

From over 500 short stories published over three decades, author Johnny Townsend presents twenty of his favorites.

**Life Is Better with Love:
Best Short Stories of Johnny Townsend**

By Johnny Townsend


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Life
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with
Love



Best
Short Stories
of
Johnny Townsend

Life Is Better with Love:

Best Short Stories of Johnny Townsend

From over 500 short stories published over three decades, author Johnny Townsend presents several of his favorites.

A gay couple steals from the rich to support their favorite charities.

Two young women vie for the affection of the same missionary.

A father with a speech impediment is forced into the spotlight after his daughter survives a school shooting.

A reporter seeks the identity of Salt Lake's new superhero—a masked man wearing temples clothes who mysteriously shows up at crime scenes.

Two young missionaries in the Pacific Northwest sneak out on a date.

An uncle awaits word on his niece caught up in the 2004 tsunami.

Missionaries in Rome try to prevent a terrorist bombing.

These are stories that celebrate love and life. Because *Life Is Better with Love*.

Praise for Johnny Townsend

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Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

In *Sex among the Saints*, “Townsend writes with a deadpan wit and a supple, realistic prose that’s full of psychological empathy....he takes his protagonists’ moral struggles seriously and invests them with real emotional resonance.”

Kirkus Reviews

Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, *Patheos*

“Johnny Townsend’s ‘Partying with St. Roch’ [in the anthology *Latter-Gay Saints*] tells a beautiful, haunting tale.”

Kent Brintnall, *Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews*

Selling the City of Enoch is “sharply intelligent...pleasingly complex...The stories are full of...doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so....Many of Townsend’s stories...have a provocative edge to them, but this [book] displays a great deal of insight as well...a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

Gayrabian Nights is “an allegorical tour de force...a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

The Washing of Brains has “A lovely writing style, and each story [is] full of unique, engaging characters....immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

In *Dead Mankind Walking*, “Townsend writes in an energetic prose that balances crankiness and humor....A rambunctious volume of short, well-crafted essays...”

Kirkus Reviews

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Print ISBN: 979-8-88531-105-2

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-106-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Cover design by Todd Engel

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The Italian

I first met Sandro three months after I moved out of my family's apartment in Vomero. I didn't want to be one of those Italian men who lived with his parents until he turned forty. Nineteen and ready to face the world, I found a dingy place in downtown Napoli but of course could rarely afford to eat out. One day, though, I stepped into a tiny pizzeria and ordered two etti of pizza bianca—their cheapest pizza. I could see on the scale that the young man behind the counter had placed almost three etti on my paper.

Just as I was about to protest, he put a finger to his lips and announced, “Due etti,” and told me what I owed him. He winked as I walked out the door with my free etto of pizza, and I knew I had to go back. To see him, of course, not for another free bit of food, though I had to admit that possibility was tempting as well.

Two weeks passed before I could afford another such extravagance. When I walked into the pizzeria, Sandro was behind the counter, singing “Biancaneve,” every bit as animated as I'd seen Rino Martinez on RAI. “I'm paying you to work,” a middle-aged man thundered from the rear of the store, “not to sing.” But Sandro continued to mouth

the words as he greeted me with a smile. He stopped just long enough to ask if I wanted two more etti of pizza bianca.

He remembered me.

I wanted to order something more expensive this time, but even the pizza bianca was stretching my budget. After he handed me my slice and I turned over my lire, I decided to be bold and not immediately walk out the door. I took a bite, savoring the rosemary, and tried to think of something clever to say.

Sandro looked to be about my age, perhaps a couple of years older. He was tall, a good 1.75 or 1.78 meters. His dark brown hair partially covered his ears, and his half-filled moustache wiggled like a caterpillar when he continued to mouth the words to the next song.

I wondered what his moustache would feel like against my lips.

“I’m Gaetano De Luca,” I said. I wanted to reach out and offer my hand, but the glass counter was too high to make that practical.

“Alessandro Rizzi,” he replied. “My friends call me Sandro.”

“I’m not paying you to make friends,” the middle-aged man shouted from the back.

I grabbed a pen from my pocket and tore a piece off the back page of a book I was carrying. “Here’s my number,” I said. “Maybe we can hang out sometime.”

Sandro smiled and began singing, “Lisa se n’è andata via.”

“Try selling some pizza,” the man shouted from the rear.

I let my fingers touch Sandro’s just a little longer than necessary as I handed him my number. He called two days later, and we decided to meet at Piazza Nazionale, just a couple of blocks from the pizzeria. I was wearing American jeans and a T-shirt that said, “The Cars,” with a photo of a girl smiling behind a steering wheel. Sandro was also wearing jeans, but his T-shirt was plain white. I was mesmerized by his nipples and flat stomach. Clearly, his boss didn’t let him take home much leftover pizza.

“Want to get some coffee?” I asked.

Sandro shook his head. “I’m too poor to do anything that fun,” he said. “I even had to call you from a pay phone since I don’t have a line myself. Do you mind just sitting for a bit?”

I shrugged, unsure if I wanted to admit my own poverty this early. At the same time, I didn’t want him to think I felt he was beneath me. “Do you like working in the pizzeria?” I asked. “Any plans to do something else?”

It was his turn to shrug now. “I’m a zingaro,” he said. “No birth certificate. No ID. I’ll never be able to get a good job.”

“A zingaro?” I repeated. “You look awfully pale for a gypsy.” Almost no one used the term “Roma” in a country whose capital bore the same name.

“There was probably an American serviceman somewhere in my family tree.” He grinned.

“Where are you from? Your accent’s different.”

“Up north,” he replied, but his smile faded. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

I nodded. “My father works for *Il Mattino*,” I said after a moment. “I’ve got a job in the newspaper’s mailroom. You have to know someone to get even a low level position anywhere in this town. It’s a start.”

“Sounds a little stuffy,” said Sandro, wrinkling his nose. “I just want to be free.”

“It’s easier to be free when you have money.” I was thinking more about my own situation than his and didn’t realize how my comment might sound until after I said it.

He shook his head. “I feel free every day of my life. Even with Cerasuolo breathing down my neck at work.”

I took a deep breath and blurted out what I’d been thinking since the first moment I’d met him. “Do you feel free enough to spend the night with me?”

Sandro's face first registered surprise, but he followed that expression with a big smile. "Does tonight work for you?"

We walked to my apartment on Via Parma, Sandro explaining that he lived just a few blocks away on Vico Tutti Santi. I hoped he was hinting we could continue seeing each other easily. Scaffolding covered the building next to mine. Empty cardboard boxes and dog feces dotted the sidewalk.

Still, the neighborhood wasn't as grungy as the ghetto on the other side of Via Roma. I showed Sandro into my apartment. I couldn't give much of a tour, of course, as I only had the one bedroom, and a kitchen even smaller than my tiny bathroom. Sandro was trembling as I took his hand.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I-I've never done this before."

"But you sounded so smooth back in the piazza."

"Well, it's all about putting on a show, isn't it?" He smiled nervously. "I've *wanted* to do this for a long time. I've thought about it a lot. It's just a little scary now that it's happening." He paused for a moment. "Have you...?"

I nodded. I'd had sex with a cousin when I was fourteen and then later with a boy in my liceo. And then with a teacher in my liceo. But it was hard to do much while still living with my parents. That only gave me a few

months in my own apartment without supervision, and I didn't have enough money to go to any clubs where I might meet men. Since I'd never done anything sexual as an adult, either, I was almost as nervous as Sandro.

I pulled off his T-shirt and he pulled off mine. We took our own shoes off, and while I wanted to be the one to pull his pants down, I let him finish disrobing on his own. We stood staring at each other by the foot of the bed.

"You're not a zingaro," I said, pointing. Sandro was circumcised. His brow furrowed at my statement and he started to protest. "You're a Jew," I concluded. "That's okay. I have nothing against Christ-killers."

Sandro's mouth fell open.

"Cretino." I laughed. "I'm kidding. As many hang-ups as Catholics have, I'm glad you're Jewish."

Sandro looked at the floor with a weary expression, and I vowed to learn more about Jews so that even my jokes wouldn't be so prejudiced. But I had something more pressing on my mind at the moment. I pulled Sandro close and hugged him loosely, rubbing my hairy chest softly against his bare chest. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

We climbed into bed together and began kissing. Knowing this was Sandro's first time, I made sure to go slow and make the event memorable. After such a long wait myself, I wanted to go slow for my own benefit as well. Two hours passed before we finished. "I feel like I should offer you a cigarette," I said, "but I don't smoke."

“I don’t smoke, either. You have any music you can play?”

I slipped a cassette into my player, and soon Al Bano and Romina Power were singing “Felicità,” low so as not to disturb the neighbors. “Kind of sappy, I know,” I said, “but I’ve liked Romina Power ever since I learned her father was gay.”

“Gay,” Sandro repeated, looking at the ceiling. Then he turned to me. “Can I see you again sometime?”

I smiled and reached over to give him a kiss.

We began dating regularly, calling each other boyfriend right from the beginning. One afternoon we walked through Capodimonte park. Another afternoon we caught the funicolare up into the ghetto. On yet another occasion, we strolled around Piazza Carlo Terzo, memorable not because Sandro let his arm touch mine as we sat on a bench but because we witnessed a Camorra killing not five meters away.

We walked along the waterfront one evening in the rain. Sandro showed me the spot on Castel dell’Ovo where he worked his first job as a fisherman, a job he loathed but which gave him enough money to move from a rented room to his own apartment. Sandro’s hours at the pizzeria were awful, so we couldn’t see each other as often as I wished.

He slept over two nights a week, even if we didn’t have much chance to do anything other than talk about pizza and

office mail and then have sex. He invited me to his place once, but the one time was enough. The place was so damaged from the earthquake a couple of years before that I was surprised it hadn't been condemned. We spent the rest of our nights together at my apartment.

“Maybe you *are* a gypsy,” I said one evening after we'd been talking about movies for a while. “You know so little about Totò and Nino Manfredi and Claudia Cardinale. A Jew would be better educated.”

He smiled but didn't answer.

We went to a neighborhood bar for some acqua Ferrarelle, a real luxury, and Sandro put a coin in the jukebox, singing “Sarà Perché Ti Amo” as he danced across the floor. He finished on his knees, taking my hand in his and giving it a kiss. I looked about nervously. Napoletani weren't the most progressive of people. A young woman drinking an aranciata hissed “Finocchi!” loudly and then walked up to us as if she might hit us.

“Valeria,” she said, her hands on her hips. When her frown turned into a smile, we introduced ourselves as well. “My brother Gennaro's gay,” she went on. “Dad beats him every time he stays out all night.” She shrugged. “But what's a guy gonna do?” She lifted her hands upward in frustrated supplication. “Dad would absolutely murder me if I stayed out, and that's no exaggeration.”

“What time do you have to be home?” I asked.

“10:00. Enough time to have a little fun, but not much. Gotta be heading back now.”

“You two should come over to our place some night and dance,” said Sandro. It was the first time he referred to my apartment as ours. I found I liked the sound of it. That night after we made love, I asked if he wanted to move in.

“We’ve only been dating six weeks,” he said.

“Seven.”

“Seven,” he conceded.

“Do you love me?” I asked.

He smiled. “It’s just that getting married so soon seems like something people in my family would do.”

“Your gypsy family?” I asked. “Or your Jewish one?”

The following Sunday, Sandro moved the few clothes and other belongings he had into my apartment. Perhaps with our combined income, we could now eat out in a real restaurant once in a while or go see a movie. There were posters for a new Fellini film plastered all about the neighborhood next to the various death notices. I wanted to go with Sandro to Sorrento and Castellammare. I also wanted to take him to Capri to see how beautiful it was, though I wasn’t sure anything was more beautiful than looking at him across the table from me in the kitchen first thing in the morning.

About a week after we officially became a couple, two Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on our door. Sandro came up to see who I was talking to and grew even paler than usual. "Non ci interesse," he said curtly and shut the door. Later that night, he awoke from a nightmare, sitting bolt upright in the bed. "You okay?" I asked, taking his hand.

"Y-yes," he replied. "I am now."

"What does 'el dair' mean?" I asked. "You kept saying it in your sleep. Are you Spanish?" Maybe that accent he had wasn't even Italian.

"Non ne voglio parlare."

"But why, sweetie? Why don't you want to talk about it?"

"Non ne voglio parlare," he said again. He put his head back down on the pillow, and I let my arm drape across him as we both fell back to sleep.

We had Gennaro and Valeria over most Saturday nights for the next little while. Sandro could mimic any singer he wanted, entertaining us with "Una Notte Che Vola Via," "Una Sporca Poesia," "Romantici," and "Maledetta Primavera." How he could sound just like Loretta Goggi was beyond me.

One night, Gennaro asked if he could stay overnight with us. I kissed him on one cheek while Sandro kissed him on the other as we said no.

Things were getting worse at the pizzeria. Cerasuolo was yelling at Sandro more and more and once slapped him across the face. “You’ve got to find another job,” I told him as we undressed that night, looking at the mark the man had left.

“I can’t,” Sandro replied. “I’m a gypsy. I don’t have any papers. No one will hire me.”

He started tapping the side of his head with the butt of one hand, groaning softly.

“I talked to my father. He knows someone who can get you a job as a door to door salesman.”

“*No!*” Sandro squeezed his eyes shut and began swaying slightly side to side.

“Then get a job in a café,” I said. “Get a job in a libreria.”

“I’m a gypsy,” he repeated. “I don’t have any papers!”

He now began smacking the butt of his hand against his forehead, his eyes squeezed shut even more tightly. I wondered if he was having a seizure.

Or if maybe he was a little crazy.

I wondered if he loved me enough to tell me what was going on.

And if I loved him enough to listen.

“Stop it,” I said. I caressed his upper arms until he slowly stopped moving. “Tell me the truth.”

“I-I’m a gypsy.”

I pulled him down onto the bed beside me and wrapped an arm around him.

“Sandro.”

And then it came out. Sandro was really Kevin Stovall of Orem, Utah. He’d been a Mormon missionary here in Italy and had known before the end of his first month that he never wanted to go back to America. He studied the language longer each day than the time allotted and had a good ear to begin with, so by the time his two-year assignment was nearing an end, he could convince most people he was from “up north.” Neapolitani had such a sloppy accent to begin with that anyone speaking crisply seemed uppercrust.

“I couldn’t go back to my family,” he said, “once I knew I was gay and needed a man. They’d be so disappointed.”

“What did you tell them?”

He shook his head. “I ran away in the middle of the night. I never told anyone anything.”

“But Sandro—I mean, Kevin—they must be worried sick.”

“Don’t call me Kevin. My name is Sandro now.”

“Sandro, you’ve *got* to call your parents.”

He put his head in his hands. “What could I possibly say?”

“Even the truth is better than what they must be imagining.”

“I’ll think about it, Gaetano. Really, I will.” He smiled. “You’ve already made my life better than it ever was before. Even getting slapped at work can’t change that.”

But I couldn’t let the man I loved continue in that job. I understood now why Sandro didn’t have any papers. He didn’t want anyone to know he was American. Of course, even as an American, he wouldn’t be able to work without a permit. But if he wanted to pass himself off as an Italian, that really did put him in the same position as the zingari. Unless...

I knew a guy at the newspaper who said he knew a guy in the Camorra. I arranged to meet the man and ask to have a birth certificate and ID made. I expected it would cost enough that I’d have to talk my father into a small loan, but the guy with the Camorra agreed I could pay simply by transporting something for him. He didn’t say what it was and I didn’t ask. But a week later, someone showed up at my apartment with a camera, and a few days after that, Sandro had his papers.

“Jobs still aren’t easy to find around here,” I said, “but at least now you have a fighting chance.”

“I would take any job in the world as long as I could come home to you every evening.”

“Now you’re sounding like Romina Power.”

“Or at least like her father.”

Three more months passed. Sandro did call his family and tell them about us. Instead of being relieved to hear he was okay, they hung up the phone and made no effort to contact him again. Maybe someday they’d change their minds.

My father was unhappy about my living arrangements, too, but said that as long as I didn’t tell anyone at the newspaper, he wouldn’t disown me. When my mother invited Sandro over for dinner, I knew we’d passed our biggest hurdle. Sandro entertained everyone with an a capella rendition of “Storie di Tutti i Giorni” that left even my father impressed.

“You know,” he told me over the phone the following day, “your...friend...has a strong presence in front of people. He’d make a good tour guide. I know someone who runs a tour company in Pompeii—he did some advertising with the paper—and I think I can get him to talk to Sandro. If you want.”

“We want.”

I didn’t tell Sandro until the appointment was confirmed. “Make sure he knows you can give tours in both English and Italian,” I said. Sandro had to call in sick

in order to meet with the owner of the tour company, which left Cerasuolo yelling and making threats, but Gennaro filled in for the day and eventually took over the position when Sandro got the new job.

We promised to help Gennaro find something better, too.

A month later, once we'd finally saved a little money, Sandro and I held a party at our place to celebrate a new beginning. Gennaro came with Vittorio, a guy he'd just met over the counter at the pizzeria, and Valeria came with Stefano, a guy she'd met over an aranciata a couple of weeks earlier, who was cuter than any of the rest of us. Sandro sang "L'italiano" quite convincingly but saved his last performance until after the others had left. "Tu Cosa Fai Stasera?" he asked.

And I answered by holding out my hand.

An Eternity of Mirrors

I put my hand on Elder Cooper's arm. "Ecco," I said. "Those guys again." I nodded toward two olive-skinned Italians in their mid-twenties near the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi.

"They aren't interested, Elder Shaw," my companion replied.

"I'm not going to do an approach," I assured him. "Just going to say hi."

I walked up to the two men with a smile and waved. One of them grabbed the other's arm and reached for his suitcase. Fire exploded around the gurgling water. There was the sound of roaring wind mixed with screams, a brief moment of pain, and then blackness.

The alarm went off at 6:30 and I stumbled out of bed toward my desk. I knew better than to leave the clock within arm's length of my mattress. In the dark, I heard a groan from my companion's bed on the other side of the room. Since he didn't have to turn off the clock himself, he always managed to stay under the covers an extra fifteen minutes. Against the rules, but that was his problem, not

mine. It was late spring of 1981, and the mission president had just changed the time we were to wake up from 6:00 to 6:30, a glorious miracle, but we'd somehow adapted overnight, and what had once seemed absolute luxury now felt way too torturous again.

I pulled up the serranda to let some light from the balcony into the room, and another groan drifted out from Elder Cooper's bed. I thought of teasing him some more, but I needed to pee and hurried down the hall. When I opened the bathroom door, I saw I was already too late. One of the zone leaders was in the shower, humming "Give, Said the Little Stream," and the other, Elder Walker, was standing at the toilet. "The Lord blesses those who take the initiative to wake up early," he said.

"You're special, all right," I agreed. "You prove it every day."

Elder Walker's face hardened, and for a moment, I was afraid he'd aim his stream at me. I left and walked a few feet down the hall toward the kitchen, where I poured myself a bowl of Corn Flakes and sprinkled some Coliseum sugar over it. I snipped the corner off a triangle container of milk and poured.

I heard a snort as Elder Walker joined me in the kitchen. A second later, he knocked my arm so that I spilled some of the milk.

"Sorry," he said coldly.

"It's OK," I replied casually. "It's your mess, so you can clean it up."

Elder Walker's eyes narrowed, and he slapped the table, making droplets of milk jump into the air. "You're getting more rebellious every day, Anziano Shaw. If you don't shape up, I'll have to report you to the mission president."

"I have four months left," I said. "If the Church wants to send me home because I'm making you wipe up the milk you spilled, I can live with that." In fact, I almost welcomed it. One door after another after another had been shut in my face these past several months, day after day after day. A mission was supposed to be the best two years of my life, but it certainly wasn't that.

Of course, I'd learned a lot about myself out here, which could potentially be positive, but not all of what I'd discovered was good. I also learned a great deal about the world, having taught people from seven different countries so far. It was eye-opening to realize there was more than one way to do things. More importantly, I'd managed to learn a tiny bit about the complexity of human behavior, just the very tiniest particle, of course, yet far more than I'd known before. I didn't regret coming to Italy, even if I wasn't sure I'd miss my mission after it was over.

I might miss Elder Cooper, though. But there was always the possibility we'd end up at college together someday.

Elder Walker slapped the table again and headed off to his bedroom. I started eating, and a moment later, Elder Cooper staggered into the kitchen. "I need coffee," he moaned. I laughed and offered him my box of cereal. He

grabbed a bowl and began pouring with his eyes closed. I put my hand on his back when he was about to spill over onto the table.

“Buddy,” I said, “hang in there. We’ll get a Coke when we leave the apartment later.”

Elder Cooper opened his eyes and smiled. “I like it when you call me buddy.”

I clapped him on the shoulder. “I gotta get in the shower before Walker jumps the line and uses up all the hot water.” I walked back down the hall to grab my towel, but while I was undressing in the bathroom a moment later, Elder Walker burst in, already naked, and pushed me aside. He pulled the shower curtain in front of him, giving me a wide but cold grin as he did so. I waited a moment and then flushed, smiling when I heard a loud grunt from the tub.

“Stronzo,” I heard him mutter.

“Not yet,” I replied, “but I’m not feeling very well, so prepare yourself for some noxious odors.” I didn’t actually sit down, but I put my hand in my armpit and made a few offensive noises. Then I flushed again.

Soon it was Quiet Hour and I sat at my desk reading the Book of Mormon. “And it came to pass,” I read. “And it came to pass.” “And it came to pass.” The same thing over and over and over. It seemed odd that Nephites, so concerned about limited space on the gold plates that they used reformed Egyptian instead of their own language, would keep wasting that precious space using the same useless phrase again and again.

“Almost time for Devotional,” I said after the hour was up. “What plans should we make today?” I always let my junior companion make his suggestions first. It saved me the trouble of figuring something out and it let him gain confidence. I usually went with whatever he suggested unless I really felt the need to override.

Cooper, who’d been out ten months, had enough time under his belt to be made senior, but the mission president told him during every interview that he wasn’t impressed with Cooper’s attitude. At least, that was my companion’s version. Despite being a bit of a slacker, Cooper and I had gotten along pretty well the past two months after his transfer to Rome Four. I probably only had one more companion left before I returned to California. But while Cooper could be trying at times, he was also probably my favorite companion. Not my best companion, to be clear, my favorite.

“Anziano,” Elder Cooper said slowly, “io so certamente che you don’t want to hear this, but I’m veramente not in the mood to do 24-hour work sta mattina.” He often protested the rule that we only speak Italian by making whatever Italian he did use irritating.

“Truamente?” I asked.

“Sì. Can we just hang out at il parco this morning?”

“The one on Via Nomentana?”

He nodded.

I considered for a moment. “How about you relax at the park while I try to get a few referrals by myself?”

Now he considered. “Va bene.” He smiled and I had to turn away. Elder Cooper was only slightly above average in looks, about 5’8” with ash blond hair, but somehow, the longer I knew him, the more attractive he became. Exactly the opposite of my reaction to Elder Walker. I’d thought the senior zone leader was surprisingly good-looking when I first came to the district, but the longer I shared an apartment with him, the less attractive he became. It seemed odd that just knowing a person could change the way I interpreted their physical attributes. A physical shape seemed absolute. A scientific fact. But somehow it wasn’t.

I looked over again at my companion as he struggled to knot his tie. He had a nose that turned slightly to the left just at the tip, either a riveting grin or a painful frown, and gray eyes I could look into forever. If I wasn’t trying to make it to the Celestial Kingdom.

I’d probably better start rereading *The Miracle of Forgiveness* again. It was one of only two Church books I owned in Italian.

We hurried out of the apartment as soon as the closing prayer at the end of Devotional had been given. “You’re supposed to have companionship prayer before you leave!” Elder Walker shouted after us, but we were already running down the marble stairs and then out on the street. Breakfast was three hours behind us by this point, and I wanted a piece of caprino from the formaggeria two doors

down, or a Bosc pear from the shop next to it, but we didn't have enough money to eat like our neighbors.

I'd saved up all the funds for my mission myself, while Elder Cooper's parents were heavily subsidizing his stay. We walked into the corner bar where we often picked up our milk, and I bought a bottle of Coke for my companion. A luxury, to be sure, but something about the day warranted it. He smiled in exultation with his first sip, and then we made our way to the bus stop, where he savored every last drop until the 36 came around the corner.

Soon, I could see Villa Torlonia coming up, and I rang for the next stop. We pushed past a couple of heavy women blocking the door and stepped off onto the street. A man hurried by in one direction and two women passed us in the other. I breathed in the morning air and closed my eyes. I was in Rome. Me. A nobody from San Jose. I supposed there were plenty of Italians who'd kill to live in California, or anywhere else in the U.S., for that matter, but every day, all I could think was how lucky I was to be in Rome. Walking into the park, my companion and I both immediately relaxed. A little haven in the midst of a huge, bustling city. Life was grand.

Elder Cooper found a bench and sat down, lifting his face to the sun and closing his eyes in ecstasy. It was an expression I'd fantasized about more than once, before I knelt beside my bed and prayed for forgiveness. Now I turned to the other folks in the park and tried to find a target. We couldn't approach women, and most Italian

men worked on weekdays. But there was a young man reading a book on a nearby bench. I strolled over.

“Che leggi?” I asked in a friendly manner.

The young man did not appear anxious to reciprocate my warmth. He held up the book, showing me the front cover. *The Bourne Identity: Un nome senza volto*. Looked like some kind of spy thriller. I smiled and nodded, and the man returned to his book.

I supposed that when I first received my call and realized I wasn't being sent someplace like West Virginia, I'd dreamed of international intrigue. Rome. How could it not be exciting? Cities like this were featured in James Bond films. The Red Brigades had kidnapped and killed the prime minister here just a couple of years ago. And some other group had blown up the Bologna train station just last year. Of course, those weren't spy kinds of things, just murder. Berlin would probably have been more thrilling, with more of a chance to interact with real agents, but Rome was plenty good enough.

Only the most exciting thing I'd ever actually done in Italy was go tracting. Over in Rome Three a few months ago, my companion and I had tracted out an apartment building using the citofono outside. The slip of paper inserted next to one button said, “Brigate Rosse.” Surely a joke. But we made sure not to press that buzzer.

And once, a portiere had chased us out of his building with a frying pan.

The Shaw Identity: Chased with Cookware.

“Are you enjoying the book?” I asked the young man on the bench reading about spies.

The man slowly turned to look back at me. “Trying to.”

“Is there a better time for us to come talk to you about our church?”

The man tore a blank page from the back of the book, wrote his name and address in a scrawl I could barely read, and handed it to me. I thanked him and headed back to the bench where Elder Cooper was sunning himself. “Got one,” I said.

He opened his eyes. “Now we can both take a break.” He closed his eyes again. Since he couldn’t see me, I took the opportunity to stare at his face for a few minutes. So, so beautiful. I wanted to kiss his forehead and his cheeks. I wanted to kiss that damaged nose. And those lips. But he’d no doubt slug me if I tried.

Elder Cooper opened one eye. I quickly turned away.

I fingered the paper in my hand, amazed again at the difference in penmanship between Americans and Italians. If I didn’t know up front this was a language I understood, I’d be certain it was written in some other alphabet. Perhaps in code.

And it may as well have been. The man had surely given us a false address. At least half the referrals we took ended up being addresses for people other than the ones we’d stopped on the street, people baffled to find us at their

door. Catholics in Italy just weren't interested in becoming Mormons.

I'd baptized two people in twenty months, and it wasn't likely I'd baptize any more. Elder Cooper had baptized one so far. Missionary work wasn't only boring and tedious—it was also fairly meaningless. Why couldn't we do something useful? Help tourists cross a busy street, easy once you learned how but difficult for Americans on their first visit. Or pick up dog crap on sidewalks across the city. Or even help clean a church or cathedral.

Whoa, I thought, shaking my head slightly. I'd just had such a strong feeling of *déjà vu*.

Elder Cooper and I timed our trip back to arrive at the apartment shortly after 1:30, the beginning of our two-hour lunch period. There'd be no dinner period, of course. After we left the apartment again at 3:30 each day, we wouldn't be allowed to return home until 9:30.

We'd spend hours and hours in the blazing sun one day and hours and hours in the pouring rain the next. Or in the freezing cold. Or fog. Or whatever. Day after day after day doing the same exact things over and over and over.

“How many referrals did you get?” Elder Walker shouted from the kitchen when we returned from the park. He was in charge of cooking this week.

“*Abbiamo got due,*” said Elder Cooper.

“Pick a flippin’ language!” Elder Walker returned. “And two isn’t nearly enough if you plan to get your required fifteen for the week.”

Tortellini was ready shortly thereafter, and when everyone had finished, Elder Cooper started washing the dishes. It would be my turn tomorrow. “Let’s get some Dual Study,” I said, not wanting to waste the time on dishes alone, which wouldn’t count in any category on our weekly stat sheet.

“Va bene,” said Cooper, “but no scriptures, no colloqui, and definitely no *Miracolo del perdono!*”

“Grammar all right?”

He nodded and we started studying the imperfect subjunctive, which we’d spent less than an hour on in the Missionary Training Center back in Provo. Almost all the missionaries here used it incorrectly. While I appreciated the opportunity to improve my language skills, I knew we were only doing it because Elder Cooper hated anything solely related to his mission.

He had “Anxious Missionary Syndrome,” the desire to be done with the whole thing, despite having over a year left to complete. The truth was his attitude was infecting me more and more as well. When I was with him, I wanted to go swimming, something absolutely forbidden while serving, given that the Devil had power over the water. I wanted to go camping in the hills outside the city. I wanted to sit in a theater and see a good movie. Something like

Culo e camicia which I'd seen advertised in posters pasted on dozens of walls across the city.

Any wall could be turned into a billboard covered with movie posters, political announcements, or a call to repeal legalized abortion. No death notices here like down in Napoli, though.

But *Culo e camicia*—I couldn't help but think of Elder Cooper walking around in our bedroom wearing just his shirt, his ass free to admire. Not that such a thing could ever happen since we always wore our garments underneath our suits. But I simply loved that word “culo.”

I also liked the word “vaffanculo” which I sometimes used on Elder Walker. He didn't know what it meant, and I loved seeing the fury on his face when I wouldn't tell him. I could never say such a thing in English, of course. But I loved that “fuck you” in Italian used the word “ass.”

I stole a glance at Elder Cooper's backside while he leaned over the sink.

How odd, I thought. I'd just had a flash of déjà vu again.

As we waited at the bus stop later, I clapped my hand on my companion's shoulder. “Buddy, now it's my turn. I'm the one who doesn't feel like tracting tonight. Are you up for a little more hooky?”

He smiled. “I'm always pronto for something like quello.”

“I’m going to picchiarti in the head if you don’t stop that merda.” I showed him my fist.

His smile broadened and he suddenly leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. Then he pulled back in horror. “Sorry about that,” he muttered.

I tried not to show my shock, but my head was suddenly swirling. Was Elder Cooper gay, too? I thought I was the only Mormon in the world who was such a sinner. Non-Mormons, yes. But missionaries?

I’d certainly never met another person like me in the Church. I’d fantasized about it over and over, of course, but it never occurred to me such a fantasy could ever come true. And now to have someone who was my companion turn out to be another finocchio? Was this a dream? I pinched myself.

Perhaps it was a blessing from Heavenly Father. Or a trial of my faith. Whatever was happening, it was big.

Damn! There was that déjà vu again. What the hell was going on?

Maybe we should go door to door tonight, after all, force ourselves to be more obedient. But I didn’t want to bore myself into righteousness. Almost without exception, I always felt less spiritual after a few hours of tracting, not more. If only we could meet a terrorist and convert him or find a Catholic priest who was secretly a Mason and convert him, even find a family of zingari and baptize them, do something interesting for a change. Then maybe

I could ask Heavenly Father to kill me, and I could go out on a high.

Instead, I directed us to a bookstore I'd seen downtown before, and we each bought a book, *Il giardino segreto* for me and *Guerre stellari* for him. Neither of them written by Italians. It was too far to take the bus back way past Porta Pia to the park, so we found a bench near the Stazione Termini and started reading.

We watched nervously as a huge flock of pigeons flew overhead but we seemed safe enough and luxuriated in an afternoon of relaxation. I'd enjoyed Elder Cooper's company every day even while doing unpleasant missionary work. Maybe *because* the work was unpleasant. But today showed me that it was even more enjoyable being around him when we were doing activities we honestly liked.

I thought of something I wanted to do with him tonight that I was sure we'd both really enjoy.

I bit my lip and turned back to my book. Colin had to try walking again and again before he got any good at it. I thoroughly loved this story and had read it many times as a child. The kids broke the rules and ended up making life better for everyone. It was fun to be reading it now in Italian. But after struggling with the *passato remoto* for a couple of hours, which no one ever used in normal speech, I needed a break.

“Want to take a walk around the train station?”

We walked inside to the main room, lined with ticket stations along the wall separating the main area from the platforms. The waiting area was always busy, though a good number of people were locals just looking for a place to hang out. One older woman I recognized immediately liked to lift her skirt when businessmen walked past. They'd stop in astonishment and she'd laugh in return. I watched an older man now reach into the pocket of a younger man struggling to get something out of a machine. The younger man never noticed a thing. Practice made perfect.

And now I wasn't sure coming here was the best idea, after all. While I enjoyed feeling worldly, some worldliness was really rather ugly. I was about to turn around when two young men in suits stopped a couple of yards from us. They looked to be in their mid-twenties and had dark complexions, maybe from farther south.

Elder Cooper's pale coloring was pleasant enough, but I had to admit, some Italian men had awfully attractive skin. The two men I was staring at each set a medium-sized suitcase at his feet. I so wanted to ask if they were in town on a visit, if they needed a place to stay. Of course, the zone leaders would never permit it, and as easy as it was to lie to myself, I was still quite aware it wasn't hospitality which drove me.

It wasn't that I wanted to have sex with them or anything. If I wasn't going to make love with my favorite companion, I certainly wasn't going to have sex with total strangers.

But that didn't mean they weren't beautiful.

One of the men seemed especially somber and my missionary instincts jumped in again. Maybe I could make this man happy by giving him the gospel. I'd go over and get a referral to make up for my lustful thoughts. I took one step forward and stopped, feeling I had approached these men somewhere before.

What an odd feeling. Then, shaking the thought out of my mind, I continued over.

"Buona sera," I said, smiling and offering my hand. "Have you ever wondered where you'll go when this life is over?" It was one of our standard approaches. We asked outrageous questions that baited people to answer. Once they had, they were trapped in a conversation.

The men looked at each other nervously, grabbed their suitcases, and hurried out of the station. How curious, I thought. Elder Cooper shrugged and pointed to his book, so we left the building and headed back for our bench. A pigeon flew over and dropped a spot of white right where I'd been sitting. We kept walking.

We walked several blocks until we came to the Pantheon, where we ordered a cheap acqua minerale from a nearby café and sat at an iron table with a stained marble top, sipping while we continued to read in the shade of the ancient building. After only fifteen minutes, though, Elder Cooper cleared his throat. "Elder Shaw," he said, "I think we need to have Companion Inventory."

I looked up in surprise. Inventories were usually saved for times elders were angry with one another and needed to clear the air. “What’s up, Anziano?”

Elder Cooper looked at me and took a deep breath. He calmly closed his eyes and then looked at me again. “Don’t you ever just want to run away?” he asked.

I frowned. “What do you mean? Leave the mission and go home?”

He shook his head. “I mean, run off to Aquila or Castel Gandolfo or someplace where there aren’t any Mormons, mix in with the Italians. Run off and live a normal life.”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing this. It was something I had in fact fantasized about many times as I was falling asleep in an apartment full of elders, but it wasn’t the kind of thing you admitted to another missionary. In my fantasies, I thought of passing myself off as Italian and never talking to another American again. But while we were fluent in terminology related to the Church, we were still amateurs when it came to holding a normal conversation. On the one hand, I could understand the importance of focus, but on the other, I often wondered if the design was to deliberately cripple us.

“Sometimes,” I said softly.

Elder Cooper leaned forward across the tiny table, his face only inches from mine, but I didn’t pull back. “We could run off together,” he whispered. “Get jobs, share an apartment.”

“Apartments are expensive,” I protested haltingly.

“We could share a one-bedroom.” He paused. “Share a bed if we have to.”

My heart began beating rapidly, amazed and thrilled and frightened by the conversation. And yet at the same time, I couldn’t knock the feeling we’d already had this talk. Perhaps I’d dreamed it. I did still have nocturnal emissions sometimes, more often the past couple of months. But that wasn’t really it, was it?

Such an odd feeling. Dreams so often dissipated within seconds of waking up. I hoped I hadn’t forgotten a warning from heaven trying to keep me pure. I stared at my companion, wanting desperately to lean back toward him the remaining few inches and kiss him full on the lips.

Mary Lennox made her own magic.

“Let’s go to Piazza Navona,” I said, pushing my chair back and standing. “I’ll splurge and treat us to dinner.” I smiled. “We don’t get to eat dinner often enough.”

“Is that a yes?” asked Elder Cooper.

I laughed nervously. “We’ll talk more later.”

When we made it to the square, there were already lots of people milling about. It was still relatively early in the evening, but the tables at the restaurants lining the square were mostly filled. A man juggled fire in one part of the square as locals and tourists watched together in admiration. A young woman in another area sang “Maledetta Primavera” to a group nodding approvingly.

Other people gazed at the churches or at the Fountain of the Four Rivers.

“Hey, look.” I put my hand on Elder Cooper’s arm. “There are those guys again.” I nodded toward the two olive-skinned Italians we’d seen earlier at Termini, now standing near the fountain.

“They’re not interested, Elder Shaw,” my companion replied.

“I’m not going to do an approach,” I assured him. “Just going to say hi.” I walked up to the two men with a smile and waved. I wondered for a second if they might be gay, too. Perhaps they could help Cooper and me figure out how to navigate our future.

But instead, Hell unleashed itself in full fury, and we were cast immediately into Outer Darkness.

The alarm went off at 6:30 and I stumbled out of bed toward my desk. Back in the MTC, I’d had a top bunk and would jump to the floor so lightly in the morning to turn off my clock that my companion called me “The Cat.” These days, I just plodded loudly across the granite floor, pushing my chair out of the way with a loud screech. I could hear Elder Cooper groan from his bed on the other side of the room. Thank heavens we could sleep in till 6:30 now. If we prayed hard enough, maybe we could get Heavenly Father to persuade the mission president to push the time back to 7:00.

I hurried to the bathroom, but I was already too late. With one zone leader in the shower and the other standing before the toilet, I was out of luck. Elder Walker grinned at me sardonically and said, “The Lord blesses those who take the initiative to wake up early.”

“Your mother must have told you you were special every single day as you were growing up,” I said.

Elder Walker’s face hardened, and for a moment, I thought he was going to spray me with the last of his stream. I nodded a pleasant goodbye and went on to the kitchen, where I poured myself some Corn Flakes. They’d never been my favorite cereal, but it was the only option I’d ever found in Italy. There were two entire aisles in the local grocery featuring several dozen different kinds of pasta, but only one single type of cereal was available. Naturally, the most boring kind, leading me to start off every morning day after day after day with soggy flakes.

As I was pouring milk from a fresh triangle onto my cereal, Elder Walker came into the kitchen and bumped up against me. Milk splashed onto the table.

“Sorry,” he said coldly.

I used my hand to brush the milk onto the floor.

“What the flip are you doing?”

“It’ll be easier for you to mop that way,” I said.

“I’m going to report you for insubordination, Elder Shaw.”

“Oh, dear, do you think they’ll take away my stripes?”

Elder Walker flicked the last bit of milk from the table into my face and stormed out of the kitchen. I wiped the liquid off my eyelid and flicked it back onto the floor. A moment later, Elder Cooper staggered into the room moaning. “I need coffee.”

I smiled. “Hang in there, buddy. I’ll get you a Coke when we leave the apartment.”

I gulped down the rest of my cereal and tried to beat Walker to the shower, but just as I was about to climb in, he rushed through the door and pushed me aside. “Ha!” he said triumphantly, pulling the shower curtain closed in front of my face.

I thought of returning to my bedroom and getting started on the morning’s studies, but instead I stood right by the shower curtain, humming “Ye Elders of Israel.” After a couple of minutes, Elder Walker jerked the curtain back. “And just what do you think you’re doing?”

“Killing two birds with one stone,” I replied.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m waiting for my turn. And I’m making sure you don’t do anything in the shower I’ll have to report later to the president.”

“You little—”

“Is it my turn yet?” I started putting one foot over the edge of the tub.

“Get the fuck out of—” Elder Walker clapped a hand over his mouth in horror at a moral lapse too great even for him.

“Did you say something about fucking?” I asked, pointing to his penis, which for some reason had started to grow, probably from all the “dirty” talk. He jumped out of the tub, grabbed his towel, and rushed off to his room. I stepped into the tub and started washing my hair.

I had no idea what had gotten into me. I often thought about doing things like that, but I rarely actually did them. I wasn't sure I even liked this new me or not. I was being exceptionally obnoxious, which was bad, but I wasn't putting up with his crap anymore, which was good. But if you added -9 and +9, you still came out with zero.

During Quiet Hour, I watched Elder Cooper put on his headphones. We were forbidden from listening to anything other than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but he'd smuggled some Springsteen and The Cars into the apartment when he was transferred in from Pescara. Elder Walker sometimes did spot checks on Preparation Day, so the only time my companion could listen in peace was during Quiet Hour.

I read several pages of the Book of Mormon, even more boring the seventh time through, and then tapped Cooper on the shoulder when it was time to get ready for Devotional. We made some plans, shared them with the other elders, and sang the closing hymn at the end of our meeting. We ran out of the apartment the second the

closing prayer was finished and grabbed a Coke at the corner bar before heading to the bus stop.

As we rode along, my companion looked out the window as usual while I simply focused on him, admiring his profile. You couldn't see the slight turn at the end of his nose from the side. But the truth was, he looked pretty good from any angle.

Several images of him from a variety of angles, unclothed, filled my mind, and I quickly offered up a prayer of repentance.

A few minutes later, we stepped off the bus at Villa Torlonia. A man hurried past in one direction and two women passed us in the other. I had a brief sensation of déjà vu and then tried to clear my head, breathing deeply to let the fresh air in. With a broad smile, I looked up at the morning sunlight streaming through the leaves. I was in Rome. Even on days when I had to deal with Elder Walker, I was still in Rome.

But why me? Why hadn't Heavenly Father sent me to North Dakota, like he'd sent my cousin?

Elder Cooper found a bench and sat down with a peaceful expression that somehow still excited me. But I had work to do, even if my companion was taking the morning off. I looked about for someone to approach and saw a young man reading a book. I walked over and asked, "Che leggi?" in my friendliest voice.

The man did not seem to recognize my friendliness. He held up the book, showing me the front cover. *The*

Bourne Identity: Un nome senza volto. Some kind of spy thriller.

I suddenly felt a pang of longing. My MTC companion had been in Napoli One last November during that huge earthquake which killed three thousand people. My trainer had told me about a time he witnessed a kidnapping in Sardegna. I always wished I could have some type of adventure myself. Not something as awful as those things, of course. I wanted to catch a bomber or shooter and save everyone he was about to kill.

Be the hero I never was as a missionary. The two people I'd baptized so far were already inactive.

Of course, I was probably no good at conversions because Heavenly Father was the one person I couldn't keep a secret from. He knew I fantasized about Elder Cooper. I looked back at him now and nodded. Yep. I'd give up the rest of my life for just one day of complete honesty with this man. You couldn't call down the Holy Spirit with that attitude.

I turned back to the young man reading his book and decided to leave him alone for now. Why in the world did we keep pestering people who clearly had no interest in our message? Someone had once said that a Buddhapest was someone who never stopped talking about Buddhism. So what were Mormon missionaries called? Missioneri?

Agents of blackness.

Well, perhaps that was a bit much. Still, it was hard to face knowing that people thought of you as bad news every

time they saw you spreading the “gospel.” I wanted to do something useful. Help tourists cross the street perhaps. Or clean up the messes dogs left all over the city sidewalks. Maybe even clean a church.

I frowned, feeling another wave of déjà vu.

Elder Cooper and I relaxed the rest of the morning, strolling through the park and sitting on various benches to get new perspectives on the other folks enjoying their morning. On one bench, Elder Cooper placed his hand so that it lightly rested against mine, just barely touching. I knew any normal guy would move his hand, but I couldn't. It felt too good. After a few minutes, I shifted on the bench, pushing my own hand ever so slightly more against his.

We arrived back at the apartment just after 1:30, Elder Walker demanding from the kitchen to know how many referrals we'd gathered.

“Abbiamo got due!” Elder Cooper yelled back. This appropriately irritated Walker but he still served a delicious meal of tortellini.

When everyone was finished, it was my companion's turn to wash dishes. I ran to my desk to get my faded purple copy of *Italian for Missionaries* and joined him again in the kitchen so we could get in some Dual Study time. We reviewed the imperfect subjunctive. I watched his ass as we studied.

“Anziano,” I said a little later on our way to the bus stop, “do you mind if we don't go tracting tonight? I'm in the mood for more hooky.”

“Tu are the piú fun collega I’ve ever avuto.”

I was just about to make some retort about how annoying he could be when suddenly he leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. We stared at each other in shock, and then we both smiled at the same time. I had a sense that I’d known all along Elder Cooper was gay, even before the kiss, even before the touch in the park. Odd, really, but now that we did know for sure...

How was that going to change anything? We were still Mormon.

We headed downtown to a bookstore, where I bought a copy of *Il giardino segreto* and Cooper bought a copy of *Guerre stellari*. I couldn’t face going all the way back to the park, so we just found a bench near the Stazione Termini and started reading.

I watched nervously at the hundreds of pigeons flying overhead. I’d had a perfectly good copy of a Book of Mormon in Italian ruined once as we passed the station on our way to an appointment at a nearby pensione. A thousand lire down the drain. I could have bought a gelato with that. Or a piece of pizza bianca.

Elder Cooper and I read in silence, enjoying the simplicity of sitting next to each other. I could get used to this. We could make our own secret garden somewhere. The endless possibilities started filling my mind, and then blood started filling my member, so I reluctantly turned back to my book. After we’d been reading a couple of

hours, I felt Elder Cooper's hand brush gently over my hair. Despite enjoying the touch, I jumped in surprise.

"There was a fly on you," my companion explained calmly. He grinned, and I knew he was lying through his teeth.

"Oh!" I returned, gently caressing his hair in return. "You had one, too."

We stared at each other a moment, neither of us knowing what to do next. Finally, I suggested we take a break and head into the station for a few minutes. We walked into the main room, lined with ticket stations along the wall separating the main area from the platforms. I watched an older man as he pickpocketed a younger man trying to get something out of a machine. I frowned, instinctively covering my front pocket where I kept my wallet. An older woman lifted her skirt when a businessman walked by.

Were Elder Cooper and I facing a future of our own degeneracy? Were we just like them now?

My companion put his hand on my arm and, still surprised by male contact, I bolted from the gnashing of teeth that his touch promised. But I ran straight into two other people, attractive young men with dark complexions.

"Uffa! Mi dispiace!" I muttered. I held out my hand. "Anziano Shaw. That's my companion, Anziano Cooper."

One of the men looked as if he was about to say something, and then both grabbed their suitcases and hurried out of the building.

“Are you OK, Elder?” my companion asked.

I laughed. “Other than being an idiot, I think so.” I shook my head. “Let’s go to the Pantheon and get some acqua minerale.”

Elder Cooper nodded. “I have something I want to tell you anyway.”

We left the building, and as we passed the bench where we’d been reading earlier, I watched a pigeon fly over and drop a spot of white right where I’d been sitting. I paused for a second, feeling that odd sense of déjà vu again before we continued on.

It was all I could do not to grab Elder Cooper’s hand like a teenager heading to the ice cream parlor. We ordered our water and found a seat at an iron table with a marble top. I took a deep sip, enjoying the sensation of slight burning in my throat.

“What did you want to say?” I asked.

Elder Cooper stared at the stained tabletop a moment and then returned his gaze to my face. “Would you still like me if I didn’t finish my mission?”

A brief pause. “Yes,” I answered.

“Would you still like me if I left the Church?”

A slightly longer pause. “Of course.”

Now it was Cooper’s turn to pause. “Would you still like yourself if you didn’t finish your mission and *you* left the Church?” He was looking down at the tabletop again.

So this was the kind of proposals gay men received, I thought. Not quite as romantic as what I had dreamed all these years when I allowed myself to hope for the impossible. I reached over and took Elder Cooper’s hands.

I felt suddenly disoriented, as if my inner ears were no longer working. Just yesterday, I would have chosen death before letting anyone else on the entire planet know my secret. And today, it almost seemed like a non-issue, as if I’d had this conversation a dozen times already.

Almost. Though I knew saying yes condemned me to an eternity of regret.

But perhaps also to a lifetime of happiness. My family wouldn’t be thrilled, but we hardly lived in the days of arranged marriages. I could choose my own mate.

“Only if I get dibs to the right side of the bed,” I said.

Elder Cooper looked up at me. “Call me Greg, Eric.” He smiled.

“Let’s go to Piazza Navona,” I said. “I’ll treat us to dinner.”

When we made it to the square, there were already lots of people milling about. It was still relatively early, but the tables at the restaurants lining the square were mostly

filled. A man juggled fire at the far end of the square while a young woman sang “Maledetta Primavera” closer to us. People were sitting near the fountain, gazing at the statue and chatting.

“Ecco.” I put my hand on Elder Cooper’s arm. “There are those guys again.” It was the two olive-skinned Italians from the train station. For a second, I almost thought I knew their names, though I’d clearly never seen them before this afternoon.

“Are you going to spend the evening with me or with strangers?” Elder Cooper said, taking my hand off his arm and clasping it gently.

I laughed. “You have my full attention,” I said.

“That’s the right answer,” he replied. “I might have had to report you to the mission president if you’d said anything else.” He stuck his tongue out at me.

I leaned forward and put my mouth around his tongue, and we stood there by the fountain kissing for what seemed an eternity. We found a seat at the restaurant closest to us and were halfway through our meal when the world suddenly exploded around us.

The alarm went off at 6:30 and I stumbled out of bed toward my desk, listening to my companion groan on the other side of the room. After pulling up the serranda, I felt pressure in my bladder and hurried to the bathroom, but I was already too late. Elder Walker was urinating like a

fountain into the toilet, an expression of triumph on his face. “The Lord blesses those who take the initiative to wake up early,” he said.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Say something original once in a while.”

Elder Walker’s face hardened, and for a moment, I thought he might turn around and pee right on me. I left and walked a few feet down the hall to the kitchen, where I poured some Corn Flakes into a bowl, added some sugar, and then opened a new triangle of milk. That was odd, I thought. Hadn’t I just opened a new container yesterday?

Seconds later, I heard Elder Walker come into the kitchen and quickly moved my arm out of his way. Elder Walker bumped into the table and grunted.

“Fool me once,” I said.

With a brief snort, he turned around and left the kitchen. I looked back at him and frowned. Elder Cooper joined me a few moments later and I shared my cereal. “Thanks, comp,” he said, still only half awake.

“Anything for you, buddy.”

He smiled and I so wanted to tousle his hair. Our eyes locked for a moment, and then we both looked away. What an odd tension in the air this morning, I thought.

I left to take a shower, but Elder Walker beat me to it, so I just started my morning studies instead. First was a review of the missionary discussions that we taught our investigators. We used them so rarely that if we didn’t

review them constantly, we'd forget them. Next came my shower, with only tepid water by this point. I hurried so my companion wouldn't have only cold water left for his turn. Finally, it was Quiet Hour, when even Elder Walker wasn't allowed to talk to us.

After Devotional, Cooper and I hurried out of the apartment, grabbed a Coke at the corner bar, and headed over to the park on Via Nomentana. As we stepped off the 36, a man walked by in one direction while two women passed us in the other. I looked at my companion and frowned.

“What?” he said.

“I guess it's just *déjà vu*,” I replied. But it was an unnerving, unsettling feeling. It passed, though, as soon as we entered the park. I breathed in the morning air and closed my eyes. I was in Rome. Glorious, wonderful Rome. Even Elder Walker couldn't ruin an experience like this. And my companion and I were going to take things easy today. Kind of a half P-Day. A mini-vacation. Those always felt even better on work days. And it seemed I was doing it more and more lately. Perhaps in a few weeks, when the water warmed up a little, we could sneak a swim in Lake Albano. At least make some lifelong memories before we parted for good.

I frowned.

Elder Cooper found a bench and sat down, lifting his face to the sun and closing his eyes in ecstasy. I felt a tingle in my groin as I started thinking about ways I could make

him show me that expression in our bedroom after everyone else went to sleep. Those kinds of wicked thoughts usually made me feel guilty, but today they just made me feel a deeper longing. Perhaps I was already “past feeling,” as the scriptures said. Gay people always ended up in the gutter, didn’t they?

I decided I’d better do at least a little work while Elder Cooper relaxed. I saw a young man on a nearby bench reading a book and walked over to him, giving a little sigh as I braced myself for the interaction. Hadn’t I done this a thousand times already in the past twenty months?

No one ever warned new elders that the next two years might be the most boring of their lives. For every one-hour trip through the Coliseum or five-minute ride past the aqueduct, there were six full weeks of missionary drudgery. “Che leggi?” I asked in my friendliest tone.

I could feel the irritation emanating from the man and almost stepped back. He held up the book, showing me the front cover. *The Bourne Identity: Un nome senza volto*. I nodded. I remembered that lots of Italians believed Mormons were CIA agents. If only it were true, I thought. “Sounds good. I’ll put it on my list.” I walked off and joined my companion on the bench, confused.

I had an uncanny feeling I’d had that encounter before. And it meant something.

Spies? Or secret agents? Or terrorists? Maybe undercover police? I wasn’t sure, but there was something strange about it. I felt a tickling at the back of my brain, an

idea or glimmer of something that was about to happen. What was it? Something about a train? Maybe a bomb?

For a brief second, I saw an explosion. Something I'd dreamed about last night. Had I been given a vision of some terrible event about to happen? I struggled to remember but couldn't. Perhaps it was too difficult for Heavenly Father to communicate with someone as degenerate as I was.

I did feel a brief moment of guilt at that realization and then shrugged. I was probably just having a nervous breakdown because all I could think about the past few weeks was running off with Elder Cooper. Being wicked weakened a person's mind.

If I couldn't be a good Mormon, though, maybe I could settle for being a decent person. Perhaps I should spend some time each day helping tourists cross the street. Or picking up dog feces on the sidewalks. Maybe even helping clean a Catholic church.

Flip. I hugged myself, feeling frightened for some unfathomable reason. Elder Cooper opened his eyes. "Stai bene?"

"I...I don't know."

Elder Cooper reached over and hesitantly took my hand. I looked down at our interlocking fingers. How had he known I wouldn't slug him? I squeezed his hand back.

"Something's happening," I said.

Elder Cooper smiled but didn't say anything in response.

We returned to the apartment on Franco Sacchetti just after 1:30, and Elder Walker immediately demanded we tell him how many referrals we'd taken.

"Abbiamo got due," Elder Cooper called back. I looked at him oddly.

Then Walker served us tortellini again. I stared in confusion at the twisted lumps filling my spoon. Two days in a row? Elder Walker always tried to be irritating. If he'd known I loved tortellini, though, he'd have found a different way to annoy me. It was my second favorite Italian meal. Lasagna was the one I saved for truly special occasions, but tortellini was a close second. I ate another mouthful, enjoying the flavor, yet feeling that there was something wrong I couldn't quite put my finger on.

While Elder Cooper washed the dishes, we spent some time reviewing the imperfect subjunctive and then some new vocabulary. Culo, un buco di culo, cazzo, coglioni, capezzolo, sborra, chiavare.

Cooper dropped a dish in the sink, but thankfully, it didn't break. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"I...I just thought we ought to know all the words for our own body parts," I said. "What if we have to go to the doctor sometime and we can't even describe what's wrong?"

Elder Cooper raised an eyebrow and put one hand on his hip. “And just what problems do you foresee with your nipple?”

I didn’t want to tell him I thought he might bite it too hard one day. And that it still might not be hard enough. I felt as if I’d been thinking about how much I loved him, and about sex, and about running away, for ages. We’d only been together nine weeks. Thank goodness we’d just made it past another transfer. We’d be together at least another month.

But I didn’t want to be with him another month. I wanted to be with him the rest of my life.

A brief image of flames filled my mind and then disappeared.

What if the rest of my life wasn’t very long?

Urgenza, audacia, intrepido.

We left the apartment at 3:30 and headed to a bookstore downtown, where we each bought a book, a ridiculous splurge. Then we made our way to the train station and found a bench outside where we could read in the spring sunshine. I watched as a heavy zingara demanded money from a man who’d just come out of the pensione where we’d taught an impoverished family a few weeks ago.

I stole a glance at the station and then looked up nervously at the hundreds of pigeons flying nearby. I tried to read but couldn’t stay focused and kept looking at

Termini. As the name suggested, it wasn't really a station but a terminal. It was massive, with thirty-two platforms. I'd been here a dozen times. We sometimes rode the local trains to Velletri and Albano and Frascati on P-Day.

I wanted to live in Frascati with Elder Cooper, maybe get a job at the observatory. I'd be happy as a janitor or portiere as long as I was with Cooper. But was Frascati far enough away from other Mormons to be safe?

It would have to be.

"Let's take a break and go inside for a bit," I said after a while. We went into the main room and watched the bustle of people. One woman stole a small suitcase from another woman without breaking her stride. A man begging for money was ignored by everyone while a woman lifting her skirt received all the attention she wanted. I saw two attractive young men talking seriously to each other and wondered if I should try to get at least one referral for the day.

I started to approach and then stopped myself. Something was wrong. I had a sudden vision of this moment being played over and over and over, as if we were in a sealing room at the temple, with facing mirrors on opposite walls. If I looked in one direction, I saw images of the room going backward indefinitely. If I looked in the other, I saw them stretching ahead for eternity.

But in each of the hundreds of mirrors, I kept seeing the same image again and again and again. A static eternity.

I felt a sudden conviction that these men were the key to my future. “Buona sera,” I said, smiling and offering my hand. “Have you ever wondered...” I felt too confused to go on. The men looked at each other nervously. I realized I must seem like someone quite mentally ill. The men grabbed their suitcases and hurried out of the building.

But something wasn’t right. Those men had been up to something. Were they going to plant a bomb and leave? That was the kind of thing the Red Brigades did. I thought back to the book in the park this morning. These guys were spies, or agents, or...or something. I knew it with every fiber of my being. I—I had a testimony of it.

“Are you OK, Anziano?”

I turned to Elder Cooper and smiled. “We need to have Companion Inventory,” I said. “A long one. Let’s go over to the Pantheon.”

“Good. I have something I want to talk about, too.”

We walked out of the terminal, and as we passed the bench we’d been sitting on earlier, a pigeon flew over and dropped a spot of white right where I’d been sitting. We kept walking.

I bought two glasses of acqua Ferrarelle, the best mineral water available, and we sat at a table with a stained marble top. We each took a sip and then Elder Cooper said, “What’s up?”

I smiled. “I know it’s not fair, buddy, since I called the Inventory, but I’d really like you to go first.”

He frowned, took another sip, and set his bottle down. “All right,” he said. “It’s a bit awkward to just come right out and say it. But...” He took a deep breath. “...what do you think about running away with me?”

I nodded. I’d known that was what he was going to suggest. I saw today happening over and over in my mind, each day the same but slightly different. Something momentous had happened. Somehow, Heavenly Father was making me relive this day until I got it right. Had I said yes to Elder Cooper before? Had I said no? I couldn’t think what I was supposed to do to correct our course.

“Well? Don’t leave me hanging.”

“Elder Cooper,” I said slowly, “I don’t know if you’re aware of what’s happening.”

He frowned. “You’re falling in love with me, aren’t you? I’ve been trying my hardest for weeks.”

“We’re in some kind of time loop. This day is repeating. For all we know, we’ve lived this day dozens of times already, maybe hundreds.” I didn’t understand enough science to know if it were possible. Even Joseph Smith never talked about such things. But angels could transport across the galaxy instantly in a beam of light.

Elder Cooper looked at me, still frowning, and then looked about him at the Pantheon and the patrons at the other tables. He turned back to me again.

“Yes,” I said, answering his question. I reached forward and took his hand. “I knew you were special the

moment you were assigned to Rome Four. In the two months since, we've become exceptionally good friends. And lately, I want to be more than that."

My companion smiled nervously. My words might have been comforting, but I doubted my tone was.

"But today—it's as if today I've become absolutely committed to marrying you. How can that happen in just one day?"

"You want to marry me?"

I nodded. "Well, move in together and start a life with you. Make cannelloni together. Scopare insieme. I love you."

"Then everything is wonderful!" he said, pulling me close and kissing me firmly, prying open my lips. It was my very first kiss. I'd never even kissed a girl before. Feeling Cooper's tongue in my mouth was the most wondrous thing I'd ever experienced, and yet, it felt as if I'd done this a hundred times before. "The stake patriarch was right when he said a mission would change my life!"

I finally pulled away. "But something's wrong," I went on.

He cocked his head like a dog.

"We're not going to make it past today. We're going to keep living it over and over."

Cooper's brows furrowed. "What's wrong with reliving today? The day you told me you loved me? Could

there be a better day than this?” He spread his arms out as if to encompass the world.

“Yes,” I said softly. “The day after.”

My companion looked at me uncertainly but smiled anyway.

“Come on,” I said, standing up. “Let’s go have dinner on Piazza Navona. My treat.”

We removed our name tags so we could walk along the street holding hands. If anyone looked at us funny, we didn’t notice. I peered up at the architecture of each building we passed, smiled at the Vespas whizzing past, smelled the city air. Perhaps we’d done this a hundred times as well but holding hands with the man I loved felt like something that could never be boring.

The Mormon doctrine of eternal marriage, one of the foundational principles of the Church, had always seemed a bit daunting. I didn’t want to marry a woman at all, but even assuming I did, did I really want to be with anyone at all for two million years? For three trillion? For fifty-five gazillion?

Looking at Elder Cooper, I realized I did.

“Greg,” I said, “you should start calling me Eric.”

“Are we leaving tonight, Eric?”

“We’ll pack what we need and head out around five in the morning in our P-Day clothes before the others get up. Go to Stazione Termini and catch a train to Frascati. We’ll

figure out what to do from there.” I wondered how many times we’d made these plans, wondered what was going to happen to stop them and send us through the loop yet again.

I remembered asking my bishop back home how eternity was possible. I could almost understand the future never ending, but I could never wrap my head around infinity going into the past. Didn’t it have to start at some point? Even if it did, though, what existed before? And if there were an infinite number of years behind us, how did we ever finally reach the present?

My bishop had smiled benevolently and said, “Eternity is a ring. A gold wedding band that has no beginning and no end.”

A loop, I realized now. All time was a loop. Some loops were bigger and some were smaller, but it was all measured in loops. Somehow, our love had trapped us in a very tiny loop. Perhaps this was our punishment for choosing apostasy and wickedness, to keep reliving the day we made our most sinful decision. Maybe we weren’t even actually alive anymore but already in Outer Darkness, living out our condemnation throughout infinity.

As if holding Greg’s hand every day could ever feel like punishment. Even eternity in Hell couldn’t truly be bad, if Greg and I were there together.

So what power did God really have over us?

It was early evening, but there were already lots of people milling about. The tables at the restaurants lining

the square were mostly filled, but I could wait for hours if necessary to celebrate our betrothal. Greg pointed to a man juggling fire, and I heard a woman singing “Maledetta Primavera” in a clear, beautiful voice.

Cursed springtime.

“Hey, look.” I put my hand on Greg’s arm. “There are those guys again.” I nodded toward the two olive-skinned men we’d seen earlier at Termini, now standing near the fountain.

“You’re not going to ask them the Golden Questions, are you?” Greg said wearily.

I suddenly felt as if all the air had been squeezed out of me.

I knew.

“Are you all right, Eric?” He shook his head slowly, a tiny smile on his lips. “Using your real name all the time is going to take some getting used to.” He put his hand on my back and repeated his question, serious again.

“It’s them,” I whispered.

“You already said that.”

“No,” I explained carefully, “they’re bombers. They’re not tourists looking for a hotel. Those suitcases are bombs.”

“Eric.”

“For pity’s sake, how many days have I known this?” I wanted to slap myself.

“If that’s true,” Greg said slowly, “what are we going to do? What did you do before? Eric...”

I looked at the men, and looked at Greg, and looked at the people all around us. What if the loop didn’t repeat again? What if this was my last chance to get it right? I wondered how many chances anyone ever had, for any of the hundred monumental decisions we all had to make throughout our lives.

Sometimes, we only got one.

What hadn’t I tried before? Maybe we should simply turn and run. Maybe the next time around, I’d understand what was happening in time to call the police. Perhaps fifty loops from now, I’d figure out something even better.

My heart was pounding, but all I could think about was why Heavenly Father hadn’t just let Greg and me die the first time we were killed. We’d have still been virgins, still have been committed to the gospel instead of each other. We might still have made it to the Celestial Kingdom. There was no merciful reason to let us survive, time after time after time.

Greg squeezed my hand and suddenly felt safe.

I looked again at the two men with their suitcases. Maybe the explosion about to come somehow split the fabric of time. Maybe similar loops developed every time a plane crashed or a volcano blew.

Perhaps hundreds of disasters over the years had already been prevented and no one was the wiser. Except the lone person at the scene who'd mysteriously been chosen to act.

It was like trying to understand why Heavenly Father had commanded Nephi to kill an unarmed, defenseless man.

Oh, my God, I suddenly realized. *He didn't.*

How long had I known that?

"Love has to be stronger than hate," I said.

"Huh?"

I almost laughed, my profound understanding of the universe merely a repetition of what every wise person throughout the millennia had already stated over and over.

"Stai bene, Eric?"

"I remember something."

Greg looked at me expectantly.

"Their names are Luca and Gianni," I said. "I remember." At some point, I must have gotten a few sentences into a conversation. Remarkable given their apparent skittishness. But I'd obviously still said the wrong thing sooner or later. I looked at the men talking quietly to each other. There was something...something I needed to figure out that I'd missed every other time. I'd already suspected they were gay, but...

“Hurry up,” Greg urged. “They can set those bombs off any minute.” Sweet how he believed me without any evidence whatsoever. Was that faith?

I shook my head. “The Red Brigades don’t blow themselves up unless they have to. These guys are here to blow everybody up.”

“Please say something that doesn’t make me feel even worse every time you open your mouth.”

I pulled him close and hugged him. “Perhaps you should move farther away.”

“Are you kidding me?”

I looked at the two men again, wondering what it took to help someone choose life over death. What had it taken me?

“Gianni!” I shouted. “Luca!” I gave the friendliest wave I could muster, showing a big smile. I nudged Greg.

“Ciao, Gianni!” Greg shouted. “Ciao, Luca!”

The two men frowned.

Don’t approach them, I told myself. Don’t spook them. But how could I possibly shout what I needed to say, with two dozen other people listening to every word?

“Questo uomo ed io siamo diventati amanti oggi!” I shouted. This man and I became lovers today. Shouted out like the “good news” from missionaries of old on street corners. “I know you guys are in love, too.” I had no idea

how I knew that, but I just went with it, whether it was intuition, knowledge, or a desperate guess. “We have a *lot* to talk about.”

The two men turned to each other in confusion, and then stared at the others around us who looking back at them with amusement. They looked as if they wanted to run.

“Abbiate fede,” I said, waving them toward us. “Let’s order some lasagna.” I grabbed Greg’s hand and held it high for them to see. We had a life full of repetition ahead of us. Making love night after night. Going to work day after day. Watching TV, taking walks, cooking dinner, washing clothes, being bored, being excited, a whole lifetime of sameness and ever so slight difference. A lifetime of loops before an eternity of them.

I almost laughed, thinking of the first time I heard “Sunrise, Sunset.” And the second time. And the third.

If this doesn’t work, I prayed quietly, please, Heavenly Father, give us just one more chance to fall in love again.

The two men near the Four Rivers still looked confused and worried, perhaps even embarrassed, but they nodded to each other hesitantly and, holding tightly onto their suitcases, started walking toward us.

About the Author

Johnny Townsend earned an MFA in fiction writing from Louisiana State University. He was also awarded a BA and MA in English, as well as a BS in Biology. A native of New Orleans, Townsend relocated to Seattle in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

After attending a Baptist high school for four years as a teenager, he volunteered as a Mormon missionary in Italy and then held positions in his local New Orleans ward as Second Councilor in the Elders Quorum, Ward Single Adult Representative, Stake Single Adult Chair, Sunday School Teacher, Stake Missionary, and Ward Membership Clerk.

In the secular world, Townsend worked as a bookstore clerk, a college English instructor, a bank teller, a loan processor, a mail carrier, a library associate, a receptionist, and a professional escort. He worked selling bus passes, installing insulation, delivering pizza, cleaning residential construction sites, rehabilitating developmentally disabled adults, surveying gas stations, translating documents from Italian into English, preparing surgical carts for medical teams, and performing experiments on rat brains in a physiology lab.

Townsend has published stories and essays in *Newsday*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *Bay Area Reporter*, *The Army Times*, *The Humanist*, *The Progressive*, *Medical Reform*, *Christopher Street*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Sunstone*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, in the anthologies *Queer Fish*, *Off the Rocks*, *Moth and Rust*, *The Kindness of Strangers*, and *In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions*. He helped edit *Latter-Gay Saints*, a collection of stories about gay Mormons, and he is the author of over 50 books.

Most of those books are collections of Mormon short stories, of which several were named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. In addition to his Mormon stories, Townsend has written several M/M romances and a collection of Jewish stories, *The Golem of Rabbi Loew*.

He has also written one non-fiction book, *Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire*, having interviewed survivors as well as friends and relatives of the 32 people who were killed when an arsonist set fire to a gay bar in the French Quarter of New Orleans on Gay Pride Day in 1973. He is an Associate Producer of the feature-length documentary *Upstairs Inferno*, directed by Robert Camina.

Johnny Townsend is married to Gary Tolman, another former Mormon who worked in the same mission in Italy. They still speak Italian to each other regularly.

Books by Johnny Townsend

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed this book, could you please take a few minutes to write a review online? Reviews are helpful both to me as an author and to other readers, so we'd all sincerely appreciate your writing one! And if you did enjoy the book, here are some others I've written you might want to look up:

Mormon Underwear

God's Gargoyles

The Circumcision of God

Sex among the Saints

Dinosaur Perversions

Zombies for Jesus

The Abominable Gayman

The Gay Mormon Quilter's Club

The Golem of Rabbi Loew

Mormon Fairy Tales

Flying over Babel

Marginal Mormons

Mormon Bullies

The Mormon Victorian Society

Dragons of the Book of Mormon

Selling the City of Enoch

A Day at the Temple

Behind the Zion Curtain

Gayrabian Nights

Lying for the Lord

Despots of Deseret

Missionaries Make the Best Companions

Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers

The Tyranny of Silence

Sex on the Sabbath

The Washing of Brains

The Mormon Inquisition

Interview with a Mission President

Weeping, Wailing, and Gnashing of Teeth

Behind the Bishop's Door

The Moat around Zion

The Last Days Linger

Mormon Madness

Human Compassion for Beginners

Dead Mankind Walking

Who Invited You to the Orgy?

Breaking the Promise of the Promised Land

I Will, Through the Veil

Am I My Planet's Keeper?

Have Your Cum and Eat It, Too

Strangers with Benefits

What Would Anne Frank Do?

This Is All Just Too Hard

Glory to the Glory Hole!

My Pre-Bucket List

Blessed Are the Firefighters

Wake Up and Smell the Missionaries

Quilting Beyond the Rainbow

Gay Sleeping Arrangements

Queer Quilting

Racism by Proxy

Orgy at the STD Clinic

Life Is Better with Love

Let the Faggots Burn: The UpStairs Lounge Fire

Latter-Gay Saints: An Anthology of Gay Mormon Fiction (co-editor)

Available from BookLocker.com or your favorite online or neighborhood bookstore.

Wondering what some of those other books are about? Read on!

Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers

During the Apocalypse, a group of Mormon survivors in Hurricane, Utah gather in the home of the Relief Society president, telling stories to pass the time as they ration their food storage and await the Second Coming. But this is no ordinary group of Mormons—or perhaps it is. They are the faithful, feminist, gay, apostate, and repentant, all working together to help each other through the darkest days any of them have yet seen.

Gayrabian Nights

Gayrabian Nights is a twist on the well-known classic, *1001 Arabian Nights*, in which Scheherazade, under the threat of death if she ceases to captivate King Shahryar's attention, enchants him through a series of mysterious, adventurous, and romantic tales.

In this variation, a male escort, invited to the hotel room of a closeted, homophobic Mormon senator, learns that the man is poised to vote on a piece of anti-gay legislation the following morning. To prevent him from sleeping, so that the exhausted senator will miss casting his vote on the Senate floor, the escort entertains him with stories of homophobia, celibacy, mixed orientation marriages, reparative therapy,

coming out, first love, gay marriage, and long-term successful gay relationships. The escort crafts the stories to give the senator a crash course in gay culture and sensibilities, hoping to bring the man closer to accepting his own sexual orientation.

Let the Faggots Burn: The UpStairs Lounge Fire

On Gay Pride Day in 1973, someone set the entrance to a French Quarter gay bar on fire. In the terrible inferno that followed, thirty-two people lost their lives, including a third of the local congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church, their pastor burning to death halfway out a second-story window as he tried to claw his way to freedom. A mother who'd gone to the bar with her two gay sons died alongside them. A man who'd helped his friend escape first was found dead near the fire escape. Two children waited outside a movie theater across town for a father and step-father who would never pick them up. During this era of rampant homophobia, several families refused to claim the bodies, and many churches refused to bury the dead. Author Johnny Townsend pored through old records and tracked down survivors of the fire as well as relatives and friends of those

killed to compile this fascinating account of a forgotten moment in gay history.

The Abominable Gayman

What is a gay Mormon missionary doing in Italy? He is trying to save his own soul as well as the souls of others. In these tales chronicling the two-year mission of Robert Anderson, we see a young man tormented by his inability to be the man the Church says he should be. In addition to his personal hell, Anderson faces a major earthquake, organized crime, a serious bus accident, and much more. He copes with horrendous mission leaders and his own suicidal tendencies. But one day, he meets another missionary who loves him, and his world changes forever.

Missionaries Make the Best Companions

What lies behind the freshly scrubbed façades of the Mormon missionaries we see about town? In these stories, an ex-Mormon tries to seduce a faithful elder by showing him increasingly suggestive movies. A sister missionary fulfills her community service requirement by babysitting for a prostitute. Two elders break their mission rules by venturing into the forbidden French Quarter. A senior missionary couple

try to reactivate lapsed members while their own family falls apart back home. A young man hopes that serving a second full-time mission will lead him up the Church hierarchy. Two bored missionaries decide to make a little extra money moonlighting in a male stripper club. Two frustrated elders find an acceptable way to masturbate—by donating to a Fertility Clinic. A lonely man searches for the favorite companion he hasn't seen in thirty years.

The Golem of Rabbi Loew

Jacob and Esau Cohen are the closest of brothers. In fact, they're lovers. A doctor tries to combine canine genes with those of Jews, to improve their chances of surviving a hostile world. A Talmudic scholar dates an escort. A scientist tries to develop the "God spot" in the brains of his patients in order to create a messiah. The Golem of Prague is really Rabbi Loew's secret lover. While some of the Jews in Townsend's book are Orthodox, this collection of Jewish stories most certainly is not.

The Last Days Linger

The scriptures tell us that in the Last Days, wickedness will increase upon the Earth. When

leaders of the Mormon Church see a rise in the number of gay members, they believe the end is upon them. But while “wickedness never was happiness,” it begins to appear that wickedness can sometimes be divine. At least, the stories here suggest that religious proscriptions condemning homosexuality have it all wrong. While gay Mormons may be no closer to perfection than anyone else, they’re no further from it, either. And sometimes, being gay provides just the right ingredient to create saints—as flawed as God himself.

Mormon Madness

Mental illness can strike the faithful as easily as anyone else. But often religious doctrine and practice exacerbate rather than alleviate these problems. From schizophrenia to obsessive-compulsive disorder, from persecution complex to sexual dysfunction, autism to dissociative identity disorder, Mormons must cope with their mental as well as their spiritual health on a daily basis.

Am I My Planet’s Keeper?

Global Warming. Climate Change. Climate Crisis. Climate Emergency. Whatever label we use, we are

facing one of the greatest challenges to the survival of life as we know it.

But while addressing greenhouse gases is perhaps our most urgent need, it's not our only task. We must also address toxic waste, pollution, habitat destruction, and our other contributions to the world's sixth mass extinction event.

In order to do that, we must simultaneously address the unmet human needs that keep us distracted from deeper engagement in stabilizing our climate: moderating economic inequality, guaranteeing healthcare to all, and ensuring education for everyone.

And to accomplish *that*, we must unite to combat the monied forces that use fear, prejudice, and misinformation to manipulate us.

It's a daunting task. But success is our only option.

Wake Up and Smell the Missionaries

Two Mormon missionaries in Italy discover they share the same rare ability—both can emit pheromones on demand. At first, they playfully compete in the hills of Frascati to see who can tempt

“investigators” most. But soon they’re targeting each other non-stop.

Can two immature young men learn to control their “superpower” to live a normal life...and develop genuine love? Even as their relationship is threatened by the attentions of another man?

They seem just on the verge of success when a massive earthquake leaves them trapped under the rubble of their apartment in Castellammare.

With night falling and temperatures dropping, can they dig themselves out in time to save themselves? And will their injuries destroy the ability that brought them together in the first place?

Orgy at the STD Clinic

Todd Tillotson is struggling to move on after his husband is killed in a hit and run attack a year earlier during a Black Lives Matter protest in Seattle.

In this novel set entirely on public transportation, we watch as Todd, isolated throughout the pandemic, battles desperation in his attempt to safely reconnect with the world.

Will he find love again, even casual friendship, or will he simply end up another crazy old man on the bus?

Things don't look good until a man whose face he can't even see sits down beside him despite the raging variants.

And asks him a question that will change his life.

What Readers Have Said

Townsend's stories are "a gay *Portnoy's Complaint* of Mormonism. Salacious, sweet, sad, insightful, insulting, religiously ethnic, quirky-faithful, and funny."

D. Michael Quinn, author of *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*

"Told from a believably conversational first-person perspective, [*The Abominable Gayman's*] novelistic focus on Anderson's journey to thoughtful self-acceptance allows for greater character development than often seen in short stories, which makes this well-paced work rich and satisfying, and one of Townsend's strongest. An extremely important contribution to the field of Mormon fiction." Named to Kirkus Reviews' Best of 2011.

Kirkus Reviews

"The thirteen stories in *Mormon Underwear* capture this struggle [between Mormonism and homosexuality] with humor, sadness, insight, and sometimes shocking details....*Mormon Underwear* provides compelling stories, literally from the inside-out."

Niki D'Andrea, *Phoenix New Times*

“Townsend’s lively writing style and engaging characters [in *Zombies for Jesus*] make for stories which force us to wake up, smell the (prohibited) coffee, and review our attitudes with regard to reading dogma so doggedly. These are tales which revel in the individual tics and quirks which make us human, Mormon or not, gay or not...”

A.J. Kirby, *The Short Review*

“The Rift,” from *The Abominable Gayman*, is a “fascinating tale of an untenable situation...a *tour de force*.”

David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

“Pronouncing the Apostrophe,” from *The Golem of Rabbi Loew*, is “quiet and revealing, an intriguing tale...”

Sima Rabinowitz, Literary Magazine Review, *NewPages.com*

The Circumcision of God is “a collection of short stories that consider the imperfect, silenced majority of Mormons, who may in fact be [the Church’s] best hope....[The book leaves] readers regretting the church’s willingness to marginalize those who best exemplify its ideals: those who love fiercely despite all obstacles, who brave challenges at great personal risk and who always choose the hard, higher road.”

Kirkus Reviews

Johnny Townsend

In *Mormon Fairy Tales*, Johnny Townsend displays “both a wicked sense of irony and a deep well of compassion.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

Zombies for Jesus is “eerie, erotic, and magical.”

Publishers Weekly

“While [Townsend’s] many touching vignettes draw deeply from Mormon mythology, history, spirituality and culture, [*Mormon Fairy Tales*] is neither a gaudy act of proselytism nor angry protest literature from an ex-believer. Like all good fiction, his stories are simply about the joys, the hopes and the sorrows of people.”

Kirkus Reviews

“In *Let the Faggots Burn* author Johnny Townsend restores this tragic event [the UpStairs Lounge fire] to its proper place in LGBT history and reminds us that the victims of the blaze were not just ‘statistics,’ but real people with real lives, families, and friends.”

Jesse Monteagudo, *The Bilerico Project*

In *Let the Faggots Burn*, “Townsend’s heart-rending descriptions of the victims...seem to [make them] come alive once more.”

Kit Van Cleave, *OutSmart Magazine*

Marginal Mormons is “an irreverent, honest look at life outside the mainstream Mormon Church....Throughout his musings on sin and forgiveness, Townsend beautifully demonstrates his characters’ internal, perhaps irreconcilable struggles....Rather than anger and disdain, he offers an honest portrayal of people searching for meaning and community in their lives, regardless of their life choices or secrets.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2012.

Kirkus Reviews

The stories in *The Mormon Victorian Society* “register the new openness and confidence of gay life in the age of same-sex marriage....What hasn’t changed is Townsend’s wry, conversational prose, his subtle evocations of character and social dynamics, and his deadpan humor. His warm empathy still glows in this intimate yet clear-eyed engagement with Mormon theology and folkways. Funny, shrewd and finely wrought dissections of the awkward contradictions—and surprising harmonies—between conscience and desire.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2013.

Kirkus Reviews

Johnny Townsend

“This collection of short stories [*The Mormon Victorian Society*] featuring gay Mormon characters slammed [me] in the face from the first page, wrestled my heart and mind to the floor, and left me panting and wanting more by the end. Johnny Townsend has created so many memorable characters in such few pages. I went weeks thinking about this book. It truly touched me.”

Tom Webb, *A Bear on Books*

Dragons of the Book of Mormon is an “entertaining collection....Townsend’s prose is sharp, clear, and easy to read, and his characters are well rendered...”

Publishers Weekly

“The pre-eminent documenter of alternative Mormon lifestyles...Townsend has a deep understanding of his characters, and his limpid prose, dry humor and well-grounded (occasionally magical) realism make their spiritual conundrums both compelling and entertaining. [*Dragons of the Book of Mormon* is] [a]nother of Townsend’s critical but affectionate and absorbing tours of Mormon discontent.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2014.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Gayrabian Nights*, “Townsend’s prose is always limpid and evocative, and...he finds real drama and emotional depth in the most ordinary of lives.”

Kirkus Reviews

Gayrabian Nights is a “complex revelation of how seriously soul damaging the denial of the true self can be.”

Ryan Rhodes, author of *Free Electricity*

Gayrabian Nights “was easily the most original book I’ve read all year. Funny, touching, topical, and thoroughly enjoyable.”

Rainbow Awards

Lying for the Lord is “one of the most gripping books that I’ve picked up for quite a while. I love the author’s writing style, alternately cynical, humorous, biting, scathing, poignant, and touching.... This is the third book of his that I’ve read, and all are equally engaging. These are stories that need to be told, and the author does it in just the right way.”

Heidi Alsop, *Ex-Mormon Foundation Board Member*

In *Lying for the Lord*, Townsend “gets under the skin of his characters to reveal their complexity and conflicts....shrewd, evocative [and] wryly humorous.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Missionaries Make the Best Companions*, “the author treats the clash between religious dogma and liberal humanism with vivid realism, sly humor, and subtle feeling as his characters try to figure out their true missions in life. Another of Townsend’s rich dissections of Mormon failures and uncertainties...” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers*, “Townsend, a confident and practiced storyteller, skewers the hypocrisies and eccentricities of his characters with precision and affection. The outlandish framing narrative is the most consistent source of shock and humor, but the stories do much to ground the reader in the world—or former world—of the characters....A funny, charming tale about a group of Mormons facing the end of the world.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Townsend’s collection [*The Washing of Brains*] once again displays his limpid, naturalistic prose, skillful narrative chops, and his subtle insights into psychology...Well-crafted dispatches on the clash between religion and self-fulfillment...”

Kirkus Reviews

“While the author is generally at his best when working as a satirist, there are some fine, understated touches in these tales [*The Last Days Linger*] that will likely affect readers in subtle ways....readers should come away impressed by the deep empathy he shows for all his characters—even the homophobic ones.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Written in a conversational style that often uses stories and personal anecdotes to reveal larger truths, this immensely approachable book [*Racism by Proxy*] skillfully serves its intended audience of White readers grappling with complex questions regarding race, history, and identity. The author’s frequent references to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be too niche for readers unfamiliar with its idiosyncrasies, but Townsend generally strikes a perfect balance of humor, introspection, and reasoned arguments that will engage even skeptical readers.”

Kirkus Reviews

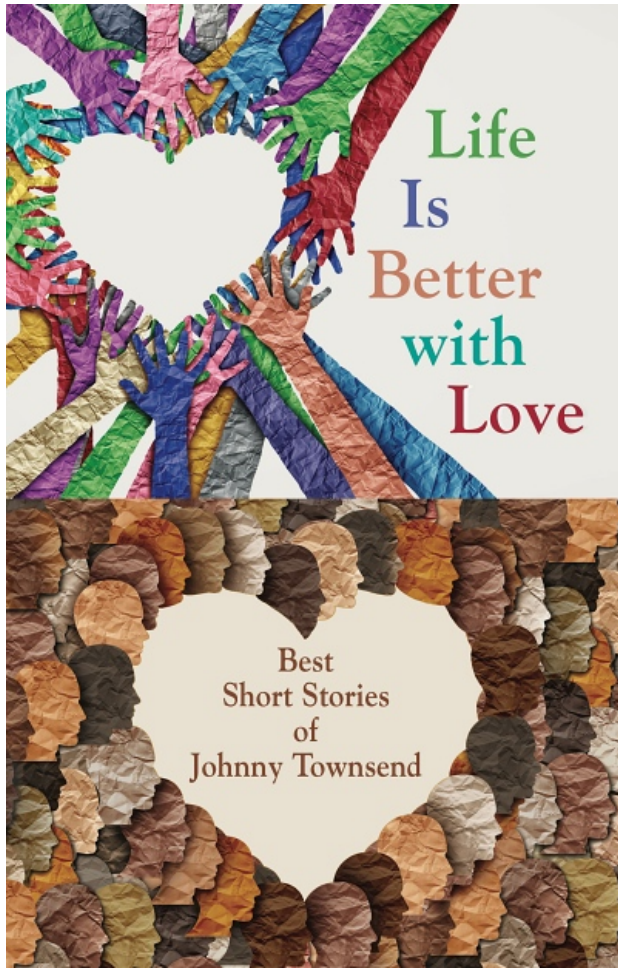
Orgy at the STD Clinic portrays “an all-too real scenario that Townsend skewers to wincingly accurate proportions...[with] instant classic moments courtesy of his punchy, sassy, sexy lead character...”

Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*

Johnny Townsend

Orgy at the STD Clinic is "...a triumph of humane sensibility. A richly textured saga that brilliantly captures the fraying social fabric of contemporary life."

Kirkus Reviews



From over 500 short stories published over three decades, author Johnny Townsend presents twenty of his favorites.

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