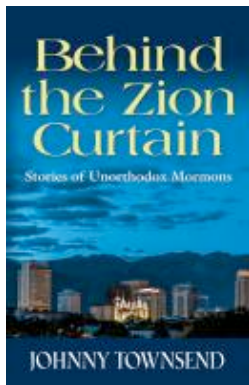


# Behind the Zion Curtain

Stories of Unorthodox Mormons



JOHNNY TOWNSEND



*In these Mormon short stories, a teenage boy, worried about the future of the planet, prays for God to send a devastating plague on humans. A polygamist endures a miserable wedding night with his multiple wives. A government assassin tries to incorporate Blood Atonement into his work. A youth outing reenacting the Mormon Handcart trek goes terribly wrong. A zealous restaurant worker devises a horrifying plan to force customers to obey the Word of Wisdom.*

## Behind the Zion Curtain

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## Praise for Johnny Townsend

In *Zombies for Jesus*, “Townsend isn’t writing satire, but deeply emotional and revealing portraits of people who are, with a few exceptions, quite lovable.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

Townsend’s stories are “a gay *Portnoy’s Complaint* of Mormonism. Salacious, sweet, sad, insightful, insulting, religiously ethnic, quirky-faithful, and funny.”

D. Michael Quinn, author of *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*

Johnny Townsend is “an important voice in the Mormon community.”

Stephen Carter, editor of *Sunstone* magazine

“Told from a believably conversational first-person perspective, [*The Abominable Gayman’s*] novelistic focus on Anderson’s journey to thoughtful self-acceptance allows for greater character development than often seen in short stories, which makes this well-paced work rich and satisfying, and one of Townsend’s strongest. An extremely important contribution to the field of Mormon fiction.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2011.

Kirkus Reviews

“The thirteen stories in *Mormon Underwear* capture this struggle [between Mormonism and homosexuality] with humor, sadness, insight, and sometimes shocking details...*Mormon Underwear* provides compelling stories, literally from the inside-out.”

Niki D’Andrea, *Phoenix New Times*

*The Circumcision of God* “asks questions that are not often asked out loud in Mormonism, and certainly not answered.”

Jeff Laver, author of *Elder Petersen’s Mission Memories*

“Townsend’s lively writing style and engaging characters [in *Zombies for Jesus*] make for stories which force us to wake up, smell the (prohibited) coffee, and review our attitudes with regard to reading dogma so doggedly. These are tales which revel in the individual tics and quirks which make us human, Mormon or not, gay or not...”

A.J. Kirby, The Short Review

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

Kirkus Reviews

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

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

David Lenson, editor, *The Massachusetts Review*

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

Sima Rabinowitz, Literary Magazine Review,  
NewPages.com

“Johnny Townsend’s short stories cannot be pigeon-holed. His keen observations on the human condition come in many shapes and sizes...reflecting on both his Jewish and Mormon backgrounds as well as life in the vast and varied American gay community. He dares to think and write about people and incidents that frighten away more timid artists. His perspective is sometimes startling, sometimes hilarious, sometimes poignant, but always compassionate.”

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

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

Kirkus Reviews

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

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

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

Donna Banta, author of *False Prophet*

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

Kirkus Reviews

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

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

Johnny Townsend has written at least ten books of Mormon stories. So far, I’ve read only two (*Mormon Fairy Tales* and *The Circumcision of God*), but I’m planning to read the rest—and you should too, if you’d like a fun and interesting new perspective on Mormons in life and imagination!”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

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

Publishers Weekly

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

Kirkus Reviews

“In *Let the Faggots Burn* author Johnny Townsend restores this tragic event [the UpStairs Lounge fire] to its proper place in

LGBT history and reminds us that the victims of the blaze were not just ‘statistics,’ but real people with real lives, families, and friends.”

Jesse Monteagudo, The Bilerico Project

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

Kirkus Reviews

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

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

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



UpStairs Lounge. *Let the Faggots Burn* is a chilling and insightful glimpse into a largely forgotten and ignored chapter of LGBT history.”

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

The stories in *The Mormon Victorian Society* “register the new openness and confidence of gay life in the age of same-sex marriage....What hasn’t changed is Townsend’s wry, conversational prose, his subtle evocations of character and social dynamics, and his deadpan humor. His warm empathy still glows in this intimate yet clear-eyed engagement with Mormon theology and folkways. Funny, shrewd and finely wrought dissections of the awkward contradictions—and surprising harmonies—between conscience and desire.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2013.

Kirkus Reviews

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

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

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

Publishers Weekly

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

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

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

Publishers Weekly

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

Kirkus Reviews

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

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

*Selling the City of Enoch* is “sharply intelligent...pleasingly complex...The stories are full of...doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so....Many of Townsend’s stories...have a provocative edge to them, but this [book] displays a great deal of insight as well...a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews



Behind  
the Zion  
Curtain

Johnny Townsend

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## Star Fleet Testing

I was mostly a lurker. Like an extra in the background from a scene set in Ten Forward, with Whoopi at the bar. An inappropriate comparison, I suppose, considering I didn't drink. But sometimes I felt like a lurker at church, too, as fathers blessed their babies and saw their sons and daughters off on missions. I felt as if I spent most of my life watching and not doing. It had taken me years to even bother looking at Facebook, and once I began, I still didn't feel the need to interact very often. People put up photos of their dog, or their mother's hat, or the polishing they did of their bathroom doorknob. They went on at length about what they had for lunch, or the long line at the bank, or what they thought of their neighbor's new drapes.

No one ever messaged me personally. The only interaction was if they posted what was essentially an exceptionally brief diary entry and I felt the need to "like" it.

But millions and millions of people related to each other this way and seemed to enjoy it, so perhaps I was being too close-minded. My wife Nina and I ate dinner without the TV on, and even if we did watch a couple of shows every evening, we always set aside time to work together on a puzzle, or plan a party for some of our friends from church, or read to each other, or do anything that would allow us to interact as participants and not as spectators.

And still I felt like a lurker most of the time.

While Nina and I did not have any children ourselves, and probably never would, now that we were in our early forties, all of our friends at church in our Sacramento ward did. And they always reminded us how unfortunate we were to be childless. Said with kindness, of course. As well as an air of superiority.

Because we didn't always relate to hearing about problems surrounding kids, we didn't get invited over to other people's houses very often, despite our own parties. People would shake my hand at church and then seem to want nothing more to do with me. Unless it was time to ask for help on a service project. I would sit in the chapel every Sunday, watching Nina up on the stand directing music, and see all the smiling faces in the congregation, and feel utterly alone.

So I lurked. I suppose I was still hoping for a real connection somewhere. Nina and I helped raise funds for Elizabeth Warren. We helped collect money for the Red Cross. We helped give out food with Jewish Family Services. But while we might volunteer with other likeminded people, everyone usually just focused on doing their job, not on becoming friends. Nina didn't seem as bothered by it as I was. She'd just pick up a novel and read in bed. But I was back to Facebook. I'd dutifully go through everything posted, but try as I might, I consistently found it hard to reply to anything.

"My friend Abigail's home was destroyed in a tornado last night," posted one friend from my old Single Adult group from twenty years ago. "She broke her arm and lost everything she had." I was checking the latest comments submitted right before dinner. People seemed to post around the clock. The old Single Adult gang all still kept in touch, though we were now scattered across the country. All the others had children by now, though a couple of folks from the gang were single again.



“I’m so sorry for her loss,” one person replied. “My prayers are with her.”

“My condolences,” wrote another.

“I send all my positive energy her way,” said one more.

“All my love.”

“I’ll be praying for her.”

“Sending my prayers to our wonderful Heavenly Father.”

There were about fifteen responses in total, all much like these. Part of me wondered at the possibility of having so many friends, but something about the interaction still bothered me, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I neglected to add my name to the list and signed off instead.

That night, Nina sat next to me on the sofa while we watched *Person of Interest*. “Boy, my feet really hurt tonight,” she said. “Standing in new shoes at work all day.”

“Put your lovely feet in my lap,” I returned. She did and I started rubbing them as we watched the show.

“I sure like this series,” said Nina, twitching her toes in pleasure, whether at the massage or the TV screen, I couldn’t tell.

“I find it kind of frustrating,” I returned, nodding toward the set.

“Why is that?”

“On the one hand, I see the importance of trying to help just one person, but on the other, they’re only getting numbers for

one single person a week in New York, the largest city in America, and they *aren't* getting numbers for anyone anywhere else in the country, or the rest of the world, either, for that matter. It's like trying to save a beach from erosion, one grain of sand at a time."

"But it's interesting and exciting," she said.

"It *is* that," I agreed, fingering her toes. After a moment, I added, "And I suppose it teaches us the importance of taking a risk to help others."

"Not everything is a Sunday school lesson, Derek."

I laughed. "I think sometimes Heavenly Father does talk to us through TV shows," I protested. "When I was a kid, I used to watch this program called *Stingray*. It was about a man who spent all his time going around helping people in trouble. As he did it, he asked for favors from other people he'd helped out earlier, in a kind of pay-it-forward fashion. I used to think Nick Mancuso was one of the Three Nephites."

"It's possible you watch too much TV."

"Ninety minutes a night, just like you, even as a kid."

"Maybe it's time to work on another puzzle." Nina clicked the remote to turn off the television, smiling as she took my hand to lead me to the puzzle table we had set up near the window. "I bought a new one of the planet Earth from space. 1500 pieces."

"Too bad nobody else likes puzzles," I said, sitting down and opening the box. "My grandma told me when she was a teenager, she and all her friends would get together on Sunday

to put a puzzle together. It was a communal activity. What do kids do these days?”

“We don’t have to worry about what kids do these days.” Nina started laying out all the pieces on the table.

“Shopping at the mall just doesn’t sound as meaningful.”

“What’s meaningful is doing something together, whatever it is.”

I nodded and started looking for border pieces. They were all the color of space.

The following day at work, my supervisor, Suzanne, who everybody loved, was quitting to start at a rival company for higher pay. While I would miss her, I was also worried about what jerk we might get in her place. Our department ordered two huge platters of Mexican food, but before we started eating, Suzanne gave a little speech, telling us all how much she’d miss us. Then she grabbed a huge cloth bag and began pulling items out. “For you, Jen, because you have a heart the size of Texas...” Suzanne gave her a large stuffed red heart. “For you, Margaret, because you always said you liked this scarf, it’s yours now.” She handed Margaret her favorite scarf. “Bill, because you’re a miserable sexist and always called me a doll, I give you this.” She handed him a Barbie doll, and everyone laughed, except Jen, the girl with the large heart, who glared at him. “Allen, because you’re such a stuffed suit, I thought you could use these.” She handed him a pair of brilliantly wild socks, half pink, half chartreuse, with lines and dots. He accepted them with an embarrassed smile. Suzanne continued with her gifts, joking, “I think I’ve learned more about giving from *The Wizard of Oz* than from my pastor.” After addressing a few more coworkers, she finally turned to me. “Derek,

because I hear you say such sweet and romantic things to your wife when you call to tell her you're on your way home, I give you this bottle of wine." I smiled as I picked it up, wondering if I should give it to our bishop at Tithing Settlement, as part of my income.

Back at my desk, I thought about the expense of all those gifts. It wasn't as if any of us were actually friends. Not really. Besides, if anything, we should all have been buying *her* gifts. Yet despite the inappropriateness of some of the presents, I could tell most of the staff felt touched by her efforts.

On Facebook that night, I saw a post by someone from my mission group. "My aunt's home was flooded by a freak storm. Just the bottom floor, but she lost all her best furniture. She's old and on Social Security and has homeowner's insurance but not flood."

The responses were similar to those of the other night. "I'm so sorry for her loss!"

"I wish her the best!"

"My prayers are with her."

"I'll send good thoughts her way."

"Isn't that your aunt who left the Church?"

"It's the Last Days, you know."

"I'll pray for her."

"Maybe this will bring her back. It's really a blessing."

"God works in mysterious ways."

I didn't post a response.

Friday evening, Nina and I went to our monthly Star Trek meeting, the highlight of the month.

I wondered why Fast and Testimony meeting wasn't the highlight of each month.

Nina and I often talked about how we would create stars and planets of our own one day, and how the Star Trek shows could give us some good ideas. As nerdy as some of the other attendees were, they could still be relatable in a way the Relief Society president wasn't. A few of the folks who came wore costumes, and sometimes a couple of people in the group would play three dimensional chess. We usually watched an episode, from any of several old series, that we'd voted for at the previous meeting. And sometimes we just played Star Trek trivia.

No one here minded that we didn't have kids.

As the meeting was drawing to an end, Samuel, a young man in his mid-twenties who always wore Vulcan ears, came up to me. "Derek, I'm going out of town next weekend. Would you be able to check in on my dog for a couple of days? He can get out in the back yard by himself through the doggie door, but he'll still want some attention and to go on a couple of walks."

"No problem, Sam."

"If you like," added Nina, "we could actually spend the weekend at your place and housesit, too. No charge."

"Really?"

“Sure. We like to have sex in other people’s beds sometimes. So hard to do when you’re both married and Mormon.”

Samuel laughed.

The bishop’s wife wouldn’t have laughed.

“That bed’s already seen lots of sleepovers,” Samuel said with a smile. “A couple more bodies won’t hurt. Just be sure to change the sheets before you leave.”

“Not a problem. But if you have any Nutella around the house, for heaven’s sake, hide it. Derek is a fiend.”

“Nutella is an evil plot,” I said, “sent from the future by the Terminators to destroy the human race.”

“Wrong show,” said Samuel.

Saturday after I weeded the garden for a while, I went with Nina to do the grocery shopping, and then we continued with our puzzle as we listened to the radio. A radical environmentalist was making fun of the NGOs that had lots of followers and raised lots of money for conservation but didn’t do anything drastic enough to make a difference. “They got almost 400,000 people to march around Central Park,” the man complained, “but that was just a photo op. They didn’t even march by the United Nations building. It’s all show but no substance. The next day, a mere thousand protestors marched on Wall Street, to protest where the real problem is.”

The speaker irritated me. There’d been no accompanying rally or march here in Sacramento, which had been disappointing. I gave regularly to the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy, though I’d recently read that the Nature

Conservancy actually allowed oil drilling on some of their land, so maybe the guy had a point. I'd planted over six hundred trees with American Forests, though. I wondered how many trees the holier-than-thou protestor on the radio had planted. Or what he'd actually accomplished in changing how corporations polluted that the larger groups hadn't.

"Maybe next weekend when we dog-sit," suggested Nina, "we can go to the park, and while I tend to the dog, you can pull up some non-native species."

I inserted a piece of Africa into the puzzle.

"What difference can *I* make?" I asked. "The problems are too big. It will take massive government intervention to save this planet."

"Big government?" asked Nina, laughing. "Don't say that too loud, or we'll get called before a Church court."

I smiled. "I'm sure we're already on someone's list for being part of the Mormon Democrats Facebook group."

I inserted a piece of the Sahara desert.

"Doing the right thing doesn't always bring you friends." Nina held up a piece of the puzzle and wrinkled her nose as she considered where to put it.

I stopped and stared at her for a long moment.

Before getting ready for bed later, I checked my Facebook feed again. Another of my old Single Adult friends had posted. This was from Shelly, who still lived here in Sacramento in a neighboring ward. "Just finished my first round of chemo. Doctors don't know if it'll help or not. I'm sick as a dog."

There were the usual responses. “My prayers are with you.”

“I’ll put your name on the temple prayer roll.”

“I’m sending all my positive energy your way.”

“God never gives us more than we can handle.”

“It’s a test. The Lord only tests those he has faith in.”

“Just remember that Heavenly Father loves you. We all love you.”

“Keep going to church. You’ll need the strength it gives you.”

Sitting there reading that, the futility of life suddenly struck me. What could I do to really help Shelly? What could I do to fight political corruption? What could I do to save the environment? What could I do to cure Parkinson’s? To end poverty? To stop war? Or human trafficking? Or child abuse? Or gang fighting? Or *anything*?

What could I do to develop enduring relationships, surely one of the most important tasks we faced on Earth?

I tried to think what my Church leaders would tell me, but as I looked at all these responses from other Mormons, I felt only disgust.

With friends like these...

Then a thought occurred to me from a recent Star Trek meeting. We’d watched a movie, *The Wrath of Khan*, and the idea of the Kobayashi Maru test had left a deep impression, though I’d seen the movie almost a dozen times before.



What if Earth life were *deliberately* a no-win situation? What if we *couldn't* solve any of the pressing problems of the world? What if it were *set up* that way on purpose? Perhaps it was all a character test, to see how we would react to serious, grave emergencies, *knowing* we were going to lose.

I sometimes dreamed of winning the lottery, though as a Mormon, I wasn't even allowed to buy a ticket. But I thought of all the good I could do with a hundred million dollars. In reality, of course, I could win a billion dollars and it would still be almost useless. A hundred billion dollars. Four trillion dollars. And I still wouldn't have enough money to solve the world's problems. So what good was my measly hundred million going to do?

Or the fifty dollars I actually had.

So many religious people felt that everything was in God's hands. They washed their own of the problem without a second thought. But Mr. Saavik didn't have the choice of passing off her Kobayashi Maru to a superior officer. It was *her* test. Passing the buck didn't show character.

I wondered why I didn't get lessons like this from the Book of Mormon.

So what was the answer to the Star Fleet test? Make a token effort? Do nothing at all?

Or do your very best, despite knowing the outcome?

Is that how one was eventually able to travel the star systems and inhabit other worlds?

I looked at Shelly's post online and decided not to lurk any longer. Do *something*, I told myself. Do anything. "I'll be at

your home tomorrow morning at 10:00 to take care of your laundry and vacuuming.” I hit enter, and then after thinking a moment, I added another line. “Oh, and my prayers are with you.”

I logged out and then went downstairs to tell Nina why I’d be skipping church in the morning. We hadn’t missed a meeting in years. We felt we had to be extra diligent to make up for our childlessness.

But Nina smiled and put her hand on mine. “I’ll clean the bathrooms while you vacuum,” she said.

Maybe one good relationship was enough to leave this world with.

It was 10:30, our usual bedtime, but Nina nodded toward the puzzle table. “We’re almost done,” she said. “Let’s finish putting the Earth together before we go to bed.”

I kissed her and we sat back down. I picked up a piece of the ocean and looked for the empty space where it belonged.

## The Neurochemistry of Monday Night

Anita heard the car in the driveway and smiled. Don was home from work. That was always exciting, but especially on a Monday when they would soon have Family Home Evening. The weekly lesson and activity were even more of a highlight than Sunday at church. Anita enjoyed her interaction with the other sisters well enough, but church also required dressing up, always a challenge when you had a one-year-old daughter to wrestle with.

Little Melissa had turned one just two weeks ago. Anita had arranged a party for all her little friends from their Denver ward as well as a couple from the neighborhood. There had been a big cake to make, streamers to hang, ice cream to buy. She'd read *Clifford, the Big Red Dog* to all the little children, using her best voices. Anita knew that reading aloud to children increased the likelihood that they'd grow up to be regular readers themselves. The afternoon had been a celebration not only of her daughter's life, but for Anita, it was a confirmation that she'd made the right decision. Having met Don her senior year in college, she'd quickly fallen in love and converted to Mormonism. After finishing her Biochemistry degree, she'd been accepted to medical school but decided to marry in the temple instead and devote herself to being a wife and mother the way Heavenly Father intended.

It had taken about two years to get pregnant. Don had accused her once of secretly being on the pill, though a fertility test soon proved she wasn't the one lacking. Anita spent most of her time at the beginning of the marriage just learning how to cook. Don had made it quite clear he wasn't satisfied. Anita had

been used to frozen dinners or a quick pizza. It had never been her life's goal to be a chef.

But tonight...Anita had prepared a Caesar salad, boiled some baby carrots in broth, fried some pork chops, made a quinoa dish with sliced sweet potatoes and chopped onions, and baked a coconut cake. Cooking was almost like chemistry class, when you thought of it, and that realization made it more bearable. Sunday was traditionally supposed to be the special meal of the week, but Anita preferred making Monday night special. Celebrating the family was celebrating one's very existence, one's whole purpose in life. She knew just when Don returned home every evening and timed finishing her meal tonight within two minutes of his driving into the garage.

"Hi, honey!" Anita called as she heard the door close. She turned the fire low on the pork chops and ran to greet him. She waited for him to put down his briefcase and take off his coat, and then she gave him a big hug and a kiss.

"Sheesh, give me a minute to breathe."

"Bad day?" Anita asked sympathetically.

"Every day's a bad day." He headed for the bedroom to change. Anita went back to the kitchen to finish the last bit of cooking and put everything on two bright yellow plates. She prepared a smaller plastic plate for Melissa and went to the living room to grab the girl out of her playpen and then insert her into a high chair. Melissa shouted happily.

"You know what's coming next, don't you?" Anita cooed.

Melissa giggled.

A few moments later, Don came into the kitchen and sat down in his chair heavily, staring at the plate in front of him. "I'm ravenous," he said, picking up his fork.

Anita liked when he used big words. She wanted their daughter to be educated, even if that didn't matter for Mormon women. But when Don scooped up a forkful of food, she raised her hand in protest. "The blessing!" she said.

Don frowned but put his fork down and offered a quick prayer on the food. Back in the early days he used to say, "Please bless the hands that prepared this," but lately he just got right down to the basics. "Thank you for this food. Please bless it that it will be good for us. We say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

He was clearly in a mood again. As his wife, it was Anita's job to make him feel better, tonight of all nights of the week. She had taken some courses about brain function in college but nothing really about psychology *per se*. She'd have to rely on the Spirit for guidance.

"How was your day, dear?" she asked as they began eating. After taking a mouthful herself, she helped Melissa with one. Half of it fell on the tray.

"They raised our goals. They're cutting overtime. They're cutting back on supplies. They're removing the cubicle walls so we can all see each other all the time."

Anita chewed for a moment. "Well, that'll be better than being isolated all day, won't it?"

“It’s so they can check up on us more easily. Besides, they don’t want us interacting. We’ll be getting noise-canceling headphones to wear.”

“Oh.” She spooned another mouthful of quinoa into Melissa, wondering what to say next. The wife was supposed to stay at home not only to take care of the children and the house but also so she could stay untainted from the influence of the world. It was her purity that would keep her husband grounded. She was like a kidney or liver cleansing the body’s fluids. She needed to get Don to think of something happy. Get his neurons rerouted. She turned to Don and added, “Anything *nice* happen today?” She had read something years ago about positive reinforcement.

“No.”

They ate in silence for a couple of minutes, Melissa slapping the chair’s tray happily so she could watch the tiny balls of fallen quinoa jump. Don seemed oblivious. Anita decided to tell him about her own day. “I bought some of the Atkins shakes for you to take to work,” she said. She laughed. “You know, I think the grocery store tracks all my purchases and changes prices based on what I buy.”

Don kept eating, making no sign he’d heard.

“I buy the Eas protein drinks for \$5.49 for two weeks, and then they go up to \$8.49. Then I buy the Atkins for \$5.49 for two weeks instead, and then *they* go up to \$8.49. If they see me buying anything on sale, they jack up the price.”

“Uh-huh.”

At least he was paying attention now. Anita talked about some of the good deals she'd managed to find at the grocery, including a great buy on some cleaning supplies. That led her to change direction in the conversation. "You know," she said, "I was cleaning the bathroom today, and you're really going to have to either start sitting down or aiming better."

"I'm not sitting down."

Ah, a complete sentence. She was getting somewhere. "Maybe we could take up archery on the weekends. Or golf. Something that requires aiming." She laughed. She was going to be positive.

How much of behavior was based on the physical wiring in the brain, Anita wondered. And how much on conditioning? And how did conditioning actually affect the physical wiring? Someday, she'd have to read up more on the subject.

Don served himself some more carrots in silence. Anita gave Melissa a carrot to chew on. It was wet and messy, but Melissa liked it.

"You should have seen what Melissa did today," said Anita, covering her smile with her hand since her mouth was half full. "She crawled from her swing to her playpen and stood up and shook the bars like she wanted to get *into* prison. Then she was happy there the rest of the day."

Don closed his eyes and ate another carrot.

"I played Lady Antebellum this afternoon, and Melissa tried to sing along with every song. It was so cute."

Anita looked at Don, who was now chewing the last bite of his pork chop. He still wasn't engaged. What was Anita doing

wrong? She was being happy and cheerful and friendly. She was trying to distract her husband from his miserable day at work by helping him focus on his forever family. Why wasn't it working? Was she a bad wife?

She tried so hard to be a good Mormon, even when it meant giving up so much. Why wasn't God helping her do her job? It wasn't fair to ask her to sacrifice, and then make the sacrifice meaningless.

It wasn't really a sacrifice, of course. Anita loved being a wife and mother.

Well, maybe it *was* a sacrifice. She'd read somewhere that a sacrifice was giving up something good for something that was better.

Being a wife and mother was better.

She wondered briefly if she liked Monday nights because of its focus on the family, or if she liked the focus on the family because it made her believe for a few more days that she hadn't made the wrong decision. Was that how brain-washing worked? One made neural connections that were so strong they could resist interference from outside questioning.

Anita looked at Melissa. How could she ever consider Melissa a mistake?

Don was another matter. Anita tried to sprinkle her untainted influence on him, but he seemed to pour more tainted influence on her instead. Godliness had to be stronger than worldliness. If Anita wasn't getting through to him, she just wasn't trying hard enough.



Perhaps she should mention the lubricant she'd bought on sale today. Anita liked having sex on Monday nights, after all that attention on the family unit. It just seemed the appropriate way to cap the evening. And Don liked having sex any night Anita was in the mood. He even insisted on it some nights when she wasn't. It was her duty, after all.

She decided to go for it.

"I picked a new lubricant we can try," she said shyly. "It was forty cents cheaper than our usual brand, so I thought we could give it a shot."

At this, Don put down his fork and looked Anita in the face for the first time the entire meal. He sighed deeply and said, "God, you are so boring." Then he took a sip of his milk.

Anita stared at him in shock.

"I think sometimes I'd rather be at work slaving my life away than listening to you prattle on."

Anita felt her face burning. She turned to look at Melissa to make sure she hadn't understood. Melissa was smiling and trying to drink from her sippy cup.

Don stood up. "I'm going out with the guys tonight to watch football." He pushed his chair under the table. "Don't wait up." He grabbed his coat and was out the door in seconds, the car engine starting just a few moments after that. Anita sat staring at the empty space in front of her, her heart pounding. She stared for several minutes, until Melissa slapped the table and demanded another carrot.

Don hadn't even asked for any coconut cake.

“Well, of *course* I’m boring,” Anita said aloud, picking out a carrot from the broth. “What choice do I have?”

Anita pretended the carrot was an airplane heading to Melissa’s mouth. The girl giggled and grabbed it, half smashing it with her grip before shoving it into her mouth.

“Naturally, I love *you*,” Anita cooed. “But where have I gone?”

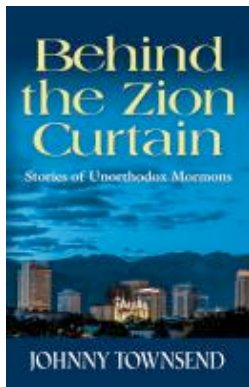
She started cleaning up the table and washing dishes, leaving Melissa for last. Then she wiped the child down and carried her back to the playpen. She started to put her down on the soft cushion and then stopped in mid-air. Anita put the child on the rug instead.

“Haven’t you been behind bars long enough?” she said. “Crawl around for a while.”

Melissa looked up at her and smiled obliviously.

Anita sat on the sofa and watched the girl sitting happily, holding a stuffed bunny. So Don had left to get his neural receptors filled elsewhere. She could still have a special evening with her baby girl all by herself. She stood up and headed for her bedroom closet. “Don’t get into any trouble while I’m gone,” Anita called. Then she laughed, a little bitterly. “Well, it’s okay to get into a *little* trouble.” Anita rummaged in a couple of boxes at the back of the closet until she found what she was looking for. She pulled out an item and carried it back out to the living room, sitting again on the sofa.

“Introduction to Neurology,” Anita announced. “We’re going to start reading some big girl stories from now on.” She opened the book, cleared her throat, and began reading.



*In these Mormon short stories, a teenage boy, worried about the future of the planet, prays for God to send a devastating plague on humans. A polygamist endures a miserable wedding night with his multiple wives. A government assassin tries to incorporate Blood Atonement into his work. A youth outing reenacting the Mormon Handcart trek goes terribly wrong. A zealous restaurant worker devises a horrifying plan to force customers to obey the Word of Wisdom.*

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