Chasing Kelsey

“It’s only awkward if you make it awkward, my dear.” – Kelsey

 The HPER field looks far different than when I first saw it, partly because I’m now used to always orienting around campus a certain way and see it from a different perspective, and partly because the Aggie Recreation Center now occupies a big chunk of it. So when I go back, it doesn’t vividly bring back the memory, but that’s probably for the best. The memory stays well enough on its own. It was a cool August night in 2011, the week before my freshman year of college was set to start. I was in the process of weaning myself off my antidepressants and making other poor life choices, but for now I was just participating in a game of laser tag. We wore helmets that were supposed to pick up the laser signals and tell us when we had been hit. Mine was malfunctioning, so several people shot at me and I stayed in the game. I felt really guilty when I realized it. That was the week an untold future stretched before me, and that was the night I first saw Kelsey. She was in line ahead of me and when we got our guns she shot at me as she ran by.

 Honors U.S. Institutions was in the Engineering building, and neither my old nor current majors gave me a lot of reason to go back there, but I did go to look at that room once and felt nearly overwhelmed as I remembered sitting there in the swivel chairs, three to a table, participating in what the professor admitted had often been called “the white males suck class.” When I recognized Kelsey – that wasn't her real name, but it was the one she preferred – in that class, our previous silent encounter gave me a starting point for a conversation which in turn gave us a starting point for friendship. Kelsey had similar political leanings to me. She also had a history of depression and anxiety and not fitting in. She was a tomboy, always wearing a baseball cap and riding her longboard around campus and usually sporting some bit of paraphernalia to hint at her Pokémon obsession.

 My second semester, we no longer had a class together but still talked on Facebook and saw each other occasionally on campus, like at the Marketplace. Thinking about the Marketplace makes me yearn to be a freshman again. I lived on campus and had a meal plan, so I ate there nearly every day and was acquainted with several people who did too. Now I go there about once a semester. There are too many memories there for it to only be associated with Kelsey, but still I can’t forget eating with her a couple times, once when she asked to join a group of my friends and once when we were alone. On the latter occasion she commented, “You seem really uncomfortable all the time. I’m just putting that out there.” That kind of astute observation and bluntness was just another reason why I was beginning to fall in love with her.

I can’t get back into Mountain View Tower unless someone lets me in as a guest, and I’m not particularly eager to anyway, especially not to revisit my dorm room on the fifth floor where I spent most of my days sitting on the bed with my laptop and where most of my conversations with Kelsey took place. One evening in February 2012, as we were chatting on Facebook about depression, I tried to cheer her up by telling her she was amazing. She didn’t believe me, so I listed off some of the specific reasons why I thought so. “Well,” she said, “someone’s been paying more attention than I thought he was.” I blushed to myself.

 The next day she mentioned that she had also been getting an unusual amount of attention from other people, and was happy about one in particular than she had been gunning for. She also mentioned that most of her friends were guys. So naturally I assumed this was a guy and asked if she liked him.

 “Nope, false,” she said, and randomly (it seemed) changed the subject. “Are you Mormon?”

 I had no idea where this was going and it made me really nervous. Back home in New York, though peers treated my religion like a joke, they were for the most part indifferent. But even before coming to Utah, reading the online comments on *Salt Lake Tribune* articles had clued me in to the fact that many people here were downright antagonistic after having it constantly in their faces. Not knowing if she would be like that, I answered in the affirmative.

Her next question turned my nervousness into full-blown fear. “What are your feelings on gays?”

 In that moment, I would have rather died than explained the LDS position on the topic. Nearly a year later, the Church would release a comprehensive resource in the Mormons and Gays site, which I could simply link to in lieu of my inferior attempt at articulating it. I would be frustrated and a bit angry that they hadn't released it sooner and saved me a lot of stress and heartache. The LDS position was my position because I had a conviction of the Book of Mormon and the foundational doctrines, and if this was indeed the true church then it seemed logically untenable to pick and choose which parts to believe. To be sure, there was room for fallability and to nitpick about what constituted “official doctrine”, but something this consistent and unanimous was clearly official. That didn’t mean I didn’t struggle with it, though.

 No one had explained it to me growing up, so only recently had I come to understand the concept of “The attraction isn’t a sin, but acting on it is.” I had already spent hours arguing with Mormons who thought that the attraction *was* a sin, let alone a choice. I had once believed that it was a choice too, despite the nagging voice in the back of my head telling me that was absurd, because that made my world so much less complicated. Now I understood. Yet I couldn’t help realizing how this doctrine probably sounded to actual gay people: “It isn’t your fault you’re that way, but because of it God wants you to stay alone and celibate your whole life.”

Some gay Mormons are willing to do that, but that doesn’t mean it’s fun for them. Others aren’t willing and I don’t blame them. In any case, I had already decided that it was between them and God. It wasn’t my place to judge people for however they dealt with something I had never dealt with, and I never thought anything less of someone either for just “having same-sex attraction” or for actually “acting on it”. I already had three gay friends back home; two who were open and one, a fellow Mormon, who had come out to me in private (and in tears). I tried to emphasize that a lot in my response, which I made unnecessarily long and convoluted as I attempted to stay true to my religion while being as inoffensive as possible. I said that if she, hypothetically, were a lesbian, I wouldn’t see her any differently, though for an entirely different reason I hoped that she wasn't. (I thought she would realize I meant that I liked her, but it turns out she didn't, so she must have been perplexed and/or offended by that.)

Although she initially terrified me by saying, “Houston, we have a problem,” but ended up saying, “You, for a Mormon, are remarkably open-minded and have responded with far more delicacy and consideration than the majority of the LDS care to give. Oh, and in case there’s any confusion, I am a lesbian. Yay. Whee.”

 Whee indeed. I was happy that she didn’t hate me, but crushed by this revelation. Unfortunately, it didn’t prevent me from continuing to fall in love with her.

I haven’t been back to the University Stadium Theater many times, simply because I don’t watch a lot of movies, but the first one I ever saw there was with Kelsey, eleven days after her bombshell. This was around the time that George Lucas was re-releasing the Star Wars movies in 3D, a plan that was cut short later that year when he sold them to Disney. Episode I was out in theaters, though, and I definitely wanted to go see it, and Kelsey had never seen any of them. I had never been on a date and since she knew that I knew she was a lesbian, this wouldn’t really be a date and that gave me the courage to ask her to go see her with me. I was under no illusions that this would somehow make her start liking me, but I still wanted to spend time with her regardless. She said she was broke but that she could go if I paid, so I did. Watching the movie was phenomenal. I just pretended that I was her and watched it through her eyes, and everything was as thrilling and awesome as if I really were seeing it for the first time. When Anakin came on the screen she asked, “Is that Luke Skywalker?”

I said, “No, that’s Anakin Skywalker”

She said, “Oh. How is he related to Luke?”

I refused to tell her and that annoyed her a little. Also, her little gasp when Darth Maul first appeared was priceless.

 Afterward, it was too late to take the bus back, so I somewhat sheepishly walked her home. I asked if I could come into her apartment and stay for a while, and that was probably my first mistake. I see the Living Learning Center every time I go to campus. Sometimes I even notice it from a distance when I’m out in town. It usually reminds me of Kelsey. I haven’t been back inside since that night and I probably never will be. Sometimes, though, I go to the balcony behind it and look out over Logan as the sun sets, and think about her.

She invited me into her bedroom because she had something to show me. It was the biggest collection of Pokémon merchandise I had ever seen. I also noticed a Victoria’s Secret catalogue by her bed, and I wondered if it was for business or pleasure. Afterward we sat on separate couches and jokingly texted each other instead of talking, and then I played “The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker,” and then her roommates Katrina and Jenna came home. Jenna was mortified that I had been in their room, which evidently wasn’t clean enough, and they were both a little upset with me for taking her to see Episode I instead of starting with the original trilogy, but they had to admit it was a good thing that at least someone had started getting her into Star Wars. I got back late that night and didn’t get a good grade on my biology assignment.

 To my dismay, taking her to the movie and then hanging out with her afterward only made my feelings worse. I Googled for a solution to my dilemma, desperately hoping that there was some way for a person’s orientation to change after all. I found out about a movie called “Chasing Amy” but nothing that gave me any hope. I realized I was in for a rough time. By the next day, Friday February 24, 2012, they were so intense that the only way to make them dissipate would be to confess them and let the chips fall where they may. She was too busy for me to see her in person so after some hemming and hawing I told her via text, “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

After an agonizing wait, she just said, “That’s immensely flattering.”

She didn’t seem to grasp my point, that this was horrible because I was in for a lot of pain, so I explained it. She said she was sorry but that her orientation was not going to change. She added, “If it helps, I’ve always had that problem. Straight girls.”

That didn’t help. It only made me far more depressed, but on her behalf this time. For the first time I questioned whether God really loved us. I didn’t question his existence, because the experiences I’d had and the things I’d felt while praying made me unable to deny it. I could not be an honest agnostic or atheist. But now, dealing with this situation and thinking about how it must be for her, I struggled. Even setting aside the Mormon doctrine as a separate issue for the sake of discussion, the fact remained that being gay or lesbian would bring a lot of heartache for exactly that reason – straight girls and straight guys are the majority. It didn’t make sense to me why God would create them that way or allow them to be that way, to create all this suffering that seemed so arbitrary and unnecessary and unfair.

I felt compelled to ask Kelsey, “Why does God hate us?”

She said, “That’s an assumption I don’t share.” I shared some of the thoughts I was having. She said, “Perhaps it’s a lesson in empathy.”

That didn’t seem fair to me. I had already been loving and accepting of her and anyone else regardless of their orientations or lifestyles. Why did I need such a painful lesson in empathy?

We texted until around two in the morning and as I became increasingly depressed at the futility of it all. If I had been thinking rationally I would have realized that this was the least personal rejection I could ever hope to receive. I could have pretended that things would have been different if only she had been interested in men. But instead, it felt like insult to injury. I started hinting that I wanted to kill myself, wanting to elicit more sympathy. I’ll be the first to admit that was a really dickhead move, but I wasn’t thinking rationally and my words were increasingly reflective of that. When she said “Are you seriously threatening suicide?” I backed down and tried not to freak her out anymore. She said, “You should consider psychological treatment.” I later found out that she had been at a party, but was unable to enjoy herself because I was making her worry.

The next day I felt a bit more rational and apologized to Kelsey. After that my memory is hazy, and that's just fine with me, but basically I kept going through mood swings and although they weren't as severe and I didn't start talking about suicide again I continued using her as a crutch and then apologizing when I realized I'd gone too far. After a few times of this she let me know that it needed to stop if I wanted to stay friends because she couldn't deal with it indefinitely.

After that, one of the next times I saw her at a study session she left before I got a chance to talk to her, and I chased her down afterward yelling, “Kelsey, are you mad at me?” I don’t remember what she said, but afterward I just berated myself even more for being such an idiot and making things worse. I had always been awkward in elementary school and high school, and now here I was in college, eighteen years old, and I still hadn’t developed enough social skills to keep from destroying this wonderful friendship. With that being the case I felt that there was no hope for me and that I didn’t belong on this planet. If I could have gotten into a spaceship with faster-than-light travel capabilities and taken off for another planet where I’d fit in better, I would have done that, but since I couldn’t, the only alternative seemed to be to take my life. I didn’t want to do that either because I didn’t want to go to hell, but there was no way in hell I could deal with this agony and focus on my schoolwork and the tests that were coming up that week.

 I went to the Marketplace for what felt like my last meal. It was a plateful of nuts, because I had no appetite for anything else. Afterward I intended to start walking along the highway toward Logan Canyon, and just keep walking until I dropped from exhaustion. But as it happened, I saw one of Kelsey’s roommates. This seems like a miracle in hindsight because that was the first time I saw her there and it was the only time I ever saw her there alone. I went up to her and asked if we could talk. She said yes, so I sat with her and I told her some of what was going on.

 “Kelsey's not mad at you,” she assured me. “She doesn't hate you. She's just stressed and she doesn't know what to do, is all.” That's all I remember, but whatever all she said gave me enough strength to tough out the rest of the week. I later found out, incidentally, from her other roommate that in fact she really didn’t like me, but at the time these reassuring lies were comforting enough that I decided not to go off walking after all. Things seemed to improve between me and Kelsey, but then one day during the summer she just stopped texting me back and that was the last contact I ever had with her.

Sometimes I felt bitter toward her. I felt like I had accepted her just the way she was but she wasn't willing to do the same for me. Most of the time, though, I placed the blame squarely on myself where I felt it belonged. When I related this story to friends, even though I was biased against myself in the telling, they invariably felt that it was her fault and that she had treated me unfairly. Maybe they were right. I suppose it doesn't matter now.

 In the aftermath of the incident but before its repercussions had subsided, my dad texted me to see how things were going. I didn't talk to my parents about most of the things that were going on in my life because after being an angry and obstinate brat for most of my childhood and some of my adolescence I was embarrassed to be open and vulnerable with them, and I wasn't going to start now. Still, without mentioning the details of my situation, I started to draft a message explaining my spiritual frustration over the issues of same-sex attraction and homosexuality. But I wasn’t comfortable opening up even that much, so I quickly nixed that idea and lied that I was doing fine.

 I saved his response: “Glad things are working out for you. College is a major turning point in life, so it won’t be easy every day. My freshman year was good, but very, very difficult in many ways. We all pray for you regularly here at home.”