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SHALLOW BONES

by

Brian Lee Cook

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Jennifer Sinor, Ph.D.  
Major Professor

---

Charles Waugh, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Benjamin Gunsberg, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Mark McLellan, Ph.D.  
Vice President for Research and  
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2017

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## ABSTRACT

Shallow Bones

by

Brian Lee Cook, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2017

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor  
Department: English

*Shallow Bones* is a creative thesis examining the culture of persecution within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints alongside my own story of persecution as a gay man. The religion rose through persecution as Joseph Smith, the prophet of the church, faced harassment and personal attacks from outsiders. His assassination spurred devote followers to move west, away from their persecutors. Settling up in the Utah territory, early Mormons feared invasions to the point that they murdered pioneers passing through Mountain Meadows. Murderers hid their wrongdoing, and the religion has institutionalized a pattern of persecution—blaming others for attacks while denying responsibility for choices that harm others. The recent suicide of Jack Reese, a gay teenager in Northern Utah, has shown how some in the religion continue to persecute others while burying the guilt for these acts.

My own story follows my own experience of persecution within the church. Self-hatred came from lessons I learned as a child, both within the church and from my families. I almost attempted suicide, but I decided to reach out for help. Unlike Jack

Reese's family, my family worked towards acceptance. Although the culture around pushed me towards despair, I learned how to accept myself.

These historical and personal threads within the creative thesis come together to show that Utah's violent history continues to push persecution onto people every day; however, I was able to find a way to love myself while surrounded by ongoing hatred. Even when the predominant culture actively discriminates against a group, people have hope to escape the cycle of persecution.

(90 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Shallow Bones

Brian Lee Cook

The research for this thesis examined historical and recent events embodying persecution both directed towards and perpetuated by the Mormon church. In order to convey the complexity of persecution, I examined stories told by church members, accounts written during the early years of the religion, and scholarly pieces written about the church's history. These stories revolved around the assassination of Joseph Smith and the Mountain Meadows massacre.

To portray the events surrounding the Mountain Meadows massacre, I performed a site visit, documented scenery, and discussed the massacre with others visiting the site. The great majority of my Mountain Meadows descriptions come from the visit. Similarly, I interviewed Alex Smith and visited sites surrounding Jack Reese's suicide.

Because site visits were planned in conjunction with holiday travel, any costs for this research were eliminated. This research allowed me to both create a historical argument about persecution while painting a vivid picture. Without this level of detail, readers would be unable to connect emotionally to the stories, nor would they be convinced of the dangers that past persecution perpetuates today.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Jennifer Sinor for guiding me through this thesis. During the course of the project, I experienced ecstasy and depression, joy and misery; Dr. Sinor repeatedly pulled me back to the middle, a place where I could focus and write. She has helped make sense of my mind's chaos. I also thank my committee members, Charles Waugh and Ben Gunsberg, for guiding me as I crafted my own writing style.

Most of all, I thank my husband, Justin Young, for his love and never-ending patience.

Brian Lee Cook

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## INTRODUCTION

### Topic

In junior high, I sat on the bus seat, a thin layer of padding covered with a mesh of fabric and dark green plastic. Tim Reese, sitting behind me, had recently learned about “gleeking,” the projection of saliva from a gland under the tongue. Tim was my personal bully, both in church and school, and he leaned forward, pressing his tongue against the roof of his mouth as a small stream of liquid shot out. As usual, it hit my face. For weeks, I had put up with him spitting on me in the bus or calling me a faggot at church. I stood up, turned around, and slammed a clenched fist square between the eyes. “Fuck,” he said, covering his face with a hand. I turned around, and his own fist cracked into the back of my head.

Throughout my childhood, I grew up learning that gays were terrible people there to destroy others’ lives. Scout leaders showed videos of gay men who abused boys, one who said, “If you give me a week with a boy, I can make him gay for life.” I learned about the dangers of gays, both physically and spiritually, believing that those who gave into their feelings would never reach the celestial kingdom—the Mormon equivalent of heaven. My outburst rage at Tim, then, was an extension of the hatred I had for myself. I knew that I was gay, and I was the enemy of all things good.

It wasn't until I was older that I learned that my family roots lay in a sort of sexual rebellion. My ancestors joined the Mormon church near its creation in 1830. Joseph Smith believed that marriage was essential to becoming a god and that everyone had a chance to achieve supreme divinity. Relying on Old Testament marriages of Jacob

and Abraham, the church incorporated polygamy into its practices. Understandably, the rest of the country pushed back, driving the followers to the Utah territory, a place where the government wouldn't touch them. The creation of this sexually oppressive state itself lies in deviancy.

At times, my own life has run parallel to that of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. We've both been persecuted. We've both run. Throughout years, we have both made secrets of our pasts, burying parts that we never wanted others to discover. But eventually, while the church continued to hide what had happened, I found a way to open myself up to live according to what I believed. This thesis looks at the chain of persecution, both my own and that of the church. Through my research and writing, I explore the following questions: what is the relationship between personal and institutional persecution? How does an institution become entrenched in persecuting others? What are the avenues out of persecution?

### **Structure**

The thesis contains three chapters, each describing a piece of Utah's political/religious history as well as my own life. Each chapter moves between two strands—one personal and one historical. In the first chapter, I focus on my life in Vernal, Utah, and the hatred I faced growing up for being gay. The second chapter includes the story of my mission, my own failed effort to change my sexuality, and the hatred I received from mission companions. The third chapter explores my post-mission life and the experience of coming out in Utah; that journey goes through self-rejection, leaving

the church, and attempting to reconnect with family.

The historical strand follows significant events in the Mormon culture. The first chapter begins with the assassination of Joseph Smith. As an event that demonstrates intense hatred for the religion and polygamy, Smith's martyrdom divides the religion from the rest of the country. The second event and the subject of chapter two, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, focuses on the growing paranoia in Utah that drives those in the church to persecute others. Finally, I discuss the recent suicide of Jack Reese in Mountain Green, Utah, in the third chapter, including how the reactions from the community show the results of persecution—members' need to remain separate, strong in their beliefs.

Both the personal and historical strands examine the role of persecution and secrets, especially relating to sexuality, in shaping my life as well as the religion. This structure—the intertwining of my life along with events in church history—highlights how history, even if unknown, molds every-day life. Other pieces of creative non-fiction employ similar structures, such as “The Boneyard” by Ben Quick, where problems of the past complicate the present. In that essay, Quick shows how Agent Orange—a toxin used for war by the military decades ago—has impacted his life by causing a birth deformity. My own story focuses on problems that appeared in my life through the Mormon religion. Together, the strands of my life and church history create an irony—while I am persecuted by the church, I also feel pain for the persecution of church members throughout the 1800's. Alone, my life story shows a very negative view of the church, while the church history alone lacks the connection to people's current lives. By bringing

these two together, the thesis suggests compassion for a religion known to persecute. It also helps readers understand how hatred can exist in a religion that preaches peace. The space between my life and the religion's history grants room for criticism and sympathy simultaneously.

### **Literature Review**

For this project, I have read in two distinct areas—narratives about sexuality and church history. Throughout the thesis, sexuality drives many decisions I have faced. The most impactful narrative I read was *Blankets*, a graphic memoir by Craig Thompson. The book follows Thompson as he grows up in a strict religious environment. He meets Raina at a Christian camp, but, while he falls in love with her, his church teaches him that sex before marriage is a sin. After breaking religious rules, he spirals into self-hatred. In one childhood scene, Thompson's father—finding a naked picture of a girl his son had drawn—tells him that Jesus feels sad. “Yes. Sad, because it hurts Him when you sin” (208). The art on the page shows Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane; he cries and turns away from the child. Thompson tries to follow the teachings, but each failure spawns more depression, more despair.

However, as Thompson explores his sexuality, he fails to find any sadness that he had been taught his entire life. Shortly after his first sexual experience, Thompson recalls the picture of Jesus praying in Gethsemane; instead of turning away, though, Jesus turns to him and smiles (431). Thompson feels no guilt, instead finding divinity in the woman he describes as “sacred, perfect, and unknowable” (429). This unexpected lack of guilt

shatters his worldview; rather than sexuality being evil, it can lead to spiritual fulfillment. Over time, Thompson finds himself unable to believe in organized religion. He explains this change to his brother, saying, “I still believe the teachings of God, the teachings of Jesus even, but the rest of Christianity... denies the beauty of being human, and it ignores all these gaps that need to be filled in by the individual” (533). Thompson’s true connection with Christ comes from outside of religion, and exploring sexuality is his first step to escaping self-hatred.

Similar to Thompson’s memoir, my thesis explores the intersection between religious history and my own sexual freedom; however, the historical events in my thesis along with my intended audience require me to dig deeper into historical explanations. Although Thompson may not specifically target Christians, he targets people who are familiar with Christianity. The Christian stories presented in the narrative are also straightforward; none require heavy explanations. Because of that, Thompson drops snippets of Biblical stories into his text without losing the reader. In contrast, my primary audience is outside Mormonism. While some stories in the religion have clear morals, the ones I discuss are filled with confusion, misunderstandings, and betrayal. Multiple points of view further complicate these stories; what some people inside the religion find holy can be seen as demonic by outsiders. Merely recounting history is not enough to find meaning; I dig into these stories, allowing them as much space as my own narrative in order to identify the cycle of persecution and give hope that the persecuted can escape.

While I grew up learning the history of the church, my early views came solely from within the religion—to me, evil men persecuted the church, and Joseph Smith was a

saint. However, violence against a group rarely appears without motivation, even if the motivation is illogical. John Krakauer's book *Under the Banner of Heaven* creates a picture of a corrupt Smith, one who "devoted much time and energy to attempting to divine the location of buried treasure by means of black magic and crystal gazing, activities he learned from his father" (58). Smith's religious ideas sprang from carnal desires rather than divine inspiration. Krakauer suggests that one revelation Smith had was "simply to persuade Emma [his wife] to shut up and accept his plural wives" (126). Even Robert D. Anderson, a former missionary of the church, agrees that "Smith used coercion and emotional pressure to persuade at least some of these women to marry him" (129). Anything questionable or illegal was allowed if God revealed it to his servants, but outsiders saw corruption in Smith's decisions. Here, violence did not come from outsiders angry at a perfect religion; it came from sexual abuse and coercion.

These rumors circulated near Smith's home, but many people still flocked to the message of eternal salvation through Christ. These people believed in a way I once believed—united in prayer, joy, and fear of persecution. They prepared themselves to die defending their religion. Even when polygamy ended in 1890, the president of the church at that time, Wilford Woodruff, stated, "I should have gone to prison myself, and let every other man go there, had not the God of heaven commanded me to do what I did do" (Church of Jesus Christ 293). Even if outsiders told these people that the religion came from evil roots, they believed enough to give everything for their cause. That fire that drove those original saints—passionate and terrifying—was the same fire that drove me to the edge of suicide; I would have rather died for my religion than lived as a sinner.

My story cannot be told simply from one side or another; persecution always has two sides, and finding a way to escape the cycle of persecution requires delving into both. However, leaders of the religion have historically refused to discuss the errors of the church. As Krakauer states at the end of his book, rather than opening up the annals of history, “The men who guide the LDS Church and its twelve million... do everything in their considerable power to keep crucial aspects of the church’s history in the shadows. How such a policy benefits either Mormons or Gentiles is difficult to understand” (365). For me, though, the policy’s reasons are clear; saints lose faith when they see the abuse, the murders, and the cover-ups by the church. When I learned these things, I felt betrayed by the religion I loved. Over time, though, the doubt from that betrayal saved my life.

Both the weaving of Thompson’s life with religion in *Blankets* and sharp criticism of the Mormon church through Krakauer’s *Under the Banner of Heaven* allow me to dig into the complicated nature of personal and institutional persecution. These two have been inseparable in my life; I only learned how to love myself again after I uprooted my beliefs. Like Thompson and Krakauer, I write ugly truths to explore agony from persecution, but my thesis aims to give hope to those currently trapped—a new life exists after escaping this pain. As Thompson writes, “How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface. To make a map of my movement—no matter how temporary” (581-582).

## **Conclusion**

Both Joseph Smith’s martyrdom and the Mountain Meadows massacre share fear that comes through persecution. Initially, Smith and his followers faced the majority of

these attacks; whether or not the claims of Smith's actions were true, a mob brutally murdered him in a jail. Continuous hatred led to more fear and violence from the saints, deepening the cycle of persecution. Both sides murdered. Both suffered. Although my own life played out on a smaller scale, I found myself trapped in my own cycle of hatred, my religious identity despising my sexuality. Institutions are slow to change, but there is hope in individuals. If nothing else, my thesis suggests there is hope for all of us, even if it is one person at a time.

## CHAPTER I

### PERSECUTION

Ashley Church rested about a hundred feet from the foothills of the Uintah Mountains. The building itself was made of a dark red brick and was surrounded by grass and parking lots. It wasn't anything impressive, but, as a kid, I thought it my only link to the divine. "You know our church is the only true one," said my mother one day. I misunderstood, thinking that rather than talking about the world-wide Mormon religion, she in the holiness of that one single building. To me, the building that could barely hold a hundred people at a time could lift people to the celestial kingdom, and everyone else was just out of luck.

At eight, I was baptized. At twelve, I was named a deacon. This wasn't the same designation that other churches bestowed on people who served decades for their religion. It was a position of service for the young who passed sacrament around the congregation and visited homes to gather charitable donations—fast offerings—for those who had less. Still, deacons receive the Aaronic Priesthood—not the power to move mountains, but the power to serve. Stories of miracles appeared all throughout the history of the church, of rivers freezing to save a group of saints from a mob, of seagulls swarming Salt Lake City to save the people from a plague of crickets. Even if I wasn't able to perform these, I believed in miracles.

The story of Joseph Smith grabbed me at a young age. When he was fourteen, Joseph saw the arguments between various religions about who was right and who was

wrong. I always imagined preachers outside of cabins, raising the Bible in the air as they yelled about hellfire and damnation. Videos made by the church about the event followed that same line—most of the preachers looked angry, and the quiet ones were still jerks in more subtle ways.

One day, out of desperation for his own soul, he decided to follow the book of James that encouraged a man to seek wisdom through God. He walked out of his house in Palmyra, New York, across wooden fences and fields until he found himself alone in a forest. As depicted in hundreds of artistic renditions, he knelt down on the ground and prayed. Suddenly, a dark force took over him, suffocating him as he fell on the ground. Joseph tried to call out, tried to reach God through prayer, but the power strangled the words, muffled his voice. Despair enveloped him.

However, just before he was about to give up, a light appeared, cast itself down towards the young boy. As he said in his own words, “I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.” The dark force disappeared, and in the light stood God and Christ. There, he asked what church he should join. There, Christ told him to join none, that they were all abominations to God.

Christ said, “They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” Over several years, Joseph received more revelations, books, and guides to help him restore the church of the New Testament, the one created by Christ and his apostles.

I often daydreamed of how it would be to go through everything Joseph experienced—the surrounding darkness, the hopelessness, all with the sudden connection to the divine. At a young age, I decided that I was willing to suffer if it would mean knowing the kindness of God.

As a twelve-year-old, I sat on the cold wooden pew, waiting for the moment to walk up and take those silver trays filled with Christ’s flesh and blood. I looked around at the lights, simple chandeliers with frosted rectangles of glass hanging from the ceiling, the wooden frame with strips of wood leading up, resembling a pipe organ. This small church had been built before the standardization of Mormon churches, the copied and pasted designs that would quickly spread over the next fifteen years across the country. The church wasn’t beautiful—the walls were just cinderblock painted white, and all the furniture was either wood or metal—but I loved the building. I had heard stories of the insides of temples across the world filled with giant paintings of Joseph Smith, a baptismal basin balancing on the backs of marble oxen. This church, though, was the greatest beauty I had seen.

My mother sat at the organ, playing the hymn “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” one that tells of a man who repeatedly found suffering people—one begging for food, another condemned to death. Each time, this man gave what he had to help, even when the person might have been evil. At the end, Christ revealed himself to the man, reassuring that his acts showed his faith. “Fear not,” says Christ, “thou didst them unto

me.” The hymn taught that the acts of Christ’s followers help people equally. The way I helped the poor or the suffering showed my love for Christ.

By my side, Jake—a kid who grew up to be my grandfather’s mortician, black hair and back fixed straight with an infused metal rod to complete the look—asked, “What’s a faggot, anyway?”

“You know,” said Brandon, a person who I’d never see again after graduating high school. “A fag is a stick. A faggot is a bunch of sticks.”

The whispering between the two grew throughout the music as we waited for our small, sacred duty.

In two years, I moved from the deacons quorum into the teachers, the group for boys between fourteen and sixteen. A year later, I was called into church for an interview. I knew it would be for a leadership position within the youth group—the previous leader had left, and I was the oldest.

“I wanted to call you to be the president of the teachers quorum,” said Bishop Alexander, short white hair circling his balding head. While much of the church was beautiful, this office terrified me—white cinderblock walls, worn white curtains, cold metal folding chairs. The whole room felt like the designer believed the war against Satan was literal. It was uncomfortable, not just because the room felt uncomfortable, but because the bishop was also supposed to be the eyes of God—the judge of Israel. Bishop Alexander’s eyes were terrifying. Somehow, with every question, he stared with his bright blue eyes at me, the irises illuminated brighter than the rest of the room. Through

the years, every bishop at the Ashley Second Ward had those glowing eyes. In my youth, the eyes of judgment were blue.

He looked at me with those eyes and asked, “Do you have a testimony in Jesus Christ?”

That one was easy. “Yes.”

“Do you believe that Joseph Smith was a true prophet?”

“Yes.” I knew the hard questions were coming.

“Do you have any problems with masturbation?”

“No.” This was a lie, of course, and I could feel those blue eyes staring into me.

He didn't move on to the next question. The religion taught that bishops served as judges of Israel, people who kept the saints in line with the teachings of God. In a way, they acted as an earthly representation of the final judgment. I knew that lying to him was lying to God. I looked down, away from those eyes, and said, “Yes.”

His eyebrows furrowed, but the blue eyes still stared into me. “You know that this is a serious sexual sin,” he said. “It's breaking the law of chastity. How many times a week do you do it?”

“I, uh...” I looked down, away from him. I had never talked about this part of my life, the sexual drive that led me to masturbation. My mind constantly swarmed with sexual desire, with my own condemnation.

“A couple times a week?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. A lie. It was much more often.

“Okay,” he said. “Do you have any problems with pornography?”

“No,” I said. Another lie. I discovered nudity through the encyclopedia at our house, the naked statues sculpted in ancient Greece. The male body fascinated me, especially the perfect way that the muscles seemed to flex in the firm marble. This led me to online searches on WebCrawler late at night where I looked for naked men, and I found much more than a teenager had ever expected to find. I closed the window, deleted the internet history to try and cover it up, but once a month or two, I crept back on and looked, amazed and ashamed at the way the human body worked.

“Well,” said the bishop as he jotted some words in a notebook, notes about the specifics of my problem, perhaps a permanent record for other bishops to see in the future. “You’ll need to stop taking the sacrament for a few months. I’m sorry, but at this time, we can’t have you as a leader for the quorum.” I looked up, my face streaked with tears. I had disappointed the bishop, disappointed God.

I left the office and sat on the stiff couch in the lobby, waiting for my parents to pick me up, never asking why I was filled with tears that day. For months, I ushered the meetings, sitting away from family so they wouldn’t see me skip the sacrament and feel my shame.

Ever since the First Vision—the name Mormons have given to that moment in the woods—people mocked Joseph for his story. Pastors especially thought it was a lie, remembering the scripture in Exodus, when God talked to Moses and said, “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.” There, in the small town of log cabins, Joseph Smith grew, translated the *Book of Mormon* from ancient gold plates. The

story he transcribed said that centuries before Christ, prophets in the Americas hammered records into the malleable metal, relating the righteousness and the wickedness of the people. The book described the resurrected Christ visiting those people, a heretical statement in most Christians' minds.

But as the church grew, the hatred from other religions mounted—the Bible was the word of God. As Revelation said, “And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” Driving out Joseph Smith, for them, was a way to drive away the devil. The church moved to Ohio, then Missouri. Fights grew between Mormons and the local residents, a group massacred several church members at Haun’s Mill, and the governor of Missouri drafted an extermination order against the saints. Again, they fled to Illinois, founded Nauvoo in a swamp where they believed others wouldn’t attack them, introduced polygamy into the religion. William Law and Robert Foster, an economic counselor and a general of the Nauvoo Legion, accused Joseph Smith of proposing to their wives. In fear, Joseph excommunicated both from the religion. Law and Foster created the Reformed Mormon Church and printed a newspaper to expose Joseph for what he had done. Everywhere he ran, rumors appeared about the evil he had done—rumors about his marrying teenage women, his attempts to assassinate the governor of Missouri, his alliance with the devil. Fear drove him to declare martial law, and the neighboring town of Carthage sent out a militia, threatening to conquer Nauvoo unless Joseph surrendered himself along with his brother, Hyrum. In fear, he fled across the Mississippi River.

But for some reason, Joseph returned and surrendered. Perhaps he knew the destruction that awaited Nauvoo if he stayed hidden. Perhaps he knew that, though his intentions were good, he made enough mistakes that the majority of a nation had risen against the religion he founded. Either innocent or guilty, Joseph walked with his brother Hyrum to Carthage Jail, charged with treason. Days later, a mob would assassinate both.

Spotlights glared onto me as I stood on the bare junior high stage. In the early afternoon, a group of us worked on the set for *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. This musical, based on a German fairy tale, told the story of twelve princesses who escaped their castle nightly to dance, ruining their shoes with each expedition. This infuriated the king, so he promised if a prince discovered where they went each night, he could marry the princess of his choosing. The princes fail, sing some Elvis-esque love songs, and still win the girls in the end anyway because one of them was smart enough to trail them.

That day, though, we had nothing to work on. I stood on the stage with several of the junior high tech crew, waiting for something to happen. Josh Gondek, a squat red head and child of a science teacher, grabbed a thick piece of rope. “How about we put this around your neck,” he said, a slight grin on his face. I felt everyone’s eyes on me—Chad, the twig who punched me the year before for talking to him; Cassidy Lee, the thick giant who regularly pumped staples into his own arm. There was no point in even refusing them. The idea was in their minds, and I knew it would happen.

“Sure,” I said.

I felt the soft nylon caress my neck, the knot tighten its grasp—loose enough to breathe, but snug. “Lay down,” said Josh, and I got on my back. The rope pulled against my throat, more, until my body slid against the dull gray paint of the stage. The lights twirled above, shining down through curtains and scrims. I cannot remember the tightness of the rope, the burn on my fingers as I gripped the length under my chin. All I remember is how beautiful those lights looked.

In the Uintah Basin, the great majority of the population was Mormon. In school, we all treated each other like we were brothers and sisters of the church, and the outsiders stayed quiet about religion, blending in as much as they could with the majority. During those years, I knew I was different—I liked boys. But I stayed quiet, tried to go along with what everyone said. Even if it meant eating lunch alone. Even if it meant agreeing to putting a rope around my neck to be dragged around a stage.

I couldn’t hide at church, either. Leaders told me to join the basketball team, even though I was a chubby kid who struggled to hit the backboard with the ball. Roland, my bus driver who yanked kids’ ears and smiled, coached the team. Behind his wide-rimmed glasses, the wrinkles on his face looked threatening as if he enjoyed the pain that people felt. “Brian,” he said, grinning behind those glasses. “You’re on skins.”

We divided up, and I stood in the church gym, my pale body exposed. “Nice boobs,” said Brandon, flicking a nipple with his finger. I said nothing—no outbreaks, no fights. Instead, I played the game. Rarely did I touch the ball. Most of the time, even when I was the only one open, I watched the others play, shoving each other to the

ground as they went for baskets. I tried to blend in with the sidelines, crossing my arms over my chest to hide my nude body.

On multiple nights, I lay in my bed, sounds and light from the television creeping in through the crack below the plywood door. I couldn't sleep. People at church and school rejected me, and even though the church taught solace from persecution, I still felt the eyes of God on me. The bishop, the most righteous person I had known, told me I was a sinner, and I couldn't go to the celestial kingdom—heaven—the way I was. But no matter how much I tried, I sinned. In the bed, I lifted my head, paused, and slammed it back against the headboard. Up again. Down. If I could knock myself out, I could sleep without worrying. Harder. The ache cracked through my head, but I was still awake. Harder, and the pain wrapped around me, a small atonement for my mistakes.

In that room colored blue, designed for the strong boy my father hoped for, I beat myself, trying to shut out the noise of my mind. And because of the roar of the television, no one heard my head bang against the wall.

Our brown van bumbled down the roads into the city of Nauvoo. Whump. The sound came from the front, something that we were hitting. Whump. Whump. “What is it?” I asked.

“Mayflies,” said my mother. “Hundreds of them.” The van stopped, and when I got out, those giant bugs buzzed around everyone. I had never seen anything like that before—swarms of large insects, completely harmless but everywhere. “It's because of

the Mississippi,” my mother said, pointing out to the expanse of water, something never seen before by a boy from a Utah desert.

We stopped at a gas station, and my father scrubbed the windshield with a squeegee. The layers of insects caked the hood and windshield of the van enough that no matter how much he scrubbed, a smudge of a mayfly remained.

Half an hour away sat Carthage, a town that had become a memorial to Joseph Smith’s martyrdom. The jail lay in an isolated city block surrounded by fresh grass. To me, Carthage Jail looked more like a house than a jail with two stories and light brown brick. We walked in, and while some of the lower rooms had iron bars, they also had a smooth wooden floor, chairs, beds, fireplaces. If I had to be in jail, I thought, that would be a wonderful place to stay.

“And this,” said the tour guide, an older woman wearing a pioneer-style dress, “is where Joseph and Hyrum Smith were.” She left off the obvious—that a mob attacked and murdered them. The door itself had two holes, one near the door knob, the other about chest level for an adult—bullet holes, perfectly preserved in the polished wood. I rubbed the hole next to the knob with my finger, feeling the void torn in that night of violence.

“I thought they had Joseph’s blood,” my mother said. “Last time I was here, they had glass on the floor to protect it.”

“They removed that years ago,” said the pioneer guide. “They didn’t think it was appropriate.” I had wanted to see the blood since my mother had talked it up before.

Turns out that church leaders decided the blood was likely someone else’s, not Joseph’s. I imagine the removal had many reasons—the impossibility of knowing whose blood it

was, the grotesque remains of violence, the desire to remember Joseph's life more than his death. Perhaps this further romanticized the martyrdom, leaving a bloodless room for a guiltless prophet. At that moment, though, I was disappointed I couldn't see the blood, the big attraction to a kid.

"And this," said the guide, moving our attention, "was the window that Joseph fell from." People in church always talked about this with reverence—his last words, "O Lord my God," said as he fell out the window, tumbling to the mob below. The room grew quiet, and I could feel the power of the message, that someone gave his life to give us what we had. I walked over to the window, put my hand against the glass—thick, wavy, distorting the light that passed through it. Everything outside looked like a blur.

Dakota, the scruffy Pomeranian my grandmother gave to us as a gift, barked as he stared at the cars racing past the house. My father cranked the wrench inside the Chevy, a truck glowing with bright blue spray paint better suited for graffiti than for vehicles. I knew nothing about cars, but as a teenager, even I knew that it was a terrible paint job. I stood handing over screwdrivers, socket wrenches, monkey wrenches, nuts, and bolts. Dakota jolted back and forth across the lawn. Father lifted out tubes, tubs, and wires, metal parts falling to the cement with a clatter from fumbling fingers. The dog barked, paws crossing the line between grass and pavement.

"Dakota!" He heard my father's voice and, with ears lowered, crouched as he slid over. Father stepped away from the truck and grasped the dog's neck, raising the thing up into the air until they stared, faces an inch apart. I could see the terror in the canine's

face, the slant of eyebrows combined with a curled-up body hanging from the mechanic's hand. "What the hell is the matter with you?" my father yelled. He pulled his arm back then lobbed forward.

I'd seen cats thrown before. As a kid, I enjoyed watching as they flew through the air and wriggled their way to a graceful landing. This dog, though, was helpless away from the ground. His body tumbled with the gyroscopic force of the throw, and as he hit the ground, he rolled in a lump. Slowly, the dog stood up and stared at my father as he walked, still curled, away. I was unsure if Dakota knew the reasons behind the violence or what needed to change to avoid pain, but he knew fear.

Years later, I would sit on the green couch as my father sank into the cushion, spending his evening ritual watching Peter Jennings. The room lay dark, hints of the sunset creeping through closed blinds. Usually, my father fell asleep on the couch, snores coupling with Jennings's aging voice, but that night something caught his eye—something from the news report or a thought that came with no provocation. "You know," he said without looking at me, "when I was in high school, we didn't tolerate gays. We ran them out of the city." His giant body—twice my weight—sank into the couch, a frame that shuddered to hold him. "We didn't put up with them," he said. Unlike Dakota, I understood what he was saying.

As Mormons, we tried to keep from glorifying humans. We criticized Catholics for their Virgin Mary, the immaculate virgin, the woman who carried prayers to Jesus. We taught that Mary and the saints were idols who removed attention from God.

But our Joseph Smith took church members' questions and pleadings to God. Sharing the name of Mary's husband, Joseph was our maculate intercessor.

My room as a kid was crafted for a boy. The carpet and curtains were blue, and the cover over the light held various sports figures around the square shape. In bed, I often looked up at the baseball player and umpire, the awkward basketball player shooting a hoop into white air, the soccer guy kicking a mostly circular ball. To me, this was just a part of a boy's room, something that felt normal.

As the only boy, I spent most of my childhood in my sisters' room. How my parents gave into those clichés—the room flowed with pink carpet and frills, carefully curved dressers, princess blankets. Rarely was the room not filled with toys—stuffed Carebear that, when squeezed, would send snow blowing around its clear nose. A white pony with its rainbow mane butchered when Melissa was in her hair-cutting stage. Rainbow Brite's sprite Twink, full with rainbow-striped legs and white fluff. A plastic stove, rubber food, and Barbies. Lots and lots of Barbies.

One day, back when I was barely in elementary school, my mother walked into the girls' bedroom, the carpet blanketed with the frilly, bright toys. She called my sisters and me into the room and said, "Look, I want you to have this room clean before your father gets home. He'll be angry if you don't." I looked up at her, hands on a waist that widened from four births. I knew she was serious, but as happens with children, I forgot the possible repercussions and, instead, got lost in the world of toys. Kari and Melissa, mirror blondes despite being four years apart, galloped around the room with ponies.

Stephanie, the tottering child excited for kindergarten, tripped over toys as she chased Melissa around. I played with a racecar smaller than an eraser, used so much that I used a bread-tie to keep it together. Somehow, my childhood infused with sports and manliness meshed with this feminine world filled with frills and fancies.

I felt the door slam when my father walked into the house. Every step made the floor throughout the house shake. Soon, the stomping grew louder until the thin door swung open. He stood, the body of a mechanic filling the only exit with muscle and sunburned skin. To me, he was the great symbol of strength. He had built the house that shook from his weight, lifting walls up rather than paying for someone else's labor. Once, his arms picked up a snowmobile and placed it into the bed of a truck. His entire body had been shaped from work.

"I'm going to count to a hundred," he said, sitting on the bottom bunk. The bed groaned under his weight. "If the room isn't clean by then, I will spank each of you." His voice rang out firm with each number as I scrambled across the room, scooping up toys— toys with pink clothes and bright smiles. I didn't know where anything went. I stuffed toys away, off into dark bins in the closet, into drawers and shelves. Fifty. The room had hardly changed. My sisters flew across the room with eyes stretched open in panic. Eighty. I could see the pink carpet in the room, but the piles of toys still rose high. Ninety. There just wasn't enough time.

At a hundred, he said, "Line up." I stood in front of him as he took Kari onto his lap. She screamed, and the rest of us cried as we watched those metal-bending hands fall.

In 1839, five years before his imprisonment in Carthage Jail, Joseph Smith surrendered himself to the militia in Missouri, atoning for violence that had broken out between Mormons and other locals. He wound up in Liberty Jail with his brother Hyrum and several others. The dungeon room held no beds, no lights—only small slots in the wooden walls to see the outside. Straw covered the floor and, during the harsh winter, became the only warmth the religious prisoners could find.

Down in that room, Joseph received revelations from God saying, “And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.

“The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?”

In the moment of Joseph’s deepest despair, God chose to rebuke him. Christ, a perfect being, had taken upon him the pains of the world’s sins in the Garden of Gethsemane. Joseph took the sins of his people, perhaps the sins of his own mistakes, into the frozen dungeon of Liberty Jail. He wasn’t a savior, but he could pay penance for the law.

When he again surrendered to authorities, two or three days before his assassination, he told others, “I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer’s morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all

men. I shall die innocent, and it shall yet be said of me—he was murdered in cold blood.” The saints were ready to follow Joseph to the end of their own lives, but he showed them a drastic change—he would be captured and killed to help his people escape their own persecutions.

The modern church tends to forget the mistakes that Joseph made, but his death for the saints allows some level of redemption. As John wrote in Revelations, “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.”

The Latter-Day Saint seminary sat across the parking lot from Uintah High School, perched on the closest land possible without being on government property. The building shows patterns of more modern church buildings in Utah—gray on the walls and floors stiff enough to scruff skin, foldout partitions between rooms. The school allowed students to cross over one class period a day and learn about the spiritual rather than the secular. My instructor, Brother Wheeler, stood at the front of the room in a suit much too large for him. I imagined he may have filled it one day, but with his stick arms and circular glasses, the sagging brown suit made him look constantly tired.

“It’s important to think about life after high school,” he said a few weeks before my graduation. “Everyone, write down in your journals something that you would one day like to do. Set your expectations high. Think of what you really want in life.” I leaned over my desk and stared into the journal with Christ on the front. What did I really want to do with my life? Until then, people my age at school and church had tormented me,

and I didn't find much comfort at home. I even hated myself for my sins and my lusting for men. My thoughts drifted to Joseph Smith, the man who was hated by many, even friends, who mobs shot and killed for doing what he believed. Many said that those who died in the service of God would be forgiven of sins. On the piece of paper, I wrote, "I want to be the prophet."

After pens rested, Brother Wheeler said, "Go ahead and share it with a neighbor." I gripped the flimsy journal. This was something personal, and I realized how ridiculous it would sound. Only the holiest men, those who were worthy to be in the presence of God, could ever end up being a prophet. Even then, they were called by God. No number of prayers or holy acts could lift me to that communion with the divine.

"I put that I want to be a basketball player," said some jock to me. "What did you put?"

"I, uh..." I closed the journal, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. "I wrote, uh, that I want to be the prophet."

He chuckled then turned to the front. Good. I didn't need to explain it to him. One person could know my stupid desire.

Brother Wheeler smiled, pushing his glasses up with a skinny finger. "Let's have a few people share. Who would like to?" The class grew silent. Questions made seminary classes more silent than even prayers—most people were simply there either because of family expectations or because they could sleep through the class without being punished. Sometimes, the instructors didn't take their own class seriously. One day was dedicated to cutting Brother Carter's hair with a Flowbee, a vacuum with a razor inside to

trim hair to a single length. I saw people kissing, teenagers passing notes in class, an instructor tackling a student with bright red rage in his face, but few people wanted to risk the vulnerability that comes with spirituality.

“Brian’s answer was pretty good.”

“Brian,” said Brother Wheeler, his thin face grinning from behind glasses. “Go ahead. Tell us what you wrote.”

I looked down at the desk, the smiling picture of Jesus Christ staring back at me. No one would understand. “I want to be the prophet.”

Brother Wheeler tilted his head to the side and squinted. “Well, that’s not exactly how things work,” he said. “It’s a calling from God, not something that you can work towards.” And I knew that.

But still, I wanted my own moment like Saul, the man who killed the prophets, who hated until he heard the voice of Christ calling out to him, “Saul, Saul, why persecuteth thou me?” For three days, he fell blind. Ananias, a disciple, heard the voice of the Lord call to him, commanding him to heal Saul in the house of Judas. The disciple knew Saul’s power to imprison those early saints, and he doubted what he was told. The Lord said, “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

In the summer heat of June 1844, Joseph Smith sat on the second floor of Carthage Jail with his brother Hyrum, John Taylor, and Willard Richards. Earlier that day, an elder of the church visited the jail. Before leaving, he pulled out a thin gun—a pepperbox six-shooter. “Would any of you like to have this?” asked the elder.

“Yes,” said Joseph. “Give it to me.” He slipped the gun into his pocket and waited in jail with the others.

Outside, as the sun started to slide down in the afternoon sky, a group with faces painted black stormed the jail. John Taylor saw the group, ran with Hyrum to the door, and threw his body against the wooden door to keep it closed. The first bullet pierced the wood near the doorknob—the same place I would touch years later. Hyrum and John sprang back, and another ball blasted through the middle of the door, pierced Hyrum to the left of his nose. He yelled, “I am a dead man,” and he fell to the ground.

Joseph rushed to Hyrum, then jumped towards the door, pulling the slim pistol out of his pocket. He pulled the trigger, again, six times. Three failed to fire, but three bullets discharged, killing two men and wounding one. However, the mob forced the door open, trapping Willard Richards behind the wood—in essence, saving his life. John Taylor ran to the window when a bullet pierced his thigh. He collapsed against the window sill, fracturing his pocket watch. Three more bullets struck him, two in the leg and one in the arm, as he crawled under the bed.

Joseph ran to the window, attempting to jump out, when three balls struck him—one in the chest, two in the back. The man who had worked to build a kingdom to God, fell from the window with a final shout— “Oh Lord, my God!” The mob swept out of the

jail down to Joseph, and Willard Richards looked out the window, determined, as he said himself, “to see the end of him I loved.”

Later, the church announced the martyrdom of the Smiths, saying, “Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it.” People believed it—he sealed the testimony of the church with his blood, and nothing, not even the threat of death, could remove what he had done to give them the gospel. The outside world and the letter of the law murdered the holiest person they knew.

Graduation day, the high school gym buzzed with red and white gowns, awkward caps that clenched at teenage scalps. Around me stood the entire spectrum of students—students who put everything they had into studying, students who showed up to school hung over and received a week-long suspension. Crowds of my own friends from theatre flocked through the place, putting on the awkward robes with creases that, after a year folded, could never be ironed out. I walked to the door, ready to leave until the ceremony later that night. A hand grabbed my shoulder, and I turned to see Nathan Hansen, the man whose face smiled even when sad. “I didn’t want you to go before I gave you something,” he said, grinning.

“Yeah?”

He handed over sheets of white paper, stapled with double-spaced writing. “I wrote it for a class,” he said. “I wanted to apologize for everything. I think you’re a great

friend, and you shouldn't have gone through everything you did. Don't read it until after graduation, alright?"

"Alright." I slipped the essay into the cover of my yearbook. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I decided to do what he asked. I walked down the long, quiet halls of Uintah, down to my rusted yellow car.

That evening, I stood under flying red and white mortarboards sailing, cascading down on heads. Families stormed the field, filtered through until we all became a mesh of clothes and colors. I stood, talked to a few people but mostly waited for my own family to come down. More people pushed by, the crowd leaving no room to walk. I slid through sweaty bodies, looking for the blonde hair of my father towering over the rest of the crowd. But he wasn't there. I dug through the sweltering masses to the sidelines, the bleachers, looking for any of my family. No one. Later, my father would tell me they left because I didn't go to find them, that it was my fault they didn't stay to congratulate me. I understand now that my father was impatient, and he'd eventually learn how to think of others, but at that time, I stood alone in the middle of crowds full of hugs.

I walked back to my car, sat down. From my seat, I could see the road through rust holes in the door, smell the history of the seats. Cars drove around me, vacating the parking lot. I pulled out Hansen's essay and read. Throughout, his essay talked about how everyone made fun of me, how the masses decided to nickname me "the pervert," how another Nathan—the one relative I thought had become a friend—continued to push me away throughout our high school years. He also wrote of one person, Jason, who tried to defend me. All of these things, the names and the defenses, the groups organizing for and

against me, happened without me knowing anything. In just a few pages, I learned of enemies I thought had been friends.

Before, I had imagined that I would leave to a mission, leaving my friends behind as I served for the church. I knew that, returning, some would be gone, but I thought some would still remain. However, the cars around vanished from that parking lot, and there I sat, the night celebrating my biggest achievement, more alone than I ever thought I could be.

Shortly before his death, Joseph Smith dreamed he stood with his brother Hyrum on a steamboat anchored in a bay next to a great ocean. Whether by bell or voice, an alarm called out, warning the two of a fire. The water appeared dangerous, but both jumped out of the boat, hoping to walk across the water. They sank to their knees, but, slowly, they stood on the smooth water, pants soaked. The two men walked west, away from the flames that engulfed the boat and, soon, the old town by the bay.

Slowly, the two lost sight of land, walking instead across the wide, calm ocean, accompanied only by the sun and sky. A voice called out, and they turned to see their brother Samuel, a man who would die a month after Joseph and Hyrum, also upon the water. "I was lonesome," he said. I imagine the three told stories of their childhood and the forests surrounding their old home in New York. They forgot the troubles of life. Soon, the three brothers saw land and a city with gold and silver towers to the west. A boat launched and took them on board and carried them to the glowing land filled with music, old friends, and the light of God.

I dreamed of the glory that I could have if I died a righteous man.

I sat in a swing at the Vernal City park with a few friends, the only ones who I spent time with after graduation. Gwen and her sister Kat sat in the sand. They were Baptists, and I didn't feel like I should be talking to them—others taught me that Baptists tried to corrupt church members, destroy the church. However, compared to those in school, these two actually wanted to be with me.

“Brian, I have a question for you,” said Gwen, a girl with her short hair slightly spiked up, a small stud in her nose. “Are you gay?”

I stared down at the sand. In the warm summer, I knew I would be leaving soon—to Brazil, to a mission. There, I would have a chance to change my desires and redeem myself. In the park, this girl asked a question I had never answered to anyone, one that named my condemnation. But I opened my mouth. “Yes,” I said.

“Oh my gosh,” said Gwen. “We knew it! Didn't we know, Kat?”

“We knew it!” said her sister, long brown hair draping her shoulder.

“We have someone you have to meet, Brian.”

A week later, I found myself in the back of a car as it rolled up Dry Fork Canyon. Trees lined Ashley Creek, one of the rare sources of water. By that time of summer, the creek had dried up, exposing the round gray stones making up the bed. The car pulled into the parking lot. Across the street, the steep flat canyon wall bore the American flag with the quote, “Remember the Maine,” a slogan that had been painted shortly after the USS Maine sank in 1898, a major event that began the Spanish-American war. Over a

century later, Vernal continued to maintain this memorial to those who died at the hands of enemies.

We walked into the trees, away from the road. The sun sank behind the mountain, the flag on the hill. Five of us sat at the picnic table—Gwen, Kat, Stephanie, myself, and Matt, a bisexual man. Gwen pulled out a pen, set it on the table in front of me. “We didn’t bring a bottle,” she said. “Just give it a spin. You have to kiss the person it lands on.”

I picked it up, twirled it on the uneven table. The pen nicked a rough piece of wood and flipped, pointing straight at Matt. Here it was, the biggest rebellion of my life. My heart pounded as I looked at him. We both smiled and leaned in. For a first kiss, it was bad—stubble covered his whole face, and my lips burned as I pressed mine to his. Everyone focused, watching close.

Time ended, and we pulled back. Matt spun the pen, kissed someone else. For an hour, every pair of lips touched—man to man, woman to woman, woman to man, sister to sister. I learned quickly how to touch lips, closed at first, then slowly begin the movement. Tips of tongues danced against each other, light and playful. With each person, I held their arms as we kissed, letting the evening stars creep over us in the canyon park. This was against everything I knew, but still, I couldn’t stop kissing whomever the pen indicated.

I sat in the back of the car as we drove back to Vernal, thinking about what had just happened. In a couple months, I would spend two years working for the church, and here I was with people who had questionable sexualities, with two sisters who kissed

long and hard. “You’re going to hell,” I said to them with a laugh. I believed, though, that I would go with them.

## CHAPTER II

## SECRETS

The last Sunday before flying to Brazil, I stood at the podium, dressed in a white shirt and tie purchased at Missionary Mall—a Utah store that specializes in awkward clothes that last a month before seams fall apart. The simple glass chandeliers still gleamed, this time over everyone else. That Sunday, the congregation filled the pews with cousins, aunts, uncles, family members I had rarely seen, some who may not have even been family. I talked about the missionary effort, the new lessons that had been created for missionaries to get them out of stale, rote memorization, the lessons that I would teach to hundreds of people throughout Southwestern Brazil. Besides the kids a few rows back playing with coloring books or the few teens off in the corner sleeping, everyone listened.

I talked about *Preach My Gospel*, a book recently created to change the way that the lessons of the church were taught to new people. Before, missionaries memorized lessons word for word. While they knew what they needed to say, the strict format of the lessons on Christ and the church kept missionaries from seeking what people really needed. If I taught to a homeless man on the street, for example, perhaps I would need to talk more about the power of prayer. No matter what I taught, the message would focus on Christ, the essence of the church.

I sat down, and Bishop Batty stood, walked to the podium. “Dear brothers and sisters,” he said, “I want to be blunt with you today. Men.” He took a breath and looked out over everyone. “There has been a growing problem with pornography recently. The

General Authorities of the church have taught for years about its danger, and yet I do not see this becoming any less of an issue.” I sat behind him as he stared out across the crowd, across all the family I ever knew, and told them of the evils of pornography, evils that I could trace back to my teen years, through those chiseled bodies that appeared on the computer screen late at night, bodies I had never told anyone about.

I can’t fathom the hate the saints must have felt for those who murdered Joseph and Hyrum, the hate they had for the Missouri government legalizing the killing of any Mormon in the state. Church hymns for years after sang of the pain and terror of the pioneers who left for Utah—“Come, come, ye Saints, no toil nor labor fear; But with joy wend your way”—but they never mentioned the hatred that divided the church, the disagreements of who should head the religion.

Brigham Young, a man in his forties who had acted in the church’s leadership, spoke to a congregation with a strong voice. Orson Hyde, an elder of the church, said, “As soon as he opened his mouth, I heard the voice of Joseph through him, and it was as familiar to me as the voice of my wife, the voice of my child, or the voice of my father.” Masses heard their martyr, Joseph, through Brigham. Some saw his body shift, the hair lightening, the face thinning down to the sight of their beloved prophet. There stood their new leader, one who would lead them to the Salt Lake Valley, a place they believed would be without sorrow, without fear.

Nobody knew about my problems from home nor how I grew up hating myself, hoping that some act of righteousness could free me from the sins that plagued my mind. In the Missionary Training Center, I had spotted one way to kill myself—jumping out the window of my room would lead to a seven-story fall down the courtyard, landing in the middle of a walkway surrounded by trees. Every missionary would be able to open their windows and see me, hear the shouts through thin wooden shades if they didn't look. Everyone would know what happened there. But this was a passing thought, one I knew I wouldn't try. People who committed suicide were evil. They trampled God's will, and all the good they could do was abruptly cut off with darkness. Even though I fantasized about dying, I knew things were better while alive. I would have time to change.

I stood in the shower, small signs on the wall and door reminding people, “Se-banha por dez minutos”—shower for ten minutes—“Não urinar no banho”—don't urinate in the shower. The warm water poured over my naked body. Then, I sang. In a room full of naked men, each divided only by a thin plastic wall, I sang out, my voice echoing through the room, out the small window into the tropical air. I sang from my childhood, from Disney, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*, from the movies that made me feel better. The movies had gruesome endings for children—Eric stabbed Ursula with a ship's bowsprit, and the hyenas devoured Scar. Despite the terrors that each hero faced, good eventually conquered evil.

“That's pretty gay, Elder Cook,” said someone next to me, but I kept singing. Soon, other voices joined in—off key but strong, flowing out the window, down into the

courtyard filled with trees. They didn't know my secrets, but perhaps through serving with them, I could learn how to destroy my own evils.

The Utah desert stretched out in front of the pioneers. The sight was terrifying—cactus, cedar, and sagebrush lay scattered throughout the dry land. In the middle of the valley sat a lake saltier than the oceans. There, Brigham Young had said, “This is the place”—a place where no one would kill them, where no one would try to take their land. Finally, they could love and marry as they pleased.

However, in 1857, an army marched across the Great Plains under President James Buchanan's command, set to disrupt the religion's rule on the land. Brigham Young was furious. He wrote, “For the last twenty-five years we have trusted officials of the government, from Constables and Justices to Judges, Governors and Presidents, only to be scorned, held in derision, insulted and betrayed. Our houses have been plundered and then burned; our fields laid waste, our principal men butchered while under the pledged faith of the Government for their safety, and our families driven from their homes to find that shelter in the barren wilderness, and that protection among hostile savages, which were denied them in the boasted abodes of Christianity and civilization.” Mormons had a reason to hide in the desert—the massacres and persecution became great enough that hiding became the only way to ensure peace. The federal invasion into Utah's theocracy, then, drove the saints through expulsion, murder, and shame, just as they had faced decades before moving west.

In the same statement, Brigham Young declared martial law, stating that “no person shall be allowed to pass or repass, into or through, or from this Territory without a permit from the proper officer.” The territory entered a stage of defense. No one could enter. No one could leave.

I sat at the computer in the top floor of the internet cafe in Pirajuí and typed away in limited Portuguese. “Presidente Burns, eu tenho um problema.” President Burns, I have a problem. As a group of a hundred and fifty missionaries, we all fell under the authority of President Burns, a man in his fifties who has spent most of his life in the Salt Lake Valley. For three years, he lived in Londrina, the center of our mission, sending missionaries from one area or another. As a man called by God, he was both responsible for inspiring and punishing. He had the authority to send missionaries home if they had problems.

And I had a problem. I looked around to make sure no one else could see my screen—no, only kids playing some version of *Half-Life* I had never seen. I typed away, filling the digital screen with my problems—attractions, pornography, the kiss in the shadows of Remember the Maine Park. The small screen held the secrets of my life, secrets that could end up sending me home.

Weeks later, at a church, I walked into a small room where the tall man sat—President Burns, a man who shared those blue eyes that stared into souls. “I have a scripture for you,” he said as I sat down. I wondered if it would be Leviticus, one about stoning gays, or Romans, where Paul condemns homosexuality. Instead, he read about

the missionary compared to a laborer, saying, “Therefore, thrust in your sickle with all your soul, and your sins are forgiven you.” The man with a crooked smile grinned at me. “If you work your hardest, it doesn’t matter what happened in the past. You will be forgiven, Elder Cook.”

I’m sure the other missionaries could see my puffy eyes, the streaks of water on my cheeks as I walked out of the room, my footsteps crossing the stiff tile of a foreign church. Only in Brazil, thousands of miles from the people who struck fear in me, was I able to share the fractures in my soul. As I walked out, I felt my self-condemnation leave for a time. Perhaps I would continue my mission without falling into sin. Perhaps I would come back home a changed man.

The Baker-Fancher party began their trek to California in Arkansas, heading west along the Cherokee Trail through Indian territory. They passed through Kansas, Colorado, turned north along the Rockies until reaching South Pass, Fort Bridger in the Nebraska Territory. South, the group trailed through Salt Lake City, down through the Old Spanish Trail—a path used since the 16th century for trade between California and New Mexico. South they went past Castle Rock, past jagged stone landscapes jutting up, an alien site to those who had never traveled through Utah before. A stop in Cedar City, and they continued.

Unknown to them, Brigham Young had instituted martial law during their time in Utah, forbidding those who entered the territory to leave. As the group neared the border, members of the Mormon Militia dressed as Paiutes, attacking the party. For five days, the

party kept the wagons circled in the Utah desert. Members of the militia—through carelessness or pure paranoia—started to believe that the Baker-Fancher party had seen that their attackers were white. If any of the party survived, news would spread of Mormons attacking innocent people.

On September 11, 1857, two members of the militia waved white flags and walked down to the party. I imagine they gave hope to the pioneers. “We can help you out. We’ve made a deal with these Indians, and if you’ll come with us, we can make sure no one else gets hurt.” The militia came down, pairing one soldier with each man, and they walked out across the sagebrush-covered desert through a valley, surrounding hills dotted with cedar trees. At some signal, each soldier pulled out a gun, shot the men they escorted, assaulted the women and children.

Over five days, the Mormon militia murdered over 120 people to cover up their guilt.

Most of the city of Bauru was flat, but I often walked up through Jardim Bela Vista, along roads that seemed to stretch up endlessly. The cars lining the roads looked costlier than the houses, area walls covered in graffiti and topped with broken glass to keep thieves out. We passed churches—Congregação Cristã, Israel em Chamas, Igreja Quadrangular. That day, I walked with Elder Silva, a squat Brazilian guy with the face of Alfred E. Newman. “You know how blacks couldn’t hold the priesthood?” he said, body barely able to carry him up the sidewalk. “Well, you see, in the premortal life, there was the war in heaven. The people who sided with God got to come and live on earth, and the

ones who sided with the devil became demons. But the people who were just sort of in the middle? They became black people.”

“I’m not sure that’s right,” I said.

“Of course it is! Come on, they received the curse of Cain to show that they were less faithful than others.” I stopped at one of the gates and, as is customary in Brazil, clapped to try and get the attention of one of the residents. Elder Silva was stupid, I decided—just one of those who will think of any theory that explains discrimination, that ritualizes the act of putting people down. He had been a member of the church for just a year before becoming a missionary, so he probably latched onto anything he was told. Only years later did I find those speeches, a century or more old, read from pulpits that said the same thing—that black people were cursed for being less faithful in the premortal life.

Church leaders modified the teachings, changed books, and hid the discrimination in history. Silence became a way to deny events in the past; if new generations knew nothing about the questionable history of the church, the history would slowly change into a haze, then rumors from outsiders that, to a faithful saint, could never be true. Forgetting the past became a way to protect people’s faith, keeping the devil and the church completely separated.

No one answered our clapping, so we kept walking up the uneven sidewalk. “You know, Elder Cook,” said the plump Brazilian who stood shorter than my shoulder, “before you got here, the mission was pretty corrupt.” A smirk crossed his face. I had heard stories like this before, but I knew how much some missionaries liked to spread

rumors. “There were a couple elders who decided to go rent a motel room. They called a hooker and everything. President Leal—you know, the one who led the mission back then—felt something wasn’t right. He traveled hundreds of miles just to get there and managed to find the motel. He spotted the prostitute and knew, just knew something was up, so he followed her. She knocked, and the missionaries opened the door. Before they could close it, though, President Leal burst into the room! They could have been there for weeks—the whole room was filled with drugs and pornography. The two were on a plane home the next day.”

I didn’t completely believe the story, especially with the implications of a church leader following prostitutes around, but I knew that three years previously, President Leal was sent by the church to clean the mission up, that he sent over 75 missionaries out of 150 home, that some parts of the mission completely closed down because of what those nineteen-year-olds had done.

In 1859, Major James Henry Carleton entered the valley where the massacre took place. Across the land lay skeletons, several clearly remnants of mothers holding their children. He, along with the 1st U.S. Dragoons, dug a mass grave and buried thirty-four victims. On top of the grave, the group piled up a cairn of stones, placing a cross on top that read, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”

Two years later, Brigham Young traveled to the site. Upon seeing the message of the cross, he said, “Vengeance is mine, and I have taken a little.” His men tore the memorial apart, leaving the place in ruins. Throughout the next century, people built

monuments and destroyed them. Eventually, in 1932, The Utah Pioneer Trails and Landmark Association put a marker on the site, bungling the facts with false information about the origin and leader of the pioneer group. Another monument, in 1990, appeared on the hill overlooking the valley where the massacre took place. With granite brought from Arkansas, this monument lists the names of those who died. Still, this monument stands, one of the only pieces of remembrance now found without the Mormon church's name engraved on it.

In 1999, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints committed to building a permanent monument to those who had died from the hatred and paranoia of an early territory. A backhoe rolled along the trail and stood. Eventually, it pushed down, scooped up a bucket a dirt. Then another. The red dirt glowed in the open air. More dirt, and the operator saw something that he didn't expect—something light gray mixed in with the soil—broken bones, bones with bullet holes. The machine stopped, and people carefully dug down, exposing those shallow bones in a shallow grave. Twenty-nine bodies were found centuries later by the organization that murdered them.

The blue house in Brazil where I lived had a particular stigma. Missionaries believed that it was cursed. "Don't go in the room at the end of the hall," said Elder Johnson, a man whose chin and gut both rivaled those of Jay Leno. "We've heard noises come from there. It's haunted." I walked to the end of the hall and opened it up, flipped the switch, but no light appeared. Armoires, cabinets, drawers lay across each other in

piles, and everything had a thick layer of dust. I imagined the place was filled with spiders and cockroaches. The door closed, remained closed for weeks.

Others told me of the demons that filled the blue house. One night, while one missionary tried to sleep, another stood up and went to the living room. The sleeping missionary heard a sound, woke, noticed his companion was missing. He got up and looked into the living room. There stood the other missionary, naked as he masturbated in the moonlight. Suddenly, their eyes locked, and the nude man rushed at him down the hallway. The first missionary slammed the door closed, pushed a bed against the door to keep the possessed man out. “You see,” said one elder. “He was gay and trying to rape the other missionary. He might have been possessed, you know. When you’re evil, it’s possible for demons to just enter you.”

Most days, I was too busy thinking about teaching, walking, how we were going to help António or Filipe or Benedito get over their drug or smoking or pornography problems. Leaders tell missionaries to get lost in the missionary work and forget anything that happened before. But on some preparation days—days designated for shopping or playing sports—I hid in my room and focused on me, on my sexuality, on the conflicts I had with the teachings of my religion. Once, my hand slipped low, under the white garments I wore as a missionary, garments there to remind me of Christ, to keep the influences of Satan away. I daydreamed of those chiseled bodies, of the way hands would feel across my body. Elder Silva slept as desire pumped through me, and, in the throes of ecstasy, I stained the clothes that protected me from sin.

One morning, I woke up and saw Elder Silva sitting on his bed, staring at me. “You okay?” I asked.

He stared, then said, “You sat up in your bed last night and said some terrible things. You talked about the ways that you would murder people here. You said that everyone here is damned.” The sweat on his face and the panic were real. “You have devils in you,” he said.

I walked down the icy slope that seemed more like a luge track than a path meant for walking. A woman in her fifties gripped onto a wooden handrail. A fall could easily mean a broken bone or, at least, a sore rear end for a week. As I slid past her, she looked at me and laughed. “Just taking the slow boat,” she said.

“Sometimes that’s the best way,” I called back. Soon, I climbed up the other ramp to the site. Outside the cast iron fence, a flag pole stood high, the rungs of the flag clanging against the metal. That was the only sound other than the small trickling of a creek. I pulled the gate open and walked into the monument. Inside lay the cairn, stones cemented together so that hands couldn’t tear it apart. On the ground rested a tile that said, “Here lie twenty-nine victims of the Mountain Meadows Massacre”—the same twenty-nine that were uncovered with the backhoe. All around the monument itself, plaques described how The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints created the monument, the history of the place without mention of who tore it down. The story focused on the church’s president, Gordon B. Hinckley, who dedicated the site. None of the markers at the burial site talked about the people, who they were, or who killed them.

An older man walked in and looked down at the plaque. Confused, he glanced at me. “Have any idea what a cairn is?”

I walked over and pointed at the cemented rocks. “That right there. Originally, they just made a pile of stones to show where the massacre happened, but this is what they have now.”

“Well, that’s a funny word, cairn,” he said with a chuckle.

“Say, do you know what happened here?”

He furrowed his brow and looked down at the plaque. “Not exactly,” he said. “I know some people died here. It’s really tragic. But you know, the bishop down at my ward was part of the church group that did research on this place. They say it’s the most accurate account out there.” He smiled as he talked about the church’s role with reconstructing the monument, seemingly oblivious to how history was created in the first place. However, I could barely blame him—only in the last couple of decades had the church acknowledged its role in the massacre, and even then, some people claimed that the pioneers had deserved what they received. But slowly, even if the monument itself lay barren of information, it still has introduced the question of what happened to those few visitors who made the journey.

Walking around Bauru, Elder Silva called me a fag. He came from the southern part of Brazil, an area known for *gauchos*, the country’s cowboys. He had been baptized into the church one year before becoming a missionary, acting on the intense faith that accompanied his conversion. Most Brazilian missionaries had similar stories—they

learned of the church, joined, and wanted to help bring others to Christ. People living in Bauru warned me that *gauchos* were confrontational. Even so, I doubt Elder Silva understood the connotations of the word “fag,” the depth of hatred embodied in such a short phrase. After all, this was the word missionaries used to say that someone was homosexual. Brazilians understood the prefix “homo,” the term “gay,” but “fag” was something people on the streets wouldn’t understand. This form of logic gave birth to the use of “fag” on the mission; people overhearing a conversation wouldn’t know what it means.

As we walked up Rua Rui Barbosa, Elder Silva wiped the sweat from his forehead, his entire face dotted with moisture. He looked over at me. “You remind me of someone on the news,” he said. “He’s a little faggy, you know. Try saying this.” He raised a hand into the air, cocking his wrist as he spoke. “Hey, cutie.”

Rarely did Elder Silva try to connect with me. Most of the time, we walked around the city silently, only talking when we needed to discuss an upcoming lesson or a specific person in trouble. That day, he smiled as he talked. I didn’t care that he used slurs that applied to me; this was a chance to find some friendship. “Hey, cutie,” I said, my voice lifted higher than usual as my hand flapped.

“That’s perfect,” he said. “Remember, fags here like to use the suffix ‘inho’ for everything. Try it.”

I did. “Aquele gravitinho é tão bonitinho.” That tiny tie is so cute.

“Yeah. You’re sounding like a true faggot.” His voice lost some of the bounce, the levity he had a moment ago. I thought I just didn’t understand him because of the

cultural barrier. I bounced along the street, my voice squawking out “inho”s. I didn’t know at that time that others spread rumors that I was gay, that this might have been a test to see if I was. But as I talked, his responses grew harsher. “You’re a moron.” “You’re going to hell.” What he said was no longer a joke.

I grew quiet.

“Come on, faggot,” he said. “Say something.”

“No.”

He shook his head, and we walked around, covered once again in sweat and silence.

After being together for months, he said, “I hate you, Elder Cook. It’s taking all my power to not punch your face in. I do not want to talk to you or even pretend to be your friend. We are here just to do work, but we will never be friends.” We wandered the streets, walking, not talking. I couldn’t talk, not to strangers or to him or anyone else. The only way I could hide from him was through silence, and, across the city, we walked without conversation.

That day, the bishop invited us to lunch at his house. We sat down at the table, and the bishop—a wrinkled Brazilian man—said, “Elder Cook, would you say the prayer?”

I nodded. I couldn’t speak, but I nodded. As I opened my mouth the tears I had restrained for weeks poured out, and I sobbed while blessing the rice and beans, the household. I wanted to be away from this, the unbearable pain that came from hiding,

from the pattern of bullying I faced through my entire life. Opening my mouth released all the pain I had.

After, I opened my reddened eyes. The bishop looked at me, his grey brow furrowed. “Is it something we said?”

A brown-haired kid stood at the bottom of the hill that overlooked Mountain Meadows. “Who are you two dudes?” he asked.

My partner and I laughed. “We’re just traveling,” I said, walking past him to the steep path up.

“It’s a long way up,” he yelled behind us. “Don’t blame me if it’s a long way up!”

We circled up the crude pavement, reading the trail markers placed by the LDS Church along the way. Here, away from the monument, these signs told a clearer story of the events, pointing out the place in the trail where the siege began and the open field where the slaughter occurred. One plaque read, “Complex animosities and political issues intertwined with religious beliefs motivated the Mormons, but the exact causes and circumstances fostering the sad events that ensued over the next five days at Mountain Meadows still defy any clear or simple explanation.” Here, a sign created by the church acknowledged the church’s involvement without explaining why. Even though the language hid any of the causes, it still admitted a layer of guilt, something that took over a century to happen.

At the top of the hill stood the granite marker with the names of those who died carved deep into the surface. I sat down on a bench to look through the names of the train

wagon captain's family. Alexander Fancher, age forty-five. Eliza Ingrum Fancher, thirty-two. Then the list of children. Hampton, nineteen. William, seventeen. Mary, fifteen. Thomas, fourteen. Martha, died at the age of ten. Sarah G., eight years old, barely old enough to be baptized in the Mormon church. Margaret A., seven years old. The whole family died, attacked for doing absolutely nothing but searching for a new home, just as the Utah pioneers had done ten years earlier.

A flash of blonde hair burst in front of me. Another. Two girls circled around the benches, yelling and screaming. "Maybe those two guys over there will take you," said the father.

"You'd have to pay me to do that." I joked, yes, but I was angry—angry at the way that people visited, how they looked at names and numbers as writing on the wall, how they seemed to disassociate these things from murder. No one tried to quiet the kids down at this memorial.

As they left, I looked closer at the granite wall's list of names, the wall that had been shipped all the way from Arkansas in memory those who died. The writing, overlooking the sagebrush valley that once ran with blood, had no mention of what the Mormons had done. The church needed to tell their story; the vast majority of the plaques ignored any of the hatred that led to mass murder. The monument, however, raised the names of the innocent higher than everything else.

I ended my mission in the city of Londrina, the former coffee capital of the world. Again, there were more streets to walk down, more clapping outside of gates, more

people with drug or cigarette or marriage problems who wanted to listen to us but not change. Even more, the stories from members grew out of control. One family we visited, members of the church, told us, “Yeah, our daughter kissed Elder Harris a few months back. He was so handsome! After his mission, maybe he’ll return and marry her.” Other families told of men who walked into church with more than one wife even though polygamy had been banned in the church over a century ago. I heard of affairs, of drunken church leaders, of tithing embezzlement and fraud. Everyone who was a member over a year had stories to tell.

Some people believed that boys served missions because they were gay. In Brazil, the term “missionary companion” held a strong sexual connotation closer to the English “partner.” On my mission, I walked with thirteen different partners, some who may have known my attraction, who may have feared me because I might change them. I walked with these unwilling partners, my skin starving for touch. I lived off of handshakes and hugs. My desires and touching myself was enough of a damnable offense, but I wouldn’t go further—I wouldn’t be the missionary who returned early, a badge of shame that lasted for life.

But as I walked around, I told people that they could be freed from sins. “I know that the church is true,” I said, feeling nothing left for the church. “I know that Joseph Smith is a true prophet,” I said, doubting it all myself. “I know that through the restored church is the only way to return to the presence of our God,” I said, seeing dozens of baptized people relapse into old habits or simply disappear from the church.

Even though I told people about my faith, even though I'd stay in the church for years, my mission started my path to disbelief.

One last marker stood alone next to the field where the men were led away from the women, escorted to their deaths. There, the plaque lists the gruesome details of the site. "On the day following the massacre, Mormon militia members hastily buried the victims in shallow graves near where they fell. However, within days wolves and coyotes had pulled the bodies from the earth." The marker refused to shy away from the carelessness, the disrespect shown by the militia.

The field itself lay empty except for wild grass and sage brush stretching out to the base of cedar-covered hills. That expanse, once a moment of violence, now lay untouched by plows or shovels. Perhaps this is the greatest sign of respect that has come—the willingness to leave it alone. No saints' houses or churches would ever hide the meadows where, out of fear and anger, their ancestors slaughtered an innocent group of pioneers.

I walked into the field, unsure what I could find, but I quickly noticed the softness of the ground, the way it collapsed under me. There were no footprints out in the field, no buildings or logs left out in the open. No, it truly was a memorial, and there I was, treading on it all. I wasn't Mormon, but I still embodied the ancestry of these people's murderers. I walked back to the car, but the mud from that side streaked my shoes. I don't know if it ever came off.

Nothing could be funnier to Brazilians than seeing a tall white American gallop across the airport in a suit while pulling along three suitcases. From those two years fleeing dogs or the possible murderer, I had learned how to run. My legs pumped me through those cavernous terminals of the São Paulo airport, past TAM, Avianca Brasil, Gol Transportes. I ran, broken suitcase dragging across the airport, plastic howling against the tile. Finally, American Airlines. I ran up to the counter, forehead streaked with sweat, and the only person there stood mopping the floor.

“Hey, I need to catch a flight that leaves in half an hour.”

“I’m a janitor,” she said. The look on her face told me she had put up with enough shit from others that day.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Is there anyone who can help me out?”

Without even looking up, she said, “You know you’re supposed to be here an hour before the flight leaves, right?”

“I would have been, but TAM’s flight got here an hour late.”

“Figures.” She pushed her bucket away. “Well, best of luck.”

Fantastic. There I was in one of the largest airports in the world, nobody around to help. For two years, I had walked around with missionaries. We were told to never be alone until we got back to the states. I grabbed a phone, stuck in the awkward Cartão Telefônico, punched the numbers taped to the back of my passport. “President Burns,” I said when a voice answered. “I’m stuck, and my Visa expires tomorrow, and I don’t have another missionary with me, and my family might go to the airport tomorrow with balloons and a sign and not be able to find me, and—”

“Elder Cook,” said President Burns’s groggy voice. “You’re going to be alright, okay? There should be a courtesy counter to help you there. Just go there, okay?”

“Okay. I’m sorry I called you this late.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I walked to the counter, got a ticket for the next flight in twenty-four hours, a ride to a hotel, dinner at one in the morning. I went upstairs to a hotel room, slept for my first time alone in two years, woke up, laid in bed without moving. I called the church office and was told not to leave the hotel until I went to the airport, so I stayed in the room.

In the bathroom, I stripped the clothes off me. Then I saw the mirror. While mission houses had small mirror shards or hand mirrors, they never had something that big, something where I could see myself down to the waist. I stood closer, rubbed the tan lines that divided my neck and arms. But I couldn’t see all of me. I climbed onto the counter, kneeled around the sink, stared at my whole body, my naked body. Everything that had been hidden under white and black, under mesh garments, looked exactly as it had before I left. Just as the terrors of Mountain Meadows were denied by Mormons for decades, my own hiding had done nothing to change who I was—not my flawed body, not my corrupt soul. On my knees, I saw my own uncovered fields where I was both victim and transgressor.

## CHAPTER III

## MOURNING

As a child, I sat in the Sunday School room, surrounded by white cinderblock walls. None of us could sit still, and I imagine Sister Bingham, the blonde woman whose smile never failed to make me happy, felt emotions other than joy as she tried to teach us. She put two lines of masking tape on the floor, forming a “V” that stretched across the room. “Sometimes,” she said, sitting in a chair suited for one of the other six-year-olds, “we do good things. Sometimes, we are bad. The scriptures say that you cannot serve two masters—God, or the devil. Now, who wants to help me?”

James Padigimus held his hand up. James, the brown hair kid who was held back in kindergarten for God knows what, had the attention span of a doped-up cat. He jumped up before Sister Bingham could acknowledge him, standing up on his chair.

“Alright, James, come on.” They both stood at the tip of the “V.” “What I want you to do is walk along this but keep your legs out of the middle. See how far you can go.” James stepped forward, legs splitting farther apart as he walked along the widening letter. His body sank lower, and with a final grunt and a hop, he fell onto the ground. We all laughed. “You see,” said Sister Bingham, “trying to serve two masters is like this. You can only do it for so long until you fail. You have to choose either God or Satan.”

I tried walking along the “V,” as well, letting my legs spread out as I crept along the masking tape, the slow burning stretch pressing into my thighs. I imagined I could split in two and walk along both. But like the others, I fell into the “V,” laughing at my own attempt. Of course I couldn’t stretch out forever; of course I couldn’t serve two

masters. The lesson clicked with me, and I knew that I would always need to choose one way or another.

But even while I learned, I lay in the blank space between masking tape lines, the space that belonged neither to the divine nor the corrupt.

My Aunt Darla, a woman who always had a grandmother's smile, worked as a mail carrier with USPS, and she talked Post Master Gary into hiring a temp worker. "It'll only be a few months until he goes back to college," she said, "and we need the help for Christmas." Within a few weeks, I interviewed. Another week, and I was working.

During the hours sorting mail, slipping letters and bills into post office boxes, I thought of the consequences of my choices. Already, I had temptations. Already, I had masturbated, had fantasized about sex, had returned to everything that I hoped my mission would destroy. I prayed, cried, and hid myself more, realizing that the holiest years of my life were not powerful enough to take away my sin.

"You remember Carly Gale?" asked my aunt one day as I lifted bundles of newspapers into her cart. "Well, I know that she's really wanting to get married sometime, and I know that she's interested in you. And it'd be a good thing if she dated and married a return missionary, you know?" She pulled out some ordered letters, slid them into a bin that she'd carry with her later. "You let me know if you ever want to go on a date with her, alright?"

"Alright," I said, but I never would. The girl was nice, one of the people whom I didn't suspect called me a pervert behind my back in school, but I couldn't date her. All

around, former missionaries got engaged within weeks of coming home. This was a part of small-town Utah life—once one step of life is over, it's time to start the next. This push to get me married, to move me towards having children, completely ignored the conflict that I had inside. When people pushed more, I used the excuses. "I'm moving to college soon," I'd say. "I'd rather not risk getting into a long distance relationship." But I couldn't tell them what was really happening—that I was gay, and it would be a while before I could date; that I was gay, and I might never be okay with a woman.

I met Alex Jordan Smith in the winter of 2013, shortly after learning that his boyfriend committed suicide in the early part of 2012. My partner and I drove down through Sardine Canyon lit up white from the bright sun streaking across snow. Alex was already standing outside when we pulled up. "You think that's him?" asked Justin.

"No doubt," I said. The man, hardly an adult, stood wearing a bright pink tie, white button up shirt, gray and white striped sweater under a black overcoat, the outfit completed with an e-cigarette pipe hanging from a rainbow-colored lanyard, the words "I <3 Jesus" printed around the length of fabric. I didn't realize how small he would be—walking to him, he seemed to shrink until his head barely reached halfway up my bicep. "Hey, Alex! It's Brian."

"Nice to meet you, Brian." He smiled, shook my hand, and got in a total stranger's car. We drove to Ogden to the Salt Rock Cafe, a small coffee shop adjoined to a non-denominational church. He asked, "Do you mind if I buy you two a coffee?"

“For once in my life,” I said, “I’m not a poor, starving college student.” He laughed but bought them anyway. I sat down, sipped on the sweet mint mocha, and listened to his story.

Alex originally grew up in Kaysville, a little to the south. There, his family was Mormon, but as his parents raised him, they gave him the choice whether to be baptized or not. He said, “I was only eight, but I knew it wasn’t for me.” He still grew up surrounded by the teachings of Christ.

During his seventh grade year, he moved up to Ogden. At that time, he began to realize he was attracted to his own gender. Growing up in a religious community, he was unsure he could talk to his family about how he felt. One day, he sat on the tan leather couch at home with his mother. Unlike him, she was tall and let her straight brown hair streak down around her shoulders. I imagine they watched television, chatting about the latest news. She turned her head and said, “Alex, I need to tell you something.”

“Yes?”

“If you were gay,” she said, eyes fixed on her son, “or if you ever like boys, I will accept you no matter what.”

He stared back at her. This came as a complete surprise. For his mother to accept him into her world, no matter whom he liked, was a small miracle.

Joseph Smith taught, “In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; And in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; And if he does not, he cannot

obtain it. He may enter into the other, but that is the end of his kingdom; he cannot have an increase.” As a child, I knew there was no point in reaching any other level of heaven than the highest, but I thought people could get there just by being good. This is the typical Christian life, after all—the good go to heaven, and the bad go to hell. Divinity in the LDS religion, however, came at a much higher price. It required covenants, promises to serve the church for the rest of my life. It required secrecy, never revealing the promises I made within the temple. It required marriage.

Anything less, even if in the celestial kingdom, and I knew I would have an eternity of regret.

I went to church at the Vernal Single’s Branch, a group organized for adults who weren’t yet married, generally with the intention of sparking some sort of romance for them. Even though it was the same religion, this church felt gloomy, dark because of the lack of windows in some rooms or the stiff gray carpet that acted as wallpaper. In those dark rooms, leaders in awkward suits taught about marriage. “A man must enter into this order of the priesthood.” I sat in the back on a stiff metal chair, one that never seemed to get warm. Around me, people recounted engagement stories, of their dreams for children, of how this would take them to heaven. “And if he does not, he cannot obtain it.”

“Would you play the piano for us in our meetings?” asked President Nelson, a man who never said a harsh word, who never did anything but smile. I accepted, and through the next months, I sat behind him on the pulpit. Other piano players embellished the hymns, changed the rhythm and flow as they improvised. To them, the message of the hymn took the back seat— “Nearer My God to Thee” apparently wasn’t near enough to

Him, and unleashed arpeggios took the player to some Nirvana the congregation couldn't hear. When I played, I tried for perfection—notes struck simultaneously, the melody ringing out just a little louder than everything else. This way, people could think about the words instead of the arrangement of the notes. "Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee! E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me." The keys under my fingers chilled. I imagined how it would feel to fall into the nothingness that comes with death. "Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down, darkness be over me." The rope from junior high still dug into my neck, this time disguised as a Sunday tie. My finger slipped on a b-flat. "Sun, moon, and stars forgot." I forgot the meaning of the words, the elevation they take to God. I was the faggot who played piano in church, the one who people nicknamed the pervert.

It's hard to describe how someone decides to commit suicide. The decision happens over months. For me, the decision came after each time I saw a straight couple in church holding hands, each time I read the scriptures and felt the depths of hell reach for me, each time I knelt and cried, praying that I could change enough to find someone who would marry me despite my problems, and with each time realizing that my prayers were never answered.

After church, I stood up and walked to the blue minivan. The way I decided was to put a bag over my head and tie it closed with a rope or belt. Suffocation. I didn't know how long I would be awake or how much my bodily instincts would kick in to rip it off—I thought I could struggle through it. The van chugged up Kid's Canal Road, past the houses of church members. At home, I grabbed a bag out of the closet, placed it over my

head, put the belt around my throat to secure it. My breath heated the bag, pushed the flimsy material in and out, puffing around my head.

But then I took it off. What would happen if my family found my body? What kind of trauma would I leave them in? What if I didn't die, if I just ended up passing out and not succeeding? What shame would I have to live with if I survived? The hot air of the bag came off from my head, and I realized—among how horrible I was, I was too afraid to even do this one thing, to take myself out of this world.

I never considered saving my soul by living. I knew, by that point, I had no hope to be saved.

Eleven days after moving to Ogden, Alex met Jack Reese, a kid with jet black hair who always wore flannel shirts and loved *Adventure Time*. He was a thin, flamboyant boy, one who laughed with his hands over his mouth and gestured with a cocked wrist. The two met through the Weber State University Gay Straight Alliance.

Charles Redwin, a man in his forties who wore ripped jeans and a watch with a pride flag design, led the GSA at the time. "They were obnoxious little shits," he said, laughing. "They would come in, interrupt the meetings, and sit in the back throwing pieces of paper. They didn't take it seriously." The organization held a vote and unanimously banned Alex and Jack from the meetings. However, when Charles began volunteering with OUTreach, an organization created by the Unitarian Universalist church, he ran into Alex again.

The short kid looked at Charles, walked up to him, and said, "I know you."

“I know you do,” said Charles. Soon, he received a friend request on Facebook. Soon, he saw that Alex and Jack had both grown up. Through this group, the three of them—an older man, a flamboyant teen, and the boy trying to find love in his life—became friends.

Less than two months after my mission ended, I sat at the computer at home, typing out a letter that contained my secret. Next to the computer, the television buzzed with the news as both my mother and father watched, commenting on the latest murder, laughing at the stupid little reports that small stations always have. The words slurred across my screen, inelegant and apologetic. In the bright light surrounded family, I spilled my secret onto the computer monitor.

At nine PM, I printed the letter out and slipped the letter onto my father’s pillow. Nobody noticed me slip away, back into my bedroom, a place that had become a storage space piled to the ceiling with boxes, totes shaped out of plastic that easily splintered. Even with all the boxes, the room still felt the same—blue carpet, the sports players circling around on the light shade. I hid in the room that was built for the boy of the family, one to whom my father constantly tried to teach the inner working of an engine, how the gas ignition pumped the pistons around in a perfect metallic loop, the one whom my father signed up for wrestling and hoped, somehow, he would want to try again a second year. The room was built for that boy, the one my parents never had.

The next day, my father came home from work and, with a tired voice, said, “Son, you mind coming on a drive with me?” I nodded, lifted myself into the green truck—one

that had been in a car accident and considered destroyed by the insurance. For months, my father bent the metal frame back out, the floor of the cab down to where it had been. I thought the truck would never run again, but his hands pried and strengthened the metal until everything worked.

The truck churned down the road and turned into the parking lot of the old brown church, the one I knew from my childhood. We sat, lamp light illuminating our dim figures. The engine purred in the silence. I had never seen my father this quiet. Usually, he was quick to say what he thought, even if it ended up being overly harsh. This time, though, he sat and stared out of the windshield. Finally, he opened his mouth. “You know your mother and I love you, son,” he said. His hands grasped the steering wheel. “Has anyone touched you?”

“What?”

“Has anyone sexually abused you?”

“No, Dad.”

“Good.” He looked at me. “They just, you know, say that can cause it. I want you to know that when I was younger, I had a hard time with my sexual drive. I was supposed to wait until marriage, you know, but it was hard for me. I didn’t want to be thinking about women all the time, but I couldn’t help it.” He paused, looked back out of the windshield up towards the Uintah Mountains. “There were a couple times where I thought of men, as well. This is why I didn’t go on a mission, son. I needed to get married. Even then, I had a hard time, especially with pornography.”

I sat, watching the emotions morph on his face. For years later, I would know many who would confess things when I came out—a sister who admitted she smuggled alcohol into the Tricinemas, a friend who unloaded her depression onto me. Most times, people who didn't know what to say talked about their own lives, their struggles and disappointments.

But then he turned to me and said the words I didn't expect. "We want you to keep going to church," he said, "but we'll love you no matter what you do."

I walked through Weber High School with Alex, through the common area with cheerleaders practicing their routine. The building impressed me—the room had tiles arranged in a large red "W," and everything felt clean. Even after a full day of school, the tile glowed in the school's lighting. I was used to the carpet in Uintah High that always seemed to cling to winter mud all year round, the black ceiling leaving a gloom across everyone.

"Here," said Alex, walking down the hallway. "These lockers are the ones he was shoved into." One day at school, Jack walked by the brown lockers as others, much larger, threw himself against the harsh metal.

I asked, "Did this happen often?"

"The lockers, no," said Alex, "but every day was something else." We walked to the gym where, in the early morning class, people tormented Jack. We walked to the English classroom where people slid pins and paper into straws, blew them at Jack. His teacher saw what happened, asked if she should intervene, but he refused. "He thought

they would bully him worse,” said Alex as he looked through the window of the darkened classroom. “That isn’t something that you ask as a teacher. You do something about it.”

After the suicide, Weber High School refused to acknowledge that Jack had gone to school there. “Students wanted a candlelight service,” said Alex, “but they wouldn’t allow it. They didn’t even tell people about counseling or help. The school district just acted like it didn’t happen.”

The eyes of another bishop stared at me as I sat in the church’s metal chair. He was different from the others physically—instead of the bright blue eyes, he had one blue and one green—but his voice echoed what many church members taught. “We can go ahead and send you to therapy,” he said. “Also, a year ago, there was another guy who had the same problem. Luckily, we managed to find him a girlfriend, and they got married just a few months later. I think we can help you do the same. Say, I’ve seen you and Emma getting close. Perhaps you two could try dating.”

Emma was a tall woman who had served a mission in Germany and, from the bright blonde hair, looked like she had come straight from that country. The way she smiled dug divots in her cheeks and furrowed her brow, creating an image of anger even when she was happy. Even so, I felt that she was the most genuine person I knew. We watched *Man of La Mancha* together and discussed the beauty of Don Quixote, a knight errant who simply wanted to do the right thing.

Once, we drove to an open field with several church friends. Horses tugged a flat sleigh with hay bales piled high. We climbed up and lay together, our hands holding each

other through the thick gloves. The stars looked like a kaleidoscope as the sleigh turned around. Emma's coat, a thick green thing, rubbed against my cheek—harsh fabric, but familiar. Friends surrounded us and talked, but we lay on the hay in our own darkness, embracing that small moment together.

That night, I stood on the balcony outside her apartment after she played “Blackbird” by the Beatles for me. “You have a good night,” I said, and she leaned in close. Her half-lidded eyes said everything the rest of her face couldn't—I knew she liked me, and I thought that maybe, maybe something could work between us. In the cheesiest move I could come up with on the spot, I walked away a step or two, let her grab the doorknob, then rushed back, grabbing her hand and pulling her into a kiss. I can't say it was a good kiss, but—for me, at least—it was genuine.

Over the next weeks, though, everything felt wrong. When we sat together holding hands as we watched a movie, I couldn't help but feel the tension in my body, the awkward way my hand pressed against hers. Both our bodies always felt cold, clammy. I knew what I was, and during the weeks we dated, I spiraled into depression, the same I had felt shortly after my mission. I knew it had to end.

The day I planned to break up with her, I stood at the bottom of the snow-covered Old Main Hill, waiting for the bus to take me to campus. “Hey, Brian,” a voice said behind me. I turned. It was Crissy, a woman who had just become engaged to Jake, the ugliest man I had ever seen. I wasn't sure what she saw in him—he looked like a black-haired mortician who had his teeth rearranged in a car accident. Besides his love for *Animorphs* and sci-fi, he didn't like the world all that much. She, however, always wore

bright shirts and had a gleaming smile. “Say,” she said, her teeth showing in a classic grin, “it looks like you and Emma are really getting close.”

“I guess it’s been a few weeks,” I said. The bus chugged up the street. Come on, I thought. Just get here already.

“So, when are you going to propose to her?”

“We’ve only been dating three weeks.” The bus stopped and opened the doors, but flocks of students slugged out. Come on, stupid freshman.

“Well, you two would have beautiful babies. I mean, can you imagine?”

I couldn’t even imagine having that conversation. Finally, the students were off. “Gotta go,” I said, and I threw myself up the stairs into the bus, overly stuffy with the smell of muddy water.

That night, I took Emma to dinner or to country swing night or to a movie—something that normal boyfriends and girlfriends do. As I drove my blue minivan back, I knew I had to end it. I was gay, and despite wanting to find happiness in the religion, I knew this wouldn’t work. We pulled into the parking spot. “Emma,” I said. “Before going, I need to tell you something.”

“Yes, Brian?”

Her hand grabbed mine. I sat, petrified except for my thumb rubbing her palm. There was no elegant way to say it, no fancy story or poetic verse. Without looking, I said, “Emma, I’m gay, and I don’t think I should be dating you.” In one line, I destroyed the future that others dreamed for me, one with babies and families. I destroyed the hope

Emma had to meet someone interested for her. And for me, I destroyed the work I had done to try to turn my life around—work I believed would save me.

Over the next weeks, Emma and I created an agreement. She could come to me whenever she wanted and talk about problems, and I would listen. Most of the time, we walked around the dark streets of Logan. There, we didn't need to worry about robbers or rapists—those things existed in large cities, not that small college town. Occasionally, I'd slip on ice or trip on a sharp sidewalk edge, but the streets were safe in their darkness, lamps lighting up only the corners.

During these walks, Emma cried, cried about how her life fell apart, about how she also struggled with sins. I told her that I didn't feel that I was changing, that I couldn't be a different person. Sometimes, we both cried.

As days went by, I regretted that agreement. I'd find an unexpected text on my phone asking if then, right then, we could talk. I'd walk around without listening, let the cement clap under my shoes until she had everything out, until she was ready to go back home. I, the one who the bishop told to go to therapy, became the therapist, listening to her talk and trying to help her when I needed help myself.

I walked into my apartment one day, and there she was, standing in the kitchen wearing her thick green coat and tired smile. "Brian," she said. "I hoped I could talk to you today."

I wanted to tell her no, but I couldn't—I had promised I'd help. "Would you give me a minute?" I said.

"Sure."

I walked out of the apartment, sprinted down the stairs, threw myself into the first apartment I found open. Two girls sat on the couch watching television. “Hey, I’m hiding from someone. Mind if I stay here for a while?”

They both stared at me. I had never visited them previously, and they obviously weren’t in the mood to interact with people—one wore pajamas while another had thin shorts that barely covered up underwear. Still, one said, “Sure.”

I sat down on the couch with them, watched the mindless screen. With everything I was doing—telling Emma about my sexuality, trying to find a way to live—I tried to never hide again, but just as I had throughout my life, I stayed quiet about my feelings. I ran. Here, in the apartment surrounded by strangers, I hid.

Although I saw Emma many times again, we only talked once. Outside my apartment, she cried. “I’m engaged,” she said, her face streaked with tears. “He told me I should never talk to you again.”

I stood at the door, unable to say anything that I felt, any explanations for why I couldn’t talk. “I’m sorry,” I said. But I wasn’t sorry for breaking up, nor for my decision. I was sorry for the pain that I had made her feel, the illusion of hope I gave to myself that one day, if I were good enough, I would change. Most of all, I was sorry for hiding myself in white garments and church walls, for staying quiet until I almost killed myself. From then, I wouldn’t hide any longer. From then, I would be me.

Jack was Mormon and lived with neither of his biological parents, instead winding up with a family that cared for him, that he never felt loved him. His stepfather,

a bishop and math teacher at the junior high, had said he was open to gay people.

“There’s a difference between others and your own child,” Charles Redwin told me. Jack came out—I could imagine the fear of talking to his family, of facing them and spilling his inner feelings.

His father said, “I think you’re wrong, but you’re okay.” He had a moment of relief, but slowly, his stepparents chipped away at his life. One day, he came home from school and found the door to his bedroom removed. A laptop that had been a gift disappeared, and soon his phone was taken away. Home became a sterile place, a world where his family severed his connection with friends.

“There’s a difference between tolerance and acceptance,” said Charles. “They tolerated Jack, but they never accepted him. No, they were going to fix him.” They told Jack to be quiet, to not talk to his brothers, to hide this part of him. Their eyes watched him at home to make sure he stayed normal.

One night, he showed up at Charles’s house where Alex was living. “My parents gave me permission,” he said, lying.

But Charles and Alex opened the door, allowed him to come in, even though they knew he was lying. “We talked all night,” said Charles, sitting in the same living room where Jack had been over a year before. “He had quit going to school because he didn’t want to be bullied. It was that bad. The conversation ended with Jack telling me that he missed his dad—his biological dad.” A tear streaked down Charles’s cheek. “I saw him as my own son. I don’t know if he saw me that way, but I did. I still feel like I could have helped him.”

I walked into the stake president's office with my hair glowing bright pink, a complete fluke. Some girl dyed her hair red and had some left over, so being an intelligent college student, I decided it was a good idea to try some myself. It started out bright red, but over a few weeks, the shade turned lighter until I had a glowing pink mound of hair on my head. I didn't really care about looks, so I let my hair shine pink.

This meeting, though, wasn't about the hair. On the president's desk sat the *Herald Journal*, a rainbow flag printed on the cover in all its vibrancy. I never cared for the whole rainbow thing—I disliked wearing bright colors because they looked bad on my pale skin, and the flamboyant stereotype had bothered me for years. “Sit down,” said the president. I took a seat in one of those stupid metal chairs—it was always the metal chairs—and looked at him as he flipped through the pages of the newspaper, my name scattered through the whole piece about gay issues. He looked over the rim of his glasses. “This is you, isn't it?”

“Yup,” I said.

“Huh.” He shuffled through it some more. “Look, I just have to make sure we get something clear,” he said. “It's fine if you're gay. It's only a sin if you act on it. However, I'm worried about you becoming an advocate. You can't go around telling people that gay marriage is okay or help out the homosexual agenda. You're in the church, and you need to act like it.”

Clearly, he hadn't read the article. In it, I talked about the time where a student dragged me around the junior high stage with a rope around my neck. I talked about the hatred I experienced both from myself and others. I talked about my drive towards

suicide, how finally opening up to others helped me survive. Mostly, I talked about my desire to stay religious and find some sort of peace. The woman who interviewed me on the university's sidewalk said, "If this is going to be a problem for you in church, I can leave your name out."

"Don't." Her eyebrows furrowed. From the stories she had heard, she knew the depression, the persecution that pervaded gay Mormons' lives. I said, "I'm tired of hiding." More than that, I was tired of hating—hating myself, hating those who hated me.

"I won't be an advocate," I said to the stake president, grasping the scriptures that I held on my lap, the ones that condemned judgment just as much as sin.

"Good," he said. I stood up to walk to the door. "And dye that hair of yours! We can't have you walking around like that." The door slammed behind me, and I stood in the hall of the church, my hair accidentally a symbol of my rebellion. I walked out of the church, across the street, hair blazing in the open. I wouldn't dye it back, nor would I stop telling people my story.

On Charles's advice, Jack came out to his biological mother and told her everything that had happened—the bullying at school, the bedroom door removed at home. She asked him to live with her in Morgan, Utah, in a hope that things could be better. But Morgan, half an hour drive from Ogden, acted as one more layer between himself and his friends. His mother took him to counselors that tried to change him. Bullies attacked him in the parking lot, more vicious than those in Ogden.

Three months later, Charles received a frantic text from Jack that said, “You’re gonna hate me. I tried to kill myself.” He had slit his wrists.

The next week, Alex stood at front of the Weber Library auditorium for OUTreach and talked about the risks of bullying, about suicide prevention. Half an hour away, Jack held a gun to his head. Somehow, across the state, hope and despair appeared simultaneously. If only Alex’s words could have reached across the mountains that separated the two, could have reached the ears of the boy with jet black hair, perhaps his finger would have eased the trigger. Perhaps one more tragedy could have turned into a story about hope.

April came, a month where snow and rain warred across Cache Valley. My phone buzzed. Hyrum Gillespie. The short kid with curly hair was my roommate who tended to give everyone a nickname whether they liked it or not. I flipped the phone open. “Hey, Hyrum.”

“Bwian!”

As usual, I held the phone away from my ear. People across campus knew Hyrum from his voice and inability to either remain silent or talk quietly. I even ran into a few people on a bus complaining about this short guy who asked questions constantly throughout lectures. “Could his name possibly be Hyrum Gillespie?” I asked, and their faces lit up.

“Bwian! We’ve missed you at church! How are you doing?”

“I’m great, Hyrum. Thanks for asking.”

“But why didn’t you come? We went looking for you in the apartment, but we couldn’t find you.”

I sat in the engineering building, a place where an English major would never be found. Except for a few people talking, the place was silent. “I didn’t feel like going today, Hyrum,” I said.

“Bwian,” he said. “I know that you have feelings for, you know, the same gender, but this is something you can get through.”

“I’m really not sure I want to.”

“Well, I want you to know that I have a testimony in the church,” he said. Oh, great. A missionary tactic. As a missionary, I had told people many times what I knew to be true—that Joseph Smith was a prophet, that the church was the only true organization on earth. I proclaimed it without any doubt—it was fact. This process of repetition, of stating that something was true, was supposed to help build faith and let others understand the level of love I had for the religion. However, as said over the phone to a doubter, Hyrum’s words sounded dull. “I know the church is true. I know Joseph Smith was a true prophet and that he restored the church for us. I know that everything can be conquered if you have enough faith. I know that Christ is the savior of the world, and it’s only through him that we can return to God. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

“Cool,” I said. “Well, I gotta go. Bye.” The phone snapped closed. For months, he pushed me back towards the church. For months, I struggled against him, trying to find my own path in life. I couldn’t dignify what he said on the phone with a response. He

intruded my refuge and refused to give me space to figure out my own spirituality. I sat, staring down the engineering hallway, a place that, for a time, became my secular seminary. Soon, the semester would end, and I would distance myself from him, from the bishop, the church—the pain that filled my life. I would leave it all.

I drove down Washington Boulevard with Alex when he pointed out the window. “Wait,” he said. “There’s the mortuary. Let’s go there.”

Myers Mortuary itself looked hideous from the outside—the building was built in the 60’s or 70’s, back when construction was minimalistic and flat. The brick was covered with white paint, flaking off from years of age. Pots around the building held dead plants, victims of a harsh winter. When we stepped inside, however, the entire place changed. Yes, it still had the mournful paintings—a lone boat floating in the sea, an urn with white carnations. But then I saw the stained glass with bright white birds with feather tips. Sandhill cranes. These cranes filled the entire mortuary—statues, paintings, a bronze mural with cranes surrounded by metallic bamboo. I had never seen a mortuary like it—rather than the dull, neutral colors that typically make up the sorrowful building, this one used blues and greens in many places.

“Here’s where the coffin was set up,” said Alex as he led me into the viewing room. A mural ran across the wall filled with forests, snow from mountains melting down to the vast blue lake that spanned the whole painting. I struggled to see how a place so beautiful could be a place of mourning. But there, Alex told me, he had seen the face of his loved one, beneath the towering mountains, the snow that became rivers and lakes. He

had broken down, cried, and Charles had helped him walk away, into the other room with rows of pews. On the day of the funeral, the two men had sat down underneath a circular stain glass window where a sandhill crane flew up through the clouds, black feather tips extended.

Weber High School rejected the candlelight vigil, but OUTreach organized one at the amphitheater in town. Alex sat in the back on the grass and watched the place fill up with friends, school members, Christians and Mormons alike. Local celebrities—Charles Lynn Frost and Jackson Whitt Carter—stood on stage and told their own stories, the struggles that they went through. That night stood as a memorial, yes, but it also called out to others—don't be quiet. People are there to help.

The story spread, but Jack's family approached Alex and Charles, threatening lawsuits for what they had already said to other news agencies. "We were too afraid of what might happen," said Charles. "I didn't want anything bad to happen to Alex." The two talked to the *Huffington Post* and others, but they left out anything about the family, the overbearing father who eliminated his son's personal space in an attempt to change him. Soon after, a Facebook page dedicated to Jack's memory disappeared after his father messaged the website's administrators. "His family didn't want him to be a martyr," Charles later told me.

At the funeral, people had placed mementos, flowers on the casket as their final farewells. As people left, some approached and took what was left with them. Charles saw a ribbon— "Beloved Son"—and pulled it off the casket. In its place, he left a rose with a simple message. "I cared about you." For the next hour, he watched those who

approached and those who left, making sure his small message was carried down to remain with Jack.

Five years have passed since I left the church—never formally, no, but by omission. I left friends who took me to church to live with those who didn't care. I left the ward I lived in without telling them where I moved so the church couldn't track me. I left people in church with hugs and handshakes, the same way that I would every week, never showing in my face that I would be leaving that faith behind. College became my new hiding place, somewhere where I could bury my thoughts and not worry about the mistakes I made with Emma, the promises that I made to the church when becoming a missionary.

And I dated men. Men who were fat, men who loved me, men who said they loved me but didn't. Men who cried when I left them, men who taught me how to taste wine me pot. Men who flunked out of college, men who crossdressed and sang Lady Gaga, men who played my terrible video games just because I wanted to see how they acted when they were angry. Men I met online, men who knew me for a week, men who loved the worst movies ever made and made me watch them. I broke hearts to the point where one almost thrashed my blue minivan with a baseball bat, to the point where another called in frantic suicidal thoughts—five of us drove him to the hospital that night and made sure, for months to come, that he was safe. Regrets run deep, yes, and every decision, every breakup was selfish—I wanted to find what was right for me, and damn what anyone else said about me. I would no longer allow hate to be a part of my life.

My pathway out of persecution was to learn how to love myself.

Last year in October, my sister sent me a tweet—of all things—telling me that my grandfather had died. “Could you go with me to the funeral?” I asked Justin, my partner of three years.

His Padawan braid swung in the air. “But what about class?”

“You’d sleep through it, anyway. Now, come on.”

We drove through canyons, trees losing the orange and red leaves up in Northern Utah, the desert near Vernal having no leaves to lose. Except after the occasional winter storm, the Uintah Mountains always looked the same with the chocolate chip landscape rising above the small town. I knew my father was more accepting than before. He even put a democrat sign on his lawn, willing to risk his reputation at church to support someone he thought would do a good job. My mother, though, never talked about sexuality. Every time the subject came up, she shrugged her shoulder, said, “Huh,” and wandered away.

When we arrived, my mother—black haired, wrinkles now caressing her eyes—hugged me and said, “We want to take some family pictures. Go dress up.” We all dressed in the same clothes we’d later wear to the mortuary and drove down to the church, the same one at the base of the mountain with the dark red brick—the one and only true church, I thought as a kid.

As we stood on the church’s dying lawn, Justin wandered over to the fence, looking up at the pale gray sandstone that jutted up from the ground. “Hey,” said my mother. “Aren’t you going to be in the picture, Justin?”

He looked over, shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Come on,” she said. He looked at me, eyebrows raised. But he walked over. Our family had to squeeze closer, but somehow, on a day that was meant for mourning, we all fit together.

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