I am an infant, barely three months old. Dressed in a tiny white gown, I coo as my father’s strong arms carry me to the front of the church congregation. There, in front of friends, family, and strangers alike, my life is promised to God. Blessings are bestowed upon my head, granted I follow God’s commandments. The words reach my ears and wash over me as unintelligible blabber. Any potential fussing is kept at bay by the warm, calming intonations of my father’s voice. When the prayer is done, my father raises me above his head, presenting me to the congregation: an offering to God.

I am eight years old. Today, I am to be baptized. Months of preparation have gone into this day. I have read my scriptures, prayed, and confidently whizzed through my interviews with the bishop. I have been deemed worthy of baptism. Being a mature eight years old, of course I am wise enough to commit my entire life to God.

I have spent the morning getting ready. My hair is neatly tucked into braids and my lacy, pastel blue dress has been exchanged for a simple white smock. I know that in the baptismal font, I must be clothed in white from head to toe if I am to receive the full blessings of heaven. God does not accept any unclean thing in his kingdom. This includes my multicolored, floral print underwear, which now sits glumly in the church bathroom, kept company by my blue dress.

Family pictures have been taken and a wide selection of sandwiches and toppings await my many guests once the ceremony is complete. After a collection of teary speeches from grandparents, teachers, and my mother, it is time. I remove my glasses and gingerly step into the
font. My father joins me from the other side. Of course, the two entrances are segregated by
gender. Men and women. Like two ends of a magnet. After all, what is a woman without a strong
man to support her?

Warm water soaks through my white socks as I take my first step into the font. I shiver,
despite the water’s warmth. Taking another step, and then another, I slosh through the water to
my father’s waiting arms. My nearsighted eyes explore the glass panel that separates myself
from my family and friends. Through it, I see a hazy collection of supporters, faces blurring
together. As practiced, I grip my father’s forearm with my tiny left hand and allow him to grasp
my right wrist. His right hand is raised, extended to God. With a deep breath, my father recites
the sacred baptismal oath, “Laine Bradley, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize
you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

I hold my nose as my father plunges me under the water. Upon emerging, I breathe a sigh
of relief. I know with certainty that my sins are washed away. Then, with an unsettling thought, I
wonder where the warm feeling in my heart is. Everyone has told me that my baptism will be the
best day of my life. They have reassured me that I will feel the warmth of the Holy Spirit in my
heart, confirming to me that I have made the right choice. As I make my clumsy way out of the
font, I search my heart for the warm feeling. The water had felt warm. Was that the warm
sensation everyone had told me about? I shrug it off and take my final step out of the font,
happily accepting the clean, dry towel my mother wraps around my shoulders.

As soon as I am warm, dry, and clothed once more in my pastel blue dress, I rejoin my
throng of guests, who overwhelm me with support and love. Once the room has quieted down,
all worthy priesthood holders are invited to the front of the room, where a chair has been set for
me. I take my seat as a collection of uncles, grandfathers, teachers, and, of course, my father surround me.

My paternal grandfather, the chosen mouthpiece of this second ritual, is the first to place his hands on my head. The others follow suit. I contemplate my grandfather’s warm, steady hands on my head. Is this the warm feeling I was supposed to feel back in the font? Before I can give it too much thought, my grandfather’s voice begins the prayer, “Laine Bradley, by the authority of the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood, which I bear, I confirm you a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and say unto you, receive the Holy Ghost.” Promises between myself and God have now been sealed upon my head.

I am twelve years old. I am now finally old enough to attend the temple. I have once again interviewed with my bishop and have received a limited-use temple recommend. My youth group loads up in white vans and we make our way to the Salt Lake Temple. We walk in through the back door, the one that leads straight to the baptismal font. Today, we are to be baptized by proxy for the dead who didn’t have the chance during their mortal lives.

Once inside, I am handed five pink cards with various names and dates printed on them. I read over the cards carefully. One reads: Mary Weston Houghs, born January 27, 1804. Died August 19, 1887. I think about those dates. Sister Houghs has been waiting for over a hundred years to be baptized and welcomed into God’s kingdom. I ponder at the enormous service I am giving her by being baptized in her name. I make a quiet promise to serve her and as many women like her as I can.

At the same time, part of me wonders why God didn’t come up with a more efficient system for allowing his children into heaven. What happens to all the people who died with no
records, no family, no one to remember them? How are the living supposed to know and be
baptized for every name to ever grace the earth? What happens if their name is pronounced
wrong? If a single toe sticks out of the water, will the soul in question truly be denied access to
eternal salvation? I know these questions are wrong, and I scold myself for thinking them. I
know that God loves all of his children, and he has a plan for everyone. It is not my job to worry
about the semantics, it is my job to listen and obey.

I am fourteen years old. A doe-eyed high school freshman. Eagerly, I have signed up for
the seminary program offered by my school. Every day, I leave the school building and walk
across the parking lot to attend. I wonder why the state does not allow religion to be taught on
school grounds. Such beloved and holy teachings should not be hidden or outcast. Everyone
should have access to these cherished truths. In fact, it should be required material for all
students, religious or not.

In these seminary classes, I make many friends who also delight in the word of God.
Together, we discuss everything from dietary restrictions to the beauty of marriage, obviously
only to be shared between a man and a woman. We make promises to avoid alcohol, drugs,
pornography, and premarital sex. We occasionally touch on deeper topics. One day, the class
discusses homosexuality. The teacher explains in no uncertain terms that those who act on
homosexual desires are not worthy to enter the kingdom of God. I nod along, but something
about this does not sit right with me. Why would God create people in a way that he designated
sacriligious? I keep my thoughts to myself and offer a quick prayer, asking God to forgive me
for even allowing such things to cross my mind.
I am fifteen years old. Despite my intense devotion to God, I sometimes find myself thinking things I know to be incorrect. I try to stop these thoughts before they begin. Sitting in class one day, my mind and eyes begin to wander. I can’t keep them off of the girl a few seats away from me. My eyes devour every inch of her. The way her dark hair curls at the ends. The way her button nose scrunches when she laughs. The way her eyes somehow manage to sparkle, even in the harsh, fluorescent lighting of the classroom.

I never let myself think too much of it. Perhaps in another life, one where I did not know of God’s plan for me, I would have allowed myself to indulge in less innocent thoughts. Right now, however, it would be sinful to think such things. I divert my focus to something else. Someone else.

A boy has now caught my eye. I am head over heels. I am in love with the way he talks, the way he laughs, the way he approaches even the smallest of tasks with passion. This boy is Jewish. This hasn’t stopped my whimsical heart from dreaming. Dating a Jewish boy wouldn’t be as bad as dating a... Well, at least Jews can convert. He doesn’t seem too serious about his faith, which is promising. I want to make him see what I see. I want to introduce him to my God, the true God.

I am sixteen years old. For the first time ever, I have used the word bisexual to describe myself. No one knows. I haven’t even dared to say the word out loud. It exists only in the darkest corner of my mind. A caged animal. I think about the damage it would do if it were to escape. The chaos that would ensue. Bisexual. What would my parents say? Without a doubt, the roof above my head and the food on my plate would vanish before the word could even settle in their
ears. Surely I would no longer be welcome at home, where I might infect my siblings with this spiritual poison.

I tell no one of my inner turmoil. I still attend church, begging God for an explanation. The heavens are sealed to me. I make promises with myself. I vow to never speak of this, to remain in the church, and to only romantically involve myself with the opposite sex. I will one day marry a man in the temple of the Lord and no one will ever know my horrible, foul secret.

I am seventeen years old. I go through all the motions of worship and prayer, but my heart is now completely detached from it. I read my scriptures, participate in seminary, and bear my testimony when prompted, but now it feels stiff and robotic. I have started a game of sorts with my sister, who is sixteen. Every time a church leader, seminary instructor, or class member says something that feels inherently, unmistakably wrong, we share a sideways glance. If anyone notices these looks, they say nothing. It is an almost telepathic connection. While neither of us has worked up the nerve to actually say it out loud, we both feel ourselves inching farther and farther away from the scorching light of God.

I have met a girl. She is like me. She was raised in the church, but always sensed that there was something missing, or wrong. She tells me how early in her childhood she knew the root of these feelings. Much earlier than I ever did. She tells me about getting in trouble in kindergarten for giving a flower to another girl; her first girlfriend, if you can even call it that. She tells me that her brother was the first person she ever told. Her parents took a while to come around, but they now love and accept her for all of who she is.

We start spending more time together. We make jokes about our similar pasts. We take long drives without a particular destination. One night, after a quiet walk in the park, we kiss. It
is nothing special and it is everything special. It is gentle and clumsy. Neither of us have ever
done this before. We giggle, pressing inexperienced lips together once more. Each embrace is a
broken promise with God, severed locks and chains falling at my feet.

After this, I continue to go to church, even more detached than before. I pull out my
phone to text her at every chance I get. I tell her about whatever crazy new doctrine I am being
spoon fed this week. She offers sympathy, grateful that her own parents do not force her through
these routines anymore. We fantasize about moving away for college. We daydream constantly
about picking a tiny town in Washington or Maine, packing up our things, and never seeing
another Mormon again. A life in a new place—somewhere with no parents, no forced church time,
and no worries.

Sometimes I feel guilty hiding so much from my parents, but I know the alternative is
worse. The truth would hurt them far more than these gentle white lies. As often as I can without
drawing attention, I ask for permission to visit her house. My parents think we talk about boys
and study for our classes together. I let them believe this.

I am eighteen years old. The night I come out to my parents, my father cries himself to
sleep. While I know he still loves me, his eyes now hold a thinly-veiled melancholy when he
looks my way. My mother takes the news better. She doesn’t show me her pain, but I know it’s
there all the same. In the following weeks, they still invite me over for Sunday dinner. The
family discusses what they learned in church that day. I cautiously nod along, afraid to misstep
and break the delicate eggshells we all walk on.

There is much they still don’t know. I have not told them that I now have a tattoo, take
birth control, and indulge in the occasional alcoholic beverage. They have never heard me swear
or take the Lord’s name in vain. They know nothing about the breakup between me and my high
school sweetheart, or even that I had a high school sweetheart to begin with. Surely there is
much I do not know. My parents say they love me unconditionally, but I don’t hear the
conversations that happen behind closed doors. I certainly don’t hear the even more private
conversations spoken directly to God, bypassing mouth and ears entirely.

My life is built on promises, both the ones that I have made and the ones that I have
broken. Each vow, forged or fractured, shapes who I am today. My ties to God have been
severed. We haven’t spoken in a while. My parents tell me to reach out to him. They beg me to
pray or find a non-denominational church to join. I feel no need to reach out to God. I think God
has already heard all I have to say to him. I wish him all the best, but more sincerely, I wish he
would just leave me alone.