

Through My Lens

A Lesbian Latter-day Saint
Perspective

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
VICKI AND DAVID, WHOM I AM
BLESSED TO CALL MOM AND DAD

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LOOKING BACK

Part One

THE FIRST TIME I can remember actually telling someone that I was Lesbian was from the phone of the psych ward, lying on a bed with no sheets in a room with two-pane thick windows and white walls with nothing on them but the drawing of the Mandarin character for hope I had done during art therapy.

I had spent the majority of my one week in the psych ward hanging out with the only other patient even close to my age, a young girl named Emily. I was twenty-four. Emily and I spent most of our meal and free time alone in one of the smaller meeting rooms playing solitaire and sharing poetry. Luckily, we had some limited access to computers, from which I could print the google document of poems I had written that spring—just months before—during the onslaught of COVID.

During that time, I had been living with my then-fiancé and his family to save money on rent. It was good to get to know his family, but it was lonely at times, especially

while I struggled with the recent loss of a good friend. Her name was Marie. We'd met only nine months prior on a study abroad in the UK. Nine months may not seem like a long time, but it's hard not to bond with someone you're sharing hostels with. It was right around when COVID hit—as if one disaster is not enough—that she told me she didn't want to be friends anymore and asked me not to call again. I was so devastated I didn't eat for two days.

That same night that I'd received the news from Marie, my fiancé and I heard that the temples were closing. Our sealing was scheduled in two months. It would never happen. The news was devastating, but not as devastating as the loss of my friend. It was hard to express the loss to anyone, but especially to my fiancé. The only way I could find to adequately express the heartbreak it had caused was to refer to it as a breakup, but that's not a term one uses with their fiancé when talking about someone else, even if it is a girl. So rather than talk, I wrote. It was my friend Grace's idea that for the duration of quarantine we write a poem a day, which we shared on a Google doc appropriately titled "Inside."

It was from this Google doc that I printed my poems to share with Emily. Emily was a strong believer that poetry is meant to be read out loud—ideally, by its author. As I read, Emily began to notice a theme. After one particularly passionate poem, she asked me who it was about, and I told her it was about a friend. Marie. As I read through my poems out loud with the audience of Emily, it became apparent that most of my poems were about her.

"Do you have any about your husband?" Emily asked.

There was one I had written him for Valentine's day, but I didn't have it with me. Aside from that, I had only one other—much less than might be expected of a doting

new bride. We had been married not three weeks before my admission to the psych ward. Perhaps a little shamefully, I read her the only one I had.

“I don’t want to say too much about your marriage,” Emily remarked, “but the one about your friend was much more passionate.” We shared an uncertain look. I knew she was right. She asked me if I had a picture of my friend. I pulled up her Facebook profile on the psych ward computers, disappointed I couldn’t access any photos from my confiscated phone—a luxury not permitted in the psych ward.

“Isn’t she hot?” I blurted as we browsed past one particularly dashing photo. Immediately, I felt a pang of regret, and guilt. Girls aren’t supposed to be hot. Guys might say they’re hot. But not girls. Girls don’t call other girls hot. Emily understood, and in that moment, she knew what I had, for years, been too afraid to accept. Being with Emily in a sequestered room almost literally shut off to the world thanks to COVID and limited phone calls, I felt safe. And I’m grateful to Emily for being bold enough to voice her thoughts. It was validating to see how clear it was to her—this part of me I’d never wanted to accept.

“I think you’re Lesbian,” she said, in just the same tone one might use to remark on the weather. It felt natural. And despite the trials and aches I knew would come with it, the overwhelming feeling was relief, likely because I was finally accepting this part of me that had lived suppressed for so long. Up until that point, I had found a million and one excuses for my feelings, and perhaps that’s why it’s so hard to say when exactly I knew. I think, deep down, I knew long before Emily had to tell me. In fact, it’s almost funny how clear it seems looking back.

Part Two

I HAVE A distinct memory of a discussion with my bishop in my early teens. I don't remember how old I was exactly, but I was likely between the ages of twelve and fifteen. He was talking with some of the youth of the Church about being sexually pure, and I remember asking him how one would know if they were Lesbian. He asked if I wanted to have sex with women, or if I thought about them in a sexual way—a bold question to ask a teenage girl in front of her peers. I didn't even know what sex was—had I, I might also have wondered how it happens with two women. At that time, sex wasn't even something I thought about. So of course, I said no, and he told me I had nothing to worry about.

Now here I was in a psych ward. I had been married, and was preparing to have that marriage annulled. I had attempted suicide. And I still had no desire to have sex with women. But for the first time in my life, I was certain at last that I was Lesbian.

I had chosen to tell my parents first because I knew they would love me no matter what, but I was still nervous as I dialed from the psych ward's phone. I remembered my mom's reaction when I'd told her a year before that my roommate was Lesbian. She'd seemed worried for me. How would she feel if I were Lesbian? There was a brief moment of silence, and then, "We love you," followed by a comment from my dad: "We kind of suspected." I was a little taken aback by this, but it also was validating to know I wasn't the only one who'd had suspicions.

I never had a boyfriend in high school, but that was easy to excuse. The boys my age seemed too immature; besides, there were extremely few boys at my high school who belonged to the Church, and I was apprehensive about dating outside it. Despite not having boyfriends, I still had interests. I call them that very cautiously, knowing that despite what I think I know now, to be true to the past, I have to be true to what I knew then—or to what I didn't know. At the time, I had barely an inkling that I might be Lesbian—in fact, the thought that I could be would have scared me—and so I never saw my interests in that light.

I had, since I can remember, felt closest to older women. They were caring and wise and excellent conversationalists—not so concerned with the high school gossip and seasonal crushes as were my peers. And for most of my youth it had served me well to have these older mentors and friends. It was after my senior year of high school that I began to wonder whether it was, well . . . normal.

When I hit a bit of a rough spot emotionally, I had reached out to one of my teachers, who referred me to the school social worker. As I sat in the social worker's office, she asked me why I had chosen to reach out to this

teacher. The answer was both easy and obvious to me: “Because I love her.” It was only later that I realized what had likely passed through the social worker’s head—but never through mine. While she was admittedly gorgeous, for me, it was platonic. I respected and admired my teacher. She was a friend.

After studying Shakespearean sonnets in class, I wrote one a day and shared them with her when the opportunity would arise. As the school year wound to a close, I got an idea. I had always hated poetry explications, but this time I would be explicating my own. I decided to write about how each of the poems I had shown her shared one common theme: love. The final message was “I love you.”

The Friday before Easter I presented the twenty-page document along with a hand-written copy of all the poems I’d shared. The following Monday I was sent to the office before her class. My dad was there, along with the school counselor. My twenty-page explication was sitting on the desk with pencil markings in a handwriting I didn’t recognize. I was told I was being removed from her class and was asked to cease contact. That’s when I learned that my way of loving was wrong.

One year later out at college I was meeting with a counselor to discuss, among some other things, the happenings of my senior year. “Do you still love her?” my counselor asked, speaking of my teacher. “I love everyone,” I responded, without hesitation. My counselor combatted my assertion, and I was confused why she would try to do so. For a moment, I wondered again whether my way of loving was wrong. For a long while after I was certain I didn’t know what love was, and it was a very rare person who would hear the words from my mouth, “I love you.”

Part Three

ASIDE FROM MY family, there was one person I was certain I loved, and that was my friend Rachel. Ironically, I'm not sure I ever told her so in English, but we said it all the time in Mandarin. "*Wǒ ài nǐ.*" They were the first characters I learned to write after Rachel drew them on my paper during our first study session together. Rachel was the friend everyone needs—she was someone I could talk with openly, and someone who I was never afraid didn't mean it when she hung up the phone and said, "*Wǒ ài nǐ.*"

I remember one night a few years into our friendship she had come over to my apartment to watch a movie. As we sat together on the couch snuggled under a blanket, I got a call from my dad. I looked at Rachel and she nodded, so I answered it. My dad said he was just calling to say hello and asked what movie I was watching. I told him I was just snuggling with Rachel while we watched *Anaconda*, and he said *snuggling* set off alarms. I told him it wasn't like that, but then I knew what he was thinking,

and I couldn't get it out of my head. I talked about it with Rachel afterward and told her that maybe we are just products of society: if it wasn't such a common topic, I wouldn't think so much about it and I wouldn't be so worried. But I had some reason to worry.

Not six months after returning from my mission I had already been in and out of three relationships. The first was with a guy who I had met before my mission. He messaged me as soon as I returned, and a week later I was seeing him. Things progressed rather quickly within that first week, and everything was fine, except that I never felt comfortable when he touched me. In fact, there were a few times when just the touch of his hand on my knee was enough that I was fighting off panic attacks. I never told him this, and sometimes I wish I had—at least then he might have known why after only one week of dating and two days of being his official girlfriend, I broke up.

A month later I was asked on a date by a young man in my ward. It seemed promising, not only because he was a great man, but because when he hugged me, I didn't panic. In fact, it felt good. And that gave me hope. We progressed rather slowly, and while I didn't necessarily enjoy the feeling of my first kiss, I derived pleasure from its meaning—that someone was willing to commit to me, and I to them.

He asked me once what a kiss meant to me. It was never sparks or butterflies. It was more like a ring. Not a sparkly one, but the kind that fits over two fingers and binds them together in a way that shouldn't be comfortable for anyone, but that you wear nonetheless because it's cool and new, and because someone special gave it to you.

Roughly three months into our relationship we hit upon my birthday. Wanting to make it extra special, he suggested we end the day with a movie at his apartment.

He held me close the whole time and kissed me as the credits played. I was uncomfortable the whole time. After that, it was never quite the same. Two weeks later, we broke up.

I could go on, but the stories are the same: I meet a wonderful man, we become good friends, they get touchy, I break up. After the fourth, I decided to stop dating for a while. It was around this time I remember going to the temple and asking God if I was straight. I never received an answer—at least, not one I could discern—and after a month or so, I stopped asking.

A SINGULAR VIEW

Part Four

A SIMILAR SITUATION occurred while I was dating my husband. I asked God many times if I was doing the right thing with the right man, receiving in response very little direction. It didn't quite help that our relationship seemed different. On our fifth date, we both confessed that we weren't attracted to the other person. Having done so, we decided that as long as we were in the same boat and enjoyed each other's company, we would continue the relationship.

Eventually attraction came, but I can only assume it was very different for each of us. I remember during a fall general conference receiving the impression, "If he is the one you want, you can pray to be attracted to him." I had never seen attraction as a choice nor as a blessing, and in all honesty, I still don't; however, at the time, I decided to act on my impression.

The answer came briefly and suddenly. We were at a friend's party playing games, and for a moment when I

looked over at him, it was as if I saw someone completely different. I believe that God gave me a glimpse of what He sees. My boyfriend looked the same physically, but in that moment, I saw him as a spiritual giant, an incredible man, which was, of course, quite attractive.

The physical attraction, though, never really came. I thought that was alright; after all, the attraction I felt seemed deeper and more important. As a consequence, our relationship progressed largely lacking the physical manifestations. I don't know how different it would have been had I been inclined to them. He was such a respectful man and so conscientious of me that I must assume it was me holding us back.

During our stay with his parents, they noticed our lack of physical affection. As we talked about it—my fiancé and I—we accepted that we were different. I had told him once about my fears that I might not be straight. Of course, at the time, I couldn't say for sure.

I had thought that Lesbian was an entirely sexual term, and having never attempted sex, I felt there was no way to know—a frustrating conundrum when you consider that the Law of Chastity would make it impossible for me to know for certain until I had already sealed myself to a possibly destructive situation. My fiancé took it calmly, and whatever impact it had on him was evidently not enough to end our relationship.

As the days till our marriage grew shorter, I grew ever more apprehensive about our honeymoon. I read books and conference talks—I even talked about it with my fiancé. Nothing seemed to help. At times, the thought of it put me in tears. There was absolutely no desire for intimacy.

Part Five

SOME TIME AFTER calling my parents, I decided to call my husband. Up until that point, I had not given him the code that would allow him to call me. The psych ward is designed such that each patient is given a number which they can choose to share—or not share—with whomever they like. If someone attempts to call the psych ward without the number of the person they are trying to reach the psych ward attendants will inform them either that they cannot disclose any information on that person or simply that no calls will be accepted. For the first five or so days, I did not give my husband my code.

I felt bad about it, but I also knew I needed time to process. For the time being, my father served as our liaison. It was my father who encouraged me most to call my husband. After coming out to my parents, I knew I needed to talk to him, but I was, perhaps understandably, apprehensive—not only because I had refused contact for

so long, but also because of the nature of what I had to discuss. I don't remember most of what was said on that call. He was respectful and supportive, though I knew it must have been hard for him. He assured me we could work through it, and I was determined to try.

It was hard to want to stay married when my counselors and psychiatrist all seemed to think that the best path would be divorce. However, I fought these suggestions obstinately. I had made a promise to a wonderful man that I had to at least try to keep. I remember kneeling by my bed and crying as did Eve when faced with the decision of whether to eat the forbidden fruit: "Is there no other way?"

I was rather shocked then when a few days later my husband called to inform me that he thought we should get an annulment. Shocked because he had been so willing just days before to work it out. He told me that he had been somewhat surprised himself when, after much prayer, this had seemed the best course of action.

Aside from a deep sense of sorrow and loss, there was also an overwhelming relief. It was that same sense of relief I had felt when I had, only a few days before, finally accepted my orientation. Relief is an imperfect word to describe it, because you know it is not a true escape, and it is tainted by many other hard realities that are sure to come as consequences.

I have, till now, always thought of it as a relief, and realize only in this moment that perhaps the better word is peace. Peace comes despite of and through anguishing experiences. It is difficult to describe how heartache, uncertainty, and *peace* can co-exist unless one has experienced for themselves such a miracle, as I did that day in the psych ward as I got off the phone with my husband.

Part Six

AFTER THE ANNULMENT, and even some time beforehand during the last couple weeks of our marriage (which was, considering its brevity, nearly all of it), my relationship with God was rather rocky. First, I had been upset about the loss of my friend, then about the seeming lack of guidance or confirmation.

On the eve of our marriage I had found myself scared, so cold-footed in fact that when my father asked if I wanted a blessing I told him that if I wasn't told directly to go forward with our marriage, I just might back out. God promised a happy celestial marriage, and the next day, in the backyard of my uncle's house with an audience of just parents and siblings, we received our marriage certificate.

I must mention that in the blessing given by my father I was also warned that the happiness that was promised in our marriage would not come without some struggles. Those struggles were readily apparent. For the sake of my husband, I will not go into any of the happenings of our

honeymoon, nor will I detail the catalyst for my ending up a psych ward patient. I will only say that, due largely to my sexual inhibitions, it was a difficult time that left me feeling largely responsible for my husband's ensuing, and understandable, misery, as well as my own. When I ran to my friend's house, and after many tears, expressed a strong desire to overdose, she wisely took the steps that eventually had me admitted to the psych ward.

Though I had been warned about the struggles, at some point, God must have decided I'd had enough. Still, I was angry and confused. After the annulment, I wondered time and again what I had done wrong that had made it so that God's promised Celestial union would not be realized. What resulted was anger. "Why," I asked, "had God told me to get married? Why would He put me through such trials and give me such a promise when He knew I was Lesbian—when, in the end, He knew it wouldn't work?"

A GLIMPSE OF GOD

Part Seven

WHEN I CAME home from the psych ward I moved in with my sister and her husband who were more than supportive of my newly-disclosed orientation as well as the situation it put me in. Over the following few weeks, I slowly came out to a small group of trusted friends, most of whom had been from my singles' ward at BYU, which I resumed attending that summer.

I was fortunate to have such a supportive group—nearly everyone that I told was considerate and patient, especially during my ensuing struggle with the Church and some of its teachings. I remember one particular phone call with my friend Kaija in which I expounded all of my frustrations—most of which were aimed, if not at the Church, then at God himself.

I was angry and confused about the promise He had made to me the night before my wedding. I was angry that the Law of Chastity had prohibited me from discovering truths about myself beforehand. I was angry at God for

being a man and for creating women to be so vulnerable. I was angry at him for making us in such a way that while the beginnings of sex were so gratifying for men, it could be so uncomfortable, even painful, for women. I was angry most of all at the teaching found in the 130th section of the Doctrine and Covenants which states that “in order to obtain the highest [degree of Celestial glory] a man [and a woman] must enter into . . . the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.”

I honestly felt hoodwinked. Here I had observed every commandment, every covenant, every teaching for all of my life. With this, I don't endeavor to claim perfection, only that like every other saint and sinner, I strived. And yet, my striving would not be enough unless I could be sealed. It seemed to me that my personal righteousness was no longer the only requirement for exaltation, and that this second requirement was beyond my control, and, in my eyes, entirely unattainable and to some extents, undesirable. It didn't seem fair.

It was this train of thought that had initiated my departure from Church teachings: if my best could never be enough for me to reach exaltation, what was the point? I hated the idea of being *half in*, yet I felt that due to my orientation I could never be *all in*. And so, I preferred to be *all out*.

When my sister and her husband were on vacation for two weeks and I found myself alone, I started drinking. Not very much, though—in fact, I found the taste of alcohol utterly abhorrent, and I couldn't afford to taste test every kind until I found something palatable. My first attempt ended mostly in the sink.

Part Eight

DURING THAT SUMMER, I also put myself on a number of Lesbian and Queer dating apps. It was in this endeavor that I stumbled across the profile of an old acquaintance whom I happened to know had left the church after graduation. Her profile also stated that she took part in social drinking. I decided to give her a call. There were a number of things I wanted to know from her—how she had realized her orientation, when and why she had decided to make such realization public, what points of doctrine or practices had initially drawn her away, and what she drank.

It was this last piece of information that proved most immediately useful. She directed me to a drink with a relatively small concentration that I can compare most closely to a spiked raspberry crystal light. I knew drinking was wrong (if not expensive), but I wasn't sure I cared. It was reliable, and numbing, and that's what I wanted.

Kaija knew I had started drinking and was familiar with most of my recent history. She listened patiently as

I told her all my frustrations with the Church and with God. When I had finally finished, there was a moment of silence, and then I started to cry. Not wanting anything to interrupt the moment, I muted the call. I couldn't believe what I was feeling—it was something I hadn't felt in a long while—at least, not from *Him*. I felt *loved*.

I was afraid to open my eyes for fear that I would glimpse God sitting on my bed. I knew I wasn't ready or worthy to see Him, but I was certain He was there. I felt comforted, but also confused. I had just *reviled* Him. I had literally spent the past half hour listing off all the reasons I *hated* Him. Why was He here? And how did I feel so *much love*?

Part Nine

NOT LONG AFTER this experience I was staying for a few days at my friend Megan's apartment. I had been going through another rough spot, and with my sister and brother-in-law still gone on vacation, I had decided it wise that I not be alone at night.

I had called Kaija to see if I could stay with her and she had mentioned that she would be spending most of the week out of town visiting family, so she put me up in her bed with her roommate, Megan. Megan, like Kaija, was a spiritual giant, and it was good for me to live, even for a short time, with such an influence. Every night, I watched from my bed as she prayed.

One night when Megan came home, she asked me if I had talked to Kaija recently. I told her I had and she asked me how Kaija was doing. I realized then that I hadn't bothered to ask. We had only talked about me. I felt bad, and committed to be better about asking in the future.

That night as I watched Megan pray, I thought about

Kaija, and I realized that my prayers were subject to the same fault. They were always about me. I had never bothered to ask God how *He* was doing or how *He* felt.

When I voiced this thought to Megan she insisted that I give it a try. Giving in, for the first time in a long time, I prayed. When I asked God how He felt, I was filled with a sadness I had not anticipated. I understood that he was sad not only *because* of me—I had not spoken to Him in a while, and my anger and silence were both understandably saddening—but also *for* me.

My mother had on occasion called me her empathetic child because I could not hear about another person's pain without feeling it myself. In that moment, I began to understand how empathetic *God* is, how he feels *with us*, and how He *cares*. It amazed me, and hurt as well, to see that my anger had never incited Him to anger, but only to sorrow.

It was almost frustrating how I couldn't seem to anger Him: no matter what I did, He was there. Sometimes I'd wished He would just go away. And truly, sometimes it was harder to feel Him, but I couldn't get away. And knowing He was there was also frustrating because it made it that much harder to leave. As much as I hated the Church, and as much as I even sometimes hated God, I could not deny His existence. Nor His love.

BLIND BUT
NOT DEAF

Part Ten

IT WAS SOME time later that fall that our annulment went through. It was easy for the courts to say it never happened, but as for me, I saw my husband nearly every day. We were in the same Master's program. And nearly every day I would get on Facebook and see that yet another acquaintance had gotten engaged. On that note, getting rid of my social media was one of the best life decisions I have ever made, but it would take another six months at least for me to grow that wise. In the meantime, it was just hard.

Most days found me in running shorts and a tank top sitting by my complex's pool sipping my "pink crystal light" from a mason jar and trying to drown my thoughts with music I blasted so loud through cheap headphones that half the pool deck got a free concert. I want to add one note here about my conduct at the time that may sound surprising. While on the inside I harbored a misery I had never before known, on the outside, I exuded confidence.

I had stopped wearing my garments—one because I felt bad wearing them while I drank my crystal light, and two because I had found in the meantime that I rather liked wearing tank tops.

I believe in modesty, but I also think there are some terrible flaws to how we understand it and how we teach it. What was strangest of all for me is that the less I wore, the more comfortable I felt. Of course, there were limits, but I had never felt so comfortable and confident in my own skin as I did that summer.

I think that one undesired effect of how we often teach modesty is that we—and here I speak of women because as far as I can tell no guy ever got this lesson—inherit a lot of shame for our beautiful bodies. That summer, I chose instead to embrace every part of me, and I feel no shame, and no guilt, for the ways I went about it. I only wish I could carry with me even now the confidence I felt then.

So why have I changed? I felt confidence, surely, but not happiness. Nothing, it seemed, would quite give me that. I had friends that would tell me that the track I was on—drinking and accomplishing little else—was only going to lead to misery, to which I responded rather brusquely, “*I am miserable.*”

Part Eleven

ONE NIGHT MY friend invited me to her apartment to watch a broadcast devotional. I don't remember the speaker, only that the topic—the second coming—might have been the only one that could draw me in at that time. By the time I arrived of course, I had already downed three bottles of pink crystal light.

After the devotional, two of my friends, Megan and Cate were asking me my thoughts on it. It was at this point that I started to cry. All my life I have looked forward to His coming. I would hear of terrible disasters and, while I felt sorry for those impacted, another part of me would be ecstatic because I could only think that with every such disaster His coming loomed nearer. But I cried then because, I realized, I was terrified.

I knew I was not ready. In fact, it was thoughts such as this that in the times I just wanted to die kept me most strongly tethered to this life—that I was not worthy to meet my Maker. But it was of all things a devotional on

the Second Coming that brought it home the hardest, likely because for so long it had been something I had looked forward to with such hope and joy.

In part explanation for my tears, I confessed to my not-entirely-sober state. My friends, Cate and Megan, were understanding, and quickly rallied around me, offering every kind of support. When I mentioned that the drink I liked best tasted much like Crystal Light, Cate emptied her cabinets, providing me with a few boxes of powdered Crystal Light mix that she just happened to have. As I was leaving, Megan expressed that she was certain there were angels rooting for me, to which I responded in my classic cynicism, “Well, I can’t hear them.”

By the time I got home, I had received a text from Megan with a picture of her, Cate, I, and some of the others who had gathered to watch the devotional that evening. The text was sent to both Cate and I. Megan had titled the text group “Audible Angels.” And that is exactly what they were. We shared thoughts from Church and personal study, and whenever I wanted to drink again, I’d let them know and they’d show their support. Not without some lapses, eventually the drinking let up.

Those lapses were, in some ways, vital to my progress. Every time I lapsed I felt terrible that I had done so. It felt like I was going behind their backs after all the work they had poured in to me. They must have felt, as I did, at times, that I was getting nowhere. But if I ever felt that way, it never came from them. Their support never slackened, and their patience was paramount. It helped me to see my progress instead of my failures. Every now and then I would still turn back to my bottles, but I knew, too, that I had somewhere else to turn—to my Audible Angels.

Part Twelve

SOMETIME LATER IN the spring I turned to alcohol again. In response to some emotional struggles I decided to drink again, but this time it was go big or go home. Suddenly my pink crystal light bottles didn't seem enough. I drove down to the liquor store and realized as soon as I walked in I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea there were so many different *types* of alcohol. I went with the one type that sounded remotely familiar and strong: vodka.

I had the wisdom to drive back to my apartment's parking lot before opening it. The smell alone nearly knocked me out and made my eyes and nose burn. I couldn't believe people voluntarily drank this stuff. I knew if I drank slowly I wouldn't make it past a couple sips, and so I plugged my nose and gulped down about a third of the bottle. I made it back to my apartment before it really set in. I was fortunate that my roommate was home, though I'm not proud of what I put her through. Let's just say alcohol didn't agree with me, nor I with it.

Not much later, I had decided I'd had enough. I just wanted to die. I made a list of the few things I needed to get done before hand: clean my room, save my important passwords in a place someone could access them etc., and then decided I would make two calls to my friends. The first, to Cate, didn't go through. The second one, to Emma, likewise didn't go through; in fact, it didn't even ring. Confused, I tried again, and Emma answered. She helped me talk through my feelings and made me promise I would see her the next morning before class. We would meet by the vending machines and get ice cream.

After I hung up, Cate called. Not wanting to explain everything again, I told her to call Emma. A few minutes later, Cate called back to say that her calls weren't going through. I found that very odd considering that Emma and I had just barely hung up.

As Emma and I sat outside the next morning eating our breakfast ice cream, at some point I must have expressed to her some of the anger I still felt towards God. "Well then there's something you should know," she said. "My phone was on do not disturb. Your call shouldn't have gone through." I then thought of Cate and how none of her calls had gone through. In a way, it was a tender mercy that I had thought to ask her to call Emma because it confirmed to me that my call going through was not a fluke of Emma's phone or any mere chance. It was the hand of an omniscient God who cared to show His daughter that He loved her and was aware through one of the ways she felt it best—through her friends—and in a way that I knew undeniably was Him.

REFRACTED LIGHT

Part Thirteen

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR following my annulment, I was often charged with questions, the hardest part of which was that often the more research I tried to do on them the angrier I would become at the apparent lack of answers. I tried the Church websites on LGBTQ first and found them not entirely helpful. Occasionally in my research I would find some promise that seemed on the surface comforting, but without any explanations, brought me little peace.

The root of my struggles went something like this: When I die, if I am not married, I have to believe that, probably more for the fairness of all those who are single despite their best efforts than for myself, I will have the opportunity to marry. For all those people who waited all their lives to find someone, I imagine this will be a wonderfully happy occasion. Assuming preconditions of worthiness, hand in hand, they will continue to exaltation. But what if I don't want a spouse? Because the spouse that he offers isn't what I want—she's a woman.

And then I'm stuck. Because either I reject God's offer and my opportunity to live in the highest degree of glory with Him, or I accept and spend the rest of eternity with a man I may be incapable of loving on an intimate level, and who, even if I did love, I would always love less than the impossible alternative.

It left me with two conclusions, neither of which I particularly liked. The first assumes that my orientation is wrong and would therefore be fixed when I was resurrected to a perfect, celestial body, at which point I would gladly accept a husband and walk through the pearly gates. The second assumes there is nothing inherently wrong about my orientation: it is a part of my eternal nature and simply represents another one of the many trivial differences we deal with as humans, in which case I would be left with my dilemma at those pearly gates. Either my very nature was wrong and sinful, but at least I might have a happy eternity or there was nothing wrong about my nature, but for the rest of eternity it would be my cross.

I have my own views on eternity, all of which seem rather incomplete. There is one that gives me some peace, not necessarily because I believe it is right, but because believing it points me in what I believe is the right direction, and since our direction is more important than our speed, I think I'll just face the right way and sit on it.

Part Fourteen

IT WAS LATER in the spring, almost one year from the start of COVID, my engagement, and the loss of my friend, that I started attending a group called Encircle. Oddly enough, I had noted it before ever coming to terms with my orientation. It's located just south of the Provo City Center temple, which I had attended often. Curiosity had almost driven me in once, but apprehension kept me out, and, by the time I had the courage to go again—this time feeling more like a member due to my newly-accepted orientation—it was closed due to COVID.

I don't know when it opened again, only that it wasn't until early spring when it came back on my radar. My grandparents as well as a friend almost simultaneously recommended that I attend. When I mentioned it to my friend Megan she said she had always wanted to check it out and was more than happy to go with me. I felt so much better having a friend along for the ride, even if she was there as a sort of outsider. I know Encircle embraces

everyone and would probably reprimand me for that label, but the logical inverse is refreshing. It was reassuring to think that for once my orientation made me the *insider*: it made me belong.

And aside from the fact that I may have been the second-oldest person there, second only to one of the staff members, I felt that I belonged and was accepted. We happened to have visited on a night when the BYU students met. Once again, since I had already started my Master's program, I was likely the oldest even among this group, but I enjoyed chatting with them. I felt an immediate kinship to another Lesbian girl there who also identified asexual. She had a girlfriend, which I was admittedly a little jealous of—not of her particular girlfriend, but of the concept. I had since removed myself from dating apps.

While I mostly just chatted, Megan was full of good questions that were accepted openly. One boy in particular seemed to interest her—and me. He was openly gay and headed soon on his mission. I'd never really given it much thought before, but I was amazed that the Church would let him go, and more so that he would want to. When Megan asked him what he thought about "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" I was amazed again by his response.

"I believe in what is there, but I also believe, there is a lot we are missing." That was something I could get behind. But it got better. The last few sentences of the third paragraph read,

*By divine design, fathers are to
preside over their families in love
and righteousness and are respon-
sible to provide the necessities of life*

*and protection for their families.
Mothers are primarily responsible
for the nurture of their children. In
these sacred responsibilities, fathers
and mothers are obligated to help
one another as equal partners.
Disability, death, or other circum-
stances may necessitate individual
adaptation.*

He then explained, “We are part of the ‘other circumstances.’” Now, I don’t hold this one interpretation as doctrine, but I had never even considered that I could be included in a document I had come to see as so exclusive and restricting. I wondered again whether God really had a plan for us, and why, if He had one, it had to be such a secret. Why should we have to search so hard for these tiny crevices to root ourselves in the doctrine?

Part Fifteen

SOMETIMES IT SEEMED that finding our little niche, albeit fragile, in the Family Proclamation was easier than finding any such acceptance elsewhere. Though the individuals I came out to were supportive, somehow the institutions we attended didn't seem so on board. While those in BYU administration undoubtedly were and are trying to show love to all, with the strict rules of the honor code and the insistenty reiterated doctrine on the family, those in the LGBTQ community are often made to feel like lack-luster Christians. The result is a campus churning with debates about same-sex relations and Church doctrine.

I remember March 4th 2020 when I walked out of class to see a gathering of rainbow-clad students protesting around the student center. I was ill-informed enough to have no idea what had incited it, and I was rather annoyed at the ruckus. Later that day, I asked a friend what it was all about.

A couple weeks prior, the clause on homosexual behavior had been removed from the updated honor code, resulting, understandably, in some confusion. Many believed that with the removal of some prescriptive prohibitions, Lesbian and Gay couples could now hold hands, kiss, and show other similar manifestations to that which straight couples would do in a dating relationship. Students were told to meet individually with the Honor Code Office if they had questions, and some reported that they left the office feeling that they had a green light to date same-sex partners.

On March fourth a clarifying letter was sent out stating that “same-sex romantic behavior cannot lead to eternal marriage and is therefore not compatible with the principles included in the honor code.” Even from my position on the sidelines, I was abhorred, not by the rainbow-clad students, but by the institution they marched on. Up until then I had always been proud of my school, but despite their apparent attempts to treat LGBTQ members and others equally, I had my own disputes.

Perhaps every freshman will (sadly) eventually come to learn the meaning of the term NCMO (pronounced “nick-moe”). It stands for non-committal make out. I can’t say anything about how *often* NCMOs occur on campus—I can only promise that they *do*.

A NCMO by definition entails that you don’t really plan to see that person again or do anything with them to harbor an actual relationship. It’s a one-night stand that both parties agree to. NCMOs do not lead to eternal marriage, and yet, I saw nothing in the updated honor code prohibiting NCMOs, so why shouldn’t a Gay couple *also* be able to make out? I can often back up the Church. I believe in God’s law of eternal marriage. I’m just saying, it didn’t seem fair.

Part Sixteen

LATER, TOWARD THE beginning of summer, I went back to visit Encircle one last time before heading home. It was my sister's day off from teaching and she had asked to come with me. While I did think it could be just a little odd to have someone so much older and not part of the community taking part in our discussions, I was thrilled to have her support and it meant the world that this was how she would spend her day off—supporting her sister.

The discussion between the group of BYU students that showed up that night quickly turned to summer plans, and that was when I realized if I ever felt lonely, many felt more so. I was one of the only ones there with family support. I felt bad for them—if they didn't feel accepted at school and they didn't feel accepted by their families, I could see why they needed this old little house to gather at. Here, at least, they belonged.

I thought about how BYU academy started in a school roughly the same size, and passingly I wondered whether we might do better to start over.

ENHANCED PERSPECTIVE

Part Seventeen

IF THERE WAS one good thing about March 4th it was that I came out of hiding.

I initially had no desire to participate in Color the Campus, until my friend showed me a flyer she had found on campus. It depicted a raining cloud with rainbow-colored raindrops and “Has the raYnbow got you seeking shelter from the storm?” written over it. Underneath, there was what appeared to be a family holding up an umbrella with “FamProc” written on it.

It seemed a harsh reminder that the world lives in dichotomies. There seemed to be the righteous, honor-code abiding straights, and the unrighteous, disobedient gays. Most of us live the honor code just like the straight students do, but there are reminders everywhere that make it so easy to feel like second-class members of the Church and of BYU. And this was one too many. It was time that I showed some support.

Here is where I must give a shout-out to my roommates who helped me make a homemade rainbow BYU shirt to wear the next day. I even colored the tops of my socks in a thin rainbow. I was ready. The morning came and I donned jeans that covered the tops of my socks and a jean jacket that made the rainbow coloring of the Y on my shirt barely visible. It was a huge deal for me to show that much.

I arrived on campus not sure what to expect. Part of me was a little terrified of the judgment I'd receive. Every time I saw someone else wearing a rainbow, my heart took a little more courage, and I'd open my jacket a little more to show my homemade shirt. But then I'd see a black umbrella. There honestly weren't too many, but the few there were was enough to mar any feelings of belonging that I initially felt. I tried to tell myself that our opposers were merely ignorant, and it was on that line of thought that I decided to finally share my experience.

I titled the blog post "Seeing."

Some time ago I was told by a servant of God that I would be blessed with the ability to see things from the perspective of others. I'm now realizing what a curse that blessing was. Rather than simply gifting me with perspective, it was perhaps in some ways warning me of the many experiences I would have that were necessary for me to develop that perspective.

I have depression and anxiety. I have been married. And I've had that marriage annulled. I am a member of the LGBTQ community. I'm a graduate student at BYU. And I'm a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints. Sometimes these experiences have been blessings, other times they feel more like crosses to bear. But all have blessed me with an ability to see.

In some ways, looking back, my orientation was kind of obvious, so much so that when I first told my parents almost a year ago, their first response other than to show their love was to admit that they had already suspected as much. But for the one going through it, it was so much harder to see and to accept, especially in a culture where every expectation, hope, and dream is the opposite.

It was so much easier to think that I merely admired the women I loved, or to tell myself that I was simply not as emotionally driven as my twitter-pated peers, or to believe that I simply had yet to find that perfect man. And so, I kept telling myself these things, because deep down I wanted, and still want, a family, and all the blessings we so often speak of coming with it. I wanted it so bad that I married a wonderful man, and had the painful opportunity through that experience of coming to terms with a truth, that in the very least for his sake, I should have seen before, and that I don't know I could have accepted otherwise.

What followed was honestly put, a faith crisis. I was angry at God for leading me to a marriage He must have known would not work. But more so, I was angry at His conditions, which I couldn't help but see as a bias toward His

straight children, and a bar to those that aren't. In our Church's canon of scripture there is one scripture, a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith, that was hardest of all for me to swallow. The gist is that in heaven there are degrees of glory, and in order to obtain the highest degree of glory, you have to be married to someone of the opposite gender as husband and wife. I imagine that it is this notion, along with the Church's focus on the eternal family, that is so hard for so many of the LGBTQ members of the Church.

I know there are many wonderful single people out there, and my mother pointed this out to me, to show me that I wasn't alone, and also to say that surely God has a plan for them. I agreed, but I still felt a little trapped. I imagine these people who have desired their whole lives to marry but have simply not had the opportunity walking up to the pearly gates. I imagine God is there and greets them and then introduces them to a wonderful spouse. And then, hand in hand, they walk through those gates into their happily ever after. But then there's me, and all those like me, who do not have nor necessarily want a spouse. I imagine walking up to the pearly gates and God presenting me with a wonderful man. And then I'm stuck, because either I reject the offer and my opportunity to live in the highest degree of glory with God, or I accept and spend the rest of eternity with a man I may be incapable of loving on an intimate level. Either way, where in this is the happiness that is promised to the righteous?

It left me with a number of conclusions, none of which I particularly liked. Either my orientation was wrong and would therefore be fixed when I was resurrected to a perfect, celestial body, at which point I would gladly accept a husband and walk through the pearly gates OR there was nothing inherently wrong about my orientation: it was a part of my eternal nature and simply represented another one of the many trivial differences we deal with as humans, in which case I would be left with my dilemma at those pearly gates.

So either my very nature was wrong and sinful, but at least I might have a happy eternity OR there was nothing wrong about my nature, but for the rest of eternity it would be my cross. Perhaps it is now obvious why the temptation to leave my faith was so strong. And why it can be so hard for those like me who are trying to be both members of the Church and members of the LGBTQ community. It has taken me a long time to at least see how they do not have to be mutually exclusive, and to find the answer that works for me.

As far as BYU, Church, and nationwide policies etc., I don't have the answers, but what I hope is that we can all be a little more empathetic, and that if we can't at first bring ourselves to understanding, that we at least can begin to *see*.

I wrote the whole thing quickly during a class break and posted the link to Facebook. The reactions and comments I received were so all-around positive that

for a moment I forgot about the hostile flyers and black umbrellas. However, I seemed to have already internalized the conflict I felt on campus that day.

When I got home late that night, I felt like I was coming home from a war zone, until my roommate exclaimed, “Did you see the Y?” I ran outside in time to see the Y on Y mountain all lit up in rainbow colors, and I literally cried. It was the best I had felt about myself in a long time. I wasn’t alone. I didn’t at the time know who had lit it—was it a group of students, members of the community, BYU administration? But these thoughts came later—in the moment, nothing mattered but that it was there. And in that moment, it was there just for me.

Part Eighteen

I remember long before I ever came out, having a conversation with my friend Susie in which I expressed that if I were lesbian, I would never come out. I couldn't see the reason for it. I saw only how it would bar any possibility I would have of eventually finding and marrying a man and raising a family. I saw only the judgment and the labels that would get attached. I read Facebook posts of people coming out and wondered why they had to make such a big deal of it.

For a short while even after coming out to my parents, I continued to hold this opinion. For me, coming out seemed essential to explain some of the issues with my marriage, but outside of that, I wasn't sure how to tell people or if they even needed to know. And I wasn't sure I wanted to be associated with all the connotations of being Lesbian.

The summer before I met my husband I had gone on a study abroad in the UK. Our very last day in London

I had decided to return to a certain shop near Piccadilly Circus to pick up a sweatshirt I had been eyeing all trip. I hadn't realized it was Pride Day until I boarded the crowded tube. The rainbow face paint and hair dyes were spectacular. Little, though, did I realize that Piccadilly Circus was at the heart of the festivities. The place was crowded with people, most of whom were drunk or in the process of getting there very quickly. I had never seen such flamboyant public displays of affection, some of which were from only partly-clad participants. It was loud and the streets were filthy.

I could understand the desire to express oneself or even just to be understood, but the impression it gave me of the LGBTQ community was not a good one. I wondered what they were trying to accomplish by showing this face to the world. It wasn't a good image, and I decided that while I could support the individual, I could never support this kind of community. What's more, I could never associate myself with them.

Sometime after leaving the psych ward and resuming my coursework at BYU, I thought back to my experience at Piccadilly Circus, and I began to understand. I had so little outlet to express myself, and I craved one. I'm not condoning some of the flamboyant and frankly grotesque behavior I saw at Piccadilly, but there is certainly something about living honestly that brings peace and power. I still wasn't sure I wanted to be associated with the community and some of the behavior that the term "Lesbian" can connote, but I found that the more I accepted and shared it, the better I felt. It was an exercise in accepting and loving myself, and conveniently, I also learned who was willing to accept and love me in return.

Part Nineteen

SHORTLY AFTER MY post on Facebook, I came out to my old ward that I happened to be re-visiting. I had never really intended to come out publicly—it was something I reserved for the one-on-one need-to-know basis. The Relief Society lesson that Sunday was on trials and blessings. I felt an overwhelming need to share something, and quite honestly, I didn't even know exactly what that was until I had raised my hand and the room was awaiting my comment.

“My patriarchal blessing tells me that I have been blessed with the ability to see things from the perspective of others and to find ways to uplift them. It wasn't until recently that I realized what a curse that blessing was. Rather than just give me the gift of perspective, God has allowed me to experience many trials that would allow me to understand others better. I have depression and anxiety. I have been married and I have had that marriage annulled. I've been drunk before. I'm a member of the Church,” and

here is where I shocked even myself by saying it, “and I’m Lesbian.” I continued by saying that because of my experiences I cannot judge anyone: I have been there and tried it all. The teacher thanked me for my comment and the lesson moved on, while I sat in minor shock.

After the lesson, my friend Emily came up and gave me a big hug. “Is that the first time you’ve come out in church?” She asked. I affirmed that it was and asked her how she knew. “You looked shocked.” So she had noticed. She acknowledged how hard it must have been to come out and commended me for my courage and honesty. She told me she would always be there to support me. It meant the world.

EYES TO SEE

Part Twenty

IT CAN BE hard to say you are Lesbian because of the views we have put around it and the dichotomy we have built. So often, we end up being grouped with the unbelievers, the attackers. The flyer I hated, the umbrellas on campus, and the recent speech given by Elder Holland at the 2021 University Conference, all made us seem like the aggressors, the opponent.

Granted, Elder Holland's audience was the staff at BYU, not it's students, not the Church at large, and not the community; however, as soon as the transcript of his speech was made public, it went viral, especially among LGBTQ+ forums. In his address, he calls on BYU staff and administration to defend the faith. He quotes Elder Neal L. Maxwell who likened scholars at BYU to the builders of the Nauvoo temple "who worked with a trowel in one hand and a musket in the other." He then quotes Elder Oaks who said in regard to Elder Maxwell's comment, "I would like to hear a little more musket fire from this temple of learning!"

Elder Oaks' comment, and therefore, Elder Holland's, were speaking of the need to defend the doctrine of the family and marriage as the union of a man and a woman. This is fine and well, but he also implied that the marches on campus—"the flag-waving and parade-holding"—are not friendly fire but rather seeds of confusion and conflict. I, meanwhile, can hardly think of a more peaceful and impactful way for those feeling unloved and ostracized to get attention.

Elder Holland said that he endorsed the metaphor of musket fire, but I hope all those holding muskets, on all sides, first ask themselves before they fire a single shot: What is it you are defending? Who are you defending it against?

Not all Lesbians are trying to destroy the Church and the Proclamation. I myself have chosen the hard path to uphold it. I believe that God instated celestial marriage between man and women. I wish with all my heart that I could make that happen for myself. But Lesbianism is not a choice. The choice I have is to hold to the beliefs I've always cherished.

Some people would say if I have a girlfriend I am not upholding the doctrine. Sometimes I feel shameful that I am not trying to date men. But I feel more shameful when I do without feeling any attraction to them. Think of all the wasted money on my dinners . . .

The point is upholding the doctrine is INCREDIBLY lonely. In fact, it's awful. It's awful being in a single ward where the focus of every interaction is to find that eternal companion, where half the ward gets married every semester and your friends are already having kids. And you're alone. I had a roommate once that I liked. And that sucked too.

There is nothing fun or comfortable about being Lesbian in the Church. But I defend my faith, through tears and anguish that most straight people could frankly never understand. The only muskets in this battle are aimed sadly and sometimes at ourselves, in an unending attempt to silence or kill that part of us that makes it so hard.

Part Twenty-One

ONE OF THE first times I met with my bishop after moving in to my new ward the summer after my marriage and annulment I asked him if there was anyone else in the ward like me. He told me that he wasn't sure but that he didn't think there was. I remember leaving feeling so alone.

Perhaps because of this interaction, and for many other reasons, I didn't come out to my ward until almost six months later, just a few Sundays before I would be heading home for the summer. Afterward, I was surprised to have multiple people come up to me and tell me that they, too, were in the LGBTQ community. I was shocked. And then something clicked. I realized that many of these girls likely had felt the same way I had when I had left my first conversation with our bishop—they had no way of knowing that there was someone else, someone like me, who was Lesbian, because I, like them, had been quiet.

Up until then I had thought that coming out was just for me, but it was then that I began to see how it can be

just as much for others too. I know my experience is not all-encompassing, but I hope that for all those who for whatever reason do not or cannot share their story, that mine can serve to give them assurance that they are not alone, and that for all those without this experience that they can take my experience and learn, as I have, to see things from the perspective of someone else. Because I believe that when we truly see each other, we won't need to feel alone.

Epilogue

UNTIL WRITING THIS book, there are a number of things I myself had failed to see. It wasn't until I wanted to look up the quote on the anti-Pride Day flyers that I learned that BYU had attempted to take them all down before Pride Day stating that they were not authorized. I had been bothered when after some students lit the Y with rainbow lights BYU's only reaction was to state that the lighting had not been authorized, but it helped to see that BYU was not partisan in its response, but rather had given the same response to both parties.

Similarly, I was distraught when I learned that for the first sixteen days of the fall semester 2021, students had chalked the block on the southwest corner of campus with pro LGBTQ sayings and every day as soon as they left, BYU washed the sidewalk. However, after visiting with the honor code office, I learned that BYU has always washed their sidewalks and would have done so no matter what the chalk art represented or depicted.

While I wish that BYU could have shown more support for the community of students that lit the Y on Pride Day or have left the sidewalk art unwashed for at least one day, I realize how easy it was to just be angry, and how anger had kept me from seeing truth.

Sometimes I am, admittedly, still a little angry at God or at the Church or at BYU administration, but as I attempt to help others see my perspective, I have realized that I need also to try to see theirs. I have seen moments that God has been there for me when I most certainly did not deserve His help. I have seen how bishops and ward members lend advice and support beyond the call of duty or discipleship. And I have known so many BYU faculty who have provided sympathy, accommodation, and in some rare and beautiful cases, even friendship.