

AN EXCERPT FROM

**SAINT
UNSHAMED**

A GAY MORMON'S LIFE

**Healing From the Shame of Religion,
Rape, Conversion Therapy & Cancer**

While this is a true story, certain names, events, and identities have been changed to protect both the innocent and the guilty.

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ISBN/SKU Number: 9780692170519

Printed in the United States of America.
First Edition, Hardcover: April 27, 2019

Author's Photo on Back Cover by Victor Ramirez

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PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED BY KERRY ASHTON

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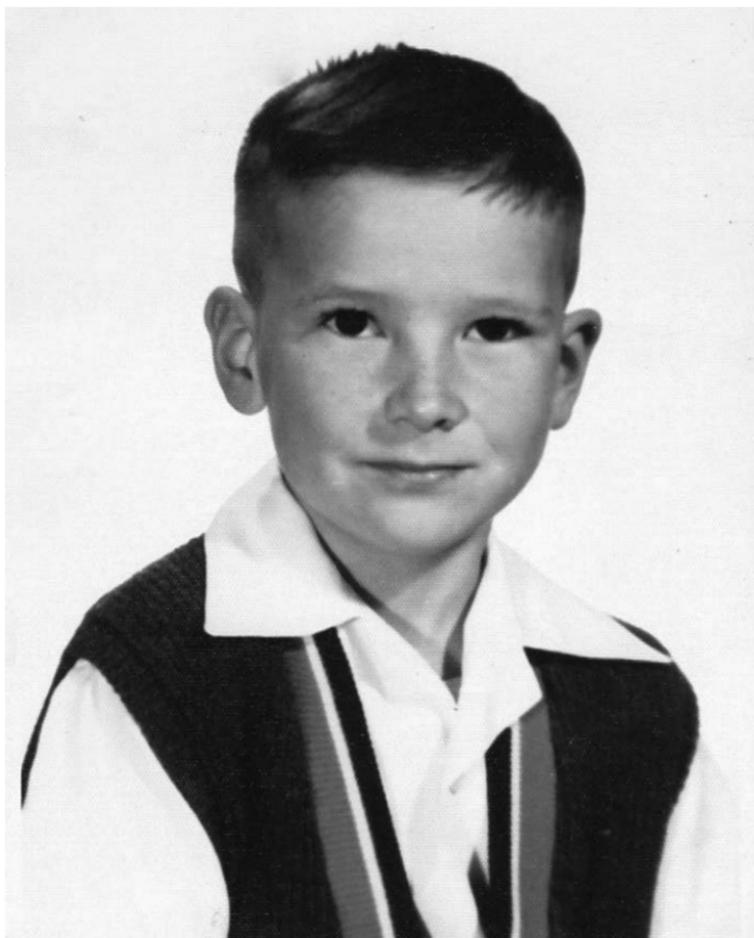
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The author at age six.

SAINT UNSHAMED

A GAY MORMON'S LIFE

**Healing From the Shame of Religion,
Rape, Conversion Therapy & Cancer**

A MEMOIR

**KERRY
ASHTON**

LYNN WOLF ENTERPRISES * FORT LAUDERDALE

*First, for my partner Victor Ramirez.
Without his love and support
I could not have completed this book.*

*For my therapist of twelve years,
Jim Enders, CSW,
who introduced me to my inner child.*

*For all of the members of my family,
and for my friends. This is sent as a
Valentine to each one of you.*

*Lastly, in loving memory of my Mormon parents,
Allan William Ashton and Millie Jane Ashton.*

PART ONE

I told this story once as fiction in the 1980s, but this time I tell the truth. I even tell the truth, in #MeToo fashion, about being violently raped by another man when I was 18, with a knife held to my throat—a secret I kept from everyone, including myself, for over 40 years. The rape, like other experiences I endured while a student at Brigham Young University, where I came out in the early 1970s, had a profound impact on my later life. But this story is not so much about my rape or my coming of age at BYU, as it is about the lifelong effects of shame itself, not only about how I internalized and inherited a wounding shame from my Mormon upbringing, but also how I eventually *unshamed* myself. It is about a lifetime journey of spiritual growth, self-discovery and healing, including many miraculous events along the way that pushed me forward through the darkness toward the light.

Growing up in Pocatello, Idaho in the 50s, in the heart of Mormon Zion, was like growing up in Oz, where Mormons kept me on a religious path the way the Munchkins told Dorothy to follow the yellow brick road. Most American families felt pressure in those years to appear like the perfect U.S. family seen in TV shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie and Harriet*. But in our insulated Mormon community in southeastern Idaho, the expectations of appearing like a perfect family increased dramatically.

With a population of 35,000, Pocatello was Idaho's second largest city in the 1950s. It is now twice that size if you count the suburbs. Home to Idaho State University, Pocatello was and still is very LDS—as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day-Saints call themselves.

In Pocatello, like all LDS communities, church membership divided into wards. My family and I were members of the Pocatello 15th Ward, one of several wards within Alameda Stake, and among the more than 40 LDS wards in Pocatello. As LDS Brothers and Sisters, we proselytized Gentiles—as we preferred to call non-Mormons—but we never socialized with them, since the Prophet had

warned us “to avoid the mere appearance of evil.”

To survive in my LDS family and Mormon community, I had to pretend to be a perfect Saint the way my parents did.

Both of my parents were raised dirt poor during the Great Depression. Mom was barely 17 and Dad only 20 when they married during his military furlough, prior to Dad shipping out with the Navy to serve in the South Pacific during World War II.

After Dad returned from the war, my parents had four babies in six years. The firstborn, my oldest brother Dennis, was expected to be the responsible one. When he couldn't live up to all that was expected of him, he became the family scapegoat. My sister Denise was assigned the role of Daddy's little girl, his perfect Mormon princess, and the sweetest of all of us. Craig would later make Dad proud as a popular athlete in school and in his later and highly successful career in public education.

Without knowing it, Dad had claimed the first of his three children as his own. So when I came along, being the youngest and Mother's last chance, she claimed me entirely for herself. As my New York therapist noted decades later, “Whether you were a boy or a girl, she knew she would name you Kerry, since she expected you to carry and meet her emotional needs from then on.”

Both of my parents had dormant and repressed shame boiling within each of them. Sometimes, as my siblings and I made our way down the LDS yellow brick road, my parents' shame came sailing at us like the fireballs thrown by the Wicked Witch.

I don't know how old I was when Mom lay me out naked on a changing mat, as I waited for a new diaper. I only remember that when she wiped down my genitals, my “little pee-pee,” as Mom called it, sprang to attention. “Oh, dear!” Mother exclaimed, removing her hand from my penis as though she had just touched a hot poker. What Mommy had been doing to my pee-pee had felt pleasurable. I wanted the feeling to continue, but when I reached down with my right hand, to rub the spot that had felt so good, Mom smacked my hand away. “No, Kerry Lynn!” she said. “You mustn't do that. That's naughty!”

My little hand stung and I cried, but the real pain was in the shame I had just internalized. It was sinful to give myself pleasure!

The next time I remember being shamed happened when I was five. My father Allan Ashton, an insurance salesman, was 35 at the time. My mother Millie Jane Ashton was a 32-year-old homemaker. At 11, my oldest brother Dennis was already a bully. At ten, my sister Denise was the saintliest among us. At seven, my brother Craig already fit in the way he was expected to. And I was Mom's "baby."

Getting in our car after spending hours in church, I announced my true feelings from the backseat: "I hate church. It's so boring!"

Enraged, Dad turned to face me in the backseat. Looking directly into my eyes, he gave me a dire warning: "Kerry, I don't ever want to hear you speak that way again about our Church!"

"I'm sorry, Daddy," I whimpered, already repentant for my outspoken honesty, behaving like the best little Mormon boy in the entire world. Yet, it was not my father's rage but the look of disapproval on my mother's face that had me cowering.

My mother was the only source of love I knew or had ever known. I could no more live without her approval than the earth can live without the sun. Clearly, I was trained from an early age not merely to be her baby boy, but to behave like her exclusive property. Not that Mom or anyone in my family would have seen it that way; her complete commandeering of my psyche and all that I was, of my very soul, was not something that she was aware of consciously, any more than any member of my family was consciously aware of their assigned roles in our dysfunctional family system. But the fact that I was my mother's personal slave is true nonetheless.

Mom had trained me well: A lifted eyebrow meant she was displeased with me, that my only source of love and companionship might abandon me. At five, I had already learned the truth: To survive, I had to lie; I had to become inauthentic and false.

When I was six, I performed in a church play with my family on the stage of our LDS ward's reception hall. It was my first appearance on stage and I was nervous. Some little girls giggled

backstage as Mom stripped me out of my clothes for a quick costume change. Naked and mortified, I was Mother's property to do with as she pleased. Once dressed, I stifled my tears and made my entrance holding my owner's hand.

That same year, our family visited my Aunt Ruth and her family at their home in Ogden, Utah. Aunt Ruth had a little girl named Carrie who was just my age and, like me, loved to sing and dance. After Carrie got up on the kitchen table and sang, "On the Good Ship Lollipop," we all applauded.

Wanting me to have my turn in the spotlight, Mom encouraged me to sing "If I Were King of the Forest" from *The Wizard of Oz*, since I did a good impression of Bert Lahr's performance, complete with dialogue and dance steps, and I always got rousing applause. "Go on, Kerry Lynn!" she said, nudging me onto the kitchen table. "Sing the Cowardly Lion's song!"

I got up on the table, but when I sang, "*It's hard believe me Missy, when you're born to be a sissy,*" Dad yelled, "Stop singing that song!"

"What?" I asked, surprised as everyone else.

"Get off that table, young man!" he hollered. "No son of mine is going to perform on a table like a ... like a ..."

"Like a what?" Mom interjected, getting up in Dad's face.

Dad shouted back at her, "Millie Jane, pack up! We're leaving!"

Before I knew it, we were in the car driving home. Sitting in the backseat, I knew Dad was ashamed of me, but I didn't understand why. "Why didn't you let me finish my song, Daddy?" I asked.

As I began to cry, Dad warned, "That'll be enough, Kerry Lynn! I don't want to hear any more about it!" Dad gave my mother a warning glance. "This is your fault, Millie Jane!"

"My fault?" Mom retorted. "Why? Because I stand up for him against you and all your bullying?" Clearly, I was the reason for their fight, but I still didn't understand why.

As my parents fought over me, I cried even more.

"Stop crying, young man," Dad shouted, "or I'll give you

something to really cry about!” But the more I tried to repress my tears, the more I sobbed.

“That’s it!” Dad shouted, pulling the car to the side of the road. “You’re getting a beating, Kerry Lynn!”

Wild with shame, Dad jumped out of the car. Deciding that his belt was not harsh enough, he went along the road and tore a two-by-four from a nearby fence. Bringing the board back with him, he dragged me out of the car.

“Allan Ashton!” Mom exclaimed. “You are not going to beat our child with that two-by-four! I will not allow it!” But Dad already had my pants down and was paddling me when Mom got between us. “Allan, that’s enough! What is wrong with you?”

Undeterred, Dad continued my beating as the drivers passing by looked on in horror.

That incident was so emotionally painful for me that I blocked out any memory of it. It was only after years spent in therapy decades later, and only after my sister Denise shared with me her memory of the entire event, that I finally faced the truth.

Regardless of what had made my father so angry that day, he made it clear to me then that I was a source of shame for him, one he either had to ignore or obliterate.

The *Holy War*, as I have come to think of it, began on a hot day in early September 1971, the day I left Pocatello to drive four hours south to Provo, Utah, to attend Brigham Young University. As in all wars, whether holy or unholy, it would not be without its casualties.

I spent the morning packing things in my ‘56 Chevrolet, parked in the spot on the lawn where our driveway would have been had my parents ever had the money to pave it. A yellow-and-bronze, two-door coupe with cream interior, a huge cream steering wheel, and black dashboard, the car had class, which is why I named it Oscar—after the Academy Awards I hoped to win one day.

END OF EXCERPT