

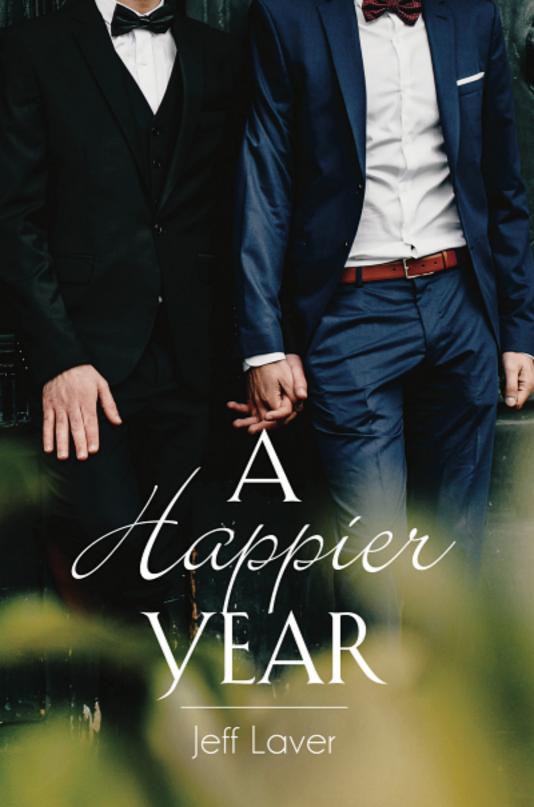
The stories in this book are about homosexuality within the sometimes baffling world of Mormonism. Accompany the characters herein as they face the dilemmas of those whose lives don't fit the mold.

# A Happier Year

By Jeff Laver

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## **Elder Petersen's Mission Memories**

1971 was still "The Sixties." Even in Salt Lake City. On May 15th of that year, anti-war protesters marched downtown, heading down State Street and turning toward Pioneer Park for a rally. Of course there were students, but several other groups participated, including Veterans Against the War, Mothers Against War, Chicanos, Blacks, and Gays.

Aunt Carol, my dad's sister, picked up my grandparents and brought them to our place for Sunday dinner the day after the protest. "Did you see this morning's paper?" she asked with obvious disgust as we brought over most of the last items and sat down at the table, now laden with steaming potatoes, vegetables, and Mom's best china. "Those darn protesters. I'm getting sick of them trying to turn this place into another Berkeley." She looked around for the nodding agreement.

"Yeah," piped up my shy, nerdy, somewhat insecure, sixteen-yearold, younger brother. "Those commie, pinko, faggots!"

"Jonathan!" my mother cautioned him as she set the pot-roast down in front of my dad at the head of the table.

"But Mom," Jonathon vaguely protested as he half-heartedly shrugged, "Pam was there. She said some of them really were queer."

Mom shook her head, glanced sideways at her smaller children, then glared for a fraction of a second at Jonathon as she sat at the other end of the table. Pam was the college aged sister of Jonathan's best friend, and Mom and Dad often warned him about her sometimes "questionable choices" and, in our family anyway, unacceptable opinions.

Meanwhile, I was gazing out the window, losing myself in the mountain views, as Aunt Carol smugly said, "Well, there you go then."

I was admiring the mountains and remembering many happy days there, camping, skiing, hiking, while just maybe, almost subconsciously, feeling a tad sympathetic toward the anti-war lot.

"Steve?" I turned to face my Aunt Carol as she directed her comments to me. "Don't you think you'd be better off going to BYU? I mean the University of Utah seems so radical these days."

"It'll be cheaper and easier to live at home and commute to the 'U.' I'm going on my mission after fall quarter."

"Carol," my dad said firmly but gently, "Steve's got a good head on his shoulders. Leave him alone."

"Yes, he's a good boy," said my grandfather. "He'll make us proud."

In 1971 it sometimes seemed like the world was turning upside down. My world, however, was the staid and stable world of Mormonism. It was kind of an unspoken taboo for good Mormons to participate in anything like an anti-war rally, and an often spoken taboo to participate in anything like the Free Love that was being proclaimed. I mostly spent 1971 inside my own little Mormon bubble. That year, Mormon Apostle Spencer W. Kimball, who was soon to be President of the Church, preached in General Conference, "There are said to be millions of perverts who have relinquished their natural affection and bypassed courtship and normal marriage relationships. This practice is spreading like a prairie fire and changing our world." He went on to

add, "To the great Moses these perversions were an abomination and a defilement, worthy of death. To Paul it was unnatural, unmanly, ungodly and a dishonorable passion of an adulterous nature and would close all the doors to the kingdom."

The summer after finishing high school in 1971, several friends and I had begun getting together for scripture study in anticipation of leaving on Mormon missions when we reached the required age of nineteen. I had been looking forward to my two years of missionary service for months.

As the time approached, I began my worthiness interviews in preparation for entering the Temple, receiving ordinances reserved for adult Mormons in good standing with the Church, and going on a mission. The Bishop, the leader of my congregation, or ward, asked the usual questions as I sat across from him at the big desk in his office in the church. "So, Steve, you want to become an elder, you want to go on a mission. Do you pay a full ten percent of your income to the Church?

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"Yes," I answered.

"Do you drink alcohol, coffee, tea, smoke, or use illegal drugs?"

"No."

"Do you fully support Church leaders?"

"I do."

"Have you ever had sex?"

"No."

"Do you masturbate?"
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This was the only one that was hard for me. Like all teenage boys, I had jacked off. A lot. But I had, with tremendous force of will, stopped in anticipation of my mission.

"Not anymore. It's been about six months," I answered truthfully.

Next I had to be interviewed by the stake president.

A stake is a geographical collection of wards (congregations) somewhat comparable to a Catholic or Episcopal diocese. All of the bishops and members within the boundaries of the stake are answerable to the stake president. Our Stake President had been the Bishop of our ward for several years and was also a close neighbor. He knew me and my family quite well.

As our mission calls began arriving in the mail, my friends and I became increasingly excited. We were all eager to know where we would be sent.

My two best friends and I were expecting our calls to arrive on Friday, December 10th. We decided to get together that afternoon after the mail had arrived.

I greeted the mailman at the door, eagerly skimming through the items he handed me, looking for the one addressed to Elder Steven Petersen. With the large, weighty envelope in hand, I nervously looked at my mother.

"Well, let's see where you're going. I'm so proud of you," she said through tears.

I tore open the envelope and read aloud, "Dear Elder Petersen: You are hereby called to be a missionary of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to labor in the Colombia Mission. Your presiding

officers have recommended you as one worthy to represent the Church of our Lord as a Minister of the Gospel."

When I finished reading, my mom and I hugged each other. I called my dad at work. My dad had told me that he felt I had a special mission to accomplish in this life. He repeated that over the phone. Next I called my friends. We three friends were taking a fourth friend, who was having a hard time deciding whether or not he would go on a mission, to wander around Temple Square in Salt Lake City that afternoon. Soon, we were planning on taking a non-Mormon friend of ours to tour the newly finished Ogden Temple before it was dedicated and closed to the public. We were already beginning our missionary work.

That cold December afternoon, we stood for a few minutes before Temple Square's Seagull Monument, built in remembrance of "The Miracle of the Gulls" in which waves of seagulls had descended and eaten the hordes of Mormon crickets that had been devouring the crops of the newly arrived pioneers.

Remembering the story, as told by a childhood Sunday school teacher, I said with a sense and tone of wonder, "And to think, The Lord brought those gulls all the way from the west coast to save His people."

"Uhh?" our Thinking about a Mission friend, whose dad was a history professor, shook his head, and looking at me with what almost seemed like pity, said, "Sorry to disappoint you but that's not true. Seagulls were here, eating crickets, long before we Mormons showed up. I can show you documentation if you want."

Crestfallen, all I could manage was, "Um, that's okay. You wouldn't lie about that."

It took a while for my feeling of disappointment, of loss, to fade.

Later, as we stood before the monument honoring some of the poorer pioneers who couldn't afford covered wagons and had pulled handcarts across the plains, the three of us who had just received our mission calls began to quietly sing the Mormon anthem about the journey west: "Come, come ye saints, no toil nor labor fear; But with joy wend your way... Do this, and joy your hearts will swell—All is well, all is well!"

Near the end of the month, we would be entering the Temple itself. As adolescents, we had only been allowed into the small part where they did baptisms for the dead but now, for the first time, we would be participating in Temple ordinances called Washing and Anointing and also, the Endowment. We weren't sure what to expect in the Temple but after that major rite of passage we would be wearing sacred underwear Mormons call Garments.

So, about a week later, my two buddies and I went to Beehive Clothing, the Garment store in Cottonwood Mall to figure out what size fit us best and whether we would want to buy them in cotton, bemberg, or nylon fabric. The store was in a small, lightly trafficked, below ground level, part of the mall. We entered the store and the attendant, a stout, elderly woman in her late sixties, greeted us.

"We're about to go through the Temple," I said.

"Well, congratulations!" she replied. "Where are you boys going on your missions?" After we told her, she looked us over and gave each of us a couple of sizes to try on and explained what people felt were advantages to each of the fabrics available. Of course, we knew about the sacred markings that were sewn into Garments.

The attendant explained, "These aren't real Garments—they have no markings, but you can decide what size is comfortable." She pointed to the changing rooms. We each entered a stall and pulled the curtain.

But when it came to actually putting on these dummy Garments, we were baffled. I'm sure all three of us had been in locker rooms with our dads, and other men, when they put their Garments back on after racquetball or a swim but that didn't mean we could do this, now. In those days, Garments only came in a one piece version. They were "briefs" that went to your knees, and undershirt, all in one. In the male version, there were precisely seven openings. One at the bottom of each leg, one at the end of each sleeve, a fairly large opening for the head, a standard underwear opening in the front for the purpose of urination, and a huge slit in the back so that the wearer could sit on a toilet, when necessary, without having to undress.

I was just standing there, puzzled, when I heard one of my buddies, in the next stall, say, "I don't know how to do this."

The third guy said, "I'm going in through the back, that's the biggest hole, but I can't figure out how to get it over both my head and my legs!"

I burst out laughing. "No way!"

The other two also cracked up and the attendant came over.

"Do you fellows need some help?" You could hear mirth in her question and soon she was giggling as she explained, through the curtains, that you had to take a side of the head opening in each hand, bunch up the Garments, put one foot at a time through that head opening and out through the proper leg, and then slide the Garment up your body until you could fit your hands and arms into the sleeves.

We were all roaring before the three of us could pronounce our task accomplished.

When the day came to go to the Temple, I felt I was ready—even with my limited knowledge. It isn't permitted for Mormons to talk

about much of what goes on inside but my Stake President had briefed me some. Still, I found parts of the ceremonies strange. In the Washing and Anointing, I was clothed in nothing but what seemed to be a sheet with a hole in it for my head. An elderly gentleman reached under the sheet, touching my bare skin and anointing parts of my body. He did not touch my genitals but his fingers came within inches. We dressed in white for the Endowment and carried with us a small package containing additional articles of clothing to be added during the ceremony, among them, a green apron, the only non-white item in the entire ensemble.

That was a long day, and as we passed from one room to another through the Temple, I was presented with much, including secret handshakes and potential punishments, that I could only assume must be symbolism that I just wasn't quite getting. I was sure however, that as I grew in the Gospel, I would come to understand it all completely. Of course some things, like the promise to sacrifice everything for the Church, seemed pretty straightforward.

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We entered the Mission Home across the street from the Church Office Building in downtown Salt Lake City on January 22nd, 1972. After saying good-bye to our families, we took our luggage to a dormitory with rows of bunk beds, then gathered in a large assembly room with rows of chairs. The President of the Mission Home stood up. "Welcome, missionaries. You are about to embark on the greatest experience of your lives up to this point. If any of you have any major sins that you have not yet confessed, make sure you see me as soon as possible. Also, there will be many new rules that you will be expected to obey. Those rules vary a little from one mission to another, but I imagine you already know that missionaries should never be alone. You will be assigned a missionary companion who will be with you

twenty-four hours a day. This companion should even be in a nearby room when you are using the bathroom. You should love each other as you love the Lord, and be strong partners in carrying Christ's message to the world."

A few days later, I was sent to the Language Training Mission (LTM) near Brigham Young University in Provo to begin two months of intense language training and religious instruction. Now, all Mormon missionaries, even those headed to English speaking missions, precede their actual proselyting with at least a month of training in what is now called the Missionary Training Center. From what I gather, other than the fact that not everyone is heard practicing a new language and that now, many are only eighteen, the experience is still very similar to what I experienced in the LTM. Within a short time after arrival, I was expected to speak only in Spanish with others whose target language was also Spanish. That made communication difficult, but we somehow got by. "Living Your Language" was a rule elevated almost to the level of a commandment that all church members are expected to obey.

Other than letters written on our off day, called Preparation Day (P-Day), we weren't allowed contact with the outside world. No newspapers. No phone calls, unless we had special permission. Our companion had to go with us if we left the LTM for any reason. Making arrangements to meet someone outside the LTM was strictly prohibited. Visitors were not allowed. Bed times and waking times were firm. Strict obedience to the rules was emphasized in ways unlike anything I had ever experienced. The biblical Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son was offered as an example, and we were told that to feel and be guided by the Spirit of God we must likewise be dutifully obedient.

After that particular lesson, which had been conducted in English, I asked my companion, shaking my head, "How would you feel if God commanded you to kill your son?" I was beginning to thoroughly internalize that message of Obedience in All Things; to incorporate it more completely than I ever had.

"Mmm, not sure I could do it," my companion answered with a casual shrug.

"Who does? Know for sure, I mean."

We switched to our fractured Spanish as we headed to the cafeteria for lunch.

While lining up at the back of the chow line, the words and tune of a familiar hymn ran through my mind, We are all enlisted till the conflict is o'er; Happy are we! Happy are we! And I was happy. I looked at my companion and smiled.

So, in the mornings I was hopping out of bed the second the alarm sounded at 6:00 a.m., because delaying until 6:01 would be an actual sin. Unlike, I think, most missionaries, past and present, I loved the isolation, the team solidarity, and the regimentation of the mission training experience. Our almost comical attempts to communicate in Spanish, and working together all day, helping each other study and memorize the lessons we would be giving to church investigators, drew us together. We were working so hard. Our days were plotted out for us and it seemed like we were all trying to do as we were told. I felt truly purposeful. It would turn out to be the last time, until I returned home to Utah on February 2nd, 1974, that I would feel at peace.

Nine of us arrived in Bogotá on the morning of March 29th. We were met at the airport by elders (missionaries) from the Mission Office. They recognized us from the photos they had been sent and

introduced themselves. "Welcome to Colombia, Elder Petersen," they said as they shook my hand.

The temperatures were pleasantly cool, because of the high altitude. Here the elders were all in suits. I already knew that in much hotter areas of the mission only slacks with a white shirt and tie were required. I stared out the window of our vehicle the whole way to the office. It was so green, but in some ways looked similar to home. There were skyscrapers and houses pressed against the foothills of tall mountains, though things didn't feel quite so nestled, so embraced. We passed by some horrible slums with shacks built out of plywood and corrugated tin.

"He's doing that in broad daylight!" I said, pointing to a man peeing on the side of the road.

"Wait till you see a beggar woman squat and take a dump," said one of the office elders. "You see some strange things here, but you'll find some good people to teach in these poor neighborhoods."

The Mission Office was in a very nice area. The large houses were attached to each other on the sides but had medium sized front lawns, one of which was being cut manually by a poorly dressed man wielding a machete while he knelt and worked his way across the lawn. I was amazed at how smooth and even he left the lawn behind him. The houses had two car garages and elegant front doors. The Mission Office was in one of these houses, which was where the office elders both lived and worked. As we walked through the door, I carefully set my bags down on the immaculately polished marble floor of the entry hall, which widened into a vestibule with a big desk. The Mission President and the rest of the office elders were there to greet us and show us around. The office elders had their bedrooms off to the left and the vestibule opened into a large living room with desks in it. The room

had a parquet floor and windows overlooking a good-sized, walled, backyard. The floors were all marble or wood except in the kitchen and laundry room, where the maid was running the washing machine, while scrubbing white shirts, with hard to remove stains, on a cement slab. There was a large dining room off of the kitchen and what was meant to be a TV, or family room, full of bunk beds for missionaries just there for short stays. They had us take naps before going to the Mission President's nearby home for lunch. The President's wife and their cook had a big meal prepared for us. Then we sat in the living room and took turns testifying to each other of our convictions. I noticed rain falling on the foliage in the atrium next to the living room. When it was my turn, I stood and bore my testimony. "I know this is the only true church and that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, and that he restored the true church to the earth. I know we have been called to spread this wonderful message to the world." I felt full of zeal, and was sure that my church was the only way to return to our Heavenly Father. I had felt the "burning in the bosom." Afterward, we walked back to the office. One by one we went into the President's personal office to be interviewed and given our assignments. He was a big man with a stern but nevertheless pleasant face and a firm handshake.

"Elder Petersen, I'm assigning you to Cali. It's a big city with about a million people. Elder Evans will be your companion. He's new to Cali as well. He's transferring from Armenia today. My Assistants will take you to the airport and give you the address of your house in Cali. I'm sure Elder Evans will be there when you arrive. He's from Salt Lake too, and will finish his mission in late August. I'm sure you'll make a good team. His picture's next to yours there on the board."

I looked at the picture and recognized my new companion immediately.

"I know him. Sort of..."

The President smiled. "Small world. Remember not to use his first name. He's Elder Evans now." And then reiterated, "I'm sure you'll make a great team."

I flew to Cali and gave the cab driver the address I had been given. There were deep potholes in the residential side streets of my new neighborhood. In spite of the darkness and few lights, the cab driver found the address among the rows of attached, stucco houses, pulled over and turned out the headlights. Elder Evans came out to greet me and help me in with my luggage. He had removed his tie and had undone the top button of his characteristic white shirt. I gulped when I glanced from his face to his Adam's apple and the dimple below it, then again into his smiling eyes. They were blue and sincere. He had light brown hair and was six feet tall, with a slender, muscular build. He had powerful shoulders and arms.

"Welcome to Cali," Elder Evans said as he gave me a hug. His hands were strong but felt gentle as he patted me on the back. "I'm new here too, so we'll learn our way around together. I did have a couple of the elders I know, who've been in Cali awhile, show me around this afternoon, though." He looked at me warmly. "Where are you from, Elder Petersen?"

"Salt Lake. The same part you're from. I recognize you from high school."

He looked at me quizzically, but with a guilty expression. "Sorry, I don't remember you. Did we know each other?"

"Not really. You were a senior when I was a sophomore. I just remember your face."

Our high school had nearly 3,000 students in grades 10 through 12. We had overlapped only one of our three years there. I had been a tenth

grader, a sophomore, who didn't stand out from the crowd. I remembered him as a twelfth grader, a senior, who was an elected student officer, on the football and wrestling teams, and involved with several other student groups. He had been hard for me to miss. Not only had he been involved in so many extracurricular activities, but also I remember noticing him in the crowded hallways at school simply because I thought he was absolutely gorgeous.

Of the approximately 1,500 male students in our school that year, there had only been about six that I found really exciting to look at. And here I was, assigned as a missionary companion to one of them. I would have to be careful to keep my thoughts in order. We were sometimes reminded that even if we didn't do anything, it was a sin to "lust in our hearts."

Although I had never spoken to Randall Evans when we were at school, nor interacted with him in any way, I remember thinking, based on my observations, that he must be a really nice guy. He seemed to have a habit of going out of his way to talk to people that most others ignored. I kind of wished he'd notice me, but those "usually ignored" people seemed to be mostly other seniors. He'd probably had a class with them at some point. Sometimes the popular people can be "stuck-up" or "full of themselves," but Randy, Elder Evans to me now, had never given that impression. I suppose I had been mildly infatuated, but it was now almost three years since I had last seen him, and I had scarcely given him a second thought since that school year had ended.

As Elder Evans and I entered the house where we would be living, he introduced me to the Colombian couple who lived there and were our new landlords. They would be providing us with our meals as well. These were standard living arrangements in our mission.

"Nice to meet you. Our daughter is putting her kids to bed. You'll meet her tomorrow," the husband said.

My new companion looked at me. "Follow me, Elder Petersen. I'll show you our room."

There was a small desk, a wardrobe, and two beds covered with mosquito netting, something I had never seen before.

Elder Evans took the net off his bed. "I hate sleeping under these things, plus the mosquitoes don't really bother me."

Cali, and the mission field in general, were a culture shock. Stepping off the plane from Bogotá I had immediately felt enveloped in humidity, and was amazed at how hot it still was even though it was after dark. The Cali airport was quite big and modern, and I had been surprised to see some enormous, dead cockroaches on the stairs leading to the front of the airport. Cali had some very nice neighborhoods with rows of beautiful townhouses, but the area I was assigned to had lots of unpaved roads and rundown houses. Very different from the mild temperatures and pleasant neighborhood of the Mission Office in Bogotá. I wanted to ignore my surroundings and lose myself in the work, partly out of guilt for feeling put off by the area, partly LTM indoctrination.

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We missionaries came from varied backgrounds and places. The whole time I was in Colombia there were only four or five of us from my old high school. Many came from places other than Utah, and a few even came from outside the United States. We had missionaries from Canada, Venezuela, Peru, Uruguay, and Chile. There was even one assigned to Cali when I got there who was Colombian. I was never

quite sure why he was assigned to the mission he was from, as that almost never happened, but there he was.

I was immediately reinfatuated with Elder Evans, but now in my zeal, I wanted him to be not merely beautiful and nice, but perfect.

We had arrived in Cali on a Wednesday, the normal day off for missionaries in Colombia at that time. It was Holy Week, the Wednesday before Easter.

Thursday morning, at precisely 6:00 a.m., my alarm went off and Elder Evans sat up with a start. "Ugh, give me a minute," as he flopped back down.

He got up almost an hour later, to find me showered, dressed—with a tie, sitting at the desk, reading *The Book of Mormon*.

As we began exploring, Elder Evans asked me, "Have you heard of Semana Santa?"

"Yeah, I don't know much about it though." I shook my head. "It seems kind of weird."

"See those giant crosses on the mountaintop?" He looked up and pointed with his lips, something I had already noticed Colombians do. "I don't know what's *Good* about it but on Friday lots of people will crawl all the way to the crosses on their hands and knees, begging God to forgive their sins."

"They crawl?" I was appalled.

"Catholics—they love blood and guts in the Great and Abominable Church." He stooped to pick up a bottle cap from the dusty sidewalk. Positioning it between his thumb and middle finger, he snapped his fingers and sent the bottle cap flying a hundred feet. "The missionaries here in Cali worked yesterday so they could take Friday off instead.

They've planned an outing to Popayán to see the Good Friday processions there—pretty impressive, I hear. It should be fun."

Elder Evans turned in time to see what might have been a flicker of disapproval in my eyes.

"Aren't we going to work?" I asked. "I thought our traveling counted as our day off."

"No, it doesn't. Besides, after I got here, before you did, I worked. We didn't just goof off the whole time. I need a day off. Don't you? P-Day in the LTM is Saturday, right? You don't want to wait until next Wednesday, do you?"

"Yeah, actually I do."

He looked at me earnestly. "Look, the parade might be a little morbid, or whatever, but it'll be *really* interesting. You may never get another chance to see something like that. Besides, it'll be good for you to get to know us all."

"But I'm here to be a missionary. That seems kind of lax considering we just got here."

Elder Evans was quiet for a second and then, gazing into the distance, muttered, seemingly as much to himself as to me, "Well, I guess you can stay in Cali with Elder Hernández." He turned. "You know, the Colombian elder I told you about. He doesn't want to go either."

"Okay. One other thing. Shouldn't we be speaking Spanish?"

His eyes widened. "Oh wow, I hear the LTM has gotten stricter than it used to be, but you're so uptight. Mellow out!"

The Anglo missionaries almost always spoke English to each other, and although at the time there were no specific rules saying they had to speak Spanish or couldn't trade their day off and go on an outing, their whole attitude seemed kind of lackadaisical to me. P-Day was supposed to end at 5:00 p.m. and the missionaries returned from Popayán much later than that. To Elder Evans and most of the other veteran missionaries, rules were just a guideline. To me, that seemed like heresy. The word used by the veterans for missionaries like me was "pious." It wasn't meant as a compliment.

The Mission President, along with his wife and children, had arrived in Colombia the previous July to set up new mission headquarters, as Colombia had just been separated from the Colombia-Venezuela mission. He seemed to be trying to gradually tighten things up a bit. It was impossible to replicate the regimentation of the Language Training Mission, but he seemed to be trying to get us a little closer to that. The Zone Leader, over all his fellow missionaries in Cali, and who was soon to go to Bogotá to be Assistant to the President, was actually impressed by my efforts to continue speaking Spanish to the other missionaries. He told the Mission President, who thought it was a fantastic idea.

We missionaries were supposed to love the Colombian people, all the other missionaries, and especially the one companion we had been assigned.

Elder Evans, my assigned companion, my "comp," often seemed frustrated with me. Our relationship became very strained.

Three or four days after our arrival, he gave me a dirty look when I spoke to him in Spanish. "We speak enough Spanish with the Colombians for you to practice. I don't mean to be a grouch, but you'll

get the hang of it without forcing it on me all the time. Can't we just relax and talk to each other? Maybe laugh a little? Have fun?"

"Okay," I said, but I couldn't think of anything else to say right then.

I felt bad. I really did want to feel close to him like I had my companion in the LTM.

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A few days later, about 11:00 in the morning, we were out knocking on doors in search of potential converts to teach. We were both sweating profusely; I had, in fact, noticed beads of sweat forming on my forearms only minutes after we had left the house two hours earlier. Suddenly Elder Evans said, "I've had it for this morning. Let's go back. I want to shower again."

I didn't say anything, but I could tell he was irritated, that he felt I was judging him. And I was. I felt disappointed by him. It's hard not to feel lonely as a missionary when you know your companion is angry with you. But underneath those feelings of disappointment and loneliness, I still liked him, which only made me feel all the more alone.

When I prayed I felt nothing. For the first time in my life, I became depressed. I began to feel inadequate, a feeling I had not often felt, and which had never tormented me like it was beginning to now. For the first time, I felt homesick. Actually, my whole heart felt sick. I began to obsessively worry about things. Life seemed hard. I felt abandoned by God. I began to worry about my mental health, to obsess about the possibility there might be something seriously wrong with me. I thought of my younger siblings at home, how much I loved and missed them, and how powerless I was to protect them from life's trials. How unable I seemed to make myself feel happy and purposeful. This stress

and loneliness began to show me an inner vulnerability of which, until then, I had been unaware. Life before my mission had been happy, and for the most part, easy. It was amazing how quickly my mental state deteriorated now. My thoughts became a vicious circle. I felt lonely, homesick, and depressed; which made me feel inadequate, which began to become an irrational obsession I couldn't control, which in turn made me even more depressed.

Five or six weeks after I'd arrived, Elder Evans sat me down for a talk. "You know, Elder," he explained, "I'm not as bad a missionary as you think I am. I've been doing this for a while now, and this mission has always been a more relaxed place than you and some of the other new guys seem to think it should be. I'm not perfect and I don't obey all of the little rules, but I obey the big ones and I do my job. I don't appreciate you judging me like you do. I want to be friends with the people I work with."

I felt horrible. It didn't seem right for me to be so self-righteous. I had become depressed, but I was still trying hard not to be less than I could be. We were sometimes told that a mission was a microcosm of life—that if we are failures here, there was a good chance we'd always be failures. I wanted to do God's will. I wanted to feel enthusiastic again.

I tried to articulate what I was feeling. "I know I shouldn't be judgmental, and I actually do like you. I'm just not sure what I'm supposed to do here."

"Nobody can be perfect," he said with a shrug. "You'll drive both yourself and me crazy trying."

I looked at him intently. "In the LTM they told us to obey every rule to the letter of the law, that God was testing us and wanted to see if we could be trusted and were worthy of His Spirit. More than anything I want to prove that I'm worthy. But nobody here seems worried about things like that." There was real desperation creeping into my voice. "I want to feel close to you. They tell us God wants me to love you, but what about *Obedience* in every way? What am I supposed to do?" I almost teared up as I stood and turned my back to him.

Elder Evans came over and gave me a hug. That was kind of a custom in our mission. After every Zone Conference or District meeting, the elders would give each other hugs. We would shake hands with the sister missionaries as per regulation. Elder Evans hadn't hugged me since that first evening together back in March.

"I'll be better," he said. "I promise. But I can't be perfect. I won't promise to even try for that. I guess you'll just have to put up with me. Let's be good to each other. We'll work things out. I know we can."

I hugged him back but quickly pulled away because I was becoming aroused.

I looked at him and felt a rush of emotion, a mixture of relief, longing, and desire. "You're right. Love is what really matters."

I began to defer to his decisions as Senior Companion without the slightest hint of disapproval. I had been getting up at 6:00 a.m. because that had been the rule in the LTM, but now I started sleeping until 6:30, which was the time allowed according to our current mission rules. Elder Evans started getting up on time at 6:30, at least most mornings, and began practicing our memorized church investigator discussions with me. I tried to lighten up and joke around a little bit. Smiling wasn't against the rules; I had just stopped because of the depression I had begun to feel. Elder Evans quit suggesting we come home for lunch earlier than we were supposed to. We still didn't always make it back by 5:00 on our off days though.

Monday mornings were when we had our weekly District meetings. There were six elders in our section of Cali, La Base area and beyond—our District. These meetings were to discuss the last week's accomplishments and set new goals. The District Leader customarily gave us an inspirational message and we would all bear our testimonies. We always closed with prayer and *abrazos*, (hugs).

After one of these meetings, Elder Smith, our other "greeny" offered the closing prayer and we were starting the round of *abrazos*, I hugged him and then said with a smile, "Elder Smith, if I had as much time left on my mission as you do, I'd slit my wrists."

He looked at me for a fraction of a second in stunned surprise. My smile was starting to fade just as his mouth opened into a wide grin and he roared with laughter.

That line, about slitting wrists, was something veteran missionaries often said to us newbies, but Elder Smith had arrived exactly *one week* after I had. And I was "Elder Pious!"

With everyone else laughing, I looked at Elder Evans, who had *never* spoken that line to me. Now, he smiled warmly, walked over, and gave me a big hug.

We all went to a corner store for snacks and chattered away, "gaily," in English. I didn't even mind. Well, maybe just a little. But I enjoyed myself.

Bright and early another morning, Elder Evans, leaning his right arm on the desk in our room and posing as an investigator, answered the memorized question I had just asked him with, "Does it matter? I'm sure your prophet, Joseph Smith, is sitting on the sun right now with Buddha, Jesus, and Bochica, all wondering what we're so worried about down here!"

After a brief pause, I answered with, "Well, I don't imagine they're on the Sun but if Buddha and Bochica are with Jesus, it means they converted to Mormonism. Now, let's get back to the discussion."

This little exchange was in Spanish, of course.

Elder Evans chuckled, and said in English. "Not a bad come-back. Your Spanish is getting better. That's an answer I actually got once, by the way, though that particular investigator did not join The Church." He turned his head and scooted away from the desk. "Okay enough. Private study now." He stood up, went over and flopped onto his bed, leaning his back against the adjacent wall, while letting his bare feet dangle over the other side. He reached under the scriptures he had left up by his pillow and pulled out a book I'd seen him with. He saw me watching so I asked, "What're you reading?

Missionaries aren't supposed to read secular literature so Elder Evans held up *Pride and Prejudice* a bit hesitantly.

Without hesitation or judgment, I exclaimed, "Whoa, I'm impressed!"

He squirmed on the bed, trying to get more comfortable. "Why? Do you think I'm just a dumb jock? There's a lot you don't know about me." He had a slight scowl on his face but then switched to a broad grin, flashing his perfect pearly whites. He modeled his profile and laughed. "I'm more than just a pretty face, y'know!"

"Yeah, I probably do know that," I said with a little smirk. It'd been a long time but I thought I remembered noticing in our old high school yearbook that a couple of his extracurricular activities had been National Honor Society and Concert Choir.

"Did you ever have Mrs. Wilcox? Best teacher, ever!"

"She was great. I had her for AP English..." I trailed off, watching a lizard climb the wall toward the only window in the room..."in another life."

We were beginning to really like each other. My overall mood vastly improved, but now I started to sometimes agonize over what I was feeling for my companion. Although I hid it fairly well, I would occasionally get depressed; obsessing, brooding, about homosexuality. I added fear that it was a real part of me to my new list of vulnerabilities. I had been aware of homosexual feelings ever since reaching puberty, but God wouldn't allow such a horrible flaw to be a permanent part of who I was, would he? I had always assumed it to be a passing fancy that would, by now, be behind me. I couldn't be a homosexual. I remember praying when I was fifteen, asking God not to let that happen. I was confident he wouldn't. I also remember later, having seen pictures printed in the media of gay activists. Their liberation movement had been garnering coverage in magazines like Time and Newsweek. Theater 138 in Salt Lake had put on the gay-themed play The Boys in the Band. I especially remembered a picture of a group of actors posed for promotion of the movie version of the play. As I looked into the photographed faces of those actors and imagined the real people they represented, I thought, I'm not like you.

Right before finishing high school I had made several trips to the University of Utah campus for various reasons—occasionally academic—tests, etcetera, and a couple of times with a friend who was already a student there. The university newspaper sometimes had articles about gay events or gay liberation. It seemed to me that Spencer W. Kimball was right; this practice was a threatening wild fire.

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Most of the time, Elder Evans and I were now enjoying life together. As I mentioned, I was pretty good at hiding my occasional bouts of obsessing depression. Good at hiding them from most people, that is, Elder Evans could tell when I felt down.

"What's up with the frowny face?" he asked one day before we left the house.

"I'm not frowning," I said, sitting down on my bed.

"But you want to. Are you pissed off at me?" He sat down at my side.

"No, no. Things are fine."

"Yeah, right. I guess I'm getting to know you well enough to tell when you're lying and when you're in a bad mood. You are mad at me, aren't you? I know I'm not perfect."

"I promise, I'm not mad at you." I stopped and looked up at the ceiling before going on. "I don't know how to explain what I'm feeling. Once in a while I'm just in this black mood." I looked at him. "It feels really weird and I don't know what to do. I've never experienced this before. Not until I got here to Colombia. It started when I got depressed, but I'm not depressed now."

He was listening.

I continued, "It's just that sometimes I start worrying about stupid things and I can't stop."

"Like what?"

I hesitated. "Oh, I don't know. Different things. Like the fact that I feel this way. What's wrong with me? It feels like I'm not good enough. Like I'm flawed."

"Everybody's flawed. Get over it." He smiled. "I should slap you like the comedians do. Then you can snap out of it and say, 'Thanks, I needed that.' Like in the comedy routines."

I laughed. "Thanks, I needed that!"

"Seriously though, I'm sorry you got depressed in the first place. And I'm sorry I helped that to happen."

"That's not your fault. It's the LTM's." My eyes opened wide, "I can't believe I just said that! Mine 'not to reason why,' mine 'but to do and die.' Right?"

He rolled his eyes. "Before that 'do and die' bit, did I just hear a Freudian slip?" He raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, then changed his tone. "Besides being perfect, is there anything I can do to help?"

"Oh, I don't expect perfection in you anymore," I laughed. "Just myself."

"So I'm beyond hope?" He laughed too, as he stood and picked up the bag containing our teaching materials.

"Yeah, pretty much, but I still like you." I paused. "Don't worry about me. I'm a lot better than I was. I've never been a moody person, until now. I'm sure in a while I'll be completely back to my old self." Although what I had said was true, I left out the parts about my homosexual thoughts and fears.

"You've developed an overactive guilt-complex," he told me as we left the house. "I hope you're back to normal soon. Maybe we're more alike than we think. Once, during my last year of high school I felt overcome by a sudden feeling of despair. I prayed and felt a wonderful feeling of comfort, of being loved. Nothing more, just that God loved me. It was enough. Just what I needed at that moment."

We started down the street heading toward the neighborhood where we were currently going door to door. Cali surrounded us. We heard music on radios and stereos, coming from open windows in practically every house we passed. No American music. The songs were all in Spanish. We weren't supposed to listen to music, except on our off days, but the sounds of romantic ballads or the lively rhythms of *cumbia* greeted us everywhere. I began to sing along as pop-star Jeanette plaintively sang her song, "*Soy rebelde*" on the radio, about being unloved and rebellious.

Elder Evans laughed. "You, a rebel? Those lyrics don't describe you at all. I should be singing that song." We looked at each other as we both sang, but simultaneously looked away when we got to the part about being unloved.

After about an hour, we stopped at a corner shop for a cold soda. Elder Evans held out his hand as the shopkeeper took the caps off the bottles. He was always seeing how far he could flip bottle caps; they could be found lying on the roads and sidewalks all over our neighborhood.

Later in the morning as the door we had just knocked on opened, we were greeted by the smells of kerosene, cooking meat, rice, plantains, and beans.

"I can't talk to you now, I'm fixing lunch," the woman at the door told us while looking at Elder Evans.

"Can we come back later?" I asked.

"Yes, yes." She continued looking at Elder Evans as she shut the door.

"Well, I guess it's time for us to head home for lunch too," said Elder Evans. "And more *plátanos*. I am *so* flippin' sick of *plátanos!*"

He then looked at me with a grin. "No! No! Don't make me eat them," he said, holding his hands up in front of his mouth to ward off imaginary, flying, magical, plantains zooming in.

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Zone Conference day arrived. The Mission President and his two Assistants always came to town for those. There was a rumor that the President would be giving us new rules. We took a bus to an affluent part of Cali where the meeting was to be held and walked the last few blocks past comfortable townhouses with small, manicured lawns separating homes from sidewalks, past palm trees and bougainvillea peeking over garden walls on corner houses. My "comp" stopped for a second, to scoop up a bottle cap and drop some change into a beggar's tin. When we arrived at our destination, Elder Evans sat on the back row of seats with some other veteran missionaries. I sat nearer the front, but we weren't far from each other. This was, after all, just the living room of a rented house that we used for a church. It was large enough that we were able to convert this main room into a chapel with a small portable pulpit and about four rows of folding chairs and portable benches. The other rooms in the house were used as Sunday school classrooms.

The Mission President got up and began to outline new rules. "You missionaries are seeing way too many movies. From now on I don't want you to see movies that I haven't preapproved."

The back row began to murmur. Most of the time, an off day for the Cali Zone consisted of basketball in the morning and a movie in the afternoon—American movies, with Spanish subtitles. Occasionally, we would react to things said in the movies before the people around us had time to finish reading the subtitles. Perhaps those movies were a touch of home.

I turned around and looked at the back row. Elder Bateman was scowling. Elder Nichols was grumbling to my companion, who looked stunned, frustrated, and anxious. He glanced at me, then turned and I heard him whisper, "I need to talk to my companion."

He came over and sat down next to me. "This is going to be hard. I sometimes need to forget that I'm a missionary for just a little while."

I patted him on the knee. "We can work this out."

The President looked at my companion. "Questions?"

"No. Sorry."

"Another thing," the Mission President continued, "I know some of you are bothered by the poverty here in Colombia. Some of you have asked me what you can do to help. I want you to know that you're already doing it. Not only does the Church have a new program that involves sending out health missionaries who, by the way, will be here to help both you and the locals, but nothing can help more than sharing the Gospel. That light and truth will do more than anything else possibly could to improve the lives of these people, both spiritually and temporally. As people feel the Spirit of God, as they accept the Gospel and receive the Holy Ghost, their lives will be blessed and the whole country will benefit. You don't need to feel obligated to give money to beggars. Your money has been set apart for use by the Lord's missionaries. Most of you are being supported here by your parents. Often it's a tremendous sacrifice for them. Don't squander those resources."

After the meeting as we mingled and chattered, I noticed my "comp" with some others who had decidedly defiant looks on their faces. Elder Evans was very quiet on the way back to our place. When

we got there and entered our room I said, "Okay, out with it, Elder. What's on your mind?"

Elder Evans puffed out his chest and smiled. "Just you remember who's Senior Companion. Besides, I can beat you up."

Obviously he was joking around, trying to avoid the topic, or at least postpone it.

I sat on the edge of my bed and grinned. "No you can't."

He pounced on me, and I was pinned in two seconds.

I was as big as he was, and maybe even as strong, but his skill way outmatched mine. I hadn't been on the wrestling or football teams in high school.

"See?" He laughed. He got up and started to gather the mosquito netting that had been pulled down.

"No fair, I was already sitting down!"

"All right, let's start from standing positions."

He pushed me toward my bed. It still only took him about four seconds to pin me. He relaxed, holding my hands off to the side with his hands, and he stretched out on top of me.

He whispered in my ear, "I'm pretty good, huh?"

"Way good," I laughed.

I felt his penis starting to get hard and realized with horror that mine was too. He got up. He glanced at me with a flustered, embarrassed look, then turned and walked out of the room, going into the nearby bathroom.

He came back, composure regained. We both acted as if nothing had happened. I really hoped he had been too preoccupied with his own arousal to notice mine.

"I need to tell you something," Elder Evans said as he sat down on the desk chair. "Some of my old friends and I decided that we're taking tomorrow off and going to a movie. I knew most of you Junior Companions wouldn't want to go, so instead of dragging you along, we thought we'd leave you behind to pair up and do missionary work or whatever you want to do. That way you can all have clear consciences." He looked concerned. "Please don't take this personally, Elder Petersen. You can come with us if you want. I don't feel like talking about it now, but we'll talk in a day or two."

"Okay." I stood up, trying to remain expressionless.

"What's the point? What the...the *heck* does all of this have to do with being good missionaries? What's wrong with the way we've always done things?"

"I don't have the answer to that. My understanding is that God wants us to obey his chosen leaders."

He glared at me.

"Sorry," I said, "you're right. Let's talk in a day or two. Elder, I still like you."

He smiled that gorgeous smile. "And I like you."

I melted. "Please God," I silently prayed, "don't let me feel this!"

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The next day as we headed over to Elder Nichols' and Elder Smith's place to make our companion switch for the day, we practically

stumbled over a young woman sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk with her face turned down, almost as if trying to bury it in her lap. She had dirty, blond hair and dirty, ragged clothes. Her daughter, who appeared to be about a year and a half old, was staring at us and holding on to her mother's torn blouse. The little girl was filthy.

We stopped and simultaneously reached into our pockets. Elder Evans gave the young woman all the money he had with him. She barely looked up as we offered it to her.

"What?" he looked at me as we walked on. "That baby reminded me of my niece. I couldn't help it."

"Did I say anything? I gave her money too."

"The 'Prez' said we shouldn't feel obligated. He didn't say we absolutely *couldn't*. It's my parents' money and they can afford a little to help the poor. Besides, I'm on my way to break a real rule."

I put my hand on his arm and we stopped. "Just so you know, I am judging you, and what I see is a good man." In an effort to lighten the mood I continued, "I suppose that one-legged guy you gave to yesterday reminded you of your uncle?"

"Oh shut up," he laughed. "Now I'll have to borrow money from Elder Nichols for the movie."

"You're right. I've only got enough for bus fare, and I wouldn't loan you movie money even if I had it."

"I know. You're a swine." We both laughed.

Those were the days before cash machines. When we needed money, we would go to a bank the Church used and cash a check drawn from our accounts in the States that our parents put money into. The bank was glad to give us pesos for our dollars, and right after our check

cashing was about the only time we carried much money. We were constantly on the lookout for pick-pockets.

That day was a comedy of errors as "greenies" Elder Smith, and I paired up. They weren't supposed to call new missionaries greenies, but often did.

Our work area that day was in one of the poorest parts of the city. Except for the busiest thoroughfares, the streets were unpaved and sidewalks non-existent. The houses were mere shacks, often with dirt floors; lighting usually consisted of a bare light bulb dangling from a wire. Buses jolted forward on bumpy, dirt roads.

We were giving a missionary discussion, with our book open behind our small Velcro board with its illustrations, just in case we got flustered and forgot our lines. I recited as well as I could to the investigator, "In his vision of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith asked the Savior which of the churches he should join. Joseph was told he must join none of them. Why do you suppose Jesus told him that?"

I didn't understand the response. I put my face down and whispered to Elder Smith, "What did he say?"

"I don't know. Just ask the next question."

The father of the family then turned to Elder Smith and asked, "Does the prophet Joseph Smith have the same surname as you?"

Both Elder Smith and I understood that question. He answered, "Yes, but I'm not a descendant."

When we finished the discussion, we were invited to return another day to give the next lesson so we left feeling all right, and laughed at our ineptitude on the way to Elder Smith's place, where we were going to meet our companions and switch back.

When we got to Elder Smith's and Elder Nichols' place, Elder Evans put his arm around my shoulder and said, "I'm glad to see you smiling." He pulled me close, leaned in, and kissed the side of my head. I felt embarrassed, but was relieved to see that no one seemed bothered. Since he could be so casual about it, I guessed that his feelings for me must be only platonic after all. His earlier arousal had merely been a physical reaction, nothing emotional. Everything now seemed innocent, light-hearted, joking. God wouldn't let anything bad happen, and for the moment, all seemed right with the world.

As we headed back to our own place, Elder Evans again put his arm around my shoulder and said as we walked toward the street where we had to catch our bus, "Sorry, I know sometimes I'm a disappointment. I guess we're opposite ends of the spectrum, but both imperfect, maybe? Each flawed in our own way?" I looked at him and he winked.

I smiled and pushed him away. "Are you making fun of me?"

"Yes. You and your overactive conscience. You do need to mellow out, but by the way, I'm glad that you're not perfect."

"I still wish you were!" I laughed.

The fact that he was making light of my obsessions wasn't hurtful; for the moment it was a relief, and he seemed to sense that. He usually knew when teasing was a good thing and when it wasn't. It was a day for letting off steam.

I had regained the ability to laugh and be a person, rather than just a missionary robot, although I still desperately wanted to be what I assumed God expected me to be.

As we got onto the bus Elder Evans said, "If it's okay with you I'd rather wait till tomorrow to finish talking about today."

We sat down on the only empty seat and I began tapping my foot to the sound of *cumbia* playing on the sound system. Our arms touched. We looked at each other and smiled. I waited a second before moving my arm.

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In the morning there was an air of expectancy, but he postponed our talk again, until lunch time. I realized he must have something more to say than just that he was sick of rules, but when we talked I was in for a surprise.

"I'm going to tell you something I've never admitted to anyone before," he said. He was standing near the door of our room with his back to me. He turned, looked into my eyes, and then continued as he looked away, "Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here. I'm so unsure about everything. I'm not sure the Church is true. I never have been, but as time goes by, the less sure I become. I'm sure God loves me, but I'm not sure this is the one and only true Church." He looked at me. "Why am I even telling you this?" He looked down.

I didn't quite know what to say. I'd never seriously doubted the Church. "Your mission hasn't convinced you at all then?"

"No. I'm more unsure now than I was when I left." He looked at me with such longing.

I was desperate to put life back into a nice, neat package. I walked over and put my arms around him. "I'm sure. Lean on me."

He stroked my hair and let out a muffled sob.

# Jeff Laver

This, of course, gave me more to think about. What if the "Miracle of the Gulls" wasn't a miracle after all? Why hadn't God strengthened Elder Evans' belief after almost two years of missionary service? Wasn't certainty supposed to be a blessing for righteousness? Was Elder Evans not righteous enough?

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One night, a few days later, I awoke with a start. Elder Evans was there.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"You yelled, 'No!'"

"I did? Oh, yeah." I rolled over and faced the wall. "What if you're right? About the Church." He lay down next to me, on his back.

"Go away," I said.

He went back to his bed on the other side of the room.

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The next morning I apologized for waking him and being so ornery.

"Yeah, I should kick your butt." He glanced at me.

"I dare you!"

We wrestled and I pinned him, but it was pretty obvious he wasn't really trying. I was sitting on his stomach, holding down both of his wrists.

He looked up at me and said, "You know, Elder, you're great, I can't believe I don't remember you from high school."

"You were a big time senior. I was a wallflower sophomore. What's to remember?"

He pulled his wrist out from under my hand and took my chin between his thumb and fingers. "Just you. I'm glad to know you now." He smiled and laughed a little. "Although at first, I was mad at you a lot of the time!"

"I was a jerk."

"Just self-righteous. But sometimes it's hard not to feel that way when you have strong beliefs and feel your comrades don't measure up."

I felt a nervous tingle in my stomach and realized we were staring at each other. I looked away and got up quickly.

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The Mormon Church was still new in Colombia. We had no wards or stakes, and baptisms were few when compared to say, Mexico. Cali was fertile ground. There was kind of a race to see whether Bogotá or Cali would get the first stake, although Bogotá was almost certain to win. It's Colombia's biggest city, and at the time, there were nine branches, or small congregations, of the church there. Cali is Colombia's third largest city, and had seven branches. The second largest, Medellín, only had three branches.

Elder Evans and I baptized two complete families, and a couple of single people. Great success for that time, even in Cali. One of the singles was a young woman about our age whose family didn't join, but supported her decision. The other was a young guy a little older than we were. We were now considered a model companionship. A good blend of the more freewheeling days, and the new regimentation. Elder Evans and I were having success, and had become the best of

buddies. When he wanted to break the rules, I'd say what I thought, but would defer to his decision as Senior Companion. He would listen and compromise. It was clear to me that Randall Evans was one of those rare people with an extraordinarily heightened ability to feel compassion and empathy. It was just a natural, inherent part of who he was. He also had a bit of the rebel in him, a trait that can be good or bad, depending on the circumstances and rationale involved. Once in a while, he could also be a little impulsive. I more than liked him.

I was conflicted about my feelings. We were supposed to love our companions, but clearly, some of what I felt crossed the line. It wasn't just love of one's fellow man, or the bonds of camaraderie and shared experience. It felt...romantic?

It wasn't terribly unusual for elders to horse around a bit. A little friendly pushing, shoving, and wrestling, once in a while. I liked it best when it wasn't a group activity. Just Elder Evans and me. It was intimate. I felt horribly guilty when I would start something and end up sexually aroused. I tried to convince myself that wasn't the result I was seeking.

Missionary companionships, or pairings, usually didn't last longer than three or four months, often less. We never knew when we would be transferred to a new area, or assigned a new companion, but when August came, Elder Evans and I knew for sure that our companionship was nearly over. He was going home toward the end of the month. We had already baptized all of our promising investigators and Elder Evans was losing interest in missionary work.

I couldn't blame him for being "trunky," although I resolved that when my time came, I would keep pushing until the last second. He told me his doubts were growing continually stronger and I was feeling doubt myself.

One afternoon he piped up with, "We don't have any appointments, and I just can't get motivated to go door to door. Let's go to a movie."

"We can't do that! Today's a work day! And there aren't any movies the President's approved."

"No shit," he said with an amused look.

"Elder!"

"Oops! Shouldn't have said that out loud. But, so what? You used to hear way worse every day at school. Look, I know you're still trying to be 'pious,' but I'm going home soon and today I just can't face another afternoon of trying to get people interested in a church I'm not sure I believe in myself." He looked at me as I shook my head, then he continued, "You're my best friend and I'm asking you to do this for me." A fleeting look of guilt on his face and then, "I'm also your Senior Companion and so, I'm going to make you do it. You don't have to feel guilty. It's not your fault."

"I go under protest," I said grimly.

"Come on, relax and have some fun!"

Suddenly, that's what I wanted. "You know, I think I'll do just that! You're my best friend too, even if you are a bad influence." I gave him a mock glare.

He laughed.

On the bus ride into the city center we had to stand, holding the hand rails to keep from falling into the people around us as the bus lurched to and fro. A woman sitting near us openly nursed her baby. Elder Evans didn't seem to notice that, but gave me a mischievous grin as he shuffled his feet and practically started dancing in the aisle as *cumbia* music played.

"See? This is fun," Elder Evans said as we hopped off the bus. "What'll you ever do without me?"

I rolled my eyes, but with a smile, and then... "Ah...air-conditioning!" as we walked into the cinema.

A part of me was actually jealous that Elder Evans was going home. I knew I would miss him and that was part of the problem right there. In a way, I wanted to go with him. But partly I felt relieved, glad he was leaving, glad to have the temptation removed so I wouldn't have to keep repenting for my lustful thoughts. We were told these were supposed to be the best two years of our lives up to this point. And in some ways, these nearly five months had been the best—and also the worst. I couldn't bring myself to accept what I was feeling for Elder Evans. I had also seen other inner vulnerabilities. And, there was this new uncertainty. When talking to each other, Elder Evans and I only occasionally mentioned our doubts about the Church. Our brief conversations on that topic felt like breaking a taboo. Mormons are usually good at pretending that all is well, that their lives are happy, their faith unfailing, and that their trials always strengthen them.

After the movie we went to *La Librería*, the downtown bookstore/ice cream shop.

"You know, Elder? I sometimes have doubts too, but I don't want to talk about that," I said almost smugly as we sat next to each other on the way home.

He gave me a questioning look, but then smiled. "We had fun though, didn't we?"

"Yeah." I gave him a playful bump with my shoulder. "And I really will miss you."

A strange fear nudged my soul...fear of both his presence and his absence. This, alongside my doubt.

And why was I so afraid of my doubt? It was partly because I had grown up deeply committed to my church, and partly because the Language Training Mission experience had made me feel very personally invested in the missionary ideal. It was the idea of going home a failure and facing the rest of my life. It was the thought of betraying my family. Not just my parents, but also my pioneer ancestors. It was the whole concept of uncertainty. Mormonism supposedly offered security and certainty in an insecure and uncertain world. My sexuality terrified me. Life as a homosexual seemed very uncertain and insecure.

The day before Elder Evans left, we once again played basketball. We came home to shower. I took off my sweaty shirt and shorts and threw them in with the dirty laundry. Elder Evans did the same. I was getting out some clean Garments and a shirt to put on after my shower, when he lunged at me, pushed me onto my bed, and pinned me quickly. We lay there for a few seconds, cheek to cheek, chest to chest, abdomen to abdomen. His skin on mine felt wonderful. Suddenly he lifted his groin, reached to grab his jock strap and pulled it down. He put his hand inside my jock strap to free my growing erection, although I didn't lift my rear end, so he couldn't pull the strap down. He removed his hand, leaving the tip of my fully erect penis protruding beyond the top of the strap. Elder Evans settled back and waited a few seconds. I tentatively rested my right hand on his upper thigh, and he then began a slow, gentle, rocking motion.

This can't be happening, I thought.

I was horrified.

I was electrified.

For a second, I just lay there, knowing I had to put a stop to this.

I did not stop it. I began to move too. I stopped myself, then...The Sensation. Although I tried hard to stop it, I couldn't. It was too late. I ejaculated into the confines of bare skin on skin, between our abdomens. As Elder Evans did the same he groaned, "Come home with me." We lay there, breathing into each other's ear.

He shuffled, sitting up on my stomach. He was grinning, but that changed quickly when he looked down and saw the terrified expression on my face.

He lay back down and whispered in my ear, "It's not your fault. I forced you."

"No, you didn't. I wanted it. I liked it. I didn't stop you."

"You couldn't have stopped me. It doesn't matter that you liked it. I forced you. Remember that. Are you going to tell on me?" he asked, in a continuing effort to assume all blame.

With panic in my heart and in my voice I said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. You do what you feel you have to do."

To calm myself, I put my arms around him and held him tightly.

"I love you..." I started to say, "Elder Evans," but, "I love you...Randy."

"I love you, Steve; you're the best thing about these two years. Will you write me?"

"Yes." I started to cry and could say no more.

Part of me wanted to confess to the Mission President and get sent home with Randy. Part of me desperately wanted to believe that this was Randy's fault. That I had done nothing to make this happen, and that I couldn't have stopped it, but I knew that wasn't the case. I knew we had both made this happen, and that Randy would have stopped if I had wanted him to.

I want to make clear that my intention is not to further stereotypes about rape victims. I don't want to say that victims should be blamed. They shouldn't. I don't wish to imply that maybe they "asked for it." I know that a victim has the right to change her (or his) mind, even if they initially consented. It's the perpetrator who is to be blamed and punished. Being a rape victim is not shameful. Being a rapist is.

I know all of these things. I'm only telling my story, and I was not raped.

The look on my face must have expressed real terror in order for Randy to try to convince me of his culpability. He must have thought that was the only way I could face myself and be happy again.

For a while, I desperately tried to convince myself of the story Randy had whispered into my ear. I tried to make that story a part of my mind and heart. I've never been very good at lying, not even to myself. Or was I? I imagined myself looking into those gay faces in the remembered photographs and I knew I was facing myself. What now? I'd read *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. Spencer W. Kimball had assured me I could change. I had to change. I'd always been good at believing what I was told to believe.

Those last hours in Cali were quiet agony. That next morning, we hauled his luggage down the stairs to the front of the house while Randy quietly sang Nino Bravo's "*Un beso y una flor*" about painful departures. Finally, while singing a couple of last words, he looked me in the eye. Then, he turned and ran to the busy corner where he flagged down a cab, directing it to where I waited with the luggage.

With the trunk loaded and the cab's back door open, Randy turned to me once more. He slowly put his arms around me and then, referencing the song and paraphrasing in English, said, "The one I love stays behind." He turned abruptly, got into the cab, and disappeared. He didn't look back.

I went into the house, then into our room to finish my own packing, sat on Randy's bed, and cried.

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Randy went home to Utah. I was transferred to Medellín. As I flew into Medellín, we went right over the skyscrapers of the city center. Colombians call Medellín the city of eternal spring. The climate is warm, but not hot. The area I was assigned was a nice part of town. Mosquito nets weren't needed. Randy and I wrote each other regularly, but my letters only told half of the story, and I was sure his didn't even do that.

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My new companion was Branch President, in charge of what was just a small, struggling congregation of the church, still led by missionaries, rather than by local members. Soon, my companion left and I became Branch President. Once, a devout branch member my father's age asked me for marital advice. It should have felt odd but at the time, even with my personal struggles and young age, it seemed like part of my duty to access and impart God's wisdom. After all, I was this man's Branch President, and we missionaries were the Lord's anointed. The thing is, I had seen enough of this brother's life that I think I gave him good advice. He would often come to church alone. His wife and children were rebellious. I told him to be less authoritarian; to preach less, to love more. As I looked at this brother from across the Branch President's desk and said these things,

memories of early days with Randy poured into my heart; and I felt the irony.

This poor brother, however, either wouldn't, or didn't know how to put my advice into practice.

The Medellín Zone Leader filled our off days with activities the Mission President approved of, including lots of outings. Once we went to La Piedra del Peñol, a huge black rock jutting 600 feet into the air. A winding staircase had been built into a vertical crevice so visitors could climb to the top. The views of the nearby mountains and the everpresent greenery were fantastic. Another time we spent the day at a farm owned by the landlady of a pair of sister missionaries. Medellín was surrounded by charming rural areas. This Zone Leader also went to Bogotá to be Assistant to the President. They changed the leadership structure. There would now be two Zone Leaders instead of one, and they would, of course, be companions.

In spite of my beautiful surrounding, I was depressed and getting obsessively preoccupied to the point that I am sure I had a diagnosable case of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. It didn't include the classic hand washing, or the triple checking of things. Nothing so tangible. It was all inside: obsessive fears that all was not well. I obsessed about every detail of what had happened that day with Randy, trying to rationalize my innocence. I tried to convince myself that I really couldn't have prevented or stopped what had happened. I obsessed about life in general.

"Row, row, row your boat... Life is but a dream." What if it was? I could hardly come up with enough things to obsess about. One day we walked by a bookstore and on the cover of a book in the window was the title, *La vida es sueño—Life is a Dream*. I would later learn that it is a well-known work of Spanish literature. At the time, I obsessed

about seeing said title at precisely that moment, coinciding with my worries on the theme.

I feared I was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. I didn't feel right inside. I couldn't just wonder if life might be a dream, as so many had done before, I had to panic about it. I couldn't make myself stop. I couldn't make myself be rational. I obsessed about my apparent weakness. How could have I become so flawed? I wondered. My happy memories of home seemed but a dream. My OCD was dampening my already weakened zeal and allowing doubt to grow. Mental illness has a great ability to make you feel robbed of God's love. All of this, combined with a passion so extremely forbidden by the God I had been taught to imagine. Could I ever be acceptable? Would I ever again be happy? There were mornings when I could barely get up and face the day. Somehow, I did, though.

I frequently fantasized about Randy Evans. In my fantasies, he would usually force me to have sex. It wasn't violent except for the fact that I was left with no choice. Once in a lenient while, I would imagine us stranded on a desert island. Just the two of us, where we would eventually give in, and make passionate love. Then I would obsess about my guilt.

After a while, I couldn't take it any longer and wrote Randy, saying that I was going to confess to the Mission President. He wrote back telling me to do what I had to do, but that if anyone asked him, he would say he forced me. He tried again to convince me, saying he knew how I could worry and obsess about things, and that I had an overactive conscience. He closed with, "I love you and will do anything I can to help. In case you've lost it, here's my phone number..."

I called him. I told the landlady I was going to call the States and to tell me what I owed her when the bill came. That night, I waited until

everything was quiet so I could be alone while I used the phone. Then I went downstairs.

I was a mass of swirling, conflicting emotions. I was eager to hear Randy's voice, but felt guilty about that excitement. I was worried about being sent home in shame, but part of me wanted to go home and face it all. I didn't want to make a sacrificial lamb of someone I loved, but I felt a religious obligation to do just that. The confession of major sexual sins was a commandment. Was this a chance to prove myself to God? I was filled with doubt. Maybe I was just weak, a failure.

It was only a phone call, but I was shaking by the time I heard him speak. "Randy..." My voice actually trembled. "I love you too and I'm really touched that you're willing to protect me, but what about you? I don't want to hurt you. Maybe I should keep my mouth shut. I need to protect you too." My voice was now strong.

"Steve, do what's best for you. Come home if you want to. Confess if you need to. For what it's worth, I've decided that you...that we've been misguided, but I love the fact that you always want to do what's right. I'll support you whatever you decide. Don't worry about me. I'm okay. I don't have much to lose in all this." There was a little catch in his voice just then, but he continued strongly. "I quit going to church right after I got home." He hesitated and went on, "My parents don't really care. They haven't been active in the church for years." He coughed, then kind of laughed nervously, "They wish they'd spent the money on something else, but, 'Oh well.' If I decide they can't handle the real story, I'll lie and tell them my 'indiscretion' was with a member girl. They'll get over it." He paused. "I just want to help. I love you."

I felt a mixture of gratitude, guilt, confusion, love. "I have to confess. The President will be in town day after tomorrow for Zone

Conference. Forgive me. Whatever happens, remember that I'll always love you."

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I was pretty certain I was going to be sent home and excommunicated, but I was determined to repent and try to get back into the church.

I confessed. I called the President the next day and told him he was going to need more time than usual for my Zone Conference interview. After he'd interviewed everyone else, he sent them off to lunch at a nearby restaurant, saying that he and I would join them there.

"Tell me what's on your mind, Elder Petersen."

I told him I had to get something off my chest even if it meant being sent home in shame. It all came pouring out, "Something awful...I had an orgasm... If you ask Elder Evans, he'll say he forced me...not true. I didn't stop him...I liked it...so ashamed."

He called Randy right then and had me wait in another room while they talked.

Then he talked to me. "This is the devil trying to make you think you're a homosexual. Your body just responded to physical stimuli. Satan wants you, but so does God. You're staying here, and I forbid you from having any more contact with Elder...with Randall Evans."

I was both devastated and relieved, typically conflicted. I was in love with Randy, but I also wanted to do God's will. I recommitted to trying harder than Randy had, to being more obedient. I committed to praying away my homosexuality, I resolved to pound on the doors of heaven until my figurative knuckles were bloody, just as Spencer W. Kimball told us to do.

So, I finished my mission, and I worked hard until the last second. I didn't have any more contact with Randy. I tried to forget about him but inevitably compared everyone to him. I struggled with my depressed mood and obsessive thoughts as much, or more, than ever. I lived in a river of anxiety, sometimes surfacing, but no matter how I felt, I got up every morning and worked until bedtime.

One night I dreamed of Mormon crickets. Hordes of black Mormon crickets. They began to fly from Utah to Colombia. At first, it was a steady stream in single file, then two by two. Then a swarm. Soon the sky was black with them, all the way back to Utah. They were eating everything in sight, even the Colombian cockroaches. They began to smother me. Where are the seagulls? I prayed. Why won't God send the seagulls?

At its worst, this black feeling and its obsessive thoughts would engulf, would enslave me, but sometimes it was less consuming. Even then, however, this fear was always close, hovering. I suppose my mental state was such that I might have been able to get a medical release from my mission, but the President had told me to stay and that's what I was going to do. I told no one what I was feeling.

Although maybe surprising, considering what was going on in my head, outwardly, I appeared to be quite normal. I was sometimes even able to relax and have fun. The other missionaries seemed to like and respect me. I liked most of my companions and fellow missionaries. When necessary, I tried to act with patience. I felt friendly affection for many, and brotherly love, but nothing approaching what I still, in spite of my best efforts, felt for Randy.

After nearly seven months in Medellín, I was assigned to Manizales, a small city, which was combined with nearby Pereira and Armenia, two other small cities, to make up our missionary zone.

Manizales enjoys an incredible setting. The luxurious mountain backdrop felt like something straight out of an Arnold Friberg *Book of Mormon* painting. Walking around, I would imagine a resurrected Christ teaching people in the ancient Americas, or I could picture Lamanites and Nephites being baptized in bodies of water I would see, in my mind's eye, on this very spot.

It would also be understandable if someone, seeing unlabeled photographs of the area, might assume it was near Machu Picchu.

The missionaries from the whole zone in all three cities would sometimes get together, not only for zone conferences, but on our off days as well. One time we all gathered in Manizales to go to Nevado del Ruiz, a glacier at about 15,000 feet and higher in elevation. Colombia is a land of striking beauty and varied climates; this was a stark place of perpetual snow, of gray rocks and frequent clouds. Some of the missionaries were drained by the altitude. I climbed and ran in spite of the ice and thin air.

Our chartered bus waited to take us back to Manizales. On these outings, someone would often bring a tape player and would throw in a cassette. Our off days were the only times we were allowed to do that and even then, we weren't supposed to listen to hard rock. I suppose, the thinking was that Jimi Hendrix would get us too "jacked up" but Simon and Garfunkel or Peter, Paul and Mary were mellow, soothing influences. Of course, The Mormon Tabernacle Choir was acceptable, but even they were only allowed on our off days.

I think the tape had finished and most of us were singing the antiwar song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" when one of the sister missionaries reached across the aisle of the bus and jabbed me in the ribs because I was singing off key, something I was wont to do when distracted. And, I was starting to get lost in interior darkness. I just about hit the ceiling.

"You're ticklish!" She laughed and reached for me again.

With both of my hands protecting my left ribs from her, the elder to my right reached in and tickled my stomach. Soon, I was on the floor, laughing and screaming while several of them ganged up on me.

Later, at home in Manizales, the elders from Armenia stopped at our place for a bit and we broke the leg on my bed as, once again, I was pounced on for a "gang tickle."

The landlady just laughed and said she'd send her husband up to fix it when we told her what happened.

At church the following Sunday, between Priesthood meeting and Sunday school, I was surrounded by three or four teenaged girls who focused their subtly flirtatious giggling and talking on me. I joined in the conversation in a way that I hoped was perceived as friendly, but nothing more.

Suddenly, I was distracted by an older woman standing in a corner, watching me with her hands folded patiently in front of her, and with a smirk on her face.

"¿Hermana Ramos?" I exclaimed as I extracted myself from the girls and hurried over to her with a smile of greeting and surprise.

"I see you're not quite so 'pious' anymore," she said with a slightly mocking, but jovial tone.

Sister Ramos was one of the most devout members of my old branch in Cali. She lived in, and cleaned, the church. She also did our laundry. I believe she was about forty-five but looked much older—gnarled hands, missing teeth; bulging, knotted, varicose veins. I think she'd had a hard life but, as one of the earliest converts in Colombia,

Mormonism now seemed to content and comfort her. She was around the missionaries a lot and, I believe, knew more gossip about us than anyone in Cali. I now remembered that she had referred to her hometown—Manizales—as the place of the four Fs: frio, fanático, feo, faldudo; cold, fanatical, ugly, steep. It seemed to me that only one of those four words actually applied to this place. Steep, I'd grant; we were forever marching up and down steep inclines. Left foot forward. Right foot forward. Up the hill, and down. We are all enlisted...Happy are we!

But Manizales was beautiful. As was Sister Ramos in a perhaps, non-literal, gnarled way.

"So, you don't think I'm pious anymore?" Her remark stung a bit.

"Oh, Elder! I'm sure you're plenty righteous. We'll talk more after Sunday school." She started to head into the chapel but asked, "What do you hear from Elder Evans?"

"Nothing. We haven't written in ages." And I felt that sting even more.

If piety is characterized by misery, I was more pious than ever, but I think I had gotten ever better at hiding my misery.

After Sunday school, I laughed and talked with Sister Ramos. When I nodded to my companion that it was time to go home for lunch, Sister Ramos said, "One more thing, Elders—look at your fingernails!"

We both turned our hands, palms toward our faces with our fingers turned down, to see our nails.

"Huh?" I gave Sister Ramos a puzzled look.

"If you had held your hands out, with the backs to your face, fingers extended, that would mean you're a homosexual. Marta wanted me to

test you." She laughed like it was all a big joke. And probably, to Sister Ramos, it was.

Marta was twenty-three or twenty-four, and quite pretty. I had actually met her once in Medellín, at a get together for members and missionaries from the whole city. At the time, I had been teased. "She likes you!" other elders cajoled. I really don't think she had come to Manizales because of me, but here she was. I was friendly to her, but maybe she sensed my complete lack of interest.

My companion and I nodded at Marta and a couple of other young, single women as we headed out of the church. "Hides," they were called—missionary slang for flirtatious girls and young women between the ages of about sixteen and twenty-five. Even then, I didn't like the word, but I suppose that on some level it was an attempt to distance, scorn even, that which was forbidden, but wanted.

Hides. I don't think the sister missionaries had a similar word for local males. Did the sisters feel less desire than the elders felt? Did sisters encounter less flirtation? Were they less attracted? Or maybe, possibly, were they simply better at coping with conflicting feelings, with forbidden fruit? Maybe just less vociferous. Missionary slang didn't address same-sex attraction. I think most of the elders knew the meaning of *maricón*, however, as we occasionally had the word hurled at us on the streets.

Our Zone Leaders were in Pereira. I was only the Manizales District Leader, down a rung on the ladder, but on several occasions, other missionaries told me they were sure my next transfer would be to Bogotá, to be Assistant to the President. When the transfer came, and it wasn't to the Mission Office, I was disappointed. We weren't supposed to aspire to position, and my almost-wish to be Assistant wasn't really about the prestige. It just seemed like it would be tangible

proof that I was measuring up. That God hadn't abandoned me. Since these calls were supposedly inspired, it seemed like it would have been a validation that I didn't feel inside. Evidence from beyond that I wasn't a failure, that I was good enough. I wanted all of this to have been an orchestrated trial, a test; and to know that I had passed. That, like Abraham, I had been willing to submit to God's will. But I had actually made the sacrifice, and then kept on going, even when I only wanted to curl up in a ball and cover my head.

I also wanted closer contact with the Mission President—the Face of God. In reality, being Assistant wouldn't have changed a thing. The Face of God was but a fallible, well-meaning man.

As my go-home date neared, I started to panic. I hadn't become the spiritual giant I so wanted to be. My doubts were stronger than ever.

In those last days of my mission, I was working in Ibagué. Although not as hot as Cali, it was the warmest city I had been assigned to since those early days. Our house was built around an open courtyard people would pass through to get to another part of the home. On the morning of December 24th, before we left the house, I stepped into the courtyard on my way to the bathroom. Things were different. Something wasn't right. The light was wrong. For a fraction of a second, something primeval stirred. What was this manifestation of my fear? My mind flew back to the nightmare I'd had in Medellín about Mormon Crickets flying to Colombia from Utah.

The landlady, standing nearby in the covered dining area, noticed my consternation.

"It's an eclipse," she stated matter-of-factly.

My brief panic had already subsided when she spoke but still, her words reassured. I was relieved to know what was happening. I'd had

no idea there was about to be an eclipse. We missionaries were so cut off from the news and "real" life.

I've been in partial eclipses but none have made such a noticeable difference in the mood and light as that, my only annular solar eclipse.

Because of Christmas Eve, we had planned something different. The four of us in Ibagué had prepared a skit we presented in three orphanages that day. I loved the enormous nativities they had. One of them must have measured about ten feet by five.

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Some of the other elders and I decided to travel a little on our way home. Our Mission President kind of encouraged that. I wasn't in a hurry to get home. I had worked hard, but I felt I was going home a failure. Rather than being an enthusiastic, happy zealot, I was plagued by depression and uncertainty, emotions good Mormons weren't supposed to feel.

We flew to Cartagena and toured the old Spanish fort. We took off our shoes and socks, rolled up our pant legs, and walked along the beach, but didn't swim, since that's forbidden for missionaries—according to Mormon mythology, the devil has power to harm missionaries in the water. We stopped in Mexico and went to the pyramids at Teotihuacán. We had planned to spend a Sunday in Mexico to see how things functioned in a Spanish-speaking country where the Church was more developed than it was in Colombia at that time, but we changed our minds, suddenly all anxious to get home. We flew to the States on Saturday, February 2nd, 1974.

That day I decided it was time to finally grow up and make my own decisions. To look my new life in the face, and love it. I realized that I

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wasn't a failure and that I had indeed, seen the Face of God. That I had come to know myself.

There was a crowd to meet me at the airport, lots of relatives and ward members. When I walked into the house with my family, Mom handed me an envelope that was sitting on the kitchen counter. She said one of my former companions had dropped by a couple of weeks ago, asking when I'd be home, and leaving the letter for me.

"Good-looking young man. Nice, too."

It was so good to be home with these people I loved. In my heart I felt calm, ready to face the coming storm and the shattered illusions.

I smiled as I looked at the board on the wall where my height had been measured twice a year growing up.

Later, alone in my room, I opened Randy's letter. It was just a note saying he was living in an apartment near the University of Utah, and giving me his address and phone number. I wanted to see him face-to-face, so I didn't call.

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Sunday morning at 8:15, I crunched on chunks of ice that had been shoveled to the side of the pathway as I opened and held the church door for my dad and my brothers as we arrived for Priesthood meeting.

"It's good to have you home, Elder Petersen," the Bishop said as he greeted me with a firm, friendly handshake. "How about next Sunday for your Homecoming?"

How am I going to get through this? I wondered. I was tempted to refuse but saw my dad's expectant look. "Sure, that's fine."

"You'll be bearing your testimony in Spanish, right? The congregation likes to hear how the Lord blesses his missionaries with the ability to learn foreign languages."

I had always thought that to be a silly tradition, as almost no one would be able to understand me, but here I saw my out. I would stand before the congregation, filling them in on my last two years, and as I concluded, I would skip the English and only bear my testimony in Spanish. When I got to the part where I would say, "I know the church is true," I would say, "No sé" (I don't know) instead of "Yo sé" (I know). Although the "yo" is optional in Spanish, it's often spoken in testimony bearing. The few who might understand could think they'd misheard, but so what if they didn't? I couldn't hide forever.

The day was warming as we walked the block home afterward to pick up Mom and my sisters for Sunday school. After that, the friends I had entered the Mission Home with dropped by to see me. They'd been home a few days. Later, the whole family walked to Sacrament Meeting at the church while Mom left dinner cooking in the crock-pot. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins came over. My cousin Gordon was there. He was now sixteen, and had always seemed to look up to me. The family had been worried about him for years because he was so effeminate. I hoped I could now be a trailblazer for him.

When I say I was ready to face what was coming that doesn't mean I felt no fear. I was about to turn my back on everything I'd ever known. By far the worst was the thought of hurting my parents. I loved them, but I couldn't keep going to church. And I had to see Randy.

I finally got a chance to go over to see him on Sunday evening. I couldn't know if he'd be home, but he opened the door. I walked in, leaned back against the door, and closed out the world. We both stared for an eternity before my arms went around him. "I've missed you." I

sobbed. "I've *really* missed you!" I hugged him. I hugged him, so that he could feel the joy, and the pain, I was expressing. "And that's no shit!" We both laughed.

Stepping back, I again looked into his deep, blue, eyes. With my hands on his shoulders, I looked. I saw longing—I saw loneliness...fading. And he looked at me. I ran my right hand down his arm. Lifting his hand to my face, I kissed his long fingers. Then, taking both his hands in mine, I admired the pale skin while, ever so gently, tracing those blue veins with my thumbs.

I unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off his shoulders. With one hand over his heart, I used the other to bring his palm to my mouth, lightly running my tongue over it. With his hands in mine, I guided him into the room. I ran my fingers over his chest and stomach, undid his pants and knelt to take his penis into my mouth. I loved the feel of it, the taste of it. The sensations. The emotions. I felt happy, full of excitement and love. Free of conflict.

"Am I sensing a little pent up frustration?" he laughed.

"Maybe just a little."

He knelt and kissed me in a way that said he understood he was sensing more than mere pent up frustration.

Soon, both naked on the floor, feeling each other, kissing each other, forefinger tracing his eyebrows and the outline of his lips; I kissed his forehead, his chin, his cheeks, his nose, his mouth. Our tongues touched. I was on top and began thrusting, but rolled off, pulled him on top of me, then stuck my middle finger up his ass as he began kissing my lips, my cheeks, my ears, my neck.

He moved down, licked my nipples, stomach, and began licking my balls. He took my dick into his mouth. I gasped. He looked up at me,

continuing. He then reached for a tube in the drawer of the end table and began stroking some lubrication onto my dick. "Just in case the saliva's not enough," he said.

He then began to sit on me, slowly inserting my penis. He made himself comfortable and sat there for a second as we looked at each other. He stroked himself as we moved. I felt his sphincter contract on my penis as he shot his wad onto my chest. I came inside him and we collapsed, both grinning, breathing into each other's ear.

And I held him. "I love you, Elder Evans."

"I love you, Elder Petersen. You're the best thing about those two years. The best thing ever."

I rolled over on top of him. "Does it hurt, getting...fucked?" I'd never said that word before.

"It does at first, but once you get used to it, it feels good. When you're ready, I'll be slow and careful."

Reality often fails to live up to fantasy, but that evening came close.

After we'd made love, I got onto one knee, and asked Randy to marry me.

He got up, took both of my hands, and led me to the couch. I watched loneliness return to his eyes. Then I saw resolve.

"I'm going to play Senior Companion one last time," he said. "I know you mean it, and I want to say yes, but you just got home from a mission. Until a few minutes ago, you were wearing Garments, for God's sake. You need time to get used to normal life. You need to see other guys."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. What do you think I've been doing since I got home? We'll be friends. We'll be more than friends. We'll have sex. But before you settle on me, you've got to compare me to others."

"I've been comparing you to every missionary I've had anything to do with since the day you left Colombia."

"And I've sometimes joked around with my gay friends about waiting for my missionary, but you need to see real life. You need to see guys who aren't missionaries."

So, he refused me. He changed the subject. We talked and laughed. He went and got his yearbook from his senior year of high school. He turned to my picture in the sophomore section.

"No wonder I didn't remember you. You were a dork," he joked.

"Gee, thanks a lot." I feigned indignation.

"Actually, I've always had a soft spot for dorks. You've developed rather nicely. You're my type of dork now."

I told him what I was planning for my Homecoming and that I was a little nervous.

"Don't psych yourself out. I'll be there," he said. "Look right at me as you say it."

And that's what I did, although I only looked right at Randy for a few seconds. Afterward, I sat down behind the pulpit and the Bishop stood to announce the closing hymn. I looked out at the congregation and noticed that Peggy, the girl I had gone out with more than any other when I was in high school, was looking at Randy with a bit of a puzzled look. I knew I had to talk to her.

She hadn't been at the airport to meet me, but called the next day to find out when my Homecoming was scheduled. She explained that she had a busy week in Provo where she was a student at Brigham Young University, but would come up to Salt Lake the next Sunday. There was no understanding, no commitment between us, but she had written me once or twice a month the whole time I was gone. I spoke to her after the service and said I would drop by her parents' house that evening.

Later, as she answered my knock on the door, I asked, "Can we go for a walk?"

"It's too cold. C'mon in, we've got the place to ourselves."

As we sat down in the living room I started with, "Thanks for writing me, I appreciate your friendship."

"Friendship?"

I saw a flash of wounded pride dart through her eyes and knew I had to come clean. I cleared my throat, put one of my hands on each knee, straightening my arms until the elbows locked. I stretched my fingers. Tension ran from my palms through my shoulders, up and down my spine, running to my toes and to my face. I looked away and took a deep breath. "I hope we can always be good friends, but I've realized that who I am...is not... I'm not... Um...How can I say this? I like you, but I don't feel that way about you. It's not you...I'm...I'm...gay. I'm a homosexual."

My averted eyes had returned to her stunned face. I watched as in the course of a second her face went from hurt, through confusion, recognition, anger—then hatred.

"That's gross! Friends? No. No! I don't ever want to see you again. No way. You're disgusting!" She shook her head as an angry tear ran down her cheek. "I can't believe you're doing this to me—to your family! What about the Church? The Church is everything!" She stood up and turned her back. "You make me sick! Please leave."

I will say that, to her credit, Peggy didn't gossip about me. I don't think anyone found out about me from her. She just went back to BYU and soon was engaged to the guy she had been dating there.

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For over a year, I went out with lots of guys. I turned into a regular slut. Randy and I were best friends. We continued to have a romantic, sexual relationship. On the night of June 18th, 1975—I think I remember the right date—disco diva Gloria Gaynor appeared at The Sun Tavern, Salt Lake's most popular gay bar at the time. Randy and I were there, and following the concert we stayed for a drink. Soon I saw a guy I'd had my eye on before and I went over to make the moves on him. When I went back to tell Randy I was leaving with this guy, I couldn't help but notice a hint of anguish in his eyes. It wasn't long after that, in July of 1975, nearly a year and a half after I got home, that Randy agreed to marry me. We've been a committed couple ever since.

We had learned to accommodate each other as people when we were missionary companions. Starting in February 1974, I had to learn how to face life as a gay man, and from July 1975, we had to learn to accommodate life as a gay couple.

Randy told me his parents actually were devout and that his excommunication had devastated them. They viewed me as an evil "temptress" who'd gotten away scot-free, coming home from my mission with honor after their son had been excommunicated following my confession to the Mission President. It was true that Randy had stopped going to church almost as soon as he got home. That fact, and

his subsequent excommunication, had nullified his also honorable return.

"Can you ever forgive my narcissism?" I asked.

"Forgiven long ago, but Mom and Dad may never accept you as a son-in-law."

He had lied to me about the consequences he might face if I confessed to the Mission President. He'd wanted me to feel free to do whatever I felt I had to do. He kind of had hoped I would get sent home so we could be together, but most of all he'd wanted what was best for me. He had determined to maintain his made-up version of what happened that day in order to protect me. While part of him wanted me sent home, he'd worried that it would destroy me. He had decided to wait, and hope for the best.

Randy's willingness to sacrifice himself is a trait I've long admired. In this case, he had not only sacrificed himself, but also the honor of his family. It was years before I was allowed into his parents' home.

My parents weren't much better. When they realized Randy and I were more than friends, he was no longer welcome in their home. While they didn't disown me, I had to move out to get some peace. Mom told me more than once that she wished she had torn up that letter. "I should have been more inspired, more receptive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost," that must have been there to warn her, she would say. It wouldn't have mattered. Randy and I would have found each other anyway.

Randy told me that, in late autumn of 1969, reading a big article in *Time* magazine about the burgeoning gay liberation movement, and about the occurrence of what we now call the Stonewall Riots in New York in June 1969—right after he had graduated from high school—

had almost given him the courage to be himself. Almost. But, he'd eventually decided to go on a mission in an effort to change. He had hoped God would turn him into a heterosexual. According to church literature he'd also read on the subject, that should happen. Even so, he hadn't gone until August 1970, although he had turned nineteen in March and could have left then. The fact that his desires didn't change at all contributed to the doubt he had always held inside. He had been able to keep his desires and feelings in check, however, until he and I started to become close.

I told Randy I would resign from the Church, but he suggested I just go quietly inactive. In those days you couldn't formally resign your membership without going through public excommunication.

"Why humiliate your family?" he asked.

As it turned out, my parents reported me and I was excommunicated anyway.

They didn't do it to be mean. They just believed church doctrine that said the only way to gain God's forgiveness for major sins—like I was committing—was to begin the repentance process by confessing to the proper church authority and facing the consequences. The Church taught that excommunication itself was often a step in the forgiveness process. Mormon penance. Our way of crawling to the mountaintop on our hands and knees.

My parents felt sure that even though I wasn't beginning the repentance process on my own, that once the wheels had been set in motion I would come to my senses and repent. What they didn't realize was that I had come to my senses the day I came home from my mission. My damaged soul had begun to heal. Once again, I felt peace. My Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder had suddenly stopped. I no longer

felt a need for desert island or rape fantasies. Those aren't necessary when you accept what you want.

Although not easy for anyone, my excommunication was hardest on my parents. My dad was on the Stake High Council at the time. Mom and Dad had turned me in, but as I stood before the High Council at my church trial, it was sad looking at my dad's downcast face.

The Stake President looked at me solemnly. "You've been charged with the grievous sin of homosexuality. Do you deny it?"

I looked at my dad. He was blinking back tears, but wouldn't look up. I had never seen my dad cry before. "No, I don't deny it."

Tears ran down my dad's cheeks.

"Are you prepared to forsake your sins and repent?" the Stake President asked.

I began to cry as Dad and I looked at each other for a brief second. I faced the Stake President. "No, I'm in love with Randy Evans."

My dad's gaze returned to his lap.

"Do you understand that this procedure will rescind all priesthood blessings, that you will have to repent and be baptized again to once more be a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?"

"I understand."

I stood before those men, whom I had admired my whole life, and admitted I had betrayed my heritage. Even so, I approached the whole affair with a mixture of both sadness and defiance. My lack of remorse sealed my fate and my excommunication became inevitable. I had my doubts about the Church, and my love for Randy to console me. Mom and Dad were faced with the eternal damnation of their baby boy.

When it was over, while everyone else shook my hand and said they hoped I would repent, Dad quietly snuck out to the foyer, where Mom had been waiting with a supply of handkerchiefs. They were gone by the time I got to the foyer. I was glad; the only person I wanted to see at that moment was Randy. He was waiting in front of the church.

He wrapped his arms around me. "I know. I know. It'll get easier," he said.

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Years later, when we could talk about it, Dad told me that he had participated in a number of church trials. Mostly involving people he knew, at least moderately well, and more often than not, for homosexuality. He had never imagined his own son would be standing there.

Some of my old friends have drifted back into our lives over the years, but in 1974 and 1975, most of them didn't seem too eager to maintain close contact. One of my inner circle of high school buddies also turned out to be gay. He tried very hard to change himself and be true to the Church, but he was also excommunicated—in the early eighties. He found his life partner around 1990 and is now very happy. He's told me about men he knew who went through the trauma of electric shock therapy to try to make heterosexual Mormons of themselves. I'm glad to have avoided all that.

It took my parents a while to accept Randy. They would invite me for dinners or holidays, but not Randy. I refused to go without him. I would drop by to see them, but not go to the big events. So they began to invite Randy, and soon remembered why they had initially liked him and finally realized what a great guy he was. Now that they are old and need help, Randy has always been there for us. My parents couldn't

have had a better daughter-in-law. I've tried to be good to my in-laws too, but their acceptance has always been a bit begrudging.

Mom and Dad never did stop trying to get me back into the Church, to reverse my damnation. Even after they had accepted Randy into the family, my parents would occasionally say, "Why don't you two just be friends and then come back to the Church, get rebaptized?"

One time I turned things around and asked them the same question minus the part about church.

"We maybe could just be friends after all these years," Dad laughed.

Mom gave him a dirty look. "I enjoyed last Friday. Was it so forgettable for you?"

Dad blushed.

Mom, almost from the beginning, had seemed to be able to understand what I felt, although she still thought I was sinning. I guess, for Dad, the notion of loving a man that way was just too foreign.

Another time when he suggested Randy and I become celibate, I replied, "Would it matter? It feels sexual even if there's no actual sex involved."

Mom nodded, Dad looked confused.

I put my face close to his. "Dad! You know how you can feel love for Mom without being horny?"

That was an oversimplification, but he understood that. Mom seemed to understand the total complexity of what I felt, the emotional, romantic, erotic attachment, beyond any orgasm-inducing act.

Sometimes you really have to simplify things for straight men, although they're not all so obtuse.

Actually, in my experience, many of them are more in touch than people sometimes give them credit for. I've had a number of strong friendships with straight men over the years.

After all this time, one of my brothers recently told me that several years ago my parents came very close to leaving the Church over the gay issue. They had come to the point of feeling that the Church was just plain wrong and that people like Randy and I didn't deserve to be demonized the way we were.

"You know," I said to my brother as my eyes began to water, "I've always wondered whether Mom and Dad would choose me, or the Church, if they were really forced to choose."

"They would choose you. Even now that we're all adults, their children and grandchildren are what matter most to Mom and Dad."

"Why didn't they ever tell me?"

"I think they were afraid they might lose any chance of getting you back into the Church."

"You're still a believer. Do you think God will punish them for making the Church number two?"

"I hope not. I feel the same way about my kids. Maybe those feelings will keep us out of the Celestial Kingdom, but so be it. If I have to give up my parents and children to make it to Heaven, I don't want to be there."

"Thanks for telling me this. I know it's selfish of me, but I feel kind of relieved. It's good to know that we are what matter most to them. I do feel sad about the grief I've caused Mom and Dad, but I couldn't have lived my life any other way."

"Our whole family has come to believe that God won't send you to Hell. You've been happy, therefore a better member of the family. And none of us could ask for a better addition than Randy has been. Dad said he can hardly wait to ask God face-to-face what's going on. Why he hasn't given the Church more revelation on this subject. The Church claims inspiration and virtual infallibility on policy and doctrinal matters like this. But they must be wrong."

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Except for once, Randy and I have been monogamous.

Russ and Don, older friends whose semi-secluded home was in wooded, suburban, Holladay, had invited us to a big Halloween party at their place and I was talking to a hot guy I had just met. This adonis wore a skimpy costume, consisting of a balloon in back, and in front a small, green, embroidered, fig-leaf apron that he must have salvaged from his old Temple clothes. That got a few knowing glances and I had pretended to be shocked when I saw it—and then caught his eye. He wore blue eye shadow and silver glitter on his toenails. His firm, round ass; above long, sinewy legs; curved into a small of the back that carried not an ounce of fat. Muscled biceps and shoulders framed a chest with hair that veed between his nipples and treasure trailed down his flat stomach before disappearing under the apron below his navel. This guy's all but bare bottom got pinched multiple times while I was talking to him. He would turn and laugh. Or maybe just smirk and roll his eyes. A couple of guys reached around, under the apron. He slapped them away, giggling—and continued talking to me. Although tempted, I wasn't trying to come on to him, but I suppose, without meaning to, I acted the part of a simpering teenager. It made Randy jealous and angry. He picked someone up and made sure I saw them leave together. That's the only time we've ever had a big fight.

I was waiting, reclining in my grandmother's old rocker in a corner of our apartment living room, with my eyes closed, when Randy came home.

He was looking at me when I opened my eyes. I slowly stood up, and scathingly said, "You don't get to decide anymore, all by yourself, which rules matter. *That* rule, we decide together!"

"Yeah? Well, fuck you, Mr. Self-Righteous! I *saw* you flirting with that guy!" He marched into our bedroom and slammed the door.

After pacing for a few seconds, I walked over and knocked.

Randy flung open the door. "How do you think that made me feel?" He grimaced and held out his hands, palms up. "I...I'm..." He turned and walked into the room.

I followed in the wake of his anger, hurt, embarrassment—embarrassed, I think, as much for me, as for himself.

When he finally turned around, Randy's face had transformed into a mixture of jealousy and contrition. "Do you love me? Or do you want to be with...," his face once again contorted in anger and he struggled for words, finally stammering, "Mister Pretty...Twinkle Toes Fuckhead?"

I would have laughed at his word choice but there was simply too much pain in the air. His pain hurt me and as my own jealousy disappeared, I realized, for perhaps the first time, that he might actually have worries about losing me.

"You know," I told him, "I've always been yours. Back when we were both dating other people, I would see you after I'd spent the night with some other guy and my heart would melt. Just touching your cheek would send chills up my spine. No matter how excited I had been the

night before, it would all fade away when I looked into your eyes and touched your hair."

Randy's expression was softening. "Before you got home from your mission, I fell for someone else," he said. "I didn't know if I'd ever see you again. I did love him, I guess, but when he and I didn't work out, I was actually a bit relieved. I could hardly wait to see you. I *hoped* you'd want to see me. I knew you'd have to go out with other guys, but it used to kill me when we'd go to a bar together and I'd watch you give someone your number, or leave with some guy."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Remember, I had to watch you do the same thing. But that's the past. It doesn't mean I don't have eyes. You look at other guys too."

"Okay. Look! Just don't flirt!"

"Deal!" I shook his hand vigorously and then, "Do you really think I'm self-righteous?"

Randy laughed a little. "Not anymore. At least not *most* of the time. By the way, I felt pretty smug myself and *spiteful*, maybe? when you watched me leave with What's-His-Name.

We've known couples who have an open relationship. I have no problem with that. Besides the fact that it's none of my business, I've always felt that people should know themselves well enough to figure those things out for themselves—to know what works for them. What we have works for us. Randy and I are open and honest with each other. Trust is essential to a good relationship.

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We were bystanders for most of the flamboyant disco era. Oh, we went to the bars to dance and see friends, but we didn't participate in

the wild times the era is known for. I don't regret it. We had enjoyed our slutty periods and neither of us regrets that either, but I guess we both had gotten that out of our systems earlier. However, in those freewheeling days, we were sometimes criticized for conforming to straight norms—conforming better, in fact, than a lot of heteros ever had, even before the sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s. It was our choice.

My cousin Gordon blazed his own trails and made me proud. He did drag and was involved in Salt Lake's Royal Court of the Golden Spike Empire. Gordon would often invite us to Royal Court sponsored events. Only sometimes would Randy and I dress in drag and we never participated in shows. But what guy doesn't like putting on a frock now and then?

Once, when pictures were being taken, Gordon waved Randy and me over. I was wearing an ugly wig with short, curly hair, a dumpy dress, and clodhopper shoes. Randy was dashing in a suit and tie that evening.

"Oh yes, we *definitely* need that gorgeous boy in a couple of photos!" hooted the photographer.

I pulled my wig off, shaking down imaginary locks, put my palm over my ample, newspaper stuffed bosom, and spread my fingers daintily. "Are you referring to me, dear?"

I could camp it up when I wanted to.

Randy grabbed me by the hand. "C'mon, girls picture night!" and pulled me over to where Gordon waited.

That photograph is still one of my favorites. Gordon, in the middle, with an arm around each of us, Randy beaming. In the photo album, I labeled it, "The Colombian sisters" because, I swear, glamorous

Gordon was uncannily like, and an even prettier version of, Medellín/Manizales Marta than Marta herself had been. Although, not by much. Marta really was pretty. But so was Gordon. He is also a handsome man, and when not in drag, he uses masculine pronouns.

It's been an eternity since he performed publicly.

Time skips on.

In his mid-thirties, Randy's looks began to fade. Just a bit at first, then more. Mine did too, of course, although I didn't have as much to lose in that department. Randy's still a very attractive man, but not what he used to be. I won't say that I didn't, or don't, care at all. Who wouldn't want to keep their young body forever? Whether it's the one they inhabit, or the one they make love to. But life doesn't work that way, and though it's trite to say it, true love is based on more than physical beauty. Our love isn't always as exciting as it was in the beginning, but there's still passion, plus all this shared experience. There's no one I'd rather spend time with. It's true, we've only had that one big fight, but we've had lots of little disagreements. We learned long ago as missionary companions to communicate and compromise.

In the eighties and nineties, we lost some close friends to the AIDS epidemic, including a good buddy from college days, and a fellow Colombian missionary who had been in my travel group, both going to and coming home from Colombia. I still get choked up remembering all of the losses, but I especially miss Garth and Elder (Fred) Bradshaw.

We've been involved in promoting rights for queers and women, environmental causes, and the humane treatment of animals. Someone once asked us why we care about the environment: after all, we're not going to still be around when things get real bad, nor do we have children. To me that's a stupid question. Not only do we have nieces and nephews, but aren't we part of the human family?

In the nineties, we began attending an Episcopal church. I felt a need. In the beginning, Randy wasn't particularly interested, but would go once in a while to please me. He grew to love it. For the first time in his life, church was an uplifting, spiritual, experience.

So far, it's been a good life and we've been happy.

We've seen the gay community in Salt Lake grow from a large, but largely closeted and almost invisible group, to having our city called the gayest mid-sized city in the U.S.

I'm cautiously optimistic about the future. I hope queer people will be equal. I hope we can prevent environmental disaster. I hope we can learn to be kind to all of God's creatures. I hope we can temper the rise of extremism. In the meantime, Randy and I will be happy.

Not long ago, on a warm evening in August, Randy and I met some friends for a picnic at Sugar House Park, near our home. We took some scraps down to the pond to feed the ducks, geese, and seagulls. There were lots of seagulls.

After dinner it was a glorious evening and as the sun set in the west, its rays illuminated the mountains to the east in beautiful, soft light. There are places where our Utah foothills are green, not quite like Colombia, but still, almost lush, and the view was exhilarating.

Randy and I walked home to the sound of chirping crickets. These were real crickets. The ones called Mormon crickets aren't really crickets, they're shield-backed grasshoppers, and were nowhere to be found.

Randy began to hum, and I chimed in. "All is well. All is well."

The Mission President was right all those years ago. We do make a good team.

### Elder Petersen, Part Two

I went to the church on the afternoon of December 20th, 2013. The previous Sunday they had asked for volunteers to help divide bulk food items into small bags for distribution at the food pantry for the needy we opened at the church every Saturday. I had about three weeks off for the holidays, but Randy had gone to work, as usual, that morning.

As we were finishing the project at church, I felt my phone vibrate.

"Hi, what's up?" I asked, as Randy blurted out from his end, "Why didn't you answer your phone, Steve? I've been calling." Randy was more into things electronic, mechanical or technical than I was, and normally that fact didn't bother either of us, but now Randy sounded exasperated. "I was just about to come to the church to get you."

"Sorry, I didn't feel the phone vibrate earlier. Is something wrong?"

"No, everything's wonderful! I'm at home getting our rings. We're getting married!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't ask questions. Just get to the county offices as soon as you can. I'll meet you there. 21st South. Hurry!"

It was about 4:30 when I arrived at the county clerk's office, checking the internet on my phone as I hurried to the door. I was, of course, aware that Utah's Amendment 3 banning legal recognition for same-sex relationships had been challenged in court, but we weren't expecting a ruling for another two or three weeks, and although I expected the judge might rule some aspects of Amendment 3 unconstitutional, there was no way, I thought, this ruling would make it possible for us to get legally married here in Utah. Now.

#### Jeff Laver

My phone buzzed. "Steve, how close are you? I'm in line. Look for me. They're going to close the offices at five, so people who aren't in line by then will be S-O-L."

"I see you now."

"There you are. I can't believe this is happening!"

We embraced and I stroked the back of Randy's neck with my thumb.

Apparently, the state had neglected to ask for an immediate stay, pending appeal, if they lost the case, which they did, so there was a mad rush of people trying to get married before a stay was granted. The place was mobbed. A state senator was there to marry his partner. The mayor of Salt Lake City was there to perform that, as well as other marriages. A pastor from First Baptist Church of Salt Lake City had rushed down to offer his services. The words "Baptist" and "support for gay marriage" don't go together in most people's minds, but First Baptist is much more open and welcoming than many Baptist congregations. Randy and I are Episcopalians, so our Rector would be happy to bless our union.

Our turn came. The clerks were harried, but helpful and pleasant, sometimes emotional and excited.

"How long have you two been together?"

"Over thirty-eight years. We formally became a couple in July of '75 when he *finally* accepted my proposal. It's been a very long engagement!" I answered with a laugh.

Randy looked at me and quietly said, "We've actually been in love since 1972."

"Wow," was all the clerk said.

At that moment emotion overwhelmed me and I got choked up. So did the clerk. "I couldn't be more happy for you," she said with a crack in her voice and a sincere smile.

License in hand, we wanted to get married right then and there. Randy had brought the rings, and this all felt so uncertain. As we went to have the ceremony performed in that crowded office building, my mind, for some reason went back to events from the past. It felt like some of them flashed before me in a matter of seconds.

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In 1974, I wasn't welcome in Randy's parents' home, nor he in the home of my family. Since we weren't officially a couple, we each participated in important activities with our respective families. In 1975, our paths united for good; by Christmas of that year, my family had relented and invited us both, but we went to San Francisco for Thanksgiving since neither family would welcome us together. We'd gone there the two previous summers, but this was our first time using that city as a holiday retreat. It was a welcome break from disapproval, and seemed to help my family accept a new vision.

Our Thanksgiving dinner was in a restaurant, followed by drinks at the Midnight Sun in the Castro, where we attracted numerous glances. A handsome guy in his mid-twenties, with a thick, dark moustache, wearing Levi's and a tight T-shirt, strolled by. He stopped and turned. "Well, fuck me! Aren't you two adorable!?" He gave us both the once over. "One," he said, focusing on Randy first, then on me, "maybe *both* of you, looking for company?"

"Not really, unless you just mean talk." Randy answered with a friendly smirk.

#### Jeff Laver

"Oh, I'll *talk* alright, if that's what you're into," the guy said, running the back of his forefinger up Randy's chest and across his cheek. "But I can talk with my mouth full." He grinned. His expression was sly.

Randy grinned but, "No, seriously, we're not taking you back to our hotel. Sit down, though, we'll buy you a drink."

"Just my luck," moustache guy muttered and plopped down with a resigned look. "Where're you boys from?'

"Salt Lake," I answered.

"Oooh!" He grinned again, mischievously. "I *love* cute Mormon boys!" He waggled his eyebrows at me.

"Look, that's not happening. Do you want a drink, or not?" Randy asked.

His shoulders slumped. "Oh, why not? I guess tonight's not my night."

We laughed and talked, inviting him to drop by if he was ever in Salt Lake. "I just might do that," he said, folding and putting our number into his pocket. "I'd love to see your Mormon underwear—with you boys in it, of course!" He giggled, and moved on.

Randy looked at me questioningly. "Would you do him, if...?"

"Oh yeah. You would too."

"Yup. We could think about having a three-way, sometime, if you want."

"We can think about it."

We thought about it. We never did it.

The day after, on Friday November 28th, we roamed the city. That evening we attended performances of Puccini's Gianni Schicchi and Il Tabarro at San Francisco Opera. As kids growing up in Salt Lake, both Randy and I had frequently, in addition to the usual football and basketball games, been taken to plays, the symphony and the ballet, but neither of us had attended a live opera until the previous academic year on campus. Randy had just graduated, but I was still a student at the University of Utah. One of my best friends from high school was a music major at the "U." He was very straight, very Mormon, and he was having a hard time relating to me now that he knew about my homosexuality. Although we were drifting apart, he was one of my friends who was trying to be open-minded and non-judgmental. He would periodically invite Randy and me to concerts on campus, so we met some of his musician friends. There was one we especially liked who was equally happy to become our friend. Garth was an unusually tall black man from San Francisco. He wouldn't have stood out in the HPER complex, near the basketball arena, where many of the Physical Education classes took place, and where tall basketball players weren't unusual, but in the Music Hall on the lower part of campus, Garth was a towering exception. He was often surrounded by a gaggle of female music majors. Most of them genuinely liked him—he was eminently likeable, but for some of the Mormon girls, Garth maybe became their token Black Friend, their attempt at showing how unprejudiced they were. After all, the "Ban" was still on in Mormonism. It wasn't until 1978 that blacks were allowed to be ordained to the Mormon priesthood or to have access to temple ordinances.

Garth was not only an unusually tall black man, he was also gay—something most of his Mormon friends didn't know. He and my high school buddy invited us to a production of *The Magic Flute* on campus for our first experience with live opera. We were hooked. As

Thanksgiving 1975 approached, Garth suggested his home town, San Francisco, and *Gianni Schiechi*.

Unlike the rest of the audience that cheerfully strolled out of the War Memorial Opera House after the performance that evening, we walked with melancholy in our shared gate. Randy's hand brushed mine. "I loved that song where the girl who's in love begs her dad to help. And he does! Admittedly, my mind's on one track right now but—if only!"

"Mmm." I nodded. "If only we could have spent yesterday cuddled on the loveseat, digesting Thanksgiving dinner, with Mom, Dad, and Aunt Carol, sitting on the couch, smiling at us—Grandma and Grandpa sitting on the other side of the living room, without a care. All listening to my brother play the piano, before we take dessert into the family room to watch football." I turned to Randy. "Or with your family!"

Randy lifted both fists high into the air and whirled around. "Who cares? We're in San Francisco!"

My mind also went back to Randy's thirtieth birthday. That evening in March of 1981 was the first time Randy's parents had allowed me to enter their home—my first time seeing inside the place where Randy had grown up. We'd driven by together and, of course, I was long familiar with the general area. The bond Randy and I shared had semiestranged him from that street, from that home, and had estranged us both from Mormonism. Now, we shared excommunication. I, especially, had felt attached to Mormonism, but that distant attachment was something neither of us had missed for a very long time. Mormonism was no longer our community and we valued our new church's emphasis on the love of Christ and doing good for all. It's not that Mormonism doesn't teach love and service, it's just that those aspects of religion are secondary in Mormonism—secondary to

obedience, regulation, and orthodoxy. When Mormon leaders speak, the members are supposed to listen and obey.

Now, our only ties to Mormonism were familial. Since my family had gotten over the shock of our love sooner than Randy's, he had continued to see his parents and siblings on ordinary days, while major events had been celebrated with my family, with our friends, or just the two of us.

Randy's parents wanted to be with him for his thirtieth birthday—a milestone they, seemingly, just had to share, so I was begrudgingly invited into their home for the first time. I was an unwanted accessory, but they were trying to make room for me. Sort of.

I walked in with a huge, if somewhat forced, grin. "It's so nice to meet you!" I said as I offered my hand to his father, who almost cringed as I put my other hand on his shoulder.

My body language hinted at a hug as his mother came toward us. She quickly stuck out her hand. "Welcome," she said in a way that didn't make me feel it.

Randy glanced at me with kind of a grimace as his mother put her arm through his, leading him to the couch, while his father directed me to a solitary chair. I felt a bit sidelined.

They didn't seat us together at dinner either. Randy's siblings were at the back of the house when we arrived and were already seated at the dining room table, with their spouses, when we joined them. None of his nieces or nephews were included that evening. I realized this was difficult for mom and dad but it all seemed so unnecessarily awkward.

I think it may have been partly out of deference to their parents but Randy's siblings were a bit cold as they were introduced. I was seated with a brother on either side of me. At first, trying to be optimistic, I wondered if maybe I was being offered a chance to get acquainted with different family members, but when I tried to engage, asking questions about their lives and families, his brothers answered with little warmth, and then as soon as semi-politely possible, they directed their comments to someone else. I began to wonder if my overly exuberant attempts to win them all over were a waste of energy. How had this family produced such a warm, caring, empathetic, son? I decided Randy was more like his grandparents. I knew one set, who had always been close to Randy, and they were lovely. We saw them often.

Then, as she caught my eye, Randy's sister gave me a quick, and warm, smile.

But by the time dinner was over, Randy had had enough. When his mother got up to get the birthday cake, he motioned me over to sit next to him. I almost imperceptibly shook my head.

"Yes Steve, I want you here." Randy then faced his dad. "Look, we're not trying to rub your noses in it, I'm not going to plant a big smackeroo on his lips, right here in front of you. But you're being rude!"

I went over and sat in the chair next to Randy, where his mother had been. Under the table, he leaned his knee against mine. Then he continued his diatribe. "You," he looked around the room, "have to face the fact that *we're* a thing." He waved his fingers back and forth between the two of us. "I'm fuckin' thirty years old! And yes, I know not to say that word in front of the kids if you ever let them be around us. We know how to be discreet, for Chrissake!" He got up, walked to where his mother now stood in the doorway to the kitchen, and gently took the cake. But she turned away when he tried to kiss her on the cheek. Randy returned, with the cake, to his place next to me. "Now, let's get this over with."

We got through cake and presents in about twenty minutes—or less. As we left and walked to our car Randy said, "Thanks for trying so hard. I'm glad we're here together." We sat down in the car, out of the view of his family and old neighborhood and Randy took hold of my hand. "Sorry they were so awful. I won't subject either of us to that again. Unless they promise to be better, there won't be a next time." He turned the key in the ignition. "Let's go to The Sun and dance our asses off! We'll get drunk and take a cab home!"

We stopped at home and called a cab to take us to the bar. Randy defiantly held my hand, letting go briefly, so we could climb out of the cab. Then, holding on tightly, he raised our entwined hands into the air, waving his other hand at passing cars while yelling, "I'm thirty and in love! Fuck you, world!" He let go, throwing his arms around me. "And they said we'd never last!"

We danced. We got drunk. We laughed with friends and new acquaintances.

At some point, while we were on the dance floor, the regular music stopped. They rarely played slow songs, but at that moment, Anne Murray's voice filled the space, softly singing her, "Could I Have This Dance" about being dance partners for life.

That hot, throbbing, dance floor hushed as our arms went around each other. We swayed to different sensations...the smell of fresh sweat in Randy's hair...the feel of his breath on my neck...the scratch of stubble that hadn't been shaved since that morning...the warmth of our bodies pressed together.

Randy was gorgeous. Broad shoulders, narrow hips, strong arms, light brown hair and a face that turned heads.

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I was vaguely aware of people leaving the dance floor but was so consumed by Randy and the moment that I didn't realize we were the only ones out there until the song ended.

I might have blushed, if blushing had been something that I did. Randy took a little bow as people clapped and we walked into the crowd.

"How long have you two been together?"

"Since 1975," I answered.

"But we've been in love since 1972," Randy added.

"Wow!"

"That's nothing," I said. "You should meet our friends Russ and Don, they've been together since 1963."

Randy whispered to me, "We'll be together forever. Let's go home, put on Puccini and..." He grinned.

I finished the sentence for him. "Fuck like there's no tomorrow!"

Later, as our entwined bodies approached sleep, Puccini's music and the accompanying lyrics ran through my mind. *Vo'andare in Porta Rossa a comperar l'anello!* I want to go to Porta Rossa to buy the ring!

Randy stirred and I opened my eyes. Face to face on the same pillow, I ran my thumb along the bridge of his nose, over his left eyebrow and along the back of his ear. I softly took his earlobe between my thumb and first two fingers. I proceeded, lightly running my fingers across his shoulder, then down the small of his back to the top of his crack. He snuggled into me and...sneezed. We laughed, rolled over, and fell asleep, back touching back and bum to bum.

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On December 20th, 2013 we got married. We had set aside rings for this day, but we thought we'd have to go to one of the 17 states that had gay marriage at that time, as some of our friends had done. But here we were in Salt Lake City. None of my family could make it in time that day, but we were afraid if we waited it might be too late. This wasn't the way we would have wanted to do things, but we had to deal with the realities of life and same-sex love. As it turned out, gay marriages continued for over two weeks before a stay was granted, but we couldn't predict on that Friday afternoon. We decided to inform Randy's family after the fact—except for his older sister, but she and her husband couldn't make it in time either.

"Do you, Randall Evans, take Steven Petersen to be your legally wedded spouse, to have, to hold, to love, honor and cherish?"

"I do."

We took turns putting the wedding rings on each other.

I had long been infatuated with the idea of wearing a wedding band. That desire may have stemmed from a mild infatuation for my English teacher my middle year of high school. He was a new teacher, probably no more than twenty-four or twenty-five years old. I thought he was good-looking and I remember sitting next to him at his desk one day going over a paper I had written. I remember his sexy hands and how nice the simple wedding band he wore looked. I wanted one like it someday.

In 2013, that day finally arrived. I looked at those simple, but to me, elegant bands on the ring finger of our left hands, and at that moment realized our hands were turning old. Randy and I were growing old together and my hands made me remember my grandfather's hands. I was a mass of emotion as I remembered the love my grandparents and

I shared, parents too, and I wished everyone I loved could have shared this moment.

The rings looked good on our "grandpa" hands, and I smiled, knowing that I could now show that ringed hand and say that I was married. Married to the man I had fallen in love with as a nineteen-year-old Mormon missionary, and still loved now, a week after my sixty-first birthday. I only regretted that we hadn't been able to hold our ringed hands in the air decades ago, when our hands were young, and proclaim our love to the world, "We're in love. We're married!" But we were proclaiming it now.

To us, this was something to celebrate, but the reaction to Judge Shelby's ruling by the rulers of Utah, both official and unofficial, let us know that merely proclaiming our love and commitment was still a subversive act. That we were still saying, "Fuck you, world!" We wanted the world to celebrate our happiness with us, not have living, and loving, be a political statement, but what were we supposed to do when apparently, simply not hiding, was still an act of defiance?

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The past flashed again as my mind went back to 1977. Anita Bryant was a leading spokesperson for those fighting "Gay Liberation," which had been building momentum. She fought to have an anti-discrimination law repealed in Florida. Utah's newly elected Senator Orrin Hatch said on the radio that homosexuals "are becoming too blatant in our society." Mormon Apostle Mark E. Petersen wrote, "Every right thinking person will sustain Miss Bryant, a prayerful, upright citizen, for her stand."

Anita Bryant was coming to sing at the Utah State Fair. Salt Lake's gay community began to plan what would be our first gay rights demonstration. On the afternoon of Sunday September 18th, 1977,

Randy and I joined a large crowd gathered at The Sun, to organize, but it was a disappointment that after leaving there, only about fifty actually showed up at the fairgrounds to protest. Our group was comprised mostly of gay men, but there were a few lesbians with us. Television news reporters were there to document it all. One even lay down on the sidewalk in front of us as we marched along North Temple Street and Tenth West. His and other cameras rolled as we were forced to step over him or leave the sidewalk to go around.

While we picketed outside the fairgrounds, a mob gathered on the grounds, on the other side of the high, chain link fence that was there at the time—separating us.

"Faggots!"

"Cocksuckers!"

"Fuckin' dykes!" A man grabbed his crotch and pointed with his other hand at a pretty, blond, lesbian. "I'll make a woman out o' *you!*"

I looked back and forth between the screaming man and the pretty woman. His face wore hatred; hers, determination and stoicism. But in her eyes I saw unease—fear even.

She looked forward and continued with firmness in her steps.

They began to spit through the fence and throw bottles over it at us.

The police were there, but they made no effort to discourage the spitting or bottle throwing.

We parted as we watched a bottle falling dangerously close. It crashed on the pavement, splintering into a hundred, violent shards.

We marched. A Utah first. Our community had been gathering for small Gay Pride events since 1974, and a gay group had joined in an

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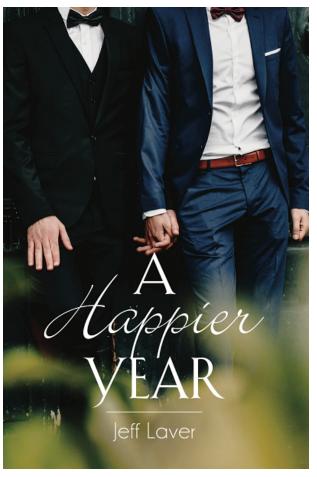
anti-war protest in 1971, but here we were, just us, on TV, proclaiming our presence.

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On December 20th, 2013 Randy and I got married.

The two of us ran down to the county clerk's office. We would have liked being surrounded by loved ones on such a special day. We would have liked to have a big party after, in a beautiful setting in the mountains, but the two of us went home, put on Puccini and made love.

A few days later, on Christmas Eve, we cooked dinner for a couple of my siblings and their kids, then we went to the late service at church to remember the birth of the One who taught, "Love one another, as I have loved you."



The stories in this book are about homosexuality within the sometimes baffling world of Mormonism. Accompany the characters herein as they face the dilemmas of those whose lives don't fit the mold.

# A Happier Year

By Jeff Laver

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