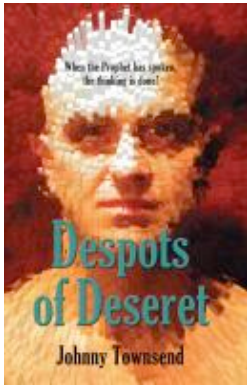


When the Prophet has spoken,  
the thinking is done!

# Despots of Deseret

Johnny Townsend



*In this collection of Mormon short stories, an uncle awaits word on his niece caught up in the 2004 tsunami. A stake president threatens to revoke a couple's temple marriage. An elderly woman breaks her hip and struggles desperately to reach the phone. Conflict over finances arises in an interracial marriage. An anti-Mormon mob threatens a church outing. A virginal gay man takes out a contract on his own life to protect his virtue.*

## **Despots of Deseret**

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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](http://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.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2014.

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*

In *Let the Faggots Burn*, “Townsend’s heart-rending descriptions of the victims...seem to [make them] come alive once more.”

Kit Van Cleave, *OutSmart Magazine*

*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* is “an allegorical tour de force...a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

In *Gayrabian Nights*, “Townsend’s prose is always limpid and evocative, and...he finds real drama and emotional depth in the most ordinary of lives.”

Kirkus Reviews

*Gayrabian Nights* is a “complex revelation of how seriously soul damaging the denial of the true self can be.”

Ryan Rhodes, author of *Free Electricity*

In *Lying for the Lord*, Townsend “gets under the skin of his characters to reveal their complexity and conflicts....shrewd, evocative [and] wryly humorous.”

Kirkus Reviews



# Despots of Deseret

Johnny Townsend

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## The Sunday After

It was the first Sunday of the New Year. Last week, the tsunami had killed almost a quarter of a million people. I still hadn't heard word from my niece who was vacationing in Thailand. I'd started my fast right at midnight on New Year's Eve, twelve hours earlier than usual, hoping the extra hours would help persuade Heavenly Father to show mercy on Tabitha.

What could mercy possibly mean to a god who had just killed so many people?

I hadn't gone to church in a few months, so I wasn't sure Heavenly Father was going to listen to my prayers in any event, no matter how long I fasted. But what else could I do? I was in touch with my sister Amber, who was literally waiting by her phone hour after hour, staring at the landline on the end table, her cell phone in her hand. Charles was on his own phone making calls to every agency he could think of, but my sister accepted no calls from friends or family, trying to keep her lines clear, sending out two emails a day to let us know she was sure Tabitha would be phoning any minute.

Amber had stopped going to church three years ago, so she wouldn't be at Fast and Testimony meeting with me today. Tabitha had flown to Thailand with a girlfriend from college, church the last thing on her mind.

Not *a* girlfriend. *Her* girlfriend.

Would Heavenly Father spare a lesbian?

I looked in the mirror and straightened my tie. No matter how many years I'd been tying the damn things, I still couldn't

do it without a mirror in front of me. I hadn't had to wear one at work in years, but church services still required the accessory.

I saw the reflection of the freshly made bed in the glass, and my shoulders slumped. Six months had passed since the divorce became final. Erin had even insisted on a temple divorce to ensure I couldn't "recapture" her in the next life. She'd moved to another state. The two kids were both finished college and married, living their own lives in other cities.

The house was so big.

I picked up my scriptures and headed out the door, obeying the speed limit on the ten-minute drive to church. Sunday was the only day I paid attention to the speedometer. The parking lot was almost full by the time I pulled in, but I found a space at the far end and started walking toward the front entrance. I nodded at Brother Higgins and his wife. He nodded politely but she looked at me with her lips set a little tight.

It's not as if I'd committed adultery or anything. I'd just told Erin I wasn't sure I believed anymore. It wasn't as if I didn't still love her, despite our differences. And though I never gave her all the children she wanted, she had never tried to get pregnant elsewhere. That had to say something about her character. But my no longer believing was simply more than she could bear.

I looked up at the windows high up on the chapel wall. I had to make myself believe today. For Tabitha's sake.

"Good morning, Jake," I said to one of the other high priests as I entered the foyer.

"Welcome back," he said with a friendly smile. "It's good to see you starting the New Year off right." He grabbed my hand and squeezed hard.

I forced a smile back.

“Hi, Jake,” said Brother Robertson, the Gospel Doctrine teacher, pushing past two other men to reach me. He clapped me on the back. “We’ve missed you.”

“And my questions?”

Brother Robertson laughed heartily. “Well, we’ve *mostly* missed you.”

I wasn’t going to be a pain in the butt today, I decided. I needed whatever brownie points I could get. “I’m looking forward to your class after Fast and Testimony.”

“It’ll be a good one today, for sure.”

I shook Bishop Franklin’s hand next and then moved on into the chapel. For the past few years, I’d been sitting closer and closer to the back, but today I sat in the fourth row, right in the center, not in either of the two side sections. “I’m engaged, Heavenly Father,” I prayed. “I’m engaged. I’m trying. Please help Tabitha and her girlfriend. Please.” I checked my phone to make sure it was on vibrate. There were no texts from Amber.

The Killian family sat in the row ahead of me: husband, wife, and five children. The Raleighs sat a few spaces away: husband, wife, and four children.

Erin and I only had the two. Erin always wanted more, had said so right from the start, but I’d insisted on using condoms pretty early on. It probably wasn’t fair of me to make the decision unilaterally, so I understood that Erin was justified in being miffed. Ten years into our marriage, I’d noticed a speck on one of the condom packages. In some back corner of my mind, I remembered I’d seen specks on several of the other packages before, and for some reason, I was finally curious enough to look at it under the light, realizing then to my horror

it was a pin prick. Erin had inserted a pin through each of the condoms, hoping one strong swimmer would find its way to success. I never said anything but instead started wearing two condoms. It didn't do much for me sensually, but I didn't need more children to have a forever family.

Or maybe I did. My family certainly hadn't lasted forever.

Was Tabitha still sealed to Amber and Charles, I wondered? No one had been excommunicated officially, of course. They'd just become "inactive." I wondered if there was any god out there to recognize temple rituals in the first place. Was Tabitha gone forever?

Please, Heavenly Father. I'll believe again. I will. Please help us.

The organist seemed to be playing music that was more somber than usual. But then, she played so slowly even on good days that any normally upbeat music often sounded dreary. Finally, though, the bishop stood up to start the meeting. "Welcome to all on this fine, beautiful morning. I hope everyone is starting their New Year on the right foot. Let's keep all our resolutions, to make it to church every single Sunday of the year, to read the scriptures every single day, to have Family Home Evening every Monday night, to pay our tithing regularly." He smiled beatifically out at the congregation. "We have a few announcements before we begin." The man proceeded to mention several thoroughly uninteresting events coming up, and then told us what opening hymn we'd be singing, and who would be offering the opening prayer.

Odd that he hadn't mentioned the tsunami or asked us to keep all those affected in our prayers. Amber had told me specifically that she'd called her Home Teachers. "I may need

some Church connections to get a flight out for Tabitha,” she explained to me. “Who knows? I’ll sell my soul for Tabitha.”

We sang “We Thank Thee O God for a Prophet” and then Sister Williams offered the opening prayer. She was a sweet old woman, one of the members everyone loved. Surely, she’d ask Heavenly Father for a special blessing. I bowed my head.

Nothing. When she finished, I looked up quizzically and followed her off the stage with my eyes. How strange, I thought. Did no one watch the news? The tsunami had been on the air every night for the past week.

Well, I’m here to do *my* part, I reminded myself. I’m fasting. I’m attending services. I’m being a good boy. Heavenly Father, please have mercy. I looked upward toward the vaulted ceiling.

I remembered Tabitha’s last visit to my house, two weeks before her trip. I saw my niece more often than my own children, who Erin had long ago turned against me, well before the divorce. “You’re better off, Uncle Jake,” she said. “Even *I* was never attracted to Erin.”

I’d smiled wistfully.

She punched me in the shoulder. “Oh, cheer up, Uncle Jake. If push comes to shove, I know a few women who swing both ways. I could set you up sometime.” Then she smiled mischievously and added, “I know some hot guys, too. You’d never have to worry about pregnancy again.” She knew of my long-standing battle with Erin. Of course, that had been a moot point the last several years after menopause had entered the relationship. But Erin had never let me or anyone else in the family forget that I’d deprived her of all the spirit children for whom she was destined to provide bodies.

“Thanks, honey,” I’d replied. “A bisexual woman will do just fine. I’m free this Saturday at 8:00. Ask her if she’s willing to stay over. Maybe bring a friend?”

Erin had looked shocked for a moment until she realized I was joking. “It’s been quite a while since you’ve joked, Uncle Jake. That’s a good sign.”

A good sign.

I looked at my watch as we began singing the sacrament hymn. There’d been no sign of Tabitha for a week. Was she lying unconscious in some dilapidated hospital? Maybe her legs were broken. Had she cracked some ribs? I’d seen footage of people with terrible gashes in their arms and legs, on their faces. Had she been disfigured? Had she actually lost a limb, had to undergo amputation to save her life? Perhaps she was fighting to stay with us every minute, wondering why we weren’t there to help her. Feeling abandoned.

Was she clinging to life, using the last of her energy to mourn Colleen? Please, Heavenly Father, let Tabitha keep the will to live.

After the sacrament was passed, the bishop opened the floor to anyone who wanted to bear their testimony. Even back in my believing days, this had always been the most excruciating meeting of the month. And that was saying something. Sister Richards was always the first to rise. She never walked to the podium, having suffered a stroke twenty years ago and being virtually paralyzed on her left side. She stood and started speaking, not waiting for the microphone which one of the deacons hurried to her pew.

“I just want to take this opportunity to say that I know the Church is true. I took too long while listening to the missionaries, straddling the fence, not wanting to leave my

former church. And Heavenly Father was gracious and gave me a stroke to let me know he wanted me to hurry up and make a decision. I was baptized as soon as I could stand again. And I've borne my testimony every single month since. I want to say again that I know the Church is true. Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. The Book of Mormon is the word of God. Anyone who doubts God's presence in our lives, just look at this walker." She slapped the metal frame. "I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen." She plopped back down in her pew.

Sister Richards was followed by a blond six-year-old girl who walked to the podium and had to stand on a box to reach the microphone. "I know the Church is true," she whispered, looking out at her parents and covering her mouth to hide a giggle. "I know the Book of Mormon is true. I love my family. And I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen." When she said it, it sounded like "cheese and rice."

Next came Brother Carlton. He also liked speaking regularly on Fast and Testimony day. I took a quick peek at my phone to make sure I hadn't missed any texts. Nothing, dammit. Please, Heavenly Father, have pity. Pity. "Brothers and Sisters," Brother Carlton began, "I had a profound experience this week I want to tell you all about. I was walking downtown, and there were lots of panhandlers and bums. One woman came up to me, her hair filthy, dirt on her face. She held out her hand, and I said, 'I'll give you some money if you'll answer a question honestly.' She nodded, and I asked, 'What do you know about the Mormon Church? Would you like to know more?' I was sure I could help her more by giving her the gospel than by giving her money to buy liquor." He shook his head. "And do you know what she said to me?" He paused and looked out at the congregation searchingly. "She said, 'I used to *be* Mormon, but I started drinking, and I ended up on the streets. Tell

everyone to stay true.” Brother Carlton smiled broadly. It seemed unlikely to me that any homeless woman would have said those words, but who knew? Brother Carlton followed this with the standard testimony and then returned to his seat.

More testimonies followed, by a couple of teenagers trying to compete with each other for holiest teen, by a young mother holding her baby, by a couple of the older women, by another six-year-old whose mother whispered in her ear what to say. I didn't feel the Spirit with any of them, though. The Holy Ghost wasn't testifying to me that what I was hearing was true. I felt disappointed. Perhaps that meant I was too far gone. And if that were the case, there was no reason for Heavenly Father to answer my prayers. Or Amber's. She was even further gone than I was. She was an atheist to my agnosticism.

Heavenly Father, don't the heathen deserve your pity, too? Tabitha still believes in you, even if she isn't Mormon. Forget about us. Just help *her*.

And Colleen.

Amber was in touch with Colleen's parents, too. But they hadn't had any contact from Colleen ever since they'd disowned her, so there wasn't much hope for news there.

The meeting dragged on, no longer than usual, but each minute feeling like fifteen. Finally, though, the bishop stood up again and announced the closing hymn and the closing prayer. We sang "Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words" and then Brother Bartlett offered the benediction.

As the other congregants started to stand and move off to Sunday School, I continued to sit, staring at the pulpit. Not a single person had even mentioned the tsunami today. No prayers had been offered for the injured or the families who lost loved ones. No one said one measly word about possibly the



largest natural disaster in recorded history in any of their accounts of thanksgiving to the Lord. Were we all living on the same planet?

I picked up my scriptures and followed everyone out of the chapel. Brother Robertson shook my hand as I reached the foyer again. Even though he had to start teaching in a few minutes, he always made sure to greet everyone a second time. “We’re still in the Relief Society room,” he reminded me, as if I’d forgotten the location for the class in three short months.

I stared at him and then looked at all the other smiling people in the foyer.

“What is wrong with all of you?” I asked.

“Huh?” said Brother Robertson, surprised.

“Here,” I said, handing him my Bible and my triple combination. “Maybe you can find some use for these.”

I walked out through the front doors and made my way back to the car. A few other people were ducking out early as well, skipping the rest of services so they could break their fast ahead of schedule. I sat down and turned on the car radio to hear the news. I checked my phone again for messages.

Then I put my head down on the steering wheel and cried.

## Poison Ivy Testimonies

I had just turned twelve and was finally eligible to participate in Girls Camp. Our stake in Asheville had arranged for us all to spend a week in the Pisgah National Forest. My parents were a little worried because a woman had been raped there a couple of months ago, and a gang of teenagers had tied an old couple to a tree a month before that. But our youth leaders guaranteed that the Holy Ghost would be with us and watch over us, so my parents reluctantly agreed I could take part.

“Hannah,” I said into my cell phone, “I’m going!” Hannah had been my best friend since we were Sunbeams.

“That’s great, Diana!” she replied. “Julie and Connie will be there, too!” We were all Beehives in our ward. Julie and Connie were a little on the dim side, but nice enough. My mother always chided me if I said anything like that about them at dinner, and I guessed I was in fact a little snooty at times, a weakness I tried steadily to overcome. My teachers at church often tried to single me out by giving me extra opportunities to grow. Julie and Connie sometimes snickered about it. But Hannah, Hannah I liked completely. She was sweet, with dimples, the friendliest smile, wavy auburn hair, and she always had a kind word for others. Her testimony never wavered, while mine did. She was the type to grow up to be Relief Society president one day. I was the type to become someone’s service project.

“We’re going to get to hike and swim and tell stories around the campfire,” I continued.

“But we’ll have to sleep in tents,” Hannah countered. “They won’t spring for the cabins. And we probably won’t get to shower for a week.”

“No parents, though,” I pointed out. “That has to count for something.”

“But my sister Victoria will be there,” said Hannah. “And she’ll report anything I do back to my Mom.”

“Well, *I* haven’t got a sister,” I said. I had a younger brother who was ten and who would be glad to see me go. I couldn’t say I would miss Calvin much, either. “And you know I’ll keep you out of trouble.”

“You always see the positive.” Hannah laughed. “What would I do without you?”

Normally during the summer, Hannah and I rode our bikes through the neighborhood, sneaked to the store to buy lipstick which we wiped off before our parents could see, and talked about what life would be like four long years from now when we would finally be allowed to date. I didn’t particularly like boys, though, and didn’t really mind not going out with them the way the other girls at school did, the way the other girls at church kept wishing they could. Just spending time with Hannah was enough. We slept at each other’s house, stayed up late watching 1930’s horror movies on DVD, and talked about what we’d do when we grew up. Hannah wanted to marry a returned missionary and have five kids. I wanted to go on a mission myself, maybe to Africa, and become an epidemiologist.

“Too bad you’re not a boy,” Hannah said once. “You’d make the perfect husband.”

I took it as a compliment.

I wondered if anyone would be bitten by a bug out in the woods during Girls Camp and catch a new disease. Part of me thought about how my parents would be upset by such a thing, and part of me was fascinated by the possibility.

The big day was only a week away, and on a bright Monday morning, all the girls met at the stake center. We squeezed into six minivans driven by Young Women's leaders, and we headed for camp about an hour away. The first thing we did was set up our tents, which took quite a while, as not even the adults seemed to know what to do. Brother Campbell, the first counselor in the stake presidency, was setting up his tent by himself. He was the lone male present, here to ensure our safety, in case the Holy Ghost alone wasn't enough. I finished our tent first and then went with Hannah over to help some others, where I heard Sister Bradford talking to Sister Goodson. "I better get a shiny gold doorknob on my mansion in heaven."

Sister Goodson replied with a smile, "I'm happy with just brass."

"Sounds like a Telesstial attitude to me," Sister Bradford returned.

"Lusting after gold isn't a Celestial one," Sister Goodson said, smiling back.

This was going to be a great week, I thought, nudging Hannah to listen to the conversation. My parents had talked to me about the perverse satisfaction I had in discovering that people at church weren't perfect. "The Church isn't for the spiritually healthy," my Dad said. "It's for the spiritually ill."

"Then I should be right at home," I replied. "What are you complaining for?"

My parents just looked at each other, not knowing what to say. I felt sorry for them, having such a difficult daughter.

Of course, Calvin was no prize, either.

Being at camp with Hannah was fun. It was a time to forget about parents and the upcoming school year and Gentile friends and television and cell phones. But the realities of the place soon began to take their toll. It was hot. There was no air conditioning. There were bugs. Everyone was covered in mosquito bites by the morning of the second day. I wondered if I had caught some new disease myself. Six of the girls had poison ivy rashes by the end of the third day. The food was terrible, and there wasn't enough of it after hours and hours of hiking every day. We did spend an hour every afternoon playing a Mormon trivia game or singing hymns or doing some role-playing exercises about how to tell our non-member friends about the Church. The worst part, though, was that at night around the campfire, instead of telling ghost stories or doing other fun things, we had to listen to stories about the pioneers crossing the plains. We were in North Carolina, for goodness' sake. What did we need to hear about that stuff for?

Hannah, Julie, Connie, and I made up for it by sharing a tent and staying up past lights out and telling our own stories. "Did you hear the one about the couple that drove to a secluded spot to neck?" asked Hannah.

"Mormons don't neck," said Julie.

"Well, these weren't Mormons. Or at least, the boy wasn't. The girl was, and she said she didn't want to go to any secluded spot. She said she'd heard there was a crazy serial killer out there with a hook for a hand."

"Ooh." Did I mention that Julie was dim-witted?

“But the boy took her out there anyway and tried to start kissing her. She kept pushing him away and he kept trying to fondle her.”

“That’s just like a non-Mormon boy,” said Connie, nodding. She was only six months older than I was and couldn’t even go to youth dances yet. And with all our parents monitoring what television shows and movies we could go see, I wondered why she thought she knew anything about this. I at least read books. A library card was a useful thing.

“When the boy kept trying to feel her up,” Hannah continued, “she started bearing her testimony. The boy finally got so mad he threw the car into gear and took off back for the girl’s house to drop her off. And when she got out of the car, what do you think she saw?”

“What?” breathed Julie.

“A *hook* hanging from the door handle!”

“Ooh!”

“Well, I heard Sister McCullers telling Sister Bradford there might be some bad men roaming the woods at night,” I said, not only because it was true but also because I was feeling perverse again and wanted to instigate a little adrenalin flow. “That we ought to be real careful if we have to get up to go to the latrine after dark.”

“Do you really think there will be any trouble, Diana?” asked Hannah. “My Mom only let me come because the bishop promised her we’d be okay.”

“The Church would never do anything that put us in real danger,” I replied, trying not to sound regretful. Perhaps a mission to Africa, though, might pose *some* adventure. And we

had all heard about those missionaries kidnapped by evil men in Russia. “Besides, Sister Bradford brought a gun.”

“A gun! How do you know?”

“She showed it to me. She told me not to tell anyone. But you guys aren’t ‘anyone.’”

We talked for another twenty or thirty minutes, but as it had been a long day, we eventually nodded off one after the other. I dreamed about finding a cure for Ebola and then waking up worried I might have diarrhea out here in the middle of nowhere. Or that some of the girls would have their periods and spread disease among the entire group. I was nothing if not morbid. Looking up at the stars at night, I began to wonder whether with such disease all over the world if there was even a God out there to begin with. Perverse. But hopefully, involving myself fully in these church activities would salvage my soul. We held Seminary scripture chases during lunch. I knew almost all of the answers. But knowing the answers didn’t mean I didn’t still have questions. I tried to throw myself into the physicality of the entire experience, hoping that would help, too. By the end of the fifth day, even hiking and swimming began to grow tedious. I could see that even the adults were ready for the week to be over. I lazily scratched at my own mosquito bites as we started to eat. Not being an idiot, of course, I didn’t have any poison ivy to worry about. I tried to psyche myself up for another painful evening of Church history. Halfway through dinner, though, everything changed.

Brother Campbell came running into the camp. We hadn’t even noticed he was gone. “Everyone, get up!” he shouted.

“What is it?” demanded Sister Bradford.

“There’s an anti-Mormon mob heading this way! They’re going to rape all the girls and kill us all because we’re Mormon!”

The girls all jumped up, their food spilling everywhere. Hannah grabbed my hand.

“I’ll go try to head them off!” shouted Brother Campbell, heading back the way he’d come.

“Come on!” Sister Bradford said authoritatively. “We’re going to run up the trail and hide.”

“But it’s dark out there,” whined one of the girls.

“Everyone get their flashlights,” Sister Bradford ordered. She went to her own tent and came back with her gun. Hannah squeezed my hand harder.

Within five minutes, we’d abandoned camp. One of the leaders tried to call 9-1-1 but couldn’t get a signal. We took off up the trail, huffing because of the incline. After about twenty minutes, we came to a small clearing. The sisters gathered us all around them, made us call out our names, and then ordered us to turn off the flashlights.

There was only a tiny sliver of moon, and everything went black.

“I’m scared,” said Julie.

“Diana, what are we going to do?” asked Hannah.

“The Lord will take care of us,” I said. I didn’t know what was going to happen out here, but I knew I wanted Hannah not to feel afraid.

“Do you really think so?” asked Connie. “I mean, even Mormons die sometimes.”



Julie started crying.

I knew I didn't want to die for a religion I wasn't even sure I believed.

"Everyone, hush!" whispered Sister Bradford loudly. "Don't make a peep! If that mob is looking for us, we don't want to give ourselves away. Stay absolutely quiet until I give the word."

We all held hands, standing, afraid to sit. The fear was contagious and kept us from growing tired, even after another twenty minutes had passed. Then we heard it—steps coming along the trail. Lots of steps.

"Shhh!" whispered Sister Bradford. But I could still hear one of the girls sniffing.

After a while, the sound of footsteps dissipated, and another fifteen minutes after that, Sister Bradford turned on her flashlight. "You, Diana," she said.

"Yes?"

"You and I are going back to the camp to see if it's safe to return." She held the flashlight in one hand and her gun in the other. "The rest of you stay here in the dark. And keep quiet."

Hannah grabbed for me. "Don't go, Diana!"

I kissed her on the mouth and then walked over to join Sister Bradford. I felt sorry for my parents. The news was going to be so hard on them. I felt sorry for Hannah, too. She was never going to have another friend who loved her like I did.

And I felt mad at the bishop and the stake president. Weren't they supposed to be inspired?

Sister Bradford and I walked carefully back down the trail to the camp and looked about. Even the one flashlight didn't

provide much illumination, and she wouldn't let me turn mine on, afraid the extra light would give us away. We stopped and paused several times along the way and then kept going. The camp was deserted and showed no signs of anyone having been there besides us. After looking into each tent and determining that everything looked okay, we walked quickly back up the trail. This time, I was allowed to turn on my beam.

When we reached the group, Hannah grabbed me and buried her face in my neck. Several of the other girls were crying audibly in relief. Sister Bradford ordered everyone to turn on their flashlights. Turning her own upward to light her face from below, she started talking. "Okay, girls, you can all relax now. There is no anti-Mormon mob. We just wanted you to feel what it means to be Mormon in a world that hates us. We are always under attack in one way or another, and the threat of real anti-Mormon mobs is just one new state or federal law away."

The girls stopped crying and stared at her. Hannah was still holding onto my hand tightly. As I listened to the unbelievable words, I realized I was squeezing hers tightly as well.

"We are always being threatened because of our beliefs," Sister Bradford went on, "and the only way we can be prepared for whatever might happen is by having strong testimonies." She paused and smiled, but because of the way the lighting from below struck her face, it made her grin look macabre. "So let's spend the next hour or so bearing our testimonies here in this clearing before we head back to camp."

"I'll start," said Sister Goodson. She then began bearing her testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel. As I looked about me, I realized that testimonies were contagious, too. And these women knew that.

"I—I don't understand," Hannah whispered to me.

“They were lying,” I replied. They must have had some of the priesthood come out to scare us with the footsteps.

“But that’s—that’s mean,” she said.

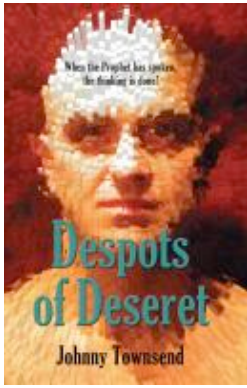
“Let’s make our way to the edge of the crowd,” I whispered. “Then we’ll sneak away and head back to the camp. Give them a little scare of their own when they realize we’re missing.”

“What’ll we do back at camp all alone?” she asked.

“We’ll eat the rest of our dinner and go to bed. I’m exhausted.”

We made our way back down the trail. There were enough embers in the pit to get the fire going again, and we finished our interrupted meal. I could see streaks on Hannah’s face where her tears had cleared a little of the dust and dirt of the last few days away. Looking at her, I suddenly felt very sad. I wouldn’t be seeing her much anymore, as I would no longer be going to church, while I knew she would. I felt sorry for my parents, too, who would never understand why I couldn’t go back.

Hannah and I cleaned up our dinner things and then crawled into our tent. I held Hannah’s hand as she quickly fell asleep, and I kept holding onto it tightly even after I heard the heavy sound of footsteps coming back loudly down the trail.



*In this collection of Mormon short stories, an uncle awaits word on his niece caught up in the 2004 tsunami. A stake president threatens to revoke a couple's temple marriage. An elderly woman breaks her hip and struggles desperately to reach the phone. Conflict over finances arises in an interracial marriage. An anti-Mormon mob threatens a church outing. A virginal gay man takes out a contract on his own life to protect his virtue.*

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