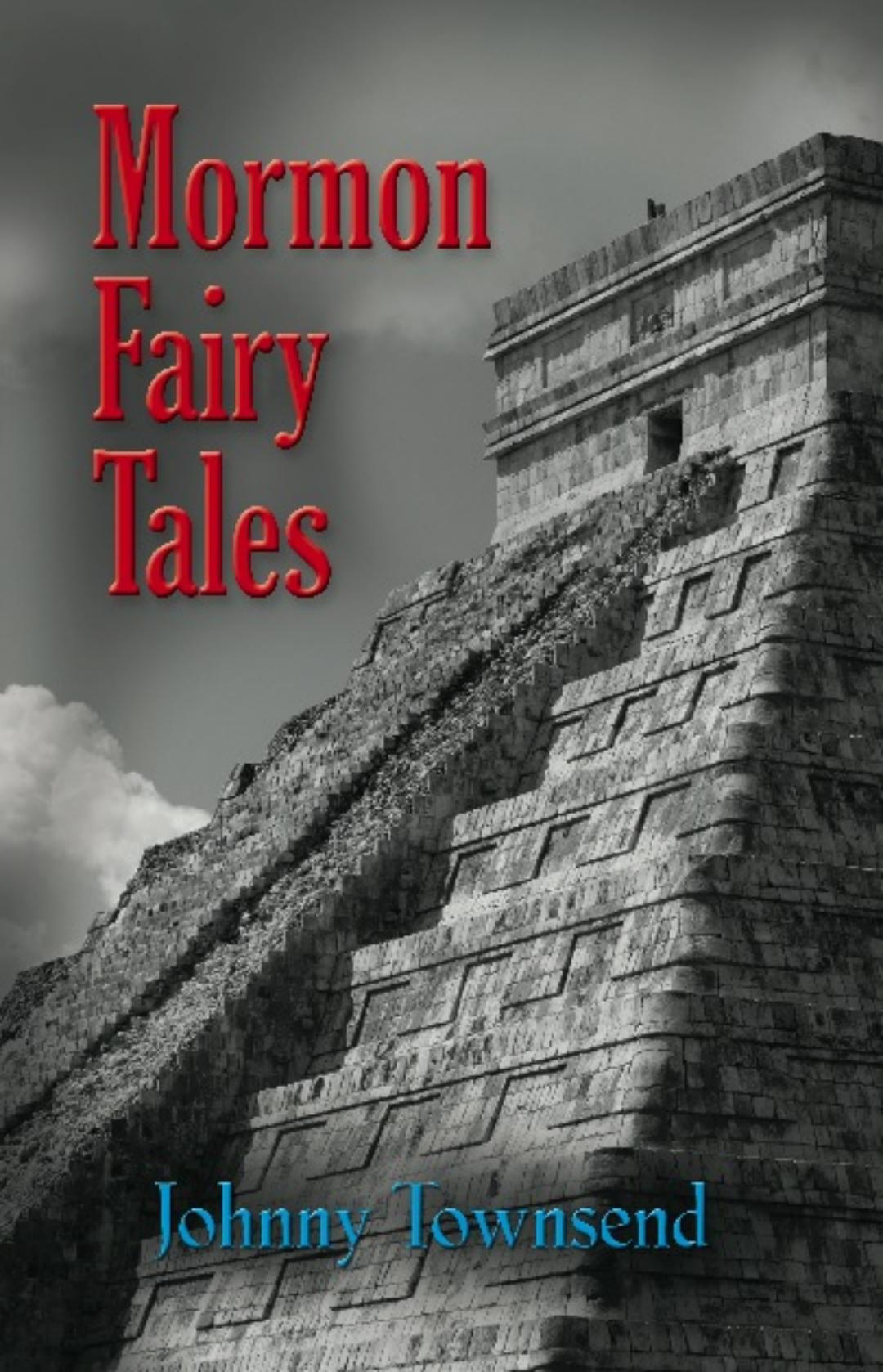
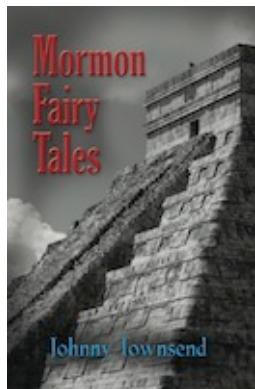


Mormon Fairy Tales



Johnny Townsend



Fascinating Mormon tales with an unorthodox twist. The Three Nephites from the Book of Mormon cope with their frustrated sexuality since their wives aren't immortal as they are. A deceased sinner plots to break out of Spirit Prison. A polygamist in 1855 is ordered to take a fourth wife, when all he really wants is to be with another man. Aliens visiting the UN reveal that God really does live on the planet Kolob.

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Mormon Fairy Tales

Johnny Townsend

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Spirit Prison Blues

“Who died and made you boss?” said Ian testily.

“I did,” Marcus replied. He looked at the picture on the wall of the Salt Lake temple. On the opposite wall was one of the San Diego temple.

“Well, I’m dead, too. So when do I get to start making rules around here?”

“As soon as we pass the parole board tribunal, I guess.”

Ian sighed and stared gloomily at Marcus. “So what’s on the agenda today?”

Marcus looked over at Ian and wished again he had a different cellmate. They weren’t technically in cells, of course. The doors were only locked in the evenings. But they weren’t allowed to go anywhere without their assigned companion. Since they never needed to go to the bathroom, this meant they never even got a few minutes alone throughout the entire day. Marcus was with Ian and his negativity every second of what was apparently an intermediate eternity.

“We’ve got the library this morning,” Marcus began.

“Ugh.”

“And then film class.”

“Oh, my god.”

“Then the museum.”

“Of course.”

“But tonight instead of classes, there’s a special concert.”

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Ian looked at him sharply. “Who is it this time? Not George Osmond again?”

Marcus shrugged. “It’s better than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir emeritus.”

“Not by much.”

“Would you rather the Ogden First Ward choir again?”

Ian stared at the floor. “No,” he said. “I guess not.”

Marcus and Ian got dressed. It seemed strange that in Spirit Prison, where they’d gone after they died because they weren’t Mormon, they’d be allowed, or actually constrained, to sleep in the nude. Marcus was pretty sure it was only to emphasize the fact that they no longer had bodies. Marcus could see his dick, could touch it, but he couldn’t actually feel it, or get an erection.

It was pretty depressing, but every evening just before lights out, they were told to take a good look in the mirror, and if they wanted their bodies back anytime soon, they’d better repent and hope someone did some proxy work in the temple for them so they could be resurrected sooner rather than later.

Marcus and Ian trudged down the hallway, buzzed out of the building, and walked across the campus to the library. Marcus remembered the shock he’d felt at being told he wasn’t in heaven. He’d been an activist for ACORN most of his adult life, had helped to register poor Black and Hispanic voters, had worked to improve conditions for immigrant workers, had sought to increase the minimum wage, and had been a union organizer. He’d believed in God, attended a liberation theology church, and had spent his life helping the poor and working class.

So why hadn’t he gone to heaven?

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“Actually, *no one* goes to heaven when they die,” the warden had told him that first day. “It’s just that the good Mormons go to Paradise.”

“And Paradise isn’t heaven?” Marcus had asked in confusion.

The warden shook his head. “It’s a resort where the Mormons go until Judgment Day.” He shrugged. “But I suppose it’s kind of like the five semi-finalists of the Miss America pageant. You already have to score pretty high to get it. It’s only the exact order of the final rewards that’s still a mystery.”

Marcus and Ian scanned their badges at the library entrance. Everywhere you went, you were monitored, to determine how good you were being. All the data were collected to be analyzed at the end of each week, and you met with an officer to discuss your progress. Marcus had to set short-term and long-term goals so he’d be ready for the parole board when the time came. It irked Marcus to no end. He felt like he was in kindergarten, being told when he could and couldn’t take a nap.

At least they still had sleep up here. It was the only respite he ever got. Apparently, even spirit bodies had spirit neurons that needed time to recuperate. They were allowed exactly eight hours a night to sleep. Then at the crack of dawn, they had to jump out of bed.

But there was no coffee, no matter how much he longed for it.

Marcus hadn’t been able to determine exactly where they were, but it seemed to still be Earth, just another dimension. He could still see the moon at night, could still see Venus up in the sky. He’d overheard two guards say once that an inmate had

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snuck back to the other side for almost an entire day before being discovered and had to be severely punished as a result.

“Good morning, Marcus,” said the librarian, a vapid woman named Marcy, smiling cheerily. “And Ian. What’ll it be today?” She waved her arms toward the stacks. “We have Glenn Beck’s latest book. And Spencer Kimball has just written a new one.”

Marcus grimaced. He’d learned the names of all the Mormon leaders of the past century and a half and had read two dozen books by them since arriving in this place three months ago. In essence, Marcy had explained that the only books available here were whatever might be found in Deseret bookstores on Earth, tomes written by Mormons, new books by Isaiah or Elijah, or occasional “edgy” material like Jane Austen, *Lassie*, *Pollyanna*, or *Anne of Green Gables*.

Marcus typed *Northanger Abbey* into the computer, which didn’t look all that different from an Apple, but he heard Marcy sniff pointedly, and he instead ended up with a slim volume called *Fatherhood* by Rex Pinegar, whoever he was. There were still more names to learn.

Marcus had never been a father as far as he knew. He hadn’t wanted to bring children into such a corrupt world, hadn’t wanted to take time away from trying to improve the world. But he’d heard since his arrival how important it was to seem like a family man, so he thought he’d give the book a try.

As he started off toward the couches, Marcy called after him in her stage whisper, “Have the best of all possible days...and smile!”

Marcus closed his eyes for a moment but then did force a smile through gritted teeth. He didn’t like being ordered to be in a good mood, but he knew everything here was monitored.

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Posted in his and Ian's cell was a sign that proclaimed, "Attitude Counts!" He'd tried to remove it his first day there, but it seemed adhered to the wall with some kind of superglue. A guard had passed by the cell later, pointed at the sign, and wagged his finger.

Marcus read for the next three hours. There was nothing else to do. He'd have to keep reading for two more as well. Once on the couches, there was a strict rule against talking. You could only read and reflect on what you were learning. The history was moderately interesting, but the theology was ludicrous. If Marcus hadn't wanted three children brought into a miserable world on Earth, he sure as hell didn't want to father six or seven billion spirit children who would all be forced onto another planet of similar misery.

Of course, chances were pretty slim he'd ever have that opportunity. Only those who made it to the top degree of the Celestial Kingdom became gods. If a person never had the chance to accept the gospel in life, they could hear about it in Spirit Prison, accept, and then, based on how they'd acted in life in relation to which true principles they'd been exposed to, they could still qualify here.

But Marcus had turned Mormon missionaries away from his door twice. He'd campaigned for Al Gore and later Barack Obama, voting against Mitt Romney. He'd given money to support abortion rights and universal healthcare. He might be eligible for one of the lesser kingdoms eventually, but only if he repented.

And he was still in no mood to repent.

Repentance implied that you thought you'd done wrong, and Marcus wasn't sure he had, despite all that he'd learned here.

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Marcus looked over at Ian. His cellmate was reading a book about *The Importance of Obedience*. He looked absorbed.

Marcus rolled his eyes. He couldn't wait till Saturday, when they had visiting hours. Then he was able to visit his friends and relatives who had died before him. The problem, of course, was that these visits were monitored, too. If you spent too much time with a rebellious prisoner, it was marked down.

Marcus closed his eyes, thinking of Nancy. She'd been his girlfriend years ago, in college. While Marcus sometimes smoked pot, he'd never tried hard drugs, like Nancy did. One evening, he came home from work to find her overdosed on the bed. He'd always regretted not being able to tell her good-bye, so he'd looked her up once he arrived in prison.

Nancy wasn't in a regular cellblock, though. She was in a detox center. The thing was, naturally, that she was permanently in a state of withdrawal. Without a body, she couldn't really detox, and Marcus had been horrified to see her shaking and screaming, and to realize she'd been doing this for twenty years now. When Marcus protested to the guard, demanding help, the woman had simply said, "Too bad. So sad. That's what she gets for sinning."

Marcus had tried to hit her, but without a body himself, he'd been unable to. Still, the guard wrote down the incident in her tablet, and his case manager had berated him at length during his next weekly appraisal.

He continued to see Nancy first thing every Saturday morning, though he could only force himself to stay for an hour. The other inmates had told him that Nancy probably wouldn't be resurrected till *after* the Millennium, so she'd be like this at least another thousand years. "It's not that anyone *wants* her to

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suffer,” one grinning doofus said. “It’s just that there are natural consequences to certain actions. It’s not as if God is *cruel*.”

But Marcus began to wonder. The religion classes ran from 6:00 till 9:30 every evening, unless there was a concert, and the more he learned, the less impressed he became. A volunteer teacher from Paradise came to see him every night, trying to earn a few extra points post-life because he was apparently a borderline case between the highest degree of the Terrestrial and the lowest of the Celestial. But this guy, Terrence, insisted that gays were damned no matter how real they thought their love was. He said that there was a hierarchy in heaven, that while technically a woman could become a goddess, she was still subject to her god-husband. You could have only one ultimate ruler in any universe. You never heard an Old Testament prophet saying, “God’s wife told him to tell me to tell you...” And no one could become a god at all, man or woman, without being married.

But Marcus had never married. He’d always thought it too stifling to both the husband and the wife. He was horrified to think he’d now have to accept an eternal marriage that would never end.

“The problem is,” Terrence had explained, shaking his head sadly, “that you were never married in life. So it’s not as if someone can just go to the temple to do proxy work for the dead for you. You’ll have to meet someone here. And *if* you qualify in other respects, you can be resurrected in time to get married in the Millennium.” He shook his head again. “But it won’t look good on your record.”

Marcus heard a tapping noise and turned to look at the librarian. Marcy had seen he was daydreaming and wanted him to get back to his studies. He nodded and looked at the pages

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once more, but not before watching her write something down in a notebook.

Marcus gritted his teeth again. Then he quietly slipped his own pen out of his pocket. The inmates had been given pens and notebooks so they could take notes about the books they read or films they saw. Marcus hadn't written much so far, but now he uncapped his pen. He glanced over at Marcy, who was talking to another inmate, and he opened the book to the middle. "Fuck fatherhood," he wrote in long, bold lines.

Finally, reading period was over, and there was a half-hour break before the afternoon film session would begin. "What'd you think?" asked Marcus, standing outside under a tree and really, really wishing he had a cigarette.

"I'm seriously missing my Stephen King," said Ian in a subdued voice.

"And I wish I could have my Faye Kellerman back." Marcus paused. "Do you suppose we could start a petition?"

He was half joking, but Ian gasped.

Marcus was irritated. "Who cares if we have a few points deducted?"

Ian shook his head. "This isn't like cramming for some college exam that determines your grade for the course. This is for *forever*. I'm not about to louse it up."

Marcus looked at Ian closely, evaluating how much he could say. "I think," he began, "that I may try to sneak out of the cellblock tonight."

"What?"

"Try to get back to the other side."

"Whatever for?"

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Marcus shrugged. “I don’t know. I still won’t be able to drink a beer or kiss a woman, but...”

“But what?”

Marcus shrugged again. “I don’t know,” he repeated. “I don’t even know that I’d try to materialize and warn people. What would I tell them? I don’t want to become Mormon even now. There’s no reason I should tell anyone back there to get baptized.”

Ian tilted his head. “Don’t you *want* to be on God’s side? Haven’t you *seen* how awful Lucifer is?”

Marcus nodded. One of the first films they’d seen was a documentary about Satan, how the evil spirits who’d followed him never obtained a body, so when apostates were sent to join them, everyone jumped into the bodies and fought over them. They were in continual spasms from the competing spirits, and there were physical fist fights between the bodies, as groups of spirits in one tried to subdue or rape the group of spirits in the other. It looked like hell.

Marcus smiled for a moment at the unintended pun but then frowned. What *did* he want out of eternity? To sit in a meadow and listen to Pearl Jam forever? You had to do *something*, but was godhood the answer? Even among Mormons, it was only a tiny elite group who achieved that. Most people, even Mormons, had to be content with eternal limitation, not eternal progression. It somehow didn’t seem fair. Judging the few years of life out of an eternity of existence was like asking a five-year-old who could barely concentrate to take a test that would determine the course of the next seventy years of his life.

“Well, *I* think we’d better get with the program,” said Ian. “There are degrees of unhappiness. And being Mormon throughout eternity has got to be better than the alternative.”

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Marcus wasn't so sure, but he didn't say anything else. He listened as Ian told him what he'd learned that morning, and soon it was time to go to the theater. Here, there were a few minutes to chat with other inmates, but too soon, the lights dimmed and the film started. Today's first show was a summary of the Spanish conquest of the Incas. They weren't watching a re-creation, of course, but the actual events, the actual people. There was a voice-over, like Cecil B. DeMille in *The Greatest Show on Earth*, talking about how the Lamanites had fallen away and were ripe for destruction. The voice-over seemed to be in English, but the voices of the Incas were in a Native American dialect, and the Spanish soldiers spoke Spanish. Yet even though there were no subtitles, somehow Marcus understood every word of the movie.

After the film, there was a break during which everyone had to take a quiz. The questions were multiple choice, but they never asked much about the actual events themselves. One of the questions today, for example, was:

To what did the Incas owe their destruction?

- A.Personal Depravity
- B.An evil religion
- C.Social injustice
- D.A and B only
- E.B and C only
- F.All of the above

Marcus circled C, but when the tests were graded at the end of the session, he learned he'd been mistaken. The teacher drew a smiley face with a frown on his paper.

Next came a film about the early Christians as they fell away from the gospel and into apostasy. It seemed to be a major

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theme today. After a quiz on the Thessalonians, Marcus whispered to Ian, “I’m going for it tonight.”

“No!”

“What’s the worst they can do? Lock me up?”

There was one last, shorter film about how the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints broke away from the main group after Joseph Smith’s assassination, and then finally film class was over. Marcus felt like a boy again in math class. “When am I ever going to need algebra?” he’d complained to the teacher.

Now he knew the answer to that question. If he was going to create worlds, he had to know every fact of biology, physics, chemistry, calculus, and every other science. And he supposed he needed all these lessons about human nature and about right and wrong, too.

But one thing confused him. In life, Marcus had often felt there wasn’t just black and white; there were lots of shades of gray. How could God be *more* complex than humans and yet have a *simpler* world view? Why wasn’t there *more* complexity in making decisions now?

There was a fifteen-minute break, during which Marcus tried to talk with a pretty female inmate. Marcus’s spirit body was the image of his physical body at the age of twenty-four, when he’d been in his prime. But the woman still looked at him askance and turned away. There wasn’t much chance he’d ever find a wife at this rate, with so little time for socializing.

The concert would give him more opportunities, though. He could mingle all evening. Maybe he could even find someone else who wanted to break out of prison, too.

At 6:30, everyone from his cellblock filed into a large auditorium. There was a little fidgeting and talking, but the

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guards quieted people down pretty quickly. Marcus made a point of sitting near the end of a row so he could get up. He'd stand most of the evening, trying to talk to anyone who looked bored and thus open to dissent.

"Welcome, everyone," said a woman, beaming from the stage. "We trust you've had another productive day. But tonight, we want to reward you with a little concert from George Osmond." Marcus wondered if Ian was rolling his eyes, but he couldn't find Ian in the crowd. At least the event was giving Marcus some relief from his companion's constant presence. No one was pleasant company twenty-four hours a day, every day. Marcus wondered again if he should even bother attempting marriage.

"George puts on a good show," the woman continued. "You'll be glad you died." She chuckled. "And next week...we have a special performance by the King family."

Marcus looked at his neighbor, mystified.

"Some of you older folks may remember Tina Cole from *My Three Sons*. Most of her family will be here. It'll be a real treat! So, everyone, be happy! And remember, you're a child of God!"

The lights dimmed, a spotlight shone on stage, and George Osmond walked out with a big smile. His first song was a cover of one of the covers his sons had sung, "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother." Marcus slipped out of his seat and started looking for anyone who might be unhappy to be there.

And there *was* someone. Another guy, an Asian, who kept looking at his naked wrist as if hoping to check the time. He was on the end of a row, too, and Marcus motioned to him. The guy nodded and stood up. He couldn't know what this was

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about, but that clearly didn't matter. Any excuse was a good one.

"You want to get out of here?" whispered Marcus.

"You mean skip the concert?"

"No, I mean, get *out* of here."

The man's eyes widened. Then he nodded. "I don't care what your plan is. I'm in."

Just then, four guards came up to Marcus and his new friend. They had spirit handcuffs and slapped them on the two men.

"What's going on?" asked Marcus. "Can't two guys hang out together at a concert?"

"Ian told us everything," said one of the guards. "He turned 'soul's evidence.' Admitted his own grumblings but gets points for turning you in."

"You're in big trouble now, mister," said one of the other guards.

"What about this guy?" asked Marcus. "*He* hasn't done anything."

"He's talking to *you*, isn't he?"

Marcus squinted. The guard looked like a young Joseph McCarthy. Marcus was led off in one direction by two of the guards, and the other man was led away by the others. Marcus ended up in a small room behind a table, in a chair under a bright light that did not hurt his eyes. He looked off to the side.

"Oh, my god," he said. "You have a one-way mirror!"

"Don't take the name of the Lord in vain."

"Fuck you."

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One of the guards slapped the table in front of Marcus.
“That’s enough! We can throw you into Outer Darkness any time we want. Do you want to go to hell?”

Marcus looked at the two guards, and then glanced over at whoever might be watching through the mirror. “If there are degrees of heaven, there are degrees of hell, too. And this is certainly one of them.”

The head guard gasped.

“You have a very rebellious spirit,” said the other guard coolly, but Marcus thought he detected an almost admiring tone.

Marcus shrugged. “I just don’t like to see injustice,” he said simply.

“Injustice!” exclaimed the first guard. “We’re giving you chance after chance after chance to repent!”

“You’re giving me chance after chance after chance to become a Stepford saint. I want to choose my own path, not be forced to choose the path you want me to take. What kind of freedom is that?”

“It’s the only freedom there is,” snapped the head guard. “You can take it or leave it.”

Marcus thought for a moment.

“Well? What’s it going to be?”

“I think your God is a bully,” said Marcus calmly, eliciting horrified expressions from both guards. “And I think your Lucifer is a punk. I don’t want to follow *either* of them.”

“Those are your choices, buddy.”

Marcus shook his head. “Why does this have to be a two-party system? I want an alternative. Or maybe four or five alternatives.”

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There were more gasps.

“There’s an eternity ahead of us,” said Marcus. “And unlimited space. And that’s only in this one dimension. There’s certainly room for another team or two.”

The head guard slapped the table again, but the other guard, while still angry, at the same time began to look confused.

Marcus looked down at his cuffed hands, and suddenly, he had what he could only describe as a revelation. Pure knowledge entered his soul. He stood up and held his hands out in front of him.

“What are you doing?” asked the main guard nervously.

Marcus stared at his handcuffs a long moment, and then they unlocked and fell to the floor.

“Oh, my god,” whispered the second guard, taking the name of the Lord in vain himself.

“What did you do?” asked the head guard, angry but a little frightened now.

“You only have power over me if I concede that power to you,” said Marcus. “I just realized that all this time, I’ve been complaining, but I’ve *let* you control me.” He paused. “And that’s not going to happen anymore.”

“What—what are you going to do?” asked the guard.

Marcus thought for a moment. He had a lifetime of political activism and union organizing behind him. Perhaps he’d organize the inmates into a prison uprising. He rubbed his chin.

And maybe after that, he’d go from universe to universe, creating spirit unions and pushing third party candidates. It was enough to keep him busy for a while.

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Marcus didn't answer the men but simply walked out of the room. The second guard ran after him, keeping his distance but looking almost hopeful. Marcus smiled and headed back for the cellblock. He walked up to the first cell and knocked on the door politely.

"Yes?" said a meek voice from inside.

"May I have permission to enter?" asked Marcus.

The door swung slowly, and a man whose mouth hung open stood staring at him.

"Do you want to go to heaven or hell?" asked Marcus bluntly.

"H-heaven," the man stammered. Now Marcus could see his cellmate in the background, peering forward timidly. They'd clearly been in prison a long while.

"Yes," said Marcus, "but that's a close-ended question. How about we ask an open-ended one now?"

The man looked confused.

"*What* do you want out of eternity?"

The man looked at Marcus, at the guard, and even back at his cellmate before looking at Marcus again. "Is this a trick?"

"Nope." He smiled at the guard, who nodded his support. "We're making our *own* heaven." He offered his hand, and the man took it cautiously. "Mind if we come in and talk for a bit?"

The two cellmates looked at each other for a moment, communicating silently, and then they opened the door wide, motioning him to enter. Marcus smiled and walked inside.

A Grain of Mustard Seed

“John, you need to take a fourth wife,” said Bishop Hughes, smiling cordially. “I’d suggest either Helen Halvorson or Isabel Thomas. But you pray about it and ask one of the women in the ward by next Sunday.”

John was dismayed. Having three wives already, and nine children, was almost more than he could bear. When would the Lord stop testing him?

“All you need is faith the size of a mustard seed,” said the bishop, “and you can do anything.”

John forced a smile. Hadn’t it been enough, though, that John and his first wife, Elaine, had left England for America, leaving behind their families and all their worldly possessions so they could join the saints in Nauvoo? Hadn’t it been enough to then serve a mission himself, leaving behind his wife and young son for an entire year, only to be tarred and feathered? His left arm was permanently scarred from the ordeal. And hadn’t it then been the final test to leave behind his worldly goods a second time and walk across the plains on foot to join the prophet in Salt Lake City, in the middle of a desert? What more could God want?

“Yes, Bishop, I’ll pray about it. And ask my other wives what they think.”

“Oh, of course, of course.” The bishop smiled. “Never hurts to ask the women what they feel.” He chuckled.

John walked home slowly. He again regretted having the surname Smith. Not every man was called to plural marriage, but with that name, everyone thought he was related to Joseph, and he had to set an example. He’d been quite upset to be

commanded to marry Mary Dickinson not long after reaching the Valley. Did the bishop actually know what he was talking about?

Part of John had liked the idea, of course. He'd never felt particularly close to Elaine, and while intimidated to be with a second woman, he was nevertheless curious to know if this relationship would work out better than the first.

It didn't. Mary was pleasant enough, and Mary and Elaine got along well, but somehow the presence of a second woman in the house simply made John feel even more alone than before.

Some men set up separate households for their different wives. But John couldn't afford that, and he felt that at the very least, the two wives could be friends and support each other.

That second marriage had only been in effect two years when the bishop called John to take a third wife, Elizabeth, and now, not even three years after that, he was being ordered to take a fourth. When would it all end? Surely, he wouldn't wind up like Brigham himself? John tried to hold onto the tiny hope that he was finally about to make his calling and election sure.

He trudged home slowly, and as soon as he entered the door, Elizabeth said, "I think we're getting another sister."

John explained what the bishop had said, and Elaine offered cautiously, "Well, I think Isabel is the better cook."

"But Helen has a sweeter personality," Mary countered.

"We should invite Isabel over for lunch on Tuesday," said Elizabeth, "and have Helen over on Thursday."

John nodded. "Can you girls let me know by Saturday?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Don't you want to have a say in this?"

"It's more important for you three to feel comfortable."

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"You didn't marry me because you loved me?" continued Elizabeth, laughing. "You let your other wives choose me?"

John didn't answer, and Elizabeth's smile faded as she stole a quick glance at her sisters.

There was no truly private place in the house, but John wanted to be alone, so he ignored the children clamoring for attention and went to his primary bedroom, the one he shared with Elaine, and closed the door. Little Samuel was asleep in his crib, but this was as private a place as he could find, so John kneeled on the floor beside the bed.

"You can transform water into wine," he said. "You can move mountains. You can turn two fishes into a feast for thousands. You have complete power over material nature. Please, please, can you turn me into what I so long to be?"

He waited on his knees, his head bent, but he felt nothing change in his body. He reached up to feel his chest, but there were still no breasts. He reached down to his crotch, but he could still feel his member filling his pants.

A tear rolled down his cheek.

John wasn't sure he really wished to be a woman. He remembered a time when he was twelve and had put on his sister's dress, just for laughs, and his father had beaten him. His father then forced him to spend thirty minutes with a streetwalker to "purify" him. John had been compelled to perform with his father looking on. The shame he felt was so great that he could only feel the tiniest kernel of goodness still in him. Years later, when he heard the elders on the street corner preaching, he immediately knew he could find forgiveness and peace among the Mormons.

He'd been completely faithful to Elaine, and then later to all his wives. He had set times to be with each, and he always

attended to them with steadfastness and with kindness. Once, Mary had been feeling lonely and asked for a special visit, but it had been Elizabeth's night and he declined. Mary later told him he'd made the right decision, that the only way the household could manage was if no one wife tried to usurp another.

The truth was that John's wives were all very close to each other, and this pleased John very much. Yet despite that, he felt no real kinship with them at all. If he were truly to be a woman like them, wouldn't he at least feel sisterly towards them?

All he knew was that he wanted to be the wife of Bishop Hughes, and to do that, he'd have to be a woman himself. Bishop Hughes had been there for him during the death of his oldest son, way back during their trek together across the plains. Bishop Hughes had just been Nathan back then, and he'd stayed behind the main group to help bury the boy. And he'd been there again years later when Mary's first daughter had almost died of a fever, giving her a blessing that saved her life. And there were all the little things he did, the wink he gave John when he arrived in the chapel, the clap on the back when they'd built a fence together for a member of the ward, the notebook he'd given John one Christmas, telling him to "write down your deepest thoughts and feelings." John always wondered if he'd share the diary with the bishop one day.

"You turned bitter water into pure water," said John, still on his knees, his face turned upward. "You can turn me into something better, too."

There were times, horrible moments, when John *liked* being a man. He would think of Bishop Hughes and imagine all sorts of abominable things that required two masculine bodies. But he remembered clearly the verse which proclaimed, "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman..." He *couldn't*

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be with the bishop if he stayed a man. So John was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice and become a woman.

The idea brought the trace of a smile to his lips. He who would give his life for a friend showed the greatest love of all. Becoming a woman was almost the same thing. It absolutely proved John's love.

And if John could love this deeply, then why couldn't God perform another miracle here in the desert? He'd brought the seagulls, hadn't he?

There was a timid knock at the door. John stood up and let Elaine in. "Are you all right?"

"I'm just praying to make a decision that is best for all of us."

"Do you think..." She stopped. "Do you think maybe what's best is that we don't take a fourth wife?"

John's mouth fell open. To flout God's will, to flout Bishop Hughes's will... John would do anything the bishop asked, no matter how painful. He had asked once in private to wash the bishop's feet, and the bishop had allowed it. John still dreamed about that day.

"I'm sorry, husband," said Elaine, seeing his dismay. She left the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

But the idea of rebellion left an odd taste in John's mouth, and not an altogether unpleasant one. What *if*? Maybe he should walk back to the church. Perhaps Bishop Hughes was still there.

John wiped his face and straightened his clothes. He opened the bedroom door and walked back to the kitchen. "I need to talk to the bishop," he said. The women looked at each other carefully. Little Susan tugged at Mary's skirt. Albert tried to sneak a cookie while the mothers weren't paying attention.

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John walked back to the church and knocked on Bishop Hughes's door. He felt a wave of relief when the door opened and he saw the bishop standing there.

"My, my," said Bishop Hughes. "Have you made a decision already?"

"Bishop Hughes, I've come to make a confession. Maybe my faith isn't the size of a mustard seed. Perhaps I am not righteous enough to deserve a fourth wife."

The bishop's brow furrowed, and he ushered John into the office. "Is there sin in your life you need to talk about?" he asked. "Something...sexual you do with your wives?" He leaned forward over his desk toward John.

John had meant to be calm and collected, but now he found himself crying, and he was deeply ashamed. He felt as he had that day with the streetwalker. "What is it, my friend?" asked Bishop Hughes, moving over and putting his hand on John's shoulder. "Nothing could be so terrible."

John shook his head. "I am married to the wrong woman, the wrong women," he said. "The wrong person."

The bishop looked confused. "Helen and Isabel are only suggestions. You can marry whoever you like."

"No," said John, shaking his head again. "The person I want is already married."

Bishop Hughes removed his hand. "Oh?" He looked out the window blankly.

John cried more heavily, but this time the bishop walked back over to his chair and sat down.

"Do you want to tell me who she is?" Bishop Hughes asked, a little coldly.

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“You’re breaking my heart,” John sobbed. “Please don’t hate me. It’s...it’s you I want to marry.” He put his face in his hands. He couldn’t bear to see Bishop Hughes’s expression. Why had he said such a thing? Perhaps he would be forced to give up all his wives now. He’d be left with nothing. What if the bishop told someone else? John was willing to suffer the humiliation of becoming a woman, but could he endure having everyone *know* what he wanted? A private grief, no matter how deep, had to be better than a public one.

He wished he were dead.

John felt a hand on his shoulder again and looked up. Bishop Hughes was standing over him, but then he kneeled, putting his hand instead on John’s knee. John looked intently into the bishop’s face. He didn’t look horrified. John’s heart began to beat faster.

“John...”

“Bishop...”

“You must know *why* I keep commanding you to get married?”

John frowned.

“I suppose it’s quite sinful of me. But I keep imagining you in bed with these women, and it comforts me.”

John’s heart began to hurt, it was beating so hard. “What do you mean?”

“I have wanted to be with you as well. But since I cannot marry you myself, I order you to marry others.”

John swallowed. “But Bishop...you hold the priesthood. You are a righteous man. Perhaps...perhaps you can anoint me with oil and give me a blessing. You can *command* me to

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become a woman. Then...then you can marry me.” He looked hopefully into the bishop’s eyes.

Bishop Hughes removed his hand, and John knew he’d gone too far. The bishop would be repulsed by what he’d said.

“I’m not sure I would *like* you if you were a woman,” Bishop Hughes said slowly. “But I suppose it’s our only chance.” He looked at the floor distractedly for a moment, and then he turned to John again. “Yes,” he said, nodding. “Yes, we’ll do it.”

“You’ll see that my wives find another husband?”

“Even if I have to marry them myself.”

John smiled. It was all going to work out. He’d been faithful, the bishop had been faithful, and God had been full of love and compassion. John had proven himself, and God would be merciful. “Do you have some oil?” he whispered.

Bishop Hughes smiled and produced a tiny vial. He stood behind John’s chair, and John felt a wet fingertip touch him on the crown of his head. A shiver went through his body. All he needed was to have faith as a grain of mustard seed. He’d been imprisoned on his mission to Kentucky, for the Church. He had faith.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Melchizedek priesthood, which I hold, I command you to become a woman, for your male body to become a female body, according to the love and faith we both have.”

Bishop Hughes concluded in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

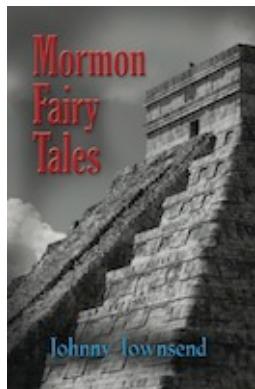
John felt a tingle in his chest, a trembling in his groin. When Bishop Hughes removed his hands from the top of his

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head, John turned to look up at him, smiling. “Thank you! Oh, thank you! Now—“

He stopped when he saw the look on the bishop’s face, and his heart skipped a beat. All he’d needed was faith as a grain of mustard seed, he thought desperately. Surely, he had that much faith. Yes, yes, he was certain he did. He quickly fingered his chest and grabbed his crotch. But Bishop Hughes was staring at him in horror, and, realizing now what the future held in store for him for the rest of his life, John started crying in despair.

The bishop turned and walked away.



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