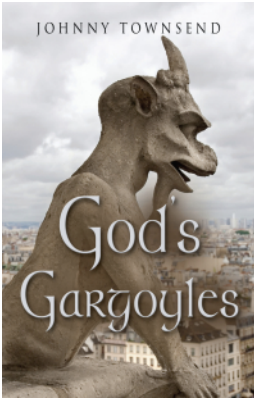


JOHNNY TOWNSEND



God's
Gargoyles



Gay Mormon short stories. A celibate man dates a promiscuous porn reviewer. A schizophrenic man accustomed to hearing voices suddenly starts to receive real revelations. A gay couple steals from the rich to provide for their favorite charities.

God's Gargoyles

by

Johnny Townsend

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Praise for Johnny Townsend

In *Zombies for Jesus*, “Townsend isn’t writing satire, but deeply emotional and revealing portraits of people who are, with a few exceptions, quite lovable.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

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*

Johnny Townsend is “an important voice in the Mormon community.”

Stephen Carter, editor of *Sunstone* magazine

“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*

The Circumcision of God “asks questions that are not often asked out loud in Mormonism, and certainly not answered.”

Jeff Laver, author of *Elder Petersen’s Mission Memories*

“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

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

“The Buzzard Tree,” from *The Circumcision of God*, was listed as a finalist for the 2007 Whitney Award for Best Short LDS Fiction.

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

David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

GOD'S GARGOYLES

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

Sima Rabinowitz, Literary Magazine Review,
NewPages.com

“Johnny Townsend’s short stories cannot be pigeon-holed. His keen observations on the human condition come in many shapes and sizes...reflecting on both his Jewish and Mormon backgrounds as well as life in the vast and varied American gay community. He dares to think and write about people and incidents that frighten away more timid artists. His perspective is sometimes startling, sometimes hilarious, sometimes poignant, but always compassionate.”

Gerald S. Argetsinger, Artistic Director of
the Hill Cumorah Pageant (1990-96)

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

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*

“*Selling the City of Enoch* exists at that awkward intersection where the LDS ideal meets the real world, and Townsend navigates his terrain with humor, insight, and pathos.”

Donna Banta, author of *False Prophet*

JOHNNY TOWNSEND

The Golem of Rabbi Loew will prompt “gasps of outrage from conservative readers...a strong collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

“That’s one of the reasons why I found Johnny Townsend’s new book *Mormon Fairy Tales* SO MUCH FUN!! Without fretting about what the theology is supposed to be if it were pinned down, Townsend takes you on a voyage to explore the rich-but-undertapped imagination of Mormonism. I loved his portrait of spirit prison! He really nailed it—not in an official doctrine sort of way, but in a sort of ‘if you know Mormonism, you know this is what it must be like’ way—and what a prison it is!

Johnny Townsend has written at least ten books of Mormon stories. So far, I’ve read only two (*Mormon Fairy Tales* and *The Circumcision of God*), but I’m planning to read the rest—and you should too, if you’d like a fun and interesting new perspective on Mormons in life and imagination!”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

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

GOD'S GARGOYLES

“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

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 Sneakover Prince” from *God’s Gargoyles* is “one of the most sweet and romantic stor[ies] I have ever read.”

Elisa Rolle, Reviews and Ramblings,
founder of The Rainbow Awards

JOHNNY TOWNSEND

“*Let the Faggots Burn* is a one-of-a-kind piece of history. Without Townsend’s diligence and devotion, many details would’ve been lost forever. With his tremendous foresight and tenacious research, Townsend put a face on this tragedy at a time when few people would talk about it....Through Townsend’s vivid writing, you will sense what it must’ve been like in those final moments as the fire ripped through the UpStairs Lounge. *Let the Faggots Burn* is a chilling and insightful glimpse into a largely forgotten and ignored chapter of LGBT history.”

Robert Camina, writer and producer of
the documentary *Raid of the Rainbow Lounge*

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

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

GOD'S GARGOYLES

“The struggles and solutions of the individuals [in *Latter-Gay Saints*] will resonate across faith traditions and help readers better understand the cost of excluding gay members from full religious participation.”

Publishers Weekly

“This collection of short stories [*The Mormon Victorian Society*] featuring gay Mormon characters slammed 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, judge for The Rainbow Awards
(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

“Mormon Movie Marathon,” from *Selling the City of Enoch*, “is funny, constructively critical, but also sad because the desire...for belonging is so palpable.”

Levi S. Peterson, author of *The Backslider* and
The Canyons of Grace

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

GOD'S GARGOYLES

God's Gargoyles

Johnny Townsend

JOHNNY TOWNSEND

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GOD'S GARGOYLES

Dedicated to my friends, Mike Quinn,
Buddy Rasmussen,
and Matt Lawrence, all heroes to me

JOHNNY TOWNSEND

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JOHNNY TOWNSEND

God's Gargoyles

Thorne put on his mask. It was Friday night, so the Single Adult group was holding a Halloween dance at the stake center later. Mormons weren't allowed to wear masks, of course. Thorne wasn't quite sure why, but apparently it was a sin. It let people do things they might not normally do, because they were disguised. And those things they could conceivably do under that kind of freedom were sure to be bad.

But Thorne had always loved gargoyles, ever since reading *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in high school. The teacher had given the class a list of a hundred books she'd read, and let each student choose a book from the list they felt interested in. Thorne had liked the approach, allowing individuality rather than forcing the same program on everyone. Most of the students picked short novels or books about teens, but Thorne had seen the Disney movie about the hunchback and wanted to learn the real story, not the whitewashed version.

The injustice of it all deeply touched Thorne. Not only was Esmerelda persecuted, but Quasimodo was as well, on several levels. Forced into deafness, punished by Nature by his deformity, simultaneously saved and tortured by Frolo.

Yet it was the figure of the gargoyle that stayed with Thorne more than that of the hunchback, though he could see how in some ways the hunchback was really a gargoyle himself.

In the years since, Thorne had watched several movies and read other books about gargoyles, and no matter how

poorly executed the works might be, he still found himself absorbed by the various images of gargoyles.

So tonight, Church rule or not, Thorne was dressing as one for the Halloween dance. Wearing a mask wasn't going to change his behavior. He'd still ask Peggy to dance, and he'd still be a perfect gentleman with her.

Thorne climbed into his car and headed for the stake center. He was still worried about his costume. Real gargoyles were usually naked. Technically, of course, any creature could be a gargoyle. All it meant was a figurine that diverted damaging water away from a building. Most gargoyles were monstrous-looking, but animals or monks or anyone at all could be a gargoyle. The usual demonic-looking creatures were technically not gargoyles in the first place if they weren't also water spouts. If they were free-standing, they were called chimeras or grotesques.

Unless he planned to funnel water tonight, Thorne was really a grotesque, not a gargoyle. And he wasn't naked. He did have gloves that gave him clawed hands, but he couldn't go to the dance even just in his shorts, the rest of his body in make-up. He had to wear his garments, the Mormon underwear that had to be worn at all times, and since they went down to his knees and included a T-shirt, Thorne could only accommodate the clothing by wearing an outfit on top that mimicked green, scaly skin. He did at least have special slippers that gave him clawed feet. He'd never danced as a half-monster before. It should be interesting.

"Ooh, cool costume," said Tad when Thorne walked into the gym.

"Hey, no masks," said Carmen.

Thorne simply shrugged without saying a word and kept walking. He went up to the refreshment table and had some Sprite.

“You can drink with that thing on?” asked Mary Ann.

Thorne nodded and kept drinking. He didn't want to respond verbally. The mask did make him want to hide his identity. Keep people guessing. If they mistook him for someone else, he could see if he was treated any differently. Perhaps they'd think he was Paul, the good-looking guy Thorne always admired. Or Jeff, the stake president's son. Would people be nicer to him, or meaner, if they weren't sure who he was?

Thorne saw Peggy looking around the room and then glancing at her watch. He knew it hadn't been very nice of him not to warn her of his costume. He didn't want her to feel abandoned, but if he only danced with her, people would figure it out. So he danced with Carmen, Mary Ann, Peggy, Kendra, and Rosie.

Thorne didn't actually ask the girls to dance. He just walked up, pointed to the girl, pointed to the dance floor, and held out his hand. The mystery was kind of exciting at first, but it soon began to wear off. If you couldn't communicate your real feelings, or even know who you were actually flirting with, what was the point? Then after Jeff and Paul arrived, the list of remaining possibilities for who he might be grew shorter.

“You dance well,” said Kendra. “You must be black.”

Thorne shook his head.

“Then you must be gay,” she continued, laughing. “Maybe you shouldn't have come in disguise. Now we're

seeing the real you. We're not distracted by the trappings any more."

She giggled, clearly joking, but Thorne stopped dancing and walked away.

"Hey!"

Thorne went back to the refreshment table and swigged down some more Sprite. He could still feel his face burning. Maybe he should go home, change, and come back as himself, casually tell everyone he had a flat tire or something.

Someone bumped his arm and almost made him spill his drink. Thorne turned to look and saw Denton standing beside him. His heart skipped a beat. Denton was the Single Adult rep for Thorne's ward. He'd just returned from his mission to Finland, which made him two years younger than Thorne, but Thorne wanted very much to be friends with him. It was just that Denton liked wrestling and boxing and football and hockey, and absolutely every bit of that bored Thorne to tears. Denton had invited him to a game once, and Thorne went to a thrift store to buy a team sweatshirt, but he felt very transparent. He couldn't even enjoy sitting next to Denton, as uncomfortable as he was with the charade.

"Great costume," said Denton. "But the stake president is stopping by later. I saw him in his office earlier. You're going to get in trouble."

Thorne watched as Denton eyed him up and down appraisingly. It wasn't that it was a sexually appraising look, but any evaluative look from Denton made Thorne's heart beat a little faster. He had to get out of there.

Thorne nodded a goodbye and left the building. He didn't feel like going straight home, though. It would be too

depressing to be alone with his thoughts. Besides, gargoyles always came in groupings, several to a building.

So where could Thorne find other gargoyles tonight?

He drove around aimlessly for twenty minutes and eventually found himself downtown. There were lots of clubs, and Thorne saw people dressed as pirates and aliens and Native Americans and hookers and nuns and superheroes. Then he saw a man in shorts wearing a leather harness that attached two huge angel wings to his back.

He slowed down.

An angel wasn't as good as a gargoyle, yet Thorne still felt attracted. He watched as the man entered a bar with several other men. It must have been a gay bar. It was called Fallen Angels, which sounded gay. And what more appropriate place would a man with angel wings go, or gays, for that matter?

Thorne paused in the street outside the bar until someone behind him honked. He'd always wanted to go to a gay bar but had never allowed himself the experience. If he went tonight, no one would know it was him. No one could report him. No one would say, "Oh, that Mormon boy is naughty." He wouldn't be giving the Church a bad name. He'd simply be satisfying his curiosity.

And he didn't want to be alone right now.

Thorne parked the car a few blocks away and walked back toward the bar. He got a few approving nods from other guys walking by. Thorne found himself gawking at two leathermen, one with a spiked thong and the other wearing a black leather covering over his entire head.

Gays really were subhuman. Or at least only part human. They were chimeras, mixtures of men and animals.

Thorne felt a pain in his chest. He understood Quasimodo's longing to be a stone gargoyle.

Thorne stood before the door and took a deep breath. Someone bumped into him, and he started into the bar. It was filled with revelers. There were several shirtless men, but most had on costumes of one sort or another. A few were dressed as women. There was a nurse and a Southern belle. But Thorne was drawn to the police officer, and to Gandalf, and to the beautiful man dressed as Pan.

"Can I touch you?" Thorne asked the human half of Pan.

Pan laughed. "It's Halloween. Everyone gets a free pass tonight."

Thorne reached out tentatively and touched Pan's flat stomach. Then he withdrew his hand, took off the glove, and touched again. He sighed heavily.

Pan reached back and groped Thorne's groin. Normally, Thorne would have felt repulsion at such a base move, but tonight, he smiled, though he knew the other man couldn't see through the rubber on his face. He groped Pan in return, feeling a lump through the man's hairy pants.

"It's too early to get this friendly," said Pan, laughing. "It's only 10:00. We've got all night. Come on. Let me introduce you to some friends."

Thorne followed Pan through the crowd. They stopped in front of a man wearing huge plastic boobs and a large plastic penis.

"This is my best friend, Rob," said Pan. The two men kissed. "This is—hey, who are you, anyway?"

"I don't know who I am," Thorne replied.

"Make something up."

"I'm Thorne."

"In my side," said Pan.

"In your backside," corrected Rob.

"We don't even know if he's a top yet. Don't pressure him."

"Are you a top?"

"I—I don't know what that means."

The two men stared at Thorne. "What rock did you just crawl out from under?" asked Rob finally.

The rock of revelation, thought Thorne, but all he said was, "I've led a very sheltered life. I was hoping to change that tonight."

"Well, come along then. Halloween is supposed to be a night for children, after all."

Pan led Thorne to another group of friends, a cowboy, a doctor, and a soldier. "Love your costumes," Thorne said politely.

"What costumes?" said one of the men. "I *am* a doctor. And Jerry *is* a soldier. And Harlan does ride bulls in the rodeo."

"Really?"

“I grew up in the suburbs,” said Harlan, “but that never felt like the real me. Then I discovered bull-riding. I still live in the city, though.” He shrugged. “But I’m not an urban cowboy. I’m a *real* cowboy.”

“Ever get fucked by a bull?” asked Pan.

“I’m not that stupid.” Harlan paused. “Though I do know a guy who got fucked by a horse once.”

Gays were disgusting, thought Thorne. These people were scaring him away from falling into sin, and that was a good thing. He should really leave.

“I’ve been with my partner six years now,” Harlan went on. “We’re still monogamous. With people or with animals. We’re even monogamous on party nights like tonight.”

“So where is he now?” asked the doctor.

“He’s laid up with a bruised leg.” He turned to Thorne. “He’s a rodeo clown. It’s a rough job.”

“And you left him at home alone?” the doctor continued.

“Love doesn’t mean being a martyr.”

“Doesn’t it?” asked Thorne.

“Love means wanting the best for the person you love.” Harlan looked at Thorne. “What do your loved ones want for you?”

Thorne thought for a moment. They wanted him to live a life of denial, of course. But it was all so he could become a god later and have a life of eternal happiness. Wasn’t that love? “They want me to be pure and good.”

The others laughed. “And my coming to a party makes me impure and bad?”

"I didn't say that. The doctor did."

"Do *you* feel impure for being here?" Pan asked Thorne.

Thorne frowned. He hadn't drunk any alcohol. He hadn't had sex. He had, however, groped and been groped. Yet even that somehow seemed innocent despite its sexuality. But perhaps he was letting his feelings divert him from the truth.

"I can't see that just congregating together is a sin."

"That's big of you."

The others then began talking of other things, of the last juicy item they'd read on afterelton.com, or the latest round of *American Idol*, or the really fabulous outfit that Katie Holmes had just worn. It all seemed so flighty to Thorne. People distracted themselves with superficiality all the time in order to escape the meaningful parts of life. He wasn't sure that actually made them bad. It just didn't make them especially good, either. Was it possible to be neutral? Even Marie Osmond had joined the cast of *Dancing with the Stars*, hadn't she?

Thorne watched as other friends and acquaintances of the group filtered past, hugging and kissing the guys he'd just met. He kept stealing glances at Pan, whose real name he still hadn't caught. There was something special about him, Thorne thought.

Or was he simply being distracted by the man's looks? The devil used lust to divert people from the truth every chance he got. That's why young men weren't allowed to serve missions if they were no longer virgins, even if they'd repented.

Thorne remembered the excitement he'd felt when he'd opened his mission letter from the prophet. The Lord had called Thorne to serve in Paris, France. Thorne's testimony doubled in strength on the spot. God was sending him to see Notre Dame. It couldn't be a coincidence.

He was stationed in the city for a full half of his mission, and he went to Notre Dame on every P-day. Sometimes, he had to go with different missionaries because his own companions tired of spending half of each Preparation Day at the cathedral.

It was always frustrating, though. Thorne could never get as close to the gargoyles as he wanted. They were always just out of reach. Beauty he could never touch. He felt like the woman trying to feel Jesus' robe.

"Stop obsessing about those damn gargoyles," his companion had told him one day. "You're missing all the rest of the interesting stuff down below."

But Thorne felt that if he could just finally have contact with a gargoyle close-up, it might somehow cure him of his depravity. Gargoyles were water spouts, certainly, but they had a spiritual function as well, to scare away evil spirits. Why an evil spirit would be scared of a demon was another question, of course, but what if? What if it really worked, and Thorne could have the evil inside him turned away from his soul? He'd tried everything else.

One day, Thorne decided he'd have the physical contact he needed. He slipped away from his companion, hid inside the church, and waited for night to fall. Once everyone was gone, he'd sneak out onto a ledge and grab hold of one of the gargoyles. He'd be saved.

Only security was tighter than he'd expected. Thorne had thought that after spending so many hours in the church on so many successive P-days, he'd found a way to escape, but he was caught and expelled, though fortunately not arrested. When the mission president learned where he'd been all that time after ditching his companion, he was sent away from the city for the remainder of his mission.

So he hadn't been cured.

Thorne continued reading about gargoyles in the hope that he'd find a key to his own salvation. Naturally, he read the scriptures daily as always, and prayed and fasted and went to church, but somehow all that didn't seem like enough. He'd decided that dressing as a gargoyle tonight might be the only way he could finally really touch a live gargoyle and heal himself.

"Come on, Thorne," said Pan. "It's hot. Let's go upstairs on the balcony."

Thorne had had a couple of Sprites since arriving at the bar, but he was in fact hot as well, in the middle of that huge crowd, so he gladly followed Pan up the stairs. The crowd was just as thick up there, and Thorne felt more than one hand on his ass as he pushed through. It was subhuman to enjoy it, but he did.

"You've been here an hour," said Pan. "What do you think? Are you going to join the dark side?"

"How can you joke like that?"

Pan shook his head. "It's religion that's the joke. Religious leaders make us the scapegoat to deflect people's attention from the real issues in their church. Like the subjugation of women, the misery of the poor, the sinfulness

of war. Who gives a fuck if my cock is in your ass? What about the killing of 80,000 Iraqis? People focus on my dick so they don't have to focus on their other beliefs and how unfounded they might be."

Thorne thought about that. It almost seemed true. When Mormons were writing letters against gay marriage and sending in large donations to fight against gays, their focus was turned away from whether or not family and marriage and children was really the only worthwhile way to devote one's life in the first place. No one considered remaining single, celibate or not, in order to devote one's life to teaching the poor in Tanzania or nursing the sick in Guatemala or fighting slavery in the Sudan.

And certainly, no one thought about whether or not the Book of Mormon were just a novel, or if authoritarianism and following blindly were really the way God wanted us to develop morally. They had a *real* enemy to fight. The gays and the devil who was leading the gays. There was no time to worry about anything else.

And yet, the Church warned against rationalization, against Satan's sly deceptions. So was the Church's untruth hidden by a mask of righteousness? Or was the sinfulness of sexual abomination disguised by a mask of freedom?

What was the truth and what was the costume?

"I want you to come home with me tonight," said Pan. "Let me make love to you. You can decide for yourself if it's sex or celibacy that's depraved. If you don't like it, you can always repent."

"What if I *do* like it?" asked Thorne. "And *need* to repent but can't?"

GOD'S GARGOYLES

“God, you religious people let the preachers yell in your ears so loudly you go deaf. What does your heart tell you?”

“It certainly doesn’t tell me I’m in love with you. I just met you.”

“But does it tell you to live your life to the fullest?”

Thorne sighed. “I don’t know.” He turned away and looked out over the balcony. He wanted more than anything else to be a gargoyle, not to have any feelings at all which might confuse or deceive him.

Yet feelings could also give him happiness, couldn’t they?

“Well, make up your mind,” said Pan. “What do you want to do?”

Thorne walked up to the iron railing and grasped it. Then he turned back to Pan. “I want to be a gargoyle,” he said. He started climbing over the railing.

“What?”

“Hold on to me.”

Thorne stood on the outside of the balcony, his feet at the base of the railing. He leaned outward dangerously, Pan hanging desperately onto his pants. He pretended he was on top of Notre Dame, looking out over a Paris crowd.

That was when he actually finally noticed who was in the crowd below. There was a group of maybe ten protestors, holding signs that said, “Gays are evil *every* night of the year” and “No rights for perversion” and other horrible things.

Thorne felt just the slightest twinge of guilt for being at a gay bar. Then he grew angry. Who the hell were those people

to be judging him? Could it possibly be righteous to get so much pleasure out of hating other people like him? Perhaps a cloak of faithfulness was only a disguise for inhumanity.

He felt a chill and shivered, and suddenly, the four Sprites he'd drunk that evening began calling at his bladder. Thorne reached down and unzipped his pants, pulling his penis out. There were a few laughs from other guys up on the balcony, and yells of disapproval from the street below.

Then Thorne let out a stream, arcing away from the building and hitting two of the protestors.

“Hey!”

“Animals!”

“Degenerates!”

But the other guys on the balcony were cheering.

Thorne felt himself being pulled back. “Come on. We need to get out of here.”

“I’m just starting to have fun.”

“We can have more fun at my place. I’ll spout for you, too.”

They made their way downstairs and out of the building and down the block. They came to Thorne’s car first, and he unlocked the door. “So what’s your name?” asked Thorne.

“It’s Pan.”

“No. Your real name.”

Pan laughed. “That *is* my real name. My parents were Greek scholars. Believe me, it could have been worse.”

“I’d like to try something Greek tonight.”

Pan grinned.

“But first I want to introduce you to some of *my* friends.”

“Really?”

Thorne nodded. He let Pan into the car, and they drove back to the stake center. It was 11:30, and the dance would be winding down soon. Thorne walked back inside, seeing fingers pointing at him and knowing people were still curious about his identity.

A slow song started playing then, and Thorne took Pan by the hand and led him to the dance floor. They held each other and turned slowly around and around. People stopped and stared, and as the song finished, James, the Single Adult chair for the stake, came up to them.

“What do you think you’re doing? Who are you anyway?”

Pan looked uncomfortable, apparently worried to be in enemy territory. But Thorne felt a peacefulness he’d never felt before.

“I’m an elder of Israel,” he said. “A saint in Zion.” He paused and then continued. “I’m a gargoyle on the face of the Church.” He reached up and lifted off his mask. There were gasps, even more when he pulled Pan close and kissed him.

“You need to leave,” said James.

“Yes, I do,” said Thorne. He took Pan’s hand and began leading him away from the crowd. “Let’s go to my place.”

“Are you going to show me your spout again?”

“I’m going to show you what a Mormon boy can do when he stops being diverted from his true nature.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about truth.”

Thorne laughed. “Fair enough.”

They walked out of the stake center and climbed back into Thorne’s car. Thorne’s chest was burning warmly, and he felt a clarity in his head as if he’d just stood under a shower of fresh rainwater. He couldn’t wait to take off his gargoyle costume and be naked in front of Pan. He didn’t know what the night would bring, or the rest of his life, or eternity, but there had to be more to existence than merely being a grotesque. And Thorne was going to find out just what that was.

He reached over to put his hand on Pan’s leg and smiled.

The Sneakover Prince

I met Alan at the Faubourg Marigny gay bookstore in New Orleans. “Any new porn?” I asked breezily, walking past the counter where he was reading a book, and heading to the porn rack in back of the store.

“Oh, I—I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t put out the magazines. I just work the cash register.”

He actually sounded kind of nervous, as if talking about gay porn unsettled him. I smiled. How could you work in a gay bookstore and be uncomfortable with gay porn?

Well, he was new here, I figured. I hadn’t seen him in the bookstore before. Still, even to come in and talk to the owner about a job suggested some degree of comfort.

I decided to test my suspicions about his jitteriness, just for fun. After looking through the magazines, I brought two up to the counter. One was the mainstream *Advocate Men* and the other was *Leather Men*. I put the two magazines in front of the new cashier and opened both, one to a photo of a businessman in an office with his pants down, and the other to a photo of a man in leather chaps kneeling doggie-style while another man in a leather harness rimmed him.

“Which do you think I should give my Dad for his birthday?”

The man became bright red in seconds and turned quickly to fiddle with some papers. “Is—is your Dad really gay?”

“Well,” I said, “since the stroke, he can’t remember, so I keep trying to convince him he is.”

The man turned to look at me a moment, trying to figure out if I was joking or not. We chatted for about fifteen minutes. He told me his name was Alan, and he was working part-time here and part-time in a used book store in the French Quarter a few blocks away.

“Nice,” I said. “I’m a librarian at Tulane University. We’ll have to get together to talk about books sometime.”

Alan looked a little flustered at that, but I wrote down my address and phone number and told him to give me a call or just drop by after work some day.

I didn’t expect anything to come of it, but I was in the habit of regularly asking strange men over to my place, so I didn’t see any reason to neglect this particular young man.

Only he wasn’t really young, was he? He *seemed* young because of his nervousness, but he had to be in his late 30’s. And I was 42 myself, so I wasn’t usually up for delicate schoolgirl flirtations. As a rule, I was more direct. “Want to come over to my place and fuck?” But Alan seemed to demand a softer approach, and something about that intrigued me.

Later that day, I stopped off at the bathhouse on Toulouse Street in the Quarter, sucked two dicks and had my own dick sucked, and then I biked home to my house in the Marigny.

By the next day, I had completely forgotten about Alan.

I got down to my part-time job after lunch. I worked at home writing reviews for porno movies. I actually made about \$400 a month doing this, but it was still only lagniappe. I couldn’t have gotten by without my library job. I worked in

the reference section on the main floor. Despite the internet, people still needed me occasionally.

I enjoyed reviewing porn, though. First of all, I enjoyed *watching* porn. And I enjoyed the fact that since I was a reviewer, I received the new porn DVDs for free. All I had to do was write my reaction to what I saw. I tried not to let my own specific interests make me too opinionated, but I found that I didn't have to say, "Oh, my god, how boring." I could just pretend to be objectively describing a scene but simply use boring words or exciting words to convey my opinion.

It was Thursday, but I had Thursdays off, and after watching two DVDs and beating off only at the end of the last one, I went downstairs to see if my mail had come.

I owned a two-story house in the Marigny that I had bought with my partner of twenty years, who had died almost three years ago of a heart attack at the age of 60. I lived on the top floor and rented out the downstairs as two small apartments. I had an entrance on the ground floor, naturally, and was walking down the stairs when I heard the metal squeak of the mail slot. Just in time, I thought.

But I stopped short when I realized there were eyes peering at me through the slot. I was only wearing my T-shirt and underwear, and I realized suddenly my underwear even had a little wet spot from where I'd leaked after coming.

Was that the mailman looking at me, I wondered. Well, whoever it was was going to get an eyeful.

I ran the rest of the way down the stairs and opened the door.

It was Alan, turning beet red.

“I—I was just—I mean—I—”

“What a perv,” I said, laughing.

Alan turned even redder.

“You don’t have to sneak a peek,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. “I’ll show you anything you want to see.” I reached down to the elastic band on my boxer briefs.

“I’ve got to go.” Alan turned and got on his bike and hurried off.

I laughed, but I couldn’t help but think, “Hey, we’ve both got bikes. We’ll have to go riding together sometime.” I knew I’d have to stop by the bookstore again to tease him.

A few days later, I did stop in, and I was happy to see Alan at the register. “Hi, boyfriend,” I said, smiling sweetly at him. He turned red. “Any new porn?”

“I don’t know.”

I left him alone then and browsed the card rack, looking for a racy birthday card to send to a friend. When I glanced back over at the counter, I could see Alan checking out my box.

He was almost squinting, of course, since I didn’t have that showy a box, being more of a grower than a shower, but he was definitely trying hard to see what he could. I smiled, and he turned away quickly to do some paperwork.

I selected a card and went up to the counter. Alan didn’t say anything, but when he handed me the card, I took his hand and held it, mostly just to see his reaction. I saw barely controlled panic in his eyes.

“What time is your shift over?”

"6:00. Why?"

"Have you ever seen *Under the Tuscan Sun*?"

"No. Why?"

"Do you like catfish?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You're coming over to my house when you get off work. We'll have a nice dinner and then watch a DVD."

Alan looked down at the counter. "I—I'm not really supposed to date," he said softly.

"You already have a boyfriend?" I asked. I think I let the surprise in my voice show.

"Oh, no. It's just that I'm Mormon. I'm supposed to be celibate. I've never gone on a date before."

"Well, I wasn't asking you to bed. Just to see a movie."

"Oh, I thought—I—"

"Not that I wouldn't have tried to make a move on you, but I can control myself, even around someone as good looking as you."

Alan turned red again.

"But we will have to cuddle while we watch. Will that work for you?"

"I—I suppose."

I didn't know why I was pursuing Alan so strongly. Part of it had to be just for the fun of watching him squirm. But I also did find him attractive, and while I had a good circle of friends already, I was always open to widening that circle.

Gay people had to rely on chosen family more than biological family, and I always wanted more “relatives.”

Alan and I did have dinner that evening, and we did cuddle while watching the movie. There was no fondling, though, and not even any kissing. I was touched at the end of the evening, however, when Alan stood up formally and offered me his hand. “I had a very good time,” he said. “Thank you.”

I grabbed his hand and pulled Alan close to me, kissing his ear. “Will you come back next Sunday?” I whispered.

“Y-yes,” he whispered back.

Alan came over every Sunday evening for the next several weeks. His shift was only from noon to six, he explained, and he went to church with his mother every Sunday morning before work, and so, he went on, “I feel I just need to treat myself once a week.” He looked guilty immediately and added, “You don’t think that’s a sin, do you? It’s not like we’re having sex or anything.”

“Well, there *is* a little bit of ‘anything,’” I said. “I do beat off thinking of you after you leave.”

Alan turned red, but he smiled, too. “Really?” Then he looked concerned. “But if I make you sin, does that count as a sin against me, too?”

“I’m not sinning, honey.”

Alan didn’t say anything.

“If you think being gay is so bad, why do you work in a gay bookstore?”

“Well, I’m not sure anymore if it’s bad. And I want to see a little of the other side of the question so I can make up

my mind. I'd like not to be alone the rest of my life. I mean, I have my Mom, but..."

"I think you need to start coming over on Wednesday evenings, too."

"Really?" Alan smiled again.

"I have a lot of DVDs," I said. "Do you mind more cuddling?"

Alan thought for a moment. "I *like* cuddling," he said slowly.

"I get off work at 6:00 on Wednesdays. So can you be here at 7:00?"

We started doing other things besides watching movies. Sometimes, we played Scrabble or UNO or gin rummy and even games like Hangman and charades. I found Alan delightfully innocent and playful on the one hand, but on the other, I was a little disturbed to learn that at 38, he still lived at home with his Mom. She was in perfect health and didn't need a caretaker, but Alan felt that after his father's death fifteen years earlier, he had to look out for his mother. It seemed sweet in some ways, but in another way, I wondered if he hadn't really stayed 18 years old for the past 20 years.

Of course, *I* wasn't still just a kid, and while I was enjoying Alan's company, I was also actively pursuing the company of other men. Sometimes, I'd sit on the stoop in front of my front door and just pick up guys walking down the street. Other times late at night, I'd go to the bar three blocks away and pick someone up there.

I usually told Alan about these episodes. He looked perturbed but also always asked for details. Then he'd just look at the floor a moment and think.

One day, though, he surprised me by kissing me hello. "Wow," I said, "That's a big step."

Alan turned red but then looked a little depressed. "It's pretty sad when something as simple as a kiss is a big step."

"Well, let's be happy about it, not sad."

He looked up then and nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry. I guess I'm just in a down mood because I've decided maybe there is no God. I've been praying for something for a long time and God hasn't given it to me, so I finally realized maybe he doesn't exist."

"Hmm," I said, trying to keep this light. "Maybe he *does* exist, but he just doesn't like you." I smiled teasingly.

Alan's brow furrowed. "You know, with my low self-esteem, it's a wonder that never occurred to me."

"So you'll keep the faith a little longer?"

"Why do you want me to believe? I thought you disapproved of all my angst."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with believing in God. It's just the believing that he doesn't want you to be loved by someone that I find upsetting."

Alan nodded. Of course, I hadn't myself prayed in a very long time, but I didn't see why Alan couldn't have both faith and love in his own life.

I decided to lighten things up now, though. I'd found an old game of Twister at a rummage sale, and after dinner, we

improvised a way to play with just two people. When we were pretty entangled already, I then announced, "Left hand on right buttocks," and placed my hand on Alan's ass. He jumped, but a moment later, I felt a hand on my ass as well.

He kissed me goodnight that evening as he left, and kissing became a regular part of our encounters from then on. I tried introducing it to the cuddling sessions, and after only a brief amount of resistance, Alan gave in and started some pretty good amateur French kissing. It didn't take him long to polish his technique, either.

He started staying longer after our Sunday night movie was over.

I found that Alan was truly a sweet man. He told me of his two years as a missionary in Tonga, where he helped teach people English as well as helped local Mormons build a couple of houses for some of the poorer islanders. I'd always thought Mormons just proselytized, so it was nice to hear they actually did some useful things, too.

And in the years since he returned to the States, Alan regularly volunteered with the Cub Scouts, and with the Sierra Club, and with an AIDS hospice, and with organizing local March of Dimes events.

"You think a lot about other people," I said.

"Well, to be honest, it's all just to divert the energy I *want* to put into sex. I sometimes wonder how many great things we could do as a people if we didn't invest so much of ourselves in seeking an orgasm."

"It doesn't have to be either/or," I said. "I teach ESL to Hispanic immigrants." I paused. "Of course, I make the men take their shirts off if they want any extra help."

“See what I mean?”

“You may have a point. But how about I make you a promise? After we start having sex, I’ll begin volunteering with the Sierra Club, too.”

Alan turned red, but he looked pensive for a few moments as well.

But we didn’t start having sex. Soon, we’d been “dating” for five months, and I had yet to so much as grope him. He did let me rub his chest during our cuddling sessions, and he would rub mine, too, but if my hand strayed down to his stomach, he would grasp it and place it back on his chest.

We did a few day excursions, too, biking together through the Marigny or to Audubon Park, buying fruit at the Farmers Market, walking slowly along the levee, and even going to gay bingo once. I found Alan intelligent, and we talked about the Middle East, and about health care reform, and about nuclear and solar and wind energy, and even about astronomy. Sometimes, we watched lectures on DVD about topics like Greek archaeology or Jewish intellectual thought of the 16th century.

“You know,” I told him one day over gumbo, “if I could just get you into bed, you’d make a great husband.”

“There’s so much else we can share,” Alan replied. “Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“But when you love someone, you want to share yourself with them completely.”

“I love my mother, but I don’t want to have sex with her. And what relationship can be stronger than that between a mother and son?”

“That between a married couple.”

Alan looked at the floor a moment. “Maybe,” he said slowly. “Maybe.”

It was on our six-month “anniversary” that I was finally able to meet Alan’s mother, in their Gentilly home. She hadn’t heard anything about me, I learned, and thought I was a regular at the straight French Quarter bookstore where Alan worked. He’d told her months ago that he also worked at a gay bookstore, and they’d talked a few times about his feelings toward men in general, but she was only okay about his “being” gay, he told me, as long as he wasn’t “doing” gay things.

“Like listening to old disco songs?” I asked him.

Alan glared at me but laughed.

“So you’re a friend of Alan’s?” his mother asked me that evening, shaking my hand as she let me into her home. “I’m Sharon.”

“I’m Balzer,” I said.

“What an odd name.” She smiled.

“It suits me,” I replied. “Because I’m ballsy.”

“Oh, dear. We try not to use language like that around here. I hope I’m not offending you.”

“Oh, no. I’m a librarian. I’m used to attempts at censorship.” I smiled, and she smiled back uncertainly.

But after our rocky start, I found I really liked Alan’s mother. She was a social worker who also volunteered with the Breast Cancer Run and the Brownies. As an active Mormon, she naturally taught Sunday School every week, but

she also made a point of being pen pals with three children in South America she was sending money to every month, teaching herself Spanish on the side. I suppose after fifteen years without a husband, she was deflecting some sexual energy, too. Still, there were plenty of more selfish ways to do that. She seemed like a legitimately nice woman to me.

“I don’t know if Alan has told you,” Sharon said, “but we only just got our stove working again. We had to cook on the grill for a whole week.” She shook her head. “I tried hard to be creative...”

“But it’s just so difficult to grill those peas,” I continued for her.

Sharon laughed, a hearty, sweet, good-natured laugh. “It was the red beans and rice that was the toughest.”

“She’s not kidding,” said Alan.

We had a pleasant, cheerful meal, and I could see why Alan genuinely liked his mother, though I was still a little concerned that she had too much control over her son’s life.

“Now tell me,” Sharon said over dessert a little later. “Alan’s been very secretive. But he stays out late a couple of times a week. Do you think he’s got a sweetheart? Does he talk to you about these things?”

“He’s been very vague,” I replied, “but I think he may be seeing someone special.”

“Oh, I hope so.” She paused a moment. “Are you married, Balzer?”

“I was married for twenty years. But three years ago after a terrible heart attack...”

“Oh, and so young. How awful.”

“Yes, it was awful. I’m sure your loss was awful for you, too.”

“Yes.” She nodded slowly. “But you find ways of coping.” She smiled at Alan.

“I had a friend,” I said suddenly, “a woman named Ann. She had a sister, but her sister left home at 20. That left Ann alone with her parents, who hadn’t gotten married till they were over 40. So they were in their 60’s by then. Ann felt she had to stay home and take care of them. Of course, they lived until their mid-80’s. By the time Ann allowed herself to date, she was 45 herself. She did finally marry at 48, but naturally, she’ll never have children. She felt she was doing a good thing by staying with her parents, but she gave up her whole life to do it.”

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man give up his life for a friend,” said Sharon, apparently quoting some scripture.

“Then why shouldn’t it be the parent giving up *their* ‘life’ for their child?” I asked.

There was silence for a moment. Then Sharon said slowly, “Do you have any children?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I think your friend Ann stayed with her parents because she *wanted* to,” said Alan, “not because she *had* to. There’s a difference.”

Sharon smiled again.

The dinner was over by then, and I only stayed about fifteen more minutes, as I could clearly see Sharon had had

enough of me for one evening. But she smiled sweetly and shook my hand at the door as I left. I couldn't read Alan's expression as he said goodbye.

Alan didn't call the next day, or the next, but he did show up again on Wednesday night. He kissed me and hugged me when he came in the door.

"Oh, what a scene you caused," he said, plopping down on the sofa. "My mother cried for half an hour, asking if she was ruining my life. It took me forever to convince her that I liked things just the way they are."

"Why would you want to convince her of that?"

"Because she was crying."

"So if I start crying, you'll begin sleeping over?"

Alan looked at me.

"I took acting in college. I can be very convincing."

"My mother isn't acting."

"I think you stay with your mother because you're comfortable there. She does the cooking and the cleaning, and you don't have to face any adult responsibilities."

"Always being there for someone is an adult responsibility."

"What are you going to do when you're 55 or 60 and your mother dies? You'll be all alone in the world."

"She'll be all alone *now* if I leave her."

"I think most men with wives and children still manage to call their mothers and visit. And there's no reason she can't

try to make a few friends and stop forcing you to be her only social support. Aren't there any nice people at your church?"

Alan was quiet a moment.

"I want you to start sleeping over one night a week."

"I don't want to have sex."

"I didn't say anything about sex. I just want to feel you beside me all night. Your mother still has you six nights a week. I'm not asking for the world. But I need you over here at least one night a week."

Alan looked at the floor. "What will I tell my mother?"

"Tell her anything you want."

"She'll think I'm having sex if I stay out all night. I couldn't do it."

I was quite irritated by this point and wanted to say, "Are you wearing diapers? Be a man!" but instead I said, "Can't you just sneak over and then sneak back home early in the morning?"

Alan continued looking at the floor. "Maybe," he said slowly. "Maybe."

Two weeks later, on a Wednesday night, Alan stayed for his first sleepover, or as we decided to call it, his "sneakover." We had our usual evening together first, then Alan rode his bike back home, made a show of going to bed, and then sneaked back over after his mother fell asleep. We debated about whether to have the sneakover at his place or mine and finally decided that it wouldn't feel like a grown up thing to do unless we did it at my place.

As we were cuddling with the lights out, still wearing our underwear (and Alan's Mormon underwear certainly took some getting used to), I said, "I'm going to tell you a bedtime story."

"Okay," said Alan, giggling, and holding my arm tightly across his chest.

I then proceeded to outline a scenario from one of the porn DVDs I'd had to review the night before. I was determined not to let this evening be just the equivalent of a preteen slumber party.

"Oh, you're mean," said Alan, but he laughed anyway.

He could feel my dick growing hard against his backside and he pressed his ass up against me, but there was no official fondling. Still, I thought it was a step forward for us, and I fell asleep pretty contentedly.

I wondered over the following weeks if all this effort was worth it. Alan was clearly damaged goods and would never be "normal." Of course, who in this life wasn't noticeably damaged in some way? But even if we did start having sex, there was no guarantee we'd be compatible in the first place. Besides, there would be so much pressure to perform well after all this foreplay that it was bound to be a little disappointing, even if it was actually quite adequate.

But I liked the guy. Even if Alan were no good in bed, I could still get my rocks off with other men, as I was doing now. I just wanted to be with him. As irritated as I was with Sharon, I had to admit she'd raised a good son.

One Sunday when Alan showed up, I said, "Want to help me with some work?"

“What do you need?”

“I’ve got another DVD I have to review.”

“I don’t know,” Alan said cautiously. “I’ve never watched porn before. I’ve heard it’s addictive.”

“Well, I have an endless supply. You’ll never have to go through withdrawal.”

“I don’t know.”

“If you get too excited, you can go in the bathroom and beat off by yourself. I won’t take advantage of you.”

Alan looked a little dejected at that, it seemed, which made me smile. “If you want to understand the gay world, or be comfortable in that world, you have to at least be exposed to a little porn.”

Alan looked at the floor. “Okay,” he said softly.

He giggled during the first ten minutes of the movie, but then his brows furrowed as he began to concentrate. We didn’t talk the whole time. I was taking notes and didn’t pause the action as I might normally have done. I wasn’t sure Alan would be able to take an entire DVD, but he sat on the sofa next to me till the very end. Then, without a word, he went to the bathroom. I smiled.

I felt a brief flash of guilt, though, wondering if I was corrupting a pure man. But I believed in God, too, and I believed God gave us sex to help make our lives better. What was corrupt was making people feel like dirt when they were sharing one of the few real pleasures in a usually difficult life.

Alan had told me a little about his theology, how sex was reserved in the hereafter only for those people who’d lived the best lives and were the most righteous. When Alan came

out of the bathroom now, he looked a little worried, so I said, “If it’s okay for the righteous to enjoy their bodies for eternity,” I said, “why is it a mortal sin to do it now?”

“Because we *are* mortal. The rules are different here.”

“Money can be used selfishly, to buy a hundred pairs of shoes, or to feed the hungry,” I said. “Books can be used to elevate the mind, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or they can be like *Mein Kampf* and used to hurt people. Sex can be used to degrade people or exercise power and control, or it can be used to make people feel good and loved. Anything can be used positively or negatively. But just because something *can* be used negatively doesn’t mean the thing itself is necessarily always bad. Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

Alan looked at the floor, his brows furrowed. “Maybe,” he said.

“How do you feel right now?”

“I don’t know. I’ve fantasized about some of those things before, so I don’t know that it’s any worse to actually watch it.” He paused. “It was oddly satisfying, and yet...”

“And yet...”

“Somehow it made me think that just getting off vicariously would somehow be a lesser thing than real sex.”

“Duh.”

“That it would be a Telestial act rather than a Celestial one.”

“You’re getting too Mormon on me.”

“The bottom line is that it makes masturbation not seem as satisfying as it used to be.”

“Oh, don’t give up jacking off. Even after you start having sex with others, it’s still fun to have sex with yourself. There’s no sin in loving yourself, too.”

Alan looked at the floor. “I wonder.”

But I felt we’d made a breakthrough, and every Sunday night thereafter, I asked Alan to “help” me with my reviews. It felt like the world’s longest seduction, but we were both enjoying every minute of the attempt. Alan was perfectly aware of what I was doing, but he seemed quite willing to let me pull him slowly along.

I thought things were going pretty well, but one Thursday evening, Alan knocked on my door, on an unscheduled visit. “My Mom almost caught me coming in this morning. I just don’t know if I can sleep over any more. It would be too awful if she found out.”

“Alan,” I said calmly. “What’s the worst she can do if she finds out you’re sleeping over here?”

“She might say something about me being ‘confused’ rather than gay.”

“So she makes some remarks. That’s it?”

“Well, she also might just ignore it and keep it to herself.”

“Great. Then she shuts up and minds her own business.”

“Well...”

“None of that sounds all that terrible to me. It’s not like she can disown you and move to Acapulco.”

“There’s another possibility.”

“What’s that?”

“She might feel sad.”

That one threw me for a second. Then I said slowly, “Well, *I’ll* feel sad if you don’t sleep over. And *you’ll* feel sad, too. That makes it two to one. Is it right for her to make us sad?”

“I’m not sure that’s fair,” said Alan. “If it makes forty million Germans happy to make six million Jews unhappy, do the numbers make it right?”

That threw me a little, too. “I just think at some point we have an obligation to live our own life. It’s an absolute obligation. God gave you life, and it’s not yours to throw away. You have to live while you’re alive.”

“Well, it’s not like my life is meaningless now. I have a good job. I earn my way in the world. I read interesting books. I do good things for people. I have a good friend I really care about. That’s not nothing, is it?”

I waited a moment before speaking. “I value your friendship. But I’ve had a partner before. And I know from experience that loving someone so much they’re you’re best friend *and* your lover is better than having someone who is just a friend. There’s certainly a place for platonic friendship, but there’s a place for sexual love, too. Adam and Eve had that. The prophet in your church has it. It’s not something to toss aside like so much garbage.”

“Gandhi was celibate the last couple of decades of his life.”

“Are your apostles abstinent? Does your church teach that abstinence is a higher way?”

“Only for gays.”

“You said that even God has sex with his wives in heaven. Are you higher than God?”

“If there is a God,” Alan mumbled. “Why would a god feel the need to torture me all my life?”

“This is crippling your chance at happiness, with me or anyone else. Are you sure you’re not just using your mother as a gatekeeper or a scarecrow? I think maybe you’re just avoiding taking responsibility for your own ambivalence about intimacy.”

“I’ve been trying.”

“Fifteen-year-old boys try harder than you. You’re an adult. You can’t stay a shy teenager your whole life.”

Alan started crying, and though I was irritated with him, I moved over and hugged him.

“Please help me,” he said, still sniffing. “Please love me enough to put up with me.”

We lay down on the bed for a few moments so I could hold him close against me.

I decided to try a new approach after this. I’d been keeping Alan to myself, a little selfishly perhaps, but I thought maybe exposing him now to other gay men might help him feel more comfortable about “our world.” I hoped working in the gay bookstore was helping, too. He’d gotten some propositions there, but he hadn’t made any friends among the regulars. I wanted Alan to have a larger network of gay men in his life.

On Tuesday night, I usually played cards with a few friends, so I asked if I could bring Alan along, and they were

all anxious to meet “the Mormon.” We simply chatted as we played, saying nothing particularly deep or meaningful.

“I’m going on a cruise this summer,” said Ted, one of the group. “But I’m telling everyone I meet there that I’m 55 instead of 40. They’ll all be saying how good I look.”

“My last vacation was back in 1995,” said David, another card player. “I mean, 2005,” he corrected himself. “I hate when I get the wrong time, I mean, the wrong period, I mean, the wrong decade.”

“The wrong lifetime?” I suggested.

“Yes, that’s so annoying.”

“Well, I have the right lifetime,” said Peter, the last in our group. “Jared and I just celebrated our seventh anniversary.”

“How’s the itch?” asked Ted.

“You have to be careful when you say that to a gay man,” countered David. “That could mean so many different things in our community.”

“I bought Jared an expensive new shirt for our anniversary. He likes to look good. In fact, this is one of his shirts I’ve got on now.”

“You wear his clothes?”

“All the time. I hate to do laundry, and he insists on doing his own clothes. So I wear his things, and he has to clean them.”

We all laughed.

“He complains and asks why I always wear his clothes.”

“So I can feel closer to you,” suggested Alan.

We all laughed again.

“Good answer,” said Peter. “You have the makings of an annoying lover.”

The evening continued in much the same way, with meaningless banter over a meaningless card game. Alan seemed to enjoy himself, and I asked the others later if it would be okay to add him to our Tuesday nights. They all agreed, and soon, Alan and I were seeing each other three nights a week.

The sneakovers continued unabated, even after Sharon discovered one night that Alan was gone. She went into a fit the next day, claiming she thought Alan had been murdered and she was up the rest of the night worrying.

“But she didn’t call the police, did she?” I asked. “Or call the hospitals? She didn’t ask for a name, did she? She’s not stupid. She knew where you were.”

I was impressed that Alan managed to avoid explaining where he was on his nights out, and managed to keep coming despite his mother’s displeasure with it.

But a few weeks later, Alan stopped by with some bad news.

“My Mom has a lump in her breast,” he said gloomily. “She goes in for a biopsy in a couple of days, and it’ll be another week or so before she gets the results. I need to be at home with her.”

“She’ll be okay,” I said softly. “Even if it’s cancer, they’ll get it in time.”

“You understand why I can’t stay, don’t you?”

“Sure. I understand.”

I did understand, but I was still irritated, though I felt like a heel because of my reaction. Obviously, Sharon couldn't have implanted the lump just to obstruct us, but it somehow still seemed calculating. Was there even a lump at all, I wondered? Or was all this just a ruse to get her boy back?

I had wondered if Sharon might start having dizzy spells or some other minor problem if she ever discovered Alan was sleeping over, but breast cancer was another thing. If it turned out to be serious, Alan would be gone for months. While I did truly love him, I realized suddenly, I wasn't sure I was up to waiting for him.

“Do you love me?” I asked.

“What?”

“Will you come back to me later, no matter how things turn out with your mother?”

“Yes,” said Alan. “I promise I'll be back.”

Either I called Alan or he called me every night over the next several days, but we only talked a few minutes before I could hear Sharon calling out for him in the background.

But as it happened, my own life got busier because my friend David from cards was starting work on a calendar that was going to be used as a fundraiser for some local HIV charities. He was a photographer and wanted to take photos of naked men.

“Charity work can be so trying,” I said.

But I decided to get involved, and over the next couple of weeks, David set up three photo shoots. The first model shoot

was in the hot tub at David's house. I got to apply the foam in the shoot.

David also had a private and jungly backyard, so he decided to use that as a setting for his second shoot with a handsome math instructor from Loyola. I got to apply the baby oil this time.

The third photo shoot took place in an out-of-the-way voodoo temple in Bywater, just down the river a few blocks from the Marigny. It turned out the temple priest was good looking enough to be right for the photos, so I was happy to attend this session as well, and got to light the candles.

What with card night and the library and the porn DVDs and the photo shoots and my occasional forays to the baths and to the bars, I realized I could still lead a perfectly happy life without Alan, if it turned out he saw the cancer as divine retribution and slowly faded out of my life.

I still *wanted* Alan, though, and I was pleasantly surprised when he showed up at my door one Monday evening a couple of days later.

"How's your Mom?" I asked.

"She's fine. The lump wasn't cancerous."

I pulled Alan inside and gave him a hug and started kissing him. He kissed back enthusiastically.

"You need any help with your reviews tonight?" He smiled.

"Sure." I waved for him to follow.

We went upstairs and kicked off our shoes, falling down together on the sofa. "So what have you been up to?" Alan asked eagerly.

I took Alan's feet in my lap and started rubbing them while I told him in detail about the photo shoots. When I finished, he pulled his feet away and sat up stiffly.

"I don't want you doing things like that anymore," he said. "You're *my* boyfriend."

I looked at him with what I hoped was tenderness and said, "I'm not a priest, you know."

"I am," Alan said sadly. "Since I was 16."

"You could come along on some of the photo shoots if you like. I'm sure David would be okay with that."

Alan stared at the floor. "I can't keep living my life by proxy." He laughed rather bitterly and shook his head. "You know, in our temples, we do baptisms for the dead by proxy, and marriages by proxy. I don't want to live my whole life as if I'm not really here in person."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I think we're going to skip the porn tonight."

He pulled me close and kissed me slowly. Then he took my hand and placed it on his crotch. I squeezed softly, and he moaned. We pulled away for a moment and looked in each other's eyes. Then he nodded gently and pulled me close again.

Two and a half hours later, Alan rested his head on my arm as we lay in bed. He held my other arm against his chest. It was the first time I'd felt the hair on his chest without the buffer of his Mormon underwear.

"I hope you understand that I'm going to be insatiable for a while," he said.

"I'll make the sacrifice," I replied. "For your sake."

Alan laughed. There was a lightness to it this time.

We lay there quietly after that and slowly fell asleep in each other's arms.

I was anxious to see Alan's reaction in the morning, though, when he'd realize more fully what had happened, but he was smiling as we ate a bowl of cereal, our first breakfast together ever, since he hadn't felt the need to sneak back home at the crack of dawn today.

"My mother may have been the reigning queen all these years," said Alan, "but I'm not going to be the prince-in-waiting anymore."

"No, you're officially a queen now, too."

We laughed.

I got ready for work, and we went downstairs together to leave. "I'll see you for cards tonight," I said, kissing Alan as I locked the door behind us. We both climbed on our bicycles but gave each other one last long look before getting ready to take off in different directions.

"I learned something last night," said Alan.

"What's that?"

"There definitely is a God," he said. "And he does love me."

"He's not the only one." I paused and then grinned. "The Sierra Club loves you, too. I keep my promises."

Alan smiled, blew me a kiss, and started pedaling off. I smiled, too. 42 and 38 suddenly seemed very young to me.

JOHNNY TOWNSEND

I made my way through the Quarter, heading Uptown, and watched people hosing down the sidewalks as I passed.

I had a lover now. It *was* better than just having a good friend. It *was* better to have both, and to love the man you were having sex with.

I waved at the men cleaning the rubber floor mats outside the bars and kept going, still smiling. I was going to have a good day.

And I was going to see Alan again tonight.

I started whistling an old disco tune and then, giggling happily, offered up a prayer of thanksgiving into the early morning sky.

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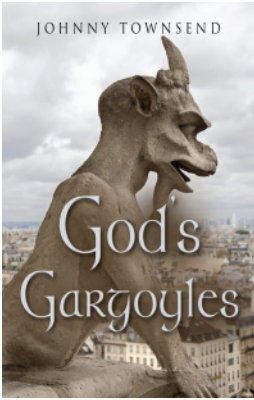
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