

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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A photograph of two men from the waist down, dressed in formal attire. The man on the left wears a black tuxedo with a white shirt and a black bow tie. The man on the right wears a navy blue suit with a white shirt, a red patterned bow tie, and a brown belt. They are holding hands. The background is dark and out of focus, with some green foliage visible at the bottom.

A
Happier
YEAR

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-year-old, 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?

"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?"

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

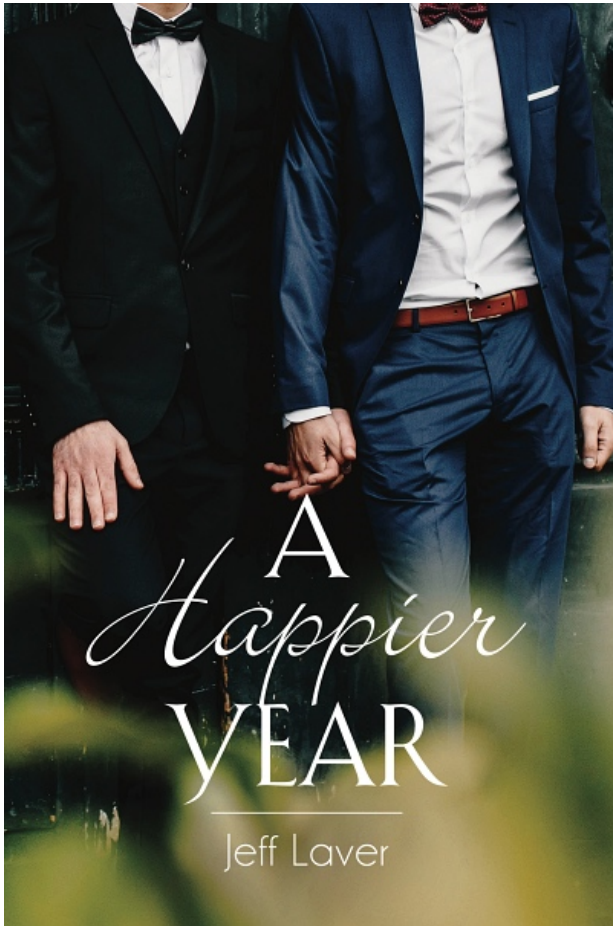
Author's Comments

Some may say that happenings in these stories are not the way Mormons do things. Well, the way they are described in this book is the way Mormons did things then. These stories are fiction but I tried to get the background history right. A couple of examples include the facts that Gloria Gaynor did perform at The Sun, Theater 138 did put on *The Boys in the Band*. But, etcetera, etcetera, and etcetera.

There is a major exception to the accurate history though. In "Just Call Me Greg" the timeline for AIDS and other things is considerably compacted for the sake of story-telling. Less major, I made up names of some organizations or places in these stories. And I couldn't verify with certainty the song "Nobody" on a Judy Garland album Rick would likely have had.

Thanks to Ben Williams and Kent Brintnall for helping me get a couple of historical events right. Also, thanks to Russ, Don, Ryan, and Brett for sharing helpful memories. My thanks to Kent again, also Jerry, Belea, Keren, and Johnny for editorial help on earlier versions of one, or more, of the stories. I am very grateful for Craig's technical help, Todd's help with typing, and Kevin's proofreading.

Different versions of these stories have been published previously.



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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