

## ACE OF SAINTS

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My dad has always been a very political man. Growing up, if he had control of the TV, there was a decent chance that Fox News would be playing. Every morning, we would listen to Glenn Beck on our way to school. At the dinner table, my dad would often rant about whatever political issue was topical at the time. During President Obama's second term in office, gay marriage was a big issue. Obama came out in support of same-sex marriage a few years earlier when he was running against our fellow Mormon, Mitt Romney, and had been pushing for its legalization ever since.

What a strange concept it was to me. Let two men get married? Or even two women? *Why would they even want to get married?* I thought. *Can't they just live with each other and be fine with it? Why do they even want to be gay? Why can't they just choose to be straight like the rest of us? They say it's not a choice and that they're just born like that, but that doesn't make any sense to me. I mean, I could totally choose to like girls if that's what society taught me was acceptable, but I choose to like boys because that's what's right. It's too bad that these people weren't taught proper morality growing up. Plus, why would God purposely make anyone anything other than straight?*

I felt grateful that I was one of the lucky few to be born into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the only true Church upon the earth, the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. In a time where the world's morality is subjective and based on the whims and appetites of the natural man, my morality was based firmly on the teachings of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the General Authorities. I reflected on how fortunate I was that I had the complete truth while the rest of the world struggled with trying to find what is right.

Growing up LDS, I had the law of chastity drilled into my mind. Whether it was in Sunday School, seminary, or Young Women, I had a lesson on chastity, modesty, or dating at least once a month. With all the lessons about modesty, dating, and pornography, it felt like we were constantly talking about sex. I often found myself thinking that for a religion that doesn't like sex, Mormons sure do talk about it a lot.

And to me, all these lessons seemed a bit unnecessary. Even as an older teen, I had never felt sexual temptation for another person before, so I doubted that any of us really needed to hear the lessons. I assumed it's kind of like teaching elementary kids to say no to drugs just in case they need to in the future.

As I sat in my cold, metal fold-up chair, leaning up against the itchy carpet walls that sometimes caught onto my dress, I would take mental notes of all the things I needed to do to keep my virtue. No dating until sixteen. *Easy. Already done. Still no dates yet.* No single dating until eighteen. *Sounds great.* Don't be alone together after dark. *Simple enough.* Don't make out or lie on top of each other. *Again, super easy. Anything more than holding hands sounds super uncomfortable and gross. Man, I'm really good at this whole following Christ thing. I'm going to be a worthy Mormon bride in no time.*

Up until the age of eighteen, I never really thought that my experience was any different from my peers. Looking back, it becomes obvious. But I was very skilled at pushing my worries to the back of my mind and ignoring anything that made me uncomfortable.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I had my fair share of "girl talk." Any time a group of girls would get together, the conversation would eventually shift to boys. *I mean, I like boys as much as the next girl,* I thought to myself, *but the way some girls are completely obsessed with boys is super weird and honestly kind of disgusting.* I would listen to all the girls go around in a circle, blushing and giggling as they went on and on about what boys they had a crush on. Some girls would even go into detail about kisses. As I listened to another Laurel describe her first attempt at a make-out, I was disgusted. *Making out at only seventeen? What kind of slut would do such a thing? She knows the rules*

*of dating set up by the Church. She really needs to be a better example. Maybe she needs to read her scriptures more.*

Eventually, all eyes would shift to me, and I was expected to give the juicy details of which boy I liked. This was always a hard decision. I would go through the short list of boys that I'd talked to and pick whichever one was nicest to me. "Um . . ." I sat, thinking. "Teddy." The other girls oohed and giggled at my answer. Then they pressed for what it was that I liked about him. "He sits next to me in art class. He's a really good artist. Plus, he's nice to me and tells really funny stories."

"Are you going to ask him to the girl's choice dance next month?" My friend Emma asked.

*Ew, no, was my gut reaction. I mean, I like Teddy. He's funny and smart and an all-around nice kid. I like talking to him during art class. But I wouldn't want to like, hold hands with him or anything. Imagining him holding my hand and lightly touching my waist while dancing seemed so inappropriate. I guess the Church says that fourteen-year-olds are allowed to go to dances, but still, it just feels wrong. What if he wanted to kiss me? Blech! Gross! I would never want to kiss Teddy, or anyone else for that matter! It just seems so weird. I don't know why all these other people my age seem so obsessed with it. It must just be the over-sexualized media.*

But I didn't want to seem weird by saying I wouldn't ask my "crush" on a date. That's what you're supposed to do when you have a crush, right? So I shrugged my shoulders and said that I was too shy. They moved on to the next girl. I was relieved that they didn't ask any further questions.

In high school, my physical education teacher would take roll and teach a short lesson in a classroom before moving to the gym. The lesson of the day was about heart rate. My teacher was showing us a short presentation about target heart rates when exercising, how to measure your heart rate, etc. While describing different situations that could change your heart rate, a picture of some random dude I didn't know suddenly appeared on the projector screen. Every single girl audibly swooned over this mystery man. Literally, they *swooned!* I didn't know people

actually swooned. I wondered, *What is wrong with all these adolescent girls that they sigh and squeal and fan their face at the mere sight of some thick-necked, thirtysomething-year-old man with a buzz cut?*

My teacher's face beamed with accomplishment that her lesson had had the intended effect on her class. "You guys all felt that?" She let out a small feminine giggle. "Seeing someone who you think is attractive can also increase your heart rate. I picked Channing Tatum because he's just so good-looking, he makes everyone's heart rates go up!" The room was filled with girlish snickers.

*Oh, so this is Channing Tatum, I thought. I had heard of him before but never seen him. Wait, isn't he in that R-rated movie coming out soon? The one about the male strippers? My teacher had just gotten married in the temple a month before. She showed us her wedding pictures in class. I knew she was Mormon. Why is she promoting this guy in class? How on earth could a man who sexually exploits his body ever be attractive to someone who knows the gospel?*

In the car ride home from school, my mom asked me if anything interesting happened at school, and I told her about what happened in PE. It was honestly kind of funny to seemingly be the only one out of the loop on something. She chuckled a bit when I described two dozen teenage girls all fawning over some older male celebrity they don't even know. When I said that I didn't really get it, she asked me if I had any crushes on boys at school. I thought through all the boys I'd spoken to in my grade, looking to come up with an answer in order to make myself seem normal, like I did with my friends. But I decided that I could be honest with my mom. So I told her that I didn't really have any crushes.

"Come on, you've got to have at least one crush," she teased.

"No, I don't think so," I repeated.

"Really, not one?" She looked slightly confused and also a little bit . . . sad? I shook my head no. Afraid that she wasn't understanding, I tried to explain a little more.

"I mean, I can tell when someone is 'attractive,' but I'm not attracted to them until I get to know them."

“Well, I guess that’s a good thing . . .” She trailed off, which made me nervous. “Actually, I can kind of understand that. I can admit when another woman is attractive even though I wouldn’t want to actually, like, date her or anything.” She shuddered slightly in disgust at the thought of being with another woman. “But don’t you ever see someone and your heart starts beating and you get butterflies in your stomach?”

“No.”

She quickly turned her head to look at me in the passenger seat. Her confused look was so intense it made my stomach churn slightly. *Is this not how everybody else feels? Maybe I’m just not explaining it right.*

I panicked slightly, trying to help her understand. “Well, sometimes when I see somebody, I think, ‘That person seems interesting. I’d like to get to know that person.’ But it feels the same way for boys and girls.”

My mother’s head jolted in shock and her eyebrows shot up as high as they would go.

I had said something wrong.

My face flushed red as I attempted to salvage the conversation. “I mean, it’s a little different for boys than it is for girls. It’s just . . . similar . . .” I couldn’t bring myself to lie to my mom, so that was the only thing I could say to try to convince her I wasn’t bisexual.

The look on my mom’s face told me she still didn’t get it, but she had realized that I was embarrassed, so she simply said “Oh” and dropped it.

Another common lesson I was taught in Young Women was about modesty. The discussion would go something along the lines of becoming walking pornography for boys to look at and be tempted. Modesty seemed like such an easy doctrine to follow. Most of the stores I went to had plenty of cute modest clothing, so I didn’t understand what was so hard about it. Even though my high school had a dress code, I would still see girls with low-cut shirts exposing a surprising amount of cleavage. Once during the school year, my friend Emma and I were complaining about it and she mentioned the typical response of immodest clothing being distracting for boys.

“They’re distracting to me too!” I exclaimed. Emma looked strangely at me, almost accusingly. She said she didn’t want to know that information. I knew what she was insinuating and tried to defend myself, but she was uncomfortable and didn’t really seem interested in my explanation for why boobs were distracting to me.

*Oh, no! I exclaimed internally. What if I actually am bisexual? Or worse, a full-on lesbian in denial? Is there any way to fix it? There has to be, right? God wouldn’t purposely make me that way without some way to overcome it. How do I know for sure I have same-sex attraction? I may be distracted by boobs, but I would never want to kiss a girl, would I? Maybe I really do deep down inside, and I was just taught that it was gross. Is attraction just wanting to be friends with girls? Because that’s what it feels like when I have a crush on a boy. Would I ever kiss a boy? I’d like to think so. Maybe some hypothetical boy, but when I think of the boys I have crushes on, I would never want to kiss them! Oh no, I definitely am a lesbian. Oh no, oh no, oh no!* I tried to control my panic.

Thoughts of being a secret lesbian would swirl around my head as I tried to calm myself of this fear. *I don’t like girls. I don’t like girls. Like I said, I would never want to kiss one. Yuck! That definitely means I’m not a lesbian, right? I mean, I wouldn’t really want to kiss a boy either . . . but that’s not the point! Maybe I don’t like any boys yet, but one day I’ll meet The One and I’ll fall in love and then everything will be fine. I just need to be patient. I like boys, just not any of the ones I know. I like boys. I like boys.*

But I didn’t like boys. I thought I liked boys. I always assumed I was straight just like everybody else. But as I got older, I got more uncomfortable with the silly girly talks. And the girls camp songs. Oh my, the girls camp songs!

Every morning and evening, we would gather around the campfire for our devotional. But before we went into the actual spiritual lesson, we sang camp songs. I loved all the classics like “The Princess Pat” and “I’m a Nut.” And nothing got me more pumped in the morning than singing “Rise and Shine,” which was my personal favorite. Even if I was still tired, I would jump up every time the chorus came and clap

enthusiastically: “Rise and shine and (clap) give God your glory, glory. Children of the Lord!”

But of course, you can’t flip through an LDS girls camp songbook without coming across a song about boys. Three songs specifically always made me uncomfortable whenever it was time to sing them. The least offending song was “Mormon Boy,” which went like this:

*I know a Mormon boy  
He is my pride and joy  
He knows most everything from Alma on down  
Someday I’ll be his wife  
We’ll have eternal life  
Oh how I love that Mormon bo-o-oy!  
I am a Mormon Girl  
I wear my hair in curls  
I wear my skirts way down to my knees  
I wear my daddy’s shirts  
I am the biggest flirt  
Oh, how I love that Mormon boy  
M-O-R-E-M-E-N  
More men, more men, sing it again!*

The song was unrelatable to me. I would sing the lyrics devoid of emotion or excitement. But it didn’t really make me uncomfortable, unlike the next song:

*I looked out the window and what did I see?  
Three returned missionaries looking at me!  
Spring has brought me such a nice surprise,  
Tall, dark, and handsome right before my eyes!  
I can take an armful and kiss all three,  
But only one for eternity.  
It wasn’t really so, but it seemed to be  
Three returned missionaries looking at me!*

The “Popcorn Popping” song I had learned in Primary was officially ruined now. The imagery of hugging and kissing a group of twenty-year-old men sounded disgusting. Even imagining boys my own age

was gross to me. I felt icky. But the next song was by far the worst. It was to the tune of “Baby Got Back.”

*I like Mormon boys and I cannot lie!  
 You other sisters can't deny!  
 When a boy walks in with a scripture case  
 And a big smile on his face  
 You get a date  
 An eternal mate  
 But wait  
 He's going on a mission  
 Leaving you wishin'  
 That you had a man  
 Someone to hold your hand  
 Deacons, what?  
 Teachers, what?  
 We don't like your features!  
 Your brothers are hot  
 But you are not  
 So bring us those righteous priests  
 HUH!*

That “Huh!” ended in an enthusiastic group pelvic thrust, which made me indescribably uncomfortable. They were singing about righteous sons of God the same way Sir Mix-a-Lot sings about big butts! *How is this song allowed?* I would think. *There are children among us for crying out loud! Those sweet, innocent Beehives are being exposed to pelvic thrusts! This is so inappropriate.* Singing “How Great Thou Art” immediately after felt extremely strange.

Eventually I did notice the difference between my experience and the experiences of others. I was “not like other girls.” I looked at other women’s sexuality with disgust. Everyone was a slut except for me. I was the normal one, following God’s commandments, refusing to even be tempted by so-called worldly pleasures.

When I was eighteen years old, I was very active in an online art community filled with teens and young adults who were very socially



liberal. In the summer of 2015, I watched my LGBT peers celebrate the legalization of same-sex marriage. By this time, I had met several gay, bisexual, and transgender people, who told me that their identity wasn't a choice, and all they wanted was to be treated equally to everyone else. I didn't quite understand. I still felt like being straight was a choice, but telling my queer friends that they were wrong was none of my business, and I was glad to see them happy.

The teens on the site seemed to be constantly coming up with new words for different genders and sexualities. I found it all pretty silly but ultimately harmless. Scrolling through the recent drawings, I came across a comment where someone mentioned the word "demisexual." Having no idea what the word meant, I searched the word online and was taken to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network website. The definition of demisexual read: "Someone who can only experience sexual attraction after an emotional bond has been formed." I rolled my eyes. *Sounds completely normal to me. Jeez, these kids think that having standards makes them special.* I kept reading the website. I had heard of asexuality before but never really learned much about it.

According to the website, about one percent of adults are asexual, and that it means not having any sexual attraction at all. But asexual people could still have sex even if they don't feel attraction. That confused me. I clicked on all the different links and tabs to better understand. The site explained that asexuality is a spectrum. Apparently, you can be attracted to a small handful of people and still call yourself asexual. The website distinguished between sexual attraction and wanting to have sex. But what was sexual attraction if it didn't mean wanting to have sex? I then had to search what sexual attraction is and what it feels like. Apparently, it's some weird magnetic pull to want to touch their privates or something, which sounds absolutely disgusting. *Wait, I thought as the realization hit me, people can feel that way without an emotional connection to a person? Like, they just look at someone and want to touch their boobs? Yuck! What the heck? Is this how most people feel? Even Mormons? Is this what people talk about when they say*

*they have a crush? Why would people admit to that? That's so gross. Then apparently there's also romantic attraction, which is somehow different. There's sensual attraction and aesthetic attraction and platonic, and just how many different types of attraction are there? This is all too much and it's way too complicated. How do I even know for sure if I've felt any of these?*

I spent several hours looking at different websites and forums all about asexuality. I took several different asexuality quizzes, all of which said that I was likely asexual. The only thing that gave me a shred of hope that maybe I was actually normal was the fact that I was only eighteen. *Maybe I'll finally feel it in a few years and I'm just a little late,* I hoped. *But everyone else my age seems to have feelings for other people. I know one of my friends was literally counting down the days until she turned sixteen so she could finally date. I've even seen seventh graders making out in the halls sometimes. But maybe thirteen is a bit early. Maybe I'm just a bit slow to mature in that specific field. I'm probably just a late bloomer.*

*But what if you're not?* the little voice in my head remarked. *That would make a lot more sense.* The voice was probably right. I thought back to the conversation with my mom. *Why would she be so surprised that I didn't have any crushes at fifteen if it was normal? Why would I feel so uncomfortable when my friends would talk about boys?* I always thought it must have been because I was more righteous than they were, but that wasn't true. They were good people who as far as I knew hadn't done any super serious sins. There was some kind of cruel irony in finding out that I was the weirdo all along after years of labeling every other normal human being a sexual deviant. Suddenly my holier-than-thou attitude regarding sex was crushed with my ego. *How did I not realize this sooner? Why did nobody tell me?*

After a few days of continued research, I finally felt like things were falling into place. Suddenly, all of these experiences I had were beginning to make sense. And I started to feel guilty about all of the silent slut-shaming I did. As I accepted the fact that I was likely somewhere on the asexual spectrum, I felt a sense of relief. Suddenly, chastity lessons

at church had a different feel. Instead of feeling holier-than-thou, I felt blessed.

*Maybe being asexual isn't so bad, I thought. I mean, I feel like a freak for not feeling the way most people do and not realizing it until just a few days ago. I feel like I'm missing out on some sort of essential human experience. But maybe this is one of those blessings in disguise. I mean, chastity is one of the biggest issues facing our generation. Fourteen-year-olds are out getting pregnant. Even members of the Church break the law of chastity all the time. It's a huge deal. Members of my family haven't been able to get married in the temple because of it. They end up getting sealed later, but it's still really awkward when someone has a civil wedding and everyone can guess why. If I'm asexual then I don't have to worry about any of that! Maybe this is Heavenly Father's gift to me. He realizes I have enough problems going on right now that I don't need any chastity issues coming up.*

*Well, I still don't know what I'm going to do if I don't get married and have kids like every other Mormon I know. That's sort of your main goal as a Mormon, especially if you're a woman. Am I going to be that one old maid in the family ward that everyone feels bad for? I guess I could find an asexual man to marry me. But what are the odds of that? Finding another Mormon asexual man who I love and get along with is a very rare and specific combination of traits I'm not sure how to find. Or maybe I'm actually in the gray area and I can get married and have kids the old-fashioned way like everyone else? It'll just take longer, that's all.*

*I don't know. I don't know what to hope for. I'd like to fall in love, get married, have sex, and make babies just like everyone else, but I don't know if that's something I'll actually want. Sure, the fantasy of it all sounds nice, but I can't imagine that ever happening in real life. As soon as I imagine myself in that scenario, it feels gross. I don't know. I guess I'll just have to wait and see. I'll deal with it later. For now, I guess I should just be grateful that I don't have to worry about committing the third worst sin ever.*

And for a while, that was that. I had finally discovered and accepted my asexual identity. I posted on the forums often, where I learned that asexual people often refer to themselves as “aces” for short. Soon, I was

confidently using the cute nickname for myself while still holding out hope that I could have the perfect Mormon family one day.

I started college soon after my self-discovery. During my first few weeks at Utah Valley University, I discovered that free breakfast was served on Monday and Friday mornings. I was pretty stoked to say the least. As I excitedly chewed my waffles, a young man approached me and started making small talk. I was in such a good mood from the thrilling discovery of free waffles that my social anxiety didn't give me too much trouble. After some discussion about ourselves, what we were studying in school, what music we liked, our hobbies, etc., he asked me out on a date. At eighteen years old, this would be my first date ever. No boy had shown any interest in me before, and I was flattered. I gave him my phone number, and we set up a date a few days later.

My asexuality wasn't a concern at the time. After all, I still wasn't sure if I was completely asexual or somewhere else on the spectrum. If there was any hope at all of eventually having a normal life with a husband and kids, I figured I might as well give dating a shot. There was nothing remarkable about our first date. He told me some stories about his mission. We chatted some more about our lives while we bowled, and at the end, he said that he'd like to go out again, and I politely agreed. Second date was the same story. Now that I had gone on two successful dates, I felt a great sense of accomplishment for being a normal human being. *Look at me! Going on dates now that I'm in college. Everything is going according to plan. This whole relationship stuff is easy.*

Several days later, I walked into my Ethics and Values class. The class was small, with only a dozen people or so. It was unusual for a general education course, but I liked that I really got to know how my classmates felt about all of the pressing moral issues we covered in the class. The day's lesson was on moral relativism, and our professor started off the discussion by demonstrating how some Utah cultural norms are very different from other places.

"Ladies," the Professor asked, "how long do you have to date before you feel comfortable kissing a guy? Like, how many dates?" The room was silent for a moment as I looked around the room and saw that there

were only two women in the class. I had never kissed anyone before and had only been on two dates. I was not qualified to answer this question at all. So I stayed quiet until the other girl answered the question.

*But if I were to answer the question, I asked myself, what would I say? Gosh, I have no idea. Maybe like, six? That seems like enough time to get to know someone well enough. Or, is that not enough? Depending on the frequency, someone could go on six dates in about month. There's no way that's enough time to develop the kind of emotional relationship necessary to do something as intimate as kissing. Maybe like two months. Sure, two months sounds good.*

“Well,” my female classmate spoke up, “I guess I'd say around the third date is when I would usually kiss a guy.”

*What?! Three dates?! And you're already kissing? You barely know each other! What kind of person kisses on the third date?*

The professor chuckled at the answer. “That's funny you say that, because in most other places, the third date is the sex date.”

I was breathless. Turns out, my sense of reality and what is normal was way off base from everyone else's. Like sure, being LDS, I was raised with more conservative ideas about romantic relationships, but my opinions were even further away from the norm than my mostly Mormon classmates. The professor stated that he had asked this question to a lot of his classes, and they all gave similar answers. In Utah, you kiss on the third date. Everywhere else, that's when you have sex. *When were people going to tell me about this? How did everyone else know about this unspoken third date rule? How did I get this far out of the loop?*

My complete shock slowly turned to anxiety as I thought about my upcoming date. This would be our third official date. *What if he thinks you're supposed to kiss on the third date? What if he tries to kiss me? Or even just hold my hand? What do I do? Do I say no? Do I go along with it to be nice? Do I just awkwardly scoot away from him? My stomach churned as I ruminated on what to do.*

Soon, the dreaded third date came. We went to the UVU student center to play games. We rented a pool table, and after a few failed attempts at hitting the balls properly, it was obvious I couldn't play at all.

“Here, let me show you how to aim,” my date said as he walked over to me. I stopped what I was doing, stood straight up, and backed up a few steps so that he could demonstrate proper technique. As I watched him bend over to show me how to hold the cue stick, I suddenly realized that he might have wanted me to stay there so that he could wrap his arms around me as he showed me how to shoot. I was filled with the same anxiety again that maybe he and I had different expectations about dating.

Thankfully, we made it through the third date with absolutely no physical contact whatsoever. As far as I was concerned, the date was a success.

For our fourth date, he invited me to see *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2*. I was excited. I loved the *Hunger Games* series and was eager to see the final film. I was completely preoccupied with the movie, paying no attention to my date. After it was over, I told him what I liked about the movie and how it compared to the books. He listened but didn’t seem as happy about the movie as I was.

He never texted me back asking for another date. And to be honest, I was completely unbothered. I enjoyed the activities we did together, and he was a decent person to talk to. But that was it. I wouldn’t want him to be my boyfriend. Just a regular friend would be nice. I had no interest in hugging or kissing. In fact, I spent our last two dates specifically trying to avoid it. *Oh*. I had figured out why he didn’t ask me out again. It was so clear that I wasn’t interested in him, and he didn’t want to waste his time and money on me. Even though I wasn’t attracted to him, this thought hurt. I wanted so badly to be in a relationship and fall in love eventually, but I worried that most people wouldn’t stick around long enough for me to maybe hopefully develop feelings over time. *If I do at all, that is. I still don’t know if I’m even capable of falling in love. Maybe if I try to date anyone, I’ll just be wasting their time.*

Suddenly, the goal of having a husband like I was supposed to seemed a lot harder to reach. But I didn’t give up. The next fall, I went on another date. The date went fine. We ate lunch and talked for a while. Then at the end of the date, he offered to drive me home, and I

reluctantly agreed. When we arrived at my apartment, he parked the car and told me how much he liked me. That he *really, really* liked me. I was a little caught off guard. I didn't know what to say back, so I just said nothing and nodded.

"Do you want me to walk you up to your door?" he asked.

I thought that was a weird thing for him to ask. I could walk up there by myself. I didn't know why he would want to come along, but I said, "Sure."

He smiled excitedly and jumped out of the car. I walked up the stairs to my second-floor apartment door while he followed behind me. As soon as I reached the top of the stairs, I realized I had made a terrible mistake. I stood outside my door, knowing the awkward moment that was coming any moment now.

"I had a good time today," he smiled. "We should do this again sometime."

"Yeah," I lied.

We stood there silently for a moment, and then he stuck out his hand. I grabbed his hand and shook it, feeling relieved. *Yes, shaking hands. Shaking hands is great.* But the handshaking only lasted for a moment before he hugged me. After releasing each other, we said good-bye and I went inside.

Thoughts raced around my head as my stomach started to form a tiny knot. *It was only a hug. It could have been much worse. Why am I feeling like this?* I took a deep breath as I tried to untangle my thoughts. It was something about the way he gushed about how much he liked me, while I felt nothing. He seemed so happy to be around me, while I just wanted to hang out like friends getting to know each other. He seemed so sure and passionate in the way he felt about me. He didn't even know me, but he was still attracted to me. *Was he . . . sexually attracted to me? Ew. I don't want to think about that.*

Even though his forwardness made me uncomfortable, I almost felt jealous. He didn't need time. He knew right away who he wanted to pursue and who he didn't. But here I was, trying to date without feeling any strong feelings one way or the other, hoping that one day I might feel

what everybody else feels. But every time it always ended in frustration. *Can't these boys realize that not everyone is like them? That maybe some of us need more time and you just have to be patient? But then again, maybe I shouldn't expect everyone to be like me either. It's not fair to make others wait for something that might never happen. A few months ago, I thought that people who kissed on the third were floozies. But apparently, they're actually just normal. Maybe I should learn some patience. I mean, they didn't choose to feel the way they feel any more than I chose not to. I don't think I would have chosen this even if I could. Oh man, is this really how gay people feel? Now that I really think about it, I doubt very many people would choose to be gay or bi if they also had to feel like they weren't normal, or that they couldn't have the same life as everyone else. But if people are born like this, why would God do that to them? Why would God make anyone anything other than straight? Heterosexual marriage is one of the key parts of the plan. Why would he ruin that for anybody?*

Dread started to overcome me. *What if I'm like this for the rest of my life? If I never fall in love, then what? Am I just stuck with my friends? I mean, I like my friends, but they're not as good as a husband. That's why people say "just friends." Friendship isn't the same as romantic love. It's not as good. It's not as real.* I felt crushed at the thought that no one would ever love me.

I sat in my room, shaking, letting the same thoughts run around my head over and over. Worried about how I could ever be as happy as all those couples smiling and holding hands in the halls, shoving their heterosexuality in everyone else's faces. I trembled, feeling like I was about to cry, until the little voice in my head told me, *You're gonna be okay.* I tried to calm myself, listening closely to the words of the voice. It didn't say anything else, but I was suddenly reminded of the information I had been consuming over the last several months in my online community, all the frequently asked questions and the frustrated forum posts from confused and worried people. There were so many options for me! Romantic love and sexual desire were two separate things. You could have one without the other. And even if I was aromantic as well,



platonic love is just as strong and meaningful as romantic love. Some people even have platonic life partners! If I couldn't find that, maybe someone who's sexual will care about me enough to compromise. Plus, I could always adopt kids if I want. Who knows what would happen? Who knows who I'd meet? Maybe I would always live alone and still be happy. I didn't need to figure it all out right then. I could just go wherever life took me. God may have a plan, but that doesn't mean the plan is the same for everyone.

I felt free. I felt empowered. I might fall in love and get married, or I might not. Either way would be fine. I didn't need to have the same life path as all of my friends and family. I realized that I am the way I am, and I couldn't change it. I needed to respect it. I had to listen to myself, and not to everyone around me, including Church leaders. I had to follow my heart and do what makes me happy, and it would all get figured out in the end.

Thanksgiving came a few weeks later, and my grandparents invited everyone over for dinner. My mom and I shared stories from our respective jobs, relating our similar bad customer experiences. My sister showed me the poster she made to ask a boy to the school dance. I was excited for her. All the adults talked around the table as my younger cousins ran around the house. Even though the children were loud and rambunctious, there was a sense of peace throughout the house. One of love, gratitude, and kindness. We laughed and played games until the sun went down. When it was time to leave, I hugged my relatives goodbye. A few of my little cousins stood in a line, waiting to give me a quick hug. My grandma gave me a big warm embrace as she told me, "It was so nice to see you! Come visit us again soon. We love you!" My parents echoed the same sentiment.

I didn't need to date in order to find love. I already had it.

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