My name is Astryd Morse. In many ways I am just a plain girl from a Baptist home. Though I loved God and was a Christian, I found a lot of judgement from the people in my life that were related to me or went to the church I went to. Don’t get me wrong I would not trade all the good memories from growing up in a Baptist church, but I also had to suppress a lot about myself for fear of damning judgment that might result from letting my true self shine. My dad was not a Christian, but he stood united with my mom in the idea that me and my sister Rebecca had to attend church and church outings. Even when we got in trouble and were grounded; we were never grounded from church activities. I never really had a problem with that, as church was where all my friends were, and my faith was very strong.

 I became a Christian myself when I was very young. I’m not even sure I was in kindergarten when I made my decision for the Lord. After I became a Christian, my mom took me to the doctors because I was having stomach issues. When the doctor put the stethoscope on my belly, I told the doctor to be careful because Jesus lived in there, and I didn’t want him to get hurt. I also remember being outside when I was younger and looking up into the sky and I imagined that I could see Jesus in the clouds. Perhaps I was too young to fully understand some basics about God and Jesus, but I believed in them.

Until I was seven, we went to the Reorganized Church of Latter-Day Saints. My mom wasn’t sure about how she felt about that church because she didn’t believe in Mormonism, or the book of Mormon, but that was where all her family went so that’s where she took us. When I was seven things changed. We started going to First Baptist Church in a small town in Michigan, called Spring Lake. The nearest city was Muskegon, Mi. We started going to First Baptist when I was 7 years old. It was me who had convinced my mom to change churches, as I was already attending Awana at First Baptist and had made many friends there. Every Wednesday the Awana van would pick me up from our trailer in Spring Lake, and take me to Awana. I started going to Awana because, my childhood boyfriend Henry, went to it and he wanted me to go with him. Henry came from a poor and neglectful home. One time while I was arguing with Henry he picked up his rollerskate in my eye. This caused me to have a pretty bruised up right eye.

In Awana I started out as a Sparky, which was the age group for 6 and 7 yrs. old. The Awana groups were Cubbies for kindergarten and younger, Sparky’s for first grade and second grade, third grade and fourth grade were Chums, and 5th grade and above went to separate Junior and Senior High groups. Every Wednesday at Awana we played team games like Capture the Flag, and races with our legs tied to someone else’s legs, or an occasional obstacle courses. We also sang songs which included the Awana theme song that started with “Hail Awana on the march for truth!” Another popular song we sang went on like “Ten and nine, eight and seven, six and five, three and two, the countdown is getting closer everyday.” We also had a Bible lesson, and we memorized scripture for awards and recognition. Every year we were given a new book that was for our age range. The book included bible scripture for memorization, required bible readings with questions to see you really read the scripture, and also short Bible lessons. If you completed your book each year you got a grander and grander trophy. Church was everything to me, and I just could not get enough of it. Plus Awana gave me a sense of accomplishment because I was able to memorize Bible verses in what could only be considered an incredible memory.

When I was a little older, I was still in Awana, but I was in the Sr High group and had been memorizing Bible verses for so long that I earned my way to a Scholarship camp in Canada. In order to get to scholarship camp, you had to have earned your Timothy award, however I had earned my Excellence Award, which was the equivalence to memorizing 10,000 Bible Verses, and was better than getting the Timothy award. I was the most accomplished Awana kid in our church even though in my preteen years I was also a troublemaker at Awana. I was the churches great turn around as far as behavior went. The truth of the matter is I just didn’t like Alisha Vandermolen. She was rude, ugly and mean towards me. One day we were the worst of enemies, and the next week we were best friends. When we were enemies we would through balls at eachother’s heads, we would try to trip eachother, and one time in particular I threw a chair at Alisha. We were always being put in time outs. I kind of liked time outs because I got to spend them with Howard. Howard was a soft spoken, kind and very intuitive person. When I had my time outs with him he let me complete as many lessons in my book that I wanted to. I was completing 50 lessons at a time so they put a limit of 25 lessons a week on me because I was winning awards to often and other kids weren’t getting their chance. Howard would become a great mentor to me for years to come. He and his wife Mary paid for me to go to scholarship camp out of their own pockets. One thing I learned from Howard and Mary was humbleness. Everytime I would that them they would say, “It was the Lord, thank him.” It was through that that I realized we were nothing apart from God, and any good works on our part also came from God. It’s important to stand out of the limelight and point people to Christ first, as it should be.

 The name of that camp that I attended was Canadian Adventure. The first time I went I was in awe with the beauty and uplifting nature of the camp. It was in the Canadian wilderness in Ontario, and the only way to get to the camp was by the Algoma train, as no roads were established so far into the country. The Algoma train was also popular for tourism because it did the color tour every Autumn. It was here, at Canadian Adventure, that I fell in love with mountain climbing and camping in nature wth just the basics and no outside lights to and noise. At Canadian Adventure we could see all the stars at night and sometimes we would get to see the Northern Lights. There just wasn’t city lights to drain the beauty out of nature and this sacred place. We weren’t climbing any extremely big mountains, but we did climb a mountain which we called Mt. Siaini. It was a small mountain about 1,000 feet high. The climb was challenging though because we didn’t use ropes, and it was steep at certain points. Also, we had to be careful not to get in a Moses way. The Moose were the main reason that we never camped on Saini overnight. We also spent the night sleeping under the stars every year on an island that we called Patmos. At Patmos we went Snipe hunting with big bags to capture the snipe with. We would howwel at the moon to try to capture them. The first year I fell for this nonsense, but I continued to play on because it was so much fun to watch some of the new comers who believed there really was this mythical creature in the woods and that you could gather them in large bags. This was a beloved tradition.

 The groups of teenagers at camp were separated into family units with a male and female counselor, and during the 10 days that we spent at the camp every year we would do activities within our small family unit. I had the Santkuyls as my camp mom and dad. I would later move in with them in Wiscosin during the duration of my senior year. I stayed with them because my eating disorder was very out of control and they thought that a change of scenery, and a butt load of love would keep the eating disorder at bay. This didn’t’ work because eating disorders are about more than a lack of love or a scenery change. It just goes way deeper than that. In many ways my eating disorder became my identity. Without the eating disorder I thought that I would just cease to exist.

There were waterfalls at Canadian Adventure so beautiful that nothing in Michigan can compared. There was a waterfall that I really loved. It was called the Golden Staircase and it looked just like it was called. It took a couple of hours to climb the Golden Staircase but when we got to the top, we would take our shoes off and roll our pants up and wade in the water at the top of the waterfall. The water was cool and helped soothe our feet after a long day’s climb. I liked to memorize my Bible Verses at the top of the Golden Staircase. The beauty made me feel closer to God.

One of the things that we did every year we went was solo time with God. During solo time you were dropped off within screaming distance of another camper, but you were basically alone in the Canadian wilderness. One year I did my solo on top of Mt Saini. This was my all-time favorite place to do my solo. I was dropped off and left at the top of Mt Siani for two hours. During those two hours I sang hymns and read my Bible and memorized scripture. Solo times really helped me focus on my relationship with God and gave me a chance to worship him in a magnificent place. I would eat my small lunch also during my solo time. Lunch usually consisted of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, an apple, and a Hershey’s candy bar. After our two hours were up, we would be picked up by our camp counselor. When I was on my solo I kind of worried about a confrontation with a bear. But at the time I knew God would protect me and keep mr safe. Its like I knew he wanted me to spemd time with him praising him and worshipping him, so he would keep me safe. We would have a campfire meeting that night and we would share what we had learned, or what was revealed to us during our solos. Almost every year I would rededicate my life to the Lords.

Every year at camp we would have a ropes coarse day. It usually took place before we hiked anywhere. In the ropes course we had trust exercises that we did as a group. One of the trust exercises that we did was one person stood on a tall stump and would just fall backwards, and they would trust that the group would catch them before they fell to the ground. I could do that exercise with great ease and comfort. What really challenged me was getting over the giant wall that had nowhere to put your feet and hands. You just had to trust that your fellow campers were going to be able to pull you over the wall. The first two years that I did that challenge I was really scared and there was some crying involved. But even the wall became easier over the years that I went to that camp. We also had a set of tires hanging from the trees and we had to go from one tire to the next without falling off. I found this to be an incredibly fun challenge, and it was my favorite part of the trust exercising. Canadian Adventure really gave me a love for nature and prepared me for much bigger mountains in the future.

The summer that I turned sixteen I found out that my youth group was going to be taking a trip to the Sangre de Cristo mountain range in Colorado. The mountains sat behind the Great Sand Dunes monument. The sand dunes were 9,000 feet tall, which we had to go through, and the mountains behind them that which we were about to climb was 14,000 feet tall. We left Spring Lake and headed to Colorado on a Saturday and the trip was for one week. I was excited that most my youth group was going on the trip. I was most pleased that Elizabeth was going to be going. At the time I didn’t know what to call it, but I had some conflicting feelings for Elizabeth. And she was not the first female I found attractive in the not so innocent way. My family and my church were full of homophobic people so it’s not like I felt safe in telling anyone about my attraction to Elizabeth. Even then I knew that that choice to tell was not a good choice, so I stayed in the closet. Elizabeth was a very attractive teenager. She had curly brown hair that fell to the middle of her back. Curls that were big and loose and made her look like she spent all her time at the beach. She had the most endearing and sincere brown eyes that I had ever laid my eyes on. It was like you could see her soul through her eyes because they sparkled a bit. Her eyes invited you into the deepest most genuine parts of her. I could have gazed at them forever. I however had to deny my feelings for Elizabeth because I knew I would be banned from church if anyone found out about my yearnings for her. My family might have even abandoned me. This I thought was too big a risk to take. So, I would look at her and then look away real fast, so no one saw the adoration in my eyes. I had to be straight at least until I was old enough to be on my own. I also was very confused because I was sometimes attracted to boys my age also. Later I would learn that it meant I was bisexual, but until that time I remained confused. I was so excited to be able to go mountain climbing and to be around Elizabeth for the next few days.

Early Saturday morning we met at church for the trip. My mom took me to church very early in the morning; something crazy like at three o clock in the morning I had to be at the church, and when we had arrived we waited there until the whole group had assembled. Once we were all at the church, we started loading the van up with all our belongings. I had a massive backpack that I would be carrying for the duration of the trip. It was one of those backpacks that held your tent, sleeping bag, water, food and belongings. I bought the bag and my climbing shoes with the money I earned form my job at Burger King. I even brought lambswool for my feet as I was told that blisters could form very quickly on a hike like we’d be taking, and it was extremely important that we keep our feet dried and stayed away from getting blisters. My toes blackened up from the constant hiking and when I arrived home all my toenails had died and fell off my foot. So I was toe nail less. I thought this was proof that I had done something amazing. A rite of passage in to adult hood. If I can take on a 14,000 foot mountain then I must be very mature and capable of taking care of my own stuff I I was very prepared for the journey and I was excited to get the vacation started. When I kissed my mom goodbye and promised her that I would be careful and not take any unneeded risks.

 That was hard for me to promise because I was bit of a risk taker and I was in love with nature. Just earlier that summer I had gone to see my aunt Vicki and Uncle Jack’s house in Florida and on the way back home they took me to the Smoky mountains in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. While we were traveling on the trails at the Smoky Mountain National Park, I decided that I wanted a better view. There was this sort of cliff in front of me and I just decided to jump down on the cliff. Once I got down on the ledge it occurred to me that I had not thought about how I might climb back up that cliff. There weren’t a lot of options. My only choice was this one small tree with baby limbs. I decided to take the risk because I didn’t want my aunt or uncle to have to call for backup and help getting me off the cliff. So, I grabbed the baby branch, braced myself for a possible fall, and jumped up with all my gusto to get off that cliff ledge. Fortunately, I made it, but the whole experience was scary for me and for my aunt and uncle. So, my mom’s worries about me being a risk taker were solidly validated. I would climb up a waterfall or hang off a cliff to get the coolest picture. After my mom was satisfied that I would be safe she saw me off. I got in the van and the only seat left was the one next to Elizabeth. Lordy was I being tested.

 I was happy for my fortune as she was the most seductive person to sit next to. Even the Sangre de Cristo monuments didn’t pale in comparison to Elizabeth’s beauty. When I was around her, I felt like I was intimately known by her. Because she was not only beautiful, she was also a very compassionate, and gracious person. I felt like I could tell her anything and she would still accept me as her friend. She just did not have judgmental bone in her body. She was a quiet person and it seemed like she was very observant of the people around her. She spoke few words but when she did talk, she was choosy about what she said, and she always was very attentive with her words. I had had feelings like this before, but they were really confusing for me. I knew my church believed that gay people were going to hell, and for sure I didn’t want to have that happen to me. But was I gay? I didn’t know because I had also been attracted to boys as well as girls. There was this boy I was attracted to at Canadian Adventure. His name is Toby. Toby was a tall boy. He had blonde hair and blue eyes. For some reason blonde hair boys were attractive to me in my teen years. My ultimate crush was Brad Pitt. I had all his pictures covering my walls, and I owned and watched every movie he was in. On the opposite side of things, I found Jewel sexy, and Angelina Jolie. So, what was I? No one had ever explained to me what a bisexual was. I was just told that girls were expected to like guys and visa versa. So, these feelings that I had for Elizabeth felt wrong and bad and I knew that I should never let anyone in on what was going on in my head. Plus, how could I know that she would even be open to something more than friendship with me. She had also been raised Baptist. That didn’t stop me from welcoming all the hugging that she wanted to do, and she was a hugger. She was very happy that we were sharing seats for the trip. She greeted me with her biggest hug possible. Then she showed me the candy that she brought for the trip. I declined candy from her because those days if it wasn’t a salad, I wouldn’t eat it. I had had an eating disorder since I was twelve, but no one knew because I was very good at hiding it. I just kindly thanked her but told her my teeth were hurting and that I thought I had a cavity. If I had known that this would be the last real food offered to me in the next week, I would have jumped on it. In our backpacks we had astronaut food packed for the trip. There were things in there like instant eggs, just add water. Lucky for me there was a lot of trail mix. I grabbed a bag of trail mix and we started our journey by van to go to Colorado.

It was a long van ride. On the van we chatted loudly while listening to Christian rock music. Some of our favorite artists back then were DC Talk, Newsboys, and Petra. DC Talk had come to our church that year to perform which ended with our youth pastor being booted out of the church. The elders in the church thought that DC Talk was inappropriate music because of all the drums and rap music. They did not like that the youth pastor John had brought that music in. But back to the van ride, I regress. We played a lot of games on the trip. One was to call out anything that started with a certain number.