

Drinking Blue Milk

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I HAVE OFTEN HEARD OF THE LESSON with the milk and the ink drop: Sister Smith drips, almost tenderly, the midnight blue ink into the whiteness. I have never seen it done, but I think I would probably watch in delight as the blue tendrils curl softly, coaxing the white, joining in gentleness until the glass is filled pale blue. I know I would do it again at home to see the softness of a new color come so gently and silently to life. I have also heard Sister Smith uses chocolate cake: offering the largest priest a slice of cake, then plunging her hands through the cream and crumbs to offer, as it were, a spoiled offering. I cannot but envy her sensation as her fingers pierce cool cream, then rough, warm crumbs, dark chocolate working its way under her nails. I would have asked to do it for myself, to be able to feel the texture oozing through my tightening fingers like river mud.

Have you ever folded firmly whipped egg whites, their peaks glistening, into the deep chocolate batter of a birthday cake, and watched the dark and light swirl behind the spoon? Have you seen the mixture turn the color of storm water pulsing through the desert—pale brown, flecks of white, clumps of egg white obstinate beneath the patient stroking of the spoon? It is a mesmerizing interlude between flour and frosting; a silent time of gentle movements, heaping, rounding, rolling, smoothing before finally settling to rest in the warmth of the oven.

I was born to convert parents in another land—the farthest branch from the headquarters of the church—who faithfully taught their family what they knew to be the gospel of Jesus Christ. Living so far away from mainstream Mormondom, we had a hardly recognizable version of Mormonism. Before television and before satellite, we had no stake Young Adult dances, no general conferences, no bishops, only faith, repentance, baptism, and Friday night movies flickering on a double white sheet pinned to the Relief Society room wall. I grew up an anomaly among my friends—they went to synagogue, I went to Primary; they drank Coke, I drank Fanta; they had two brothers and sisters, I had six.

The fifth child, I am a girl but always wanted to be a boy. Perhaps it was my brothers' fault: I wanted to be like them. I have two of them immediately above me in the family line-up: Jonathan, three years older than I—small and asthmatic. He played the piano and the girl parts in the school plays. He couldn't do much outside because he was allergic to horse hair and dogs: his face swelled, his eyes closed, and he started to scratch. We fought constantly, perhaps because we had nothing in common, but mainly because I was bigger than he until he hit his growth spurt at seventeen. I do remember, though, when we both had chicken pox. It must have been an uneasy truce that day. Mom was gone visiting teaching, the sky was a pure blue, and the breeze blew salt through the house—early summer in the Cape. Suddenly we found ourselves naked at the swimming pool in the backyard, our scrawny white bodies dotted in fiery red pox, jumping off the lamppost into the deep end. The water felt cool against my skin and we laughed.

On the other hand, Paul is big and brawny with bow legs and crooked teeth. My mother was asked to remove him from nursery school when he was four: he was teaching the other children to swear. He had a mess of freckles strewn across his round face and report cards filled with comments like "A satisfactory result but Paul is not reaching his potential." His room smelled like rugby boots and mud. He played the guitar, crooning "Norwegian Wood" into a tape recorder to send to Angie, the daughter of the mission president living up north and the only eligible Mormon girl in the country beside his sisters. Paul left for BYU when he was seventeen, the first of the children to leave. I always believed I would marry Paul, but he loves Janet Nicole of the dark mane of hair whom he met in the reserve library. Paul was wearing Easter grass in his moccasins—he wanted to be a walking Easter basket. Janet knew it wouldn't be boring to spend eternity with a walking Easter basket, so she married him. They live in Indiana now; I live in Provo, and Vivian, our oldest sister, lives in Africa still.

Vivian never left. Graduating from high school, she went to work as a laboratory technician, coming home at night with tales of rats and mice and long needles. One night she came home with Harry.

I remember shrinking behind the dining room table from this huge, bearded man hanging between his crutches to save his broken ankle from the dead weight of his body. He was an antiques dealer, more at home on his deep sea fishing boat, gone for weeks at a time when the tuna were running far out in the Atlantic, accustomed to male company and open air bathrooms over the side of the boat. Vivian was slender (still is at size 6), full-breasted, long legged, her hips swelling below her flat stomach tanned ocher from the sun. Her auburn hair swung long and straight from the center of her head down her back, framing a face saved only by

a Grecian nose from being elfin.

Her hair is short now; permed, I think. She eats chocolate cookies for breakfast and jerky for lunch, with a double mushroom cheeseburger, large fries, and chocolate shake for tea. She runs knock-kneed, wears black bikinis during the summer, drives down the highway to the station wagon stereo blasting Paul Simon's "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes." She takes her children out of school for the day if the weather is too beautiful to be anywhere but at the beach, and concedes new white tennis shoes for her parent-teacher conferences where she tries to smile concernedly as the teacher tells her, "Daniel really must improve his penmanship," thinking of her own backward sloping scrawl loping across the page. She studies Hebrew and religion at the university now, where her learning, she says, convinces her even more of the truthfulness of this strange religion we live and makes her more determined to be part of the building of the temple in Jerusalem. She visits Granny Rosie, the 100-year-old grandmother of her husband, every week, but hates being in the Relief Society presidency, preferring rather to be back in Primary teaching the children how to sing: fewer meetings and never a word about how "I can't visit teach her; she's the wrong color." She runs a 5,000-rand-a-month business out of a little black notebook under the front seat of her car and a bankroll beneath her bras at the back of her closet. And once she even threatened to castrate Charles the Dog if he so much as sniffed her newly planted tulip bulbs. She never did, not even when he ripped the head off Joel the Duck and left him strewn around the back garden in a flurry of feathers. Now she nurses her aging hound through arthritic hips and loose bowels, wanting to keep him with her as long as she can.

She kept me with her as long as she could. Carried me on her hip until I was too heavy. She is ten years older than I; Mom was busy with four other children and pregnant with a sixth, so Vivian, being the eldest, raised me. I don't remember really but she tells me she did. Perhaps that explains the attachment I feel towards her: my deep loyalty to my older sister.

Vivian met Harry at the Parade, an open-air market every Wednesday and Saturday in front of the city hall, where people came to trade: chiffon, silk, polka-dotted polyester mixed with eighteenth-century daguerreotypes, red-tasseled Hessian helmets, and grandmother's amethyst rings—anything of value, intrinsic or not. It seems the whole city descends the slopes of the mountain from its weekday lairs to meet at the Parade. Cries of the fruit vendors' "Fife fora runt, fife fora runt" rise in crescendo from their stalls around the perimeter where they perch on three-legged stools surrounded by the brilliant colors of the inland harvest. Occasionally, they sally into the crowd carrying green bunches of

grapes in paper sacks, or guavas sweating yellow in their plastic bags, still crying, "Fife fora runt, fife fora runt." Across the top of the refrain runs the frenetic chorus of "Save Me Jesus" echoing from the converted Moslem gospel band in place every Saturday next to the public toilets at the foot of the statue of Queen Victoria—ever resplendent in grey-green bustle and crown, her head streaked with pigeon droppings.

I have often wondered why Vivian married Harry, why she was even attracted to him. Perhaps he said something to her like, "What lovely long fingers you have, my dear," smiling to reach his eyes. Perhaps he slipped an antique band on her hand, his own wide and calloused hand covering hers. Perhaps he took her for a ride in his midnight blue Mercedes—we had a red and white Volkswagen bus at the time. Perhaps because she was the oldest daughter of a self-employed architect and he was the second and only single son of a wealthy antiques dealer. Perhaps because he was thirty-five and she was nineteen.

He married my sister on the twenty-seventh of November 1976 in the Mowbray chapel where we had gone to church our whole life. Vivian wouldn't marry him if he wasn't a member, so he was baptized. When they were married, he hadn't been a member very long, probably two or three months, so the idea of temple marriage wasn't even discussed; besides, the closest temple was in London. Temple marriage, in fact, wasn't even taught in the Cape. As a child, I knew I was going to be sealed in the temple; never married. That wasn't how the members did it down there. We married in the chapel with Sister Laverne, in stocking feet, playing the Wedding March; honeymooned in a cottage; and ten years later when there was enough money and four children, we sold the house, car, or whatever else was necessary to take six people to London or Salt Lake City. So my parents were happy with the wedding: Vivian was marrying a member. I was ecstatic: I was a flowergirl—a long, cherry-sprigged dress with a posy of daisies and new white shoes; hair, short and curly brown; but still fighting and praying to be a boy.

I don't remember how it all started, but I know I never wanted to be a girl. I even fought once on the rugby fields of Rondebosch Boys High School with a boy who disbelieved me when I said I was a girl. Secretly, I was thrilled, but I had to defend my honor, beat him up until he finally conceded my femininity. I was ten years old.

I prayed at night to be changed. Come morning I sneaked my night-dress up ever so slowly over my stomach only to be disappointed.

Womanhood came early the next year. It came before I wore a bra, before my first kiss. It came when Harry moved his hand slowly across my chest. He whispered roughly, "Let me show you how I love you." I kept my eyes fixed firmly on my book, trying to pretend he wasn't there,

that he wasn't doing what he was doing, that I wasn't feeling what I was feeling. "Touch me," he whispered as we walked between the pillars of the garden gate towards the front door. His voice was hoarse. "Please, touch me." I ran, pretending I hadn't heard. I was twelve years old. He was my sister's husband.

It's a strange thing when you're twelve, in seventh grade at an all-girls school, and a man tries to touch you. It's a fascinating, repulsive thing when you're eleven and a man shows you pictures, pulled from beneath the Welsh dresser in a secret drawer, of things you don't know the words for. It's an anxious thing hoping the family won't see when he kisses you hello in a masquerade of familial affection. It's an agonizing thing waiting to see who will take you home at the end of the night's babysitting. It's the fear rising inside as Vivian asks Harry to drive you home: she's too tired. It's knowing his hand will come slowly over the back of the front seat to find you in the dark where you sit huddled in the corner. Most of all, it's a frightening thing, when at eleven and twelve your prayers are filled with earnest pleadings that your sister's husband will drown at sea and never, ever, come back.

I didn't know what else to do. I was twelve years old. He was my sister's husband. He was family. He told me it was a good thing, a beautiful thing. He told me never to tell. I never did. I loved Vivian too much. And so I prayed, and feared, and prayed, and felt my body respond in ways I had never known. I hated my body; it betrayed me. I hated him; he betrayed my sister. I loved him; he was my sister's husband. I felt in some way responsible. If only I hadn't started developing so soon. If only I didn't look seventeen when I was eleven, eighteen when I was twelve. If only, if only, if only. Eventually, I just learned to block it out. I carried on doing homework, I carried on reading, I carried on. What else could I do. I carried on, in silence.

Until one summer two years later.

I returned home after two and a half years away, half of that spent in missionary service, to find our family reeling and an older sister, waif-like, nervous, spirit deadened. After thirteen years.

Vivian had finally told of years of silent abuse, of episodes of violent anger, of trying to raise Daniel and Emily single-handedly while her husband was at sea. In one long afternoon Mom and I sat at the kitchen counter making chocolate cakes, and she told me the story. Then, hesitatingly, awkwardly, I told her mine. But it was not only mine. It was my younger sister's story too. He had done the same to Laura, convincing her that it was right because Tessa, her older sister, had done it. In a distraught whisper, Mom said, "I must tell your father." Perhaps the biggest reason that I never told anyone is because my father loves his children

beyond his own life. I thought Daddy would kill him if he ever knew. His reaction surprised me. We walked along the beach front at The Wilderness, an isolated little village on the east coast. The air smelled of salt and sand and the ocean mist creeping across the horizon in the grey of the dusk. Mommy and my youngest sister, Alex, and I had joined Daddy that weekend on his speaking assignment as a stake high councilor to the Hamilton Branch—eleven members and 400 miles away. Arriving early after a six-hour drive, we drifted to the beach where we had come so many summers before as a young family. I can see myself, brown curls stapled to my head, turning hand-sand-sky down the slopes of the dunes, to land cold in the ocean, giggling at Daddy with his big belly. I am older now, the sun has gone down, and Daddy walks ahead of me, his legs still lean, his belly a little bigger, his hair grey. I can hear his words, the words I have feared for so long: “Oh, sweetheart, I don’t know why the Lord gives us such strong urges. It’s hard to control and so difficult to understand. But we must learn to battle them and to be forgiving.” I consciously loved my father more then than I had in years. With his kind and gentle wisdom, he gave me the family’s permission to feel the peace that I hadn’t felt for years.

I had forgiven Harry. To enter the House of the Lord to receive my endowments, I had to forgive. But the forgiving happened long before that interview day. I don’t think I was the one who consciously chose to forgive. Through the silent and divine process of time and faith, the pain was gone, first buried to ease it, then washed away in an understanding born of age. The forgiving came easily when the pain was gone.

My bishop asked me if there was anything in my conduct relating to my family members that was not in keeping with the Spirit of the Lord. I remember searching the faces in my mind: childish fights with Jonathan, harsh words with Laura but more recently letters of love and support; rocking Alex to sleep; Daddy and I watching *Silverado* on a rainy Saturday afternoon. From a recess, long unvisited, came shadows of fear and anger and Harry. I hesitated then and said, “Yes, but it is over.” He must have understood, because he said, “I sense no animosity.” And he was right. I did not hate Harry then, ten years after the fact, and I do not hate him now. I accept whatever happened, much of which has been erased from my memory, as part of life and the rich brocade I weave. I had hoped my husband would have been the first one to touch me so; but he understands. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t sat through Mutual knowing exactly what the advisors were talking about. Sometimes I wish those very strong feelings and passions had not been stirred in me at such a young and inappropriate age. Often I wish I had not learned to associate those expressions of love and tenderness with sick men and misguided desires. That association is so hard to undo. And sometimes I smile, in self-depre-

cating humor, at the thought of being a statistic.

Before I was married, I did not think very often of what happened so long ago, but when I saw the clouds stretch across the back of the mountain sky, or the swell of the hills green in the spring, or when I felt a hand resting warm in the small of my back, and lips gently brushing my neck, then I remembered not Harry but the swells of passion, and I had to fight against them.

I knew, dangerously well, how to focus my mind on something completely unrelated to the activities of my body. I knew how to turn off the guilt, and how to rationalize, even enjoy in a panic-heightened state, what was happening to me. I needed to do that when I was twelve. It was vital in order for me to survive. And Christ knew, even in my youth, how to succor me so that I could go on. He dimmed my memory and dulled the hate, turning me to acceptance and a hazy understanding of why Harry did what he did. At twelve years of age, I did not regard myself as a victim. In fact, I did not regard myself as anything out of the ordinary.

But I am twenty-six now, married and a mother, and the legacy lives with me still. However, there is no longer only one person who must suffer from this period in my life. In fact, when I was alone, I did not suffer. If I kept control of my life and my passions, I never found myself in the situation which I had been in twelve years before. But now, married, I think my husband and I are both victims of what happened. I use the word victim with trepidation. I don't wish to shift the reasons for our situation onto anybody. What happened to me is part of my life, a cloud which passed over, a dark thread in a rich tapestry, necessary eventually to make lighter colors seem richer in comparison. However, sometimes it is hard for me to see anything but that one thread.

I struggle to know that my husband really loves me. I convince myself, through some strange logic, that if he loved me, he would not ask me to share myself with him. I struggle to disassociate the sacred acts of husband and wife from the perverted acts of a middle-aged man and a twelve-year-old girl. I misinterpret his loving caress as the gropings of a misguided soul. My mind tells me he cannot be the same as Harry, but many times that silent, rigid, young girl is closer to the surface than I realize, waiting and watching with bated breath, trying not to panic as a hand comes closer and closer to her body. These are the things I struggle with.

I entered marriage with Hollywood dreams compounded by MIA Maid lessons on the delights of marriage. We were going to live happily ever after in temple garments and satin sheets. I thought, because my husband and I had been so passionate in our dating, that the same passion would continue in our marriage. I could not imagine the irrational

fear and guilt that accompanied our first nights. I needed a priesthood blessing from a perplexed, new husband to still the sobs and the screams welling in my throat. He could not reconcile the stiff, frightened girl before him on the bed with the demonstrative, passionate woman he had been engaged to. We could not have imagined I would fight him, pushing him away to physically escape what I had mentally escaped before.

Our marriage is not smooth at times because of this. He shrinks from expressing his affection (not a natural posture for him), not wanting to be mistaken for Harry. I retreat behind a barricade of silence and protests of fatigue. We are beginning to talk. The talking helps. Knowing he is trying to understand me helps. But how can you really understand a feeling, a fear so irrational, yet so real unless you have felt it yourself? The revulsion comes in a wave so unexpected that even the sweetest kiss turns instantly sour in my mouth. The fear and the guilt are with me still. Even after bearing a child, I still feel afraid when I try to enjoy my body with my husband or try to enjoy his. Just as I learned to fight the passion, I need now to let it ride, climb on its back, do something, anything to enjoy myself.

My husband enjoys me. He loves me passionately. He's a remarkably kind, gentle man who entered marriage with the same passion-filled dreams I did but with the capacity to fulfill them. Unfortunately, he married me. I don't think he regrets the decision. Nothing indicated things would be this way between us, that I would be so crippled. But at times he struggles to know that I love him, that I find him desirable. Because if I did, I would want to make love to him. But I don't. I tell him it's nothing personal. He doesn't quite buy that. Round and round we go. So we struggle through this area of intimacy and expression, as each newlywed Mormon couple probably does. Only I cannot help but think it would have been easier for me, for us, if things had not been the way they were. To give yourself clean and undefiled, naive and inexperienced, eager to participate, must be a fearful, reverent, divine moment free of shadows and fear and guilt. It was a moment I never knew. But I know, I hope, that I can come to know that moment. If there is such a thing as forgiveness and a lighter yoke, then there have to be for us, for my husband, for me, nights and mornings and lazy summer afternoons of sensual, sexual, divine moments. They are not with us yet. God willing, they will be.