



Two Mormon missionaries knocking on doors in New Orleans come upon a gay couple who help them unleash their repressed sexuality, leading them to begin a clandestine love affair carried out in the back rooms of gay bars and French Quarter bathhouses.

Strangers with Benefits

by Johnny Townsend

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A photograph of a person from the waist up, wearing white ribbed tank tops and white briefs. The person is pulling down the waistband of the briefs with both hands. The background is a solid teal color.

Strangers with Benefits

Johnny Townsend

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

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*

“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*

In *Sex among the Saints*, “Townsend writes with a deadpan wit and a supple, realistic prose that’s full of psychological empathy....he takes his protagonists’ moral struggles seriously and invests them with real emotional resonance.”

Kirkus Reviews

“The Buzzard Tree,” from *The Circumcision of God*, was a finalist for the 2007 Whitney Award for Best Short LDS Fiction.

“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*

“The Rift,” from *The Abominable Gayman*, is a “fascinating tale of an untenable situation...a *tour de force*.”

David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

“Pronouncing the Apostrophe,” from *The Golem of Rabbi Loew*, is “quiet and revealing, an intriguing tale...”

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

The Circumcision of God is “a collection of short stories that consider the imperfect, silenced majority of Mormons, who may in fact be [the Church’s] best hope....[The book leaves] readers regretting the church’s willingness to marginalize those who best exemplify its ideals: those who love fiercely despite all obstacles, who brave challenges at great personal risk and who always choose the hard, higher road.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Johnny Townsend’s...keen observations on the human condition come in many shapes and sizes...reflecting on both his Jewish and Mormon backgrounds as well as life in the vast and varied American gay community...His perspective is sometimes startling, sometimes hilarious, sometimes poignant, but always compassionate.”

Gerald S. Argetsinger, Artistic Director of the Hill Cumorah
Pageant (1990-96)

In *Mormon Fairy Tales*, Johnny Townsend displays “both a wicked sense of irony and a deep well of compassion.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

“*Selling the City of Enoch* exists at that awkward intersection where the LDS ideal meets the real world, and Townsend navigates his terrain with humor, insight, and pathos.”

Donna Banta, author of *False Prophet*

The Golem of Rabbi Loew will prompt “gasps of outrage from conservative readers...a strong collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

“That’s one of the reasons why I found Johnny Townsend’s new book *Mormon Fairy Tales* SO MUCH FUN!! Without fretting about what the theology is supposed to be if it were

pinned down, Townsend takes you on a voyage to explore the rich-but-undertapped imagination of Mormonism. I loved his portrait of spirit prison! He really nailed it—not in an official doctrine sort of way, but in a sort of ‘if you know Mormonism, you know this is what it must be like’ way—and what a prison it is!”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

Zombies for Jesus is “eerie, erotic, and magical.”

Publishers Weekly

“While [Townsend’s] many touching vignettes draw deeply from Mormon mythology, history, spirituality and culture, [*Mormon Fairy Tales*] is neither a gaudy act of proselytism nor angry protest literature from an ex-believer. Like all good fiction, his stories are simply about the joys, the hopes and the sorrows of people.”

Kirkus Reviews

“In *Let the Faggots Burn* author Johnny Townsend restores this tragic event [the UpStairs Lounge fire] to its proper place in LGBT history and reminds us that the victims of the blaze were not just ‘statistics,’ but real people with real lives, families, and friends.”

Jesse Monteagudo, The Bilerico Project

Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, Patheos

In *Let the Faggots Burn*, “Townsend’s heart-rending descriptions of the victims...seem to [make them] come alive once more.”

Kit Van Cleave, *OutSmart Magazine*

Marginal Mormons is “an irreverent, honest look at life outside the mainstream Mormon Church....Throughout his musings on sin and forgiveness, Townsend beautifully demonstrates his characters’ internal, perhaps irreconcilable struggles....Rather than anger and disdain, he offers an honest portrayal of people searching for meaning and community in their lives, regardless of their life choices or secrets.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2012.

Kirkus Reviews

“The Sneakover Prince” from *God’s Gargoyles* is “one of the most sweet and romantic stor[ies] I have ever read.”

Elisa Rolle, Reviews and Ramblings, founder
of The Rainbow Awards

“*Let the Faggots Burn* is a one-of-a-kind piece of history. Without Townsend’s diligence and devotion, many details would’ve been lost forever. With his tremendous foresight and tenacious research, Townsend put a face on this tragedy at a time when few people would talk about it....Through Townsend’s vivid writing, you will sense what it must’ve been like in those final moments as the fire ripped through the Upstairs Lounge. *Let the Faggots Burn* is a chilling and insightful glimpse into a largely forgotten and ignored chapter of LGBT history.”

Robert Camina, writer and producer of the documentary *Raid of the Rainbow Lounge*

“Johnny Townsend’s ‘Partying with St. Roch’ [in the anthology *Latter-Gay Saints*] tells a beautiful, haunting tale.”

Kent Brintnall, *Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews*

Gayrabian Nights is “an allegorical tour de force...a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

The stories in *The Mormon Victorian Society* “register the new openness and confidence of gay life in the age of same-sex marriage....What hasn’t changed is Townsend’s wry, conversational prose, his subtle evocations of character and social dynamics, and his deadpan humor. His warm empathy still glows in this intimate yet clear-eyed engagement with

Mormon theology and folkways. Funny, shrewd and finely wrought dissections of the awkward contradictions—and surprising harmonies—between conscience and desire.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2013.

Kirkus Reviews

“This collection of short stories [*The Mormon Victorian Society*] featuring gay Mormon characters slammed [me] in the face from the first page, wrestled my heart and mind to the floor, and left me panting and wanting more by the end. Johnny Townsend has created so many memorable characters in such few pages. I went weeks thinking about this book. It truly touched me.”

Tom Webb, judge for The Rainbow Awards (A Bear on Books)

“The struggles and solutions of the individuals [in *Latter-Gay Saints*] will resonate across faith traditions and help readers better understand the cost of excluding gay members from full religious participation.”

Publishers Weekly

Dragons of the Book of Mormon is an “entertaining collection....Townsend’s prose is sharp, clear, and easy to read, and his characters are well rendered...”

Publishers Weekly

“The pre-eminent documenter of alternative Mormon lifestyles...Townsend has a deep understanding of his characters, and his limpid prose, dry humor and well-grounded (occasionally magical) realism make their spiritual conundrums both compelling and entertaining. [*Dragons of the Book of Mormon* is] [a]nother of Townsend’s critical but affectionate and absorbing tours of Mormon discontent.”
Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2014.

Kirkus Reviews

“Mormon Movie Marathon,” from *Selling the City of Enoch*,
“is funny, constructively critical, but also sad because the desire...for belonging is so palpable.”

Levi S. Peterson, author of *The Backslider* and *The Canyons of Grace*

In *Gayrabian Nights*, “Townsend’s prose is always limpid and evocative, and...he finds real drama and emotional depth in the most ordinary of lives.”

Kirkus Reviews

Selling the City of Enoch is “sharply intelligent...pleasingly complex...The stories are full of...doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so....Many of Townsend’s stories...have a provocative edge to them, but this

[book] displays a great deal of insight as well...a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Among the most captivating of the prose [in *Off the Rocks*, in a piece reprinted from the collection *A Day at the Temple*] was a story by Johnny Townsend illustrating two Mormon missionaries who break the rules of their teachings to spend more time with one another.”

Lauren Childers, *Windy City Times*

Gayrabian Nights is a “complex revelation of how seriously soul damaging the denial of the true self can be.”

Ryan Rhodes, author of *Free Electricity*

Gayrabian Nights “was easily the most original book I’ve read all year. Funny, touching, topical, and thoroughly enjoyable.”

Rainbow Awards

Lying for the Lord is “one of the most gripping books that I’ve picked up for quite a while. I love the author’s writing style, alternately cynical, humorous, biting, scathing, poignant, and touching.... This is the third book of his that I’ve read, and all

are equally engaging. These are stories that need to be told, and the author does it in just the right way.”

Heidi Alsop, Ex-Mormon Foundation Board Member

“If you like short stories and you’re interested in the lives of Mormons, you should be following the work of Johnny Townsend. Since he writes from an ex-Mormon perspective, believers often dismiss Townsend’s work as biased—or as *a priori* ‘an attack on the church’—but I think that’s a mistake. Johnny Townsend writes his characters with a great deal of compassion and empathy, whether they’re in the church or not...or somewhere in between.”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

“Townsend is a wonderful writer with a wry but sympathetic eye for humans’ frailties, and the ways in which religious belief both exacerbate and console them. [*Despots of Deseret* contains] more vibrant parables about doubts and blasphemies that hide beneath a veneer of piety.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Lying for the Lord*, Townsend “gets under the skin of his characters to reveal their complexity and conflicts....shrewd, evocative [and] wryly humorous.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Missionaries Make the Best Companions*, “the author treats the clash between religious dogma and liberal humanism with vivid realism, sly humor, and subtle feeling as his characters try to figure out their true missions in life. Another of Townsend’s rich dissections of Mormon failures and uncertainties...” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers*, “Townsend, a confident and practiced storyteller, skewers the hypocrisies and eccentricities of his characters with precision and affection. The outlandish framing narrative is the most consistent source of shock and humor, but the stories do much to ground the reader in the world—or former world—of the characters....A funny, charming tale about a group of Mormons facing the end of the world.”

Kirkus Reviews

Townsend’s “works are on a cutting edge of history.”

Walter Jones, Assistant Head of Special
Collections, Marriott Library

The Washing of Brains has “A lovely writing style, and each story was full of unique, engaging characters....immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

“Townsend’s collection [*The Washing of Brains*] once again displays his limpid, naturalistic prose, skillful narrative chops, and his subtle insights into psychology...Well-crafted dispatches on the clash between religion and self-fulfillment...”

Kirkus Reviews

The Last Days Linger was awarded Second Place for Best Gay Contemporary General Fiction in the 2017 Rainbow Awards

“While the author is generally at his best when working as a satirist, there are some fine, understated touches in these tales [*The Last Days Linger*] that will likely affect readers in subtle ways....readers should come away impressed by the deep empathy he shows for all his characters—even the homophobic ones.”

Kirkus Reviews

In *Dead Mankind Walking*, “Townsend writes in an energetic prose that balances crankiness and humor....A rambunctious volume of short, well-crafted essays...”

Kirkus Reviews

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Chapter One: It's Raining Men

“This rain is so nasty.” Elder Nelson shifted his navy blue umbrella in an effort to better shield his Book of Mormon. I wasn't sure if he was addressing me, God, or the raindrops themselves.

“If mail carriers can manage,” I replied, stepping over a break in the sidewalk where part of the cement had been lifted by a tree root, “missionaries can, too.” It was hard for me to be as unhappy about it as he was, given that just enough wind kept whipping up in the downpour to dampen my companion's white shirt, making it cling to his hard chest. Even through an additional layer of temple garments, I could still see his nipples.

If only I could *feel* them.

Elder Nelson stopped beside a cast iron bathtub being used as a flower bed and turned to me. “Elder Weber,” he said, “I love the way you correct me without making me feel corrected.” He laughed, tapping the outer edge of his umbrella against the edge of mine as if toasting me. My companion told me I was “incurrigible” when I carried doggie treats to give to potential investigators' pets. If I refused to argue with a Bible basher, I was incurrigible. If I stopped to buy a coconut snowball, if I handed some coins to a homeless man, I was incurrigible.

I tried to stop looking at his nipples. “I just find you very corrigible, Elder. You don’t need a heavy hand.” I managed to keep from laying my hand anywhere on his body.

“You must be a convert.”

“Two sister missionaries knocked on our door when I was eight,” I admitted, “so I was still baptized at the age of accountability.” I remembered stepping into the font with a man who seemed terribly wise and mature, though looking back, I expect he was just an ordinary missionary serving in our ward. I remembered his strong arm on my back lifting me out of the water after dunking me. And I remembered changing into dry clothes with him in the dressing area of the font afterwards.

Had Satan been after my soul even at the age of eight?

I realized I was staring at my companion’s nipples again.

Since Elder Nelson and I had only been together two weeks, there was still plenty we didn’t know about each other. After three exceptionally long months with my previous senior companion, I had never even learned his first name. What I knew so far about Elder Nelson was that he was a year older than I was, born in 1967, from pioneer stock in Salt Lake. I knew he woke up at 6:00 every morning, half an hour earlier than required, so he could exercise. I knew he considered his hair brown, though it was only a shade away from black. And I knew that he already had a five o’clock shadow only one hour after his morning shave.

“Does it rain like this where you’re from?” he asked.

“It rains,” I said, “but not like this.” Oregon had a wide variety of climates ranging from wet forests to dry desert, with varying geologic features including coasts and mountains and volcanoes.

Lots of folks thought of Mt. St. Helens when they thought of Oregon, even though the volcano was actually across the state line in Washington. I was almost twelve when it blew in 1980. We didn’t have to go to church that day. I still felt guilty over my happiness at skipping Sacrament meeting.

I’d only been out to the blast area once, shortly after I’d been ordained a priest at sixteen, astounded at the devastation still evident so many years later.

“A relatively minor sin would leave a mark on your soul like a forest fire,” my scoutmaster had said. “Something like drinking a beer or smoking a cigarette.” He motioned to the landscape before us with a sweeping gesture. “This is what a *major* sin will do to you,” he went on. “Something like having sex even a single time before you get married.”

An empty beer can floated past Elder Nelson along the curb.

Perhaps this deluge today was a punishment for New Orleans. The City That Care Forgot was almost certainly more sinful than any of the cities in the path of the volcano’s ash cloud. New Orleans had drive-thru daiquiri shops. There was horse racing. People here drank in the streets on Mardi Gras. They drank on St. Patrick’s Day. They drank during Jazz Fest. They drank for French Quarter Fest. They drank because it was Friday. They drank because it was Saturday. They drank

at 3:30 in the morning because the bars were open twenty-four hours a day.

And everyone knew that a lot more than drinking took place in the French Quarter.

I felt like a diabetic in a pastry shop.

“We get more snow than rain in Salt Lake,” Elder Nelson said. “When I first arrived in Louisiana, I kind of liked seeing the rain.” He shook his umbrella at an angle to keep the water from seeping through the fabric. “Even now it would be okay if we could just sit on a wide porch and watch without getting wet.”

“Or maybe a veranda.” I was proud that I now knew the difference. Still, I thought I might rather go hiking on a remote mountain trail with Elder Nelson, perhaps get lost and be forced to cuddle together through the night to stay warm. It got cold out by Multnomah Falls even in the summer.

“Have you ever gone skinny dipping, Elder Weber?”

I looked at my companion. For that not to be a complete non sequitur, he had to be thinking at least a little about getting naked with me.

But what could I say in response? It *might* have been a complete non sequitur.

Nelson had been made the senior in our New Orleans district a month before I arrived. When his junior was transferred two weeks ago, I’d taken his place, transferring in

from Slidell. Yesterday, we'd finished the tracting zone they'd been working in Mid-City and this morning started a new area in the Faubourg Marigny. Elder Nelson had chosen it. The neighborhood right next to the French Quarter.

Had he done it on purpose? Was it a hint? A signal? A plea?

He'd pointed out a barber shop on Elysian Fields that would have been the location where *A Streetcar Named Desire* took place, if a residence had ever existed there. I'd come so close to dropping to my knees and shouting, "Elder Neilllsson!" at the top of my lungs.

I wanted to walk down Bourbon Street with him. I wanted to walk into a bar—any bar—and tell a missionary joke or something. Have a tiny adventure I could write about in my journal. Have a secret adventure that only Elder Nelson and I would ever know about.

But how could I ask for any of that? I might make a fool of myself.

And what if I got sent home?

"We usually get pretty light rain in Portland," I said, "even if it lasts a long time." Several raindrops hit our umbrellas with such force they came right through the fabric. Elder Nelson wiped a drop off his forehead. I let one roll down my cheek. "It's...it's..."

"It's raining cummoms and cureloms."

I groaned. Born-in-the-covenant Mormons were far cornier than converts.

But maybe I could use his improved mood to ask for the dangerous favor I wanted. “We might not have much success in this weather,” I said. “People seem to be grumpier when it rains.”

“Now who’s negative?” Elder Nelson teased. His lips were almost irresistible when the corners of his mouth turned up like that. Did I dare wipe that drop of water off his cheek?

“I’m just thinking...we’re so close to the French Quarter. Maybe...”

“The French Quarter is off limits to missionaries, Elder Weber.”

I remembered trying to convince the Single Adult group to watch *Ladyhawke* for movie night, explaining that viewers never *quite* saw Michelle Pfeiffer’s breasts, when all I was truly interested in was seeing *any* part of Rutger Hauer.

Was Elder Nelson hoping to be convinced to cross into the Forbidden Zone? Elder Gillespie had reported Elder Focosi for drinking tea at an investigator’s home. Sister Moss had reported Sister Young for flirting with a man at the grocery.

“I know,” I said. “But it’s only a few blocks away. And in this rain, it’s not as if we’re going to see orgies in the street.” I could hear Rockwell’s captivating lyrics in my head. “Somebody’s Watching Me.”

“Well...”

“We won’t be going into any bars.” Not on our first trip, anyway. I wondered what it would be like, though, to stand on the second floor balcony of a gay bar in a pouring rainstorm, my arms spread wide as I looked up into the sky, just to say I’d done it.

“Yes, but...”

Assuming I’d even know a gay bar when I saw one. They weren’t going to have a symbol on their door of two men, like we were going into a big, gay bathroom.

Were they?

Aauugghh!

The first time I’d ever gone to the temple, when our youth group went to do baptisms for the dead, I couldn’t wait to see all the secret, sacred miracles inside.

But we just changed into white clothes, got dunked in a font, and put our street clothes on again.

Damn this rain making Elder Nelson’s nipples stand out like that!

“How about we just walk along the edge of the French Quarter?” I suggested. “Walk along Esplanade for a few blocks?”

I didn't want to lead my companion into sin. I liked him. At least I thought I did. It was hard to know for sure after such a short time together. I was only willing to sin slightly myself, but I didn't want anyone else's Outer Darkness on my conscience.

Still, I'd heard there were lots of gay people in the Quarter. I simply had to see one or two of them. Maybe talk to a couple. It was like knowing the Three Nephites were down at the stake center but you couldn't go speak with them. Talking to gay men, of course, was completely different. The best drivers, we were told in Seminary, stayed away from the edge of the cliff.

"You and I didn't get to serve a foreign mission," I continued. "I'd really like to see some exotic architecture. I heard some of the balconies in the French Quarter have pretty iron railings."

Flip! Why in the world did I have to say "pretty"? It sounded so gay. I clenched my fist tightly, my nails digging into my palm. I could feel water dripping over the back of my hand.

Elder Nelson didn't respond. We walked up to the next door, and I rang the bell. The paint on the clapboard was cracked and peeling. I wondered how long it took in weather like this for homes to deteriorate. When I was a kid, President Kimball had said it was a commandment to keep our homes painted and our lawns mowed. Dad had made me mow twice a week ever since. I wasn't sorry to skip that for two years.

Strangers with Benefits

After a few moments, a woman in her early sixties opened the door. She looked just like my grandmother. I smiled and began my approach.

But Grandma shook her head. “Why don’t you boys go get a life?” She shut the door, but at least she hadn’t slammed it.

We’d heard worse. Yesterday, “Grandpa” had threatened to skewer us “personally,” until, he said, our eyes popped out of their sockets. I’d fantasized the rest of the morning about what he might thrust inside us.

My first semester of college, I’d brought a cucumber into a bathroom in the Liberal Arts building, inserting it a couple of inches while perched over a toilet in one of the stalls as I listened to two guys talking at the urinal.

I used to sneak into the gay section at the university library, trying to read a few paragraphs here and there before anyone saw what kind of book I was looking in.

Why didn’t guys leave their phone numbers on little slips of paper inside the relevant books? Why didn’t they leave their numbers in the study cubicles? Nothing even in the trash cans.

All I wanted to do was talk.

There was no one to talk to at home. Or at church.

We moved on from Grandma's door. I straightened a loose brick about to fall off her flowerbed. Her petunias had been all but beaten down by the rain.

"Your turn," I said, pointing to the next door. The wood was painted a bright purple, the signature color of K&B Drugstore. The trim was light yellow, and the rest of the structure was lavender, except for the cornices, which were a sickly chartreuse. Better than Pepto Bismol pink, I supposed, a surprisingly popular color around here.

Because of all the spicy food?

Elder Nelson and I had been turned down at the last ten houses, the rain growing heavier by the minute. The puddles along the curb reached almost to the center of the street. Some of the parked cars with underbellies closer to the pavement looked to be in possible danger if the rain didn't let up.

I tried not to stare at Elder Nelson's nipples as he knocked on the door. When no one answered after thirty seconds, he rang the bell. The eave of the one-story Victorian gave us just enough protection that we were reluctant to trudge down to the next house.

I wondered if I could "accidentally" break my umbrella so Elder Nelson and I would have to huddle together under his.

A rivulet of water ran down my companion's neck to the edge of his tight collar. In this humidity, it might have been sweat as easily as a stray raindrop. We'd soon be soaked even if the rain ceased altogether. Perhaps I could suggest going back to the apartment early to get out of our wet clothes. Even

seeing my companion's nude body for thirty seconds was better than nothing.

Or maybe I could talk Elder Nelson into buying a T-shirt in the French Quarter, to wear just until we got home and changed into a dry white dress shirt. A T-shirt with something daring and decadent on the front, perhaps a steaming cup of coffee from the Café du Monde. Or the famous Mardi Gras shout: Show me your tits! "Elder Nelson," I began.

I wanted to see his nipples.

"We're not going to the French Quarter."

Elder Nelson's Adam's apple bobbed so beautifully when he talked. I didn't have anything noticeable at all. I used to be glad, finding the lumps on other men's necks jarring. But when I saw my companion's Adam's apple, I wanted to kiss it, nip it, lick it.

What in God's name was wrong with me?

I'd so hoped coming on a mission would finally cure me of being gay. I was already nineteen. I'd need to get married in a few years, and I didn't want to go to the temple with a woman until I knew I could be straight for her.

The purple door opened. A man around thirty looked at us in astonishment. "What the hell are you doing out there?" His hair was fully black, not a shade away from it.

Elder Nelson cleared his throat. "We're representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ—"

“No.” The man held up his hand like a stop sign. “What are you doing out there *now*?”

Elder Nelson frowned. It was well past 10:00 a.m. Surely, we weren’t interrupting this guy’s breakfast.

“We’re talking to people about our church,” Elder Nelson said hesitantly. I gritted my teeth at his uncertain tone.

“For God’s sake,” the man said, “don’t you watch the news?”

“We don’t have a television,” Elder Nelson replied.

“Or a radio,” I added.

“Good grief.” The man shook his head. “Come on inside.” When he opened the door wider, we closed our umbrellas, shook them as best we could to reduce the mess they’d make, and walked in. “My name’s Gabriel,” he told us, motioning us toward the sofa after we set our umbrellas down near the door. He had no accent except when he pronounced his name. Gobbree-elle. His hair was shaggy, far longer than anything missionaries were allowed, covering most of his ears, his forehead, and the back of his neck. “Have a seat.”

Bonnie Raitt was suggesting, “Let’s Give ‘Em Something to Talk About.” Gabriel bent over to turn off his stereo, making me feel I’d sneaked past a velvet rope to look at a magnificent sculpture up close. When he stood and moved back toward us, I had a sudden impulse to accidentally toss my keys on the floor.

But keys weren't a ball. And Gabriel wasn't a dog.

"I'm Elder Nelson," my companion said, offering his hand. Gabriel raised an eyebrow but shook it.

"And I'm Elder Weber." He shook my hand as well.

I should excuse myself, I thought, go to the bathroom and jerk off to drop my hormone level so I could concentrate on teaching a powerful first discussion.

My companion began speaking as soon as we sat down. "You have a lovely home." One of our standard icebreakers, no matter what the house actually looked like. Gabriel started to sit in a side chair a few feet away but then motioned toward the window being splattered with rain and then to his ears, shaking his head. He stood in front of us and then turned around and squeezed in between Elder Nelson and me. We scooted to the edges of the sofa.

"Oh, don't be that way." Gabriel put one hand on my right thigh and his other on Elder Nelson's left thigh. "If you can impose on me, you can't expect me not to return the favor."

Elder Nelson cleared his throat. "The Lord has sent us here—"

Gabriel squeezed our thighs, and my companion stopped talking. "I can't express forcefully enough how much I *don't* want to hear what you have to say." He motioned to the artwork in the living room. A bright acrylic painting showed two men in tight jeans and T-shirts shaking hands. There was

nothing overtly sexual about it, but the piece still expressed a vibrant sensuality.

On another wall was a black and white framed photograph of a naked black dwarf. Next to that was another framed photo of a nude, uncircumcised Latino.

“Is that you?” I asked.

“Are you going to explain to your friend here how you recognize me with my clothes off?”

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. This was all good, though, wasn't it? My first vision of an out gay man.

The opening lines of “O How Lovely Was the Morning” flashed through my mind.

But I couldn't think of anything to say.

“Here's the way this is going to work.” Gabriel squeezed our thighs again. “You can give me your spiel for half an hour *if* I can then give you mine.” He looked at Elder Nelson to his right and then turned to look at me. “Okay?”

My companion and I both leaned forward so we could see past Gabriel and consult. Elder Nelson pressed his lips while I motioned with my hand toward the rain still beating against the window.

“Where're you guys from?” Gabriel caressed my thigh gently as he looked at me.

“P-Portland.”

Gabriel turned his attention back to my companion. I should have taken longer to answer.

“I’m from Salt Lake.”

“And you?” I wanted Gabriel to look at me again.

“Oh, born and raised in Noo Awlins. I’m a Yat through and through.” He looked from my face to Elder Nelson’s again. “We have a deal?”

I nodded and my companion reluctantly agreed as well. “Can we start with a prayer?” Elder Nelson asked.

Gabriel dropped to his knees in front of my companion, his hands clasped together in mock devotion.

“All right,” Elder Nelson assented. “We’ll dispense with the prayer.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s not like the Holy Ghost is going to be here anyway.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow again. “You planning to preach to me from outside in the rain?” He scooted up even closer to my companion, prying his legs apart.

“Apologize, Elder,” I said.

Elder Nelson sighed. “I’m sorry. I-I’m just not used to...”

“Cute men?” Gabriel guessed. “Virility? Directness?”

Elder Nelson opened his flip charts to a Biblical scene, the plastic-coated pages almost hitting Gabriel in the face, making him scoot back on the floor several inches. “In all the history of the Earth,” my companion began, “the Lord has communicated with his children through his prophets.” We’d memorized the lessons, and it sounded like it. As we took turns reciting the first few concepts of the first discussion, Gabriel scooted back and forth along the floor between us on his knees. His constant quips and interruptions should have been annoying, only I didn’t feel annoyed at all.

“And there, uh, in the pillar of light...um...there in the pillar of light...” I was reaching the climax of the concept. Why in the world was I forgetting my place? “There in the pillar of light stood—”

“My turn.” Gabriel jumped to his feet and rubbed his knees. “Damn, I should have put on my BJ kneepads.” When my mouth fell open again, he tapped his watch. Then he crossed his arms. “Your friend already pointed out the Holy Spirit isn’t showing up today, so what are you losing, really?”

I closed my mouth and nodded, giving Elder Nelson a shrug. But we both leaned forward in concern when Gabriel slipped a videocassette into his player. He wasn’t going to show us dirty movies, was he?

And if he did, how would I convince my companion we needed to uphold our end of the agreement we’d made?

As Gabriel fiddled with his remote, his beautiful ass right in my face, I looked toward the kitchen to see if anything was cooking. I wondered if there was a carbon monoxide leak.

Maybe a gas leak. I didn't smell anything, but something was fogging up my brain. Perhaps the guy had been sniffing glue when we showed up, and the fumes were still in the air.

The seam in Gabriel's jeans went straight along his ass crack.

There in the pillar of light...

Gabriel hit Play and sat on the sofa between us again. When the picture came onto the screen, we watched a scene of confusion unfold, actual footage apparently of police or security guards running down a hallway, reporters struggling for position as a woman came forward to make an announcement. "Both Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk have been shot...and killed." The crowd erupted into shouting chaos. When they calmed down enough for the woman to be heard again, she continued. "The suspect is Supervisor Dan White."

Disappointed we weren't seeing a home movie of Gabriel with another man, perhaps the black dwarf or the two men in T-shirts, I was soon captivated by the documentary. Exactly thirty minutes later, though, Gabriel hit the Pause button. "Did you guys want another turn? I can hardly wait to hear what was in the pillar of light." He smiled. "We have a black light in the bedroom."

Elder Nelson didn't even look at me before replying. "Let's watch the rest."

Was he really gay, too? Or was he just trying to be "open minded"? Could I talk to him later without him reporting me?

If only there were some way for me to sneak out of the apartment alone and come talk to Gabriel.

Maybe he had other movies he could show us before we left.

The storm inside my head was every bit as violent as the one outside. Actual gay men on the screen. And sitting right next to me, his hand still on my leg, was a cute, virile, direct man.

I wasn't sure if it was a sign of God's love or a trial of my faith.

I thought I was maintaining appropriate control, however, until the point in the film when a mourner becomes shocked so few people have shown up for the vigil. Then someone points to the line of marchers still on their way, and the camera cuts to a scene of *thousands* of people holding candles. I gasped, but then the camera kept panning, and the line of mourners with candles went on...and on...and on.

Gabriel gently pulled my head onto his shoulder. "I'd tell you everything was going to be okay," he said, "but that almost certainly won't be true for a few more years yet."

I could feel his heart beating in his chest, not as hard as mine was pounding, but enough to recognize this man wasn't a caricature, wasn't a stereotype, wasn't a monster. He was real and alive and perverted...and maybe even a little kind.

"Your hair smells nice." He kissed the top of my head. "Almond. Like a wedding cake."

I thought about Loren from the Single Adults group back home.

“That sandy color looks good on you,” Gabriel continued. “Brings out the green in your eyes.” He wasn’t even looking at my eyes as he said it. He’d noticed earlier. He’d paid attention. “But you really need to let your hair grow out.”

We watched a reporter saying she expected the assassin to get the death penalty. We watched as the man was sentenced to eight years. We watched the riots that followed, listened to the murderer’s wife say she fully expected she and her husband would get over this and get on with their lives.

Long before the movie ended, I put my hand on Gabriel’s chest, and when Elder Nelson put his next to mine, we let our fingers touch without pulling away. I felt a flood of testosterone and adrenalin and whatever hormones triggered feelings of awe and gratitude and happiness.

And sadness.

The front door opened, and a tall, white Marlboro man with a bushy moustache stood looking at us with a severe expression. Elder Nelson and I both jerked up and pulled away from Gabriel as fast as we could.

The Marlboro man, his hair almost the exact color of mine, wagged a finger toward our host. “You know you’re supposed to call me when you’re arranging a play date,” he said. “I could have douched before I left work.”

Gabriel stood up casually and moved over to kiss his lover. “You’re home early, hon.”

“Yes, and I see I should probably pop in unannounced a little more often.”

“Your office send you home because of the weather?”

The Marlboro man nodded. “Half the city’s flooded. Water burbling up through manholes. Cars parked on the neutral grounds. It’s a mess out there.” He motioned to his soaked clothing before taking a stance like da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. Then he began singing off key, “It’s raining men!”

Gay men might be even cornier than born-in-the-covenant Mormons.

It irritated me that I was impressed.

Gabriel turned back to us. “Okay, guys, come give me a hand.” He waved but we didn’t move, and he turned back to us again. “You’re missionaries. You’re supposed to be dedicated to a life of service. Let’s get this man out of his wet clothes before he catches a cold.”

Okay, it wouldn’t be Elder Nelson’s wet clothes I’d be taking off. So be it. Gabriel waved again, and this time, I got up off the sofa and walked over to help.



Two Mormon missionaries knocking on doors in New Orleans come upon a gay couple who help them unleash their repressed sexuality, leading them to begin a clandestine love affair carried out in the back rooms of gay bars and French Quarter bathhouses.

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