

THE FIRST LETTER SHE FOUND

Charity Shumway

Oh Ellie, how to start? I keep thinking about the temple. I guess I'll start there.

I put my temple clothes and my garments in a bag and buried the bag in the back of my closet when I was young, just out of college. I've carried it to every new apartment and house since, never sure what to do with it. It's in the back of Dad's and my closet right now. I wonder if you've ever seen it. You used to crawl into our closet all the time when you and your brothers played hide-and-seek.

Sometimes, rarely, maybe four times in twenty years, I've taken the bag out and touched the white fabric—the cotton, the silk, the lace. I can remember then, so clearly, how the garments felt when I used to wear them. Every time I've done this, I've cried.

For a long time, your dad didn't know I had the bag, but he found me crying over it once. We had a terrible fight that day.

He's never understood that part of me. He doubts that I can be settled in the choices I have made, how I can have married him, had you kids and raised you like I have, but still feel conflict, regret, sorrow about religion—religion being the dirtiest word he can think of. He has always been afraid of faith. Afraid of me, really. That I would snap back to some puritanical position toward life, that I'd wake up and say I want to be a practicing Latter-day Saint again.

Faith is something he's never felt, and so he mistrusts it in all its forms, even the barely living form I still carry around. The time he found me with the bag was a long time ago, before you were born. That was the last fight we ever had about the issue. I think we both sensed the danger—it was a truly ugly fight, I am sorry to say—and we have

silently, since then, acknowledged it as untouchable territory, something we cannot talk about. It's one of the reasons I never talk about it with you.

In fact, Ellie, it's funny how I would never say any of this to you but here I am writing it. Not that funny because I've always been more comfortable writing things down than saying them, especially hard things. It used to perplex your dad when we were dating, the way I wouldn't have it out with him in the moment but would turn up a day or two later with a letter about whatever it is we were disagreeing about. I'm still that way. I wonder if I will actually give you this letter. I'll have to decide later. Maybe I'll read it over in a year or two and laugh to think I ever felt the need.

I'm not surprised that I'm writing this letter to you and not your brothers. There are things about me I want you to know, things about life that I want to tell you. Things I want to warn you about or spare you from. I have never worried for your three brothers the way I worry for you—because you are a girl in the world, because you're my girl. You are on the edge of so much, the end of high school, all that comes next. I look at your sweet teenage face, and I see the future, and I have such feelings. Fear and hope, all mixed together.

There's so much to explain—I'm in the sunroom, my usual spot in the corner chair. You're still at school, and I have hours until you'll be home, and I'm just staring out the window, watching the ropes of the willow tree moving in the wind.

The other day you were out here with your friend Amanda after school. The two of you sitting on the rug, doing a school project. And I was in this very chair, writing something, but really just listening to you being your sweet, silly selves. Then something happened. It was the smallest thing really. You said, "We should cut out some pictures of plants and paste them around!" You looked so excited. You leaned toward the piled-up gardening magazines in the rack beside my chair.

Amanda pursed her lips. “That’d be too busy,” she said. And you instantly wiped the eagerness from your face and nodded.

It was nothing, really. Just a poster! But your face changed so suddenly, the excitement hid itself away so completely. And it was this tiny suppression of yourself, something I hadn’t seen in quite this way in you before and have never seen in your brothers. You did it so readily. It left me cold.

The older you get the more I worry you’ll become practiced in that art, womanly art that it is. The more I fear you won’t even show eagerness until you’ve looked for acceptance. I am so afraid of this for you. I want to warn you against these surrenders of the self. Surrenders the women in my family, me prime among them, have too easily made. They seem like such nothings at the time. But they grow and grow.

If only it were as simple as some “be true to yourself” slogan. What is much harder is even knowing where your eagerness lies, and if it lies in several places, where to stand, how to protect the territory of yourself. How to know what really matters.

I can’t think that I really know how to help you, but Ellie, I wish I did! I wish I could! It’s this that’s making me think so strongly of my young self, facing my faith and trying to figure out my heart. The decisions I made surrounding that seem to me to be my most fundamental self-surrenders. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it, about you, since that afternoon.

To tell you about them, I have to tell you about the temple. Of course, you know that’s not where regular church services are, since you’ve been to a few of those. Never on ordinary Sundays, since that would have just killed your dad, but I’m sure you remember the services when some of your baby cousins were blessed.

The temple is something else entirely. I think you mostly know about it from weddings. That’s the reason we’ve never gone to any of your older cousins’ wedding ceremonies—they’ve all been in the

temple, and you have to be an adult member of the Church who has been endowed to go.

It's funny to think that there are words that have never needed explanation in my life, words like "temple" and "endowment" that are like the word "fork" or "bed" to me. But you're not LDS in any real sense. (Though I can't help but think it's in you in some ghostly form. The way you're so hard on yourself, or even the way you play piano, all those moving thirds and fifths you improvise. Do you even know those are hymn chords, that you learned those note progressions from me?)

So let me explain. The real heart of the temple is the endowment ceremony, which is basically the ceremony in which you commit to the faith as an adult and in which, in response to your covenanting, you are endowed with knowledge. It's this rite of passage, this big thing that is supposed to deepen your understanding and offer new realms of peace and guidance, and it's also something with this very physical change associated with it—the garments. You put them on when you go to the temple for your first time.

Garments were everywhere when I was growing up. All the adults I knew wore them. They're underclothing, tops and bottoms. For men, it's basically like wearing a white undershirt and extra-long white boxers. For women, it's a little stranger. The tops are like camisoles with cap sleeves. There are various necklines: scoop, princess, square. And the bottoms are like drapey white biker shorts. You wear them under everything, the closest thing to your skin. Your bra goes on top of the garments. (How ridiculous this all seems to explain, but you have to know to understand.) You can take the garments off to swim or work out, and, of course, to shower and all that. But otherwise, you're supposed to wear them all the time.

All your aunts and uncles on my side wear them. You probably haven't noticed, but that's just because you don't know what to look for. For me, I can always tell if someone is wearing them because of the lines they create under your clothing, a scoop near the neck, lines

under pants just above the knee. After I stopped wearing mine, I tried to wear thick clothing around my family whenever I visited, hoping they wouldn't notice. Of course they did, though. There were enough occasions when my skirt was a hair too short and they should have seen garments when I sat but didn't, when I bent over and my skin showed instead of my garments.

You know lots of stories about me from college. And lots about me and Dad in college together. The story of me and the temple is in and around all those other stories, and what amazes me most after all these years is how easy it's been not to tell it. I've pulled that vital cord from the stories and made them whole and lovely without it. I've been so thorough that I often don't even think of it myself.

The first time the temple came up was just before I left for college. The bishop of my ward back home asked me if I'd thought about going through the temple. I was surprised. Men go through the temple when they're just out of high school, right before their missions, but women don't usually go through the temple that young. They usually wait until they're twenty-one and going on a mission (actually that's changed now to nineteen, but that was the age when I was young) or until they're getting married, which sometimes happens at nineteen, I must admit, but which is usually a little later. Or if neither of those happens for them, no mission, no marriage, they'll go through when they feel ready, usually sometime in their late twenties. (When I was young, I always felt sad for the women who didn't have a momentous event compelling them, who just did it one day, no big hoopla. No one ever said it was sad, but I felt it—the smell of thwarted dreams coming up through the perfume of the day. I laugh at this now, as if twenty-eight were old! But back then it seemed tragically past hope).

Anyhow, what matters for what I'm explaining is that for the bishop to suggest that eighteen-year-old me consider going to the temple felt like a grand compliment. I left his office flattered. Looking back, I wonder if he feared that exactly what happened to me in college would

happen and hoped to bind me to the Church early, to protect me. But I didn't really think that at the time. The idea that I would leave would have been completely preposterous to me.

I might, in fact, have gone to the temple then, at age eighteen, if it hadn't been for the garments. I didn't want to wear them. I had never in my life worn anything sleeveless, and even though I was ashamed to put off unlocking the mysteries of the kingdom for the sake of tank tops, that's in large part what it came down to. I didn't want to have to explain my funny underwear to my new college roommate. It wasn't like I wanted to turn into a rebel in revealing clothes, so I didn't articulate my hesitancy by saying I didn't want to wear garments, but I did say I didn't feel a strong calling to go to the temple at the time, so why rush.

And then college happened. I went to Boston specifically to get away from Utah, to experience something bigger and broader, and I did. I made lots of new friends, saw all these different ways of thinking about things. During that time, I did a good deal of blustering about my various degrees of doubt, though never out loud to anyone other than my close LDS friends. And then only from the safe position of being a good Mormon girl—I paid my tithing, went to church, didn't drink or smoke, didn't fool around. (“Fool around” is actually your dad's phrase—one that I appreciate for its vagueness and also the sense of fun it implies. The words the Church uses—“petting,” in particular—are much more embarrassing.)

I say I blustered, but in truth, I was troubled by it all. There were things I doubted, doctrines that grated, rifts between my feelings and my thoughts on certain subjects that seemed impossible to mend: doctrines about gender, doctrines about revelation and obedience, the list went on and on. I wrote in my journal about it night after night, and I felt the beginnings of estrangement. But there I was, a sixth-generation Latter-day Saint. Did I really think I was going to up and become a Congregationalist, a Quaker? What was the point? Leaving religion

altogether was so fantastical a thought that it didn't even occur to me then.

There was something else too, something that would be easy to leave out, that I would seem nobler without. But to be honest I have to say there was embarrassment. It wasn't just that I was intellectually troubled by, say, the old doctrine of polygamy or the Church's stance toward homosexuality. Most of my friends in college were dismissive of faith in general and would have been dismissive of me if I had ever talked about it with them. I could get all worked up just thinking about it—those prejudiced jerks! But it was too internalized for that most of the time. I never wanted to talk about my faith with them anyway. There was too much to explain. And what was at the heart of it always seemed much too unspeakable.

I never felt comfortable with the language of the Church, the standard professions of belief. They sounded tinny. Corporate, even. "I'd like to bear my testimony. I know the Church is true. I know Joseph Smith is a true prophet"—you'll hear that a dozen times a meeting. The LDS Church is a church of bureaucrats and laymen. We have no paid clergy. Just regular folks who get up in church week after week and sometimes speak beautifully but much more often speak awkwardly and along standard lines. And sure, there's something great about that—the unpretentiousness of it. But instead of joining that shared voice, I've always retreated into silence or very carefully worded phrases. I still find it nearly impossible to talk about faith of any sort without evacuating myself and putting on some pose, some distanced voice: "Latter-day Saints believe. . . ." "The doctrine is. . . ."

So there I was, embarrassed, questioning, and stirring myself up into a real furor about the whole thing when something happened. That something was your dad. We met toward the end of my freshman year, and he swept into my life like . . . a novel. New York, Nantucket—you know all of it because it's your life. It's mine now too. But to me back then it was like stepping into something I'd only ever read about. And,

of course, you know your dad is loving and kind and good and smart and funny and wonderful. Ellie, in this letter I hope you will above all know that I love your dad and all of you kids! I don't unwish my life! You are my happiness. This is a beautiful life!

But there we were, college kids, and as time went on, he was interested, unshockingly, in doing a little more than kissing. And bit by bit, I went along with it. The trauma this caused me might seem funny to you, but it was a huge break for me. My questioning of my faith had always been safe because I was faithful in deed, if not always in thought, and that was proof of my devotion. I could say whatever I wanted as long as everyone knew where I really stood. It was part of my identity. The same thing that made me want to get good grades made me want to be a good girl—one more opportunity to excel! And for one measly guy, a fantasy really, I was losing myself.

There's a real ranking system in LDS doctrine. Murder is worst. Breaking the law of chastity is next in line. I realize as I write that phrase—the law of chastity—that it might not have a definite meaning to you. Let me be clear. It means sex, and who is allowed to have it. Married couples only. And even though we hadn't broken "the law of chastity" yet, we were pushing things. My non-Mormon friends would have thought all that anguish over a little petting (egads! that word!) was perplexing, and I certainly couldn't say anything about it to my LDS friends. They would have understood why it was so awful, but they never would have looked at me the same. So there I was, floundering, feeling alone and miserable. And then your dad and I slept together. (I'm sure these details about our physical intimacy are absolutely mortifying to you. I'm sorry! But it matters. So here we are. You can grimace if you have to.)

I broke up with him a week later, the both of us sobbing and blubbering and arguing for hours, days really, until we were exhausted and I slunk away, horrified about hurting him and ruining everything. Of course, you know we got back together my senior year, and I will come

to that, but nineteen-year-old-me was afraid and grieving. I felt like I had seen emptiness, had seen what it might be like to be without the Church, had felt that cavernous longing and loneliness. If I wasn't the golden child, who was I? I wanted back in.

I felt like it was time for me to accept myself, to finally say once and for all, stop wrangling! Who do you think you're fooling? This is who you are! Your ancestors walked barefoot across the plains to get to Zion, then scraped out lives in the desert, and you think snotty little you is in any position to tell them they sacrificed for no good reason? You think you're ready to throw it all away? Baloney.

I wanted to prove that I was spiritually mature, that I could embody that grand compliment the bishop had given me before I'd gone and ruined everything. But I will say that was only the trimming of my urge to go through the temple, not the heart of it. At the heart of it was a tender spot of faith I've never really been able to articulate. Because your dad and I slept together, I had to wait a year. That's a rule. And that entire year I felt that spot of faith grow brighter and brighter. I could sit back and feel it like the warmth of the sun.

And then the day came, a week before I went back to school for my senior year.

Your dad has always scorned the architecture of LDS temples. I see what he's saying. Their exteriors are often a little fantasy-ish—an inclination toward blazing white spires everywhere. But I've never been able to condemn them so roundly. I grew up on that aesthetic too much to fully reject it. And the Bountiful temple that first day could not have been more beautiful to me.

I remember driving with my mother up toward the temple, warm August sunshine giving all the dry brush on the whole hillside a soft golden glow. Inside the bride's room, where nonbridal little me was still led to put on my white temple dress and prepare myself for the endowment ceremony, that same light poured through the stained-glass

windows. Most stained-glass windows are bright primary colors, but these were pale purple and ivory. The ceilings in the room were perhaps thirty feet? I can't exactly recall. But that light. It was beautiful. The dress I'd picked out had mother-of-pearl buttons, pin tucks, and a high satin neck. I looked at myself there in the filigree-framed mirror, the light glowing off me in my temple dress, and I thought I had never looked more beautiful. Of course, you know that I am vain and that feeling beautiful matters to me more than it should. But it truly does matter to me, and it's only a feeling I have when I have a sense of well-being.

The endowment ceremony was ritualistic—hand signs, particular words and names to memorize, standing up and sitting down at particular times to show my consent and my covenanting. “Covenanting”—another word I understand instinctively but that won't mean much to you. It means promising, but two ways. I make promises to God, and He makes promises to me in return. But it's more than that, actually. You also make promises to your fellow saints, and they make promises to you. It's a communion of promises. A sturdy structure. Mutuality. I'm still moved by it.

I wasn't surprised by the ritual, strange as it might have seemed to an outsider, and I felt such peace, such complete un-embarrassment, as if I could at last embrace every bit of LDS peculiarity, could know that not a soul in the room looked down on me for my faith, irrational, clunky, or inarticulate as it may have been.

I left the temple that day wearing garments, an adult Latter-day Saint woman. I left feeling quiet, as if I had gathered the pieces of myself up and simply wanted to hold them close for as long as I could, as if I might scatter them again with words of any sort.

In the days after, I stayed quiet, but it became a morose quiet, a silent anxiety. It was the garments. I was too aware of my body. Parts of me that I was used to ignoring were suddenly signaling my brain at all times. My thighs, covered with fabric. My waist, bunched with fabric

where the garment tops tucked into the bottoms. My back. My arms. It was the heat of our little house in August, the way the sweat gathered where my bra covered my garment top. It was the agony of going through my wardrobe. I'd known the shorter skirts and the sleeveless dresses would be out, but I hadn't expected that so many of my shirts would have necks that were too wide or that so many shirts would be a little too short, the garment showing when I leaned forward or lifted my arms. I hadn't expected that so many of my knee-length skirts would, in fact, not quite cover the bottom of the garments. I moped around and cried. And then I went back to college.

I figured I would get used to garments soon enough. That it was a little something like the strangeness you had when you got your braces off, the way your teeth felt huge and slick for a week, and then you adjusted and could hardly remember that feeling. But I remained acutely aware of them. I looked at every girl I passed and assessed her outfit, garment friendly or not? The slightly sheer sweaters, low-rise jeans, tank tops—I was ashamed of my envy of them. And in the moments when it was possible that someone saw my garments—when I crossed my legs and my thigh showed a little too much or when, worst of the worst, I changed at the gym, I was embarrassed and ashamed of my embarrassment.

But all in all, even with the swirl of distress about the garments, I felt a power I hadn't felt before. A slight settling. I had hoped for a final settling, but slight was enough.

They'd just finished a new temple in Boston, a short drive from school, and all that year I went to the temple every Wednesday night. Sitting in the temple, wearing my dress, feeling like I belonged with "my people" was, until I had you children, the happiest I have ever felt.

That year was also when more of the stories you already know begin. Your dad had graduated and moved to New York for his first job after my freshman year, but when I was a senior he was back in Boston for business school. We started to see each other again, at first

just dinner. But then more. I hadn't seen him in a year and a half, and I felt an irresistible pull, like cords tightening. I remember the first time he finally touched me again. It was just his hand on my arm, but I felt it like a shock through my body, a jolt of pleasure and love. All I wanted was more.

We've told you all those stories, our crazy middle of the night calls and walks, our sudden road trips, how hard we fell for each other, so much more than before. How wonderful it was to rediscover him. And every bit of that is true and bears repeating. I'm afraid reading this letter you'll get the wrong idea. That's one reason I might not give it to you. I want you to know I chose your dad every bit of the way, that I fell in love with him, that I have loved him every day since and still do.

But I suppose the whole point of this letter, or one of the points, is for me to tell you that it would be easy if feelings were always clear, if one good feeling didn't conflict with another.

All within a week or so of us seeing each other again I told him about garments and about deciding to go through the temple, how it was a challenge but wonderful too. I remember the exact bench we sat on during that conversation, just a few blocks from my dorm. It was a warm night, and very late, and even though it was a busy street during the day it was almost silent at night, just the occasional cab going by. He listened so intently, leaning toward me, his eyes warm and wide, and partway through he put his hand on top of mine, the same pure pleasure flowing through me at his touch. I actually remember going home and writing in my journal, "John is so so good. He seems to understand all the sides of me." I remember that all these years later because I went back to that entry a lot of times and reread it. I wondered later how I could have thought that. Your dad is so so good, that part is true. But he does not understand all the sides of me.

Before, I had felt pressure, as if I were proving I was the sort of person he'd want, some game of sophistication, but now I just wanted to spend every moment with him, and I almost didn't think about what

I was doing as I pressed the boundaries of the law of chastity. Again, what a terrible phrase that is, but I use it because that's the specific phrase they use during the temple ceremony. The covenanting is fairly broad—promising to obey the law of the gospel, to consecrate your time and talents to building the kingdom. More words that might mean nothing to you, but just know they mean a general sort of faithfulness and participation. But then there is a very specific covenanting to obey the law of chastity. It's the only specific commandment that gets broken out. And there I was, once again troubled by it but now with much higher stakes. We were still in fairly safe territory, and I was still wearing my garments, going to church, being my newly revitalized LDS self and figuring, hey, who knows what I'm doing with this guy, but I love him too much to do anything else. I actually fantasized that he might convert.

And then after months of togetherness, one day I just knew something was up. Your dad had been droopy-eyed and sadly affectionate all day, handling me the way you would an old photograph, an edge of nostalgia in his touch. Finally, late that night, I nudged him and asked what was wrong. After a long pause, he said he couldn't ever marry a Mormon girl. And that was that. I slipped out of his arms and caught a cab back to my dorm. I fell asleep berating myself—what had I thought would happen? I cried all the next day and then the day after that. But I was also relieved, in a way. It was time to gather myself back up again and march forward with my Latter-day Saint life.

But then your dad showed up on my doorstep, desperate. He didn't know what he wanted. He wanted me. He didn't know. It was quite a scene. And, of course, you know we got back together—I was still crazy about him. But everything had changed. He couldn't put his hand on top of mine and listen to me talk about the temple anymore. He was trying to put me into his life, and he said he couldn't have that kind of religion in it. He couldn't stand that I felt guilty about what we were doing. Couldn't raise his children in the Church, in any church.

He didn't want a Mormon wife, even though he wanted me. And for me part of the problem was that he was so sure while I was trying to cope with uncertainty. I was so vulnerable to attack. Again, it may seem funny that we were these kids thinking and talking about our lives in these terms—our children, marriage, all of that. But Dad and I were always serious like that.

I wanted to cling to my faith. He couldn't stand it, couldn't stand me, but wanted me, wanted me. Your dad pushed me—did I really believe x, y, and z? And I saw more and more of my own inconsistencies, my own shakiness. We started sleeping together again (sorry again for the details!) It was so gradual that by the time it happened niggling over the details felt crazy. But I cannot overstate how ravaged by guilt I was. I'd made promises. And now I'd broken them. Still, I kept going to church, kept wearing my garments. For a short time, I even kept going to the temple even though I was in direct violation of my covenants. I told myself my life was complicated, and that some conflicts were unresolvable and that being a hypocrite was just being a reasonable person in the world—consistency was too much to ask, too painful to consider.

I was also increasingly unsure that I could hack it as a Latter-day Saint, even if we broke up. What if, instead of your dad, I married some nice Mormon man. Was I going to wake up at forty with three kids and tell him I wanted out? I couldn't shake that fear. But I also couldn't bear the thought of leaving, of never going to the temple again, of giving up the sweet, unembarrassed peace I felt there.

I am sure you will wonder if it really had to be so black and white, in or out. And I can only answer by telling you that you don't understand the Church. It is, in fact, black and white, in or out. I suppose I could have lingered in it, but it would have been a crippling half-life. There is very, very little place in the Church for the undevoted. I did my best to cling to that small both-in-and-out territory, until I just couldn't.

And so I took off my garments and put away my temple clothes, which really meant putting away the Church and that part of myself.

Your dad said he wanted nothing to do with it; it had to be my choice. But not too long after I did, we got engaged, got married, had you kids.

In the years since then I still feel clinging edges of embarrassment whenever anyone learns I grew up in Utah and asks, as they so often do, if I am Mormon. I never know what to answer, even still. The question always freezes my heart. There is such judgment in that question. I have seen clear relief pass over too many people's faces when I've answered that question no.

I stopped going to the temple before I stopped going to church—part of that attempted half-life. But on my last visit to the temple, just as I was finally deciding I was breaking myself apart with my dishonesty and couldn't go on, I carried my temple bag in, changed into my temple dress, and went in feeling heavy, verging on tears.

At the end of the temple ceremony, you pass through a veil—just a curtain, really, but meant to represent the thin division between earth and heaven, mortality and beyond, a division Latter-day Saints always call “the veil.” After passing through, you enter the celestial room, which is always the grandest room in the temple—white, light, perfectly peaceful. You can sit there and think and pray for as long as you want. That night, the last night I would ever be in a temple, I went through the veil and entered the celestial room and fell apart. I sat in a corner of the celestial room sobbing for almost an hour. I know the word “sobbing” is melodramatic, but it was the sort of crying you can't control, the kind that catches in your throat and shakes your body.

I am still not sure if I cried so long and so hard because I knew I was giving up something that I shouldn't have been giving up or because I was simply mourning a loss that was inevitable and for the best, though sad.

But I do know, Ellie, that I want you to be very careful. I don't take back what happened. I love you all so much. I love Dad! But I wish I had been more careful. I wish I had been gentler with myself. I wish I had tolerated my uncertainty to a greater degree. I wish Dad had tolerated

my uncertainty more too. I wish I had kept parts of myself for myself only.

But perhaps this letter shows how untrue that is, how desperate we are to share all of ourselves. Ellie, I have always wanted to share my spiritual self with someone and never have. I could never handle the blazing devotion of my fellow Latter-day Saints, and I could never find myself at home in the clear atheism of your dad's world. I wish I could share myself with you. I see now that this might be a foolish letter. Too much to give to a teenager. Even in a year or two.

You'll be home from school any minute. What am I going to do with this letter? I'll tuck it away for now, I guess? Maybe in the bag? Maybe you're enough like your dad that you'll never need to find stability in uncertainty the way I needed to. Perhaps all I will do is watch you more closely. Perhaps all I will do is pray for you in that silent, strange, muddled way I pray.

CHARITY SHUMWAY {charityshumway@gmail.com} is the author of two novels, *Bountiful* (By Common Consent Press, 2020), winner of the Association for Mormon Letters 2020 Novel Award, and *Ten Girls to Watch* (Washington Square Press, 2012). She earned an MFA in creative writing from Oregon State University and a BA in English from Harvard College. She and her family live in the Hudson Valley.