

# What You Walk Away From

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JESUS SAID, "AN EVIL AND ADULTEROUS generation seeketh after a sign." In fact, that statement shows up in the New Testament three times: in Matthew 12:39, in Matthew 16:4, and again in Luke 11:29. Now that I am evil and adulterous, I find I'm much less interested in signs than I ever was when I was righteous and virginal. It makes no sense. But still I have these dreadful dreams where someone steals my shoes for no other reason than spite. And it goes on like that for days.

Tonight is Christmas Eve and my Mormon family has just finished watching *Christmas with Brigham Young University* while I have listened to *Meat Beat Manifesto* and polished all my shoes. Now everyone is sitting around the living room, wondering what they can say at our traditional family gathering about the meaning and significance of Christmas with me there, me, the only member of the family to serve a mission, read every word of both the Old and New Testaments, make it through the Book of Mormon twelve times, and after all that still enter into apostasy.

If you talk to me more than once, you'll discover that I tell the same unbelievable stories over and over. You won't know quite what to think because although the stories seem too ludicrous to be true, I seem completely earnest. After a while I'll produce some object that corroborates one of my stories, and then you'll begin to realize that my imagination simply isn't vivid enough to fabricate all the diseases of heart and intestine, all the traumatic religious crises endured on three continents, that I insist clutter my past. Let me qualify that: my mother would say that my imagination *did* create all those diseases and crises, that every wretched thing I've been through is somehow psychosomatic. Which is possible. But I still had to go to the hospital, for hemorrhaging at home one Easter; for depression, broken bones, and vertigo as a missionary in Taiwan; a year ago it was tachycardia and transitory high blood pressure in Shanghai. And I won't be going back to Europe without my stash of anti-depressants.

I got home from Shanghai last Christmas jaundiced, jittery, and broke. The yellow disappeared quickly from my skin; my heart slowed

down after a few weeks, and once that happened I could sleep again. I'm still poor but harbor grand notions of not living like a peasant when I go to graduate school next fall. Which is why I'm entrenched in the third bedroom of my parents' house and why I will remain, barring my incarceration for disorderly conduct or some such charge, entrenched there for the next six or seven months.

Sometimes I think about what Morrissey, the thin, angst-ridden, mildly androgynous vocalist for the Smiths, had to say about a type of people at least as common as those who seek after signs: he says he's not interested in hearing about people who are nice, that he's spent his entire life in ruins because of people who are nice. I didn't used to feel all that ruined until I found out that nice people approach my mother and commiserate with her over the fact that she has a daughter who reached the ripe old age of twenty-nine while remaining fond of dancing to loud music. They are all certain that if I only had a little more musical talent and larger breasts, I would name myself after the mother of God and be seen in every medium available, kissing other women and grabbing my crotch. After all, what can you expect from someone who not only *likes* celibate vegetarian homosexual pop icons, but *cites* them as well?

I know this is not a particularly innovative insight, but, really, Jesus Christ seemed to prefer hanging out with the evil and adulterous to being stuck with the pious and dull. In your own reading, who is more interesting: Simon Peter, a guy who wanted to be good but succumbed to fear, or Mary Magdalene, the reformed whore who wasn't afraid of her future or ashamed of her past? Mary Magdalene was the first person Christ appeared to once he'd risen from the grave and I don't think that was just luck on her part. She's one reason I named my cat Madeleine. Proust and his madeleines dipped in tea are the other reason and there I go again revealing my affinity for the effete, the affected, the sexually deviant artist. I also like the young, the angry, and the obnoxious. Especially to dance with.

In 2 Samuel 6, we get this story: David's first wife, Michal, sees him dancing in the street in celebration of a victory. He wears nothing but a loincloth that does an inadequate job of covering him and Michal is disgusted by his display of flesh. When he comes in, she scolds him, saying, "That was no way for a king to behave, cavorting naked in the streets with servants." He says, "If you think that's bad, too bad for you: I won't sleep with you anymore; instead, I'll sleep with the handmaidens you think I disgraced myself in front of." And so Michal ends up childless, which is the worst thing that could happen to a good Israelite wife.

You have to wonder what's so frightening about watching someone else move to music you don't understand—though in Michal's case, it wasn't David's movements but what he was wearing (or not wearing)

that upset her so. Still, the waltz, the Lindy, and now moshing—people get arrested over things like that. Especially in small towns. I should know.

Every so often I tell myself, “Look, you don’t have to explain a damn thing.” And it works really well for a while because some people are comfortable with mystery and plenty others just don’t care. But then I run into one of those people who values certainty above everything else, who insists that if you have questions, it’s because you willfully ignore the obvious answers all around you. When that happens, I find myself telling stories like this:

A kind man, a patriarch, once laid his hands on my head and said, “I declare unto you, Holly, that the Lord is aware of you, that he is mindful of your goodness, of your basic integrity.” It seemed to me the most miraculous, most impossible thing I had ever heard, and the only sign I ever hungered and thirsted after was proof from God that that impossible statement was true. Perhaps the sign came. But if it did, it came too late: it came when my own soul was so worthless to me that I simply could not believe God would see any value in something I knew had none.

My Bible is fine-grain blue leather and I have a Book of Mormon to match. My name is embossed in silver on each. I used a red pencil and a ruler to underline neatly scriptures that mattered to me. The Book of Mormon is not my favorite book of scripture. It contains verses like this one, in 2 Nephi 9:28: “O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.” Also I say, with an English teacher’s smugness, that the Book of Mormon just doesn’t sound as good as the Bible. Joseph Smith, supposing he really did translate rather than compose it, simply didn’t have the talent of Tyndale and Wycliffe and the other men who translated the Bible into English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I have two favorite scriptures. One is Psalms 139:14: “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.” The other is Romans 8:26: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” I think those are the only prayers God really hears: the ones that cannot be articulated in anything other than a shout of joy or a groan of despair. And what can he use to answer a prayer like that?

What good is a world full of grace if you don’t share in that grace? When I was certain that God had rejected me, I set about finding other

ways to ensnare him in my life. The first man I loved, the man I loved most deeply, was a nineteen-year-old gay Mormon missionary I met at church when I was twenty-four and on the verge of quitting my religion; his name was Matthew, which means "Gift from God." Then for a while I was with a man who seemed to me more than a little demonic, but he said it made perfect sense that we were together. "After all," he told me, "what Satan shares with the angels is an obsession with divinity." And the best lover I ever had had grown up an Episcopalian altar boy. And I'm glad. I hope things go on like this.

It seems odd that you can look up a word like "nowadays" and find out that it means "In these times." Everyone automatically knows what "nowadays" means and everyone has for the past 1,000 years. There aren't many people who would bother getting out a dictionary to check. Only English teachers and writers do things like that. Which is what I mean about the evil and adulterous not giving a shit about signs.

My name is really quite pagan: Holly, a good old Celtic fertility symbol that has subsequently been co-opted by Christianity and is now one of the most recognizable symbols of Christmas. The song "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" ends with the line, "But the prettiest sight you'll see is the holly that will be on your own front door." One of my lovers, the Episcopalian altar boy, just gave me a Christmas wreath made from barbed wire. Where to hang such a thing? And what does it mean?

Last year at lunch in the Shanghai Hilton, my beautiful student Olivia Hwang told me she had finally managed, after plenty of research, to discover that in Chinese holly is called "nyau bu shu" which means "little birds can't live" (because holly is prickly and uninviting) or else "gou gu" which means "bent bones." "It took me a long time to figure out what that plant is," she said. "It's just not that meaningful in China."

Thank God, no one has ever called me *petunia*.

One of the last Sundays I was in Shanghai, I took my bike and set off, not looking for a holy place in that unholy city, but I found it anyway: a cathedral, severe and gothic in red brick. The spire called such desperate attention to itself against so many tall gray tenements that I began following it through a maze of alleys until there it was, with an unlocked gate and cultivated flower beds and cats lounging in every doorway. The inside had been trashed decades ago, and repairs seemed to have been going on almost as long: pews overturned, scaffolding everywhere, all of it cloaked in thick mantles of dust. But bikes were parked in the chapels and wet laundry hung from twine tied to pillars. Some of the stained-glass windows were broken and some were not, and that's what I remember most: the light, falling in stripes made by those broken windows; the silence a little, but mostly the light. I'd been chased out of plenty of Chinese buildings and kept waiting for someone to show up

and shoo me out. But no one bothered me and so I worshipped there: and I wonder now if it's solitude and size that makes one believe in God.

Even in China I put on my favorite boots and went dancing—not often, perhaps not often enough. At one Chinese dance I disgraced myself with my barely competent knowledge of ballroom dance steps: I would have thought that nothing, *nothing* in this universe smacks so thoroughly of Western bourgeois decadence than the rumba, the waltz, and the jitterbug, and perhaps that's why it was all the Chinese wanted to do. I much preferred squandering my precious foreign currency (I was employed by the Chinese government and paid in worthless Chinese money) at student discos, sweating furiously to anything loud and fast.

Now that I'm home and heathenish, I have tried to reassure my family: I like Christmas. I think they don't quite believe me, but I really do. I like all of it. I like buying and getting gifts and I like going to parties and I like saying "Happy Holidays" to people I don't even know and I like mailing out four dozen obnoxious homemade Christmas cards. But more than anything else, I think, I like the music. Even though you can't dance to it. One of the reasons I was so unhappy in China—it hurts to admit this but I might as well—is that I'm a Western culture snob and I *missed* those really old, kind of scary carols like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" done by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I like "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night," and I love "For Unto Us a Son is Given" from Handel's *Messiah*. I think everyone should "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas." After all, "It's the best time of the year." And so on.

I've begun to suspect that the only thing worse than an inexorable skeptic is a reformed one, a truth seeker who thinks she has found the truth she sought, and so becomes the most rigid of dogmatists. What is so wrong, I want to know, with saying, "I DON'T KNOW!" when you really don't. After all, ignorance may not be bliss but it is certainly hard to avoid. For a while I did word-processing for a guy who was writing a history of Afghanistan and ever since then I have wondered about the quality of life in fourteenth-century Afghanistan. Sometimes my own body is as foreign to me as Kabul and the Bamian provinces: I don't think I really know what I look like. I think about my body and all I can visualize is this landscape of sweat, dark hair, light hair, and blood. And I don't even *want* to know what makes the world go round; I want to know what makes it *stop*.

I have tried to imagine a world with no coffee and no death and all that happens is I wake up sweating. To sleep, to sleep or not: it might not be the question I start with but it's the question I always end with. I've written one pop song and it goes like this:

I don't know which wish to want  
 I don't know which house to haunt  
 I don't know which fault to flaunt  
 Well maybe, I'm confused

I don't know if my own heart  
 can hurt enough to make me start  
 falling down and all apart  
 Well maybe, I'm confused

And the times I feel confused  
 Are the times when I'm awake  
 Sometimes I think that getting up  
 Is always the first mistake.

I think and think but all that happens is I want to go to sleep. So I extinguish all thoughts of music and shoes and clocks and coins and anything else that fits a pattern.

I know in my own way I'm every bit as weird as some fruitcake out of Dickens. But that's okay. How could it be any other way, given the fact that pain perpetuates its own tortured monotony? Pain and religion, resilience and retaliation; what you lose, what you walk away from, and why. Does enduring to the end mean that you accomplish something, or that you merely survive? I want to remain involved in a search for inspiration and for the power to say something that matters about what matters to me.

They say that Joseph Smith insisted Christ was born on April 6th. Very likely Christ wasn't born in December. (But Joseph Smith was. I was too.) The world does not agree on when Christ was born. Nor does the world agree on whether he was—is?—the savior of the world. I don't know if he is. I may yet find out and the knowledge may damn me.

But you know what? Mormon theology has always rejected the traditional hell of fire and brimstone. Hell to Mormons is a psychological state, the pain of being separated from God, of knowing what you could have had if you hadn't willfully rejected truth. And I've already been there. It happened while I was a missionary—I would even say *because* I was a missionary—and I'm not there anymore. I don't reject any truth. I just prefer to admit that I don't know. And then go dancing. And then go sleep: believing I'll wake up.