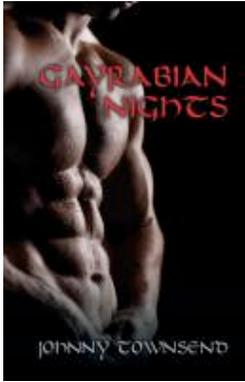


GAYRABIAN
NIGHTS

JOHNNY TOWNSEND



A male escort, invited to the hotel room of a closeted gay Mormon Republican senator, learns that the man is poised to vote on a piece of anti-gay legislation the following morning. To prevent him from sleeping, so that the exhausted senator will miss casting his vote on the Senate floor, the escort entertains him with stories of homophobia, celibacy, mixed marriages, reparative therapy, coming out, first love, gay marriage, and long-term successful gay relationships.

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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

Gayrabian Nights

Johnny Townsend

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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.

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The Removal of Debra

“Gary, could you type up this bid for the job I’m hoping to get? Your Mom’s not feeling well.”

“Sure, Dad.”

I followed him to his office, the former dining room which now had a desk, two file cabinets, an adding machine, and a wall lined with trophies from tractor pulls. Dad was Texas State Champion in his category. I’d only gone to one of the tractor pulls he competed in, though Mom went to almost all of them. Her favorite song was Petula Clark’s “Downtown,” so I wasn’t sure what she thought of the rural crowds. The one pull I’d gone to was in Mississippi, just two hours north of our home in New Orleans, but it so bored me I could never force myself to go again. I felt bad not to be more supportive of him, so I was glad to be of some help now.

“Here’s the proposal, Gary,” Dad said, handing me several papers. “You’re the college student. Fix any problems you find with it.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about building houses. If there’s something wrong, I won’t know it. I’ll just type it like I see it.”

“Okay. Your Mom never has any trouble with it, so I guess it’ll be okay.”

I took the proposal upstairs to my computer and started typing. It was mostly a long list of materials or jobs and the corresponding price for each. “Molding” was one of the items.

I wasn't sure if it should be "moulding," so despite what I'd told my Dad about not making corrections, I thought I'd look it up. Then there was an entry for "wainscoating," and I wasn't even sure what that was, so I definitely had to look the term up. And finally I saw an entry for "the removal of deبرا," and that one stumped me.

My Mom's name was Debra. Obviously, there wasn't a fee for getting her off the property. But was there some other person who was stalking the workers and who had to be removed from the site by a security guard? My Dad had had two houses he was building burned by an arsonist once. Or was this just some technical term I wasn't aware of? My Dad only had a high school education, but he was certainly intelligent enough to use some technology. He'd had faxes and cell phones and email for years.

I was just about to go downstairs and ask him about the entry when a light went off in my head, and I laughed at myself for being so slow. It was obviously supposed to be "the removal of debris."

I finished typing up the bid and handed it to my father. We got along well enough, but we never seemed to have much in common. He liked football and hunting. I liked books and movies. He liked raising cows on our land in Mississippi. I liked playing Scrabble with friends. So it felt good to have at least this one brief moment when we were working together on the same thing.

If he ever realized I was gay, of course, God only knew how he'd react to me then. I had hoped my missionary work would change me, but now I realized being gay was permanent, and I was simply doomed to Outer Darkness. Yet I still hoped as a Sunday school teacher and stake missionary to

help save some other souls, even if my own was damned. I wanted my parents to make it to the Celestial Kingdom, so I didn't want to be a stumbling block to them in any way, and I tried hard to be good. If I could do some little thing for Dad today to help him, even if it was just for his business, then I felt happy about that.

"Thanks, Gary," said my Dad as I handed him the papers. "I'll take a quick look at this, and then we're going to have to take your Mom to the doctor."

"Is she feeling worse? I'll go in and check on her."

"No, she wants to be alone."

"Oh, okay. But you're sure you don't want me to take her? I have a test tomorrow, but I can study in the waiting room while she's with the doctor."

"No, I'll take care of it."

I was only a sophomore at the University of New Orleans, though I was 21. I was behind everyone else because I'd served two years as a Mormon missionary in Romania. I still lived at home, and Dad paid my tuition. I had a part-time job delivering pizza on Friday and Saturday nights, but I felt pretty useless most of the time, like a leech living off my parents. I did the family's laundry every few days, but it was really the only chore I did around the house.

I went back to my room and studied a little of my notes on *Hamlet*. I was going over one of the soliloquies when I heard the car pulling out of the driveway. Mom had been kind of sullen the past few weeks and clearly didn't feel well. She was the type who got grumpy when she felt ill, so I'd mostly been

staying out of her way. She had a cliché personality when she had her monthly periods. She'd be fine one day and a monster the next. I'd never told her, "I guess it's that time of month" because I knew if I said it during "that time," she'd probably knock my head off. The rest of the month, she was as sweet as could be. The last few weeks, though, she'd been pretty grumpy all the time. Once, she'd even kicked our Chihuahua for getting in her way, and she loved that dog.

I had finished reviewing *Hamlet* and had moved on to *Coriolanus* when I heard the car pulling back into the driveway. I went downstairs. The kitchen door opened and Dad came in. "Where's Mom?"

Dad looked very tired. "They admitted her to the hospital. She's lost a lot of blood."

"She's hurt? I thought she was sick."

Dad gave me a weary look. "She's been bleeding for a month. I came back to get you and see if you wanted to go to the hospital to keep her company while I do some work in the office. She still doesn't want company, but I think it's best."

"Sure, Dad. Which hospital is she in?"

"Lakeside Women's Hospital."

"Okay, I'll go right now."

"You better eat a sandwich first. I won't be able to get back for a few hours."

I quickly shoved down a turkey sandwich and drove over to the hospital near my old high school. Soon I was in my

Mom's room. She was glaring at the bag of blood attached by a tube to her arm.

"How're you feeling?"

"Like crap," she said angrily. "I'm watching that blood go into my arm drop by drop, and I lose it as fast as it comes in. They're going to do a hysterectomy tomorrow morning."

Wow. This was serious. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I've had fibroid tumors for years, and apparently now they're causing this bleeding."

"Well, at least you won't have periods any more. That'll be good."

My Mom shot me a dirty look. "I've had periods since I was 10. I'm 43 now. I'm happy to get rid of all that junk. I'll be so glad not to have these fucking problems anymore."

I was shocked at her language. I'd once heard her say "shit" and another time heard Dad say "damn" and was surprised even at that. Mom must really be feeling awful to be in such a foul mood.

We didn't talk much for the next few hours. Finally, around 9:30, I thought I might better head back home so I could get some sleep before my morning classes started. But Mom looked so miserable I didn't want to leave her. I wondered where my Dad was. I'd thought he was going to come back to see her for a little while.

At 9:45, Dad walked into the room. "You can go on now, Gary. I'll stay the night."

I nodded and gave my Mom a kiss on the forehead. She looked too exhausted to be annoyed. I was surprised my Dad was staying the whole night. He was not an overly demonstrative man, and this seemed much more intimate an action from him than I would have expected. I hoped my Mom wasn't in any real danger.

It was hard to concentrate on my exam the next day, knowing my Mom was in surgery, but I thought I did well. Mom always liked to hear about my grades, and I didn't want to let her down. After classes were over, I headed back to the hospital.

Dad was still there, though it was after 3:00 now. "How're you feeling?" I asked Mom.

"Like crap."

"I'm going to the job to get some work done. You'll want to fix a sandwich for yourself when you get home, Gary."

"Sure, Dad."

"See you tomorrow, Debra."

Dad left, and I sat beside Mom's bed. She had bruises covering half her arm. I wanted to hold her hand, but she had an IV in it.

"They did a goddamn bone marrow test this afternoon. Hurt like hell. I don't know what the fuck that was all about." She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry I'm cursing. I know I shouldn't make things any harder on you. I just don't feel good."

“It’s okay, Mom. You’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“But I should be stronger.” She looked at her hands and suddenly got a disgusted look on her face.

We didn’t talk much over the next few hours. The TV was on, and Mom watched it intently, the look on her face now an angry one. I’d brought my Western Civilization notebook and studied a bit out of that, a little uncomfortable.

Around 8:00, the doctor came by and made Mom stand up beside the bed and walk a few steps. Mom swore, but she did it.

“We’ll have you walking down the hall tomorrow,” said the doctor, smiling despite my Mom’s scowl. “And you’ll be home tomorrow night.”

Mom was indeed home by the next evening. She still didn’t feel very good and went straight to bed. I left her alone but thought about her while delivering pizza in the rain later. The next day was Sunday, so after church, I went in to sit on Mom’s bed beside her. “All those bruises look painful,” I said in a worried tone. Then I added impishly, “Maybe we should try some acupuncture to relieve the pain.”

She smiled for the first time in days. “I think acupuncture is what caused all the bruises in the first place.”

We chatted for an hour, and then she got a call from the Relief Society president, so I left her alone then. She looked like she’d be back to normal soon. I checked on her just once more a couple of hours later, and since it was Sunday, I asked if she wanted me to bring her scriptures to her. She nodded

absently, but when I handed her the Book of Mormon, she looked at the cover for a long moment and then put the book aside.

Because it was the Sabbath, I didn't study for school. Instead, I emailed some friends in Bucharest and my aunt Robin in Jackson. Then I read some of *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, and a little of *Life After Life*, about near death experiences.

Mom came down for breakfast the next morning, and Dad cooked for her. I had a bowl of cereal and headed off to school. Mom was back in bed resting when I got home in the late afternoon. Dad fixed Mom some soup, and I had a sandwich.

Then I headed over to the stake president's house. Their oldest daughter was hosting the Single Adult Family Home Evening. We had a brief lesson on charity and then played Truth or Dare. For one of my truths, I had to reveal my first crush, which was easy enough—it was my first grade teacher, Miss Kavanaugh. At least they didn't ask for my second crush, which would have been Mr. Edwards, in second grade. Or my third, which would have been Coach Marks in 8th grade. Or my fourth, which would have been my classmate Jim in 9th grade. Or my fifth...

As much as I had to hide, I still always chose Truth in Truth or Dare. I was too wimpy to ever do a Dare.

The stake president, who'd left the Single Adults alone during the evening, came up to me at the end of the meeting. "Your Dad just called. He had to take your Mom back to the hospital. She has a high fever. She's in East Jefferson."

“I’d better stop by on my way home.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. “If you were my son, you’d be working your way through college. I don’t approve of your Dad paying your way. I’d teach you some responsibility. I’d make a man out of you.”

My first impulse was to say, “Thank God you’re not my Dad.” But I knew my father and President Brooks were friends, so I just smiled and left. I couldn’t help but notice he didn’t have any problem paying his daughter’s way through college.

On my way to the hospital, though, I thought about what the stake president had said. Would it make me a better person to move out on my own and get a full-time job and just go to school part-time? I was two years behind most of my classmates as it was, but was that as important as being self-sufficient? I could get student loans and be \$50,000 in debt by the time I finished school. It would be a hard way to start my adult life, but hard wasn’t necessarily bad.

But so what if I was a lazy bum for staying at home while going to school? I was going to hell anyway. Why did I need to bother with improving my character? I was studying hard and getting A’s, taking five classes a semester. I didn’t date or go out or waste the money my Dad gave me at the beginning of each semester. I might be wickedly evil, but I was nevertheless a good kid.

Yet I was still a kid. Even after a two-year mission. Even after going through the temple. Even after a year and a half of college. I was still just a kid.

When I got to the hospital, I went up to my Mom's room. I wondered if the fact that she was in a larger hospital this time meant the infection that had caused her fever was serious. I offered up a quick prayer, put a smile on my face, and went into my Mom's room. My Dad was sitting next to the bed.

"I want to talk to Gary alone for a minute," said my Mom curtly, and Dad nodded and left the room.

I took my Dad's place in the chair and held my Mom's hand.

"I am super pissed off," she said. "Do you know when they were admitting me, the nurse looked at my chart and said, 'Oh, you're the leukemia patient.' So that's how I found out I have leukemia."

"You have leukemia?"

"Your Dad wasn't going to tell me. He thinks I'm too fragile. But I can tell you this—if I'd known what I had, I'd have stayed at home and blown my brains out. But now I'm trapped here, on chemotherapy, and I can't get out. My whole life, people have been telling me what to do. Even now, I don't have any say over my own life. I am really pissed."

My mind was going a mile a minute, but mostly I was thinking maybe my Dad was right not to tell her, if it kept her from committing suicide. The Church said that was a terrible sin. There was no sense going to hell when you were so close to finishing your test.

But certainly she wasn't about to "finish." She wasn't going to die. The chemotherapy was going to work. Certainly it would. There were huge strides forward in cancer treatment

all the time. And this was my Mom. My Mom couldn't possibly die. Those things only happened to other people.

My Mom grasped my hand. "They won't tell me my prognosis. But I got them to tell me the name of the leukemia. It's acute lymphatic leukemia. I want you to go to the library and find out how long I've got."

"Okay," I said numbly.

She squeezed my hand harder. "I just want you to know," she said, looking at me intently, "that I've always loved you. I've always been proud of you. I couldn't have had a better son."

"There's no need to talk like that, Mom. You're not going anywhere."

"We'll see. You come back and tell me my prognosis tomorrow."

"Okay."

"And for God's sake, don't let the Relief Society president come. I can't stand that bitch. I don't feel like pretending I like her at a time like this. I don't have the patience for all that trash. And I'm not going to apologize for it, either."

"I'll call and tell her you're not up to having visitors."

"Hell, you can tell her the truth for all I care. I'm sick of pretending." She laughed a little bitterly. "Maybe I'm sick *from* pretending."

I nodded, knowing I'd of course want to find something diplomatic to say. I'd been voted Most Courteous in high

school. With so many defects in my character, being nice was one of the very few things I had going for me. But was there really any pressing reason to be nice, I wondered, if I was going to hell anyway?

“Call your aunt Robin and ask her to come down. I want to see her before I die.”

“You’re not going to die.”

“I want to see her. And call Grandma, too.”

“I’ll call them tonight.”

Grandma drove a couple of hours down from Brookhaven the next morning, and Robin left her two teens and husband home in Jackson and came down early in the afternoon, before I was back again after school.

“What’s the verdict?” Mom demanded as soon as I walked into the room. Three pairs of eyes stared intensely at me.

“If the chemotherapy doesn’t work,” I began uncomfortably, “you have about three months.”

My Mom deflated in front of me like a punctured balloon, and I felt like a murderer. I didn’t have the heart to go on, to say that even with successful chemotherapy, which was rare, remission usually only lasted a single year. All our worlds were being turned upside down.

Mom didn’t say anything more the rest of the afternoon, other than muttering “shit” a couple of times. Robin and Grandma tried to carry on a cheerful conversation, but Mom took no part in it, and I didn’t, either. Around 9:30, Dad came

to stay with Mom for the night, and the three of us went back to the house.

“The chemotherapy will get rid of the bad cells,” said Robin as we came inside. “It’s all going to work out fine. Tomorrow morning before you go to school, you and your Dad need to give your Mom a blessing. You still carry your consecrated oil with you, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then everything is going to be all right.”

Grandma looked unconvinced but smiled weakly, yet I knew that God would never honor a blessing made by a homosexual, even though I was still a virgin. I wasn’t a virgin in my thoughts, of course, and I knew God hated me for it. He’d certainly never save my Mom on my account. Maybe I could get the bishop to do the blessing with Dad.

I went upstairs and called Bishop Tillotson, asking if he could stop by the hospital in the morning before he went to work. He agreed, and I sighed in relief.

The hospital was on my way to school, so I dropped Robin and Grandma off in the morning. Dad looked beat but said he and the bishop had given Mom a blessing earlier. I looked at Mom as he told me this, and she was glaring at Dad.

I was through with classes by 3:00 and went back to the hospital. A nurse came into the room to draw blood, but Mom’s arms were already covered with bruises. A little later, I noticed that the tubing had become disconnected to the IV in her hand. I pushed the call button, and about five minutes later a nurse responded. I explained what had occurred, and the

nurse angrily told me that this couldn't happen. I insisted she come look, and the nurse came several minutes later. When she saw the tubing, she didn't say anything but just reattached the hose and left, still angry. For some reason, I felt guilty.

The next few days went by in much the same manner. Robin and Grandma did the mornings. I came in mid-afternoon, took them home, and went back till the late evening. Dad came around 10:00 and stayed the night.

Mom didn't talk much, so on my shifts, I mostly studied or told Mom stories of my mission experiences in Romania. I'd had a favorite companion, Nicolae Petrescu, who'd just written me a long email, so I told her what he was up to these days. She didn't look overly interested, but I felt we had to talk about something. I didn't tell her that Nicolae had said he missed me. "Mi-e dor de tine!" he'd said, I remembered now, smiling.

I asked if she wanted me to bring her a book to read. She had probably two thousand books at the house and particularly loved mysteries, though I had found a few classics and also a few books about sex on her shelves, too. She had a locked cabinet in her tiny study, and she had never let anyone see what was inside. She had collected first editions for a while, and I figured she kept a few rare books in there. Perhaps if I brought her something special from home, she'd feel a little better.

"My reading days are over," she said. "Take whatever books you want, and get rid of the rest. And don't clutter up your house with all that junk like I did mine. Use the library."

"But you love your books, Mom. There's no sin in enjoying something."

She stared at the ceiling. “I wish I had actually done something with my life.” I put my hand lightly on her arm, afraid of hurting her. “I wasted all that time being a good little girl. God, I wish I’d posed for *Playboy* or something when I was young. Or gone to college myself. Or written something. Or backpacked across Europe. Or gotten arrested. I wish I’d done something interesting.”

“You got married in the temple and raised a family.” I felt stupid saying it, knowing that forced her to say she was glad she’d had me.

“Having a kid shouldn’t mean you never get to do anything else interesting with your life.”

“No,” I agreed. “You’re right.”

Unfortunately, our talks tapered off quickly after this. By the next day, Mom was starting to lose her sense of awareness of what was going on around her. Once, after a nurse left, Mom asked me, “Who was that?”

“The nurse.”

“Should we help her?”

“She doesn’t need any help.”

“Why not? Did we already help her?”

I nodded. “Yes, we helped her.” I thought that should end the discussion, but my Mom looked confused.

“What did we do?”

I didn't know what to say at this point. "You gave her some blood." Mom just looked at me like I was crazy.

The next few days were worse. One morning, I stopped in to see her briefly while dropping Robin and Grandma off, and two nurses were lifting Mom in a huge sling so they could weigh her, since she couldn't stand to get on a scale. They had to push her over to one side to slide the fabric under her, and then push her over to the other side to pull it the rest of the way across. It was clear they were hurting her, and I wondered how knowing if she'd lost or gained a pound could possibly be so important.

After the nurses finally left, Mom turned to me and said encouragingly, "Gary, you can get your snakes now."

I smiled and thanked her.

Another time, in the afternoon, I watched as a nurse poked my Mom's almost entirely blue arm to draw yet more blood. After the nurse left, my Mom turned to me with a completely disgusted look on her face. "Why did we join this club?" she asked miserably.

That evening, Dad came a half hour early to relieve me. "Gary, I had to revise my proposal for the job. Would you mind retyping it before bed tonight?"

"Sure, Dad. But you didn't have to get here early for that. I can stay up a little later."

"It's okay, son."

I'd taken a couple more exams at school and was still doing okay. I felt I had to prove to God that I could take the stress and still perform, that doing well while my Mom was

sick was a test He was giving me, that perhaps it would somehow change my soul. I thought about what my Mom had said. We had joined the “club” of Earth life so we could pass the tests God gave us and become gods. It was a miserable club sometimes, but if we could do well even at the worst of times, it would all pay off in the end. I wondered, though, what it would be like to take a class just for the sake of learning, not as a method of proving myself. What would it be like just to enjoy life for the sake of living, and not as part of creating a celestial resume’?

I retyped Dad’s proposal and read a few more pages of my Book of Mormon in Romanian, and then I went to bed.

The next afternoon when I walked into Mom’s room after dropping Robin and Grandma off at the house, two nurses met me at the door. “We have to draw so much blood, and we’re running out of veins, so we decided to put this tube inside her arm, and now we can always just stick a needle into the tube.”

I was irritated that they hadn’t thought of that right at the beginning. Did they not know in advance they’d be using up all her veins? I almost said something, but then I thought I ought to be polite.

I sat off to the side and watched as the nurses cut and dug into my Mom’s arm. Mom grunted and cried, and I squirmed in my chair. But if they could do this, it would lessen the suffering later. The nurses kept working and shoving and muttering, and my Mom kept crying and moaning. It went on and on and on. After fifteen horrendous minutes, I couldn’t take it anymore and left the room.

But the nurses didn’t come out for yet another fifteen minutes. Half an hour of sheer, literal torture. But at least it

was done. I felt ashamed for leaving Mom alone during all of that, but relieved it was over.

“So the tube is in?” I asked.

“No, we didn’t get it,” one of the nurses said. “Her veins are too damaged. We couldn’t get rid of all the clogs.” She shrugged and walked off, unconcerned, and I had to fight not to hit her.

The next day was even worse. When I arrived to pick up Robin and Grandma, Mom was sleeping, but a nurse came in to draw more blood, and Mom woke up moaning from the pain. She’d always had veins that were hard to find anyway, and now the nurses had to dig and dig.

While the nurse was digging in my Mom’s leg, Mom began looking around wildly, her eyes searching desperately and blindly for help, and then she threw her arms up to the ceiling and wailed, “I want my Mama!”

Grandma sobbed loudly and rushed over to her, but Mom seemed not to recognize her. She cried as the nurse continued to work on her, and Grandma cried, and Robin cried, and I thought life could never get any worse than this.

But it did. The next morning, Dad reported that he’d been up all night, that Mom was now bleeding from her bowels, and he’d had to empty the bedpan every twenty minutes. Mom’s platelets were gone, and she wasn’t reacting well to the platelet transfusions.

He stayed a little longer so Robin and Grandma could do platelet pheresis, in the hopes that Mom wouldn’t reject her family’s platelets, and I went right after school to have my

platelets taken out, too. It took about 90 minutes, a nurse taking blood out of one arm, spinning it in a centrifuge, scooping out the layer of platelets, and putting the rest of the blood back in the other arm, repeating the process over and over.

So I didn't get to Mom's room till around 5:00. I called Dad to tell him not to come till he'd taken a long nap, that I could do more than just five hours for my shift, since I knew I always had the shortest shift of anyone in the family to begin with.

Dad came at 11:00, though, and with my emptying the bedpan every twenty or thirty minutes, even those six hours seemed an eternity. But Dad's shift was even longer, and he was trying to maintain a business as well. I wondered if I should drop out of school and carry more of the burden. But there was only a month left to the semester. It seemed like such a waste to just chuck two and a half months of work. And maybe managing all of it together really would help God to bless me. If my Dad could handle his heavy load, surely I could handle this little one. And maybe the blessing that this might bring would be an improvement in Mom's health rather than an improvement in my soul. Maybe it would be an improvement in my Mom's soul instead, a reconversion to the gospel. This illness seemed like the "trial of her faith," and I was afraid she was losing her testimony. I had started fasting every other day, asking God to save my Mom's life or her soul, whichever He had more power to do.

I hardly had any interaction with anyone at all these days, studying non-stop between classes, driving my car delivering pizza on weekends, and spending just a few minutes with my family during shift changes. Mom slept or moaned or talked

crazy while I was with her. I wasn't sure she could even regain her testimony now in any event if she was no longer lucid. So I hoped the chemotherapy would work long enough to let her be happy with her gospel-centered life.

The Relief Society president insisted on coming over one evening despite what I'd told her, but Mom didn't seem to notice. A couple of other members of the ward came by on other days, but really, Mom had never made many friends over the years, keeping to herself a lot, so no one seemed to really care that she was sick besides us. It struck me that completely devoting yourself to your family must be a limiting, lonely life, no matter how righteous. Maybe there really was something to be sorry about in that. Perhaps Mom wasn't losing her testimony now so much as repenting.

One day, though, without warning, Mom looked at me and seemed to be her old self again. It was like a miracle, and I smiled to see the recognition in her eyes. "You're getting better," I said.

"It would have been so much better still if I'd just shot myself."

I wondered then if she might be right, but I said, "The chemotherapy's working, and you're going to be fine." Then I had a horrible thought—what if in fact the chemotherapy *did* work, and she went into remission, and then a year from now had to die all over again? I suddenly hoped the treatments wouldn't work. Dying once was bad enough.

"Don't waste your life like I did," Mom said. "Time isn't something to be tossed away like so much garbage."

“You didn’t waste your life, Mom. You read me stories. You made peanut butter fudge for Christmas. You went to the Smoky Mountains with Dad every year.”

“I’m 43, and I only had about ten good years out of that.”

“You went to the temple. You taught Relief Society. Didn’t you enjoy any of that?” How could she not have felt the Spirit and liked it?

Mom sighed. “So much time wasted doing what I was supposed to do.”

“Well, if we’re supposed to do it...”

“The Church gives us materials to build our lives. I know. But sometimes even good things become scrap.”

“Your life isn’t scrap.”

She smiled weakly. “I meant the building materials.”

“But the Church helps us so much.”

“My only hope is to be myself the little time I have left.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked straight ahead.

“We have all eternity, Mom. Even if you die, it’s not the end.”

She looked at me sadly. “You need to find yourself a nice young man,” she said softly. “Maybe this guy Nicolae you like so much.”

“What?”

“Don’t throw away your whole life. If there really is something beyond all this, what we get will depend on how well we used what we were given here. Don’t let all the crud out there drag you down. Being nice and following the rules isn’t the most important thing in the world. Don’t waste your life not being true to yourself. Live while you’re alive. God, the things I wanted to do. The things I meant to do.” She looked at the IV pole sadly. “The things I’ll never do.”

She seemed exhausted after this and closed her eyes. I looked at her and realized I was tightly clutching the sheet on the bed. My mind was reeling from the discovery that my Mom had known I was gay all along. But living in the Church, of course, was the only real way to have happiness in the next world. She was wrong to be upset that she’d been “good” all her life.

Yet somehow, her words seemed just as valid as any scripture I’d ever read. However many “near death” experiences were out there, I’d certainly never talked to anyone who’d been on the other side. Talking to someone this near to death was as close as I was likely to get, and it seemed to make her more of an authority, though maybe it was only an apparent lucidity and she was still talking crazy.

I was wondering what else to ask her while she was still reasonably coherent, but suddenly her eyes rolled up and she began shaking. The whole bed started rocking. I didn’t bother with the call button but ran to the door and shouted for help.

The convulsions were over in a few minutes, but when the doctor came later, he said she’d had a stroke. It was too early to tell if there would be permanent damage or not.

The doctor left, and after I emptied the bedpan again, wiped Mom's legs, and tried to shove some clean pads underneath her, I sat with my head in my hands. Was Mom being punished for her heresy? Or was this a blessing, to knock her out so she wouldn't feel so much pain? Or to keep her from sinning even more?

I hesitated to call my Dad but felt he'd want to know, and he came to the hospital by 9:00. I stayed with him a while longer, but neither of us said anything. Then I went home.

I had an Italian test the next day. I'd picked Italian to fulfill my language requirement since it was the closest thing offered to Romanian. My heart wasn't in it today, but I forced myself to concentrate and was sure I'd made an A.

To my great surprise, my Mom was awake when I got back to the hospital. There seemed to be no lasting effects from the stroke. It was another miracle. Maybe that meant God really was going to bless her. I rushed back after dropping Robin and Grandma off at the house.

"I'm afraid I've been too protective of you," Mom said sadly as I held her hand. "God is getting rid of me so you can grow up."

"If I'm immature, that's my problem," I said. "God doesn't impose the death penalty for a thing like that."

She just shook her head in a melancholy way and smiled weakly. Then I emptied her bedpan again.

Mom talked about growing up in the country in Mississippi, finding arrowheads in the pasture behind her house, the big day when the gravel road out front was finally

paved, and the day her parents met two Mormon missionaries in town. I realized we'd never talked as adults before, and I suddenly wanted desperately for her to survive so I could finally get to know her as a person.

“You know, Gary,” she said then, “the Church thinks you’re trash. They’ll try to get rid of you.” She patted my hand, her IV tube glistening in the light. “But that’s okay. I worried about it for a while.” She stopped, and her face grew harder. “But you don’t need to carry all that baggage around with you the rest of your life, like I did. Guilt and fear are pretty useless emotions.” She paused and then added uncertainly, “Do you think Nicolae might really like you? You know, the way you like him?”

I felt my face flush. It was just too strange to be talking like this. How could my Mom be so calm? “I—I don’t know,” I said. “I hope so.” I felt I was going to be struck down with leukemia, too, for saying it.

She nodded. “Then you’ll get a job this summer and save up some money to go see him. Or you’ll invite him here to stay with you a few weeks to find out.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, my ears and cheeks still burning.

“These things don’t happen on their own. You have to make them happen. If you don’t, your whole life goes by without anything good ever getting done.”

I was looking down at the floor, too embarrassed to look my Mom in the face. She put her hand on my arm. “I suppose everyone looks for meaning at a shitty time like this. But if I can just teach you not to treat your chances like junk, maybe my life would have been worth it.” She paused and then

managed a brief smile. “God, it feels good to finally say all these things I’ve been thinking for so many years.” She laughed a little. “I’m still a Stepford wife when your Dad comes in the evening. No sense upsetting him. Maybe you can never truly be the person you want to be completely. You always have to worry about how others are going to be affected. But Gary, don’t worry about it as much as I did.”

We talked about other things then, me just enjoying her company. She *was* more fun like this, more interesting, more real. I felt mystified and guilty that I even thought the word “fun” in such circumstances. I always felt like my Mom and I had been close, but the definition of “close” had changed in the past few days. I could see how robotic I’d been myself as a missionary, how robotic I was now in church. As much as I loved Nicolae, how often had we ever actually talked about anything that mattered to us outside of religion? Was I up to spending the next twenty years just writing him about how things were going in the ward and hoping the work was going well over in Romania? Never telling him anything deeper I was feeling?

Mom whispered to me where she kept her dildo and told me to find it before my Dad did. I didn’t even know what she was talking about until she explained it. Two weeks ago, I would have been mortified, but now I just nodded and assured her I’d take care of it. I turned the nurse away once when she came to draw blood. The woman was angry, but she left. Then Mom and I talked about how I would need to help Dad by taking over the cooking and cleaning, how I would give Mom’s clothes to some of the poorer members of the congregation, how I was to keep no more than a hundred of Mom’s books and then donate the rest to the public library, and how I was to be sure to visit Grandma often and be a

support to her. Robin was to have the one painting Mom had done, of their childhood home in Mississippi. I was to be nice to whatever woman my Dad eventually chose to marry.

Mom was very calm but firm about everything. I felt selfish, spending all this special time alone with her while everyone else was away. But maybe she'd talked to them this way, too. I hoped so.

I emptied the bedpan a few more times. Mom always moaned when I turned her over, and around 8:30, when I pushed her back into place, after another bedpan moment, she had a glazed look on her face. "Why is it raining in here?" she asked in alarm. "Get rid of those dogs!"

It had happened so suddenly, I didn't know what to do. Then in a matter of seconds, her eyes rolled up, and her jaw clenched tight, and she started shaking again. There was nothing to be done, so I didn't feel a sense of urgency. I calmly pressed the call button and told the nurse what was happening.

The seizure was over in a couple of minutes, but by the time the doctor arrived an hour later, things seemed pretty grim. "You can see by the way she's holding her hand that she's had a severe stroke. I expect she's paralyzed on her left side. It's impossible to tell right now how much of her brain function is left, but it doesn't look good. The other tests show her kidneys are shutting down, too, and it looks like she may be developing diabetes."

Dad was due in a few minutes, but I didn't want him to feel neglected, so I called and told him what had happened. When I saw him looking down at Mom a few minutes later, I could see that he'd finally given up. I knew he wouldn't like

my doing it, but I went over and hugged him anyway. He was unresponsive at first but eventually started hugging me back. Then he released me and said, “You go get some sleep, son.”

The next morning, Dad didn’t leave when I brought Robin and Grandma. I thought maybe I should skip school for just one day, since Mom might die at any moment, but I had a geology test, and I didn’t want to have to reschedule. Would Mom have wanted me to be just a little selfish instead of doing the respectable thing? It was probably just rationalization. I wasn’t able to put Mom out of my mind during the test, but I found I could think of her and still concentrate on continental drift at the same time. It somehow made me realize that life truly was a test, whether God was behind it or not, and some days there was going to be more than one test at a time.

I arrived back at the hospital a few minutes after 3:00. Dad, Robin, and Grandma were in the hall outside Mom’s door. They all looked exhausted.

Dad came up to me and grabbed my arm. “Your Mom died five minutes ago.”

My first reaction was to feel a wave of guilt. I wasn’t there when my mother died. Had I let a stupid class be more important to me? But immediately afterward, I thought, “If God had wanted me to be there, He could have kept her alive five extra minutes.”

“I want to see her.”

I went in the room and looked at her motionless body. It was clearly just an empty shell now. Then I looked up at the ceiling, and into the corners. Was she up there right now

looking down at me? Or had she gone on to meet her father and grandparents?

Would she have fun in the next world, I wondered. Would there still be books to read? Would she have a chance to write one of her own? Or to pose nude for someone? Was there “spirit body” porn? Would she have a chance to finally make some friends? Or to do any of the things she’d missed out on here?

There was an eternity ahead of her. Surely, God wouldn’t condemn her completely for all of forever just for whatever few mistakes she’d made here.

But I wasn’t going to take a chance.

Robin, Grandma, and I went back to the house while Dad stayed at the hospital to make arrangements. As soon as we closed the door behind us, our Chihuahua started pawing frantically at the carpet in front of the door, trying to get out. She knew Mom wasn’t coming back. I picked her up and held her, and she squealed pitifully. She howled for fifteen minutes, and I held her the entire time. But when Dad got home later, I had dinner ready for everyone. Even Robin and Grandma hadn’t felt like cooking.

But after dinner and a little subdued conversation, I went up to my room, and I chucked out my copy of *The Miracle of Forgiveness* with its homophobic chapter on homosexuality. I looked online for gay support groups in New Orleans and found a chapter of PFLAG that met once a month, with a meeting to be held just next week. And then I emailed Nicolae, telling him about the last few weeks, and asking if he was up for a visit from me in August.

It was only November, so a full-time summer job was months away, but I started looking for another part-time job right now. Maybe I could tutor ESL students at school and work toward a degree in that field so I could get a job in Romania teaching English.

Maybe Nicolae would rather move to America, though. Or maybe he didn't really like me the same way I liked him in the first place. But whatever happened, I was going to try to do something interesting with my life. Maybe I'd pose for a magazine myself one day. I was already in good shape, but I did some push ups and sit ups for a while as I thought about it, and then I studied a little more of Shakespeare.

After I felt I'd done as much as I could for the evening, I got out my photo album and began looking through all my pictures. I was shocked to find I'd only taken six photos of my Mom in 21 years. The last one I had taken was over a year before my mission. How could that have happened?

In two days, the person who meant most to me in my life would be taken away and buried like so much garbage in a landfill. But I was going to make her life mean something. I was going to make my own life mean something, too. I'd make sure I had something interesting to tell her the next time we met. She'd said she was proud of me, but I'd make sure I would make her even prouder. Maybe God wouldn't think much of me, but my Mom would.

One thing was for sure--I wasn't going to let the Relief Society president say anything at the service.

I looked at the old photo of my Mom and gently caressed it, and then I kissed her goodbye.

The Sneakover Prince

I met Alan at the Faubourg Marigny gay bookstore in New Orleans. “Any new porn?” I asked breezily, walking past the counter where he was reading a book, and heading to the porn rack in back of the store.

“Oh, I—I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t put out the magazines. I just work the cash register.”

He actually sounded kind of nervous, as if talking about gay porn unsettled him. I smiled. How could you work in a gay bookstore and be uncomfortable with gay porn?

Well, he was new here, I figured. I hadn’t seen him in the bookstore before. Still, even to come in and talk to the owner about a job suggested some degree of comfort.

I decided to test my suspicions about his jitteriness, just for fun. After looking through the magazines, I brought two up to the counter. One was the mainstream *Advocate Men* and the other was *Leather Men*. I put the two magazines in front of the new cashier and opened both, one to a photo of a businessman in an office with his pants down, and the other to a photo of a man in leather chaps kneeling doggie-style while another man in a leather harness rimmed him.

“Which do you think I should give my Dad for his birthday?”

The man became bright red in seconds and turned quickly to fiddle with some papers. “Is—is your Dad really gay?”

“Well,” I said, “since the stroke, he can’t remember, so I keep trying to convince him he is.”

The man turned to look at me a moment, trying to figure out if I was joking or not. We chatted for about fifteen minutes. He told me his name was Alan, and he was working part-time here and part-time in a used book store in the French Quarter a few blocks away.

“Nice,” I said. “I’m a librarian at Tulane University. We’ll have to get together to talk about books sometime.”

Alan looked a little flustered at that, but I wrote down my address and phone number and told him to give me a call or just drop by after work some day.

I didn’t expect anything to come of it, but I was in the habit of regularly asking strange men over to my place, so I didn’t see any reason to neglect this particular young man.

Only he wasn’t really young, was he? He *seemed* young because of his nervousness, but he had to be in his late 30’s. And I was 42 myself, so I wasn’t usually up for delicate schoolgirl flirtations. As a rule, I was more direct. “Want to come over to my place and fuck?” But Alan seemed to demand a softer approach, and something about that intrigued me.

Later that day, I stopped off at the bathhouse on Toulouse Street in the Quarter, sucked two dicks and had my own dick sucked, and then I biked home to my house in the Marigny.

By the next day, I had completely forgotten about Alan.

I got down to my part-time job after lunch. I worked at home writing reviews for porno movies. I actually made about

\$400 a month doing this, but it was still only lagniappe. I couldn't have gotten by without my library job. I worked in the reference section on the main floor. Despite the internet, people still needed me occasionally.

I enjoyed reviewing porn, though. First of all, I enjoyed *watching* porn. And I enjoyed the fact that since I was a reviewer, I received the new porn DVDs for free. All I had to do was write my reaction to what I saw. I tried not to let my own specific interests make me too opinionated, but I found that I didn't have to say, "Oh, my god, how boring." I could just pretend to be objectively describing a scene but simply use boring words or exciting words to convey my opinion.

It was Thursday, but I had Thursdays off, and after watching two DVDs and beating off only at the end of the last one, I went downstairs to see if my mail had come.

I owned a two-story house in the Marigny that I had bought with my partner of twenty years, who had died almost three years ago of a heart attack at the age of 60. I lived on the top floor and rented out the downstairs as two small apartments. I had an entrance on the ground floor, naturally, and was walking down the stairs when I heard the metal squeak of the mail slot. Just in time, I thought.

But I stopped short when I realized there were eyes peering at me through the slot. I was only wearing my T-shirt and underwear, and I realized suddenly my underwear even had a little wet spot from where I'd leaked after coming.

Was that the mailman looking at me, I wondered. Well, whoever it was was going to get an eyeful.

I ran the rest of the way down the stairs and opened the door.

It was Alan, turning beet red.

“I—I was just—I mean—I—”

“What a perv,” I said, laughing.

Alan turned even redder.

“You don’t have to sneak a peek,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. “I’ll show you anything you want to see.” I reached down to the elastic band on my boxer briefs.

“I’ve got to go.” Alan turned and got on his bike and hurried off.

I laughed, but I couldn’t help but think, “Hey, we’ve both got bikes. We’ll have to go riding together sometime.” I knew I’d have to stop by the bookstore again to tease him.

A few days later, I did stop in, and I was happy to see Alan at the register. “Hi, boyfriend,” I said, smiling sweetly at him. He turned red. “Any new porn?”

“I don’t know.”

I left him alone then and browsed the card rack, looking for a racy birthday card to send to a friend. When I glanced back over at the counter, I could see Alan checking out my box.

He was almost squinting, of course, since I didn’t have that showy a box, being more of a grower than a shower, but

he was definitely trying hard to see what he could. I smiled, and he turned away quickly to do some paperwork.

I selected a card and went up to the counter. Alan didn't say anything, but when he handed me the card, I took his hand and held it, mostly just to see his reaction. I saw barely controlled panic in his eyes.

"What time is your shift over?"

"6:00. Why?"

"Have you ever seen *Under the Tuscan Sun*?"

"No. Why?"

"Do you like catfish?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You're coming over to my house when you get off work. We'll have a nice dinner and then watch a DVD."

Alan looked down at the counter. "I—I'm not really supposed to date," he said softly.

"You already have a boyfriend?" I asked. I think I let the surprise in my voice show.

"Oh, no. It's just that I'm Mormon. I'm supposed to be celibate. I've never gone on a date before."

"Well, I wasn't asking you to bed. Just to see a movie."

"Oh, I thought—I—"

“Not that I wouldn’t have tried to make a move on you, but I can control myself, even around someone as good looking as you.”

Alan turned red again.

“But we will have to cuddle while we watch. Will that work for you?”

“I—I suppose.”

I didn’t know why I was pursuing Alan so strongly. Part of it had to be just for the fun of watching him squirm. But I also did find him attractive, and while I had a good circle of friends already, I was always open to widening that circle. Gay people had to rely on chosen family more than biological family, and I always wanted more “relatives.”

Alan and I did have dinner that evening, and we did cuddle while watching the movie. There was no fondling, though, and not even any kissing. I was touched at the end of the evening, however, when Alan stood up formally and offered me his hand. “I had a very good time,” he said. “Thank you.”

I grabbed his hand and pulled Alan close to me, kissing his ear. “Will you come back next Sunday?” I whispered.

“Y-yes,” he whispered back.

Alan came over every Sunday evening for the next several weeks. His shift was only from noon to six, he explained, and he went to church with his mother every Sunday morning before work, and so, he went on, “I feel I just need to treat myself once a week.” He looked guilty immediately and added, “You don’t think that’s a sin, do you? It’s not like we’re having sex or anything.”

“Well, there *is* a little bit of ‘anything,’” I said. “I do beat off thinking of you after you leave.”

Alan turned red, but he smiled, too. “Really?” Then he looked concerned. “But if I make you sin, does that count as a sin against me, too?”

“I’m not sinning, honey.”

Alan didn’t say anything.

“If you think being gay is so bad, why do you work in a gay bookstore?”

“Well, I’m not sure anymore if it’s bad. And I want to see a little of the other side of the question so I can make up my mind. I’d like not to be alone the rest of my life. I mean, I have my Mom, but...”

“I think you need to start coming over on Wednesday evenings, too.”

“Really?” Alan smiled again.

“I have a lot of DVDs,” I said. “Do you mind more cuddling?”

Alan thought for a moment. “I *like* cuddling,” he said slowly.

“I get off work at 6:00 on Wednesdays. So can you be here at 7:00?”

We started doing other things besides watching movies. Sometimes, we played Scrabble or UNO or gin rummy and even games like Hangman and charades. I found Alan

delightfully innocent and playful on the one hand, but on the other, I was a little disturbed to learn that at 38, he still lived at home with his Mom. She was in perfect health and didn't need a caretaker, but Alan felt that after his father's death fifteen years earlier, he had to look out for his mother. It seemed sweet in some ways, but in another way, I wondered if he hadn't really stayed 18 years old for the past 20 years.

Of course, *I* wasn't still just a kid, and while I was enjoying Alan's company, I was also actively pursuing the company of other men. Sometimes, I'd sit on the stoop in front of my front door and just pick up guys walking down the street. Other times late at night, I'd go to the bar three blocks away and pick someone up there.

I usually told Alan about these episodes. He looked perturbed but also always asked for details. Then he'd just look at the floor a moment and think.

One day, though, he surprised me by kissing me hello. "Wow," I said, "That's a big step."

Alan turned red but then looked a little depressed. "It's pretty sad when something as simple as a kiss is a big step."

"Well, let's be happy about it, not sad."

He looked up then and nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry. I guess I'm just in a down mood because I've decided maybe there is no God. I've been praying for something for a long time and God hasn't given it to me, so I finally realized maybe he doesn't exist."

"Hmm," I said, trying to keep this light. "Maybe he *does* exist, but he just doesn't like you." I smiled teasingly.

Alan's brow furrowed. "You know, with my low self-esteem, it's a wonder that never occurred to me."

"So you'll keep the faith a little longer?"

"Why do you want me to believe? I thought you disapproved of all my angst."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with believing in God. It's just the believing that he doesn't want you to be loved by someone that I find upsetting."

Alan nodded. Of course, I hadn't myself prayed in a very long time, but I didn't see why Alan couldn't have both faith and love in his own life.

I decided to lighten things up now, though. I'd found an old game of Twister at a rummage sale, and after dinner, we improvised a way to play with just two people. When we were pretty entangled already, I then announced, "Left hand on right buttocks," and placed my hand on Alan's ass. He jumped, but a moment later, I felt a hand on my ass as well.

He kissed me goodnight that evening as he left, and kissing became a regular part of our encounters from then on. I tried introducing it to the cuddling sessions, and after only a brief amount of resistance, Alan gave in and started some pretty good amateur French kissing. It didn't take him long to polish his technique, either.

He started staying longer after our Sunday night movie was over.

I found that Alan was truly a sweet man. He told me of his two years as a missionary in Tonga, where he helped teach people English as well as helped local Mormons build a

couple of houses for some of the poorer islanders. I'd always thought Mormons just proselytized, so it was nice to hear they actually did some useful things, too.

And in the years since he returned to the States, Alan regularly volunteered with the Cub Scouts, and with the Sierra Club, and with an AIDS hospice, and with organizing local March of Dimes events.

"You think a lot about other people," I said.

"Well, to be honest, it's all just to divert the energy I *want* to put into sex. I sometimes wonder how many great things we could do as a people if we didn't invest so much of ourselves in seeking an orgasm."

"It doesn't have to be either/or," I said. "I teach ESL to Latino immigrants." I paused. "Of course, I make the men take their shirts off if they want any extra help."

"See what I mean?"

"You may have a point. But how about I make you a promise? After we start having sex, I'll begin volunteering with the Sierra Club, too."

Alan turned red, but he looked pensive for a few moments as well.

But we didn't start having sex. Soon, we'd been "dating" for five months, and I had yet to so much as grope him. He did let me rub his chest during our cuddling sessions, and he would rub mine, too, but if my hand strayed down to his stomach, he would grasp it and place it back on his chest.

We did a few day excursions, too, biking together through the Marigny or to Audubon Park, buying fruit at the Farmers Market, walking slowly along the levee, and even going to gay bingo once. I found Alan intelligent, and we talked about the Middle East, and about health care reform, and about nuclear and solar and wind energy, and even about astronomy. Sometimes, we watched lectures on DVD about topics like Greek archaeology or Jewish intellectual thought of the 16th century.

“You know,” I told him one day over gumbo, “if I could just get you into bed, you’d make a great husband.”

“There’s so much else we can share,” Alan replied. “Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“But when you love someone, you want to share yourself with them completely.”

“I love my mother, but I don’t want to have sex with her. And what relationship can be stronger than that between a mother and son?”

“That between a married couple.”

Alan looked at the floor a moment. “Maybe,” he said slowly. “Maybe.”

It was on our six-month “anniversary” that I was finally able to meet Alan’s mother, in their Gentilly home. She hadn’t heard anything about me, I learned, and thought I was a regular at the straight French Quarter bookstore where Alan worked. He’d told her months ago that he also worked at a gay bookstore, and they’d talked a few times about his feelings toward men in general, but she was only okay about his

“being” gay, he told me, as long as he wasn’t “doing” gay things.

“Like listening to old disco songs?” I asked him.

Alan glared at me but laughed.

“So you’re a friend of Alan’s?” his mother asked me that evening, shaking my hand as she let me into her home. “I’m Sharon.”

“I’m Balzer,” I said.

“What an odd name.” She smiled.

“It suits me,” I replied. “Because I’m ballsy.”

“Oh, dear. We try not to use language like that around here. I hope I’m not offending you.”

“Oh, no. I’m a librarian. I’m used to attempts at censorship.” I smiled, and she smiled back uncertainly.

But after our rocky start, I found I really liked Alan’s mother. She was a social worker who also volunteered with the Breast Cancer Run and the Brownies. As an active Mormon, she naturally taught Sunday school every week, but she also made a point of being pen pals with three children in South America she was sending money to every month, teaching herself Spanish on the side. I suppose after fifteen years without a husband, she was deflecting some sexual energy, too. Still, there were plenty of more selfish ways to do that. She seemed like a legitimately nice woman to me.

“I don’t know if Alan has told you,” Sharon said, “but we only just got our stove working again. We had to cook on the

grill for a whole week.” She shook her head. “I tried hard to be creative...”

“But it’s just so difficult to grill those peas,” I continued for her.

Sharon laughed, a hearty, sweet, good-natured laugh. “It was the red beans and rice that was the toughest.”

“She’s not kidding,” said Alan.

We had a pleasant, cheerful meal, and I could see why Alan genuinely liked his mother, though I was still a little concerned that she had too much control over her son’s life.

“Now tell me,” Sharon said over dessert a little later. “Alan’s been very secretive. But he stays out late a couple of times a week. Do you think he’s got a sweetheart? Does he talk to you about these things?”

“He’s been very vague,” I replied, “but I think he may be seeing someone special.”

“Oh, I hope so.” She paused a moment. “Are you married, Balzer?”

“I was married for twenty years. But three years ago after a terrible heart attack...”

“Oh, and so young. How awful.”

“Yes, it was awful. I’m sure your loss was awful for you, too.”

“Yes.” She nodded slowly. “But you find ways of coping.” She smiled at Alan.

“I had a friend,” I said suddenly, “a woman named Ann. She had a sister, but her sister left home at 20. That left Ann alone with her parents, who hadn’t gotten married till they were over 40. So they were in their 60’s by then. Ann felt she had to stay home and take care of them. Of course, they lived until their mid-80’s. By the time Ann allowed herself to date, she was 45 herself. She did finally marry at 48, but naturally, she’ll never have children. She felt she was doing a good thing by staying with her parents, but she gave up her whole life to do it.”

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man give up his life for a friend,” said Sharon, apparently quoting some scripture.

“Then why shouldn’t it be the parent giving up *their* ‘life’ for their child?” I asked.

There was silence for a moment. Then Sharon said slowly, “Do you have any children?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I think your friend Ann stayed with her parents because she *wanted* to,” said Alan, “not because she *had* to. There’s a difference.”

Sharon smiled again.

The dinner was over by then, and I only stayed about fifteen more minutes, as I could clearly see Sharon had had enough of me for one evening. But she smiled sweetly and shook my hand at the door as I left. I couldn’t read Alan’s expression as he said goodbye.

Alan didn't call the next day, or the next, but he did show up again on Wednesday night. He kissed me and hugged me when he came in the door.

"Oh, what a scene you caused," he said, plopping down on the sofa. "My mother cried for half an hour, asking if she was ruining my life. It took me forever to convince her that I liked things just the way they are."

"Why would you want to convince her of that?"

"Because she was crying."

"So if I start crying, you'll begin sleeping over?"

Alan looked at me.

"I took acting in college. I can be very convincing."

"My mother isn't acting."

"I think you stay with your mother because you're comfortable there. She does the cooking and the cleaning, and you don't have to face any adult responsibilities."

"Always being there for someone is an adult responsibility."

"What are you going to do when you're 55 or 60 and your mother dies? You'll be all alone in the world."

"She'll be all alone *now* if I leave her."

"I think most men with wives and children still manage to call their mothers and visit. And there's no reason she can't try to make a few friends and stop forcing you to be her only social support. Aren't there any nice people at your church?"

Alan was quiet a moment.

“I want you to start sleeping over one night a week.”

“I don’t want to have sex.”

“I didn’t say anything about sex. I just want to feel you beside me all night. Your mother still has you six nights a week. I’m not asking for the world. But I need you over here at least one night a week.”

Alan looked at the floor. “What will I tell my mother?”

“Tell her anything you want.”

“She’ll think I’m having sex if I stay out all night. I couldn’t do it.”

I was quite irritated by this point and wanted to say, “Are you wearing diapers? Be a man!” but instead I said, “Can’t you just sneak over and then sneak back home early in the morning?”

Alan continued looking at the floor. “Maybe,” he said slowly. “Maybe.”

Two weeks later, on a Wednesday night, Alan stayed for his first sleepover, or as we decided to call it, his “sneakover.” We had our usual evening together first, then Alan rode his bike back home, made a show of going to bed, and then sneaked back over after his mother fell asleep. We debated about whether to have the sneakover at his place or mine and finally decided that it wouldn’t feel like a grown up thing to do unless we did it at my place.

As we were cuddling with the lights out, still wearing our underwear (and Alan's Mormon underwear certainly took some getting used to), I said, "I'm going to tell you a bedtime story."

"Okay," said Alan, giggling, and holding my arm tightly across his chest.

I then proceeded to outline a scenario from one of the porn DVDs I'd had to review the night before. I was determined not to let this evening be just the equivalent of a preteen slumber party.

"Oh, you're mean," said Alan, but he laughed anyway.

He could feel my dick growing hard against his backside and he pressed his ass up against me, but there was no official fondling. Still, I thought it was a step forward for us, and I fell asleep pretty contentedly.

I wondered over the following weeks if all this effort was worth it. Alan was clearly damaged goods and would never be "normal." Of course, who in this life wasn't noticeably damaged in some way? But even if we did start having sex, there was no guarantee we'd be compatible in the first place. Besides, there would be so much pressure to perform well after all this foreplay that it was bound to be a little disappointing, even if it was actually quite adequate.

But I liked the guy. Even if Alan were no good in bed, I could still get my rocks off with other men, as I was doing now. I just wanted to be with him. As irritated as I was with Sharon, I had to admit she'd raised a good son.

One Sunday when Alan showed up, I said, “Want to help me with some work?”

“What do you need?”

“I’ve got another DVD I have to review.”

“I don’t know,” Alan said cautiously. “I’ve never watched porn before. I’ve heard it’s addictive.”

“Well, I have an endless supply. You’ll never have to go through withdrawal.”

“I don’t know.”

“If you get too excited, you can go in the bathroom and beat off by yourself. I won’t take advantage of you.”

Alan looked a little dejected at that, it seemed, which made me smile. “If you want to understand the gay world, or be comfortable in that world, you have to at least be exposed to a little porn.”

Alan looked at the floor. “Okay,” he said softly.

He giggled during the first ten minutes of the movie, but then his brows furrowed as he began to concentrate. We didn’t talk the whole time. I was taking notes and didn’t pause the action as I might normally have done. I wasn’t sure Alan would be able to take an entire DVD, but he sat on the sofa next to me till the very end. Then, without a word, he went to the bathroom. I smiled.

I felt a brief flash of guilt, though, wondering if I was corrupting a pure man. But I believed in God, too, and I believed God gave us sex to help make our lives better. What

was corrupt was making people feel like dirt when they were sharing one of the few real pleasures in a usually difficult life.

Alan had told me a little about his theology, how sex was reserved in the hereafter only for those people who'd lived the best lives and were the most righteous. When Alan came out of the bathroom now, he looked a little worried, so I said, "If it's okay for the righteous to enjoy their bodies for eternity," I said, "why is it a mortal sin to do it now?"

"Because we *are* mortal. The rules are different here."

"Money can be used selfishly, to buy a hundred pairs of shoes, or to feed the hungry," I said. "Books can be used to elevate the mind, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or they can be like *Mein Kampf* and used to hurt people. Sex can be used to degrade people or exercise power and control, or it can be used to make people feel good and loved. Anything can be used positively or negatively. But just because something *can* be used negatively doesn't mean the thing itself is necessarily always bad. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater."

Alan looked at the floor, his brows furrowed. "Maybe," he said.

"How do you feel right now?"

"I don't know. I've fantasized about some of those things before, so I don't know that it's any worse to actually watch it." He paused. "It was oddly satisfying, and yet..."

"And yet..."

"Somehow it made me think that just getting off vicariously would somehow be a lesser thing than real sex."

“Duh.”

“That it would be a Telestial act rather than a Celestial one.”

“You’re getting too Mormon on me.”

“The bottom line is that it makes masturbation not seem as satisfying as it used to be.”

“Oh, don’t give up jacking off. Even after you start having sex with others, it’s still fun to have sex with yourself. There’s no sin in loving yourself, too.”

Alan looked at the floor. “I wonder.”

But I felt we’d made a breakthrough, and every Sunday night thereafter, I asked Alan to “help” me with my reviews. It felt like the world’s longest seduction, but we were both enjoying every minute of the attempt. Alan was perfectly aware of what I was doing, but he seemed quite willing to let me pull him slowly along.

I thought things were going pretty well, but one Thursday evening, Alan knocked on my door, on an unscheduled visit. “My Mom almost caught me coming in this morning. I just don’t know if I can sleep over any more. It would be too awful if she found out.”

“Alan,” I said calmly. “What’s the worst she can do if she finds out you’re sleeping over here?”

“She might say something about me being ‘confused’ rather than gay.”

“So she makes some remarks. That’s it?”

“Well, she also might just ignore it and keep it to herself.”

“Great. Then she shuts up and minds her own business.”

“Well...”

“None of that sounds all that terrible to me. It’s not like she can disown you and move to Acapulco.”

“There’s another possibility.”

“What’s that?”

“She might feel sad.”

That one threw me for a second. Then I said slowly, “Well, *I’ll* feel sad if you don’t sleep over. And *you’ll* feel sad, too. That makes it two to one. Is it right for her to make us sad?”

“I’m not sure that’s fair,” said Alan. “If it makes 40 million Germans happy to make 6 million Jews unhappy, do the numbers make it right?”

That threw me a little, too. “I just think at some point we have an obligation to live our own life. It’s an absolute obligation. God gave you life, and it’s not yours to throw away. You have to live while you’re alive.”

“Well, it’s not like my life is meaningless now. I have a good job. I earn my way in the world. I read interesting books. I do good things for people. I have a good friend I really care about. That’s not nothing, is it?”

I waited a moment before speaking. “I value your friendship. But I’ve had a partner before. And I know from

experience that loving someone so much they're your best friend *and* your lover is better than having someone who is just a friend. There's certainly a place for platonic friendship, but there's a place for sexual love, too. Adam and Eve had that. The prophet in your church has it. It's not something to toss aside like so much garbage."

"Ghandi was celibate the last couple of decades of his life."

"Are your apostles abstinent? Does your church teach that abstinence is a higher way?"

"Only for gays."

"You said that even God has sex with his wives in heaven. Are you higher than God?"

"If there is a God," Alan mumbled. "Why would a god feel the need to torture me all my life?"

"This is crippling your chance at happiness, with me or anyone else. Are you sure you're not just using your mother as a gatekeeper or a scarecrow? I think maybe you're just avoiding taking responsibility for your own ambivalence about intimacy."

"I've been trying."

"Fifteen-year-old boys try harder than you. You're an adult. You can't stay a shy teenager your whole life."

Alan started crying, and though I was irritated with him, I moved over and hugged him.

“Please help me,” he said, still sniffing. “Please love me enough to put up with me.”

We lay down on the bed for a few moments so I could hold him close against me.

I decided to try a new approach after this. I’d been keeping Alan to myself, a little selfishly perhaps, but I thought maybe exposing him now to other gay men might help him feel more comfortable about “our world.” I hoped working in the gay bookstore was helping, too. He’d gotten some propositions there, but he hadn’t made any friends among the regulars. I wanted Alan to have a larger network of gay men in his life.

On Tuesday night, I usually played cards with a few friends, so I asked if I could bring Alan along, and they were all anxious to meet “the Mormon.” We simply chatted as we played, saying nothing particularly deep or meaningful.

“I’m going on a cruise this summer,” said Ted, one of the group. “But I’m telling everyone I meet there that I’m 55 instead of 40. They’ll all be saying how good I look.”

“My last vacation was back in 1995,” said David, another card player. “I mean, 2005,” he corrected himself. “I hate when I get the wrong time, I mean, the wrong period, I mean, the wrong decade.”

“The wrong lifetime?” I suggested.

“Yes, that’s so annoying.”

“Well, I have the right lifetime,” said Peter, the last in our group. “Jared and I just celebrated our seventh anniversary.”

“How’s the itch?” asked Ted.

“You have to be careful when you say that to a gay man,” countered David. “That could mean so many different things in our community.”

“I bought Jared an expensive new shirt for our anniversary. He likes to look good. In fact, this is one of his shirts I’ve got on now.”

“You wear his clothes?”

“All the time. I hate to do laundry, and he insists on doing his own clothes. So I wear his things, and he has to clean them.”

We all laughed.

“He complains and asks why I always wear his clothes.”

“So I can feel closer to you,” suggested Alan.

We all laughed again.

“Good answer,” said Peter. “You have the makings of an annoying lover.”

The evening continued in much the same way, with meaningless banter over a meaningless card game. Alan seemed to enjoy himself, and I asked the others later if it would be okay to add him to our Tuesday nights. They all consented, and soon, Alan and I were seeing each other three nights a week.

The sneakovers continued unabated, even after Sharon discovered one night that Alan was gone. She went into a fit the next day, claiming she thought Alan had been murdered and she was up the rest of the night worrying.

“But she didn’t call the police, did she?” I asked. “Or call the hospitals? She didn’t ask for a name, did she? She’s not stupid. She knew where you were.”

I was impressed that Alan managed to avoid explaining where he was on his nights out, and managed to keep coming despite his mother’s displeasure with it.

But a few weeks later, Alan stopped by with some bad news.

“My Mom has a lump in her breast,” he said gloomily. “She goes in for a biopsy in a couple of days, and it’ll be another week or so before she gets the results. I need to be at home with her.”

“She’ll be okay,” I said softly. “Even if it’s cancer, they’ll get it in time.”

“You understand why I can’t stay, don’t you?”

“Sure. I understand.”

I did understand, but I was still irritated, though I felt like a heel because of my reaction. Obviously, Sharon couldn’t have implanted the lump just to obstruct us, but it somehow still seemed calculating. Was there even a lump at all, I wondered? Or was all this just a ruse to get her boy back?

I had wondered if Sharon might start having dizzy spells or some other minor problem if she ever discovered Alan was sleeping over, but breast cancer was another thing. If it turned out to be serious, Alan would be gone for months. While I did truly love him, I realized suddenly, I wasn’t sure I was up to waiting for him.

“Do you love me?” I asked.

“What?”

“Will you come back to me later, no matter how things turn out with your mother?”

“Yes,” said Alan. “I promise I’ll be back.”

Either I called Alan or he called me every night over the next several days, but we only talked a few minutes before I could hear Sharon calling out for him in the background.

But as it happened, my own life got busier because my friend David from cards was starting work on a calendar that was going to be used as a fundraiser for some local HIV charities. He was a photographer and wanted to take photos of naked men.

“Charity work can be so trying,” I said.

But I decided to get involved, and over the next couple of weeks, David set up three photo shoots. The first model shoot was in the hot tub at David’s house. I got to apply the foam in the shoot.

David also had a private and jungly backyard, so he decided to use that as a setting for his second shoot with a handsome math instructor from Loyola. I got to apply the baby oil this time.

The third photo shoot took place in an out-of-the-way voodoo temple in Bywater, just down the river a few blocks from the Marigny. It turned out the temple priest was good looking enough to be right for the photos, so I was happy to attend this session as well, and got to light the candles.

What with card night and the library and the porn DVDs and the photo shoots and my occasional forays to the baths and to the bars, I realized I could still lead a perfectly happy life without Alan, if it turned out he saw the cancer as divine retribution and slowly faded out of my life.

I still *wanted* Alan, though, and I was pleasantly surprised when he showed up at my door one Monday evening a couple of days later.

“How’s your Mom?” I asked.

“She’s fine. The lump wasn’t cancerous.”

I pulled Alan inside and gave him a hug and started kissing him. He kissed back enthusiastically.

“You need any help with your reviews tonight?” He smiled.

“Sure.” I waved for him to follow.

We went upstairs and kicked off our shoes, falling down together on the sofa. “So what have you been up to?” Alan asked eagerly.

I took Alan’s feet in my lap and started rubbing them while I told him in detail about the photo shoots. When I finished, he pulled his feet away and sat up stiffly.

“I don’t want you doing things like that anymore,” he said. “You’re *my* boyfriend.”

I looked at him with what I hoped was tenderness and said, “I’m not a priest, you know.”

“I am,” Alan said sadly. “Since I was 16.”

“You could come along on some of the photo shoots if you like. I’m sure David would be okay with that.”

Alan stared at the floor. “I can’t keep living my life by proxy.” He laughed rather bitterly and shook his head. “You know, in our temples, we do baptisms for the dead by proxy, and marriages by proxy. I don’t want to live my whole life as if I’m not really here in person.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“I think we’re going to skip the porn tonight.”

He pulled me close and kissed me slowly. Then he took my hand and placed it on his crotch. I squeezed softly, and he moaned. We pulled away for a moment and looked in each other’s eyes. Then he nodded gently and pulled me close again.

Two and a half hours later, Alan rested his head on my arm as we lay in bed. He held my other arm against his chest. It was the first time I’d felt the hair on his chest without the buffer of his Mormon underwear.

“I hope you understand that I’m going to be insatiable for a while,” he said.

“I’ll make the sacrifice,” I replied. “For your sake.”

Alan laughed. There was a lightness to it this time.

We lay there quietly after that and slowly fell asleep in each other’s arms.

I was anxious to see Alan's reaction in the morning, though, when he'd realize more fully what had happened, but he was smiling as we ate a bowl of cereal, our first breakfast together ever, since he hadn't felt the need to sneak back home at the crack of dawn today.

"My mother may have been the reigning queen all these years," said Alan, "but I'm not going to be the prince-in-waiting anymore."

"No, you're officially a queen now, too."

We laughed.

I got ready for work, and we went downstairs together to leave. "I'll see you for cards tonight," I said, kissing Alan as I locked the door behind us. We both climbed on our bicycles but gave each other one last long look before getting ready to take off in different directions.

"I learned something last night," said Alan.

"What's that?"

"There definitely is a God," he said. "And he does love me."

"He's not the only one." I paused and then grinned. "The Sierra Club loves you, too. I keep my promises."

Alan smiled, blew me a kiss, and started pedaling off. I smiled, too. 42 and 38 suddenly seemed very young to me.

I made my way through the Quarter, heading Uptown, and watched people hosing down the sidewalks as I passed.

I had a lover now. It *was* better than just having a good friend. It *was* better to have both, and to love the man you were having sex with.

I waved at the men cleaning the rubber floor mats outside the bars and kept going, still smiling. I was going to have a good day.

And I was going to see Alan again tonight.

I started whistling an old disco tune and then, giggling happily, offered up a prayer of thanksgiving into the early morning sky.



A male escort, invited to the hotel room of a closeted gay Mormon Republican senator, learns that the man is poised to vote on a piece of anti-gay legislation the following morning. To prevent him from sleeping, so that the exhausted senator will miss casting his vote on the Senate floor, the escort entertains him with stories of homophobia, celibacy, mixed marriages, reparative therapy, coming out, first love, gay marriage, and long-term successful gay relationships.

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