

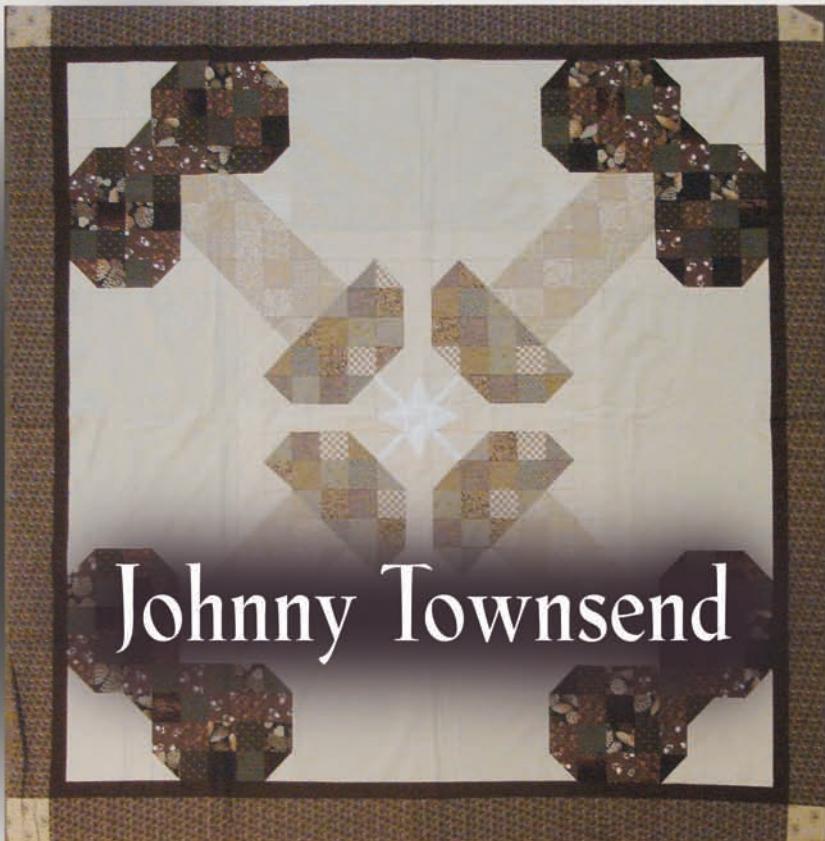
A gay quilting club in Salt Lake tries to win a contest using pornographic designs. A man tries to rebuild his life after being shot in the face by the wife of a man with whom he's having an affair. A college student becomes a false prophet to save his friends from disaster. A gay couple rejected by their biological families painstakingly creates a new "chosen" family.

## **The Gay Mormon Quilter's Club**

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# THE GAY MORMON QUILTER'S CLUB



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## The Gay Mormon Quilter's Club

“So what should we offer as our official entry?” asked Morgan, pulling his needle through the fabric. “We need to win first prize this time.”

“All we really need to do is place,” said Harry, tying a knot in his thread. “We just have to be noticed.”

“Well, I vote for a traditional quilt,” said Parker. “Something like Log Cabin.”

“I’m not endorsing Log Cabin Republicans,” said Jay. “It’s out of the question.”

“We need something spectacular,” said Morgan. “Something unmistakably a winner.”

The four men continued working for the next several minutes in silence, thinking. The particular quilt they were working on was made of hexagonal patches, in the design of a ribbon made from different shades and prints of red, against a background of different blacks. They’d pieced the top together by machine, but the group always did their final quilting of the finished product by hand. They had been meeting for three years now, and none of their quilts had ever received so much as an honorable mention. Not their leather flag patchwork, not all their variations on the rainbow flag, not their quilts depicting a pair of cowboy boots, or army boots, or ruby slippers. Not even the quilts showing a pink triangle surrounded by barbed wire. The judging was supposedly done blind, but perhaps the

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very subject matter of their entries “signed” the quilts too visibly. The four friends wanted to quilt, but here in Salt Lake amidst so much oppression, they also wanted to make a statement, and 90% of the quilts they produced were markedly “gay.”

Of course, there was only so much the Gay Mormon Quilter’s Club could do that was gay and still presentable in decent society. They could never exhibit their quilts depicting a penis shooting onto a man’s face, or one of two men fucking doggy-style, or even the beautiful one of a simple penis ejaculating like a fountain. The men sold these other quilts online and split the money among four different charities—the Human Rights Campaign, American Forests, Partners in Health, and the Myelin Project.

Nevertheless, the men really wanted to be seen and acknowledged by mainstream quilters. It seemed an innocuous way to put a happy, successful face on a group usually made so miserable by the Mormon Church here in the valley, kind of like the Gay Men’s choruses singing around the country. But not even their “neutral” quilts had garnered any recognition, the one of a plane flying over the Salt Lake temple, the one of a hill full of trees, or even the one of Arches National Park. If they were going to lose, though, the group decided they were going to lose in the future on exclusively gay quilts.

Morgan had been the first to initiate the club three years ago, feeling that devoting all his sartorial skill to making dresses for one of his friends to perform in was not promoting the “gay agenda” forcefully enough. “I don’t want to use my talent to endorse some fringe element of gay society like drag queens. We need to assimilate if we want to be accepted.”

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"You can't pick and choose what parts of gay life you like," Harry had replied over a cup of coffee.

"Of course I can," said Morgan. "Italians don't have to like pasta *and* the Mafia. They can just like olives and pizza. They don't even have to like wine if they join the Church. Of *course* you can pick and choose."

"We don't want to look divided," insisted Harry. "Straight society keeps us fighting amongst ourselves so we don't have any strength left to fight against them. And what's *wrong* with drag queens?"

"Nothing, I suppose," said Morgan, shrugging, "but I want to do something I don't have to cringe over when it's noticed."

"You're good at sewing. Be a clothes designer."

"Like that will help our image." Morgan smiled wryly. "I—" "He stopped.

"What?"

"How about a quaint, homey, folksy use of my skills?"

"You're going to knit baby blankets?"

"No, I'm going to sew patchwork quilts."

"And you're worried about drag queens looking too effeminate?"

"This will work," said Morgan excitedly. "I know it!"

Harry had looked at him dubiously but then conceded, "Well, maybe it will get Mormon *women* to like us..."

"That's half the battle."

"Of course, Mormon women have no power."

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“We can’t solve the whole problem just by ourselves. But we can still make a positive difference of a measurable degree. And that’s all anyone can ask.”

“If you say so.”

“I simply want the security of knowing we’re finally accepted, that we can breathe a sigh of relief.”

Harry laughed. “Gays in pre-war Germany were pretty well accepted, and then under Hitler they all went to the concentration camps.”

“True. But I can’t plan for every contingency. All I can do is try to make things better than they are now.”

“I suppose you’re right. Just throwing up our arms in the air does no good. We have to do *something*.”

“So when are you available to start sewing?”

“Who? Me? I don’t sew.”

“You will.”

It took a year for the group to grow to four, and at that point, the quilt production really took off. There was one showing the faces of two bearded men, another of a torso covered with a leather harness, with a nipple sporting a ring. There was one of two grooms atop a wedding cake. The group had real hopes for that one, but it received the most vitriolic response of anything they ever exhibited. They participated in every quilt show in the entire region, only showing their most “respectable” designs, like a towel rack with His and His towels, or a single man holding a baby. Naturally, they never displayed their quilt of two men sharing a sleeping bag under the stars, or of a man jerking off in the shower, or even their innocent quilt of a nude man standing alone.

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As they continued working tonight on their AIDS ribbon, Jay was the first to grow tired, and before long, they all decided to put away the quilting for the evening. "Next Tuesday, guys," said Morgan as they all hugged and kissed goodbye. Morgan kept the quilt in his apartment, but he didn't work on it when the others weren't present. It was important for him that this be a communal activity. They all took turns drawing ideas on graph paper and then translating the squares into pieces of cloth. They shopped at thrift stores for old clothes they could use, went to fabric stores together, browsed samples on ebay and narrowed down their selections together. They all participated in choosing colors for a particular design, participated together in the ironing, the cutting, and the sewing. Both Morgan and Harry owned sewing machines, and Morgan asked to keep Harry's in his apartment, too, so two people could be sewing at the same time.

Morgan rented a two-bedroom apartment, an incredible luxury, but quilting took up a lot of space. There was the cutting table and the ironing board and two sewing machines, and stacks of fabric against the walls. He figured he would never have enough room for a partner, but in this homophobic state, maybe that was a moot point.

A couple of days later, though, Morgan felt the longing to try. He was treating himself to a rare restaurant meal, and he noticed the cute young waiter who was attending him. But the young man, probably only twenty-one, a good eight years younger than Morgan, seemed to be struggling. He took longer and longer between visits to Morgan's table, and Morgan had to wait almost fifteen minutes after he'd finished his meal before he could catch the waiter's attention to get the check. He thought of asking the guy for his number, or writing his own on a napkin for the guy, but by this point, he just wanted to be able

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to pay and leave. Dating, or even a quick fuck, weren't worth this much trouble. Not that he often allowed himself a quick fuck.

"Oh, garçon," said Morgan patiently.

"It's Garson," said the waiter, "with the accent on the first syllable."

Morgan stared at him. "I lived in France for two years," he said, smiling. "I know how to pronounce garçon."

"Oh, I thought you were calling my name. I'm Garson. I wondered how you knew who I was. I just started."

"You'll be called garçon by lots of other smart asses before long. You'll get used to it."

"I wish I could have gone to France. I went to Tuscaloosa."

"What did you learn there?"

He shrugged. "I learned that it's damn hot in Alabama."

"Hey, you learned how to say 'damn.' That's something."

"Well, I've made myself become comfortable saying the word. I'm psyching myself up for Outer Darkness." A shadow passed over Garson's face.

"Why would you do that?"

"I'm working here because I'm gay," he said simply. "I got back from my mission four months ago, started a new quarter at Brigham Young, and fell in love with my roommate."

"You got ex'ed?" Morgan asked sympathetically.

"Oh, no. No one knows. I can't imagine why I blabbered it to you. I dropped out of BYU after one quarter. But I heard gays become waiters and hairdressers. I didn't want to be a

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hairdresser, so I started working here, to get used to my new position in society.”

Morgan laughed. “You can’t be serious.”

Garson looked confused. “Sure I am.”

“Haven’t you heard of Greg Louganis?”

“Who?”

“The gay Olympic diver. And Barney Frank?”

“The Democrat?”

“He’s a successful, powerful politician.”

Garson frowned. “What’s your point?”

“You don’t have to be a waiter the rest of your life.”

Garson looked depressed again. “But won’t God punish me if I try to do anything else?”

“There are lots of successful gays out there, Garson.”

“What about Ted Haggard? And Jeffrey Dahmer? And John Gacy? *Those* are gays I’ve heard of.”

“You can’t isolate only the bad apples and think you’ve understood homemade apple pie.”

“But—“

“Garson,” said an older, heavy man walking up to the table briskly. “I don’t want to have to tell you again. You’re not here to socialize.”

“Yes, sir.”

Morgan felt a stab of guilt for getting the young man in trouble. He quickly handed over his credit card, and while he was waiting for Garson to return, he wrote his name and

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number on a napkin, just as he'd earlier thought he might. Now he definitely wanted to talk to this young man further.

When he returned home, Morgan got out his graph paper and drew two missionaries with nametags kissing each other. "Another quilt we can never use as an entry," he muttered to himself.

After thinking about it a little more, Morgan regretted giving his number to the waiter. Garson was too freshly gay to have the nerve to call. It would have been better to have asked for the young man's number instead. But as Morgan was beating off in bed after his evening prayers, the phone rang.

"Morgan?" It was Garson.

"Hey there. I enjoyed the meal tonight."

"I don't mind being a waiter. I like restaurants. People get to pick out exactly what they like. Everyone's happy there."

"You haven't been working very long," said Morgan, laughing.

"Long enough that I'm bushed," he replied. "Can I come crash at your place tonight?"

"What?"

"I'm better at sex in the morning. At least, I think I am. That's when I always masturbate."

"You're a virgin?"

"Only technically. I've been fantasizing for years."

"And so you want to come over, just like that?"

"It's a decision, like becoming a waiter."

"Well, I'll be happy to fuck you in the morning."

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“What’s your address?”

Garson knocked on Morgan’s door fifteen minutes later, and Morgan undressed him carefully, leaving him in his Mormon underwear. Morgan slept in the nude, and though he tried, he couldn’t make himself wait until daylight. Around 3:30 in the morning, he lubed up and entered Garson, who moaned lightly but pretended to still be asleep. After he finished, Morgan pulled Garson’s garment bottoms back over his ass and cuddled the rest of the night.

He woke up with Garson straddling his chest, his dick pointing straight into Morgan’s face. “My turn,” was all he said.

Morgan took care of the young man, and then he jumped in the shower while Garson slurped down a bowl of cereal. “I’m glad my first was another Mormon,” said Garson as Morgan dressed for work.

“Why is that?”

“It seems...more celebratory.”

Morgan laughed. “We can celebrate as often as you’d like.”

“Good, because I can only adapt to one new culture at a time. Don’t freak, but it’s kind of like marriage—something borrowed, something blue, something old, something new. I understand that when you’re starting out a new life, you have to keep something familiar around you, too. You have to be very selective about the different pieces of life you surround yourself with.”

“So I’m ‘something old’?”

Garson slapped Morgan’s hand. “I’m glad we’re going to have sex again.” He paused a moment, looking off toward the

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second bedroom. “I saw all your quilting supplies. I snooped while you were in the shower.”

“What’d you think?”

“I guess once you have sex, you become completely degenerate. All I could think about were sexual images. Have you ever done a quilt of bunnies fucking?”

“There’s no way to make both bunnies look male,” said Morgan.

Now it was Garson’s turn to laugh. “Do you only quilt gay animals?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I belong to the Gay Mormon Quilter’s Club. Want to join?”

Garson sobered up quickly. “Jesus, this is the real deal, isn’t it? I really am gay.”

“If you’re not, you pass pretty well.”

“I guess I’ll have to come out the rest of the way eventually. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to meet some more gay guys. But I’ve never done more than sew on a button.”

“We all start at the beginning sometime. We meet here on Tuesday evenings. Can you get that night off work?”

“I already have Monday and Tuesday nights off.”

“Excellent. So we’ll see you Tuesday?”

“Well...”

“Yes?”

“Can I see you again tonight?”

“You can’t fall for your first guy, Garson.”

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“You can’t pick and choose my emotions.”

“You’re a whole package?”

Garson shrugged. “Maybe I’m a hodgepodge of feelings right now, but that’s immaterial. We can certainly fuck some more, can’t we?”

“I’ll see you when you get off work.”

Morgan and Garson spent Friday night and Saturday night together as well, but Morgan was happy when Garson decided not to return on Sunday night. “I’ll be staying Tuesday night, though, if that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

The truth was that Morgan enjoyed sex, but he didn’t enjoy being a slut, despite some of the quilt designs he’d come up with. He’d much rather have a boyfriend, or a select group of three or four regular fuck buddies, than roam the bars at random. While he felt the Church was wrong on the subject of homosexuality, he did feel there were both moral and immoral ways to be gay.

“You can’t sleep with 400 guys and be moral,” said Morgan while Harry was over Sunday evening for a game of Scrabble. Harry did like to pick up strangers in the bars.

“Why not? If gay sex isn’t a sin once, why is it a sin the tenth time?”

“The Church isn’t an all or nothing deal,” said Morgan. “Just because *some* parts of it are wrong doesn’t mean we need to throw out the whole thing. I still believe in eternal progression.”

“And how does my having lots of sex keep me from progressing? We need to become perfect at sex, too.”

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Morgan shrugged. “It’s like keeping kosher,” he said.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I never understood why an ex-Mormon who’s been oppressed by religion would go out of his way to add *more* rules to his life.” They’d discussed Morgan’s adoption of this particular Jewish law before.

“It’s not a matter of pork itself being bad. Or shellfish. Or catfish.”

Harry sighed.

“It’s a reminder that ideally, we wouldn’t eat other animals in the first place. God understands that we’re weak and want meat, but he bans just a little of it to help us to remember that in a perfect world, we wouldn’t eat it at all.”

“You’re like a cafeteria Catholic,” Harry complained. “You piece together the rules you like and discard the rest. How is it a sin for *me* to be promiscuous with twenty men but you’re okay with just four?”

“It’s a matter of degree, just like eating meat. You’ll ruin your karma.”

“So you’re part Buddhist now, too?”

Morgan shrugged again. “If I can’t be 100% Mormon, there’s no reason I can’t pick the best from several religions and make up my own belief system.”

“Can you tailor eternal truths to your own tastes?”

“Come on. Drop your pants. I haven’t had sex in almost twelve hours.”

Harry did drop his pants, but he kept talking as Morgan pumped him from behind. They continued to debate which religious rules should still apply to excommunicated gay

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Mormons, and Harry was extolling the virtues of coffee beans as he ejaculated with Morgan's hand around his penis. Morgan licked off the cum that had landed on the back of his hand, and then the two men walked to the quilting room and looked at the fabric squares on the cutting mat.

"Any ideas for our next masterpiece?" asked Harry.

"We've just got to win this competition."

Harry put his hand on Morgan's shoulder. "Will it really make any difference?"

Morgan rubbed his chin. "It's like asking if Sam Cooke made a difference by being the first black singer to have a pop hit."

"But quilting is hardly mainstream pop culture."

"I suppose if we could make a *Spiderman* movie with all the same exciting action as usual, but the love interest is Billy Bob instead of Mary Jane, and that fact is just incidental, we'd have more success. But I don't have the power to do that."

"Wouldn't we be better off just accepting that society is made up of a hundred separate parts, all different, all with something worthwhile to add to the final product?"

"That's like asking the high school quarterback to take up quilting."

"I *was* the high school quarterback."

Morgan laughed. "You don't even know what a fourth down is."

"Does it have anything to do with giving head four times?"

"Hey, there's an idea. How about a quilt of a human train? You know, six guys in a row all fucking each other."

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“Isn’t six over your limit?”

Morgan frowned. “I seem to be less prudish in my art than in real life.”

“Then let life imitate art.”

“Maybe I’ll up my allotment of men to five, if you design a good human train quilt.”

“Well, that can hardly be our entry, but I’ll start drawing something up.”

Harry left a few minutes later, and Morgan sat at the cutting table, staring at a piece of graph paper, his mind empty of good ideas. He tried to forget about finding a fifth man, afraid of his soul unraveling, and forced himself to consider quilt designs. What could they do that would be beautiful, meaningful, and yet only subtly gay? Then again, why did it have to be meaningful in the first place? If they did a diamond star quilt, the fact that they won at all would get their name out there. *That* would be all the meaning they’d need.

And yet, Morgan *wanted* to do a picture quilt of two men holding hands in front of the Salt Lake temple, or even in front of a Mayan temple, for that matter. Perhaps just a simple wedding ring quilt would do. The implications would be pretty obvious once the group’s name was announced. Morgan was taking quality photos of each of their quilts, as well as keeping designs. Maybe the best he could do was publish a quilting book and have the Gay Mormon Quilter’s Club be the collective author. Still, even a book such as that would only be powerful if the group had actually won at least one competition.

Morgan climbed into bed and fell fitfully asleep, still thinking about quilts.

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Monday at work, though, he found that he was spending more time thinking about Garson. The guy was far too young for Morgan, and way too inexperienced in life to be a good boyfriend, but something about him was endearing and almost made him want to consider not five other men, not four, but only him. If Morgan could keep the guy from falling in love, it might be worthwhile to play out the relationship until the adventure died out.

But why would you get in a relationship *intending* for it to dissolve? Were the Mormons right? If Morgan couldn't get a gay relationship to last even one year, how could he expect to ever have a marriage to another man that would last an eternity?

Perhaps this was a place where he'd have to come up with his own gospel principle. There would be thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of gays in heaven. Maybe even millions. Who knew? Morgan could just flit from one to another over thousands of years. By the time he got through them all, he could start over. It would be a smorgasbord to last forever.

Of course, that rather went against his idea that sex needed to be limited in order for it to be righteous. Maybe Harry had the better idea, after all.

For a brief moment, Morgan felt nostalgia for the old days when he didn't have to think, when he could just follow Mormon teachings without question. He always had the vague sensation now that his life was slowly but continually unraveling.

Monday evening, Morgan considered calling one of his fuck buddies, but instead, he put in his DVD of Tom Bianchi's *On the Couch* and beat off methodically as he watched real-life couples making love.

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Tuesday on his lunch break, Morgan thought more about a new quilt design. He loved crossword puzzles, so he made up a grid and filled in connecting words. One across was “lust.” One down was “lube.” Three across used the “b” from “lube” to start the word “blew,” and the “e” from that word going down started the word “escort.” He ended up with a fun gay quilt incorporating other words like “ass,” “cock,” “hard,” “kiss,” “fucking,” “semen,” “hunk,” and “nipple.” It was actually a rather clever design, he thought, and quite doable, but of course, they could never enter this one in any competition, either.

Then a new thought occurred to Morgan. Perhaps they shouldn’t be bothering with competitions in the first place. Maybe that was simply making Uncle Tom’s of them. They should just do their own thing and to hell with being accepted. They could enter purely for the fun of it, and include their most political quilts, one of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young kissing, for instance. Even without winning, they’d certainly be noticed.

Morgan had a quick bite to eat when he arrived home, and soon the others began knocking at the door. He was surprised to feel his heart leap just a little when Garson showed up, and he introduced him happily to the rest of the group.

“Glad to meet you,” said Jay. “We could use another hand around here, at the pace we’re trying to crank these things out.”

“Though five might just about be our limit,” said Parker. “It’ll get too crowded in the room if we have anyone else.”

“We can always have two branches,” said Morgan. “Have one group meet here and another meet somewhere else, and still share ideas and work.”

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"Well, let's get back to our AIDS ribbon," said Harry, moving over to his favorite chair. "Garson, you sit next to me. I'll teach you what to do, and I'll give you a separate piece to practice on."

"No moving in on my boyfriend," Morgan wanted to say, but thinking a moment before he spoke, he realized he actually didn't feel particularly possessive. He could share if it came to that. These guys were his brothers.

Weren't all the other gay Mormons in the bars here in town also his brothers, though? Weren't all the non-Mormons?

The group sat down and started quilting, chit chatting about their past week, gripes from work, conquests over the weekend, phone calls with their parents. "I called my parents Sunday," said Garson during a lull in the conversation. "And I came out to them."

Everyone stopped sewing. "How did it go?" asked Morgan softly.

"They said they'd known for years but were just glad I got to serve a mission first."

"That's it?" said Jay.

Garson shrugged. "They said it used to bother them, but my Mom really loves Ellen DeGeneres, and my Dad liked Raymond Burr."

"You've got to be kidding."

"What can I say? Perry Mason saves the day again."

"So they're cool with you?"

"They invited me to dinner next Sunday." He smiled. "And they said I could bring a friend if I wanted."

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Morgan's heart skipped a beat.

"So I'm going to ask Morgan."

"Is there something we should know?" asked Parker.

"Your nickname should be Nosy."

"I've heard that one before."

The feeling on Tuesday nights was almost always light when the friends were together, but after Garson's announcement, the atmosphere seemed to grow brighter still. They continued talking, about Rachel Maddow, and a new country and western bar that had just opened up, and the moderate weather they'd had lately.

"I have an old shirt that might make some good patches," offered Garson later in the evening.

"What fabric is it made of?" asked Harry.

"I don't know. Does it matter? It's in good condition."

"You can't sew wool to linen. We go for cotton in this group. Even the Torah insists on it."

"The Torah commands cotton quilts?" Garson looked confused.

"It says not to mix certain fabrics," said Harry patiently. "Morgan loves to pretend he's following God every chance he gets, since he usually just does what he wants and then justifies it after the fact."

"Hey."

They began talking about a new design for the next competition again, and no one could come up with anything appropriate. Jay suggested a man pissing on another man,

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Parker suggested Santa fucking an elf, and Harry suggested a cabin in the woods. Morgan couldn't find any satisfaction with either the extreme or the mundane.

"How about a large rooster?" suggested Garson.

"What?" said Morgan.

"You know, a cock. Have the rooster take up the whole quilt and be extra beautiful. It'll be a testament to the penis, but no one will really know."

The rest of the group looked at each other.

"That's actually not a bad idea," said Harry. "I think I could come up with a design."

"Harry, hand over your needle to Garson, and get right to the drawing board. The show's in a month. We'll have to knock this one out." Morgan smiled at Garson, and Garson smiled back.

The group finished the final quilting of the AIDS ribbon that night, and before they disbanded, Harry had a wonderful design for the rooster quilt, and they were even able to pick out a couple of fabrics from their stash to start assigning to various squares and triangles. They authorized a special shopping session the next evening and then again on Saturday if they still needed anything else, and Jay promised to take a look at fabric offerings on ebay.

"You guys are a well-oiled machine," said Garson after everyone else had left.

"Speaking of well-oiled, I need you to bend over."

Garson grinned but did as he was told. As Morgan slid in and out, he asked about Garson's relationship with God, and how he liked to pray.

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“You want to talk about that during sex?” Garson asked uncomfortably.

“Why not? If sex isn’t dirty, then it’s not as if we contaminate theology by mixing the two together.”

“It’s not like sewing together silk and...and...and burlap?”

“It’s making a beautiful mosaic out of life.”

Garson thought for a moment. “Would you suck my dick while I prayed?”

“Now that would be rude. It’d be interrupting a conversation.”

“How about while I was reading the scriptures?”

“When you’re sharing your body with someone, you need to be engaged.”

Garson nodded slowly. “I think I get it now.”

“Good, because I’m about to come.” Morgan finished with a deep grunt, and after a moment to rest, he kneeled down in front of Garson and took him in his mouth.

“So you think God is really okay with all this? We hardly know each other.”

Morgan stopped sucking and looked up at Garson. “What’s better? Living next to your neighbor for ten years and not even knowing his dog’s name? Or just meeting someone and giving yourself to him completely?”

Garson frowned.

“There are worse things than immediate intimacy.” Morgan resumed sucking.

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"But...but..." Garson hesitated. "I know it sounds awfully base of me, but as much as I like you, now that I've crossed over into having sex..."

Morgan stopped again. "What?" It was the age-old complaint against gays. Homosexual sex was a slippery slope that led to untold abominations. He took Garson's penis back in his mouth.

"Well...there's this cute guy at work I'd like to get in bed with. And the bus driver on my route. And my neighbor down the hall, whatever his dog's name is. And—"

Morgan stopped again. *Was* one act of sex in fact a slippery slope? He wondered if he should feel offended by Garson's admission, but he didn't. The truth was, he was interested in the barista at the local coffeehouse himself, and the mail clerk at the post office, and his own neighbor down the hall. He tried to restrict his sexual activities out of a vague sense that restraint had to be a good thing, but now he doubted himself.

Restraint was good if you were eating cupcakes, but was it good if you were donating to medical charities? Too much alcohol was bad, but was too much generosity? Too much of anything sounded dangerous, but they were commanded to love God with *all* their heart, weren't they? They were commanded to love their neighbors as themselves, and self-love was pretty absolute.

Except when people were taught to hate themselves for who they were.

"You up to sucking another dick before you come tonight?" asked Morgan.

Garson frowned again. "I suppose. Why?"

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“There’s a bar not far from here. Lots of disparate casual flirtations, and maybe a couple of different sexual acts, to mold into one beautiful night.”

“Are you sure?”

Morgan laughed. “No. We’ll never be sure about anything anymore. Maybe that’s why I sew quilts. It’s my personal version of a security blanket.”

“And does it give you security?”

Morgan turned his head and stared off at nothing for a moment. “I think security is an illusion,” he said slowly. Then he looked up again at Garson. “Life gives us isolated moments of joy mixed with almost constant challenges. We have to be able to adapt and roll with the punches.”

“Punches? So now you’re into S & M?” Garson laughed.

“It takes all kinds.”

Garson thought for a moment. “Well, a bar right now does sound interesting,” he admitted.

“Then you should go. I won’t be able to come because I have to get up early, but you can tell me all about it tomorrow night, if you want to stop over again.”

“I do.”

They got dressed, Morgan wrote directions for Garson, and then he gave him a hug. “Now take notes,” said Morgan. “If you get any ideas for future quilts, write them down. Every member of the Gay Mormon Quilter’s Club has their own pack of graph paper.” He ran off quickly to grab some paper for Garson.

“I’m glad I met you,” said Garson, giving Morgan a quick peck at the door. “I’m going to marry you one day.”

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Morgan laughed. "We'll see."

"But I'll move in next door, so we still have space for quilting."

Maybe that would actually work, Morgan thought after Garson left. Binding together two unrelated souls to form a cohesive loving unit was perhaps the biggest challenge anyone ever faced, gay Mormon or not. Perhaps achieving that would be a bigger award than anything he could get at a quilting show. And if he had that, maybe it didn't really matter if other Mormons liked him or not.

It was late, and Morgan needed to go to sleep, but he went instead to the computer, promising to only stay up for fifteen minutes. He looked at photographs of roosters to get a better idea of the color scheme they needed to use. He still wanted to win, not for any abstract degree of acceptance narrow-minded people might deign to offer, but because this design was Garson's idea.

He hoped Garson was having a good time.

Morgan jotted down some ideas for the tail feathers, and another for the border. Smiling at his choices, he turned off the computer. He took off his clothes and slid under the covers, thinking as he hugged his pillow about how Garson would soon be here beside him, maybe not forever, but hopefully for a long, long time to come.

## The Brother of Spotted Owls

I was no great philanthropist, but I made an honest effort to give to charity whenever I could. But I was disturbed by the ones which claimed that all money donated would go to help “families in need” or “families suffering from this disease.” After the terrible earthquake in Haiti earlier this year, one charity specifically said my money would go to help “children and families” affected by the quake.

So I guessed if some guy lost his wife and kids and was the only one left out of all his relatives, he was out of luck, left to suffer and die alone. If a bachelor with a broken leg had lost his home, he would get no assistance. If a person wasn’t part of a family, he wasn’t worth saving.

I wouldn’t give to a group that claimed to only help families. I was more interested in helping *people*, and those were the groups I donated to.

Well, I also donated to lots of conservation groups, but they didn’t usually make absurd claims about only helping “families of snail darters” or “families of black-footed ferrets.”

I’d grown up in a reasonably loving Mormon family in Mississippi. My father and I had never been very close, and my mother died while I was on my mission to Wisconsin. My sister had always been rebellious and left home at sixteen to marry a boy from the Baptist church down the block. But for every Easter and Thanksgiving and Christmas, the clan always got together at Grandma’s house in the country. There my mother’s

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brother Mark and his family would come, and my mother's sister Annabeth and her family, and it had felt wonderful as a child to luxuriate in the bonds of extended family.

"Hey, Brother," said Alec, my partner. "We can get four rooms at the Marriott for half price if we book now."

I shook my head. "We haven't gotten confirmations from everyone yet."

"They always come, don't they?"

"But I don't want to be presumptuous."

"Let's book them, Brother."

I nodded, and Alec smiled and returned to his computer. Every year, Alec and I and three other gay couples met in a different city for Thanksgiving. We might spend other holidays with our partners at home, or somewhere else with biological family, but we always saved Thanksgiving for the "chosen family." I had been the one to suggest it nine years ago, just as a one-time event. But Billy and Danny, and Jim and Ron, and Luana and Margie all seemed to have a good time, and we decided to do it a second year as well. It had continued to this day, not a family tradition but a chosen family tradition.

"It's going to be a little tight this year, Brother," said Alec. "I sure wish—"

"Don't say it."

"Your aunt and uncle have *got* to get on the ball," Alec continued. "It's been three and a half years since your grandmother died."

At one year, I had complained nicely about the need to make good on the will. At two years, I told them a little more pointedly that I could have served a second full-time mission

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for the Church in the time it was taking to get the land Grandma had left us. And at three years, I pointed out I could have served a three-year mission presidency. “I can’t *make* them do their duty,” I said.

“Brother, you have to get firm with them. It’s your money, not theirs.”

“Well, some of it is theirs.”

“And don’t they want it? They’re always complaining about how much it costs to raise a houseful of kids.”

“Maybe the kids keep them too busy.”

“So only spinsters can process an inheritance? Most people out there have kids, and estates get settled all the time.”

“I’ll send them another email.”

“Brother, you can’t let this go on forever.”

“They’ll think I’m a vulture.”

Alec made a face. “You waited one full year before you said anything at all. That’s not being a vulture.”

This was the kind of thing that drove families apart, and I didn’t want to lose my family. As it was, Uncle Mark hadn’t talked to me in over two years, ever since my first complaint about the estate. Granted, we’d never been all that close to begin with, but now we had no contact at all. He hadn’t even sent a Christmas card the past two years.

Things weren’t much better with Annabeth. She was only six years older than I was, so we’d actually been closer than I was with my sister. My coming out had driven a small wedge between us, of course. I could always feel her thinking, “We still love you, but since you’re not going to be a part of our

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Celestial family, there's no sense investing *too* much in our relationship." The Church always talked about the importance of families, but it was the one breaking families apart.

"I don't think we'll ever be able to visit you," Annabeth had said sadly at one point. "It'd be one thing if you were just down at the bottom of the Celestial Kingdom, but you'll be all the way in Outer Darkness. Maybe if you hadn't had a Book of Mormon name..."

My given name was "Brother of Jared," after the character in the book of Ether. It was hell growing up in the deep South with teachers calling out on the first day of class, "Brother of Jared Smith?" Everyone wanted to know who Jared Smith was, though of course there was no such person.

But folks at church got a kick out of my name, and I was elected Seminary class president three years and was chosen to bless the sacrament every Sunday for two years after I was ordained a priest.

But when I invited one of my missionary companions to Biloxi to visit me, and he moved in, it wasn't long before people began calling me "Brother of Nephi," meaning now I was an apostate Lamanite.

Alec and I had been together fourteen years now, moving to Seattle after Hurricane Katrina.

I got on the computer and tried to write a delicate note to Annabeth. "I know life gets busy with family. But if we wait till the kids are all grown before we take care of this, we'll start having to worry about college and missions and grandkids. There's never going to be a good time to do an unpleasant chore. But we really need to get the estate settled. Please bite the bullet and fulfill Grandma's last wishes."

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Was there any easy way to be diplomatic when you were dealing with such issues?

I was just about to log off the computer when I saw a new email in my inbox. It was from Luana. I'd met her at an Affirmation conference ten years ago. That was the same conference where she'd met Margie. "Brother," the email began, "we're not going to be able to go to San Diego with you guys for Thanksgiving. Margie's parents have finally invited us to a family dinner. We have to give them a chance."

I was miffed. A chance? They'd had ten years worth of chances. What gave them the right to claim first place now when they'd been assholes for the last decade? Just because they shared the same DNA?

I wanted to write back, "I thought we were family, too," but decided not to write anything till I'd calmed down a little.

But I did write to Billy and Danny and to Ron and Jim, letting them know we'd found a hotel and what the prices were. I didn't tell them we'd already booked the rooms, not wanting them to feel obligated. That was the whole point of chosen family. These were people you were supposed to *want* to be with, not people you *had* to put up with.

Within two days, both other couples had agreed to the accommodations. I still hadn't written back to Luana, and she sent me another email. "Are you mad?"

"Let me put it this way," I wrote back. "If you'd been seeing your grandmother for Christmas every year for the past ten years, and then one day you decided you'd rather just go see a movie with friends, would she feel hurt? We matter, too."

Then I deleted all that and wrote back simply, "You have to go where your heart leads. All we want is for you to be happy."

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Thanksgiving was still a month away, and I had lots going on at work. The credit union where I was a teller had recently converted to a new computer program, and the past two months had been a nightmare. People had their loan payments post twice or not at all. ACH's to other institutions weren't going through. Direct deposit was being bounced back to employers. The computer was placing arbitrary stop payments on our own credit union's checks. Payroll allocations were posting to the wrong accounts. It was one disaster after another, and people were getting fed up.

"I joined this credit union because you're small and locally owned," a woman complained to me today. "I thought we were family. But families don't treat each other like this."

I was instantly irritated, and not only because the stress had me on edge. "Well, my father disowned me for marrying someone he didn't like," I said, smiling pleasantly as if saying something reassuring.

The woman looked at me in confusion and then got up and left.

People endured crap from their families all the time. Billy and Danny were both Baptist, and Billy's family didn't even talk to him anymore. But on more than one occasion, he'd told me he dreamed of the day when his father would welcome him home again.

Forgiveness was one thing, but being a doormat was another. If someone treated you badly for years and years and years, why would you invest so much energy in the vain hope of being treated nice maybe two days out of the year?

Billy and Danny visited Danny's family for Christmas every December, and *they* treated Billy and Danny well. Why

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not just adopt your in-laws as your family, I wondered. Why put up with repeated rejection? What good was sharing genes if you shared nothing else?

I hadn't celebrated Christmas with my family since my grandmother died. Dad hadn't gone since my Mom passed away, of course. But I had still liked seeing Grandma and Mark and Annabeth. They naturally had to take turns between our family and their spouses' families. It was hard juggling so many obligations. But friends weren't considered obligations. We never once invited a non-relative to share a family holiday. I knew of people who would invite a "lonely" friend, someone with no family of their own, but it was always described as a gesture of charity. You didn't invite Bob along because you actually liked Bob's company. You did it out of pity because Bob had nowhere else to go.

And I was doing it, too. I'd already started going through the list of my other gay friends, wondering who was the most likely to take Luana and Margie's place this Thanksgiving. And I was trying to find the most pathetic couple, someone who'd be foolish to turn me down.

What I needed to do was ask the people I *liked* the most.

"Hey, Rodney," I said over the phone the next evening, "Alec and I are heading to San Diego for Thanksgiving to meet up with some other friends. Do you think you might like to come?"

"I have Roger that weekend," he said instantly.

"Well, we have a whole extra room already booked. Roger might enjoy the city, too. It's got a great zoo."

Rodney hesitated a moment. "Are these other friends of yours gay?"

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“Yes, but none of them are turned on by kids. Roger will be perfectly safe.”

“Oh, Brother, I wasn’t worried about that....I just...well, I don’t know that I want Roger to see lots of men hugging and kissing.”

I frowned. “I didn’t realize you were prejudiced, Rodney. You never seemed to mind hanging out with us before.”

“You guys have been a godsend since I divorced Kathy, but...”

“Are you afraid Roger will think you’re gay?”

Rodney sighed. “Roger’s ten years old. You have concerns when you raise kids. You wouldn’t understand. You’ve never had a family.”

“Thanks.”

“You know what I mean. I’m worried Roger will think that since heterosexual relationships don’t work out, he should consider gay ones.”

“It’s really not a choice he’ll ever have to make. He’s either gay or he isn’t. If he’s gay, seeing us will help him come out later without all the self-hate, and if he’s straight, seeing us will help him grow to be the kind, tolerant man you are.” Or that I’d thought he was.

“Well...”

Maybe I had misjudged. I’d decided that it was time to include someone non-gay in my chosen family, but maybe heterosexuals could never bridge the gap that would be necessary to make that work. “How many uncles does Roger have?” I knew both Rodney and Kathy had been only children.

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Rodney didn't answer.

"Everyone can benefit from having a couple of gay uncles."

"Well..."

"Rodney, I have three other gay friends I could have asked. I'm inviting *you* because I like you best. We really would have a much better time if you came along. There's no reason you can't be there for us at the same time we're there for you."

Rodney sighed. "You're right, Brother. I'm being stupid. I just get so caught up in what I *think* holidays are supposed to be like. But life itself isn't turning out the way I'd imagined. I guess it won't hurt to be open to other scenarios."

I gave Rodney the hotel information, still not sure I was making the right decision, and we chatted about the latest tennis news for a few minutes. Rodney and I had met at the local court and had been playing each other for almost two years now. Since the divorce, we also got together a couple of times a month to watch movies and talk. He'd grown up Catholic and been molested by a priest, but while he hated pedophiles, he usually had no problem with gays. He gave to the Save the Redwoods League with every paycheck, and we'd cleaned park trails together a couple of Saturdays. I liked Rodney, and I also liked that being friends with him helped me avoid entrapment in a social gay ghetto.

Still, his hesitation tonight irritated me. Was I making myself a second-class citizen in my own chosen family by accepting his reservations? How was that any different than putting up with crap from our own biological families? I wondered if it was too late to retract my offer.

The next day at the credit union, my coworker Barry told me during lunch all about his latest conquest, some girl he

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picked up in a bar, whose name he didn't remember, if he had ever known it to begin with. Barry knew I was gay, but he reveled in telling me all the details of his twice-a-week sexual excursions. "Some girl named Tomita keeps calling the apartment," he complained. "I don't know how she even got my number. I never give out my real one. She claims she's pregnant, but it's sure not *my* baby."

"How do you know?"

"Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"Alec's."

Barry groaned.

Later, at my teller window, Marvin slipped me his phone number. Marvin was one of our regulars, a reasonably attractive man almost fifty, who'd been hit by a car a year before and now walked with a jagged limp. He'd volunteered his HIV status, boasting he'd never taken any medications and was still fine fifteen years after being infected. Marvin liked to flirt, had on two or three occasions propositioned me, and gave me his phone number every time he came to my window, "in case you change your mind." Did that count as a proposition, too?

"Alec and I are monogamous," I told him again today.

"Well, then let me just come watch you two have sex," he said.

"You need to find a man of your own."

"*A* man? I want *lots* of men."

Suddenly, I had a thought. "What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" I asked.

Marvin frowned. "You're inviting me to Thanksgiving?"

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"No, I'm asking what you're doing for Thanksgiving."

"Going to the bathhouse probably," he said, grinning. "It's easy pickings. Anyone who's there is pretty desperate for company."

"You like desperate men?"

"I like *good-looking* desperate men."

"You don't have any friends or family to spend the day with?"

Marvin smiled. "Family is overrated. I'd rather be alone."

"No friends, though?"

Marvin shrugged. "*They* still believe in family."

I nodded. "Well, Alec and I are meeting a few other friends in San Diego for Thanksgiving," I said. "The other couples are all monogamous, too, and the one straight guy in the group certainly won't be interested. Would you have any desire to come along, even if you don't get many opportunities for sex?"

Marvin looked at me quizzically. "You want my *company*?"

"If it wouldn't be too boring for you."

He looked at me a moment and then shrugged. "Let me think about it. I'll stop by again in a couple of days."

After he left, I wondered what was going through my mind. Was I a desperate man myself? Marvin clearly would never make a solid part of any chosen family. But I sensed a loneliness despite all the bravura. It wouldn't hurt to give him a chance, would it? Of course, he didn't seem all that different from Barry, and I'd never have invited Barry.

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That night, Alec and I cuddled on the sofa while we watched an episode of *Nature*. We looked on as a family of eagles mated, hatched and fed their offspring, and let one hatchling kill the other to get more food.

Then I sucked Alec's dick and we went to bed.

A couple of days later, Marvin stopped by the credit union again, to accept my offer and leave his phone number again. This time I kept it in case I needed to call him about the arrangements. He was on his own for getting a room, but I gave him the phone number to the Marriott.

On Saturday, I talked Alec into going with me to the Arboretum to help pick up trash and pull weeds. "Isn't this what we pay taxes for?" he asked.

"There aren't enough taxes to do everything," I replied. "It's kind of like raising a child. Sure, the parents are supposed to be the responsible ones, but it takes schoolteachers and Sunday School teachers and *Sesame Street* and everybody else to really make sure it gets done."

"So you're Big Bird?"

"I can take you behind some bushes and show you."

We filled three thirty-gallon plastic bags full of trash and weeds and left the bags by garbage receptacles. Of course, that hardly made even a perceivable dent in the work that needed to be done. Still, I had learned a long time ago that just because I couldn't save the entire planet didn't mean I could give up my obligation to help the part I *could* save.

I had brought along my camera and took a picture now of Alec caressing a beautiful leaf. I was an amateur photographer, and I went through phases. I started out taking lots of pictures of

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nature, then moved on to architecture, and eventually, I found I liked taking pictures of people. I took photographs of people strolling through the park, shopping on downtown streets, reading books on the bus, or wherever the compulsion struck me. I felt a kinship with these strangers, and yet I always felt very distant, too. In the same way, I always felt close to nature no matter where I was, and yet I always felt a little bit like the spotted owl's step-brother. I wasn't sure there would ever be a place I could call home.

I began thinking about canceling the California trip, or just not participating myself. I knew that if biological family could disappoint, it was unrealistic to expect chosen family to be without fault. Maybe what I really wanted was Celestial family, after all, where everybody truly was perfect.

I had to wonder about godly families, though. My father, who was a respected High Priest with a valid temple recommend, rarely spoke to Annabeth, who was first counselor in the Relief Society. Would they keep their distance even once they became gods? I knew so many Mormon families like that. The siblings lived three miles apart and spoke to each other only a few times a year. It wasn't that they felt animosity toward each other. They simply felt apathy. Could you be part of an eternal family if all you felt for each other was mere tolerance?

I had so hoped my chosen family would rise above such things.

But it wasn't fair for me to penalize Ron and Jim and Billy and Danny with my morose attitude because of something Luana and Margie had done. I decided to start looking up things to do in San Diego.

And then the phone rang. "Brother?" said a raspy voice. "It's your Dad."

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“Are you all right?” We hadn’t spoken in years. The only news I had of him I got through Annabeth.

“Oh, I’m fine.” He paused. “I was just wondering if...if you would like to come down for Thanksgiving.”

“Me?”

“You and Alec.”

I didn’t know what to think. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened. Can’t a guy want to see his son for Thanksgiving?”

I immediately understood what Luana and Margie must have felt, and it irritated me. How dare this man be so presumptuous? And what kind of asshole was I that I was considering his offer?

“You can stay with me,” Dad went on.

“I’ll talk it over with Alec and call you back in a few days.”

“Okay.” Dad sounded disappointed.

I hung up the phone and related to Alec what had just happened. “Tell him we’ll see him for Christmas but that we already have another commitment for Thanksgiving.”

“What if this is the only brief window he’ll be receptive?”

“Then he isn’t worth bothering with anyway.”

Actually, I wondered if it wasn’t already too late. How could a single nice gesture now make up for all those years of abandonment? Could a grizzly mother hibernate through her cubs’ infancy?

Of course, I’d been an adult before my father cast me aside, and there was no law that said you had to be nice to your grown

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children. By the same token, though, there was no rule that insisted I had to be kind to my father now, either. Were humans the only species that sent their oldest members away to die alone, like the Inuit in Alaska? Like most Americans who shipped their aging parents to nursing homes to wither away by themselves?

Part of me felt a trip to my family home was an opportunity to make the Church acknowledge me, but I realized that Dad didn't represent the First Presidency. And if he only represented himself, was the invitation worth very much?

I wondered if biological family ties were so strong that they could withstand blows mere friendships would crumble under.

I didn't sleep very well that night, fidgeting until I drove Alec to the sofa. Around 5:00, I went out to the living room and knelt beside the couch, laying my head on Alec's stomach.

Work was hellacious again. The cash dispenser stopped working, and we weren't able to give out money for the last half of the day. Mary, a non-member who came in weekly to do shared branching transactions with her own credit union, seemed particularly miffed. We got nothing out of doing these shared branching transactions. They were a pain in the butt, we only did them because we were contractually bound, and Mary was always obnoxious even when we did everything perfectly, one of those people who is never satisfied. Today, she sniffed loudly and said disdainfully, "Well, I may just have to take my business elsewhere."

It was hard not to laugh and say, "We'll get over it." I simply smiled pleasantly and said, "Perhaps you should keep your options open." That seemed vague enough.

But she looked shocked. "Don't you *want* me here?"

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Barry, at the next window, had heard the exchange and started to laugh, quickly covering it with a cough.

“Mary, you choose of your own volition to come here.” I smiled again. “But the fact that we’re *your* choice doesn’t mean that you’re...” I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Where is your manager?”

“He’s over at the desk in the corner,” I said, still smiling sweetly. “You can go to the information desk to see when he’ll be available.”

I continued to do transactions for the next several customers, watching Mary out of the corner of my eye. She waited ten minutes, but my boss was still working on a loan for someone else, and finally Mary grimaced and stomped off.

I would have gotten in trouble for sure if she’d said anything, and there was no guarantee she might not come back in two days and complain. But why did we have to put up with crap like that even from someone who wasn’t a member? Everybody was always telling us we had to accept poor behavior. But why? People behaved poorly because they knew they could get away with it. If there were real consequences for being an asshole, more people would make an effort to be nice.

Before bed that night, I read a little from the scriptures, as usual. I was just finishing the Old Testament again and came across a passage from Malachi that we used to quote in Seminary. “And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” It was supposed to be talking about genealogy and doing proxy work in the temple for our deceased ancestors. At least that was the Mormon interpretation. I wondered, though, in a world where every day

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you heard of mothers abandoning their infants in dumpsters, and children physically abusing their elderly parents, if humans were as cold to their relatives as salmon who laid eggs and then never gave another thought to their offspring.

And what about that “smite the earth with a curse” part? If we as humans failed to turn to our families, were we ourselves the curse? Was that why we were destroying the environment?

Alec slipped in a mix CD of some of his favorite songs before he turned off the lights, and among all the love songs that spoke of ultimate human commitment, I heard a line from 4 Non Blondes. “That the world was made up of this brotherhood of man, for whatever that means.” The refrain expressed exactly what I always seemed to be feeling lately—“What’s going on?”

I fell into another fitful sleep, and this time, I went out to the sofa to try to spare Alec.

I had another rough day at work, fed up with customers and coworkers, and I wanted to simply run out into the wilderness and become a hermit, away from the whole world, living amongst the trees. Trees never seemed mean.

Alec called me at lunch. “Just thinking of you,” he said. “What’cha doing?”

“Planning ways to retire early.”

“Any good ideas?”

“Nothing legal.”

“Then we’d better pass.”

“I still don’t know what to do about Dad.”

“Why don’t you agree to go, and then just not show up? Maybe then he’d understand what he did to you.”

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I thought for a second. “I want to keep my side of the street clean.”

“Brother, I’ll go wherever you want me to go.”

“Thanks, Alec.”

The next hour after lunch went smoothly. We were giving out tall porcelain coffee mugs with silicone lids to advertise the credit union. Our marketing goal was to distribute them all by the end of the day. I was lagging behind my coworkers because I only handed them out to the customers I liked.

“Give one out to your next five customers,” said my boss, looking at my inventory. “Period.”

I nodded.

The next woman who came to my window took up twenty minutes, going over her statement in detail to find why she was off one penny. She did this every week, off a dollar here, ten cents there. Normally, I found her to be a huge irritation. But today, I decided she was simply afflicted with a mental disorder, and I took pity and gave her a mug.

An unattractive man came next, easy enough to work with, but he always spent five or six minutes on his cell phone belittling his wife as I conducted the transaction. I of course knew his wife’s name by this point, so I took a Marks-a-lot and wrote her name on the box the coffee mug came in and handed it to him as he left. Whether or not he took the mug out and threw away the box before he went home, I didn’t know, but the tiny effort made me feel better.

Two run-of-the-mill members came next and each got a mug, and finally Marvin showed up at my window again. “I’m feeling kind of weird about the trip to California,” he said.

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“Why is that?”

He shrugged. “I’m used to using sex as currency. I don’t know what it’s like to be part of anything without paying for it.”

“We pay for everything, one way or another.”

“What’s the price of being your friend?”

“You have to invest time and energy into the relationship.”

Marvin nodded slowly. Then he looked at me carefully. “You guys want to come over for dinner Friday?” He saw my expression and added quickly, “No funny business. I make a mean spaghetti.”

“Sure,” I said after a moment. “Sounds good.” We processed his transaction, and I handed him a mug.

“Just because you like me?”

“I *have* to give it out,” I said, “but I do like you, too.”

He smiled as he walked off.

While Alec was preparing dinner later, I decided to give Annabeth a call. If she was going to be in town during Thanksgiving, it might be more worthwhile to see my Dad. I truly regretted that we’d become so distant. Maybe it wasn’t too late to reverse that.

“Hi, Brother,” she said listlessly when she recognized my voice.

“Hey there. How is everybody?”

“Oh, fine. Nothing new here.” She made no effort to elaborate. The conversation jolted along weakly for another ninety seconds, and I was just about to hang up in resignation when Annabeth offered a new bit of information. “I sold the

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timber rights to the land,” she said. “I had to pay the taxes. There’s plenty left over, though. I’ll keep it in an account until the estate is settled.”

I was floored. “But Annabeth, I don’t *want* all the trees cut down. I *want* the forest.”

“What does it matter? You’re just going to sell the land anyway, and someone else will cut the trees.”

“I was going to sell ten acres, just to help us pay off some bills. The other forty I was going to donate to the Nature Conservancy.”

“Oh. Well, now you can sell that forty, too, and just give them the money.”

“Shouldn’t that be my decision?”

“I can’t help it if you want to waste your money. That’s not my fault.”

“Is what you’re doing even legal?”

There was the sound of exploding air on the other end of the phone. “You going to sue me now?”

“Annabeth, wouldn’t it have been easier just to settle the estate like you were supposed to?” I never thought our family would be one of those to fall apart over a thing like this. You heard about it all the time, but I always assumed those were families with lots of other problems. Weren’t we all good Mormons? Could our whole extended family mean nothing now just because I was gay? Was this all somehow my fault?

“That’s easy for you to say. I’m the one doing all the work.”

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"Yes," I said slowly. "You're quite a role model for the Relief Society."

Annabeth hung up.

I didn't talk much during dinner. "Sorry I'm grumpy," I said. "It's going to take me a while to be talkative again." I didn't like being mean to Annabeth, and I certainly didn't want to say anything awful to my partner.

"Don't worry about it," said Alec. "I love you even when you're grumpy."

I washed the dishes in silence and then joined Alec on the sofa. We turned on *Nature* and watched whales migrating from Hawaii to the Arctic and then back again. I loved what seemed the innocence of nature, but it was all a life and death struggle for every other species out there, too. How did humans even develop the concept of peace to begin with, when it really existed nowhere at all?

"I'd better call my Dad before it gets too late."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"I still don't know."

I dialed my father's number and heard the phone ring six times. He didn't have an answering machine. I was just about to hang up when he picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"It's Brother."

"Hey there." I could hear the smile in his voice.

"I'm calling about Thanksgiving."

"You going to be able to come?"

"No," I said, taking a deep breath.

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“Oh.”

“But I wanted to know if you could join us in San Diego. We’re meeting with several other friends for Thanksgiving. We do it every year. You want to come along?”

“Well...”

“It’ll be good to see you after so long.”

He hesitated again. “It won’t be like old times.”

“It’ll never be like old times again.”

Another pause. “I suppose you’re right.”

“What do you say? Will you join *our* family get together?”

There was another moment of silence. Clearly, this wasn’t the easy solution I thought it would be. “So you have another family now?”

“You didn’t leave me much choice, Dad.”

“You know, every Christmas for the last few years, instead of sending you a Christmas card, I sent a \$20 donation to the Sierra Club in your name.”

I felt a tingle run through me. “Really?” Maybe I’d never truly lost him to begin with.

“I want us to be close again.”

I laughed. “Dad, we were never close. You liked sports, and I would never watch with you.”

He laughed now, too. “Maybe I could learn to like musicals.”

“Don’t bother, Dad. I don’t like musicals, either. How do you feel about chick flicks?”

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"Hmm. We'll have to work on that one."

We talked for fifteen more minutes, I gave him the hotel information, and we hung up.

"Success?" asked Alec.

"Who knows?" I said. "When someone lets you down once, I don't know if you can ever fully trust them again."

Alec nodded. "So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to start making an extra donation to the World Wildlife Federation every time there's a family holiday." Perhaps nature and the Earth were my real kin, and everything else in life would disappoint.

"You don't even like camping."

"Maybe we should try again next spring."

I checked my email one more time before bed, and there was a note from Luana. "Had another argument with Margie's Dad. Thanksgiving's off. Is it too late to horn back in?"

I felt two conflicting emotions, maybe three, all at the same time. I was happy to be back on Luana's "important" list, but at the same time, I couldn't help but feel like a consolation prize. And there was also some disappointment that Margie's parents had let them down again. Perhaps family always meant a jumble of conflicting feelings.

"It's going to be a really big group this year," I wrote back. "But we'll be glad to see you."

She must have still been at her computer because she wrote right back. "I found some poppies I know you'll like. I'm sending some seeds to you right now. You always have the nicest garden. Send us another photo next spring."

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I smiled. Alec and I did have a good garden, wild and beautiful. We had debated for a while moving out to the country where we could have more land, but we found we needed human contact with our friends even more. I wanted nature to be protected for all the other species, but my own species was humanity, and I liked being with them, as disappointing as they could be. They could also really come through for you sometimes, too, and that was an irreplaceably good feeling.

Alec put his hand on my shoulder. “Time to come to bed, Brother.”

“Okay. I’ll be right in.”

“Shall we do it doggy style tonight?”

I looked up at him. “Let’s do it man to man style instead.” When it came right down to it, he was the only family that really mattered.

Alec raised an eyebrow, and I turned off my computer and calmly took his hand.

A gay quilting club in Salt Lake tries to win a contest using pornographic designs. A man tries to rebuild his life after being shot in the face by the wife of a man with whom he's having an affair. A college student becomes a false prophet to save his friends from disaster. A gay couple rejected by their biological families painstakingly creates a new "chosen" family.

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