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Mrs. Quinn

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Unbecoming

Only four years ago, I was a good Mormon boy. I was born and raised in the Mormon faith, and for a long time, my life has revolved around it. Every Sunday, unless terribly sick, was the day that we get up incredibly early in the morning, we get dressed in our best clothes, and we go sit quietly for three hours in a building identical to the other thousands spread across America, being preached to on the same material as the other few millions of members across America. Each child knew what they would do when they grow up. As soon as they graduate from high school, it’s their job to go out into the world to gather more members and spread what they believe to be true. And immediately following that, it’s off the BYU, the school owned by their church. Marriage is supposed to happen as early as possible, regardless of financial stability, and a large family is expected, to be rewarded with the utmost glory. Yet, as cookie-cutter as the customs were in both practice and people, I can hardly recall a time where I felt like I was a part of it. But once you’re in, it’s almost impossible to safely get out.

Both of my parents were born in Burley, Idaho. If you’re looking for ghetto Idaho, that’s where you’ll find it. In Burley, you’re one of two things, and you’re born into them. My parents were one of each. My dad is Hispanic, and my mom, Mormon. Her, and her eleven siblings. I knew all throughout my childhood that my dad converted to the Mormon faith in his early twenties after going out with my aunt. Eventually, while he and my mom were working together, and said aunt had moved to Taiwan, they started dating. Against the approval of most of my mother’s family, got married, and moved to the Boise/Nampa area.

I don’t vividly remember much about the early years of my life. I know that per Sunday tradition, we attended church for three hours, and I got to spend time with kids who I only knew from church. I wouldn’t say we were close, but because of the artificial community, they were what I knew as friends. As I started and progressed through elementary school, these kids became increasingly just the kids I did church activities with on Sunday and Wednesday. I opened more to friends at school regardless of their religion, but my roots and lifestyle were still Mormon. It didn’t occur to me then how much I preached to my friends. I had eventually brought most of them to church, or a church activity, and didn’t realize how much they didn’t enjoy it.

Middle school started, and I was about to turn twelve. That’s a big year for Mormon boys, it’s when boys get this gift which they call the “priesthood.” The priesthood, like much of Mormonism, has many layers, but a succinct description of it is that it’s supposed to be a way in which Mormon men can deliver God’s power themselves.

One of the activities you get to participate in when you turn twelve is called “baptisms for the dead”. The Mormon church loves ancestry, so long as DNA records show no evidence of Neanderthal genetics. Baptisms for the dead are, as they sound, rituals in which deceased people whose record have been collected are baptized via a proxy, the proxy being one of the 12-year-olds or older. I didn’t think much about these activities when I first attended them, but watching from an outside perspective has changed my perception of that and so many church activities, most of which were hidden from me as a member.

At thirteen, I was selected to be the president of the group of twelve and thirteen-year-olds at church, referred to as deacons. This was an integral point in me finding out where I belonged in the church. It was possibly the first time I realized I didn’t. In this position, which was really such a minor role, I caught a glimpse into what a busy Mormon life looked like. I was suddenly supposed to attend meetings constantly, on top of regular church activities. I was supposed to be a part of planning Wednesday activities for our Boy Scout troop, I was supposed to be a leader and instructor for kids who had been my church friends months before. I was also supposed to present myself well to my leaders, and any slip up was subject to public ridicule over the pulpit, which was something anxious preteen Micah couldn’t handle.

At fourteen, I was starting my freshman year of high school. My world got entirely flipped upside down thanks to one of my closest friends and my parents, and I couldn’t appreciate it more. The summer before freshman year, I attended what was called the “Boise Youth Spectacular,” which was a youth camp for Mormon children to attend seminars and workshops. Something at that event really built me up, and for some reason, I came out of it much more faithful than I’d ever been. I was excited to attend church, and I signed myself up for seminary the upcoming schoolyear.

I really enjoyed it all, around this point in my life. I had a good handful of Mormon friends as my primary friend group, and had made the decision that I wanted to serve a mission to convert people around the world to the church. However, I didn’t know that at this same time, my parents were hitting a rough patch with their beliefs. A little while into the school year, I noticed my parents become more vocal about a few false ideas we had been taught in church, and some stories about church history which had been falsified.

Of course, I was on my way to being a good cookie-cutter Mormon. I won’t forget the thought I had as my mom explained to me the problems with the stories the Mormon church’s founder told. It was the programmed response, the cognitive dissonance that blocks out criticism, “This isn’t what we’re taught at church,” and I defaulted back to the blocked-off mindset I had developed, hoping my parents would overcome their faith crisis.

Not long after, I was hanging out with two of my friends. They were both Mormons, but I knew one didn’t attend. It didn’t bother me, he never really talked about it until this day. Caleb, David (name changed), and I were sitting at a park near David’s house, just down the street, in the neighborhood he and I grew up together as close friends. I don’t remember exactly how the topic was brought up, but Caleb asked if I knew about “the rock in the hat”. I had no idea what he was talking about, so he explained to me that Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion didn’t translate the Book of Mormon by reading it himself, but the original story went that he put a stone in a hat… and stared at it, until letters formed, and read to him the entire book. He went on for about 5 minutes until something in me *snapped.* This was exactly what my parents had been talking about. It only took one more source for me to realize my parents weren’t crazy theorists. There were credible sources for this information, and my parents weren’t the only ones who thought like this. I was suddenly engaged in this conversation with Caleb, as things started to unravel.

Almost immediately, my views were changing. I was talking to Caleb to find out as much as I could on the topic, what else was there evidence against? He pointed me to the CES Letter, a document written by a then-faithful member of the church, asking for an explanation to questions he developed while studying history of the Mormon church. An explanation he never received.

But that isn’t what sealed the deal for me. I was still ready to be a believer, so long as what was taught today was true and in line with what I had known as the church values of truth, love, and respect. My Mormon friends were concerned for me when they heard me talking about the issues I had discovered, but I constantly reassured them that I still believed, and I was still Mormon. That changed one day, while reading the CES Letter in the computer lab at school, I had pulled it up for myself to read since I had not yet finished it. The same David mentioned before came to see what I was reading.

“Oh, you’re reading your anti-Mormon thing again?”

“It’s not anti-Mormon. Caleb told me to read it, and it’s actually interesting,” I countered. He certainly didn’t approve of me reading the letter. He had tried to insult me in the past for reading it by calling me a “liberal” and an “apostate”. Regardless, I could resonate with the confusion he felt, I had felt the same about my parents. He was still my friend. Which made what he said next even more surprising to me. He knew the girl I liked at the time, and it was silly how much I liked her.

“She won’t like you if you’re not Mormon, you know.”

I don’t think he meant for it to come across the way it did, but I also couldn’t imagine how else he could have meant it. I didn’t respond. I couldn’t believe he had the audacity to use that against me, but I also realized that he was right. I didn’t even know what to make of it, so I ignored it.

The breaking point was still yet to come. My political views were shifting with my religious views, and this was the first time I had really cared about politics. I was still learning about different topics, so I didn’t hold any particularly strong views. I do remember hearing about a policy put into place by the Mormon leaders in light of the recent legalization of gay marriages across the country. The “November policy” stated that members engaging in homosexual relationships, as well as their children, were barred from joining the church, unless they officially denounced the lifestyle, or in the children’s case, the lifestyle of their parents, the one in which they were raised.

It was appalling to me how negatively the church reacted to people who were willing to join their church. The issue didn’t directly affect me or anybody I knew, but the lack of empathy portrayed by an organization I was slowly losing trust in was just enough to push me off the deep end.

There was still a problem, that problem being that I was still enrolled in seminary, and that a large amount of our community and family were still Mormon. My parents cared less about the church, and as a family finally, we were looking on how to get out of the church, minding all potential obstacles.

Over the course of the following months, my family stopped regularly attending church. We started hopping around to other churches, and eventually, decided that we were completely done with the Mormon church. My friend group started moving away from the church, I realized I was free to live my life with fewer micromanaging restrictions, and eventually, dropped my religious beliefs altogether. I realized what was open to me.

The church has always taught that true happiness was found in the church, and that you can’t be truly happy without the gospel of Jesus Christ as restored by Joseph Smith. One of the church authorities at the very top asked the question to members, “If you choose to become inactive or leave the restored church… Where will you go?” And with the church no longer holding me back, I can say I will not only go wherever, but most importantly, wherever I want. it was my unbecoming that finally made me happy.