

COMING OUT IN THE SOUTH

*Going from Fear and Frustration to
Courage and Confidence*

Julie Still-Rolin

Coming Out in the South: Going from Fear and Frustration to Courage and Confidence
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This book is dedicated to all those brave souls who came out in the South before me and to those who will one day embrace their own identity and join us on this trek.

Wild nights - Wild nights! (269)

Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah - the Sea!
Might I but moor - tonight -
In thee!

- Emily Dickinson

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CHAPTER 2: I MARRIED JESUS

CHRIST FIRST

What Being Raised in a Non-denominational Christian Southern Church Taught Me about Sexuality and Critical Thinking

“From error to error, one discovers the entire truth.”
–Sigmund Freud

RELIGION IS A VERY SENSITIVE SUBJECT. It does not bother me to discuss it, but when I do, other people usually get offended because they do not understand me. Most people assume that because I do not go to church, I must have never been. In their minds, I could not possibly know Jesus and not be a Christian. Consequentially, this could not be further from the truth. In fact, I was married to Jesus. This among many other stories riddle my relationship with religion. However, these stories led me to the place where I am now: happily oblivious and focused on living and living my truth. Also, divorced from Jesus.

In addition to going to church every Sunday and Wednesday, being a top student in Bible Drills, and attending every extra-curricular church activity offered, I also went to church camp every summer from the ages of eight to thirteen. For me, this was more about pranking people and swimming in the lake than it was about religion at first. When I turned thirteen, I got to leave the children and join the youth group. I liked feeling independent and being responsible for my own time. Although we were expected to be at every meeting, we had to get there of our own will. I liked the planning. My best friend Nicole and I would determine our schedule in the morning: go to the lake before the boys got there, then head to the morning sermon, then arts and crafts until lunch, then back to the lake, and so on. I felt like I was in college.

The older kids did more religious practicing than the younger ones. The youngsters just did typical Sunday school stuff: lessons about the bible accompanied by some craft activity. The youth group stuff got a little more intense. One of our sessions was about finding our gift. The pastor preached for a while about different people in the bible who had certain talents that they used for the church. Then, we got into groups. Each group was assigned an adult leader.

My leader was an older lady that I knew quite well. She often spoke in tongues and caught the holy ghost. She prayed over each of us, and when she was finished, she would tell us our gift. She told me that my hands had a special touch, a healing touch. She said that if I had enough faith, god would heal people through my touch.

We also gathered one night to learn how to pray in tongues. This was a secret language between you and god, but you could only do it if you really believed and were right with god. I followed every word the pastor said. I really wanted to speak in tongues. I thought it would be cool to have my own language with god. I did everything I was told. I believed. I concentrated. I prayed and prayed. I just couldn't do it. It was like the time that there was a guest pastor at our church. He was on fire for god, and everyone that he touched caught the holy ghost. I wanted to see what it was like, so I went up to him. He prayed for me, and then, BAM! He pushed me on my forehead. Nothing happened. I just stood there with my eyes closed waiting, so BAM! He did it again. This time, I fell back on purpose. I didn't want him to know that the holy ghost would not get in me. I didn't want him to know that something was wrong with me. I laid there for what I thought was an appropriate amount of time, jerking every now and then like the others I'd seen catch the holy ghost. Then, I got up and went to the bathroom until it was time to leave.

Other than these experiences, camp went by as usual. I enjoyed painting a little birdhouse for my mom, and we had fun covering each other in shaving cream at night.

I fell asleep on the way home. Finally, the big white van barreled into my driveway, and it looked like no one was there. My mom's car was gone, and the lights were off. It was just getting dark outside, so I figured my parents had gone grocery shopping or something. I got my stuff from the back of the van and walked up the back steps. The back door was open on the other side of the screen door, so I figured my dad was home alone. He has epilepsy, so he doesn't have a car. It was not unusual for him to be home alone with all the lights off because he is cheap and usually fell asleep reading his bible.

I put my bags down on the kitchen counter and switched on the light to find a large pool of blood in the middle of the kitchen floor next to a pair of electric hedge clippers. I grabbed the cordless phone from its deck and called my grandparents' house. No answer. I called my aunt. She answered the phone.

"What happened?" I screamed into the phone.

"Calm down, Julie," she said quickly, "your dad had an accident, but he's okay. I'll come get you and take you to the hospital. I've been waiting on you to get home."

"Okay."

I put the phone down and stared at the blood. Smear marks surrounded the puddle. I imagined my dad having one of his grand-maul seizures. His right arm always went up, and his head shook to the opposite side. The marks of blood looked like he had fallen and slipped then thrashed around in his own blood.

When I got to the hospital, he was asleep. My grandmother explained that he had had a seizure and fallen, but when he went down, he hit his nose on the counter. This is where the

blood came from. His nose was pushed dangerously close to his brain, but he was going to make it. Luckily, my little brother was there with him and called my grandparents.

A lot went through my thirteen-year-old brain that night. I felt that it was unfair that my dad had seizures. I thought about what it would be like to lose him. I thought about all the times that I had been scared like this. Then, I thought about what my church leader had said. I grabbed my father's hand, and I prayed. I prayed harder than I had ever prayed before. I prayed, and I believed. I believed that god would heal my dad through my hands. I believed it so hard that I felt relieved after I finished praying.

The next time he had a seizure, I believed that my faith was broken. I was convinced that something was wrong with me. I must have done something wrong for god to not heal my dad. I wanted so bad to be good and go to heaven that when the chance came, I said yes to marrying Jesus.

The youth pastor said that we were all the bride of Christ, so we should have a ceremony to show our commitment. By Jesus' grace and mercy, we were absolved of our sins and would go to heaven as long as we repent and confess our belief in him, so it was the least we could do. Granny let me go across the street to the Tot Shop, a boutique store, to pick out a white dress and charge it to her account. I loved the way that clothes from the Tot Shop smelled. I wanted to be good and pure. The dress smelled good and pure. I didn't want to feel dirty like I did after I had kissed people or when I watched my friend touch herself.

The deal was that if we married Jesus, we would get a ring. This ring would be our wedding ring, but it would also signify our promise to stay virgins. They said that if you have sex before you get married then you'll go to hell. I didn't want to go to hell, but I also wanted to be able to heal my dad with my touch. I wanted to feel the holy ghost. I wanted to pray in tongues.

My friends had decided to do it too. We paid \$30 for the ceremony. This included the ring. The wedding took place on a Wednesday night. I remember the purple flowers that lined the pews. I think they were forget-me-knots. We each got one white rose to carry. My dad walked me down the aisle. His face was still not completely healed from the fall, but he looked so happy. We said our vows and put on our rings and promised Jesus that we would stay pure for him.

As you already know, that did not last long. I divorced Jesus and had sex when I was fifteen. I did not leave the church. I just continued going and beating myself up for every single sin I committed. I would go to church, feel good, leave church, feel bad. I would spend the week between Sundays in constant turmoil. I felt like I was never good enough. I hated myself.

I know all too well the fear that lives behind the reasoning of religion. The stories of dying and going to hell did not escape me. I remember when my uncle died in a car accident, and my grandmother was scared that he went to hell because he was drinking and may not have had a chance to repent. I also remember when my aunt died, and everyone assured me that she had gone to a better place. She was, after all, surrounded by church people and listening to "Amazing Grace" when her time came. The hope of one day walking on the streets of gold to meet our dead loved ones not only gave us hope for ourselves, but it comforted us when the

pain of losing them was great. So, the hatred for myself fueled by my inability to avoid sin was just a side effect of the bigger goal. It was okay as long as I would repent before I died.

When it came to sexuality, the church not only forbade pre-marital sex, but it also condemned homosexuals to hell. They were, according to my mother, explicitly deemed “abominations” in god’s eyes. Although I liked kissing girls, this condemnation prevented me from even considering the fact that I might be a lesbian. It’s difficult to explain, but I looked at being attracted to girls as separate from my identity. It was just an act. It was just another sin. I could be forgiven of it if it was just a singular act. It was too scary to be an abomination, so just like every other sin, I chopped it off as something that I did but needed to repent of before I die.