

Liberty and Loss

Anna Jensen

It's 9 am on Saturday morning and already the dank Louisiana heat has my thick white too tight stockings uncomfortably clinging to and suffocating my little legs all the way up to my elasticized waist. My senses drift from the stifling heat and pinching clothes to the sounds and smells of the "Tanglewood" neighborhood in the heart of the Monroe ghetto. Crackling bacon and frying eggs, Scooby Doo cartoons and sharp laughter sing out from the tin-roofed homes, as my squeaky black patent leather Mary Janes clomp, click, and clunk down the splitting sidewalk to the next house.

"Anna, are you ready?" Mom's sweet, soothing voice brings me back to the duty at hand: It's my turn to present the latest *Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines to the stranger behind the door. My sweaty little hands are barely big enough to proudly clutch my book bag filled with arsenal of Bible, copious amounts of other literature that I don't yet understand, and "house-to-house" record-keeping cards. I mutter to myself what I will say, hoping that I get it right. Good morning, my name is Anna and I bring to you today the latest *Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines. As you can see (show magazine cover) the *Watchtower* is entitled "You Too Can Live on a Paradise Earth..." Remembering last week's ambush by the biggest teeth-gnashing pit bull *I'd* ever seen, I crouch to peek under the rusted out Pontiac in the driveway for killer watchdogs on the loose. Hoping none of my "worldly" school friends—or worse yet, that girl that pushed me down yesterday—will answer.....I take a deep breath and boldly knock on the door....

The small dark windowless room in the rear of the “Kingdom Hall” smelled and felt like a dungeon. The fluorescent light nervously flickered as I sat there waiting for the private meeting to begin. “Anna, do you know why you are here?” From the “brothers” and “sisters” judgmental looks I had an uncomfortable suspicion why I was now seated before three “elders.”

Anna, lately your style of dress has made some in the congregation uncomfortable. Specifically, the hemlines of your dresses are too short. We recommend a more modest wardrobe, say right at or only an inch or two above the knee. Brother Belcher, do you agree?

Looking at me with raised eyebrows, then at each other, they motion their hands to their knees the proper length. As I sit before them frozen, feeling as if I had committed some great wrong when I only thought I looked stylish in my black and hot pink polka-dotted sundress, Brother Belcher quizzically utters, “If we need to come inspect your closet....”

Once it became clear that the reprimand for my too short attire was cause for my marriage, to a fellow JW, to not be Kingdom Hall suitable, the gradual deconstruction of what I once believed to be “the truth” began. One escape—marriage—for freedom from coercive constraints led to another—infidelity and divorce.

In my tiny and empty one-bedroom apartment, sitting cross-legged on the floor, I open the letter. It’s been so long ago now that I don’t recall the exact words, but the message delivered was both welcomed and feared. After numerous attempts to contact me about my reported infidelity and subsequent pending status in the congregation, it will be announced at the next meeting that I am officially “disfellowshipped,” better known as—

excommunicated. By the mightier and holier than thou pen wielded by a group of self-proclaimed men of God, my life as I had known it no longer existed.

Since I was my mother's favorite, our relationship mostly carried on as before save the family vacations I wasn't invited to, or my sister's wedding at which an "elder" protested my attendance, with subsequent retraction of the invitation. Recently, though, our communication has existed only if I initiate. The sinking feeling that our connection would soon be lost prompted me to write with the intention of scheduling a visit to Florida sometime in May. After all, I missed my family dearly and thought openly requesting time would either be well received, or, as I feared, mark the end of a once close relationship. Either way, I'd have clarity.

I love you so much, Anna. I am willing to accept that your reaction to this email will disappoint you so much that you will not talk to me, but from now on I will do with you as I did with Kristinne when she was disfellowshipped.... We did not socialize or eat meals together.... **It is only fair Anna....** Maybe if I had reacted the way I did with Kristinne you would be back with us, happy serving Jehovah.... You know I want all my children to be with me in the promised earthly paradise. False religion is crumbling and will soon fall completely as you studied, and then Armageddon. My great fear is that my children will only want Jehovah's protection when it will be too late.... My heart aches for your change of heart.

Mom, being disappointed is the understatement of the millennium. I got your message yesterday and I wept like I've not wept in a very long time, because I know that I will be grieving the loss of the connection with my family (including you) for a long time. Perhaps

permanently. I don't want this, but you really have given me no choice other than choosing a religion in which I do not believe to keep my family close, or to lose contact entirely. I'm sure that my note to you now may break your heart, but welcome to my world. My heart has been broken into a thousand pieces over the last fifteen years. Being shunned and rejected by my own family simply because I do not believe the same doctrine is the worst imaginable pain that I would not wish on my worst enemy.

It's 9 am on Saturday morning. The crisp damp Boulder sky brings a smile to my face as my four-legged girl Dharma and I walk softly down the sidewalk on the way home after a stroll through downtown. The sight before me is unmistakable: a family—the son with the father, and the daughter with the mother—out “in service.” I consider crossing to the other side of the street to avoid having to be so close to something that was once so familiar, but I boldly stay on my path towards them. Their sweet smiles and pleasantries briefly transported me back to another time causing a pain in my heart both for the lost connection with my mom and also for the young girl who reminded me of all the bittersweet memories I'd left behind. I wondered if she was happy, or if her individuality was being crushed to bits. Today, like many other days, I mourn the “loss” of my family. Do I keep reaching out to them, “turning the other cheek” in the hopes that one day their eyes will be opened to the real “truth”? Or is the pain that I must endure with each rejection so great that they have to be dead to me? As we walk away from the family knocking on strangers' doors, I weigh these thoughts. I close my eyes to breathe in the cool air as Dharma looks up at me with her wagging tongue, almost human face, and unconditional love. I think of Troy, Bret, Gabby, Deirdre, Masyn, Emily, Lindsay, Ji, and

Nami—my family of friends. I again feel excited for my “rebirth” into the world. Life is good.

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