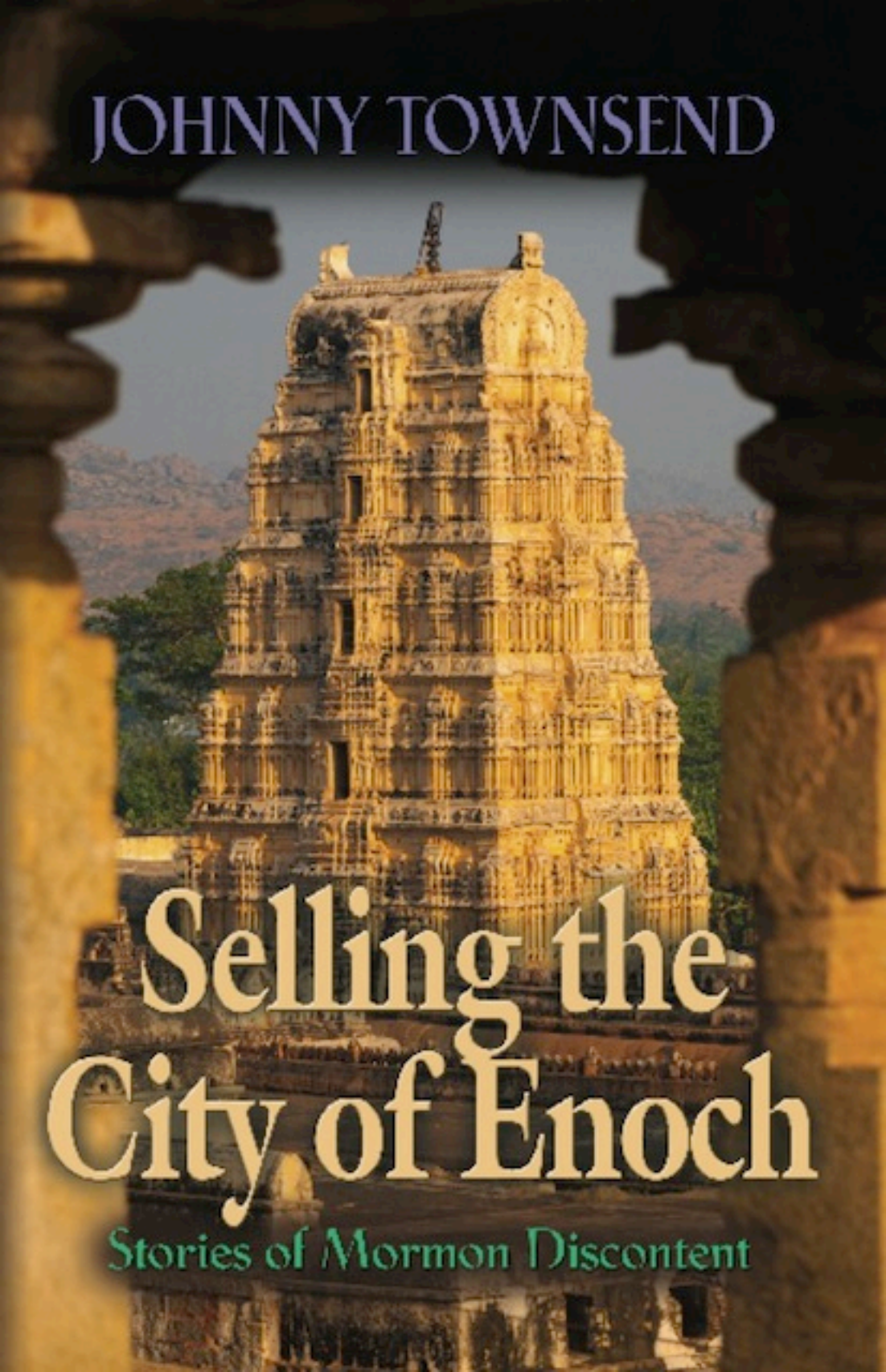
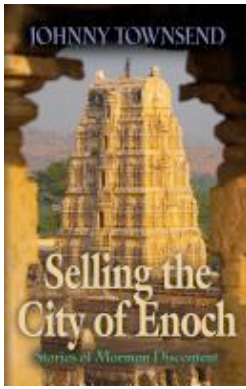


JOHNNY TOWNSEND



Selling the
City of Enoch

Stories of Mormon Discontent



In this collection of Mormon short stories, we see a mission president's wife murdered in Rome. A mother plans for her role as a god in the hereafter. A descendant of Enoch tries out Capitalism. A bishop disguises himself as a homeless man to teach his congregation a lesson. A lonely young woman rents a mother and father for Christmas. A husband is horrified to learn he has married a pre-op transgender in the temple.

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Praise for Johnny Townsend

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

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

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

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

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

Stephen Carter, editor of *Sunstone* magazine

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

to the field of Mormon fiction.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2011.

Kirkus Reviews

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

Niki D’Andrea, *Phoenix New Times*

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

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

“Townsend’s lively writing style and engaging characters [in *Zombies for Jesus*] make for stories which force us to wake up, smell the (prohibited) coffee, and review our attitudes with regard to reading dogma so doggedly. These are tales which revel in the individual tics and quirks which make us human, Mormon or not, gay or not...”

A.J. Kirby, The Short Review

A Life of Horror

“No, I can’t see you tonight, Brad,” said Albert.

“Why not? We had this planned.”

“I’m not feeling good.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t feel well enough to talk about it, Brad. I gotta go.”

“I hope you feel better, hon. I love you.”

Albert didn’t say anything. He just closed his eyes and hung up the phone.

Albert was tired of West Hollywood, tired of L.A. in general, tired of his apartment, tired of his job, tired of Brad, tired of everything. He’d been living in this basement apartment for over eighteen years now. It was rent-controlled, and he simply couldn’t find anything else for the price. Even with all his movies, he wasn’t really crowded, though. He simply wanted something different. He wanted a change.

Albert sat back on his black leather sofa and looked about him. A poster advertising Dario Argento’s *Opera* was on one wall. A narrow poster advertising a William Castle movie hung from another, at the top a life insurance form promising any moviegoer a thousand dollars if they died of fright while watching the film. There wasn’t much wall space available for posters, of course. Almost every inch of every wall in the entire apartment was filled with shelves, and those shelves were filled

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with DVDs and VHS tapes. OOP movies. Out of print. Thousands of them.

Albert had always liked movies, horror movies mostly, and he'd even earned a degree in film at Loyola University Marymount, hoping to get into the business. He'd worked on a handful of projects back in the 1980's, in the lowliest possible positions, and he realized it would take more years and more energy than he possessed to ever force himself into a position of power where he could actually influence the way the film turned out. He'd taken a couple of office jobs related to film, had gone to the Cannes Film Festival once and to Tokyo another time. And he'd even been asked to take part in several film commentaries by some directors he knew, credited as a "film historian." But as much as he liked movies, he decided he was simply going to have to forge his own path.

He ran into someone who was closing out their inventory of VHS tapes, getting rid of a bunch of movies about to go out of print. Albert bought them for almost nothing and decided to try selling them on Amazon. And to his surprise, people bought them. For \$50 each, \$85 each, even \$100. From that time on, Albert made his living scouring the internet for news on which tapes and DVDs were going out of print, then looking for stores or individuals selling them cheap, and finally selling them in turn for whatever people were willing to pay. He'd paid his way through life for almost seventeen years now feeding people's twisted desires to own, to collect, at any price.

Cannibal Apocalypse. The Butchers. The Deathmaster. A Polish Vampire in Burbank. The Psycho Lover. A Scream in the Street. Slumber Party Massacre III.

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Albert wasn't sure why people would be willing even to pay regular prices for this crap, much less top dollar. Only one in a hundred horror movies was worth seeing. He should know. He'd seen them all.

He walked to the kitchen, big enough to house three more shelving units on wheels, something he'd bought for a few dollars each from a Blockbuster going out of business. He started to eat a banana but then stared at it, half peeled.

He needed to see Brad.

He pulled out his cell phone and punched in Brad's number.

"Hey there!"

"Brad, let's go ahead and have dinner at Hugo's tonight after all."

"You're feeling better?"

"No, but I still need to see you."

"Great! I'll be there at 7:00."

Albert looked at his watch. It was not quite 4:00. His mail run was done for the day, always tedious because he had to stand in two different long lines, one to deliver mail and another to pick up mail. Maybe it was time to take out Wilbur again. "Wanna go out?" he asked the shaggy, gray-haired mutt staring up at him from his toy mouse.

Wilbur wagged his tail furiously, and Albert hooked up the leash. They walked out of the apartment, up some stairs, then down some more, and out onto the street. West Hollywood was

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the kind of place where you had to lift weights for ten minutes before going to take out your trash. Buff men walked by at almost any hour. Albert was a little short, at 5'5", but he was slim and defined, with dark, straight hair, a goatee and a labret. For Wilbur's walks, Albert stayed away from the main street and wandered through the residential area, historic two-story homes and newer three-story apartment buildings. There was Susan, walking her Lab. And there were Jeff and Carl, walking their poodle.

Wilbur strained at the leash to try to visit his doggy friends, but Albert held him back. He was so tired of the same old mundane conversations he had every day with the other dog walkers in the neighborhood.

Susan waved, and Albert waved back, but he made no effort to head over toward her. Wilbur peed, and they made their way back to the apartment.

Back inside, Wilbur was still excited from his walk. He grabbed a chew stick and threw it in the air and chased it. Then he threw it another time and chased it again. Albert smiled. Wilbur could entertain himself like this for an hour.

But Albert couldn't. He felt he was staring at the four walls of a prison cell, trapped inside an iron maiden. He wanted to scream. He wanted out.

Blood Bath 2. Bollywood Horror Collection. Revenge of the Living Dead Girls. Phantasm.

Albert found himself absentmindedly rubbing his arm, and he finally looked down to see what he was doing. He saw the scar his mother had left when she bit him once when he was thirteen.

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His parents had divorced when Albert was twelve. All three of his siblings moved in with their father. Albert hadn't liked his siblings and so stayed with his mother. But she was a real piece of work. She threw Kleenex boxes at him, threw ink pens, threw forks at him. She bopped him on the head, slapped him, yelled at him, and bit him. She'd leave him alone for two or three days at a time while she headed out to the bars and went home with different guys. Even at the time, Albert realized he shouldn't be left alone for so long, but since it was the only peace he ever got, he certainly wasn't going to complain about it.

Popcorn. Fright Night II. Sleepaway Camp. Let's Scare Jessica to Death. Clownhouse. Nightmares.

Albert watched Wilbur play for another moment. The dog was now messing up his throw rug, wrinkling it and then trying to un wrinkle it, and then wrinkling it again. He looked at Albert and wagged his tail.

Albert shook his head. He couldn't do it. He picked up his phone and called again. "Hey, loverboy," said Brad.

How could he possibly marry someone named Brad, thought Albert. He'd be singing songs from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* every time he introduced the man as his husband. "I'm going to have to cancel again," said Albert. "I'm sorry."

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment. "Okay, honey. It's not the end of the world. We'll have dinner tomorrow night."

"Sorry."

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Albert went to lie down on his bed, a single bed in a little nook in the living room. The sole bedroom in the apartment was Albert's office, with his desk, his computer, more shelves, and his collection of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, which he'd saved for almost forty years. He even had a *Vampirella* and *Creepy* collection, the only things he still had from his childhood. The *Lost in Space* robot he'd bought as an adult. The *Alien* action figure, too.

Albert turned on the fan. The basement stayed pretty cool most of the time, even when it was 88 degrees outside like now. And his electricity was included in the rent, so he could turn the air conditioner on any time he wanted without having to worry. He just didn't think it was very good for the planet for him to turn it on unless he really needed it.

Like he cared what happened to the planet. *He* was never going to have any kids.

He was never going to get married, either, despite Brad's proposal the night before. He was fifty-two years old, for goodness' sake. He'd never had a partner. He'd had a few boyfriends over the years, naturally, but none had lasted more than a few months. Mostly, he picked up guys in bars. The last few years, he barely bothered with that.

And then he'd met Brad six months ago. That had been at a local grocery. Brad was another fifty-year-old with a great body. A hair dresser in West Hollywood. Another flighty, self-indulgent jerk like everybody else in West Hollywood.

Only Brad wasn't a jerk.

Brad had been a Mormon missionary when he was just out of high school. He'd served in the Peace Corps after that. He'd

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been dumped by all his Mormon friends and all his Mormon family when he came out. Albert had heard that those people were supposed to value family more than anything else. Brad had explained how they were supposedly “sealed” for all eternity. But even “good” families were worthless, it seemed. Yet Brad had made a life for himself, found a partner and been happy with him for over twenty years, until his partner died of pancreatic cancer a few years ago.

And now he wanted to replace the love of his life with Albert, who could never be that for anybody. It just proved how selfish humans were. Brad needed a body, and Albert was available.

That was love?

Albert looked at the DVDs on the wall beside his bed. *Demons II. Bleeders. Killer Inside Me. Horror Express. The Brood. Dangerous Seductress. Madman.*

Albert’s oldest brother had died of a brain tumor when he was twenty-seven. Their father had died of a heart attack related to his diabetes when he was fifty-two. Fifty-two, sheesh. And Albert’s remaining brother had died of melanoma just three years ago. The only ones left were his sister, living in Cancun, and his mother, still living in Boston. When Albert visited every couple of years, his mother did nothing but sit in front of the TV all day. She’d have one TV on in one room on one channel, and another TV on in another room on another channel. It drove Albert crazy.

But she didn’t yell anymore.

Of course, the lack of yelling didn’t mean there was happiness. There was no such thing as happiness. Albert

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wanted to be happy. He wanted Brad to leave him alone. He wanted to be married to the man he loved. He wanted to watch a good movie and escape into another reality. He wanted to die.

He grabbed the phone again. “Brad?” he asked when the line picked up.

“Are you okay, Albert?”

“I think we should break up.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Finally, Brad said slowly, “I love you, Albert.”

“No! I don’t want to hear that! I’m hanging up now! Good-bye!”

Albert hung up the phone and looked at Wilbur. His tail was at half-staff, wagging uncertainly as he looked at Albert with his head cocked. Albert spread his arms, and Wilbur leaped into them. Wilbur licked Albert on the lips, and Albert buried his face in the dog’s fur.

This was the first dog Albert had ever owned. He’d never wanted the responsibility, but his boyfriend John five years ago had adopted this puppy and then didn’t take care of it. Albert had been furious, had taken the dog to his apartment, and had told John never to speak to him again.

And it *was* a lot of responsibility. He couldn’t go on day-long DVD runs like he used to. He had to plan everything around Wilbur’s three daily walks. He couldn’t stay out all night. He couldn’t take a weekend trip somewhere.

But he loved Wilbur.

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Witchcraft 666. Don't Answer the Phone. Scanners. Zombie Chronicles. Ilsa. Slaughter Vomit Dolls.

Albert went to his office and checked his emails to catch up on the last bit of business for the day. He'd check again right before bed. He usually sold two to five movies a day, just enough to keep him solvent. He didn't need anybody else.

He remembered the time he was twelve, not long after the divorce. He'd come home from band practice and started feeling ill. Before long, his right side was killing him. He tried to tough it out, but the pain soon became excruciating. Albert tried calling his mother but couldn't track her down. No cell phones in those days. She wasn't at work, and she wasn't with the one boyfriend Albert was aware of. Then he called his father and told him he needed to go to the hospital. His father had said he wanted to finish making dinner for the other kids and then he'd be over. His father never did show up, but his mother did, just in time to get him to the hospital only minutes before the doctor said his appendix would have burst.

Albert walked to the kitchen and opened a bottle of mineral water.

Life sucked.

He hated everyone.

Albert rarely took naps, but he felt so listless today that there was nothing else he wanted to do. He lay down on his bed, patted the mattress for Wilbur, and then cuddled up with the dog. He listened to the whir of the fan and to Wilbur's heartbeat, and he slowly dozed off to sleep.

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Later, he heard a noise and looked up. The clock on the wall said 7:00. He'd better get up if he wanted to get any sleep later. He threw his legs over the bed, and Wilbur jumped down and ran to the kitchen, whimpering in pleasure.

There was another knock. Albert rubbed his forehead and stumbled groggily to the door.

It was Brad.

"What are you doing here?"

"We're going out to eat at Hugo's. You like their breakfast food for dinner."

"I'm not going out with you. We broke up."

Brad came inside, ignoring the *Dawn of the Dead* poster near the kitchen door. He took Albert's hands, and Albert grew angry when he felt tears coming to his eyes. Brad should just go away. He was rude and insensitive to come over like this.

"Albert, I'm going to love you for the rest of your life, and it's going to be okay."

Albert shook his head, unable to say anything.

They hugged for a long moment, and then they headed out the door. They went up some stairs and down some others, and then they were out on the street. They walked up to the main drag, turned the corner past the massage parlor, and, holding hands, walked up the street to the restaurant.

The Homeless Bishop

The idea was born during services the Sunday before Thanksgiving, when I listened to my congregants talking about the things they were thankful for. “I’m so grateful Heavenly Father has allowed us to buy a second home down in Palm Springs,” said Brother Knightly, our High Priest group leader. “Now we can get away during some of these dreary Salt Lake winters. It’s such a blessing.”

“I’m truly grateful Heavenly Father has blessed us that we can now afford to go First Class when we fly,” said a young man, Brother Erickson, with his smiling young wife by his side. “It makes learning about this great world so much easier. And you know the saying, ‘The World is Our Campus.’”

The following young man to speak was that elder’s best friend, Aaron Smith. “I’m so blessed that I can now afford to fly on private jets and no longer have to bother with commercial airlines.” Aaron winked at Brother Erickson, who didn’t wink back.

“I’m thankful for Heavenly Father helping me realize how important it is to save our planet,” said Brother Randolph, another High Priest. “Our family used to have six cars. But then we realized we had too big a footprint on the planet, so we downsized to five. I’m grateful Heavenly Father has kept us humble despite our wonderful business successes.”

By “family,” I suppose I should mention he was referring to himself, his wife, and his ten-year-old son. It wasn’t as if he had three teenage children, or four wives.

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The entire service progressed in much the same manner, every speaker trying to one-up the previous speaker in the degree to which they were blessed by God. Somehow, though, the voices didn't sound truly thankful. They sounded like they thought they deserved more. I found it gauche, to say the least. And not a single person mentioned anything truly spiritual. If people would only stop concentrating so much on their financial prosperity, I thought.

But if I went through with my idea...

When I arrived home after meeting with my first and second counselors, I proposed the idea to Jacqueline, my wife. She was not impressed. "You're just doing this to show up everyone, Daniel. You want to embarrass them and prove they're not as righteous as they think they are."

"I simply want to see how they'll react. I think it will be a learning experience for everyone."

"*You* don't want to learn anything. You want *them* to learn."

"What's so bad about that?"

"It comes across as condescending. You're the great, wise bishop who knows everything and you have to teach the little children."

"Actually, I'm particularly interested in seeing how the children in the ward will react."

"You just want to prove to everyone how superior you are."

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“Do you realize that the richest eighty-five people in the world have the same amount of wealth as the poorest three and a half billion?” I said.

Jacqueline didn't even look at me as she spoke. “The poor will always be with us,” she replied.

I was miffed. I thought my idea to show up in a couple of weeks dressed as a homeless man was pure genius. I'd already told my counselors today that I had to go out of town in two weeks and they'd have to conduct services themselves. No one would be expecting to see me. And apparently, Jacqueline wasn't going to be giving me away with any loving glances, so maybe her disapproval would actually come in handy.

Veronica would have understood.

I sighed and wished I hadn't agreed with Jacqueline's demand that I destroy every remaining photograph of Veronica. Veronica had been my college sweetheart, a couple of years older than I was and already working as a co-pilot while I was still just a senior. Then there'd been that terrible day when I turned on the news and learned that her flight had gone down after a fire broke out onboard. The plane had dived almost vertically into the ground at the end.

One of the officials from the regional airline she worked for advised me not to listen to the cockpit voice recorder. “There's a horrible scream at the end. You don't want to hear it.”

“But I do want to hear it,” I protested. “I *want* to be haunted by her scream. Someone who loved her should feel at least some of the terror she felt at the end. I *want* to lie awake at night and remember what I hear.”

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Against his better judgment, the official let me listen to the recording.

I heard that heartrending scream every night in my mind for the next several months. When I broke the commandments and rented the R-rated movie *Blow Out*, I was deeply moved by the concluding scene, when the John Travolta character listens to the sound of his girlfriend's dying scream as he uses it to dub an inadequate actress in a film he's working on.

He did the right thing, I thought. No one should forget such a scream.

After I met Jacqueline and tried to move on with my life, I acquiesced to her prerequisite that I get rid of every photo of every girlfriend I'd ever had. Letters, cards, emails, gifts, anything that had come from another woman had to go. I felt I was losing the possessions that made my life rich and full. But I told myself possessions didn't matter. What mattered was that I had found love again. I was going to make an eternal family. And our eternal family would always have a home, at church and, most importantly, in the Celestial Kingdom in our Heavenly Father's house.

The day after I told Jacqueline of my plan to appear as a homeless man, I contacted a make-up artist, Kelly, and we arranged to meet early in two weeks on Sunday morning. Fortunately, our block wouldn't begin until 10:00, so at least we wouldn't have to get up at the crack of dawn to do the make-up. The following evening after I contacted the make-up person, I stopped at Deseret Industries on my way home from work to buy an ugly, ill-fitting outfit and the most unattractive jacket I could find. Then that Saturday, even though it was freezing cold outside, I jogged and did work on the house

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without wearing any deodorant. It took a while in that weather to work up a sweat, but I continued to wear the clothes the rest of the day, to let the sweat ferment a little. I knew I'd succeeded when even little Florence, our two-year-old, finally turned up her nose when I came near.

"Don't think you're getting close to me tonight," said Jacqueline as we sat down to dinner. I'd already changed clothes at this point, of course.

"I took a shower," I pointed out.

"What you're doing still smells, Daniel. No nookie tonight."

"No nookie!" said Florence, unaware of what she was saying. I looked at Jacqueline disapprovingly.

On Wednesday during my lunch break at work, I decided to take a walk. There were always several homeless people in the area, even in weather like this, with a few inches of snow on the ground. One man was huddled in an alleyway between two buildings, his coat looking quite insufficient. A woman held out a cardboard sign, "Veteran. Please help." I gave her a dollar, but the look of misery on her face didn't change. Finally, I came to a bus stop, where the half-partition gave a little relief from the slight wind we had today. A man about sixty was hunched over, mumbling angrily to himself.

Must be schizophrenic, I thought. Who could even fathom what he was angry at? I'd seen people like this shouting at every passerby, upset at the whole world.

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But this man was saying things in disgust as well as anger, judging from his expression, and now he was hitting himself in the head as he mumbled. Oh, my, I thought. He hates *himself*.

It just seemed too awful, so I sat down beside him and offered my hand. “How are you doing today?” I asked. “Pretty cold, isn’t it?”

Without even looking at me, the man stood up and walked away. I’d driven him from the bus shelter. Good job, Daniel.

After lunch, when I went back to the office, one of my coworkers stopped by my desk. “I saw you during your break,” said Brad. “It’s nice that you’re making some new friends.” He smirked but didn’t walk away.

“Everyone can use a kind word,” I returned, hoping he’d catch the sarcasm.

He didn’t. “Gonna baptize anyone?” he asked.

“Not everyone has an ulterior motive for everything they do.”

“Of course we do.” Brad laughed.

That night at dinner, I tried again to get Jacqueline on my side. After she served the scalloped potatoes and green beans, I took a sip of my milk and said, “I talked to a homeless man today.”

She didn’t even look at me as she responded. “I don’t want to hear it.” She scooped a spoonful of cauliflower with cheese onto her plate and took a bite. Then she helped Florence eat a green bean.

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“Do you know how many children are homeless in Salt Lake?” I persisted.

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

There was no nookie that night, either.

Lying in bed next to Jacqueline, I thought about Veronica. I remembered one day when we’d gone to the park, about a month before I proposed. It was springtime, and birds were singing, and there was a light, fragrant breeze. I noticed some children nearby playing on the swings, but my attention was directed primarily toward Veronica. After several moments, she stood up and walked over to the swings. There was a boy about eight on the one swing that was functional. A six-year-old girl waited patiently for her turn, but the boy, I now realized, was laughing at the girl, saying things like, “*I’ve* got the swing. It’s *my* swing. You can wait all day, but *I’m* the one having fun.”

Veronica stood next to the girl and looked at the boy flying back and forth through the air. She didn’t reprimand him. She smiled and said sweetly, “Wouldn’t it be better to let her take her turn? And then you can take another turn. And then she can take her turn again. Don’t you really think that would be better?”

The boy didn’t say anything at first, but after a moment, he stopped swinging and let the girl on, waiting now for his next turn.

The last year of our relationship, Veronica was stationed in Cincinnati, so we didn’t get to spend much time together, Skyping when we were able so we could at least see each other’s face. It would only be another year before I graduated

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and we could marry. I planned to look for a job in Cincinnati. One day, about six weeks after she'd set up her apartment there, she called me on a Sunday afternoon. "There's an old woman in the ward," she said. "She sits in the back row in Sacrament meeting. No one sits near her or talks to her."

"That's a shame," I said.

"So the last couple of weeks, I've been making a point of speaking with her." Veronica laughed. "I understand now why people avoid her."

"Why's that?"

"She's one of those people who doesn't stop talking once she starts. And it's always some boring, pointless story with far too many details."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep talking to her, of course. The woman needs human contact even if she isn't perfect. Goodness knows I'm not perfect, either."

I lay in bed and pinched my arm till it bruised. Was I sinning by thinking about Veronica while I was married to Jacqueline? Normally, Jacqueline was a perfectly fine woman. We watched *Person of Interest* together and *Sleepy Hollow*, and we played with Florence together every evening for at least half an hour. We didn't take turns bathing Florence but did it together as a couple. We read at least four pages of the scriptures together every evening before bed. We even had fun sexually sometimes, those days when Jacqueline was willing to participate, me pretending to be a missionary and she pretending to be an investigator. We did lots of role-playing

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and kept things interesting. She was mad about the homeless “stunt” I was about to pull, but every married couple had disagreements once in a while. That didn’t mean we weren’t right for each other.

I turned on my side and looked at Jacqueline in the dim light as I drifted off to sleep. I could hear Veronica screaming distantly in the night.

The rest of the week went pretty well, and on Saturday morning, with two new inches of snow on the ground, I dressed in my “costume” and caught the bus downtown, getting off near Pioneer Park on the southwest end of downtown. The bus driver gave me a suspicious look, and no one sat near me on the bus. The homeless were spread out in the city, but there was one area where I’d seen several, so I headed there. Once I arrived, though, I didn’t know what to do. A couple of men were hanging out together, but most of the people I saw were alone. Where were all those families I’d read about?

One man looked at me as he passed by. He was missing several teeth and had a five-day growth of beard. Another man walked by as well. His skin was covered with lesions, the kind I’d seen on meth addicts in a TV commercial once. A black man gave me a piercing stare, and another white man looked at me and licked his lips. Was he hungry? Or was he plotting something? I hadn’t brought much money, but I might still get mugged, I realized. What if someone hit me with a rock? These were crazy people and alcoholics and people with nothing to lose. Anything could happen.

I already knew how my congregation would react when I showed up. They’d react like I was, full of fear and suspicion. What was the point of “testing” them?

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I walked up to a man who appeared to be in his fifties. “Hey,” I said.

He nodded.

“So what’s your story?” I asked.

He looked at me for a long moment. “You must be new,” he said softly.

“What do you mean?”

“No one else asks questions like that.”

“Yes, I’m new,” I admitted. But I still wanted to know. “So what happened?”

The man was leaning against a brick wall and looked about for someplace dry to sit, but there was nothing. He turned back to me and said, “I worked as a real estate agent until the crash. Then I got divorced. My wife took most of the friends. My family is all Baptist and disowned me after I was baptized a Mormon.”

He was Mormon? I guess I knew that must happen, but I couldn’t help but wonder where his bishop had been. Why wasn’t this man on Church welfare?

“I stayed with one friend for three weeks on his sofa, and with another friend for a month, but no one wants people like us around for long.”

“You couldn’t find another job?” I asked.

“Couldn’t you?” he returned.

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“Well...”

He shrugged. “Actually, I did find another job, just at minimum wage, and only part-time. I couldn’t afford rent on that. I have a bank account and have enough money to eat, but I have to live on the street. I wash my clothes at the Laundromat once a week. It’s not the worst life in the world.”

How could he say that?

“But...but what can people do?”

“What people?”

“People who can help.”

“There’s no one who can help. Everyone’s just trying to take care of their own life.” He looked at me. “Did *you* ever think of helping before it happened to you?”

Yes, I thought. That’s why I was there. But I couldn’t say that. And really, I wasn’t sure it was even true. What good did “thinking” about it do? What good did “feeling sorry” do?

The Church offered Church welfare, which was great, but why didn’t individual wards volunteer at soup kitchens? Or have a ward fundraiser to support homeless shelters? Why did we only care about “our own” and forget that there was a whole wide world out there which needed help? Maybe I could do something with my congregation, after all.

I slipped back into the house and changed clothes without letting Jacqueline see me. I let her take a nap while I watched Florence, and then I chopped up some vegetables and started a stew in the early afternoon. Jacqueline put on a Taylor Swift

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CD, and we danced for half an hour, Florence joining in most of the time.

Then late in the afternoon, about an hour before dinnertime, Jacqueline and I went in the bedroom. I thought about role-playing and wanted to ask if we could pretend to be homeless people trying to find some privacy for sex, but I knew that would turn Jacqueline off, so instead I didn't suggest anything, and we made love just as Daniel and Jacqueline.

I'd never had sex with Veronica and wondered what that might have been like.

I wondered if she could be my second wife in the Celestial Kingdom.

Would she even want to be? And would Jacqueline allow it?

Why did I feel homeless, even at home?

That evening, we watched Amy Adams in *Enchanted* while I rubbed Jacqueline's feet. She went to bed around 9:30, and I stayed up, reading articles about the homeless on the Internet. One appalling story explained how the Japanese government was developing a plan to help get their homeless back to work—by offering them jobs cleaning up the radiation contamination at the Fukushima power plant. Another story was about how some teenagers had beaten a homeless man to death in Denver. Finally, a third story described how the city of Phoenix had found housing for every one of its homeless military veterans. Non-veterans were still homeless all over the city, but at least one small segment of the dispossessed had been helped. At least for now.

Johnny Townsend

In the morning, I was off early to meet Kelly, the make-up artist, at her apartment. I brought my outfit and changed into it after she'd finished, so as not to offend her with the smell any more than necessary. I did still ask her to drive me to church. She went in first, already a member and knowing how to navigate, even if it wasn't her home ward. I walked back and forth outside, afraid to go in, unnerved even by the worried and suspicious glances I received from families walking past on their way to the foyer.

Finally, I headed inside, and I watched as the sea of people parted in front of me, just like a miracle from Exodus. I didn't panhandle for money, thinking that would be in poor taste even for a real homeless person who'd come to church. I simply sat on the back row in the chapel, about six feet from the doors, and watched as my congregants walked by. Some of the women pulled their children away from me as they passed. The men narrowed their eyes. An older woman literally walked by with her nose in the air. Another older woman looked at me with sad, sympathetic eyes, but she didn't approach, either. Jacqueline strolled by, holding Florence, ignoring me completely.

To my surprise, not a single person came over to shake my hand. I'd expected the number to be small, but I didn't expect it to be zero.

Also to my surprise, I found that my feelings were hurt.

I sat throughout the meeting, struggling to sing along with the hymns, pretending to be a person who couldn't cope. I partook of the sacrament when it was passed, getting several stern glances for my audacity, and I listened to the talks given. I had planned near the end of the meeting to stand up and walk

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straight to the podium, taking off the matted wig and revealing my identity. But I found that I no longer wanted to do that. I wanted to curl up in a corner. I sat through the closing prayer and then walked back out into the parking lot. The other congregants would be going on to their next meetings, but soon Kelly came out and walked up to her car.

“Was it everything you’d hoped for?” she asked with a smile.

“I want to clean up and go home,” I replied.

We drove back to her apartment, where she removed the make-up. I put on my regular clothes and drove off.

Only I didn’t feel like going directly home, even knowing that Jacqueline wouldn’t be there to poke fun. I went to Liberty Park and started slowly walking along the roughly cleared sidewalk. I came upon an iron bench and sat down, staring at the desolate trees in front of me. The wind blew snow gently across the snow-covered grass. I could give a talk next week, saying I’d “heard” that a homeless man had come the previous Sunday, and see if we couldn’t organize some kind of useful response to the problem. I looked at the leafless trees in front of me, their branches covered in snow that was being softly blown away.

Then I looked at my hands, pink in the cold air. Weren’t our bodies our temples? If Veronica was bodiless, was that like being spiritually homeless?

If no one remembered you any more, were you like a tree that had fallen in a forest with no one to hear?

Johnny Townsend

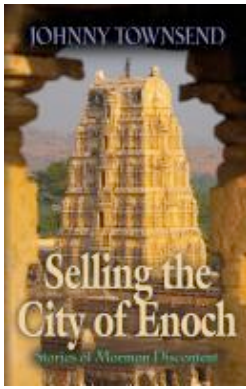
I watched as an older man trudged by. He wasn't homeless, just lonely.

What was that old woman in Veronica's ward doing now?

I saw a plane flying by slowly in the west and felt a tear on my cheek. I stood up, shaking my head. I couldn't do it. I just wasn't the man Veronica wanted me to be. I couldn't help all those helpless people. I wasn't strong enough. I would tell no one what I'd done, and this entire episode would soon fade away into the past. My real job, my only job, was to make my family a Celestial family. Everything else was secondary, even serving as bishop. I would go home and prepare Jacqueline's favorite meal.

I started walking back toward the car. The wind picked up a little, creating a low howl through the barren trees.

It sounded like a scream.



In this collection of Mormon short stories, we see a mission president's wife murdered in Rome. A mother plans for her role as a god in the hereafter. A descendant of Enoch tries out Capitalism. A bishop disguises himself as a homeless man to teach his congregation a lesson. A lonely young woman rents a mother and father for Christmas. A husband is horrified to learn he has married a pre-op transgender in the temple.

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