

Debut Memoir Explores "Worthiness," Grace, and Belonging in Mormonism and Christianity

Katie Langston's *Sealed* chronicles a unique transformation from devout Mormon to Lutheran minister

March 12, 2021 — A new memoir, *Sealed: An Unexpected Journey into the Heart of Grace* by Utah native and Lutheran ordinand Katie Langston, is being released from Thornbush Press on April 6, 2021. The memoir recounts Langston's upbringing in a conservative Mormon home, her experience of mental illness and religious anxiety, and her conversion to mainstream Christianity—specifically, Lutheranism—as an adult.

"*Sealed* is a story of faith and family, and a meditation on what it means to truly belong," said Langston, who currently serves as an intern pastor at a Lutheran congregation in Vadnais Heights, Minnesota. "But it isn't a straightforward conversion story, as if the narrative can be boiled down to 'Mormonism: bad; Lutheranism: good.' My journey was full of nuance, ambiguity, and struggle, and I tried to convey that in the book."

The memoir deals candidly with Mormon rituals, especially the temple ceremonies and "worthiness interviews," a practice in which members meet regularly with a lay leader to affirm they are complying with the church's standards. Often, these interviews include detailed interrogations of sexual behavior, even with minors. Langston has been an outspoken public critic of worthiness interviews, and she details the impact of the practice in *Sealed*.

"I couldn't tell my story without directly addressing the worthiness system and the temple rituals," Langston said. "While I know I'm violating a cultural taboo in doing so, I've tried to be straightforward and non-sensational in my portrayal of these matters. Still, I think it's crucial to understanding not just my experience but the Mormon experience more generally."

Langston's transformation began almost two decades ago when, as a young mother, she heard a Christian scholar from Wheaton College, Jerry Root, speak about grace on the campus of Utah State University in Logan, Utah. "It opened me up and healed me in ways I wasn't anticipating," she said. "But I had no idea then what a disruption this experience of grace would prove to be, both in terms of my sense of identity and my vocation. In the book, you see me working through the implications of this experience in ways that are surprising and difficult."

Ultimately, Langston hopes that her memoir will be a bridge-builder. "I would love for Mormons who read it to understand mainstream Christianity better, and for Christians who read it to understand Mormonism better," Langston said. "In the end, I hope that anyone who reads it—Mormon, Christian, or neither—will catch a glimpse of the life-changing grace of God."

Availability

Sealed: An Unexpected Journey into the Heart of Grace will be available April 6, 2021 in hardback, paperback, ebook, and audiobook formats at all major retailers, including Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Bookshop.org, and Indie Bound.

###



Katie Langston is a doubter by nature and a believer by grace. She is the director of digital strategy for Luther Seminary's innovation team, where she oversees digital projects aimed at cultivating vibrant Christian spirituality in a postmodern, post-Christian cultural context. A pastoral intern preparing for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Katie lives in the greater Twin Cities area with her husband and two daughters. *Sealed* is her first book.

Contact Katie Langston

✉ inquiries@katielangston.com

🌐 katielangston.com

☎ 435.232.3325



Katie Langston

@katielangston

A doubter by nature and a believer by grace. Author, preacher, evangelist, digital strategist, basketball fan, coffee enthusiast, lover of fine (and not-so-fine) cheeses.

A gripping story of transformation told with generosity and insight

Born and raised a devout Mormon in Utah, Katie Langston chronicles her unexpected conversion to orthodox Christianity with candor and theological depth. Her remarkable debut memoir explores themes of religious fundamentalism, mental illness, and family belonging—culminating in her surprising and liberating encounters with the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Pre-order on: Amazon, B&N, Bookshop.org, Indie Bound, and more

Publisher: Thornbush Press

Release date: April 6, 2021

MSRP

Hardback: \$24.95

Paperback: \$14.99

Ebook: \$9.99

Audiobook: \$34.95

Trim size: 6x9

Pages: 237

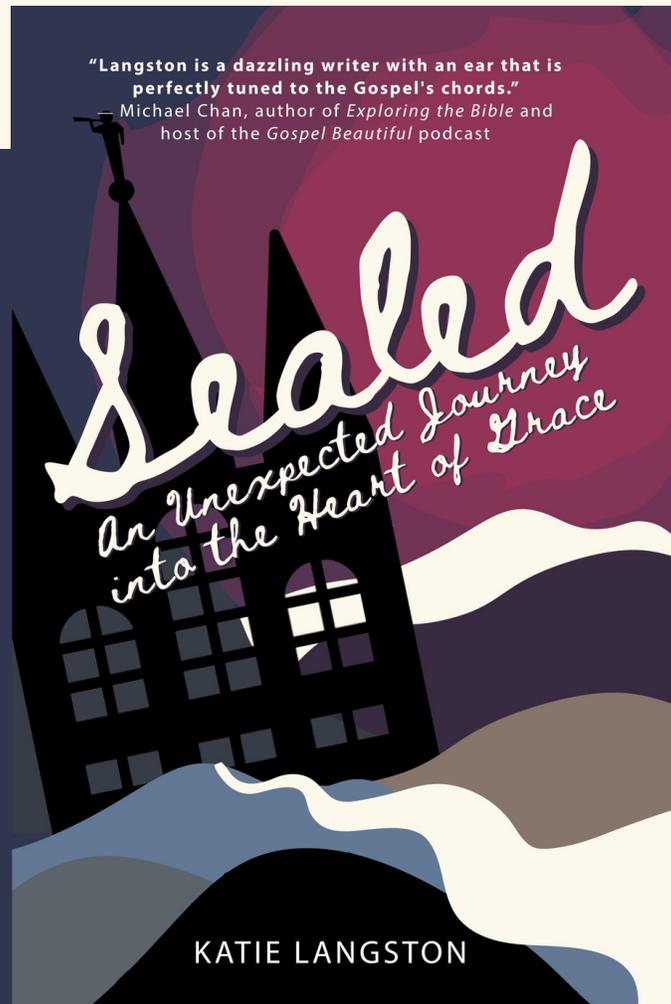
ISBNs

978-1-7360136-7-0 (hardback)

978-1-7360136-6-3 (paperback)

978-1-7360136-8-7 (ebook)

978-1-7360136-9-4 (audiobook)



"Langston is a dazzling writer with an ear that is perfectly tuned to the Gospel's chords."
—Michael Chan, author of *Exploring the Bible* and host of the *Gospel Beautiful* podcast

Advance Praise for *Sealed*

"Exquisite, edge-of-the-sword honesty and elevated prose."

—Phyllis Barber, author of *How I Got Cultured*

"A powerful and deeply theological memoir."

—Jana Riess, author of *The Next Mormons*

"Fearless honesty, vulnerability, and full-bodied faith."

—Joanna Brooks, author of *The Book of Mormon Girl*

"Langston is a dazzling writer with an ear that is perfectly tuned to the Gospel's chords."

—Michael Chan, host of the *Gospel Beautiful* podcast

"Beautiful—both for its honest vulnerability and theological profundity."

—Debbie Blue, author of *Sensual Orthodoxy*

"An instant classic that plumbs the depths of the Mormon experience."

—Stephen Carter, editor of *Sunstone Magazine*

Sample Q&A for *Sealed*

Tell us more about yourself and your journey.

I grew up in a conservative, almost quasi-fundamentalist Mormon home. This brought with it both gifts and pain: on the one hand, a sense of community and purpose; on the other, a lot of religious fear. As a child, I developed severe OCD, with religious-related obsessions and compulsions (often called "scrupulosity"), though I didn't have a diagnosis for it until much later. By the time I was in my early twenties, I had accomplished all the major Mormon milestones—full-time proselytizing mission, marriage in the Mormon temple, a baby on the way—but I was coming apart at the seams. Just when I thought I didn't want to live anymore, I had a profound experience with God's grace that changed everything. I'm now a Lutheran minister, a call that began with that first experience of grace.

The basic arc of the story describes how an anxious Mormon girl from Utah grew up to be a Lutheran minister. But it's more than that—it's a meditation on faith, family, and belonging. It's about how we must reconcile even the seemingly irreconcilable parts of ourselves in order to be whole, and how we never outgrow our roots. While it is a conversion story, the conversion isn't straightforward. The book is deeply Mormon *and* deeply Christian, because I couldn't tell my story without acknowledging how I'm both.

What is *Sealed* about? What are its themes?

Why write such a personal book?

You know, it's funny: if I could have *not* written it, I would have much preferred that! But the book kind of poured out of me. It was one of those experiences, that as an artist and as a Christian I have come to understand are quite rare, in which I felt as though I must write—almost like I was being *compelled* to write. There were aspects of this book that were difficult to write because it meant diving into past traumas, griefs, and pain, but I hope that in so doing I have told a story that is resonant and compelling. If others can find themselves in my story, I will have done my job.

Sealed is for wonderers, wanderers, skeptics, and believers. It's for anyone who's had the feeling they don't quite fit in. It's for folks who have experienced the pain of leaving a religion or faith community, and folks who have experienced the excitement of joining a religion or a faith community. It's for people who are at odds with their family. It's for survivors of spiritual abuse. It's for mainstream Christians who want to understand Mormonism better, and for Mormons who want to understand mainstream Christianity better. It's for readers who enjoy memoirs and spiritual writing. Ultimately, it's for anyone who marvels at the miracle of grace, and longs to see it whenever and however it shows up in the most unexpected of places.

What is the audience? Who do you hope will find and read it?

"Langston is a dazzling writer with an ear that is perfectly tuned to the Gospel's chords."

— Michael Chan, author of *Exploring the Bible* and host of the *Gospel Beautiful* podcast

BOOK SAMPLE:
Prologue and Chapter 1

Sealed

An Unexpected Journey
into the Heart of Grace

KATIE LANGSTON

Prologue

IN LOGAN, UTAH, in the center of town, on a hill overlooking a lush valley that sprawls for miles, the Mormon temple stands like a fortress. It is our protector, our sentinel, preserving our wholesome tree-lined streets, our sweet neighborhoods with neatly trimmed lawns, our modest but well-kept homes, and further out, toward the Wellsville Mountains where the town gives way to fields of open farmland, our crops of alfalfa, wheat, and corn. It was the second temple in Zion, finished even before the iconic structure in Salt Lake City, which made it the beating heart of Northern Utah for nearly a decade on the Mormon frontier. It is the first thing you see when, traveling north from the capital, you make your way through the twisting curves of Sardine Canyon and emerge at its mouth. There, the spectacular views of Cache Valley break open like birdsong and the temple greets you with a welcome and a warning. During the day, its formidable limestone exterior, flanked by castle-like turrets on either side, fortifies the landscape; after sunset, it's illuminated by the power of one-thousand-watt lights, casting an authoritative glow across the entire valley.

My parents were married there. So was I. Their wedding, I'm told, was a much more subdued affair than mine. While my husband and I were surrounded by jubilant friends and family—siblings, mission companions, parents, leaders, and neighbors, until there were no seats left in the sealing room—theirs was hauntingly sparse. A couple of friends. No family. My mother's parents were never Mormon; my father's were lapsed enough at the time that they weren't allowed entrance. My mother recalls arriving at the temple on December 13, 1980, with no one to help her prepare her dress or sit with her in the bridal room; she waited with bated breath, alone, convinced my father wouldn't show. When he did, she breathed a sigh of relief, and they were sealed together before God, angels, and their tiny gathering of witnesses, for time and all eternity.

To be *sealed* for time and all eternity: this was the highest possible promise, the culmination of all of Mormonism's mysteries. We were to think of ourselves as on a path, progressing from one degree of spiritual development to the next, a journey that began even before we were born. First, we were disembodied spirits in a pre-existence, yearning for the corporeality of our Heavenly Father's flesh and bones; then we were sent to Earth to experience life in this tabernacle of clay. Once mortal, we were to receive the ordinances of salvation, available only in God's true and living church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which included baptism, the laying-on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the temple ceremonies: the initiatory, which prepared us for further light and knowledge through anointing and blessing; the endowment, which delivered the light and knowledge through ritualistic drama; and the sealing, which bound us to a spouse, and the children that would come from our union, as a forever family. If we fulfilled each step, we would be exalted as gods and create worlds and spirit children as our Heavenly Father had done.

I was born exactly nine months and three days after my parents' sealing in the temple (they insist on their chastity beforehand), and the story of their wedding was the foundation upon which our family

was built. It was proof of their devotion: they married in the temple, even at the expense of the pain of their parents, who couldn't be present with them, because they wanted the blessings of sealing. Whatever it required for us to be a forever family was worth every sacrifice.

Of course, it didn't strike me as sacrifice then. It was inevitable, the only possible choice. If anything, my grandparents were the ones to blame for their unworthiness to enter the temple. My mother's parents were so addicted to drink they didn't even come to the reception in Logan but held their own, weeks later, where they could arrange for an open bar; my father's dad was unable to give up smoking and my grandmother decided to remain outside the temple in solidarity with him. It was clear that their exclusion was the consequence of their choices, as sure as day follows night.

Even for those of us who had the sealing, the temple was the promise of a forever family, but not its fulfillment. The fulfillment would take a lifetime. Obedience, repentance, purity: this was the price of belonging. A family could remain a family only if they were worthy of it. The standards were high, but so were the rewards. We repeated it in Sunday services and morning devotionals in the living room through the lyrics of a popular children's song: "I always want to be with my own family, and the Lord has shown me how I can."

That word: *can*. A single syllable, laden with condition: we *can* be together forever, but *will* we? That was up to each of us. At a certain point, our parents' efforts would be insufficient to ensure our safety; our agency, our choices would determine whether their sealing held.

One night, Mom had a dream—more like a vision, a revelation from God. She said she saw herself die, and as her spirit floated above her body, she passed over Dad and us kids weeping in a hospital waiting room. She tried to speak to us, but the veil was too thick. The only thing penetrating it was a golden thread protruding from her abdomen, connecting her to each of us. She held it fast and turned toward the light, the hope of our eternal family piercing the fog of death. When she was swallowed up in it, she awoke with tears in her eyes and intensified

conviction that there could be nothing more precious than this sealing. I was young when she dreamed it, maybe eight or nine, and I clutched at my own belly, imagining the pull of the celestial cord she described and the mystery of the blinding unknown.

“Are we really going to be together forever?” I asked.

“We can, sweetie, we can,” she said, her response both reassuring and disorienting. It was a daunting contingency, but I loved my parents desperately, so I was determined to keep our sealing secure. I had only an inkling then how difficult it would prove to be.

Years ago I read that landscape affects us viscerally. The environment that surrounds us shapes us. I never believed it until I lived away from the mountains. Now whenever I return home (is it still home?) I am struck by their omnipresence: they’re everywhere but nowhere, like a watercolor backdrop painted against the sky. You feel you could almost reach out, smudge it with your fingertips, and expose the whole façade.

What was the landscape of my grandparents like? My great-grandparents? I didn’t grow up where my ancestors did. Does that make me fundamentally different from them in a way that can never be recovered? Did the mountains alter my DNA?

I traveled to New Jersey once to visit the graves of my paternal grandparents. My dad’s cousin, Ella, took my husband Lanny and me to see them. We were newlyweds on a week-long vacation in New York City. Most of our time was spent in line for Broadway tickets or in gritty, urine-scented subways, but one morning we took a train out to Morristown, the New York City skyline retreating as we approached hilly landscapes thawing in the February sun. When we stepped off the train into air laden with smog, it occurred to me that New Jersey must be a bifurcated place, part Garden State, part Jersey Shore, a state at war with itself. That, at least, felt familiar.

My grandfather died when I was too young to have formed many memories of him, but Grandma Ackerman loomed large in my life. I

tried not to imagine her beneath the soil, the woman I'd loved decaying in a bargain casket. Instead, I pictured her as I remembered her: short hair dyed a flattering shade of auburn; bright, intelligent brown eyes; thin lips that all but disappeared when she was angry or contemplative; the many hours we spent together on the piano bench, where she corrected my posture and cried "sharp!" or "flat!" at each slip of my finger; how her New Jersey accent had been softened by years of living in the Intermountain West. She was the most dignified woman I'd ever met, her relative poverty never an excuse for poor manners, her demeanor at turns funny and gracious and appropriately stern.

I have a photo of me at my grandparents' gravesite. I'm crouching next to their modest gray headstone in a bright red jacket, leaning awkwardly against it, trying not to get my jeans wet in a thin covering of melting snow. I look as if I don't belong, my face drawn into a wan smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes, as if it's all I can do to resist the urge to run as far and as fast as possible. As I study the photograph now, I wish I could go back and touch the earth, scoop up handfuls of dirt and grass poking up through the slush, and claim it as my own. This was the land that nourished my family. These were the graveyards that collected their bones. But I was too young and disconnected to allow myself to rest in the presence of those whose lives birthed mine. We stayed only a moment. I didn't know that place. I preferred to retreat than to face what I didn't understand.

What I did understand were the shadows of the Everlasting Hills and the rugged, unwieldy country I inhabited, once a barren wasteland, now wholly tamed. In the heart of the unforgiving desert the Mormon pioneers built a civilization teeming with industry and self-reliance: Zion, they called it, a kind of outlaw haven for religious zealots, people who had lost everything once, twice, three times in the name of God. They came by the thousands, hobbling over miles of barren plains to

this place, this promised land—promised to us, perhaps, because no one else would have it.

Here they knit their hearts together in stubborn defiance against the rest of the world. Here they proclaimed their independence from the persecutions that drove them westward. Here, where shopping malls and Wal-Marts and Starbucks stores and used-car dealerships now spring up like stubborn prairie weeds, they refused to assimilate, turning instead to their guns—to their graves—before they would give in. The transition from theocratic radicals to middle-class big-box-store consumers is as mysterious as Mormon origins themselves, but in it I always sensed a belligerent edge, a dare to the rest of the world cloaked in deliberate, almost fierce friendliness. It is the paradox I inherited: to be apart, but still accepted. To be reviled, but still loved.

Even now, I cannot separate my religious past from my religious present, any more than I could carve a boulder from the walls of the Wellsville Mountains with a wish. It is, simply, who I am: *a Mormon*. The clean-cut boys on bicycles, the fantastical stories of gold plates and angelic visitors, the prohibitions on alcohol and coffee, the rows of elderly white men in white shirts and conservative ties whom we called prophets and apostles—this is the language, the landscape, of my youth.

The rhythms of Mormon life, disciplined and rigorous, were passed down through the generations: get up, read the scriptures, eat breakfast, go to school, come home, have dinner, say bedtime prayers. Mondays are Family Home Evenings. Wednesdays Mom crosses the backyard to the church building for activities with the youth. Sundays you attend church, an entirely separate experience from the temple's ritual and symbolism: a no-nonsense, no-frills ordeal in practical wooden pews. Hymns are accompanied on the organ, sermons are delivered by congregants on a rotating basis, the weekly emblems of the Lord's Supper, which consists of bread and water, are passed from row to row—for even in sacred ritual Mormons don't drink wine. Everyone dresses in Sunday best: skirts and dresses for the women and girls, shirts and ties

for the men and boys. Altogether, church takes three hours, between talks, classes, songs, and scriptures.

Underscoring each message is an unbending perception of right and wrong, one that must have been influenced by the vast endlessness of the Midwestern plains the pioneers crossed at such terrible expense. There is good and evil, us and them. Ours is the only true church; all other Christian denominations are apostate expressions of the pristine faith. The early Christians went so far astray that the truth was lost entirely and had to be restored through Joseph Smith in 1830, so that we could have the church as Jesus intended it: new scriptures, the temple rituals, leaders who spoke directly to God and taught us the way we should go. You might be tempted to doubt, but that's a trick of Satan, who lurks in every shadow to send you wandering through the winding paths of sin and darkness that lead away from eternal life.

For years, it was impossible to imagine anything else. The Mormons' past was my past, their stories my stories. I grew up singing songs of the American West, beating invisible insects with burlap sacks to reenact the miracle when God sent the seagulls to swallow up hordes of crickets that were destroying the Mormon settlers' crops. We were God's chosen people, plucked from the world and deposited in the planting pot of Utah's mountain valleys, layers of soil transported across time and space to make the desert bloom as paradise. This was the heritage for which my forebears sacrificed all.

Except that it wasn't my heritage and they weren't my forebears—not really. My many-times-great-grandparents came over on the *Mayflower*. Others were Methodists and Mennonites and Anglicans. I knew they were a part of me, but peripherally: they existed in another time, another world, before our family found the truth. Both my parents converted to Mormonism as kids when missionaries knocked on the doors of their childhood homes, and those were the moments that changed our eternal destiny. Everything that came before was but a prelude to the apex of our family's history, the first in a series of steps that led to the temple, the fortress of sealing that would bind the chosen togeth-

er for all eternity. It was a tremendous privilege to be chosen, and our ancestors, well-intentioned as they might have been, were merely God's vehicles to bring us here. At least, that's how I was raised to think of them.

Perhaps that's at the heart of this—my despair, my apostasy, my journey away. If only the Mormons had really been my people, I would have kept my faith. I wouldn't have turned up my nose at the air that smelled of sulfur when the breeze caught the stench off Great Salt Lake. The irrigation water flowing down from winter run-offs would have been more than enough to nourish me. But I was a transplant, and God help me, I never fully took.

*Part One:
Home*

Chapter 1

MY FIRST MEMORY of pain is a memory of pleasure.

It's strange how memory works: hours and days and months and years can slip silently by, as if shrouded by a sheet, just a shadow here or a motion there, nothing specific to recall but vapor and fog—and then, suddenly, the shroud lifts and for a moment everything is clear. That's how it is with this.

There are two memories that form a whole.

The first: I'm three years old, maybe four. In a car seat. It is upright and bulky, supported by huge, heavy frames, and covered with bright brown vinyl that sticks to my skin in the sun. I ride around town for hours in it while Mom tows me along for daily errands: grocery store, library, utility payment, mall. One afternoon, en route to one destination or another, I discover I can press myself down against the plastic latch between my legs and produce a pulsating sensation in my private parts.

It never occurs to me that it's wrong; it's just a way to pass the time. My first clue comes months after my discovery, in the second memory that is sharp as nails. We're stopped in front of Grandma Ackerman's

house and Mom unsnaps the buckle moments before I can make the feeling come. At first, I'm upset by the interruption. But then she says in a voice more urgent than anything I've heard before, "No, Katie, don't do that. That's something very special. It's not something we do in a car seat."

That's it—over in five seconds. But not before I notice the fear in her voice, the panic in her eyes. The message I receive—though now that I am a mother myself, I am certain it is not the one she intends to send—is clear: *You must never trust your body.*

More terrifying still: *You can do something horribly wrong without knowing it.*

Looking back, I see the child I was, full of innocence and vulnerability, and I wonder: why these lies, of all the lies I might have believed? What if I had never learned to imagine myself defective? There is no way of knowing how all this might have unfolded, but there are times I have begged God to take me back there, to let me rewrite that exchange, to stop what became of me before it started. But I have discovered that God is not in the business of changing what is past. We must sit with it, live with it, until we learn to accept it—or be consumed by it.

And so it came to be that I was almost consumed, as a child, a teenager, a young adult—a small scrap of paper in the belly of a blazing fire.

From the moment she caught me, my mother watched me like a hawk.

Sometimes she'd come into my room after she put me to bed. "Are you playing with your bottom?" she'd ask as I'd drift off to sleep with my hand down my pajamas.

"I don't know," I'd reply.

"Sweetheart," she'd say, pleading, "that's not something we do to ourselves."

Then who does it to us? I wanted to ask, but I never did.

When I was five, out came the charts and rewards. For every day I could control myself, I got a sticker. When I got seven stickers, I could

choose any cereal I wanted from the grocery store. The chart was hanging on the refrigerator, a conspicuously public place, but we had a code for my habit that only Mom and I knew. We called it “being clean.” If anyone asked, we just told them it was about picking up after myself. There were other things on my chart too, like making my bed and being nice to my brother—but we both knew what was most important.

Every morning when I woke up, Mom would greet me with a hug. We’d walk over to the chart. We’d pretend to care about bed-making and sharing. Then she’d ask in an over-friendly tone that never quite masked her apprehension, “Did you play with your bottom last night?”

I rarely lied. When I’d done it, I told her so. Her lips would stay smiling but her eyes would fall. She’d say, “It’s okay, sweetie, today is a new day.”

Sometimes I hadn’t. Those were great mornings. To hear her shout, “Great job! I’m so proud of you!” and to see the look on her face as she pulled the stickers down from the top of the fridge so that I could select any color I wanted.

Occasionally it was hard to remember. Those were mornings I never knew what to say. Every once in a while I said no, but I always feared I was being dishonest. So more often than not I’d reply, “I’m not sure,” or even, “Yes”—just to be safe.

Twice I said no when I knew I was fibbing. In both cases I was just one sticker away from Apple Jacks. I felt bad about it, but even a child with a highly sensitive conscience will discover it’s difficult to be honest with Apple Jacks on the line.



MY CHILDHOOD HOME was in Magna, a residential township in the southwest corner of the Salt Lake Valley, just eight miles east of the brine flies and uninhabitable wetlands of Great Salt Lake. Overhead, California seagulls, drawn to the lake’s salinity, squawked and shat on the sidewalks like pigeons, but if you closed your eyes you could al-

most imagine you were near the shore in a quaint oceanside town, not a working-class neighborhood where shifts of bleary-eyed men rose early to extract the earth's treasures from the nearby Bingham Copper Mine, blighting a once-pristine landscape with the irrevocable devastation of human greed.

Still, the neighborhood was friendly enough, and if we were toward the bottom of the socioeconomic scale in our rundown, split-level homes, as children we never knew it. On our street alone, there were over a dozen kids my siblings and I could play with, and we spent most of our afternoons outside, engrossed in the sagas we invented about runaway children and private detectives, darting through each other's yards, hiding behind each other's evergreen bushes, climbing each other's poplar trees. A grocery store where you could buy penny candies was just three blocks away, but the route was treacherous, strewn with empty beer bottles and discarded cigarette butts, evidence of a world we were not allowed to touch.

In our neighborhood almost everyone was Mormon—but of course there were exceptions. Across the street, a tired, middle-aged man lived with an angry, middle-aged woman. They had a ferociously independent teenage daughter who was always running out the front door in miniskirts and tank tops, ducking into cars with boyfriends, shouting things like, “I can do whatever the fuck I *want!*” as her parents chased behind her, demanding she tell them just where she thought she was going. I often hid behind the green curtain in my parents' room so I could see directly into their yard, fascinated by their drama, their way of life that seemed so worldly, so forbidden.

Once, Mom noticed the father across the street acting a little strange. He stumbled to his car and got in. Mom gasped.

“He's drunk,” she whispered.

My eyes widened. “He *is?* How do you know?”

Mom grew up with alcoholic parents. It was a dull pain that was always in her eyes. “I just know,” she said. “Katie, go run and get a pen

and paper from the kitchen table. Hurry! We need to write down that license plate number.”

I dashed to the kitchen and retrieved what she asked me for. She grabbed the pen out of my hands and scribbled down the information as the car roared off. “We need to call the police,” she said. “He’s driving under the influence.”

Fifteen minutes later we were both hiding behind the curtain as the police brought him home. He protested that he was perfectly fit to drive, that he’d only had a drink or two. His words were slurring together and he was stumbling over cracks in the sidewalk.

“It’s a good thing we stopped him before he hurt someone,” Mom said.

“Is he going to find out we told?” I asked.

“No. They keep that sort of thing private.”

I nodded, relieved. It was moments like this that reminded me there was a very clear line between right and wrong—and it was a darn good thing I knew which was which. If only the man across the street knew it, perhaps his daughter wouldn’t be so rebellious and his wife so angry and he so drunk. Perhaps he *did* know it but chose to be wicked anyway. The thought excited me, a foreign delight tingling in my limbs. I noticed the feeling immediately and shut it down with a guilty shake of my head.

“Will he be okay?” I asked Mom.

She was quiet a long time, like she was struggling to keep a pot of boiling water from overflowing the sides and making a mess everywhere.

“I don’t know, Katie,” she said at last.

My mother was soft and warm like a down comforter. She was heavily overweight, and I loved snuggling up to her, getting lost in the folds of her belly, her ample breasts cushioning my head. When we watched movies, I’d nestle into her softness, waiting for her to stroke my hair or dance her fingers up and down my back. Sometimes she’d sing idly, her

classically trained voice floating up to fill the room, even though her volume was hushed.

Beneath her suppleness was an emotional fragility that was difficult to understand. There were inexplicable meltdowns, crying fits that seemed to stop and start suddenly, with no predictable trigger. Such outbursts were infrequent, but they were shocking and disorienting, and we found ourselves treading carefully whenever one seemed imminent.

Mom had a friend, Edith, who lived down the street. Edith was a striking woman, tall and thin with dark hair and elegant features. She was always smiling. Mom said that's because Edith was a healer. She practiced Neuro-Linguistic Programming and had sessions with Mom to help her come to terms with her troubled childhood.

One day, Mom returned home from a session with Edith, beaming. "She's so helpful," she said. Tears welled up in her eyes. "She told me I was a beautiful woman. She meant it."

"I think you're beautiful," I said.

To my astonishment, she turned to me and laughed—a bitter laugh without humor or delight. "No, you don't, Katie," she said. "You're ashamed of me."

I didn't respond. It was the first time I was aware of it, but I was as ashamed of her body as I was of my own.

Whenever Edith came around, she brought my mother new energy and hope, but I remained skeptical. Mom was just one of many women who leaned on Edith for emotional support. Too many afternoons I watched my mother dial and redial Edith's number, hoping to get past the busy signal, pacing anxiously.

Edith taught Mom an exercise I found particularly amusing. "A lot of my sadness comes from when I was a little girl," Mom said. "So Edith had me hold my inner child and comfort her." She demonstrated by rocking back and forth and stroking her midsection, shushing and whispering, "It's okay, Mary. It's okay. You're going to be okay."

I almost cracked up right there on the spot. It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen, a grown woman rubbing her own belly and talking to

herself like a baby. I ran outside to find my best friend, Sandy Cooper, and tell her what a crazy thing my mom just did. She couldn't believe it either. We laughed and laughed.

We were too young to understand that sometimes when you're all grown up, you'd give anything to be able to go back in time and do just that.