

What Won Out

When it comes to churches, I'm mostly fascinated with their outsides. I realize that's basically the antithesis of what churches are supposed to represent—the faithful emphasize churches' guts: leadership, spiritual guidance, fellowship. Regardless, the things I love: columns to the sky, stained glass, towering spires, ornate brick and statues. I judge churches by their covers—and much prefer jewels of architecture to the newer tract-home look-alikes that litter most of our suburbs.

I blame this mild obsession on my upbringing. Before a switch to hard-line fundamentalism, virtually every member of my family was devoutly Catholic. Eventually, though, conversion came (for *everyone*) and we moved to one of the above-mentioned soulless structures. But Catholic imagery was forever burned into my memory and no amount of reprogramming could oust it. Relegated to inhabit a cold, comfortable suburban mammoth, I remained forever envious of hell-bound Catholics and other renegades who frolicked inside the buildings I adored.

A few weeks ago, I ventured to Canby to attend my young cousin's graduation—and, in turn, make my return to the sort of church I'd sworn off. (I'm not yet convinced I won't someday spontaneously combust, *True Blood*-style, if I set foot inside.) My cousin's ceremony, a service celebrating a move from 8th to 9th grade—apparently that warrants a celebration—was grand. It was marked with a



lady about town

BY DANIEL BORGEN

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dizzying number of speakers, a constant barrage of Christian pop hits piped over loudspeakers—think “Butterfly Kisses” for two hours straight, long photo slide shows decorated with various Bible verses—these kids got it all, even a Hummer limousine to take them to an all-night party. (*Quinceañera!*)

The two main speakers seemed to be the ones who ran my cousin's school. One was a matronly, librarian-looking woman who offered up grand gestures and a voice better suited for Michele Bachmann's political campaign. Despite an overheated, ruddy complexion and constantly steamed spectacles, she was undeniably engaging. Her comrade-in-arms was a shorter, wildly effeminate man with a shiny bald head who wept a lot. Just about everything choked him up. We'll call him Steve.

I had spent most of my time creating mental to-do lists and wondering how Grindr would fare in Canby (not well, it turns out) before

Steve took the stage. My typically inept gaydar went haywire. I listened intently to his every word, studied his every movement, wondering just how gay he'd been—or still was, or if he ever was. And I wondered, had I never escaped, how easily I could have slipped through the queer cracks, ending up dedicated to a life of Christian servitude.

A few years ago, my cousin's mother begged me to explore Love Won Out, an ex-gay ministry launched by Focus on the Family in the late 1990s. Their focus is conversion and curbing homosexual tendencies. Fortunately, for our viewing pleasure, the organization's website hosts a slew of staff photographs, which looks more like a collection of Pride snapshots than a church roll call (hint: Look up Alan Chambers). Although I found my research amusing—but terrifying, I avoided my aunt for years post intervention.

I slipped out of my cousin's graduation unscathed, with only my neuroses in tow. Days later, I ventured to my parents' house for our annual Fourth of July mayonnaise-salad fest, and I again mingled with my converted kin, the aunt who still harbors secret desires to ship me

off to Houston, an oft-used Love Won Out meeting spot. There, I was briefly cornered, told I am loved despite different lifestyle “choices,” comments that bounced off now much thicker skin.

The older I get, the more fascinating I find these family events. As a sentient, relatively sane adult, I examine conversion from both ends. It's a constant game of mental compare and contrast, as mid-conversation I'm remembering earlier days, times when beliefs weren't quite so rigid or staunch. I comfort my present with my past. And in knowing my appearances pay homage to my mother, who provokes less ire from her siblings when her eldest child remains somewhat plugged into family events.

Post Fourth, I hurried back to the safety of the city. I recruited my friend Kevin, and we sauntered down Stark, amassing beers and lewd exchanges with all-day drinkers on our way to watch fireworks on the Burnside Bridge. Huddled there, the unimpressive fireworks display began, and we soon abandoned our posts in favor of rollicking rounds of karaoke at Hamburger Mary's. Halfway lost in thought, I realized I'm infinitely more comfortable in our city's tried-and-true haunts than my cousin's church or even my family's compound. And maybe some of my favorite spots might be a little drab and worn on the outside—it turns out that's no indication of the comforts found inside. **JO**

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