

Missionaries Make the Best Companions



Johnny Townsend



In this collection of Mormon short stories, a sister missionary fulfills her community service requirement by babysitting for a prostitute. Two elders break their mission rules by venturing into the forbidden French Quarter. A schizophrenic woman tries to do her part spreading the gospel. Two bored missionaries decide to make a little extra money moonlighting in a male stripper club. Two frustrated elders find an acceptable way to masturbate-by donating to a Fertility Clinic.

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Under the Covers

Elder Zachary's dislike for me started the minute I walked into the Rome Four apartment in the northeastern part of the city. I'd just caught the ferry from Sardinia to Civitavecchia, tossed about the entire time by a winter storm, then boarded a train to the Stazione Termini in Rome, and finally caught a bus to my new apartment. By anyone's standards, I should have been exhausted and maybe even in a foul mood, especially since it had been cold and raining heavily all day. But I was smiling. And I could tell in an instant that Elder Zachary disliked me for it.

"You seem to be in an awfully good mood," he said. "Troppo allegro. What mission rules did you break while you were all alone?"

"What makes you think I was all alone?" I said with a grin. "The ferry was an overnight trip."

The other missionaries gasped at my joke, but Elder Zachary's eyes grew tighter. "You would have had a man share your bunkroom. Are you admitting you're a finocchio?"

I shrugged. "Desperate times for call desperate measures." I wasn't gay, of course, but my new senior zone leader was beginning to get on my nerves after only a few moments. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get to know my new companion more intimately." I paused. "I mean, better." I made an elaborate wink, grabbed my two suitcases, and nodded for my new assignment, Elder Burton, to show me the way to our

room. He looked like he'd just heard he'd been disfellowshipped, but he swallowed and led the way.

Once in the tiny room, I put my suitcases down next to my cot and closed the door. "Is he always such a prick?"

"D-don't speak ill of the Lord's anointed," was all he could say.

"Elder Burton, I'm not gay. I have a testimony. I've baptized eight people so far on my mission, twice the average. You can relax."

"O-okay, Elder Hardinger."

I unpacked in just five minutes, there not being much to it. Then I turned back to Elder Burton, who was standing beside his desk, still looking worried. "I've had a long day," I said, "but I still think we'll be better off away from the apartment than hanging around Elder Zachary while he waits for the new junior ZL to arrive. So what say you show me to our tracting zone?" I was the senior, after all, having been out twenty months already. This would probably be my last area before I went home to Pennsylvania.

He nodded, I offered a short prayer, and we headed for the front door. "Teach a lesson tonight," Elder Zachary called out as I reached for the door knob.

"There's no reason you can't be doing some cold calling," I said in return. "Follow the Spirit and use the phone book. No sense wasting the Lord's time."

Elder Burton looked at me in horror.

I shrugged again as I closed the door behind us.

We had to catch two buses to reach our area. I tried to memorize all the landmarks as quickly as possible so I'd be able to do this on my own if my companion were transferred next month. From the look on his face, I was sure he hoped he would be. I wasn't a bad guy, though, in my own humble opinion, and hoped I could win him over. After so many months as a Mormon missionary, I'd simply grown tired of the "unrighteous dominion" under which we suffered constantly. The mission president had ordered all the sister missionaries to cut their hair short so they wouldn't waste time trying to look pretty. They were here to work, after all, not attract men. The president had also ordered the elders to wear their suit jackets all year long, even during the sweltering summer months, because he was sure it made us look more righteous.

And it wasn't only the rules from the top that were unreasonable. The zone leaders and district leaders took their calling as mission leaders quite seriously as well. I'd been ordered to work an extra ten hours a week to show the Lord my dedication, when the normal sixty hours was plenty already. I'd been ordered to wake up at 5:30 instead of 6:00, to show my eagerness for the work day. I'd been ordered to stand up in church and confess all my weaknesses, to show the local members how humble I was. While I still believed the Church was true, as I'd just told my companion, I nevertheless had serious doubts about the methods our leaders sometimes used to lead.

As it turned out, Elder Burton and I did teach a lesson that night, about Joseph Smith's First Vision in the Sacred Grove. It was possible to go an entire week without teaching, so I was grateful for Heavenly Father's blessing in leading us to a receptive person. And since leaders weren't the only imperfect

Mormons, I had to admit I looked forward to telling Elder Zachary about it later.

“How did you do tonight?” were the first words out of his mouth when we entered the apartment. He and his new companion were standing at their bedroom door in their garments. Their bedroom, naturally, was the apartment’s living room. The other companionship shared the regular-sized bedroom, and the tiny room Elder Burton and I shared looked like the nursery. Mission royalty always claimed the living room as their own space. I don’t suppose I minded for the most part, except when the leaders were so obnoxious. It looked like the zone leaders hadn’t been out the entire evening. But then, I was probably just making assumptions.

“Taught the first discussion,” said Elder Burton with a hesitant smile.

Elder Zachary ignored him and continued looking at me. “Soltanto uno?” he said. “If you guys had faith, you could have taught three colloqui.” His continual mixture of English and Italian was beginning to annoy me. Couldn’t he just pick one language and stick with it?

“How many did you teach sitting around here in your underwear?” I returned. “Any luck on the phone?”

Elder Zachary’s eyes narrowed again. “This isn’t about luck,” he said. “This is about faith. You could baptize a hundred people a month if you had enough fede.”

I looked at Elder Burton, whose eyes were wide as he anticipated the interaction. I motioned for him to go on to our bedroom, and he did so willingly. Then I turned back to my zone leader. “First of all,” I said slowly, “if that were true,

you've just admitted that *you* obviously don't have any faith. But secondly, it's *not* true. I can't force someone to accept the gospel. I'm here to offer it to them. It's up to them whether they're interested or not."

"Everyone is interested," Elder Zachary replied. "They just need to feel the Spirit to realize it. And if you can't provide the Spirit, the fact that they don't get battezzati is on you."

I sighed. Elder Zachary wasn't the first leader to say this kind of thing. I'd believed it for a long time and spent months and months feeling guilty, until I realized it was a lie. I wasn't about to put up with that kind of thinking any longer. "I'm not responsible for decisions other people make."

"Are you calling the mission president a liar?" Elder Zachary put his hands on his hips. I saw the tiniest twitch in his garments near his crotch. He was getting off on being a jackass.

"I can't make people join," I said.

"You're *allowing* them to join," he returned. "They are ready now but just need a spiritual experience in order to realize it. It's up to you to provide that for them."

"I'm just here to offer," I insisted.

"I'm going to have to report you to the presidente," Elder Zachary said coldly. "Here we are about to get a temple in Rome, and you're bringing us all down."

"Are you saying the Lord made a mistake by calling me to this mission?" I asked.

Elder Zachary suddenly began to smile wickedly. "If you're right and I'm wrong," he said, "why did the Lord call *me* to be a

zone leader, while you're about to finish your mission, and you're still just a measly senior companion?"

And then it happened. All my bravado slipped right out of me, and the habitual tonnage of everyday Mormon guilt came rushing back. Maybe *I* was the one being an ass, I thought. The Church *was* true, after all, and that meant Heavenly Father had, in fact, called Elder Zachary to the position he held over me. "All right, all right," I said. "I'll teach five lessons tomorrow, okay?"

"See that you do." I was almost sure I heard him mutter "stronzo" as I left the room. It was the same thing I was thinking about him.

Over the next few days, I tried to act simultaneously gung ho and contrite. Elder Zachary seemed to tolerate me slightly better, but his eyes still narrowed most of the time he deigned to look in my direction. On the chore rotation, it was his week to cook, and he'd asked all of us up front what we specifically liked and disliked. I thought this surprisingly admirable of him, since most missionaries simply cooked what they wanted and to hell with what anybody else thought. Maybe we'd just gotten off on the wrong foot. But on the third day, I finally realized his motives hadn't been quite as altruistic as I'd hoped. Both Elder Burton and I had admitted a dislike for liver, the other three elders hadn't specified either a like or dislike for it, but liver is what we had for lunch. Since we only had two meals a day—breakfast on our own when we woke up in the morning and a communal lunch at 2:00—a distasteful dinner could throw off the entire evening.

I wasn't going to let Elder Zachary feel too victorious, though, so I ate every bite with a smile, forced as it was. Elder Burton only ate a few bites of his and then excused himself.

“This is not so bad, after all,” I said then, scooping the remains of my companion’s meal onto my plate and finishing it off.

I could tell by that sadistic smile of Zachary’s that he wasn’t fooled, so I probably suffered for nothing.

That evening, Elder Burton and I took a break from tracting so I could treat him to some pizza at a shop that sold it by the slice.

The next day was worse. For lunch, Elder Zachary proudly presented us each with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The others exclaimed in grateful awe at the sight. Peanut butter was almost impossible to find in Italy, so this meal represented a great deal of effort on Zachary’s part. “I just thought it would be a treat to have some genuine comfort food,” he said with that special smile of his.

Since I’d told him at the beginning of the week that I was allergic to peanuts, it was clear what his real agenda was.

“I had your serving of liver yesterday,” I said to Elder Burton. “It’s only fair you have my sandwich today. I’ll fast instead for the Spirit to guide us to a special family.”

“It’s against the rules to fast more than once a month,” said Elder Zachary.

I wanted to say, “It’s also against the rules to try to murder other missionaries,” but I was still trying to understand the real reason the Lord had chosen this man to guide me. There was obviously something I was missing, and I needed to humble myself to figure it out. I just smiled serenely and went to my desk to review one of the discussions.

It was my day to wash dishes, and I had to laugh that despite the simple meal, Elder Zachary had still managed to get over half the dishes in the kitchen dirty. I asked my companion to offer a prayer in our room after I was done, and then we headed out the door.

Elder Burton was exceptionally quiet on the ride to our tracting zone, the bus windows so covered in frigid condensation we almost missed our stop. But while we were climbing up the stairs to the sixth floor of the first building on our list, he said simply, “Elder Hardinger, I’m thinking of going home.”

“What?” I said, surprised.

“I’m not sure I believe any more.”

This happened all the time with the local members. And with friends and even family back home. But it didn’t happen often with missionaries. “Is it the polygamy?” I asked. “Or the lack of DNA evidence for the Lamanites?”

He shook his head. “I don’t care about any of that. I understand the necessity of faith.” We reached the top floor and stopped to take a breath.

“Then what is it?” I panted.

“I’m just not having any fun.”

I looked at him. “Is this supposed to be fun?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe fun isn’t the right word. I just mean...we’re spending every waking minute with the elect. The best of the best. People who have dedicated their time and money to serving the Lord. And...”

I nodded for him to continue.

“Half of them are assholes,” he said firmly, “and most of the others are just average joes, nothing special. That’s got to say something about the whole thing.”

“Well,” I said carefully, feeling the weight of my position as senior companion, “we’re just kids, aren’t we? Still teenagers. You can’t expect us all to behave like bishops and stake presidents.”

Elder Burton shook his head sadly. “When you first came to the district, I had such hope that finally, someone was going to stand up to Zachary. He’s such a bully. I was here with him for two months before you came.” He turned to look back down the stairs. “I had such hope.”

I was surprised, never having suspected a thing. Now I felt guilty all over again. But while I’d often experienced many of Elder Burton’s thoughts myself over the past year and a half, I’d still always figured the point was to learn from all this. One could learn from a sterling example, but one could also learn from a poor one. Earth life was a classroom, and every lesson was for our benefit. I’d heard that in Sunday School. And Seminary. And Priesthood. And the Missionary Training Center.

We tracted out the building, unsuccessfully, and once back on the street, I said, “I’m not in the mood. Too hungry. Are you up for more pizza?”

Elder Burton grinned. “How can you afford it?”

“I have my own personal debit card. I worked hard to save up money for my mission, and I’m not limiting myself to the pre-ordained missionary budget.”

“Why can’t you be a rebel like this all the time?” He was joking, but I thought about his words the entire time we were eating.

It was exceptionally cold this evening, with a stiff wind, so after the pizza I led Elder Burton to a bar where we drank some hot chocolate. I enjoyed the break, but I was beginning to feel guilty again. I felt bad for following the rules, and I felt bad for breaking them. What other option did that leave me? Were people like us destined to feel miserable no matter what? Were we just bad people, and that’s what we got?

“I’ve seen you guys around.”

I turned and saw a young man in his early twenties, standing with his cup of coffee. I put on my missionary smile.

“You guys seem nice.”

It’s all an act, I wanted to tell him.

“I’m kind of searching right now. Do you guys think you could teach me something?”

I looked at Elder Burton and he looked at me, and then we stood up and followed the young man two blocks to his building. We taught our first discussion to Dario, each of us bearing our testimony at the appropriate places, and then made a return appointment to see the young man again in two days. As we left the building, Elder Burton said, “Maybe it *is* true.”

I didn't know what to say to that, so we walked to the bus stop in silence. We could see a bus just pulling away, so we knew we had several minutes to wait before the next one came along. We watched the traffic pass, still lost in our own thoughts. Finally, after about ten minutes, Elder Burton turned to me. "Do you know what he told me?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Elder Zachary."

"I can't imagine," I said.

Elder Burton sighed heavily. "He came in the bathroom one day while I was showering." He looked me straight in the eye. "He said...I had a little dick."

My mouth fell open.

"He said it was a punishment for not being valiant in the Pre-Existence. I was good enough to be born into a Mormon family in America, but not *quite* good enough to have all the blessings that people like him received."

"You should have slugged him."

He looked down at the ground. "I gave in, just like you did." He paused. "It's what good boys do, isn't it." It wasn't a question.

"It's only one guy," I said.

"Is it?" asked Elder Burton. "You hear stories about some of the apostles, too. They just try to keep everything under cover." He paused again. "Elder Zachary will probably become an apostle one day." He looked like his dog had just died.

A gust of icy wind buffeted us, and I wanted to hug my companion to keep him from feeling so cold.

We waited another twenty minutes for the next bus, arriving home just after 9:40. “Teach any lessons?” asked Elder Zachary as we came in the door.

“Yes,” I said softly, heading with my companion to our room.

“Get a return appointment?” he persisted. “Qualcosa utile?”

“Yes.”

Once we were in our room, I closed the door behind us, looking at the door knob longingly. It was against mission rules to lock our doors. Our leaders had to be able to come in at any moment to verify we weren’t committing the serious sin of studying on our beds, or, God forbid, the unpardonable sin of masturbating. I knew we were supposed to study until lights out at 10:30, but I really wasn’t in the mood tonight. I just wanted to plop into bed and forget about everything.

“Elder Hardinger!”

“What?”

“Look!” Elder Burton pointed to my bed. I turned and saw that my two blankets were missing. All that was left was a thin sheet. And our building only received about two hours of heat a day, one hour in the morning, starting at 7:00, and another hour at night, starting at 9:00. Even with the heat on at this moment, it wasn’t terribly warm in the room.

I marched out of the bedroom toward the ZL’s room. “Where are my blankets?” I demanded.

Elder Zachary had that sickening smile I knew so well. “We’re having a baptism tomorrow morning,” he explained. “So I spent the evening at the chapel filling the font, and we have to keep the water covered to keep it from getting cold.”

“And you’re using *my* blankets because...?”

“Because you need to learn to sacrifice for the gospel.”

“And *you*’ve already learned that lesson.”

He smiled.

I went to the kitchen, where the other elders were gathered around the table, eating stale bread and jam. I looked on my shelf for my Bucaneve cookies, but the package was missing. I returned to my room. Elder Burton was in his garments, kneeling beside his bed, crying softly. I sat on his bed and put my hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and looked at me, shaking his head forlornly.

“I’m going home,” he said, choking a little on his words.

I leaned over until our heads were almost touching. “Give me a few more days,” I replied. Elder Burton looked at me with the saddest eyes I’d ever seen. Then he pushed me aside and climbed into bed, nodding at me to turn out the light.

I sat at my desk in the dark, keeping my eyes on our glow-in-the-dark clock, until 11:30. Then I took off my suit, quietly opened the bedroom door, and tiptoed down the hall. I crept into the ZL’s bedroom and stood over Elder Zachary’s bed. I might get sent home for this, but I knew I had to do it.

I gently lifted Elder Zachary’s blankets and listened to him murmur in his sleep. Then in a quick movement, I slid into the

bed next to him. He jerked awake, and I put my hand over his mouth. “You listen to me,” I said, and something in my tone made him stop struggling. “I’m going to tell everyone you deliberately took my blankets as an excuse for us to share a bed together, that you told me if I didn’t get in your bed with you, you’d make up some story about catching me in the bathroom jacking off.” He started struggling again but didn’t make any noise. That fact alone told me I’d won. With my free hand, I grabbed his right hand and squeezed as hard as I could, crushing his fingers, the way he always did when he shook hands. He stopped struggling.

“Your other option,” I whispered, “is to go sleep in my bed tonight in just your garments with only that flimsy sheet for cover. I’ll sleep in your bed with the warm blankets and tell everyone you made this exchange as a sacrifice because you’re such a great guy.” I gently removed my hand from his face.

“It’s fifty degrees in here.”

“Use Celsius, please.”

“I’ll tell the president. He’ll believe me.”

“Maybe he will, and maybe he won’t. But you’ll never make Assistant to the President, will you? He’ll always doubt you just a little.”

There was silence for a long moment, and then Elder Zachary hissed, “You’re a bastard.”

“I follow the example of my leaders,” I replied, “as I’ve been taught to do.” I felt a little sick as I realized that was probably true. What kind of jerk would do what I’d just done?

Elder Zachary climbed out of the bed quietly and softly walked off down the hall toward the nursery bedroom. I hated forcing my companion to share a room with this creep, and I knew the battle wasn't over, that Zachary was better at this than I was, that he'd find a way to take revenge. As I lay there listening to the junior zone leader's breathing from the cot on the other side of the room, I suddenly realized how ridiculous the whole scenario was.

Servants of the Lord?

Maybe Elder Burton was right and I should just head home and start the next portion of my life without looking back.

But I wanted to see if Dario would eventually join the Church. I wanted to see other people in this country join the Church. I wanted to be a part of the gospel growing here. It was true even if some of the members weren't perfect.

Even if none of us were.

I climbed out of the bed and pulled down the front of my garments. I pointed my penis at Zachary's bed and let loose a long stream of urine, aiming the trail up and down the length of the mattress, making sure the blankets were soaked as well.

Then I headed back for my room. I nudged Elder Zachary. "What?" he hissed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was wrong. You can go back to your own bed. I apologize."

He got up from the bed and put his face in mine. "You'll regret this, mister. Ti prometto." Then he hurried out of my room. As soon as he was in the hallway, I locked the door.

Then I walked over to Elder Burton's bed and shook him gently. He woke up groggily and sat up. "What is it?" he said.

"Do you mind if I get in bed with you?" I asked softly. "It's pretty cold in here."

"I—I was going to ask, but I thought you'd think it was too gay."

I slid in next to him. The cot was so narrow that the only way we could both easily fit was to spoon. I turned Elder Burton away from me and snuggled up into his back, putting one arm over his chest. "I'm going to tell you a story," I whispered into his ear.

At first, he gasped when I told him what I'd done, but soon we were both giggling uncontrollably. When we finally settled down several minutes later, I felt so warm inside that I had the best sleep I'd had in quite some time.

In the morning, Elder Burton and I headed to the kitchen together and shared the last of my Corn Flakes.

Elder Zachary had dark circles under his eyes, as if he'd spent the night sitting at his desk.

He never said a word.

Splitting

Tanny peeked through the curtain to look at the two sister missionaries getting out of their car. They didn't seem happy to be there. She could hear them talking to each other. "Do we have to bring her along? She's so fat."

"She's weak. She needs us."

Tanny let the curtain fall back into place. The sister missionaries had only asked her to go on splits with them out of pity, not because they wanted her. She'd show them. When they went to teach someone, she would bear her testimony and bring down the Holy Ghost upon everyone. Then they'd see.

The chimes rang, and Tanny went over to open the door. "Hi, Sister Archer," she said sweetly. "Hi, Sister Blackburn."

"Good morning, Tanny. It's so good to see you." Sister Archer smiled beautifully. She was so pretty. Flawless skin. She looked like a saint. Tanny giggled. She *was* one.

"Did you need to come in, or shall we start working right away?"

Sister Archer laughed melodically. "Are you sure you want to work all morning? It must be so nice to be retired and not *have* to work."

"I'm not really retired," Tanny reminded her. "I'm disabled. It's not exactly the same thing. I'm only fifty-one." The sisters must both be around twenty, Tanny thought. To them, fifty-one probably sounded ancient.

“You’re not *really* sick,” said Sister Blackburn. “No one who lives the gospel is ever truly mentally ill.” The bishop had told her the same thing. So had the Relief Society president. To her face. With real voices.

“Schizophrenia is a genuine disease,” Tanny replied flatly. She remembered losing her friends over the years one by one after all her accusations. She remembered how her non-member family no longer talked to her. She remembered all the times she’d been called in by HR on her various jobs and fired.

Sister Archer laughed sweetly. “Well, you seem perfectly fine to me. Let’s get going.”

Tanny wasn’t going to argue about it. Life these past three years since she’d finally been diagnosed and prescribed meds had changed dramatically for the better. Instead of hearing voices constantly, she could actually cope most days. She still heard them, of course, but not as frequently as before, though she continued to have bad days once in a while. She could still have worked part-time if she wanted to, almost certainly able to keep a job now that her auditory hallucinations were mostly under control. She just didn’t see the point when Disability paid enough for this tiny apartment and food to eat, even if sometimes it was only a can of tuna. She had a DVD player and checked movies out of the library since she couldn’t afford cable. But books were free at the library, too. Being poor was infinitely better than being ill. She was pretty content most of the time.

Except when she was unhappy.

“Who else is working with us this morning?” asked Tanny. “Veronica?” Veronica was another older single woman in the Relief Society.

“No. That fell through,” said Sister Archer. “It’s just us.”

“But I thought the whole point of going on splits was to double the workload. I go out with one of you and someone else goes out with the other.”

“It’s just us,” Sister Archer repeated.

The two sister missionaries stole glances at one another, and Tanny knew exactly what they were thinking. It was almost as if she could hear them. They were both afraid to be alone with her.

“We’re going to see Sister Bounds,” said Sister Archer. “She’s feeling ill and needs someone to lift her spirits.”

“She has a real illness,” Sister Blackburn pointed out.

“Are we wearing masks?” asked Tanny. It was all fine and good to knock on someone’s door and hand them a pie and then run off, but to deliberately spend time with the sick? Who would do such a thing on purpose?

“We’re missionaries,” said Sister Archer, not really answering Tanny’s question. “We help those in need.”

They were driving along the road, stopping at stoplights, passing stores. Tanny luxuriated in the feel of the air conditioning, of the freedom and comfort. She always had to ride the bus when going somewhere by herself. It must be wonderful to be a missionary, she thought. She leaned against the back seat to enjoy the ride, but she could see the two sisters in the front talking softly to each other.

“If she acts all weird in public, we’re going to have to dump her on the side of the road,” Sister Blackburn whispered.

“We can always call the elders to take her home.”

“Elders can’t be alone with women.”

“Who would ever be tempted by *her*?”

Tanny looked out the window at some children playing on a playground.

Soon they were pulling up in front of a beautiful, two-story brick home in a lovely neighborhood. The lawn was immaculately manicured, with blooming camellias along the front of the house. They all climbed out of the car and walked up to the magnificent front door, made of dark, rich wood and beveled glass. Sister Archer knocked. A few moments later, the door opened and Sister Bounds stood there, looking pretty awful without her make-up. “Who invited her?” she whispered to the sister missionaries.

They went inside and asked Sister Bounds what she wanted for dinner, and then Tanny and the missionaries got to work in the kitchen preparing the meal. Tanny couldn’t even imagine what it must be like to have such a large kitchen, with so much food in the refrigerator and pantry. The family even had their Year’s Supply, while Tanny would have starved to death two weeks into the Apocalypse. She saw Sister Bounds eyeing her suspiciously, as if Tanny were going to sneak a ham into her blouse.

“What’s your favorite meal, Tanny?” asked Sister Archer as they cooked.

“I like Salisbury steak,” she replied.

“Huh?”

“Frozen dinners. They’re my favorite thing. So easy.”

“I see.”

There was a lull in the conversation after that, but a while later, Sister Archer tried again. “Have you read any good books lately?”

“Jonathan Kellerman is my favorite author,” said Tanny. Once she found a writer she liked, she went through every book he ever wrote.

“What does he write about?” asked Sister Archer.

“Murder and mayhem.”

There was another long lull after that.

Tanny didn’t really mind the silences. Sometimes, silence was better than sound. Sounds haunted her. Even with the meds. It was just nice to be spending time with someone. She didn’t really have friends at church, hadn’t since her Young Adult days. Even the Visiting Teachers never came by. The missionaries, though, they made an effort.

It was probably because they had nothing better to do, she realized. It was either stop by Tanny’s apartment or go looking for converts. With those choices, even Tanny looked good.

They continued with the meal.

Finally, they were done, and Sister Blackburn went to tell Sister Bounds they were leaving. Then the three of them climbed back into the car. Tanny listened as they pulled away from the curb. “She said never to bring her back to her house,” Sister Blackburn whispered.

“We’re almost through. Hang in there a little longer.” Then, looking brightly into the rear view mirror, Sister Archer smiled and spoke up more loudly. “Is there anywhere you’d like us to take you before we head back to your place?”

“No. Back home is fine.” She wanted to go to the grocery and buy all the heavy items so she wouldn’t have to carry them on the bus. She wanted to go to the park and look at all the flowers. She wanted to go to a museum, but who could afford that?

She wanted to go to another group therapy session. That sometimes almost felt like Single Adult Family Home Evening at church all those years ago.

They drove along in silence, but Tanny could still see the sisters looking at each other anxiously.

If only they held the priesthood, she thought. She could ask them to cast out the evil spirit inside her. She felt as if she were two people, a normal, happy woman, and an ugly, unpleasant freak everyone hated. How could that really all just be brain chemistry? Couldn’t Heavenly Father get rid of the ugly part of herself no one liked? Why couldn’t she be healed? What was the point of priesthood if it couldn’t do anything?

She remembered reporting back to her doctor a few weeks after first going on medication. “It’s a miracle!” she’d exclaimed.

“No,” her doctor had replied. “It’s science.”

But it was a miracle she had found the science, Tanny had thought, though she kept that idea to herself. Then she’d seen

the doctor turn to a nurse and whisper, “She’s still delusional.” And all her doubts and insecurities came flooding back.

If Heavenly Father couldn’t cure her himself, why couldn’t he at least let the doctors do it?

“I see my psychiatrist on Tuesday,” Tanny announced. There was no response. “Every couple of months I have to go in and have my meds adjusted. Seems they’re never quite right. I still hear the voices.”

The two sisters looked at each other in the front seat.

Tanny laughed. “You’d die if you knew what words they were putting in your mouths.” She chuckled again. “But I know enough now to realize what I hear isn’t real.” She paused. “Still, it’s terrible to hear it. I’m never really quite sure what’s real and what isn’t. You could say something awful right to my face and then deny it and I’d never know the difference.” She laughed again.

Sister Archer pulled into a Dairy Queen. “Why are we stopping here?” asked Sister Blackburn.

“Tanny, how would you like a great big strawberry shake?” Sister Archer asked, twisting her head to look into the back seat. “Or a banana split?”

“Oh, I’m already so fat.”

“If you hear mean voices all the time, don’t let yours be another of those voices. Tell yourself something nice.” She smiled. “Let’s go get some ice cream.”

Tanny suddenly felt more alone than she’d ever felt. It was like being trapped in a cave-in, just barely able to hear sounds

on the other side of the rocks, but knowing your rescuers would never reach you in time.

They stepped out of the car and walked into the restaurant. It was so cool and fresh and clean inside. They stood in line and looked up at the menu on the wall. Such a luxury to eat out, thought Tanny. Should she be wasting the missionaries' money? They needed that money to serve the Lord.

Sister Archer leaned over and whispered into Tanny's ear. "Get a large," she said. Then she turned to Sister Blackburn and laughed. "A large shake for a large girl!"

They picked up their order and then sat at a table to enjoy their ice cream.



In this collection of Mormon short stories, a sister missionary fulfills her community service requirement by babysitting for a prostitute. Two elders break their mission rules by venturing into the forbidden French Quarter. A schizophrenic woman tries to do her part spreading the gospel. Two bored missionaries decide to make a little extra money moonlighting in a male stripper club. Two frustrated elders find an acceptable way to masturbate-by donating to a Fertility Clinic.

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