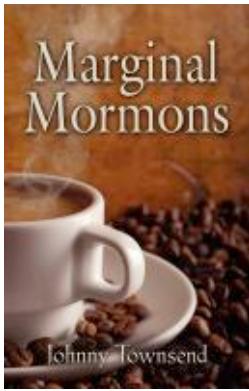




Marginal Mormons

Johnny Townsend



What happens when a High Priest becomes addicted to crack cocaine? Should an unemployed bank teller take in a homeless protestor from the Occupy movement? Do gay people have positive near-death experiences or unhappy ones? Can a schizophrenic woman on anti-delusional drugs keep her belief in an intangible God? Not every Latter-day Saint has a mainstream story to tell, but these soul-searching people are all still more than just "Marginal Mormons."

Marginal Mormons

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Praise for Johnny Townsend

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

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Kirkus Reviews

“The thirteen stories in *Mormon Underwear* capture this struggle [between Mormonism and homosexuality] with humor, sadness, insight, and sometimes shocking details....*Mormon*

Underwear provides compelling stories, literally from the inside-out.”

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Kirkus Reviews

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David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

“Pronouncing the Apostrophe” is “quiet and revealing, an intriguing tale...”

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

The Abominable Gayman—Named to *Kirkus Reviews*’ Best of 2011

Mock Judgment Day

I'd been out of work for almost a month and was becoming more desperate each day. I was either overqualified or underqualified for almost everything. The only jobs that might take me sight unseen were ones that barely paid above minimum wage and certainly wouldn't help me make the mortgage payments. I began wondering if God were punishing me. I'd always paid my tithing, had put my daughters Deeann and Gloria through college and sent Gloria on a mission as well, and now that I was in my mid-fifties, I'd been hoping to coast until retirement, when I planned to go with my wife, Eileen, on a mission as a couple.

Then came the layoff.

Was this because I hadn't given as much as the bishop asked in addition to my regular tithe? Was it because I had passed up the last four ward temple sessions? Was it because I sometimes read anti-Mormon blogs? I wasn't *trying* to be rebellious. I just wanted to know about the things my two daughters kept bringing up, so I'd be better prepared to answer their questions. Why did my one-year-old grandson have epilepsy? Why did my two-year-old granddaughter have a club foot? I tried to find loving answers for my daughters, even if that meant going temporarily over to the dark side. I hoped Heavenly Father would understand. But he could get angry at just about anything, it seemed, so I very well might have tested his patience too far.

I remembered when I was growing up, my father would always smile grimly when something bad happened to me and say, "It's for your own good." When I sprained my ankle falling off my bike, it was for my own good. When I broke my arm

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falling out of a tree, that was for my own good, too. When I split my nose playing basketball, when I came in last place in the Church regional speech contest, when I was too sick to go to my high school prom, it was all for my own good. “Heavenly Father afflicts those he loves,” my father assured me, smiling.

“So I guess he really loved Job,” I replied sarcastically one day, upset over my first car being stolen.

“That’s right, son.”

“Maybe it’s better not to be loved by God too much,” I returned.

My father slapped me hard across the face. Then he hugged me tightly and said, “It’s because I love you. I don’t want you to fall away. That’s why Heavenly Father tests you, too. It helps keep us in line. It’s like whipping a toddler who keeps getting too close to the fire. We can’t understand reasoning on God’s level. All we can understand is the whipping.”

I went to the bishop the following Sunday and repented of my dissent, and I tried from that time on to be a better and more faithful Latter-day Saint. I’d certainly been tested many times in the years since then, and I always had a love/hate relationship with God’s love/hate relationship with me.

Just yesterday, though, when my younger daughter Gloria asked me why Heavenly Father wouldn’t let her become pregnant a second time, I’d said automatically, “Perhaps it’s for your own good.” The look of hurt in her eyes made me turn away. I hadn’t been able to sleep all night. I tried so hard to be better than my own father had been to me, but sometimes, after a lifetime of training, it was hard not to follow in his footsteps. I needed to call and apologize, but my worry over my joblessness kept pulling my focus elsewhere.

I applied for my required three jobs a week, all in downtown Seattle, in order to be eligible for unemployment benefits, and last week, I’d applied for eight, even though I knew I wasn’t

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right for most of them. I was growing more willing to take just about anything, even something temporary, so I applied for a one-day job as a juror on a mock jury. I'd never served on a real jury and thought it might be interesting, and the pay, even though it would be deducted from my unemployment check, would still help me feel like a real person, I hoped.

What I felt, though, was the same humiliation as the day I'd failed a science test in high school, and as punishment, my father forced me to scrub the bathroom with a toothbrush. "That'll teach you a lesson," he said. Just like the time in grammar school when I'd lost the school spelling bee and been forced by Dad to pick up trash along the highway, and like the time in junior high when I lost my solo in Band because I'd missed a key rehearsal due to illness and had then been made to weed our neighbor's yard. Dad always felt that "consequences" for my actions would make me a better person. Punishment, punishment, punishment. Sometimes, the whole purpose of life seemed to be punishment.

"Brock, do you want to have sex tomorrow after you get back from jury duty?" Eileen asked around 9:00 Monday evening. I had mentioned in the morning that I wanted to have sex sometime that day.

"No. I want to have sex now."

"But it's so late for you." I usually preferred sex while I was still alert and not right at bedtime. At 11:00 pm, sex felt like a chore. At 7:00 pm, it felt like sex.

"The defense deserves for me to be in a good mood."

Eileen smiled. "Okay, I'll see what I can do."

Our sex life was not very dynamic, with our encounters occurring maybe once a week. I found I had to give Eileen a few hours of warning to let her work herself into being in the mood. She acted sometimes as if sex were not only a chore at any hour, but even something to dread. I wondered how we'd

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manage throughout eternity if we ever made it to godhood. She didn't seem up to all the sex required to bear billions of spirit offspring. Perhaps that was why there was polygamy in heaven, to make eternal sex easier on the women. I wondered if sexually reluctant goddesses ever made Heavenly Father irritable.

I remembered one blog that suggested God had committed incest when he got his own daughter Mary pregnant with Jesus. Since that wasn't a very sexy thought, I focused instead on Eileen. I tried hard not to make her feel she was undergoing some type of trial to be with me physically. It was difficult not to feel like a heel when I knew she wasn't having a good time, but what options did I have? Was she "being taught a lesson"? Was I?

The following morning, I woke up early and caught the light rail downtown, getting off at the Pioneer Square station. While filled with dozens of homeless and various other grungy people, this part of town was still lovely because of all the old buildings made with such craftsmanship and attention to detail. I walked down to First Avenue South to the address listed in my email and entered a five-story building made of brown stone. I was supposed to go up to Suite 500, and rather than take the cage elevator, I chose to climb the stairs, because the walls were covered with intricate wood paneling.

Puffing a little bit on the top floor, I saw a sign that said, "Mock Jury in Basement." I frowned. Would it have hurt to put that sign in the lobby? Then I heard my father's voice in my head. I walked back down the stairs and, once on the basement level, saw signs leading to a large back room. I was the first person to arrive, though there was the typical forbidden tea and coffee on a table along with some pastries cut in half.

In the center of the room was a small meeting table, which somehow had permanent stains on its surface. The eight chairs around the table didn't match, half of them covered in white

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fabric with some kind of abstract pattern, and half simple wooden chairs. One of the white chairs was also stained, I noticed. Along the wall were a few other chairs of yet a third type, some kind of faux brown leather. A plastic ficus tree was in one corner. I sat at the table, looking up at the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. Some of the white acoustical tiles that made up the ceiling were stained as well.

Pay attention, I told myself. Learn something today.

About ten minutes later, a tremendously obese white man in his mid-twenties walked into the room. He must have weighed 400 pounds or more. A minute later, a goofy-looking white man came in, with a severe overbite, and after him, two well-dressed white women, an attractive African-American man around 35, and an African-American woman a decade younger. In all, thirteen of us showed up, all white except for the two Blacks who had come in.

“Have you done this before?” asked a woman whose nametag said Janine. “It’s my first time, but it has to be better than delivering phone books. I did that last month. God, how awful.”

A couple of the others commiserated over the phone books, and two people, including the Black man, who was named Emory, said they had been part of other mock juries. “Easy money,” he said, “and we’re doing something useful.”

Just before 9:00, a middle-aged African-American woman came into the room and took attendance. One person was missing, but that didn’t seem to concern her. She handed out confidentiality paperwork, which we all signed, and about ten minutes later, two other women came into the room, an Asian woman and a white woman. I got the impression they were the attorneys.

“Everyone, pick up your chairs and put them along the wall in two rows,” said the Asian woman, who introduced herself as

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Linda Wong. We did so, and I ended up as Juror number eight. I smiled. The age of accountability. It was a sign that I was doing the right thing in assessing guilt in this case.

“We’re going to give you the facts,” said the other woman, who introduced herself as Sandra Thompson, “and then we’ll let you deliberate.” She sat down and started taking notes, which confused me, until I saw that she was writing down our reactions to the information Ms. Wong was giving us.

“The facts are these,” said Ms. Wong. “Deressa Davenport is a mother of five. Three of her adult children were out of the house at the time of the incident. One child, Lydia, was thirteen, and the youngest child, Harmony, was seven. One of Harmony’s friends, Brianna, was over playing at the house and overheard Mrs. Davenport say the F word. It was not directed at the children, but Brianna went home to her own mother and reported that Harmony’s mother had a ‘potty mouth.’ Brianna’s mother, Helen Nagle, was upset and called DCPSA, the Department of Child Protective Services Agency.”

We had all been given legal pads and pens, and I was writing down what seemed important. We had been told we would not be allowed to ask questions but had to go on what we and the other jurors remembered about the case. I wasn’t sure where this was going. Mrs. Davenport had clearly been at fault, but it also didn’t seem like the biggest crime in the world. Perhaps she needed to be taught a lesson, but I would be lenient, I decided.

“DCPSA assigned Brenda Rathke to investigate the case. Brenda had been with the agency two years. She interviewed Deressa Davenport but did not interview any of the three children who had been present in the house at the time of the alleged incident. She interviewed one neighbor, who said she had never heard Deressa cursing even once. But Brenda’s report claims that three neighbors confirmed Deressa’s cursing in front

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of her children. There is nothing in the report to actually substantiate this claim. Brenda's report also claims that she interviewed two psychologists who insisted that such cursing would be detrimental to the children's welfare, but again, there is nothing in the file to substantiate this. The conclusions are listed in the report, but no documentary material is there to support them."

I still wasn't sure where this was going. There seemed to be no sexual or physical abuse going on, and the verbal problem didn't seem to really qualify as abuse. You didn't need to curse in order to verbally abuse someone in any event. My father never cursed.

"A week after the report was filed, DCPSA officers came and physically removed the two children from the Davenport household. The children were placed in foster care, where the older girl was molested by another foster child two months later. Deressa, who was a single mother at the time of these incidents, spent all her money fighting DCPSA. She eventually lost her home and had to move in with one of her grown daughters."

Everyone was scribbling away, a few gasps escaping some of the jurors. I was still confused. The state could actually take away someone's children, just over use of the F word? It seemed mind-boggling. I could hardly make it through a single movie these days, there was so much vulgarity spewing out of everyone's mouth. I'd taken to reading children's books because adult books were so abrasive to my spirit. Did society really think cursing was an actionable offense? I wasn't sure if that proved there was still hope for the nation or not. Children did deserve a beautiful, innocent childhood, though, so perhaps the action was justified. Wasn't the mother ultimately responsible for what happened to her daughters in foster care,

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since her poor parenting was what put them in foster care to begin with?

“The case was appealed, and all five of Deressa’s children testified that their mother was loving and wonderful to them. But we have an email from Brenda’s supervisor and another from the supervisor’s supervisor, both saying basically, ‘DCPSA is above reproach. No one can tell us what to do. We make the rules.’ Brenda Rathke was promoted because of her work on this case.”

The attorney went on and on for another fifteen minutes, stating injustice after injustice. I wanted to believe a government agency would do the right thing. Could it be that someone in such authority over children might act inappropriately? I kept wondering what might have happened if I could have been raised by someone other than my own father. Perhaps I should be grateful my upbringing wasn’t any worse than it was. Maybe Heavenly Father putting me under the care of my father was in fact “for my own good.” As I continued to listen to the attorney, I was horrified to learn that the original incident had occurred seven years ago. Lydia was now twenty and living on her own, and Harmony, fourteen, was still in foster care. DCPSA simply refused to back down, and they even refused to allow one of Deressa’s older daughters to act as a foster parent for Harmony.

Ms. Wong finished speaking, and Ms. Thompson held up a sheet of paper. “You will need to choose a foreman,” she said. “He or she will ask the jurors to answer these questions. We’ll give you forty-five minutes to deliberate, and then we’ll be back.”

Everyone looked around at each other for a moment, and then I said, “Emory has done this before and seems to know what’s going on. How about we pick him to lead us?”

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There was no debate. Most people seemed relieved to have it decided that quickly. Emory got up and moved to the front of the room, where he picked up the piece of paper. “Do you feel that Deressa Davenport was wronged in this case?” He looked up at us. “Okay, I’ll go down the rows and everyone answer one at a time. Juror number one?”

“Yes.”

“Juror number two?”

“Yes.”

And so it went. It seemed impossible for anyone to vote against the poor woman, and no one did. “Of course, we’ve just heard one side of it,” Janine pointed out. She was Juror number nine and sitting right next to me.

“True,” I said, “but we can only go on what we know, not what might be said later. They may come in after we’re done and give us new information and make us vote again.” I thought for some reason about all the times at church when the bishop or stake president asked us to sustain someone for a position, and the only thing we knew was that the bishop or stake president was in favor of it. Then we had to say “Aye” in front of everyone and raise our hands, or dissent publicly and give a reason. In all my years at church sustaining people, only once had I ever seen someone dissent, and it was my father. Everyone in Priesthood meeting had gasped. Then my father simply said, “I’ve never even met this man. How can I say I believe he’ll do a good job?”

“You’re only saying you’ll *help* him do a good job,” he was told. “That’s what ‘sustain’ means.” But I understood about making decisions based on inadequate information, and the peer pressure involved in making those decisions. That was one of the few times I was actually proud of my father, despite being mortified at the same time. In the car on the way home, he said calmly, “I hope you learned a lesson.”

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Emory read the next question. “Do you believe the state should be held responsible for taking Deressa Davenport’s children away without just cause?”

Two jurors were opposed to this point. One man, a white guy in his mid-forties with gray hair and an acne-scarred face, said, “You can’t hold the state responsible for what one or two employees did. Fire the employees.”

A young woman sitting on my left, Juror number seven, said, “If we hold the state responsible, where does that lead? Do we sue the state because our mail was late?”

“It’s systemic,” said the morbidly obese young man, who was sitting in the front row. “I was raised in foster care. The whole organization is corrupt.”

“We can’t punish the system just because you don’t like it,” said the acne-scarred man.

“All the poor mother did was use the F word,” said Janine. “Give the goddamn bitch a break.”

Everyone laughed, and we continued deliberating. I wasn’t sure we needed to come up with a unanimous vote or not and was just about to suggest we move on to the next question when a final vote pulled the two dissenters over to the side of the majority.

Emory picked up the piece of paper. “One question left,” he said. “How much money do you think the woman is entitled to in compensatory damages?” He looked at the paper a moment longer. “There’s a note. In the State of Washington,” he went on, “there are apparently no punitive damages, no repayment for lost income or anything like that. It’s all lumped together under ‘Compensatory Damages.’ Whatever we say she gets is what she gets, and it has to cover everything.”

“I don’t think she deserves anything,” said the acne-scarred man. “She gets her kids back. Her name is cleared. That’s it.”

“But her children were taken away,” said Janine.

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“So what price do you put on children?” asked the man. “Twenty thousand dollars? Five million? Children are priceless. It’s demeaning to put a dollar figure on it.”

“And you don’t think it’s demeaning to say they’re worth absolutely nothing at all?” said Janine.

“So she wins the lottery because someone was mean to her? Boo hoo, you hurt my feelings.”

“You’re being disingenuous,” I said. “It’s clearly much more than hurt feelings.” I felt a small surge of adrenalin flowing through my veins, even over such a minor comment. I usually avoided confrontations pretty consistently.

We went around the room then, juror by juror, and each said the amount we thought the woman was entitled to. Two people said zero, a couple of people said \$500,000, and then there were a few suggestions of \$750,000 and \$1,000,000 and even \$1,500,000. But then Emory concluded with, “I think she should get \$5,000,000.”

Everyone gasped. The acne-scarred man started complaining loudly, and people argued for the next several moments over the responsibility of a parent and the responsibility of a higher authority. But when I heard the words “higher authority,” I was suddenly drawn back to one of those anti-Mormon blogs I had read recently, one that claimed that the God Mormons worshipped, and that most Christians worshipped, was not a very nice being. He allowed his children to suffer from painful and disfiguring diseases. He allowed them to be beaten and raped by their Earthly parents. He allowed them to starve to death. He allowed them to be raised by fathers who made them feel like dirt their whole lives. If this woman was guilty of abuse for using bad language, it struck me suddenly that Heavenly Father was guilty of neglect at the very least.

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If that was a sin for us, why wasn't it a sin for him, too? Was he like the DCPSA? Was he above the law?

I felt a little dizzy and looked at my knees to steady myself. My mind was reeling like the time I'd seen one of those optical illusions, and what at first appeared to be a lamp suddenly turned into two faces looking at each other.

What about the Flood, I asked myself. I had glossed over that blog pretty quickly the other day, feeling too uncomfortable to read it carefully, but now I couldn't seem to stop from dwelling on the questions it had raised. Heavenly Father hadn't just "allowed" Nature or Free Will to take its natural course when he created a worldwide flood. He had deliberately murdered untold numbers of his children. What would happen to a human parent who killed his own children? Josh Powell, that repulsive man, had very likely murdered his wife, but we *knew* he'd attacked his two sons with a hatchet before burning them to death. How I'd hated having to deal with the comments at work about "Mormon family values." Why did that jerk have to be a Mormon? It looked like the DCPSA had made another terrible mistake in that case, even worse than this one.

But it was one thing for humans to be imperfect and make poor judgment calls on complicated cases. It was another thing for Heavenly Father, all-knowing, to behave this way. Was it possible he *wasn't* a very nice guy?

I looked around the room nervously. I was in a building constructed in 1902, according to the plaque out front. Another powerful earthquake like the one Seattle had had a decade ago could bring this building down right on my head.

I almost laughed. I was wondering if Heavenly Father was nice, and I believed he might strike me dead just for considering the possibility that he wasn't?

Perhaps it was understandable why there were doubters out there. But I also believed Heavenly Father loved me. The

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Church told me so all the time. At least, he loved me while I was obeying his commandments. But if a human father was nice to his kids only when they obeyed every order he gave them, and then made them sick or killed them if they disobeyed, wouldn't we be calling the police?

Something didn't seem right here.

After more debate, we finally agreed to average everyone's dollar amount. Even the two zero amounts had been raised to \$100,000 by this point, and the overall average turned out to be \$2.25 million.

The attorneys weren't back yet, so a few of the jurors took off for a smoke break. I wondered if lung cancer were a punishment from God, or was just the natural consequence of the action. God always said he didn't create universal laws and principles himself. Even he had to obey them.

Okay, so maybe cancer wasn't God's doing. Carcinogens existed, with or without his input. But the Flood? I couldn't get past that one. If we were to believe the Bible at all, he was fully responsible for that massacre.

And now I started wondering about consequences *for him*. Was there an eternal DCPSA that would take Heavenly Father's children away from *him*? Did he get custody no matter what awful things he did? Who would sit on God's jury? There were millions of other gods, after all. Would he be judged by a jury of *his* peers? I knew Judgment Day was coming for me, and for everyone in my family, and for all of my friends. But was there going to be a Judgment Day for Heavenly Father, too?

And if there was, would I testify?

And if I did, what would I say?

I took a quick pee break in a unisex bathroom out in the hallway and then hurried back, not wanting to have to walk in on the attorneys if they returned. They ended up coming back

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five minutes later, and Ms. Wong asked us only one question. “What dollar amount did you come up with?”

It seemed awfully crass.

“Okay,” she said, sounding disappointed at Emory’s answer. “I want everyone to stand up in a row, according to the dollar amounts you personally decided upon, lowest amount over here and highest amount over there.”

We all complied. It felt good not to be sitting any longer.

“Okay. I’m going to give you a few more facts,” Ms. Wong continued. “And if they change your mind to go either up or down on your amount, I want you to move to the right or left accordingly.” She paused and then said, “Would it make a difference if you knew that the younger girl, Harmony, was also molested while in foster care?”

Everyone looked at each other in confusion. Did we put a dollar figure on that, too?

“Would it make a difference if you knew we had an email from a senior person at DCPSA saying they would lose face if they backed down now?”

A couple of people moved toward the higher end of the dollar range. I thought these last two facts were pretty damning, but I still hadn’t moved yet.

“Would it make a difference to you if we told you there is a letter from the DCPSA dated two years after the girls were taken stating that they would return custody of the older girl only, as long as the mother refused to file charges?”

There was some shuffling of feet.

“Would it make a difference if we told you Deressa Davenport had won Mother of the Year in the State of Washington four years before this incident occurred?”

More shifting, but no one moved.

“Would it make a difference if we told you that Deressa was a Mormon, and that she was excommunicated from her Church

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as a result of being publicly ‘proven’ to be a bad and abusive mother?”

My mouth fell open. Did we actually excommunicate for things like that? I remembered Sonia Johnson had been ex’ed for fighting to support women’s rights. Some intellectuals had been ex’ed for, well, for thinking too much.

“Are you serious?” I said.

Ms. Thompson wrote something down on a piece of paper.

Ms. Wong smiled. “Would it make a difference if I told you that when Lydia was molested, she was infected with HPV, the virus that can cause cervical cancer years later?”

A couple more people moved over to the higher amount side of the room. I still hadn’t moved, mostly because I was too shocked to think clearly.

“Would it make a difference if I told you we have an email from someone at DCPSA stating that the two daughters were being deliberately placed in homes where the most difficult boys lived?”

“Oh, my god,” said Janine. “You can’t be serious. Do you really have all this evidence?”

“We’ve only told you about one-fifth of all the egregious things the state has done.”

“But it wasn’t the state,” the acne-scarred man insisted. “It was just a handful of employees.”

“I think I’m afraid of the government now,” said Janine. “Anyone with that much power...”

“What you have to decide,” Ms. Wong said, “is whether or not you think Deressa Davenport deserves any compensatory damages for what she and her family went through, and what dollar amount you want to put on that.”

I thought about that “handful of employees” claim. Was Heavenly Father responsible for things one of his children did against another one? Could he help it if his son Satan was mean

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to us and led us astray? Could he help it if the North Koreans hated the South Koreans? Perhaps he couldn't help it if my father wasn't perfect, since no one at all was perfect.

So did that mean Heavenly Father was absolved of everything his children did to each other? What would have happened to *me* if I'd let my oldest daughter kill my youngest daughter? Well, it would probably have been Deeann who went to jail, not me. But if I'd *known* she was plotting against Gloria and I had done nothing about it? Heavenly Father was all-knowing, I thought again. He *let* his children run amok and kill each other. He let them be cruel to each other in millions of different ways. Didn't that make him complicit? An accessory?

And he still got custody?

I moved to the far end of the room. "I don't know what dollar amount you want us to go for," I said. "And I don't know if you can give direction. But I'm willing to go pretty high. I don't know what kind of ballpark figure we're talking about. I just want to make sure this woman gets *something*."

Ms. Thompson wrote another note down on her paper.

Was Heavenly Father "letting" me be unemployed, or was he actually responsible? Was he accountable for all the homeless people I'd walked past to get to the attorney's office this morning? Was "heaven" supposed to be our compensatory damages? An eternity with the man who had wronged us?

I decided I was going to write a comment on one of those blogs I'd been visiting recently. Maybe I'd tell the story of how as a teenager I'd called an attorney to see how much it would cost to be emancipated from my "eternal family." Perhaps I'd put a dollar figure on hearing the bishop praise my father in Sacrament meeting for his parenting skills. To hell with whether or not anyone in the ward found out. It looked like the Church could abandon its own as easily as any drug-addled mother could abandon hers. I thought of my wonderful cousin who'd

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been excommunicated years ago for being gay and who ended up committing suicide the following day. If churches could toss aside the needs of their own without any consequences, if states could do it, if even God could do it, what hope was there for any justice in the universe?

Ms. Thompson had us all sit down again, and she handed us each a sheet of paper asking us to write our main reasons for voting as we did, and to put our final individual figure down for the award. I still didn't know if I was guessing right or not but put down \$25 million. Even if Ms. Davenport won the case, the state was sure to appeal. Who could ever really force the state to pay?

Who was ever going to be able to make God pay? Did my personal verdict against him count any more than the verdict of this mock jury against DCPSA?

I turned in my paper, and Ms. Thompson handed me an envelope with my check. \$50. I looked at it, feeling suddenly very cheap, as if I'd been begging at an intersection. Then I grew angry again at Heavenly Father for reducing his children to beggars.

Walking back to the light rail station, I passed a Bank of America and went inside to cash my check. Then I climbed down into the tunnel and waited for the train. I ended up sitting next to a group of five mentally disabled teenagers who seemed to find everything funny and laughed loudly the following twenty minutes until I stepped off at my station. I caught an 8 back to my neighborhood and walked the last few blocks to my house.

"Hi, Eileen," I said, closing the door behind me and kissing her as she came up to greet me.

"How'd it go?"

"Let's call Deeann and Gloria and have them over for dinner Sunday."

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“Both their families?” Eileen said in surprise. We usually alternated Sundays.

I nodded and took off my coat. “I’m going to take a nap,” I said, “but I wanted to give you a heads up. I’d like to have sex later today.”

“Twice in one week?” Eileen sounded surprised again.

“I don’t know if Heavenly Father is ever going to permit us to become gods,” I said, “but if he does, I want us to be loving parents in every way possible.”

“Okay,” said Eileen doubtfully.

“I’ll help prepare the girls’ favorite meal on Sunday.”

“Okay.”

“And we’ll play some fun games or something afterward.” Or maybe just ask everyone how they were really feeling.

I went to the bedroom and took off my shoes, feeling very tired, though it was still not quite 1:00. Maybe later in the afternoon I’d call my father. He’d left several messages over the past few months, saying things like, “I haven’t heard from you in a while. Don’t you love your old Dad anymore?” and then chuckling nervously. I never called him back. Perhaps I was the one being cruel now. I knelt briefly beside the bed and clasped my hands. I wanted to pray but couldn’t quite bring myself to do it. I stripped down to my Mormon undergarments instead and slipped under the covers. I pulled the comforter up to my chin and tried to pray again.

But all I could do was cry.

Partying with St. Roch

I could see that Dennis had a drinking problem. It wasn't as bad as Glenn's had been, of course. I'd dated Glenn for almost a year before he died of cirrhosis, holed up in his apartment with empty beer cans around his bed. He'd frequently point to my flat stomach after we had sex and say, "You may have a six-pack, but *I've* got a whole keg," and then he would pat his extended abdomen. I'd thought it was just a beer belly, but some of that enlargement was due to his damaged liver. After that experience, I vowed I'd never date another drinker.

Then I met Dennis at the Unitarian church in Uptown New Orleans on Nashville. We were both excommunicated Mormons, and we hit it off singing about a God who loved all people equally. We dated for five months and then moved in together, about one month before Dennis's T-cells dropped to 50 and he was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS.

It was late 1989, and we were looking forward to New Year's, hoping for a repeat of the Gay Nineties, at least in name, working together for gay rights with several organizations, not the least of which was ACT UP, carrying signs and shouting slogans in front of City Hall as we demanded more access to medicines. Shortly after we moved in together on St. Roch, just off of Chartres in the Marigny, Dennis developed an addiction to Coke.

That's Coke with a capital C.

He began having me purchase every three-liter bottle of the off brand the local Schwegmann's grocery stocked when I went to do our weekly shopping. I'd pile twelve of the monstrous bottles into my cart and plod my way to the checkout. Every

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single week, people would smile and say, “You having a party?”

“Nothing but fun at my house,” I’d reply, smiling back.

“Kirk, you only bought eight bottles today,” Dennis complained to me this afternoon. “I’ll never make it through the week.”

“I’ll stop at the store again tomorrow.”

“I need this. I get so little pleasure out of life.”

“I’ll stop at the store again tomorrow.”

The sodas were not diet. I was afraid that at any moment, Dennis would have diabetes to add to his problems, but something about the HIV or his particular metabolism seemed to defy the sugar overload. He remained thin as a rail despite a full daily allotment of calories just from the cola alone. His other favorite treat was chocolate, which was a debatable violation of the Word of Wisdom. And perhaps because the caffeine kept him from fully hydrating despite the vast amounts of liquid he consumed, he also drank a great deal of black tea.

“Do you think I’m a hedonist, Kirk?” Dennis asked. “Do you think I should be obeying all the commandments now that I’m about to die?”

“Shut up and fuck me,” I said, forcing a smile.

I was still negative, and Dennis always used a condom when we had sex. The irony was that he was basically a top. He’d only bottomed maybe three or four times ever, but he’d done it just once without a condom, and now he was paying the price. Every day, priests and pastors across the country were still proclaiming that AIDS was God’s punishment for our abominable sins, thereby infecting everyone with their hatred. It was impossible not to wonder if they were right. Every evening as I kissed the man I loved goodnight, I would look into his face and wonder if God really despised us this much. One of the last things I heard my stake president say after he told me I was

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excommunicated was, “If Heavenly Father still loves you, He’ll give you AIDS to help you repent. It’s so much kinder than letting you live in your sins for a lifetime, thinking you’re not sinning. I’ll pray that God gives you AIDS, for your own good.” He smiled and held out his hand warmly, as if he’d just said something comforting.

My hand stayed by my side, and his finally dropped as well, a look of confusion on his face. I turned and walked out of his office, and I never went to an LDS church again. Mormonism had always been my rock before, “the one and only true church.” Four years passed, in fact, before I ever entered any other church at all. A friend invited me to a meeting at the MCC in the Bywater, in an ancient red brick building along the levee. I didn’t like the congregation, so a few months later, I tried a Dignity meeting with some gay Catholics. I didn’t care for that, either. I attended a Reform synagogue Uptown on St. Charles and liked that well enough, but I was afraid to stop praying “in the name of Jesus Christ,” even though I wasn’t sure I even believed in Jesus Christ anymore. I realized I was being superstitious, not religious. I attended a Methodist meeting on North Rampart in the Quarter and then an Episcopalian service Uptown and a Hare Krishna meeting on Esplanade. At last I stumbled upon the Unitarian meeting. I had been just about to give up my quest as pointless when I listened to a blonde woman with dreadlocks give a sermon on the importance of protecting the environment, and I decided to come back a second time. I’d been attending ever since.

“Really?” said Dennis, looking doubtful, almost mournful. “You’re still attracted to me?”

“I want you, mister.”

I grabbed my crotch, and Dennis’s eyes lit up. He hurried over to the dresser and pulled out the two nametags I’d had made a couple of months earlier. He slipped one on his shirt

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pocket that said, “Elder Top—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-gay Saints” and handed mine for me to put on my pocket, “Elder Bottom” and with the same fake Church name. Dennis leaned forward to kiss me, rubbing against me and smiling as our two missionary nametags clicked against each other. Then, despite the costume, he took off his shirt and knelt in front of me, unzipping my pants as I rubbed his head, trying not to be distracted by the large black Kaposi’s lesions on his shoulders and back. He didn’t fuck me as I’d suggested but just sucked me off. I watched as his head moved back and forth, wanting to memorize every sexual encounter with him, so that I could replay them after he was gone. With a final thrust, I came, and then Dennis smiled and stood up.

“Your turn?” I asked, pointing to his zipper.

He shook his head. “All I want is more Coke. I know it’s a pain, but can you go to another store?”

I nodded and went to grab my cart again. We didn’t have a car, and the Schwegmann’s on Claiborne was the only store truly within walking distance, about nine blocks from the apartment. The next closest was a grocery on Franklin. I walked the five blocks to the bus stop, waited for almost twenty minutes, and then boarded the 57. A few minutes later, I was at the store.

There were no three-liter bottles here of the off brand that Dennis preferred, but there were several two-liter bottles of regular Coke. I’d tried making this substitution for Dennis before with negative results. He wanted what he wanted, and nothing else would do. It could be annoying, but how could I deny him what few indulgences he had left in life?

If what the Church taught were true, there’d be no Coke in heaven. I’d never even dared try a sip until I went to my first gay bar.

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I wondered if it were true that the Church owned lots of stock in Coca-Cola.

I pushed my cart along the pavement until I arrived at the bus stop. What could I try next? There was a Rouse's up closer to the lake. Since I was already taking the bus, I supposed it didn't matter how many blocks I had to go once I was sitting down. The bus jerked to a halt in front of me fifteen minutes later, and I dragged my cart on board. I was the only white person in the vehicle. Whites in general were afraid to ride the buses in New Orleans, afraid they'd be murdered by all those "low-class" blacks who filled the seats. While I did get a few cold stares once in a while, obviously most other passengers ignored me completely. Once, I'd run into my Sunday School teacher Theautrey on the Elysian Fields bus and said hi and shaken his hand. At the Unitarian church the next Sunday, he admitted he'd felt two conflicting emotions: one, surprise that a white person would acknowledge him in public, and two, embarrassment in front of other blacks that *he* was friends with a white person himself.

As a Mormon, I'd learned about how blacks had been cursed with a dark skin for their lack of dedication to God in the Pre-Existence. While I'd grown up watching *Diff'rent Strokes* and *The Jeffersons* and didn't feel I harbored much prejudice, whenever I saw a news report of another black murderer or listened to the uneducated speech of blacks around me, I'd doubt just a little my belief that all people were equal. Maybe it wasn't oppression and lack of opportunity that hurt this community. What if they really were inferior spirits? Even while listening to Theautrey teach a class on Sundays and feeling impressed with his knowledge, I'd doubt. Maybe he had some white blood, I'd think. Maybe that was why he was so smart.

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I'd hate myself for thinking these things and then get mad at the Mormons all over again for filling my head with such nonsense. Gays weren't bad. Blacks weren't inferior. What kind of religion went around spreading such a plague of hateful teachings in the first place?

Then I'd wonder again if I was going to hell.

I climbed out of the bus across the street from Rouse's and headed for the store. I went straight for the soda aisle, ready to be finished with this interminable chore and get back home to relax. I worked all week at the public library under a tyrannical manager and then came home to a sick partner. Saturday was my day to have fun, and I had to take my fun when I could get it. I tried to make these outings an escape from the confines of my apartment, but all I really wanted to do was listen to Roxette while putting together a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle of Notre Dame or the Taj Mahal.

No three-liter bottles.

Why did Dennis have to drink so much? Was it his way of thumbing his nose at God?

I looked over the soda section a second time to make sure I wasn't missing anything. There was a section for three-liter bottles, all right, but there weren't any stocked. Was there an epidemic of cola addiction out there?

"Excuse me," I said, stopping a young black man with a nametag. "Could you check in back to see if you have any more of the three-liter bottles?"

The man looked at me, looked at the empty shelf, looked at me again with his lip curled ever so slightly, and headed off without a word. I waited fifteen minutes and then decided to try one last store, a new one that had opened next to the projects near Canal. This would be the last stop on my pilgrimage, regardless of the outcome.

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I arrived thirty-five minutes later and pushed my cart quickly to the soda aisle. There was a lone three-liter bottle. An elderly woman looked as if she was contemplating it. I debated whether or not to snatch the bottle before she had a chance to reach for it, but I bit my lip and waited till she slowly moved on down the aisle. I put the bottle in my cart, added one more item from a few aisles away, and headed for the checkout.

Dennis was not going to be pleased.

Was I a bad partner for giving up before I'd accomplished what Dennis asked of me? The man was dying, after all. He'd be gone in only a few months. Couldn't I sacrifice just a little more for him? Perhaps this proved that fleeting gay relationships were a poor substitute for "true" eternal marriage. It was what I felt every Sunday, too, that my new religion was only a lackluster replacement for the real thing, no matter how much I told myself I preferred these services to the Sacrament and Priesthood meetings of before.

Could one be inoculated against the infection of self-doubt?

I dragged my cart off the steps of the bus twenty minutes later and pushed the metal cage ahead of me slowly, careful going over the cracked and uneven sidewalks of the Marigny. I passed the funeral home and the home of a gay hairdresser who was Clyde Barrow's cousin and then passed the home of a cute guy who routinely invited me to come in whenever he saw me walk by. I always politely refused, of course. He wasn't out today. I walked past the Lion's Inn gay bed and breakfast and finally made it to St. Roch.

The patron saint of the plague.

I unlocked the door underneath the balcony and headed up the stairs. "Kirk! I was afraid something had happened to you!"

"I could only find one more bottle."

Dennis stared at the bottle in disappointment and then managed a smile. "Maybe there will be more later in the week. I

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just want you to spend the rest of the day with me. We have so little time left together. Tell me more of your mission stories from Germany. You know I like that.”

Dennis sat down on the sofa eagerly, and I poured him a glass of cola. Then I opened my other purchase, my first bottle of red wine, and poured myself a drink, too. I brought both glasses over to the coffee table and set them down. Dennis picked up his and looked at mine for a long moment without saying anything. Then I picked up mine and took a sip. Not bad.

“Tell me again about that time you decked your zone leader,” said Dennis, leaning back and smiling.

“Well, naturally, it was an accident,” I began. I sat back on the sofa, too, and Dennis swung his legs up so that his feet were resting in my lap. I sipped my wine with one hand and rubbed his feet with the other. I looked over at the man I loved, and wondered how I was going to fit the whole of eternity into the next few months. “It all started the day my zone leader told me in front of everyone that I didn’t measure up to his expectations...”

I continued with my story, distracted by a new lesion on Dennis’s leg. I began embellishing, just to add some variety, and Dennis grinned as I went on.

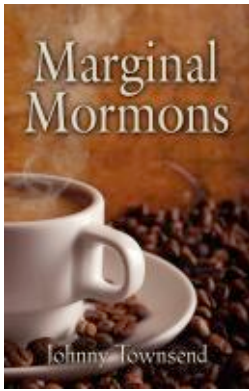
These are the good old days, I realized as I talked. One day soon, I’d look back and miss these times. I tried to memorize every detail of the room, the torn vinyl sofa we’d bought at Goodwill and had a friend deliver, the coffee table I’d carried two blocks from a garage sale, a mediocre piece of art Dennis had painted. When I finished my story, Dennis asked for another, this one about the middle-aged German man who’d fucked me one day when I’d broken the mission rules and took a long walk on my own.

We both smiled as I began telling the story. When I finished, I poured Dennis another glass of cola, and I sipped

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more of my wine. Then I had Dennis tell me one of his own favorite mission stories, back when he thought it was a healthy thing to spread the teachings of the Church. We smiled and laughed and drank, happy for a few brief moments on the torn sofa.

In the back of my mind, I wondered where I'd packed my Book of Mormon, and if maybe I should read for a while after Dennis fell asleep.



What happens when a High Priest becomes addicted to crack cocaine? Should an unemployed bank teller take in a homeless protestor from the Occupy movement? Do gay people have positive near-death experiences or unhappy ones? Can a schizophrenic woman on anti-delusional drugs keep her belief in an intangible God? Not every Latter-day Saint has a mainstream story to tell, but these soul-searching people are all still more than just "Marginal Mormons."

Marginal Mormons

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