

Broken Horses

A MEMOIR



**BRANDI
CARLILE**



WHAT I LOOKED LIKE WHEN MOM LEFT ME THE HELL ALONE



HAMMER PANTS AND DIETBAY PARTIES IN RAVENSDALE AT OUR SINGLE WIDE TRAILER. THE ONE I'M ALWAYS HIDING OUT IN, IN MY DREAMS



THE CARLICE FAMILY PHOTO IN 1985 "COWBOY HAT" FRAME

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ELVIS AND THE GAY '90S

It was 1997. My father was out of work, but he had gotten sober and we were spending a lot of time together. Mom's music was slowing down and Dad was obsessively writing political letters to the newspaper and expressing himself. He was in AA working the steps and was very candid and open about his struggle with alcohol, and our family felt pretty tight.

We were comedically disrespectful to our parents. We'd developed a kind of a vulgar, dry, Bart Simpson-style rapport. We were lazily lounging around the Nintendo in the fall when Dad hollered at us to go outside

and “sort garbage” for the burn barrel. I must have shot back some off-color retort when my mother shouted from the other room that “he’s your father” in an attempt at demanding respect, to which I replied that I’d like to take a DNA test to prove it. It was during this strange moment of dark humor and tension that he revealed to us kids that he had another daughter living in Oregon. He casually said something like, “Actually, I do have another kid....” He’d never met her. He was asked to leave her alone so that she could grow up separate from the scallywag Carlile family.

All I really heard was that I wasn’t his first-born child anymore and I was weirdly upset. He took me for a long walk on the Cedar River. I was embarrassed because I had cried, so we didn’t really talk. Just watched the salmon.

The five of us Carliles were an arguably codependent but intimately connected family. The trailer was small. We got the power shut off a lot. There were animals every-

where. The friends who were allowed to come over loved the wildness of our house, but I remembered overhearing stories of my father’s childhood and realized that, in some ways, history was repeating itself. We hung around some *rough* folks and our street smarts were well earned.

Some days I believed that my childhood was a dream and some days I was sure it was a nightmare. We had an abundance of complicated freedom. I’d hike in the woods in groups of kids and alone, looking for abandoned mine shafts and coal miners’ graves. If we found a pond, we’d build a raft...I got my last ever spanking for that raft. I ran into a bear one day and threw a can of hairspray at him. My sister and I even saw one of our feral dogs kill a deer one afternoon when we were out for a walk...she just locked onto its neck and swung there until the deer stopped moving. There were pig roasts and overnight parties, where my parents’ friends would pepper the yard with colorful tents; we had a potentially deadly rope swing and fought

paintball wars that lasted through the weekend. It was in the midst of all this wildness that I would meet my first broken horse.

You may have heard the word “broke” as it pertains to tamed horses. That is not what I mean. To be “broke,” a horse must allow a person to believe that it is afraid enough to be conquered, tamed, and ridden. It’s never true. They don’t break. I’ve never been thrown, kicked, or stepped on by a wild horse...they’ve always been “broke.” Horse people never say a horse is broken even when it would seem to make sense...

“Can I ride him?”

“No! He ain’t broke yet.”

I mean *actually* broken in some obvious way. An apparent flaw that would suggest that the animal can no longer serve his man-made, human-serving purpose. Work.

He was a retired racehorse with a broken leg called Drummer.

Drummer was a quarter horse. He was over sixteen hands tall, a term I would

proudly use when describing him to people—it was “horse terminology.” He went down during a race one day and instead of being euthanized, he was given to the jockey. That’s how he found his way to me. I had dreamed of having a horse my whole life. I drew them on every surface and fantasized nonstop about being a “horse person.” I even had a recurring dream about having a horse that could talk with me at night but never in the daytime.

Spoiler alert: I’m still not a “horse person.” I never got there. As much as I adore horses, I never was a proper rider. I was too afraid after being thrown off repeatedly by a series of horses the “Dolls” had put me on. The Dolls are a part of my family that’s comprised mainly of crazy-ass jockeys. Five feet tall and full of piss. I mean this affectionately, of course...but dang! My favorite second cousin, Connie Doll, is one such jockey, and she got Drummer for me. I was never brave enough to ride in front of people for fear of embarrassment. If you can believe it, the

physical pain of being injured by a twelve-hundred-pound animal didn't bother me a bit, but I don't do humiliation. I would slip outside alone and tie a rope around Drummer's halter, lead him to a stump, and jump onto his back. He was a gentle giant and he would just saunter back into his pen before I'd have to jump off to avoid the roof of his crumbling stall, *but I was riding*. He was naughty for sure, but he was remarkably protective of me. The day I got him, he had blood poisoning and an infection from a massive tear between his leg and his chest from being tangled in barbed wire. It was my job to give him shots of antibiotics and change his gauze. I would clean off the pus with hydrogen peroxide and his whole body would shake and twitch, but he would never have hurt me. I was too young to do all that, and I probably didn't do that good of a job, but it bonded us forever.

There was a girl just through the woods who rode horses for real. Her name was Bri, and I couldn't stop thinking about her. I kept

telling her about my horse and what a great rider I was until she eventually invited me and Drummer for a ride. She couldn't have lived much more than a quarter mile away and could have easily ridden to my house, but I didn't really want her to see how we lived, so I was going to have to ride to her. I'd never really made an attempt to properly ride Drummer before, but I was determined to try. I didn't ask anyone, I just led Drummer to the edge of the woods and used a different stump to climb onto his back. He stood perfectly still. I think he sensed my bravery and the fact that we were taking a risk.

The woods were thick. You can't see through woods in western Washington at all. Trails are made by humans or animals; everything else belongs to the underbrush. The leaves were wet and it was raining, so I had my hood up, blocking my peripheral vision. I gave Drummer a light kick and he started obediently making his way through the nettles with his ears perked straight for-

ward. I closed my eyes, leaned all the way down, and pressed my head against his neck. I put all my faith in his sense of direction and that I knew he'd never buck. We rode like that for probably five minutes before I felt his skin start to twitch. It was random at first, and if it hadn't been raining, I'd have thought it was flies. But when his ears pinned back, I knew from the time I'd spent treating his wound that he was fighting the urge to spook and throw me. I pulled back on his lead rope and he stopped. Sensing that something strange was happening all around me, with one hand clutching Drummer's mane, I pulled off my hood. As I looked around the forest and clocked my surroundings, I froze, overwhelmed with emotion and excitement: Drummer and I had managed to assimilate by accident into a massive herd of elk. Maybe they didn't notice us at first because of the rain and because I was bent all the way down. Maybe they just didn't see us as a threat. When they finally did notice, they calmly scattered and trotted off in every

direction. I still think about what an unusual privilege it was to be in the middle of that herd out there in the rain. We didn't make it to Bri's house. Drummer made the decision to turn around and steadily take us both home.

Later that year, Connie came and got Drummer. She wanted to further rehabilitate him and had just gotten herself into a place with a pasture. Looking back on it now, we probably weren't taking the best care of him. I realize now that in some quiet way that actually he was taking care of me. I was devastated. I would go and visit him whenever I could get my folks to drive me, but it was probably only a handful of times. Soon after he left, he got a brain tumor and Connie shot him. I found out after the fact standing outside of the Black Diamond Eagles Club on karaoke night. Some parts of my childhood are a bit brutal and that was one of them. I wished I could have said goodbye to that big ol' guardian angel, and I'm still not over it.

Meanwhile, at some point after my failed singing competition/pageant career, I had started to develop a friendship with another, far more successful, contestant. Amber Lee was the eight-year-old who strolled out onto the Northwest Grand Ole Opry stage in her yellow dress and had me believing by the end of her Dolly Parton song that I was destined to be a child star. Needless to say, even years down the road I was enamored with her. We started hanging out at karaoke bars with our parents, and I was immediately obsessed with her and her father, who was an Elvis impersonator. I was spending weekends at her house in the summer of '96 and Elvis was in the basement rehearsing with his band. I heard a song I recognized from the Opry and I suggested to Amber that we go down and sing a harmony behind him just in case he'd want to invite us to sing on a microphone (always hustling). He loved it, and it became a thing. I started teaching Amber harmony, courtesy of Jay Carlile, and she'd help me fix my hair.

Singing for her dad was my first real musical job—twenty-five bucks a show. We were booked almost every weekend. I was unwittingly learning about harmony and backing vocals from the Jordanares and learning about fronting a band from someone trying to impersonate the man who invented rock stardom. You couldn't pay for that education...not that I could have paid for any education at that point.

I returned from Amber's house late one night with a head full of confusing feelings. The rest of my family was asleep, but I saw a VHS tape of the movie *Philadelphia* sitting on the kitchen counter ready to be returned to the video store, and I snuck it into the VCR. The film and its music galvanized my respect for the plight of LGBTQ people in a deep and personal way that I was inching ever closer to understanding. I had been reading that Elton John biography that introduced me to Queen, U2, George Michael, the Beatles, and David Bowie. The music I was seeking out and becoming

attached to was becoming my home and my emotional support system.

It was around that time that someone slipped the *Philadelphia* soundtrack into my stocking at Christmas and also I discovered the Indigo Girls. I can't say enough about them. The Indigos were huge for me. They had androgynous music and images. They were singing love songs and using same-gender pronouns. That should have felt normal, but to me it was radical. I felt like I knew them...and I couldn't understand why. Whatever it was, it was in their voices. They sounded like they were resisting something... I couldn't make sense of it at the time, but I knew that somehow I was in that fight too.

It was that same Christmas that my parents managed to buy me a Casio keyboard. It couldn't have been easy for them. I had been looking at it in the Toys "R" Us catalog for months and I knew it cost \$80...I couldn't even imagine actually owning one. Even the keyboard stand was twenty bucks! But there it was on Christmas morning out of the box

all set up on the stand with a bow on it. It was my prized possession and I set it up between two broken garage-sale speakers, each five feet tall, so I could pretend it was an actual PA. I had learned to play every song from the *Philadelphia* soundtrack by ear before winter ended.

Whenever I wasn't spending time with Amber, I was with David. (I never could spend a day alone, then or now, and I have never once been single.) I had a deep and enduring crush on David and he didn't give a shit about my awkward eccentricity, or my passion for music, for that matter. David and I played video games, horse, and flag football. I wore his Green Bay Packers jacket at school every day because I loved the way he smelled. We sometimes made a plan to sneak a kiss on the school bus at the end of the day, and I'd look forward to it all day long. I wasn't attracted to him sexually, but to be honest, I was too innocent in that way to really understand what that even meant.

The Ellen DeGeneres coming-out episode was the beginning and the end of any confusion I was having around my sexuality. Ellen was obviously gay but hadn't come out yet. I loved her so much and my dad did too. We never talked about her sexuality, but we lounged around the TV in the evenings and watched her show together quite a bit, both of us recoiling from embarrassment when she'd start rambling and digging herself into those famous Ellen holes. There was a buildup to her coming out and it was all over the news. I recorded the episode on a VHS tape marked "David's baseball game" that I still have.

I needed to admit to myself that I was becoming very attracted to women. I thought about it all the time. It wasn't that it was gross to me, but it freaked me out. I would imagine holding and kissing other girls, but I would always fantasize that I was someone else. Just some blank-faced character who wasn't me so that I personally could still be "not gay." At first, this character had a differ-

ent hair color, different skin and clothes, and most importantly, they were nongendered. But before too long I was having to accept this character as a woman. Day by day and moment by moment, that character was starting to feel more and more *like me* until it just was. That's when I finally felt right and I knew that what I was feeling was real.

I knew that when Ellen said she was gay on national television that I was, too, and it was time to tell my parents. It didn't happen all at once, so I don't really have a coming-out *story* for you....I wish I did, but I guess it was clumsier and less beautiful than that; honestly it was a series of awkward little chats and avoidances. But maybe there are too many "coming-out stories" and not enough of us talking about an uncomfortable and awkward...emergence. Ellen gave me the language and an inroad to a dialogue with my family. It was the first mile of a very long road toward all of us understanding what any of that meant. I was, simply put, the only gay person I had ever met. Even I didn't

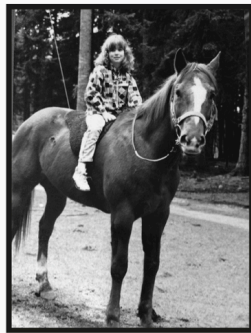
accept me yet....Should I cut my hair? Am I a vegetarian now?

David didn't care. We continued to sleep in the same bed and hold hands. Even when I cut off all my hair, we stayed the same. The first time I said the words it was to Amber Lee. I told her on my sixteenth birthday. It was awkward and hard for her. She already knew, and she still loved me and wanted to accept me, but she began to phase me out as her friend. She had a very religious boyfriend and was feeling conflicted. Then her dad fired me—he said that my sexuality made the bass player uncomfortable.

I had lost my first job. The worst part was being told that because I was gay, I couldn't do that music anymore. That was the one rejection I couldn't take.

I was drawn back to church at this point because it had brought me such comfort as a young child, and I was fundamentally unsettled. All was not right with my soul.

It's probably safe to say that again I didn't find mercy there.



ME RIDING MY HUGE DRUMMER
AROUND AGE 12 - HE WAS HUGE!



ME AND MY BELOVED DRUMMER

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7.

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THAT YEAR

I was SO gay by the end of 1997. I started to have relationships with girls in secret at school and creepy relationships with much older women in my band/work life. I had found a group of friends who accepted me, and my brother, Jay, and I were inseparable. He wasn't crazy about my sexuality, but we each individually thought that the other was a total dickhead anyway, so it didn't really matter. We are both quite judgmental by nature.

Then Dad fell off the wagon and we got evicted from the trailer on the hill. I still dream about that place all the time. I think

it's the most time we spent in a house and although it was only a mystical moment in a complex and meaningful childhood, it has sustained itself in my memory through all my transitions.

In my dream, we're all adults but we're squatting there. It'd been abandoned for years, but we're always fixing it up and salvaging useful bits of garbage, like the Boxcar Children. We are hanging Christmas lights and cooking on a fire while hiding out from "Jack Heckenlively," the evil landlord who will toss us out on our asses if he catches us there. I'm in the top bunk of my old bed, with Tiffany below me and Jay on the other side of the wall. No money, no wife or kids. Feeling nervous but somehow so comfortable, like all is right with the world. Back where my animals are buried and I'm totally free... I'm equal to my family members. Nothing is separating us.

WE LEFT THE trailer on my sixteenth birthday, and it was profound.

Jay and I moved into the detached garage of a trailer in a Maple Valley trailer park. The two of us were sharing a room for the first time, and I loved it. I would lie in bed and laugh all night because Jay is fucking FUNNY—Chris Farley funny...and humble and accident-prone. We'd stay out late and come home to our garage and wash our spiky hair in a washing machine with powdered detergent. The guy who owned the trailer was sharing it with the rest of our family and he slept in a recliner in the living room. We never wanted to walk past him. If we had to pee, we'd do it in a cup and pour it outside. Everything was hilarious to us. That's how we were coping with it, like brothers.

We'd buy rolls of quarters and hang out with our mom, our dad, and Dad's best friend, Ron, to play poker for real money. Our family has always had a tense relationship with gambling, but in those days, and in contrast to everything else, it felt like the

most wholesome thing in the world. If I was lucky the next day I'd be hauling several hundred dollars' worth of quarters to the Coinstar machine at the grocery store. It was on one of these nights that we'd meet Darren and Troy, a couple of brothers in their thirties who were learning to play instruments. They were practicing in a shed off a trailer down the street on Lake Sawyer. Jay and I fell head-over-heels in love with them and joined their band. We called it "The Shed."

We didn't really want to drink, but we could have if we wanted to. We were high on possibility, and the adult surroundings we were being accepted into were truly extraordinary for kids our age. It felt really weird to go back to school after that.

In high school, we had a small group of best friends. Band geeks and rejects: a bass player called Brian Seeley, who was extremely gifted and had a penchant for Jaco Pastorius; Sean Morrissey, a gorgeous jazz drummer with a genius vocabulary; and Blair Barnes, a lanky blue-eyed comedian who had

been severely bullied in junior high but was developing quite the fan club for his unpredictable quirkiness—the kind not often found in kids...something you'd see in an *SNL* cast member who also understands string theory. The older guys from the Shed began to hang out with us and our limited number of school friends. I know how weird that sounds now, but at the time, we sort of formed one big band. These guys would all spend the night at my house on the living-room floor and I'd stay at theirs. Grown men, just hanging out constantly with a crazy sixteen-year-old girl who looked exactly like a sixteen-year-old boy. It still cracks me up to remember how strange it all was.

School was the only thing left in my life that I felt helpless about. I hated it. It was the last place standing that still made me feel like a child. I had removed all other infantilizing institutions from my life in an effort to feel like I could control my surroundings. I was out of the closet at school. The only gay person. My brother and I were different kids

there. Jay began to struggle with paralyzing anxiety and agoraphobia. He developed crippling stomach problems and had to stop playing in the band for a while. I was skipping many of my classes for fear of the embarrassment of my classmates watching me walk into the special-education classes.

We were both smart. We were both failing.

Shortly after the Shed started getting serious, my family moved out of the trailer park and into a different part of Ravensdale. Dad started a new job in construction, and he was instantly very talented at it, but his drinking was the worst anyone had seen it. Tiffany was finally old enough to really understand how complicated our lives were. We got along, and I have always felt like a second mother to her. I'm not as good of a friend to Tiffany as I should be because I still can't move past that responsibility.

Jay and I dropped out of high school together on Valentine's Day in 1998. It was our sophomore year. We became very

depressed. We picked up an unlabeled box of VHS tapes at a garage sale and watched old movies, sharing a twin bed for months. Our anxiety had stunted us, and we had disappointed our parents. Neither of them had finished high school either, and the resignation stung us all...Just another stain.

We kept talking about going to Crown College and being cops (hilarious), but we were punk asses too. I don't know why this stands out in my mind but one of our many low points came when Tiffany was about to start junior high. She was extremely nervous and had meticulously laid her clothes out and packed her backpack. Another new school was no big deal, but this was a new school district altogether. She knew no one, and junior high is terrifying in any case. Sometime around three A.M., we thought it'd be funny to wake her up and make her breakfast so that she'd get ready to go to school only to find out that it was a prank and have to go back to bed again. She kept asking us why we were being so nice to her. It was awful! She

laughed, but my dad woke up and called us losers, said that we should be ashamed of ourselves. And let me tell you—we were. Just the thought of being so mean now is unthinkable. So often parents seem to pull back when those awful teen years hit just from the unpleasantness of it...but it's so rudderless. It's when we need parenting the most. After all the mess that Dad had gotten us into and even as the one person in our family probably least worthy of respect at that point, Dad telling me that I was a loser and that I should be ashamed of myself was exactly what I needed to hear. I had dropped out of school. I had to pull it together and get back on my feet.

Artists I love never seem to reveal themselves later in life as a person who struggled to get by in their youth *and also* a person who is a narcissistic, insufferable asshole at times. I just personally find it liberating to tell you this because it's true. I can't be seen as an angel in these times or any times, although I wish it were so. I have been lost,

racist, religious, brutal, and broken before. I hurt people as much as I've been hurt.

I began working as a barista at a curbside coffee stand, a sample lady at a grocery store, and as a roofing laborer whenever I could. The young guys in the band would sometimes get hired and work alongside me. Not Blair though. He was way too smart for our kid jobs.

The band became my North Star. I was sad about my life and feeling really conflicted about school, but I wasn't worried. I was absolutely going to be famous, and when I closed my eyes I fantasized constantly about all the things I would buy my family. Mostly four-wheelers and huge houses. Speaking of houses, we had to move into a new one in the fall that year. I had my own room for the very first time, and this house had a great big barn, oil heat, a big yard—and rats. Everyone on that road had rats. Tons of rats. The dump across the street had closed and thousands of rats had scattered and infested the houses across the street—at least, that's how

I remember it. It was hard to get comfortable living with them. That was a RED LINE for my mother! She was horrified. We liked that house a lot but never could get used to those damn rats.

Because of the barn, our parents had worked out a horse-boarding situation with their friends, and then horses turned into cows. There was an auction in a nearby town and animals were cheap. We knew some people making good money raising and selling cows, and you could pick these calves up for twenty to thirty bucks, so I got to attend these auctions from time to time. No one told us that the calves really like to just up and die on you...but they did.

As a little girl I loved the story of the ponies of Chincoteague, and I had always romanticized the idea of buying a horse of my own. Once you have a horse, you never forget the way they smell, or how reassuring it is to look one in the eye and hug his neck.

I was at the auction with my mom's friend and a big wad of roofing cash when they opened the gate and three squirrely little foals ran into the ring. That's the first time I laid eyes on my second broken horse. He was an unpapered Arab. Absolutely worthless in his world and not destined for much of a life. He was a bay with no socks and a matted and filthy jet-black tail. His mane had been rubbed off and he was covered in bug bites. Having no plan and knowing full well that it'd be less than a hot second until we got thrown out of the rat house with the barn, I raised my paddle and bought that mangey little horse for \$75 anyway.

I took him home in the back of a pickup like a dog. He was tiny. I could push him right over and I did. He was my world. I played with him all the time. He healed me from the trauma of losing Drummer (twice), and I was actually pretty good with him, for a seventeen-year-old. I called him Sovereign after my mom brought home a guitar of the same name that she found in the bushes out-

side a casino. Just like him it was deep red and flawed in the best way. I had no idea that of all the impulsive decisions I made as a teenager, buying that horse would be the most impactful by far. I would have that responsibility with me until I was nearly forty. He was the gift of burden that gave me my work ethic.

I had a lot of freedom, and my band and my brother were a band of brothers for me in a way I'll never forget. I had a couch in my room, and there was always some wayward dude on it. Blair, Sean, and Brian were mainstays. The grown-ups in the band were starting to get some understandable resistance from their wives. Apparently hanging out with teenagers wasn't winning them any family points. But their disapproval was nothing that we couldn't handle.

At one point, the young part of the group contemplated stealing a car. We wanted to play a show in Spokane, and no one had a car that would make it there on this particular weekend. One of us had access to a key to a

brand-new car parked on a lot in town, so Blair suggested we go get it and take off to eastern Washington, and then scrap it once we got to Spokane. It's the kind of thing that all kids talk about around a campfire before coming to their senses. Of course, we came to ours...some kids don't. But our funny, sweet friend Blair was getting kind of dark...no one said it out loud, but sometimes it felt scary.

I was still trying relentlessly during that time to drag Jay out of the house and to band practice, karaoke, road trips, and camping in eastern Washington. Sometimes he'd come! But he struggled.

One New Year's Eve, we decided to break into Sean's dad's house for a party. I call it breaking in, but really Sean had a key...he probably even had permission, but we enjoyed feeling like we were living on the edge. It was nothing crazy, just some band geeks with cupcakes and wine coolers. We liked to use his dad's hot tub.

It was the first and last time we decided not to invite Blair. He was getting really intense. We all had new girlfriends and we didn't want him to make the evening feel crazy. He was behaving more and more erratically and always ramping up our sense of adventure past where any of us felt comfortable. To top it all off, he was doing it stone-cold sober!

Instead, Blair's parents took him to a fancy New Year's Eve dinner in Bellevue at a nice hotel. The next morning, he got into a taxi and went back to the same hotel, where he jumped out of a window and killed himself.

The shock and guilt were unbearable.

I transformed these feelings into visceral teenage Baptist judgment and condemnation. Monkey see, monkey do.

One of the older brothers in my band gave me a guitar. I dove into it with everything that was left of me...I lost all track of time after that.

8.

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BAPTISTS ARE MEAN

It was July and the adolescent boys' swim trunks I was wearing under my baggy "poor-kid" jeans were uncomfortable as I shuffled north on Coal Street toward the town's only Baptist church for my big day. I never knew what kind of swimsuit I was supposed to wear. I avoided pools in favor of floating the river because I felt like I was under less pressure to wear a "proper" swimsuit. I didn't want to wear a bikini, and board shorts felt just a little too butch. So I settled on my drummer friend Sean's tightest trunks and a sports bra. I was supposed to feel vulnerable anyway. Baptism isn't a bandstand.

It had been a few years since the beginning of my spiritual transition. I was drawn back to church when I came out of the closet as both a comfort and out of fear. Church made sense of things: Blair, sex, money, and desire. The church camp that I had attended at my brother's request had made a massive impression on me. But even still, it took me a long time to collect enough nerve to take the step I was about to take.

The Evangelicals and the Baptists have a special brand of homogeneous teen religion, and it all starts at "church camp." It has all the things a regular camp has: food, games, music, exhilarating independence, and an overall togetherness that feels somehow less intimidating than trying to fit in at school. Sometimes it's a weekend, sometimes it's an all-day trip, but there's always an agenda—which is more often than not teenage salvation. Sure, there are advantages to adolescent piety, but in my experience, these standards of purity cannot be sustained in the modern age. At best, they inevitably lead

to real shame, and at worst, self-destruction—and that’s if you’re NOT gay.

We were motivated holistically by hormones, and we were obviously in desperate need of a spiky-haired, ultra-hip youth pastor to show us how we could stop living for ourselves and join the rock club. Electric guitars, swimming pools, girls, and Capri Sun juice boxes for anyone who wants to self-consciously approach the altar and be saved in front of their tearful peers, their eyes shut tight with outstretched hands, singing a Christian power ballad: *“Open my eyes to your heart, Lord.”*

Even in the years that followed, every time I stood up at church, I felt an overwhelming urge to cry. I never understood why at the time. The pastors were all used to it; people feel the spirit and they are overcome. This time, though, I was ready. I had been in spiritual training with Pastor Steve all week. Baptism was going to be no big deal. My younger brother and sister had already been baptized; I was just a late-bloomer.

To my immense relief, my anxious meditations were interrupted by the familiar sound of Sheryl Crow coming in louder and clearer by the second. I knew if I turned around, I’d see my girlfriend’s red 1995 Jetta approaching at the brutally enforced Black Diamond speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour. “All I Wanna Do Is Have Some Fun” felt audacious and foreign in contrast to the thoughts I was having. I was waxing philosophical about duty and rebirth. I didn’t want her to stop the car; I didn’t want to talk. She caught my eye and smiled; she knew why I wanted to walk to the church.

I met Jessica at the grocery store where I was working. I was instantly enamored with her. She worked in the photo department and was a photographer. I used being a musician to my advantage and asked her to take some photos of “my band” that quickly turned into one-on-one photo shoots—and you can guess how that went. I still see the insecure photos sometimes and they make me smile because the affection I have for her

is so clearly written on my face. I was in the process of moving in with her, effectively dragging my seventeen-year-old self and my now-eight-hundred-pound horse into her life like a sledgehammer. I didn't even have a bank account or a driver's license. Also, I told her I was eighteen.

She was my first real girlfriend, and my whole family absolutely loved her. She was a Mormon and understood the complicated dance I was doing with organized religion. She wasn't a fan of my church, but not because it wasn't liberal enough; she just felt like the rug was about to be pulled out from under me. I had already been discouraged from participating in musical worship because of my "spiritual state of mind," but I assumed that just meant that I needed to be baptized...Then they were going to let me sing.

Jay was out of town for the weekend with his near-future fiancée. Things were getting tense between us and it felt like it was connected to the church. There was a commu-

nity there and they adored him—me, not so much. But again, as soon as I was baptized, I was sure...

Most of my family and my "occasional" friends were all there sitting in folding chairs, but I was too nervous to chat. I was nervous about my swimsuit, nervous about having my head dunked (control freaks always are), and nervous about the crying thing. I wanted people to think I was cool, just like the rest of the kids who got dunked in the holy water and high-fived—only to return immediately to rolling around in the backseat of cars and drinking too many wine coolers. Baptism was the final step in my journey to community and self-acceptance. It was going to make me the same as everyone else, or at the very least, a fellow purchaser of the same brand of fire insurance.

I got to the church and was greeted outside the building by an unusually manic and smiling Pastor Steve. There was another kid participating in the ceremony, James—he was only thirteen and he was ready to give his life

to the Lord...again. He'd been baptized Catholic but that doesn't count to the Baptists—full submersion or afterlife combustion. Pastor Steve took us into the back room together and asked if we had our swimsuits on. I was mortified, but I answered yes. The next question tickled me. I was actually grateful to the good pastor for making a joke and breaking the ice.

“Do you currently practice black magic or witchcraft?”

I knew I'd laughed too loud when he didn't smile. “Uh, no,” I mumbled, feeling my face get hot. All at once I knew what was coming next...He looked like it was killing him to ask. He already knew the answer: I was the only person out of the closet in Black Diamond and three towns over in every direction.

“Do you practice homosexuality?”

I was a student of all the parts in the Bible that pertained to me. I hated the word “homosexual.” I felt it didn't belong there and

always wondered why we let them pin it on us. I pontificated often in uncertain terror about the nuanced and cultural meaning of the actual words “Malakois” and “Arsenokoitai”—in my opinion two of the most mischaracterized words in the Bible, often used to condemn and cast their misleading net over queer people for centuries. Two of the broadest brushes ever to paint a painful picture.

“I don't care for that word,” I said calmly. “I'm only being who I was born to be.”

Pastor Steve was sweating profusely and looked as if he was reading straight from the script of a graphic porno film. “I know,” he said, “but I have to ask these two questions, and if you can't repent, I can't baptize you.”

My heart sank like a stone from the weight of the imminent embarrassment. “What about this week?” I asked. “You know me, and you know my girlfriend. You let me go through the training program. You know I'm gay.”

He went hoarse. “I know...I’m so sorry.”

The lapsed Catholic kid in the corner had stripped. It would have been such comic relief, if only I could have seen the humor in a half-naked preteen boy being forced into a conversation about homosexuality and witchcraft whilst standing in his underwear.

I said, “Okay,” and I bolted.

Everyone I loved was a blur as I ran out of the church. Not everyone “agreed with my lifestyle” (the most common dismissal of gay people in the ’90s), but they all wanted me to have my moment with the Lord and feel supported. My mom and dad didn’t care for church and avoided it at almost all costs. So, when I got to my parents’ house, they were just putting out their cigarettes and leaving for the spectacle—always late. I told my mom what had happened and ran up to my room. My dad said he was going to go beat up Pastor Steve. He was pacing and ranting as he repeated his mantra—he’d been telling me all year, “Baptists are mean,” but I never really

agreed. “I’m gonna kick that guy’s ass,” he said. I knew it wasn’t true and I knew that Pastor Steve was beating himself up worse than anything my dad would have done to him.

Looking back on it now, I see grace everywhere. There was grace in the outrage my public rejection incited in my family and in that tiny town. I hadn’t fully seen it until then. That’s how real “heart change” is made. Consciousness that shifts not as the result of triumph, but of sacrifice, even sometimes humiliation. That’s where the mercy creeps in.

It’s not a cry that you hear at night

It’s not somebody who’s seen the light

It’s a cold and it’s a broken

Hallelujah

Everyone hated Pastor Steve after that. He called and called and called. I never spoke to him again. But I wasn’t mad at him. I didn’t feel “wronged” yet because I still felt wrong.

I was nowhere near ready to be forgiven. The whole ordeal would have meant nothing to me spiritually. It was a checklist for conformity. I wasn't upset with Pastor Steve for not baptizing me...I was upset because I knew that *I* wouldn't have baptized me.

I fell asleep listening to Jeff Buckley sing "Hallelujah" every night after that for weeks. I was becoming more and more awake, more certain that I had been looking for my salvation in all the wrong places. My obsession with "Hallelujah" had begun to transform itself into a fantasy future life full of concert stages and deep and meaningful relationships with friends. Having never taken a plane ride, there was also a burning desire welling up inside me to see the rest of America.

I would take the leap, move out of my parents' home, and find salvation where the rest of the misfits and the rejects find it.

Through twisted, joyful, sexual, weird, and wonderful music.