

Cast Out Darkness

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I.

If you asked me when the fear started, I would say autumn of 2001. I was the first third-grader in my Lutheran school's eleven-year history to take issue with the reading material. Every time I opened my grade-school version of *Pilgrim's Progress*,¹ I blinked away tears until I could excuse myself to the restroom. When my teacher came to fetch me, she usually found me trying frantically to call my mother on one of the public phones.

Looking back, I understand how strange and melodramatic I appeared to outsiders, but the fear was real. News of my panic reached the administration, and my teacher gently explained that I'd soon have a visit from the

¹*The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come; Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream*. A Christian allegory written in 1678 by John Bunyan, featuring memorable locales such as The City of Destruction, The Hill of Difficulty, and Doubting Castle, and characters like Evangelist, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Faithful, and Hopeful. Christian, the protagonist, carries a large burden on his back—the knowledge of his sin—that threatens constantly to pull him into Hell as he journeys to The Celestial City.

elementary school counselor. Mr. Mason and I sat on the small bench outside the classroom. I perched beside the enormous man, afraid to settle fully in case the addition of my weight caused the bench to collapse. But it only offered a muffled creak as I crossed my legs. I wasn't looking at him, or at the offending book on his lap, but instead at a sunbeam that played across the floor. The warmth that swarmed the windowed entryway did little to calm the gooseflesh on my arms.

At Mr. Mason's urging, I glanced at the triggering page: a full-color illustration of a demonic humanoid climbing a twilight hill toward Christian. Toward me. The figure was rough around the edges down to his jagged fingertips, and he glowed with unholy blue-white light. Bright-red eyes cast a bloody pallor over his fangs, and the illustration was captioned *Beelzebub*.² Vicious and otherworldly, he stood half the height of the oak tree at the hill's summit.

"I'm not sure why this upsets you," Mr. Mason said.

I didn't doubt his earnestness in seeking to understand my distress. But frightened children do not so easily explain the heavy gloom that sits in their chests and turns their hearts to hummingbirds. "It's scary," I said. I folded my arms.

Just as I expected, he explained that Jesus would protect me. That I must wear the armor of God³ and rely on His strength and guidance. That I must not worry about tomorrow, for each day has enough trouble of its own.⁴

I hoped my silence registered as agreement. Even then, I had begun to collect fragmented thoughts that would become questions, which would become skepticism, which would become the engine for my savage self-searching.

It started in autumn of 2001 when I was violently afraid of Something, down to my bones.

²Both the name of Satan's lieutenant and one of the many names for Satan in Christian lore and the occult. Derivative of *Baal*, the name of a Philistine god featured prominently in the Old Testament.

³Ephesians 6:10–18. Memorized earlier that year for a September homework assignment.

⁴Matthew 6:34. Memorized in kindergarten.

Each classroom at my Lutheran school followed the same morning routine: stand with Bible sandwiched between hands, recite biblical pledge of allegiance. Face right corner of room, place hand over heart, recite American pledge of allegiance to the American flag. Face left corner of room, hand over heart, recite Christian pledge of allegiance to the Christian flag. Blue banner, red cross, white field. *One Savior, crucified, risen, and coming again, with life and liberty for all who believe.* Sit down. Repeat for ten years.

My mother tells me I was a happy child before I started school. I remember my earliest days as being as romantic as a picture book: the kind with mull-cloth binding and cream-colored pages. I grew up on the edge of suburban nowhere. A safe, good place. Not far from our house, the neighborhoods thinned into great grassy spaces, which grew into dry brush and tall woods.

Minnesota is known for its winters, but nobody outside the state talks about the intense summers. When the temperature climbed above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, I could hear the crickets whirring and, in the evening, the occasional sigh of a great horned owl. My sister and I played outside whenever we could, but by August we were forced indoors by air that smothered the lungs. Those soft, slow days were punctuated by heat shimmers at noon and enormous fits of thunder after sundown.

When my sister and I could not sleep through those storms, our father sometimes took us on night drives in the rain. Winding neighborhood streets turned to two-lane roads, which after many miles turned to gravel and dust. At the reflective dead-end signs nestled against the edge of the woods, we turned back. If the rain let up, my father parked the car at the dim midway between street lamps. Barefoot, nightgowns blowing loose around our knees, Anna and I slid out of the back seat and onto the cool asphalt. Even familiar roads were transformed by night, by the crystalline air, and the touch of skin to blacktop in the dark. We looked for toads and frogs. The three of us dove after any amphibians that glittered in the lonely glow; we cupped their wax bodies in our hands and assigned them names before placing them gently in the grass at the side of the road. When we returned to our house—to those warm, full yellows in the windows at the end

of the cul-de-sac—we were calmed and ready for dreams.

If childhoods can be seen as objective, quantifiable sensations and places and experiences, then I had one of the best. But no happiness is impervious to trouble. By first grade, my parents were already struggling against my paralyzing neuroses—a battle they ultimately lost when the Twin Towers fell during the second week of third grade. The intense paranoia that followed—nuclear fallout detectors on key chains, war mentioned as often as the weather—electrified my already anxious synapses to a breaking point. People and places seemed less inviting. Neighbors kept their curtains closed even when they were home, and I became suddenly aware of the transience of sunlight. I wept, daily, unexpectedly. I was taught over and over all the ways the devil hides himself in our world.

I had a list of demands: All the closet doors in the house were to remain shut, even at midday. I would not venture to the cold basement to fetch a soda pop for a guest. My mother had to hide the kitchen knives whenever she left the house. Not because I would have hurt myself but because of the bloody thoughts⁵ that flooded my mind when I was left alone. Any place where shadows lurked, however familiar, launched a silent assault on my sanity.

Today, when the doctors ask for the history of mental illness in my family, the list I give is entirely concentrated on my mother's side. The anxiety, depression, and obsessive compulsive disorder that manifest in different branches on that tree all found a home in me before I turned ten years old. Back then, a string of child psychologists spoke to me privately, fishing for some buried maltreatment that would provide a key to my recovery. But my fond stories about family vacations to California and days spent climbing the backyard willow tree stood contrary to my whimpered plea for help: "Can you make the bad thoughts go away?" Little girl, too full of sadness she could not comprehend, a

⁵Intrusive thoughts: unwelcome involuntary thoughts, images, or ideas that may mutate into obsessions. Distressing and nearly impossible to eliminate. A hallmark of OCD and the full spectrum of anxiety disorders

sea in a teaspoon.

I became hypersensitive. At first, just the little things bothered me: the tags on my shirt that itched too much, my hair that kept standing up from its slick ponytail. Then I started getting sick. Every muscle in my body contracted against food and drink until I failed to keep any breakfast down.

David Adam, one of a handful of high-profile writers with OCD, explored the social and clinical history of the disorder in his book *The Man Who Couldn't Stop: OCD and the True Story of a Life Lost in Thought*. One study that he examined struck me and has stayed with me more than the others. In 2012, Israeli scientists conducted a study on children like me.⁶ The ones who, perhaps, pulled their socks on and off dozens of times, until they felt just right; the ones who avoid any surface with a grating texture, and also messy craft supplies; the ones who had their mothers cut the tags out of their shirts to avoid that unforgiving itch at the back of the neck. The scientists evaluated these children's sensory integration—that is, the cognitive mechanisms by which the brain processes sensory data and combines it to form an image of the outside world (that is, the world outside the skull⁷). These children (the neurotic, the meticulous, the perpetually agitated) exhibit sensory dysfunction. Something goes wrong in the translation from the skin to the medulla to the somatosensory cortex. This mental misfiring causes distress. Distress causes self-soothing in the form of predictable rituals. The socks will feel right on the thirteenth try. The ponytail must sit exactly in the measurable middle of the head. For those children whose sensory dysfunction is the worst, those rituals can become obsessive-compulsive disorder when children feel the need to regularly exert control over their environment.

My attendance at elementary school grew more inconsistent. On the days

⁶R. Dar et al., "The Relationship between Sensory Processing, Childhood Rituals and Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms," *Journal of Behavioral Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 43 (2012): 679–84.

⁷"O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams," so spoke the trapped prince of Denmark.

that I was present, I found comfort in the songs we sang: “This Little Light of Mine,” with one pointer finger extended to represent a candle, and “King of Kings,” in American Sign Language. We even learned a song in Spanish that my teacher brought back from her mission work in Bolivia. But my favorite song, simple, with only six notes, became a mantra I hummed in quiet, lonely moments when I felt lost and uncertain:

I have decided to follow Jesus

I have decided to follow Jesus

I have decided to follow Jesus

*No turning back, no turning back.*⁸

Following Jesus worked for me when I was growing up. I was a good girl who did everything she was told, and believed what she was told to believe. All Bible stories were as true and objective as my own lived experiences. I looked to those who stayed faithful in dire circumstances for guidance. Noah. Daniel.⁹ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.¹⁰ If I remained constant in my belief, if I did not waver, I reasoned that Jesus would watch over me. But anxiety upsets all such resolutions. It upsets all fixed points and constants; this is the very nature of the thing.

Every morning, the teacher called the class to a cozy corner of the room for Bible story time. My classmates and I arranged ourselves and our pretzeled legs in front of the teacher’s chair and listened as she paraphrased stories, accompanied by intricate illustrations she held up for us to see. This is where I learned the things that I clung to, both the good and the bad. At night, the lingering images of the sinister characters spread fear through me like an infection. The scaly, obsidian snake in the Garden of Eden. The hunchback Witch of Endor,

⁸“I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.” Christian hymn that originated in India in the 1800s.

⁹Survived a night in a den of lions after defying King Darius’s temporary prohibition of prayer

¹⁰Survived execution in a furnace after refusing to worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s idol. The king saw a fourth man walking among them in the flames, though the fourth did not emerge with them when he bade the men to come out.

whose wrinkled face melted around her pale eyes.

But none seized my heart so much as the illustration of Lot's wife: blue-black sky clouded by smoke that rose from the burning cities, and all the life in her was vanquished. She looked like a proper Greek tragedy, immobilized in white elements, turning regretfully over her shoulder.¹¹ Her slender arm reached out to the home she'd left behind. I asked my teacher afterward what her name was. She told me that the Bible did not say. I dreamed of my cul-de-sac home in flames, and me at the end of the block, motionless and turned to salt.

II.

When you are brought up in a fundamentalist Christian home, you are taught to cast out darkness. All ills come from the outside and make their way in if the wayward heart lets them.¹² In my father's eyes, my struggles were more a sign of faulty faith than a neurochemical imbalance. I imagine how I must have looked to him. Face always twisted in a nervous frown. Eyes downcast, worries spilling out of my mouth at a pace and in a tone that required slow, deliberate repeats. When I started pulling out my hair,¹³ what was a man of faith to think, except that his daughter was plagued by spirits?

On those days I could not get out of bed, when I was panicked by tense dreams that coiled nausea in my stomach, my father made me repeat his words. Cast away the bad thoughts in Jesus's name. *In Jesus's name, in Jesus's name, injesusname*. The compulsive tic¹⁴ of words flew quietly through my hissed teeth at all hours of the day. *injesusname*. Other repetitions appeared: high- and low-pitched chirps in the back of my throat as I did my homework. I readjusted and shifted the muscles in my face. My mother tells me I asked for reassurance

¹¹Genesis 19. Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed. God spares the righteous man Lot and his family and instructs them not to look back as they flee the burning city. Lot's wife does, and is irrevocably transformed into a pillar of salt.

¹²James 4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

¹³Trichotillomania: an impulse disorder characterized by the compulsion to recurrently pull out one's own hair. Commonly comorbid with obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety disorders.

¹⁴Brief and objectively meaningless sounds or movements. Stress, exhaustion, and emotional turmoil increase tic frequency.

once every seven¹⁵ minutes, though I remember it as much more frequent. I pulled up the follicles of my hair until my scalp bled, and touched the roots to my lips in a cool, silent prayer.

The more panicked episodes were triggered by what everyone around me saw as benign. In the height of their Evangelical days, my parents monitored all forms of media that my sister and I consumed. Their curtailing of some popular franchises led me to fear most films and television shows. If the whole world could love something apparently evil, I reasoned, what was to stop me from unintentionally doing the same? I shut myself off in ways my parents never anticipated. I spent trips to the video rental store with fingers in my ears and eyes on the patterned carpet so the evil couldn't reach me. I left the room when my family surfed channels on the television. See no evil, hear no evil.

Everything linked together in a web in my mind: a series of minor infractions that all connected to demons and the devil. Occult symbols and words became doorways, but only if I recognized them. I made my mind the lens through which they were translated. So I shut down. Except during those glorious, school-free summers, an errand outside the house turned my insides red-hot with anxiety. I was more than careful in sealing off any entrances to my heart.¹⁶ I had become obsessed.

III.

Forty years after their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites still wandered the desert of the Sinai Peninsula as punishment for their lack of faith. Under Moses's guidance, they had arrived at Canaan, their future home. But when their scouts reported on the land's current inhabitants—*fierce, strong giants, and they were many*—the Israelites cowered and turned away. They did not believe that the God who sent Heaven's wrath on Egypt and split the Red Sea could deliver them from the Canaanites. So God swept them up in sand and dust,

¹⁵Biblically, the number of completeness and perfection.

¹⁶Proverbs 4:23 *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*

cursing them to wander in the desert until the unbelievers died. Moses passed. And after forty years, God chose Joshua to lead the new generation into the land he had promised them so long before.¹⁷

When the Israelites arrived at the great walled city of Jericho, God instructed Joshua to march his people around it. Once a day for six days, seven times on the seventh day. Some of them must have doubted, but they endured on bloodied, blistered feet, held their heads high at the jeers from the turret guards. They thought of their fathers' corpses in the wilderness and their own childhoods spent walking in circles. This was not so different. Round and round to appease a vengeful God. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. They spoke the chosen words, and the walls fell down.

Make no mistake: I don't mean to conflate mental illness with religion. But having lived with both, I see the commonality between obsessive-compulsive disorder and fundamentalism. Both are fixated on fatal flaws, confession, repentance. Fear of punishment. Rituals. Walking in circles, saying the right prayers. OCD speaks dark thoughts that aren't one's own, in the same way a foul spirit might. You cast out each sinful thought *injesusname*. There are pentagrams in that shiny new graphic novel you got for Christmas—cut them out with scissors.¹⁸ *injesusname*. Did I want to kiss my sister¹⁹ or was it the demons in my mind? I think this is why my father misunderstood my affliction. Faith and fever were so closely related in my case. My mother spearheaded the therapy efforts, and my father gave his tacit approval, though he often shrugged at my difficulties and said, "Everybody's got something." As though my illness was a matter of self-control. As though this *something* was a constant, not a spectrum from *raincloud* to *hurricane*.

¹⁷Genesis 12:1 *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."*

¹⁸OCD: Religious subtype. Assume anything and everything is sinful until proven otherwise.

¹⁹OCD: Sexual subtype. Distinctly different from sexual fantasies, as sexual intrusive thoughts are involuntary and distressing.

I fell for my illness's trick. I believed that those intrusive thoughts came from some corrupt corner of my consciousness. I could not separate my illness from the structures that made me. So it consumed me, little girl, confused and fervent. Saint and doubter.

IV.

The summer before I enrolled in public high school, I visited Montana on a weeklong mission trip. I feel embarrassed now, of course, for participating in a mode of evangelical charity that feigned service though it was entirely centered on the self. Collectively our group raised several thousand dollars for our trip, all for our use: the gas, the lodgings, the food, the stop at Mount Rushmore on our way back. None of it went to the people of the reservation that we purported to help.

On the fifth day of the trip, I was paired with the aptly named Pastor White for a prayer walk in the nearby town. I remember my surprise at how young the pastor was, considering he'd permanently relocated to Montana from a suburban Midwestern town not unlike my own. He couldn't have been more than thirty, short but fit, and tan from working under the high and hot Montana sun.

Regardless of the mystical narrative imposed by the Christian trip leaders, the whole aura of the town piqued my sixth sense. An eerie cloud of displacement hung over the houses, a kind of malingering that made my hairs stand on end even in the glaring sunlight. A handful of curious children ventured out from behind the screen doors. They followed us for some time, telling stories. One—a boy of maybe ten, with a gap in his teeth and blue-black hair—stopped at an overturned trash bin and pointed to the foot of a long, cracked driveway. "That's where my brother saw the devil," he said matter-of-factly. "He drove up in his car and my brother got inside."

I walked with the pastor on the broken and faded asphalt, past small, slumped homes half-consumed by dry weeds. Green shutters hung crooked and bleached on black windows that dissolved all the colors of day. Plants

fractured the concrete, flooded past the yards and into the street. We took turns saying prayers at each driveway. Our behavior drove the children away, and I wondered if we should spend our time with them instead. But I was young, and I didn't dare contradict the pastor.

"The Bible says we all see into the spirit world through a glass darkly,"²⁰ Pastor White said. He'd been listening to my prayers. I knew what to say without prompting or context. *There's abuse at this house*, I told him. Drugs at another. Each time, something prodded me as I stood still. A certain quiet in my bones. "You see particularly well," he told me.

The gaps between the houses grew larger, with dips of deep, scorched yellow grass between them. I told Pastor White I'd always felt the immediacy of the spirit world converging on ours. "Ever since I was a kid." Ever since the dark uncertainty of anxiety took hold of me in autumn of 2001.

He nodded. "You seem like that."

I was a sensitive girl. I knew this. He saw this. For the first time, I began to think about my instincts beyond a psychological context. How many times throughout my life had my spiritual sensations been more than an obsession? Moments like this dot my life from age eight onward, this looking through the glass at the unholy dark. In a long-gone-friend's house, built in 1904, where they told me about the voices in the hallway by their room, near the old photos, whispering their names some nights. In the office of the psychiatrist who kept cacti instead of flowers. In the house of an ex-lover, who, at my prompting, explained how their mother had the same apprehensive sensation when their family moved in, and how her Taoist friend advised them against living there. How could I know what was unseen? When did disorder end and intuition begin?

The road stopped abruptly and we overlooked the tall grass, and the two-lane highway, and the mountains and blue sky beyond. I don't remember exactly what we talked about next, but he asked me how old I was.

²⁰1 Corinthians 13:12 "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known".

“Fourteen,”²¹ I said.

“You seem older. Have you thought about going into mission work?”

I smiled and gave him the prescribed answer: “I’ve thought about it.”

I had thought about it. Out of guilt. Knowing it was what I should want to do, and knowing I didn’t want it.

All that week, I grappled with the life I wanted—a life for myself, and the life I’d been groomed for at school. At night, while the others slept, I wrote journal entries. Flagellating. Frightened. Desperate to escape a spiral of self-abandonment and angelic obsession. It all comes from Lucifer—the fear of falling from God’s grace.

I told Pastor White I’d be attending public high school in the fall, and that I would wait to see what happened next. I didn’t tell him I left my Christian school because of the hypocrisy, the bullying, the favors that wealth brought the elite students. I told myself that these were the things that were souring my faith, not the doubts I still internally denied.

I remember this very clearly. He didn’t turn his gaze from the glorious landscape as he offered me his advice: “Don’t let the world happen to you.”²²

When I finally drifted off to sleep that night inside the reservation’s high school, I quietly hummed prayers of repentance in my sleeping bag the under the blackboard.

I woke to a film of white chalk dust on my clothes, my face, my nose.

V.

It ended at the tree.

In the life before my study-abroad in England, I learned that I see through

²¹Multiple of 7, biblical number for perfection; therefore, doubly perfect; therefore, the first number of an endless sequence of paradoxes.

²² The world behind me, the cross before me.
The world behind me, the cross before me
The world behind me, the cross before me
No turning back, no turning back.

the glass darkly. I later learned that there are places in this world where the veil is thin. Where the glass is not so dark, and anyone can see. In Montana, the glass had opened into wicked places. I know now that much of that wickedness was made by man, by oppressors; I misattributed a manufactured and remediable darkness to the spirit world itself. But six years later, when I found myself once again standing on that thin glass edge between worlds, it offered a better view. Near the end of a five-month stay, deep in the northern moors, I stood at the foot of a tree. Biblically, Eden was a world away from there, but I wondered if that tree was descended from those mythic gardens, hallowed and guarded by blades of fire.

Sycamore Gap lies near the east end of Hadrian's Wall, where the well-worn path runs along grassy crags. Between two hills, in a gentle dip, the tree sits. Full, round canopy. Chapped, sturdy trunk. Roots that reach into the lush yet rocky earth. I stood under the branches to see the endless green, gray, blue, white of the wide world, and let the lens of a new consciousness open. In elementary school, we sang songs about a peace that passes understanding. When I looked into the eye of the creation at Sycamore Gap, I found it waiting for me.

During my time spent Elsewhere, beyond the familiar and formative influences of my life, I had the opportunity to stand outside myself. I could deconstruct and rebuild on my own terms, free of the concepts that had limited my curiosity for so long. It didn't all happen in five months. High school primed me, then college. Gentle prods in textbooks, and the words of wise professors. Across the Atlantic, I had time and space alone to regenerate. And like most travelers, I came back changed. My spirituality had become fluid, versatile, nameless.

I think about the Israeli scientists and those children they observed, my soul siblings. People like me cannot trust our skin. How do we trust our other senses? My brain's inability to separate discomfort from danger legitimized my religiously inspired fears. I think about this, and I see my old self and her world for what it was: a child drowning in each stilted scene, too much, too loud. I had to carry that girl long and far, over hill and under hill, to quiet her soul.

My parents still hold the old fear. Without faith in Jesus alone, I am doomed to Hell. My father says he grieves for me. They pray that I will come back to the light. They don't know that I pray, too, to whatever cosmic good it is that watches over us. I pray for the sadness to leave them.

Mom, Dad. I still believe. I've just lost my fear of falling.

I still think about the stories. I think about Joshua. I wonder if he felt alone in that darkness. The man chosen to lead his disgraced people back to holiness. I wonder if he doubted himself. He'd watched Moses fall from God's favor. Perhaps his own failure felt inevitable.

No one knows how God guided any of the righteous men. I imagine Joshua rose from his tent early each morning to commune with the breath of the Almighty. The desert before him was dim, vast, marked with sharp mountains and strewn with the bones of his forbearers. Quiet, except for the wind.

I imagine Joshua's clairvoyance was like mine; his *something* was a hurricane. He prayed, meditated, worked for years to cast the darkness from his mind. He watched his people turn their faces from their destiny, saw Moses die unfulfilled. *Not like them*, he vowed. He refused to be lost in the fear. So when his moment came, he was ready. On a dim desert morning, the sun rose to his right hand, and suddenly he knew. The momentum in his chest strove north. A soft weight pressed in his ribs. He made peace with the bitterness of his past, and took his people in the direction of a whisper. *Go*.

I cannot undo the damage my storms caused me. None of us can. All we can do is walk north out of the desert, go to cognitive behavioral therapy, and learn the nature of our hearts. OCD and fundamentalist Christianity tell me otherwise, but I know the truth now: my soul is pure. Sometimes, when it gets too close to the glass, it confuses itself with whatever shadow lies beyond. But hold my soul to the light, and it will shine.

Illness and doubt. Illness and doubt. They fused into one chimaera with pale eyes and lamb horns that chased me and snapped at my little girl feet for so long. I cannot separate myself from the structures that made me. But I meet

them at the tree and whisper to them, slowly, with full awareness, in Jesus's name. "Go in peace." I start down the empty road of my own making, and when I look back, I do not turn to salt.²³



²³ Though none go with me, still I will follow,
Though none go with me, still I will follow,
Though none go with me, still I will follow,
No turning back, no turning back.