

BELIEVE: A COLLECTION

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by

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Abstract:

Believe is a collection of short stories that revolve around a common theme. Each story shows a brief slice of a young woman's life. They encapsulate the struggles and insecurities one might experience when deeply involved in a religion that is restrictive to women. Each story is meant to stand alone, though they are all tied together by common themes and symbolism.

Marriage Counseling

Tick. . . tick. . . tick. . . The sound of the large wooden clock on the wall was deafening. Its golden hands slowly punctuated the silence that suffocated the room. The office was trying desperately to convince its occupants that it was warm and inviting, and yet, a cold and clerical feeling still lingered in the air.

Leah sat on the burgundy loveseat alone, staring dully at an oddly shaped grain of wood in the coffee table. She wore a grey, long-sleeved dress that fell to her calves. It was shapeless and cut high, and the gray made her skin appear sickly and dead. Her ankles, crossed neatly, were so thin that one might imagine that if she were to stand upright, they might snap under the weight. Not to say that Leah was a big woman. Leah was fragile.

Across from Leah sat another woman. She filled her high-backed arm chair to its limits. She held a black plastic clipboard and was scribbling notes. Leah wondered what she could possibly be writing, as the session hadn't begun, and yet Mrs. Peters kept writing. Tick. . . tick. . . tick. . .

"What time did you say your husband would be here?" Mrs. Peters looked up briefly from her scrawls.

"He should be here any minute," Leah said, looking behind her towards the door as if Mrs. Peters' words had the power to make him appear. "Traffic," she muttered feebly, turning back to the grain of wood. Mrs. Peters took a quick note. Leah wanted to ask her what she was writing. What about that brief exchange required documentation?

The door swung open with a jolt and John entered, looking flushed.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “Traffic was a nightmare and I got caught up. It was Gilson’s birthday and the office was having cake. I lost track of time.”

John’s rambling was met by a gracious smile from Mrs. Peters. “Oh that’s quite alright John. We understand that you have obligations outside of our weekly appointments, right Leah?” She shot Leah a pointed look, but it was met with stone silence. Leah’s eyes hadn’t left the table. John circled the couch in the cramped room and sat next to Leah, pulling her hand into his lap and patting it gently. He looked at Mrs. Peters meaningfully.

“I am establishing physical contact to show affection and that I am apologetic,” he said slowly and carefully.

“Very good!” Mrs. Peters exclaimed. “And Leah, you say...? It’s clear your husband is trying here. How would you like to respond?”

Leah held her breath, staring at the same spot. She wanted to look at her husband and see John, the man she fell in love with. She wanted to feel the things that he made her feel six years ago when she agreed to marry him. She wanted her heart to beat quicker and her cheeks to flush. She steeled her courage and slowly lifted her eyes to his face.

She felt nothing. His dark green almond eyes, the eyes that used to make her melt, seemed hollow and empty now. The gentle slope of his nose now appeared rough and jagged. His jaw line was no longer strong and masculine; it was cruel and sharp. Her John was gone. This man was unrecognizable.

He gave her hand a quick squeeze and leaned in to kiss her forehead. Leah let her eyes fall to the grain of wood in the coffee table. John turned to Mrs. Peters.

“So,” Mrs. Peters said, “Did you have any breakthroughs this week? Anything new come up?”

John looked down at Leah. “Anything changed, Lee?” he asked.

Leah shook her head.

“Did you read over the scriptures I assigned to you?” Mrs. Peters continued

“We did,” John said, “We read them and I discussed what I feel that God is saying to us through them.”

“And how did Leah respond to this?” Mrs. Peters asked.

“Same as always,” John said. He put on a stern high pitched voice. “I’m not ready yet. It’s not time yet. There are so many things we haven’t done.” He turned to Leah. Her face was pale and emotionless. Her eyes were fixed still.

“Leah?” Mrs. Peters prompted, “Do you feel that the Holy Scripture does not apply to you?”

“That’s not it,” Leah said quietly.

“Then what is it?” The volume of John’s voice slowly increased.

Leah shook her head. John launched into a diatribe about his feelings and his words washed over her in waves. Mrs. Peters’ occasional “mhm” and “that’s right” punctuated his ramblings. Suddenly, Leah was no longer sitting on Mrs. Peter’s plush burgundy loveseat. She was a twelve-year-old girl with her family on the beach. Her parents had driven from their home in Providence, Utah, to the California coast so that Leah and her brother, Sol, could see the ocean for the first time. She was floating in the

water alone, the cool waves buffeting her around. She had surrendered to them completely, floating on her back and watching the clouds above her drift.

And then her skin was on fire. She turned upright instantly and searched for the sand with her toes, but it was gone. The water was no longer clear, but a dark crimson red. She screamed as a wave of red crashed over her, shoving her below the surface. As she resurfaced, sputtering water out of her mouth, Leah realized why her skin was burning. Crabs. Hundreds, no thousands of tiny crabs were crawling all over her skin, pinching the exposed flesh, which was then cauterized in salty sea water. She didn't scream. She was petrified. She shut down. She allowed the current to slowly push her back to the shore where she walked onto the sand and collapsed into a pile of beach towels. Her father had patted her on the back.

“Was it everything you ever dreamed it would be?” he asked.

Leah blinked a few times and the beach melted back into cold office. John was talking. She took a deep breath.

“I didn't realize it would be like this,” she said. John turned to stare at her. Mrs. Peters picked up her pen and began scratching away on her legal pad.

“What do you mean, Leah?” she asked, pen poised.

“This is the part of the story that no one ever told me. The story always ended at the wedding. No one ever told me that. . . that. . . this is all there is.”

“What do you—” Mrs. Peters began, but John cut her off.

“What do you mean ‘all there is’? I give you everything. What more do you want?”

Leah fell silent again under John’s stare. He was right. He gave her everything.

Mrs. Peters broke the silence.

“You know, a lot of women feel this way at this stage of the marriage. They feel empty. Even though their husbands are loving and provide for them, something is missing. Does that seem right, Leah?”

She nodded.

Mrs. Peters smiled sagely. “This is our heavenly father’s way of letting you know that you’re ready for a baby.” Leah looked up, eyes swimming with tears. Mrs. Peters continued, “A baby will fill your heart with so much joy and love. You will never be lonely. You won’t believe the change you will see.”

Tears began to slide down Leah’s cheeks. “I’m not ready,” she said. “I won’t be a good mother. I don’t know how.”

John wrapped his arms around her. “Leah, come on. You’re going to be an amazing mother. I wouldn’t have married you if I didn’t think so.”

Mrs. Peters nodded. “And our Lord wouldn’t make you have these feelings if he didn’t know you were ready. He has a plan for you. You just have to let him take control, okay?”

Leah stared up at her. “Okay.”

Mrs. Peters leaned back in her chair, smiling. John clapped excitedly. “This is going to be amazing for us. I promise. You are going to be so happy.” He held Leah’s face in his hands. Leah allowed a small smile to cross her face and, for the first time in weeks, she leaned in to kiss her husband.

Mirror

She was staring at herself in the mirror of a tiny dressing room. The prom dress she was wearing was a royal blue, floor-length strappy contraption with cut outs at the waist. If anyone who knew her saw her in this dress, they would be ashamed, and yet, Rachel couldn't take her eyes off the girl in the mirror. She spun slowly, taking in all the angles of her body in the skin-tight dress. A small smile crossed her face. The back of the dress was cut low and reached to right below her shoulder blades. The straps were all lined with shimmery silver jewels that caused the bright lights of the dressing room to dance.

As she twirled, she imagined walking into the high school gym next weekend for prom. She would straighten her curly hair until it fell to the small of her back, and she'd wear as much make-up as she wanted. She would wear sparkly silver high heels and jewelry to match. The dress would glitter like a disco ball under the dim lights. Everyone would stare. They would all be shocked, but Rachel wouldn't pay them a second glance. She would walk straight over to her friends and dance all night in the center of the dance floor, laughing and holding onto these last moments of high school with the people she loved.

Suddenly nausea washed over her. The dress felt like a corset, slowly constricting around her. In the mirror, her face had lost its color. She shuddered and grabbed her long sleeved t-shirt from the floor and pulled it on over the dress. She collapsed onto the chair in the corner and stared at her reflection. Her heart was racing. Her palms were suddenly glossed with sweat. She tried to force her breath into a more steady rhythm, but nothing

she did had any effect. She knew what she had to do. Under her shirt, Rachel slipped the straps off of her shoulders and shoved the fabric down her body to the floor. She pulled on her jeans and left the dressing room, leaving the dress in a crumpled ball on the floor like an injured blue jay.

Utensils clink on dinner plates

Mom is wearing her apron, Robins eternally watching from a tree branch. Dad sits at the head. David sits at the tail. Mom and I are somewhere in the middle, maybe the intestines or ribcage. It's Thursday. Dinner is meatloaf. David speaks.

Math test: B+

Mom flushes. Dad allows his fork to pause. "That's my boy! We're so proud" I smile and nod. Utensils clink on dinner plate. Heads are down. I speak

Science test: B+

Mom smiles. Dad chews his meatloaf. "That's great, Angel." Mom nods. I feel like I've done this before. It's Thursday. It's meatloaf

Utensils clink on dinner plates.

The Birds

Sarah had never liked birds. Something about them, maybe it was the way they moved or their speed. They had always scared her.

Sarah was fifteen years old and had just gotten her learners permit. Her dad was in the passenger seat, and she was whipping down the highway at nearly eighty miles per hour. She felt like she was flying, completely free. Nothing could stop her or slow her down. She was in the left lane trying to pass an eighteen wheeler when it happened. She was approaching the truck's rear tire exactly as a large black crow was soaring past in the opposite direction. The bird was too close to the chase. It was sucked into the vacuum of air created by the truck and was flung behind the truck, straight into Sarah's windshield. All she could do was scream. With a noise like a gunshot, the bird disappeared in an explosion of blood and feathers, coating the windshield. Once she pulled the car over to the shoulder, her father shook his head. "Birds are birds and cars are cars."

She was 17 years old and driving to the movie theatre with a friend. They were blasting music and singing shrilly. Sarah felt so alive, as if the music resonated in every pore. It was like electricity. She was awake. As they sat in traffic, a bird, a small one this time, maybe a mockingbird or a sparrow, was flitting in between cars in the near distance. It seemed to be struggling to stay aloft. Sarah's stomach began to squirm, and she turned the music down. She leaned forward and clenched the steering wheel the car inched closer and closer to the bird. It was almost as if it had been waiting for her. As soon as Sarah began to pass underneath it, the bird dove. She tried to swerve, and spare the

creature's life, but it clipped the side mirror of the car anyway and bounced to the ground.

She didn't scream this time, but her eyes filled as she looked into the rear view mirror.

"Don't worry," her friend said, "she's still mo-"

The bird disappeared under the wheel of the pick-up behind them.

"Birds are birds, and cars are cars." Sarah whispered.

Through Her Eyes

I sit at my vanity and stare determinedly into the mirror. My hair. Why does it always have to refuse to submit? My reflection is terrifying in the morning, my eyes dull and puffy, my skin shockingly pale, and my face covered in blotches. Ugh. Thank goodness for make-up.

I glance at my phone. 6:10 AM. Okay, no problem. I have fifty minutes to pull together this hot mess before my dad leaves for work. “With or without you,” he says. But I know he loves our morning car rides. He tells me nearly every week that he can’t believe how fast I’m growing up. I’ve even seen him tear up. He’s a big softy.

I flick on my curling iron and wait, run my fingers through my hair. It’s getting really long, which I love, but it gets so unmanageable in the morning. Like, am I *really* supposed to spend an hour every day on this stuff? Unfair! Being a girl sucks sometimes. I run my brush through the tangle and it poofs up like a bird’s nest.

Once more, I check my phone. Still no “Good morning” text. Why would there be? It’s not like he knows how much I love hearing from him in the morning. It’s not like I’ve told him a million times that it makes me feel special when I wake up to something sweet and considerate from my boyfriend who is supposed to love me. But he does know that. I *have* told him. He knows how it makes me feel when he blows me off, so there is no text. Sometimes I feel like he intentionally upsets me. Maybe he needs the attention, like a child who is badly behaved: any attention is good attention? Makes sense I suppose. Except for the fact that I’m not his mother, and he’s not a child. We’re grown adults, and this relationship only works if he takes care of me sometimes, too. I wish he’d

take some pride in that fact that he's a grown man in a committed relationship. Shouldn't he be like, embarrassed that he spends his time begging me to be the man in this relationship? I don't want to be the bad guy; he just makes it so hard. I understand that he has needs, but I have needs too. Relationships are a two-way street. But he's going to come around. I just need to practice patience.

My curling iron dings, meaning it's finally hit 350 degrees. I pick up the wand and begin to tame the nest into perfect blonde ringlets. He loves when I curl my hair. Maybe he's still asleep? Maybe that's why he hasn't texted? Not likely. He's usually awake by six. The most attractive guy in the entire school, and he's all mine. The dark hair, the hazel eyes, the strong jaw line. . . and his voice when he sings. . . there is nothing better in the entire world. My eyes glimmer as I become overwhelmed with emotion. I'm in love. I love his soul and need to keep him safe. The thought of us being apart even for a moment is unbearable. When we're together, the world changes shape and becomes something so much kinder. I want that world to be my world, his world, the world our children will grow up in. More than anything, I love this man. And I will never give that up.

The last strand of hair falls from my curling iron into alignment, perfectly conforming to the other curls. I pride my ability to quickly curl my hair into perfect symmetry. I blink at my reflection in the mirror. I am super crazy pale. Judging from my complexion, nobody would ever guess that I live in a desert state. I pick up my concealer and apply it gently under my eyes. Without it, the skin is frighteningly translucent, the blue veins are prominent. The accompanying bags have gotten worse recently, too. I know it's all his fault. I wonder if he understands the stress he puts me under. Except for

sometimes. Sometimes he's the nicest, sweetest, most beautiful person I've ever met. That's what makes it all worth it I guess, his amazing soul. Those are the moments that reassure me that I've made the right choice.

I pick up my foundation and my biggest, fluffiest makeup brush. Putting on my foundation is the nicest part of getting ready. The big luxurious brush feels like a million tiny angel kisses on my cheeks and forehead. As I apply the base evenly over my skin, it's like I'm becoming myself again. Once the foundation is applied, I am transformed from a pale splotchy little girl to a beautiful woman with clear skin. I take a moment to admire my new face in the mirror. My nose, which is usually just a bit too big for my face, looks perfectly proportionate. Makeup is such a blessing. But I'm always *super* careful not to use too much. I don't want to look like a hussy. Mom and Dad won't let me out of the house with much more than this anyway.

I pick up my only tube of mascara. It's a dark raisin color, a medium brown with purple tints. My mom picked it out for me. She says black is much too intense for a sophomore in high school. I respect her judgement, but seeing the other girls at school with their perfect smoky eyes makes me strangely sad. But I have no reason to be jealous of those types of girls. I mean, come on, have a *little* respect. If not for yourself, at least respect the boys in your classes.

I pull the mascara wand out of the tube and begin to apply it to my lashes. I slowly and carefully move the wand, trying to keep from clumping. The purplish brown liquid is supposed to make my green eyes pop. I've never liked my eyes. Why should I wear makeup that accentuates features I don't even like? I've always wished for the bright blue eyes of so many of my classmates. They're just perfect and beautiful and

innocent. I know that he really likes blue eyes. More than my green ones, that's for sure. He'll never admit that of course. He's too much of a gentleman, but I can tell by the way he looks at those other girls. He would much rather be dating a girl with pretty blue eyes than my gross moss-green ones. Yes, I'm not supposed to be envious, but hey, Jesus was perfect, and he had blue eyes.

I slip the make-up into my school bag and check my phone again: 6:31. Still no "good morning" text. I grit my teeth and flick through the hangers of my closet in search of something extra cute. Maybe I'll wear a dress today. My eyes fall upon a white dress with lacey three-quarter sleeves. Perfect. I love the way my skin looks in white. My flannel PJ's fall to the floor and I pull on the white dress and do a quick twirl. Standing in front of the full length mirror, my arms above my head, I do a twirl, carefully ensuring the dress doesn't fall anywhere above my knee. I can almost hear my mother's voice cooing: "Beauty is far from revealing." A loud knocking comes from downstairs. Dad is letting me know breakfast is ready. Sparkly silver flats on my feet, I grab my bag, and exit my room, pausing only to take one last look in the mirror.

Sunday School

“God has given each and every one of you a very special gift.” Ms. Julia said, surveying the group of young women in front of her. It was early on Sunday morning. The girls were all in long dresses, hose, and shiny buckle shoes. Their hair was clean and held flat against their heads with bobby pins, ribbons, and big pink bows. Some of the girls carried small handbags or clutches, but these were more for fashion than function.

Ms. Julia was standing in front of a blackboard with the word ‘chastity’ scrawled across it in cursive. She was this week’s special guest speaker for the 10-16 girl’s Sunday school class.

“When God created you, he gave you the gift of your virginity. You need to treasure it and protect it. Many will try to steal it away from you with temptation, but you can’t let them. Because that was given to you by God. Don’t throw his gift in the trash.”

The younger girls were horrified. They wrapped their arms around themselves as if trying to form a protective shield against the adversary. The older girls nodded approvingly. They had heard this speech before and lived their lives by Ms. Julia’s words.

“Some of you might wonder why? Why should I wait until marriage, Julia?” She said, putting on a stereotypical teenybopper voice. Everyone laughed. “Well,” she continued, “we know that deep emotional trauma accompanies sex outside of marriage because the Holy Ghost does not live inside those who are unchaste.” The room was silent again.

Another voice piped up from the back of the classroom. “So how far is too far, Julia?” Mr. Mark, the other teacher, chirped from the back of the room. Everyone laughed again.

“Good question little lady!” Julia responded, winking. “I like to think of it like this. If I’m going canoeing with my Fiancé,” all the girls squealed. Julia blushed and giggled. “Shush! Anyway . . . if Mark and I are going canoeing and we want to be safe, are we going to go on the river that ends in a waterfall and then try to stop when we get too close?”

“No!” Mark said from the back of the room. “You better believe we are going to go on the calm river that stays away from all danger.”

“Right!” Julia responded. “It’s the same for sacred connection. Why would you mess around doing things that you know lead you to sin when you could do something else altogether?”

“Very good, Julia!” Mark exclaimed and the room erupted with clapping. Mark walked to Julia’s side and held her hand.

“As many of you know, Julia and I are getting married tomorrow!” The group of girls cheered. “And I knew she was the one because of how beautiful and pure her soul is. And I’m so glad that she saved herself for me. On your wedding day, don’t you want to be able to say that you saved yourself just for your husband?”

The girls all nodded, eyes glimmering. Julia smiled. She had finally made it.

Julia gently closed the bathroom door behind her. She was a wife now. The sight of her naked body in the full length mirror on the wall was shocking to her. Her stomach began to churn. She turned away from the mirror and pulled a fluffy bath towel from the rack and wrapped herself up in it. She extended a shaking hand to the shower faucet and turned the knob. It hissed slightly, and water began to beat rhythmically against the porcelain tub.

Slowly, the towel to slipped from her shoulders. The bathroom was warm, but the air against her skin felt like ice. She stepped under the hot water of the shower. It was nice at first, but soon she was freezing again. She reached toward the knob again and again, praying that the water would get warmer. The knob wouldn't turn anymore. Julia sunk to the floor of the tub and pulled her knees up to her chest. Her body was aching. She knew it would hurt, but she never imagined that it would be this bad. Hot tears slid down her cheeks. She bowed her head and began to pray. She was searching for that warm voice that she knew so well, the eagle's wings that enveloped her and kept her safe from pain. She couldn't find it. It was gone.