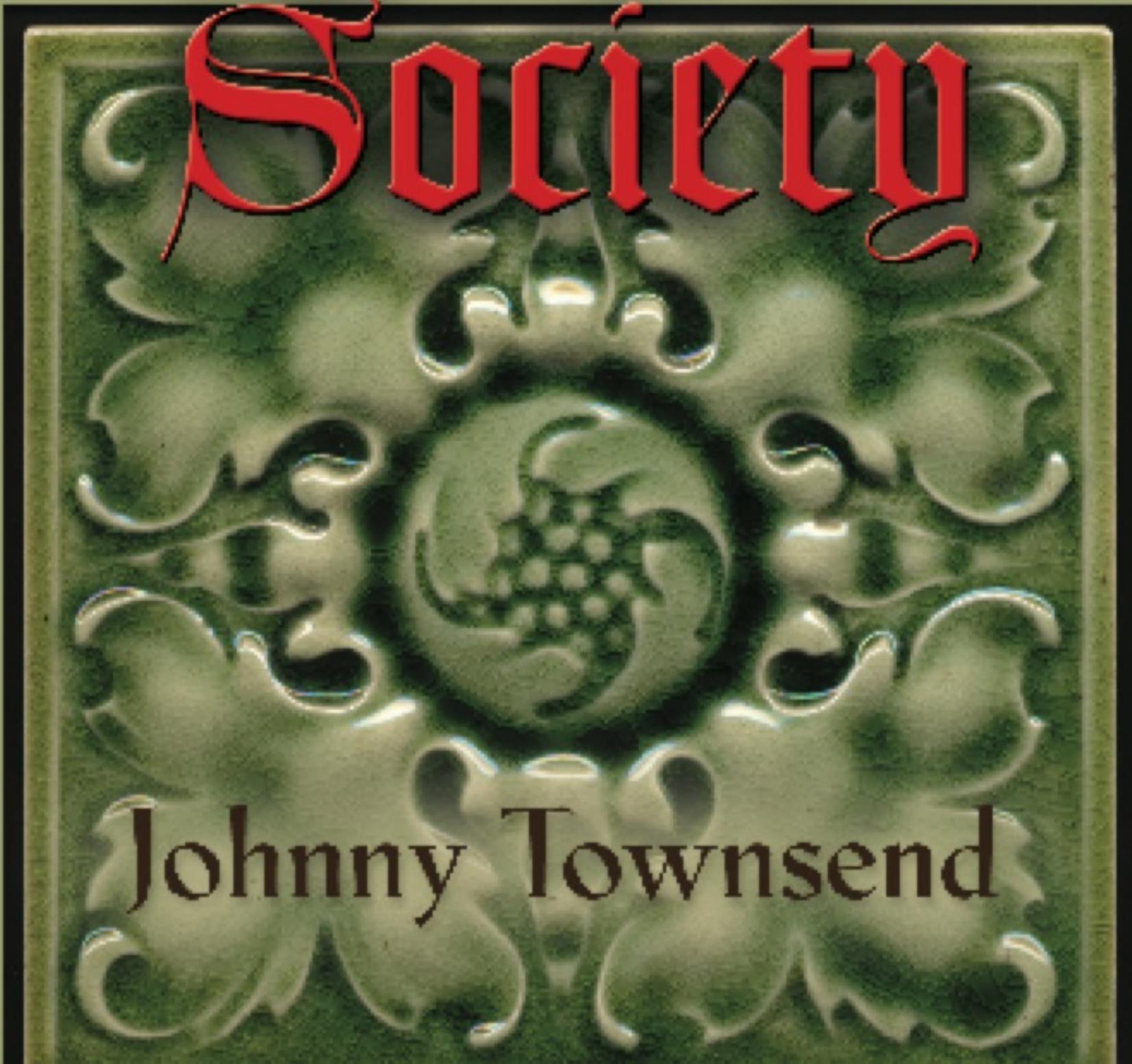
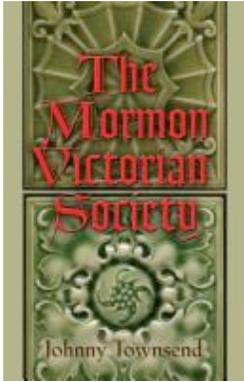


The  
Mormon  
Victorian



Society

Johnny Townsend



*A Victorian enthusiast has a startling sexual revelation to make at his monthly Society meeting. Two men find love in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. A home teaching assignment goes terribly wrong when a man is confronted with a young gay cowboy. A Relief Society president is trapped on a plane next to a gay man flaunting his sexuality. Gay Mormons react when the Prophet has a new revelation about homosexuality.*

## **The Mormon Victorian Society**

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## Praise for Johnny Townsend

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

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

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

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

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

Stephen Carter, editor of *Sunstone* magazine

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

Kirkus Reviews

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

Niki D’Andrea, *Phoenix New Times*

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

Jeff Laver, author of *Just Call Me Greg*

## **Life in the Dungeon**

I saw the short, hunchbacked woman shuffling toward the booth and waved her over. She was elderly and would probably want to buy November's senior bus pass for \$27. As she drew closer to the window, I could see that her left eye looked off severely to the side. I wondered if she could even see with it.

"How can I help you?" I asked cheerfully.

"There's shit in the elevator. A huge pile of it. I stepped right in it, and I couldn't get it off my shoe."

I looked at the floor behind her and could see that she was telling the truth. She was tracking something repulsive along as she walked. "I'll report it to the Facilities guys immediately."

"You know why they did it, don't you?" said the woman. "They're mad that you got rid of the Ride Free Zone."

I was a Bus Pass Sales Rep for Seattle Transit. Three weeks earlier, the city had eliminated its policy of allowing anyone to ride for free within the downtown area, a program which had lasted forty years. The city could no longer afford it. Some pointed out that making it harder to get around downtown would discourage both tourists and locals from shopping, and the city would lose even more revenue than it would gain by charging \$2.25 per ride. That was yet to be

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determined, but already known was that many, many people were unhappy.

And now someone had protested in the Transit elevator at the Westlake station.

Transit only had two offices, our main one near Pioneer Square, and the one where I worked, in the tunnel at Westlake on the other end of the downtown area. Seattle had long ago created a transit tunnel underground going the length of downtown, from Westlake on the north, not far from the Space Needle, to the International District on the south in Chinatown. A dozen different bus lines, plus the light rail, avoided street traffic by operating below the surface. Sometimes, I felt like a Morlock servicing the Eloi.

“I think you got the winner for the day,” said Tim, one of my coworkers. There were three of us working the tiny booth about the size of a handicapped bathroom stall. I felt I was spending my days in an airplane cockpit. The only festive feature was a garland of orange skeletons draped along the top of the Plexiglass windows. Tim weighed about 300 pounds and took insulin every day, usually in pill form but sometimes by injection. Every afternoon during break, he would bring back Halloween candy and hand it to the rest of us, saying he at least wanted vicarious pleasure. The only proxy work I could do, I thought, since I no longer held a temple recommend.

“You didn’t see my customer?” asked Sharon, a hefty 240 pounds herself. She was divorced and always talking badly about her ex. “The woman had \$200 on her card and was complaining about being overcharged twenty-five cents on a bus. I had to do a goddamn cash adjustment for twenty-five cents.”

Cash adjustments were tedious, I had to admit, often taking fifteen minutes. I did five or six of them a day, usually for teenaged Chinese girls who'd accidentally bought an adult card and put a youth pass on it, where it wouldn't work. The card was never registered, which meant I had to spend a few minutes registering it, not easy because I had to get the address of the girl, always difficult because of her limited English. Then I'd have to refund the card, issue a new card and register that one, and then transfer the funds over. Not the end of the world, but tiresome, especially since a whole gang of girls would usually come just a few minutes before closing.

"Yes, your customer was a pain in the butt," I said to Sharon. Sharon sometimes worked as a senior, our word for supervisor, and I didn't want to get on her bad side. She routinely read her mail, clipped coupons, read the newspaper, played on the internet, filled out forms so her sons could attend various activities, ate popcorn, and did all sorts of other inappropriate things at her window. When customers would come to her station, she'd take a minute before looking up from whatever she was doing, and then she'd look back down and continue her personal activities, ignoring the customer. The customer would glance around in confusion, and I'd wave them over to my window. Even when Sharon did address the customer, it was usually with an antagonistic tone to her voice. I didn't personally see the advantage in being a creep, even if it was all displaced anger at one's ex.

Of course, I didn't have an ex. I was still with my first love.

"I don't know why people have to be such jerks," she said. "Must be a full moon."

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“Only a week or so until Halloween,” said Tim. “The nuts’ll be crawling out of the woodwork before long.” He was turned toward us, his back to his window, and he didn’t see the young Hispanic woman walking up to him. “You and your partner celebrate Halloween, Graydon?”

I nodded and then pointed to his window. Tim turned and jumped in surprise when he saw the woman standing there. “Thanks,” he said to me after he’d helped her. “She was hot.”

Sharon ignored us and kept painting her nails.

“Oh, my mother will probably haunt me for saying that.” Tim was 57 and had lived with his mother till she died nine months ago. He’d never married but was always talking about the “young chicks” who came to his window, or the strip clubs he frequented on weekends. “Every time I lust after a girl, Mom sends a pregnant woman my way to keep me in line.” He looked into the tunnel and pointed out a pregnant woman in a burqa coming up off an escalator. “See?”

“You know, there’s therapy for that,” I said.

“Oh, I don’t mean she’s really haunting me,” said Tim. “I’m not hearing voices or anything. What do Mormons believe about ghosts?”

“We believe they pretty much leave us alone,” I said.

“Do you still believe in God, even after being excommunicated?”

I’d been ex’ed two years before, a week after my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. Tim had never gotten over it. He wasn’t religious but thought excommunication was barbaric. “You’ve been in a

relationship for a year,” he’d told me at the time. “That’s already longer than anything I’ve had. How can they say you’re a monster?” He was still marveling that I’d been with Alex for three years now.

My parents were still marveling that I’d chosen a Jewish partner. Growing up, I had only known Anglo-Saxons from the congregation I’d been a part of for so many years. Even now, my parents knew only one non-Anglo personally, Alex.

An elderly man came up to my window. “What can I do for you?”

“I’d like a senior transit card.”

“How old are you?”

He handed me an Indonesian ID card. “I’m 64.”

“Oh, then you’ll need to come back when you turn 65.”

Right then, two more people came to my window one after another, the first shifting over from Sharon’s window where she wasn’t being helped. I loaded \$30 onto one card for a Danish exchange student and put a \$90 regular adult November pass on another for a Japanese woman. I liked these transactions. People usually paid with cash or credit, so it was a quick, easy task. A couple of times a day, customers paid with vouchers from some company or charity paying their fare, and those took a little longer to process, but even those were relatively simple transactions. Actually, most of what we did every day was pretty easy. The only thing I didn’t like was that I had to stand on my feet all day. Tim and Sharon sat in chairs, but I found that if I sat, I couldn’t reach the window or the receipt printer or the calculator. I had to move around and

*Johnny Townsend*

reach for too many things during every transaction. Sometimes, it was easier to do the harder thing.

“So you still believe?” asked Tim. He wasn’t going to let it drop.

I knew that Sharon’s oldest son was studying theology at Gonzaga in Spokane and thinking of becoming a Catholic priest. Alex attended Torah study on Saturdays but rarely attended services. “Sure, I believe,” I said.

Even if the last thing I heard my stake president say was, “You’re on your own now. Don’t ask the Church for any help when you get in trouble.” I nodded at Hector, the janitor, as he walked by the booth. He nodded back.

“Oh, that’s good,” Tim replied.

“Why?”

“I’d hate to see religion hurt you.”

I laughed. “It’s already hurt me.”

“Will you guys shut up?” said Sharon. “I’m trying to read.” She could barely hold on to her magazine with her fingers spread wide so her nails could dry.

I waved a man standing in front of her window over to mine. “Can I help you?” I asked.

The man thrust a transit card at me. “Money,” he said in a thick Middle Eastern accent.

I put the card on the reader and saw that he had \$2.25 left on his card. I told him the amount.

“Money,” he said again.

“Did you want to put money on the card?” I asked.

“Huh?” He looked confused. “Money,” he repeated.

“What about money?” I asked.

“Money,” he said again with more conviction.

I held out my hand. He still looked confused but handed me a twenty dollar bill.

“You want me to put twenty on the card?” I asked.

He pointed to the bill.

I loaded the money onto the card and gave him his receipt with his card. He nodded brusquely and headed off.

“Oh, I got another hot girl,” said Tim. An auburn-haired woman was approaching his station.

“You know, they can hear you over your microphone,” said Sharon. She put down her magazine and waved impatiently for a woman with a stroller to come to her window. “Can I help you?” she said in a strained voice.

We’d already taken our morning breaks, and soon Tim took the first lunch, at 11:15. He didn’t return for an hour, and I left at 12:20. It could be dreary working underground all day. I felt safe from nuclear attack, but that was about the only positive aspect of working in the tunnel. I worried that an earthquake would trap me in the booth, and I’d spend my last two weeks dying in the rubble, unable to escape Tim and Sharon. On some days, I felt buried alive in a tight coffin.

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Alex usually made my lunch, a turkey sandwich or peanut butter and jelly. Today I had turkey with a slice of dill pickle, a surprise treat. I could have eaten in the tiny break room behind the counter, an area about the size of a small walk-in closet, but I needed to get away. On sunny days, I sat on a bench outside in front of the Westlake Shopping Center, but as it was raining today, I just went to the third floor food court and grabbed an empty table.

I still thought of religion more than I wanted to. Could I truly be a good person without it? Or was I really the horror the Church said I was? Dracula never saw himself as evil. The Mummy felt completely justified in the murders he was committing. It was only an objective person looking on from the outside who could see the truth. On my mission to Minnesota, my companions and I had had a motto: You have to apostatize to baptize. Sometimes, you simply had to break the rules to do the right thing. I'd tried to leave Mormonism behind me, but I still sent a yearly protest letter to Salt Lake, and of course I donated to the Human Rights Campaign, Lambda Legal, the ACLU, and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Still, I wasn't very much of an activist. I'd been contacted by the organization "Mormons for Marriage Equality" in regard to the Washington State campaign to legalize gay marriage here, and I'd written some emails to my elected officials as well as a couple of letters to the editor to complain about the Church pushing its members to vote against equality. I was grateful to see the handful of straight, supposedly faithful Mormons who were standing up for us, but frankly, I didn't much care if they liked me or not. Part of me cheered the gay Mormons who picketed in front of temples and held kiss-ins on Temple Square. Another part of me didn't give a shit. The Church often gloated, "You can't leave us alone," as if that somehow proved

their divine status, but in reality, it was the Church who couldn't leave *us* alone.

So Romney scared me. I'd already turned in my mail-in vote for Obama, but the race was still neck and neck in battleground states across the country. The prospect of a Mormon president who wanted to ban gay marriage and abortion and who was part of a party that wanted to dismantle Social Security and Medicare was terrifying. My family emailed me about how Romney was going to save the Constitution which was "hanging by a thread." I worried that the relative acceptance gays had in society now could be ripped away overnight. Alex had told me just last evening, "I wonder if this was how the Jews felt right before the election where Hitler took control." Romney was no Hitler, but persecution was persecution. Even if he didn't win, another awful Republican with Draconian ideas was sure to follow him.

I looked around at the people in the food court. Several Asian youths were sitting at the table next to me, eating noodles with chopsticks. A heavy white woman with mussed up dirty blond hair was eating a pulled pork sandwich a few tables away. A businessman in a suit was eating a McChicken sandwich. A thin brunette was eating a salad and two black teenage girls were slurping Smoothies. An Ethiopian woman in a purple head scarf was eating rice and broccoli.

America was a great place, I thought, where all these people could come together in peace.

So why did I always feel such an impending sense of doom?

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I looked out the window at the rain misting down and luxuriated in being able to sit for a full forty-five minutes, even on a hard chair.

Once I was back in the booth, Sharon took off without a word. My first customer was an elderly Russian woman who wanted to put \$20 on her card. "Spaseba," I said when she'd finished.

She laughed and said, "Pajalsta." I could never remember which term meant thanks and which meant you're welcome. But the elderly Russian women who came to the booth always got a kick out of even my one Russian word.

A Vietnamese woman stopped by to purchase a book of ten \$1.25 youth fare tickets. I was sure she was buying them for herself and trying to pass off to bus drivers that she was still a teenager.

"You and your partner doing anything for Halloween?" asked Tim during a brief lull. "Going to any haunted houses?"

"I doubt it. You?"

"My mother loved Halloween. When I was a month old, she put me in a basket, put a note that said, 'Please take care of me' on top, and left me on the neighbor's porch. She rang his doorbell and then hid in the bushes and watched him almost faint when he found me. Then she jumped out and said, 'Scared you on Halloween!'"

"Your mother sounds very special."

"Oh, she was, she was. She's still with me. Look! There's another pregnant woman." He pointed.

A Hispanic man came to my window then and plopped down his card. “Want month,” he said.

“You want the November pass?” I asked.

“Month.” He nodded.

He had a regular adult card, which meant he was eligible for the \$81 pass, the \$90 pass, the \$99 pass, the \$108 pass, and on up to \$126. “Which one?”

“Month.” He said it firmly and nodded authoritatively.

I looked up Details to see if he’d had a pass in the preceding months. Then I could just get him whatever he’d bought before. I saw the screen and took a breath. He’d had both an \$81 pass and a \$90 pass. “You want the \$81 pass?”

“Yes. Pass.”

“Did you want the \$90 pass?”

“Pass. Yes.”

I held out my hand, hopeful the answer would come in whatever the man pushed through the slot in the window. But no, he handed me a \$100 bill. I marked it with my counterfeit pen to verify it. “\$90?” I asked.

He nodded. I put the pass on the card and handed him the card, his receipt, and \$10. He looked confused and walked off.

“You’re really good with the customers,” said Tim. “I get so impatient.”

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“Can I help you?” I waved at a 40-year-old white woman with stringy hair who looked as if she couldn’t decide whether or not to approach. She did.

The woman thrust her application for a Disability card through my window. “The FBI wants this,” she said. “And Jesus wants it.”

“I’m afraid we don’t process these here,” I said. “The Disabled cards are printed at our main branch in Pioneer Square.” I slid the paper back to her. She pushed it right back at me again.

“You keep it. I’ll lose it. The FBI wants it. Satan wants it, too.” She shuffled away slowly like a zombie.

I took the form and went back to the senior’s office. Mike was watching a football game on the internet. “Can we interoffice this to the main branch so the customer will have it when she shows up to get a card? She doesn’t want to keep it. She’s afraid she’ll lose it.”

Mike took the form, looked at it for a few seconds, and then put it on his desk where dozens of other miscellaneous papers lay. “They have no place to keep these. She’ll need to bring another.” He turned back to his game.

I returned to my window and put thirty dollars on a youth card for a petite blonde teenager.

“She was hot,” said Tim after the girl left.

“She was fifteen.”

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Soon Sharon was back at her window, sipping coffee. The only time she really helped was when she had to sell taxi scrip, since she was the only cashier allowed to sell it. Taxi scrip was a type of coupon that allowed the customer to buy a certain amount of taxi fare for half price, say \$30 for \$15 or \$50 for \$25. People had to have a special yellow card to be eligible.

At the beginning and end of each month, our line out front might get up to fifty people in length, but at this time of the cycle it was never more than four or five long, and sometimes there was no line at all. It was the longest it had been all day right now, with four people waiting for their turn. A thirty-year-old bypassed the other four people and came around from the side directly to my window. “Uh, there’s a line,” I said, smiling and pointing.

“But the sign said to step to the side if you wanted to avoid the line.”

There were two signs on either side of the line, which directed customers to the Regional Transit vending machines along the walls to buy cards, load cards, or buy light rail tickets. All of that could be done without us, yet a great many people came to us anyway. “If you read the sign more carefully,” I said, still smiling, “you’ll see that it isn’t an invitation to cut in line.” I pointed for her to go to the back of the group.

She turned around, bewildered, and wandered away.

“You were too nice,” Sharon muttered. “That little bitch knew exactly what she was doing.”

Some days, I wondered if being cast into Outer Darkness when I died would mean having to live like this for eternity. If

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the Church were right about gays, it would be worth being celibate for sixty years to avoid such a fate. The devil wasn't scary only at the end of October.

Stop it, Graydon, I told myself. You're over this. You're over it.

"Boy, that was some good looking gal," said Tim, turned around in his chair so that he was facing Sharon and me rather than his window. I didn't even know which woman he was referring to. Sharon ignored him and kept looking at pictures on her phone. It was Tim's turn to take his afternoon break and he put up a sign in front of his window. "Maybe I'll follow her for a while."

"Think of your mother," I said, to ward off the stalking. Tim looked at the floor glumly and went to sit in the back room instead. I saw a young woman walk purposefully toward the booth and thought about letting Sharon take her. It was Satan's plan, though, to try to force people to be good rather than let them choose. I waved her over.

"My transit card broke," said the woman with difficulty. She had some kind of speech impediment. She thrust the card at me. It was a green and white Disability card that allowed the rider to pay seventy-five cents per fare.

"I'm afraid we don't print those at this location," I said. "You'll need to go to the main branch near Pioneer Square."

"They told me I could come here," she said with a whine, instantly petulant. Her mouth twitched.

"I'm sorry about the misinformation, but we simply don't have a printer that can print those here."

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“Well, what am I going to do?” She was raising her voice.

“You’re going to need to go down to the main branch.”

“But I have a seizure disorder. You have to accommodate me.”

“Ma’am, our printer won’t print those cards. There’s nothing we can do at this location.”

“I don’t think you understand. I’m disabled.”

“Yes, and the branch that handles Disability applications and prints Disability cards is our main branch near Pioneer Square.”

“I can’t go all the way down there!” She was yelling now, drawing looks from the other people in line behind her and from passersby walking toward the stairs leading down to the bus and train platform. “I have my paperwork *here!*” She threw it at me. The papers hit the window and then fell on the floor.

“Ma’am, you’re welcome to yell and argue as long as you wish, but that’s not going to change anything.”

I instantly realized that this was exactly the same message the Church was sending to me when it ignored our protests. Some things were simply pointless. I glanced over briefly at Sharon. Was being second-class going to be my fate the rest of my life, both in and out of the Church? What if the election in a couple of weeks made Washington the 32<sup>nd</sup> state in a row to deny marriage equality? Even my own family lovingly demonized me.

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The woman slapped the counter, and I turned back to her, irritated for allowing myself to be distracted by my own thoughts. “You can get a friend or family member to help you get there if you’re having difficulty on your own. We also have the Access van if you need it.”

“Give me the number of the main office!”

I wrote down our Customer Service number.

“Not that one! The direct line!”

“We don’t give out the direct line. You can call this number, and they’ll transfer you.”

“I WANT THE DIRECT NUMBER!”

“This is what I can give you.” I slipped the note paper through the little opening in my window, and she pushed it back.

“I need the manager’s direct number!” she repeated. “I can’t go all the way to the other branch!”

“Ma’am,” I said quietly into my microphone. “Blind people go down there. People without legs go down there. You’re a big girl. You can handle it.”

“Stop talking into that damn microphone! You’re going to make me seize!”

I turned off the microphone and said through the thick glass, “You’re going to need to step away from the window.”

“What?” She leaned forward.

“You’re going to need to—”

“Huh?”

I turned the microphone back on. “You’re going to need to step away and let me wait on the other customers.”

“Well, you haven’t helped *me* yet!”

“I’ve told you where you need to go to accomplish what you want, and I’ve given you our customer service number. You’re going to need to step away.”

“You can tell her where to go all right,” Sharon muttered next to me.

The woman continued to yell, and I turned my microphone back off so I wouldn’t have to hear her. Then I walked to the senior’s office and said to Mike, “I need help out here. I have an irate customer who won’t leave.” I explained the situation, and he walked through the two locked doors separating our booth from the tunnel. I waited until I saw him lead the woman off, and then I returned to my window.

“I almost felt sorry for you,” said Sharon, leaning over.

Almost, I thought. My own instincts were to feel bad for anyone disabled and go out of my way to make their lives easier, but some disabled people used their disability like a weapon and tried to bully everyone in their path. I’d come close to saying, “I understand that you’re unhappy and that this leads you to want to make everyone around you unhappy, but no matter how much you yell, I’m not going to be able to help you.” I’d been afraid she’d report me, though, so I’d tried to maintain my composure.

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Then a new thought struck me. Were gays using *our* “disability” like a weapon, too?

I remembered one obnoxious customer at my window justifying her behavior to me a couple of weeks ago, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” I’d wanted to say then, “No one’s going to remember you, either. You’re just a bitter old asshole who makes everyone around you miserable, and in a few years you’re going to die and be forgotten. Being poorly behaved doesn’t make you important. Or right.” But I knew she’d have reported me, too, so I just kept a blank face and let her gloat.

Was I like that when I wrote to the Church?

I looked at the ring on my hand, which I wore despite the lack of a marriage certificate. Even with this crummy job that took up most of my waking life, I still had Alex to go home to.

I looked out and saw Mike turning away from the woman, and watched her defeated expression as her right hand twitched. There was no way I could offer to take her to the other branch on Saturday, my day off, because both branches were closed the same days. I’d already had my lunch break today, so I couldn’t use that to help her down to Pioneer Square now. Sharon was next to me, playing with an ink pen which had a skull on top that lit up whenever she pressed down. She kept lighting it while an Indian man at her window talked.

The disabled woman was still standing motionless in the tunnel.

Why did I even feel obligated to help this unpleasant customer staring dejectedly at the floor in the first place? Because I knew it must be harder to *be* her than simply to deal

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with her? Because I wanted some Mormon somewhere to be nice to me? Even a blind man had the power to pour soup for Frankenstein's monster.

I locked my computer and passed Mike on his way back through the metal doors. "Where are you going?" he asked. "Isn't Tim on break?"

"I'm going to escort that woman to the main branch. I'll be back in thirty minutes, forty minutes tops. You can dock my hours."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Hey, I'm all alone up here," Sharon shouted into the hallway where we were standing.

"Be back in a jiffy, Mike. Thanks." I smiled and nodded, not waiting for his reply, and headed out the door.

## Kolob Abbey

Back in my mortal days, I was a regular PBS viewer. I especially loved BBC productions. You could always catch me watching *Sherlock Holmes* or *Inspector Morse* or *Prime Suspect*. I even liked their comedies, such as *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Are You Being Served?* But I have to say my favorite programs were *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey*. Monthly donations to PBS were deducted from my debit card. I was a reasonably intelligent man and liked to promote good television that would raise the overall level of thought in the world.

But I wasn't a snob or anything. I went to the gym daily and worked out to keep my body in shape. I taught Sunday School at the Episcopal church I attended after being excommunicated by the Mormons. I volunteered twice a month at the homeless shelter soup kitchen in Minneapolis. I mowed the lawns of two elderly neighbors in the summer and shoveled their walks in the winter. I didn't make a lot as a social worker, but I gave \$300 every month to a different charity. I had served a two-year mission in Nigeria for the LDS Church when I was nineteen, and after graduating BYU a few years later, spent another year in Africa in the Peace Corps.

I'll admit that part of my motive then was to avoid the issue of marriage, and when I returned to Minnesota, I made an appointment with my bishop and told him he was going to have

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to remove my name from the records because I was going to a gay bar that coming weekend and never looking back. He chose to have the stake president hold a court instead. I still believed in God, still believed in Jesus, still wanted to be a good person. I studied several other faiths and eventually ended up an Episcopalian.

The brass bell above my desk rang now, as it usually did about this time of the morning, and I put away my journal and headed out of my bedroom.

Walking down the marble hallway to the master bedroom, I continued reflecting on how I'd ended up here. Over the years, I had helped build four houses for Habitat for Humanity. I picked up trash in parks. I pulled up invasive species of weeds as well. I fell in love with Henry, and we spent thirty-one years together, until that fateful night when I tried to drive home from a political rally in the fog.

I rammed into the back of that truck so quickly and forcefully that to be honest, I wasn't even aware of what happened. I saw a tunnel with a light at the end, and I felt confused because I seemed to be walking now instead of driving. When had I left the car? I was afraid I'd fallen asleep at the wheel and so tried to wake myself up but couldn't.

Once in the light, my grandparents greeted me warmly, my mother was there, some aunts and uncles and cousins, and several of my friends who'd died over the years. I realized at that point what had happened, and I didn't particularly mind being dead. I felt a brief stab of regret over leaving Henry, but I knew somehow in my heart that he would be okay. I was in heaven, and I felt such love that I understood what the saying

“being on cloud nine” meant for the first time. I felt I could float on this wave of love forever.

That’s when the escorts came. After the short reunion with my loved ones, I was taken to Spirit Prison, where I was given lessons until Judgment Day and the First Resurrection. You see, it turned out the Mormon Church was true. The members still had some of the doctrine wrong, of course, since humans were so fallible. It was okay for women to wear pants. Coffee wasn’t a sin. And gays weren’t really abominations. They didn’t get sent to Outer Darkness or even the Telestial Kingdom, unless they warranted such things for other reasons. I ended up with a verdict better than I might have expected. I wasn’t sent to the Terrestrial Kingdom with the “good people of the Earth.” It was determined I’d exhibited exemplary virtue and compassion, despite my many faults, and I actually made it into the Celestial Kingdom. Here, though, is where the traditional LDS doctrine did come into play.

Because I hadn’t married in the temple, I wasn’t worthy of godhood itself. I was only capable of becoming a “ministering angel.” I was assured, of course, that this was no trivial accomplishment. Only the most select second-class citizens ever gained such stature. Yes, there was class distinction in heaven. There was nothing wrong with recognizing that some people were inherently better than others. Second class was certainly better than third class, or fourth class, or eightieth class, or three hundred and fifty-seventh class.

There were a lot of classes in heaven.

“James, could you come to my room?” That was Caleb, the god I was assigned to, calling me on my Communicator, which was hanging from my belt. I’d always been Jimmy on

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Earth, but here in the Celestial Kingdom, things were always a bit formal. Caleb wasn't usually impatient, but I must have been dawdling in my reflective state of mind. Caleb himself had seemed preoccupied the last few days, and I suppose that had put me in a similar mood.

I passed Calpurnia in the hallway and nodded politely to her. Cal and Cal they'd been on Earth, but they too went by their full names here in the Celestial Kingdom. They'd both been black in mortality and were a little surprised to find themselves still black in the hereafter. They'd been proud African-Americans, but as devout Mormons, they couldn't help but believe their skin would become white and delightful at some point. It took them a few hundred years to fully get over it. I wasn't assigned to Caleb until well after that, but he'd confided it to me a few days ago. On *their* planet, they insisted on creating seven different skin colors so it would be harder for any one to claim superiority. Even as a disinterested onlooker, however, I could see clearly that the green humans were well on their way to dominance down below.

But Caleb was in charge. That was a deistic problem. I was just a valet.

The house was huge, taking up about forty acres. There were several wings simply for the wives. Calpurnia was number one, but after Judgment Day, there had been many more weddings, to women who'd been worthy in Earth life but who either hadn't had the chance to marry in the temple or whose husbands hadn't made it to the top with them.

There were apparently a lot more righteous women than men back on Earth. It always seemed to me to be related to

testosterone, and holding us accountable for a hormone we didn't choose seemed unfair.

But then I wasn't the Supreme Judge.

I knocked gently on Caleb's door, and he called out for me to enter. "Good morning, Caleb," I said, smiling brightly. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, James," he said from his bed. "Six more births last night. Always got to be making more spirit babies, even though we made billions before that planet ever cooled."

"It's good you have perfect stamina," I replied. I pulled the sheet down to let Caleb sit up and swing his legs over the side of the bed. It had four towering bedposts, intricately carved. A massive headboard joined the two posts at the head of the bed. Tyler, who I'd known since Spirit Prison, had crafted it, as he'd made the bed frames for over half the wives. Carving was a solitary job, and occasionally when we had lunch together when our days off coincided, Tyler would express a wish that he had more direct interaction with the gods. I'd always smile politely. This morning, our god Caleb was wearing a white nightgown. It made his dark skin almost shine in contrast.

Caleb stood up and held out his arms, and I untied the nightgown and pulled it off of him. He was a fine specimen of a man, though never having worked directly with any other gods, I couldn't really make a fair comparison. Probably most gods were in pretty good shape. As usual, I let my eyes linger a bit too long on his genitals. I was still gay, after all, and there was nothing quite like looking at a perfect penis every day on

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the job. (It was a penis in the Celestial Kingdom, not a dick.) I had to admit, things could be worse.

“Okay, okay, James, enough of that. You’ll make me get an erection, and you know I don’t like to get erections till after lunch when I start visiting the West Wing.”

“Sorry, Caleb.” I slipped a toga over his head and pulled it tight around his waist with a maroon rope. Caleb wore all sorts of clothes, pants and shirt sometimes, a suit, a blouse and kilt, a dress, and several different types of robes, all depending on his mood. Part of my job was to anticipate his mood and choose the right wardrobe for the day even before he suggested anything. When you’ve been working for someone over three billion years, you learn to pick up on those things.

As I finished, Caleb put one hand on my shoulder and sighed.

“What is it, sir?”

“I was just thinking that this arrangement somehow doesn’t seem fair.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I very much enjoy working for you, Caleb.”

Caleb chuckled and shook his head. “What I mean is that you get to see my penis every day, and after all these years, I’ve never had an opportunity to see yours.”

“Sir?”

Caleb sat down on his bed and patted the sheet next to him for me to sit as well. I sat down reluctantly.

“It’s something I’ve never confided in you yet, though we’ve known each other all these years. It obviously came out in the trial on Judgment Day, but you didn’t know me then and so probably didn’t pay very much attention.”

I looked at him questioningly.

He sighed again. “They told us in church that being gay was a mortal experience, that it wasn’t an eternal identity. I think about that promise every day. Not once in Earth life did I have sex with a man. Not once. And it paid off.” He waved his arms around the room. “But still. It’s hard to go *forever* without having what you want.”

“Sir, they’ll be waiting for you at breakfast.” I started to get up, but Caleb put his hand on my knee.

“Yes, and they’ll have my favorite foods, as usual. I know.” He shook his head and started picking at the frayed end of the rope around his waist. “I always loved bacon and still do. I always loved fried eggs and still do. I always loved hash browns and still do.”

“Caleb...”

“And I’ve always loved men.” He took my hand and squeezed it. “It’s not a matter of temptation. There’s no temptation anymore. But I still like what I like. And after having you dress me for 3,614,379,401 years, I’ve just *got* to see your penis at least once.” He motioned with his hand. “May I?”

“Caleb, you know I’ll always do whatever you command me to do.”

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“Do I have to command it?” he asked sadly.

I thought back to that day so many years ago when Caleb first took me into the house, after we’d spent countless years gathering space dust and forming stars and planets. Once all that preliminary work was done, there weren’t many important tasks left for us angels to do. The gods still had to keep us employed, however, so most of us were transferred to teaching and tending the spirit children. Others made clothes. Some tended the gardens. But Caleb had taken me in to work for him personally. I figured it was because he knew I never much liked children, and he was being kind. Even now, I realized he surely didn’t want to see *my* penis, just *any* penis. It wasn’t really very flattering. I felt as if I were scratching an itch for him.

Which I sometimes did when he was coming out of the shower.

I stood up, and Caleb smiled. I was wearing a basic blue robe today, and I lifted it up over my waist. Caleb’s eyes went straight to my pubic area.

“Could you...?” he asked.

“It’s been a long time,” I said. “You know we can’t even masturbate up here. So my plumbing hasn’t had to work in quite a while.” I closed my eyes and concentrated, allowing myself to fantasize for the first time in eons. I’d almost forgotten how, but I suppose it was like riding a bike. I thought about Henry, and two minutes later, I was hard.

“It’s beautiful,” Caleb breathed. He moved closer and stared.

I felt like Sally Hemings.

Just when Caleb was about to touch it, I cleared my throat. “You know, sir, that you still have to answer to *your* god.”

Caleb pulled away and stared glumly at the floor. “It doesn’t quite seem fair, does it? I worked so hard during Earth life, and I’ve done nothing but prove myself over and over these past few billion years. I’ve been *perfect* all this time. I’m a *god*. Why can’t *I* make the rules?”

I shrugged. “Heavenly Father always insisted that the laws weren’t his, that there are natural eternal laws we must all abide.” I lowered my robe, my penis making it poke out like a tent. I felt slightly embarrassed.

“Do you think he was telling the truth?”

“I can’t say,” I said slowly. “He’s never let us meet *his* god. We just have to take his word for it.”

“It just doesn’t seem fair,” Caleb repeated.

I began to feel a little irritated and said, “Well, what about me, sir? My entire eternity is based on what I did during a few measly years on Earth. It’s like taking a random two minutes out of a single day in the life of a kindergartner, and basing where he goes to graduate school on those two minutes.” Even though Earth life was so long ago, since so much depended on it, we still found ourselves making analogies based on our experiences from that brief period.

Caleb nodded. “I suppose I accept the status quo without questioning,” he said. “That’s part of what got me here in the first place.”

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“And I rebelled against the status quo,” I pointed out, “and ended up an eternal servant.”

“Well, when you think about it,” said Caleb, a little defensively, “*I’m* serving billions and billions of spirits by giving them spirit bodies and sending them down to Anregan, and then by listening to their neverending prayers.” He held his head. “It’s like a continual ringing in my ears every second of the day.”

“Uh-huh.” I knew that he recorded over 90% of those prayers with a device one of his other servants created and handed them off to yet more staff in the outlying buildings on the estate. He’d named the estate Kolob, after his god’s home world. He’d named his own planet Anregan, after a science fiction novel he’d read as a teenager. Caleb spent maybe two or three hours every morning directly responding to the people on his planet clamoring out for his help. He may have been gay, but he seemed much more intent on his afternoon duties “serving” his wives, seven a day.

I looked at Caleb sharply. I wondered if he’d been led to believe that if he had enough sex with enough goddesses, that eventually his homosexuality would go away up here, just as on Earth we’d been told that serving as a missionary or marrying a woman would make the gay go away back there.

I shuddered. Was an eternity having sex with spouses you weren’t attracted to what heaven was all about? It sounded more like hell to me. Even celibacy was better than that.

I wished they’d let me see Henry, but he hadn’t been quite as generous with his charity work on Earth and had only

merited the Terrestrial Kingdom. We did get to Skype, but some days that just wasn't enough. I wanted to hold him now.

We were told that technically, even the lower degrees of heaven, the Terrestrial and Telestial Kingdoms, were hell because while there, one was separated eternally from Heavenly Father. Only in the Celestial Kingdom could one see and interact with the god who'd sent us to Earth. That was supposed to mean something, being in the *real* heaven.

But Caleb and Calpurnia and the other wives were the only ones who actually had contact with him. For the rest of us, Caleb had become our new boss. It was he to whom we reported. As nice as he usually was to us, the place still sometimes felt a little like hell. I had resigned myself to that brass bell in my tiny bedroom, but now I wondered if that was the right decision.

"Thanks for letting me see your penis, James," said Caleb, standing up.

"Thanks for letting me see *yours*," I replied. "It's almost as nice as Henry's."

Caleb froze and stared at me. "You—you mean there are *better* penises than mine?"

"I've seen dozens of them."

Caleb continued staring.

"Not that yours isn't quite impressive. I'm just saying."

"I'm going to breakfast. Be back here in an hour to help me change into my work clothes."

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“Yes, sir.”

Caleb dismissed me with a wave of his hand, and I headed back down the hallway and downstairs to my room. I picked up a book about life in the six hundredth year of the Millennium and started reading. We could only read “good” books with “appropriate” content. There certainly hadn’t been enough of those written back on Earth. I went through all of those in a couple of decades. Fortunately, many of the people sent to the Terrestrial Kingdom were able to develop their writing skills, and they produced more books for us to read. Some of them helped provide the infrastructure we relied on up here in the Celestial Kingdom, even if they weren’t technically “ministering angels” themselves. For instance, they helped provide and sustain the communication devices we used daily. They helped produce the cloth that we then sewed into clothing up here. If it took a village to raise a child, it took a whole nation to sustain a god. Those of us in the Celestial Kingdom were awarded the most select of the servant positions, but even with twenty thousand servants, we weren’t enough to serve one god, plus just over twenty-five hundred goddesses, and countless spirit children. We simply had to outsource some of the more mundane work.

Henry had once slipped me a handwritten note inside the packaging for some materials to be turned into a new pair of sandals for Caleb. Though we saw each other on the Ethernet once a week, I still felt a tremendous thrill go through my body when I saw the note. It said simply, “Yours always, Henry.”

I wondered if I should abdicate my position here and ask to be sent down to a lower kingdom. I’d asked that very question almost as soon as I’d arrived eons ago and was given a blunt no in response. But now I questioned whether or not I

needed to accept that answer. Even now, after all these years making friends with other angels, my weekly chats with Henry were really the only thing that gave me the strength to go on.

I wrote a little more in my journal and was back in Caleb's bedroom in time to see him come back from breakfast. He did not look as if he'd had a good meal.

"Are you feeling well, sir?" I asked. It was a stupid question. Gods never became ill. Hash browns were never burned. I knew perfectly well what the problem was.

Caleb glared at me. I remembered reading stories from the Old Testament where God had acted petulantly or angrily, and it always bothered me that a perfect being could behave in ways that seemed so imperfect. Even Caleb had his moods. Earth life was the single most decisive and formative influence on our character, stronger than the influence of the Pre-Existence before we gained physical bodies, and stronger than anything that happened after Judgment Day. That's precisely why what we did on Earth mattered so much. In the Pre-Existence, we were like sand on a beach. During Earth life, we were molten glass easily molded into almost any form. In the afterlife, we were pretty much the vessel or object we'd been shaped into while in the furnace of Earthly experience, just polished a little.

I accepted that this meant I would always be gay. If I had to be celibate, being gay or straight didn't make much difference. But for a god like Caleb...

"Sir, what are you going to do?" I asked softly.

"What do you mean?" He held out his arms again, and I took off the toga and started putting on his blue pin-striped suit.

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Caleb lifted his legs at the appropriate times as I slid the pants on him and bent his arms so I could get him into his starched white shirt.

“It’s one thing to suppress who you really are for six or seven billion years. But you realize, you have hundreds of billions of years still ahead of you. You’re still a relatively new god.”

Caleb’s gaze hardened. “I’m a god, and I’m going to do what gods do.”

I put a knot in his tie.

“No more penis envy?” I said with a smile.

He shot me a dirty look. “Do you want to work in the nursery for a million years?”

“No, sir.”

Caleb looked at himself in the mirror and nodded authoritatively at what he saw. Then he started toward the door. “Folks are going to get some tough love answers to their prayers today.” Just before he reached the hallway, he turned back and said, “Be here at 11:45 to dress me for lunch.” Then he went on without even a wave of his hand.

I had some free time now, one of the perks of this special position. I went back to my room and sat at my desk, looking up at the brass bell for the longest time. I thought about my mortal expectations of immortality. I figured gods and probably angels could just blink like Barbara Eden and create things out of nothing, but even gods didn’t have that kind of power. We could teleport in a beam of light like they did on

*Star Trek*, something apparent from the days Joseph Smith described his angelic visitations. But most of what we did here was drudge work just like back on Earth. The priesthood wasn't nearly as big a deal as it had been made out to be.

I remembered a time when Henry and I were trying to refinance our home and had to get a new appraisal. We owned a hundred-year-old house in downtown Minneapolis and had been doing some renovations, taking out the old furnace but not having yet replaced it with a new one. There were also some holes in the kitchen wall from some other work we had done. The bank had balked at the results, saying they couldn't possibly refinance a home in that condition. I had prayed for help and had experienced some fleeting self-doubt over the kind of help Heavenly Father would give an apostate Mormon.

Still, Henry and I had gone to another institution and tried again. Only this time we put up a shelf in the kitchen and covered the holes with a row of large cereal boxes. And we bought a few grills and affixed them to various walls in the house and pretended they were part of our heating system.

We got the loan.

And despite the blatant dishonesty, I made it to the Celestial Kingdom.

It was two more days before my day off, when I would be allowed to talk to Henry. I took a deep breath and walked to the servants' library, logging onto a computer as nonchalantly as I could. Some of the others in the room may have noticed, but no one said anything. Henry was already on the ether, not having as many restrictions on his time, and I made my request quickly. "What are your GPS coordinates?" He seemed

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puzzled but gave me the information. I blew him a kiss and logged out.

The next part would be trickier. I returned to Caleb's room and gathered a hunter green cloak and his favorite red hat. Then I made my way into the East Wing to the far end where the transporter room lay. The angel manning the post, Michael, put down his magazine and sat up straight when I entered, relaxing a little when he saw I was alone.

"Caleb has to make a short trip," I explained. "He asked me to meet him here with his accessories."

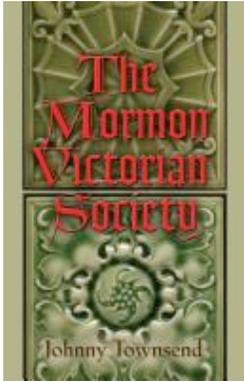
Michael nodded.

"There's a little clutter out in the hall," I said uncomfortably. "Do you think...?"

"I'll get right on it," said Michael, jumping up from his seat.

The moment he was out of sight, I ran over to the control panel and input the coordinates to Henry's home on the planet where he was stationed light years away. I knew I had only seconds. I pushed the button, giving myself a two-second time delay, and ran to the platform. As the light filled my eyes, I could see Michael returning with a look of horror on his face.

But I'd left him the cloak and the hat, so at least he'd have something to offer to Caleb.



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