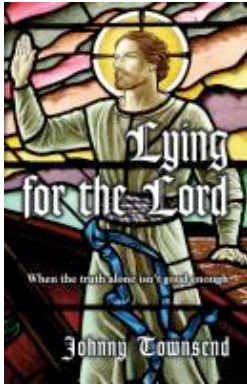


Lying for the Lord

When the truth alone isn't good enough

Johnny Townsend



In these Mormon short stories, a missionary in Italy makes a break for freedom on Christmas. Mormons create a theocracy in America and rename the country Zion. A conflicted father wonders how to deal with a transgender son who wants to be his daughter. Parents hire men to pose as the Three Nephites to teach their children the Book of Mormon is true. Ex-Mormons unwelcome at home for Christmas band together for their own holiday celebration.

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Sneaking in the Carpenters

It was cold, and our landlord only turned on the heat for half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening. So even though we were in Quartu, on the southernmost tip of Sardinia in the middle of the Mediterranean, we wore our overcoats most of the time we were in the apartment. A few days ago, it had been so frigid that there was ice in the middle of the streets even at noon, with a wind so strong that it dragged a bicycle along the road lying on its side. But since we were dedicated Mormon missionaries, that didn't keep us from working.

“Can I get in your cot with you?” my companion, Elder Stuart, had asked me at the height of the cold. “I can even bring my blanket over, so we'll have two.”

“Of course not,” I said.

But I could hear his teeth chattering from five feet away and finally relented. I had to admit, the warm body felt good. I suspected he was gay, but the only thing on his mind that night was the same thing on my mind, staying warm.

Today was Christmas Eve, though, and the weather had warmed to something easily bearable, about 7 or 8 degrees Celsius, maybe 9. It's not as if we had a TV or radio where we could check the temperature regularly. Having grown up in Salt Lake, I was certainly used to colder weather than what we had today. I hardly needed a jacket at all, except that it was mandatory mission attire. I wasn't sure what 8 degrees Celsius equaled in Fahrenheit, but we were no longer covering ourselves with blankets while we ate breakfast in our tiny apartment kitchen. I looked forward to the day in May when

the mission president would announce we could go jacket-free while tracting, though our suit coats would always be required for Sunday services.

We'd still had to go door to door this afternoon, trying to convert disinterested Catholics. But this evening there was a special program at the church in Cagliari, and we were going to be part of a skit involving a raw egg and some other food. I was chosen to carry the egg, and I was worried it would be broken on the long bus ride into the city.

"Ready, Anziano Blake?" asked Elder Stuart, pulling on his suit jacket.

"Si," I replied, pulling mine on as well. I gingerly set the egg in my left jacket pocket.

"Too bad we can't wear something festive to the party," said Elder Stuart.

"Like what?" I asked. "All we have are white shirts."

"I want to wear a bright red tie," he replied. "Or bright green. Or something."

I nodded. My family had mailed me a Christmas package which arrived three days ago and which I had opened immediately. In it were three pairs of black socks, another cassette tape of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and three ties—one featuring a dinosaur, one featuring the NASA space shuttle, due to make its first flight this coming Spring, and one that was simply bright purple, with metallic stripes. None of the ties were acceptable missionary clothing. I understood how Elder Stuart felt.

As my companion offered a prayer before we left, I looked down at what we were wearing. He had on a blue polyester suit, and I had on a brown one. Gray might have been

acceptable, too, but I had yet to see a suit that color in the mission. Then again, I'd only been out two months since leaving the Missionary Training Center in Provo. I was still learning every day.

“Nel nome di Gesù Cristo. Amen.” Elder Stuart looked up and smiled, and we headed out the door. I'd finally learned how to pray in Italian, thanks to my companion's help, and I'd finished memorizing all eight of our missionary lessons just this past week, but I still didn't feel like I knew very much. While I could speak Italian myself, I thought, I rarely understood a single word any of the Italians actually said to me in return.

The bus stop was just a block away, in front of the Upim department store. The district leader and his companion had already left for the church twenty minutes earlier. I could hardly tell Elder Jones and Elder Smith apart. Same height, same build, same hair color, same hair style, same clothes. The only noticeable difference was that Elder Jones, the district leader, talked more. “No classical music!” he would shout, walking through the apartment on Preparation Day as we did our chores. “No *Saturday's Warrior!* No *My Turn on Earth!* Only MoTab!” Even other church music outside of the Choir was banned. “We'll be so righteous we can call down the Holy Ghost to testify for us!”

I was glad we were taking separate buses.

It wasn't long before a 13 stopped in front of us and we climbed aboard. It was a mission rule that we were never to sit on a bus, always offering our seats to other passengers to show how generous we were. There were about ten empty seats now, but we remained standing, holding onto the bar over our heads. I kept my free hand wrapped around the egg in my pocket, wanting to shield it from any inappropriate bumps or

nudges. The last thing I wanted was a runny yolk in my pocket.

Elder Stuart was looking at a young Italian man sitting near us. “I want to grow a beard when I get off my mission,” said Stuart, motioning toward the man’s short, dark beard.

“I thought you were going to BYU,” I said. Everyone knew that beards were prohibited on the Brigham Young campus.

“You can apply for a permit,” Elder Stuart replied. “They’re good for a year. Then you have to reapply to have your case examined again.”

I frowned.

“If you get the permit, you have to wear a lanyard around your neck at all times, proving you have the permit, so you don’t get stopped by campus security.”

“Seems like a lot of bother,” I said.

“I suppose it’s a step forward for them. They used not to allow it at all. If you get your permit, you have to wear a white shirt and tie all the time to compensate for the beard.”

“Aren’t you tired of white shirts and ties?” I asked. “I’ve only been out four months, and I’m sure tired of them.”

He shrugged. “Yes, but I really want a beard.” He motioned again toward the young man. “Don’t you think it’s attractive?”

I raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment. No one ever said anything about Elder Stuart’s possible homosexuality. It wasn’t the kind of topic you could bring up in decent conversation. I myself happily liked girls and couldn’t imagine life without them, hoping to get married to Jeanette as soon as

I returned home. I wondered how long Elder Stuart would last after his mission before falling into sin. Maybe longer at BYU than elsewhere, of course. Besides, we also knew the Church practiced electroshock therapy at BYU for students who had a problem with this crime against nature.

I frowned again. How did we know so much about things like this when we never talked about it? I wasn't really sure. We just knew.

So many things to learn.

Soon we had passed through Selargius and Quartucciu and then through the marshes, smelly even in winter, and finally we reached the big city. We rode halfway through town before getting off the bus and starting our climb up the hill toward the church. My left hand was still wrapped carefully around the egg. I hated that as a greenie I was given all the unpleasant jobs. I suppose carrying a raw egg wasn't really all that unpleasant, but it was unpleasant enough that none of the other elders wanted to do it.

"We're still six referrals short for the week," I said as we walked along. "Do you think we should stop someone to get their address?"

"On Christmas Eve?" asked Elder Stuart. "I don't think so."

"But it's a work day," I pointed out.

"Be my guest."

How could he so brazenly flout the rules, I wondered? The mission president in Rome had told me in our interview two months ago that I had to make sure to learn something important from every companion. "Is *this* what I'm supposed to learn from my trainer?" I asked myself for the fiftieth time

since being assigned to Elder Stuart. I frowned again and continued walking, not talking to any of the men we passed on the sidewalk.

Several minutes later, we came upon the tiny storefront that the local congregation rented as the church. We went inside, where about twenty members and several missionaries, including the Cagliari zone leaders, as well as Elder Jones and Elder Smith, were chatting and laughing with each other.

I'd made it. All the way to the church without breaking the egg. I was so relieved I sighed heavily and plopped down in one of the metal folding chairs. There was a sickening crunch.

Oh, my heck. I'd sat right on my own coat pocket! What a complete idiot!

I stood up and looked at the thick, shiny liquid oozing through the fabric. I wanted to curse. "Flip!" I said in disgust. I took off my jacket.

Elder Jones was at my side in a second. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded. "Put that jacket back on. You're in church. You have to set an example."

"But I just broke the egg in my pocket."

"I don't care. Put that jacket back on."

I stared at him in disbelief, but it was clear he wasn't joking.

"It's disgusting," I said.

"Put it on," he repeated. "And thanks for ruining our skit. Now we'll have to come up with something else."

Elder Stuart had been watching the exchange, and he now walked up beside me. "It's okay, Elder Jones," he said

pleasantly. “We’ll just go back to the apartment and change real quick and be right back.”

“Anziani, you’ll miss half the program.”

“Well, we’ll set a bad example by staying and wearing filthy clothes,” Elder Stuart pointed out.

Elder Jones paused a moment at this and then nodded. “Okay, hurry up,” he ordered.

I followed Elder Stuart out of the church, and we started back down the hill, my pocket a complete mess. “I could have kept the coat on,” I said. After all, I was still wearing it now.

He laughed. “Are you kidding? I saw the look on your face. Why don’t you trust yourself to make your own decisions?”

“He’s our priesthood leader,” I said.

“And you have a broken egg in your pocket.”

Just what was I supposed to be learning from him?

“Elder, what say we go back to the apartment, put on some of those ties you got for Christmas, and go to a pizzeria and get a slice of pizza?”

“Skip the Christmas program?”

“We’ll never get back in time anyway.”

I thought for a moment. It seemed so radical, so outrageous, so decadent. But I had to admit, it also felt good.

“Let’s stop in here for a second.” Elder Stuart pointed to a music store just across from the bus stop, busy making last minute holiday sales. Now he was really flouting the rules.

But I looked to see which names I recognized. Sometimes, we overheard the neighbor's radio, and there were two Italian songs I really liked.

"Tell you what, Elder," said Stuart. "If you give me your purple tie as a Christmas present, I'll buy you one of these tapes. Which one do you want?"

I looked about, adrenaline pumping as I considered breaking away from the life set out in such detail for me. I was a slow learner, but I did learn.

"You can use your earphones on P-Day," said Elder Stuart. "No one will ever know." He leaned closer and whispered, "I listen to John Denver sometimes."

I nodded. I would do it. I'd be daring, too. I picked up a cassette of The Carpenters and handed it to my companion. He took it and patted me on the back as we headed to the cashier. "The pizza will be my treat as well, Elder." He kissed me on the cheek and handed the check-out girl a five mille lire note. I smiled as I watched the transaction.

The temperature seemed to have warmed a degree, and I took off my coat. Then we went back outside to wait for the bus back home.

Lord of the Cul de Sac

“Can’t you do something, Andrew?” Marni begged. “This is Salt Lake. People are supposed to be happy here. Nice. That guy is making life miserable for everyone.”

Andrew shrugged. “It was my saying anything in the first place that caused all the trouble.”

“Well, say something *else*. Make it better.”

Andrew and Marni and their four children lived on a cul de sac in Sandy, Utah. There were only five houses on their street. Four of the homes were filled with happy, life-affirming Mormons. But the house right in the middle was where Bill Niehoff lived.

The Scrooge.

The problem had started when Bill, recovering from a recent divorce, had devoted all his energy to putting up Christmas lights all over his house and yard. He’d put up so many that Andrew and Marni, living right next door, couldn’t sleep at night, the lights were so bright. Andrew had gone over and asked kindly, in a neighborly way, if Bill couldn’t tone things down just a bit. Bill had gone ballistic.

The next evening, though, all his decorations were gone. Or rather, they’d been replaced with new decorations. Now, instead of bright lights and Santa with his reindeer and a jolly snowman, there were elves stabbing each other, Santa pissing on a stack of gifts, carolers choking one another, Mary vomiting on Jesus.

“Andrew, go talk to him,” Marni begged again.

Andrew sighed and walked over to the house next door. He rang the bell. A moment later, Bill opened the door. “What do you want?” he demanded.

“Well, it’s about your decorations...” Andrew began.

“Yes?”

“Christmas is supposed to be a happy time. A time of love and understanding.”

Bill leaned forward and hissed, “Merry Kiss My Ass.” Then he slammed the door. Andrew walked back to his house.

“Well?” asked Marni. Andrew just shook his head.

The next day when Andrew came home from work, Marni was smiling. She gave him a peck and thrust a plate of brownies at him. “Go give these to Bill,” she said. “That’ll patch things up.”

“Maybe we should just leave well enough alone. Christmas will be over in a couple of weeks and things will go back to normal.”

“No, they won’t. He’ll be upset every day of the year until we resolve this.” She waved the plate of brownies again. “Go on, honey.”

Andrew took the plate, covered in holiday plastic wrap and topped with a bow, and headed out the door. There was a cold, stiff wind blowing, so Andrew kept his head down. He knocked on Bill’s door. There was no answer. He knocked again.

“Yes?” said Bill, with a bit of a sneer. Non-Mormons could be so nasty, Andrew thought.

“My wife thought you might like some brownies.” He offered the plate.

“Thanks.” Bill took the brownies and closed the door.

Andrew stood there a moment, shrugged, and then walked back to his own house. At least the wind was behind him now.

“Well?” asked Marni.

“He accepted the brownies.”

“And?”

“And nothing. What’s for dinner?”

“Green bean casserole. It’ll be ready in a few minutes. Go wash up.”

Andrew and Marni and the kids were just finishing dinner when there was a loud, powerful knock on their front door. The kids jumped, and Marni looked at Andrew questioningly. Andrew went to the door and opened. Two police officers were outside.

“Can I help you?” asked Andrew.

“Your neighbor here says you gave him a plate of pot brownies.”

“What!”

“The brownies tested positive. We’re going to have to ask you some questions.”

Andrew explained what had happened, the bad blood between them and Niehoff, and Marni’s attempt to smooth things over. He explained that he was a high priest and that Marni was first counselor in the Relief Society. Three of their children were in honors classes. “Mr. Niehoff is just being...”

“A prick?” asked one of the officers.

“I was going to say ‘difficult,’” said Andrew.

The officer smiled. But the two policemen seemed to accept their version of events and didn't arrest anyone. They were probably both LDS. Andrew sighed in relief as the men walked back to their car. "What are we going to do?" asked Marni as they prepared for bed later.

"We're going to have to leave him alone," said Andrew.

"No, we have to get through to that man somehow. We have to *do* something."

"Let's sleep on it."

When they woke up the following morning, though, and Andrew went outside to pick up the newspaper, he saw that their own modest light display had been vandalized by someone. The wires had been cut in several places. Someone had rubbed dog feces into their wreath.

"Andrew, you've got to figure something out."

"I'm going to be late for work."

"You need to call the police."

"Maybe if we just let things drop, this will be the end of it."

"There will never be an end unless you do something."

When Andrew returned home from work that evening, Marni had a huge plateful of divinity in her hands. "Go give this to Bill," she said the moment Andrew walked through the door.

"Haven't we gone down that route already?" he asked.

"Good has *got* to prevail over evil," she replied. "We can't give up."

Andrew sighed and brought the plate of divinity over to his neighbor's house. The wind was even stronger tonight, and the temperature was even lower. He hated Bill for making his life cold and miserable.

"What do you want?" Bill demanded, opening his door.

Andrew offered the plate. "We thought you might like this," he said.

Bill grabbed the plate with a wicked smile and closed the door. Andrew had a bad feeling about the exchange. He and Marni were barely finished their main course when there was another loud knock at their front door. "I told you," said Andrew.

He went to open the door and greeted the same two officers as the night before. "Yes?" he asked, trying to sound innocent, though he felt terribly guilty for some reason.

"Your neighbor here says you gave him some candy laced with LSD."

"You can't be serious," said Andrew. "Can't you guys arrest him for having all these drugs?"

"There's no evidence they're his drugs," said one of the officers.

"But you know they're not ours."

The officer shrugged. "We've seen Mormons go bad before."

"This is a nightmare."

"Perhaps you'd better not give your neighbor any more gifts," said the officer.

Andrew nodded and closed the door.

“Maybe we should have the missionaries stop by,” Marni suggested as they got ready for bed later. “Maybe have the ward carolers sing for him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“We’ll, we’ve got to do *something*.”

“We’ve already done something.” After praying, Andrew pulled the covers up to his chin. This was like the never-ending fight between the Lamanites and Nephites, an epic battle between the positive and negative forces in the universe. It was like Frodo battling against Mordor.

It was Jesus battling Satan. And this was the season to celebrate Jesus. Jesus had to win.

In the morning, Andrew discovered that someone had turned a hose on their driveway overnight, covering the cement with a thick layer of ice. He pulled out of the driveway carefully and parked on the street that night. The next morning, the car itself was covered in ice. Andrew called a cab to get to work. He thought about calling the police himself to report these incidents, but he really couldn’t prove anything. The police might think he was trying to frame Niehoff, the way their neighbor was trying to implicate them.

“Andrew, we have to do something,” Marni repeated when he returned from work that evening.

“We’re just going to make things worse.”
“I put Bill’s name on the temple prayer roll,” she said.

“That’s nice.”

“And I made a plate of Rice Krispy treats.”

“You must be kidding.”

“We can’t be the ones who give in first. Good has got to be stronger than evil.”

“You already said that.”

“It’s still true.”

Andrew sighed and carried the plate of treats next door and knocked. Bill opened with an evil gleam in his eye, chuckling as he closed the door. Andrew and Marni ate dinner in silence, waiting. Even the kids were quiet tonight. Sure enough, just as they were reaching dessert, there was a loud knock on the door.

“Yes?” Andrew asked the officers.

“We’re going to have to ask you not to give any more food to your neighbor,” said one of the officers. “Now he’s saying you put sand in the treats. Next time, he’ll claim arsenic or something, and this is really going to get out of hand. Leave him alone.”

“Look what he did to my car,” said Andrew. “We’re just trying to be nice to the man, and he insists on being mean.” But he wondered if maybe the officers didn’t have a good idea, that he should actually give his neighbor something with arsenic next time. He remembered the scripture, “Better that one man should perish, than a whole nation should dwindle in unbelief.” Everyone on the block was starting to act nastier the past few days. Perhaps after all these episodes of crying wolf, no one would believe he and Marni had really poisoned the guy. They’d be doing a good deed.

“Stay away from him.”

Andrew nodded. “I’m thinking of putting our house on the market.”

“Well, wait till after Christmas. No one’s going to buy if they see all his decorations.”

“I heard what you said,” said Marni after he closed the door. “Are we really going to move? We’re going to let that creep win?”

“Maybe it’s for the best.”

“Joseph Smith didn’t get tired when people were awful to him. He persisted.”

“He was murdered.”

“We *can*’t be the ones who give up,” Marni insisted.

Andrew tried to stay awake to catch his neighbor in the act. Perhaps if he had a photo proving what Bill was doing, he could press charges. But by 2:00 a.m., nothing had happened. It was like when he was a kid and trying to wait up for Santa. At a certain point, he was just too tired to keep trying.

Evil never seemed to get tired, though. Every evening, Andrew and Marni would watch a half hour of the news. And every evening, seeing all those terrible things, hostages killed in Sydney, 148 people—most of them children—killed in a Pakistani school, North Korea hacking into movie studios, left them feeling they were losing the battle. They’d put on a Mormon movie after dinner, trying to give their children the strength to face the world, but Andrew himself wondered how much longer he could go on.

And that was even before their neighbor became possessed by an evil spirit.

He could leave a copy of *The Power of Positive Thinking* on Bill’s doorstep, but he realized the book would probably end up next to the vomit-covered Jesus, covered itself in dog poop. But Andrew knew that Bill liked horses. He had talked

about them often enough, back when he was still talking to people. Would a gift of some coffee table book filled with beautiful horse pictures make a difference? Perhaps a replica of a Remington sculpture?

How far was Andrew willing to go? How far would Marni push him?

And why wasn't Heavenly Father helping? This was his battle, too.

In the morning, as Andrew walked groggily out to the cab, he saw that their home had been TP'd overnight, the toilet paper wrapped at intervals around the disabled Christmas lights and other vandalized decorations. All day at work, Andrew wondered about what to do. His boss called him out at one point for not concentrating on his work.

When he returned home, he saw that Marni had baked a plateful of chocolate chip cookies. "No one can resist my cookies," she said, thrusting them toward Andrew. It struck Andrew suddenly that this was basically the way Heavenly Father treated everyone on Earth, too, trying to bribe them to be good. If I give you blessings, will you follow me? There had to be a better form of motivation. How good could people willing to accept bribes be?

"No," he said firmly. "I'm just going over to talk to him."

"Without any ammunition?"

"I'll be back in a few minutes."

Andrew walked over to the house next door, his shoulders slumped. He was simply going to give in. He was going to let Bill win. It was the only solution. Maybe if Nephi hadn't been so arrogantly superior to Laman but had been gentle with him instead, Laman and his descendants might not have become

his enemy for generations. Maybe if Joseph Smith had not provoked his opponents by physically attacking their printing press, he wouldn't have been shot. Perhaps if Heavenly Father had tried being nice to Satan rather than kicking him out of heaven, things would have turned out differently. Just who was fighting whom? Who was doing the acting and who was merely reacting? Who was really the one in control? Andrew knocked on the door. There was no answer, so he knocked again.

“Yes?” asked Bill wearily when he opened the door. He looked like a lonely, middle-aged man who just needed something bright in his life, even if it was electric.

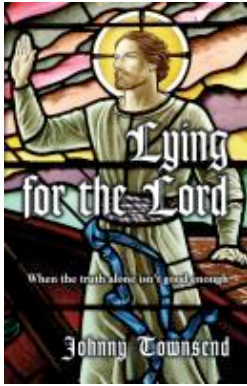
“Bill,” said Andrew. “I want to apologize. I was wrong to ask you to tone down your light display. We still have a week before Christmas. If you want, I can help you put everything back up. And I can buy you a few more lights, too, if you want. You can have the best display in all of Sandy.”

Was it still a bribe if you were helping the person achieve the goals they set for themselves, rather than one you set for them?

“Won't it keep you up at night?” asked Bill with a slight tone of disgust.

“We'll put thicker blinds on our windows. What do you say?” He offered his hand.

Bill stared at Andrew for a long, long moment. Then he slowly and carefully reached out his hand as well.



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