



Sex, Sin, and Secrets in the
Biggest Church No One Knows

HOLY DISOBEDIENCE



MELISSA DUGE SPIERS

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Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

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Dear Dr. Z,

Several years ago I stumbled across a newspaper interview in which you discussed recent abuse cases in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It has taken me years to work up the courage to write to you.

...

I have no hope of getting the truth from the church or my family.

You, in a way, are the only person I can turn to.

Melissa S.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story contained within these pages is told to the best of my recollection. It is an honest effort to relate facts and experiences with candor but also kindness. Thus, names and details have been liberally adjusted in order to protect the privacy of everyone mentioned. We each behave differently in different relationships and situations, so my memories of events and interactions are not meant as immutable indictments of character—people change, grow, and respond in different ways.

FOREWORD

I've heard it said that being a former Seventh-day Adventist feels a lot like being marooned on an island: You're alone. How you survive is up to you to figure out by yourself. You see, Seventh-day Adventism isn't a church you just leave. You lose your entire support system, and even years after departing, many former members find that the church, its dogma, its secrets, and the specter of Ellen White still have their claws deeply embedded. To rephrase the classic adage, you can take the person out of Adventism, but you can't take the Adventism out of the person, at least not without great personal effort, therapy, and reprogramming, as I've come to find myself.

The pandemic, of course, only made the loneliness of deconversion more acute. As so many of us did, I turned to social media for community and connection. That's how I met Melissa, a fellow former Seventh-day Adventist who was also a writer, an advocate. She brought an all-around passionate, witty, and enjoyable presence to the space. We exchanged pleasantries and snarky banter over ex-SDA memes, fast becoming friends as we discovered we had even more in common: Each of our fathers had once served in church leadership. Each of them had also lost their position amidst scandal.

About a year ago I had the opportunity to interview Melissa for a podcast that I cohosted on leaving and deconstructing Seventh-day Adventism. What struck me most in that conversation, and in every conversation we've had since, was Melissa's ability to articulate the complicated, often contradictory emotions bound up in leaving a high-control religious group. She never overgeneralized

the experience into either simple bitterness or triumph. Rather, she held space for the grief, the humor, the absurdity, the confusion, and the liberation that can all co-occur when a person finally steps outside the walls that once defined their entire world. That nuance can be a difficult thing to grasp, and it's also essential for healing.

Melissa's story is a compelling testament that does just that, resting in the tension of healing that can happen even amid half-answers and institutional silence. In a climate where former Adventists often feel pressured to either justify their exit, soften their story for the comfort of others, or just fade away altogether, Melissa speaks with clarity, wit, and unapologetic honesty. Courageous honesty. She does not shy away from discussing the Adventist pattern of institutional coverups when dealing with abuse and the human toll this leaves behind. As many former Adventists know, the church is notorious for being quite litigious, rarely hesitating to pursue legal action when its reputation is at stake. Too many stories have been silenced by non-disclosure agreements and non-disparagement clauses. This makes Melissa's story all the more vulnerable *and* valuable.

If leaving Adventism is to be marooned alone on an island, then this book is the first friendly ship on the horizon. Melissa doesn't merely recount her own experience; she names the patterns, the doctrines, the psychological residue, and the generational echoes that shape life inside and beyond Adventism. She delves into the fear, the indoctrination, the way a belief system can covertly guide your inner world long after you've stopped attending the church. She also writes with profound tenderness for the people we once were—the kids who learned so young that their bodies were bad, the teens yearning to get out and find freedom, the adults striving for healing while still being haunted by the stark warnings of a long-dead prophetess.

Healing from Adventism, or any high-control religion, isn't a straight path. It comes in waves: moments of anger, clarity, unex-

pected nostalgia, and wrestling with the past. What Melissa gives readers here is not a map but a shared language. She validates the messy middle, the unresolved questions, and the slow reclamation of one's identity. She reminds us of what it takes to not only look at our painful past, but to move on from it. Her book is a testament that healing doesn't require perfection or even all the answers, only the courage to tell the truth.

—ANDREW KERBS, TRAUMA RESOLUTION COACH,
CO-HOST OF *SUNDAY SCHOOL DROPOUTS*

PROLOGUE

With my face pressed heavily into the bed, I grit my teeth, squinting one eye like a cyclops to make out the words printed in script across the sheet: *je me souviens*. “I remember.”

More words rise from the pattern on the 400-thread-count French fabric in which I wrap myself every night. The rhythmic motion of my naked body being driven over the cotton makes them jump in and out of focus, appearing and disappearing in disjointed phrases. *Le monde . . . comme il faut*.

I like sleeping in words, even poorly written nonsense on overpriced sheets calculated to make their purchasers feel exclusive and well traveled. The sheets are my Paris, my secret escape, a reminder of the path not taken, a throwback to remind me of those few short years in which I had truly escaped and had a life of my own.

Très cher . . . Mon Dieu. Funny thing, that great and fearsome Dieu of my childhood. While I was certainly *ton*, God had never seemed to be *mon*. But look at me now, how free I am, spread out here in pain.

When my parents once stayed in our guest room on these sheets, my father pointed out that things printed with French phrases reeked of yuppie pretentiousness, of trying too hard, like the fancy “Chaud” and “Froid” faucet handles my husband, Andrei, and I had special-ordered for our guest bathroom. “Now, Melissa,” my father chortled, eyes twinkling, “you realize, don’t you, that a real European would never have these sheets!”

I agreed with him, as I always did. My dad was the most brilliant, erudite person in my hemisphere. But I needed the sheets

to remind me of those few good years, of that path not taken and now gone forever.

“Daddy,” I gasp, crushed into the expensive memory foam mattress.

I wish the mattress could remember everything so I could forget. I grab *les bonnes rêves* and crumple them in my hand as the commotion above and behind me becomes more insistent: harder, deeper, faster.

I free my hand from where it is pinned at my side and slide it along the sheets—*douce, aime, nuit*—until I can bring it to my mouth. I part my lips slowly and begin to suck my thumb, caressing it with lips and tongue. Physically it soothes and numbs me. It also increases the frenetic pumping and grinding behind me, which is soothing too, because it means I will soon be free.

I close my eyes—*torride, très gentile*—and I suck slowly and rhythmically. I know what I need to do.

“Mmmmm, Daddy, yes, yes, please . . . please, Daddy, please,” I whisper.

I cannot look at the lovely words on the sheets anymore. If I can just get through this, I won’t have to think about it again for a few days.

It’s very simple, I tell myself. It works every time.

“Yes, Daddy, please. More.”

My words are slobbery and lisping, wrapped around my thumb. The sheer monotony of the performance blends with the pain to form a dull film in my brain. The print goes out of focus.

“Deeper, Daddy, give me more.” I can barely speak, but I will myself to relax as the frenzy reaches its apex.

There are two or three more excruciating thrusts and an interminable pause.

Andrei finally releases me and I can breathe once more. My husband is pleased for another day or two.

I slowly ease open my balled fists, releasing the crushed sheet

that had wetly accompanied my thumb. I idly wonder which words had been put in my mouth—what silent, cottony verbiage I had been choking on.

I open my eyes.

Je ne me souviens pas: I don't remember.

A full decade later, I am still trying to remember. I really am.

“What are your feelings about sex?” the dowdy woman across from me asks.

I stare at her.

Je ne me souviens pas.

Andrei and I are in marriage counseling at this point—together for eleven years, married for four—and I really love my smart, shy husband. He has morphed over the years from poorly dressed martial arts teacher to sharp-tongued VP at a major company. We are much alike in many ways: sarcastic, misanthropic, bookish, ambitious. And we take our relationship seriously—sex issues and all.

I don't remember how we found her, but the therapist's office is in an old church. It is the first time I have been to a marriage counselor, of course, but it is also the first time I have been back inside a church since I fled my childhood religion.

I don't care for the therapist, but I love marching under the prim steeple, making a solemn procession through the carved double doors and into a former Youth Group room to spew details of sexual deviance all over the carpet like a sorority initiate after a hard night. I know the truth of what happens so often within walls like these, so each sordid revelation I vomit up is a small strike back.

“What sexual fantasies do you have?” the woman asks in her

best impartial, unable-to-be-shocked voice.

I want out of my marriage. Does that count as a sexual fantasy?

In the face of my mute stare, she presses on. “When did you begin to dislike the sex?”

I blink hard. Had I ever *liked* the sex? I needed it. Wasn’t that the same thing?

Andrei is glued to my side on the couch, swollen eyes imploring me to say something he wants to hear. He squeezes my fingers in desperation until they turn numb.

If the sex had stayed simply violent and degrading, we might not be sitting across from the gray-haired therapist with the smoker’s voice and the African masks on her walls. But over the years, it has become apparent that Andrei isn’t into rough so much as role-play, and after the initial frisson of varied sexual ferocity, we have settled into rote repetition, our roles in and out of bed similarly ritualized. Andrei has grown increasingly self-serving, controlling, and smothering in every arena. After so many years, we have become conjoined twins—but my side has all the vital organs. And they’re starting to fail.

“Okay, let me rephrase that,” says the therapist, betraying an unprofessional hint of frustration as my silence drags on. I am not being purposely difficult; I am *never* purposely difficult. I just don’t feel I have anything to offer on the subject. Gauging my own sexual interest is an unfamiliar sport.

She tries once more. “When did you like the sex?”

Did I ever like it?

My search for rough sex has lasted forever. Even before I discovered *Blue Velvet* and the *Story of O*, I was goading bewildered preppies to hit me and hurt me, urging them to inflict bruises, welts, and bites. I didn’t know why. I don’t know if I ever knew why, and I didn’t care. I always told myself that it is just what I like.

Not all of my conquests allowed me to bully them into violent sex, of course, but none of them lasted very long. I had no long-

term relationships before Andrei. For those glorious short years of freedom, I had always moved quickly from one hookup to the next, looking for something, searching for someone.

Something to make me *feel*. Someone to make me feel *bad*.

At last the counselor has something to work with. She removes her glasses and lowers her chin, gazing at me with the mixture of sympathy and reprimand I used to get from my high school calculus teacher. “Why does sex have to make you feel bad? Where did you learn that sex is bad?”

I attempt to return her gaze steadily, but my face does not cooperate. The corners of my mouth leap in lopsided, disconnected lurches, like Venetian blinds in a cheap hotel room: first one side, then the other, jerking uncontrollably upward in drunken, goofy spurts.

Clearly, she does not know the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

1

I was raised a strict Adventist, as was every member of my family reaching back four or five generations. The fifth richest church organization in the world, with a reported material net worth over \$15 billion and a global membership of 25 million and counting (a larger organization than either the Mormons or the Southern Baptists), the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the biggest religion no one has ever heard of.

Founded in 1863 by “prophet” Ellen G. White, who suffered a devastating head injury in childhood that left her with lifelong seizures and hallucinations which she interpreted as mandates from God, the church rapidly expanded within just a few generations from a fringe end-times cult (one with a particular fixation on the evils of everything sexual and Catholicism) into a sprawling, high-control, fundamentalist denomination with a formidable worldwide presence.

A formidable yet mostly hidden presence. Despite quietly administering the second largest private education system and third largest healthcare system in the world and spawning the likes of David Koresh, The Ant Hill Kids, Ben Carson, Colin Cook, Prince, Little Richard, Usain Bolt, Black Sabbath, and more than a few serial killers, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has remained unbelievably successful at staying completely under the radar and out of the news.

Fostering an all-encompassing secrecy from the outset, it is a sect built on singular insularity. With Adventist-run schools, businesses, food manufacturers, television and radio studios,

magazines, publishers, and radio channels, it is quite possible (and, for practitioners, preferable) to live one's entire life like a sanctified veal calf: folded within the Adventist box, real-world muscles atrophying, no contact with or exposure to outside of that box. Anyone who strays from the fold is game for all manner of coercive agents who deploy methods ranging from subtle shaming to exorcisms, forced counseling, prayer circles, shunning, and guilt trips.

Tactics of increasing membership through mission work and outreach are hardly less draconian yet equally suspect. While North American membership has stagnated from the mid-twentieth century onward and is now reportedly shrinking, the church has only expanded its reach worldwide through an aggressive colonial-missionary approach. Destitute or at-risk peoples in both developing countries and the US are flooded with generosity: medical treatment, English lessons, health seminars, vegetarian cooking classes, stop-smoking clinics, hospitals, and schools, all accompanied by the often not-so-subtle expectation of attendance at associated religious seminars, baptisms, and services. It is an extraordinarily effective way of swelling church ranks and guaranteeing generations of grateful and obedient Adventists like those on both sides of my family.

Like so many, both my paternal and maternal great-grandparents and grandparents—poor but ambitious—were lured in by the dangled mix of educational advancement and medical training. Nearly all of the males on both sides of my family doggedly worked their way through the Adventist school system, earning their way to the pinnacle of Adventist academic achievement: degrees from the world-renowned Loma Linda Medical School in Southern California. It was a shrewd and eventually very lucrative gamble on the part of the church, taking in and educating these destitute young men, as my entire family through several subsequent and quite affluent generations have been devout tithing Adventists ever since.

My father, whose parents pushed him several years ahead of his class and sent him away to Adventist boarding high school at the age of ten or eleven, initially deviated from the family's physician tradition and chose to pursue a PhD in physics at a major non-Adventist University. However, in a dramatic and mysterious about-face only weeks into his program, he fled across the country to the Adventist seminary. Thus he was serving as an Adventist youth pastor and leader of a Pathfinder group (an Adventist imitation of Scouts with a faux military veneer) when I was born, the second of two girls, in the arid, ugly Central Valley of California.

Everyone loved Dad. People gravitated to him, turned their faces up adoringly when his distinctively deep, crackling voice boomed from the pulpit. Dad's sermons were exciting: stories of Bible wars, dramatic migrations and terrifying enemies vanquished, instead of the usual dull parsing of verses, pious espousing of righteousness, and "call to Jesus" humdrum. No matter how often or where we moved, Dad's star power drew people in, and together he and Mom gave off a distinctly Jack-and-Jackie vibe: stylish and charming, with good looks to spare. They were special, and they made me feel special.

That was a little bit of needed armor when it came to always being the new kid. Because we moved a lot. Later, people would ask if I was an army brat, and I would laugh and say, "No, a medical brat." Our peripatetic family life started when Dad was a youth pastor, during which time we moved churches suddenly and repeatedly, but soon enough my dad made yet another abrupt about-face and left the ministry to pursue the "family business": an MD. We bounced around from place to place as he completed medical training and residencies in various parts of the Midwest.

When I was young, moving was not as traumatic for my sister and me as it might have been for normal kids, however. From our earliest memories we already knew we weren't normal. We weren't even normal for Adventist kids. There were no sleepovers

or playdates. We did not have friends outside of Sabbath School (the child-centered pre-church services we attended each Saturday). We were not allowed to join Pathfinders or attend Vacation Bible School or go to Adventist sleepaway camp. There was a great lurking, intangible danger out there somewhere that could only be avoided by keeping us at home, always in Mom's sight. We interpreted it as slightly biblical, probably our fault, surely the shortcoming of something or someone else, and definitely something mysterious and sinister that floated, omnipresent, unspoken, just out of reach.

In obedience to the prophet Ellen White's edicts, we were homeschooled by my mother through early elementary school, a stilted and agonizing process for all of us. It was all part of our tightly monitored and disciplined upbringing, as Ellen advises, "Mothers, be sure that you properly discipline your children during the first three years of their lives. Do not allow them to form their wishes and desires. The mother must be mind for her child." There were no homeschool groups or support systems at that time, either within or outside of the church; homeschooling was an extreme, freak-fringe activity, so we had no school friends or activities. All three of us chafed under the dry formality of the arithmetic and grammar drills in ancient looseleaf binders that we were duty bound to complete and mail in each week. Math was particularly difficult for me, the endless bouts with arithmetic flash cards sending me into angry tears and Mom into frustrated rages.

She did not have to teach me to read, however.

2

“Pee . . . nusss . . .”

I am three years old.

“Pennn . . . iz . . .”

I dive over the back window railing of our VW van head-first onto the scorching red leather bench seat, squirming upright to settle in next to the miserable pretty girl with the fascinating papers fluttering beside her. It is before seatbelts and car seats, and my sister and I habitually ride wild in the theater-stage back window box of the van, rolling around on our stomachs staging Breyer horse and Barbie scenes. But today the silent teenager and her untouched, lurid, cartoon-drawing brochures are much more interesting. Clutching my plastic palomino, cruising over the text, I sound out the words over and over. “Peenussss!”

I am very proud of myself. It is a mystery to everyone how I have learned to read. More remarkable than my age is the fact that we have hardly any children’s books in the house. Where did I learn? And we certainly have nothing that looks like this, with graphic displays of spread legs and line-drawn vaginas disgorging hairy infant crowns.

“SurVIX!”

I can feel the pretty girl beside me shrink away. I want her to like me. I want to impress her. I need to please people. Anyone, everyone. I rush to try again.

“Plakenta . . .”

The silence is as oppressive as the inland empire heat that hangs in our van. The air conditioning broke years before.

Something is very bad. Maybe I'm just pronouncing it all wrong.

"Plassenta?"

Something is definitely very absolutely totally not okay.

At three I already know the weight of both my imperfections and the mandate that I must not ruin it for everyone else in Heaven. Ellen White said so! "But wicked children God does not love. He will not take them to the beautiful City, for he only admits the good, obedient, and patient children there. One fretful, disobedient child would spoil all the harmony of Heaven." I already know all sins carry the same weight. Whether it's being disobedient or reading the wrong thing, I might mess it all up for everyone forever.

I am paralyzed with fear, shivering in spite of the heat.

Our beloved VW van eventually grew old and decrepit after we fled California for the ugly Midwest, the gray, slushy winters so drab compared to our sunny SoCal memories. During my elementary school years the entire center floorboard slowly rusted out in the salt and snow of harsh winters. Even when a piece of plywood was laid over the growing hole, random jets of freezing black slush would occasionally shoot over us kids huddled in the back seat.

But that would be nothing compared to the icy looks shooting into me now through the rearview mirror from my mother, high up in the driver's seat, posture rigid. Unbeknownst to me, she is grimly fulfilling one of the youth pastor's wife's least comfortable obligations: ferrying unwed mothers-to-be to doctor's appointments. These young women are important church catches in the BOGO missionary tradition, a repeat of the method used to snag my paternal great-grandmother: seduce the vulnerable young mother with financial support and medical care, and you get not just one, but two—or more!—meek and indebted new church members.

The particular unfortunate specimens like the unwed girl be-

side me are an even more secure prize than my proper, widowed great-grandmother. These girls are the fallen fornicators, the tawdry tramps whose sign of sin grows more visible every month. It is always their fault, regardless of whether it was ever their choice, and it is everyone's Christian obligation to make sure they feel their unworthiness. They are taken in by the church ladies and showered with equal parts solicitude and shame, guaranteeing at least two generations or more of grateful, appropriately cowed members who will forever struggle to distinguish disgrace from duty, obligation from devotion.

"Vagg . . . vajjeena . . ." My earnest, lispy repetitions continue to taunt the unfortunate girl and enrage my mother, but I am safely out of her reach. She cannot rip the pamphlet away from me, viciously slapping my hands like she does when I pull at the clips and pins of my Sabbath church hairdos. So she seethes impotently, shooting looks into the rearview mirror that terrify me and the girl beside me.

Even though they are right beside her, the unhappy pretty girl won't touch the papers. She will not acknowledge this bomb I have unwittingly detonated. She seems paralyzed now. I shrink alongside her. I feel her humiliation, I feel my mother's fury, and I wonder what I have done that is so very, very wrong.

It has something to do with what I am reading, this fascinating display of babies and bodies and breasts, nakedness and nipples, penises and penetration. I am too young to understand, but I am old enough to know I cannot ask. Whatever this is, it is a huge, forbidden, hidden subject. It is saturated in shame, anger, fear, disgust. It is big. And it is very, very bad.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MELISSA DUGE SPIERS is an award-winning essayist, screenwriter, and speaker on topics of religious abuse and resilience, utilizing her online platforms (TikTok and Instagram @theglorywhole) to raise awareness and help others find healing. Her memoir *Holy Disobedience* won the 2021 Book Pipeline Unpublished Nonfiction Manuscript prize, with excerpts featured in *The Huffington Post*. Melissa's writing has appeared in magazines nationwide, and she's a contributor to *Take the Fruit: An Anthology of Religious Trauma*. She holds a BA in English Literature from Barnard College and is based in California.

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