

In Light

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The day the missionaries came to our house in 1988, a rainbow fell across the sky in our neighborhood on the hill. I stood on the ledge of the bathtub and curled my fingers on the windowsill to pull my scrawny body up to see. I could hear their voices, fresh as orange juice, through the open window. The way I see it now, the rainbow is brighter than any rainbow I've seen since. The sky more orange and small. The fresh puddles on asphalt reflect two shimmering missionaries, pressed shirts and black pants, my mom, my dad, my little white-haired brother between them, and somewhere in the background, me, watching it all. Documenting the magic, cataloguing it for some future time. Surely they all came in to eat dinner then, and I reached up on tiptoes and pulled down my best dress, because I always did when the missionaries came, and we must have all celebrated my mom. After so long, she'd decided to be baptized.

The other image that has come back to me recently, and replayed itself like a marionette show, or a little puppet on a string moving forward across the stage, then backwards to start again is this: I am running to the church two blocks away and across a street. My grandparents, who pulled an RV full of poker cards and whiskey into our driveway, were visiting Provo, Utah, for the week. They had no idea where they'd come to. My mom said I didn't need to go to church that week, that it was okay, but as I stood at the front window watching my neighbors click past in heels, swinging scripture bags, something compelled my whole body to the church building. I don't know if I told my parents, or at this point, how much of this story is actually true, but I remember so distinctly the feeling of running a few minutes behind everyone to get where I

was supposed to be. I picture my dress to be yellow. And so I am forever running with blonde hair and a yellow dress. A miniature body housing a gigantic child heart that just wanted to do the right thing. Whether I stopped to put on my shoes in the hurry to love God is something I can't remember. I am still compelled to love God in this inexplicable, even irrational way.

The most difficult words to write are the ones that are my compass. For so long they have been the direction, the movement, however subtle, I trusted. So what to do when you have to step back and articulate north? My husband, a geologist, still uses the glassy compass of his grandfather. I picture both men during their long and solo excursions, under the white spotted, black Nevada sky looking into the cupped object in their hand. Across the span of two generations, they'd both known so many times exactly where to go, where to find safety, how to get home. But my husband says that there are times when you're out in the desert as alone as you might ever be and even a compass cannot assure you that you're going the right way. He says that it's both unnerving and humbling to admit that although you believe in this object pointing you one way, you could be totally lost. It is at these times when you sit in the red sand and pray. You don't necessarily expect an answer, but the call of a night bird, the distant blinking of a star, a warm desert breeze. These are your articulations now: they are hardly words, but symbols of hope nonetheless.

I go to church every Sunday because I love the people and I love the things I grew up knowing. So much of my heart believes what Mormons believe. I practice it. I am awed by it. I am faithful in almost every sense and duty. I love the unintentional community that brings me lasagna when I have a baby and watches my children when I am sick. I love that I can do the same for them. I started to tell my son about Joseph Smith and then stopped at least a dozen times because I didn't know how to rectify the contradictions in my head into a story for a three-year-old. I felt that I should do something though: not rectify, perhaps, but rather tell my son as I could. I did tell him the story of Joseph Smith, as much as he needed to know. I told him because I believe that he deserves a space in this wild world where he can ask for miracles and know they are his for the taking. I will tell my daughter the same.

Leaving the church I grew up in is almost an indigestible thought; it gets caught up somewhere in the space between my ribs and stays there heavy. I don't want to go, and I don't plan to. I love this gospel. Not because I believe every detail of Mormonism, and I don't believe with every fiber of my being, or beyond a shadow of a doubt, but . . . my children, my children, my children. If you were sitting next to me, those words would accompany near tears glistening on the rims of my tired mother eyes. If I did leave, I'd miss it terribly. I would feel sorrow because I believe in promises between myself and a God that I cannot un-know. But I'd find my place because I have thirty years to build from. But my children, how will they know the sacred space that belongs only to a form of consecration, the belief in the impractical and spiritual that serves one so well in all other things, the unique sense of identity that comes from a concrete God who knows you, a prayer on your knees in the deep night, the chance to be obedient because you love someone more than yourself? I know these things surely exist in similar forms elsewhere, but I'm too old, and not sure where to find them.

As a twenty-one-year-old missionary in Uruguay, for eighteen months I was positive that every family I saw on the street, or in a front yard, or on a bus, was the golden family I'd been called to Uruguay to teach the gospel to. So I stopped them, doggedly, and asked if we could come over and share a message, or cut their lawn, or anything, please. I never converted a family to the church and most often they gave me a wrong house number or pretended they didn't hear me. For so long I wondered why I'd felt strongly to talk to each of them, partially looking nothing more than a naive child for a year and a half, but the more I look back on it, the more I realize what a glorious thing to have the chance to love and love and love again with a heart maybe more pure and hopeful than I'll ever have again.

In Sweden we ride the subway and then the train an hour across town to get to the church. We are greeted by old men with firm handshakes, warbling around the lobby. Some of them pull my husband aside later and ask how he reconciles his work as a geologist with the fact that the earth is only 7,000 years old. Absurd stories are sometimes told at testimony meeting and once, in Uruguay, a

woman got so worked up, she fainted and fell backwards into the arms of the bishop who'd jumped up to catch her. I am tired of the mystification of motherhood and the priesthood and I want to talk about Heavenly Mother. I think there is room for improvement in the way we live the gospel. But none of these things seem to matter much when I see my little boy perched on his metal folding chair near the window in his primary class. He is beaming and his legs are swinging and Jesus is there.

When I find him again he has drawn a picture of me, dad, himself and Thea, and one figure I don't know. We have tall lines for legs, big round heads, and more circles for ears. At the top of the page his teacher has written, *I have an eternal family*. And so this world is rife with contradictions of the heart and mind. I am out, then I am in, and so on for weeks, months, and now years. But I never speak much of this to anyone but my husband because I love these people, and I love singing hymns together, and playing the prelude music in Relief Society. I love the missionaries coming for dinner and the deep rich space for divine thought. I'm so grateful to these people, I would cry if I stood up to talk about it.

It is very real, and most honest, this well of feeling and thought from which I pull both glorious senses about this world and what lies beyond, and things I once felt sure of but no longer do. I know, this is no surprise for organized religion; we all go through our dismantling, our terrifying and liberating deconstruction, but then in the aftermath, the reality of staying 100 percent becomes real. The sacrifices are not imagined, they refine at times and bruise at others. When will you tell your children about the questions you have? Belief is no longer a simple, "of course," no matter how long you demand it to be. People are leaving and asking if you will stay. People who hardly know you are asking how you can stay. And you are left standing in a beautiful meadow, staring at your children, praying *what is it you would have me do?* And then a warm rain starts to fall and you stand still because you remember vibrant rainbows from so long ago. You believe in them still, that they were so bright. And the rain falls down your hair, and into your eyes until the whole world shimmers and dances. You stand, thinking of your children and waiting for an answer.