by Jessa

claimed

She came to the city with two suitcases and no one to call. The church gave her everything she had been missing—community, belonging, a sense of purpose. She gave it everything in return. For years, she served without question, believed without doubt, and silenced the voice inside her that knew something was wrong.

Then she saw what the church did with a confession.

Now she has to decide what to do with her own.

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Jessa writes at www.jessa.blog
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He had not said anything I could point to as a lie. That was the thing about how it worked. Nothing was ever said directly enough to be directly denied. But I knew the specific thing my friend had shared in that sealed room, because she had told me herself. I knew its actual shape.

What he described bore the same outline. The color was wrong. The weight had shifted. The details had been adjusted in small ways that would only be visible to someone who knew the original—like a photograph retouched so carefully that only the subject would notice.

I noticed.

It had taken me years to be able to.

Part 1

The city had a way of making you feel like the only person who didn't know where they were going.

I arrived in June, with two suitcases and a cousin's address written on a scrap of paper. The cousin was kind but busy—she had her own life, her own schedule, her own friends she'd built over the years I wasn't there for. My office was full of people who were pleasant in the way that people are pleasant when they don't need anything from you. I had a phone full of contacts who were acquaintances at best, family at worst—meaning I could call them, but they'd hear the asking in my voice, and I couldn't bear that.

I was not unhappy—I had work I was good at, an apartment with afternoon light, the discipline of someone who knew how to be alone. But there is a difference between being alone and being lonely. I was both.

So when a woman from the office—cheerful, certain of herself in that way I envied—invited me to her church on a Sunday, I said yes the way you say yes when you have nowhere else to be.

I did not expect to stay.

The church met in a rented hall on the third floor of a commercial building. You could hear the traffic from the street below even when the music was playing. And the music was always playing—bright and loud and the kind that moves into your chest before your brain catches up. People raised their hands. People closed their eyes. Some of them wept. I stood at the back with my officemate and watched and thought: *I don't know these people.*

And then a woman turned and smiled at me—not the polite smile of someone acknowledging a stranger, but the warm smile of someone who had been expecting me. She took my hand with both of hers.

"First time? Do you live nearby?"

I told her I did.

"Then you'll come back," she said. Not a question.

I noticed a young woman seated three rows ahead. She hadn't turned around like the others had when I walked in. She was singing with her eyes closed, one hand raised slightly, like she wasn't performing it but couldn't help it. Like the music was pulling something out of her. I don't know why I noticed her specifically. Perhaps because she seemed to belong to the room in a way I hadn't learned yet—not loudly, not conspicuously, just fully.

The pastor took the stage and the room shifted.

He was a foreigner. Tall, unhurried in his movements, with the kind of calm that reads as authority. When he spoke, the room went quiet in a way it hadn't for the worship leaders, hadn't for the announcements, hadn't for anything before him. The quiet wasn't polite. It was expectant.

He preached about open doors. How God goes ahead of you, he said, and prepares what you need before you even know to ask. How faith is the key—not striving, not earning, just believing what God has already promised. *Your breakthrough is waiting,* he said. *All you have to do is claim it.*

I thought about my two suitcases. My cousin's address on a scrap of paper.

Perhaps this is a door, I thought. *Perhaps I am supposed to walk through.*

I didn't notice then what was buried in the sermon—the small equation at the center of it: that faith produces outcomes, that believing correctly leads to receiving. It sounded like grace. It felt like relief. After years of working hard and hoping quietly and never quite asking God for anything specific, here was someone telling me I was allowed to want things. That God wanted to give them to me.

I filed the feeling away and walked out into the afternoon.

I went back the following Sunday. And the one after that.

The city looked different on Sunday mornings. Quieter. The traffic that usually pressed at everything had somewhere else to be. I'd walk the two blocks to the bus stop with my Bible tucked under my arm—I had started bringing my Bible again, which I hadn't done since high school—and feel, for those few minutes, like I knew where I was going.

The third Sunday, I stayed for the small group that met after service.

There were eight of us, seated in a loose circle of plastic chairs in a side room off the main hall. The cell group leader, a young man with an easy laugh, opened with a question: *What are you believing God for this season?*

Everyone had an answer ready. A new job. Healing for a parent. A relationship restored. I hadn't expected the question. I scrambled and landed on a sense of direction.

The cell group leader nodded, as if that was exactly right.

Afterward, someone brought out a box of bread rolls and instant coffee and everyone stood around talking the way people do when they've been together long enough to be comfortable. I was still new enough to stand slightly outside the circle, smiling when people smiled at me. And then the young woman from the front row, the one who'd been singing with her eyes closed, appeared beside me with two cups of coffee.

"How about you," she said, "are you joining a cell group?"

I told her I had just joined this one.

She nodded slowly, like she was thinking about something else. "I've been in this cell group for two years," she said. "Before that, a different one.

Before that, another." Not a complaint. Just a fact. "I keep getting moved around."

I didn't know what to say to that. So I said, "Do you like it here?"

She thought about it longer than I expected.

"I don't know what I'd be without it," she said finally.

The friendship built slowly, the way real ones do. First it was coffee after small group. Then it was texting during the week—she'd share a verse, I'd share something I was reading, we'd go back and forth in the comfortable way of people who are interested in the same things. Then it was meals. Then it was calling each other when things were hard.

She had grown up in the church. Not this building—they had moved halls three times since she was a teenager—but this community, these people, this pastor. She knew who had been there the longest, who sat where, which families were close to the leadership and which were not. She knew everything about the place the way you know the house you grew up in—the creaking floorboard, the drawer that sticks, the corner of the garden where something won't grow no matter what you plant there.

I trusted her instinctively. I think now that's partly because she never seemed to be performing anything. Quiet when she was quiet. Uncertain when she was uncertain. She never told me everything was going to be fine.

She just kept showing up.

Within a month, I had a small group. Within two, I had people who saved me a seat—a married couple who always arrived early, she the first to laugh in small group, he the one who remembered how I took my coffee. Within three, I had stopped thinking of myself as new.

This is how it works, I know now. The welcome is real. That's what makes it so hard to explain to people who weren't there: the warmth wasn't a performance, or, if it was, no one told the performers. The coffee after service, the text messages checking in, the way someone always seemed to notice if you looked tired. I had been lonely for months and now I wasn't.

I just felt grateful. I felt, for the first time since the city, like I had landed somewhere.

Part 2

The first time I tithed, I felt something close to joy.

Not because I had money to spare—I didn't—but because I was told it was an act of faith, and I wanted to be a person of faith. The pastor preached about it on a Sunday I remember clearly. He opened with Malachi 3:10. *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.* He read it slowly, the way he read all his verses, like he was letting each word find its seat.

"God doesn't need your money," he said. "But He wants to know if you trust Him with it."

He paused. The room was quiet.

"You cannot out-give God," he said. "Test Him on this. He said so Himself."

I wrote it in my journal that evening. *You cannot out-give God.* I underlined it twice. I set up an automatic transfer the following morning — ten percent, every payday, before anything else. It felt like discipline. Like clarity. Like I had finally figured out the right thing to do.

I started serving on Sunday mornings—the setup team, arriving an hour before service to arrange chairs and set out the coffee. Then I joined the prayer team, which met on Friday evenings. Then I volunteered for the youth outreach that happened once a month on Saturday afternoons.

Nobody asked me to do all of it. It accumulated the way things do when you are eager and available and hungry to be useful. Someone would mention a need and I would be the one to fill it. My cell group leader would say, *we're looking for someone to help with*—and before he finished, I'd already nodded.

My friend was already on the setup team, the prayer team, the outreach. Had been for years. I thought I was catching up to her. I thought that's

what growth looked like—arriving earlier, staying later, saying yes more readily. She was my model of what a faithful person did.

"How about you," she said once, after I'd agreed to something new. "Do you actually want to do that?"

I told her of course I did.

She nodded and didn't say anything else. I thought she was checking on me, making sure I wasn't overextending. I went home feeling looked after.

It was around this time that the invitations started coming.

My cell group leader mentioned to the worship coordinator that I was reliable. The worship coordinator asked if I'd help manage the Sunday volunteers. I said yes. A few weeks later, the pastor's secretary approached me after service; they were looking for someone to help coordinate the women's fellowship events. Someone had recommended me. I said yes to that too.

Each yes felt like being seen. Like the church was saying: *we trust you, we need you, you belong here.* I didn't understand then that being useful and belonging are not the same thing. I only knew that the more I did, the more certain I felt—that I was in the right place, doing the right things, becoming the right kind of person. And so I did more.

The theology arrived the way all things arrive when you are not looking for them—through the side door, while you are busy with something else.

It was in the language first. Small phrases I absorbed without examining. *God wants to bless you. Don't let doubt steal what God has prepared.* They sounded like encouragement. They sounded like faith was simple, which was what I wanted faith to be.

Then came the sermon about Abraham.

The pastor preached about how Abraham believed God for the impossible—a son, an heir, a future—and how his belief was counted as righteousness. *Faith,* the pastor said, *is not hoping for something. Faith is knowing it before you can see it. Faith is acting like it's already done.*

"What are you believing God for?" he asked the room.

The room stirred. Hands went up. People began to speak aloud—a promotion, a house, a healing, a child. The pastor affirmed each one. *Yes. Claim it. It's yours.*

I raised my hand too. I named the thing I had been carrying quietly since I arrived in the city—a door I was hoping would open in my work, the next step that would make the move feel like it had meant something. When the pastor nodded at me, something in my chest loosened.

It's already done, I wrote in my journal that night. *I just have to believe it into being.*

I meant it completely.

There was a flicker—brief, quickly dismissed—of something I had encountered before, outside of church. The same shape: thoughts becoming things, speaking what you desired into existence, belief as the mechanism for receiving. I had seen it in a book once, heard it discussed on television as a teenager. The kind of idea that circulated for a season in certain circles and was considered, by people like the ones I had grown up with, to be New Age at best and dangerous at worst.

I pushed the thought away. That was not the same thing. That had no Scripture behind it, no Holy Spirit, no Jesus. The source was different. The source was everything. I closed my journal and went to sleep and did not think about it again.

So when the thing I had been praying for didn't come, I didn't question the theology.

I questioned myself.

I went back to my prayers and examined them like a student reviewing a failed exam. Was my faith specific enough? Had I let doubt in through the back door while I wasn't paying attention? I remembered a sermon about how doubt was like a hole in a bucket; it didn't matter how much water you poured in if the bucket couldn't hold it. Perhaps my bucket had holes I couldn't see.

My cell group leader noticed I had been quieter than usual in meetings. He called one evening to check in. When I told him I was waiting on something I'd been praying for, he listened carefully and then said, "Sometimes when we're not seeing movement, it's because God is waiting for us to press in deeper." *Be in the house. Come to prayer meeting. Blessing flows where there's faithfulness.*

It felt like being handed a map. Of course. I had been sitting with the problem when I should have been moving toward the solution. I signed up for the Wednesday Bible study that week. I started coming to the Friday prayer meeting more consistently. I gave an additional offering on top of my tithe. not much, but something. Each small act felt like plugging a hole in the bucket.

The Bible study was led by one of the staff pastors—a quiet man who paused a full second before he began speaking, every time. Not the pause of someone gathering his notes. The pause of someone weighing whether what he was about to say was true. I had never watched a man do that before. I found that I listened harder when he taught, and that I did not know what to do with the small ache of respect I felt afterward, which did not feel like the other kinds of respect the church had taught me.

My friend came to see me one afternoon. We sat on my apartment floor with tea going cold between us. I told her the thing hadn't happened. Not what the thing was, just that I was still waiting.

"Maybe it's just not the right time yet," she said.

I felt relieved hearing it. Of course. God's timing, not mine. I wrote it in my journal after she left.

Not my timing. His.

I underlined it three times. Then I went back to pressing in.

There had been a time, before the church, when I spent Sunday afternoons alone—reading at my window, walking with nowhere to be, sitting with my own company without needing to fix anything about it. I had liked that part of myself. I had known how to be quiet and still call it company. I did not notice when those afternoons stopped being mine.

What I did not write in my journal was that I was tired.

Not the ordinary tiredness of a full week. Something deeper; a flatness behind the eyes, a heaviness that didn't lift on the days I rested, a sense of performing energy I wasn't sure I had. I had heard exhaustion preached about as a spiritual warning: if you were depleted, perhaps you were drawing from the wrong source, from your own strength rather than God's. The answer, always, was more of the same: more prayer, more worship, more immersion in the community until the cup was full again.

So I pressed in. And I performed without being tired. And I wrote in my journal about abundance and overflow and rivers of living water, and I did not ask myself why I had to keep writing it to believe it.

Part 3

Years passed the way years pass when you are busy and belong somewhere.

I stopped counting Sundays. I stopped thinking of myself as someone who had arrived from somewhere else. The city was just where I lived now, and the church was just where I was. I had a history there. I knew which families had been there the longest, whose children had grown up in the youth group, which couples had met at a cell group and married with the pastor presiding. I was woven into the place the way thread gets woven into cloth; pulled through so many times you can no longer find the beginning of it.

I thought that was rootedness. I thought that was what I had been looking for.

The first time I swallowed something I should have said, I didn't notice I had done it.

It was a small group discussion and the passage was about leadership, about how God places authorities over us and calls us to honor them. Someone asked a question about what happens when a leader is wrong. The room shifted slightly, the way a room shifts when something has been said that everyone feels but nobody wants to hold.

Our cell group leader smiled and said, "Touch not God's anointed." *Our role is to trust and pray, not to question.*

The verse had once sounded like humility to me. David refusing to lift his hand against Saul, because the throne was not his to take. I don't remember when it became the other thing.

Everyone nodded. I nodded too.

And somewhere inside me, a door closed. Not loudly. Not with any feeling I could have named at the time. It just . . . closed. The question I had been about to ask folded back into itself and disappeared, and I smoothed over the place where it had been and listened to what came next.

This happened again. And again. Each time smaller, quieter, easier.

I learned the grammar of acceptable feelings.

Joy was always acceptable. Gratitude was acceptable. Testimony—*God did this for me, I believed and received*—was not only acceptable but celebrated. You would be called to the front. The congregation would clap.

Doubt was not acceptable. Not as a public thing and not, I slowly learned, even as a private one. I had a journal I had kept since I joined the church: pages of prayers, verses, reflections. I went back once and read an entry from my second year, where I had written: *sometimes I wonder if I am doing enough, or if doing enough is even the right question.* I had crossed it out. Written over it: *God is sufficient. My faith is sufficient. It is enough.*

I didn't remember doing that. But there it was in my own handwriting—the original thought, and then the correction, and then the correction winning.

I started writing differently after that. Cleaner. More certain. I reread my entries less.

Outside the church, my world grew smaller without my noticing.

It happened gradually, the way these things always do. A friend from the office would suggest dinner on a Friday and I'd already have prayer meeting. A family gathering fell on a Sunday and I'd leave early to make it to service. At first I explained myself. Then I stopped explaining and just arrived late or not at all, and the people who cared asked fewer questions after a while, and the people who didn't care stopped inviting me.

The theology made the narrowing feel intentional rather than incidental. We were told, regularly and in various ways, that the world outside did not understand what we had here. That the people in your life who hadn't committed to a spiritual covering, who hadn't submitted themselves to God's authority, were operating in a different realm. Not evil, necessarily, but unprotected. The world would pull you toward itself if you let it. That was its nature. Our nature was to resist.

I absorbed this without examining it. The outside world had always felt a little inhospitable to me: too loud, too fast, too indifferent. It wasn't hard to believe that the distance I was creating was wisdom rather than withdrawal. That I was choosing the better thing. That the friendships I was letting go of were, in fact, letting me go first.

I told myself this was what real community felt like. Perhaps I needed to believe that, by then.

There was a season when several families in the church raised quiet concerns about the direction of the leadership—nothing public, nothing organized, just the ordinary unease of people who had been somewhere long enough to notice when something shifted. It reached the pastor, the way things always reached the pastor.

On a Sunday not long after, he addressed it from the stage. Not by name. Not directly. He spoke about trust, about the danger of allowing human reasoning to override spiritual discernment. And then he said something I have thought about many times since: that God had sent him from far away, that he had left everything to come here, and that this itself was a sign of God's hand. Who were we, he asked gently, to question what God had placed in our midst?

The room received this. I received it too. He had given up something to be here. He had chosen us. And somehow, in the logic of the room, that choosing had become the argument for his authority, not his character,

not his accountability, not the fruit of his decisions over time, but the simple fact of his arrival from somewhere else.

I did not see, then, what I was agreeing to.

My friend and I had a rhythm by now. We knew each other the way you know someone after years of small shared moments, which pew she preferred, how she took her coffee, the particular silence she went into when something was bothering her.

One evening, after prayer meeting and on the way to the bus stop, she said something about a decision the leadership had made—a change to the cell group structure that had split up several long-standing groups, including hers. She had been in her group for four years. She said it quietly, not quite a complaint, more like thinking aloud.

Then she stopped herself.

"Anyway," she said. "They must have their reasons. Pastor knows what's best for the church."

I agreed immediately. Of course. Leadership sees the bigger picture. Ours is not to question.

We walked the rest of the way in silence and I felt the rightness of what we had both done, the thought released, the trust restored, the peace that came from not pulling at threads. I felt mature. I felt like someone who had learned to submit her understanding to something larger than herself.

I did not notice that she had gone quiet in a way that lasted longer than the walk.

This is what the frozen looks like, from the inside: it doesn't feel like freezing.

It feels like growth. It feels like you are becoming less reactive, less prideful, less governed by your own limited perspective. The pastor said once that the most dangerous thing in the church was someone who trusted their own heart above the Word and above their spiritual covering. *The heart is deceitful above all things,* he said. *Who can know it?*

I took this seriously. When something inside me rose up in disagreement, I had learned to identify that rising as the thing to distrust—not the teaching, not the leader, not the structure. Me. My deceitful heart. My pride dressed up as discernment.

I became very good at this.

So good that after a while, I stopped feeling the rising at all.

Part 4

The first one I noticed was a pastor on staff.

He had been there for years, long enough that I had stopped thinking of him as a person who had arrived, the way I had arrived. He was just part of the place. He led the Wednesday Bible study. He still paused, every time, before he spoke—the pause of a man who would rather be slow than wrong. He prayed with a particular kind of quiet authority that made you feel the room had gotten smaller and safer at the same time.

One Sunday he wasn't there. The following Sunday, same. Nobody announced anything. Nobody explained. His name disappeared from the bulletin, then from the website, then from conversations, the way a word disappears from a language when people stop needing it.

I asked my cell group leader about it after service one morning, carefully, the way I had learned to ask things carefully.

He nodded slowly. *There were some issues,* he said. *Leadership had to make a hard decision. Let's keep him in prayer. He's going through a difficult season spiritually.*

I said I would. I meant it. I went home and prayed for the pastor and his difficult season and felt sad for him in the vague way you feel sad for someone whose problem you don't fully understand.

Someone mentioned, in passing, that he had been struggling to submit to the senior pastor's vision. Someone else said he had been asking questions that were not helpful to raise. I accepted both versions and did not notice that they could not both be true.

It didn't occur to me to wonder what the issues were. It didn't occur to me that I wasn't told.

Then a family disappeared.

They had been in the church longer than I had, one of those families whose children had grown up in the youth group, whose names appeared in old photographs on the lobby wall. They stopped coming between one Sunday and the next, no farewell, no announcement.

This time the story arrived in pieces, from different directions.

In small group, someone mentioned them with a careful lowering of the voice, *I heard they've been struggling with a critical spirit. Pray for them.* At a women's fellowship meeting, the pastor's wife referenced them obliquely, as a cautionary example about the danger of allowing bitterness to take root. And then one afternoon my cell group leader called me, one of those calls that felt pastoral but carried something else underneath, and mentioned that the family had been causing division, that leadership had tried to restore them but they had hardened their hearts.

Three different people. Three slightly different versions. All arriving at the same conclusion.

I accepted it. I prayed for their hardened hearts. I felt, beneath the sadness, a faint unspoken gratitude that I was not like them, that I had learned submission, that I trusted my covering, that I would never let bitterness take root in me the way it had taken root in them.

I am not proud of that feeling. But it was there.

There were others after that.

A worship leader who had served for six years, gone within a week of a disagreement nobody would name. A couple from my original cell group—the ones who had first saved me a seat—who simply stopped appearing and whose absence was explained, when explained at all, as a mutual decision, a season ending, God moving them on.

Each time the story came the same way—pulpit, small group, private conversation—arriving from enough directions that it felt like consensus. Each time the person who left was framed: struggling spiritually, carrying unresolved sin, unable to submit to authority, operating in a critical spirit. Some were said to have gone back to the world, a phrase that arrived with particular weight. Not just that they had left the church, but that they had chosen a side, and it was the wrong one.

And each time I received it.

It was my friend who told me, one evening after prayer meeting, that this was not new.

We were sitting in the empty hall after everyone else had gone, the plastic chairs still in their circle, the overhead lights humming. She said it the way she said most things: quietly, without drama, as if she were reporting a fact about the weather.

"This has happened before," she said. "Before you came. There were others."

I looked at her. "How many?"

She thought about it. "Enough that I stopped counting."

She didn't say it as a warning. I don't think she knew anymore that it could be one. She had been there since she was sixteen; she had watched people come and go, had heard the stories told and retold, had learned to receive them the way you receive any recurring feature of a place you call home. The disappearances were just something the church did, the way it also did worship and small groups and Sunday setup. Another rhythm she had absorbed without examining.

"Does it bother you?" I asked.

She was quiet for a moment.

"It used to," she said.

I turned that conversation over for days afterward.

I told myself: every church has difficult seasons. Leadership carries burdens the congregation doesn't see. God's house must be kept pure, and purity sometimes requires hard decisions. The pastor had said as much once, in a sermon about Ananias and Sapphira, about how God takes the integrity of His church seriously and will not let sin go unaddressed among His people.

Perhaps these people had genuinely been difficult. Perhaps there was truth in the stories that I wasn't close enough to see. Perhaps my discomfort was just the flesh resisting what the spirit knew was right.

Touch not God's anointed, I reminded myself. *Trust your covering.*

I filed the conversation away. I went back to serving.

But I kept thinking about what she had said.

It used to.

Part 5

My friend called me on a Tuesday evening, which was unusual. I was standing at the sink when my phone rang. We texted during the week but we didn't often call. I knew from the first second of her voice that something had shifted.

"Do you have a minute," she said. Not quite a question.

I turned off the tap. "I have as long as you need."

She was quiet for a moment. When she started, she did not start at the beginning.

"Do you remember I told you, a while back, that I'd been meeting with one of the pastors? Not the senior one. One of the others."

I remembered. She had mentioned it once, the way she mentioned things that mattered to her — lightly, as if they didn't.

"I told him things," she said. "Personal things. A struggle I've been carrying. And a question I hadn't known how to ask anyone else — whether some of what I've been seeing here is right. Whether what's being done is of God."

I waited.

"I asked him not to share it."

"He shared it."

"With the leadership first. Then further." Her voice did not break. That was the part that would stay with me. "It came back to me in pieces. The way everything here comes back. By the time it reached me, the struggle had become evidence of spiritual instability. The question had become proof of a rebellious heart." A pause. "The woman in the story is someone I barely recognize."

When I looked down, my hands were still in the dishwater.

"I don't know what to do," she said.

I told her I didn't know either. But I believed her. I want to be clear about that. I believed her immediately, without reservation, the way you believe someone whose honesty you have watched up close for years.

What I didn't tell her was what I was already, quietly, beginning to do.

I found a moment with my cell group leader after Wednesday Bible study, when the room was emptying and the chairs were still warm. I kept my voice light.

"I've been a little worried about her," I said, mentioning my friend's name. "She seemed off the last time we spoke. I've been praying for her but I wasn't sure if there was something specific I should be lifting up."

He glanced at me, then away. "She's going through some things. The leadership is walking alongside her."

"Of course," I said. "Is it something I should know about, as her friend? So I can support her better?"

A pause. The kind that fills itself in.

"There are some concerns that have come to light," he said carefully. "Some issues that have needed addressing for a while."

"What kind of issues?"

"Unresolved things." He folded a chair and set it against the wall. "A critical spirit, if I'm honest. It's been there for some time. Leadership has been patient."

I nodded slowly. "I hadn't noticed that in her," I said. "She's always seemed so faithful."

"Sometimes the people who look the most faithful are the ones carrying the most hidden things." He said it gently, the way a diagnosis is delivered. "That's why we need covering. That's why we don't lean on our own understanding."

"Of course," I said again. "I'll keep praying for her."

He put his hand briefly on my shoulder. "She's blessed to have a friend like you."

I smiled. I picked up my Bible. I walked out.

He hadn't said anything I could point to as a lie. He never did. Nothing was ever said directly enough to be directly denied. But I had been carrying my friend's version of the story for months now, and what he was offering me had the same outline and none of the same weight. A photograph retouched so carefully that only the subject would see.

This time, I let myself notice.

I went home and sat with what I had noticed for a long time.

I thought deeply.

I want to say that carefully, because in that community, thinking was not always treated as a gift. Discernment belonged to the leadership. The heart was deceitful. Your own reasoning was the thing least to be trusted, especially when it led you away from what the authority said was true.

But I sat at my desk with my journal closed in front of me, and I let myself think plainly, carefully, without correcting myself, for the first time in longer than I could measure.

I thought about my friend's voice on the phone. I thought about the version of events I had just been given, and the version I already knew, and the distance between them. I thought about the worship leader who had served for six years and disappeared within a week of a disagreement nobody would name. I thought about the family whose hardened hearts had been prayed over in small group. I thought about the pastor who had led the Wednesday Bible study and then was simply gone, and the difficult spiritual season that explained him away.

I thought about my friend saying *it used to,* and the particular flatness of her voice when she said it.

Then I opened my laptop and I started reading.

I had heard of spiritual abuse before, the way you have heard of something without knowing it has a name. That night I found the name. I found a book—*The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* —and after reading the book I had the framework: the thought-terminating language, the information control, the way pastoral relationships become systems of surveillance, the way love is offered as a conditional thing and withdrawn when questions are asked. I read until the room was very quiet and the street outside had gone still.

I am not a person who arrives at conclusions quickly. I like to examine a thing from several angles before I commit to what it is. That night I examined it from every angle I had.

The conclusion was the same from all of them.

I didn't sleep much. In the morning I made coffee and sat with what I now knew, which was not new information but newly assembled, the same pieces I had been holding for years, finally arranged in the right order. Like a sentence I had been reading one word at a time, never understanding it, and then suddenly reading it whole.

I thought about my friend, who had been in this place since she was sixteen. Who had built her entire self around it, her friendships, her Sundays, her sense of who she was before God. Whose confidence had been taken from a sealed room and passed around until it no longer resembled itself.

I thought about what it would cost her to see what I was seeing.

I thought about what it would cost me.

Then I got up, washed my cup, and went to work. I didn't say anything to anyone. I wasn't ready yet.

But I had stopped trusting. And in that community, I already knew, that was the beginning of the end.

Part 6

The first Sunday I didn't go, I sat by my window with coffee and watched the street.

The city was quieter on Sunday mornings. I had always used that quiet to move toward something—the bus stop, the Bible under my arm, the sense of going where I was supposed to go. That morning I just sat in it. I didn't know yet what to do with a Sunday that belonged only to me.

I had not announced anything. I had not written a letter or requested a meeting or given anyone a reason. I simply didn't go. And then the following Sunday, I didn't go again.

This was, I realized, exactly what the others had done. The pastor who disappeared. The family with the hardened hearts. The worship leader, the couples, the names quietly removed from the bulletin. They had all, at some point, sat somewhere else on a Sunday morning and not gone. And then the story had been told about them.

I wondered what story would be told about me.

I told my friend before anyone else.

We met at a small restaurant near her apartment, a place we had eaten at enough times that the owner knew our order. I waited until the food came before I said it.

"I'm not going back," I said.

She was quiet for a moment. She set down her fork.

"I know," she said.

"Do you?"

"I've known for a little while." She looked at her plate. "Since you started asking questions."

I asked her what she was going to do.

She didn't answer right away. Outside the window, the street went about its Sunday. A child on a bicycle. A man carrying groceries. Ordinary things.

"I don't know who I am without it," she said finally.

I understood that. I had only been there for years. She had been there for most of her life. The church was not a place she attended. It was the material her identity was made of. I could not ask her to unweave herself just because I had seen the loom.

"I'm not asking you to leave," I said.

"I know you're not."

We finished eating. We talked about other things. When we said goodbye outside she held me for a moment longer than usual, and I thought: *this is what it costs.* Not the church. Not the Sundays. This, the slight loosening of something between us, the new careful distance that would grow whether we wanted it to or not.

I walked home alone.

The outreach came on a Thursday evening. My cell group leader, a message first. *Just checking in, haven't seen you around, hoping you're okay.* Warm. Genuine-sounding. I recognized the warmth now for what it also was: information gathering. A temperature check. He needed to know where I stood before the story could be calibrated.

I wrote back that I was fine, thank you, just navigating some things.

He called two days later. I let it ring and then felt guilty and called back.

"We've been concerned about you," he said. "The leadership has been praying."

I thanked him.

"Is there something going on? Sometimes when people pull away it's a sign that something needs to be addressed. The enemy loves to isolate."

I had heard this before. Leaving was always the enemy's work. Staying was always God's.

"I'm doing some reflecting," I said. I kept my voice even. I gave him nothing specific—no grievance, no accusation, no detail that could be lifted and reshaped. I had watched enough disappearances to know how the stories were built. I would not hand them the material.

"We'd love to have you come in and talk," he said. "The pastor has an open door."

I said I appreciated that. I said I would think about it.

I didn't go.

Within a month I knew a story was circulating. I heard it the way I had heard all the other stories: through the side door, in pieces, from people who mentioned my name with that careful lowering of the voice. I heard I was going through something. I heard there had been concerns about me for some time. I heard I had a critical spirit.

I thought about all the people whose stories I had received and prayed over and accepted without question. I thought about how I had felt that faint, shameful gratitude that I was not like them, that I had submitted better, served more faithfully, believed without the critical spirit that had evidently been their undoing.

That was the part that was hardest to sit with. Not what had been done to me, but what I had done; the quiet complicity of it, the nodding along, the prayers offered for people whose real offense was asking questions I should have been asking too. I had been a bystander to other people's harm and called it faithfulness. I had watched names disappear from the bulletin and accepted the explanation and felt, beneath whatever sympathy I performed, quietly relieved.

I had benefited from the system even while it was running on me. My usefulness had protected me, for a time. And I had confused that protection with righteousness.

Shameful as it was to admit: I had not been better than them. I had only been more useful, and more afraid.

Perhaps they were not like what I was told either.

What remained, after everything else was gone, was smaller than I expected. And quieter.

I still believed. That surprised me. I think I had half expected that when the system fell away, the faith would fall with it, that they were so entangled I couldn't have one without the other. But they weren't. The system had borrowed the language of faith and worn it like a coat, and when I took the coat off the faith was still there underneath. Thinner than I remembered. A little cold. But mine.

For a long time I didn't know what to do with it.

The only way I had known how to pray was the way I had been taught—specific, declarative, certain. Name it. Claim it. Believe it into being. Faith as a performance of confidence, doubt as a hole in the bucket. I had spent years trying to believe correctly, to hold the right things with sufficient certainty, to never let the questions in through the back door.

But the certainty had been the problem. Or not the certainty itself but the demand for it. The insistence that faith meant holding correct positions without wavering, that doubt was the enemy, that a question was already a kind of falling away.

I was tired of maintaining it.

For a while I had nothing.

The system was gone and the faith was still there but I didn't know what to do with it. No instructions anymore, no container, nothing telling it how to move or what to claim. I had been told for so long what to believe and how to believe it that the absence felt like standing in a room where all the furniture had been removed. I knew the dimensions of the space. I had no idea what to put in it.

Every question I had ever swallowed came back at once. About the theology, about the authority, about what I had believed and why and whether any of it was mine or whether I had only ever been repeating things back. I sat with them without the clichés to hand them off to. I couldn't terminate the thoughts anymore. I had to just hold them.

This was its own kind of disorientation. I had spent years learning to distrust my own mind, and now I had to decide whether to trust it. That is not a small thing to undo.

I started praying differently. Without the formulas, without the claiming and declaring. I prayed the way the psalmists sometimes prayed; not with answers, but with honest lostness. *Where are you. I don't understand. I am here and I don't know what I'm doing.* Not a transaction. Not a declaration. Just presence. Mine offered toward whatever was there.

Some mornings I sat by my window with my coffee and my Bible and read without underlining anything. Without turning the words into instructions. I let them be uncertain where they were uncertain, and I let myself be uncertain alongside them, and I did not correct either of us.

It was not comfortable, this kind of faith. It didn't come with the warmth of belonging or the clarity of a system that told you exactly what to do. It didn't promise anything in exchange for the right kind of believing.

But it was honest. And after years of smoothing over everything that was honest in me, that felt like something worth keeping.

The city was still loud. I was still far from home. I was still, in certain hours, lonely.

But the loneliness was mine now. Unmanaged and unspun. Not evidence of insufficient faith. Just the ordinary condition of a person still finding her way.

That felt, strangely, like enough.

None of the people in this story have names—not the narrator, not her friend, not the pastor, not the cell group leader. The erasure of the self was part of what was done. To give them names now would be a lie about how quickly a self comes back.

A note on how this work was made

This story was written in collaboration with an AI assistant (Claude, made by Anthropic). The emotional and narrative core comes from the author's personal essays which served as the primary source material. All creative decisions were the author's. Claude analyzed the essay archive, proposed framings and prose drafts, and drew on two texts that shaped the story's understanding of the dynamics it explores—The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse by David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, and The Sin of Certainty by Peter Enns.

The voice is the author's. The story is the author's. Claude was the instrument, not the author.

This transparency is offered as honesty, not apology.

by Jessa

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