentle in public. I got under her skin, as did Bo, quite easily. The pair of us were loud and annoying. Savannah was often left in charge of the four of us, even if no one really assigned that task to her. She sort of always felt it was her job to keep us in line, especially in public.

I admired Savannah immensely. She was always dressed in the best outfits and said the best things. Her hair was never messy like mine, and she never had food on her clothing. Savannah was smart. She won a short story contest in middle school, and I told all my friends in school. They didn't think it was nearly as cool as I did. Savannah was awkward around boys, despite the fact most of the boys had crushes on her. The first time a boy asked her out, she told him she had to ask our mom first. Savannah was an easy target for bullies in middle school because she was pretty but didn't know how pretty she was, and was shy and smart. She came home crying one day after school and it surprised me because she never cried. Savannah was and still is a silent crier. You might not even know she's crying, you might think she's laughing if you didn't see the actual tears. Her shoulders kind of shake, and she makes no noise, but suddenly she'll let out a little gasp and you realize she's crying, and it's a sinking feeling that's sort of scary, like finding out Santa's not real or you did way worse on a test than you thought because all those things defy expectations. The day Savannah came home crying made me feel an empty sort of sadness, especially when I realized Savannah must have felt much sadder than I.

Kayla was always loud. She had hair the color of gold and was all tan long limbs that I was eternally jealous of. She led us in skits and plays that we put on for my parents, despite the fact she was the second child and not the oldest. Kayla played veterinarian and doctor with me, even when she went to middle school and I was still in elementary.

Kayla was scared to sleep with the lights off, and there was a time period when the two of us slept in the same room for months, despite the fact we both had our own rooms. Kayla was always very popular in school, and was good at making friends. But what always impressed me about Kayla was her predilection for making "nerdy" friends. She was in with the popular kids, of course, but would occasionally bring home a dorkier friend, someone who wore glasses or was obsessed with Broadway plays. Kayla was always authentically herself, and sometimes I was jealous of her and Savannah's relationship. Kayla had, and still has, a quick temper. But she cools down quicker than anyone I've ever met. Which is pretty cool.

And then there's Bo. Bo was my buddy. We would play the rowdy games my sisters wouldn't engage in. Bo and I wrestled. We played Legos and football, we chased each other with BB guns in the backyard. He looked up to me so much, and I took advantage of it sometimes. I made fun of him in front of my sisters to get an easy laugh. He would almost always cry or throw a tantrum, which only made it easier to make fun of him. Still, all I had to do was mumble a soft apology or offer to play roller hockey in the backyard, and he'd be back to being a little puppy at my heels.

Bo was a chubby little kid with blonde hair that grew into curls if he let it grow out. He loved to dance, and would often dance himself into a red-faced sweat. Bo and I were often grouped together. When my parents said "the girls," they were usually referring to Savannah and Kayla. Bo was the only boy among a sea of girl toys and girl fights and the mean little comments

that only girls know how to dish out. But he had me, and we made clubhouses and secret handshakes just for us.

We lived most of our childhood in Montclair, New Jersey. We fought and played and ate big family dinners. We fought *a lot*, but we loved each other fiercely. My parents made sure of that.

“Look it. When you’re an old lady like me, no one will care about or understand your life more than those three,” my mom lectured anytime I complained about my siblings. We tended to gang up on one another quite a bit. “So you better go in there and try to get along with them.”

Savannah and I shared a room at our summer home down the shore. We wrote our names behind the bed frames with the date, and giggled ourselves to sleep that night at the secret.

Kayla and I walked to middle school every morning, rain or shine, when I was a sixth grader and she was in eighth. We gossiped and commiserated about Ms. Bernheim, the mean English teacher we both had.

Bo and I used to stand at the edge of the ocean during summers down the shore. We picked up handfuls of sand and chucked them into the sea, convinced the more sand we threw the bigger the waves would be.

Safe to say, I grew up extraordinarily rich in the only way I see meaningful.

### In My Father's House

It was April of 2012. My hands were sweaty, creasing the corners of my folded-up statement. I looked around the room, glancing at Jordan, Miranda, Lena, Will, and all of the other kids in my confirmation class. We had been going to church over an hour early every morning for the past year, studying and learning in order to be officially confirmed as members of the Presbyterian Church of Upper Montclair. Most of us had been going to PCUM since we were little kids. Most of us went to church every Sunday.

Lena and I had a sleepover the night before, staying up late to talk about boys and girls and all the drama that middle school has to offer. We fell asleep in my bed around one in the morning, like we'd been doing at countless sleepovers since I was five years old. I stared at the back of her head now, willing her to turn around. I thought I might throw up, nerves stirring my stomach worse than bad curry.

Finally, my confirmation mentor found me in the common room. Each confirmation candidate got a mentor. Someone we could chat about our faith with, a person to help and support us as we navigated our acceptance into the church. My mentor was Sarah Johnson. She was barely out of college, a short and squat girl-woman with a crop of bright blonde hair and a smile that screamed (and still screams) "Hello there! Do you have time to talk about our savior Jesus Christ?" Sarah sat beside me.

"Hey girl!" She twisted her lips upwards into a grin that was bordering menacing. "Let's take a look at that faith statement, shall we?"

Faith statements are read aloud to the elders of the church during a confirmation service. They are professions of, well, faith. And a confirmation of Christianity. The elders vote as to whether or not the candidate should be admitted as a member of the church. My church is somewhat relaxed. Most people are admitted, even if they confess a smidge of doubt. I remembered my older sister Savannah had done just that. I wrote my statement with precisely that in mind.

"Today, I become a member of the church. I am excited, scared, but also astounded that I have made it from being one of the kids in the children's sermon, to now, becoming a full-fledged member. I would say that my faith has perplexed me and changes continually. At this point, I would say my faith is not as strong as it once was, and I am till questioning myself and my beliefs. I don't think that if you asked me, I would be able to give a straight yes or no answer on my belief in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit."

I watched Sarah's eyes scan the first paragraph of my statement. She looked up at me with a soft grimace, her beady brown eyes searching me. She looked back down.

"When I was little, I was so positive and trusting in God I promised my whole family that one day I would become a pastor. As time has evolved, since I was six years old, slowly my faith has eroded. I don't know how or why this occurred, but slowly I found myself praying less and less, and trusting less in God than I ever had. I think it would be due to watching the news on events such as the Haiti earthquake, which broke an already broken civilization, or watching my dad's favorite cousin die slowly from breast cancer leaving behind two pretty and kind daughters. Then I looked at my own charmed lifestyle, from my summers down at the shore, to a loving family and a great home, and decided something was wrong with these two pictures. I am unsure in how there can be a God when these two sides are so unequal. Although I am very confused, I do however find the Bible interesting and gorgeous in its message."

Sarah stopped again. "Wow, you've clearly thought a lot about this, girl."

I thought back to the church retreat camp we went to just three weeks prior. I drove in Sarah's car, and we listened to Wiz Khalifa and Zac Brown Band. She told me I was her funniest and favorite mentee. The doubt on her face now creased her forehead, and my guts suddenly tied themselves up in a messy bow.

She looked back down.

"My grandfather and my mom were the two biggest helps in me trying to figure things out in my faith. My grandpa has seemed so natural in his beliefs and his faith that I was instantly jealous as soon as I was old enough to realize my faith was slowly growing weaker. My mother was equally as certain, but she will admit she too has questions from time to time. I don't know how they became so absolutely positive in their faith, but I hope one day I too can achieve this. To this day, my mom still tries to talk to me about what I don't understand, and it has been helpful during confirmation homework and just the questions I have in general. My grandpa will talk about any section, chapter, or verse in the Bible for hour upon hour without losing the light of excitement and giddy joy from speaking of his devotion and true love for God and Jesus. I can only hope that one day I will be this confident."

I looked away as Sarah started to look back up at me. I saw Lena turn around smiling, clearly almost done with her revisions session. Her mentor was a middle-aged mom, who flashed a pearly grin at me. I could only manage a feeble thumbs up.

I searched Sarah's eyes to see where she was at in my essay. She was reading the final paragraph.

"As shown, I am nowhere near where I would like to be in my relationship with God. In fact, I am unsure about mostly everything. I can't tell what I actually believe with my own heart, or what I have been told from an early age. No matter what I believe in, I will try to live my life as Jesus and God would have me do so, regardless of my faith in them."

Sarah is a kind person. She cut out the niceties, and cut right to it.

"It's very well written, Mentee," she began. We'd gotten into the habit of calling each other "Mentor" and "Mentee." All of our email correspondences were signed off as such. "I'm just a little bit worried you won't get confirmed if you leave it like this. You have to answer to the elders. They will ask you at the end of the service whether or not you believe in God, and that is a Yes or No question."

I took a breath, and reminded myself I was talking to Sarah. Not an elder, not Pastor Greg, not my parents, but Sarah. Sarah who wore scarves and silly socks and wanted to marry Tim Tebow. Sarah who emailed me to make sure I set my alarm clock for class.

We emailed edits back and forth. Sarah chipped away at the doubt in my essay, but she didn't erase it. After all, lying in a faith statement service seems a little taboo. Nonetheless, she knew my confirmation was important to me and very important to my family. So she sent a note with her final edits in an email, the day of my confirmation:

"Maggie – see if these edits make sense, and go along with your beliefs. Remember, you have to answer, "Do you trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" and you should answer it truthfully yes. We don't want your faith statement to be super contradictory. It's perfect that you are honest and so clearly acknowledge your doubts/questions. Because everybody has them!! Having faith is believing in God/Jesus/Holy Spirit even when you have questions. Part of my favorite bible verse is this: 'Faith is being sure of what we hope for' it's Hebrews something. You're sure of what you hope for, you want to have faith in God etc. like your mom and grandfather. Luckily, God doesn't ever tell anyone that she has too little faith. Any faith is faith. Sorry to get so preachy! Anyway, make sure you look at the things I've crossed out / replaced.



Most of them are grammatical or stylistic. And I know the last line sounds different the way I've edited it, I just think it's clear throughout the whole thing that you have big questions but still want faith, and ending with 'regardless of my faith in them' seems like ending on a down note. I think ending on a positive note is better, but if it doesn't feel right to you then definitely don't change it. On the other hand, if you don't really care, then change it haha and please don't show up with a torah and singing in Hebrew tonight."

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*The Encyclopedia Britannica* describes confirmation as, "Christian rite by which admission to the church, established previously in infant baptism, is said to be confirmed (or strengthened and established in faith)." Essentially, confirmation seeks to reaffirm the precedence of belief and faith that are pressed upon infants and young children during a baptism ceremony. Interestingly, Evangelical churches prefer to baptize adult Christians rather than babies, and bypass the confirmation process all together. The baptism is a surrender to faith in it of itself, an adult decision to become a Christian rather than a baby's participation in a ceremony that is perhaps more about the pictures and the cute baptism dress than the actual acceptance of the Lord into the infant's life. If Jesus Christ himself came and tapped a one-year-old on the shoulder, that toddler most likely wouldn't melt with the fear and love of a devoted, newly baptized Christian. He'd probably just cry.

So, confirmation is reaffirming what most dedicated Protestant Christians have already signed on for whilst still defecating in diapers and crying for their mothers. It's promising to follow God and live according to His will. But this time, with the agency and intention of an "adult." Most denominations confirm church kids around twelve or thirteen, so as to how adult the decision actually is remains to be seen. Still, I concede it is more adult than the choice of a screaming nine-month-old.

It's just something you have to do. Jewish kids get Bar Mitzvah'ed, Mexican teenagers get a quinceañera, American teenagers throw sweet sixteen's, it's just another one of those moving up rituals humans are so intent on practicing. A marker of age or maturity or growth, or perhaps ceremonies to reveal just how immature and under-cooked young teenagers really are. Most of my Jewish friends botched their Torah readings. They didn't look like the men and women they were said to have turned into after the transformative experience of their Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations. They still looked like plain old David Schnittman and Tori Schoen to me.

What's the deal with all of these moving up ceremonies? Is confirmation just the Christian version of a Bar Mitzvah? It's certainly easier. Christian kids don't have to read in Hebrew, don't have to learn an entirely new language. In some ways. In other ways, confirmation *does* require learning an entire new language. Reading the Bible biblically and scholarly. There are no pictures to go along with the readings, and there are comprehension study questions at the end. There's no more *Veggie Tales*. Nothing is cut out, none of the gore, violence, or contradictions that the Bible has to offer. Sections that were mysteriously missing while in Sunday School. It is sort of like learning a new language. Or perhaps just learning how to read through a foreign language, even if you still lack the ability to speak it yourself. The Bible doesn't say anything about this confirmation class business, so it's hard to know What Jesus Would Do (WWJD).

The Bible doesn't say a single word about confirmation class. However, there is a scene from Jesus's childhood that hits on a similar note of developmental growth. After this particular scene, he is no longer just a child to Mary and Joseph. He's something else. Specifically, he's the

Messiah. A prophet. The one who was promised. Mary and Joseph always knew what and who Jesus was. This scene just confirms what they already knew.

This passage is called “The Boy Jesus at the Temple.” Jesus and his parents are in Jerusalem celebrating Passover. Once it is over, Mary and Joseph begin the journey home to Nazareth with a group of extended family and friends. They soon realize that Jesus is missing, and return to Jerusalem in a panic. Finally, after three days they find him in a temple. He is sitting with a group of rabbis and scholars, asking questions and engaging in religious conversations. The book of Luke reads, “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.’ ‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’” (Luke 2:47-49).

He says it so flatly. If most teenagers acted with that sort of attitude, it would probably result in a slap upside the head. But, him being the Messiah and all, Mary holds back. God bless her. Why would they search for him? They should have known he would be in the temple. Mary and Joseph are both surprised and confused by this response. The level of devotion and determination Jesus has to God is not yet apparent. Not until this scene. Jesus’s tone and lack of remorse, his confusion at their astonishment, it speaks to how deeply ingrained his faith is at this early point in his life. He just has to confirm it to them.

He gets his point across. Luke later tells us, “He went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke, 2:51-52). This is poignant. Jesus is transformed in Mary’s eyes. She treasures what she saw that day in Jerusalem. Something is different, whether Luke specifically says it or not.

More importantly, Jesus continues to grow. This passage doesn’t say that suddenly, Jesus was a full-blown man and the prophet the people began to know as the Messiah. But it’s the beginning. The beginning of his growth, and his faith. There is something comforting about that, at least for a young Christian. Luke was the chapter of the Bible my confirmation class focused on that year. I highlighted this passage in my youth Bible, and added a smiley face for good measure.

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We filed into the youth group room in our dresses and suits, looking and feeling like the awkward preteens that we most certainly were. The youth group room was meant to seem cool and hip. It had beanie bags and slouchy couches meant for “chilling.” There was a signed picture of Stephen Colbert, and posters with Christian phrases like “Jesus ROCKS!” hanging in the corners. It smelled like hormones. And sweat. And BBQ chips.

“Wow, we won’t have to wake up anymore,” Lena said with enthusiasm. All of us slumped on the couches, waiting to meet in groups with our mentors and the elders.

“And we get free bibles when it’s over!” Jordan ran a hand through his greasy, dark gelled back hair. I tried not to gag.

“Don’t forget we are actually going to be members of the church when this is over,” Miranda reminded in a tone akin to a librarian, her thick glasses pushed up on her skinny nose.

We were finally separated into groups, our mentors following us into separate rooms usually used to teach Sunday School classes. It was time to read our statements to various members while our parents mingled in Fellowship Hall.

I stretched the hem of my green skirt, worried it was coming up too high. My mom got me it for Duke Plofker's Bar Mitzvah. *Lena looks cuter than I do*, I thought, stretching my skirt further. Sarah plopped down beside me, gave me a tap, and a look that read "Did you remember to bring your faith statement?"

I held it up.

I listened to the other confirmation candidates read their essays. About how God had saved them (really? In our quick thirteen years of life?). How they were excited to become members of such a great church. How confirmation class had helped them become a better Christian. I played with the fraying plastic on the old card table in front of me, looking out of the giant window in front of me. It was a clear night. I remember because I was counting stars during Miranda's reading, and almost didn't hear that it was my turn to profess my faith.

It felt tacky and fake to stick on the ending Sarah suggested. To have it all wrapped up in a bow. My original statement had actually been too generous, too faithful. I felt absolutely nothing towards God. I feel nothing at all. My thirteen-year-old wisdom has provided me clarity. Clarity to say that God didn't and doesn't and would never exist. And it felt good to doubt because I was so sick and tired of believing in something that had never done anything tangible for me in my whole life. Praying never made me happier, praying never made a sick person I'd loved ever recover, praying never took away anyone's pain. And that didn't only frustrate me, it was just plain unacceptable. Because if I was God, I would never let any of my children face their pain. I remembered my dad telling me he would take a bullet for me. It didn't really seem like God would, so using that logic, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that God was a lie. How foolish my parents are, like kids waiting up for Santa. Even more foolish than Santa. The Easter Bunny, perhaps.

But, I went through with it, I read my statement, I lied and told the elders I believed in God. My parents got me a gift. A real gold cross necklace that I stuffed under my shirt when I wore it.

My essay was the best written of the bunch, Sarah told me nonchalantly afterwards. A biased claim, no doubt. Every year, two or three students are picked to read their statements to the whole church during a regular Sunday Service. I watched with admiration every year since I was eight or nine. I knew I would be picked to read.

But I wasn't. Jordan and Miranda got to read their statements about the beauty and grace of God's love, and how they couldn't wait to continue their lives as faithful stewards of the Holy Ghost.

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*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines doubt as:

Doubt (verb)

1. To call into question the truth of: to be uncertain or in doubt about
2. To lack confidence in: DISTRUST
  - a. To consider unlikely
3. FEAR
  - a. SUSPECT

In early high school, I read a lot of Norman Vincent Peale. Peale was a Protestant minister who preached at the Minister Collegiate Reformed Church for most of his career. He was also an

author, well known for ideas on the power of positive thinking. In fact, that is the title of the book I owned.

*The Power of Positive Thinking*. Freshman and sophomore year of high school, it was my Bible. The red title shown in loud letters on a manila yellow background, its shiny lacquer-like hard-cover shell looking at me, emanating confidence. My mom bought me the book because I'd become a bit of a downer. A shell of my formerly gregarious self. In lacrosse, I was riddled with anxiety. I committed to play collegiately at Brown University when I was only fifteen years old. Normally, that might be a sigh of relief.

"Now that I'm committed to Brown everyone will expect me to be amazing, it will be so awkward when I'm just me," I complained.

In school, I was positive none of my friends wanted to be around me. My best friend Lena had transferred to a private school after freshman year, leaving me to find new friends.

"The three of them have always been close since middle school, I feel weird going over," I whined. My new friends had all known each other for years. I felt like an outsider.

And I could not stand church.

"Everyone in there is so stuffy. If God loves everyone, then why do I have to wear a dress to pray? Seems like a lot of tradition for nothing," I doubted.

So, like any doting mother, my mom purchased me a glorified self-help book. Peale did have some nuggets of wisdom that have stuck with me even to today.

"Don't take tomorrow to bed with you."

"Get the heat and emotion out of worry, and put cold, ruthless scrutiny onto the problem, and worry loses its power. When we are worried and filled with apprehension, we become panicky and are likely to see only gloom and failure. There isn't any situation so bad that it won't become a lot better when you think rationally - and spiritually - about it. God gives you the ability to think rationally about things by filling you with peace and faith" (320).

It is true that rational thinking is much more productive than anxiety. And I saw anxiety as a branch on the tree of doubt. Doubt is the trunk, stemming all sorts of negative emotions. Panic, anxiety, distrust. They sound like synonyms, but I saw them more as symptoms. Symptoms of doubt. I doubt my abilities, and therefore I have anxiety. If I doubt God is real, I must distrust the church. If I doubt God's love for me, his love for me as my authentic self, I am panicking.

But how can you be doubt-free? Should you be doubt free of anything, for that matter? The theory of gravity is just that: a theory. The scientific community winces when calling it a fact, despite gravity being an essential pillar of scientific understanding. Is anything for certain? Following God blindly certainly fits the image of the faithful and trusting servant. Doubt is for nonbelievers.

What if I don't doubt the existence of God, but perhaps just *some* of the material in the Bible. Does that make me a nonbeliever? What if I still believe in the spirit of God, maybe even in the human embodiment of Jesus, just retain some serious concerns with some of the scripture? I couldn't wrap my head around Adam and Eve (still can't). For that matter, I couldn't wrap my head around the claims of immaculate conception or resurrection, perhaps the two most integral pillars of the Christian faith. But I doubted them heavily, and my doubt spiraled into worry and panic and stress.

God is very clear on worry. If you worry or are anxious, you are not trusting in God. You are not handing your life to Him, you are not faithful. He will take care of you.

One of my favorite passages from Matthew echoes this. I read it every night in high school, and it felt curious, especially since I told myself I was a nonbeliever.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?...

Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:25-34).

Somehow, I found this comforting. Even during periods of my life where God and faith were nothing more to me than something to do on a Sunday morning. This section of the Bible spoke on a deeper level to me, on a level at the core of my being. The core of life, the core of seasons of life. And impermanence. The grasses of the field are here today, and are gone tomorrow. So why worry about trivial matters, when life is short anyways?

This chapter of my teenage Bible is well-worn in around the edges. It was around this time that I came to the conclusion that despite the fact God was not real, despite the fact God was fake, I could still go to church and enjoy the services without seeming like a *complete* fraud. After all, people practice yoga or meditate and they aren't all Buddhists! If church and the Bible and a sense of love gave me peace, why not lean into that?

Do you really need to believe in God, do you really need to erase doubt, just to love all the great things Jesus said? I believed I could side-step my belief, that I could access the sense of peace I felt many Christians had, just from enjoying the Bible as a piece of philosophical literature. And I believed I didn't need any help from anyone or anything or any God to do so.

### Say a Little Prayer

“Should we say a prayer? Who’d like to say it?” My mom would ask, at the precise moment I was positive she had forgotten. And I was *just* getting ready to put the steak in my mouth.

Dinner time prayers are one of the most irritating parts of dinner. My mom cannot put a bite in her mouth until she’s said thank you. It shouldn’t bother me, it really shouldn’t. When all is said and done, dinner time prayer probably eats up about three minutes of time. I think what always pissed me off, what maybe still does, is the request for a volunteer. If she wants to bless the meal so bad, why doesn’t she just do it herself?

And don’t get me started on when she tells us to “join hands.” Praying while holding hands at the dinner table is on a list of the things I hate to do most in the world, alongside listening to a literature theory discussion, watching baseball, bringing out the trash, or taking trips to the gynecologist or the DMV. Horrifying. I’m about to eat, you expect me to hold someone else’s hand right before I do that? Not just anyone’s hand, Bo’s hand? Hellish.

I can picture so clearly how everyone says their prayer. I don’t know what it reveals about them, if it reveals anything at all. Does it expose something about their personality? Their faith? Their level of hunger? All three?

“Dear God,” my mother will begin, her blue eyes earnestly shut so tight I think the lids will fuse together. “Thank you for this meal. Thank you for these children and this husband and this house. Watch over Savannah as she applies to college this week. Help Kayla with her science project. Let Maggie excel on the lacrosse field this weekend. Protect Bo as he starts spring football. Find peace for Rob in the office. Oh, and help –insert name of sick or ailing friend/family member-.”

It’s the same formula. Thank you. Please help us. And please help this person, who *really* needs the help. And wow, does it take her a while to spit it out. Comparatively, of course. After a while, the rest of us figured out it would be a lot quicker if we offered our prayer services up instead.

“BlessusOhLordforthesethygiftswhichweareabouttoreceivefromChrist’sbounty. Amen.” My dad spits his prayer out, his eyes closed, his hands folded, moving rhythmically to the chant.

“Dear God,” Bo begins, his eyes shut. “Thank you for the food. Looks good. Thanks for helping me get an A on my test today.” He hears one of his three sisters giggle, and then God help us all, he’s off to the races. “Thanks for helping Mom to make some edible food tonight, it looks amazing. Please, Dear God almighty, let Evan have a party this weekend...” It continues until he opens an eye to catch my dad’s, which is usually fixed into a stern glare.

“Thank you for this food. Thank you for our family, and thank you for everything you do for us. Bless us in this coming week. Amen. Oh, and help –insert name of sick or ailing friend/family member-.” Kayla’s formula is the same as my mom’s, she just may be a little bit hungrier.

Savannah does not say grace. I have no idea what that would sound like, like a foreign tongue to my ear. I can’t even picture it, so I cannot write down what she would say. She closes her eyes while we pray, but she doesn’t fold her hands. Her eyebrows are dark, even darker than mine, and she knits them together like she’s thinking very hard. Conversely, sometimes I open my eyes to see that she never closed hers. I open my eyes and see her looking around at the rest of us.

“Bless us Oh Lord for these thy gifts which we are about to receive from Christ’s bounty. Amen.” This is my go-to. “Oh, and please watch over –insert name of sick or ailing friend/family member-.”

The words tumble out, I feel my cheeks redden, but I’ve done the deed. I’ve blessed the meal, it’s time to eat.

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“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

Isn’t that nice? A nice concept, at the very least? Nothing is worthy of worry, give it all to God. He may not fix it immediately, my mom would tell me. Or even in the way you think. But He hears you. Someone to listen, someone who cares. The comfort in prayer.

I’ve prayed for a lot of things in my life, in a lot of different ways. I once had a youth group teacher who gave us an extremely detailed outline for the perfect prayer. The quadratic formula of prayers.

“Here’s how you should talk to God,” he said with certainty. His bald head shone under the spotlight above him. “Just remember the acronym ‘ACTS,’ like the book Acts in the Bible.

A is for acknowledgement. Acknowledge Him, say ‘Dear God,’ or ‘My Lord,’ something like that. Next is Confession. Confess how you have sinned. Simple. Then, Thanks. Thank Him for the beautiful things in your life, and the ugly things in your life that are going to make you stronger. Last is Seek. Tell God what is bothering you, what you need.”

I used the ACTS formula for a little while, realizing I was praying all wrong. But I would always forget some part.

*Fuck. I’ll start over. Forgot the Acknowledgement. DEAR God, forgive me for being a bitch to Kayla, please help me with my exam this week, FUCK I forgot the thank you...*

So that didn’t last that long.

The Bible champions prayer. It’s our earthly connection to God. Psalms is one of the most poetic, beautiful books in the Bible. It’s practically just an epic poem. It reads, “In my distress, I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before Him, into His ears” (Psalms 18:6).

I called to the Lord. How personable is that? I *called* to him. It practically says I texted the Lord. The beauty of being able to call upon your Lord, to have enough trust even in distress, to know He will pick up. To not call a friend or a wife or husband or father or mother but to call the Father. It was beyond comforting to my existence. Even as I drifted away from youth group and the solid belief my parents had tried to instill upon me practically at my baptism, prayer was aloe vera to my doubting soul. Because if Jesus and God *are* real, if I was actually wrong, it’s okay. And they’re just a phone call away.

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*Please, Dear God. Please, please, please, please, please, please.*

I prayed for the same thing every day and night. For some reason, I always remembered this particular prayer when I would get ready in the morning and have to look in a mirror.

Freshman year of high school was an interesting time. An awkward time. A confusing time. I discovered I was no longer a child, and yet, felt so distant from the semi, almost, not-quite-adult seniors. So much so, I couldn’t believe we were allowed in the same building. My

oldest sister Savannah was a senior. She drove me to school with my other sister Kayla, and I could never stop staring. They looked light years away from me.

*Please, Dear God, I will do anything.*

My boyfriend Cooper sat down next to me at the lunch table. He placed his arm around my chair. I felt myself start to sweat.

What confused me the most is that initially I had an embarrassingly *massive* crush on Cooper. He was cute, with dark hair and light brown eyes, lined with thick, long eyelashes and dark eyebrows. Cooper wore blue and white checkered pants the first day of school and I couldn't believe the courage. Every other boy wore tan chinos.

After the school football team won the 2012 state championship, my friend told me Cooper liked me. We kissed that night, and started dating three weeks later. I was ecstatic. I liked Cooper. He was good at soccer and popular. What more could a fourteen-year-old ask for in a first boyfriend?

"So can I come over again after school?" he asked me, snapping me back into the cafeteria with a tap on my shoulder.

Ugh.

"Yeah, of course! We can watch a movie or something."

*Please.*

He came over. And immediately wanted to make out. I really tried this time. I ignore the way his stubble felt on my face (like ants crawling all over me), and the scent of his musky cologne (is that Abercrombie and Fitch? Or maybe Old Spice?). I ignored his hand trailing to the bottom of my sweater, I tried to really focus, to get into it, to get my mind to shut up. Do people normally think this much while kissing?

*Please, please, please, please, please.*

I wanted so badly to like it, to feel anything besides mild distaste. Once while kissing Cooper, I felt neutral. That was huge for me. I wrote in my journal it was the best kiss of my short life.

*Please! God, please!*

Praying while kissing is perhaps my weirdest prayer to date. But I had to. If I couldn't get myself to like Cooper, then... I actually didn't know what that meant. Or maybe I did know what it meant. I just wasn't in a place to give it a name.

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*Please God, help me make this save. Please dear God. Thanks for getting me this far. Help me make this save.*

There's a girl lined up at the eight meter, about to take a free-position shot. Basically a free throw for lacrosse players. It's virtually shooter versus goalie in a free position. Her versus me. Mano y mano.

*Please God.*

In high school, I decided the most effective way to save a shot was to pray right before it. Or when I saw the offense running down towards me. Once I started doing this, I couldn't not do it, it became a crippling superstition. If I didn't pray before a shot, I was positive it would go in the net.

I held a gloved hand up to the ref, signaling I wasn't ready. She shot me an exasperated short nod, so I turned into the goal to grab my water bottle. I squirted it forcefully. Water spilled



over my nose and face, dripping into my mouth. A mixture of sweat and warm water that was far from refreshing.

*Shit. What if I just got water in my contact lenses? Please Dear God don't let there be water in my contact lenses. That could mean an eye infection... Or worse, she could score simply because I can't see...*

My panic was cut short.

“C'mon, Keeper. Let's get this going.”

I banged on the pipes of the net with my stick, did a few hops, squared up, and stayed absolutely still. I heard the whistle, I saw the attacker's feet move toward me, her stick cocked back ready to fire.

Then, within a blink, I heard the crowd roar. I saved the ball, it was in my stick. I never really remember how I get from point A to point B, how the mechanics of the physical and mental match up to make a save, but somehow, I had made this save.

*Thank you, God, I prayed quietly for a quarter of a second before launching the ball to my team, clearing it down the field.*

*Thank you, thank you. Help me make the next one. Help me stop praying and thinking for the remainder of the game. Thank you.*

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How much can you actually pray for? Because not every prayer gets answered. God isn't Santa Claus, there are no wish lists, and sometimes bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. And the world keeps on spinning. Sometimes, I prayed for saves that I didn't make. How can I trust prayer, especially on the big things, when God can't even handle the little stuff?

My mom prayed every day for her best friend Patty to beat her brain tumor. Patty went to France to bathe in the Springs of Bernadette. Named for St. Bernadette, the water is said to have healing power when combined with prayer and faith. Patty died not six months later. There was no miracle. Patty had a lot of people praying for her, including three sons and a husband. And I wonder why she didn't get her miracle, when other people do.

Why doesn't prayer always work?

Not even for Jesus.

Right before Jesus is crucified, he prays to God. He doesn't want to die, he doesn't want the earthly pain and humiliation he knows is about to come.

He prays, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

If it be possible, let this seemingly impossible and unthinkable conflict pass. If possible, save me from this situation. If possible, let me make this save. If possible, let me feel attraction towards this boy.

Nevertheless, the world runs according to Your will, not mine. Nevertheless, I will accept what is coming my way fearlessly.

Not even the son of God always gets what he prays for. Jesus is brought to trial the very next day. He is beaten and tortured, humiliated and mocked, crucified and murdered. I know the end of this story, I know why Jesus was beaten, tortured, humiliated, mocked, crucified and murdered. For humanity to live without sin.

The Lord's Prayer is something I have known since elementary school. It is repeated at most Christian churches weekly. The Lord's Prayer is to bless the communion, to remind the church what communion is, and what Jesus's sacrifice was for.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name  
Thy Kingdom come Thy will be done  
On Earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread  
And forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.  
For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory forever.  
Amen.*

This prayer mirrors the first communion, the Lord's Supper. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus eats a Passover supper with his disciples. The book of Matthew says, "'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Matthew 26: 27-29).

His blood is poured out for the sins of billions, the concept of forgiveness introduced to a sinful humanity. A loving Father who can and will forgive you, if you ask to be forgiven.

So, I suppose when Jesus prayed to God to be saved, to not have to go through with the whole crucifixion business, God felt he was justified to deny the request. While God loves Jesus, and hates to see him suffer, humanity is at stake. And God gave Jesus a task that Jesus could, and eventually did handle.

"God only gives you what you can handle!"

This is what people say when you complain that your prayers aren't answered, that you are struggling endlessly with no end in sight. God only gives you what you can handle. He takes away or brings His peace to situations you can't handle. Beyond that, you can handle it.

What if you can't, though? Patty's sons Jack, Joe, and Rob, can certainly *handle* being motherless. But I think they would handle having a mom a lot better.

"Everything happens for a reason! What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Another wonderful sliver of wisdom people offer up when tough times come knocking. I agree that the things we survive from make us into tougher people. But I think they change us too, in ways that aren't always so favorable. Rough patches of life can leave people callused and hard. I know that life isn't meant to be perfect and God can't just fix every shitty problem the world flings at us, but at the same time, why they hell can't He?

My parents read to my siblings and me a lot when we were younger. Almost nightly. *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Narnia Chronicles*, and once, my mom read us a Holocaust memoir called *The Hiding Place*. It's a true story written by Dutch Christian Corrie ten Boom. Ten Boom was sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp with her father and sister, the price to pay for hiding Jews in their apartment for years.

At one point in the book, Ten Boom notices their barrack is infested by fleas. She is upset, but her sister Betsie insists they thank God for the fleas. Ten Boom is exasperated with Betsie's foolishness.

The next day, their barrack is set to be gassed. The Nazis decide to skip over them, too disgusted with the flea infestation to bother. Betsie insists ten Boom read from the Bible, a biblical *I told you so*.

“In the feeble light I turned the pages. ‘Here it is: Comfort the frightened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all...’ It seemed written expressly to Ravensbruck.”

‘Go on,’ said Betsie. ‘That wasn’t all’

‘Oh, yes... Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.’

‘That’s it, Corrie! That’s His answer. “Give thanks in all circumstances!” That’s what we can do.’” (209).

That story hit me hard, even as a little kid. Thanking God for the fleas. It’s so hard to do, it’s so hard to take your medicine and thank God for the bad times. I feel as if I’m especially bad at it. Maybe I’m praying for the wrong things. Maybe I should be... It was hard to even articulate the words in my head, but I forced myself bit by bit. Maybe I should be praying and thanking God for making me gay. That something good will come of this. It was hard to label myself in such a way, hard to even let myself consider “gay” as a possibility. Thanking God for that, thanking Him for what I saw as the ugliest part of myself, was a monumental task. It was actually, at that point in time, impossible.

“Tough times don’t last, tough people do.”

My least favorite. It is a little tiring to always have to be tough. And when the world is falling apart and everything is mismatched and backwards, it’s fucking tough to wonder why God doesn’t pick up the phone and return some missed calls.

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“Hurry up and shower. Pastor Greg and Pastor Lauren are going to be here in like, fifteen minutes,” Kayla glanced at my sweaty clothes, fresh out of lacrosse practice my sophomore year of high school.

Pastor Greg and Pastor Lauren? It was a Tuesday night, why would they be coming over? My face must have screamed confusion.

“Yeah, don’t ask. I have no idea why they’re coming. I guess Mom emailed Greg some questions about gay marriage or something.”

I felt bile trickle up my throat, hot and thin like a river of poison. It tasted like fear, and I began to sweat through my already sweaty t-shirt. I stood cemented to the wooden floor, prickles of goosebumps snaking up my legs.

“Mag, go shower. Seriously, they’re going to be here soon.”

I felt my feet move numbly towards the bathroom, thudding deftly as though I were wearing shoes of brick rather than just thin socks. It was out of body. I watched myself turn on the water, undress, and step over the ledge of the bathtub into the shower. I looked at the bath tile depicting different safari scenes, I squirted floral scented shampoo into my hair, and I shaved my legs (which was quite difficult, due to the number of goosebumps populating my pale skin). It was all mechanical. I sat in the back corner of my mind, shaking back and forth in a manic motion of pure despair, watching my body wash itself.

*Please, Dear God. Don’t let this be about me, don’t let this be about what I told Mom last week.*

The previous week, I accidentally came out to my mom. It really was just an accident. She’d cornered me in a drunk moment of self-hatred. I was puking my guts out in our downstairs bathroom after a lacrosse celebration party when she took advantage of my state.

“Mags, this is so not like you,” she breathed, her cold hands on the back of my sweaty neck. “You are so not yourself.”

I wretched in response. “Yeah, well, I don’t know what to say about that. I’m just not happy anymore.”

She sighed. “But you used to be the happiest, most care-free little kid. Everyone thought you were so funny and cute. Now you’re just very...”

The pause crept up on me, slid under my skin like a splinter.

“What, what am I now?”

“Well, you’re very angry.”

She got up slowly, rubbing my back once for good measure before walking into the living room. I stayed a beat longer, contemplating my next move as the room spun around me. I always hated the Ferris wheel. It’s too slow and static to be an exhilarating ride, but still requires a good deal of courage to convince yourself to get on. The height is exhausting, the spinning even worse.

Still, I followed her into the living room. I plopped myself down on the tan couch opposite the chaise chair that no one in our family was particularly fond of sitting in.

“I am angry,” I said. My voice hitched on the final syllable, a choke caught in my throat like a trickle of unexpected vinegar.

“I know,” her eyes widened. Suddenly she seemed very old to me, in her pajama set and slippers. Slippers I made for her when I was twelve. “But I don’t know why. I think I know why, but I don’t know.”

“Sometimes I think maybe I’m gay,” I coughed out. Venom I’d been waiting to dispel. I said it quickly, hoping maybe it would be like I never said it at all. And for a while, it was like I never said it at all. We never really talked about it again, and I hoped maybe it had all been a tragically realistic drunken nightmare. I convinced myself of this. It wasn’t hard to do, to tack on yet another repression upon myself, yet another false memory.

That is, until Greg and Lauren wound up on my couch. I felt my fingers grow cold and tingly as I heard the doorbell ring from my room.

*Please, Dear God. Let this be about something else, please, please, please.*

“Maggie, Kayla, Bo! Come downstairs!” My mom called.

We sat like three little ducks, all in a row. Kayla and Bo could not have looked more confused as we watched Lauren and Greg chew nervously on sugar cookies. I attempted to feign the same confusion, my cheeks burning with the heat of a sunburn. To my relief, Greg didn’t address me solely, but rather the group.

“Your mom asked us to come chat because you guys have some questions about same-sex marriage, and how being gay fits in with Christianity,” he started slowly. It was bizarre seeing him out of his pastor robes, in a pair of light-wash dad jeans and a t-shirt. He played nervously with the wire-rimmed glasses perched on his thin nose. His greying hair sat sloppily atop his head.

Lauren sat by, nodding along. She looked like a regular woman out of her normal Sunday apparel. Lauren was actually kind of pretty. My cheeks burned harder at this sudden revelation.

“The Presbyterian Church does not support gay marriage,” Greg said with a sigh. Same-sex marriage had been recognized and allowed since 2013 in New Jersey. My heart sank heavily, and surprisingly. Somehow I found myself invested in what they had to say. Greg shook his head. “I would lose my place in the church if I performed a same-sex ceremony. But, I’d do it anyways.”

What?

“There are a lot of traditionalist views in the Presbyterian Church I don’t believe in. But I believe in love, and I believe love is something beyond the realm of human comprehension, so who am I to get in the way of that?”

Pastor Lauren stepped in politely, her Southern twang cutting softly like a butter knife.

“Back where I’m from, South Carolina, people don’t believe women should be pastors. And I’m a pastor, so sometimes I get some dirty looks myself. I’d be standing right up there with Greg. I would also perform a same-sex ceremony.”

The soft blaze in my cheeks picked up to a gentle roar. A confused flame. I had never been more infuriated with my mother. For involving people in my business, for going behind my back, for being the worst confidante ever, for forcing me to confront the un-confrontable. Somehow, through the heat of my rage, something managed to resonate with me. I was absolutely indignant. *How dare she, Dear God, how dare she out me.* But, something *did* resonate with me.

For the first time in maybe my entire life, an image flit across my brain. It was of me. I saw myself in a white dress. It was too much to picture the person across the altar from me, but for the first time, I could see at least myself standing there. I could see myself dancing and eating wedding cake and vowing away eternity.

*Please Dear God, let it be me someday.*

The prayer was quick, and perhaps meaningless considering I’d crossed my heart and hopped to die, promised myself I no longer believed in God. And if He was real, He certainly wouldn’t appreciate a prayer for a same-sex marriage.

But I sent it into the nether anyways. Just in case.

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*Hi. We haven’t talked in a while, I feel a little off. I kind of forget how to do this. Riding a bike, though right? I’m having a tough time. I’m not sure if You even exist, and if You do, if You can actually do anything for me. Because I don’t actually know what I’m asking for. I think You might know what I’m asking for. I’m so unhappy. Help me.*

I was seated in Sanctuary Church, actually praying. I had been coming to the church with Bri for about five months. Things were reconciling, things were healing, scabs were forming, but I still didn’t know what to think. This was the first time I’d said a prayer during silent prayer time. Previous trips I’d thought about what type of homework I had waiting for me in my dorm room, wondered what the score of the Broncos game was, or maybe even thought about the girl in my business class.

I felt like praying that day. Maybe things had gotten so bad, maybe I had become so at odds with myself that I wanted to give it away to someone else. Or at least exhaust all my options. So the next time I called my mom and complained about anxiety, when she would inevitably prescribe me a few minutes of prayer, I could answer in exasperation that I’d already done it. That I tried her method, and it didn’t work, and I still felt a full hollowness in my gut. Like there was nothing inside me, but simultaneously so many things that I might explode from the fullness of my thoughts, worries, hopes, and dreams.

Will I get to be the starter this season?

How am I going to get an internship this summer?

Does anyone on the team think I’m gay?

What am I going to do if I’m gay?

What grade did I get on my English paper?  
 Do my friends actually like me or just feel obligated to hangout?  
 Am I going to hell?  
 Should I transfer schools?  
 Am I gay?  
 Does she think about me too?

It was physically painful at that point in my life, to remain in the closet. Brown opened so many doors and so much happiness for me, but I felt like remaining in the cramped space of the closet was only putting a silencer on my joy. I felt inauthentic, and I felt like a liar. When my lacrosse team showered together after practice, my lack of honesty felt perverted and wrong. When my friends said hurtful comments about the LGBT community, not knowing they had a spy within their ranks, I felt distrustful of them and their friendship. I stayed up long nights, wondering what my best friends would say, how they would treat me, if only they knew. If only they knew who and what I really was.

On the flip side, I was waiting to tell anyone. I wanted to give heterosexuality one more go around. See if I really could change. Give it the ol' college try.

So, because I didn't know what to do with the vast amount of anxiety in my brain, a wide range of questions that only the future could answer, I decided to pack them up in a backpack and hand them off to God. Like a relay race in my mind. Just hand them on over, see if He could make sense of them. See if we still had a connection, see if He gave a shit, see if maybe just hoping and praying and wishing could make me feel a little bit better.

I opened my eyes. Bri's eyes were still closed. The twinkly string lights hung around the church shone bright that morning against the backdrop of a dreary Providence Sunday morning. The church was quiet, save for a few rustlings from people moving around in their pews.

I looked up to the portrait of Jesus. We made uncomfortable eye contact for a few seconds, acknowledging one another with familiarity but distance. The way you smile awkwardly at a kid from your class who you know *of* but don't necessarily *know*. I couldn't take the distance so I close my eyes again, wanting the words to come naturally but they didn't.

I reopened my eyes. Most of the other eyes in the church were closed. I was a voyeur, observing these people pray. I looked back to Jesus, eyes watching God. He looked a little different. I realized his arms are open, outstretched almost as if to embrace. I used to think they were outstretched in triumph, the stance of a champion.

We weren't there yet, I didn't know if I was ready for a hug.  
 But I closed my eyes and tried again.

### Movies with Cam

“And there was a whole world beyond that shoreline, beyond the forest, beyond the knuckle mountains, beyond, beyond, beyond, not beneath the surface at all, but beyond and waiting” (479).

My eyes stung and I couldn't tell if it was because I was about to cry, or rather because it was three o'clock in the morning on a school night. I was sixteen, and I'd just finished quite possibly the greatest book ever written.

“Beyond, beyond, beyond.”

I started reading emily danforth's (she prefers to spell her name in lowercase letters) *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* only two days prior to the teary finale. I tore through it, devouring up each relatable line as I went.

“You don't know anything about God. You don't even know anything about the movies” (294).

I didn't feel like I *did* know anything about God. And much like the title protagonist Cameron, I liked to think of myself as somewhat of a movie connoisseur. In hindsight, I really knew nothing.

“I knew that this (praying) is where the faith part was supposed to come in, and that faith, real faith, that's what was supposed to keep the whole thing from just being make-believe. But I didn't have any of that faith and I didn't know where to get it, how to get it, or even if I wanted it right then. I felt like it could be God that made this happen, had killed my parents because I was living my life so wrong that I had to be punished, that I had to be made to understand how I must change... But I also thought, at the exact same time I was thinking the other stuff, that maybe what all this meant was that there was no God, but instead only fate...” (44).

That one really made my heart thud. No, my parents were not dead like tragic orphan Cam's but I always had a sinking feeling when bad things happened to me. I had the sinking feeling that the reasoning behind any of my failures was God's wrath against me, God's wrath against a part of myself I'd never even acted upon.

“I just liked girls because I couldn't help not to” (104).

I wished Cam was real so we could be best friends, to commiserate, dissect, and worry together. So we could talk about all the nonsense in our heads that we couldn't discuss with anyone else. Or maybe I wanted to date Cam. To be loved by her. I never could decide.

*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a book about a girl named Cameron Post living in rural Montana in the 90's. Cameron's parents both die in a tragic car accident the same day she has her first kiss with a girl at age twelve. She draws a strong correlation between the two events. All I could think, in all honesty, was *wow, kissing girls at twelve? I know this is fiction, but come on.*

Cam continues living as a sporty, witty, charming teen, with all types of normal mishaps of teenagedom along the way. She smokes weed for the first time, gets a summer job, becomes obsessed with her hot high school English teacher, all that boring stuff. Her voice is so authentic, so truthfully sincere and earnest, I couldn't help but fall in love with her a little.

Cam is busy falling in love with her best friend, Coley. The two of them are caught in a somewhat compromising situation, and (SPOILER ALERT) Cameron is sent to conversion therapy camp. I won't give away too much of the rest of the plot because I would be doing a great disservice to a fantastic piece of gay literature. Maybe calling this young adult novel a piece of literature is a stretch, but I can't help it.

What a beautiful final sentence.

“And there was a whole world beyond that shoreline, beyond the forest, beyond the knuckle mountains, beyond, beyond, beyond, not beneath the surface at all, but beyond and waiting” (479).

I hid under the covers when I read it. It was quite the stealthy operation. I bought the book on iBook on my phone, too nervous to pick up a copy at a bookstore. It was recommended to me in the iTunes book store because I read *The Hunger Games*. I weighed the pros and cons of the purchase for about an hour.

I couldn't bear the thought of one of my family members seeing the book their phones little animated bookshelves on iBook. What if they looked into it and saw what this particular novel was about? Would they immediately know it was me who made the purchase? Immediately question why I would read such a book? My heart ached in fear, even after having finished it, at the mere thought of one of my siblings happening upon Cam's world. Or God forbid, my parents.

I laid on my bed. My phone screen was lit up beside me like a candle, the words of the last page still wafting towards my vision. I liked where it ended. In uncertainty, and yet complete certainty, that Cameron would be okay. That she now had the tools she needs to get by in a world not meant for her. In a world not meant for us.

I've never been one to fawn over book characters. While I'll always be Team Peeta and Team Edward, I was never one to care much one way or the other. They were all well enough, but I did not understand my friends who lost their minds over the actors chosen to play such coveted book-to-movie roles.

“Robert Pattinson is just NOT hot enough to play Edward,” they'd roar. “Edward is a god. I would kill to be with him.”

I'd nod and agree, and not really care. It's not like it was a gay thing, I didn't really give two shits about Bella either. I'd never placed stock in a book character.

Except Cam. I loved Cam with my whole heart, which felt a little weird since sometimes she reminded me of me.

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It feels drastic and perhaps flippant to compare and contrast between conversion therapy and the movies. And yet, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* sets them up practically in opposition of one another.

The first half of the novel, Cam is obsessed with renting VHS tapes. Obsessed. She gets a new one practically every night. Many of them have Sapphic themes. Movies like *Personal Best*, or *Thelma and Louise*. She even rents the overtly Sapphic *The Hunger*, with Susan Sarandon. She's getting an education on what it means to be gay from these films.

Even more interestingly, during her courtship with Coley, the two of them almost exclusively meet and involve themselves romantically under the soft, anonymous glow of a dark movie theater.

In many ways, I guess one could argue that movies, and the movie theater enhanced Cam's gayness. I wonder what things in my life that have enhanced my gayness. Probably Natalie Portman as Padme in the *Star Wars* prequels. I digress.

The movie theater never seemed like an ideal place to kiss. You see it all the time in, well, movies, but it always looked awkward. There's an elbow rest in between, you're both covered in movie theater butter, and most importantly, you're sitting next to about fifty other people!



Three months before I read about my first love, Cam, I went on a date with a boy named Perry. We went to see a semi-terrible Steve Carrell indie comedy. I guess other movie-goers had already heard the news that it was terrible, because we were the only two people in the audience. I kept waiting for that fateful moment. Perry would creep his hand toward mine, we would lock eyes just as the music from the film started to swell, and we would share a kiss with only Steve Carrell as our witness. But no. My eyes were glued to the screen, and to my surprise, Perry's were as well. I was less than shocked to hear rumors that Perry was gay, after his freshman year of college.

My freshman year of college, my friend and lacrosse teammate Ali and I saw a scary movie together. We saw *Get Out*, a thriller. She was wearing a green combat jacket and kept stuffing her hands in the pockets. I knew we weren't on a date but it felt like a date. She grabbed the bicep of my arm at all the scary parts and then eventually just held there for the entire rest of the movie. I didn't dare move an inch, scared she'd retract it.

The tension of a movie theater exists, I suppose. Cam got it right.

The first half of the book is chock full of movie scenes and allusions. Cam has a rabid desire to exit her own life and hop into the shoes of her favorite protagonists, to get to act out the romantic sins they so carelessly engage in. It's only fitting that she finds a home for her first great love in the back of the movie theater, on so many nights.

The second half of the book features a much different locale. There's no movies or movie theaters, and definitely no romance for Cameron. She is sent to conversion therapy. I was shocked. I had no personal experience with such a horrific institution, I barely knew what it was prior to reading the novel. It scared the living shit out of me. So methodical, so intentional. And conversion therapists don't see anything wrong with their actions. In fact, at least in the case of Cameron Post, they see themselves as doing a service not only to God and Christianity, but to the homosexual in question.

Cam gets sent to a fictional camp called "God's Promise." Every day prior to group work, the students pray, "I will not pray for God to change me because God does not make mistakes and I am the one who is tempted by sin: Change will come through God, but within me. I must be the change" (372). It's a concept of same-sex attraction as a sin or earthly desire, rather than an innate quality. Same as the tendency towards gluttony or heterosexual lust.

I already thought that some people perhaps viewed gayness in this way. I was already scared that they might. I had grown up with loving parents, but conservative parents. My dad was not in support of gay marriage, and was somewhat vocal about that.

"I'm not explicitly against it, I don't really care to be honest," he would say. "But, I just think if we let those people get married, who's next? Can a man marry his horse if he wants to? Can I have four wives? Where do we draw the line?"

I knew it was a fraught issue, but *Miseducation* opened my eyes to the stakes. Especially for kids living in more conservative homes than my own. The stakes were more significant than I realized. I never once thought my parents would send me to a place like God's Promise. But knowing that it was even an option, that it was a possibility in some realm of the country... It floated in the back of my mind like a sort of déjà vu nightmare of a place I'd never been.

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An article by Dr. Jack Drescher in the *Journal of Medical Regulation* describes conversion therapy as: "any treatments, including individual talk therapy, behavioral (e.g. aversive stimuli), group therapy or milieu (e.g. "retreats or inpatient treatments" relying on all of the above methods) treatments, which attempt to change an individual's sexual orientation from

homosexual to heterosexual.” Earliest instances of this type of treatment date back to our good friend Freud, who in the book *On Sexuality: Volume 7*, suggested hypnosis could possible cure homosexuality. This book is compiled of Freud’s essays, most of which were published from 1906-1938. But even Freud noted the difficulty and even impossibility in changing these predilections, remarking, “in general to undertake to convert a fully developed homosexual into a heterosexual does not offer much more prospect of success than the reverse”. Freud concludes that success could be measured not by eliminating homosexual desires, but instead by at least creating the possibility of heterosexual desire.

In 1972, New Orleans psychiatrist Dr. Robert Galbraith Heath pioneered electrotherapy as a means of curing homosexuality. He was known for attaching electrodes to areas of his patients’ brains, and administering shocks in order to discourage against homosexual images, and encourage erotic reactions to heterosexual imagery. An enormous critique of Dr. Heath’s methodology was that his experiments were “generally serving to amplify rather than create emotions, especially in the case of arousal, and having much less effect on those who were already feeling happy and contented.” Dr. Heath wanted to increase heterosexual lust rather than create emotions of happiness and contentment within the confines of a heterosexual relationship. This method seems out of bounds with the Christian ideologies in *Miseducation*. A focus on the erotic hardly seems in line with a relationship with the Lord. That’s what Christian conversion instills within members. They want their constituents to fear a mangled relationship with Jesus, rather than attempting to fix the supposed problem with medicine or treatment.

This new wave of religious conversion therapy came about in the mid 70s. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association officially removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This meant queerness was no longer a mental illness in the eyes of psychiatrists. However, this distinction meant nothing to various religious sects. As gay culture became more mainstream, “reparative” religious groups busted out of the woodwork. And it wasn’t just Christian groups. JONAH, or Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing,” is notorious for insisting those under its care beat effigies of their parents in order to overcome their homosexual predilections. Other methods from groups across the country include hypnosis, intense prayer, coaching on proper gender roles, therapy sessions, and other techniques. This list is tragically non-exhaustive.

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Conversion therapy fascinated me after reading *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. My freshman year of college, I read Garrard Conley’s 2016 memoir *Boy Erased*. It tells of Conley’s time spent in the ex-gay ministry Love in Action, now referred to as Restoration Path.

Conley is the son of a Baptist pastor in Arkansas. He realizes he might be gay while still in high school, but is hesitant to reveal his anxieties to anyone. In a sick twist of fate, Conley is raped by a male student during his freshman year of college. He is then subsequently outed by the same man, and is sent to Love in Action by a pair of shocked and terrified parents.

What surprised me about Conley’s experience was the way he related his gayness to an intense, almost sacred sense of self. I was hanging on to the idea that my homosexuality was a minute factor of my personality. Really, just a blip. Something to be ashamed of, but certainly something I could overcome. And if I decided someday to actually come out, I would insist to others that I was the same person. That my preference for women was the smallest part of my identity. Conley rejects this, again and again. That is surprising. So often in movies and

television shows, the gay character rails against this concept. “Trust me, this is so small. It’s not who I am, it’s just a teensy little thing about me.”

Conley says, “I came to therapy thinking that my sexuality didn’t matter, but it turned out that every part of my personality was intimately connected. Cutting one piece damaged the rest” (309).

If queerness is that intimately connected to one’s sense of self, then how do you excise it? Can you just choose to snip and cut and trim out innate aspects? How much choice is involved? How much nurture, how much nature? It was scary to consider the pervasive nature of sexuality, when I began to consider how intertwined it was with other aspects of personality, life, and day to day activities. And who do you go to ask these questions? Who can you trust? I certainly didn’t know. The internal nature of it was painful. Deafening silence.

Conley faces this. Especially in an institute such as Love in Action, where discussing such things is the exact opposite point of treatment. He writes, “LIA (Love in Action) was telling me on a daily basis that a loss of self meant a gain in virtue, and a gain in virtue meant I was drawing closer to God and therefore closer to my true heavenly self. But the means to that end—self-loathing, suicidal ideation, years of false starts—could make you feel lonelier and less like yourself than you’d ever felt in your life” (308).

Loneliness. Humans need other humans. Even Jesus travelled around with a pack of buddies (or as he called them, disciples). Loneliness is hard to recognize because sometimes it exists even while in the company of the many. Even while among family or other Christians.

Justin Lee is the author of the book *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel From the Gays vs. Christians Debate*. His description of loneliness in times of great personal questioning is one of yearning. Yearning for companionship, for the smallest kernel of understanding or compassion.

Lee is a life-long Christian, and a gay man. In his autobiography, Lee is a very thoughtful and earnest high schooler. He actually confesses his attractions to his family and pastor, and expresses desires to become, in his words, an “ex-gay.” He doesn’t attend conversion therapy, but does become a member of what I suppose you could call conversion meetings. They’re meetings akin to Alcoholics Anonymous. In fact, the organization was artfully and creatively named Homosexuals Anonymous. Much of Lee’s book talks about the ways in which such a community and culture confused him more than it ever helped him. Which makes sense, as much more of Lee’s book argues that homosexuality is innate. Confusion seems the next obvious step, when you invite a group of people to dissect and condemn an aspect of themselves that seems so obviously unchangeable as one’s dominant hand. But then again, people used to ostracize lefties too.

I think the most powerful part of Lee’s notes on his experiences comes when he says he leaned deeply into the book of Job. Job is a polarizing book in the Bible. Job begins as a rich man, with a loving family and a generally satisfying life. He is a faithful man. God is so proud of Job, He even brags to the devil.

The devil replies something akin to, “But aha, there’s the tricky bit. Would Job be such a pious servant, had you not provided him with such a life?”

So God makes a bet with the devil. He bets that even when all is taken from Job, he will remain a faithful servant. And God does just that. He allows Satan to strip away Job’s wealth, to kill Job’s family and afflict Job with boils.

Nonetheless, Job is faithful. I find it interesting that this is the chapter of the Bible Lee leans into.

Lee writes:

When I had read the book of Job before, those thirty-nine chapters...had always seemed like a waste of space. Now, they became powerfully relevant...“A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty. But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams..... Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid”

My Christian friends, too, had proved to be of no help. My homosexuality was “something dreadful” to them, something they were afraid of, and the only way they knew to handle it was to tell me it would go away if I just trusted God... Bit by bit, I was learning a painful lesson. In this Christians vs. Gays culture, Christians weren’t such great people to be around if you were gay. They might lecture you, talk down to you, or quote the Bible at you, but they weren’t very likely to make you feel loved. Quite the opposite. But all my close friends were Christians. I didn’t have anyone else to talk to (115).

Lee is comparing his sense of isolation to the isolation Job felt. He is wrestling with extreme confusion, much in the way Job felt confused as to why he’d been forsaken. And with no friends to talk to.

Cameron Post, much like Lee, has no allies in conversion therapy. Even the other kids, kids suffering from “same –sex attraction” much like herself, are far too scared or even pious to discuss their similar predicaments. It’s fear of yourself, fear of those around you, fear of God’s wrath, fear for the future, and a fear of the oblivion. Of the unknowable.

And I wonder if *that* is where the movies come into play. As a juxtaposition to conversion therapy, and Christian culture on the larger whole. Sure, Cam isn’t talking much at the movies. But she is viewing content that makes her feel seen. That makes her feel, in the words of Lee, loved. Less lonely, perhaps. Lee and Conley both describe the intense loneliness that exists in the questioning of one’s sexuality. The strange purgatory of not being fully out, but somehow being too gay to be a correct Christian. I felt like if I could just bounce ideas off of one person, one person who understood my doubts and worries, I’d be able to come out. I was sure of it. But things can feel hopeless when you’re trapped in a sound tunnel of your own voice.

Loneliness aches. That specific brand of loneliness feels like guilt, self-doubt, embarrassment, and singularity. It feels like a punch in the gut with no witnesses.

### On Believing

It was the middle of April, still my freshman year of college. And everything was different. Everything.

I kept replaying the night over in my head, like my own personal highlight reel. In high school, I'd skip through TV shows or movies until the two female protagonists finally had their advertised moment, and shared the rare televised gay kiss (the only reason I'd decided to watch that particular movie or show). I would re-watch it with butterflies in my stomach. This was similar to that. I skipped past the game, past the party, past all of it until it was just us. And then I'd click play, and relive the memory for the next couple of days afterwards.

We had gone out celebrating, despite losing to Cornell by three. I was celebrating for my own reasons. That game was my first Ivy League career start for Brown. And that felt like something worth drinking to.

"After the party, let's watch *Black Mirror* at my apartment," Ali suggested on the bus ride home from Ithaca. We were watching *Life of Pi* on my phone, practically cuddling in the last row. I nodded feverishly, the itchy carpet-like material of the bus seat scratching my wind-burned face.

Things had changed in recent weeks. Our dynamic had shifted. I'd been going to Ali's apartment a lot, alone. I was just a freshman. She was a senior, so I knew that the close nature of our friendship was somewhat unconventional from the beginning. Midway through second semester was the shift. We started cozying up to one another while watching TV in her bed. First, just the closeness of our heads. Then, a leg draped over mine. Not long after, a hand across my chest, gripping whichever t-shirt I'd thrown on.

We still hadn't kissed.

"Are you ready to go, finally?" I begged at the party after the game. Beer hung heavily on my breath, but I was too drunk to care. My other teammates were dancing wildly around us in the junior girls' apartment. Someone was playing Guitar Hero, another jumping on the ratty black couch by the fireplace.

Ali looked at me with the wisdom of her last semester. "We have all night to watch *Black Mirror*, we should stay a little longer."

I obliged, but was dragging her out of the party only an hour later.

Her room was the smallest in the apartment. Cozy and dark, with the intense smell of Ali that left me woozy with puppy love. She turned on the twinkly lights above her bed, next to a massive California state flag and a poster that read, "Adventure Awaits!". Ali slid closer towards me, her long black hair dripping over my shoulder like rain pouring over a window sill. She turned her face towards mine, her lips inches from my cheek. My heart all but stopped.

"What do you think of this episode?" she asked innocently, her familiar breath tickling my cheek.

*Don't be a pussy, don't be a pussy, don't be a pussy.*

I turned towards her, now facing her. Facing whatever this was. Our noses skimmed one another, our lips touching. I could feel her lips on mine, the softness of them, like when you skim a rose petal over your face. We still weren't kissing, just talking, with our lips touching and our eyes locked on one another. Even through the dark I could see her brown eyes, and felt emotion swell from the tip of my toes to my tangled brown hair.

*Don't be a pussy, don't be a pussy, don't be a pussy.*

She said something I don't remember, and we were quiet, and I knew it was the right time. I closed my eyes. All I had to do was purse my lips, and we'd be kissing. I did just that. I

felt her kiss me back, I felt our bodies tangle closer, I felt a stirring inside myself that I'd never quite felt before.

We went on for a few seconds before coming up for air.

"Well, shit," she laughed.

"Fuck, fuck, I'm so sorry, should I not have done that? I thought I was reading the room right, I'm so sorry, let me grab my stuff and I'll get out of here," I panicked, awkwardly scurrying away from her.

She chuckled in response, her hand reaching for the small of my back, pulling me back to her wordlessly.

"Relax, weirdo. I just meant, well shit, you finally did it," Ali breathed into my neck, and we picked up where we left off, desire rippling through my entire being.

I had never felt desire like that, and it frightened me immensely. Because it wasn't just lust, and I knew it the second our lips met. I was deeply in love. I snuck out of her room the next morning feeling like the luckiest and most special person in the world, feeling more certain than ever that this thing inside me was never going away, and wondering what exactly that meant for the future. I felt that I had answered the whole nurture/nature thing that had nagged me from the start. This was nature. There was no changing that. I almost laughed to myself. If I had known it was as easy to solve my self-loathing, inner doubts with one good kiss, maybe I should have been kissing a lot more girls.

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The service was very boring, which made it a strange moment and a strange setting for my moment of clarity.

It was a week after my first kiss with Ali. We'd been secretly meeting, secretly growing our relationship in the quiet cave of her room, the glow of the laptop the excuse for our meet-ups.

"We *have* to watch *The Silver Linings Playbook*," I'd insist, she'd agree, and we would have yet another reason to hangout alone. Inevitably, we almost never watched the movie. We'd kiss or talk, rewinding to the scenes we missed and laugh about what a waste the \$3.99 rental had been.

My parents had driven up, after that first week I spent with Ali. They watched our home game against Harvard, and planned to take me to Connecticut the following day for an Easter service with my extended family. We lost the game, but I didn't really care. All of Ali's roommates were going home for the holiday, so we would have the apartment to ourselves. I packed a small overnight bag, and told my parents to pick me up from her apartment the next morning rather than my dorm.

"We're going to do a movie night, since most people are gone for Easter," I explained. "It'll probably be easier just to sleepover rather than trek all the way back to Keeney Quad."

They picked me up the next morning with suspicious smiles that annoyed me, but simultaneously excited me. Like it made whatever Ali and I were doing more real. I didn't want anyone to know, and yet I wanted everyone to know. We drove to Connecticut talking in circles, as I tried desperately to avoid mentioning Ali, quickly realizing how much of my life and my mind she had permeated. Every other subject I seemed to interject her thoughts, her opinions, her ideas. The drive seemed endless. I was biting my tongue every other word.

Finally, we pulled up outside of the bright white church. My cousins and aunts and uncles filed into the pews next to us. We were in the balcony, looking out on the vast amount of people shoved into the rows in their Easter bonnets and bright colored bowties. It was a sunny day, and light streamed in from every angle of the room.

The pastor gave a very boring sermon, a sermon I don't remember. But I do remember what I was thinking. It was a very clear thought, a thought that came to me like a reminder on a cellphone or an alarm clock that you forgot you set.

*I buy into this. I believe again. This is everything to me, I don't even care how boring the sermon is. This is me, she's retelling the history of my beliefs, she's retelling the history of who I am.*

I don't know where the thought came from, as it wasn't a particularly stirring sermon being delivered. It almost felt like telepathy, as if someone else had planted the thought inside my head. It was the culmination of so many things, of so many prayers I felt were finally being answered. Of a happiness I had found, a sense of peace I suddenly realized was directly because of God and Jesus, and all of the praying I had been consistently practicing. I realized in that exact moment, with my parents on either side of me and a congregation full of people I did not know, that I had in fact remained faithful that whole year. That everything from the moment I entered Sanctuary that first Sunday had been leading me back to that reconciliation. And I felt very much like the sheep that the shepherd goes to find. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before, I hadn't seen the work that God was doing in my life. The support, the wisdom, the family. I felt very foolish I hadn't seen it before.

I felt like Saul.

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Saul's story appears in Acts. Saul is known for his persecution of Jesus's followers. He is on the road to Damascus when he receives a vision from God, telling of Jesus. He is shocked and frightened. The Bible reads, "And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutes" (9:4-5).

Saul immediately loses his sight for three days, following the vision. He is blind. As blind as I felt I'd been, sitting in the pews in the rafters of my aunt's church. One of God's disciples, Ananias, is sent to give Saul his sight back. He appears to Saul. The Bible tells, "Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized... and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues" (Acts 9:17-20).

This quote means a lot to me. Upon returning from Connecticut, I gave it a quick Google search, to see if my memory had served me and I was accurate on the meaning of the story. I surmised I had been in exactly the right ballpark.

The blindness may have been literal, sure. But the figurative blindness meant so much more to me. A blindness to what is right in front of us. I was still unsure about so many things. I didn't know how to talk to my family or friends about Ali. More importantly, my newfound strong Christian identity seemed in opposition to my newfound identity as a gay woman.

But somehow, I realized how far things had come. Somewhere existed a lurking notion that things were going to work out, and against all odds, everything would reconcile. Even within the damaged spaces of my own heart. The scales had been removed from my eyes, and I felt so thankful and absolutely free I could've cried.

A few days later, I was on the phone with Kayla. I was sitting at the bottom of a flagpole on the Main Green of Brown University, a week after the Easter service. It was a sweltering day for April, and I remember how good the sun felt on my pale legs. Students were hurrying around

me, and I had the comfortable feeling of complete anonymity that can be so rare in today's culture of oversharing.

"I need to tell you something," I started. I wasn't too scared, as Kayla was one of the few people in the world who I had already come out to. "I'm seeing someone. It's Ali Kim, from my lacrosse team."

Silence. A beat, or two beats. It hung in the air, giving the sentence form and shape. I realized I wasn't scared of it anymore. I wasn't scared for what was about to come next.

"Maggie! That is amazing! I knew it," Kayla gushed, and I realized I never had to be anxious at all. What she said next only increased my awareness as to how blind I'd really been. "Mom and Dad have had their suspicions for months. You need to call them. They love you so much."

I knew I needed to tell them. I knew I wanted them to meet Ali as my girlfriend, not as my teammate. But I didn't have the words, I couldn't shirk the shame I felt, despite all of the positive strides I'd made in the past months. I decided firmly that I would tell them soon, but not until I told my friends. And I wasn't planning on telling my friends until the season ended in two more weeks. I was absolutely, positively going to wait.

They just beat me to it. Or rather, my dad did.

"Check your email. Sent something over," he texted me on a nondescript day. Because I still have the email, I can say that the particular nondescript day was a Tuesday. It was April 18, 2017. The subject line read, "Couple Things."

It said:

Mooglie,

1. I know you know this, but I love you more than you can truly fathom. Someday, when the good Lord blesses you, as he has blessed me, with a perfect, beautiful baby girl you will understand. I would not change one hair on your perfect little fuzzball of a head. You are perfect as you are!
2. Mom and I have both suspected for a while now that you and Ali might be more than just best friends.
3. Mom and I also shared a great laugh when I told her that if it was true, Ali would be by far our favorite person that any of our kids have ever dated.
4. I truly hope my suspicions are correct (I am pretty sure they are) and wanted to send you this email so that you did not feel a need to keep things from me (or mom for that matter). I also don't need to have some awkward talk with you and very much respect your privacy. That said, I do very much love talking to you about anything and everything in your life--the bigger and more important the better. And, I can think of few bigger things.

Finally, it makes me happy to see you so happy. All I will ever want for you in your life is your happiness.

Love,

Daddy

My eyes welled with tears, and breath eased out of my chest. When surprising things happen, it's common to have your breath taken away, or stopped completely. It was quite the opposite in this case. Air oozed out of me, like I'd been holding it in for days, weeks, maybe even months. I let the stale air go, and took another breath. Again, it felt like I'd never had a real breath before in my life. As if I'd been running and running and running with no break for years. The air tasted like water after the world's worst workout on the hottest day. And I'll never forget



that feeling, I will never forget the day I learned to believe in unconditional love. I will never forget that truly unbreakable, unshakeable love has a smell and a feeling. It smells like the sidewalks after a rainstorm on a warm April day, and it feels like learning how to breathe again.

### Being Babylonian

Gold, orange, yellow, purple, and red in every direction. Light poured through the tent door, cold air invading the cocoon of warmth as we opened it wider. I turned towards Ali at the exact moment she angled her body towards mine. We locked eyes and grinned the type of stupid grins that only exist among people in love in the summertime. I don't know if it was the tight, crispness of the air or the collage of colors painted on the sky in front of me, but my breath caught in my chest, releasing more like a whisper than an exhale.

The alpine trees below the ledge we'd camped on stretched towards the sky, their green tips reaching towards the heavens. I could see Half Dome quite clearly now, the previous night's rain having cleared away much of the ash and gloom that had obstructed our view. Morning brought another day of hiking, but more importantly, a view that quite simply felt like a dream or a mirage or some sort of hallucination.

Cotton candy pink clouds dripped lethargically across the canvas, which was growing bluer and bluer with every second, waking itself up. I slid out of the tent, my sleeping bag dragging behind me, very much a timid tail between my legs. The gaudy, mustard yellow of my North Face sleeping bag suddenly seemed obscene and offensive while the pastels of the sky swirled around my head intoxicatingly.

I pulled my sleeping bag to a rock, slipped both legs back in. Like a beached mermaid, I flopped my way down on the rock until it supported my back so I could watch the show. Ali followed behind me in her own sleeping bag, the polyester material swishing and sashaying rhythmically behind me. The ground was grainy, with millions of little tan pebbles poking and prodding my behind. We had backpacked into Yosemite, deciding to make camp right on top of North Dome after hiking about 8 miles. There was virtually no plant life on the top of the Dome, the only green behind us or in front of us. Half Dome stared threateningly, its sheer face mocking the relatively easier hiking route we choose on North Dome.

All I could think of was Thoreau.

“Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.”

I used to think that the concept of heaven on Earth was not only tacky, but also a bit pretentious. Heaven is supposed to be beyond human comprehension, beyond our imagination. I felt a bit miffed when people would remark “this ice cream is heaven on Earth,” or “this easy chair feels like heaven,” or, God forbid, “this air conditioning *is* heaven.” It's just a figure of speech, but I could feel a scoff bubble up in my chest.

I didn't really understand the nature/heaven comparison either. I couldn't get past my conception of heaven as unreachable, as so far beyond the grasp of humans, that it was comedic to say that one could see the heavens from a particularly expansive viewpoint at the end of a long hike.

It felt like the Tower of Babel. A classic Old Testament tale, it tells of the people who biblically existed post-Noah's ark. After God wiped out the entire human population, save for righteous Noah, his family, and a few lucky pairs of animals, supposedly His people lived in peace for a time. Generations of Babylonians were united, a tribe living in Shinar in a great and moral community.

The trouble begins when they get a little too curious about this heaven business. These bold Babylonians decide they want to try to build a tower that will reach all the way to heaven. They want to try to see the face of God.

Well, you can guess how that went down. This is the same God who, only a few generations prior had wiped out thousands of humans with a flood. I can only assume He

probably would *not* be up for a meet-and-greet. Even if that was possible, the sheer hubris of these fleshy, mortal humans to attempt a tower that could ascend to heaven?

So, as the tale goes, God pulls the rug out from under the silly humans for the billionth time in the Old Testament. He changes all of their languages, mixing and matching dialects so that none of them can speak the same language, forcing a sort of halt on any further construction on the tower. In their confusion, the men split themselves up into tribes, depending on languages spoken, ending the unity.

That story always seemed weird to me. I call it a story or a tale because I struggle to think of it as being the truth, something that tangibly and actually happened. Beyond the strange conception of God breaking up a group of unified people and altering their languages simply because of silly bit of pride, I am surprised that these people imagined a tower to heaven as a feasible goal.

Science may have been rudimentary, the Earth may have been perceived as flat, but I can't wrap my head around people who truly believe they can walk their way to the afterlife. To me, heaven is an eternal, ethereal destination that is more metaphysical than anything else. The Babylonians perceiving heaven as a place they could MapQuest, perceiving God as having a literal and physical home, it confounds me.

That's what I thought when I heard comparisons or metaphors and any number of similes including heaven.

Until I was wrapped in a tacky yellow sleeping bag on the edge of a mountain, staring out into the expansiveness of Yosemite. I was looking at the entire park, I was sure of it. Peaks, and peaks, and peaks stretched in front of me like waves in the ocean. One after the other, spilling into view as inevitable as rain drops on a window sill or leaves falling lazily on a particularly blustery fall day. They're going to come, you know it, you just have to wait and watch.

It feels rather Babylonian to say, but maybe sometimes, we get tiny glimpses of little heavens in life. When I pass, I would be plenty content to wake up looking out on Half Dome. I turned towards Ali, her eyes fixed on the sky around us. It was the summer after my freshman year at Brown, the summer after Ali's senior year. I was visiting her in her home state of California, and I don't think I'd ever been so full of blindly adoring love. I faced forward.

"This looks like heaven," I said softly, not looking at her.

"Hm," she replied, not looking at me either. Wisps of her straight black hair flitted around like butterflies, sometimes landing on my shoulder for a bit.

"I feel like if I died, I would want to wake up looking at this," I shivered into the bag, pulling the hood of my gray sweatshirt tighter around my matted brown hair.

She went silent and I realized I'd gone a step too far.

"I mean, I know you don't think anything happens when you die, I'm just saying that if something did happen when you die like I think, this would be a not so bad place to come. Just like theoretically from a purely agnostic viewpoint, like almost like just me saying that this is a cool spot," I rambled, covering up my Christian inclinations. "Are you mad now?"

Ali, a devout atheist, shrugged.

"I'm not mad dude, chill." She paused. "I just don't really see the connection between Yosemite and God. Like at all. But that's fine," she pulled out her iPhone to grab a shot of the clouds, which were starting to slip away from one another.

We were speaking different tongues. I felt misunderstood and misrepresented and angry and even a little bit stupid. A lot of bit stupid. Mostly, I felt very Babylonian.

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During second semester of my freshman year, before my trip to Yosemite and before I started dating Ali, I went to an Athletes in Action meeting with Bri. Athletes in Action is a Christian organization focused on youth ministry and youth group work specifically with athletes. At the particular meeting I went to, the topic of discussion was dating. Broadly, we covered pornography, pre-marital sex, how to know you've found the one, and the pros and cons of dating outside of our religion.

Unsurprisingly, we focused on the cons. I was still not quite bought in to the whole Christian thing yet, but I was definitely on the edge of confirming my own faith. I listened with a cautiously skeptical ear.

"This isn't discriminatory. I'm not saying don't date non-Christians because they're bad people or they don't know how to love," said Elizabeth, the wife of Brown's baseball coach and a leader at Sanctuary Church. "It's more about you and your values. Someone you know looks at life and raising kids and marriage and sex in the same ways you do. In the ways of Christ. If Christ is the most important person in our lives, shouldn't we make the ultimate vow to someone who places him on that same pedestal?"

I was shocked with this sentiment, and completely disavowed it. I forgot about it entirely, and began dating Ali with no thoughts as to our extreme differences in religious belief. She was generally respectful, so I didn't necessarily give a shit one way or another.

The issue never crossed my mind. Until we were sitting out at Yosemite. I suddenly realized there was a massive gap between us and our world views.

Can you be a serious Christian and date outside the faith? A lot of Christian literature says no. Or at least, you really shouldn't.

Relevant Magazine is a Christian publication aimed at young adults, mainly in their 20's and 30's. Debra Fileta wrote the article "Why is Dating a Non-Christian Such a Big Deal?" and effectively echoes Elizabeth's sentiments. Fileta writes of this unspoken rule, "I have met so many believers who—when times got tough or lonely—ditched that rule and started a relationship with an unbeliever. 'What could be the harm,' they wonder. 'My boyfriend acts more like a Christian than my Christian friends do,' they say. And sadly, that may be true, but being a Christian is about so much more than just being a moral person. Being a believer means that your relationship with God has absolutely, entirely and clearly changed your life."

Is that right? Is there more to Christianity than merely being moral? There's a practically infinite number of "unbelievers" who are moral and good people. But the Bible *does* say, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christianity isn't just a set of moral codes, but rather a completely unique and specific way of seeing the world.

Fileta echoes this sentiment when she writes, "If you are a believer... there is no getting around the fact that this (a relationship with Jesus) is by far the most influential relationship you will ever have. It's a relationship that will shape your identity... It's a relationship that, according to Scripture... will re-create you. When you enter a relationship with Jesus, you're not simply a 'better version' of yourself, you are made absolutely new." By this definition of Christianity, you cannot date or marry outside of the faith because it would be a relationship lacking in a fundamental understanding of one's partner. A relationship with Jesus gives birth to a completely new person with a very specific vision of life. A life built in the image of God, a life built by and for love.

Shared interests can be an important part of relationships. If you can't share the things you love with the person you love, what's the point? There is something so internal and personal about religious faith. It isn't just liking the Broncos over the Jets (but, go Broncos). It isn't preferring a particular television show or enjoying a good hike. Religious faith is a path you've set out for yourself, a belief so inherent to who you are at your core, that perhaps it can't be separate from you yourself as a person. If your partner doesn't understand that part of you, that very vital part of you from which all your opinions and life flow, how in the hell can you create a sustainable relationship?

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The Babylonians didn't make it to heaven. They were too busy speaking a million different languages to finish their tower. The problem was, I felt like I was already in heaven, eating trail mix on top of the North Dome in Yosemite with the person I loved most in the world.

It was little things that tipped me off. I started thinking too heavily after that morning, started wondering what would happen if we were to get married. How would we raise our children? I intended on bringing my kids to Sunday school every morning. If I had my ass dragged to church for 18 years, they could suffer through it too. Jokes aside, I wanted (and still want) my kids to have access to the strong faith I have.

Ali is her own person. She does not believe in God, believes in nothing after death. I have no qualms with that, I never have. I think she's one of the kindest, most moral people I've ever met. The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized how easy it would be to stray if I was married to someone who didn't believe in Jesus the way I did. I thought back on the ways my parents held one another accountable. The ways they enriched one another's Christianity, and Christianity in turn enriched their marriage. Like nutrients for a plant, growing the trunk stronger and thicker, like the Redwoods Ali took me to see later that week.

On the flip side, what if God's plan was for me to marry a nonreligious person? To help her see the light, see all of the joy and hope available under God's love? I thought I could do that. Be that for someone, be the shepherd that my friend Bri had been to me. I don't know if you can guide people to faith if they have no desire whatsoever, but at that time period in my life, I thought it was possible.

The whole thing sounds messed up. "Oh, I can't marry you, you're not a Christian." It's not very inclusive. But I guess people do that about all sorts of things. Democrats refuse to date Republicans. Vegans refuse to date meat eaters. Most people tend to date within their own race. We're all very particular and we all want to love someone who reflects some part of us.

I was speaking gibberish to Ali when I explained my notions of God and Jesus, and the strong faith I was so happy to have regained in my life. It's like I was shouting Mandarin and she only knew Spanish. I wish God could have helped me translate how I felt, could have made me come off less foolish. I certainly didn't feel foolish talking about the exact same things to my mom or to Bri.

We were speaking different languages on the top of North Dome that day. Just two Babylonians yapping away, neither one grasping even close to translation.

### I Now Pronounce You

My grandma made my sisters and I wedding dresses when I was about four years old. Savannah and Kayla just about lost their minds. Savannah, ever the fashionista, refused to take hers off for weeks on end. I liked my dress and was happy my grandma had included me. But I didn't have the same electric reaction as my older sisters. That Halloween, the two of them went as brides, offering me a spot as the third bride.

I went as Captain Hook instead, my brother Bo dressing as a tiny Peter Pan. We jostled through our house in Denver, shouting "argh!" and "walk the plank!" as Savannah and Kayla practiced their "I do's."

Still, my dress didn't go to waste. Two years later, my family moved to New Jersey. Our next-door neighbors were a family of Brits, the Crosleys. I became fast friends with Harry, a shy blonde boy my exact age. That summer we were almost always with the Crosleys, or the neighbors on the other side of us, the Paternos. Our house stood bravely in the middle, a bridge between the Crosleys and the Paternos that all ten of us kids crossed constantly.

We had all sorts of adventures, that first summer in New Jersey. Half-baked notions of creating a clubhouse in our shed, skateboard contests in my driveway, roller hockey in the Paternos' driveway, and by the end of the summer, we had schemed up a wedding. Harry and I were to be married. It would be a proper wedding, with a two-tier cake baked by twelve-year-old Dillon. I would wear my wedding dress, and Harry would wear a suit, and there would be rings and music and lots of guests. At the end of the night, Harry and I would ride off down the driveway to a figurative honey-moon. I could hardly contain my excitement, my six-year-old body shaking from the reality of being the center of attention. My sisters primped and prodded my unruly thick hair, putting dabs of lipstick on my lips and rouge on my cheeks.

"I can't believe you're missing my wedding," I complained to my dad with a huff. He was headed out of town on a business trip.

He snorted.

"I'll be at your real wedding, Mags."

It hadn't occurred to me that this *wasn't* a real wedding.

The ceremony went on without a hitch. The driveway was lined with rose petals, and I held flowers in my pudgy little paws. Harry looked handsome in his tiny suit, and we took more pictures than we knew what to do with. Dillon acted as pastor, and we exchanged vows and rings, and a hug instead of a kiss, our mothers watching us warily.

And as promised, we rode off on bicycles into the sunset down to the edge of the driveway. Out of sight from our wedding guests, Harry smiled at me and cautiously gave me a kiss on the lips. It lasted all of one second, a simple peck that felt rebellious and secretive. My first semi-kiss at my first semi-wedding.

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Loving v. Virginia is the Supreme Court case considered to be the precedent for same-sex marriage equality in the United States of America. Richard and Mildred Loving were an interracial couple in Virginia during the Jim Crow era. Mildred was of mixed Native American, white, and black ancestry. Richard was white. In 1958, Mildred discovered she was pregnant. The couple travelled to Washington D.C. to get married, as it was illegal to enter into an interracial marriage in Virginia.

July 11, 1958. This is where it gets weird. The newlyweds, pregnant with a baby and living together, were given up by some snitch on a tip to the cops. The police stormed their home in the middle of the night, hoping to catch the Lovings having sex. Interracial sex was illegal in Virginia. A concept that truly blows my mind. But then again, thirteen U.S. states still have laws banning sodomy. The Lovings were doing nothing more than sleeping, committing the fatal mistake of sleeping in the same bed. "Cohabiting as man and wife," Virginia law accused. Their marriage license was hanging, framed on the wall. A testament of love.

The police asserted it had no bearing in Virginia, where such a document was practically meaningless. The two were arrested, and pled guilty to the crimes they were accused of. Their sentences of one entire year in prison was suspended, on the demand that Mildred and Richard refrain from travelling together as a couple to Virginia for at least 25 years. They moved on to D.C., hats in hand.

Flash forward to 1964. Frustrated with separate travel and inequalities all around them, Mildred was put in touch with the American Civil Liberties Union. They provided the Lovings with representation, and filed a motion against Virginia on the basis of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Fourteenth Amendment deals with the rights and equal protections of citizens under the eye of the law. It has also been used in *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Roe v. Wade*, *Bush v. Gore*, and eventually, *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The fourteenth amendment does a lot of things I'm not really qualified to go into, but most importantly, this is the amendment that officially emancipated slaves in 1868. It is known as the law that ensures no one is treated differently because of who they are.

The Lovings won their case. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, and was issued a 9-0 decision to overturn their criminal charges. The Supreme Court also federally mandated the abolition of any laws forbidding interracial marriage. One of the Lovings' attorneys famously said,

"The freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men. Marriage is one of the "basic civil rights of man," fundamental to our very existence and survival. To deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as the racial classifications embodied in these statutes, classifications so directly subversive of the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment, is surely to deprive all the State's citizens of liberty without due process of law" (*Loving v. Virginia in a Post-Racial World: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Marriage* 107).

What a beautiful sentiment. *Obergefell v. Hodges*, decades later, fought on the same charges. The book *Loving v. Virginia in a Post-Racial World: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Marriage* by Kevin Noble Maillard, and Rose Cuison Villazor details the way laws and society have changed since *Loving v. Rose* was decided. Maillard and Villazor examine the discrimination still faced by interracial couples in America, and goes a step further to compare interracial marriage to gay marriage. The authors directly say that *Loving v. Rose* should have been a clear precedent to allow for same-sex marriage when the book says:

"Equality based on sexual orientation echoes *Loving's* principles of freedom, anti-discrimination, and anti-subordination. *Loving's* principles are defined as follows: 1) freedom of choice means that marriage is a fundamental right that is only fully realized by being able to marry the person of one's choice, regardless of race; 2) antidiscrimination stands for the idea that prohibiting interracial couples to marry

constitutes race discrimination; and 3) the anti-subordination principle mean that maintaining White supremacy, and thereby subordinating non-White, more specifically Blacks, is not a legitimate reason to bar persons from marrying. These principles prove three things: 1) The *Loving* analogy is valid; 2) there is connection between interracial marriage and same-sex marriage; and 3) gay rights are civil rights, with the Black LGBT community at the intersection” (236-237).

Effectively, this passage lays out the three main principles of the 1964 court decision, and backs the assumption that interracial relationship injustice mirrors the injustices queer people have had pressed upon them.

I remember *Obergefell v. Hodges*. I was a senior in high school, I followed the court case quite closely. On a 5-4 ruling, same-sex couples were afforded the same rights that everyone else in the country had since the *Loveings*. I remember feeling outraged that it was such a close decision, and I remember feeling so much possibility from the decision. I had wanted to go to New York City’s Pride Parade so badly that year, positive it would be the best and most full of pride it had ever been. My mom didn’t let me go, positive it would also be the fullest of assholes and possible terrorists it had ever been.

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I went to Australia during my winter break, sophomore year of college. Ali and I were still dating, tragically trying out the long-distance thing. She had graduated, and was doing a year of travel before settling down to work for a tech start-up.

Marriage equality passed in Australia on December 9, 2017. We met up at the Sydney Airport on December 12. I don’t think we really thought about the significance or whether there was any significance at all. Marriage equality had been around for almost a year and a half in the U.S. We were just happy to be in a country we considered to be the Canada of the Eastern Hemisphere; all friendly faces, kangaroos, unconditional acceptance, and maybe some digeridoos.

So, sitting on the bus on the way to our Air BnB, we didn’t give much thought to holding hands. We hadn’t seen one another in over four months. It felt criminal to not be touching, but as the vehemently anti-PDA people we both are and were, kept it to a casual hand-hold. Smiling earnestly, Ali chattered to me about what she’d done all day in Sydney anticipating my arrival. She showed me a Spotify playlist she’d created for our hike the following day, her fingers gripping my hand tighter and tighter as she spoke. The freckles across her face seemed to light up like string lights, her brown eyes glittering with anticipation.

“Faggots,” a boy standing directly in front of us spat. He wasn’t looking at us, or anyone for that matter. His eyes searched the ground as he played with the wheel of his skateboard.

Hot shame ballooned in my cheeks, red rushing to my face like a bad rash. I tore my hand away from Ali’s, which fell limply. I grabbed my own hand, nursing it as if it had been smashed hard with a hammer. Ali’s face grew red as well, covering up her tiny brown freckles, kisses from God as my mom sometimes calls them, in roses and blossoms of embarrassment.

The boy exited the bus a few stops later, turning to shoot a rather lethal glare.

We brushed off the experience, too drunk on each other’s company to let it weigh us down. We’d experienced unfortunate encounters with bigots before, usually the price to pay for holding hands in public. We laughed about the boy, made fun of his reluctance to meet our eyes when he threw the slur out.

“Besides, he’s such an idiot,” I rolled my eyes. “We’re dykes, not fags.”



Ali laughed. “Yeah. Maybe he wasn’t even talking to us. I couldn’t really tell what the heck he was talking about.”

Two nights later, Ali and I were sitting in a movie theater awaiting the new Star Wars movie premiere. Star Wars nerds at heart, we couldn’t contain ourselves, buzzing eagerly. With popcorn, M&M’s, the type of movie theater seats that lean back, I guess we felt a sort of familiarity with our surroundings, enough so that we started to hold hands on the arm between our seats.

A group of tweens filed into the row in front of us. Loud and obnoxious and awkward, I looked at them nostalgically, thinking back on my days as a loud, obnoxious, and awkward twelve-year-old.

One of the boys looked back at us sharply. A snaggle-toothed grin shaped his face into the sneer of a gargoyle.

“Look,” he called loudly to his gaggle of friends. They turned their heads to us, as did half of the movie theater. The kid was practically screaming. “It’s two gays.”

He laughed hysterically, his friends joining in, I felt Ali squeeze my hand so sharply it hurt. I slithered my fingers from hers, returning my hand to the safety of my own lap. Audience members around us turned to gaze. The whole theater had turned around. My eyes were glued to the floor, feeling like a pervert, astonished at my own audacity to hold her hand in public yet again.

People slowly turned back to their popcorn and their own lives. I wanted to sink into the movie theater seats. Fuck Star Wars. I didn’t care anymore. I already felt like I was in a different galaxy.

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My mom has a favorite meme she told me about recently. It speaks not only to her growth in terms of accepting and understanding my sexuality, but more importantly, the types of memes that moms find funny.

It’s a page that says “Swipe to see what Jesus has to say about homosexuality and gay marriage.” And you swipe on the page, and a blank page comes up.

“Get it?” She asked me. “Because Jesus never said a THING about gay marriage. Or homosexuality.”

Jesus actually says quite a bit about divorce.

“But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate... Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her” (Mark 10:6-11).

While the whole “woman and man” thing is brought up here, it is far from the focus. The focus is the integrity of sticking with your partner. None of my immediate relatives have ever been divorced, which is something I think is rare, but maybe it isn’t. I agree with Jesus here that the seriousness of marriage should be taken into consideration before biting the bullet and making an oath to God, but I don’t know if I agree that divorce is always wrong. What if you have a husband who beats you? A wife who cheats? A lot of people get divorced. Half of the couples in the U.S., for some clarity on “a lot.” There are very few picketers outside of the divorce courts. I’m getting off target.

Jesus never says anything about gendered marriage or sexuality. And I know, I know, the whole song and dance regarding the fact that it's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. There are other points in the bible that talk about homosexual sex and sodomy. Leviticus and Romans, chiefly. These are two Old Testament books. They are important texts to the Christian faith, and I consider myself a Christian, but I consider myself a follower of Jesus first and foremost. I don't need a label of faith, I am a believer and follower of Jesus. And his New Testament. The Old Testament lays the groundwork and I believe in a lot of it, but the New Testament is a testament to my beliefs and my heart. Jesus is the center of what I believe. And Jesus never says a peep about homosexuality.

I kind of wish he had. Just so I'd know. If I knew what he thought, if I knew for sure in my heart that Jesus was in support of what I believe to be an intrinsic part of myself, I know a lot of this would have been a lot easier. Conversely, if I knew without a shadow of a doubt he thought it was sinful, I guess I would try to find a different way to live? That part is tough for me to work around. I don't know the answers, though.

For now, I'll live in the ambiguity, exist in the wiggle room that is biblical interpretation, and continue daydreaming about what my wedding may look like.

### Make the Turn

You used to have to really search to find a good TV show or movie with queer characters. I remember scouring through Netflix in high school, desperate to see a same-sex relationship. “Glee” was one of my favorites, as were “The 100,” and “Orphan Black.” I would watch with bated breath, and then immediately delete my viewing history from our family’s shared Netflix account. I definitely recommend any and all of those titles. Especially if you’re gay.

After coming out, I was more open with my family about the shows and movies I was excited to see. Even if they had queer themes or characters. I noticed that even in the seven-year span since I realized I was gay and eventually came out, the number of queer characters and even protagonists had drastically increased. GLAAD reported in 2017 that 12.4% of all movies included a queer character. The following year, that number increased to almost 20%. It might not seem like a big deal. After all, who cares? Movies and television shows are just entertainment. Does inclusion really matter, so long as the story is good?

Inclusion matters because if you can see yourself on the screen, if you can see characters you relate with leading normal and happy lives, you’re able to picture it for yourself. It is so impossibly hard to imagine a life that you’ve never seen depicted.

Enter *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. Cam practically carries out an independent study of queer film. So, when I found out that the book was being turned into a movie, it was almost ironic. Like a film study within a film. I lead my own study, watching every movie teaser, trailer, cast interview, and inside scoop I could get my hands on. The movie was directed by Desiree Akhavan. A woman, and a queer woman at that. I watched an interview on YouTube a couple weeks before I saw the movie.

“I mean at the end of the day I didn’t want to go into this (directing the film) specifically because I had an agenda specifically against conversion therapy,” Akhavan laughed. “I do, I don’t like it obviously, most liberal gay people don’t. But also to me when I read this book and what I loved was the universality of it. I think that it’s a metaphor for being a teenager no matter who you are. Gay, straight, any ethnicity, you feel diseased. That there’s something really wrong with you. There are voices in your head that develop... telling you your instincts are wrong, doubt yourself, doubt yourself, doubt yourself.”

And I knew the film was going to be at least pretty good.

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I could hardly park the car, I was so excited. My hands were jittery. I was talking a mile a minute, my thoughts racing around the movie and the book, and the fact we were finally getting ready to see Cam in the flesh. We were finally going to see *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* on the big screen.

“Maggie, focus on parking,” Ali snapped.

Ali and I were living together in Boston for the summer. I was working for the nature documentary series, NOVA. She was at a tech start-up. We lived in a shoebox apartment in Allston, near the Boston University campus.

Things had been weird since Ali returned from her travels. She was different. Little quirks of mine that used to enthrall and amuse now just seemed to mildly displease her. My tendency towards bad driving, for instance. Or my social anxiety. Ali used to find it almost endearing when I would ask her for the third or fourth time if I had upset her, used to reassure me with hugs and kisses. Now, I was just paranoid.

“When you ask me if I’m mad at you, it just makes me mad at you.”

She was colder than I remembered. We had been dating for over a year, most of it long-distance. Perhaps we were just experiencing shock at our close proximity, sleeping in the same bed every night rather than facetimeing until we both fell asleep. Maybe the difficulty of our age difference was finally setting in. Maybe she was realizing she still had two years of college immaturity to deal with.

Or, perhaps, Ali just changed. She'd gained so many unique experiences, had been so many places. Literally around the world. She'd visited every single continent besides Europe but including Antarctica, of all places. I felt young, and I felt small. I found us running out of things to talk about. She snapped at me for comments she felt were juvenile, and seemed embarrassed of my age constantly. Ali had outgrown me.

"I feel like they cast it so well. I mean we'll have to wait to get there to know for sure, but I pictured Cam exactly like that. Very pretty but not like, a model," I chattered excitedly as we walked from the car, past the Trader Joe's to the indie movie theater next to the acai bowl place. Actress Chloë Grace Moretz would be portraying my beloved Cam.

Ali nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure it'll be great."

She didn't share my excitement. Fair. She hadn't read the book. I tried to read it to her over the summer before bed, an attempt to lull both of us asleep. She usually passed out after the first few sentences.

I mused silently on her favorite book, a non-fiction book about a Brown grad's travel around Asia called *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven*. I read it the previous year. It took me two days.

When we got to the theater, there was an obvious theme in viewers. Almost all of them were gay women. Or, what I judged to be gay women. Undercuts, dyed hair, thick Doc Marten boots, collared shirts, women holding hands with other women, I didn't know where to look. So I looked at the ground. Ali and I rushed to our seats, feeling slightly uncomfortable.

"I've never seen this many lesbians in my entire life," I whispered.

Ali gave me a tight-lipped grin, and turned towards her popcorn. I played with the frayed material of the worn-down theater seats, and turned to glance around at our movie theater companions. The crowd was almost entirely women, everyone buzzing with matching excitement to see the book come to life. I overheard murmurs regarding changes the director had made in the film that differed from the book. I saw girls scroll through Chloë Grace Moretz's Instagram. I felt unrestricted giddiness. From every girl except the one to my left. Ali looked nothing but bored. Maybe a little tired.

The lights dimmed, the movie began. It was everything I wanted and more. To see Cameron and Coley's romance come to life. Watch Cameron struggle, watch her doubt herself and her friends. The rest of the audience was as animated as I was. Girls whooped and cheered during kissing scenes. They booed the homophobes and teachers at the conversion therapy site. We all clapped as Cameron rode off in the end. Into that "beyond, beyond, beyond."

Ali and I walked home in the dark. All I wanted was to talk about the movie.

"It was decent. Parts of it seemed rushed or just like didn't make sense to me," she sniffed. "And I'm surprised you like it, it's a really damning portrayal of Christians."

*If you'd read it, maybe you would understand better,* I thought bitterly. I couldn't meet her eyes. But she didn't read the book. She'd never shown an ounce of interest in it, she didn't understand why it had been so profoundly important to me, why I had watched the trailer for the movie over and over and over again, that I felt like part of my teenage-self lived in Cameron, in

her earnest embarrassment and her honest fear. I couldn't tell Ali that because it felt very small and it felt very stupid.

We bought microwavable burritos from Trader Joe's for dinner, and ate them silently back at the apartment. I was bursting, I wanted to talk about the movie so desperately it was splitting my seams. We sat opposite one another at the circular black dining table in the living room/kitchen area of the apartment. I wanted to flip the stupid black table and scream. But that would be childish.

"I'm tired," Ali finally sighed, bringing her burrito wrapper to the garbage. "I'm going to head to bed."

She said it as though we had separate rooms, separate beds. She said it as though I wouldn't be joining her five minutes later.

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I am sitting in my car outside of 7 Stars Bakery in Providence, RI. Sweating profusely. I have never been so nervous in my entire life. The author of my all-time favorite novel, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, has agreed to have coffee with me. I feel like I'm fifteen again, filled with the unbridled nervous thrill of meeting a member of a boy band or seeing Beyoncé live.

emily danforth doesn't seem like the type to buy into the fanfare, from what I've seen of her online presence. She lives in Providence with her wife, and teaches creative writing at Rhode Island College. I've done some background research in preparation for our chat, which makes me feel a little creepy, and I wonder if my questions will seem either too leading or not informed enough. I make a note for my eventual draft of the interview, reminding myself she spells her name with lowercase letters.

I force myself out of my car into the bakery. I order with nervous energy, wondering if I picked out the right outfit. I'm wearing a black turtleneck with a pair of high-waist blue jeans and black converse. I wanted to seem bookish and professional, without the air of trying too hard. Suddenly, in the harsh light of a hipster coffee shop, I feel I'm trying too hard.

The cashier hands me my tea, and I immediately spot danforth. She's sitting at the back of the café with a gray beanie on over a crop of short, white-blond hair. I sit down opposite her, careful not to spill my Earl Grey. God forbid.

"Emily?" I ask cautiously. "I'm Maggie, thank you so much for meeting with me. I'm sure you're plenty busy with classes and writing, so I can't thank you enough."

She smiles graciously, and tells me she actually has recently left RIC in order to have more time to write. She is currently writing a new novel.

We head right into it. I ask her what it was like to grow up in Miles City, Montana. It has been my understanding that the first half of *Miseducation* is close to autobiographical.

"Yeah, so probably... I give a different number every time but probably 60% of my early life is reflected in Cam. But it is fiction, right? I didn't worry since it is fiction about getting it all right. But like Cam, I grew up in about the same time period," danforth answers. Most of Cam's friends are composite characters, composite scenarios that danforth created out of amalgamations of her childhood pals.

The second half however, is a beast of its own. danforth was never sent to conversion therapy. Much of the inspiration for the latter half of the book comes from stories she saw, read, or heard in the news.

"I've been really careful how I say this because I've seen certain journalists take this and misrepresent what I've said. It happened to be the summer that a teenager named Zack Stark had

been sent by his parents to Love in Action. He was posting about it on his MySpace, and that really caught the media attention,” danforth is very certain to emphasize that Zach Stark was not the sole inspiration for Cam’s conversion experiences. But there is a really vital aspect to Stark’s tale that is reflected in Cam.

“What I was really interested in, because I had heard of conversion therapy before, was how ambivalent and confused he was about it. How in one post he would talk about you know, sort of claiming he was bisexual or gay, but in the next post be like ‘I understand why my parents want this.’ It was not settled for him at all. It was both like you should be outraged that my parents even have this as an option, and maybe I should go there,” she tells me. I immediately recognize portions of her book where Cam reflects similar sentiments of confusion. I remember feeling just the same. Mad at homophobic Christians, but uncertain of whether or not I understood where they were coming from. She continues, “He was being so raw and honest about it. When I’d seen some narratives that deal with conversion therapy...I thought what was interesting is to find yourself not entirely ambivalent but kind of swaying in the wind about this thing.”

I have been waiting to ask danforth why the preoccupation with queer Christianity. I know from my research that she was brought up in a Christian household, but find myself nervous to ask the more personal details of her own life. She winds up bringing up her faith on her own, gracious not only with her time but intimate details of life in Miles City.

“I was raised Lutheran and Presbyterian and you know, we were regular church goers. But it was really in high school that I, not through my parents’ influence, fell into a crowd of quite Evangelical, much more ideologically conservative Christian friends,” she tells me. It makes me think of my upbringing as a Presbyterian, and inexplicable switch to the Evangelical grounds of Sanctuary Church. “I think that I really was drawn to those friends because I knew that I was gay, but I also didn’t want to be out in 1994 in Montana. And so it was like, these people will keep me... I will not do that.”

I can’t decide if I was drawn to Sanctuary for similar reasons. I was definitely inspired by the seemingly unwavering faith they displayed. It helped me regain my identity as a Christian. Did I join to avoid myself, though? To protect myself against my own queerness? I’ve never even considered it until now. I want to know if danforth has found her way back to the church. If it’s possible to be hurt and lean towards reconciliation anyways. I surprise myself when I ask what her current faith is. I sort of feel like one of those Jehovah’s witness door bangers, begging her to accept a free bible.

danforth smiles when I ask if she considers herself a Christian now, like she’s thought about the question before. “No, but that was a really important identity to me but I felt like I’d grown out of it by college. I didn’t see a path for myself to *be* a gay Christian. I didn’t see how it would be available because of the Christian options around me,” she answers truthfully.

A lack of visibility is an issue. How can queer kids feel comfortable with dual identities as Christians AND gay people if they don’t see it around them? LGBT people are less likely to identify as Christian than the rest of the American population. In 2015 Pew Research reported that 72% of heterosexual Americans identify as Christian, compared with only 48% of LGBT Americans. Times have changed since 2015. Out and proud gay Christians like Pete Buttigieg and Billy Porter loudly claim both their faiths and sexual orientations. But is that enough to convince people who have been told for so long that they don’t belong?

danforth waits a beat and then elaborates on her answer. “I’ve said to my wife several times, maybe this is something I would look into again, because there are elements that I find

very appealing,” she says. That interests me immensely, and she continues before I have to ask what she means. “I am so thrilled to see the number of queer folks who identify as Christian and have figured out like, ‘no we’re in the church too and we’re going to change the church and the church isn’t going to change us.’ It’s just not a turn I’ve made.”

What does it take to “make the turn?” One of my questions for danforth was going to be whether or not she envisioned Cam returning to Christianity. Seeing as Cam is pretty much based on her, I decide I don’t even need to ask. It’s gratifying to come out and completely accept your sexuality. Still, it sounds lonely to stand on the outside looking in. Maybe Christianity isn’t *that* important to danforth, or at least important enough for her to truly try to return to. But if it is actually something she wants to pursue, a “turn” she wants to make, it saddens me that the turn is so difficult. It makes sense to me, but saddens me nonetheless. The anti-gay redirect of the church has turned queer people further from the church, further from Jesus. So much more harm has been done than any amount of good.

We turn away from religion for a bit. I tell danforth that her novel made me feel seen. I identified so strongly with Cam, I wondered if someone had been reading my mind and writing down my thoughts.

“Representation matters, I want everyone to have their story told,” she agrees, but her voice rises up at the end of the sentence. “On the other side, I think there’s something kind of powerful as a queer person growing up when I *imagined* queer lives for characters that were not presented that way. There was something powerful and private about doing that.”

We talk about the book turned movie *Fried Green Tomatoes* for a while. The book is overtly queer, the two main characters Idgie and Ruth live together as partners. They even raise a child together. The movie, however, presents Idgie and Ruth as best friends. danforth says she found personal satisfaction in decoding the relationship on screen. Satisfaction amplified when director Steven Spielberg confirmed certain queer coded aspects as canon. He even explicitly said that a food fight scene was supposed to be interpreted as a love scene.

“My mom loves that movie. She thinks it’s the sweetest female friendship like, ever,” I tell her and we both laugh.

The coffee shop is beginning to fill up and I feel my voice drop around words like “gay” or “queer.” danforth by no means does the same, and I wonder how long it will be until I am just as comfortable.

We talk a little about different queer characters we appreciated over the years. danforth is certainly younger than my parents by at least fifteen years, but we are clearly from different generations. I can’t say I ever had a crush on Nancy Drew. I was more of a Katniss Everdeen fan. I get back to Cam, as perhaps my most fervent literature crush, and ask what she sees Cam doing now.

“What would Cam be, like in her mid-forties?” danforth laughs.

It turns out the character Cameron Post was created in a short story danforth was writing. Cam was in California, working in a factory of maternity fetus dioramas. danforth says she knew this character had escaped a past life, and just kind of went backwards from there.

“That’s really interesting,” I say, and it sounds fake coming out of my stupid mouth, but I really mean it. “I really love Cam’s voice, I think it’s really funny. How did you develop it?”

She laughs, and starts by saying that while Cam is based on her, they certainly don’t share the same voice. In fact, it’s offensive when people who know her personally say something along the lines of “omg! You sound just like Cam!” The humor is a big thing, though. It cuts the serious tone of the book, turning it from a tragedy into something far more complex.

“I can’t say I sat down and was like ‘Oh I’m writing a comedy now,’” danforth laughs. “I think there’s an instinct I have, and probably not an uncommon instinct for a lot of queer people and especially queers in my generation, is to make jokes. It’s not always the healthiest instinct but I think that is my funnel to kind of keep my tender feelings tender by having a layer of humor.”

I reflect on some of my own essays I’ve turned in over the years. Essays on coming out, finding my first girlfriend, breaking up with said girlfriend, struggling with finding myself. And I think of my readers, who noted how funny the essay was. Coping mechanism or not, I just tend to not take myself too seriously. Clearly, danforth tends towards the same style.

We’re nearing the end of our time together. I can tell because my Earl Grey is almost gone, and I’m out of questions. Still, I’m hanging on to the experience. One last question. I’m straying from my thesis my study of queer Christianity, and just want some advice. Writer to writer, so I know what the future holds. Was it hard to get this queer narrative published?

In short, danforth tells me, no. She initially tried to sell it as an adult novel, which didn’t take quite as well. However, after marking it as young adult fiction, she got a deal within two weeks. She was ecstatic to sell something, to have someone pay her for her writing, but it was more than that.

danforth says of her publisher, “She talked about my book to me, the way I talk to my friends about books I love. She wasn’t just trying to make money. I knew that she loved the book, she believed in the story, and she was going to do right by it.”

The book is partly based off danforth’s life. To have someone appreciate and love the story must have been incredibly gratifying. As a writer, it makes me just the tiniest bit jealous. As a reader, I am incredibly indebted to danforth. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is the most profoundly impactful novel I read growing up. I love the book and believe in the story. Maybe even more so after seeing firsthand the level of authenticity behind the pages. There’s something cosmically coincidental about the fact I ended up attending college in the same state danforth lives.

Rhode Island, the tiny little Ocean State. All the blessings it’s brought to me, all the amazing experiences I’ve had in this state, my chat with emily danforth is just another one to add to the list. And there’s always something just beyond, beyond, beyond the shoreline.



## Love the Sinner

“I feel excluded by both, though,” Cory raised his blonde eyebrows in dismay. “I’m too gay for the Christian community, especially in the South. But then you try to explain your faith to other gay people and they really don’t understand.”

He took a long, contemplative sip of a \$10 margarita.

“Especially gay people who have been hurt by the church.”

I met Cory during my summer internship after my junior year at Brown. We were in the Big Apple, working for CBS News. The first time we met, Cory was wearing an indigo cardigan over a blue and white checkered shirt with an indigo cardigan over, encasing his slight frame tightly. His white-blond hair was gelled into a coif which sat neatly above a pair of brow line wire framed square glasses that reminded me of my own.

“Love your dress,” he commented softly. I felt my hands instinctively dash to the hem of my light pink dress, pulling at it desperately.

He started slowly, tentatively, mentioning a Carly Rae Jepsen concert he was excited for, his excitement for World Pride at the end of June, and his relief to be out of the South.

“I’m excited too,” I nodded, picking at the crusty cafeteria salad in front of me. “My girlfriend Marion and I are going to go with a bunch of our friends.”

After the summer in Boston, Ali and I decided to go on a break. If the show *Friends* tells us anything, it’s that breaks aren’t exactly a relationship strengthener. We broke up a couple months later. It was a slow, ragged end that was far too unceremonious for how meaningful our relationship was to me. And to her.

I met Marion at a Halloween party. We instantly bonded over broken hearts and a shared love of *The Office*. We never intended to date, thinking we’d keep it casual since we both had just gotten out of long-term relationships. We started dating New Years, 2019.

Cory’s blue eyes shot open, then narrowed hesitantly. “Your girlfriend?” He asked. “Like...”

“Like someone I’m romantically dating,” I laughed.

He giggled loudly, raising several glances from neighboring tables, superiors trying to enjoy a moment of peace and quiet from the stressful newsroom.

“Okay, okay, I was just checking.” He raised both elegant pale hands in reassurance.

And with that, I instantly liked Cory.

He was inordinately kind, always saving me seats in the intern seminars or grabbing me the last edible salad from the cafeteria if I was running late. Cory was quick to fill me in on the drama of his dating life, (he was dating two different boys simultaneously, enjoying some freedom that only New York City can offer), but never went too long without questioning about my own life. We were fast friends.

Being the high-aiming intern that he was, Cory made sure to get in with the right people from the start. Soon, he was friends with most of the Broadcast Associates and News Associates. It wasn’t long before he had made friends with the Associate Producers as well.

“Here,” he chucked a shirt at me one afternoon toward the end of June.

It was indigo blue, with the CBS eye logo in rainbow colors.

“I asked Jenna and she said we could walk with the CBS float,” he explained excitedly through bites of salmon salad. “In the pride parade!”

Cory was fun and smart and sassy and an entirely necessary break from the toils of the newsroom. We were almost never serious. We dissected episodes of *Big Little Lies* or, in hushed tones, gossiped over which of the other interns were *definitely* gay (which was none of our

business), and discussed plans for the future in dreamy, slow voices that assured us the future would never actually arrive.

Our last day at CBS News, a large group of the interns I'd hung out with all summer decided to get drinks and go out together. Cory and I met up to grab a drink prior to meeting up with the others.

"Two margaritas, please," he motioned to the bar tender, a stocky man with a thick black beard and the eyebrows to match.

I couldn't help but laugh. I'd wanted a beer.

Cory chatted mindlessly, filling me in on the drama with his two men, both of whom he dumped before heading back to South Carolina for the school year. He noticed my gold cross necklace dangling from beneath its hiding spot under my t-shirt.

And soon enough, Cory was crying softly, dreading the future.

"You don't know what it's like in the South," he wiped a tear from a pink chin, the blush of his buzz altering his usual porcelain complexion. "I can't go anywhere without getting stares. My voice, the way I dress, all of it. People look so disgusted by me just for existing. I've never even had a boyfriend. You're so lucky you're from New York."

I started to reply, but couldn't find the words. Everything sounded trite in my head, everything sounded all wrong.

"Don't get me started on church." He raised his hands up in frustration, laughing. "I know it isn't true, but every time I'm in there, I feel like everyone is looking at me. Waiting to see if I'll burst into flames or something. I don't know."

Cory ended up getting borderline inappropriately drunk. He hugged and kissed my cheeks, and begged to visit me at Brown. I said my goodbyes for the summer, vowing to stay in touch with all of my summer intern friends, and let the door hit me on the way out.

I felt weird.

Sometimes it's easier to tune out the notes you don't like, when it's a song you really love.

I thought back to that night. Coming home, realizing my pastors were coming over to talk to my siblings and I. I thought back to that conversation with my mom, drunk and despairing.

"I just don't understand, Mags," my mom's cool hands stroked the back of my neck as she held my hair back for me. I gagged.

"You seem so angry lately, you don't seem like yourself," she sighed, sitting back against the bathroom wall.

She was quiet, and she told me she was worried for what my life would look like if I was gay. That I should take some time to think about it, but that it would all be okay. Life is hard enough as it is. And then, Greg and Lauren showed up. The feeling of existential dread that fossilized in my stomach as I saw them sitting there, my own (false) predictions of their opinions dominating my emotions.

Fuck.

As I hurried home from the bar with Cory, all I could think about was sitting on the couch with my pastors. Feeling the sweat bead down my back. Looking at them, wondering what they must think of me. And I thought *fuck, Cory feels that way all the time.*

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The Christian and gay communities are at odds with one another. It's something I tune out because it's easier to forget or misremember than it is to consider why they are at odds. It's

easier to remind myself that *good* Christians, Christians like me, don't care who I sleep with or who I marry, as long as I'm a good person and say my prayers before I go to sleep. It's easier to say that Christians who disagree with homosexuality are inherently bad and evil, and don't love Jesus as much as I do. Of *course* not.

It's easier to say that some gay people don't like Christians because they misunderstand Christianity. Not because they've been legitimately hurt or ostracized by the religion. Of *course* not.

Leviticus is the oft repeated, oft defended, oft thorn-in-my-side bible verse that is thrown in the face of queer people by the Christian community.

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination... If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them" (Leviticus 18:22-20:13).

Seems pretty straightforward. But as with everything in the Bible, it is not. The Bible has been translated and translated and translated, from Hebrew to Latin to Old English to Modern English, sometimes it's difficult to understand what the hell these ancient people were condemning versus championing.

This could mean a lot of things. The term "abomination" is used to vaguely describe idolatry at some points in the Bible, prostitution in others. Perhaps the abomination is in reference to the abomination of same-sex prostitution. I don't know. I do know that the Bible also says a lot about how righteous it is to own slaves. That beating your wife is totally cool, so long as she deserves it. I've said it before, and I'll say it again because it is comforting to me; Jesus never says a single thing about homosexuality.

I digress.

Leviticus quotes are all over signs at Pride parades from those lovely protestors who line the sides. Gay people have experienced a lot of pain from the conservative side of Christianity.

And it isn't just the conservative side.

Sanctuary Church had become a community for me, early on in my freshman year at Brown. I was still easing back into my Christian faith, but it felt good and genuine to lean into it. Beyond that, Bri and I had cultivated an awesome friendship that meant a lot to me. After my first Sunday with her, Bri demanded I join her and her fur-lined jean jacket on the following Sunday. We'd known each other for about three weeks, but church tends to bring people closer together. Praying and singing and hoping and believing in the same space is transformative for friendships. That person becomes not just your friend, but a sister in Christ.

A month into our Sunday routine (church, breakfast sandwiches at Amy's, and homework in the SciLi), we decided to walk back up the hill from Sanctuary instead of catching a ride.

The sermon that morning had been on the sacredness of the Bible, the importance Christians need to pay to the words of the New Testament in particular.

"I don't know if I really believe like, *every* word in the New Testament though," I voiced my doubts tentatively. "Like, obviously I trust everything Jesus says. But other than that, I get suspicious sometimes."

"About what?" Bri asked nonchalantly, pulling her light brown hair into a messy bun.

I shrugged. "I don't know, I just feel like the Bible was written so long ago, and while some things are definitely just moral truths that will always be relevant, others are outdated."

She nodded. "You mean like slavery, gay-marriage, abortion, the whole nine yards."

Yeah, that's exactly what I meant.

“I feel that,” she agreed, filling my chest with a sense of relief. “But, I really struggle with the gay marriage and abortion stuff. I mean, the Bible says one thing but then another. I don’t know what to think, it’s really confusing. In my opinion. I totally respect everyone, I just struggle to know what to think about all that.”

A fist tightened around my heart, squeezing it tighter and smaller and tighter with every breath I managed to intake. I wasn’t out yet, Bri had no clue what she was saying, that she was voicing my very own concerns, but it definitely put a damper on the rest of my Sunday.

It hurt more than the usual sting of self-doubt because Bri was, and is, a liberal Christian. She sings to Christian rock and wears skinny jeans to church and has a bobble-head of Jesus on her desk. Bri says she thinks Jesus would have loved Woodstock (without the drugs of course) and probably was “a cool dude.”

Bri is not the type of Christian to tote around Leviticus quotes on a poster board. And even *she* had a lot of concern regarding the validity of someone like me.

Christians who experience same-sex attraction but refuse to indulge those attractions refuse to refer to themselves as gay Christians. To label themselves as gay would be to admit that their preferences are as intrinsic as being a brunette is. They see their attractions to the same sex the way an alcoholic sees a smooth glass of scotch; it’s a temptation, it’s their cross to bear, it’s their cross to defeat. They are not gay Christians. They are Christians who experience same-sex attraction.

In her book *Gay Girl, Good God*, Jackie Hill Perry explains her life as a Christian who struggles with same-sex attractions. I read this book the same way one watches a horror movie. It’s so cringe inducing, so tragically awful, so macabre, that I could not tear myself away. I was scared to read it, afraid it might alter how I view myself. Afraid I would feel stones of shame in my gut, stones I haven’t felt since the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

“I was attracted to women before I knew how to spell my name” (11).

Perry has lost me already, and its only Chapter 2. She has been attracted to girls since she was a child. A child’s crushes and preferences surely are innocent, less sexual in nature than they are just, well, preferences!

Perry goes on to describe her childhood romance with another girl in her 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class. Labelling it as perverse, as something shameful. She isn’t even eight years old.

Jesus is explicitly clear on his view of children.

The book of Matthew is one of my personal favorites. All of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell the story of Jesus’s life and teachings, but Matthew tells it the best.

Jesus’s disciples ask him who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They want to know who is most favored.

The Bible reads:

Calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2-4).

By this definition that Jesus himself gives, children are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Or, by default, people who are childlike. People with childlike innocence. I’m not trying to disprove Perry. Her accounts of her childhood attractions are her own. I can’t help but pity her, though.

The word “pity” sounds so demeaning. Perry is an extremely accomplished, intelligent woman. She’s a poet, an artist, a book author, a speaker. She truly believes what she says she

believes, that living a homosexual lifestyle is abhorrent in God's eyes. Perry even practices what she preaches. She has abandoned all aspects of the "gay lifestyle," and now has a husband and two daughters.

I am fascinated by Jackie Hill Perry.

A filmmaker named Grace Baldrige interviewed Perry in a video regarding queerness and Christianity.

Baldrige, an Episcopalian Christian, is married to a woman. She sat down with Perry to ask her thoughts on issues such as conversion therapy, gay culture, and how to reconcile one's faith with sexual urges. It was a shockingly respectful and introspective conversation, both women at odds with but in full respect of her counterpart.

Baldrige keeps her questions above board. Non-specific, placing her own connection to the topics just out of reach. Until she has to ask.

"In your view is my marriage to my wife a cross of mine?" She asks it with sincere and genuine interest, fiddling with a gold-banded wedding ring on her ring finger.

"If we were going to apply this to you, the marriage and the relationship is something to put on the cross, yes," Hill keeps her eyes steady, her resolution steadier.

Baldrige stares back.

"Oh, oh. So my marriage is like... you've got to divorce?"

Hill nods awkwardly, her long dreads shaking with her head.

To my utter shock, Baldrige laughs. Not even mockingly.

"That's a lot of paperwork Jackie! I don't know what kind of time you think I have! But even if I agreed with you, I don't have the brain power for a divorce!"

Christians like Hill baffle me. She seems like a nice person, she seems like a good Christian, and she seems like she is utterly and completely against queer love. I struggle so much to relate to these people because even though I know they don't hate me, they "hate the sin" (barf), it feels so much like they hate *me*.

I want to go to a church where I know without a shadow of a doubt that the pastor giving the sermon has, at the absolute bare minimum least, no opinion on homosexuality one way or the other. Even better, the pastor supports it. Not because it's politically correct, not because he wants new hip and young parishioners, but because in his heart that's how he feels. I can't help but think back to Cory, sitting at that tacky bar in NYC, feeling split in half. Too gay to be a Christian, too Christian to properly be gay. I can't imagine if I grew up in the South, after Cory's assertion that it is practically incomparable to the North in terms of tolerant folks.

My faith is the most important thing about me. But no one is a born a Christian. We have a whole baptism process to prove it, full of oaths and swears and secret holy water dousing.

I am a strong believer that DNA plays a role in sexual orientation. Maybe not the entirety of the equation, but definitely the largest part of it.

Pastor Andrew, the pastor at Sanctuary Church, once said that being a Christian is the most important part of any person in the church. It is the most significant hat you wear, a hat you cannot in fact take off while believing in Jesus.

But it is a hat that you chose to put on.

If you can't say the same for queerness, if it's something you have felt since before you knew how to spell your name, how can you be asked to pick between the two?

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"When the fuck are you going to interview me for your gay thesis thingy?" Jack asks loudly. "I'm a gay, I'm a Christian, interview me already!"

We were dancing wildly together to a Britney Spears/T.I. mashup in a crowded party at Jack's apartment. I waved him off, eager to forget about classes and responsibilities and thesis deadlines for the night. Jack grabbed my hand and spun me. He laughed shrilly, giggling in a maniacal falsetto. The lights were dim and the air was foggy with the sweat of friends and strangers, despite the fact it was late January. Colored lights from some kind of disco ball type fixture spun around, lighting up the faces of all our friends, acquaintances, and unknown freshmen who somehow snuck their way into the party.

"I'm going to grab a new drink," I tapped Jack after a fellow dancer knocked my stale 3% alcohol beer down the front of my already stained white crop top.

He nodded, but grabbed my forearm tightly. "Seriously, interview me already." He giggled again, letting me go and returning to the damp mosh of college kids draping themselves over one another in some sort of imitation of dancing.

Jack and I met through a mutual friend during my junior year at Brown. Initially, I wasn't too fond of him. I thought he was loud and bitchy. He was slightly aloof and I could never really get a solid grasp of his vibe. Until he found out about my sexuality.

We were in the middle of a bar. My girlfriend Marion had come up and drunkenly wrapped her arms around my hips.

"Who was that?" Jack asked me, raising a vodka soda to his face, clouded over with a five o'clock shadow. I told him that was my girlfriend, Marion. His blue eyes shot open. "What? You're a lesbian?"

And the rest was history. I'm still slightly intimidated by Jack. His dad is a fabulously famous author, and he says things like "Bill Clinton facetimed me yesterday." We rarely hangout sober, mostly finding solace in one another drunkenly at parties, promising that we'll meet up the next day for brunch. Most of our friends are straight (read: all of our friends), and we tend to gravitate towards one another under the lights of fake disco balls in crowded rooms.

I am intimidated by Jack. I am intimidated by him, and I wish I wasn't because so much of it is tied up in misjudgment and misunderstanding.

"You know, I used to be a deacon at the church I go to," he told me in another effort to have me interview him. "I'm a religious studies major, I'm gay, why won't you just interview me already?"

So, as I waited on my porch for Jack to pick me up, I wondered why the hell it had taken me so long. I played with the button on my corduroy bomber jacket, nervously watching for him. He was a little late, but eventually walked over wearing a pair of neatly pressed khakis and a button-down shirt tucked in. I glanced down at my jeans and t-shirt. Shit.

"Don't worry," he said, following my eyes. "No one will care."

We walked two blocks to his church, Union Congregationalist. It's on Angell Street, and I pass it almost every day while jogging. I had never been inside.

"What's funny is that my church is buttoned up and mostly old people, but it's really progressive," he mentioned. I nodded along. "We even have an LGBT coalition for LGBT youth. It's not very big, but like, your church doesn't have that, does it?"

No, Sanctuary does not have anything even close to resembling that.

We walked into the church, the noises of their choir wafting from behind the chapel doors. We were late. I followed closely behind Jack like a lost little puppy. He scooted into the back pew and grabbed the forearm of a woman to our left.

"Jack! So good to see you sweetie," she smiled at us and mirrored his gesture, clasping the arm of his pressed shirt.

We sat down and I was struck by the church's similarities to PCUM, the church I grew up in. The service was traditional. A church service pamphlet was handed out, and the schedule followed it to a tee. There was a children's sermon, the singing of some hymns, and a meaningful albeit boring sermon. No one was dunked into a giant baptismal tank. There were no screams affirming the love of Jesus Christ. The female pastor's sermon was about the nearness of heaven. Not necessarily from sitting out on the North Dome in Yosemite, but rather from witnessing great acts of love. She quoted from the book of Matthew, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" (Matthew 4:16).

On our way out the door, we paused to greet the pastor. Jack hugged her, and asked her how she had been doing. Her father had just passed away.

"Oh, you know. Life is hard," she admitted. She turned to me. "It is so nice you came today. Please come back. You're so welcome here."

We walked back to my apartment making small-talk, dissecting the previous night's party and wondering aloud when the hell midterm season would finally end. Jack turned to me once we walked through the door of my apartment. It was messy and grungy after a night of drinking with friends. There were used red solo cups on every surface, and the table was sticky with the remnants of some type of alcohol. We sat down nonetheless, Jack careful not to rest the arm of his clean shirt on the table.

"So, should we get into it?" he asked, raising both brown eyebrows daringly.

Jack grew up in Palm Beach, Florida. He is an only child, with older parents. Jack attended Hotchkiss boarding school in Connecticut. He found a church in the area that he really liked. At the time, Jack told me no other students were really going to church. Soon it became a "thing," so to speak. Jack got some friends to join him, and they would all go to church in the morning on Sundays and go get breakfast together afterwards. By the end of his time at Hotchkiss, he had twenty or thirty kids going with him every week.

He grew up religious, but without a lot of turmoil regarding his religion and sexual orientation. "My mom was more off-put by the gay stuff than my dad. My dad didn't really care," he said, fixing a loose strand of hair and wiping a bagel crumb from his chin. "But now it doesn't really matter at all. Both of them are cool."

Jack was out in high school, which he said never really posed a problem for him. "People were fine with it, I wasn't scared or worried, it kind of just was what it was."

I believe Jack, of course. But I sensed something guarded in him. I can't imagine growing up with *zero* turmoil in relation to one's sexuality. I think back to Cory, who was so raw and fragile with me. Cory, who felt perpetually excluded and judged.

What about churches that don't accept gay people? That would scoff at people like Jack or myself holding deacon leadership positions?

"I don't really care, to be frank with you. They can think whatever they want. I'm well-read on all this stuff, I know how I feel," he said matter-of-factly. I am jealous of his certainty, and I wish I was as well-read. "Look, there are so many things in the Bible that are condemned time and time again. Weird things. Women in roles of leadership, certain foods, the list goes on. I have no time for people who are so selective in their reading of the Bible. Pay attention to what Jesus says if you want to be so literal."

Jack came to Brown with the intention of becoming a pastor. His original goal was actually to attend seminary school after undergrad. It's surprising, but also completely unsurprising after having an actually meaningful and intellectual Christian conversation with him. He knows an astounding amount about the religion. Everything I say, every misquote I

make, he is quick with a gentle correction. Not a know-it-all, rather just someone who knows it. Instead of seminary school, Jack is going to work at Barclays next year.

“I think I might return to the idea in a couple of years, though,” he told me, and I want to tell him I think he should because he’d be pretty great at it.

A gay pastor. My aunt’s pastor for a long time was a lesbian woman. Now, her new pastor is a gay man. Presbyterian churches have recently allowed for gay pastors. It’s a big step, and I wonder what my story would have looked like if I had grown up around such a person.

Jack and I don’t talk for long, which is okay. I have heard what I needed to hear. A deeply faithful, Christian man who is also deeply and unapologetically homosexual. Cory and I are maybe just not quite there yet. I feel like I’ve accepted myself, that Cory has accepted himself, but somehow, we are still standing *just* on the precipice of the point Jack has reached with himself.

There’s a difference between Cory and Jack. Even between Jack and myself. Jack carries himself like he not only knows who he is, but fully believes he was meant to be this way. That his creation is an act of godliness in it of itself. And I don’t mean that Jack thinks he’s a God or above anyone else. Just that there’s no part of him too ugly to put on full display. I’m sick of apologizing for myself. I know Cory is too. Shame is powerfully and evilly pervasive, and I wonder how long it will take for me to completely wash myself of it. To wash myself of the care I still hold for the opinions of others, especially other Christians. Those Christians who love the sinner but hate the sin.

Cory and I marinated in shame for so long, so helplessly, that it is going to take more than a few years to drain it out. It’s almost like we need another baptism. A baptism as the Christians we are today. Jesus gets baptized in the book of Matthew. The scripture reads, “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment, heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God... And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16-17). I think I’d like that. To come up for air, and feel that all was right in the world. To feel like Jack. To know the one who created me was pleased.



### The New Standard

“While it isn’t definitive one way or another, I am fairly confident that Sanctuary would not be in support of a same sex marriage....” My mom’s voice trails off to a halt. I’m sitting in the parking lot outside East Side Market. My groceries are buckled up safely in the back, waiting for me to start the engine. Rain droplets races down the windshield of my car. It’s raining so hard, the inside of my car sounds like a war zone.

Well, I guess there you have it. I was going to interview Pastor Andrew from Sanctuary Church for my thesis. I was going to ask him his opinions, probe his faith, maybe share with him the importance of his services in my life. I wanted to once and for all know if Sanctuary was as new age as they seemed, or if it was all just talk. If there was purpose behind their hippy, welcoming atmosphere, or if it was all intentional. To trick unsuspecting people like me into seats, without necessarily actually accepting us.

A nagging thought held me back. *If you get an answer you don’t like, you’ll never go back. More accurately, if you get an answer you don’t like, you’ll never feel comfortable in that space. You’ll be an outsider.* The thought came from my gut, sharp and pronounced, rising to my head and consuming all thoughts around Sanctuary. And I knew I couldn’t go through with the interview. I never pressed send on my email request to Pastor Andrew. The gut feeling was reason enough to be distrustful of the results of such an interview.

My mom mentioned the dilemma to my pastor from home, Pastor Greg. Being the person he is, Greg did some digging of his own. He lurked around their website and social media. My mom had called me to let me know the results of his research.

“Hey kid. You still there?” she asks me, stopping in the middle of her reading of Greg’s email.

“Actually, I’m surprisingly fine,” I say, shock still registering. “Knowing something like this two, three years ago would have totally crushed me but... I don’t know. I still don’t want to interview Andrew and sort of ‘out’ myself and ruin Sanctuary as a place of peace for myself, but I’m not going to stop going.”

“That’s great,” Mom starts.

“But like even better, I don’t hate Andrew. I don’t think he’s a bad person, he’s actually an awesome person,” I interrupt her. “Like, I would have just written him off as an asshole because he’s anti-gay marriage, but I think it’s so much more complicated than that.”

“I know what you mean,” she begins again.

“AND,” I steamroll over her yet again. “AND, I think I just don’t care anymore. Like, he’s just a man. He’s not the word of God. So who’s to say he’s any more right than I am? Like, he can think that and that’s fine and I can live my life and that’s fine and... Am I making sense?”

My mom laughs a deep and throaty laugh so particular to her and her only. It sends a wave of love through me, reminds me to call her more often.

“Yes, it makes sense to me. But I think you should talk to Greg yourself about what he found.”

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It’s freezing cold. Like, really fucking cold. I’m sitting in my beat-up silver Jeep outside of Presbyterian Church of Upper Montclair, waiting for my watch to tick to 11:00. I’m five minutes early. I check through my notes for the fiftieth time, ticking off each question, circling the ones I want to be sure I get to. At 10:59, I get out of my car.

Pastor Greg lets me in the side door. He’s in a casual green sweater and khakis. No pastor robes to be seen.

“Come on in. I would hug you, but I’m battling a bit of a cold,” he tells me, beckoning me to follow him to his office.

“I’ve never really been to church on a weekday,” I admit nervously. “Or in the middle of the day, for that matter.”

He laughs. “I don’t think you’re the only twenty-one-year-old who hasn’t. I didn’t even know churches were open during the week, when I was twenty-one.”

We step into his office. It’s almost as cold as it was outside, and it makes an incredible amount of sense that Greg is under the weather.

His office is large, cluttered with books and books and books and more books. They pour out of the bounds of the giant bookcase behind his desk, onto the floor, behind the couch, and of course, all over his cluttered desk.

The second most represented item in the office would have to be pictures. Pictures from way back when, pictures of his family and his children, a couple photographs from mission trips he took years ago. I recognize the boy in one of the pictures, Greg’s son William. He sang during the Christmas Eve service just weeks prior.

We get to it right away. No lead up, no baby steps into what I want to know.

“I know my mom asked you to do some digging into Sanctuary Church’s beliefs on same-sex marriage. I would love to know what you found.”

“We could talk about that if you want to,” he answers. “I remember going on their website and it is *so* good. It’s not just techy. They’re language is verrrry good and verrrry attractive. But I grew up in that culture, and I know how to read through it. It’s the same things as Hillsong,” he says, referencing Hillsong, a “mega-church” in Montclair similar to Sanctuary in its affinity for flamboyant services and an over-abundance of man-buns.

“I want to say, they don’t think you’re a real…” Greg trails off. “Look, I want to be respectful. But I also know I could read this and I had a hunch, and I wanted to do this right. You have to *really* know what you’re doing to get through Sanctuary’s website to find their denominational affiliation. If you follow that thread, you’ll see they are very clearly against gay and lesbian… that it’s just not of God. And that’s because as a basic fundamental tenet of their church, like so many, they’re much more of a literal reading of the scripture. And, I would argue, they’re very selective in their reading. Because there’s only really two places where it’s even vaguely referenced.”

“Right,” I say. “Romans and Leviticus.”

“Yes, and I would even argue that our denomination has changed. It’s not changed just because ‘justice, and love.’ It’s because it’s scriptural. Presbyterians base everything off scripture. You could argue scripturally that again and again and again, Jesus took the person who was the outsider, the person who was the marginalized one, and showed them to be the one that embodied faith and love and fidelity to his radical teachings. Over and over and over again. I think you need to let scripture interpret scripture when dealing with these types of issues.”

I had a general idea of Pastor Greg’s opinions on same-sex marriage. I can’t help flashing back to that moment when he and Pastor Lauren sat awkwardly opposite my siblings and I and assuaged some of my fears. Now, I’m here. I’m a full-grown person with opinions of my own, and a very distinct point of view on this particular issue. He won’t change the way I think, regardless of what he says, but it is comforting to hear him speak so academically. So thoughtfully. Greg has clearly spent a number of minutes in his life weighing and dissecting this dilemma in the church. He is an incredibly accomplished academic, receiving his undergrad from Stanford followed by a seminary degree from Columbia University. It is comforting to hand the

issue over to someone I respect, someone I feel has greater authority over me. It's an affirming feeling of belonging. I have looked up to and listened to this man my entire life, have known him since childhood. The adult conversation we are engaging in fills me with all different emotions of pride, interest, but mostly just gratitude. I feel seen.

But I do wonder why PCUM's opinion on homosexuality isn't more forthright. Other churches in town fly the rainbow LGBT pride flag outside their doors. PCUM does not. I want to ask Greg about this, but I think I already know the answer. A large portion of the church consists of conservative, older white members. Most of them probably have no issue with same-sex marriage. This, Greg tells me himself.

"Most of those people, if they met someone like you, knew someone like you, had experience with actual people... They don't really care in their heart of hearts."

Nonetheless, there's no flag. I wish there was one. While it might irritate the baby-boomer era constituent, I know if I saw that flag seven years ago, it would have meant something to me. Instead of confidently asking Greg why there's no flag, I decide to get around it. He's under the weather and been far too generous with his time. It doesn't seem like the time to ask a "gotcha" question. Instead, I ask how he tries to make kids feel comfortable in his church, and what methods he uses to encourage them that church can be a space they return to in the future for support. He smiles at me, revealing wordlessly that he thinks often of the youth at PCUM.

"The moment that is very meaningful for Presbyterians, at least for me, is this opening sort of confessional prayer, and at the end we say 'You are loved as you are.' And you are forgiven. You don't have to do anything, you don't have to believe anything, you don't have to say any kind of prayer, you don't have to like go to the soup kitchen." We both laugh, as both of us have spent our fair share in PCUM soup kitchens over the years.

"In other words, it's God's choice to love you completely and fully which in the Christian idiom means in Christ, through the life, death and resurrection. None of which is provable at all, it makes no sense, I get it," he admits. "God died so that you can live that absolute best self-life. That's a gift."

Really, his message is love. It isn't tolerance or respect or even a strict adherence to the word of God. Although Greg admits that yes, one must give up certain things to live the life Jesus and God imagined for us, he maintains that love is the center of his church, and the center of God.

"That is my approach to everyone in the church who I am privileged enough to serve. But especially the kids. I just want them to know that they're loved," Greg smiles softly, and I wonder if he's wondering whether or not I felt loved at PCUM. It's a loaded question. I felt love from Greg and Lauren always. I felt love from my parents, and some of the elders I met throughout youth group and confirmation class. But I still felt a lack of belonging in my later years as a Christian. I don't know if that discomfort was a symptom of my own insecurities and fear, or if the anxiety I had was created by the church itself. I don't know if I'll ever know. Just like I will never, at least while I'm mortal, know what God truly has to say on same-sex relations.

What I do know today, what I am positively certain in this second, is that Pastor Greg loves me. And I am welcome here. I don't know for sure about Pastor Andrew and Sanctuary Church, I don't know that I'll ever really know. And for the first time, a sense of relief washes over me as I realize that's okay.

As I'm leaving, Pastor Greg again refuses a hug or a handshake. He *really* does not want to get me sick. But he leaves me with words that are far more meaningful than any hug ever would have been.

"If you're at Brown or California, or in Timbuktu, I just hope you wander into a place and find a community that's going to treat you the same way. Make that the standard. Make sure they value you the way you were valued here. And you deserve that, you know? Don't settle for anything less."

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A lot has changed since I began writing this thesis. I have stopped attending Sanctuary Church. I found it difficult to sit in the pews after finding out that my love was not seen as the reflection of God's perfect love, but rather a perversion or something to be fixed. It's a decision that has weighed on me greatly, especially considering all of the light Sanctuary Church brought into my life. Pastor Andrew and his congregation brought me an immense amount of peace, and mended my broken relationship with God. Which is sort of ironic, considering the church's views on homosexuality. Whatever it's worth, Sanctuary fixed my relationship with God. I'm eternally grateful for that.

I still think Pastor Greg was right. I need a new standard. I don't want to be tolerated, I want to be accepted. When I first came out, I was happy just to have a seat in the room. I was happy just to not feel explicitly hated. My new standard is far more selective. Tolerance is the bare minimum requirement. My new standard is love without addendum or asterisk.

I am moving to California in the beginning of June. Just a week after I graduate from Brown. As I reflect on my time here, I can't help but think of Brown as the place where I became a Christian. Sure, I grew in many other ways. Academically, socially, the list goes on. Those pale in comparison to the ways in which my belief flourished during my four years. My belief in God and Jesus, and my belief in myself as a valid human worthy of love and acceptance. It all started with a simple word. Nothing more than the desire to stop fighting so hard, nothing more than the desire to say "yes."

I am moving to California. Away from my family and most of my friends. I am scared and I am nervous but mostly I am excited beyond words. I want to find a new church that adheres to my new standard, and I want to continue to grow my faith out West. I can't wait to make new friends and start earning my way through the world. Maybe I'll meet my future wife. Maybe I'll learn how to surf. Maybe I'll find a place that makes bagels even slightly comparable to the truly exceptional bagels I grew up with on the East Coast. Or maybe I won't. The most exciting part is that I have no fucking clue.

The only thing I'm absolutely certain of is that no matter how my California adventures turn out, I'm going to be just fine. Growing up, my mom had a printout taped to our fridge that's still there even today. It's a quote from Mary Stevenson. Stevenson wrote the book, *Falling Over Reno: The True Story of the Skyjacker's Wife*. In 1972, Stevenson's boyfriend skyjacked and crashed a plane. His horrific actions derailed their plans to live happily ever after. However, the aftermath thrust Stevenson into a level of spirituality she never knew existed. The quote my mom likes says:

"One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord,

You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you."

I'll never be alone. I never have been. When I die, if it fades to black, and it turns out that this Christianity stuff was nothing more than a fairy tale, I will still have been so grateful for it. Even the confusion my faith has caused. I could never move to California by myself without the certainty that someone is coming with me.

I am overwhelmed with love and joy in my life. I am so thankful I said yes. I know countless friends and family members with hearts plagued by pain and worry festering in their minds. My mom always told me to pray in times like that, which even she would admit sounded rather futile in the most hopeless of scenarios. It even sounds kind of foolish.

However, I can't imagine anything more hopeful than praying and reaching towards the unknown. I'll stand on my tiptoes, reach my fingertips as tall as I can, and keep my eyes on the sky.

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To my parents. I don't really know where to begin because words like "thank you" don't cover it. I'm sorry I was moody and mean for all those years, thank you for supporting and loving me anyways. For reading every draft of this piece, and encouraging me to be honest in every corner of it. Thanks for raising my three best friends, who double as an endless supply of inspiration for my writing. Thanks for forcing us to wake up before all our friends on Sundays.

Finally, I think I would have missed the entire point of my own thesis if I didn't thank God. Eight years ago, I would have been equally surprised and mortified to know I'd written a thesis about my sexuality, as I would to realize that same thesis doubles as a love letter to my faith. I didn't know this type of peace existed, so thank You for carrying me back to the fold and never abandoning me when I wander.

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