

There, in the grass of her favorite park, on a warm sun-kissed afternoon, on a Friday in the summer, Sara wept. What good is being free, she thought, when my present is still enslaved to the past? Her therapist had encouraged her to write when feeling this way. So she reached into her handbag and retrieved her journal, and there on page 68, she tried, again, to cope:

...No matter how far I run from John, he's always there. His face. His terrible face. He's with me always. His ruins are all around me. The architecture of my world he so completely destroyed, the joy of my life before feels like a long-forgotten dream. There is no quiet pasture for me. I have no resting place. He haunts me. If in life there was justice, a millstone would hang from his neck, dragging him to the bottom of the deep. Instead, I'm the one who is tormented. I'm the one who has stumbled into the abyss of depression. ...On the bus today, in the eyes of a complete stranger, John suddenly appeared, and I shrunk like a toddler when first meeting a newcomer. He's turned a 34-year old woman into a pathetic little child. And yet, that's all I wish for on days like this: to just be a child again, to shrink, and become invisible.

And no matter how much time passes, Andrew will never fully understand. It's been seven months, but it could be seven years, and he'd still never truly get it. It's amazing, he's such an incredible thinker -- he can sit idle for hours processing every minute detail of his day, and yet, somehow he still can't puzzle me out. He thinks, and tells me, that things are different now that I'm with him. That I should just try to be happy, even if I can't forget what came before. He says, that I need to forgive, let go, and move on. For by not forgiving, I'm only revisiting the pain back upon myself, repeating the cycle. And while I know he's just saying what he thinks is best, and while I admit there is some truth to his words, in the end, he just doesn't get it. He just doesn't get me. And how would he? He's been fine all his life. He's been free all his life. He's never had someone literally lord over him. Overpower him. Emotionally and physically abuse him. How could he ever know then what it's like for me; what it was like for me? He can't. And if he can't, how can we ever really know each other? No, he would need to be abused and held captive himself to ever know what it's truly like.

Maybe then I should just be with someone else, someone who's as screwed up as me. ...And, isn't that just sad? My thoughts are a mess. I'm a mess. And I'm only going to make things with Andrew a mess. I love him. I really do. But I also should leave him. That would be the right thing, for happiness evades me and the darkness that hovers will only cast a shadow over his light.

I wasn't always like this. ...I know, I write the same words on every other page, but sometimes I think that if I write it enough, maybe one day that old version of me might return. I was happy once. I was sweet and innocent, I was optimistic. I was fun and funny, I was adventurous. I looked at life with a sense of wonder, and at the center of everything was my faith in God. And He and I went to so many places together. In Paris, I prayed in the pews of Notre Dame. In Florence, I worshipped Him at the Duomo. In Amsterdam, I rode bikes with Him along the canals, and there, one day, we even knelt together to wonder at the simple beauty of His tulip. ...Oh, I used to love the smell of tulips...but now...their aroma is vacant. For God has deserted me. My God has widowed me. I was once God's princess but now I'm just a vassal of degradation.

Oh, but mom tries to tell me that all is not lost. That somewhere, in all of this, God still has a plan for me. Haha. Really? God has a plan, mom? Really!? Was God's plan made manifest when John called me his whore? When he beat and raped me? Was that God's plan, mom? And where was He then?? Just watching somewhere beyond the clouds like some sort of pervert, a divine voyeur? And what was that you said the other night? That He actually willed this to happen, just so He could then work through me so to help others who've suffered as I have? Oh, how wonderful of Him! So in the end, it's all about his glory, right? Well, I don't want to glorify Him, mom! Nor do I want to help others. I've helped others all of my life, and look where it's gotten me. Used, taken advantage of, and discarded like Sunday's trash. No, I'm the one who now needs help! And who is going to help me? Will God? Will Andrew? Will you? Or will all of you just hide behind your piety?

At the very least... Dad hasn't been so blatantly offensive. But in the end, he's just as clueless. He actually read a passage out of scripture the other day over the phone, though I certainly didn't ask for it. He said it would help me in my relationship with Andrew. That it would help me better understand his intentions, and in turn, offer me the aid I've been so convinced was absent. But the passage he read made absolutely no sense. In fact, it was just awful, the antithesis of helpful. It was something out of Luke, some horrible story about slaves. He kept telling me I was misunderstanding what Jesus was actually saying, but eventually I just cut him off. I didn't want to hear anymore. How could he think I would want to listen to a parable about a slave, whose sole purpose was to put on an apron, get in the kitchen, and serve others? ...My virgin body was ravaged just to serve the lust of a beast, and now I'm a slave to that singular moment in time. What was that story they taught us in high school? The Allegory of the Cave? By Plato? Well now I'm the one who's walking in circles. I'm the one who's chained like a prisoner, unwilling and unable to face the bright light of life. And so I live in the shadows. And really, that's where I belong: in the shadows.

And so here, on page 70, I must finish this chapter. Because it's not right or fair to him, to be with someone so...like this, like me. I have to tell Andrew that it's over. And I simply have to do it tonight.

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There, in a windowless office, on a Friday in the summer, Andrew worked on an email to an old friend whom he had recently reconnected with. Its title: "Sara: Pt.2" -- it read:

...If only I could just show Sara how much she means to me. If I could just convince her that rebirth is in fact possible, and that through Christ, her past is forever confined to the catacombs. If only.

She's so much more than she gives herself credit for. But it's as if the heaviness of her memory has permanently anchored her soul beneath the tide. Maybe she's right, perhaps it's just easier for me to observe hope, to see the good in life and the light in others. The light in her. She often whispers at night that I'll never understand her pain because I've only ever known grace. Grace from my parents, grace from God, grace from the general situation and community into which I was born. And all of that, I admit, is true. As you well know, I was given such a large inheritance that I've never known need. At age 20, I was so well endowed, I was able to leave college, travel, and freely drift from here and there without care or caution. Honestly, I can't even recall a single truly horrible thing that has ever happened to me. Sure, our family dog died in that regrettable accident -- no doubt, you remember poor little Turbo -- but death is just another step along the way, a step that we all must take, even our best and most furry of friends.

But, I must ask, is it so wrong to have only ever known love? To have lived free from famine, hardship, and distress? Does it actually render me ignorant, as Sara so frequently argues? Does it determine me impotent, when offering my hand to her and to others? I mean, can we really only ever help someone provided that we have first gone through the exact same trauma? If so, Sara's therapist would be first in the unemployment line.

My mother used to tell me that if I wanted to be a true disciple of Christ, I should seek every opportunity to serve others. She also used to say that the answer to life's most persistent of questions -- what is the meaning of life? -- is actually the most plain of all solutions: to glorify God. And in the end, I think she was right on both accounts. For now, I truly believe that my life's meaning is none else but to glorify God, and the only way I can authentically do that, is to spend every free minute I have in the service of others. And principally, for me at least, that means attempting to serve and glorify Sara.

Having owned that, I must yet confess that even though my conviction is strong and the spirit willing, my body is weak. For if my mind has the neural pathways of Solomon, my mouth has the tongue and lips of Moses. I simply cannot form words in the manner or eloquence I wish, at least when I am there with her in person. And so, like Moses employing his brother Aaron to speak for him, I enlisted her father to help me convey all of this to Sara over the phone. And just as the prophets pleaded with Pharaoh to release the captives, only to be met with complete silence and utter disdain, her father's plea was met with a dial tone. Precisely, he said that Sara hung up on him just after he read the passage out of Luke that I gave him. You know, the one in chapter 17:7-10. All I wanted though was for her to hear that she, who has been enslaved for far too long, now has a life-long servant in me; for Christ, who freely offered himself up for my sake, for all of our sakes, is now asking me to do the same for others, for her.

Now, I imagine you're probably thinking that I just should have told her all of this myself, but again, I must remind you, I am weak. But, before you judge me too harshly, just listen what I have in mind to correct my error, to show her that people can in fact overcome their weaknesses... So tonight is our date night, right? Well, what if I take her on our favorite walk down by her favorite park? And what if we quickly, just ever so quickly, stop by my church and go up front to the Table? And what if, after silently praying for the sweet Lord to bless me with the good gift of elocution, I attempt to remind her that Christ has indeed invited all to his table, and that no matter from where and whence anyone may come, all are welcome. Yes, that even she is welcome!

And so there at the Table of Life, I will rest all of my faith, and trust that through God's grace everything for Sara can be made new; that light can in fact emerge out of darkness; and love can really conquer all. For tonight, there at the table, I will also get down on my knee and ask her to join me at the Banquet of Life. Yes, tonight, I will ask Sara to marry me...

And pray, so let it be.

your friend,

Andy.

Amen