

# FLYING OVER BABEL



JOHNNY TOWNSEND



How do you ask a girl on a date when everyone in town knows your father was convicted for the serial murders of a dozen prostitutes? Will the torture of electroshock therapy turn a gay BYU student straight? In this compelling collection of Mormon stories, there is an acknowledgment of the real evil that exists around us, and an awareness of the difficult compromises we sometimes make in order to live in an imperfect world.

## **Flying Over Babel**

**Order the complete book from the publisher**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/5855.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

**YOUR FREE EXCERPT APPEARS BELOW. ENJOY!**

Flying  
Over  
Babel

Johnny Townsend

Copyright 2011 Johnny Townsend

ISBN 978-1-61434-759-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, events, and dialogue are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2011

First Edition

Cover art, "Ode to Mozo" by Nate Stottrup  
([www.natestottrup.com](http://www.natestottrup.com))  
Cover design by Todd Engel and Nate Stottrup

## To Open the Eyes of the Blind

“Of course I’m a virgin,” I said. “Isn’t everyone at BYU a virgin?” I frowned. “Except for the married students, of course.”

My branch president smiled at me, a bit condescendingly, I thought. “Even some of the saints are weak,” he replied. “Particularly people like you.”

I felt my armpits instantly grow wet. “What’s wrong with me? Just because my father’s a bishop?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

I did, but I was sure he couldn’t really *know*. I’d never told anyone, never acted on my feelings even once. I was a good boy, and I’d be serving as a missionary as soon as my freshman year at Brigham Young University was completed.

“I—I don’t even date,” I said. “I don’t want to leave a girlfriend behind for two years.”

“Jeremy,” said President Blakely softly, “I’m going to give you a recommend for electroshock therapy.”

I felt the color drain from my face. “Wh-what? You mean like a temple recommend?”

“Of course. You can’t go without a recommend.” He chuckled. “BYU’s been getting excellent results,” he went on. “If you’re really still a virgin, your chances are even better. Don’t you *want* to get married and have a family? This is your only chance to overcome those homosexual feelings.”

I felt sick. How had he guessed? I was a good-looking boy. At least, when I looked in the mirror, I thought *I’d* be attracted to me. And I had good friends. I wasn’t a social misfit or

*Johnny Townsend*

anything. I volunteered as a math tutor. I cheered up the boys in my dorm who were homesick. I was fit, too, on the track team. And I'd been a Boy Scout, an Eagle.

"My father's a bishop," I repeated. "I have two brothers who served missions. My sister is married in the temple."

"But you're the youngest, aren't you?"

"Y-yes," I said in confusion.

"So you're the baby. You've been pampered. You've had it easy. And that's a key way for Satan to grab hold of your soul. But it'll be okay. The program really works."

"But President Blakely—"

"You're not going to sin and deny it, are you? Pride like that will make it much harder for Heavenly Father to help you. You *do* want to be cured, don't you?"

I stared at the floor. Was he going to tell my father? Would I be kicked out of school? Would they keep me from going on a mission? It was mortifying to talk about such a repulsive subject, but if this was truly my only chance, I decided I'd better take it.

"Yes, President, I want to be cured."

President Blakely slapped his desk. "Excellent!" His grin covered his entire face. "You'll meet with your therapist tomorrow at 1:00."

"I have classes at noon and 2:00."

"Exactly. You see, we're working with you. We want to help."

I nodded, and the president told me the details of the location on campus where I was to go the following day. I tried to smile. Then we prayed, he handed me the recommend, and I

*Flying Over Babel*

left. I strolled back to my dorm in a daze. It was early October, still warmer than I'd expected Utah to be. I was from San Diego, where it never grew cold. I missed my mother. I missed my dog. I missed my best friend, Scott, who'd gone to UCLA.

Life had been so easy back in San Diego. I belonged to the math club and the chess club and ran on the track team. That plus classes and Seminary and church kept me too busy to worry about my feelings. Whenever sexual urges became too insistent, I'd grab my father's lawnmower and walk around the neighborhood till I found a lawn that needed attention. People thought I was a great guy, so I'd had to repent of the deception every Sunday when I partook of the sacrament. Then I'd learned sign language on my own when a deaf 12-year-old girl was baptized three years ago, so I could interpret for her in meetings. That just made people think I had a crush on her, but despite the inappropriate age difference, I let them believe it. Being good always seemed to be tainted with some degree of sin.

I stood outside my dormitory, looking up at the building. It was just a few months since the Church had granted Blacks the right to hold the priesthood. There were big changes in the air. We'd defeated the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have brought destruction down on society. Maybe it was time to finally defeat homosexuality as well. This new science of electroshock therapy might be the modern advancement God had given the world to help save people like me, who might have been goners in an earlier time. I prayed, thanking Heavenly Father for giving my branch president the gift of perception so that he was able to call me out and offer the help I needed.

That night was a Fireside, on the subject of faith. I sat next to Doug, one of the guys in my student branch I really liked. We

*Johnny Townsend*

joked and laughed. I was determined not to let anyone else know my nasty secret. I'd be normal soon, and I could be true friends with people like Doug for the first time, without my sinful desires playing any role in it.

"How's the German coming along?" asked Doug after the talk was over.

"Wunderbar." I'd deliberately not studied Spanish because I didn't want to go to South America on my mission next year. I'd wanted to take French because I thought Paris would be lovely, yet with French there was always the chance of being sent to Canada, and that sounded too cold. German was pretty site-specific, and I really wanted to serve in Europe, despite the notoriously low baptism rates there. Of course, I knew that God had his own plans and I couldn't circumnavigate them, but I could do what I could to influence him. The Old Testament was full of stories of humans trying to persuade God.

Maybe if I worked hard and squashed my gay feelings, Heavenly Father would reward me.

"If it's going so well, why do you look depressed?"

"It's just a headache. I'm fine." I smiled brightly to prove it.

"Okay. See you at Family Home Evening tomorrow night."

I went back to my dorm, ignored my roommate Bill, who I thought very immature, and read the scriptures until bedtime. I never studied for school on Sundays.

I don't remember much about my classes the next day. My memory is all focused on the meeting with my therapist. After looking at the recommend the branch president had written for me, he had me sign a waiver stating that I did not hold BYU, the Church, or the therapist himself liable for any harm that might occur, or for any failure to become heterosexual. That



*Flying Over Babel*

failure would be entirely my responsibility, if I didn't exercise enough faith. I also had to promise never to discuss these sessions with anyone. As if I'd ever want to! I'd have rather died than let Doug or Scott or my family know what a terrible person I really was.

We established that we'd meet twice a week at first, on Mondays and Fridays. "Aversion therapy truly works," said Dr. Troutman. He never explained his credentials, so I assumed he was a psychologist or maybe a psychiatrist. "It helps people stop smoking, stop drinking, stop doing lots of negative behaviors that damage their lives."

"But I don't have any behavior to modify," I said. "I don't *do* anything gay."

"We don't use the word 'gay' here," said Dr. Troutman. "We say 'homosexual urges' or 'same-sex attraction.' These are degenerate feelings. We don't legitimize them by saying 'gay.'"

"Well, how are homosexual feelings a behavior?" I insisted.

"You're being very resistant. That's not a good sign. The fact is that you *choose* to think about men. And you masturbate, don't you?"

I felt my face grow warm. "Y-yes," I said. I jerked off maybe once a week. I wasn't sure if that was a lot or not since no one ever talked about these things, but I knew it was a wicked sin. I'd tried repenting for years, but I could never overcome the disgusting habit.

"And you think about men when you do it, right?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"Those are choices. Those are actions. But this program will take care of all that."

*Johnny Townsend*

That first day, he only attached electrodes to my hands and chest. I felt awkward sitting there without a shirt. Even though Dr. Troutman wasn't all that attractive, my semi-nude state made me feel sexual, and when I felt his fingers on my skin, I started to become aroused.

Thankfully, he turned off the lights then, and a series of slides began to show on a screen. I squinted my eyes at first. That looked like—oh, my god! Those were pictures of naked men! Naked men touching each other! I'd never looked at pornography before and couldn't believe what I was seeing. That man's dick—

Zap.

I jumped in my chair and shouted as a jolt of electricity passed through my body for a full three seconds. I wasn't sure I could say if it was painful or just uncomfortable, but it was certainly unpleasant. I looked away from the screen.

“No, you have to keep looking. We need to create an association in your brain. It'll take some time.”

I kind of *wanted* to see the pictures, of course. Other than a few quick glimpses of nudity in gym classes or dormitory bathrooms, all I had was my imagination. It was kind of nice to finally see real men's bodies, doing what—

Zap.

I grunted and looked at Dr. Troutman. I was going to have to do this for two hours a week? How long would it take? Part of me felt grateful that it was suddenly acceptable for me to see these images. They were so nice, I was afraid the treatment might work too quickly and I'd lose my ability to appreciate their beauty. But I knew it was only an illusion of beauty, and it would bring me to Outer Darkness. Perhaps the program was

*Flying Over Babel*

working already. Did I still find that man on the screen attractive? His nipples—

Zap.

I groaned. Three seconds was a long time. “I don’t want to do this anymore. It hurts.”

“Excellent. We’ll have you cured in no time.”

“I want to go home.”

“If you stop the sessions before you’re cured, we’ll have to declare a breach of the school’s honor code.”

I gripped the armrests on my chair and looked back at the next picture. That guy’s blond hair was really cute, and that angular face—

Zap.

My eyes watered, and I blinked to clear my vision. I had to see the screen. I had to look at these men. Oh, my god. That man’s dick was going into another man’s ass. How could I be watching this at BYU? It was horrifying. And intriguing. And lovely. That man had a captivating hair pattern on his chest. And those arms alone were worth—

Zap.

I could smell burned hair, a nauseating odor, coming from my hands. I continued looking at the men before me, and I kept getting shocked, until 1:50, when Dr. Troutman pulled off all the electrodes and had me put my shirt back on.

“Great job,” said Dr. Troutman. “You’re progressing nicely.”

I muddled through my next class and tried to study in the afternoon, but I found my mind kept wandering. I hoped the electricity wouldn’t affect the regular activity of my neurons.

*Johnny Townsend*

Surely, that would only happen if they applied the electrodes directly to my head. Maybe we'd have to resort to that if nothing else worked.

I tried to assess my feelings. I didn't feel especially sexual right now. That was a good sign. What if I'd be normal in a few weeks? Maybe even in time for Christmas. What a wonderful present that would be. I couldn't even imagine how nice life must be for people who didn't carry this heavy burden around with them all the time.

Family Home Evening was in Doug's room. Everyone in our student branch divided up into small groups on Monday nights. It was only a substitute for a real family activity, but we didn't want to get out of the habit when we'd be forming our own families as soon as we came home from our missions. The family was not only the most important thing; it was really the *only* important thing. Everything else was secondary to supporting and promoting it. So every Monday, thousands of groups of students pretended to gather as families across the BYU campus.

"Hi, Jeremy," said Doug. "Boy, you look terrible. You have another headache?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Just a little eye strain. Thanks."

Norm, Doug's roommate, called everyone to order, and then he offered an opening prayer. "I thought we'd talk tonight about obedience," Norm went on after his prayer. "We're going to analyze Abraham's commitment to sacrificing Isaac, how we must do *anything* the Lord asks of us, no matter how difficult."

"What happened to your hand?" whispered Doug, poking me in the ribs and pointing.

"Burned it cooking," I whispered back.

"You have a stove?"

*Flying Over Babel*

“Do you two mind?” said Norm.

I covered the burned spot on my hand with my other hand and concentrated on the lesson. These lessons never lasted very long. No one wanted a boring evening after a long day of classes. A few minutes later, just as we were wrapping up, Doug raised his hand.

“Yes?”

“Did you notice that after the attempted murder of Isaac, Isaac is never shown talking to his father again?”

There was silence in the room. I had certainly never noticed such a thing, but I spent more time reading the Book of Mormon than the Old Testament.

“So?” Norm finally responded.

Doug shrugged. “It just seems like we need to acknowledge that there are sometimes permanent unwanted consequences from following blindly.”

“Well, we *accept* the consequences from obedience,” Norm insisted. “It’s the right thing to do. God will make everything better later.”

“It’s just that...”

“What?”

“It’s just that I wonder if the test was really to make Abraham follow any commandment whatsoever, or if the test was to see if Abraham would challenge a truly unjust order.”

Norm put his hand on his hip and stomped his foot.

“Remember the Nuremberg trials?” Doug went on. “When the Nazis said they were just following orders, they were told that didn’t justify their actions.”

“That’s because they were taking orders from *men*,” said Norm. “We’re taking orders from God.” His eyes narrowed and he added slowly, “So what commandment do *you* not want to follow?”

Everyone turned to look at Doug, even me.

He shrugged. “I don’t particularly want to go on a mission,” he said. “I’m planning on becoming a doctor. Maybe an ophthalmologist. It takes years of schooling. I don’t want to get even further behind by taking off for two years.”

Norm’s lip curled. “Sounds selfish to me. We have to remember that if God gives us a commandment, there’s a *reason*. Commandments are always for our own good.”

I was still staring at Doug. He wanted to be an ophthalmologist? So did I. How come I didn’t know this about him? I suddenly felt very close to Doug, and the idea briefly flashed across my mind that maybe this meant we were right for each other. Then I realized that another man could never be right for me. Besides, it had never occurred to me to worry about being two years behind the other medical students. Serving God on a mission was more important than being a doctor by the age of 26. Perhaps even a terrible sinner like me could show Doug how to see the importance of righteous priorities.

The meeting ended with a prayer from Ben, and then after a little isolated chatting, things broke up and people headed back to their own rooms. “Take care of that hand,” said Doug, punching me lightly in the shoulder. “Burns can get infected.”

I smiled weakly and nodded and then walked slowly out into the hall.

I was able to get back into my studies by the next day. On Wednesday night, I caught a glimpse of Doug getting into the

*Flying Over Babel*

shower at the end of the hall, and I locked myself in a bathroom cubicle and masturbated. I almost cried when I was done. I had desecrated my friendship with a truly good man. I prayed God would take pity on a sleaze like me and help me be cured quickly.

On Friday, it was all I could do to sit through my noon class. I was so anxious to continue my treatment and get better. I shook Dr. Troutman's hand firmly just after 1:00 and smiled. "I'm ready," I said.

"You'll need to take off all your clothes today," he said matter-of-factly.

I frowned but did as I was told. I felt very vulnerable standing naked in front of him but managed, thank goodness, not to get an erection. Dr. Troutman had me sit down, and he placed electrodes on my hands and chest as before, but he added one to my penis as well.

It was mortifying to be touched so intimately and know it was because I was thoroughly filthy. I wished he could hurry up and turn off the lights.

"Here's a dial," said Dr. Troutman. "You'll control the level of pain yourself."

I nodded.

I was amazed when the photos started flashing up on the screen by how accustomed I'd become to seeing nude men, after just one session. While the images still intrigued me, they also seemed perfectly normal and familiar. There was a Hispanic guy with a thick moustache. There was an Italian man with a throbbing penis. And there was—

*Zzzt.*

Whew.

*Johnny Townsend*

*Zzzt.*

What was that?

*Zzzt.*

The electric shocks still lasted three seconds each, but now there was a series of ten in a row. After only the first series, I felt as if I'd just been beaten by a neighborhood bully. "What's going on?" I asked.

"Just keep looking. And remember, the level of pain you feel is up to you."

I looked back at the screen. A Black man was taking the penis of a blond man in his mouth. Oh, I'd wanted to do that for such a long time. Another blond with a beard was fondling himself. A dark-haired man was kissing another man.

*Zzzt.*

*Zzzt.*

*Zzzt.*

*Zzzt.*

My heart was racing, and I was sweating. But that penis up on the screen still looked like a work of art. I leaned over and turned up the dial a notch. I didn't know what to think. I *loved* looking at these pictures, but I so wanted *not* to love it. My eyes ate the screen hungrily, and I felt like scum for doing it. But just *look* at those arms, I thought, unable to turn away. And just look at that chest. And oh, my god, I had never dreamed a penis could be that beautiful.

*Zzzt.*

*Zzzt.*

*Zzzt.*

*Zzzt.*



*Flying Over Babel*

I smelled burned hair again, and my penis hurt even when the shocks were no longer being administered. But as an athlete, I understood the saying, “No pain, no gain.” I had a lot to gain here, so I knew it would require a great deal of pain. And I was ready to do what I had to do.

I was exhausted by the time the session was over. I had just one more burn on my hand and one now on my penis. But that was a small price to pay for spiritual freedom. I put my clothes back on, thanked Dr. Troutman for his help, and headed to my next class.

There was no dance or any other activity planned that weekend, so I didn’t see Doug again until Sunday. “You look like shit,” he whispered, sitting next to me in elders quorum. “Pardon the University of Utah language. Are you still getting those headaches? Maybe you should see a doctor.”

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

Doug put his hand on my arm. “I’m serious, Jeremy. Don’t fool around with something like this.”

I nodded and turned my attention to the teacher. “Today’s lesson is on keeping pure,” Malcolm began. The first time I’d seen him, I thought he was attractive, but I’d quickly found him to be annoying, and suddenly, he wasn’t attractive anymore. I wondered how something unrelated to appearance could actually change my perception of that appearance. In a way, I was grateful. It was one less man to lust after. But there were times I tried to see him again the way I had that first day.

Men in general were creeps, though, so I didn’t know why I didn’t find fewer of them appealing. I wondered what role emotion had in my seeing males as attractive in the first place. How did my perceiving arrogance or spite in someone like Malcolm change the impulses hitting my eye’s rods and cones?

*Johnny Townsend*

But if I could find this individual man attractive one day and ordinary the next, maybe my therapy sessions could help me see *all* men as unattractive before long. I wondered what part of perception I would have to alter, though, to see women sexually and men as uninteresting. Could electricity and pain really be all that was needed?

Malcolm's words were coming in and out of focus as I sometimes paid attention and other times let my mind wander, but at one point, he said something that grabbed me by the throat. "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out," he said.

I raised my hand hesitantly. "How does an eye offend?" I asked. "How can an eye sin?"

"Remember King David?" said Malcolm. "He looked at Bathsheba too long. And look at the problems that caused."

"So why didn't God tell *him* to pluck out his eye?" asked Doug. "And would plucking out just one eye do the job? Aren't we looking with both?"

"Well," said Malcolm slowly, "if you're really sinning a lot, you probably *should* pluck out both eyes."

There was some murmuring among the elders in the class. "Is that a real commandment?" asked Doug. "There would be a lot of blind Mormons running around if it was. And what about repentance? If you repent of having looked at something inappropriate, you're still blind the rest of your life. What shape would the Church Welfare program be in if 62% of Church members were blind?"

Malcolm sighed.

"And what about that next verse? If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off. How many guys in this room have ever beat off using their right hand?"

*Flying Over Babel*

There was a stunned silence. People simply didn't talk about these things. Certainly not in church. But were we all thinking it? How could Doug know all the questions I was having myself, unless he was having them, too? Just how widespread was this type of grievous sin?

Malcolm gritted his teeth this time. "Doug, you always cause trouble. You know what the scriptures say about people who are learned."

"We're at BYU." Doug laughed. "We aren't supposed to use our brains?"

"Not to fight against God."

"Who's fighting against God?"

Malcolm closed his eyes.

"So if thy brain offend thee, get a lobotomy?"

I stood up and squeezed my way down the row till I reached the aisle, and then I hurried out the door. I felt sick to my stomach. Was my only hope of not lusting after men in photographs, or after men I saw on the street, to pluck out my own eyes? When I was in bed at night with my eyes closed, I could still see men in my mind. So did I need to cut off my hands? Castrate myself? Undergo an actual lobotomy like Doug said? If it was my spirit itself that was an offense, did I need to "pluck out" my very soul? Was committing suicide the only solution?

The next day, I had Dr. Troutman place two electrodes on my penis instead of just the one, and another on my testicles, plus the usual devices on my hands and chest. I turned up the dial as high as it would go.

*Johnny Townsend*

“Are you sure?” asked Dr. Troutman. “We can work up to that level if we have to. But maybe you can be cured without such drastic measures.”

Drastic measures? Was *anything* drastic if it kept a person from being cast into Outer Darkness? The Church obviously approved of this program, so the only thing for me to do was embrace it fully.

I stared at the first picture on the screen. It was of an Asian man who was flaccid. I was still flaccid myself. The whole idea of looking at men almost made me sick to my stomach. But that didn't mean I wasn't still fully attracted to them, that I didn't still want to—

*Zzzt.*

*Zap.*

*Ssst.*

*Zzzk.*

A dark-haired man with a thick chestful of hair held his hard penis like a weapon. A sandy-haired man also showed a lovely chestful of hair, and a wonderful bush of pubic hair as well. I gripped the armrests tightly, trying not to cry. *Why* did I want these men? What if even six months of loathsome sessions like this didn't cure me? What if I fell before I was healed? I could see Scott up on that screen. I could see Doug. I wanted to turn the dial even beyond its highest mark. It was what God wanted. The Church said so. I blinked my eyes dry and stared at the screen. The curve on that penis—

*Zzzt.*

*Zap.*

*Ssst.*

*Zzzk.*

*Flying Over Babel*

I smelled burned hair again, and maybe even burned flesh this time. I wondered what the Jews in Auschwitz thought when they smelled that horrid odor coming from the ovens. Thank goodness Heavenly Father took better care of his *real* chosen people than that. God was helping me. He'd sent me to Dr. Troutman. I'd be normal soon. I would. By the time I got off my mission, that deaf girl would be old enough to marry. I kept staring at the screen.

There was a knock at the door. I barely noticed, luxuriating in the pain searing my body. Last night, I'd dreamed I was being executed in an electric chair, waking up disappointed it was only a dream. The knocking continued, becoming insistent, and Dr. Troutman turned off the electric shock machine and flipped off the projector.

"Hang on," he said in an irritated voice. "Must be one of the other subjects, but I tell everyone there's no dropping by."

My thoughts were still flying everywhere, but I was stunned to attention by that last comment. Just how many of us were there on campus? How many of us were there in the Church? Was there a Church-wide program of inflicting pain on people? Was this a pilot program?

Part of me thought about the huge advances that could be made if everyone were electrocuted into being righteous. But another part of me remembered that it was Satan's plan to force obedience rather than let people choose. Yet homosexuality wasn't a choice to begin with, no matter what my branch president said, so perhaps it didn't count. The ends might justify the means in this case.

Still, if I couldn't just snap my fingers and be normal, was it possible to do so by simply flipping a switch?

I wished Dr. Troutman would come back.

*Johnny Townsend*

I heard the sound of arguing and turned. My mouth fell open when I saw Doug pushing his way past Dr. Troutman. Oh, my god. Was he a patient, too?

“Jeremy,” said Doug, kneeling beside me. He looked as awful as I felt. It must be true then.

“I went to talk to your roommate, Bill.” Doug was pulling electrodes off of my arms and chest. For some reason, I didn’t feel naked in front of him. “He told me some things you were saying in your sleep, and I tracked you down.” Doug carefully pulled off an electrode attached to my penis. “Jeremy, you’re burned. You’re coming back to my room so we can take care of that.”

“But...but I need treatment,” I said. “I can’t leave. And I have a class at two...”

Doug stopped, his hand resting on the second electrode on my penis. “Haven’t you ever seen *A Clockwork Orange*?” he asked.

I shook my head dully. “It’s rated R.”

“Look, they’re not going to let you stay at BYU. Is there a school in California you could attend?”

I thought of Scott at UCLA. “Will they let *you* stay?” I asked.

Doug pulled off the last electrode on my penis and grabbed the one on my sac. He was almost vicious as he tore them off. “Yes,” he said harshly. “I’m a *good* boy.”

So was I, I thought. Then I looked at the blank screen and the machine sitting next to me. I saw Dr. Troutman off to the side on the phone, sounding angry.

“But...don’t you believe?” I asked. “Why did you stop them?”

*Flying Over Babel*

Doug had me stand up and handed me my underwear. “I believe that what God wants and what people *think* he wants are not always the same thing.”

“Would you want to go to UCLA?” I asked. I suddenly felt very alone.

Doug laughed. “I don’t want to be a missionary,” he said, “but I do have a mission.”

“What’s that?” I pulled on my slacks.

“To open the eyes of the blind.” He smiled, handing me my shirt. “Let’s get out of here.”

Dr. Troutman was off the phone then. “We’ll be reporting you for breaking the Honor Code,” he said to me in a rather cold voice. “I’d report you, too, if I knew who you were.”

We hurried out before campus security could arrive, and Doug gave my arm a squeeze and headed off in another direction so we wouldn’t be found together.

I wasn’t sure why, but I knew quite fully that I wouldn’t be going back for any more sessions. Was it simply because Doug’s brief touch had felt so comforting? My perception of the world had changed in the blink of an eye. Somehow, I felt better, even understanding now I’d always be gay. Maybe liking men really wasn’t the end of the world, after all.

That idea might still take a little prayer.

It would be a shame to lose all the tuition for this quarter, I thought, but in the long run, UCLA would be cheaper. Dad might not help pay for any school besides BYU, of course, but I could always take out a student loan and do work study on campus tutoring deaf students. The future was starting to look very different, as if I’d just taken off dark sunglasses and could now see my surroundings unshadowed for the first time. I had

*Johnny Townsend*

the bizarre impression that I truly was seeing colors I'd never seen before. I felt a little disoriented.

I suddenly had to pee, so as soon as I made it back to my dormitory, I headed for the bathroom. I stood at the urinal, looking down at my burned penis, and let out a stream. A moment later, someone stood beside me at the urinal, and when I glanced over, he smiled.

I nodded and then looked down to see his penis. I simply knew somehow that I wasn't sinning. Well, I was pretty sure, anyway. The guy's penis twitched a little as I watched. Maybe I should be a urologist instead of an ophthalmologist, I thought. God did say he would help turn our weaknesses into strengths. I smiled, and I could see the guy thought I was smiling at him. I zipped up and thought about waiting till he was done, but I'd agreed to meet Doug, and my burns did need some care.

I looked at the man's back longingly for a second. Men truly were beautiful, I thought. I was glad I could really see that. I smiled again for a moment, and then I washed my hands thoroughly and headed out of the bathroom and down the hall toward Doug's room.



## Barricading the Emergency Exit

I stepped off the plane at Logan airport in Boston and smiled. I was finally in the mission field. Sure, technically I'd been a missionary for a month, in the Missionary Training Center in Provo. But now I was ready to face the world as a servant of the Lord. I'd been a little rebellious as a teenager, smoking from the age of fifteen, and getting a tattoo at eighteen, but I'd never actually had sex, so I was still qualified to serve, once I quit smoking. I hadn't had a cigarette in over six months. I wasn't exactly the prodigal son, but my parents had never expected me to make it this far. I snapped the rubber band on my wrist as I walked through the terminal till I arrived at Baggage Claim, and I picked up my two bags.

"Elder Biden!" I heard my name and turned to see two young men in suits approaching. "We're the mission assistants, here to take you to the mission home to meet the president."

I smiled and offered my hand, but both the other elders pulled up short. "Oh, dear," said one of them, frowning.

"We can't have that," said the other. He took out a pen with one hand, and put his other on my head. What the—

The two elders pointed and whispered and drew on my head while I stood there dumbfounded. When they finished, they stepped back. "Okay," said the one with the pen. "Now we'll get you a *real* haircut before you meet the prez."

We stopped at a barbershop, and my close-cut hair was cut even shorter. Then I went to the bathroom to wash off the ink lines. As we drove through the city, I wondered what I'd gotten myself into. Still, I'd had a spiritual conversion eight months ago, fasting for two days and asking God if the Mormon Church

*Flying Over Babel*

were true, and feeling a burning in my chest to confirm it. It wasn't a vision or anything, but I'd experienced the kind of peace that I normally only felt when smoking pot, and I hadn't had pot in days.

So now I was a believer. And in the MTC and in the temple, I'd had other spiritual witnesses. I guess I'd always believed just a little, or I'd have had sex with my girlfriends and experimented with harder drugs. But now, I really *believed*.

Soon we were at the mission home, and I met the other office staff. Then President Gillette and his wife came into the room. After a few minutes of socializing and one cookie, I was whisked upstairs to the president's office.

"Here are two things you're going to need to be successful," said President Gillette. He handed me what looked like a self-published book. "It's our mission rules."

"It's an inch thick," I said.

"I can see you're going to be a troublemaker." He laughed. "But we'll whip you into shape in no time."

"What's the other book?" I asked.

"Ah, curiosity. That can be a good thing, and that can be a bad thing. Remember, you're in the mission field to teach, not to learn. Except from me." He handed me a paperback with the title *Think and Grow Rich*, by Napoleon Hill. I looked up quizzically.

"The principles are what counts. His goal is money but ours is converts. We run this mission like a business. God's business is winning souls."

I nodded uncertainly and took the two books.

"Your first area will be here in Boston. Don't let any of the older elders tell you about their cars. Lots of the missionaries

*Johnny Townsend*

had cars when I started out as president eight months ago. The first thing I did was get rid of them. Too many elders out there joyriding. Now the stats have gone down. The elders say it takes too long to get anywhere and they can't work as hard. But I know they're just trying to make me look bad because they're angry with me for taking away their toys. But this is tough love. It's what the Lord preaches. And you're going to read this book and start bringing in baptisms."

I nodded again. I latched onto the fact that the mission president had been here eight months, the same length of time I'd had my testimony. It couldn't be a coincidence. I was meant to serve under him.

We began an interview which lasted about thirty minutes, where President Gillette verified my worthiness to be in his mission. He admonished me to be very careful not to masturbate and risk being sent home. "I tolerate no sexual sin in this mission."

"None?" I asked. "You mean, I should throw away my KY?" I looked at him innocently, though the look he gave back was stone cold. I felt a little irritated that he was treating me like a child. I knew full well I wasn't allowed to beat off. Even just as a regular member and not a missionary, that was a sin.

"Yep. You're going to be a problem." He picked up a writing pad from his desk. "I may need to change your first companion. I think you need a tougher trainer."

I was tempted to say something else, but I'd vowed I wouldn't let my rebellious nature ruin my mission. I was here to serve God, not be my own man.

When we went downstairs, President Gillette pointed to one of the mission assistants. "Elder McAnn, it's still early

*Flying Over Babel*

enough to do some tracting. Take Elder Biden out. And make sure he does all the door approaches.”

Elder McAnn nodded and we were soon out the door. We didn't take the car this time but headed to a bus stop. Neither of us said anything for the next fifteen minutes while we waited for a bus. Finally, I said casually, “Is the president always an asshole?”

Elder McAnn jumped and looked about nervously. “He's a great man. He's inspired to lead us.”

I was silent again for another moment. “I notice you didn't answer the question.”

“Don't get me in trouble, too,” he said. “Once I made some comment the prez didn't like, and even though I had a cold, he made me do street contacting in the rain all day. I ended up catching pneumonia.”

“I suppose that was so you could better touch the hearts of the hospital staff?”

“Don't get me in trouble.”

The bus came right then and we climbed on. I didn't want to be a jerk. I knew that leaders were humans with their own personalities. Here I was supposed to be a stalwart missionary, and I certainly had my personality quirks, too. I could hardly expect anything different from the mission president.

We got off the bus on a busy street, and Elder McAnn led me to the entrance of an apartment building. “It's an intercom,” he explained, pointing. “That'll make it harder. But you heard what the president said. Go ahead.”

“Not even one example first?”

“Oh, for Pete's sake.”

*Johnny Townsend*

I pushed the buzzer. After waiting several seconds, I pushed it again. This time, an angry woman said, “Yeah? I’m busy cleaning up here.”

“Need any help?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“We’re two missionaries who have to get in some service hours. We’re looking for anyone who needs some work done for free.”

“Are you fucking with me?”

“We’re not allowed to do that for two years.”

Elder McAnn gasped, and I heard laughter over the intercom. A moment later, I heard a window open up above, and a woman yelled down, “Okay, come on up.”

At the top of the stairs, we showed the woman our nametags, and she let us in. “You’ll really clean my apartment?”

“Just tell me what to do,” I said. “My companion here is kind of new, so he really needs to practice going over our first lesson. You can ignore him completely, but it’d be a great help if while I was cleaning the bathroom you let him go over his lines.”

An hour and a half later, we headed down the stairs with a return appointment. Elder McAnn looked dazed. “How did you do that?”

“That’s not the way you guys do it?”

“Hardly.”

“I learned it from my cousin who served a mission to Italy.”

“It’s a bit unorthodox, isn’t it?”

*Flying Over Babel*

I remembered my cousin had constantly been in trouble with his leaders, and I wondered if I'd done the right thing by reenacting some of the stories he'd told me. "*Quid pro quo* seems to work in the business world." I smiled. "I don't see why it shouldn't work here." I was joking, but the Napoleon Hill book came to mind, and I frowned.

"Maybe the president will take to you after all."

Once in my assigned area with my first companion, Elder Stilwell, I decided to take a more conventional approach to the work, but this didn't seem to get me many points, either. "You're not polishing your shoes the right way," he told me one night about two weeks after I arrived.

"Does it matter?" I asked, surprised. "They're still shiny."

"You have to do it the way it says in the rule book."

"Why?"

"Because it's in the rule book! You have to follow it to show your faith."

"Whatever."

"Don't you 'whatever' me. You do it the right way or else."

I put down the shoe I was polishing. "Or else what? You're going to send me home for not polishing my shoes right?"

"You have to be obedient to bring down the blessings of heaven. You're blocking the Holy Ghost from coming down."

"The Holy Ghost isn't a genie in a bottle. I don't have to rub my shoes the right way for him to show up."

"That's it. Tomorrow's Preparation Day. And you don't get to leave the apartment. The three of *us* will go out and have fun, and you'll be stuck here all by yourself."

“Oh, good. Finally some privacy. I should be able to get off two or three times.”

Elder Stilwell spluttered.

“Maybe I’ll use your garments to wipe up.” I snapped the rubber band on my wrist.

“I’m calling the zone leaders right now.”

“Tattletale, tattletale,” I called out in a singsong voice. Sheesh, were we adults or children? Wasn’t a mission supposed to be a great spiritual adventure? I’d been reading *Think and Grow Rich* diligently the past couple of weeks, but all I could think about was Jesus meeting with the apostles after the Sermon on the Mount. “Here’s your baptismal quota,” he must have said, “and I need you to give the baptismal challenge by fifteen minutes into the second lesson or I’ll have to write you up.”

The next morning, Elder Stilwell still wasn’t speaking to me. He and the other senior companion left the apartment at 9:00, and the other junior came to my room. “Got stuck babysitting?” I asked Elder Driscoll. He was usually pretty quiet, so even after two weeks in the same apartment, I knew almost nothing about him, but he had to be better than my regular companion.

“We couldn’t have you falling into sexual depravity,” he said, smiling.

“Sexual depravity is a lot easier with two people,” I returned in a sultry voice, reaching for my zipper. I waited until Elder Driscoll looked thoroughly horrified, and then I laughed.

“Flip, Elder Biden. You aren’t going to last very long out here.”

*Flying Over Babel*

“Elder Driscoll,” I said carefully, “why can’t the mission be fun? Was it Thomas Edison who said, ‘I never worked a day in my life. It was all fun’? The mission doesn’t *have* to be miserable.”

“We’re doing serious work here.”

“All the more reason to lighten up.”

We were silent a moment, and then Elder Driscoll said softly, “It wasn’t always like this. I’ve been out eleven months. The last mission president...”

“Yes?”

“He was different. When our families sent us packages for Christmas, rather than send them on to us at our apartments, he kept them at the mission home. He had his wife wrap them in colored paper, and he invited all the elders and sister missionaries in Boston to the mission home for Christmas, and we opened our presents around the tree just like a real family.”

That sounded sweet, I thought.

“Another time, the zone leaders in our area went to the sisters’ apartment while they were working, and they unscrewed all the light bulbs, so the sisters would think their electricity was out.”

Hmm. Not sweet, I thought, but at least light-hearted.

“Things changed overnight when President Gillette came aboard. We were in the same ward, and that first Sunday at church, he saw a woman bringing homemade wheat bread to use in the sacrament, and he told her in front of everyone that her bread wasn’t good enough to use because it wasn’t pure white to symbolize the purity of the Savior. That woman left crying and never came back.”

“Why is he such a jerk?” I asked.



Elder Driscoll shrugged. “He wants to be a General Authority.”

“General Authorities are jerks?”

Elder Driscoll laughed. “He thinks God wants a Drill Sergeant.” He laughed again. “Can you imagine Jesus saying, ‘You didn’t shave this morning! No basketball for you!’”

“Huh?”

“I can go two or three days without shaving, and usually no one notices. I haven’t got much of a beard, and what little I have is blond. But I got grounded one P-day just like you, because I hadn’t shaved. The president’s attitude eventually infected all the zone leaders and district leaders, too. Everyone’s a hard-ass now.”

“And mission presidents serve for three years,” I said, “so we’re stuck.”

“You just need to roll with the punches. Fly under the radar.”

“Be a collaborator.”

“Don’t think of it like that.”

I snapped the rubbed band around my wrist.

We took turns doing our laundry and our cleaning chores, and I played some music on my iPod. Pink sang out for everyone who was wrong in all the right ways to raise their glass with her. That kind of music was of course off limits, but I’d sneaked in several songs I doubted the rule book would allow.

“I’m bored,” I said.

“You’re supposed to be. That’s your punishment.”

*Flying Over Babel*

I looked out the window. “See those teenagers? Let’s go get them.”

“*Those* teenagers?” asked Elder Driscoll doubtfully. “They look a little rough. Aren’t they smoking?”

“Come on.” I gave him no choice but started out the door. He could hardly let me roam the streets alone, so he quickly followed.

“If the other elders come back...”

“Hey, guys,” I said as we approached the group. There were three boys about seventeen and a girl maybe fifteen.

“Yeah, what?” said one boy, blowing smoke in my face.

I breathed it in deeply, wondering how it would look if I bummed a cigarette from him. “We just want to hang out a little. It’s our day off.” I fingered my rubber band.

“We don’t hang out with nerds.”

“Nerds? Have *you* got a tattoo like this?” I unbuttoned my white shirt and pulled it and my T-shirt off. I turned so the group could see the Angel Moroni on my back blowing his horn.

“What the hell is that?” laughed one of the boys. Elder Driscoll looked appalled.

“It’s an angel. For a while there, I thought I might end up in prison. I decided I’d put a religious scene on my back, so that if anyone tried to rape me, they’d see a real weenie-shrinker.”

The kids howled, but Elder Driscoll still looked horrified. I put my shirt back on. “The Angel Moroni gave us the Book of Mormon,” I said.

“Oh, come on. We don’t want to hear any of that crap.”

*Johnny Townsend*

“You know, our Church was started by a 14-year-old boy. We send out 19-year-olds to be our spokesmen. Our Church really believes in the power of teenagers.”

“Look, Mr. Cool Missionary. All we want to do is smoke pot.”

“Then what in the world are you smoking tobacco for? That stuff’ll kill you.”

The kids laughed.

“Well?” I went on. “Where’s the pot?”

There was an awkward silence, and then the leader said in a muffled voice, “We ran out.”

“I can help you with that,” I said.

“Elder Biden!”

“Look, if you can get some viable seeds, I can show you how to grow your own.”

“And you think *that* will make us join your church?”

“Let’s make a deal. I show you how to grow pot if you get your parents to listen to all seven of our lessons. They agree to it in exchange for *your* promise not to do hard drugs. Everybody’s happy. What do you say?”

The kids looked at each other in confusion for a moment, and then the leader nodded. I gave him our phone number, and Elder Driscoll and I headed back to our apartment.

“Elder Biden, I think I’m going to have to report you.” Elder Driscoll looked both nervous and unhappy.

“We’re not getting them hooked on anything. They already smoke.”

“How can you possibly see that as missionary work?”

*Flying Over Babel*

“We need a ‘brand,’” I said. “We have to be hip and happening in a hip and happening world.”

“But you just made a deal with the devil to get these kids’ parents.”

The phrase struck me like a blast from Moroni’s horn. I’d realized I was playing with that *quid pro quo* idea again, but if it helped someone hear our message, how was that bad? I turned away from Elder Driscoll and thought for a moment. Wasn’t that what the Church had done in regard to gay rights, though? We attacked gays more than anyone, to prove to other Christian religions that we were Christian, too. We could sacrifice a whole group of people just to put ourselves in a better position. Mitt Romney passed a universal healthcare measure in Massachusetts as governor but lambasted Obama when the President tried to do the same thing nationwide. It was all about making a deal.

I felt like Napoleon Hill again, only this time I felt I was making backroom deals just to get a buck. If “my way” was still following a business model, maybe I was no better than President Gillette. Did the Church use the business model in the first place because it was right, or simply because it played into our baser nature and made making the deals go down more easily?

Maybe the gospel itself and all of life was just one big business deal. Come down to Earth, get a free body for stopping by, and get promoted as you proved your worth to “the company.”

I sat brooding at the window while Elder Driscoll had a sandwich in the kitchen. I didn’t want to be a dealmaker, even if it was effective. Yet just straight street contacting or tracting door to door seemed ineffective enough as to be virtually

*Johnny Townsend*

pointless. And really, if all we were doing was asking bluntly if someone wanted to hear our message, wouldn't it be cheaper and more useful simply to issue a large media campaign? Billboards, newspaper ads, commercials, Twitter? If being a missionary were to mean anything, we had to do something special.

And it had to be more special than showing kids how to grow pot. Or than helping a woman clean her apartment.

Heavenly Father, I prayed, I may not be as worthy as Joseph Smith, but I need a revelation. What should I be doing out here?

I kept staring out the window and absentmindedly toying with my rubber band.

Then I saw my answer and gasped. Another kid had joined the ones we'd spoken to earlier, only this one was in a wheelchair. And I could see even from here that it was powered by a device near the kid's head. He wasn't merely paraplegic. He was quadriplegic.

"Elder Driscoll! Come on!"

I ran out the door, with Driscoll following in confusion. We ran up to the group, and I stopped to catch my breath.

"Must be nice to be able to run," said the boy in the chair coolly.

"Show off," said the girl.

"What do you want now?" asked the teen who seemed to be the leader.

"We work six days a week," I began. "Wednesdays are our day off."

"Today?"

*Flying Over Babel*

I nodded, looking directly at the new boy. “What we’d like to do is offer one day a week, perhaps Monday or Thursday or whatever works for you, and be attendants for you.” I shrugged. “You know, take you out, go shopping, dress you if you like, bathe you—“

“Hey!”

“Whatever you feel comfortable with. I’ve never known anyone in a chair, but I expect the people who help you regularly need a break once in a while. We’ll be that break.”

“And who do you want to baptize in exchange?” asked the one who’d called me Mr. Cool Missionary.

“Nothing.” I shrugged again. “I realize our previous deal was perhaps not entirely fair. I wanted to do something this time with no strings attached.”

The kids looked at me suspiciously. Elder Driscoll just looked confused. We talked a few more minutes, and then Elder Driscoll and I walked slowly back to our apartment. “You volunteered me?” he asked at the door.

“Well, I know *my* comp won’t do it. You and I can do a ‘work visit’ once a week, can’t we?”

“We’ll never get permission for a thing like this.”

“Who’s asking permission?”

Elder Driscoll laughed.

“You know,” I said. “This reminds me of something I did when I was a teenager.”

“You’re a teenager now,” Driscoll pointed out. “I’m twenty.”

I stuck out my tongue. “We had a new stake president who’d just moved in from Salt Lake to Santa Barbara. When we

had stake dances for the teenagers, he charged a dollar entry fee. It irked him that some teens would sneak in the back way so they wouldn't have to pay. He ended up barricading all of the emergency exits at the stake center."

"And how in the world does this remind you of that?" Driscoll laughed. "Because you were both thinking outside the box?"

"No." I smiled wanly. "Because he was the one *making* the box so restrictive in the first place. It made me commit my first heretical act."

"Yes?"

"I called the fire marshal on the stake president and got him in trouble."

Elder Driscoll laughed again.

"But I've felt so bad ever since. It's one of the reasons I came on a mission, to redeem myself for not trusting my leaders."

"I'm still not getting the comparison," said Elder Driscoll.

I went to the window and pointed down at the teenagers. "We can't force people to behave the way we want them to. That's as dangerous for their souls as herding them into a locked gymnasium is for their lives."

"So what do we do? Wipe that guy's ass every week?"

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly what we're going to do."

Elder Driscoll still looked confused. "But what does that actually accomplish?"

I leaned toward Elder Driscoll. "It brings goodness into the world." I rubbed my short hair for a moment. "In the end, that's all we have the power to do. We can't make other people be

*Flying Over Babel*

good. We can't make other people respond favorably to our goodness. But it tips the scales, if we do enough of it. We have to be responsible for bringing as much goodness into the world as *we* can do."

"But we do that as missionaries every day."

I shook my head and sat beside him. "Goodness with a full allotment of purity can't expect rewards. And our missionary work is all about rewards. How many lessons did you teach? How many referrals did you get? How many people did you baptize? Who did you get to come to church?"

"So why only do truly good deeds once a week?"

"Because I still want the glory of being an RM. And I'll never be a returned missionary if I get sent home my first month."

"No full allotment of purity?"

"I'm afraid not."

Elder Driscoll nodded. "But a *little* goodness with a *little* purity. I can accept that." He looked thoughtfully at his hands. "I'm in."

We sat silently for a few moments. I was quite conscious of my rubber band. After another couple of minutes, I turned to Elder Driscoll again. "I know I'm causing a lot of stress. What do you usually do to relieve stress?"

Elder Driscoll reddened and turned away.

"Look," I said, standing up. "I really need a cigarette. I'm going out to get one, so I'll be gone for several minutes. You do whatever you need to do to relieve your stress." I clapped him on the shoulder. "Just be sure to wash up before I get back."

Elder Driscoll looked up at me. "We're going to hell, aren't we?"



*Johnny Townsend*

“You’re focusing on the rewards again. Just worry about doing the right thing.”

“Like smoking and jacking off?”

“We’re taking down the barricades.”

He nodded. “Okay, now go. But for God’s sake, no pot.”

I looked at him sternly. “Certainly. Not my first month in the field.”

Elder Driscoll shook his head, and I headed out the door and down to the street below. I turned up my iPod so I could hear Jessie J singing “Price Tag.” As I started for the corner convenience store, I took the rubber band from around my wrist and threw it into a trash can with a smile.



How do you ask a girl on a date when everyone in town knows your father was convicted for the serial murders of a dozen prostitutes? Will the torture of electroshock therapy turn a gay BYU student straight? In this compelling collection of Mormon stories, there is an acknowledgment of the real evil that exists around us, and an awareness of the difficult compromises we sometimes make in order to live in an imperfect world.

## **Flying Over Babel**

**Order the complete book from the publisher**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/5855.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**