

It's 1981, and two Mormon missionaries randomly assigned to work together as "companions" in Napoli find themselves in trouble. They're falling in love, but the Church forbids gay relationships. Will they be crushed by dedication to their beliefs, or will love provide a way for them to escape?

Have Your Cum and Eat It, Too

By Johnny Townsend

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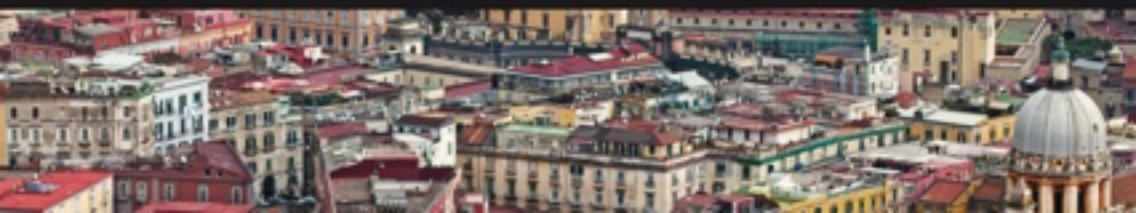
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HAVE
YOUR CUM
AND
EAT IT, TOO

JOHNNY TOWNSEND



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Chapter One:
Lovers' Lane,
Naples

Even the Bucaneve cookies and a triangle of milk with the other elders hadn't cheered up my companion. Neither did a long shower. After we brushed our teeth, we retired to our room and said our evening companion prayer, in Italian, of course, and then stripped to our garments. Anziano Grant preferred the cotton variety, but I liked the silkier bemberg. The few minutes each day when we walked around in our Mormon underwear was the closest I could ever get to seeing Elder Grant naked. Sometimes, I could see something flopping around in front. Other times, when he leaned over, the slit in the seat would reveal just a little of his crack.

A spaccaculo, if you will.

I'd always found it frustrating, even as a young boy, that Batman didn't wear more form-fitting tights. The Superman movie that came out my senior year of high school wasn't much better. No form-fitting tights for Christopher Reeve, either. Superheroes weren't really brave if they had to hide their bulges.

Elder Grant and I knelt beside our beds and offered individual prayers to “nostro Padre Celeste.” Heavenly Father had been human once on another world, which meant he’d sinned at some point before progressing to godhood. It was impossible not to hope he’d liked looking at other men’s cracks as well. If he could still eventually reach the Celestial Kingdom, then I could, too.

My companion pulled back the sheet on his cot with a sigh, his eyes looking guiltily in my direction for a split second before turning away. He sat down but didn’t slide underneath the covers.

Every time I returned his gaze and he didn’t look away, I started hearing Air Supply’s “Lost in Love” and had to force myself not to sing along. I’d never understood all those ridiculously sentimental lyrics when the song was released a few months before my mission.

When I’d heard it yesterday during Dual Study, it had taken me a moment to realize the sound was coming from our neighbor’s radio.

“Lights Out, I guess,” Elder Grant said, giving me a barely perceptible nod. His hair was too dark to be called sandy but too light to be considered brown, too short to move when he bobbed his head.

I walked over to the switch near the bedroom door. It aggravated me that mission rules forbid us from locking that door, or the bathroom door, or the door to the prayer closet where we kept our stock of Church magazines. The zone

leaders sometimes popped into any of these rooms without warning, “just to check” on us. Once, Elder Murdock, the senior zone leader here in Napoli 2, had sneaked into our bedroom at 3:00 in the morning and leaned over my bed.

“Are you dreaming worthy dreams?” he shouted. He was trying to be funny. He’d told us over lunch earlier that the mission president didn’t want to hear any more elders confessing to masturbation. When I’d frowned in response, he’d teased, “Feeling guilty, Elder? I didn’t say it wasn’t a sin, just that the prez is tired of hearing about it. I can always keep track of your sins myself.”

When Elder Murdock had shouted at me in my sleep, I’d awakened terrorized and then sat up so quickly my head busted his lower lip. He hadn’t pulled any more middle of the night inspections, but there was always the possibility he’d try again, perhaps at a slightly less vulnerable distance from my cot.

“Anziano Grant,” I said, “I think we need to have Companion Inventory.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Now, Anziano Mortensen? It’s almost 10:30.” He glanced toward the door.

“I’ll turn out the lights so they won’t know we’re up past bedtime.” I flicked the switch. Because we’d already lowered the serranda over the window, the room was now pitch black. The lack of even a sliver of light under the door from the hallway revealed the other two companionships had also retired in the last couple of minutes.

I moved slowly over to Elder Grant's cot and sat beside him. The springs creaked unhappily.

"Down at that Lovers' Lane earlier," I said, "you looked so forlorn. I couldn't tell if you were sad for the souls of those people or..."

"You know perfectly well why I was sad." Elder Grant and I had both been out long enough that we enjoyed speaking Italian even when off duty. Of course, so many Italian words were virtually identical to their English equivalent. "Perfettamente" instead of "perfectly" wasn't much of a stretch. After scoring so high on the language aptitude test when I filled out my mission papers the year before, I'd expected to end up in Finland or Taiwan.

Was it too much to hope that Heavenly Father had sent me to the Italy Rome mission expressly to meet Elder Grant?

"Sì," I said. "Lo so." I closed my eyes, though it made no difference in the darkness. My companion had just told me he wanted to share a Cinquecento with me. I felt myself trembling. But if he could be brave, I had to step up, too.

"Do you ever m-masturbate?" I whispered.

I heard a sigh. "You know I do." Of course I knew. Almost every evening immediately after Lights Out, I could hear rustling from my companion's bed, his arm brushing against his sheet loudly as he began beating off. He'd start to moan ever so softly, just loud enough for me to hear but not the other companionship in the next room, or the zone leaders down the

hall. When he ejaculated, he'd sigh the tiniest fraction of a decibel more loudly.

I'd wait until I heard him wiping his hand on his sheet before I conducted the exact same performance for him.

But we'd never acknowledged our bedtime activities in any way. When the alarm went off the following morning, Elder Grant's first comment was always, "Another day full of opportunity to serve the Lord."

We'd give our morning companion prayer and then start our day like the missionaries we were.

"Anziano Grant," I continued, shifting on his cot so that our thighs almost touched, and causing the springs to creak once again. I could feel the proximity of my companion's thighs if not their warmth. "Jacking off isn't a terrible sin, is it?"

There was a long silence.

I'd crossed a line and I knew it. Good Mormon boys didn't talk about such things out loud. I started to shift away.

Elder Grant put his hand on my thigh. "No," he said, "it's not." His voice was so weak I could barely hear him. "But what I *want* to do..."

I put my hand on top of his, and we sat on his cot in silence for another few minutes. If this was the most that ever happened between us, it was already the most incredible

experience of my life. Better even than baptizing Massimo back in my first district in Quartu.

Nothing could be better than bringing someone into the gospel.

“I wish...” Elder Grant whispered.

Even when I thought of Massimo, I didn’t remember him in his suit during his confirmation after the baptism when he was given the gift of the Holy Ghost. I remembered his thirty-year-old figure climbing out of the font with his white clothes clinging tightly to his body.

Thin white clothes.

Too bad Batman never had to be baptized. Or Robin.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said, squeezing my companion’s hand. What I was going to suggest was clearly sinful, but I hoped not *too* sinful, perhaps like fantasizing about my Home Teachers back in New Orleans.

“What?” Elder Grant asked immediately. He was from Santa Rosa. Close enough to San Francisco maybe to have a gay person in his ward.

“Sex would be a sin, obviously. We’d be sent back to the States. Excommunicated.”

“And your idea?”

“It’s not sex if I touch your hand.” I squeezed it again. “It’s not sex if I touch you on your elbow.” I fumbled around for it. “Or your ankle. Or your ear.”

Elder Grant made a grunt that wasn’t English and wasn’t Italian but which still fully conveyed his lack of satisfaction with my idea so far.

“Why don’t you stand up?” I suggested. “Face your bed, pull your p-penis out your front slit, and start stroking yourself.” I’d looked up the word for “penis” my first month in Sardinia.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m going to kneel behind you,” I explained, “and pry open your back slit.”

“But that—”

“We’re not going to have sex,” I assured him. “My penis won’t get anywhere near you. And I won’t touch yours.” I hesitated. “I’ll just lick your asshole while you masturbate.” I switched to English with that last sentence. Breaking a mission rule. My heart started beating faster.

“That’s perverted.” Elder Grant switched to English as well, even though “pervertito” was an easy word.

“It’s just a body part,” I said. “It’s not a sex organ.”

“Can’t you lick my elbow?”

“Anziano,” I said, “I want to feel intimate with you. As intimate as possible without sinning. If we can’t have sex, licking your asshole is the next best way to feel a connection.” On the bus on the way home earlier, I’d already made a mental list detailing quite a variety of ways to achieve physical intimacy, but this was what I wanted at that moment.

“I-I’m afraid, Elder Mortensen.”

“There’s nothing in the scriptures against licking your best friend’s asshole.”

I stood up and reached for my companion’s hands in the dark, pulling him to his feet as well. I turned him away from me and dropped to my knees, tugging at his rear slit. I brushed my face against his cheeks.

“Oh my heck.”

“Catch your semen in your hand,” I whispered. Then I took a deep breath and pushed my face as deep into his crack as I could, licking everywhere until I found his hole. I could feel my hands on his waist trembling until I heard him groan softly. Then all fear disappeared.

Elder Grant’s body began rocking in a manner that let me know he was following my command to beat off.

We weren’t having sex. He was masturbating, and I was touching part of his body that wasn’t a sex organ.

Of course, a hand wasn't a sex organ, either. I'd fantasized so many times about sliding my penis inside Elder Grant. An asshole could become a sex organ if it interacted with a penis. Just like a mouth. As long as I didn't touch Elder Grant's penis, though, his asshole would remain just an asshole.

Elder Grant's body convulsed, his asshole clenched, and I knew he'd come. Before he could do anything else, I whirled him around, grabbing his cupped hand. I pulled it toward my face in the dark and licked his palm clean. I almost gagged, having never even managed before to swallow my own semen, but I got every last drop off his hand. Then I stood up.

"It-it's not sex if you swallow my load?" Elder Grant whispered with a note of despair.

"Not if I don't get it straight from your dick." If he could use sex words, I could, too. That still didn't make it either oral or anal intercourse. The fact that what we'd done didn't fit into either category proved it wasn't sex.

He pulled me against him, and we hugged tightly for almost a minute. Then he whispered in my ear. "What about you?"

"I'll just jack off like usual."

"Really? You don't want me—"

"Turn around."

I dropped to my knees again and resumed licking my companion's asshole while I beat off into my hand. It didn't take long. I stood up and turned Elder Grant back toward me again.

"I don't think I can..." he began.

"Let's just smell my cum together," I whispered. I raised my hand, and I could feel my companion's breath in the darkness. I wasn't able to face eating my own load after ejaculating, but I felt something more was needed to cap the experience.

"Turn around," I said.

"Again?"

I positioned him facing his cot once more and again pried open his back slit. This time, though, I wiped my palm covered in cum up and down his crack.

He gasped.

I closed his flaps, pulled him close, and kissed the back of his neck. "Buona notte, caro," I whispered.

"S-sogni d'oro," he whispered back.

The color of my dreams, though, was slightly darker than sandy but lighter than brown.

After I reached over to turn off my alarm the next morning, I lay in the dark for another few minutes until Elder Grant pulled up the serranda and let the early morning light in. I was afraid to look at him. What if he was sorry about last night? What if he felt compelled to repent and call the mission president? We'd only masturbated, but I knew President Kimball in Salt Lake was disgusted by gays. I'd read *Il Miracolo del Perdono* in English before my mission and in Italian again here. Elder Packer in the Quorum of the Twelve downright loathed us. Even if Elder Grant and I hadn't done anything *really* bad, I understood that life as I knew it could be over by the end of the day.

"Buona mattina," I ventured, grateful my voice didn't crack.

Spaccavoce.

Elder Grant walked over to my cot and leaned down. "Ciao, caro," he whispered before giving me a peck on the lips. Morning breath was incredible, I realized. It meant someone loved me enough to get close even at his worst.

How could life ever get any better than it was right now?

If only Heavenly Father could kill me before I loused everything up.

"Another day full of opportunity to serve the Lord."

Johnny Townsend

I sat on the edge of my cot and watched as my companion headed to the bathroom. I brushed a couple of ants off my arm and thanked Heavenly Father for the wonderful day ahead.

Chapter Two:

David Hedison's Referral

Mornings after we left the apartment at 9:30 were dedicated to 24-hour work. Even being rebuffed by man after man with no interest in our message couldn't bring me down today. What was difficult was not dragging Elder Grant into an alley to make out with him. I wondered if it would be okay to return to Lovers' Lane some evening and beat off together while we watched all those cars with newspapers taped over their windows rocking back and forth.

I'd been infatuated with Elder Grant from the first day I arrived in Napoli. Most missionaries arriving in an area had to find their new apartment on their own, hard enough even if we weren't carrying everything we owned in two huge suitcases. But Elder Grant had been waiting for me—alone—at the station. It wasn't long before I noticed other qualities: every time he emptied the trash can beside his desk, he'd empty mine as well; and our very first P-Day a week after we met, he spent the day writing out the most important verses from the Book of Mormon in large print for an elderly member with poor eyesight.

We wandered around Piazza Plebiscito this morning, past the shops in the glass-covered Galleria, and even into the old

castle along the waterfront which was used these days as Napoli's City Hall.

“Non mi interesse.”

“Scusate.”

“Ho fretta.”

The translation was always the same: “Get lost.”

Being torn down like this virtually every moment we were out of the apartment left most of us so fragile I wondered if other companionships found unorthodox ways to cope with the stress. I knew Elder Bennett liked going to the roughest neighborhoods in Cagliari to provoke hoodlums he could then try to beat up. Elder Swanson had been caught twice with straight porn in his suitcase after traveling alone during transfers.

I almost *wanted* an unpleasant confrontation with a stranger on the street so Elder Grant and I would have more stress to relieve later.

But as the hours passed without any exceptionally rude interactions, all I could think about was getting my companion behind closed doors again. I selected a few postcards I hoped would always remind me of this incredible day, the day after yesterday evening's incredible night, in this incredible place. The Mergellina lit up at dusk, Castel Sant'Elmo protecting the city, and the funicolare creeping its way uphill.

We'd sung "Funicolì, funicolá!" in Culture Capsule every Sunday night in the Missionary Training Center.

"Buon giorno," Elder Grant said, stopping a gentleman in a tailored wool business suit that clearly cost more than our off-the-rack polyester ones. The man looked a bit like David Hedison from *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. "Siamo rappresentanti della Chiesa de Gesù Cristo—"

How could I have a crush on Captain Crane when I was only six years old? Two years before the age of accountability?

The man held up a hand and started to walk past. I gave a little shrug to encourage Elder Grant not to take the rejection to heart. Elder Young in Cagliari had had a nervous breakdown over his feelings of rejection, sitting down in the middle of the street crying, and had quickly been sent back to Boise. It was technically an "honorable release," but we all knew the cool reception he'd receive in his home ward.

A moment later, David Hedison turned back toward us.

"Look," he said, "I'm not interested. I don't believe in God." He shook his head rather smugly. "But my sister might want to talk to you. She's a devout Catholic, but she's been very depressed lately, and if you can cheer her up a little, maybe what you're doing isn't entirely useless."

Just *mostly* useless, I realized he was saying. It was still nicer than a lot of comments we heard.

“Her name’s Elisabetta,” the man continued, jotting down an address. “I’m afraid she’s in the Quartieri Spagnoli.”

At least it wasn’t the Rione Sanità.

“Do you think she’s home now?” Elder Grant asked.

“Unless she’s out buying some tomatoes. It’s good to try her during the day, though. That neighborhood’s not very nice at night.”

“Thanks, Signor...?”

The man started to walk off again but hesitated one last time. “She likes aranciata.”

We watched him continue whatever errand he’d been on for another few moments until he was lost in the crowd. “Good job,” I said. “He could see the Spirit in your eyes.”

“Thank you, Anziano Mortensen, but if he was responding to the joy in my countenance, it’s because you put it there.”

Words like that weren’t sappy when the person you loved said them about *you*. “I saw a picture of you in E.U.R. from one of the other elders before we ever met,” I said. “And you already had a beautiful countenance.”

“Aw, shucks.” Elder Grant laughed. “Flattery will get you a handful of cum.”

“Ottimo,” I returned. “Your shoes are polished nicely, too. And that tie is really sharp. And you ironed your shirt quite well. And—”

“Per carità! How much cum do you think I have?”

I tried to think of a clever reply but couldn't. “Well,” I said, “you do have limited storage capacity, so we'll have to keep emptying you out to give you a chance to refill.” If only I could tell him I had plenty of room in my rectum. But that would be sex, and we couldn't do anything that sinful.

“If we pop into a bar to get an aranciata for Elisabetta, we can use their bathroom.” Elder Grant paused. “Do you have someplace to put what I've got stored up right now?”

I licked my lips. “I'll think of something.”

Elisabetta lived only a few streets over from Spaccanapoli, the long, straight thoroughfare that had sliced directly through old Napoli for centuries. From the right vantage point up on the hill, one could look down and understand immediately why the street had acquired its nickname.

Some areas along the infamous street were reasonably nice, while others, like the part nearest Elisabetta's apartment, were subtly depressing. Subtly only because one grew accustomed so quickly to the garbage and filth everywhere. Relatives who came to visit my family in New Orleans often commented on how much trash lay on the streets of the French Quarter. But

the garbage level of Napoli was three orders of magnitude more severe. Perhaps someone could come up with a Mercalli scale for filth and decay.

I didn't want to imagine what the city must have looked like back in 1656 when over 150,000 people, almost 60% of its residents, had died of the plague.

When I'd sent some photos of the present-day Forcella neighborhood home to my parents, Mom had commented that Napoli seemed rather quaint.

"No, Mom," I'd written back, "it's not quaint. It's only quaint if the image is four by six inches in front of you. When it's *everywhere*, it's brutal." Yet these days, only a few weeks later, I hardly thought about it anymore, only if something struck me as unnaturally dirtier than usual. Like the elderly woman in front of us who slipped on some dog feces and then sat down hard on the rest of the mess not clinging to her shoe.

"Merde!" she shouted.

True enough.

Elder Grant and I hurried to help her up, and she instinctively reached back to rub her sore behind, pulling away her hand in disgust.

My companion retreated a step. Fortunately, I carried a cloth handkerchief with me at all times, something my trainer in Quartu had taught me. It was an easy way to appear helpful when you really hadn't done anything all that difficult.

Elder Grant picked up the woman's bag of groceries—three rosette and a couple of etti of salami. He tried to be nonchalant while inspecting the bag for evidence of contamination, but the old woman could see his searching gaze and grabbed the bag from him. "Grazie," she muttered, not sounding at all grateful, but then there was no reason she should be. Who wouldn't be angry in her situation?

"Possiamo accompagnarle a casa?" I asked.

Her eyes flitted from my nametag to Elder Grant's. "No."

And who could blame her for feeling suspicious as well? A cousin of mine doing his mission in Illinois told me the missionaries there tried to recruit teens to play basketball but then used that to pressure them to come to church. An RM in my ward told me that on his mission to Japan, they "taught English," but the words they taught were things like "church," "gospel," "atonement," and "tithing." In Quartu, Elder Cornett and I did a weekly radio show. We'd play pop songs like Barbra Streisand's "Woman in Love" or ELO's "All over the World." In between songs, we'd read a few minutes from our missionary discussions.

No listeners ever called the station and asked us to come teach them the rest.

The old woman tossed the soiled handkerchief onto the street and walked away. A young boy, maybe five, threw down the cigarette butt he'd just picked up and grabbed the handkerchief instead, running off with his find.

Sometimes, it was easier to handle the things I witnessed by pretending I was Will Robinson in an episode of *Lost in Space*, exploring life on a newly discovered planet.

I wondered if the director had meant for Dr. Smith to seem so gay?

While I identified with Nellie Oleson's brother in *Land of the Giants*, I felt nothing for his bank robber friend. It was Don Marshall I couldn't keep my eyes off of. But I told my parents I watched the series every week because one of the flight attendants was Mormon.

We knocked on Elisabetta's door a few minutes later. She lived two flights up in a building with yellow paint fading to gray in places. The stairwell showed what appeared to be unhealthy cracks, but as inspectors hadn't insisted on adding beams to support it, I assumed the damage was only superficial. Against the outer wall of each landing, someone had set up a memorial for a deceased loved one. Almost all of the photos were of young men.

"Chi é?" asked the woman who answered the door. She wore a plain black dress. Women in southern Italy often wore black after the death of their husband or a parent. Mormons in America might wear black to a funeral and keep their mourning clothes stored away until needed again. I knew a Jewish family that had mourning rituals, something to do with a mirror, if I remembered correctly, that lasted a whole week, with some other kind of commemoration at the end of a year. But southern Italian women often wore black *every day for the rest of their lives*, even if they started at the age of thirty. They'd discard all of their previous clothing and only buy black from that point

on. Times were changing, but they would never change for some people, and I sensed Elisabetta was one of them.

“Buon giorno,” Elder Grant said. “Il suo fratello ci ha chiesto di visitarle.”

“Davvero?”

“He said you were having a bit of a hard time and might like someone to talk to.”

At that, the woman laughed. “Talk?” She chuckled again, but it quickly turned into a sigh. “Sure. Why not? Come on in.”

Elders were never supposed to be alone with women. Sister missionaries were never supposed to be alone with men. But sometimes, we did what we had to do.

I handed Elisabetta the bottle of aranciata we’d purchased. Fanta. She took it with a smile, but she looked wary, not pleased.

Her apartment was simply furnished, though everything appeared to be in good condition, and the place looked spotless. On one wall was a framed print of Mary holding baby Jesus. To the left, several inches lower, was a photo of a man about Elisabetta’s age, taken in a portrait studio. To the right, at the same height as the photo of the forty-year-old man, was a photo of a twenty-year-old man, also taken professionally.

I recognized the young man from the memorial out on the stairwell landing.

On a tiny table underneath the portrait of Mary sat a simple ceramic vase, blue, that held three fresh daisies—happy, cheerful flowers. Maybe her brother was wrong about her. Perhaps she was already recovering from her loss.

Elder Grant and I sat on the sofa. Before she would take a chair near us, Elisabetta asked if she could offer us anything. My companion deferred, but I'd learned that being a slight imposition was more polite. "Un bicchiere d'acqua, per favore," I said, wanting her to keep the aranciata for herself. Elisabetta disappeared into the kitchen and returned shortly with a glass.

Mineral water, I recognized from the bubbles. I loved the stuff, but I'd hoped for tap, since mineral water could be expensive. I usually only splurged on it once or twice a month myself. I smiled and took a sip.

Porca vacca. It was Acqua Ferrarelle, probably the most expensive mineral water out there, with an unmistakable flavor. Elisabetta had just served me the equivalent of champagne, something clearly reserved for special guests.

I felt like a heel.

"Signora...?" I began.

"Coticelli," she said.

"Signora Coticelli, quest'acqua é proprio incredibile." I figured it best to pretend it was my first time, making her sacrifice more meaningful.

“Le piace?” She smiled.

“Mi da le palpitazioni.” It was a bit over the top, but the David Hedison lookalike had asked us to make his sister feel better, and that was always the right thing to do, whether she was depressed or not, whether or not she was interested in the Church.

“You speak Italian so well.”

Elder Grant rolled his eyes at my undeserved praise. It wasn't hard to sound educated. Almost any word in English ending with -tion was essentially the same in Italian, only with a -zione at the end instead. Inclinazione, maturazione, perturbazione, and, of course, masturbazione. I could use a “big word” in Italian I'd never seen or heard even once just by making an educated guess.

I sometimes used “big words” in English, too, without meaning to sound snooty. I'd mentioned something in Elders' Quorum once about carcinogens in New Orleans drinking water.

“Ooh, carcinogens,” the first councilor said in a mocking tone.

I'd had no idea that was a pretentious word. I just tried to use words appropriate to the topic at hand. I'd been using the impurity of New Orleans tap water as a metaphor.

“Ooh, metaphor,” the first councilor mocked when I explained.

“Thank you, Signora,” I said. “But we’d really like to hear what *you* have to say. Your brother said life’s been difficult lately.”

Elisabetta sighed again, but not as heavily as before. “It’s not just lately,” she said. “Ernesto cheated on me all the time. He...brought things home.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “It was a relief when he left.”

I saw her eying my glass of mineral water and wished I had something useful to offer her.

“Your husband left you?” Elder Grant repeated.

“He didn’t come home one evening.” She shrugged. “I never heard from him again. He either ran off or got killed by some other woman’s husband. But I never heard from the police, so who knows?”

I was amazed sometimes at the things perfect strangers would tell us. While we were out tracting one day, a woman had confided, standing right in her doorway, not even inside with her door closed, that she’d had an affair with the portiere in her building. A man told us he’d stolen money from his brother-in-law and asked us for advice on how to resolve the rift in his family. An elderly woman asked if we thought she should tell her middle child, in his fifties, he had a different father from his siblings.

“Not knowing what happened must have been difficult,” I said, looking from Elisabetta to the photo of her husband. He reminded me of Michael York’s best friend in *Logan’s Run*. I’d

been shocked by a sex scene in the novel I'd purchased after seeing the movie. Logan was forced to have sex five times in a row and was in agony by the end.

"It was hard on Enea," she said. "He was only eleven."

Signora Coticelli went on to talk about her son's truancy, then his shoplifting, then his introduction to housebreaking, low level drug dealing, and finally doing things for the Camorra he could no longer tell his mother about.

"He wasn't a bad boy," she said. "He just knew I needed the money. And I *did* need it. So what could I do?" She looked at the photo on the wall. "I let him do those terrible things. And it killed him." She absentmindedly fiddled with a crucifix hanging from a thin necklace. "If it was wrong for Ernesto to cheat on me, what I did to my son was a hundred times worse." She sighed. "A thousand times."

Elder Grant and I exchanged glances. I could see him mouthing a suggestion we give her a blessing, but I shook my head. We needed to do something that could provide a more tangible benefit.

"My brother is worried I'm unhappy." Elisabetta laughed again but without mirth. "I deserve to be unhappy."

"Signora Coticelli," Elder Grant said softly, "the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring peace and forgiveness to everyone."

I could feel my companion shift into missionary mode. Every week, we had to turn in our stats to our zone leaders,

who then sent them to the mission president in Rome. In addition to the number of hours worked—sixty; lessons taught—seven; hours spent in individual and companion study—twelve and six, respectively; we had several other hard and fast quotas not to be missed under any circumstances: get addresses from fifteen random people we stopped on the street, bring at least one person to church, have at least one person committed to baptism, and baptize at least one person. The next week, we had to bring yet another new person to church, the person who had come to church the previous week we now needed firmly committed to baptism, and the person committed to baptism the week before now had to physically be baptized. We were ordered to keep that pipeline flowing without any clogs.

Of course, that pipeline was filled with nothing *but* clogs. Clogs that could only be cleared, we were told at every zone conference, if we demonstrated more faith.

I held up a hand and said, in English, without taking my eyes away from Elisabetta's pained face, "We're going to help her in whatever way works best for *her*."

"But having the gospel—"

"Is more painful for some people than not having it."

I often daydreamed about what it must be like to be gay without knowing it was wrong. The Church taught that we were only responsible to live up to the amount of truth we had. Sometimes, I wondered if sending missionaries out into the

world wasn't the absolute worst thing the Church could do for humanity.

Signora Coticelli frowned, probably suspecting we were saying something bad about her. One of the mission rules was that if we ever did need to speak English, we weren't to do it in front of Italians.

"Signora," I said, "is there something you do that brings you even a few minutes of happiness?" I wasn't sure what to say, what to ask, but I wanted to talk about something, anything, that wasn't the Church.

"Happiness?" She shook her head. "My brother sends me postcards from the cities he travels to for work. I like looking at all the different places he's been."

I wanted to ask if she had a photo album she could show us, but I was afraid she might never have been able to afford one, and the request would be insensitive. What if I asked if she had a box of photos and postcards, and she felt insulted I didn't expect her to have an album?

What if sharing her photos was simply too personal an act?

"Sometimes," she said, "I listen to the radio. Or I walk past the flower stalls. Or I go up to Vomero and look down on the city. It's so pretty...from a distance."

I laughed, causing both Elisabetta and my companion to frown. "Can I quote you on that?"

“Non capisco.”

“I was just saying something similar to my mother.”

Signora Coticelli smiled sadly. “Are you close to your mother?”

And suddenly, I knew what to give Elisabetta. “Yes, it’s hard being away for two years. We can’t even call.”

“You can’t phone her on her birthday? On Christmas?” Her eyes narrowed as she glanced at our scriptures and flip charts.

“We write once a week.”

Elisabetta’s shoulders relaxed a little. “You write your mother?” she asked. “Every week?”

“Every week.”

She turned to look at the photos on her wall.

“What was Enea’s favorite meal?” I asked.

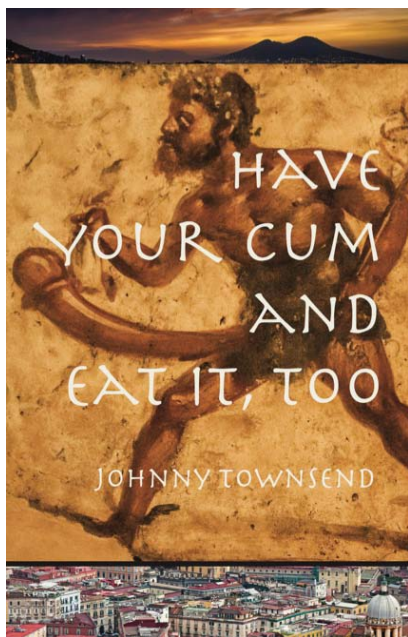
“Anziano...”

Signora Coticelli frowned again. She studied our faces for several more seconds. “He liked lasagna.”

I smiled. Of course he did. So expensive and time-consuming to make it was often the special holiday meal for

Christmas. “Signora Coticelli,” I said, “how do you feel about us dropping off all the cheeses and meats and everything else you’ll need? We can bring it by Thursday morning and then stop by for dinner later so you can tell us some stories about Enea.”

Elisabetta’s smile looked genuine. I could tell by the crinkles next to her eyes. Polite smiles didn’t make crinkles.



It's 1981, and two Mormon missionaries randomly assigned to work together as "companions" in Napoli find themselves in trouble. They're falling in love, but the Church forbids gay relationships. Will they be crushed by dedication to their beliefs, or will love provide a way for them to escape?

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