

Madari Pendas
Don't Act on it

Sin.

In English sin means "an immoral act considered to be a transgression against God."

Sin.

In Spanish sin means "to go without."

For decades both definitions were accurate. I've felt that the love I experienced and gave other women was an "immoral act; a transgression." The need to suppress it and hide any indications of these feelings has also created, a void, a going without. Something essential was missing from my life.



I ask Colleen, my Bible Study Conductor, and her husband Russell, about same-sex relationships on the car ride to the yearly assembly. An annual spiritual convention for Jehovah's Witnesses. I am twenty-years old and have already loved Sarah, Amy, Nicolette, and Annika. Not platonic friendship love, not love in the way we women tend to admire one another's achievements and grace, not a passive love. Twenty-years old and I have *loved* these women. The love that sears one from the inside, love that makes fools, love that hides and fumbles under blankets, love that obsesses but never tires.

I feel a rush of shame after asking about same-sex relationship. All the air in the car is gone, my voice is jarring—too loud, too hoarse—and the vein in my forehead is pulsing.

Sin, to go without.

Without a voice.

Without conviction in your love.

I sit in the backseat. I ride with them because my mother, Caridad, is convinced I must attend English services in order to really understand God. She's determined to make a believer out of me. Even if I am bilingual, and that Spanish was my first language, she insists I listen in English. I think she wants me to accept the English definition of sin, to reify its meaning, to have that be the first definition in my inner dictionary.

Without language.

Without a side to fully embrace.

Without an empathetic mother.

The car cruises down I-95 northbound towards West Palm Beach. I tune in to the noises of the car: the thrumming of the air conditioner's fan, the melodic and predictable rhythms of smooth jazz, the tires treading

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against asphalt, and the occasional clearing of a sinus. Sometimes, Colleen notices something or comments on the scenery, *oh look at the cows; punch buggy yellow; is another super Walmart, huh?*

Women are always on my mind, and I am certain other people can see it on me, like the mark of Cain.

When I ask about same-sex love, I emphasize the word “love,” dragging out the syllables to make sure they hear that part more than “same-sex.” I want to remind them that it is *love*. While I cannot see her face, I imagine she’s smirking and thinking of what to say to me, scratching her chin, ferreting the most apt Bible verse. Her blonde hair spills over the back of the seat like a palm frond in the noon sun, and I think of touching it, holding it in my hands. Sarah, the first girl I loved, had strawberry-blond hair. Colleen glances over at her husband, Russell, who looks back to see if the question really came from me, as if the backseat could ask questions. I want to see if her hair feels like Sarah’s, and I let my fingers hover over the strands just for a second.



Perhaps Colleen wants to answer my question with another question:

Why are you asking?

Is there something you’re not telling us?

Have you sinned?



I think of all the girls and women I have loved, but like spit I choke these memories down. I can’t let my face give it away. When Colleen looks back at me, I wonder if I have been caught, if she’s seen the mark on my forehead or put two-and-two together. Her front two teeth overlap slightly, like one is trying to coup the other. It’s a smile she’s giving me, but the type one delivers with pity and southern mercy (*you poor, dumb, little thing*).

“The urges aren’t bad. Everyone has urges,” she says.

For a moment, I forget her husband is there, and I want to hear that she’s felt these feelings too—maybe towards a sister in the congregation with loose black curls and hazel eyes, who always grabs her shoulder when they greet one another. Maybe she’s felt the urge to move a wild strand from a woman’s cheek and linger in a stare. Maybe the urge has been more subtle, a curiosity, a flooding and unrelenting impulse. Or maybe, like it was for me in the beginning, she feels an unexpected tensing in her abdomen and back whenever a girl friend enters a room. A feeling with no name. A feeling that cannot be named.



“You’re not supposed to act on them,” she continues. “You hold in your farts at dinner parties, don’t you?”

Urges, impulses, temptations—I will come to recognize these code words as stand-ins for queerness. As if a whole identity can be reduced to momentary spasms of want.

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"It's like serial killers."

Suddenly the car is too cold, the music too loud, the velocity too fast, the throat clearings too revolting. I feel a naked cold. A cold with no respite, where no matter how much you scrunch your body together (hands in the crooks of your armpits), or how many layers you put on, or however much you move your legs, the cold is within you—in your bones, in your pelvis, in your clattering teeth.

To go without warmth.

Without humanity.

Without mercy.



I remember reading about Charles Whitman, the University of Texas shooter, who left a note after killing his wife and mother. In his note, he wrote:

I do not quite understand what it is that compels me to type this letter. Perhaps it is to leave some vague reason for the actions I have recently performed. I do not really understand myself these days. I am supposed to be an average reasonable and intelligent young man. However, lately (I cannot recall when it started) I have been a victim of many unusual and irrational thoughts. These thoughts constantly recur, and it requires a tremendous mental effort to concentrate on useful and progressive tasks.

When the autopsy was performed, a tumor was discovered pushing on the area of the brain associated with anger.

Is this what Colleen means? In what ways is my biology misleading me?

"See, them murderers have urges to kill people, but they don't need to act on them."

I can't fathom being similar to a serial murderer. I want to critique the analogy and tell her it doesn't make sense. But I'm afraid any arguing could be interpreted as me hiding something, and I could be accused of what she's just condemned. I look at my hands again, only a few centimeters away from Colleen's hair. I could pull it. I could make a fist around the long rope of hair and yank her neck back, exposing her jugular—is that what's in me?

Without redemption.

Without an argument or protest.

Without hope.



I wonder if somewhere in my brain, there is an unknown growth pressing down on a lobe that is causing me to love women.

As we continue on I-95, I want to touch my brain, search and examine it to see if there's anything different about mine. Whitman was so certain there was something physically changing within his brain, and I close my

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eyes. I try to listen to my body—I feel my pulse in my thumbs, my breathing is shallow, and my head hurts from carsickness. I don't hear or sense anything wrong in me, at least not explicitly. Perhaps my "illness" is less pronounced, since I have also loved boys. I sometimes use that love as a cover, as a shield, as if I were saying *yes, I love women, but I've also loved men, that other part is the aberration; I can be normal*. I act as though the love is equal. Bisexuality is like the color purple. Men are red, women are blue. For some it's an even mixing, for me the blue overwhelms the red, creating a deep veinous purple. Under a certain light, it would almost look blue. I fantasize about a wife, about being able to call some brilliant woman "my wife." Even to write the words is magic.

I use the male attraction to remind myself that I *can* be normal, that this other part of myself can go unexplored, hidden away, opaqued. I act as though there is an element of choice, in the matter. I treat my same-sex attraction as an aberration. When Colleen condemns, I focus on the color red, pretending I'm not included on her list of the damned.

I want to talk about spectrums with Colleen and Russell, maybe even encourage them to look for where they may land on the Kinsey Scale. I'm looking for exceptions.

I sometimes think all women can love other women; we've just been historically discouraged. Loving women feels easier than most acts in life. There's no pretense. How lovely women are. I imagine being wrapped in another woman's arms, her lips on my nape, her leg across my stomach.



"It ain't that deep. You just don't act on it," she says. "It's a sin."

Without exceptions.

Without empathy.

Without love.

This response makes me wonder even further if she's ever felt this way, if the zealous answers, especially next to her husband, are a cover for something she's felt that has been smothered deep within her. Maybe she too uses men as shields. This could be a performance, a recital, her giving lecture that she herself has received.

Where would I, a bisexual woman, fall on the scale of ire? Would she only hate half of me? Would she think it'd be easier? Would it be worse, and would she call me a slut? Greedy? Indecisive?

If she said any of those things, would I have the courage to argue against her?

Sometimes, I also think that if you can perform love for men, your actions towards women can be disregarded or "forgiven" because you remain hypothetically attainable to men. A queer woman provokes more rage from society than a so-called "slut." People hate lesbians, perhaps, because they can deny men love. They can be precious with their bodies, withhold them from the sex that feels entitled to a woman's space and spaces. A "slut" becomes a sort of communal property. From her, there can

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be a devouring; a queer woman can reject men all together, and perhaps that avoidance incites offense—a *life without men? Love without men? Happiness without men?*



Colleen tells me about a member in the congregation who was able to get “help.”

“Brother K—did a lot of praying on the matter and is a real example in the kingdom hall. He doesn’t act on the *urges*. Prays and prays. You know, he had a husband before he found The Truth. Poor thing.”

I try to imagine Brother K— what his life must have looked like before joining the Witnesses. These were typical stories, sometimes featured in the organization’s monthly magazine *The Awake*, usually accompanied by a picture of a smiling couple building a home or in door-to-door witnessing. I overheard after a meeting about a man who fought his “urges” by marrying his female best friend as soon as he turned seventeen (legal age to marry in Florida with parental consent).

While I had never met them, I could vividly see their performative joy when a brother or sister approached them—a wide smile, surprised eyebrows, a warm greeting. I imagine the woman growing up and fantasizing about her wedding (like many born-in girls), so excited when her friend proposed that she didn’t sleep for two nights straight. I can see the care in her make-up and hair, wearing it half-up and half down in loose ringlets. Maybe in that first kiss, in the Kingdom Hall, she knew. Or maybe it would take several months to realize that *this* wasn’t the intimacy she had expected.

I can see him as well. I imagine him, as a teenager, begging Jehovah every night to “deaden” his desires. Each morning he hope to wake as a different person. Maybe he told his mother, who went straight to the elders, who spoke to him in the backroom huddle around him like an intervention. One elder, perhaps, told his wife, and rumors quickly spread across the congregation. After service, at the urinal two brothers, who had heard the gossip, see him and walk out in disgust. Marriage, he believed, would show everyone he’s “normal” and “better.” He gets on well with his fiancé, she was always the first to smile at him when they went out in field service. They marry, and it’s fine except for intimacy. It’s mechanical and uncomfortable. “Why do you always look away when we...you know?” She asks. He hates how lonely he makes her feel. In their bed, he still prays that same teenaged-boy prayer, “please God deaden these wants in me.”



You are made to choose: God or your identity. For a long time, I think I can only have one and I beg Jehovah to take these feelings from me, “deaden them in me.” I repeat the young man’s prayer. If this love is something living and sentient, perhaps it can be deadened. I ask him to make me normal, to make me someone worthy of receiving his grace, someone deserving of love.

When I kissed Annika it felt easy. Under a banyan tree at night, her parents asleep, we snuck to the backyard and listened to the cicadas and

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the wind ruffling through the leaves. We fell into one another the way I imagine a black hole swallows a comet—a slow drag that from one perspective can appear to last forever. I wanted that kiss, light and tentative, to last forever.



“Don’t act on it.”

Same-sex attraction reduced to impulses and actions. I remember someone telling me at a meeting, or maybe at an at-home study, that it is the actual engagement with desire that makes you queer, not your thoughts. I wonder if I can at least keep my thoughts. At least I can have my fantasies; I can take refuge in them. Love in my mind as freely as I choose.

To go without your truest self.

To go without the life you know would make you happiest.

To go without living.

That is what it felt like, an essential element excluded from my day-to-day life.



We continue driving on that long stretch of highway, almost nearing the convention hall. Colleen asks if that answers my question, and I say yes.

The air is still too cold, my nails have gone purple, and I reach for Colleen’s hair, still spilling over the backseat.

I twist the strand in my fingers, curling it around my index. I wait. I wait for her to pull away and to gather her hair up, moving it over the other shoulder. I wait. I wait for what’s in my hand to be taken away. I wait to go without.