

# Beyond the Cold Coming

*Jessica Sorensen*

Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life.

—2 Nephi 10:23

... relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith.

—Moroni 6:4

**Y**ou're stalling now," Sister Howard says, "because you don't want to go." I nod, half-smile, and wonder if I'm that transparent. I want to go, but I don't. *You'll end up there anyway*, the thought persists, *it's time*. I shove it away, but I also stare at Sister Howard for permission. She holds my eyes in a knowing moment.

"I know, I need to go, but . . ."

Her gaze is level despite the lift on the end of my phrase. "When you're serious," she'd told me the semester before, "I'll give you a reference, tell you who's good." And that's all she'd said, but she'd waited, like she's waiting now, leaning forward in her office chair.

A breath drops heavy in my lungs. "I'll go," I tell her finally, softly. And I mean it. The decision moves across me like a shadow. Sister Howard—proud of me, I think—gives me the names.

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The walls are pastel, and soft piano music floats through the lobby. *Anyone who needs to be here*, I think, *won't be fooled by that music*. I pretend an easy confidence and walk to the counter.



*I don't deserve to marry, I could tell him. Other people do, but not me. I can't see it, can't want it, though I do. I was almost engaged, once—my eyes lock down on my fingers, watching one thumbnail drag across the other. I cringe when I see couples touch, and I don't know why, or if I can stop, or how. I'm broken. Every time I see it, I hate his arm on hers, the smiles he doesn't deserve, no matter who. I'll never be able to love, be loved.*

Resigned, I tilt my eyes until they meet my counselor's. The room pivots on a sharp intake of breath before I can speak. "I think I've been abused," I tell him, "though I don't remember anything." Something must have happened to me, though, to explain how I feel. I don't know how badly I'm messed up, or why, but I want to work things out, make sure I'm okay.

"My bishop agreed," I continue, "that it was a good idea to talk to someone, just to be sure." I remember my promise to Bishop Anderson, and another promise I'd made from the shelter of my car on the night I said good-bye to Jared. I'd driven through a storm that night, fighting the snow that buried my windshield between each cut of the wipers. I'd cried. The tears were first for him, but then for other things—haunting things, home and family, hurts I didn't understand, hurts I only knew belonged to dark places I couldn't explain or hide from.

Pavement slipped under my tires that night, and I wondered if I should pull over. *Where had this pain come from?* Fighting the ice, I begged my Father in Heaven: *I don't know what I need, or what to ask for . . . I don't deserve your help, but please, I can't do it myself . . . please . . . I'll do anything, just help me know what . . .* Exit 108 neared on the right. I didn't want to go home, but I had nowhere else to go. I turned. *I'll do anything,* I prayed again, and I meant it. And I mean it still, sitting in front of Brother Welling, trying to keep my promise.

A hard breath settles me against the back of my chair. Somehow there's a tissue in my hand. The rims of my eyes are stinging, and I smile at the absurdity of it all—me, confessing to a shrink, incredibly grateful for a tissue.

Brother Welling is talking now, and I answer his questions. The tissue becomes a shredded wad. *But no more hiding,* I tell myself, and I imagine my soul laid on a great altar before the Lord. Despite still-bloodless fingers, I feel brave. I agree to come back next week. When the session is over, Brother Welling walks with me to the door.

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The women's lounge becomes my refuge. I find it when, after meeting with Brother Welling, I can't go to work yet, or class—not until I vent all the things I couldn't show or say. Ducking into a bathroom down the hall, I notice a second door just inside, spilling a rectangle of light across the tile. I step through it, kick the doorstop, and pull the knob behind me.

The lounge's far wall is mostly window, with glass large enough to push the top of the ceiling and the walls at either side. It is warm and white, filled with a view of the campus religion building. Sunlight reflects from the white brick spires into the hollow of the women's lounge, softening the look of mismatched armchairs and couches. The room seems light and warm—the kind of pastel I believe in.

My backpack drops from my shoulder, and I fold into the corner of an armchair, pulling my jacket tight like my knees to my chest. The chair rocks. I drop one foot to the ground and push forward and backward, slowly and evenly. *He's probably making notes on me right now*, I think—“*too tight, unemotional, crazy*.” Why hadn't I cried? But now, alone in the women's lounge, I cry until I'm spent.

And I write. I pull a notebook from my backpack and flip to the first blank page, hungry, ready to spill the frustration I still feel: *Brother Welling, I write, addressing my counselor: I'm sitting in your office, wrapped in tight control. If I let loose for one second, I'd cry and cry and cry and never stop. I don't want to be out of control. I'm afraid of being overpowered by emotions bigger than I am. I'm afraid I don't deserve healing and will never be allowed to marry. I'm angry at myself for not being perfect and for needing counseling. I'm too tired, too weary.*

*I'm too tired of feeling crazy*, I write, *but too tired of needing help*. I'm tired of balancing the two sides of my head—the one that wants healing and the other that clutches pain like air and won't let go. *But I will heal*. The thought is persistent, David at the foot of Goliath. *I will. I don't know how to do this, but with the Lord, there has to be a way. I've started—I'll find out how.*

The rocking slows as I finish two pages, settling into rhythm with my breath. Eyes closed, I hook my pen over the edge of the notebook. Slowly, evenly, I rock.

It becomes my habit to write after each session, as I wait for the red to drain from my eyes. Every Friday I write through pages of loose leaf—honest, hard words penned too deeply into the paper. Every Friday I pull the lounge door shut behind me, breaking some unwritten rule and not caring. The room is always full of white and light, and I trust my tears to the window and the rocking of the chair. Occasionally, some secretary opens the door and finds me hiding. Once, I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep. Another time, when I'm caught standing by the window with my palms on the cold, stone sill, I hold my place with my back turned. She takes the hint and closes the door. Eventually, every Friday, I check my eyes in the bathroom mirrors and rejoin the work-as-usual hallway on my way to class.

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After three weeks, I no longer care what Brother Welling thinks of me. I almost look forward to dropping my soul on the floor between his two office chairs, knowing it will help. Even as they hurt, those Friday hours help.

“Do your appointments ever just, not show up?” My question is half joke, but part of me would rather not show up myself.

“Counseling is like cleaning out your fridge,” Brother Welling tells me once. “You take everything out, open all the containers, and put just the good ones back in. Everything else can be dealt with and thrown away.” *Like a fridge?* Some Fridays I feel I’m dragging my fridge up the stairs to his office with a piece of dental floss. But when I make it, frayed and thin, I’m always relieved. At least I make it.

Brother Welling always holds a pillow on his lap, and I wonder if it’s out of habit or comfort or both. When my heels lift against the legs of the chair, showing my stress, he doesn’t care. The clock behind his head looks like its numbers dropped to the bottom, leaving them jumbled in the arc where the “6” should be. That clock shields the office from time, promising to listen as long as I need. But I know there’s also a clock behind my head, a normal one that Brother Welling uses to find the end of the hour. So my worries wrap themselves into hour-long bundles, quick packages of home, mom, dating, future, fear. I drop them all in the space between the office chairs, between the two clocks, between the counselor and the girl with her heels on the chair.

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We talk first about my mom, and I realize how much I’ve moved away. I’m apart from her, different from her house. Now when I come home, I notice the lawn chairs around the kitchen table. The kitchen ceiling is still black from the grease fire that burned my mom’s hand three years ago, and the cupboards above the stove are still paint-blistered from the heat. I tried to scrub them once, with water so hot it left my hands pink. I tried to wash the dishes each time I came home. Angry once, I’d scrubbed through the counters and floors and the bathroom mold before Mom came home from work. “We don’t have to live like this,” I told her; “my apartment is cleaner than this.” She cried, I think, and I wished I hadn’t come home. I wished I didn’t know what new carpet smelled like.

“But I love my family,” I tell Brother Welling, twisting my weight in the chair, “and I love my mom. And I want to love my house, but it’s dizzy there, like the walls are tilted and everything is falling off the shelves and sliding down the door frames. And somehow the house *is* my mom, and *she’s* sliding, down beyond the places I can find her.

“She tries, I know she tries. I want to be fair, but why is it falling apart? Why is *she* falling apart?” I drop both my feet to the floor, flatly. My elbows brace against my knees before I turn to Brother Welling. “She’s neglectful,” I finally say. “I don’t want to be like my mom.”

*Bad daughter.* The words taste disloyal in my mouth. Am I too harsh with her? She tries with everything she has. But it’s true, I think. But I love her. I cry then, caught halfway between home and the office chair.

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“It’s okay to improve on your past,” Brother Welling tells me as we discuss my home. His voice is cool like the aloe vera my mom used to grow by the window. “Most parents want their children to end up better than they did.” He sounds genuinely sure this should be normal. I blink. He’s even smiling. As he explains with the context of his own kids, I roll the idea around in my head until I believe it. *It’s okay to be different from her, to choose better things? Can I say that?* The idea is strange, but I can’t give it back—it means hating the blistered cupboards without feeling guilty. *I can admit what I don’t like, but I can still love her, even if I’m not like her.* Brother Welling is leaning forward now. “You can choose a different life,” he says.

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As the weeks continue, I soon envy the daughter of Jairus—all she had to do was die. She died physically, and Christ healed her. It’s the easy way out, I’m sure. When the *Ensign* prints a copy of *Christ Raising the Daughter of Jairus*, I rip it from the inside cover. The picture is rough-edged and frameless, but I tack it to my bedroom wall where I can see it from my bed. It is beautiful—my mystery and goal. The girl, painted in the same yellow as the Savior’s robe, lifts away from the tatters of her cot. I’m drawn to her, and, despite my sarcasm, I want to be like her, understand her.

My mind knows Christ can heal, but my heart knows I don’t deserve it. Maybe my faith isn’t strong enough, I admit. Jesus doesn’t heal without faith, I know. Often, I turn to the daughter of Jairus on the wall. From my spot on the bed, she seems to glow.

*But I don’t know how to accept him, I pray, angry at my weakness. I believe in healing, but somehow I can’t believe.* Instead of the daughter of Jairus, I feel more like a different New Testament character, a father crying both “Lord, I believe” and “help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). I come to love that line. *But they don’t paint paintings of unbelievers,* I tell the girl across the room.

I think also of T. S. Eliot’s magi, those wise men who found the road so hard and cold. In the dead of winter, they drove their camels through

“cities hostile and towns unfriendly,” all to seek the Christ.<sup>1</sup> And as I reconcile myself to counseling, I know it must be a search for my Savior, if it is to help at all. But I wonder how long those magi scraped their sandaled feet along the path before they missed the comforts they’d left behind. Did they cry when they remembered the silken sherbet girls and the ease of their abandoned palaces? Did their days sleep long, like mine, heavy with the labor of their faith? “Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?” the magi ask in their famous lines from Bethlehem. Centuries later, from my bedroom, I ask the same.

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“You’re starting in the right place if you know where healing comes from,” Brother Welling tells me. He rests his pillow on the bend of his crossed knee. *At least I know where to look. I’ve always known where, even if I don’t know how.*

Through the weeks, I begin to view coming to Brother Welling as a metaphor for coming to the Savior. The physical act of climbing the stairs to his office shows my willingness, at least, even if I can’t get from *knowing* Christ can heal to *letting* him. Slowly, though, I begin to believe he loves me, *wants* to heal me. I realize that the warm, familiar feeling of the Spirit is really the witness of Christ, the feeling of his love relayed through the Holy Ghost. I already know him, I realize, but had not recognized him.

So, as I roll Kleenex between my thumbs in Brother Welling’s office, my testimony changes. How could I believe in the Atonement for healing sin and not use it to heal my emotional and spiritual wounds, too? “Come unto me,” Christ offers, “come unto me and be whole.” *Be whole.* I’d always known I had to be sinless to receive eternal life, but I’d never imagined I had to be whole. I’d always assumed, without knowing, that I’d carry my scars until I finally died and inherited happiness. Instead, I begin to offer them up to both of my counselors.

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“Here’s something you’ll love,” I announce one Friday, trying to sound off-handed. Although I’m more comfortable with Brother Welling now, I still approach the topic indirectly.

“What?”

“When I see couples holding hands, I automatically think, ‘That’s wrong, he shouldn’t do that.’”

“*He shouldn’t do that?*” Brother Welling catches.

“Yes. He should leave her alone. He doesn’t really love her, he just wants to hurt her, and he’ll leave her anyway. He doesn’t want to be there.”

It comes in one long breath before I wait for my counselor's response. *Yep, she's messed up*, I imagine for him.

But he doesn't miss a beat. "Did you feel this way when you were dating Jared?"

"No, not really. We held hands and kissed, but I felt guilty, sort of, in the back of my mind. But only if I thought about it." Brother Welling waits, and I continue: "When I see couples, or even think of them, I think she's a fool for loving him, because he doesn't love her back. His hand is dirty around her waist, and he shouldn't touch her." *Was he hearing me?*

I can't explain why these fears are mine, not even to myself. In the daylight, I lecture myself for being silly, for fearing things that don't exist, but in the dark I still curl up in the corner of my bed near the wall, waiting for my roommates to come home. I still imagine hands around my ankles when I run up dark stairwells, and people's faces becoming monster faces, hollow and twisted, just when I look at them. People I know. And I still hate seeing couples, any of them, holding hands, his arm dirty around her waist.

"I don't know why I think this way, feel this way," I tell Brother Welling. *What if I'm broken and never change?* "I don't want to think it. My mind already knows it isn't right." My hands flip the air to accent my point. "But I still feel it. How do I keep from feeling it?" I watch him, honest and scared.

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"They call it cognitive restructuring," Brother Welling tells me. We're both leaning forward. "By replacing your thoughts with different, healthy ones, you eventually teach yourself new beliefs." The concept seems sterile, like a bold-faced phrase in a textbook, but I listen. "For example," he says, "when you see couples holding hands, tell yourself how healthy it is to love someone. Understand?" I do. Mentally, I start a list of all the beliefs I need to restructure: *don't feel naked without your jacket, don't hate couples, don't think she's stupid for loving the man at her side, believe he will treat her well instead of hurting her*. I catch myself grinding my teeth—this will take time.

"We can focus on the present," Brother Welling explains. "We can't change the past, but we can deal with its effects."

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Over several weeks, I work to replace old beliefs with new ones. I watch my thoughts, write in my notebook, and even write 3 x 5 cards to keep in my scriptures and planner. *Relationships are good*, I tell myself when Kristin introduces her fiancé in church. In class, when Blaine reaches over to touch his wife's shoulder, I cringe before I catch myself and think: *He*

*chose to be with her because he loves her, and he always will.* They're expecting their first baby.

Eliot's magi walk through my mind, struggling against "the ways deep and the weather sharp." My own process feels similar and exhausting. Still, the process is freeing. *I don't have to carry this forever, I write in the women's lounge. I never imagined I'd be rid of it. Who knew? It's amazing to think my instinct is to hold on to something so painful.* I feel as if someone picked me up, turned me away from the past, and faced me forward. I didn't even realize that I had been facing the past.

I also write about the Savior. He becomes *my* Savior, and I feel him lifting me out of the tatters of my emotions.

After writing, I pass couples as I walk to class. *He wants to be with her,* I think of one pair. His fingers are laced into hers, just showing below the sleeves of their jackets. *He's there because he really loves her.* When I pass the next couple, I notice how she smiles. She reaches for his hand without prompting.

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The tall foyer window watches me cry, its eyes dizzy with snowflakes from a heavy sky. I've pushed my bench against the glass, and I hear it shudder as it braces against the wind. The surface is cool to my cheek.

I shift and lean over my notebook. All week I've dropped my shoulders when I caught them tense, released the grip on my teeth. I caught myself hating the hand-holding and tried to rethink: *He wants her there, love is good, he's taking care of her. Yeah, right.*

*So tired, I write. I have no safe place to go.* My pen pushes letters harder into the page, writing also of classes I can't handle and difficult roommates I hide from in my bedroom. *I have nowhere safe to go, I write again, but I love the religion building. I seek safety in God.*

Thick snowflakes collide with the window, but they're white, and the bricks are white, and the grand piano in the chapel is white. This morning, it's the first place I find to write and cry, insulated by snow and glass and bench. Students hurry past, adjusting their hats and scarves whether they're coming in or out. They all seem a part of the snow, either lost or recovered from it. I watch, suspended behind the windows.

"It's been a hard week," I admit when I reach Brother Welling's office. He tries to find my eyes, but they drop, fat-lidded, searching out the carpet. "You could ask me anything today. I'll tell you anything." The words are resigned.

Brother Welling is asking what I mean, reaching me like a rope that won't let me slip any farther. "I have nowhere to go," I tell him. "There's no

hole small enough for me to crawl inside and feel safe.” Without noise, long tears are slipping from my eyes to my chin. I don’t watch Brother Welling, but I know his eyebrows crease as he looks at me. *Does he know where I’ve lost myself to?* He’s forgotten his desk and the storm behind his office blinds. He listens. He’s the only reason I dared leave the safety of the religion building foyer.

In ragged phrases, I explain how I went home that week, how it left me shattered. “And I’m tired,” I finally manage, “too tired to hold up my family anymore.” Miserable, I pull my knees close, not caring that today I look as pitiful as I feel. “I see them, and I ache for them, but it’s too hard to take care of them.” With that, I turn to Brother Welling, daring and begging him to solve the problem I can’t.

“You need to give over your care-giver role,” he offers, sliding the words toward me like a gift he’s afraid I won’t take. But he continues: “Let your sisters carry some, let your brother. Don’t try to replace your mother.”

“But if I leave them alone, they’ll be alone.” My answer is quick on the tail of his. “I don’t want them to be alone.”

After the session, still miserable, I retreat to the lounge. My mind watches my sisters, still at home. I think of my brother on his mission. I even see my mom, sliding down the walls. I can’t leave my family alone, I know. But I can’t hold them up myself—maybe I never could. My breath is trapped by a sob. I pray. Even with my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room comes through the lids. *Please, Father, I pray, hugging my folded arms, please take care of them. I’ll give them over to you, where they belong. Please take care of them, in all the ways I can’t.* The chair rocks, forward and backward, slowly and evenly, settling into rhythm with my breath.

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I know Christ can heal—he raised the daughter of Jairus, and he raised my broken prayer through the ceiling of the women’s lounge. It had been a miracle. But the next time I try to tell Brother Welling I’ve had a hard week, the words are flat. The situation is different—I’m less distressed—but I wonder why the burden isn’t taken away as it was before. Then I remember another woman, one who had to reach for the Savior’s robe.

My thinking shifts. The choice is mine, I realize, to reach for the Healer. No one else will make the final choice for me—not my counselor, not even my Savior. They invite me, but I have to reach. Like the brother of Jared, I may be given air, but I have to find my own stones for light. An idea begins, small but growing. I find the library.

The project hurts as much as counseling, maybe more. At my computer, I create a table with two columns. Slowly, I fill in the left-hand column

with all the unhealthy beliefs I can think of. I drop each one into a tight square, purging it out of my head. Most of the thoughts I've never said out loud, or consciously thought of, but at my worst I've believed them all. The thoughts arrange themselves into categories: Guilt/Self-Worth, Emotions, Family, Trust, God, Relationships. This last is the core of the project, and the hardest to type. When I try to skirt around a particularly dark thought, I erase the square and fill in exactly what I didn't want to say. When it's too much, my fingers pull back from the keys, but I start again. The process is cleansing, if unnerving. "Tell it honest," I imagine Sister Howard saying. "Write it honest or it won't do any good. Write like only your Father in Heaven will ever see it." Soon the column stretches into five pages.

Then my project shifts. For each square on the left, I write a healthy statement on the right. "All honest emotions are righteous and healthy," I write. "Love is possible and good," and "relationships are ordained of God." Every dark thought receives its counterpart, a healthy thought to cancel it out. As I work, I scroll through all five pages, overwhelmed by the wonderful strength of my right-hand column; it makes up for the ugliness of the left. And for the first time, I realize I don't need my counselor's help to decide which attitudes I want to change. I begin to address problems I haven't even brought up in counseling.

The table takes two weeks to write. Sometimes I avoid it, hating it. But I come back to it. And I come to rely on it, trusting each new belief as a savior from the old. And I trust the one true Savior, praying for him to make the words a part of my heart, something I can believe.

When I print the completed table, I include Nephi's words at the top of the first page: "Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life" (2 Ne. 10:23). Free to act for myself, free to choose which column to live by. The quote is highlighted in bold.

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I know before coming that today's session with Brother Welling will be my last. I bring my completed list, my project of healing. When he reads it through, his eyebrows jump; I'm happy to have finally surprised him. "This is how you feel?" he asks me. But he's pleased. We talk about the ideas, some familiar to him, some I hadn't shared.

"But they're not mine anymore," I tell him. "It's like a different person in that left column. I don't have to carry those things anymore." I lean back in my chair, imitating his easy style of crossing his legs.

Brother Welling asks for a copy, hoping to share it with colleagues and other clients. I leave it with him willingly, wishing I could give him more.

I thank him, knowing he has served me, knowing I would thank him many times when he couldn't hear.

He walks with me to the door.

In a few moments, I'm down the hall, watching a thin layer of snow fall outside the women's lounge window. It makes the ground look clean and neat in squares between the sidewalks. From my side of the glass, the sun is warm, heating the room through the glass. A slow smile spreads through me like the heat. *What am I feeling?* I write in my final notebook entry. *Sanctification. Gratitude. Hope.* Whole is a process, I know, but today I feel closer than I have ever been.

As I pray, a smile crosses my lips without effort. I thank my Father in Heaven, thank Him for the chance to heal, for real emotions, for the counselor who helped me, and mostly for His perfect Son. I thank Him with the same inadequacy that I once begged for his help.

And I write, finishing the page: *I'm grateful to my Savior, who lifts me. I now know of his healing power. He was always there, and I knew it, but I didn't know how to allow him into my life. But now I have, and he's worked a miracle in me.*

I hook my pen over the edge of my notebook and think of Eliot's magi. "Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?" they asked after their cold coming to Bethlehem. "I had seen birth and death," one of them said, "but had thought they were different." Their road was hard and bitter like death, but nothing less would have brought them to the Christ. After returning to their kingdoms, they were no longer content with their old dispensations, clutching their alien gods, because they knew the difference. And now, like them, so do I.

From my chair, feeling sun through my eyelids, I push my toe forward and backward, slowly and evenly.

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1. T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1952), 68.