Instructions for Mac Users

WHAT LOVE DOESN'T CONQUER

by

Jessie Szalay
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

Committee:

_____ Director

_____

_____

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date: _____ Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

What Love Doesn't Conquer

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Jessie Szalay
Bachelor of Arts
Kenyon College, 2005

Director: Kyoko Mori, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

DEDICATION

To my family: my father Tom, my mother Arlene, and Caitlin and Emily, who gave me the privilege of being their big sister.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have made this happen. Kyoko Mori, Tim Denevi, and Susan Shreve provided me with unwavering support and encouraged me to expand my writing beyond where I'd ever imaged it could go. It is thanks to you that I have gotten so much out of this MFA. Alex Henderson, Steph Liberatore, Danielle Harms, Erica Dolson, and Emily Heiden, who provided the best workshop comments I've yet seen. Bill Miller, whose advocacy and willingness to help with financial support allowed me to attend this wonderful program in the first place. Amy, Alice, and Lee Triplett and Brett Harvey, who provided me with a sense of family on the East Coast. Rest in Peace, Lee. And, lastly, thank you to my dearest one, Ryan Kamitsis, who has taught me what it is to feel beloved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

WHAT LOVE DOESN'T CONQUER

Jessie Szalay

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Dr. Kyoko Mori

This is a collection of thematically linked narrative essays.

NON-MORMON PIONEERS

The Mormon women and I do not walk from house to house. Instead, we pile into minivans and SUVs, drive for three minutes, and unpack ourselves at the next high-ceilinged residence. We step gingerly over snowy gutters and driveways confettied with ice chunks. It is a cold December night in 2007, in West Haven Utah, forty miles north and west of Salt Lake City. Thirteen Mormon women are visiting their neighbors' homes to see each others' Christmas decorations and learn about their yuletide traditions, to drink water and eat Santa-shaped cookies smeared with red-dye icing. I have joined them, though I am not Mormon. I never have been, and have no Mormon relatives or ancestry. I do not consider myself Christian. I don't even live in Utah.

Though I did, once. During middle and high school and for a little while after I graduated from college in 2005, I lived in my parents' mountain bungalow situated within an hour's drive of four Mormon temples and countless wards, in which the faithful meet on Sundays. But a year ago I traded my Utah residency for a working visa in Kyoto, Japan. I live there now, teaching English to preschoolers and dating my way through the expat community. I have escaped, thank Heavenly Father (as the Mormons would say), and can now swear in public, wear tank tops, and drink coffee and alcohol without a second glance—all the sweetness that comes from living outside Utah. But the holidays

and their accompanying vacation days have arrived, and I've returned to the West's sprawling skies and towering mountains for a visit.

I am slipping and sliding into these women's illuminated homes because SueZan Wight, my longtime best friend, has invited me along. (Her name, pronounced "Suzanne," is part of a long Mormon tradition of bestowing strange names or odd spellings.) It is her local congregation's Relief Society women's organization activity. She's helped arrange it. SueZan—blue-eyed, twenty-five-year-old mother of three, National Merit Scholar back in high school, and devout Mormon—is such a delight to be around and I have missed her so much while in Japan that I readily agreed to join this group of strangers as they parade through each other's suburban mansions, congratulating themselves on their holiday displays. The paint on the white walls is as smooth and flawless as their makeup.

At one house, a miniature Christmas train covers the floors, counters, and tables. We all have to dance around the tracks like bank robbers navigating a laser security system. At another, a woman shows us crèches from around the world displayed throughout her home. I wander the house, finding nativities from countries I've visited. Japan. France. Mexico. The woman's father, her husband, her brothers-in-law, her male cousins, and her sons all brought them back for her, after their Mormon missions. The two-year missions aren't technically required for LDS men, but not going raises eyebrows. The nineteen-year-old missionaries are assigned a destination, from overseas to just a few states away, where they will go door to door wearing nametags and pressed white shirts, trying to open the eyes of the world to the teachings of the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). They phone their families only on Christmas and Mother's Day.

At her house, SueZan shows off her Austrian Christmas carousel, which she picked out and purchased during a Vienna vacation. The women coo. Most of their husbands have been abroad on missions, but the women probably haven't. Women can serve missions, too, though they are shorter in length and far less common.

The homes we are visiting are part of a development in the flatness around the shores of Great Salt Lake, where the wind sometimes carries the scent of rotting eggs, the smell of brine shrimp dying or dead. My parents' bungalow is fifteen minutes east, nestled in a crook halfway up Mount Ogden in the Wasatch Front, the westernmost edge of the Rocky Mountains. SueZan's parents live down the street from mine. Looking left from my parents' kitchen window, one sees Mount Ogden's granite summit fill half the blue sky; it's as imposing as standing next to a blue whale. Looking right, there's horizon-to-horizon expanse of valley and Great Salt Lake, itself festooned with small islands that shine purple in sunset. Beyond that, Nevada's peaks glimmer on the horizon.

But out at the flat development where SueZan now lives, new houses and big box stores block the views of the mountains and the slippery edge of Lake. I tell SueZan that her neighborhood reminds me of the Midwest's flat stretches of strip malls, and she recoils. "Ugh," she says. "I know. It's like Nebraska." Her own parents' mountain house is spacious and warm, and minutes from the best sledding hill in town.

When we attended Ogden High School together, I dreamed of a New York sky rise apartment and SueZan wanted to live in Europe, to raise her children in the centuries-

old townhouses of London or Brussels. She'd spent her junior year of high school in Liverpool and four years later married Rex, who had done his mission in the UK—steps, she thought, toward eventual European residence. But Rex brought her instead to West Haven, where without consulting her, he'd purchased a house. SueZan was devastated, but she followed him with two babies in tow. "What else," she'd said, eyes on the floor, "can I do?"

SueZan wouldn't want me to be such a snob, to look at these other women and think that she was better than they. To think that her Austrian carousel trumped that woman's crèches because she'd chosen it herself, had walked the streets of Vienna with her own two feet. And it's not as if these women were unsuccessful. There is no failure in managing a functional marriage and raising healthy children.

When I lived in Utah before, Mormonism—its values, its culture, its assumptions—encircled me completely. I lived in the empty space in the center, the hole in the middle of the ring of acceptance and certainty, which the Church provides for its members. Outside of that religious ring lay the wide world, seemingly made of the same stuff as my hole in the middle.

Like many Non-Mormons in Utah—for that is how we define ourselves, in the absence of any formal group or distinction—I'd grown up harshly judging the Church. But my judgments had always fallen silent around SueZan. She was so filled with light, joy, and peaceful, easy acceptance of me, that it used to be nearly impossible to keep up negativity in her presence.

At a home that looks torn from the pages of *House Beautiful,* I let my meringue cookie, molded to the shape of a Christmas mushroom, dissolve on my tongue. I admire the four impeccably decorated trees—one for each living room window—and the dining room chairs with giant, shining tulle bows tied to their backs. As if just sitting down here is a gift. In each immaculate room—the play room painted like a jungle; the craft room with color-coordinated bins; the laundry room with the phases "*Wash and Rinse!"* and *"We Love Laundry!"* stenciled in enormous party-pink calligraphy on the white walls—I ask the hostess over and over with increasing incredulity how many children she has.

"Six," she laughs gaily, thickly mascaraed eyes open wide. "Ages one to twelve."

I stare at the glittery holly boughs perfectly draped on the bannister. I love the house, but it is impossible to imagine myself living in it. Any children I have—and I do want children, though I cannot fathom having them now—will most likely grow up in a messy apartment, argue like overly serious adults, and read books in the bathtub. This hostess seems a different species from myself, both more highly functioning and less complicated. It is amazing that SueZan lives in this world; that she, too, exhibits the characteristics of this species of woman. But she does. She is a tremendous mother. She wears the bulky sweaters and high-waisted, boot-cut jeans of the Mormon moms easily, flawlessly.

The woman at the last house looks like all the others—blonde ponytail, heavy foundation, beaded winter white cardigan. She comes into the living room carrying a single children's book.

“This is my favorite Christmas tradition,” she says, explaining that over the years she’s carefully collected twenty-five nativity picture books. Each day of advent, her kids open one, wrapped up green and gold like a present, and read it together.

My glazed-over eyes open.

“I’d like to read you my favorite story,” she says.

She holds the book open in front of her so that we can see the illustrations: thick oil paintings of camels and star-rich Arabian skies. She reads the old story with her Utah accent, dropping her Ts and occasionally dipping into a Southern drawl on words like “angel,” and “Christ child.” It is soothing, a mom voice. I hear my own mother in it, though she is Jewish. I hear myself, too, reading to SueZan’s kids who call me aunt, reading to my little Japanese students who are waiting for me to return from this American holiday, reading to the babies I dream of one day cradling.

The woman’s voice wavers as the whole cast of Christmas characters, including the camels and oxen, watch baby Jesus sleep and the story ends. Normally when I hear the Christmas story, I flash forward a thousand years to the Crusades, two-thousand years to the religious right. I think of all the discord and frustration Christianity has brought. But tonight, this woman’s tradition is sweet and beautiful, the kind of thing that makes your heart swell against your ribs. Tears well in my eyes, clinging to the nice mascara SueZan brushed on my lashes before we left.

And for a moment, the fact that I do not and never have belonged here in Utah, that I can never have and don’t truly want this woman’s religion, house, makeup, or

politics doesn't matter. We are women who love the weight of babies in our laps and books in our hands.

* * *

Ten years earlier, at age fifteen, I walked into a Church-sponsored makeup class. It was a Young Women's group activity, reserved for Mormon girls, but SueZan got me in. At the time, I had lived in Utah for three-and-a-half years and made almost no friends. Sitting on hard plastic folding chairs in the ward rec room, I recognized all the other girls though none of them seemed to recognize me. In the fluorescent-lit, peach-walled space, they all looked so much nicer than they did at school. I was going to have a million new friends starting tonight, I could feel it. Maybe I'd even get to go to dances.

I'd been trying to be SueZan's friend for nearly two years. On the first day of freshman year, I could tell by her kind eyes and thoughtful questions in English class that she was the nicest person in school. But she was always busy and surrounded by her Church friends. Slowly, I convinced her I was smart. We started studying together; she was into art history and came up with mnemonic devices for recalling Renaissance paintings (Botticelli = pasta, because his name sounds like vermicelli and he painted *La Primavera*, which sounds like pasta primavera). Now, she'd invited me to a Church activity, a major milestone in a lonely, Non-Mormon teenager's social life.

A horse-faced girl named Kandace sat a few chairs away from me. I looked away when she tried to catch my eye. A few days earlier, she'd given me a hard time when she realized that the only class we didn't share was seminary. In Utah public schools, LDS seminary takes up a class period in Church members' school days. To keep church and state technically separate, the seminaries must be off school property. Ours was kitty-corner across the street. Kandace trapped me after Algebra one day and ranted about the sinfulness of Non-Mormons' defining characteristics: coffee eating your insides, premarital sex ruining lives and hurting Heavenly Father, just like a prostitute would do. Only as an afterthought did she add, "And, plus, the Church is true and Jesus is our savior and *we* get to be with our families for all time and eternity." I listened until she paused, then said with a shrug, "Well, yeah, but I'm just not Mormon." She stared at me incredulously before turning and rushing across the street to the seminary building.

Ogden, our little town thirty-eight miles north of Salt Lake City, was only around 70% Mormon. But most of the population's remaining 30% was from Mexico and stayed in the neighborhood with the *panaderias* on the corners, where most non-Mexicans were afraid to go. Sometimes, my family bought pastries in that neighborhood, but we didn't have any friends there. And I was too shy to speak much in English, let alone Spanish. The LDS Church controlled a substantial portion of the social activities in Utah—dances, volunteering events, trick-or-treating, Boy and Girl Scouts, just to name a few—so if any of my Non-Mormon classmates had friends who weren't Mexican, chances were they went to LDS activities sometimes. If they didn't, they were probably just as shy and awkward as I was.

“Don’t let them convert you,” my mother said before SueZan picked me up for the makeup class. “Be nice, but don’t let them think you’re interested.” She hugged me tightly. “I’m so happy for you. Have fun.”

I didn’t know if she always told my younger sister, Caitlin, not to convert. Caitlin had been socially successful—which meant she had Mormon friends—since we arrived in Utah. We moved from San Diego when I was beginning middle school as an overweight, bumbling, angry-at-the-world sixth-grader. My father’s new job in Utah forced us to leave the avocado trees and ocean, which I hadn’t even realized I’d liked until we’d left. But Caitlin had always been a cute, perky, and very social child, so two months after our move, she was attending LDS activities, coming home singing songs about Joseph Smith. My mother wasn’t interested in fitting in; she hadn’t fit in at her Maryland Hebrew school, hadn’t fit in at college, hadn’t fit in with the wealthy women on our San Diego street, so why start now? When we got to Utah, she tracked down the synagogue, gave up on it, and switched to guitar group and sweat lodge. The members were all from out-of-state, brought here to teach at the local college.

My father had a harder time. As with me, no one seemed to want him around. Nine months after being hired as director of photography at a Northern Utah newspaper, he was fired. His subordinates had complained about him incessantly: We don’t know him, we can’t trust him, we need someone who’s established here, who is one of us, who we can understand. Translation: he’s not Mormon. Over their years of Utah residence, my parents have met many people, all Non-Mormons, with similar stories across a variety of industries. We also met people like our neighbor, Dave, who struggled and struggled with

his fledgling insurance business until he converted and suddenly found hundreds of clients, a big house, and a cheery blonde wife.

My dad found a job teaching photography. He even had his own friends, who, like my mother's, were not LDS.

In the rec room, which looked more like a Holiday Inn conference room than any church, I tried not to think about the fact that I was making social inroads when just a few days ago my other sister, eight-year-old Emily, was pushed down on the playground at her public elementary school because she wasn't Mormon. The kids in her second-grade class wouldn't play with her. Instead, they asked her what was wrong with her since she didn't go to Church. When I was her age in California, I'd hardly been aware of any religion. But here, people seemed to be aware of its resonance from the time they were in diapers, and by second grade, they were ready to discriminate on its basis.

If the girls in the Young Women's makeup class asked why I didn't go to Church, I was prepared to say that I was not Mormon. But I would be so nice and thoughtful that the pretty girls from school would be friends with me anyway. It didn't occur to me to say that I was Jewish or Christian, atheist or Buddhist, because all of that was subordinate to the defining characteristic of the 30% of the population to which I belonged: we weren't Mormon.

My mom needn't have worried; there was no real chance I'd convert. Since my parents announced our move to Utah, I had been told by them, my relatives, my parents' friends, my California teachers, all adults: You're not Mormon. When we came here, we discovered that the religious minority actively referred to themselves as Non-Mormons,

and we took up the convention. My parents went to liberal Christian church sometimes, and sweat lodge sometimes, and synagogue occasionally, and Unitarian services once in a while. It didn't seem important to figure out what I believed in, because all that mattered was that I didn't believe in Mormonism.

Sitting in the ward conference room waiting for makeup class to start, though, I didn't know much about the LDS Church. As my friendship with SueZan grew over the next several years, I came to learn about both the conventional and the eccentric elements of the religion. Through talks with SueZan and her family, missionaries I met at their social gatherings, and a lot of reading, I learned the kind of stuff that turns many outsiders off, and which ultimately explains the need for a dedicated religious enclave in the first place. I learned about Joseph Smith's 1830 backwoods vision that created LDS Church. I learned about how, as a young and pious man in the Burned Over District of upstate New York during the Second Great Awakening, he prayed one night in a grove of trees. He prayed to know which Christian sect was true. An evil power descended upon him and nearly overtook him but, at the last moment, he was saved by God and Jesus. They appeared and told him that no current Christian church would lead to salvation.

After that, an angel called Moroni (you can imagine the fun young Non-Mormons have with that name) appeared to Joseph Smith and showed him where he could find some golden plates buried on a hill in the forest. Inscribed with what Smith called "reformed Egyptian" writing, which no one has seen before or since, the plates told the story of the Nephites and the Lamanites, two groups descended from an Israelite prophet named Lehi who followed God's orders to flee Jerusalem in 600 BC and sail

little wooden boats across the Pacific to America. The light-skinned Nephites (usually the good guys in the Book of Mormon stories) frequently fought against the dark-skinned Lamanites (usually the bad guys). Jesus stopped over in America after his resurrection and proselytized them, but only the Nephites stuck with his teachings. The fighting went on until 421 AD when the Nephites were wiped out. Moroni was the last Nephite, and he buried the golden plates in the woods after the battle, only to return several hundred years later in angel form and lead Joseph Smith to their hiding place. The Lamanites, on the other hand, would go on to become the Native Americans and Polynesians. And the whole story would become the Book of Mormon.

Translating the plates wasn't easy for Joseph Smith, and not just because they were in an unknown hieroglyphic language. He permitted few people to view the plates, and townspeople grew suspicious. Joseph Smith and his family traveled to Pennsylvania where he translated a chunk of the plates to a friend who transcribed the story. In order to read the language, Joseph used two seer stones, putting them in a hat and putting the hat over his face. The words from the plates appeared on the seer stones. He often strung a blanket between him and his scribe, or kept the scribe downstairs, while he yelled out the words. When the translation was finished, the plates disappeared before anyone of any official capacity laid eyes on them, and Joseph Smith started his new, true Church.

His followers traveled west from New York, often encountering opposition and sometimes bloody persecution. He wrote two other Mormon holy books, Doctrine and Covenants, which outlines the basic workings of the Church, and the Pearl of Great Price, another book of scripture stories and tenets of faith. In 1844, a mob shot Smith to death

and pushed him out a window in Carthage, Illinois. He was succeeded by Brigham Young, who led the Mormons to the Salt Lake Valley. He founded the city, designed its wide streets and many parks, and gave polygamy the go-ahead.

I didn't know the Church's origin story in high school, but I would spend the next fifteen years and counting picking up information about it from books, friends, and through the osmosis that comes from living in Utah for more than a decade. (For example, Joseph Smith's visions, plates, and prophecies were highly influenced by the Egyptology craze of his day, as well as the Free Masons, of which he was a member.) At fifteen in the Young Women's makeup class, what they believed didn't seem to matter. What mattered was that they were a ticket out of loneliness.

The Young Women's teacher in the ward rec room had brown bobbed hair, which struck me as unusual because many Mormon women in Utah dyed theirs blonde. She did, however, retain the Utah Claw—one perfectly round curl of bangs on her forehead, as if a can of orange juice concentrate had been shoved underneath it for days. As long as my parents have lived in Utah, this has been the quintessential Mormon hairstyle.

First, they prayed: *Heavenly Father, please bless us young women to learn to be beautiful for you. Please bless us to become the kind of young women that you want, kind and virtuous. Please bless us to be good daughters and, one day, good wives. We ask this in the name of your son Jesus Christ, Amen.* I kept my head down but sneaked glimpses at the girls. Their arms were folded chastely across their chests in standard LDS prayer

fashion. They were concentrating hard. This was serious stuff, not just an excuse for girly fun or to put off homework.

The teacher—a thirty-something Church member who the local bishop had assigned to teach Young Women's classes—showed us catalog pictures of creamy-faced women who looked so pretty they'd never need to wear makeup (I didn't realize that they already were). She held up summer and winter color palettes and a chart of brushes, but I paid more attention to the girls' rapt faces than the makeup. The bare rec room walls made the whole momentous event feel strangely anonymous. I wished for something to signify that I was truly in an LDS ward, but modern LDS buildings other than temples aren't much for iconography. The entry halls typically have pictures of castle-like temples from around the world: a white Buenos Aires Temple here, a white Massachusetts Temple there. There's always a painting of the Mormon Jesus, who is fair and possesses features so feminine that years later he would be singled out in my college comparative religion class for his distinctive features, so different from the other Jesuses. But everywhere else, even in the sanctuary, there is no decoration. This keeps the buildings uniform.

A couple of assistants—mothers of some of the girls—appeared and chose a few girls to bring to the front of the room. They smeared makeup on their faces, swirled shadows on their eyes. I sat up straight in my chair and hoped they'd call on me. I wanted to be made beautiful in the way of this place: All-American with a modest twist. Made up heavily but with tasteful colors, nothing garish. At least three shades of perfectly blended neutral eyeshadow and eyelashes up curled like fiddleheads. Hair with dark roots and

more volume than mine ever achieved, even with a perm. A boring but pretty look. SueZan was called and they matched colors to her pale features. The teacher, middle-aged, six-kids-heavy, explained the precise movements of their tools. “Line the eyes from the outside. Swirl your foundation with your fingers. Blend it at the jaw line.” SueZan, already a pretty blonde, looked contoured, womanly. Wifely.

The teacher continued, drawing out her words Utah-style, “I’m so glad you girls are here.” It was as if she were looking right at me. I was conspicuous, I knew. My hair was too dark, I was too tall, and though I was pale as printer paper, my features weren’t right. Years later, I would watch BBC period dramas and decide my high cheek bones and vaguely Semitic heart-shaped face gave me an old-fashioned and European appearance, that I was meant for lacy gowns and horse-drawn carriages, not Ogden High School, where decades of polygamy had left many of the students with a slightly inbred, long-face and big-forehead look. My mother and her Non-Mormon women friends analyzed my face and pointed out all the ways that it was more classically beautiful than an average Mormon girl’s. I hated it nevertheless, would have traded it for a slight overbite, a weak Mormon chin, blue eyes and freckles, like SueZan’s, any day.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” the teacher said again.

Me too, I thought. *Me too, me too.*

“You know,” she continued, pulling out a plastic box of lipsticks, “I worry about your generation. I really do. I worry that girls won’t grow up to be women who know how to be beautiful for their husbands. It’s a wife’s duty to always look pretty, because that makes men happy.” She turned to her assistants, the mothers. “How many of

you wear lipstick to bed?" One of the other mothers raised her hand. The other stared at her white-sneakered feet, avoiding the disapproving glance.

Even at that time I knew that one of the most fundamental tenets of the LDS Church is the belief that marriage is forever. They take it much further than "till death do us part"—they call it being married "for time and all eternity." I also had the sense that this eternal marriage would be an old-fashioned one, in which the man is the head of the household. I understood that that was why these girls had to learn to please men now, had to learn to look pretty for them and keep them happy at such a young age.

Traditional gender roles underlie the basic assumptions of Church doctrine and faith. Joseph Smith wasn't just the founder of the Church, he was its prophet, no different from Elijah or Moses. To be a Mormon, you must believe that prophets exist today just as they did in Biblical times, and that they walk among us. And Joseph Smith was only the first. Mormons believe that there is *always* a living prophet. This living prophet *always* functions as President of the Church. This living prophet *always* has a direct line of communication with God, and is the only living person allowed to receive and interpret revelations from God that affect the entire Church or Church doctrine. The living prophet is the one who decided that polygamy wasn't okay anymore in 1890. The living prophet was the one who decided black people could attain the same levels of Church leadership as their white counterparts in 1978, a decision conveniently coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement. And that living prophet is *always* a man.

That living prophet isn't always a man the way that the President of the United States is always a man, because no woman has yet assumed the role. The Mormon living

prophet is always a man because women can't be prophets. They can't have that direct line of communication with God. They lack the requisite ability; whether that means hardware or holiness is unclear.

Women also cannot attain the priesthood, a level of authority held by every boy over the age of twelve who is in good standing. Joseph Smith defined the Priesthood as the "authority and power that God gives to a man to act in all things for the salvation of man." Every good Mormon man in the Church attains it, and women cannot get it. God gives men the power and authority to act in the way that they deem best. God does not give this power and authority women. In recent years, this piece of doctrine has come under scrutiny from feminist Mormon groups, who want the doctrine changed, presumably by the prophet via revelation from God, to allow women to hold the priesthood. Their movement has resulted in many ex-communications and no change in doctrine, though I believe change will happen eventually. For now, though, the Church maintains former prophet Gordon B. Hinkley's line, "Women do not hold the priesthood because the Lord has put it that way . . . [God has endowed women with] capabilities to round out this great and marvelous organization, which is the Church and kingdom of God."

I didn't know it at the time, but that priesthood doctrine was the foundation of the whole evening. The doctrine underlay the Young Women's teacher's decision to do a lesson on makeup, the girls' attendance at the activity, the mothers' decisions to volunteer. The Young Women's teacher, the middle-aged woman who had suggested lipstick in bed, got the position of Young Women's teacher only because a local,

Priesthood-holding man had decided, with his God-given authority and knowledge, that she should.

"I'm worried about these girls," the teacher said again. "I don't think they have enough good role models. I mean, look at our First Lady. She's supposed to be a role model. But Hillary Clinton? She's so mannish. She's doing the exact opposite of what a First Lady should be doing for our country's young women."

I wanted to raise my hand and come to the First Lady's defense. I wanted to come to my own defense, as someone who didn't believe in wearing lipstick to bed (I'd never so much as been on a real date, but even I knew that). I wanted to tell this woman that Hillary Clinton was an excellent role model because she was a smart, educated lawyer. I wanted to tell her that the first chance I got, I was going to out-of-state college and was going to be a big, important career woman with a New York high rise apartment.

But I didn't do it, because if I had, I would have spent the rest of high school watching movies or going to weird drum circles with my parents on Friday nights. I'd never be friends with these girls, and they, in turn, would never introduce me to their brothers, who would never ask me—via elaborate treasure hunt, as was the Utah custom—to school dances. More than anything I wanted to come home and find an invitation hidden in a rose bouquet in my tub: *Now that I've showered you with flowers, will you go to Christmas Dance with me?*

So I stayed silent, and was never called on for a makeup session, and at the end of the night SueZan drove me home, her cheeks creaky with rouge. I said I had a great time. She said nothing, and when we reached my parents' bungalow, she gave me a soft

hug that seemed to acknowledge failure, though I think we were both unsure on who's part.

I went to a few more Young Women's events during high school but they were few and far between. At one, an ice tubing night at the ski resort on the other side of Mount Ogden, my tube flipped over. I hit my head, slid on my face for about ten feet, and couldn't move. My face was scraped, swollen, almost unrecognizable. The girls prayed over my body when they found me sprawled on the ice under the black alpine sky. I guess it worked because I had no concussion nor even scars. But, as I joked sadly with my parents and sisters afterward, it couldn't have been more clear that I didn't fit in with the group. The mountain practically threw me off.

One Non-Mormon friend of mine, Marcie, was a new convert. To this day she'll tell you it was because she realized the truth of the Church but at the time all she could talk about were the cute missionaries who came to her house to discuss the faith and her conversion and take her out for ice cream. Despite her elaborate seduction plans, none of the missionaries strayed from their divinely mandated duties and made out with her. Nevertheless, she did, suddenly, have dates to all the dances. One day at school I muttered the word "damn," and she slapped me across the face. "Don't say that word around me!" she snapped. "Don't take my Heavenly Father's name in vain." I muttered an apology and stared into my locker knowing that we would never again really be friends.

SueZan and I, however, got closer. I never had a genuinely good time at Church events but I did always have fun with her. My parents found her enchanting; she brought my eight-year-old sister picture books and she and my mother fooled around with simple piano duets. “Oh my gosh, Arlene,” she said, hugging my beaming mother. “I can’t believe you taught yourself to play by ear! I’ve been in lessons since kindergarten.” We spent hours studying for English and history. Her enthusiasm for the War of the Roses was infectious, and when I offered a poor interpretation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, she hugged me, exclaiming, “Oh my gosh, Jessie! It’s just so cool how you can read into a book like that. Listening to you makes me see it in a whole different way.”

Talking about academic ideas laid the foundation for us to discuss Mormonism in a somewhat analytical way though she, of course, believed every word of her creed. I tagged along while she ran errands for her large, perpetually disorganized family. We drove along the feet of the mountains in her old Ford Explorer, from Wal-Mart to her little brother’s part-time job at Utah’s only amusement park, and talked.

“I don’t know how anyone couldn’t believe in God when they see something like that,” she said one late-summer evening while we sat on her parents’ stoop high on the mountain and watched the sun go down over Great Salt Lake. The sky was the juice of a blood orange and the silhouettes of the islands seemed rimmed with gold.

“Mmm,” I said in general agreement, because it hadn’t yet occurred to me that there could *not* be a higher power. (That wouldn’t happen until college.) I don’t think I knew the words atheist or agnostic, though I must have known people, namely my

parents' friends, who subscribed to those philosophies. They wouldn't have used those words, though, only calling themselves Non-Mormons.

"Did you always believe in the Church?" I asked.

"I guess I always believed in it, even when I was little, even if I didn't really understand it. Kids don't. But I didn't always like it." She laughed. "I remember, once, asking my dad if church went on summer vacation like school did, and I was pretty bummed when I learned it didn't."

"When did you believe in it? Do you remember when?"

"When I was in sixth grade, I felt really crummy. Like low self-esteem. My elementary school friends were all in a different homeroom than me and I was really lonely. I was praying about it a lot but I was starting to think my prayers didn't go beyond the ceiling. Then I was in Merry Miss class one Sunday and Sister Jensen, who was running it and is just the sweetest lady, she said in this incredibly caring, tender voice that God has a plan for me and loves me more than I can possibly know.

She actually started crying. She said, 'Oh, SueZan, I promise you, your prayers are heard.' She asked me not to give up on the gifts that were coming because they're huge."

"Wow." I picked up a twig and twirled it on the cement stoop, until I grinned and said, "Huge gifts like Rex."

She blushed. "I know! I mean, it's not like we're even official yet but I think I know, and I think he just has to be part of Heavenly Father's plan for me. We talk about the blessings of the Church all the time, and when he was on his mission, he sent me a

whole series of alphabetical letters with his thoughts about some particular teaching or other. Like, *D is for Doctrine and Covenants, E is for Eternal Families, P is for the Pearl of Great Price.*"

"That's so cool!"

She laughed again. "You're probably like, that's so nerdy."

"No, I think it's really cool, and sweet, and meaningful for you."

"It was. It was beautiful."

We watched the sun set to darkness and post-Fourth of July fireworks pop in sporadic blooms throughout the black desert sky.

After a long time, I asked, "Do you really feel like you've gotten huge gifts from the Church?"

"I do," she said in a tone that made her sound much older than almost-eighteen. "I mean, the greatest gift is that I know God. I know that I am his daughter. And I know that Christ is my redeemer. He taught so many great things, performed many miracles, atoned for my sins, and died for me. He was resurrected and lives, I know it. I feel that deep inside and with every fiber of my being," In the dark, I heard her take a deep, shaking breath. "That is the greatest gift. The gift of knowledge and the power to put that knowledge into action to better myself and the world around me."

"Wow," I said again. A small golden firework exploded like a dandelion. "That's beautiful."

"I'm so glad you think so! I know it probably sounds strange to you."

"No, it makes me happy for you."

“Have you ever felt anything about God with such certainty?”

I gave a little chuckle. “It’s pretty much the exact opposite of yours.”

“Tell me.”

“When I was about seven or eight, my parents took us to church on Easter. And I remember them telling us the Easter story in Sunday school and then giving us a little break to play outside. And I went away from the other kids and sat down under a palm tree—this was San Diego. And I sat there in my lacy Easter dress and knew, just knew, that all of it hadn’t literally happened. I knew it was a story.”

“Do you still think that?”

“Yeah, but you know, my parents are into metaphors in their religion.”

“Your parents are so fabulous. I love how they take religious stories as metaphors but find so much meaning in them.”

“They are good at that. And,” I said slowly, realizing it as I spoke, “I guess I get a lot of meaning from stories, too.”

The front door opened and a square of yellow light poured over us. It was after nine but SueZan’s mother asked if I’d like to go to dinner with them. Her parents took us to Cracker Barrel. I’d never been before, as it was the type of place my parents avoided, but SueZan showed me all the vegetarian options and her mother ordered extra macaroni and cheese for me.

At the same time as I was becoming close to SueZan, I volunteered to do stage lights for the school play. I met the techie girls who cut out gels and strung heavy lights

from the catwalk, who wore boy jeans and wife beaters and had short hair. They were as hard to make friends with as anyone, but one day I invited myself to a coffee shop with them and they decided I was cool enough. They taught me to run the light board and to belt all the songs from *Rent.* We skipped school to go to thrift stores and stayed up late watching Eddie Izzard videos in their basements. Their ex-Mormon relatives (the largest population of Non-Mormons in Utah are ex-Mormons) told us about the LDS view of the afterlife.

They told us that if you're a good, Eternally Married Mormon, your family gets a world. Brigham Young wrote that becoming a "King of kings and Lord of lords,…is promised to the faithful." The Encyclopedia of Mormonism, published by Brigham Young University, explains it thus: "Latter-day Saints believe that those who attain the highest level in the Celestial Kingdom become gods . . . This exalted status, called eternal life, is available to be received by a man and wife." This idea comes from the scripture Doctrine and Covenants scripture 132:19-20, "Godhood is not for men only; it is for men and women together." Together they will populate that world and others with spirit children, a concept known as "eternal increase," which is often interpreted to mean that women will be eternally pregnant. If you're single and a good Mormon, you get to serve these gods.

The universe filled with eternally increasing Mormon gods is known as the Celestial Kingdom. It is the best of three kingdoms that make up the physical Mormon heaven. The three kingdoms are known as the Degrees of Glory. The second-best kingdom is the Terrestrial Kingdom, where other good Christians go. They get to play on

white clouds and have a generally nice time, but get no worlds or spirit children. They also don't get to be with their families forever, or remain eternally married. The third and lowest level is the Telestial Kingdom, for those who have rejected Christ. They get to go here after spending 1,000 years in Spirit Prison. The Telestial Kingdom isn't too bad of a place, either, and is where most criminals can still go. Really, really bad guys go to the Outer Darkness, which functions similarly to hell, though there is probably no fire or brimstone. The real punishment comes from being completely separated from God.

The techie girls and I learned about this and squawked with laughter. “It’s like a fucking science fiction novel!” we cried.

I don’t remember who invented the game Scare the Missionaries, but it quickly escalated into a favorite. The premise was to come up with hilarious ways to frighten off Mormon missionaries when they came to your door (you wouldn’t think they’d need to proselytize in Utah, but us 30% needed education). One suggestion was chugging coffee, another was chugging alcohol. Swearing like a sailor was tossed out. I told the techie girls that my mother liked to simply say, “We’re Jewish,” which sent missionaries fleeing—it’s asking a lot for a Jew to accept Jesus *and* Joseph Smith. The techie girls were impressed. But a girl named Rachel came up with the winning strategy: When the missionaries ring the doorbell, send your younger siblings into the next room and have them squeal like pigs. Listen for a minute to the missionaries’ message, then, with a look of complete disappointment, excuse yourself by saying, “I’m so sorry. I’m right in the middle of an animal sacrifice and the pigs are getting antsy.”

SueZan and the techie girls were friendly with each other, too. SueZan's sunny personality was hard to resist, and she was interested in the performing arts. But mostly they liked her because she was the only active Mormon at school who showed an interest in them and never, ever tried to convert anyone. "I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable or seem disrespectful of their beliefs," she said once during Marcie's conversion. "If someone wants to talk to me about converting, that would be amazing and wonderful and a blessing, but I'm not going to try to change anyone." Years later, when I knew more about Mormonism, she'd explain that of her beliefs in the afterlife, she didn't need to feel guilty about not trying to convert her friends. None of us would go to the Outer Darkness, but would be joyful in the Telestial or Terrestrial Kingdoms. And because she would be basking in Celestial glory and have incredible god powers, she could come visit us anytime she wanted.

Neither party suspected the things I said to the others. SueZan had no idea that we played Scare the Missionaries or joked about the Mormon afterlife. The Non-Mormon techie girls had no idea that SueZan and I stayed up late discussing the details of Jesus' night in Gethsemane, where he prayed and was tempted before the crucifixion. Mormons loved that story and in some ways found it more important than Jesus' death and resurrection. Like the Mormon pioneers who pushed handcarts across the plains under persecution, he was tempted to abandon God. Like those who reached their Northern Utah promised land, he prevailed.

Neither knew what I said to the other, or what I truly believed (I wasn't sure I knew—or cared—either). Actually, SueZan would probably have forgiven me eventually,

while the techie girls most likely wouldn't have cared enough to. But I remained giddy and guilty with secrecy.

* * *

After high school graduation, I headed off to a small liberal arts college in Ohio. SueZan went to Utah State, an hour north of Ogden in a tiny, cold, very Mormon mountain town. The day I left for Ohio, she handed me a note written in purple glitter gel pen. She wrote,

I've decided to go to Utah State. I'm going to do it—I'm going to leave my parents and Rex, and I'm even going to try to date other people even though I know I will never marry anyone but him, so that I can have a full, real college experience. I'm going to have a great adventure, I would never would have done it if it weren't for your example. You inspired me to leave Ogden!

All of our other classmates went to the college two miles from our high school and lived with their parents, so I knew she wasn't joking. Going an hour away was a big deal. I read her note over and over on the plane to Ohio, held it close to my chest, and cried from missing her.

There were two other Utah kids on the Kenyon College campus, but neither were Mormon. In fact, there was not a single Mormon in the whole school, which, to be

fair, had only about 1,500 students. I could hardly believe it at first, but while walking through the small town one day, I saw how hard it would be to maintain a devout LDS lifestyle there.

The town's streets were crowded with Catholic, Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, and other Christian denominational churches. But there were no LDS wards.

In telling my classmates that I was from Utah, I discovered that most of them had never met a Mormon. Their eyes grew wide as they intoned, "Oh, Mormons are so weird!" I wanted to agree with them, but couldn't quite. Life at Kenyon—where people drank not only coffee but copious amounts of alcohol that they hid in their closets; where my classmates wore designer clothes that they donated to the Salvation Army after only a few months; where people had sex seemingly willy-nilly—seemed to me far more alien than anything the Mormons did. What a surprise that despite all the jokes and petty judgments the Non-Mormons and I made, I had become used to life in LDS culture. That for all of my mean jokes about Mormons and supposed rebelliousness, I had internalized their norms as deeply as this.

On that old college campus, which was so filled with trees that I could barely see the building next door let alone the neighboring state, I came to understand that though the Church was the fastest growing religion in the world, it was still relatively small. What I had formerly taken for the whole world was now revealed to be only a small enclave, easily left, dismissed, or, in the case of my classmates, never known about to begin with. I could go anywhere outside of the Utah region and not be in the shadow of

it. Out here, no one could judge me for not wanting a planet, because they didn't even know that having a planet in the afterlife was an option.

The Mormons that I knew in Utah—Kandace who was angry that I didn't attend seminary, Marcie who slapped me for swearing, the Young Women's teacher who hated Hillary Clinton and didn't ask me to come forward for a makeup lesson—they all lived blissfully within the enclave. There, they were the majority, and my understanding of them was founded on their acting from this place of comfort. But if they were out here, in the world without LDS churches and with people publicly vocal about their distaste for the faith, they'd be defensive, uncomfortable, alienated. They'd be as I had been, when in Utah. They would define themselves as different than everyone else. As *other*. As they had done from the beginning, when the first skeptics challenged Joseph's Smith's revelation, when persecutors drove them out of city after Midwestern city, when the pioneers lurched through the tall prairie grass, searching for a place that could be only theirs.

SueZan had spent her junior year of high school in Liverpool, England. There, she was the first and only Mormon her host family had ever met. She had struggled to make friends, and eventually her host family asked her to leave. Her religion made them uncomfortable, they said.

When she returned, she told me how alone and angry she'd felt. How defensive and desperate. How everything that she was, smart and friendly and thrilled to be in England, seemed to shrink until all that was left was her Mormonism. At the time, I hadn't really understood her story. Sitting in her parents' living room, high school art

history notes spread before us, I hadn't been able to truly conceive of a world in which Mormons didn't hold the power.

But outside of the enclave, in Mormon-less Ohio, her story made sense to me. In this way, Mormons were like me. In the world's concentric enclaves, we were both minorities.

In college, I never actively missed the Mormons, but I no longer wished to scare away the missionaries. In fact, bizarrely, I found myself defending the Church. When a student in religious studies class mentioned that it was a cult, I exclaimed, "That's not true!" and instigated a class-wide debate. "Sure, they have a strange origin story," I said. "Sure, you have to give them 10% of your income and send your tax returns to the Church so they can make sure you did it. It's true that they have living prophets that are revered. Yes, when you die you get a planet to fill up with spirit babies. But is that really any weirder than any other religion?"

The consensus was that yes, it was weirder. And deep down, I didn't really disagree. But I couldn't stop arguing. After all of those years of the defining feature of my identity being Not something (for even among the techie girls, our bond centered around our minority status), I had no clue how to function in a place where I wasn't truly different from everyone else. I only knew how to think of myself as a minority.

There were heaps of ways in which I didn't fit in at college: I had the wrong clothes, I wasn't experienced enough in the ways of drugs or drinking or sex, I hadn't been abroad or heard of the Harlem Renaissance. While all of those differences made me feel uncomfortable, they were ultimately superficial. I could go shopping or get laid and

in the space of a few hours become significantly more similar to my peers. What made me truly different—the thing that made me feel most vividly *me*—was being the expert on Mormons, and at times, their defender.

During a summer break in Utah, an LDS coworker sent me a poem by Carol Lynn Pearson, a prolific Mormon writer. The title and refrain was "My people were Mormon pioneers." I read it aloud to myself again and again. The words had a strong sound, a stalwart rhythm, as steadily rolling as a handcart across the plains.

My people, those other Non-Mormon Utahns, were not Mormon pioneers but we were constantly surrounded by people who were. They were our neighbors, our co-workers, our close friends. And us Non-Mormons, what were we if not pioneers of a new classification, a new almost-religion in itself, defined purely by what we were not?

* * *

The Japanese firedancers' flaming orange bulbs loop through the air like a skilled calligrapher's fountain pen. The drums are tribal. I clap my hands in time, the handles from the plastic bag full of convenience store beers digging into my wrists. Eventually I put it down on the cobblestone walkway by the riverbank, letting the Sapporo cans fall gracefully to their sides in the bag. I don't care if someone takes them; this is Kyoto, alcohol is widely available and cheap, and we can always buy more.

It is February 2008 and I've left the Mormon women and their holiday decorations behind on another continent. Here on the riverbank two months after my Utah visit, my friends are all around. Most are expats from Australia, England, Ireland, Canada; very few are from the US. They were easy to come by when I came to Kyoto to teach English. I have some Japanese friends, too, but most of them, regardless of age, live with their parents. They don't come downtown and drink all night by the Kyoto River, whose thick, marshy waters run through the center of the city. They don't watch the firedancers or shoot Coke-bottle rockets or light fireworks. They certainly don't make out under the bridge or drink too much and collapse on stone memorials. Though I know that Japan represents something different to them than it does to me, I think they are missing out. I love life here.

Tonight, Canadian Erik's cousin is here, visiting from Montreal. I'm going to make out with him, I've known it all night. He's bearded, burly, and doesn't pronounce a single thing with Japanese inflection, the way the rest of us do. The accent has crept into our speech.

Erik's cousin—I never learn his name—reaches into my plastic bag for a beer. He grins at me. "So, Utah, huh?" he says. I'm surprised he hasn't brought it up before this. We've been talking for fifteen minutes.

"That's right," I chirp. "The Beehive State."

"But you're not Mormon."

"Nope."

He looks confused, but is too polite to ask how the hell that happened. Not everyone is. Usually people comment that it must have been rough, or ask why on earth I lived there.

"It's not that weird," I say. "There are lots of Non-Mormons in Utah." And it's true. By 2008, the LDS population has dwindled to about 60% of the state.

"Do you know a lot of Mormons?" he asks.

"Of course. My best friend is Mormon. But most of my friends aren't." At this point, SueZan is my only Mormon friend. I have a couple of acquaintances, including Marcie the convert, and a Mormon boy I dated while working in Salt Lake before coming to Japan. Most of my Utah friends are those techie girls from high school, the other Non-Mormons. They live in Salt Lake now, in Non-Mormon neighborhoods with microbreweries every few blocks.

"Mormons," he says. "That is one fucking weird religion."

"No," I say, looking up at him, hoping my eyes are shining with urgency in the spinning firelight. "Well, yes. It is. But it's also great."

The boy cocks his head and sips one of my Sapporos.

"It's true. They're super nice. Like, incredibly nice. If you ever need help, they're there. They helped my parents move houses. Twice. The local Church just sent over guys."

"Really."

"And, they have some really great stuff about family. It's huge for them. Their whole idea of heaven is based around being with your family forever. They have family

home evening on Mondays when you all get together. They pray every morning. And a lot of them live close to each other so the kids spend a lot of time with their relatives. Everything revolves around family and community."

"I guess that's pretty cool," he says.

"It really is. And yeah, they're weird. But what religion isn't?"

He nods. We watch the firedancers. Reflections of Kyoto's neon lights shimmer in the river water. Eventually, the Utah conversation not quite done, he asks if I ski.

Everywhere I go, I have this conversation. I expect it and am comfortable with it. I am still the most at ease when I am an outsider; it is still a major factor in my self-definition. At college, I felt strongly that I was Not from Ohio or the East Coast and Not from Boarding School and Not Wealthy. In Kyoto, I'm Not Japanese. But no matter where I go, the fist thing people want to know when they find out where I'm from is that I'm Not Mormon.

But it's a conversation I've come to enjoy. By seeing Mormons from a different perspective, as a small sect surrounded by the wide world just as they had surrounded me, I know that there is no point in resenting them, this other group of others. They gave me knowledge of a whole culture that was not my own and a sense of forging myself in contrast. Whether opposition is a good way to define oneself or not, I don't know. But that is part of me and always will be. Being a Non-Mormon has given me the tools to act as a pioneer, too, venturing out from a place of discomfort and thriving in worlds different from my own. And from this vantage point, both inside and outside the enclave

of Utah Mormonism, I want to strive for acceptance, as much as I can give without losing my distinctly Non-Mormon self.

Utah is changing. Salt Lake City is now only about 40% practicing LDS. The area's outdoor recreation activities have become well-known, and Non-Mormons have moved in from out-of-state to ski and hike. Some atheist friends of mine have a four-year-old daughter. There are no Mormons in her Salt Lake City preschool. When she goes to elementary, she won't know what Mormons are. If she hears the stories of Jesus or Joseph Smith, she'll think them as fantastical as the tale of Cinderella. My friends tell me this proudly, but I'm not sure how I feel about it. I'm ultimately glad for my Utah experience. Surviving it made me feel brave. It made me feel like I can navigate any social situation. And it made me realize that I'm Not Mormon, but I'm also many other things.

I'm also a girl who is about to kiss the Montreal visitor in the alley next to the ramen shop. Who went off to Japan without knowing a soul and who can try all the different Japanese beers and never worry about disappointing Heavenly Father or anyone else. Who ultimately wants many of the things SueZan and those other Mormon women have—a husband, children—but who wants to get them in different ways.

I kiss the Canadian boy and the scents of firedance smoke and ramen swirl around us.

CHAPTER THREE

Before I'd ever met Kahn, he sent a cake in the popular style of the Arabian Gulf to my classroom. It was a huge, hubcap-sized thing, a fluffy white flavorless cake with piles of thick white frosting that tasted of nothing but sugar. Between the layers were slices of mandarin oranges, and on top were glacée strawberries, mandarins, and kiwis. It looked far better than it tasted and, in any case, fruit was much less appealing to my preschool students than a Spiderman drawn on the icing.

Kahn sent me the cake because his four-year old daughter Hirra was in my preschool class in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. At twenty-seven, I'd left my home in Utah for teaching English to mostly Arabic-speaking three-to-five year olds in the UAE desert, where the air is yellow with sand and smells of cheap cologne. I set up my classroom in the crumbly barracks of Al Ma'Arifa International Private School, decorated the cinderblock walls with pictures of zoo animals. Though the class was already overcrowded—twenty-one preschoolers and me in a tiny room—we had to accept Hirra because Kahn, who was Pakistani and an important hotel businessman, knew the Arab Sheikh of our emirate. Whether the Sheikh would have really demanded that Hirra be enrolled was unclear, but no one at school wanted to risk displeasing him. More than a way to say thank you, the cake was Kahn's attempt to buy Hirra's popularity and good

grades. It made no difference to the children, of course, but I could tell that Kahn was someone with *wasta* (Arabic for connections), someone I should have on my side.

In his mid-sixties, Kahn had a Santa Claus kind of voice and resembled an elephant in a finely tailored suit. He was warm and funny, intensely likeable and a shrewd businessman, but his connection to the Sheikh took everyone at school—Arab, South Asian, Filipino, and Western employees alike—by surprise. In the UAE, Pakistanis did not typically have close associations with Emiratis, let alone Emirati royalty.

The United Arab Emirates is only forty-three years old as a country. Its population can seem strangely upside down. The Emirati citizenship comprises only 16% of the country's population. Indians are the largest ethnic group and Pakistanis are the second—totaling 42% of the country's population. And though all of these groups interact every day—how could they not, when 75% of taxis are driven by Pakistanis?—their lives are separate. The groups live in different neighborhoods, wear different clothes, speak different languages, attend different schools and mosques. They bring home wildly different incomes. And, it seemed to me, the Arabs and Pakistanis didn't trust each other much. My Palestinian friend Lobna said that Pakistanis were dirty and bad Muslims. The women didn't cover their hair, the men were not noble. My Pakistani friend Fozia said that Arabs were untrustworthy. They put on a show of faith and modesty, with their hijabs and abayas, but they were faking it all. Fozia had grown up in the UAE, had only gone to Lahore on vacations. Still, she referred to the UAE as, "this place," and Pakistan as, "My country."

That Kahn had bridged this gap appealed to my possibly naive American sensibilities—a hardworker earning his way to status, people being friends because they liked each others' personalities. I wanted to be part of this shining example of Pakistani-Emirati camaraderie, to revel in the cultural transcendence that the Kahn's represented.

The first time Kahn and his much-younger wife Shazia had me and my friends Candice and Andrew over for dinner, they served the Pakistani fare that I quickly came to associate with their small house in the affluent Arab neighborhood where bougainvillas grew over white courtyard walls. There was some sort of meat that I didn't eat, hammour fish filets in thin, simmering broth with tomatoes and mild peppers, dark green, oily spinach curry with no paneer but plenty of spices, and potatoes with a mild red curry paste. All of it was far simpler than what I'd encountered at Indian restaurants in the States, and I often wondered if Pakistani food was less ornate. The meals always began with vodka and orange juice for me and Johnny Walker Red Label for Candice, Andrew, and Kahn. Shazia didn't drink ("She's a good Muslim," Kahn said with a wink).

After that first dinner, Kahn drove us back to our apartment by the sandpits. We'd only just turned the corner from his house when he slowed and pointed to an enormous concrete mansion with a twenty-foot tall wall around it. The mansion was covered in a thick tent of fairy lights.

"The Sheikh lives there," Kahn said. "His daughter got married, and they'll leave the lights up for, it depends, sometimes one month, sometimes three months, in celebration."

Kahn was a high-level manager for Hilton hotels, and the family had spent many years in the U.S. Khan was already living in Boston when he went back to Pakistan for his arranged marriage to then-nineteen-year-old Shazia. It was a hurried wedding, without any of the traditional fanfare and sequined festivities. Shazia was not happy about this. Now, their seventeenth anniversary was coming up—an arbitrary number, but perhaps because of the month they spent driving by the Sheikh's fairy-lit wedding house, Shazia and Kahn decided that they would have the belated wedding celebration of their dreams. Kahn made me promise over and over again that I would be there and bring everybody. "There will be very fine food and drinks," he said. "Lots and lots to drink." He grinned at me, loving to think of his daughter's preschool teacher as a booze hound. "We'll have a big wedding party, with many of guests. It's just for our good friends, so we are still deciding if we want to invite the Sheikh. You know how they are—you invite one and suddenly the whole royal family is coming with hundreds of cousins."

Following Kahn's request to bring "everybody," I invited along Jamila, a fellow teacher from Denver, in addition to Candice and Andrew, my two most charming co-workers. Kahn was a big fan of Andrew and kept promising him a sales or marketing job at a hotel. Andrew had started wearing his blond hair slicked back in a way that made me think of an Arab businessman.

The night of the party, the Kahns' courtyard was filled with about ten large, round, rented tables draped in red satin cloths. About twelve Pakistani guests milled around, caterers busied themselves at the buffet, little Hirra ran up to me dressed in a sparkling, emerald shalwar kameez (a tunic and loose pants), gold slippers, and red

lipstick that had already been licked off the corners of her mouth. “Hi, Ms. Jessie,” she said.

“Hi, Hirra.”

“See my… see this?” Her hand had single daisy drawn on it in henna.

Shazia came up to us, flushed and bridal with dewy makeup and rhinestones everywhere, from her forehead to her fingernails. Her dusty-rose shalwar kameez glittered with crystals sewn in swooping designs. I had never seen her so pretty.

“We were going to get Hirra real henna,” she said. “But she couldn’t sit still in the parlor long enough. But look, look at this.” Shazia held out her hands, which were covered in brown henna with lace-like intricacy, all swirls and zigzags, blossoms and spirals. I could have stared its detail for hours, and all I could do was mumble, “Wow,” and “You look so beautiful.”

“More people will be here, soon,” she said. “Then we’ll eat. We got a highly recommended caterer.”

Over the course of an hour about ten more Pakistani guests showed up, but perhaps because the big, empty tables made it so clear that the entire courtyard had been intended for use, it looked strikingly sparse. Shazia went off to talk to her family, and Khan came over. He introduced us to a few sets of family friends, none of whom seemed very interested in talking to us much. Learning that Candice and Andrew were from Chicago, they asked about gangsters.

One man asked what we were eating, but Kahn would only say, “We’ve hired an excellent caterer, very famous. You’ll like it. And we’ll eat soon, just as soon as a few more people arrive. We invited the Shiekh, and royalty is always late.”

We got more drinks, and I happily discovered that pineapple juice was available to mix with my vodka. I had three little crystal tumblers of it and eyed the buffet table, the silver covered trays filled with, I imagined, Pakistani curries, naan and roti, dosas, fifteen kinds of chutney, and Pakistani honey-and-rosewater-soaked pastry balls.

My friends and I carefully avoided discussing the guest situation. We told Jamila Kahn’s amazing story about getting pulled over for drunk driving in Sharjah, which is a dry emirate. He showed the cops his American driver’s license, and got off with nary a warning. It was a story that always made us feel a little safer, with our American IDs tucked in our wallets.

We hadn’t seen Khan or Shazia for a while, but Khan finally reappeared and told us we were eating. The trays were uncovered, and everybody lined up. There was not a curry in sight. It was the same food that was served at every catered school event: heavy and practically Midwestern. There were pans of fatty sliced lamb, coleslaw, and fruit salad in a thick white sauce that was more like a gluey coating—a dense mayonnaise but with less egg and no hint of mustard. I knew from the countless times I’d eaten it at school that it would all be flavorless. The salads were piled on their silver dishes, resting on beds of lettuce and doilies, mountains of mayonnaise. Behind the buffet table, I could see several more full trays.

During all my time living in Sharjah, I never figured out why this meal was served over and over again. It was clearly considered both high-end and inoffensive, the go-to catering menu. How it came into existence, I have no idea.

Hungry as everyone was, they all seemed to pick at their food. I drank more vodka and pineapple and counted the guests silently. Including the Khans and their children, I got twenty-seven. Guests had carefully spread themselves out so that most of the tables had at least two people sitting at them. Since the whole party could have fit at three tables, I wasn't sure if this made the scene appear better or worse. Nobody went for seconds, and Candice and Jamila left heaps of waxy-white fruit salad uneaten. People pushed their plates to the middle of the tables to make them look fuller.

Kahn went to the front of the patio, holding his little crystal glass of Johnny Walker, running his fat thumb up and down its sweaty sides and over the rim. He said quickly, "Thank you all for coming. I'm glad you could celebrate with me and Shazia. We never had a real wedding before, and now we have." He didn't lift his glass but kept it tightly clenched in his fist and sat down.

When it was clear that no one had anything else to say and nobody was going to eat any more of the food, the caterers covered the trays again. Someone nodded to a teenage boy in the corner by a CD player, and jangly music began to play. Hirra, her twelve-year-old sister Anoush, and two of their cousins hurried to the middle of the courtyard and, after a few false starts, began to dance. I'd never seen children dance so sensually. While we'd been eating, the older girls had changed into traditional belly dance costumes. Their thin torsos undulated like cracking whips, their jeweled feet

pranced lightly, their toes were bouncy. They waved their arms, bent to scoop air and swooped up again, loose sleeves billowing. The music was fluttered, quick and spicy-sounding.

All twenty-seven people watched silently, smiling and nodding with the music. We clapped loudly for the girls when they finished. Blushing, they ran back into the house, leaving a wide empty space in the courtyard where all we could see, was, behind where they'd danced, the cold, full buffet tables.

At the end of the evening, Shazia pressed several trays of the awful, white fruit salad on us, which she wrapped in tight aluminum foil bundles the size of babies. "Thank you for coming," she said. "Thank you, thank you for coming." I wanted to tell her again that I loved her outfit, but worried that if I said anything about it, her face would crumple.

Kahn said a brusque goodbye and we got in a taxi, holding our bundles of food. We passed the Sheikh's house, where only recently the fairy lights had been taken down.

"I felt so bad for them," I said. "Waiting and waiting like that. Just because they're Pakistani. That's why the bigwig Arabs didn't show up, don't you think?"

Andrew shrugged. "Kahn's got connections, but even that doesn't guarantee you wedding guests."

Back in my apartment, I opened the package of fruit salad, and ate it by the overflowing spoonful. I wanted it gone, polished off. I couldn't get the taste of waxy white sauce out of my mouth for hours.

IN THE HOLIEST OF PLACES

In Utah

The Oquirrh Mountain LDS Temple, a narrow rectangle of beige marble topped with a scrawny steeple, sat on raw dirt like a fresh suburban house. People in modest clothes formed a long line outside of it. I, a curious non-Mormon with no interest in converting, stood among them, sweating in the Utah summer sun, waiting to get in the new temple for its open house. I was excited. Non-Mormons are not usually allowed inside LDS temples, but the one exception is when a new temple is built and before it is dedicated to God, when an open house is held. Though I'd grown up in Utah, this was the first open house I'd been able to attend. Temples weren't built that often. SueZan, my best friend since high school and a devout Mormon, had come with me at my invitation, to explain what we saw. She'd brought her three children, all under five. SueZan (pronounced Suzanne) and I were twenty-six. I had no children. While SueZan and her husband had purchased a big house with a playroom, I had been coming and going from Utah for the last several years, taking freelance teaching and writing gigs abroad and dating around.

For me and many other non-Mormons I knew, not being allowed in had imbued Mormon temples with an almost-mythic allure. “I just want to go in one of them, is that so much to ask?” I’d whined, and heard dozens of other non-Mormons complain.

The Oquirrh (pronounced o-ker) Mountain Temple was nearly two hours south of Ogden, where SueZan and I had grown up. The land was brown and beige with new housing tracts. The Qquirrh Mountain Temple had been built to serve this population. Or vice versa.

Like most non-Mormons in Utah, I’d heard about how beautiful and special the temples were. I’d come expecting something akin to, if not Notre Dame, at least Disneyland. I expected ornate carvings, intricate glasswork, gold and silver and jeweled accents. Statuary. Vaulted ceilings. But the Oquirrh Mountain Temple had a smooth stone façade with long, thin windows that reminded me of an office building. I’d seen photos of other LDS temples in Church buildings and in friends’ homes. The temples in Salt Lake and La Jolla looked like fairy tale castles; the one in Los Angeles was vaguely Mayan; the Mesa, Arizona one had a Parthenon vibe.

“How come this one doesn’t look like a castle?” I asked SueZan.

She smiled. “That’s a great question. So recently the prophet’s revelations have been focusing on rapidly spreading the words of wisdom, because the end-times are among us. That’s why there’s been a big increase in temple building. In the last fifteen years, they’ve built nearly one hundred new temples around the world, and part of doing that is having an architectural layout that can be easily duplicated.”

SueZan had always worried that she was the least pretty of her three sisters, but in the right light, at the right time, her beauty could blow them away. As SueZan spoke about the temple, she looked radiant, with her pale, lightly freckled complexion and large blue eyes that popped under black liner. But I looked confusedly at her sparkling eyes. There was no question or disapproval in them as she spoke about the "easily duplicated architectural layout," which surprised me. SueZan spent most of her disposable income on trips to Europe to look at historical architecture. We'd become friends in our sophomore art history class and bonded over our shared obsessions with Westminster Abbey and Chartres Cathedral. The two of us used to stare at the images of triptychs and stained glass windows of those places, to stare deeply at images of them as if they were Magic Eye pictures. "Look how beautiful that is," She sighed repeatedly, smiling like the sun. Her positivity and appreciation for life helped me through unrequited high school crushes, through college exam freak-outs, through moments of self-hatred and guilt. "You are a beautiful person, inside and out, who has inspired and supported me," she said, holding me in a tight hug. And in her moments of struggle, I tried to do the same for her.

I did not ask SueZan if she thought this cookie cutter approach to architecture was perhaps bad, making the temples lose part of what made them holy and awe-inspiring. I simply nodded. SueZan was going to show me the holy place of her religion, and through its beauty I could come to understand her in new ways, and to understand her faith and her religion. I was lucky—*incredibly* lucky, I reminded myself—to be permitted a glance.

* * *

In the Body

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
1 Corinthians 3:16, English Standard Version

Nothing dwells in my body except a thousand bacteria that I try to ignore, the way one ignores fellow passengers on an exceptionally crowded train. Know they're there, but avoid eye contact. Thinking too hard about their presence is uncomfortable, will gross you out.

"I don't understand how people can put that stuff in their bodies," says a woman whom I've met at Zumba class. We're talking about Utah's many Mexican drive-thrus, which serve forearm-sized burritos all night. They're greasy and delicious. When I eat them, I don't think about the buttery tortilla or the lard-soaked beans going into my body; my conception of the food stops on my tongue, at my taste buds.

The 1 Corinthians bible verses about bodies as temples are usually invoked to tell people what to do with their bodies. To eat well, exercise, abstain from drugs and sometimes alcohol, get enough sleep, and to abstain from improper sexual behavior.

“Your body is a temple” is a slogan adorning workout gear and motivational posters, imposed over stock photos of women meditating seaside or running down tree-lined streets.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides this definition of temple:

1. a building for religious practice as: **a:** either of two successive national sanctuaries in ancient Jerusalem, **b:** a building for Mormon sacred ordinances

This definition (and most other dictionaries’ are like it) ignores what, for Mormons especially, is a fundamental aspect of temples, and what distinguishes temples from cathedrals, churches, synagogues, etc. A temple is where God is believed to reside. A church is where people congregate to encounter God, but not where God dwells all the time. It’s where God and his people go to visit each other. Presumably, God, or some part of God, is in residence in a temple whether there are people in it or not.

The definition also ignores Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Pagan, Greek, Zoroastrian, Sikh, and all the other temples, focusing on the two religions with which I have the most association. I’m half Jewish. And I’m not at all Mormon, but after living in Utah for so many years I feel close to and somewhat possessive of the religion. Temples seem written in my heritage.

Chew the bread and swallow the wine and God has entered your body, your temple. Eating is a distinctive feature in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but its emphasis is on what happens inside of you, once the bread is in your gut. Once God is inside of you,

you are changed into a holy being; once greasy late-night burritos are inside of you, you are defiled. The devil is not nutritious. But what of the fact that he tastes so good? For delight, I think, is holy, too. The rods and cones of my eyes absorbing light so that I may analyze the curves of a flower petal or the embellishment of an old bannister; my taste buds bathing in honey and salt. These human senses afford a kind of spiritual taste. It is through them that I am closest to the world and its divinity.

*　　*　　*

In Utah

On the front of all LDS temples are inscribed the words "Holiness to the Lord. The House of the Lord." The words hung over SueZan's and my sweaty heads. Little Caleb pulled on his mother's skirt, and SueZan gazed at baby Logan in his carrier. I looked at the words, laser-carved in the beige granite. I was not holy, at least not in the way they meant it. I was pretty sure I didn't believe in a Lord, and I certainly didn't believe this was his house.

Throughout high school and college summer breaks, SueZan and I stayed up late nights discussing her faith, and my developing secular humanism, and unlike most Mormons I knew, she had never pressured me to convert. SueZan was born with a sunny optimism that was surely buoyed by her religion's culture of niceness. She used it to focus on why it was okay for her close friends and loved ones to not necessarily be

Mormon. We wouldn't go to hell, but to a lower-level heaven. She, having obtained full glory in Celestial Kingdom, the highest heaven, would be able to come visit us. She focused on this positive aspect because she felt strongly about not making others feel uncomfortable, or seeming disrespectful of their beliefs. "If someone wants to talk to me about converting, that would be amazing and wonderful and a blessing, but I'm not going to try to change anyone," she said.

I did a little happy hop in the line. I was going to see the prettiest place an entire religion could come up with (for the interior was sure to make up for the exterior), and understand the Church—my best friend's church—in a way that could only come from being in the closest proximity to their God.

For years, my non-Mormon friends and I had joked about our bursting into flames if we ever entered a Mormon temple. Or, we said, our sinfulness would cause the temple itself to set fire. Not that we really believed that we were sinners, but fire would have een the only good excuse for not allowing us to enter the temples. A Church-issued statement on the subject says, "Since the temple is the house of the Lord, dedicated to Him, those who enter must hold a current temple recommend, which certifies that they are living by the standards He has set." Once, a missionary described it to me as not letting perfect strangers into your home without permission: "Your home is not just another building, it's a private, sacred place for only your family and close friends." This never made me feel much better, but like a barbarian or criminal that the "good people" didn't want soiling their space.

"The special ordinances performed in temples are sacred. That means that they are so special and personal that to talk about them outside the temple makes them not sacred anymore," SueZan has said, many times. Though I've always nodded, grasping the logic of her argument to an extent, it has always hurt to hear her say such things.

Mormons don't like to use the word "secret" to describe the temple, probably because non-Mormons have given them a hard time about secrecy for much of their existence. Instead, they repeat the line from 1970s prophet David O. McKay: "The temple is sacred, not secret." Church publications usually describe the difference using sex as a metaphor. Daniel Hardman writes in the Church's *Meridian Magazine*,

> happily married couples are reluctant to discuss the details of their physical intimacy with others. What happens between them is not supposed to be a deep, dark secret . . . But out of respect for each other, and to preserve the integrity of the bond that unites them, that aspect of their lives is not shared—even with others who are similarly informed. It is sacred territory. Casual travel cheapens it.

Non-Mormons understood all these words of explanation (even if we wouldn't necessarily see anything wrong with discussing our sex lives). But we felt that our lives, and the Mormons' too, would be much easier if we could go in. How much speculation, judgment, and resentment could we non-Mormons abandon if we were just allowed to see the temple's interior and even observe some of the services? There could be no better way to squash fear and bridge distance. But because we didn't understand the LDS Church, we made jokes about it, we spoke of its weirdness, we feared its philosophy. We thought that if we could just enter the temples the way one can enter the Vatican, it would

be easier for us all to remember that we shared the same land, and friends, and schools, and offices.

The heavy mahogany doors swung open. Cool air wafted gently around us as we stepped into a white-tiled foyer. The walls were ivory, the ceilings eight feet high. There was a dark wood side table, on its polished surface a daisy arrangement. I could have been in my dentist's office.

An older woman with red-dyed hair handed us what looked like vacuum bags. They were soft, veined, and nearly translucent. I watched as SueZan stood on one leg and slid her foot—ballet flat and all—into the vacuum bag. "The carpets in temples are pristine," she whispered. I tried to put mine on while SueZan helped the kids with theirs, but I stumbled backwards and had to lean my butt against the wall.

* * *

In the Body

The idea of a body as a temple has never sat right with me. I first encountered the concept in born again Christian Sunday school, in which my non-Jewish father enrolled me when I was twelve years old. "Your body is a temple," said the wild-white-haired pastor, quoting 1 Corinthians. At that age, I hated everything about my body, from my thick thighs to my hair, frizzy from a recent ill-advised perm. Still, I could get behind the idea of a body being somehow holy and good. Human life had an element of magic in it.

That our fingers would form, and our toes, and those incredible opposable thumbs; that we would be able to walk upright and hear through tiny, winding tubes and three small bones—all of that was phenomenal, and I could understand it as holy. But as the pastor began to speak about temples as houses for God, I became squeamish. It is strange to think of one's body being possessed by or shared with another presence. It's the stuff of horror films. Devils and alien beings waft into us, taking over our brains, and burst from our chests covered in gore. Why would God do something so grotesque? But I was most bothered by the notion that God would feel comfortable taking up residence in my body, a body by which I felt unfairly trapped. Even now, many years later, it can be hard to believe I—whatever *I* am: psyche, soul?—dwell in my body. And if I can barely live there, how can God?

I've got the wrong body for my personality. I have always known that. I am tall and chunky with broad baby-making hips and a tread my parents say they can hear throughout the house, like an elephant's. My dark hair is straight but thick, my eyes are hazel, and my face is classically pretty. This is all wrong. I'm an "alternative" kind of girl, an "artsy" kind of girl. A girl with chiming glass earrings and prairie boots who is a little awkward and a little shy, who is passionate about her books and calligraphy, who is intense in her pursuit of deep emotions and beauty. Who belives in the purity of anger and the purity of love. A girl who thinks both Joni Mitchell and The Clash speak the truest words there are. That girl should be housed in a cute and quirky, unconventionally

pretty kind of exterior. I should be petite and freckly, with big curly hair and sparkly blue eyes. I need a little body that will balance out a big personality. What am I doing, stuck in this tall and heavy thing? This body takes up so much space. It is solid and strong in a way that my confidence is often not. How is it possible that my words and emotions present on this traditional, heart-shaped face? This face that looks good with hair swept up behind it, a huge Victorian hat perched above, weeping feathers and flowers and small birds? This exterior of mine conveys convention and femininity in a way I'm not sure my interior possesses.

"Just believe," that old white haired pastor said. "It's *faith*. You have to believe that God exists, and then you will know he exists." SueZan uses the word "belief" to describe how she thinks of moral issues—"I believe it's wrong to steal because Heavenly Father has said it is." She uses the word "know" to talk about God, as in, "I know Heavenly Father is up there, watching out for me."

My interior possesses the capacity for neither this knowledge nor belief, and long ago I stopped trying to move into a space where it could. With relative ease, like giving up eating green peppers, which I'd never liked in the first place, I stopped going through the motions. Outward gestures cannot change my belief any more than my physical appearance can determine who I am.

* * *

In Utah

First, we watched a video. It showed aerial views of LDS temples, surrounded by gardens and fountains, standing white and regal against clear blue skies. A jowly, well-spoken member of the Quorom of the Twelve Apostles (part of Church leadership, directly below the President/Prophet), said that he can go to the temple and feel close to God. Other impeccably groomed Church members of various races explained that visiting the temple made them feel in the presence of the Holy Spirit, and like they were better understanding God's plan.

Mormons believe their temples align with Old Testament teachings, that they are practicing the concept of restoration. "Through the latter-day Prophet [Joseph Smith], there has been a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ on the earth with the powers, authority, and ordinances as in ancient times," said Joseph Fielding Smith (the first Church founder's grandnephew) in his 1945 book *The Restoration of All Things*. Mormons consider Joseph Smith's revelation and writing of The Book of Mormon his restoration of the gospel, which had been corrupted by other Christian denominations. They consider building their temples to be restoring the Jerusalem temple, which was corrupted and then destroyed. "Our temples are appointed beautifully just as was done in ancient Israel," says William R. Walker, a Church leader who oversees temples worldwide.

As the video faded in and out on images of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, I wondered what SueZan thought about me, a half-Jew, watching it. I wondered if she

thought about how different our lives were now, with her family, my transience, her marital vows, my premarital sex life, both of our hectic schedules that made it harder and harder to stay up nights talking. There had been a summer, before she was married, before I moved away, when we sat on my parents' porch most nights and discussed everything from families to heaven until the late night hours. "I love Utah," I remember her saying melodically, as if she were reciting a sonnet, "But I wish, sometimes so much I want to cry, that I had been born in Europe and grown up surrounded by all that history." Seven years had passed since that summer. Though SueZan's body and swollen and retreated with three pregnancies, she looks more or less the same as she did then.

We joined a group of twenty visitors and a sister missionary shuffled us into a carpeted hallway. We passed administrative offices: Accountant, Receptionist. A sign proudly announced the state-of-the-art, superfast WiFi. I glanced down at five-year-old Caleb, who looked about as interested in his surroundings as he might if he were in a convention center. Which, given the aesthetics, he could have been. I almost laughed out loud: after Christmas and Easter, the most holy days of the Mormon calendar are the two-day spring and fall holidays called General Conference, which takes place in a holy convention center (not a temple) built specifically for that purpose. It was no wonder, I thought, that they decorated their most holy sites like this.

"We're going down to the baptismal font," whispered SueZan. "You'll love this."

Because it's not actively a secret, baptism for the dead is one of the most well-known Mormon temple rituals. A proxy, who must be at least twelve years old and approved to enter the temple, can be baptized for a dead person. In middle school, kids

asked each other if they'd baptized the dead the way I imagined kids outside of Utah asked each other if they'd had their first kiss or gotten their period. Baptisms for the dead are done because many people did not have the opportunity to be baptized while alive. "Because God is merciful, He has prepared a way for all people to receive the blessings of baptism," states the LDS Church website. "By performing proxy baptisms in behalf of those who have died, Church members offer these blessings to deceased ancestors." Mormons trace this practice back to 1 Corinthians 15:29: "Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?"

According to Mormon doctrine, the recipient can chose to accept or reject the baptism. "It's a loving, kind gesture," says Walker, a Church leader. Usually, the baptized dead are the ancestors of a current member. Genealogy study is so important to Mormons because it is how they find relatives to baptize and marry posthumously. (Everything you can do in the temple while alive can be done by proxy for someone who is dead, including being married and sealed in marriage for eternity, explains Walker.) Sometimes, however, the baptized dead are not related to members. The LDS practice of baptizing Holocaust victims—including Anne Frank—resulted in uproar from both Jews and non-Jews and had to be discontinued.

Walking down the office-building hallway to the baptism font, I imagined gold and jewel-encrusted tumblers for pouring water on heads, intricate tile and glasswork.

The actual font was nothing like I'd imagined. It was very clean and smelled like a pool. It was quiet, spa-like. The font, which was hot tub-sized and octagonal, was

lofted, sitting above a large round statue. The statue was white. Twelve almost-life-sized oxen emerged mid-torso from it in a circle. They were meant to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. “King Solomon’s temple had a baptismal font like this,” whispered SueZan. (It’s true, according to 1 Kings 7:25: “It [the baptismal font] stood upon twelve oxen.”) I looked closely at the oxen, which were plaster and appeared to have been cast from one mold. The statue reminded me of something I could paint in tempera at a paint-your-own pottery shop.

“Cows!” Caleb whispered loudly, pointing to the oxen. “Moo!”

“Moo!” I whispered back. When SueZan had visited Belgium, several years before I did, she’d shown me pictures of the baptismal font at St. Barthomew’s Church in Liege, its notably classic, high-relief bronze figures shining in the light of her camera flash. “Isn’t it gorgeous?” she’d cooed. “Look at the folds of their robes, how precise and detailed they are!”

* * *

In Jerusalem

The trip leaders told us to line up, put our hands on the shoulders of the person in front of us, and close our eyes. Palms hooked around Zac’s bony shoulders, I wanted to giggle. This was how preschoolers lined up for bathroom breaks or to walk to the

playground. But the leaders lined us up in this way so that our first glimpse of the Western Wall would be dramatic.

I was in Jerusalem on a "Birthright," a trip designed for young people of Jewish heritage to experience Israel. Our trip leader Chaim, upon whom I had a bit of a crush despite his Orthodox, Zionist leanings, explained, "You will walk through the plaza with your eyes closed until I tell you to stop. When I tell you to open your eyes, a great sight will await." Neither he, nor the other trip leader Nadia—an Orthodox New Zealand tomboy who paired her mandatory skirts with baggy sports jerseys and Adidas—had told us that we were going to see the Western Wall. But I had closely examined our itinerary: Friday, July 9, 2010: Shabbat at the Kotel. Among the many things I'd learned since arriving in Israel six days ago was that Kotel was another term for the Western Wall.

At twenty-seven, a year after visiting the Oquirrh Mountain Temple, I'd joined thirty-eight other young Americans for the free ten-day Israel sojourn. Birthrights are paid for by wealthy Zionists, Zionist and Jewish organizations in Israel and North America, and the Israeli government. Like many of my trip-mates, I did not practice much Judaism, nor was I a Zionist. I didn't typically travel on tours. But it was hard to argue with free.

It was our first day in Jerusalem. We woke in Tiberias, a touristy seaside village on the Galilee and the place where Jesus performed his loaves and fishes miracle (the trip leaders said nothing of this story, which I knew from Sunday school and my interfaith upbringing; they called the lake by its Hebrew name, Kinneret). We toured Tzfat, a narrow-alleyed mountain town with blue roofs and crumbly buildings, center of

Kabbalah. We drove four hours in the plush Birthright bus to Jerusalem listening to the Israeli pop mix that Chaim and Nadia had been playing since the trip began. At our hotel, we changed into modest clothes and hopped back on the bus, which brought us to the Old City. Even if the Western Wall hadn't been on the itinerary, eyeing the Old City walls would have given away the surprise. Unlike Christians and Muslims who have multiple holy sites in the Old City, Jews have just one place: The Western Wall.

The Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, is the only remaining part of the Second Temple, the most important Jewish temple in history (alongside the First, or Solomon's, Temple, built on the same spot). These temples were considered God's house, built to house the Ark of the Covenant that holds the Ten Commandment stones, and the only place in the world where Jews could sacrifice animals to God. Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE and the Second Temple was built in 516 BCE. The Second Temple was where Jesus studied, drove out the moneychangers, and often preached. It stood until 70 CE, when it was destroyed again, this time by the Romans to stop the Jewish Revolt against Roman rule. After the Roman attack, all that remained of the Second Temple was the Western Wall. It has been a place of Jewish pilgrimage since at least the fourth century. The eventual building of a Third Temple is prophesied and typically believed to coincide with the arrival of the Messiah.

We stood sweating in our modest clothes, long skirts usually reserved for work and funerals, cardigans over our tank tops. Eyes closed, I listened to the clangs and yells of the plaza. Heat radiating from the limestone pavers shot up my legs; my thighs melted. The smell of body odor and musk from the Orthodox men's old suits rose from the

unmistakable toasty scent of sun-roasted sand. It was the smell of desert, which I knew well from Utah, which was common here in this other religion's promised land.

I tried to focus on the fact: *I going to see the Western Wall.* I tried to ignore the sweat bead running down my forehead, which I couldn't wipe away because of my grip on Zac's shoulders. My hands acknowledged the importance of this event with the intensity of their clutch: *these are the last moments of my life before I have laid eyes on the holy site*. I concentrated on not tripping on my skirt or slipping on the slick limestone.

Stumbling blindly through the plaza, I ran though what I knew of the Wall. My mother didn't raise my sisters and me with much Judaism—we were Hanukkah and Passover Jews—but the Wall has retained a significant and essential place in my understanding of the world. It was synonymous with the phrase "holy place." If asked to do a quick association game for the word "Judaism," the Western Wall would probably come somewhere between "big nose" and "bagels." The way that I *had* to see the Eiffel Tower because I love travel and art and architecture, I *had* to see the Wall because I am Jewish. I think now that I also wanted viewing the Wall to legitimize my Jewishness in a way that my interfaith upbringing had not.

Though I'd seen aerial photos of the Western Wall area, I had always pictured the Wall itself as a standalone ruin. I'd pictured it crumbling, practically weeping itself. The fact that it's just a wall—an ornament-free, retaining wall, no less—had never bothered me. It had never led me to suspect that the Wall's fundamental power would be lessened. I'd gone breathless over soup bowls in archaeology museums and teary over ancient Greek drainage canals. In my imagination, the Wall oozed history from its pores. It

looked ancient, is ancient. I imagined the wall disintegrating at its corners, bent and lurching forward like a crone's back. I imagined it weighted down with prayer notes tucked into every crevice. The tears and wails of its pilgrims, the sweat and blood of its builders—all of that flowed from it, the most ancient and holy of structures.

In front of the real Western Wall, the hum of a thousand prayers grew stronger. My toes gripped the inside of my ballet flats for balance. Blind, I heard an abrupt gush of water hitting metal, which quickly stopped (in a few moments, I would learn the water was for washing one's hands before nearing the Wall). Chaim said, "Stop." We halted, my knee colliding with Zac's calf. "Turn right," said Chaim, then he paused. "Now, open your eyes."

* * *

In Utah

Back in the beige hallway in our vacuum cleaner-bag shoes, SueZan pointed to a large print of a painting depicting fair-haired Jesus in Gethsemane. "Isn't it beautiful?" she whispered. "I love that one."

I nodded. "I've seen it before, at the Salt Lake Visitor's Center." The Salt Lake Temple, the largest LDS temple where the LDS Holy of Holies is located, is a popular tourist attraction complete with multiple visitor buildings that non-Mormons can enter.

I'd gone to the visitor's center dozens of times, often to see the Christmas light display or to show out-of-town visitors.

"Do they always put prints in temples? Or do they sometimes have original art?" I asked SueZan.

"I think they are original."

"That one's a print, and the ones in the Visitor's Center are prints."

"Are they? I guess I've never noticed. I've just thought they were beautiful."

"It is nice," I said, surprised that Church leaders didn't commission original art for God's house.

"Maybe they figure they already have paintings they like," SueZan seemed unfazed, her smile still bright. "It's probably easier that way and also makes it so people visiting have the comfort of seeing familiar art."

I hadn't believed in any kind of God since at least my college freshman year, but the times I'd come closest had been in cathedrals and old synagogues. In those soaring, spectacular sanctuaries, my thoughts have gone, my worries have gone, the world has disappeared because all that can fit in my mind is every exquisite detail of the ribbed vaulted ceilings, the carved bannisters, the stained-glass windows as vibrant as an underwater reef. Even the gargoyles, even the medieval paintings with their awkward perspectives and babies with old man faces. Taking it all in has taken me above, or what felt like above, the world. I suspect that transcendence means that I identified most strongly with my fellow humans in those moments, not that I felt the devine or anything close to it. I was connected with the artists and builders who made the space that makes

me feel exalted. It was as John Ruskin said of cathedral gargoyles: “They are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought.”

That originality not only offers proximity to the creators, and through them to all of humanity, but allows for imperfections and successes, for risks and failures, for attempts at creating works as big as the human imagination. It is through that wildness that beauty is achieved. For me, powerful beauty is not necessarily something that will put people at ease but something that will inspire and awe. Why does beauty need to be comfortable? Shouldn’t beauty be thrilling or even a little scary? And shouldn’t an encounter with God be the same?

Humans made the great cathedrals, but it’s a mistake to ignore the faith that inspired their construction in the first place. The cathedrals and synagogues were built to glorify the God in whom many of their architects and artists and builders believed. Feeling awed by religious buildings at least gets me in the general vicinity of faith. There was an element of belief, or feeling the Spirit, by proxy. In cathedrals, I have thought things like, “If any religion were true, it would surely be the one that inspired people to make *this*.” And sometimes, underneath those sky-high apses, the world seemed bigger and more fantastic than anything I could conceive, and I have thought, for a second, that I understand what it means to be “fearfully and wonderfully made.” In those moments, it seemed there could be something larger and grander, something more that didn’t require proof or logic to exist.

Those were fleeting moments and I'd never felt compelled to seek out a Catholic service after visiting a cathedral. But they have helped me understand, however briefly, how one could believe, and what it is possible to feel.

Caleb's pudgy fingers nestled in my palm and I squeezed them gently, wanting the reassurance of something tangibly good. SueZan and I were twenty-one when Caleb had been born, and I'd made him a card out of construction paper. "Welcome to the World, Caleb!" I wrote in magic marker. I'd held him in the hospital, stroked his red hair with one fingertip. "I'm going to love you so much," I whispered.

"He's so lucky to have his Aunt Jessie," SueZan said, smiling on her birthing bed, her mascara still unsmudged. "You have so much to teach him."

I walked with Caleb down the smooth beige hallway, past the mass-printed art, toward the Ordinance Room, yearning. My eyes were peeled for beauty, for anything.

* * *

In the Body

Temples externalize the sacred. They help us feel connected to the sacred by giving us something tangible and concrete, when normally what we have is vague and abstract. Churches and synagogues externalize the sacred, too, but by acting as a physical

dwelling place for a divine presence, temples take it to another level. That which is formless is made to fit in four walls. That which does not have weight is given the chair in Solomon's Temple. That which is not human is assumed to need a place of residence. Still, even those who believe that humans were made in God's image, and that therefore God can take some sort of physical form, do not presume to actually see the divine in physical form inside a temple. When God appears in the Old Testament, it is as a burning bush, a pillar of smoke and fire, an earthquake. In the case of Ezekiel, who sees a half-human, half-fire diety, it is during a prophecy.

Wandering the desert, Israelites created a tabernacle, essentially a portable temple, so that God could reside with them. What could be a more human instinct—besides, perhaps, creating a creator? We imagine something immensely vaster than we can comprehend, in order to explain the world. We like this idea, but in order to manage our most powerful creation, we shrink it down and claim it needs a house. We can carry it with us, as the Israelites did, or we can go to his house down the street, as the Mormons do. Or, we can understand it as Paul did in his letter to the Corinthians. Understanding one's body as a temple keeps God as close as possible.

If our bodies were created in God's image, then maybe having a body is the closest, most tangible way to experience God, and maybe the body itself is a sacred space. But keeping one's body holy for God requires guarding it, sealing it off from the rest of the world. It requires the secrecy of the Mormons, the ablutions of the Jews, and a strict adherence to rules, which makes the body seem distant rather than intimate, alien and unknowable.

I was sent to a born-again Christian school in seventh grade because my father was going through his "Christian phase." Christian Heritage School had a strict dress code. I moped and cried over my forced-collared shirts, my strictly black-or-brown shoes, my long black skirts or straight black slacks. These clothes, the administration said in their brochures, would not only keep us students focused on our academic and spiritual work, free from distractions like fashion, they would also serve to separate us from the sinful, materialistic world. At the end of each school day, I tore off the clothes and put on the wackiest ones I could find that fit my lumpy, slumpy pre-teen body: hot pink T-shirts, skater shorts, fringe, Doc Martens. Those were the things that were who I was: a funky kid, an artsy kid, a self-conscious kid, a kid who needed color.

As an adult, I've ripped off business outfits the same way. The only criticism I ever received from one school principal was that I didn't follow the faculty dress code closely enough (it was Japan; we were supposed to wear business suits). The requirements of Godly dressing are not so different from those of business attire—only religious attire is designed for purity, for safety, for keeping our bodies separate from the world. What are the rules for headcoverings and beard length, for modesty, for tefillin, if not instructions about the appearance of one's body-temple? But I feel separated by the heavens and the earth from my body when I have no say in how to decorate it. Dressed in my favorite lace-up boots and a flannel shirt to hint at my Western childhood, or wearing my funky polka dot dress from Japan, helps me move into the body that has often felt

foreign and wrong to me. My body-temple may be God's, but dressed in His required clothing, it is no longer mine.

* * *

In Jerusalem

For a second, I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking at. I stood in a three-walled limestone plaza. It was crowded and hot. I squinted through my sunglasses. My forehead was slick with sweat. After a moment I understood that the wall right in front of me was it. The Western Wall.

The original wall from the Second Temple period was built into a new wall. New, smooth rock filled in gaps in the old stone, ensuring a ruler-straight top. The old and new rocks were the same color, the same limestone. This gave the wall a uniform look, like a scrap of parchment placed and glued onto a complete sheet of parchment of the exact same color. The only way to tell the old parts from the new was by the amount of pockmarks; the old rocks carry more scars.

The Western Wall was just a wall. My eyes told me so little about its holiness. At many ruins, the walls take on a geologic quality from having stood in one place for so long. They seem as craggy as mountains, as timeless as a canyon. They have eroded into the dirt around them; the dirt around them has made its way into the wall's pores. I once

grinned wildly and bug-eyed at the sight of Ta Prohm, the famous Angkor Wat temple overgrown with silk-cotton trees. Like a pile of anacondas, the roots spill into and over and through the ruins; the trunks grow though and around the structures before soaring skyward. The walls of Ta Phrohm tell the story of neglect, of fecundity, of mysteries solved and unsolved—of time. But at the Western Wall, the only vegetation is some dusty-green henbane sprouting, no more impressive than grass growing from a crack in the sidewalk.

Would the Western Wall be helped if it stood in the dirt instead of on a thousand limestone pavers in a plaza? Would that make it appear, feel, practically *be* older? Certainly it would help if the south and east walls weren't the same height and made of the same stone. That they were made the place remind me of one of the many desert-inspired outdoor malls in Utah. It felt too modern. Structurally sound and hardly weeping.

Tourists in khaki shorts and Orthodox Jews in huge, round fur hats scurried around, pressing themselves into the crowds of thousands, sliding their way toward the wall. In their freshly washed hands, they clutched scraps of papers scrawled with prayers. My Birthright group rushed forward, men to the left and women to the right, to wash at fountains, to touch the special stones. They left me standing in the plaza, sweaty faced and staring, at a wall.

* * *

In Utah

Even among other members, even among their own families, Mormons are not supposed to talk about the particulars of what happens in the temple. "By avoiding discussion of these sacred things outside the temple, we protect them from mocking, ridicule, or disrespect," says the official Church statement on the subject. "Do not be casual when talking about your experiences in the temple." As a result of this rule, the internet teems with stories of young people going through the temple for the first time and feeling shocked and unprepared because their own parents were forbidden to tell them what to expect.

All that Mormons say is that the ordinances done in the temples are baptisms, endowments, and sealings (marriages for eternity) for both the living and deceased. Endowments are by far the most secret part of the temple ordinances. The official Mormon description of them reads,

> The word *endowment* means "gift" or "bestowal." As part of this ordinance, we are taught about the purpose of life, the mission and Atonement of Jesus Christ, and Heavenly Father's plan for His children. We gain a glimpse of what it will be like to live in His presence as we feel the peaceful atmosphere of the temple.

After the baptismal font with the plaster-cast oxen, our tour took us to the ordinance rooms. When people talk about "going through the temple," said SueZan, going through these rooms and doing special rituals within them is what they're talking about.

The first room we entered was more aesthetically interesting than the hotel conference center style of the rest of the place. The walls were covered in murals

depicting a jungle scene. There were green ferns, lush trees, and a large leopard. Some alpine mountains and stags were also thrown in. In the middle of the room were lines of plush beige folding chairs, like in a movie theater, which, it turned out, was what it was.

SueZan explained that in this room, after having changed into white temple robes and washed in the locker rooms, people sat and watched a film about God's creation and work on Earth. The jungle walls were meant to evoke the terrestrial world. Not all temples have the jungle rooms, however; in most, you watch the movie and do all the ordinances in one beige room. The Oquirrh Mountain Temple was what is called a "moving temple" because you move from room to room throughout the whole ritual.

"So not all the rooms are painted according to what goes on in them?"

"No, it wouldn't really work to do that. But there are so many symbolic decorations, and it's all so beautiful."

Half an hour ago, if SueZan had told me that something in the temple was beautiful, I would have believed her wholeheartedly. Now, I wondered how it happened that SueZan, who is more artistic than most people I know, excellent at drawing and painting, came to think this building was beautiful.

The next room, the sealing room where marriages are performed, was a return to beige and white. Shining, silver-framed mirrors dotted the walls. Windows looked out on the parking lot. A few dozen nicely made side chairs stood around an altar, where the sealing ceremony would be done, with the bride kneeling on one side and the groom on the other. SueZan pointed to the carpet, which was a thick cream. "Nice," I said. She

pointed to the chairs, which were stackable but not foldable, with cream and gold brocade upholstery. She pointed to the mirrors, which she noted reflected in each other, so you could see mirrors forever. “That represents eternity,” she said. “Isn’t that gorgeous? It’s because when you get married here, you’re sealed for all time and eternity.”

It had broken my heart to miss SueZan’s wedding (or rather, wedding reception—non-Mormons are of course not allowed in temples for the ceremony). It had been October of my sophomore year of college and I couldn’t afford the $500 plane ticket from rural Ohio to Salt Lake. My parents had been struggling financially and SueZan couldn’t help, either; she wore a hand-me-down wedding dress and had a pot luck reception. She’d said not to worry, that it was okay that I couldn’t come, as we’d cried about it over the phone. Still, I have always regretted not having been there to see her and Rex, the man she’d loved since age fourteen, come out the temple doors as husband and wife. She made me a photo album of her wedding, took me through each shot of the day she became sealed to Rex for eternity.

The concept of eternal marriage is a cornerstone of the Mormon faith. “In order to obtain the highest [level of heaven], a man must enter into this order of the priesthood (meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage),” says Doctrine and Covenants 131:1-4. This means that only people who are sealed to their spouse in the temple have the option of being granted access the best part of the Mormon afterlife, the highest level of the Celestial Kingdom. Husbands meet wives there (actually, husbands grant their wives admittance), and are eventually joined by their children. They can also, in the words of Joseph Smith, “continue to increase and have children in the celestial glory.”

These posthumous offspring are called spirit children. Together with their children from mortal life, they form an "eternal family." This is the principal gift that Heavenly Father gives his believers.

It's also, I think, the cornerstone of Mormon faith for another reason. In some key ways, Mormonism is a religion built on convenience and ease. The concept of a living prophet, also a central tenet of Mormonism, allows for the Church to engage in endless revision. For much of the 1800s, the Church and the U.S. government butted heads over the issue of polygamy (it was a significant factor in the Utah War of 1857-58, was taken to the Supreme Court in 1879 to Mormon defeat, and was a major reason why the government would not admit Utah as a state). Then, in 1890, Church president and living prophet Wilford Woodruff received a prophecy from Heavenly Father terminating polygamy. Almost instantly, relations between the Church and the government improved and Utah was admitted to the Union. The same story applies to the prophecy that let blacks into the priesthood, a high-level of membership attained by all men over the age of 12 that enables them to "act in God's name" and receive revelations to guide their families. Under pressure from African-Americans in the Church, athletes on scholarship at BYU, the NAACP, and others during the Civil Rights Movement, and faced with the difficulty of knowing how to bestow the priesthood to mixed-race Brazilian converts after the opening of the Sao Paulo Temple, president Spencer W. Kimball received a revelation from Heavenly Father. Blacks could receive the priesthood and the issue evaporated (or at least lessened). It was, as Bruce R. McConkie, a member of the Quorum

of the Twelve Apostles at the time, said, “It doesn’t make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June 1978.”

Though eternal marriage and families were written into Church doctrine from the start, by Joseph Smith himself, they, too function on the premise of convenience. The most painful experience we go through in life is losing loved ones, and nothing could be a bigger relief than being told we weren’t really losing them. Mormonism promises that not only will you see your loved ones again, you’ll live with them as family, forever.

My non-Mormon friends—including those who are married—have often said flippantly that they can’t imagine wanting to be married to anyone for eternity. But that might be because we have fortified ourselves for loss, for separation. I’m troubled by the convenience of concepts that suggest one can avoid the pain of loss, but a part of me envies the opportunity to not need to harden oneself against that pain. It allows for remaining soft to the world. I looked across the sealing room—less romantic than a courthouse—at SueZan, whose sunny optimism I’ve always loved, depended on, and never entirely understood. It is surely buoyed by the softness her belief in the afterlife endows. Knowing that her picture of forever bliss does not include me in the Celestial Kingdom, however, doesn’t seem so gentle. If I believed in a definitive afterlife, she’d surely be in it, close enough for hugs and frequent chats. In her mythology, at best, she could come visit me in a lower level of heaven. Looking ahead to her days of eternal glory, had she already hardened against the loss of me?

* * *

In Jerusalem

The men danced and the women wept. All around me, thousands of Orthodox women, dressed in long black skirts and stockings, thick, plastic-soled black shoes, and black head kerchiefs, bobbed their heads back and forth, bent and moaning. They covered their eyes with one hand but didn't wipe away their tears.

I was tall enough to see over the barrier that separates the women's section of the Western Wall from the men's. The men had nearly three-fourths of the Wall. They milled. The women crowded together like commuters on a rush hour train. It was bad to be smooshed between the religious women; surely they could feel my ungodliness, surely they worried it was polluting them.

On the other side of the barrier, the men were using their space to party like it was a Jewish wedding. A-capella, as is usually the way with Jewish prayers and songs, they belted festive tunes. They clapped along, laughed, sang in a hundred-person chorus. I couldn't see faces, but over the barrier I saw black hats bobbing, swerving as the Orthodox men danced and jumped. A young man was lifted onto the shoulders of his friends; he appeared in my line of vision doughy-faced and wide-eyed, but ecstatic.

"This is messed up," I whispered to Molly, another half-Jewish and anti-Zionist member of my Birthright group. "How come they get all that space? How come the men are singing and dancing and the women are crying? What does that *say*?"

She shook her head. “It’s totally messed up. Maybe we should sing?”

We moved closer to the barrier and began to clap with the beat. The Orthodox women looked at us strangely, as if our meager claps were distracting them from their crying prayers. After a few seconds, we gave up. “It’s too awkward,” I said. At least, we decided, we should get closer to the wall, all the way up to it.

We had to push, hard. I held my Kotel Shabbat prayer book, given to us by the Birthright leaders, close to my chest. After a minute, I realized that it was pressing into the backs of all the Orthodox women I was trying to pass. I felt huge next to these women, like an ungainly, confused gentile. I had every right to touch the wall—I was a Jew according to all the rules and it was my birthright—but there was no space for me. To make space, I had to push others aside, to shove them with my prayer book. The women I passed didn’t glare or give me funny looks. They kept right on going, eyes closed, heads bobbing, unstoppable in their laments.

Up close, the wall was no more impressive than it had been from far away. The prayers written on scraps were balanced precariously in the nooks and crannies of the rock; it was obvious that they’d fall out within a few hours. Dozens of scraps already littered the ground. I watched a pigeon fly by. Its feathers knocked another prayer to the ground. I’d known logically that prayers reside in the wall temporarily, but since childhood I’d enjoyed the image of a wall full of all the prayers from the last two thousand years. I’d imagined that the papers would have been absorbed into the rock over time, so that the rocks and the prayers would be one and the same.

The trip leaders had given us scraps of paper and golf pencils, which I'd tucked into my prayer book. I hated writing my prayer in pencil; even the markings on my paper wouldn't last.

With the prettiest, loopiest script I could manage standing awkwardly in a crowd, staring up at a very tall, very old wall, I wrote a prayer for peace in the land. *May the violence here cease*, I wrote because it was what I wanted and because it seemed like the thing to do. *May everyone see each other for the people, just people, that they are. May they forgive.*

I rolled up my prayer. It was an uneven scrap of paper with rough edges, and rolled up it made a little cone. I didn't know what I'd always expected my Western Wall prayer to look like, but a little white cone of printer paper wasn't it. I found a spot in the wall where I thought my prayer would be secure for at least a day. I had to reach high to put it in, and I felt, yet again, how tall I was among these people, who were partly mine.

As if it was a lover's chest, I raised my right hand and placed it squarely against the wall. I leaned into it. I wanted to feel that little spot of wall as much as possible, to have its ridges and cracks tickle my palm. I wanted the energy of the wall—all its history, all its holiness—to touch me. I hadn't been inspired by the sight of the wall; I closed my eyes like the Orthodox women and hoped touching it would be different.

The wall was neither hot nor cold. Its texture reminded me of a boulder on a Utah mountainside; that is to say, of a rock. I often laid hands on the mountain boulders and the Southern Utah red rocks, and when I did, I always felt energy, aliveness coming from the stone. But, hewed and piled by the hands of men, this was not living stone.

I opened my eyes and looked up. The wall stretched nearly sixty feet above me. All of it looked plain, but my knowledge told me it held more than what I could see.

"Hi there, Wall," I whispered. I patted the stone, turned, and walked away westward in the fading light.

* * *

In Utah

The rule of secrecy was for a different time. Now, apostates and former Mormons share their stories online. The internet teams with message boards where ex-Mormons describe the secrets of temple rituals in detail. One man went to the temple with a hidden camera in his ritual white robes, filmed the whole thing, and put it on YouTube. For years, I abstained from accessing this information, out of respect for SueZan, who has said, "Sometimes I wish I could tell you what goes on, just because I know you're really curious. But they're so sacred, they're so holy, that I can't. And I know that anyone can find out online about what happens in temples. But it breaks my heart when people do that. Even if you don't believe anymore, why would you broadcast something so sacred to other people, something you know they don't want out there? And why would anyone read about it, knowing its importance?"

But after we went through the temple, curiosity got the better of me.

The tour signs said that in the beige endowment room, Mormons received God's greatest gift and better understood the secret of his plan. Through the internet, I learned that this meant a man (dressed in a little baker-like hat and white robe) and a woman (dressed in a white apron and robe) approached the front of the room together and a temple worker taught them secret, Free Masonesque handshakes (Joseph Smith was an inducted member), passwords, and secret names that would enable them to enter the Celestial Kingdom. Prior to complaints in the 1970s, they also received anointments on their genitals. Now, the temple workers just touch their heads. Men learn more coded handshakes and passwords than do women. The first time one goes through the temple, at age eighteen at the earliest, they get their own secret name. (I do not, of course, know SueZan's secret name, but I have always imagined that it is Lily, which "Susannah" means in Hebrew, and which is both of our favorite flower.) Subsequently, Mormons going through the temple receive names for deceased; in this way, they perform endowments for the dead as well as baptisms and sealings.

Pair by pair, men and women perform the handshakes and utter the passwords in front of temple workers. This is practice for what to do upon reaching the afterlife. Then, they are ushered into the next room in a process called "passing through the veil." The next room represents the Celestial Kingdom. Of all the things I'd heard about the temple, I'd heard the most about the Celestial room, though none of it was very specific. Official Mormon publications describe it as "exquisitely beautiful." Mormons I knew, including SueZan, brandished phrases like, "gorgeous beyond your wildest dreams," and "unlike

anything you've seen before." Unfortunately, I thought as we walked inside, I'd seen a four-star hotel lobby before.

The room was shades of white; the only color came from a few pastel floral arrangements and the rainbows shimmering off large chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling. The silent room, wallpapered in snowy brocade, was plush and pure and luxurious, dotted with overstuffed armchairs bearing white fringed throw pillows. Running my fingers across an ivory velvet sofa gave me a feeling of having made it financially, of being swathed in glamor and success. It was easy to imagine I'd been nominated for an Oscar and was checking into The Four Seasons.

On the end tables sat white tissue boxes, for Mormons moved by the Holy Spirit to tears. SueZan's eyes were moist just from walking through the room.

As we made our way down more beige hallways, SueZan said, "I wish we could go back through, and just sit there for a while. I could just feel the presence of God."

I nodded, wanting to do nothing of the sort. Wanting to run to Salt Lake's majestic Catholic cathedral, to a waterfall, to an art museum, to a boutique with baroque, high-priced dresses—to see something that *was* exquisitely beautiful, not just fancy. We helped the kids take off their vaccum cleaner shoe bags, helped each other take off ours, and stepped out into the hot desert sun.

Blinking my eyes, I said in what I hoped was a positive tone, "So, do most temples look like that, inside?"

SueZan, still dreamy-faced from the Celestial room, said, "They look different on the outsides, sometimes, but yeah, new ones mostly look like that. Really old temples

look different. The Salt Lake one is a little more colorful and it has more mural rooms, showing the creation and things like that."

"Why'd they stop making them that way?"

"I think it was because they wanted the temples to be a place of familiarity and comfort, a place where you could be at home, anywhere, with God."

"That's nice," I said. I meant it, in a way. It was nice. It also hinted at rationales for Mormon practices that I had never before guessed. BYU's *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* notes that, "There is a marked tendency to avoid any distraction from direct and personal spirituality." (It also states, "Latter-day Saints' concern for uniting heavenly principles with earthly practices has been adequately expressed in practical, durable, and extraordinarily well-maintained buildings and grounds.")

Matthew Bowman, author of *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith,* points out that Mormon architecture is designed to emphasize the difference in the LDS Church from other Christian denominations. Mormonism is the result of Joseph Smith praying for guidance in choosing a denomination during the Second Great Awakening. He believed his Church to be truly distinct from all other Christian sects, and wanted its buildings to reflect that. It is important for members not to confuse Mormon buildings with regular churches, so they intentionally lack traditional sanctuaries, decoration, pews, or crosses.

The dullness of Mormon architecture is purposeful rather than lazy. Bowman (himself LDS) describes as a "respectable, if sometimes bland, material spirituality." Mormon architecture emphasizes the opposite of what I want in my holy places: comfort

and familiarity, coziness and relaxation—things I value highly in my family, in my living room, in my hot chocolate. Things that could never be enough for me to hang a faith on. I would need, at a minimum, flying buttresses for that.

* * *

In the Body

From the first time I heard the phrase "the man enters the woman," in fifth grade sex ed, I thought it seemed horribly incorrect. My parents had told me the basics when I was a toddler, in time for my sister to be born, so the act wasn't what was wrong. It was the word "enter." I wasn't a house or a store or a car, and my body, even in fifth grade, was much bigger than a man's penis. The proper words, I thought, should be "take"—the woman would take the man—or "engulf" or "consume." I giggled, imagining a cheeseburger saying, "Don't eat me! I'm a boy!" The sex-ed teacher asked why I was laughing and I apologized and said nothing.

An aura of mystery surrounds bodies and temples, these things that must be kept pure. There is tremendous emphasis placed upon who may enter—God, of course, and only people who have been deemed worthy. In the case of Judaism, where only the High Priest was allowed to enter the temple's inner sanctum, also called the Holy of Holies (where the Ark of the Covenant and God's seat were kept), only one man was deemed

worthy. It is completely possible to make a wrong choice about who you let in. Making the wrong choice is dangerous and displeases God. Both bodies and temples contain things that must be kept secret, and if the secret gets out, it loses its sanctity—sometimes by degrees, sometimes all at once.

Sex that I have chosen to experience—even bad sex, even sex with the wrong person—rarely feels to me like a loss. Sex is not made more sacred by secrecy; from my awkward first sex to the times I've stared into a lover's eyes and felt the upmost connection, sex has been improved by loss of secrecy. My first sex was far from glorious, but the primary thought that ran through my head as I lay on that bed was, "this feels like the most natural thing in the world." This is not to say that I do not sometimes feel insecure about my body's appearance during sex. But the feeling of being trapped in my body, the feeling that it is not truly mine, or is the wrong one for my personality minimizes when doing what feels purely natural. During sex, my body is not wrong. It is not sinful. It does not hold secrets.

This, it seems to me, is the actual secret of sex, which shouldn't be a secret at all: As with eating, as with dressing, it is something that puts me in touch with my body, and through my bodily sensations, in touch with the world. During those moments of sex, I am more present, more fully inhabited in myself. My spirit, which has so often felt so disconnected from my form, comes down to it, enters and exists in physical sensation. It is hedonistic, perhaps. I value sensation and pleasure highly. But for me, the fact remains:

a man may be physically connected to my body, but during sex, my body belongs to me. It is where I am, and from its vantage point I can see clearly.

* * *

In Jerusalem

Though I stared at the wall, face-to-face with 62x187 feet of it, I didn't truly see it until several weeks later, after the Birthright trip had ended and I was wandering the streets of Jerusalem alone.

I entered the Old City through the Dung Gate, one of the eight gates in the Old City walls, which put me squarely in the Western Wall plaza. But rather than heading into the crowds, I turned east, toward the wall. I passed the armed Israeli guards and entered a wooden staircase that gently climbed sixty-two feet. The walkway to the Temple Mount is enclosed, like a wooden mine shaft in the middle of a city. Through the wooden slats, I saw the Orthodox Jews praying. I wondered if they could see me, if they could tell that I was hiding my own religious heritage for a chance to see something beautiful.

Jews aren't allowed on the Temple Mount. That's the Israeli stance anyway. But that's also the lie: if you don't wear your religious affiliation on your sleeve, anyone's

allowed. There's no formal admittance process. The Temple Mount is open for the experiencing.

High up, on the elevated site of Solomon's Temple, Jerusalem looked different. To the West, the Old City roofs and walls were below or at eye level. To the East loomed the Mount of Olives with its thousands of Jewish graves on one side, the thousands of olive trees dotted with churches, including one magnificent gold-domed Russian Orthodox church, on the other.

There are two religious sites on the Temple Mount: Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Al Aqsa Mosque is where God transported Muhammad during his night journey, and is considered the third holiest site in Islam. The Dome of the Rock enshrines the rock that was the foundation of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple. It's also the site where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac. Only Muslims are allowed in either site, and that's an actual rule enforced by the guards.

Muddy brown and unadorned, Al Aqsa mosque was plain on the outside. But the Dome of the Rock—one of the oldest pieces of Islamic architecture—took my breath away. It was a large building for what I imagined was a tiny shrine; octagonal and tiled in shades of blue like a desert spring. The iconic golden dome glowed in the ceaseless Middle Eastern sun. I circled it three times slowly, looking, looking. The tiles, which envelop the upper two-thirds of the building, which is itself lined with decorative archways to nowhere, were a delicate mix of blue and gold. In Islam, blue suggests infinity and gold represents the knowledge of God. Some of the tiles' patterns evoked swirling, rushing nature or Arabic calligraphy; others were laid in precise geometric

patterns. Placed together, carefully side by side, the two styles became unified in their discord, creating a peaceful whole comprised of intricacy and business.

The 45,000 exterior tiles were installed under Ottoman sultan Suleiman in the Magnificent in the 1500s and carry a heavy Ottoman influence. Apparently, the architectural and decorative elements inside the Dome also reflect dozens of styles and cultures. This hodgepodge is appropriate for a holy site in Jerusalem, the crossroads of Abrahamic faith, a city ruled by dozens of different groups throughout its history. Nonetheless, Oleg Grabar's *The Formation of Islamic Art* asserts that the Dome of the Rock's grandness was intended to demonstrate Islam's legitimacy and importance at a time when it was a relatively young religion. Islam's start is marked in 610 AD, the year after Mohammed received his prophecy at the age of forty. Though Christianity has less than 1,000 years on it, Judaism is millennia older. A massive, architecturally and decoratively sumptuous holy building said, "Islam is here to stay."

I circled the dome, drinking in its beauty, feeling, through my eyes, the place's importance in my bones. I felt the shades of blue and gold pulse, felt the way the tiles fit together in a perfect puzzle.

When I was finished, I walked to the western edge of the Temple Mount. I looked down, over the edge of the Western Wall. And that's when I really saw it.

Only, I couldn't see it. It was directly beneath me; I'd have needed to bend far out over the wall, to lie flat on my stomach and look down. What I saw were the people. The thousands of people, mostly Orthodox Jews, swarming the wall, singing, bobbing their heads, praying. I saw the tops of their heads. The jet of the black hats; the brown and grey

of uncovered, less Orthodox hair; the splashes of brightly colored headscarves on Chabad women, all mosaicked together in lively faith. Their chants wafted up to the Temple Mount like dust: light, disjointed, airy. They were the same crowds I'd seen on Shabbat, but different from high above. Those thousands of heads were the life force that I'd not felt in the stones of the wall. They had all come to this one, specific place. Out of everywhere in the world, they had come here, to this single, simple wall, to worship. Visually beautiful or not, there was no other place like it on earth. That's what gave the wall its power, what brought these people and all their aliveness to it. That was what the wall was.

But the question remained—would I have seen the truth in the wall if I hadn't seen the physical beauty of the Dome of the Rock, first?

* * *

In Utah

We entered an air-conditioned tent with free cookies and missionaries on hand to talk about the Oquirrh Mountain Temple and answer questions. The tent was decorated with artificial floral arrangements and the same art prints that hung in the temple. I looked at a display explaining the fineness of the materials used in building the temple (1 Kings 7 contains a line about Solomon's Temple being built from the finest materials).

Oquirrh Mountain Temple was made with marble from China, mohagany from Brazil. The display reminded me of a floor sample display at Home Depot. I ate four cookies.

The kids sat in the corner, playing. SueZan talked to the missionaries. I stood silently next to her, watching my lovely friend, with her open, warm face, her artfully smudged eyeliner, her eyes that held so much knowledge and love for the world. I watched her, my oldest friend, talk to the missionaries about the temple, and the feelings they had within it. How beautiful it was, how close to God they felt there. How the Celestial Room had taken their breaths away, and that ordinance room, with the jungle mural—that was spectacular.

I'd come to the temple hoping that, by experiencing the beauty of it, I would become closer to SueZan. To all the Mormons. I wanted a glimpse into the spiritual sensations that they felt as members of the Church. Official Mormon publications always describe the temple as the "great metaphor for God's plan, here on earth." But it's also the great metaphor for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Unfailingly modern, thoroughly American. In all of our countless late-night discussions about Mormonism and spirituality, I'd rarely come across an idea of SueZan's that I simply didn't get. There were plenty I didn't agree with, but usually, it wasn't hard to imagine how she could believe them. But watching her talk to the missionaries, I felt as thought we'd just walked through two different places, two different temples. What had she seen? Where was this beautiful building she had witnessed, and what had I been looking at? There was a sense of her, and the other Mormons, being special and chosen. As if you had to be a member of God's chosen church to truly see the temple. Mormonism is, like

most religions, based on an us-vs-them framework. SueZan was an "us" and I was a "them" and all the temple tours and midnight conversations and hugs and "I love yous" wouldn't change that.

A missionary asked what I thought of the Temple.

"It was really nice," I said.

"Did you feel the spirit?"

"No, but I could totally see how someone else could, in there," I lied.

The missionary handed me a card with Jesus in Gethsemane on one side and place for my name and address on the other. "If you're ever interested in learning more," she said, "We'd love to talk with you."

"Thanks," I said, shoving the card in my purse to throw away later, the way I had all the other cards I'd gotten over my years in Utah.

"It breaks my heart when people go on the internet and read about what happens in the temple," SueZan has said, dozens of times. Driving home, I stared at the window, watched the fading light silhouette the mountains. I knew I would go online when I got home. The temple itself had been so anticlimactic, most likely the rituals, too, would bore rather than shock. With low expectations, I would click on the YouTube video by the man who sneaked a camera into the temple. I would watch, increasingly uncomfortable with the handshakes and passwords and anointments that I saw. I would squirm in my chair, a spy on my friend's beliefs, but I would not feel guilty.

A LOT OF ROOM TO MOVE AROUND

Gaijin. The Japanese word used to signify "foreigner," "non-Japanese," "alien," and "outsider." It is a polarizing word that usually describes Caucasians. *Gaijin* is made from two kanji—gai, meaning "outside," and jin, meaning "person." *Jin* is a swoopy little bottomless triangle, vaguely humanoid with two legs narrowing to a torso, though lacking in arms. It emphasizes human beings' bipedal nature. *Gai* has the same upside-down V shape. But it is askew, slanted and weighed down by other things: a straight vertical line to its right intersecting one branch of the legs, and a curious little box balanced near its top like a crooked hat.

During my two years in Japan, 2006 and 2007, I came to enjoy dissecting kanji, which is a pictorial language system. Once I knew the translation, I could see how the kanji for "word" looked like a little mouth, portrayed as a gaping square, with thoughts, portrayed as lines, coming out of its top. "Shell" shared the same base image (a square with two horizontal lines inside it) as "eye" and a similar one to "body," plus had two little legs poking out the bottom, like a hermit crab scuttling across the sand. "Corpse," looked like half of "body," hinting at what is left behind in death. But with gaijin, I could not understand which element of *gai* signified outside. Was it the slanted person, with his precarious hat, that implied a certain off-ness? Was it the line, of which the person was almost totally on one side?

When I arrived in Kyoto to teach English, I was twenty-two and a recent college graduate. I stood nearly five feet, nine inches tall and had pale skin and brown hair. My thighs were sturdy and my arms soft. I spoke only English and a smattering of conversational Japanese that I had learned from "So You're Going to Japan" tapes. I was bad with chopsticks. I teetered in heels and wore mostly jeans and T-shirts and Converse sneakers, and though I did not know it, my years in Japan would revolutionize my fashion sense, fill it with flared mini skirts and knee socks.

On my first day in Kyoto, Japan, my new boss told me about the word gaijin as he walked me down Tambabashi-dori, my new street, a one-lane road crowded with storefronts and slow-moving bicycles and pedestrians with long, closed umbrellas hanging from their forearms. The air smelled sweet with recent rain, fruit piled on tables in front of the groceries, and blood from freshly slaughtered chickens. "They'll call you gaijin all the time," my British boss said bitterly. "You can't become Japanese. I try not to let it bother me. It bothers a lot of people. But don't worry about it. Get yourself a drink." I nodded, half-listening, taking in the sights and sounds, and not entirely understanding why I should be upset. I was a foreigner, an outsider in this place. Why shouldn't I be labeled as such? If I didn't want to be a foreigner, I would have stayed in the United States.

I had come to Japan to recreate the fun and sense of community I had experienced as an ex-pat in England during my junior year of college. After dealing with crippling shyness for most of my life, I discovered that talking with other ex-pats in Exeter, England was amazingly easy. Our shared foreignness allowed for a simple, paint-by-

numbers sort of social formula. At home in Utah, I had agonized over what to say. I thought I had no good stories, no thoughts worth sharing. But among the Belgians and Norwegians and Chinese in England, I found that my life had provided me with an endless supply of conversational topics that others would actually find interesting. *What is _____ like in your home country?* It was a question that was almost magic. It could be asked until the stars went out. If asked of me, I had all the answers. A year later, when I walked off the stage with my BA diploma, I didn't care much about getting a career-starting job. I cared about putting myself back in a situation where I could easily make friends. Lack of a EU passport made returning to Europe difficult, and a fondness for historic Japanese art made the country attractive. So while I planned to love Kyoto's old temples and cherry blossoms, and to appreciate tea ceremonies and sumo wrestling, I didn't expect to integrate into Japanese society. I expected to remain on the periphery, in a cozy bubble of foreignness, of gaijinness.

For close to a year, that bubble was scented with whiskey and Asahi beer and diminished inhibitions. It tasted of sushi and smoky, late night izakayas. It gave me a confidence in my singing voice that shattered outside private karaoke booths, and a renewed sense of myself as an intellectual. Few of my fellow gaijin wanted to listen to me talk about the artistic and historical significance of the Nio (protector spirits) statues at Todai-ji Temple. But they would come with me to visit the vast wooden temple, and thus warded off loneliness. From the people of that bubble—who hailed from Australia, the UK, Ireland, and Canada—I learned about the sheep and sheer cliffs of Tasmania, the art scene of Melbourne, and the nearly British Adelaide dialect. Safe with the gaijin, I felt

the fun facts and friendships of the world mix and flow through the green-tea filter of Japan and into my young mind.

I met many foreigners, particularly ones who had lived in Japan for a while, who believed that gaijin was a racist term, on par with nigger or chink or jap. They said it stripped them of their intricate identities, their cultural richness. They had learned the language, had made Japan their home. Why couldn't they be Japanese? I understood their frustration, to an extent. Japan has what some political scientists refer to as an "allergy to immigration." It's all but impossible to become a Japanese citizen, even if one was born there. This is especially problematic for Koreans and Chinese brought there involuntarily during World War II and before. I knew this, but the desire to become Japanese—or any nationality—eluded me. It wasn't that I was especially proud of being American; like many of my fellow countrymen, I spent a lot of time apologizing for the US and announcing that I would happily renounce my American citizenship if one didn't need to be a citizen of somewhere. But I could think of few greater freedoms than not being in one's home country. Being a foreigner, a gaijin, a perpetual outsider, allowed for reduced responsibility. It allowed for relaxation. The problems I saw on the streets of Kyoto were not my own to solve. I was free to observe, and to question, and to help if I wanted to.

When I decided to change my bangs from swoopy to straight across, so that they cut blunt, girlish line across my forehead; when I started covering my mouth with my hand as I laughed, as is common for Japanese women to do; and when I attached an adorable monkey charm to my cell phone, I was free to do so simply because I liked those Japanese aesthetics, and was met only with slightly confused smiles. Dressing and

carrying one's self correctly is a powerful symbol of understanding, but doing it half-correctly carries weight, too. Mixing cute bangs and mini skirts with sleeveless shirts and bare arms, which Japanese women typically cover with cardigans, acknowledged cultural norms but suggested no threat of attempted assimilation. It also felt like the truest way to be: my hodgepodge self in a blend of styles, my big body that would never look right in kimono or a Harajuku outfit nevertheless thriving in striped knee socks. Relieved of the burden of ever being accepted, I was liberated to be who I was.

Was that the reason, I wonder now, that Japan eventually welcomed me so warmly? In an ironic twist, the place that is notoriously the least accepting is the place where I've experienced the most cultural bridging. My Japanese friends Kazue and Ken, and the woman who cried in my classroom—did they appear in my life because I felt confident in my own skin, and was open to them?

Do not misunderstand; I never came close to assimilating in Japan. I never even got very good at the language, in spite of taking classes and reviewing my hiragana and katakana flashcards every time I rode the subway. I never considered living my whole life there, and I never even drove a car. But what did happen was that I grew to love the place.

During my one-on-one conversational lessons, I taught many older Japanese women in pearl necklaces and cashmere sweaters. Their husbands didn't know they were taking English lessons during the day. I asked them what their hobbies were; they said housework and cooking and watching TV. Michiko knit, showed me her pearled scarf. She stroked the fibers like a cat. Most of my students did not speak English very well and

I was under instructions not to speak Japanese, but though their voices stilted and jerked under the strange words and pronunciations, they brought eloquence to their missing-article sentences.

In the conversational one-on-one classes I taught, the best way to fill up the hour was to continuously ask "why?" "Why don't you tell your husband that you go to English lessons?"

"Because he wouldn't like it."

"Why wouldn't he like it?"

"Because he likes to know what I am doing."

"Why does he like to know?"

"Because he's a man."

"Oh, okay." I strummed my fingers on the table. "Let's talk about our favorite foods."

As our lessons progressed, the women wanted to know about me. Where was I from, who was in my family? Why had I left my parents? Did I like Japan? Yes, I said. I love it. That made them smile.

Michiko, who was in her seventies, had frizzy black hair and brown spots on her cheeks. I thought she looked frail, but once I caught her lifting overfull shopping bags like they contained nothing but candy floss. We discovered that we shopped at the same Fresco, and from then on, she told me I was her neighbor-granddaughter. She told me that her son had died in an accident. She was knitting mittens for her grandchildren, and then would knit hats, and then would knit . . . and she began to cry. "I am very, very sad," she

said as tears rolled down her craggy cheeks. “What do you say in English? My heart is broken.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “What was your son like?”

She said her son was handsome and kind. Her limited vocabulary led her to say things that she probably otherwise wouldn’t have thought to mention, like that he enjoyed omelets and that his favorite color was blue. At the end of the hour, her eyes were dry and she said, “Thank you” in a way that meant it wasn’t just for the lesson.

The others didn’t necessarily cry—though sometimes I saw misty eyes—but in our small, sterile-white cubicle that passed for a classroom, they told me about their fears, often financial, and their boredom, which sometimes turned to anger directed at their husbands. The young women told me about how they hated their part-time jobs and were terrified they’d never be able to move out of their parents’ houses. We’re getting old, they said, eyes downcast. We don’t like the men, we don’t want to marry them, they said. Most of them wanted to be flight attendants.

Japan is famous for its polite society, the etiquette of keeping one’s emotions off display so as not to make others uncomfortable. In an old city like Kyoto, still the seat of Japanese tradition, the rules hold especially strong sway. But the tether slacked in the presence of an outsider. In a language not their own, these women’s emotions tumbled from their mouths, which were no longer covered by palms or fans—the Japanese way that I, now, sometimes covered mine.

Not all my students were female. Ken, a forty-something bachelor, became a friend. He was lonely, and freely admitted it in English. But he was also jolly. Once he

told me that he enjoyed speaking English because the word "love" can be used in so many contexts. "I never get to say 'love' in Japanese," he said. "In English, I can say it all the time." He grinned slyly. "I *love* speaking English."

Kazue, a sixty-something woman, said something similar. "I *love* ice cream. I *love* horse racing. I *love* Japan. I *love* my daughter. I *love* Chion-in Temple." She laughed easily, squealed at her use of the word *love*. "Of course," she said later, "In English, the same goes for 'hate.' You can use it just as easily."

Kazue did not live in one of Kyoto's beautiful old houses. She lived in the outskirts of the suburb of Fushimi, at the end of the subway line. Kazue had short, boyish hair that she didn't style and wore no makeup. Her clothes were baggy and utilitarian—parkas and cargo pants and sneakers. The kind of clothes that other Japanese women probably judged or mocked her for; the kind of clothes that reminded me of my mother. Kazue told me she had to scrape together money for English lessons, but nevertheless she came three times a week and always requested one-on-one classes, which were more expensive. Her English never really got better. She didn't study; Kazue wanted to talk. Like Michiko, she called me her Japanese granddaughter. She took me on outings around the Kansai region, where she had lived her whole life. We went to cedar woodworking studios of Kitayama and made kusa mochi, grass-flavored rice paste. We talked with our hands, mostly. I told her about my dog back in the US, about the boys I'd loved who hadn't loved me back, about how, a year into my time in Japan, the ex-pat community in Japan was becoming stifling. "Chantelle from Gold Coast started dating Johnny from Ireland, though she knew I liked him," I complained. Several months later, wandering the

sharp streets near Kiyamizu-dera, I told Kazue that my heart had been broken by an American English teacher named Josh, who lived around the corner from me. “He said that he loved me,” I said. “He said that he wanted to be with me for a long time, even after we one day returned to the US. He was so handsome, and so smart, and so funny. He was everything I’d ever dreamed of in a boy.”

Kazue nodded, rapt, though she probably didn’t understand all of my vocabulary.

“He told me he loved me on the Kamogawa. Late at night. He kissed me against the ivy walls, with the river lapping beside us. Then, two days later, he said he could not date me.” I made a slicing motion with my hand, and my voice cracked. “I thought I’d found the one. He was so special.” I didn’t tell Kazue that I’d been boy crazy, with mostly unsuccessful results, since I was twelve, and that this was the most crushing blow yet. She seemed to understand.

She gave me a hug and never seemed judgmental, although maybe she was. I grew up without a grandmother and realized that I had always wanted one, though my grandmother moved through the world heavily, on the same large Eastern European bones as mine. Kazue had a daughter, Kayo, who stood less than five feet and had wrists like silver spoons, and who would give her mother grandchildren that looked different from me in every way.

Kazue told me about growing up in Kyoto in the fifties, in poverty in the wake of the war. She gave me a grandma’s perspective on the past, stretched it into something that encompassed my present. But I see now that I also needed Kazue because she treated me as something precious, though I didn’t do anything. I did even less with her than I did

with the ex-pats. I didn't need to apologize for my American heritage, nor did I need to drink copiously. I didn't need to pretend like what had happened with Josh was no big deal. That is the great gift of gaijinness—you are special for just existing.

My fellow gaijin became annoyed with my sadness, anger, and obsession with Josh. I didn't understand what had happened, though now I see my twenty-three-year-old desperation, sexual willingness shining in my smile and whiskey-tinged caresses. I'd assumed that Josh, who was terribly handsome, was out of my league. I'd flirted modestly, not wanting to embarrass myself, and then he had kissed me out of nowhere in the bar elevator and to this day I've never felt a kiss like it. I thought of Josh as my pinnacle, and when he crumbled, I discovered that I had few places to turn. "It's just sex, it sucks that he lied to you, but he came clean pretty quickly," my fellow gaijin said casually, offering me a beer and an episode of *South Park*. They had no patience for crying jags or sympathy for me the time I got drunk and went to Josh's house to yell at him. One girl, Thao from Australia, found out and yelled back at me. "You should just go home," she spat. "We're sick of you and your whining."

After the ex-pats' friendship had faded, Kazue, Ken, and Satsuki and Yuko, two young anxious women, took me to Gion Matsuri Festival, to the yatsuhashi candy-making factory, and to their houses for dinner. They politely admired my much-improved chopstick skills. I sat on their tatami mats with my legs folded under me and discovered I could do it for hours without my legs getting numb. I would sit this way for years, even after I returned to the States.

In the most traditional of Japanese cities, I lived for a year a seemingly consequence-free, debaucherous ex-patriot existence. I stayed up all night and rode my bicycle drunk, I stained stone monuments to emperors with vomit after too many whiskey shots, I yelled at Josh in the street of our traditional Japanese neighborhood, tried to slam a sliding paper *shoji* door in his face. I am not proud of these things. But I also loved the taste of tofu udon soup from the coin-operated café, where the ex-pats and I would go after a long night of partying. I loved sitting silently on the shores of the Kamogawa with them, watching the sunrise over the mountains. The adventures I had with the gaijin are worth appreciating. If it weren't for Josh, I may never have become disillusioned with the ex-pat life. But the freedom that that life affords can lead to a lack of compassion, a refusal to take responsibility. It's easy to lie to a lover, to say, "we're sick of you," to let friendships burn when all of your present life feels temporary, as free from consequence as stealing five dollars from your mother's purse. You will return to your home country soon enough, and no one there will know the hurtful things you said abroad. And the person you hurt, too, will leave and you will never see their weepy face again. In the gaijin bubble, what can feel initially liberating can turn oppressive, and it becomes clear that there are some relationships worth maintaining, and others worth leaving behind.

But the freedom of gaijin life comes with a surprisingly positive consequence, as well. Never fully or permanently admitting me to their society afforded my Japanese friends their own freedom to invite me in in an oblique way. It is not traditional Japanese custom to invite new, Japanese friends over for family dinner. It is not traditional Japanese custom to cry in front of strangers, or to utter "love." But liminality is existing

not only between worlds, but at least partly outside of one or the other. Because of my strange, liminal space in society, the there-but-not-there gaijin, Kazue, Michiko, and the others allowed me to glimpse what is at once very special, and, since I was not there to stay, very inconsequential. And from that space outside yet just a bit in between, I was privileged to learn that, even outside, there is a lot of room to move around.

Once, in a restaurant, a patron who had only seen me, with my long, straight, dark hair, from behind caught a glimpse of my face while returning to his table from the restroom. He stopped beside me. “Eh!” he cried. “Not Japanese!”

Many other times, while riding my pink bicycle along the shores of the Kamogawa, Japanese pedestrians did a double take. I rode with a straight back; my posture had improved in Japan. With my dark hair and school-girl bangs, I must have looked Japanese from far away. As I got closer and my European features came into focus, the pedestrians’ expressions turned to surprise, and their mouths hung open uncovered. On my bike, in a distance between near and far from the pedestrians’, I blended in while moving freely, pedaling at my own pace.

HOMECOMING

I drive through grasslands fast as I dare, very late to the costume party. A few stars shine but there is little moon, and in the dark I see only wisps of the tall grass waving in the wind, snatches of crumbly ranch houses illuminated by dangling porch lights. There are about five miles of rural flatlands between Utah's Great Salt Lake and the western edge of the Wasatch Mountains, where my parents live in Ogden, a city that stretches nearly halfway up the range. I am driving west, toward the Lake, and through the car vents I can feel the salt air blowing off the brown, stinging lake shallows that are swarming with brine shrimp—and at this time of year, little else. By Thanksgiving, the mosquitoes are all dead.

My friend Stef and I went to high school together in Ogden, up on the mountain. Now she lives in these flatlands. Now I live in Washington, DC. I'm only here for Thanksgiving week and am leaving tomorrow. I haven't yet seen Stef or her house, bought new with her husband Jack. I've been hiking constantly and eating Tofurky with my parents, staring at the peak outside the kitchen window. Yesterday, I found a goat trail and followed it up a couple thousand feet, past boulders speckled with hard moss.

Stef, I'm sure, lives in one of the suburban mansions that have sprung up rash-like in the flatlands over the last decade. Before them, no one lived out here but Mormon ranchers and cattle with a taste for salted grass. Years ago, my parents briefly considered

living here, but they decided it was too Mormon. It was important, they said, to live where you could at least try to build community, and they've cobbled together a group of spiritual but not religious friends for parties and hikes and boozy art gallery openings. I don't really understand what Stef's doing out here, atheist and liberal, with her two divorces and her whiskey cabinet. She and Jack are having a baby and have decorated the nursery with a *Corpse Bride* theme. Who the hell is that kid going to hang out with in these boonies? Plus, it's a real drive out here. The road is curvy, and each turn makes me think I'm lost. I curse Stef's far-away house under my breath. The only time I should have to come out this far is to watch birds and bison at the Lake.

These tidal flatlands are one of North America's primary spots for migratory birds. I'm no birdwatcher so I usually miss the tiny ones, the white-bellied snowy plovers, but I always gasp at the bald eagles, the ibises, black-necked stilts teetering on toothpick legs. And the bison still trick me into thinking they're boulders. The antelope are my favorite though, always giving me a little sense of being sucked through a wormhole to Africa. But the animals mostly live around the shoreline or on windswept islands. They avoid the suburbs, even the Mormon ranches, just like I do. I understand why they like the Lake, though. In DC, I often stare at my office computer and fantasize about flying into Utah. I love the view of the Lake from above, splotchy, brown and white and alien, like water droplets on a film negative. When the Lake appears in that thick airplane window, I know I'm home.

For this trip, however, I flew in at midnight and couldn't see the Lake. And my flight back to DC is at seven a.m. tomorrow. It will still be dark; I won't be able to see the Lake as I fly out.

I've come in and out of Utah so many times, but this time is different. Before, there's always been a chance I'll live here again in the relatively near future. I spent most of my twenties leaving for a year or two to teach overseas, and then coming back to my parents' cozy mountain house, to my old high school friends, to the familiar trails and scrambling rocks. But now I have a real, grown-up job in advertising and live a Victorian brownstone in a hip neighborhood. I have health insurance and furniture and friends and, for the first time in my adult life, no concrete plans to leave. Utah, its land and its people, are no longer quite so much mine, no more than this Subaru that I've borrowed from my parents.

Even my costume for Stef's Harry Potter party is mostly comprised of my father's things. I'm Moaning Myrtle, the sad-sack ghost of a witch who haunts a bathroom. She was a student at wizard boarding school, so I made her uniform from Dad's blue and black striped tie and his white button-down. An old graduation gown from the school where he teaches is doubling as my wizarding robe. Only the white makeup caked on my face is mine, left over from a high school production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. The tie is tight around my neck, and I toy at it with my fingers, clumsy in gloves. My phone is buzzing on the seat next to me, and I know it's Stef. I was supposed to have been at the party over an hour ago. I haven't seen anything even resembling the suburbs yet. There's

a white house on the horizon but it's just another little farm house. I smack the steering wheel with one hand. Who the hell lives out here besides Mormons, anyway?

Suddenly, there is a flash of white on the road in front of me. A dog. Small and fast and coming right at my tires. My brakes are louder than I've ever heard, like movie theater surround sound. The shriek seems to go on long after the car has stopped. I don't know if I hit the dog or not, but I drive off.

I once saw somebody run over a cat and drive off. They didn't stop for a second, just kept driving down that tree-lined street. From the car behind them, I could see the backs of their heads bobbing along with the radio. It happens. People do things like kill animals. They don't get in trouble. Not at all. On the East Cost highways, animal corpses dot the sides of the roads like confetti.

I pull over.

I can kill ants en masse with a wet paper towel and run down roaches with cans of death spray, even enjoy watching their legs curl into stillness. I consider the day I learned to kill roaches a marker of losing childhood naiveté and gaining adult practicality. But now I am a dog murderer and the thought make me shake and sob and hit the steering wheel, the dashboard, and my thighs. The horn goes off once, accidentally.

My cell phone buzzes; there are six messages from Stef, Jack, and other friends. Without looking at them, I dial my parents' phone. My voice is terrifyingly loud in the car, all half-sobs as I say that maybe I hit a dog and I am on some road by the Salt Lake and can't move.

“Do you want me and Dad to come out?” Mom asks, sounding sort of confused. It must have been years since I wailed at her in quite this way. Just that morning, as she watched me pack my things, she told me how good my life looks.

“Yeah. Please. Please, come.”

When we hang up, I take a deep breath, start the car, and make a wide turn.

The Christmas lights are already up at the old ranch house, a single line around the gutters and windows, small red spots like acne against the peeling white paint. There is a wreath, too, a heavy circle of plastic needles dotted with stiff glittered snowflakes. I stare at it while I wait for the door to open. A reflection of my face in the storm door floats over the wreath. I am a puffy, red-faced mess with mascara everywhere and tear streaks in my white makeup. I don’t try to wipe it away—I want them to know I’m upset.

The plastic wreath sways on its nail as the door opens. Standing there is a Mormon mom—I may not live here anymore but I can still tell. She’s short and a little round with too-blue jeans, and her bangs are sprayed so they’re still puffy at eight in the evening. On the wall next to her is one of those LDS paintings of a blond, slightly feminine Jesus standing on a sunlit rock.

I am trying so hard not to cry that I can’t really get the words out, mumbling, “I was driving, and, and, I’m late, and. . .”

“Did you hit the dog?” she asks.

“I think maybe,” I say, taken aback.

“I thought Tizzy was inside, but I don’t think she is. We heard the screech of the brakes, maybe fifteen minutes ago.”

I look down at the Santa Claus welcome mat. “I know, I should have come back sooner. But, I don’t know. . .”

The woman looks at me sympathetically but I don’t know how she could be anything but furious. She calls over her shoulder, “Mackenzie!”

A teenage girl past the typical age for braces but still wearing them comes up behind her mother. She is taller than her mom, like I am with mine.

“When did you last see Tizzy?”

“An hour ago? I let her out, I don’t think she’s wanted to be let back in yet.”

“This girl thinks she hit her, when we heard the brakes a little while ago.”

The daughter pushes past me into the dark, her braced teeth clenched. The mom pauses to get jackets, and we follow.

We look around the narrow dirt shoulder by the light of the stars and the porch light. There are tire marks on the asphalt where I stopped. I’m breathing fast and shallow, expecting to see Tizzy lying there, limbs splayed out like a hunter’s trophy skin. That’s how the run-over rats in my DC neighborhood sometimes look. There’s something cartoonish about them, a caricature of a dead thing, and I can’t believe I might have made that happen. We look on the grille of the Subaru and under the car and all around the tire marks, but there is no white dog. I stop biting my lip, relax my jaw.

Then the daughter says, “Maybe she got hurt and ran off.” She tears off into the house, calling, “I’m getting flashlights.”

“Call your dad,” the mom says after her. Then she asks me, “Do you go to Ogden High?”

All I can do was shake my head. I certainly can’t tell her I’m twenty-eight.

The breeze is cold; the grass and my long wizard robe rustle, moving this way and that, together like dancers. The girl returns and we set off into the field. As we trample through the grass, I can almost hear Tizzy whimpering, and I keep turning around expecting to see her dying. In those fifteen minutes when I drove off and cried in the car, I could have found her, saved her.

We all call out, “Tizzy, here girl!” and stare down as we part the grass. The chill and the movement have frozen the flow of my tears and my near-hyperventilating breaths, but my hands are steadied only by sheer will.

They both seem so calm. I wonder if they are thinking about cute things Tizzy does, about how she licks their hands with a tongue as light as a butterfly, about how her dead body will look, about life without her. Probably not. They have that serenity of religious people, as if Jesus has his hand on their shoulder, telling them it will all be okay.

My parents arrive. Their sedan has weak lights and I don’t notice them until Dad calls, “Jessie Laurel!” They hug me when I emerge from the grass. Mom furrows her brow when she sees me, wipes my cheek with her thumb. Dad smiles and looks at me fondly, as if I am a kid who’s stolen a candy bar from the grocery. I’m suddenly embarrassed they’re there.

A dog barks from inside the car.

“Is that Mira?” I ask, unable to see through the tinted windows.

“Yep,” Dad says, opening the back door a bit. Our dog, a black-and-white springer spaniel, sticks her nose out, sniffing eagerly. “We thought you could use some dog time.”

I put my arms around Mira’s neck. This is all wrong. I’ve possibly killed someone else’s dog; the owners are the ones in need of comforting. If this had happened in DC, I wouldn’t have called Mom and Dad, I tell myself. Maybe I would have cried, but I certainly wouldn’t have my own dog here, rubbing it in the family’s face.

“She called us right after the accident,” Dad tells the woman when she walks up.

“It’s so good of you to come out. Your daughter, she was a wreck.”

“She’s a little sensitive,” Dad says, agreeably.

“We’re searching for Tizzy,” I say. “We should get back out there.”

I hold Mom’s hand as we walk through the field. Dad and the woman talk, and I hear him say, “She totaled the car when a pheasant ran in front of us in Idaho.” It’s true; I was sixteen, and had had my license for a week.

“Are you going to go to the party?” Mom asks as we push our way through the grass.

“Be careful,” I say. “We don’t want to step on her if she’s lying hurt.”

“Okay.” She rubs my back, then says, “You should probably let them know if you’re not coming.”

Checking my phone, I see seven texts and three missed calls. I read the first text, *Where are you? I’m wearing my Bellatrix outfit! Come! We want to see you!* I write

back, *I think I hit a dog driving out here. Not sure what's going on.* I ignore the other messages.

My phone buzzes. The message from Stef reads, *Oh no! But I'm sure if the dog ran off it's okay. Come over!*

I respond, *I'm worried she's hurt in the field.*

Stef writes, *If you haven't found her yet I'm sure she's fine. If she was hurt she couldn't have gotten that far.*

"She might be right," Mom says, reading the text over my shoulder, and squeezes my hand. I clench my jaw and tuck my hands into my wizarding robe. I'm not leaving until Tizzy is found. It's the one right, responsible, adult thing I can still do. I might be the one with the cool job in a big city, but my Utah friends always have been, and probably always will be, more adult than I. They married after high school while I sometimes have dates. They own houses while I rent, and they have children while I have hangovers. I am okay with this, usually. I like my life and don't want theirs. But I should be going to their party stylish and shining with urban success. Instead, once again I am the young one, the innocent, the one who hasn't experienced enough of mortgage payments and childbirth to know that road kill doesn't matter.

When the Mormon cavalry arrives we see them coming from a mile away. Their extended cab Dodge Rams have bright headlights that illuminate the field and the winding road. The trucks rumble to a stop, four in total, straight in a line. Simultaneously doors open and sixteen children of Heavenly Father climb out.

“This is my husband,” the woman says, gesturing to a tall, thin man with a doughy face. His blond hair is spiked up like the boys at my high school’s had been ten years ago, like I imagine his son’s is. “This is the girl who hit Tizzy.”

The tears start welling up again. I fumble with my wizarding robe but say nothing.

With the husband come eight more men and four more women. They all look very parental. There are four teenagers, too, in hoodies with their high school’s initials in fuzzy block letters. The girls wear thick makeup.

Without any explanation my parents and I know that they are aunts, uncles, cousins, and other church members, all here as a result of one phone call to the husband, all here to look for the little dog. The teenage daughter runs to the girls and they embrace, swaying together.

“We’re so sorry,” one of the girls says.

“I’m sure she’s okay,” says another.

And another: “Don’t worry, we’ll find her, as long as it takes.”

The field is streaked with light from the beams of so many industrial flashlights as we resume our search, all the Mormon brothers and sisters, and me and my little family. There’s a big gust of wind and we all shiver. It carries the lake smell, which isn’t salty like the ocean but like pickles. I wonder if the Mormons notice. The family’s house is old, which means they’ve probably raised at least five grown kids here, or that it’s been in the family for generations. I wonder if they have horses or cattle, if their pioneer ancestors picked this spot to homestead. To them, the salty lake smell is probably just air.

The Mormon woman and my mother are about the same height and they both have curly hair that poofs around their ears. But the Mormon woman seems so much bigger than my mom—and not just because my mom's petite. This woman seems to absorb the support of all these family members, blood relatives or not. Together, they can afford to spend an evening shivering and searching the field for a dog, though they live in the country and have probably lost pets to cars before. If Stef had a pet that was lost and possibly wounded, I'd help her search for it—if I didn't live two thousand miles away, if she called me. But there's a good chance Stef would go it alone, try to stay tough. I'd want to do the same thing, to act like an adult. We'd ask our parents or husbands for help, but not a dozen people. Who would we ask?

I wonder if I'd be expected to brush off killing animals if I had so many people around, all of us living under a golden canopy of godly affection. There's a Mormon church down the street from my house in DC. I've always felt very glad it was there. If I had an emergency, I'd be more likely to call that church than some of my DC friends.

The Mormon woman and daughter come up to me and my mom. "You know," says the woman, "You've been helping us look for a while. And we've got so many people here now. You can take off, if you want."

"Oh, that's okay," I say. "I don't mind staying and searching, really. I feel so bad."

The woman smiles, charitably, like the missionaries at Temple Square. "It's really okay. You've done so much. Most people wouldn't do this."

“We really appreciate it,” says the daughter, her long dyed-blond ponytail blowing like the grass in the field.

“Maybe we should go,” says my mom. “You can go to the party.”

“Are you going to a costume party?” the woman asks. I nod. “Oh, that makes sense. We were wondering.”

At 7 a.m. the next morning, I am sitting on the plane waiting for it to take off, imagining the Lake’s amoeba-like shoreline outside my window, invisible in the dark. Last night, in the enormous house with thin walls, they all teased me for freaking out so much about the dog. I didn’t say anything, just took it until they started talking about their mortgages. I was still so worried about Tizzy that I couldn’t finish my beer.

Now I notice a text message on my phone, sent five hours ago. It is from the dog’s family. It reads: *We found her! She is fine. She was under the porch the whole time! Thanks for staying to look. You’re a sweet girl.*

The plane takes off as the sun breaks over the Rocky Mountains, and I wish that the family knew about my job and life in DC, about my travels around the world, about my responsibilities and boyfriends all the other grown-up things I am. All the things that are really just accessories to the animal-loving child just a screech of the brakes from the surface. But I know that even if the family were aware of my life, they wouldn’t really care. They know that they have each other, Jesus, and even a little dog, safe and sound. They don’t need to know anything else.

FOUR BOYS

Palm

You may barely remember your first kiss—a truth or dare game, in the woods, with someone who may have been named Chad—but the first time a boy held your hand? Held it like he cared about you? Oh yes, that you remember.

It was eighth grade and you were still new to Ogden. Two years earlier, your family had moved you from San Diego where the air was avocado to Utah where the new seasons turned your world brown. You had been angry about the move. Your mother distracted you with community theater auditions. You were bad, only cast as an extra. But Taylor, oh Taylor was good. He had a rafter-reaching, brighten-your-day Broadway voice. His floppy blond hair was out of your California surfer boy dreams. You loved him from the moment you saw him.

The play was *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* and Taylor was a lead. It was kind of funny that you were in a play about a play about Jesus-Mary-Joseph Christmas because since your move to Utah you'd been feeling much more Jewish. You don't remember if the performance went well, if anyone came, or the plot of the play. You remember Taylor running up to you back stage after the opening, grabbing your hands, and the two of you squealing together, "We did it!"

You remember that his hand was warm. You remember its pressure. You remember that his hands—his awkwardly big, mid-puberty hands—held yours so

strongly that though you had never thought of the world as scary before, you suddenly did because his hands made you feel so shielded and wrapped up.

You remember that the next day, your family moved to a new house. It was smaller than the previous one, where you'd been just two years, since moving to Utah. You were downgrading because your dad, who had been hired to run the photography department at the local newspaper, was fired. "We won't work for an outsider who's not even Mormon," his staffers had said. His boss cited "irreconcilable differences." You had to move to a smaller house. You don't know why your parents didn't take you back to California. They don't know either. To this day, your mother says they just . . . stayed.

In the dark, jolting cavern of the U-Haul rolling across town, you leaned against a bookcase and stroked your hand. You touched your palm where Taylor had touched it, still feeling him there. You thought *I'll never wash this hand again* wasn't a cliché after all. You filled your notebooks with "Jessie Laurel Peterson" and "Jessie + Taylor = FOREVER" and named your children. As you set up your new bedroom, you thought about what he'd think of each decorating decision you made.

Nothing ever happened with you and Taylor beyond that one hand clasp. You waited and waited for things to progress, but nothing did. He liked you as a friend. It broke your thirteen-year-old heart, but you remember that your parents were secretly relieved.

"Oh honey," said your mom, stroking your long dark hair as you wept in your lily pad pillow. "It's okay. You know it never would have worked out anyway. Taylor's Mormon."

"That doesn't matter," you cried. "Who cares? It's just some religion."

"Oh, *bubala*. You know it's not. It would be strange for you."

"Would not. He's gonna go on a mission but I would wait for him and we'd get married."

"Jessie. You probably wouldn't have. You'd have needed to convert to marry him."

It didn't occur to you to argue that she and your dad were a mixed-religion couple (Jewish and Christian). It didn't occur to you to point out that she was the one always going on about how each religion was just a spoke in a wheel, all leading to the same place. It didn't occur to you to say, tearily, "None of that is important. We're soul mates. I'm in love with him," even though in your heart you knew that was the truth and that she would never understand. Maybe no one would understand, not even Taylor.

Impure

Everyone said Paul's family was an example of inbreeding gone right. His parents were cousins from a long line of a little-too-close-for-comfort generations, reaching back all the way to Joseph Smith. Against all genetic laws, they produced five children who were not only brilliant (valedictorians each year) but ocean-eyed and chisel-jawed. Paul was voted "Dream Date" in your high school yearbook. One day, during your senior year of high school when you became friends, he drove you around Ogden in his white Ford Explorer and pointed out all the old houses that had once been polygamists' compounds. You could tell by the layout (one big house surrounded by several smaller ones) and the

presence of fences. The fences were old and stoney, Irish-looking, low to the ground. Not tall enough to keep anyone out, but rather there to say "all this land, all these houses, they are one."

Paul told you that he had to be careful with dating. "Because of polygamy, I'm somehow related to almost everyone I meet." You thought for a while that maybe this was why he liked you: your ancestors were still in the Belarusian shtetl when his were crossing the plains with handcarts.

Your houses were five minutes apart walking and that close distance kick-started your friendship. One afternoon in early fall, while you were walking home from the school, up the mountain, he pulled his white Explorer up next to you and offered you a ride. In the days after, he stopped driving and started walking with you. Paul cared about the environment and was happy to save gas. He had worn-down sneakers his wealthy parents could have easily replaced, and he shuffled them through the fallen leaves.

Everyone at school quickly concluded that you were going out. In reality, he didn't kiss you and you didn't go many places, but you were both bookish. Your coupledom made more sense to everyone else than it did to you. Paul was a golden Mormon boy and you were not LDS. Paul had classic White Anglo-Saxon Mormon good looks. Your Semitic, Eastern European heritage displayed itself in your high cheek bones, dark hair, your eyebrows thick as caterpillars, your tall stature, your big hips. You not only felt less attractive than your shiny blond peers, you knew your appearance screamed, "Not Mormon!"

An LDS girl called Rael, who was fat and mean, liked Paul, too. And so you got an enemy, which you enjoyed more than you thought you should have. With your mostly non-Mormon girlfriends, you talked badly about her, planned to sabotage any interactions she might have with Paul. You giggled a lot during these shit-talk sessions.

Mostly, though, you and Paul took long walks and talked about college. You were going to liberal arts school in Ohio. He was going on a Mormon mission though he'd been offered full scholarships at the University of Rochester. He said he might go there after his mission but you knew that he would go to Brigham Young University. You had meandering discussions about writing and books though you rarely read the same ones. You complained about your family and tried to get him to complain about his, though he never did. He taught you to juggle, the most wholesome activity you could imagine. Once, he and his dad took you out on their speedboat and you stared at Paul's chest while he pulled on his wet suit. Looking back, you realize that that was probably the most intimate you and Paul ever were.

His world was far bigger than yours, encompassing the universe and heaven and eternity and a god. Your world was just the world. His morals were footnoted with doctrine and revelation; yours were basic. You imagined that his real self only came out in church, where you were not. Paul had an aura of holiness. You wondered if transcendence lit up his brain like dye in an MRI machine. You wondered if his skin turned gold and glowing.

Perhaps it was because Paul was so holy that you never wrote "Jessie Felt" on your notebooks, that you never dreamed about what your babies with him would look

like. “Sure, I’d marry a Mormon,” you said casually to friends and family. “It’s not a bad religion, they have so much good family stuff.” Your parents had come around, too; living in Utah for six years had made them realize that, statistically, the chances of one of their three daughters marrying LDS was significant. Your mother had resumed her “Mormonism is just another path,” speech.

But Paul was so holy. “He’s the most devout person I know,” said Kaylee, a Mormon friend of Paul’s since childhood. She was beautiful; had she ever dated him? “No,” she said. “I’m too weird for him and he’s too devout for me.” You began to wonder, really wonder, what he was doing with you. He never mentioned conversion, which subconsciously made you realize your relationship was not serious. Plus, you would never be good enough—in the moral sense—for him. He was kind and tolerant of mean Rael with her crush. He listened to her, asked her questions, but never flirted. Whereas you relished the rivalry.

Together, you went to prom. You wore a spaghetti-strap blue dress that was completely immodest by Mormon standards. You hoped it would make Paul uncomfortable in a good way. Slow dancing, you were close enough to catch each other’s breath, but he didn’t try to kiss you even then. You ended up holding hands and strolling through the gardens. You felt beautiful but now all you really remember is wanting desperately to press your lips to his.

You finished your finals. He got his mission call to Chile. He helped throw you an eighteenth birthday party in the park. You walked across the stage at high school graduation and cheered for each other. His valedictorian speech was not as inspiring as

you had expected, and that small failure, his first imperfection that you had seen, made you wish that you could be together forever. After graduation, you walked home with Paul. The dry sun pounded, shone in your eyes. You were both too young to realize the importance of sunglasses. Your views of each other's faces fragmented with the squints.

The street was silent in the way of the high desert. You sighed, looked Paul in his blue eyes, and said, "I really want to kiss you." Your words threatened to echo off the mountainside.

"Oh, Jessie," he said. "I, um, well, that would be nice for sure." The beating light and cloudless sky put everything, including Paul's tanned face, in vivid color. He looked illustrated, unreal. "That would be really nice. I wanted to do it at prom."

"Yes," I said. "I thought you might have. I wanted to."

"Prom was good . . . I really liked how we held hands there. You, um, actually, you give me . . . impure thoughts."

Later, this line will make you laugh. For the rest of your life, it will become one of your most foolproof stories. But at the time, all you could do was smile. It was the greatest complement you'd ever received.

"You make me think fun things, too."

He gazed toward the vast mountainside behind you and sighed. "This is the thing. I've decided, for, you know, God, that I'm not going to kiss anyone until I'm engaged."

You did want to laugh at that. You wanted to roll your eyes and slap your thighs and laugh and laugh and laugh. Instead, you said, "Oh. Okay."

When was the first time someone called you boy crazy? When you brought home the posters of Jonathan Taylor Thomas in sixth grade? Before that? It never seemed right to categorize yourself as boy crazy since you never had a boyfriend, had never even been French kissed, but under that bone-sucking hot sun, you understood with new clarity that all you've ever wanted was a boyfriend, and that this was as close as you'd ever gotten. And that quite likely, as long as you stayed in Utah, this is as close as you'd come.

You and Paul saw each other only once more, on a brief hike. His mind was gone to Chile, and yours was off in Ohio. You were hoping, hoping that nothing there would be pure.

Deep Down

You called him Rick the Mormon because his very Mormonness seemed so counter to his Rick-ness. His Rick-ness was: hair dyed black to look like a vampire, a self-published vampire novel (this was 2005, in the days before *Twilight* joined Mormons and vampires at the hip), an Italian last name, edgy sense of humor, and obsession with horror and gore that threw his inherent sweetness into stark relief. His Mormonness was of a strange second-generation convert's sort. His parents had converted before he was born and Rick straddled their convert's zeal and the blind faith that was his birthright. He had done his mission in Corpus Christi, which he described as the least holy mission location on the planet. Missionaries boated to an island technically outside the mission bounds, and there they'd dance, drink, and have sex.

“Why would you go on a mission if you wanted to do those things?” you asked Rick.

He shrugged. It was just what some people did. Not Rick, though. In spite of his fundamental nerdy-coolness, Rick believed. He held the priesthood, went to church on Sundays, and visited the temple regularly to do rites. He believed in the words of Joseph Smith and of the living prophet and in the Mormon concept of salvation, with its promises of godhood in the afterlife. He avoided caffeine and alcohol and R-rated movies, and he planned to be married for eternity in the temple—but he wasn’t above kissing girls. He supported gay rights, if not temple marriages, and considered Democratic candidates.

You met Rick while working for the Utah Book Festival the summer after your college graduation. For you, it was a temporary job before moving to Japan to teach English. He was a Book Festival volunteer, hoping that his association with the festival would lead to publicity for his vampire book. You were both twenty-two. You hung banners together on the Salt Lake City sidewalks and hit it off right away. He was the first boy you met who seemed to understand all the sociological theory you learned in college, but more importantly, you laughed at all each other’s jokes and had chemistry unlike any you had yet experienced. Stringing banners to lampposts in the bright July heat, you felt cozy in your own skin.

At liberal arts college in Ohio, which you attended on scholarship, you had felt provincial, innocent, and virginal (which you were), compared to the worldly, wealthy New Yorkers who were your classmates. The few boys you dated at college intimidated

you with their cigarette kisses and St. Thomas Christmases. Rick, whose family was lower middle class and whose religion required that he also maintain virginal innocence, was a relief. He gave you rides in his old car and, soaring, laughing past the dusty flats and cattle ranches out by Great Salt Lake, you felt like a cowboy version of Audrey Hepburn. Together, you went to a corn maze, ate ice cream in a country shop, and kissed gently, lips milky and chilled. You ground your pelvises against each other at Salt Lake's one goth club and you made out, sloppily, in your bed.

Unlike with Paul, whose aura of holiness made you unable to forget his religion, with Rick, you pushed it out of your mind. But isn't he Mormon?" asked your non-Mormon friends from high school, looking concerned. "Yes," you said, "But I'm trying not to think about it."

Your parents had lived in Utah for ten years and professed to no longer care about your boyfriend's religion. "We just want to see you happy," they said. "But would you convert?" Their voices were so wide and accepting that part of you wanted to scream. You wanted them to disapprove; deep down, you disapproved.

"Maybe," you said, trying to look serene. "I guess I'd sort of take it metaphorically, try to hold onto their good family stuff, ignore all the patriarchal parts and the homophobic and evangelical parts."

Your parents nodded approvingly. Among their highest values were seeing and appreciating the good in other belief systems. Your mother launched into yet another description of some of her Mormon coworkers who were just so nice, just such good people, and really, it wouldn't be too bad to be part of such a community, would it? "If

you had kids, you'd have so much help. If you got in financial trouble, you'd have so much help. They'd probably be okay with it if you still wanted to light the menorah."

This was the type of talk about Mormons that you'd performed for almost everyone you'd met at college. *I'm not Mormon but Mormons aren't bad for the following reasons* . . . Spouting this testimony made loving your neighbors easier. People from outside of Utah always wanted to know: how did you survive? You didn't know how to explain, and sometimes you didn't want to think about it, and sometimes you wanted to come off as a good, moral, open-minded person, and so you described your nice Mormon friends, your Mormon neighbors who shoveled your walk, the boys from the ward who helped you move.

But occasionally your mother's eyes would cloud when she spoke of Rick. "Of course, we wouldn't be able to come to your wedding," she said warily. The only way to be married for eternity is to be "sealed" in the temple, which only approved church members are allowed inside.

You were grateful whenever the subject changed.

"I guess I'd think about converting if the circumstances were right," was all you said to Rick. He didn't have to worry that your relationship was pointless because he believed what you said. You didn't have to worry that your relationship was pointless because you deluded yourself into believing what you said.

You knew in your heart that you would never convert. For much of your remembered life, the defining feature of your identity had been "not Mormon." Since moving to Utah, it had become more important than being half-Jewish, than being from

California, than being half-Hungarian, than being a vegetarian, than being a writer, than being liberal, than being smart, than being an animal lover, than being almost anything. If you did an about face and went from being Not Mormon to being Mormon, you had no idea who you'd be. You thought of it as on par with getting a sex change.

You and Rick went to a French bakery one early December evening. You were supposed to leave for Japan in one month. You sipped romance-flavored hot chocolate with your spoon. You held hands across the lattice-work table.

"The snow is falling," you said. You were grateful for it; you thought the whiteness hushed you in together, in a quiet place where religion and travel couldn't reach. Rick looked at you with what you would come to think of as wonderment eyes. His unconscious smile sent the corners of his eyes crinkling. His irises spread as he gazed at your mouth, your small hands. His eyes seemed to say, "You're incredible. You're beautiful. I'm so very happy I know you." You had never felt so cared for. His gaze held no criticism, only appreciation.

Rick suggested you walk in the snow. You wove your gloved fingers with his and considered going bare-handed in the freezing air because the thought of the fine grains of his skin, the whorls and loops of his fingerprints grazing yours was the most beautiful thought in the world.

You held each other tightly against the whirling snow, noting the individual beauty of each flake, until a comment about the snow being like stars turned into a comment about galaxies, turned into a comment about the Mormon afterlife.

“The thing is,” you said, “I just don’t think I’d want a planet. Or to be a god. It seems like a lot of responsibility. I’d just want to relax in my afterlife, if there is one.”

Rick bristled slightly, though he kept smiling. His white teeth glowed in the lamp light.

“Well,” he said. “You wouldn’t be a god. You’d be a goddess.”

“Right. But you see how that’s not very appealing either? To be eternally pregnant with spirit babies?”

“Pregnancy in the Celestial Kingdom isn’t like pregnancy on earth, I’m pretty sure.”

“Okay. But you know what I mean, about relaxing? I mean, do you honestly want to be in charge of a planet forever?”

He looked startled, as if no one had asked him that before. After a while, he said thoughtfully, “I guess I never thought about it. If it’s part of Heavenly Father’s plan, then I know it’s better than what I could think to want right now.”

You nodded, as if that made any sense to you.

“Anyway,” he continued, “It’s not like everyone gets a planet.”

“Right, you have to be celestially married and have kids and do a lot of temple work and everything to get the Celestial Kingdom.”

“And even then it’s not totally clear how the planet-getting works. But yeah—you have to be celestially married and sealed in the temple. That’s one of the first things. So . . . a lot of things have to fall into place for me first, before I think about being the god of a planet.”

You nodded, understanding the implication behind his words. You didn't fit into his schema of the afterlife. You looked at the snow and thought about how, unless you converted, you'd be heavenly bodies apart.

Long before you met Rick, you'd signed a contract to teach English in Kyoto starting in January. You and Rick decided to try long distance, and if it worked out, you would break your contract after a few months and return to Utah. And then, if you returned, you'd start talking to the missionaries in pre-conversion meetings called Discussions. When Rick asked if you'd take the Discussions, you were surprised at how easily the "yes" spilt from your mouth. He wrapped his arms around you and grinned. Later you'd wonder if you agreed so easily because you already knew that the distance would destroy you.

Your last days in Utah were filled with dreams of Rick. Your affection for him felt so real, and you couldn't imagine your life without him in it. To have him, you began to think, could be worth changing yourself. You drove around, past LDS wards, whose architecture always struck you as ugly and boring; you took in the modest women pushing strollers overfull with babies and you imagined being one of them. You thought that maybe you could wear that mask.

You barely remember your goodbye with Rick. You do remember that it was anticlimactic. That he said he'd see you with casual conviction, as if he could imagine your life together in the Church. Or as if he knew that you'd never see each other again and he was looking forward to his life being simplified.

You spent fourteen hours in the air crying and dreaming and writing jaggedly in your journal. *It will be okay,* you wrote. *You can go back in a couple of months and Rick, your Rick, beautiful Rick with his blue eyes and that hair would be so, so perfect and soft and sexy if he would stop gelling it, your Rick will be there, waiting for you and maybe he won't need to be Rick the Mormon because you could just be Rick and Jessie and be happy together, forever.*

Had you always known that the goodbye in your parents' driveway, that the hug, that the kiss, which ramen and green tea and Suntory whiskey would soon cleanse from your lips, would be your last? You suspect so. You suspect that the thing you knew deep in your heart—that you'd never convert, that he'd always be Rick the Mormon, and that you'd always be Jessie the Not—had never really wavered.

After a few weeks, his voice over Skype started to sound incredibly far away. His e-mails describing life in Utah seemed to be about an alien place, irrelevant to you. You developed an intense crush on Johnny, an oft-drunk Irishman also teaching at your school. When, after a month, Rick announced that he had met someone new, a liberal Mormon, you used it as an excuse to knock on Johnny's door and get drunk with him.

Not Cool

Eighteen years after Taylor held your hand, Ryan arrived and he was everything that you wanted. Not that he met everything on your dreamboat checklist, for he played video games, lived in Utah, and was not Jewish. He lived in the suburbs while you were a city person, and he wasn't a literary reader. But he was supportive and kind, a tall and

handsome half-Greek with startling green eyes, and able to provide the companionship and stability that you'd realized, as your twenties had drawn to a close, is what you wanted more than all the intellectual discussions in the world.

Like you, Ryan was not born in Utah but spent his adolescence there because of his father's job. Like you, he is not Mormon. Unlike you, he'd stayed in Utah after high school. Your mothers set you up. You were thirty-one and had sublet your DC apartment for the summer and returned to Utah to escape the east coast humidity. You were in graduate school and taking the summer off. You had no plans to ever again live in Utah.

You met Ryan at a local brewpub, the kind of place you loved because they serve only their own beer, brewed onsite, unlike the places in DC that called themselves microbreweries but served beers from around the country. You proudly mentioned this Utah quirk to your DC friends. It was one of the things you could say, proudly, about where you were from.

Several beers later, you went home with Ryan. During the drive, you talked about Mormons. You were not surprised by this; in Utah, non-Mormons talked about Mormons the way that other people talk about the weather or sports. It's a go-to conversation. It's also the go-to conversation out-of-state, but in that case Mormons are talked about positively: *Mormons are kind of weird, but they're so nice and they have really good family values.* Inside of Utah and among other non-Mormons, the talk goes like this*: Mormons are so weird. They think you get a planet when you die. They think Joseph Smith found some golden plates in the ground in upstate New York, but they conveniently went missing. They think Jesus popped over to the American continents post-crucifixion.*

They think the Native Americans are descendants of the Lost Tribe of Israel who paddled from the Levant over to the Caribbean in canoes. And that's just the stuff that we know about.

Every non-Mormon knows these things, and you all repeat them to each other when there's a lull in conversation. Non-Mormons also talk about Mormon strangeness when meeting new people, to signal to each other that you understand the reality. You're not starry-eyed, nor are you ignorant. It signifies that you are on the same, not-Mormon page. By listing the weird things about Mormons, you say to each other, "I get it. I'm safe to talk to." But non-Mormons also have this conversation when they know someone very well. By speaking of the religion's weirdness over and over again, non-Mormons are trying to make sense of the world in which they've found themselves living. By speaking of it repeatedly among those they trust most, they're are begging for solidarity and support in this strange place.

So you and Ryan talked about Mormon oddities as he drove his Civic to his house in the Salt Lake Valley. In the nine years since Rick the Mormon, you'd had several boyfriends and none of them had been LDS. In those nine years, you hadn't spent much time living in Utah. As you looked at Ryan and said, "The Church is so crazy, they based the original *Battlestar Galactica* on it!" you were unnerved by how comfortable you felt. After all this time, you saw that this core of your identity—this non-Mormon part—had not only never gone away, it was perhaps who you were most comfortable being.

You and Ryan fell for each other quickly. Within a few days, you suspected that it would become serious, and within a few weeks you started to think he might be The One

(thinking this forced you to re-adopt your middle school beliefs in the existence of "The One"). He asked you to do long distance once you returned to DC in the fall.

In many ways, it made sense that at this point in your life you would meet someone you liked more than anyone who'd come before. You'd been feeling more comfortable with yourself and what you wanted in a partner. Dating around taught you those things. Once you finally had sex, not long after things ended with Rick the Mormon, you realized that you could never again date an LDS person. Not only would a celibate relationship be too hard, but you couldn't subscribe to any belief system that would encourage people to not have sex. Knowing that made you feel surer of yourself.

At the same time, once you consistently lived far from Utah, it became easier to appreciate things about the Church. By the time you settled in DC at twenty-eight, you felt comfortable in your relationship with it. It no longer seemed to hold much weight over you, was no longer so relevant to your life. It existed in an easy, superficial place of default conversation when meeting new people. You knew the things you liked about the Church and when it did come up in conversations with people in DC, you spent most of your time defending it. "I'm cool with the Mormon Church," you'd taken to saying.

So when Ryan told you that his elderly LDS neighbor had been trying to convert him, you laughed and weren't bothered. When he told you that he'd gone to church with her a couple of times, and he let her send missionaries to his house, and they still came by once in a while, you still weren't bothered. You had attended church a few times in high school with friends, with Paul. Ryan is an extremely nice person and you could see how it might be hard for him to tell the missionaries or his neighbor that he was not interested.

Rather, you thought his willingness to see the missionaries was sweet. It spoke of an open-mindedness you saw as rare among your peers. By thirty-one, your friends, like you, had grappled with some of life's big issues. You knew what you thought about things, and you certainly felt you knew what you needed to about the LDS Church. Anything you were still curious about, such as the secret rituals that happen in the temple, could be answered by the Internet. It was charming that Ryan was still willing to listen, to humor these missionaries.

"You're not thinking of converting, are you?" You asked, just to make sure. You looked around Ryan's sparsely decorated living room, ran your fingers through his soft dark hair, and understood that, however unlikely, this could be your last moment of ignorant bliss.

"No. I'm pretty much an atheist." Your heart melted with relief. "But, I mean, I guess if I got some sort of proof that the Church was true and Joseph Smith really found the plates, I would consider it." He said this casually, as if admitting he could be persuaded to try alligator meat.

"But do you think you're going to find proof?" You grabbed his hand, quickly, strongly, needing to feel it.

"No. But the missionaries keep saying that if I pray and read the Book of Mormon, I'll receive proof."

"Right. Sure you will."

"Exactly. So I'm like, 'I'll take you at your word.' I'll try praying and I'll try reading the Book of Mormon and I'll try church, and let's see if I get proof it's true."

"Have you so far? Have you felt anything?"

"Not a thing."

Ryan works in engineering and you wondered if that's where he was getting this faith in the scientific method. For, after several conversations, you came to see that that was really how he thought of this whole thing: as a science experiment. You tried to explain to him how faith works, how in your opinion, if one believes that praying and reading the Book of Mormon will deliver proof of a religion's truth, then it likely will. If one approaches the prayer and readings with skepticism, probably nothing will happen. There is no *concrete truth* to be discovered; it's a matter of faith, or of wanting to believe.

Ryan didn't see it like that. Ryan saw that some young guys in suits and nametags made a claim, and he was testing it. You noted the oddity of two people who were not Mormon having such different understandings of faith's workings, and attempted to shrug the situation away.

Nevertheless, you asked to be present the next time the missionaries visited. It would be an experience, something strange that would lead to a good story. Doing things because they would be weird, or provide a story, was, you'd decided in the last few years, a bad reason to do things. A cheap reason. You'd tried to stop and only to do things in which you had genuine interest. But missionaries appearing, ready to answer any questions you had in what would surely be an awkward and hilarious way, was too good to pass up. You'd never be able to go through the farce of feigning interest in the Church in order to get missionaries to visit yourself. But since your nice boyfriend had done it for

you, you'd get the chance to see what it would be like if you were interested in the Church, if you were a different person.

The missionaries came at 10 in the morning. You had wet hair and no shoes on. Wine bottles lay across Ryan's countertops. You hoped the missionaries would pick up on all this, and know that their potential convert was having sex and drinking.

You were prepared for awkwardness, and you were prepared to revel in it. But you didn't expect anyone's feelings to be hurt. You'd be polite to the missionaries; you were not looking to fight or dissuade them from any beliefs they held dear. After all, you were cool with the Mormons.

Ryan got a trio of missionaries: a nineteen-year-old whom you privately called Elder Babyface because of his chubby cheeks, a twenty-three-year-old called Elder Mason, who was from Seattle and who you thought probably used to get high, and a sixteen-year-old local kid in cowboy boots who was along for training. Mormon men can go on missions at eighteen, and at that age can be called an "elder."

They talked like regular guys—"hey man, what's up?"—and then sat well-spaced out at the kitchen table, Books of Mormon in front of them. Elder Mason said, "Ryan, can you get us started with a prayer?"

Ryan, the man you'd been falling for rapidly, the man you thought might be The One, a man who had no Mormon family or ties to the LDS Church, the man with whom you were having consistent sex and who swore and could hold his whiskey, nodded and folded his arms on the table in the traditional LDS prayer posture. He closes his eyes and said, "Heavenly Father, thank thee for this day and for bringing these missionairies here

today that we may study your gospel and learn about thy ways. Bless that we may be happy and healthy and that we may reap many blessings and that we may open our hearts."

The missionaries' heads were bent and eyes closed, but yours were wide open in horror. Your stomach constricted; you felt ill. You wanted to yell, *No, no, no.* You wanted to run away, and take Ryan with you, or maybe leave him behind, you weren't sure. But you knew, instantly, that this was worse than anything you'd imagined.

"Bless that we can remember this lesson and apply it in our daily lives. We say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen." Ryan opened his beautiful green eyes. You gazed at them, wondering if he could see your panic. You grabbed his hand under the table, though he gave you a look that said it wasn't an appropriate time. You stroked his thigh. You wanted to rip off his clothes and fuck him on the dining room table right in front of the missionaries, fuck him until they left and never came back.

You don't remember much about the rest of the hour, except that you read passages from the Book of Mormon that made you squirm, and the missionaries said things that made you squirm, and the annoying sixteen-year-old talked about how the end of the world was nigh. Elder Babyface nodded along solemnly, and Elder Mason looked like he wanted to roll his eyes. You remember staring at Ryan, trying to make sense of the situation in the sight of his straight nose, his tapered chin. Ryan, though half-Greek and olive skinned, had a long, oval face, a high forehead, and low cheekbones, which meant he could pass for Mormon in a way that you, and even his own, more Mediterranean-looking sister, never could. With his hair cut too short for your taste, Ryan

easily sported an inoffensive white-person look, a Mormon look, and you strongly suspected that looking sufficiently like the majority had made Ryan's life in Utah far easier than yours had been. Perhaps it had also made it easier for him to slip into the folded-arm posture and utter his horrid prayer.

The missionaries shook your hand when they left. You wanted to thank them for coming but could hardly get any words out.

You collapsed into Ryan's arms. He held you and stroked your hair as you said, "That was so weird. Way weirder than I thought it would be. I didn't like it."

"Oh, poor Jessie. Yeah, it is kind of weird having them here."

"And I really . . ." You took a deep breath and stepped back just enough to be able to look into Ryan's eyes. "I really didn't like how you prayed. That made me feel really uncomfortable."

"Oh. I was just saying the words. Why'd it make you uncomfortable?"

"Because you sounded so Mormon. You sounded like someone who could convert, who could be Mormon, or who already was."

"Well, I know what words to say. I'm sure you do, too."

"I do. It's not that, exactly. It was hearing them out of your mouth. And I care about you, and I like you so much, and I couldn't date a Mormon."

It was his turn to step back. He dropped his arms from your sides.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not ever going to convert. I dated a Mormon before and it didn't work and I know I can't do it again. I need to be with someone who can drink and have

sex, who is open minded, and I don't agree with the patriarchy of the Church, and . . . you know, everything. You know why I can't date a Mormon."

"But that's not fair. Why couldn't you date a Mormon if they weren't asking you to convert? I wouldn't care if you decided to do more Jewish stuff."

"But that's different—the Jewish stuff I'd do is mostly cultural."

"You make this big deal about being open minded and tolerant. And you say you have no problem with Mormons. But you wouldn't date one if he wasn't trying to convert you. What if he would still have sex and drink?"

"It's the philosophy of the religion."

"You're not being fair."

You didn't finish the conversation because Ryan had to go to work, and you didn't resume it except to ask him once again if he was thinking of converting. He said he wasn't, and he said he wouldn't pray if you were ever around the missionaries again. He hugged you and kissed your forehead. You felt yourself falling in love with him, and falling into doubt of yourself. For one thing was clear—you were not so cool with the Mormons, after all.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY

I. Wabi-sabi

Kyoto, February 2006

There is a memory from when I worked in Japan during my early twenties that resurfaces often. It is of me and my Japanese friend, Hide, sitting in his car eating chocolates in the middle of the night in the scenic Arashiyama neighborhood of Kyoto. A winding river snakes through the mountains covered in Japanese cedar. In the autumn, they are shocking red and yellow, alive with color and with tourists photographing the leaves. A famous but simple wooden bridge crosses the Arashiyama River, connecting the town with the mountain jumping with monkeys. The bridge is called *Togetsukyo*, the Moon Crossing Bridge.

Its name had never been more apt than on the February night Hide and I sat near it in his warm car. The mountains were dark and the cedars were spindly, but the moon shone full over the river, and the bridge seemed to be floating. It was quiet and subtly beautiful in a way that I thought of as classically Japanese, and so different from the dramatic, sky-filling North American mountains where I'd grown up. It was a type of beauty I had learned to see during my time there, in the first foreign country where I taught English.

Hide and I looked at the bridge, and I told him this. He nodded. Then I asked him about the meaning of the word "*wabi-sabi*." *Wabi-sabi* is one of the millions of Japanese words that are difficult to translate. Books describe it is an aesthetic based on accepting life's transience and imperfection, but my Japanese friends and teachers called it a feeling, or connection, that was fundamentally Japanese. They said wabi-sabi was to feel, to embrace, something that embodies Japanese-ness. They said foreigners were incapable of feeling it.

But, I said to Hide, looking out at the Moon Crossing Bridge, I felt what I could only describe as *wabi-sabi*. After a year in Japan, my own beloved English didn't feel powerful enough to describe my feeling. Connection and love didn't cut it. It was not the feeling I'd had often when I studied in Southwest England and spent hours curled in a nook in the ruins of a medieval castle. That had been an overwhelming sense of belonging, or oneness. I felt a part of every human being that had come before me. But looking at the Moon Crossing Bridge was like seeing a magical world. I was not necessarily a part of that world, but it was a space I had observed and cared for long enough to feel enchanted by. And it wasn't a kind of magic I could get from any other world; it wasn't a feeling I had experienced in any other corner of the earth. Was that, I asked Hide, *wabi-sabi?*

Hide popped a chocolate in his mouth. In a car, in a deserted neighborhood, on an enchanted bridge under the moonlight, we discussed and debated the meaning of *wabi-sabi*, of Japanese traditionalism and the importance it places on the exclusivity of the Japanese race. We discussed what his parents would think of me experiencing *wabi-sabi*,

what his great grandparents (who were Kyoto Samuri) would think of it, and what Hide thought as a fashionable twenty-four-year-old with his floppy hair dyed brown, a member of a new, cosmopolitan generation who thought being close to Western women was fun and normal, who carefully considered my questions and revealed stories about his childhood and fears and dreams and asked me about mine. When he told me that he thought traditional Japanese attitudes were changing, and he viewed *wabi-sabi* as a more fluid concept that would be open to a foreigner like me.

"Is that a good thing, though?" I asked. "I want to experience wabi-sabi, but if it really defies my perception . . . should we pretend it doesn't?"

I wanted to know: Did that sully the whole concept? Did it sully Japanese consciousness?

Hide shook his head no.

What did it mean that cultural mores meant that Hide probably wouldn't have this kind of intimate, philosophical conversation with a Japanese woman, even if he were dating her; that my foreignness also allowed for this openness? Did the context of my discussing it mean that I was experiencing something fundamentally different from *wabi-sabi*, after all?

We didn't come down on any answers, or at least none that I remember. What I remember is sitting with Hide in that warm car, laughing and pondering, into the small hours of the morning.

II. The Shape of My Knees

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, March 2010

I broke the law that day and wearing leggings.

Everyone in Sharjah, most conservative emirate of the United Arab Emirates, broke the rules a little. Especially the Russians. Once in a mall, I saw a Russian woman wearing a transparent shirt, bra visible for all to see. Of course, she was a prostitute, like most of the Russian women in the UAE. That meant that the police turned a blind eye to her existence and the existence of her bright red bra.

But the law was still the law. The modesty decency law forbade wearing "tight or transparent clothing that describes the body." Leggings did that, described visually my calves and knees and thighs.

The United Arab Emirates was the second foreign country in which I taught English. I moved there when I was twenty-six, two years after leaving Japan. In the eight months I'd lived in Sharjah, I'd learned that most of the time, the police left Westerners alone. The Western women I knew had become comfortable baring our shoulders and kneecaps for a few minutes while we ran from our apartments to taxis that would take us into Dubai for a night out. Dubai was five miles west of Sharjah and had a much looser dress code.

Sometimes, if I felt reckless, I'd even run in tight exercise pants at night along the corniche, the touristy esplanade around the lagoon. But for Westerners in Sharjah, it often

seemed like just when you would get comfortable, the Sharjah government would change the rules. Or in this case, start enforcing them.

That day was the Hundred Days of School celebration party at the international school where I worked. People would be taking pictures, so I decided to forego the long, worn-out denim skirt and baggy polo shirt that I usually wore to avoid male attention, and try to look more put together. I wore a blue plaid dress that hung a few inches above my knees. Under the dress, I wore navy leggings. No one at school would mind. The foreigner's dress code wasn't enforced too strictly at school, where parents wanted their children taught by obvious-looking Westerners.

After school, I took my usual route home through the sandpits. I held big breaths as I walked, trying not to smell the piles of trash festering in the scorching March sun. My earphones were in; I listened to North American music and tried to tune out the surrounding noise of construction and honking cars and whining street cats. I turned onto Estiqlal, a busy central street, hopping up and down over the high curbs at every parking lot entrance. A car honked, particularly loudly. I ignored it. It honked again, and out of the corner of my eye—I was careful never to turn my head to stare at the cars directly, lest the drivers think I was a prostitute—I saw a dark government car pulling over beside me. It honked again, and I slowed.

"Hello," called a Middle Eastern male voice.

"Hello," I said warily, and took a few steps toward the car.

The car was a dark green sedan with an official-looking seals on the side. I could tell it was an important person's car because there were only three numbers on the license

plates. The driver was a youngish looking man in some sort of military uniform. He wore thick glasses and a little olive hat. His jaw was clenched tightly.

"You!" he barked. "Where do you come from?"

"From . . . from the USA."

He took off his sunglasses and looked at me up and down slowly.

I fumbled with the hem on my dress, trying desperately to pull it down so that the line of my kneecaps would be no longer visible. Of course he had already seen the shape of my knees. If I were arrested, I would explain that I didn't fully understand the rules, that I thought that if my knees were covered it was okay, that I didn't know about the bans on tightness, transparency, and "describing" clothing. It would do no good, I knew. During my time in the UAE so far, the police hadn't done a clothing raid in my neighborhood, but everyone I knew who had been arrested the last time they raided said that excuses were useless. They would put you in jail for a few days and give you a hefty fine. I might have to leave my job.

"From America?" the man repeated.

"Yes."

He looked slightly surprised, possibly because I have dark hair and a traditional Arab body: narrow-shouldered, wide-hipped. Also, the entire, stupid outfit I was wearing had been purchased in Sharjah, so maybe there was something distinctly local about it.

"You live in Sharjah?"

"Yes."

His eyes grew round and angry.

“What do you do here?”

“I teach school. Preschool,” I added, hoping that the word would evoke images of cuddly babies and feelings of innocence.

He nodded again, curling his lip as he glared at me. I wondered if he was going to ask to see my visa. I didn’t have the proper one. My school had not gotten around to processing a working visa. I’d been on a tourist visa for eight months, hopping the Oman/ UAE border every thirty days to get a stamp.

The man heaved a sigh. Then he barked, “I would like your number.”

“No . . . no, I can’t do that,” I said, quickly exhaling with relief. He wasn’t going to arrest me. My voice was still shaky.

The man nodded understandingly and sped away, wheels screeching.

That was what culture-clash looked like in Sharjah. An Arab man, probably a very decent person with a good government job, saw a woman he found attractive walking down the street. With her dark hair, light skin, slightly Semitic features, and curves, she might have been Muslim, probably Lebanese or Jordanian. But she was not veiled, which implied some degree of modernity and relaxation. He stopped his car, confident that his uniform and the short number on his license plate would give a good impression. He honked; the woman came over. When he opened his mouth, however, his lack of experience in talking casually with women rendered him awkward. His words came out short and demanding. He didn’t know what to say, how to say it, how to appear friendly.

When the woman revealed that she was, in fact, not from this region at all, he stumbled even further. He did not know what to say to an American woman, and he hardly knew why he was talking to her in the first place. She was much less likely to be impressed by his short license plate, and probably would not know what his uniform meant. He no longer expected his endeavor to end successfully. He ended up looking so angry about the whole thing that the woman feared he was set on arresting her for wearing leggings.

I, in turn, was in such a constant state of fear that I readily believed that a man who was just after my phone number had designs on my arrest and deportation.

III. Mixed Messages

United Arab Emirates, 2009-2010

Sheila, a teacher from Canada, had a fight with her long-distance boyfriend during her prep period. She ran across the street to cry in the sand pit, away from the eyes of her coworkers and students. She leaned against the back of a building and cried into her hands. "Hello, *habibi*," said a male voice. She lowered her hands and looked up. An Arab man stood in front of her with his penis, hard, hanging out of his pants. "I make you feel better," he said before Sheila sprinted back to school, where she cried again for a different reason.

*

The college students sat in the Dubai coffee shop for over an hour. I didn't get any writing done because I couldn't stop watching them. There were two Arab men and one well-dressed, artsy looking Western woman. They spoke in a mix of Arabic and English, which allowed me to understand the gist of their conversation. The woman was just meeting the men; they were in her math class. They talked about movies they liked and their upcoming exams. They all ate chocolate muffins. I kept waiting for one of the men to say something inappropriate to the woman, to touch her arm, to lean in too closely and to see her nose wrinkle under the scent of excessive cologne. I kept waiting to see her blush and look down.

The Arab women that I knew were always saying to us Western women, "You have to expect the men to be aggressive with you. They know you're not virgins, so they will expect you to sleep with them. They don't see how they're any different from any other men you'd sleep with. Don't trust them."

The woman in the coffee shop had no ring on her finger, but still, the men did nothing but talk and laugh with her.

*

Mohammed had a strange charm. He was not my type at all: married with children, too much cologne, a mark on his forehead from touching it to prayer rugs five times a day for his forty-six years. His eyes were penetrating and his energy was rawly

sexual in a way that should have made me feel uncomfortable—*did* make me feel uncomfortable—but was also appealing. He taught tenth grade and was friends with the one Western man in our group, Andrew, and that is how we met. He came to the Americans' small Thanksgiving, skipping a family dinner. Andrew invited him to my secret Hanukkah party and Mohammed smiled at me and promised he wouldn't tell any Muslims that I was Jewish. "Be careful, Jessie," he said. "You can't trust anyone here." Mohammed and I didn't talk much but my heart always beat faster when he was in the room.

He gave Andrew rides to school, and Andrew asked me and some other Western women if we'd like to join their carpool. We rode with them until Mohammed and Andrew had a fight the subject of which I didn't know and the carpool ended. Mohammed started showing up outside my apartment building. He sat in his gold minivan waiting for me.

The tinted windows slowly rolled down, revealing his penetrating eyes and big grin. "You want a ride, Jessie?" he asked, teeth glinting.

"No, thanks," I said. I remembered the warnings of the women at school: *Western women have a reputation. Don't trust the men.* A Western woman had been raped by her taxi driver last month. Emily, another fellow teacher, was being stalked by the Burger King delivery boy; he kept showing up at her front door and classroom when she had not ordered food.

"Why not?"

“I don’t feel comfortable with it just being me. I feel better when Andrew’s there.”

“Come on,” Mohammed said.

“No thanks,” I said, over and over until he went away. He waited in his gold minivan every day for three weeks, until I started leaving the house fifteen minutes earlier and avoiding him all together.

*

Candice, Andrew’s girlfriend, showed up at Sheila’s door with boxes of clothes and hair things. “Quick,” she said. “I have to hide my girly stuff here. They’re doing cohabitation raids.”

Sheila’s eyes went wide and she ushered Candice inside.

Another of Sharjah’s decency laws forbade cohabitation between unwed couples, as well as unchaperoned men and women being in the same home together. The punishment was a week in jail or lashings. Occasionally and at no set interval, the police raided neighborhoods looking for violators or for evidence of cohabitation. Earlier that evening, a married couple we knew had called Andrew to tell him that the police had just come to their apartment and asked to see their marriage certificate. Candice had packed up evidence of her existence, brought it to Sheila’s, and then invited us all over to drink beer amid her piles of clothing and hair products.

When I got home, I warned my roommate Katherine, who had an Arab boyfriend, about the raids. Katherine, who was usually unemotional, looked frightened. “Ramez and I can’t get caught,” she fretted. “I’m American, I’m sure I could get out of any real trouble. But he’s Palestinian. He could lose everything. He’s such a wonderful person and the best boyfriend . . .” she shut the door to her bedroom, still muttering.

Her boyfriend didn’t come over for a week, but no police ever came to our door. They didn’t come to Andrew’s, either.

*

On cynical days, I was proud of the bitchy face I assumed when I walking in public. I almost always wore sunglasses to make avoiding eye contact easier. Emily, who was from Alabama, struggled to do these things. She said her Southern upbringing made it difficult not to smile at strangers, make small talk, and be excessively polite. It didn’t help that her breasts were large. She had more stalkers than any of the other Western women. The electrician was the latest one. On the other hand, she also went home with some Arab men that she met at Dubai clubs. “Sometimes, you’ve just got to get laid,” she said, and described the handsome men whom she was proud of. On lonely days, I was jealous of her ability to hook up with the Arab men. I had easily hooked up with strangers in the States, England, and Japan, but the warnings of the Muslim women rang too strongly in my ears: “Don’t trust them.”

One day Emily and I were walking home from the grocery store. We were talking about places we'd like to travel, when out of the corner of my eye I saw something flying through the air. There was a crash, the sound of shattering. We looked around confused, and saw chunks of glass at our feet.

We didn't want to believe that someone would throw glass at us. "No way," we kept saying, shaking, imagining what would have happened if those chunks had hit us, sliced open our cheeks, scarred us for life. Then, slowly, disbelieving, "Why? Why would someone do that?"

We looked up at the building from which the glass had come, looking for the perpetrator's face, looking for reasons that we would never know. Maybe we had been laughing too loudly. Maybe it was because our hair was uncovered, though that is not illegal in Sharjah. Or maybe someone was just throwing out garbage, though there was nothing on the ground around us but the freshly broken glass, heavy and white-rimmed where it had broken on the asphalt.

*

Bloody stumps and severed hands appeared in my dreams. One of the Filipino teaching assistants at school (technically, their job title was "nanny") had stolen about $1,000 in gold jewelry from another nanny. As a result, she was under threat of losing a hand. Sura verse 5.38 of the Qur'an states, "And (as for) the man who steals and the woman who steals, cut off their hands as a punishment for what they have earned." The

UAE technically still followed this law, albeit rarely enforced it, and when the nanny was accused, everyone at school started talking about hand amputation.

I went online. I found different claims on various UAE ex-pat forums. Some said that hand amputation was only done on the third, serious offense. Others said that the practice hasn't occurred in the UAE in twenty years. My boss came into the faculty lounge and said that to the best of her knowledge, the nanny would go to jail but not lose any hands.

I was relieved. Then Fozia, a Pakistani teacher, said, "Just because they say she's not in danger doesn't mean it's true." My Filipino assistant echoed her worry, as did Candice and Andrew, who had lived in the Middle East much longer than I. "Remember," they said, "Don't trust anyone here."

So the nightmares of the handless persisted and no one ever knew for sure what happened to the accused nanny. She never returned to school.

*

During my first week in the UAE, Ibrahim said, "Don't tell anyone you're Jewish."

"But I'm only half-Jewish," I said, taking gulp of Bloody Mary and blushing. I'd always felt like a bit of a poser as a Jew, because my mother hadn't done much beyond lighting the menorah and hiding the matzo.

"Doesn't matter," said Ibrahim, who was from Syria, hiding out in the UAE to escape military duty. "They'll deport you. The parents don't want their kids being taught

by a Jew. The school won't pay you. They'll see you as a liar for not mentioning it during your job interview. And you think the Muslims you know will still want to talk to you?" He snorted.

"But I'm not a Zionist. I'm critical of Israel."

Ibrahim shook his bald head and took a long sip of whiskey. He was the only Arab man who hung out with the Westerners all year long and never hit on any women.

My Jewishness grew in importance the way that secrets do. I could tell none of the Arabs and Muslims I knew and so wanted to tell them all. I started to listen to Israeli music. I held a Hanukkah party for the Westerners, which I knew was a potentially dangerous thing to do. In the teacher's lounge, the other Arab women made anti-Semitic remarks (Jews are greedy, Jews are evil, Jews aren't human) and I bit my tongue until my eyes watered. I grew jumpy. When in the spring I became close to Lobna, a Palestinian woman and my coworker, I sometimes found myself shaking under the weight of the secret. After lunch with her, I would go home and cry.

It was June and I had only two weeks left in the UAE before heading back to the States. Lobna and I spent a lot of time together during those weeks. We wandered the shopping malls and she told me she was afraid of her father and that she was terrified of being matched with a man she did not like. I told her that I'd always felt like the least favorite child in my family. I felt so close to her in those days, and though I didn't actively plan to tell her, I knew that I couldn't keep my secret any longer.

We were waiting for a taxi outside the mall when I looked at her in the sandy yellow light and said, “Lobna, there’s something I have to tell you. My mother’s Jewish. *I’m* Jewish.” I felt tears on my cheeks.

I had planned to qualify my statement with assertions of anti-Zionist feelings, with sympathy for Palestine. But before I could say anything, Lobna hugged me tightly and said, “Oh, *habibi*. Please don’t cry. I don’t care. I don’t care at all.”

Lobna told Fozia, a Pakistani teacher I really liked. “I’m so sorry you felt like you couldn’t tell us,” Fozia said. “We don’t care.” Fozia told Houda, who was Palestinian, who smiled and said that Jews and Muslims were both children of Abraham. Fozia and Houda told Rodaina, my Lebanese boss, who never said anything about it but, on the last day of school, gave me a hug and handed me a glowing letter of recommendation.

IV. Haraam

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, March 2010

After I declined to give him my number, the Arab man in the government car drove off. But I still walked fast, as quick as I could, fleeing the stretch of sidewalk where he’d stopped his car. Sweat dripped down my forehead. After a few pleasant months of winter weather, the heat was coming back.

The initial fear of deportation subsided and I began to play the incident over in my head. The man’s dark sunglasses, the unquestionably military car, his sharp, hostile

tone. My stupid leggings, my fingers groping at the hem of my dress. What was that man thinking? Did he really want my number? I shivered in the heat; I felt violated somehow.

And suddenly, I wanted to run back to that man in the car. I wanted him to be where I left him, parked in the middle of the lane with his hazards on, eyes narrowed and mouth hanging open. I wanted to go back and question him, ask him what he was thinking, what he had meant by all of it. I wanted to know if he thought I was a prostitute. But if he said that he didn't think I was for sale, I wanted to give him my number. I wanted to go out with him, to open my mind and have one of those cultural exchanges that I had with Hide in Japan, that, being a good traveler, I was supposed to be having all the time.

I wished I could sit with the man at a sidewalk café or lounge with him on the grass of the corniche, where local families picnicked and smoked *shisha* in the evenings. That was as close to Arashiyama as you could get. I wished I could ask him questions and have my concepts about this culture shred and float away with the sand. They would be destroyed and replaced with something beautiful and more understandable.

I'd always had several male friends—men who weren't boyfriends but almost could have been for all our emotional intimacy—and I missed what they offered. I wanted their perspective, and I wanted the distinct rhythms of male-female talk. The hint of flirtatious banter. The thrill of engagement with that which is opposite, of staring down that unbridgeable distance born of lives spent in different gendered bodies.

All but three of my friends in the UAE were women. The men were Andrew, a fellow non-religious, heavy-drinking American teacher; Ibrahim, a very liberal Syrian

who took any opportunity to discuss his hatred of the UAE; and a sixty-something Pakistani man, the father of one of my students who primarily wanted to share drinking stories with me. For some reason or another, I was not close to any of those men in a one-on-one sort of way. Perhaps, I thought irrationally, wishfully, that man in the car was my opportunity for a good male Arab friend, and perhaps I had lost him to fear and negative stereotypes and cultural misunderstanding.

I wanted to think that if I gave the man my number and we went out, either he would make no moves or I would be able to politely decline any advances (or accept, depending on my mood). Rationally, I knew that was unlikely. Though he may have thought I was a liberal Muslim at first, and therefore been potentially interested in courtship, once he realized I was Western, he'd likely called up the assumptions about promiscuous Western women and asked for my number with nothing but sex in mind. If we went out, he would probably be sexually aggressive and polite declinations might not be enough.

Probably, that is what would have happened. But I didn't know, and there was no way to be sure. I'd assumed he was a police officer there to arrest me for wearing leggings, and that had been dead wrong. Who's to say that my assumption that he was after sex, and would have no interest in friendship or conversation, was not also wrong? Who's to say that his tone was really snappish and angry; who's to say it wasn't just an awkward man's attempt to be direct and suave, filtered unflatteringly through my prejudices?

It was impossible to know. A cloud of it blew back in my face. I didn't want to be the woman who worried that everyone was out to get them.

But before my mind spiraled too far out of control with speculation and self-doubt, I remembered that imagining what opportunities this man could have offered me was pointless.

We could not be friends here, even if we both wanted to be. What would we do? Where would we go? It was illegal for men and women who were unmarried or unrelated to be in public together, another of Sharjah's decency laws.

This rule was easy enough to get around with my American friend Andrew. We were both white, and therefore we could easily pretend to be brother and sister. If a man and woman were clearly a couple (though there was a law against PDA, too), authorities would most likely assume they were married and leave them alone. But I did not necessarily want to date this man who scared me so—I wanted a male friend to talk to.

A few days prior, while the children were at recess, my fellow teachers ate their lunches and discussed divorce. I had kept my eyes on my lesson plans but listened intently. They debated whether or not it was *haraam* (sin) to speak with ex-husbands. Houda, an older, divorced woman, mentioned she had a conversation with her ex recently.

"You talk to him?" Interjected Fozia, who was my age and married. "But we're not to speak to them after a divorce."

"But sometimes you have to," Houda had said. "To discuss logistic stuff. Picking up the kids and things like this."

“You should have a go-between,” Fozia had said, shaking her head.

I had looked up and asked, “What if you wanted to talk to them about something other than the kids?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if you wanted to stay friends?”

They had chuckled. “It is definitely haraam to be friends with them,” Houda had said. She leaned back in her seat and put her feet up on a nearby plastic chair.

“Why?”

“Because,” said Fozia, who had looked like I’d just asked her why dogs can’t talk, “Because you’re not married or related so you can’t . . .”

“Oh!” I cried. “Of course. Duh.”

Fozia and Houda had looked at me, smiled slightly, and went back to their discussion and their lunches. I had begun to giggle. Uncontrollable giggles of misunderstanding and absurdity. I couldn’t stop and buried my head in my arms.

It was all so simple, so clear. They were not married, so they could not associate. It had nothing to do with being ex-spouses, with hurt feelings or a philosophy against staying friends with your ex. It was not about possible temptation, about emotional hardship, or confusing the children. They could not be friends with their ex-husbands anymore than they could be friends with the male teachers at school, or with Andrew, or my father if he happened to visit. They could not associate with men who were not their husbands because it was the rule, and it was as simple as that. I giggled on; of course, of course, it is so obvious and I missed it.

I crossed several lanes of traffic with my arms folded, my backpack strapped tightly to my shoulders, my head down, and tried to recapture the old adolescent feelings of invisibility. Staring at the sticky sidewalk, I avoided trash and squashed bugs and the looks that I knew I was getting. I turned off busy Estiqlal street with relief, away from the street where the man approached me, and made my way through dumpster-lined alleys buzzing with flies. I breathed shallowly until I crossed the final littered sand pit to my building. At the elevator, I prayed that no one would follow me in, that I could ride up to the sixth floor alone. When, just before the elevator doors closed, an Indian delivery boy from the corner supermarket hopped inside, I kept my eyes on the scuffed marble floor. He got out on the third floor and I punched a fist into my palm, guilty of rudeness.

Inside my hot apartment, I shoved the thermostat down twenty degrees. My room was dim and messy, as usual. I ripped off my leggings and dress and hurled them onto the bed. Then I crawled under the covers and stared at the dusty brocade curtains that I always kept closed.

V. Going Haywire

Washington, DC, United States of America, 2015

It's been five years since I left Sharjah and returned to the States. It's been five years and I still don't know about the man in the car and my reaction to him. What was it about that man that haunts me? There were so many others. I do not wish I'd accepted

rides from Mohammed, the forty-five-year old married man. But in our thirty-second encounter, the man in the government car proved my paranoia wrong. Could he have done it again? I'll never know because during our encounter, my paranoia switches were flipped with the rapidity of a pinball machine. *Possible arrest for immodesty! Possible deportation or firing for lacking a work visa! Possible stalking! Possible rape!* Bing, bing, bing, the switches flipped too fast for logic.

It's been five years and I still sometimes wish I'd given him my phone number, just so I would know, with certainty, if he was a creep or not. Just so the second-guessing would go away.

The phrase "justified paranoia" first began to appear widely in Western culture in the 1970s, when the Watergate scandal, the 1973 Chilean coup, Idi Amin's war crimes and alleged cannibalism, and other events showed citizens rather bluntly that governments were corrupt, were doing illegal things, and were trying to cover them up. Historian Francis Wheen called the decade justified paranoia's golden age. But the phrase "justified paranoia" seems oxymoronic given the definition of paranoia: "a tendency on the part of an individual or group toward excessive or irrational suspiciousness and distrustfulness of others," according to Merriam-Webster. Something that is irrational cannot be justified; to justify it makes it rational.

My beloved English does not have a word to describe fear that might be reasonable, but might not be. Fear that may be excessive for the situation. Fear that stems not only from the potential risk, but also from the impossibility of being able to effectively calculate that risk, and one's perceived powerlessness to stop it. Nor does

English have a word that precisely describes the fear of that fear—experienced not because that fear makes us weak, but because that fear might mean we are crazy.

I never knew what was true in the UAE. Some rumors seemed founded, some fears seemed justified, but some did not. Was that because the people issuing the warnings to never trust the men, to never trust anyone, were lying, or trying to scare me? I don't think so. It is five years later and all I know now is that there is no way to know. Sometimes the people with the power—the men, the police, the school administration—chose to prove the warnings right, and sometimes they chose to prove them wrong.

In their 2014 book *Suspicious Minds: On Culture and Madness*, Joel and Ian Gold describe the Suspicion System, an evolutionary tool that helps us interact safely with other humans. The suspicion system "creates heightened responses to subtle, uncertain, and ambiguous signs of social danger: the glance exchanged by your colleagues; your husband's unexplained weekend meetings." Usually, our analytical mind stops us from letting the suspicion system get out of control and turn into delusions. But sometimes it goes haywire. That breakdown can be partly caused by misfiring neurotransmitters, but, argue the Golds, it is also deeply influenced by cultural and environmental factors. A wealth of studies have established strong risk factors for paranoia: lack of online privacy and awareness of government surveillance, the stress of big-city living, a history of abuse, and, crucially, the immigrant experience, being an "outsider" in the place where you live. The UAE is over 70 percent immigrant; no wonder paranoia runs high. The women are afraid of the men. The many illegal workers are worried about deportation and not being paid. The Westerners are afraid of the government, having seen newspaper

stories on vacationing couples being jailed for kissing in public, and afraid of doctors who do not change gloves between blood tests. Everyone is afraid of erratic taxi drivers and the thousands brutal car crashes that happen each year on Sheikh Zayed Road. The unwed Western women are afraid of the doctors whom they ask for birth control. The fear—and the fear of the fear, the fear that it might be a crazy, irrational fear—is as thick in the Emirati air as the sand that blows ceaselessly across the Arabian Peninsula.

All of the risk factors for paranoia, justified or not, involve feeling powerless. But though I felt powerless next to the man in the car, part of me still wishes I had given him my phone number. This could have given him even more power over me. But it would also have given me a feeling that I was undercutting his power. If I had given him my phone number, the paranoia and fear would not have won out. Assuming the good in people would have triumphed. But I cannot know if that would have been a victory or simple naiveté.

VI. Gamble

Dubai, United Arab Emirates, June 2010

My flight to Chicago was in two days and this is what I did: I got into an Arab man's car.

I did it because I was sick of feeling afraid. Even more, I did it because I was sick of feeling paranoid, which is worse than feeling afraid.

My bags were packed; my students' grades were in. All that was left to do was see the Dubai Museum, housed in Al Fahidi fort which dates from the 1780s and is the oldest building in Dubai. It was the last thing on my UAE bucket list, and with its quiet, crumbling rock halls, it proved to be one of my favorite things that I saw in my year there. Alone, I admired the *arish*, a traditional summer house made of palm fronds, and tried to imagine a family living there a hundred years ago. In my imagination, children's *abayas* and *dish-dashas*, the long traditional robes of this region, fluttered in the wind.

An elderly Bedouin man sitting in a reconstructed Bedouin tent was cooking real rice. He invited me, the only visitor that humid afternoon, in to share. The rice tasted of turmeric and cumin and the great stone cooking bowl; it tasted like spiced earth. The Bedouin man gave me a second bowl, all smiles, and though our encounter was touristy and half-fake, in a reconstructed tent from a culture that only existed in poverty, far from the reaches of the city, I loved it. It presented the UAE in a way that was workable to me.

I wandered the cool museum halls and examined artifacts from Dubai's fishing village past. I felt full of acceptance for the country, the kind of acceptance that comes when you're about to leave a place forever.

"You like the museum?"

I turned. A young Arab man in a *dish-dasha* and *keffiyeh* stood behind me.

"It's great. I love it," I said.

"I volunteer here," said the man. "My family is Emirati and used to live in this neighborhood hundreds of years ago. My father works in the gift shop as a volunteer."

"Really? That's cool."

“This is my favorite exhibit,” he gestured toward a dark room where a movie about Dubai’s transformation from fishing village to ultra-modern business center showed on a loop. “Have you seen it? Would you like to watch it with me?”

“I saw it,” I said. “Very interesting.” It had been my least favorite part of the museum. It couldn’t compete with the artifacts.

I let the man walk near me as I looked at the rest of the pottery. I didn’t feel like telling him to go away. It had been such a pleasant afternoon, and though we were alone in the museum, it didn’t seem imperative that he leave. We didn’t say much except, “That bowl’s beautiful,” and “What a cool fishing rod.” I let him walk near me until I looked at my phone and said, “I’ve got to go. I’m late to catch the last bus.”

“Can I give you a ride to the bus stop?”

I took a deep breath. “Okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

He led me to a shiny black SUV with zebra print upholstery. “Wait here,” he said, “I need to tell my father I’m driving you to the bus stop.”

I sat in the plush passenger seat and waited for him. The man let the air-conditioning run while I waited and I stuck my face in front of the blasting vent. I hated zebra print and wondered, strangely calm, if I would be assaulted on this ugly pattern. Agreeing to the ride was a stupid thing to do, but I made no move to leave the car. Being inside of it imbued me with sense of power. It was as if I had taken control, which of course I hadn’t. I wanted to think that something I did—my bravery in accepting a stranger’s kind offer, or my relaxed mood, or my current feelings of goodwill toward the UAE brought on my the museum—would influence the strange man in whose car I sat.

But that was not true. Whether he was good or bad to me was up to him. The outcome of my gamble would be as random as the man himself.

The man played rap music as he drove me the five minutes to the bus station.

"Thanks for the ride," I said when he stopped the car.

"My pleasure," he said. "It was very nice to meet you."

My hand moved toward the door handle. It clicked ajar. I kept waiting for the strange man to say something creepy, to grab at me. For something to happen.

ON OTHERING

Because all the good people wanna rescue
All the small people, wanna talk to you.
All the clever people wanna tell you,
"All the little people wanna dance, it's true."

So it's Us v. Them. Over and over again.

— LCD Soundsystem

On tax day, April 15, 1994, my family moved from Vista, California, near San Diego, to Ogden, Utah, near Salt Lake City. I was a few weeks from eleven years old. We moved because my father, who had been laid off during the 1992 recession, had been offered a job as director of photography for the local newspaper. For weeks before we left California, I sat in warm, dry dirt under our backyard avocado tree and cried. My classmates and teachers were sympathetic, though most adults tried to put a "what a neat adventure!" spin on the situation. Except for Claudia Leonezio-Monz, the school drama teacher, who wound her sparse eyebrows together and said, "Utah? Oh, my dear, that is not good."

"I know," I said, adjusting my backpack straps. "They have *snow*."

Mrs. L&M, as the students called her, stared at me like I was a peer. She'd turned that serious, adult stare to me a few times before: when I'd impressed her with my voice projection, when I'd spoken seriously about the character motivation. I was her favorite

student. Mrs. L&M had Shirley Temple hair and clear blue eyes. She was a professional actress, and in fifth grade, it seemed natural to me that she would want to spend part of her time teaching drama in a public school. Now I realize she must have needed the money.

"The people that live in Utah are weird," she said. "They're Mormons."

"Oh," I said. "I don't really know what those are." I'd heard the term, but didn't understand it. I also didn't know that my family already knew several LDS families in California, including the OBG-YN who'd delivered my two sisters.

Mrs. L&M looked at me straight with her wise blue eyes and said, "They're a religion. A church. They're weird, and you—" she said, her warm voice containing all her hopes and dreams for me— "they will stifle you."

* * *

A swaddled infant stares at two faces form his bassinet. The child is white, as is one of the faces hovering, smiling, above him. The face belongs to a friend of his parents, but the infant has not met him before. The infant looks at this Caucasian face briefly, before moving on to his mobile, his fist, his toy elephant.

The other unfamiliar face belongs to another friend of his parents. That face, also hovering, smiling, cooing, is black. When this face enters the child's view, he stares at it for significantly longer than he did the white face. He is not distracted by his elephant—he stares at the face's contours, at its eyes, at, psychologists presume, its skin color.

According to Dr. Erin Winkler, a sociologist specializing in racial socialization, this behavior is "very consistent in six-month olds." It has led developmental psychologists to conclude that children are aware of race far earlier than initially thought. Substantial research has also shown that children "develop racial biases by ages three to five." Though adults are fond of blaming kids' inappropriate remarks on external factors ("she must have heard that on TV" or "his parents must have said that"), research shows that these young children's racial biases do not always "resemble the racial attitudes of adults in their lives." On the playgrounds of diverse preschools, toddling girls and boys identify themselves and others by race. They use these categories to include or exclude their peers: the black boy can't join the white kids in coloring; the white girl can't play princess with the Latinas.

Kids are not "colorblind," as many adults wish they were. There are whole areas of psychology devoted to the development of understanding race, but reading the scholarly books doesn't make me feel any better. What lingers in my mind is a sticker that my father stuck on our refrigerator: two chubby baby hands, black and white, holding each other tenderly. The words, "Nobody is born a bigot."

I grew up with that phrase, in a progressive household that extolled the virtues of colorblindness, open-mindedness, and believed that children were blank slates. I have no memories of talking about race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other common social grouping with my family—other than to say that everyone is equal and we love all. In third grade, when I participated in a Martin Luther King Day play, I decided that I was

part of the generation that would no longer see race. We kids would put the whole business behind us.

It is a warm September day in Washington, DC's rapidly gentrifying Columbia Heights neighborhood, where I've lived for the past three-and-a-half years. I am thirty-one years old and love the neighborhood, despite harboring my fair share of white guilt for being part of the gentrification process. The Victorian row houses are beautiful, with turrets and transom windows. The bars have reclaimed wood tables, sport excellent beer lists, and are filled with handsome, bearded NGO workers who speak multiple languages. Though it's fast becoming more expensive, it's one of the few places in DC I can afford rent.

But today I am tired, which is no excuse. I have commuted nearly two hours in terrible traffic from my teaching job in Virginia, which is no excuse. I have a thousand things to do, and there is no parking on my street, so I have to circle the block—all of which are no excuse for how I end up behaving, for the thoughts that end up running through my head.

The only parking spot is in front of my neighbor Teronica's house, the house with the Redskins flag that blasts music up and down the street at all hours, that hosts parties until four in the morning. Teronica is sitting on the porch with a friend, drinking whiskey out of the bottle.

Teronica is the queen of our street, and her porch is the gathering place for the black residents in our neighborhood. Walking down the street, I see her friends hanging out with her, drinking from plastic cups, laughing at her jokes. Teronica is pretty, with

high cheekbones and long, sinewy body. She may be in her late twenties or she may be in her early forties—years of drugs and heavy drinking make it hard to tell. She wears skinny jeans and big sneakers and often, over her swinging cornrows, a fedora.

The house with the Redskins flag belongs to her grandparents, who I suspect have owned it since at least the forties. Teronica lives there with them, the three daughters she is raising alone, and I don't know who else—the residents seem to change regularly. I assume none of them have jobs because they sit on the porch all day.

Late in the night, her booming voice calls to the black residents, "Party over here!" It's understood that the white residents are not invited. She climbs on cars and dances in the streetlight. She cranks the music up until it can be heard two blocks away. It makes the plates in my apartment rattle and brings me to tears in the dead of night.

Teronica sits, legs-splayed, on her porch, the bottle of whiskey held loosely between her knees. She knows my car. She raises her head when she sees me slow in front of her house.

I am not good at parallel parking; just yesterday I dented my car severely while trying to do it and now the brakes are making a funny noise. The idea of being watched while parallel parking, especially by Teronica, who calls me "baby white girl" and laughed in my face when I asked her to turn the party music down late one night, sends me into a panic. But this, too, is no excuse. I take a deep breath, and after about ten minutes of pulling in and out, cutting wheels left and right and cursing the whole time, I manage to park without further damaging my fourteen-year-old Civic. I lock the door and

get out of the car. Teronica is laughing hysterically. “Baby white girl, you’re a shit parker.”

“I know,” I mumble.

Teronica turns to her friend and says, loudly enough for the whole street to hear, “Girl can’t even parallel park!”

Every muscle in my body is clenched, and my torso jerks in small convulsions of fury and humiliation as I walk the hundred feet from her house to mine. I can feel her eyes on me. *I hate her,* I think. I can’t wait for it to snow, so they’ll stay off their porches. *I hate her.*

What I really mean is, *I’m scared of her.* Her sharp, jeering laughter follows me up the street and I clench my fists and shake with anger, but keep my head down, teeth gritted, with fear. The emotions merge in my body, swirling around each other into a mucky potion, turning me into someone I feel bad for being.

My neighbor Alex, a white man, my age, is not scared of Teronica. He kind of likes her. He thinks she’s wacky and weird but laughs her off. That’s what I should be able to do. I’m not as naturally outgoing as Alex, who is the charismatic center of my social group, who flails about to noise music, who always befriends the bartender. I think of the thousands of privileges I have as a white, not-in-poverty woman. Like Alex, I should not hate Teronica—I have invaded her neighborhood. I’m made uncomfortable by her culture of loud, late-night parties and playing music from the porch, but she was here first, so isn’t it her right to let her culture fly? It is not her fault. Nobody’s born a bigot. When did I become one?

* * *

In September of 2003, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* published an article titled "Relations Break Down Between U.S. and Them." Throughout the article, the opposition is only referred to as "Them" or "They": "the standoff is a result of Their continued economic encroachment, Their ongoing reluctance to allow U.S. military bases on Their lands, and the refusal of many of Them to speak English." Who is this Them? Is it one opponent, two, or a thousand? Does it matter? It is human nature, at least in Western society, it seems, to draw up us vs. them frameworks. The babies do it in their race-reflecting eyes; the children do it with playground cliques. Caroline Howarth, a social psychologist at the London School of Economics, writes, "Identities are always constructed through and against representations." To draw boundaries around our mind, our body, our social group, our gender, our race, our religion, our country, and to make ourselves separate from whatever is outside—this is part of human nature.

From the second my family pulled our blue Dodge Caravan with its fake-wood stripe on the side into the gray streets of Ogden, I was drawing boundaries. I glared at the barren brown mountains—they seemed like piles of crap, and anyone who thought they were pretty was an idiot. We drove down residential streets, looked at the tall trees, the rundown Victorian homes. The people that lived here were Utahns; I was a non-Utahn. I introduced myself to everyone that way. In the mid-nineties (and even somewhat today), Utah was provincial. The malls carried clothes that had been out of style in San Diego for

two years. The people spoke with an almost Southern drawl. Mrs. L&M's warning hovered. There were the strange Mormons out there. Just across the street, just next door. They would stifle me. I went in with my fists up.

My classmates widened their eyes and nodded when I told them that I was a "Californian who had to live in Utah until college." They took this identity statement as a mark of sophistication, not jerkiness. Adults smiled indulgently; after all, I was a child who had just been forced to move 1,700 miles.

Though Central Middle School peers were initially impressed by my being a "Californian who lives in Utah," after a brief discussion of Disneyland, they drew up their shoulders and asked which ward I attended. Quickly, I learned that a ward is, essentially, a Mormon church, where members go for three-hour services on Sundays. In Utah, there is a ward about every six square blocks.

I learned to say that I was not Mormon. I learned to anticipate the question. Some potential new friends appeared excited before asking, "So, which ward do you go to? It would just be so perfect if we go to the same one!" They looked crestfallen when I told them the truth. Other girls were warier. "Oh," they said sharply when I told them I wasn't Mormon, and dismissed me with no regrets. I was apologetic whenever uttering, "Actually, I'm not Mormon," for I knew a friendship had been squashed before it had even really begun.

My identity as a non-Mormon quickly supplanted that of being from California. After a few months, I started bringing up my non-Mormon status as soon as possible

when meeting new people. Until they knew, it was as if I were leading them on, letting them assume I was something I was not.

Even without Mrs. L&M's warning that Mormons were weird and would stifle me, I would have come to understand the importance and prominence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Utah soon enough. Today, Mormons make up about 62% of the Utah population and 83% of Ogden City's population. In the mid-nineties, it was higher. Mormons were everyone and everywhere, and even as a child I would have realized that speedily. But when you enter a situation expecting a threatening Them, having been warned about Them by someone whom you respect, how much more quickly, how much more strongly, do They appear scary to you?

* * *

It is three a.m. on a Thursday night in early November and the beat of the hip hop is thundering through my door, through my basement studio apartment, into my ears and my bones. I can feel the music thumping in the pillow that covers my head. I can feel it in my tears of rage and frustration that soak my mattress. I can hear happy, drunk party yelling, and laughter and whoops encouraging more shots, more hits. I cannot sleep, I cannot think. It seems impossible to me that anyone could do this, could be this inconsiderate. Babies live on this street. Elderly people live on this street.

Teronica hosts these parties every night it's warm enough, which is nearly three-quarters of the year. Sometimes I try to sleep with music or television on. I chew

melatonin by the handful, swig chamomile tea, and chug red wine. Sometimes those sleep-inducing methods help, but usually they don't. I love my neighborhood, but I have not consistently slept well since moving there.

I have lived in neighborhoods with loud partiers before, and I've always tried to be chill about it. I've taken pride in not being a killjoy; I like to have an occasional loud, debacherous night as much as the next person. On weekend nights, I make it a rule to not be annoyed before 1 a.m. But in those other neighborhoods, the parties didn't occur as often, and they were not consistently so loud.

In this neighborhood, it turns out, I *am* a killjoy. A few times since moving to Columbia Heights, I have gone outside after 1 a.m. has passed and asked, shyly, for Teronica and her friends to keep it down. Teronica has laughed at these requests. She has tossed her head back, thrust her long neck forward, and cackled. "Sure," she's said, rolling her eyes. "Sure, we'll quiet down. We know bitches can't sleep with those sticks up your ass."

Blushing, I've muttered thank you. On those instances, she's been mean, but my requests have sometimes partly worked. Usually, the party has quieted for ten or fifteen minutes before picking up again. Sometimes in those ten or fifteen minutes of beautiful silence I have fallen asleep.

I don't know why the other neighbors don't seem bothered by the parties, but as far as I know I am the only one who is maddened by them and asked for them to stop. I wonder if other neighbors have called the police with anonymous noise complaints, since it seems impossible to me that no one else on the street could be annoyed. I've always

sworn I wouldn't call the police on my neighbors. I've read too many articles about gentrification that advise never calling the cops. A good neighbor never calls the cops. It's not your place, say articles on AlterNet and in the Washington City Paper, DC's local alt weekly. Gentrifiers do not have the right to judge neighbors. You do not know their circumstances.

I'm not sure why, but tonight seems worse than usual. Even louder. It's even later in the night. And for whatever reason, tonight I cannot handle it. I'm going outside.

In front of my house stand forty people, laughing and talking and rapping along with the music. They are drinking beer and holding whiskey bottles. Empty cans are strewn across the sidewalk. Teronica is leaning against my car, talking animatedly. No one seems to see me as I walk toward them, shivering in my pajamas. My face is puffy from crying. I'm frightened, specifically because Teronica is mean and more generally because I don't like confrontation with anyone. My fear shows in my crossed arms, my quaking body, my wide eyes. I can hear it in my voice, which sounds angrier than I mean it to, as I say, "Excuse me."

Teronica looks at me and her posse follows suit. She pulls herself up off my car and puts her hands on her hips.

"I'm sorry," I say. "But it's three a.m. and I have to work tomorrow. I can hear everything you say and all the music. Could you please, please keep it down?"

Teronica lunges. "Bitch!" she yells, her face inches from mine. "What are you doing, coming out here? This is our street. We've always done these nights. Do you see anyone else out here?"

“I can’t be the only one bothered by the noise,” I say. “There are babies here.”

“And they’ve got no problem! My ninety-year-old grandma ain’t got no problem.”

“It’s really hard for me. The noise bothers me. I can’t help it. I can’t sleep.” I am crying again. “And I live here, too.”

“You live here but this ain’t your street.”

“But I live here! And if you don’t stop, I’ll call the cops.”

“You call the cops and you better watch yourself!” She pushes me and I stumble back.

“Hey!” I yell.

Teronica raises her fists. “Watch yourself!” she yells.

“Hey, hey,” says one of her friends, a tall man. He pulls Teronica back. “Sorry about her,” he says. “She’s had a lot to drink. We’ll quiet down.”

“Thank you,” I say and scurry back inside my apartment as fast as I can. They do not quiet down. I call the cops to complain anonymously, and the police officer has to ask me to repeat myself several times. She cannot hear me through my sobs.

Teronica knows it was me, though I complained anonymously. Every day for weeks she pounds her fists on my door with force that makes the art on my walls tremor. I do not answer and finally she stops.

* * *

The conventional narrative of liberal unity goes like this: learn about what the out-group has suffered throughout history, watch the words you use, keep and open mind, and, most importantly, spend a lot of time around them. Get to know them. That's how stereotypes break down, as well as our tendency to see out-groups as homogenous. Know the other as individuals, as people, and the prejudice will fall away. The website Wiki-How's article "How to Stop Being Racist (in 9 Steps)" includes some additional tips: Think about how it feels to be put down by a racist, read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and, practice anti-racism, once you've stopped being a racist yourself.

My parents sent my sisters and me to social-justice-oriented church, synagogue, and preschool. Loving kindness was a buzzword, as was tolerance, though really the goal was to embrace with love, not be merely tolerant. Flags and paintings of doves, rainbows, and glowing hearts decorated these organizations' buildings. We spent a lot of time visiting the Indian Reservations high in the desert hills. My parents had friends who lived there; my sisters and I swam in their pool complex with the big fountain. Through his work as a newspaper photographer, my father became friends with some migrant workers who picked the strawberry fields. His Spanish was good enough to make conversation. He brought my sisters and me to the fields and we plucked ripe berries from vines like it was a game. Our Spanish wasn't good enough to get very far with the migrant workers' kids; our dolls wore each other's outfits and gave each other hugs, but I never knew what those girls thought about anything. Though the research indicates that I was aware of race from infancy, I first remember being aware of racial segregation in fourth grade. My

sister and I began to attend a new arts magnet school located in what had been a struggling elementary in a poor, mostly Latino area. There were Mexican kids in my class, but they were a minority. I stood at the far edge of the playground, my face against the chain link fence, and gazed across the street at the run-down houses. Hispanic kids played ball in the yards. I wondered where they went to school. It must have been strange for those kids to not attend the school right across the street from their homes. To see us, mostly white, mostly middle class, kids playing foursquare and tetherball just behind the fence.

My mother is Jewish and looks it. She has big, curly dark hair and a Semitic nose. She received plentiful stares in both California and Utah, and was very aware of being a minority. As a result, she is open-minded and sensitive to others who feel excluded. She got along with my drug addict uncle who was regularly shunned by the rest of the family. She had several gay friends in the 1970s and ‘80s, when many gay men were still in the closet. Once we moved to Utah and “Mormons are weird” became a regular conversation topic, she maintained a loving kindness that I sometimes struggle to sustain, even though I have now had a Mormon best friend for fifteen years. In lily-white Utah, my parents had black friends and brown friends and gay friends and friends on welfare. They were new in town, and not Mormon, and liberal, and sought out others with whom they could have a good conversation and invite for dinner. My mother, I grew up thinking, had no prejudices at all.

But even she had her limits. When, in my early twenties, my family got lost driving through Chicago and ended up on the South Side, she locked the doors and

screamed at my dad to get us out of there. When I moved to Columbia Heights, my neighborhood in Washington, DC, she told me to call her every night and let her know I was safe. I couldn't believe that my mother, who had hitchhiked across the country four times, who had said nothing but "Have fun! Send pictures!" when I announced plans to backpack alone through Southeast Asia, would worry so.

The crime rate is high in Chicago's South Side and in Columbia Heights. That is why she was concerned. But fear like hers—fear like mine—isn't just about statistics. A complicated cocktail of rapid-fire worry goes into a panicked response when you realize that you're in a bad neighborhood, and sighting of a black man in a hoodie and sagging pants standing on the street corner becomes an understood sign for danger. In Columbia Heights, or Chicago's South Side, there's fear of being hurt. The statistics of rapes per year and the murders last week ring in your ears, as do the experiences of your own friends who have been robbed at gunpoint on the way home. Walking around lily-white Utah late at night, you clutch your bag close and your heart thuds and you hold your keys woven through fingers like brass knuckles because Utah's so empty, someone could hurt you and no one would see. Any woman walking late at night, anywhere, feels some fear. But this is more than a dark, empty street—this is a black neighborhood, and you've seen the news and the movies and the music videos with the men in gangsta clothes rapping about raping women, and all that conditioning tells you to put up your guard, too, to hold your keys tight and run for it because these black people are not like your black people—your friend Andrea with whom you discuss nineteenth-century American literature over wine, or your ex-boyfriend Conrad whose father was the former attorney general of DC,

or that guy Phil, with whom you made out but didn't date because he was deploying to Iraq and you didn't think you could handle it. And into your head creep the memories of being felt up on the Metro, of being pushed unwillingly against the wall at clubs. You remember that white men did those things, that danger is danger. But nonetheless, the fact remains that in your culture, those hoodies say scary in a way that a form-fitting suit does not, and you feel bad about wanting to flee but it's better to be safe than sorry.

I am not sure if "spending time around other races" and reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* can solve the problem of racism. I had a healthy rainbow of friends as a child. I grew up in an open, affirming atmosphere. I won a high school writing contest for an essay about loving kindness and how the people I knew of different races and religions and creeds had enriched my life. I sought out jobs in different cities and countries—and not just English-speaking or European ones—and made friends with locals and people from dozens of different ethnicities. When I moved to DC, I was giddy over the diversity in my neighborhood. But since moving here, I've been harassed and catcalled almost every day; my bike's been stolen and my car broken into; I've been followed and insulted and threatened by Teronica. One of the worst things humans do is make generalizations about the many based on our interactions with the few, and unfairly and illogically as it may be, Teronica has filtered into my snap-judgment ideas about black people. And now, after nearly four years of living in a predominantly black neighborhood, I hold my keys more tightly, I pay more attention to street lighting, and I bristle at the sound of traditionally black voices in a way I never did before. It's easy to practice loving kindness when you are in the majority, but what happens when suddenly you find yourself the

minority? I don't want the key to stopping prejudice to be staying on the periphery, to "get to know them" only while making sure you're still in the majority. I want all the bumper stickers on my parents' cars to be true: *Coexist. Love One Another. Loving Kindness is My Religion. Not My People, Not Their People—Our People. Nobody's Born A Bigot.* But perhaps those aren't my slogans. In reality, perhaps they are no one's.

* * *

Sociologist Fred Dervin writes, "Othering consists in objectification of another person or group or creating the other, which puts aside and ignores the complexity and subjectivity of the individual." Social identity theory refers to this process as in-gouping and out-grouping. I was eighteen when I learned these concepts, in my freshman year at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. I'd fulfilled the prophecy I'd set out for myself at eleven when I proclaimed I was a "Californian who had to live in Utah until I could escape to college." I sat in anthropology 101 and listened to my handsome young professor lecture about Edward Said. Said said: "we define ourselves in opposition to others." He said: "we think of people who are not like our group as Other." He said: "we exoticize the Other." And I thought: "That is how Utah works. I am The Other. Non-Mormons—we are all The Other."

In that classroom, much about the last seven years of my life clicked into place. That is the strange power of theoretical frameworks: once you apply them, everything fits; it might as well be a religious framework. The reason that I was desperate for

everyone in high school to know I drank coffee: I wanted the Mormons to exoticize me because I was The Other. They *needed* to exoticize me for the whole identity structure to make sense. They had to think I was strange and curious, so I wanted to be exotic in an interesting way. *The non-Mormon is a sinful heathen*, I wanted them to think. *Yet she remains nice and good at school. She drinks coffee, but she volunteers at the women's shelter*.

That was why I brought giant 7-11 mochas to school. "Want a sip?" I asked Marcie, a zealous LDS classmate and my friend. That was why I swore. "That trig test was such bullshit," I said loudly, hoping Rachel and Chad, other Mormon friends, would overhear. I expected nothing more than a sideways glance of disapproval, but it was a glance I relished anyway. My classmates' squirming meant that I had triumphed in being me. I craved those cocked, reproving eyebrows, those awkward silences—not because I wanted to necessarily make my friends uncomfortable, but because I never wanted them to forget: I am not you. I am Other.

The non-Mormons in Ogden were a diverse bunch: people like my parents, who moved from other, liberal states for work; a significant number of Mexican immigrants; Chinese families, descended from the railroad workers who linked the Union and Pacific together fifty miles from my high school. We sometimes intermingled, happy to have found each other. We had our own cultures, too, which we maintained, but at my parents' dinner parties it never took long for conversation to turn toward the Mormons. Walking by the Mexican parties in city parks, one could frequently overhear the word "Mormon"

amid the festive chatter and children's laughter. Local online forums reveal a lot of Utahns, with a variety of ethnic names, talking about the LDS Church.

"Their underwear looks so uncomfortable." "You know, they believe that you get a *planet* when you die!" "No one ever saw the golden plates but Joseph Smith—isn't that convenient?" Through my adolescence, I listened to my parents' friends restate the facts about Mormons we already knew so well, either to vent or to try to understand. Every non-Mormon date I've had in Utah has included this rehashing of Mormon facts, as has every conversation with a new, non-Mormon friend in Utah. We could not get the Mormons out of our heads, even when they were nowhere around.

There is a film called *SLC Punk!*, which, when it came out in 1998, became our mirror. Regardless of ethnicity, gender, or taste in music, we all saw ourselves in Matthew Lillard's dyed-blue hair. The movie, based on director James Merindino's real experiences growing up in Utah, centers on two teenaged punks in Salt Lake City in the mid-eighties. They party and interact with various Utah subcultures: the mods, the rednecks, the new wavers. Mormons don't play a large role but their presence is always felt, and though the subcultures fight amongst themselves, it is clear that what they are really fighting is the Church. Shooting up and moshing, they are screaming, "You have driven us to this—we have to do this because we are not you." Even if you hated punk, even if you never once did drugs—if you were not Mormon, it was one film made about you. It was about my parents, about all the university professors who came from New York and California for coveted tenure-track jobs, and about every Mexican Catholic grandma who somehow ended up living in the Mormon Zion. The movie depicts, in the

non-Mormon crowds, a rock band's dream audience. They mosh, they scream, they crowd surf, they dance, they sing along, they rock out. Real life musicians love playing Salt Lake. All that counter-culture has created the country's best audiences.

As it turned out, I misunderstood much of the theoretical intricacies that my anthropology professor tried to convey. For example, in Edward Said's concept of Othering, outlined in his 1978 book *Orientalism*, the Orientals do not think of themselves as Other; that is a distinction placed upon them by the Occidental colonizers. And his theory certainly did not suggest that Orientals embraced the imposed Otherness, going around with exaggerated Persian accents and wearing curled-up genie shoes. What I did, what all the non-Mormons did, was closer to rebellion, to bucking the majority, to fighting.

Futhermore, in social identity theory, the in-group is the one to which you belong and the out-group is the one to which you don't. In that sense, the Mormons were always my Other. And the non-Mormons, the group of others that I so clearly saw as Utah's logical out-group, was actually my in-group.

For me, the non-Mormons were "Us," the Mormons were "Them." But They had so much power. Mormons controlled the Utah government and were responsible for the state's severely restrictive liquor laws. My Mormon classmates spent one hour out of the school day at LDS Seminary, which was separated from our public school campus by 50 feet. Mormons controlled the Boy Scouts. Mormon culture dictated the standard dating etiquette, which novels were deemed inappropriate for school, when people got married.

Utah was theirs, its culture was theirs. Given their extreme dominance, it felt wrong to think of them as anything other than an in-group. Living on the fringes, identifying ourselves primarily as Not, how could that be anything but an out-group experience?

In his famous lord and bondsman dialectic, Hegel points out that the lord, who holds all the power, sees the bondsman as an other but is not concerned with what the bondsman thinks of him. The bondsman, on the other hand, because he lacks power, is stuck reflecting on his state of otherness. Even as I tried to assert my power by saying "fuck" around Mormons; even as non-Mormons watched *SLC Punk!* over and over again; even as we took pride in our moshing skills, we were reflecting on our otherness. And to a large extent, we let Mormons define who we were.

Hegel doesn't say this, but reflecting on a state of otherness can make you mean. It made me resentful. The SLC punks were not nice. And my persistent little jabs—my coffee flaunting and my swearing and my boasting about my strapless prom dress—were not nice. Identifying myself as Other encouraged my selfishness. It forced distance. It was self-protection. It "put aside and ignored the complexity and subjectivity of the individual;" from over here, with my nose in my coffee, I couldn't see my Mormon friends very clearly.

In-groups create stereotypes, both of their own members (auto-stereotypes, according to social identity theory) and of the out-group (hetero-stereotypes). Non-Mormons are: Not Mormon. Keenly aware that they are Not Mormon. Typically, they drink coffee and alcohol, might smoke cigarettes, use swear words, wear above-the-knee shorts and skirts, wear tank tops, do not go on missions, and do not marry in LDS

temples. They may also have sex before marriage, sleep in on Sundays, and not believe in God. They are more likely to be Democrats.

Mormons are: believers of the Mormon Church and followers of its dogma. The majority. Often blond. Often Republican. Kind of strange. Nice. Nicer than you.

* * *

As a white woman, I am a minority in Columbia Heights. It's a fact—there are more black people than white people, and probably more Latinos than whites, too. But while the concept of a minority as an in-group, as anything but Other, turns my mind in knots when I think about it in terms of Utah, Mormons, and non-Mormons, in Columbia Heights, I default to thinking that the literal majority is Other, that they are the out-group, because they are black. Given that race and gender—not religion, which is often less obvious to a stranger on the street—are the primary bases for discrimination in our culture, this shouldn't come as a surprise to me. But it does. I was raised to strive for colorblindness, after all.

In the United States, Mormons are a minority, as are African-Americans. In both Utah and Columbia Heights, the minority is the majority. But not being Mormon in Utah is different from not being black in Columbia Heights. With the exception of select neighborhoods, I am only a minority in Utah. African-Americans are a minority almost everywhere.

When I hear Teronica's jeers and shake with fear and rage, I understand why it was easier for me to accept Mormon cultural domination in Utah than to accept urban black cultural domination in Columbia Heights. Mormonism is a religion of niceness, of friendliness, and of politeness. That is not the culture of Teronica, of my Columbia Heights street. Mormons have suffered their share of persecution. It chased them across the plains, destroyed their early settlements and temples, and caused the murder of Joseph Smith. It's why Mormons are in Utah in the first place. Acutely aware of this history, Mormonism is a religion with a persecution complex—but it's not strongly felt in Utah. For by fleeing and establishing a place of their own, Mormons were able to wrest control from their persecutors. Holding that power, they were able to build a culture that values niceness, which brings its own set of problems to be sure, but is nonetheless easier to be around than a culture of anger. Safe in Utah, Mormons are able to forget for long stretches of time their minority status. But in this country, I think it must be impossible for blacks to lose sight of the idea that they are a minority. Neither, I suppose, can they forget their tragic history, from which there was no sprawling safe haven, no state of their own in the Rocky Mountains.

To establish a culture of polite niceties, let alone to establish one of tolerance, people cannot be diminished. And for families like Teronica's, the place they do have, this small neighborhood in the District of Columbia, is diminishing. Most of the black families that have lived in the neighborhood for generations, who have seen it through poverty and riots, have less money and economic prospects than I, and my fellow gentrifiers, do.

Non-Mormons may think Mormons are weird, but since the latter half of the 1800s, there has not been much violent tension between Mormons and the rest of America. The tensions between whites and blacks are tragic and ongoing, and those national tensions cannot be forgotten in my neighborhood. They can only be carried into Columbia Heights, especially given its current gentrification. Non-Mormons fight back against the Mormon majority in a silly way, sipping coffee obviously and shimmying revealed shoulders. Teronica fights back by mocking me, by threatening me, by painting me as an uptight white person. Recalling my crying jags brought on by the late-night parties and humiliation-filled parking jobs, it occurs to me that there's a kernel of truth in that assessment. I've always tried hard to be laid back, to be tolerant, but the truth is that on Teronica's street at least, I *am* an uptight white person. It's a truth I often bury, though, so that I don't have to deal with it, so that I can continue to chose to see my neighbors as Other, and myself as normal.

Nevertheless, I want Teronica to like me. Or at least to leave me alone. I want her to think I'm cool enough so that she won't threaten me again, and maybe even shut down the parties at midnight, knowing I hate them.

So Alex and I bring Teronica a bottle of wine. This is probably a bad idea, since she's a barely functional alcoholic, but we can think of nothing else that we know for sure she'll like.

She is, as usual, sitting on her porch, under the Redskins flag, smoking and looking out at the street. She's the queen of the neighborhood, sitting on her stoop,

surveying her domain. Alex calls, “Hey, Teronica!” with a smiling voice. “We thought you might like some vino.”

She slowly stands, stretching her skinny arms, eyebrows cocked skeptically. She laughs at our cabernet. “Thanks. That’s nice of you. But damn, you know the only real drink is whiskey.” She takes the bottle anyway. She gives me a long, smileless stare, blows smoke just to the side of my face.

To Alex she says, “Skinny white boy, you wanna drink?”

“I actually don’t like wine,” he says, sounding honest because it’s true; he’s a beer guy.

“That’s all right, that’s all right.” She turns back to me. My heart is pounding. “And I know you don’t want none. This girl, she don’t like to have a good time. I know she is *uptight*!” Each word is delivered like a punch.

Cowering will only make it worse, so I try to smile, sure I look sick, aware that probably the reason she hates me is because she can tell I’m scared of her. That, or because I’ve asked her to keep the parties down. I quiver at the memory of her charging toward me with her fists up.

When I don’t respond, she says, “Girl, you know I’m just messing with you.”

“I know, I, um, I know. It’s true. I’m pretty uptight.”

Alex says we’d better get going. She gives us hugs. I’m steel-rod ridged. Her arms are crackling with energy, as if with her thin limbs she could snap me in half.

Alex tells me not to worry about it. Nevertheless, I resolve to try and wave to Teronica when I walk by. I resolve to smile at the black men who catcall me, because it’s

part of their culture and I'm in their territory. I am the Other here, and it seems the least I can do.

There are limits to the tolerance that I have always valued highly. Everyone knows that. It's cultural relativism's classic flaw: some things are not worth tolerating. But is it really tolerance in the first place if, once you live in Their neighborhood, you can barely stand them? Cultural relativism assumes one accepts, learns, and then judges. But what if you judge from the get-go, because their music and their voices are so loud and you love quiet? There are limits to tolerance, but in particular, there are limits to *my* tolerance.

I have become familiar, even comfortable, with being the Other in Utah. In Japan. In Jerusalem and Dubai. I could deal with it in Uganda, where locals yelled, "Mugungu!" ("White person!") after me, down the street. But I'm not comfortable in Columbia Heights. Many of my DC friends have been robbed at gunpoint, by black men. Most of those victims have been women and gay men, Others in their own right. We all have our limits.

My mother's *Coexist* bumper sticker has the symbol of every major world religion (except Mormons) integrated into the calligraphy. But maybe we can't really coexist among all those groups. I don't want separation to be the answer, and am silently horrified that it is the best I can come up with now. But I also feel calmly resigned. You can't live next door to everyone. Maybe the best we can hope for is to live peacefully, in

loving kindness, with a few. A few who have cultures that mesh with our own, or our personalities. Maybe the primary reason I liked Japan because its culture values quiet.

After a few weeks, smiling at the catcallers gets easier. It makes me feel like a better, nicer person. Catcalling is demeaning, but I can't change the behavior of the people who do it. So I'm smiling. Tolerating it. Everyone has their limits.

Waving at Teronica and feeling her needle eyes on me is harder. I start parking my car up the street so I don't have to walk by her house on the way home. I check the weather obsessively for snow, so that she'll stay inside. I keep trying to wave when I do walk by, but we all have our limits.

And the comforting—disturbingly comforting—fact is that I won't live in Columbia Heights forever. One day, probably within the next few years, I will leave. I want to return to California. I want to marry, and bear children, and raise them near the ocean and the avocados, as I was. I'm going to enroll them in Spanish lessons. I'm going to take them to volunteer in the migrant workers' shelter near the strawberry fields.

I'm going to leave. I'm going to separate myself. I'm going to keep trying. I'm going to raise my children and hope they turn out better, and more loving than me. I won't tell them that loving kindness overcomes all adversity, but I will try to ensure they know when they're Othering. I will try to ensure they know that being someone else's Other doesn't make them less.

Hegel wrote, "The truth is in the whole." I don't know if I will ever find the whole, or see the world as united, the way I want for it to be. Loving kindness was good enough to prepare for Utah, but it wasn't enough for DC. I don't know that loving

kindness can transcend all barriers, but will try to find a place where I can allow it to transcend at least some. I want to be open-minded but not naïve, and I will keep working to find that balance—but more than likely, I will do that work in a different neighborhood.

EPILOGUE

While living in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates in 2009-2010, I kept a blog. I had never kept a travel blog before, but after a few months of life there, I thought I must begin. “This place is insane,” went my thinking. “I have to let people know about it.”

I didn’t explicitly set out to write negative things about the UAE. I named my blog “In the Hot Shade of Islam,” a phrase from Isabel Eberhardt’s nineteenth century travelogues from Egypt, where she lived for years dressed as a man. Unlike many other European travel writers discussing the Middle East at that time, Eberhardt did not consider the Muslims “dark savages” or heathens. She shunned her native Switzerland and adopted turn-of-the-century Islamic society as her own.

I wanted to paint Sharjah, Dubai, and the rest of the United Arab Emirates that I encountered in a thoughtful way. I wanted to express the place’s complexity, its sometimes troubling customs, its sometimes startling beauty. I wanted to investigate societal behaviors I found to be at times closed minded but other times sympathetic and welcoming. But with each new blog post, I felt that my topics and insights were all degenerating to one theme: The UAE is mostly bad, especially according to my tastes. I do not like this custom or that custom. It’s bad for x, y, and z reasons.

I am far from the only Westerner who quickly came to regard the UAE in this way. I have never heard so many people utter “I hate this place!” daily. Young,

progressive Westerners who were experienced and passionate travelers said that now that they'd lived in the UAE, they understood the West's desire to bomb the Middle East.

What was going on? How had we become people who said such things? And what were we going to do about it? I did not know how I, or my fellow suddenly hateful, xenophobic Westerners, would continue to be who we were. We had been travelers and travelers were not supposed to hate the places they visited. We had been liberals, but now we sounded like Fox News. We had come into the Middle East with open arms, and after having seen the culture it had to offer, had drawn them closed.

I know now that I have been haunted by these questions since childhood, when my family moved to Utah and I was confronted with a large and powerful religious majority that I grew to both appreciate and resent. These questions followed me to college, where I found dorm life and my peers a disappointment. They followed me through jobs in various countries, and to my current home in Washington, DC. These questions have followed me, but as their existence made me uncomfortable, I pushed them away unexamined. Until I went to the UAE.

I have been writing about the limits of tolerance, about othering and about defining one's self as other, and about the failure of our platitudes for more than half a decade now. By examining specific remembered moments from my life, I have tried to investigate these questions here. I was born into a family with a history of nomadism, and contain the blood of at least two cultures—Jews and Gypsies—who have lived, for much of remembered history, in other people's lands. With my family's move to Utah,

emersion in other cultures became my primary mode of experiencing the world. I became used to, and comfortable with, living in places belonging to other people.

A pattern emerged: The longer I spent around these other people, the better I liked them. Even if I was turned off by them upon first meeting, by living in close proximity, I grew into appreciation and fondness. That was exactly the opposite of what happened to the Westerners in the UAE. There, I realized that I can be prejudiced and racist, I can be intolerant, I can be hateful. I realized I had always had the capacity to be those things.

I had hoped to find, in this investigation, some insight into how to proceed. I wanted to discover how to still live a good life and be a good person in the face of these unflattering truths. I wanted to know how to still be the person I'd always thought I was—open minded, kind—without being naïve or false, pretending to like or approve of things I did not.

I have not made this grand discovery. There may be no prescription for life in the face of these complications. Most answers I have come up with are as weak as the platitudes that have failed me already: *Love conquers all. Inside, we're all the same*. That's true, except when our insides are so colored by aspects of our different cultures that they are no longer recognizable. The best I can do is offer another platitude: *Do the best you can.*

But, I think, doing the best you can requires considering these hard truths. Looking in the mirror and seeing the ugly parts of yourself, and trying to understand how they got so warped. Looking at them, and not sinking into self-hatred. Considering how they might be improved, and trying to improve them, while at the same time not losing

yourself. Upon realizing how critical I was of UAE culture, I tried to convince myself I loved it, that there was nothing wrong with any of it, that none of it made me cringe. Unsuprisingly, being dishonest with myself only made me resent the place and culture more.

I was similarly thrown when my boyfriend's flirtation with Mormonism forced me to realize that I was not as comfortable with the religion as I'd previously thought. I was dazed, no longer recognizing myself. But at the same time, it was as if I'd wiped away grime from a window. I could clearly see how I really was, how I really felt. And that was like letting out a deep breath I hadn't realized I was holding. I recognized my acceptance levels and limits, and though their balance may not be perfect, they are the best I can do right now, and that's okay. It has to be, because I'm human.

I will be returning to Utah again soon to live with my boyfriend. I am open to my personal balance of acceptance and disapproval changing; I hope it does, because I want to keep growing. But entering into a new phase of life in Utah is made easier with the knowledge of what I truly think. Whatever ways I change, and whatever growth does happen, will be enabled by that self-acknowledgement and honesty.

So though I cannot say much with certitude, I will suggest this: Do not lie.

BIOGRAPHY

Jessie Szalay is a writer living in Washington, DC.