

WORLDLY
GIRLS



A MEMOIR

TAMARA
JONG



My family at my parents' wedding reception in Chomedey, Laval, Quebec, April 24, 1971. Back row, left to right: my Ma (Alexandra), my father (Thomas), my little brother Tommy. Front row, left to right: me, my oldest sister Angie.

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TAMARA

GIRLS

A MEMOIR IN ESSAYS

JONG

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Worldly

1. An individual who does not follow Jehovah and his laws, who pursues materialism, higher education, and fleshly desires, and who chooses the “philosophy and empty deception according to human tradition” (Col. 2: 8). A non-worshiper, unbeliever, outsider, someone who is “bad association” that can lead a Christian astray from Jehovah. “An enemy of God” (James. 4:4).
2. Experienced or sophisticated.

Some of the names of individuals in this book have been changed or aren't named at all. These tellings are my own and remembered to the best of my ability. At times, I may have recalled what others have said through my own lens.



TRIPTYCH:
WHAT WE GET
TO KEEP



I.

When I was in kindergarten I wrote a story about my family. There wasn't much of a plot. I depicted them as tiny, smiling, round-headed people obsessed with cleaning. I drew detailed pictures of our plumbing, the car, the oven—even the coin-operated laundromat in our building, the dryer visibly tumbling clothes round and round.

In the story, my sister sorts the chaos of shoes near the front door of our tiny apartment. I'm at the kitchen counter putting away dishes, while Ma, with a drawn-on smile, is vacuuming the rug, little speckles of loose dirt making their way up into her treasured beige, humming Electrolux. (I would eventually inherit Ma's drawn-on smile, among other things.) My brother only appeared on the cover, too tiny to contribute.

Ma and us girls were in dresses because, for those growing up Jehovah's Witness, the teachings advised that "women should adorn themselves in appropriate dress, with modesty and soundness of mind...but in the way that is proper for women professing devotion to God, namely, through good works" (1 Tim. 2:9, 10).

...

My father always told us about everything that needed to be cleaned and what needed to be avoided altogether: money, shoes, motel rooms, beds, bathrooms, door handles, and my uncles, Ma's brothers.

"Don't hug or kiss them," he would say.

We once saw our Uncle Alec blow his nose into a paper bag and throw the bag under our coffee table. Alec would play silly card games with me when he visited, which was never really for long. He was probably passing the time before going back to New Waterford. Ma was always wanting to help her brothers—or anyone really. That was always her way, which may have attracted her to the ministry in the first place.

Of all our assigned chores, I liked vacuuming the most. Something about it calmed me, the way it drowned out the world and sucked away all the filth. The sound of the dirt going up through the hose was so satisfying, even if the carpets and floors would only be clean for a few hours. My father bought the vacuum from a door-to-door salesman, and it cost a lot of money on some kind of payment plan.

When Ma was younger she used to wipe her bum with old newspapers in the family's outhouse, and her brothers and sisters had to share shoes so they could take turns going to school. Ma was so proud of that vacuum. She must have thought she'd finally made it.

...

I was twenty when Ma drowned in Cancun, and her prized possession, her vacuum, came to me. Of course, I also got other

things when she died: jewelry, childhood photographs, a sectional couch, some household items, and her unpublished poetry.

My sister never asked for any of Ma's things. When she later asked to borrow Ma's vacuum cleaner for a while, I didn't hesitate. When I wanted it back, she told me it didn't work anymore and was beyond repair.

It would be years before I got another vacuum. When I did, it wasn't new, just someone else's second-best, which I rightly deserved.

II.

“Do not think I came to bring peace to the earth; I came to bring, not peace to the earth; but a sword. For I came to cause division, with a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Indeed, a man's enemies will be persons of his own household. Whoever has greater affection for father or mother than for me is not worthy of me; and whoever has great affection for son or daughter than for me is not worthy of me.” (Matt. 10:34–37).

...

When I was little, Ma was ministering to a sister from Kingdom Hall whose husband had been disfellowshipped and expelled from our congregation. When my sister, brother, and I played hide-and-seek, the husband scooped me up in his arms to hide me in a good place. Since I didn't want to be “a sharer in his wicked works” (2 John 1:11), I didn't say a peep to him. I was good at following the rules.

When Ma got disfellowshipped for smoking, Ray, a long-time elder and friend of the family, called me before the official announcement. I cried while holding hands with my friend Natasha at the closing prayer. I knew that if Armageddon came tomorrow, Ma would be washed away with the rest of the wicked world because she no longer had the mark that Ezekiel 9:4 speaks of.

“Jehovah said to him: ‘Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who are sighing and groaning over all the detestable things that are being done in the city.’”

Ma had survived a terrible childhood but couldn't part with her Du Mauriers.

When I turned eighteen, my sister and I moved out. Since I recently became a full-time minister, I had to protect my spiritual life and heart from Ma. Jehovah had always been my constant, and I owed him this. Prayers and hopes for Ma's repentance and a return to Jehovah's and his loving congregation never came.

The last time I saw Ma alive, we didn't speak. We were both in Montréal, in the underground tunnel leading to the Métro Henri-Bourassa. Ma was going to her job at a nursing home, and I was heading back to Laval after my cleaning job. It was rush hour, just another mundane morning, and people were shuffling past one another.

I hadn't seen Ma for months and now here she was, standing right in front of me, waving. I wasn't at all prepared to shun her and was mindful of Apostle Matthew's words—“the spirit of course, is eager, but the flesh is weak.” My mind often works in the scriptures. I felt closest to Matthew, a despised tax collector who sacrificed everything to follow his Lord. When Matthew scribed

Jesus's life, there was a contradiction; Jesus was to fulfill prophecy by dying for humanity, yet he asked for the cup to be taken away, crying out to God in his final moments. Maybe I wanted to tell my Witness friends that I kept going, that Ma repented because I maintained my integrity.

I would write and rewrite this scene in the subway many times in the years that followed, but I rarely told anyone that I waved back.

III.

I have been recently hospitalized for depression, just like Ma was, except I'm thirty-two and she was thirty-eight. I never thought I would end up where she had been—me, the ideal workaholic, a Kingdom Hall-going Jehovah's Witness.

But here I am, back in my friend Robin's house, on the hard blue cement floor of the bathroom, with the door shut, plucking out my sparse arm hairs one by one with my good set of tweezers, something that always seems to relax me.

Time moves slower. My mornings and nights are unscheduled, seemingly unending. I barely pray or study, and there are nightmares.

I go to three weekly Bible meetings at the Kingdom Hall because Robin refuses to leave me at home alone. I can't blame her after I tried to hang myself in her basement, which is what got me hospitalized in the first place. I wonder if things would have been different if I hadn't said anything.

I'm not much different than teenage me—I need to always have that best friend. There were times where I didn't have one, and I was so lonely. I wonder how much of a burden I am to Robin, who is now livid on the other side of the bathroom door.

She's mad because I took apart her vacuum, piece by piece. I worked my way through the filter and motor, and gave them a good scrub, but now it won't work. She is yelling at me, and I barely understand what she's saying, yelling back at her to leave me alone. I don't normally yell. My nerves aren't great; I am visibly shaking.

I remember once Ma chased me and Tommy with a butter knife down our apartment hall to the bathroom. We both ran, screaming the whole time, and scrambled to lock the door.

I rarely cry these days, but today the tears I've held in all year don't want to stop.

Robin is afraid I'll hurt myself. Of course, she is right to worry and now refuses to leave. I know I can't win this argument with her, so I push past her out of the bathroom and curl myself into a loose ball on my bed in a dark corner of this dingy little basement. The light from the bathroom lets me see the outline of her body, and I feel her sit at the foot of my bed. But we're still so far apart.

There's a brief moment when I think, *God, when was the last time we even laughed together?* Gone are the nights we stayed up talking until dawn. We are strangers now. Robin stopped telling me important things—how her marriage was falling apart, and she had started to fall apart too. At thirty-two, I didn't know that I'd be leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses in five years. I didn't know that my faith in God would wane and fade.

I didn't think I'd be losing Robin.

I was trying to repair the vacuum, but I knew nothing about vacuums. I didn't know that I never would be able to fix what I had taken apart.