

The Prodigal Daughter Returns

written by Guest Contributor | September 25, 2020



The therapy was supposed to be paid for by insurance. That was how I justified it to myself. How I ended up on a green couch inside a therapist's office inside of a church.

The church part is a red herring. That was just where his office was.

Finding a secular therapist in this cranny of the Bible Belt had posed a unique challenge. Requiring skills that had long lay dormant inside of me. For instance: the ability to see God in the white space around words. To tease Jesus from the confluence of sentences. The Holy Ghost hidden in whole paragraphs. The implied Trinity. To find this therapist, I had relied heavily on my gut, which, like an over-active gag reflex, would quiver when I got too close to anyone who reminded me of where I came from—the praying hands; the pointing fingers; church on a Sunday and on a Wednesday night.

How many times had I walked to the front of a church in southeast Texas while the piano played a soaring rendition of *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*? Up to the front where the lilies clustered on the stair. Up to the front where a woman in paisley would reach out a liver-spotted hand, a life raft to guide my mortal soul to dry land. Many, many times. I don't know if it was precisely necessary, but I repeated this activity, this trek to the front, this saving and re-saving, annually. Like spring-cleaning. Just to be sure everything was in order. I was thorough with this practice as puberty clutched me from the inside out, as life's possibilities widened into choices.

But for all that, it hadn't stuck. Or it had until it stopped sticking anymore. My salvation like a tan Band-Aid that grew grimy with life and filth and finally fell off one day in my early twenties after I had left home and the stretches of cow field and the sun-bleached billboards for the best B-B-Q in the south.

And yet here I sat ten years later. Inside a therapist's office, inside a church, just minutes from where I grew up. Like some kind of prodigal daughter returned. So close to my childhood home, I could taste the communion grape juice. It must have been tricky, I thought, for this secular therapist to find office space in a town where every building was a church. This one was Lutheran, large and expansive, with breezeways and hedges and a swan-necked fountain out front. At the turn-in, a towering beveled cross that seemed a bit like overkill.

One of the last times I had been inside a church, I had spilled half a cup of hot coffee into my lap as the pastor spoke to his congregation about people like me. The unsaved, jeans soaked.

"Nice couch," I said, looking around the therapist's office that first time. The couch was especially hideous, some kind of synthetic jacquard, that particular shade of obvious Christmas green. But the lie was better than saying nothing. Better than wondering who would speak first.

"Thanks," the therapist said from the folding chair across. "It's not mine." He vaguely reminded me of somebody's youth pastor, the wilted button-down tucked into the dark wash jeans, the jaunty plaid newsboy cap that he would always wear, always, to every single one of our meetings. "Why don't you tell me why you're here."

I clutched a green pillow to my chest, a knee-jerk response. He seemed kind, ready to record his interpretation of my thoughts on the blank sheets of paper on his lap. Scribbles he would make that I would never see. But I hesitated. The walls of my throat narrowed. Even ten years later, it felt bold to be in a room alone with a man. Where I came from, men and women who are not related or married to each other do not talk like this. Openly, that is. Especially not in rooms with closed doors, without chaperones.

I have known couples whose only pre-marital contact was touching either end of a stick. They called it a courtship stick, and this stick acted as a bridge from his warmth to hers. There is an infamous Bible college that has separate sidewalks for males and females. Circuitous routes so the women do not distract the men. Where I come from, to be female is to be Eve with the curves of desperation and deceit. Enticing Eve. Her body, that piece of ripe fruit flesh. She holds out her arms to bear the load of her brethren's sin. The nudity in his eyes. The clogged-pipe of his desire. His purity is her responsibility. If he falls off the straight and narrow path, if he sins, it is on her and her curvaceous collarbone. It was always on Eve. Eve, made for Adam. Eve, from the very beginning.

I no longer believed any of that, but my throat tightened anyway. Another example of my long dormant skills. I had always been such a good girl. Admired in my church community for my apparent goodness. I was so good. A girl of straight lines. I smiled to soften the otherwise hard edges. Smiling was my purpose.

I smiled as I told the therapist why I was there: because normal things had become difficult. Traveling, almost impossible. How was I supposed to go

anywhere when I felt the power of the plane's propeller, its wheels, its speed, chalk outlined around my body in alarming neon? How was I supposed to breathe when the seatbelt pinned me to my seat?

But it happened in cars too. Anytime I wasn't driving. Most recently in my husband's red monstrosity. A car that made no apologies for how loud it was, for how much over the speed-limit it could go, for existing in all of its masculine brashness. The last time I had been a passenger in that car, strapped into the seat by an elaborate harness, I had screamed for my husband to stop driving, because the clugging noise that came from the engine threatened to erase me entirely.

I made it clear to him that before coming to therapy I had tried to Google these symptoms, hoping for some kind of medical explanation, something like vertigo. Something I could self diagnose and use as my reason for never leaving the house. But I fit none of the profiles I found online. I belonged to none of those fearful and well-meaning communities. I had no people.

Around that same time, I had happened upon my brother's email address in a darkened corner of the Internet. He was mostly invisible, but through repeated searches and after combing the latter pages of my fourth or fifth Google search, I found him. Brother. He was there, on one of those pages that purported to collect the names and information for every person alive. Pertinent information tucked behind a pay-wall. I considered paying for his information and made it as far as putting in my credit card information before deleting it and closing my laptop lid.

"What are you afraid of do you think?" asked the therapist.

Not dying. Not quite that.

"What I'm hearing," said the therapist, "is you're afraid to lose control because you don't trust how you will react."

This was true enough.

I continued. Beyond my decreased tolerance for noise and movement, there was more. I had always been an anxious person— about irons left on and stove tops burning red and exploding, and hair-straighteners magnetizing stray bits of paper to start stray bits of fire while I was at the grocery store—but this was something different. One afternoon, I looked too long in the bathroom mirror. Up so close that my features detached from one another and became islands of discontent. My hair follicles, I determined via handheld mirror pointed down, were a rainforest that was slowly being destroyed by mankind, thinned out in unspeakable ways, whole ecosystems dying. Once I had seen this deforestation, I could not look away. I was religious in my scrutiny. And each time I scrutinized, I could almost coax my heart into complete stillness.

I told the therapist this. I told him that he might not be able to tell from his vantage, that the handheld mirror and the abrasive bathroom lights were important components.

"And why," asked the therapist with a wry smile, "do you think you care so much about the top of your head?"

In the auditioning of therapists, I was looking for an accurate rendering. I was looking, for once, to see myself as I was.

Perhaps I looked to him like a person who had a series of made-up problems. I didn't know anymore. Perhaps I did. Perhaps my mind had flipped itself inside out and begun to consume itself.

I didn't tell him about the summer in my early twenties, after I had left home and left God. The summer I started fishing hair out of the shower drain in large wads. Wet tangled hair like the seaweed that grows in The Gulf, that winds around ankles in the murky water. That summer, I was dating the atheist who would become my husband. That summer, my older brother met me for coffee at Starbucks and then disappeared from my life.

My brother didn't come up that first meeting, but God did. I don't remember how or why, perhaps He came up because we were inside of a church. Perhaps I wanted to clarify. To classify. To set myself apart. I might be inside of this church, but I did not want what they were selling. The therapist made careful note of this.

"My assessment is this," he said, just as time was up, "you have no idea who you are." He said this with kindness and maybe a little bit of pity. "And how can you trust yourself in these situations if you don't know yourself?"

I was impressed. I had been to therapy one time before and that therapist had not led with this.

That therapist, soft-featured and pretty, with straight hair that reminded me of a beige rainbow, had her office at the skylit top of a creeky old house. I had sizzled in that room, my face growing hot.

Her assessment was that I had ragged edges. Traumas that had long since dislocated from their memories. Dangling threads. Or, perhaps more accurately, roads that needed reroutes, detours. Orange signs that would point me home.

She had just attended training for something called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and she thought it might help. I remember skimming the Wikipedia page of this healing modality and retaining nothing. I remember calling it EDM...R.

How it worked was this: I chose a traumatic memory and I chose a safe location in some cozy fold of my brain. A bugless field, perhaps. Tall grasses. Pale sky. It didn't have to be a real place. I accessed these two worlds, the real and the imaginary, with my eyes closed. When I had had enough, I opened my eyes and the therapist facilitated the EMDR. When her finger moved, I followed it with my eyes.

I don't know that we accomplished anything, but the idea intrigues me now. That a finger moving in front of my face could elicit healing of any kind.

Her fingers were stubby. A stubby dry finger could facilitate healing.

I cried every time. I cried in part because this therapist whose name I can never remember was nice, almost too nice. I hated to disappoint her, to see pity in her big hazel eyes. Crying was compulsory. Someone was pulling open the curtain and shining in the daylight. Maybe I was mourning the loss of the darkness.

When I left those sessions, my back and eyes damp, I plugged in my headphones and waited for the street to clear. I piped music into my ears so I could live my life to a soundtrack. Like a movie of a life rather than a life itself.

During one of our last sessions, this therapist had insinuated, or perhaps she had said it point blank, that maybe I missed God. I didn't think so, I said. Really. And that had been the nail in the coffin of our working relationship. I had emailed her to cancel one session and then the next, and then I had stopped emailing altogether. I have always felt bad about that.

I look back at photos from that time in my life and I wonder if things were better or worse than they appear. My memory is broken up into pieces. Quick flashes. The cat box, lid off, litter in the grout. The smell of litter in that tiny apartment was enough to make a person want to move. But then, I remember early mornings on the patio high up over the river, like a bird in a nest, clear view of the sky as it changed like a mood ring.

I was acutely aware back then of my brother's absence. How I'd had a brother. How I technically still did. One question occurred over and over: did my brother's love still count if it was conditional? If it had a clear beginning and an even clearer end? All those birthday cards filled with his chicken scratch. All those memories. How did I categorize them now? God too, and the faith I used to wear like armor to protect me from my doubt. Had I truly believed any of those times I had "gotten saved"? Was any of it real?

I remember spilling sound into all of my lonely godless spaces: sound, beautiful sound. Sound making a sea wall, keeping the salt water at bay. Try to think about loss, that four-lettered word, while Kurt Cobain howls this question over and over: *where did you sleep last night*. It's almost impossible. While the music caulks up the leaky spaces, casually refer to yourself as an only child once. Just once. It will feel like a lie until it doesn't anymore.

When my brother came up on the green couch many years later, it felt like a revelation. I have a brother. He was merely a bit of folk lore now. The older brother who had wanted more than life itself to be a missionary. To take Jesus to third world countries where language would be an issue. To that end, he used to fall asleep on his unmade bed with gigantic books open on his face. Not the Bible but one of those hard backed and thin-paged companion texts. So you really had to squint to read the words. So you really had to work for it.

I had a brother, yes. A brother who had lost his religion around the same

time I had lost mine. Who had even lived with me for a brief stint: adult siblings inhabiting a too-small apartment, both of us clueless about a world without God in it. Like babies walking. He had joined the military and started dating; I was a sophomore in college. He covered my floral couch with his long body and my living room became less a place I cried alone and more a place I did not recognize. There was a dresser under the window, and from one of the drawers, my brother's clothes hung like food from a mouth.

The therapist passed me a box of Kleenex while my tears fell out of my eye-pockets like lint. How useless and inconvenient when there was only this therapist to witness them. My mascara ran, and for what? My brother remained remote and inaccessible. A mute by choice. The world's longest case of the silent treatment.

One of the last times I had seen him was inside of a bookstore in my early twenties. A massive independent bookstore with generous windows. I used to say I never ran into anyone I knew. I said this self-deprecatingly. A way to insinuate that I could count my friends on one hand. But on that day, I look up from a stack of new releases, and he is there by the glass entrance doors: my brother. T-shirt over new pudgy belly. Does this mean he's happy, this belly? That his new wife is making him happy? Is that how happiness works? His hair cut military short. His eyes two darkened caves. Beside him, his new wife. Natural light splashes all over everything. They are ten feet away in a gorgeous bath of light. I see them. They see me. I see them see me.

A traumatic memory: Being paper-thin. A sheet of vellum. Brittle in the bookstore air-conditioning, quivering in the draft.

The doors open. My brother turns. His soft back and the back of his wife, her scapula poking her tangerine t-shirt. Their spines straight. The doors close behind them.

I told the therapist about finding my brother's email address. I asked him if I should just do it. Pay the fee and send my missive out into the void.

"What do you hope to get out of it?" the therapist asked. "After you email your brother, what do you hope will happen?"

It seemed obvious. I wanted answers. His actions broken down into explainable pieces, like he used to teach me algebra, lesson by lesson. Or, if not that, I wanted acknowledgement. I wanted my brother to admit I existed. At the very least, I wanted a response.

"And what if he doesn't give you what you want? Because there's a good chance that he won't." The disapproval was apparent. The therapist did not want me to email my brother.

The therapist, instead, wanted to refocus the conversation to me. To the singular work of rehabbing my body-brain connection.

This felt like running towards a brick wall until the bricks disappeared. Matching the plane's roar with my own. Remembering I could not be erased. Months of this. Months of opening my palms and flipping them up. Months of

closing my eyes and trusting my body in the sudden dark. The crown of my head, the bones that fit together to make my spine. My sacrum. Months of tonguing that word. Sacrum. What an exquisite word. With my eyes closed, I was kaleidoscopic. Months of closing my eyes and opening them. Of squinting at myself in the mirror until my two halves began to align. Of calling what I had experienced trauma. Trauma. Of hearing that echoed back to me by the therapist. Of taking one step and then another. The beauty of those first few steps was inconceivable.

After my last therapy session, I left the Lutheran church knowing I would not be coming back. I passed the supersized cross at the turn-in, and it seemed as if my entire life had been a series of lily pads to get to this.

*

My brother's room was always filled with so much paper. A fire-hazard. It was always poorly lit. Always the side room with the window that looked out on the next door neighbor's brick. He left his blinds open at night so there was blackness between the slats. It was a room that smelled like stagnation. Like sweat and basketball shorts and sneeze. But in the middle of the night, after my own room had squeezed me out, it was the safest place I knew. I dropped my pillow to the smelly boy carpet and lay down beside the cavernous under-bed. The only thing between me and fear, a thin hang of fabric bed-skirt. I don't know why this arrangement worked. My brother not only snored, he was a very committed sleeper. When he was a baby, before I was alive, our mother lived on Long Island near a train-line. My brother learned how to sleep while the world rushed past. Nothing could wake him. But a comatose brother was better than no brother at all. I must have known this instinctively as I curled my knees up to my chest, as I inhaled the stale smell of him. As I tried to sleep.



Lindsey Smith is a writer living just outside of Houston, Texas. She is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and currently teaches online at the Sarah Selecky Writing School. Find her at www.lindseysmith.com.