

A photograph of a man from the waist down, wearing a dark green ribbed sweater and blue denim jeans. He is holding a single yellow button in his right hand, positioned near the fly of his jeans. The background is a solid blue color.

# Sex on the Sabbath

JOHNNY TOWNSEND



*A missionary in Italy tries to rescue a woman enslaved in trafficking. A Salt Lake bishop is murdered in his office. A Mormon advice columnist gets into trouble with the Church. Parents arrange to kidnap their missionary son and force him into deprogramming. A disabled woman questions her Patriarchal Blessing's admonition to remain celibate her entire life. A husband chafes when his wife won't let him watch R-rated movies. Johnny Townsend is the author of 27 books. "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.*

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Johnny Townsend

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## Guilt-Edged Sword of Laban

“Would you do something wrong because God told you to?” asked Garrett, my best friend from church. We also attended the same high school in Lake Tahoe. We were seniors, and we could hardly wait to graduate next month and finally start living.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Like Nephi killing Laban with his own sword?”

Garrett shrugged. “I suppose. I mean, the guy was drunk, wasn’t he? There was no need to kill him. But I was thinking about things that come up for us all the time.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like having kids if you know you don’t want to be a father. Or a woman staying at home when she knows she could contribute something to science. Or, I don’t know, marrying a woman if you knew you were gay.”

I looked at Garrett. He’d never been on a date, even though he was seventeen. I’d started dating at the normal age of sixteen last year. I’d even invited Garrett to double with me sometime. But he always turned me down. He was on the track team and in better shape than I was. I wasn’t overweight at all, just not toned like Garrett. And yet somehow on him, muscles didn’t look as masculine as they did on other guys.

Which was a completely ridiculous thing to say. He'd earned his Eagle and I probably never would.

"What made you start thinking about things like that?" I asked.

"Would you go on a mission, Rick, if you knew it was wrong for you?"

I hesitated. While it wasn't absolutely required for a man to go on a mission, anyone avoiding service would pretty much be seen as a draft dodger. At least that's what Grandpa always said. I couldn't wait to go on a mission. I'd started studying Portuguese on my own in the hopes of heading to Europe. I knew choosing that language was a big risk, that I could end up in the Amazon jungle instead, but I trusted Heavenly Father.

"Just pray, Garrett, and do what the Spirit tells you."

Garrett laughed, but there wasn't much humor in it. "That's what people at church say all the time. Pray and ask God. But if you get any other answer than what *they* think the answer should be, you're automatically a sinner listening to Satan."

The conversation was becoming entirely too serious. It was Friday afternoon. We were in Study Hall and just about to leave school for the weekend. It was time to have *fun*. "You don't have to go on a mission if you don't want to," I said, "but you *do* have to write me every week. What would I do without my best bud?" I slapped him on the back. He gave a short nod and returned to his Physics. When the bell rang, he drove me home in his ratty used car. I'd wondered why he'd bothered buying one, knowing he'd just have to sell it to go on a mission a few months later. Now I realized he must have been thinking about this for some time.

Saturday morning, I mowed the lawn and edged along the sidewalk, first our yard, for which Dad paid me, and then for the neighbor, who also paid. After that, I helped my sister do the grocery shopping. I drove Mom's car and kept Jocelyn company while she put everything from the grocery list in our basket. After that came an hour of homework. Thankfully, with Study Hall, I hardly ever had any schoolwork to do at home, which let me work two weeknights each week, but sometimes, teachers assigned extra reading on weekends just to try to make us miserable. Then, just before 2:00, there was a knock at the door. Since I was in the kitchen getting some orange juice, I went to answer.

"Garrett!" I said. "Hey, buddy! What brings you out this way?" He lived all of two streets over.

"Just wondering if you wanted to go jogging. It's pretty cool for April."

Jogging was the last thing I wanted to do, in any weather, but every few months when Garrett had something on his mind, he asked. What was I going to do? Turn him down? I'd tried redirecting his "safe space" by suggesting we shoot hoops or watch a game together, but when he wanted to talk, jogging was the only solution.

When I jogged, it was all I could do to keep breathing.

"Sure, let me change to my shorts."

Soon we were heading slowly down the block. Garrett had learned that my pace was three times slower than his normal pace, and he made an effort to accommodate me, much like a mother using baby talk with her infant. I didn't take it personally. "What do you think your GPA will be when you

graduate?” I asked. While I’d used up most of my ATP mowing lawns this morning, I wasn’t puffing yet.

“Probably around 3.6,” he replied. “I should have tried harder.”

“3.6 isn’t so bad,” I said. “Mine is going to be about 3.1.”

“Yeah, but I’m smarter than you.”

I stuck out my tongue and Garrett grinned back at me. “So you’re going to go straight to college instead of on a mission?”

Garrett didn’t reply for a long time. I wondered if he had heard me. Maybe I was panting more than I thought.

“I’m not good enough for a track scholarship,” he replied, “so I’ll have to work my way through, but I think I’m going to take classes at the university in Reno.”

“Really? UNR?” I made an effort to breathe normally. “Have you already applied?”

We turned a corner and Garrett jogged in place for a moment till I caught up. “I’m going to study ecohydrology.” He explained what it meant, which allowed me to focus on breathing for a couple of minutes.

Finally, when we reached the little park six blocks over, I plopped down onto a bench. Garrett didn’t even protest as he sat down beside me. “So why is this bugging you?” I asked.

“Who says it’s bugging me?”

I wiped a few beads of sweat from my brow. It was dry enough here that most sweat evaporated as we went along.



“You’re not going to Outer Darkness because you want to go to college,” I said. “If worse comes to worst, you can always go on a mission when you’re twenty-one or twenty-two.”

“I’m not going on a mission,” Garrett said firmly. “Ever.”

“Okay, so don’t go on a mission. We have General Authorities who never went on missions. It isn’t the end of the world.”

Garrett was quiet for a long moment.

“Are you sure that’s all that’s bothering you?” I watched his eyes as he tracked a thirty-year-old man jogging.

Garrett sighed. “I just wonder...”

“Yeah?”

“I just wonder if I’ll ever really fit in.”

I laughed. “What are you talking about? You’ve been Seminary class president for the past two years. You always know the answers in Priesthood and Sunday School. Everybody thinks you’re great!”

Garrett scraped his right sneaker back and forth along the sidewalk. “They don’t really think that,” he said. “Not really.”

“Sure they do.” I was confused. I knew some people had issues with self-confidence, but that had never been Garrett’s problem before.

Garrett stood and pointed back in the direction of my house, and we started jogging again. I was definitely going to have to get in better shape before my mission physical. And that

was only six weeks away, I realized. There wasn't much time to waste. When we reached my front lawn, we stopped, and I clapped Garrett on the back. "Shall we do this again tomorrow after church?" I asked.

"Really?" He smiled.

"Even time spent being tortured is quality time when it's with you," I said, laughing. I meant it as a joke, but his brows furrowed, and he almost frowned as he turned to leave. Humor was never my forte.

"I've got to go get ready for work." He started jogging off.

I took a shower, then took a nap on top of my covers in just my boxers, and woke up in time to get ready for my date with Anrietta. She was the daughter of the first counselor in the bishopric, so we'd never done anything more than dry kissing. I was hoping for a little tongue tonight. I wasn't sure I would like it. The idea seemed kind of gross. But everyone was doing it, so there must be something to it. Jocelyn razzed me a little as I picked up Mom's keys. I almost gave her the finger but was afraid I'd get grounded and have to miss my date.

Anrietta and I ate at Izzy's Burger Spa, sitting outside at a picnic table. It was our favorite place. I liked it because they had malts in addition to shakes. We talked about school, since we had three of the same classes, and we talked about a Young Men/Young Women event coming up right after graduation, the last one we'd be taking part in. And we talked about the upcoming prom. I definitely planned to get some tongue then if I hadn't managed it earlier. "I can't wait to see your dress," I said.

"Don't expect anything too revealing."

“You’re the kind of girl that looks beautiful fully covered,” I replied.

Anrietta frowned.

“I mean, you would look beautiful no matter what you were wearing.”

Anrietta kept her frown as she sipped her 7-Up. “I’ll certainly look better in my dress than Garrett would,” she said.

I laughed. “What would Garrett want to wear your dress for?” I chomped on another fry.

“Please,” was all she said.

We took a walk along the lake, but we couldn’t linger since we both had a curfew of 10:00. I had a piece of meat stuck between my teeth, which I couldn’t dislodge despite working on it all evening, so I didn’t try for anything more than a dry kiss, after all.

I slept poorly and drank a Coke first thing in the morning to get ready for church. Sacrament meeting was first, and Garrett blessed the bread while I blessed the water. I stumbled over the words and had to repeat the prayer. When I flubbed the second time in a row, Garrett leaned over and whispered in my ear. “It’s going to be okay.” I stopped and took a deep breath. I had no problem after that reciting the words.

Next came Sunday School. I sat next to Anrietta, who liked to sit in back of the class. I could see Garrett in front, looking oddly detached as he answered the questions Brother Wilkins posed. At one point, Anrietta mimed putting on lipstick while she nudged me to look at Garrett. She giggled as she was miming, and Garrett casually looked back toward us. His face

went slack when he saw what Anrietta was doing. I felt my face burning.

Garrett walked out of the classroom as soon as the closing prayer was over, and I struggled to catch up with him. He ignored me during opening exercises for Priesthood and then took off as soon as we were released for classes. He wouldn't slow down when I called his name. But mustering whatever jogging muscles I had developed yesterday, I caught him just as he was about to go into the priests' classroom. "What do you want, Rick?" he asked, again in that detached manner.

I dragged him a few doors down, where the deacons were meeting, as if that somehow provided some kind of safety. "I have to ask you a question," I said. "Something important."

Garrett's face still had that slack look to it. He didn't even look guarded. "Yeah?"

"Garrett," I began and then took a deep breath. "Garrett, will you go to the prom with me?"

Garrett's mouth fell open. Looking at his tongue, I wondered what it would be like to French kiss a guy. The idea didn't do much for me, but I wondered if I could manage it for Garrett's sake. Or if he'd even want me to. "What did you say?"

"I know I'm kind of slow," I said. "3.1 and all. But I just thought I might have more fun with you at the prom than with Anrietta. She's kind a jerk, you know."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I know."

"Pretty isn't everything," I went on. Garrett looked down at his tie.

“You do know what’s going to happen if we go to the prom together,” said Garrett. “Well, I know, anyway. 3.6 and all.”

I nodded. “For me it’s just a date. But for you...” We stood looking at each other for a few seconds. I could see our teacher waving at us to hurry up and join the others down the hall.

“Why?” Garrett asked.

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I hadn’t even known for sure about Garrett until a few minutes ago. But somehow that made the world a different place. “Would you *not* do something that is right just because God told you not to?” I asked.

He looked at me again for a long moment, and our teacher called out for us once more. “You said you were up for another jog after church today?” Garrett asked.

I looked over at our teacher, starting to get angry at our delay. “Why don’t we start right now?” I asked, clapping Garrett on the back.

He smiled and nodded, his face starting to come to life again. “Let’s go change,” he said. “I always keep some spare running outfits in the trunk.”

“‘Be prepared,’ right?” I asked.

He laughed. Then we walked out of the church to Garrett’s old clunker and headed directly for the park.

## Mardi Gras Mormons

“Are you sure about this?” I asked as Dylan parked the car along the curb on Mandeville Street in the Marigny. We could see a Christmas tree decorated in purple and gold through the window of the Victorian gingerbread in front of us. The crepe myrtle near the sidewalk was draped in dozens of brightly colored plastic and metallic beads.

“Tomás,” said Mallory from the back seat, “if you moan about our adventure one more time, we’re leaving you behind.” Mallory was short and squat, with mousy brown hair and a piercing gaze.

“Come on, guys,” said Piper, sitting between Mallory and Gabe, “we’re adults. It’s perfectly okay to be in the world but not of the world. Let’s go!” She’d dyed her blond hair blue for the occasion and was wearing a pink bathrobe over her clothes. The rest of us were in jeans and looked the way we did any night we showed up for Institute.

We all climbed out of the car. We were lucky to find a parking space so close to the French Quarter, but then it was only 8:30 in the morning. Though we were all part of the New Orleans Single Adult group, venturing into the Quarter on Mardi Gras wasn’t an official activity, as we surely would never have gotten permission. But none of us was comfortable exploring the wild side of life without chaperoning one another.

“Look!” said Mallory. “There goes a woman dressed in antebellum clothes!” We looked in the direction Mallory was pointing. A slender white woman about thirty was dressed in a hoop skirt and carrying a lace umbrella. Mallory touched her cheek as she looked at the elegant woman.

“Oh, my heck!” said Dylan. He was the oldest of the group at twenty-six, slim but with no definition. “She’s got a black man on a chain!” Everyone laughed, even me, though I wasn’t sure it was funny.

I was probably the only one in the group who was more scared than excited about going to the French Quarter. Everyone knew there were gays down here, and that they swarmed the streets during Mardi Gras. What if some guy came up to us and kissed me? Anything could happen. And the most frightening possibility of all—what if I liked it?

“Come on, Tomás,” said Piper. “Keep up.”

All five of us were from the New Orleans ward, so we were already the most sophisticated singles in our stake. Those from Metairie and Kenner and the Westbank were so white bread. I was one of the few active Latinos, and even my mother was white. But my father was one-quarter Wayuú, enough to make me a Lamanite destined for greatness in the Last Days. I was determined to reach the highest degree of glory in the next life and become a god, if I could overcome my Telesstial weaknesses. My parents had met while my mom was serving a mission to Colombia. He’d joined her in New Orleans three months after she returned home. To my great disappointment, I’d been called to serve a mission to Brazil. Brazil! Of course, I ended up loving it. God always had his own plans, no matter what our own personal goals might be. And it was great now being fluent in three languages.

Thankfully, I'd been nowhere near Rio for Carnival. New Orleans was small town compared to that, but I was still nervous. I didn't want to do anything that would keep me out of the Celestial Kingdom.

We crossed Elysian Fields, following Chartres Street until we reached Esplanade. Lots of people about, but no real crowds. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Probably three fourths of the people weren't even wearing costumes, like us. A woman wearing a white dress with huge angel wings crossed in front of us. Angels weren't scary. Even if real ones didn't have wings.

"Hey, Gabe, get a load of that!" Dylan pointed to an old, heavysset man wearing a bright silver evening gown and heels.

That might be scary, but it certainly wasn't tempting.

Gabe and Dylan laughed. Gabe, who was also slightly heavy, posed like a model. Mallory said she liked the man's shoes. Mallory and Piper were both twenty-two and in medical school, though Mallory was at Tulane and Piper was at LSU. What amazed me was that both of them managed to participate in every single Single Adult activity. Didn't they ever study? They both seemed to be making good grades, and they never seemed particularly stressed or worried. I was in my senior year at the University of New Orleans, studying Spanish, with a minor in Education. I had no great plans for my life. Teaching Spanish in high school was plenty for me. All my real energy was focused toward becoming straight so I could marry a good woman in the temple.

We strolled along Chartres Street slowly, looking at the architecture, a few Victorians, a Creole cottage or two, lots of buildings with ironwork balconies or galleries. I was probably the only one who noticed that each street sign posted a Spanish



street name in addition to the current French one, since the Spanish had ruled here for a time as well. Most people also didn't know that there were more Spanish structures in the Quarter than French ones, which had mostly been burned during the two great fires that swept the city in the late 1700's.

"Smell that?" asked Dylan. "It's marijuana." He grinned. One of his front teeth had a yellow discoloration, kind of like those young people who had normal colored hair but with a round circle of gray right in the middle. Dylan made a motion as if smoking a joint.

I remembered the Church had just come out against medical marijuana in Utah. I wondered what the two med students thought.

"And how is that you recognize the odor?" asked Mallory, laughing. Piper was breathing in deeply.

"I'm twenty-six," he replied. Gabe was twenty and had only been home from his mission five months. He was Italian, but American Italian. None of his family knew a word of the language.

He was cute, even with a weak chin.

I closed my eyes. Then Piper pointed out a man on stilts, and we all admired his skill as he maneuvered around other people. "He's brave," said Mallory, "with all those drunks who are going to be bumping into him."

Heavenly Father, I prayed, please give me a sign. Show me that I can be strong. That I can fight this.

Mardi Gras was a religious holiday, wasn't it? Even if it was pagan. The next forty days were Lent, where people gave

up a vice. If I proved myself faithful today in this den of iniquity, perhaps God would help me give up gay feelings for good.

Of course, if he hadn't done it when I got my endowments, if he hadn't done it when I served a mission, if he hadn't done it when I was called as first counselor in the Elders Quorum, I didn't know why he'd do it just because I celebrated Mardi Gras.

But then, I'd never walked right into Hell before. Maybe this was the kind of thing it took.

We watched a dog wearing a dinosaur costume being led by a man dressed as a lion tamer. We meandered through the streets, the crowds growing thicker and thicker as we approached Bourbon Street and headed toward Canal. "Show me your tits!" a man yelled out to us from a balcony. Mallory and Piper giggled, but Dylan lifted his T-shirt. He didn't get any beads. The smell of beer became almost tangible by the time we reached St. Ann. There were so many people now that we decided to hold hands to get through the mass of humanity.

"Fetch!" said Gabe in astonishment.

"What?" asked Dylan.

Gabe pointed. Two men had unzipped their pants and pulled out their penises. Several men on a balcony above us tossed them beads. Oh, my goodness, I thought. It was a gay bar. I felt a thrill, as if I were a birdwatcher who'd just seen a red-breasted grosbeak for the first time. I tried to look at the handful of dicks around me without being obvious. Then I bit my tongue, hard, to punish myself.

“Let’s go where it isn’t so crowded,” I said. We pushed our way through. I tripped at one point but didn’t fall, realizing that anyone who did fall would very likely be trampled to death, their face pressed into the beer-soaked street, smelling the urine mixed in with the alcohol. Suddenly, none of this seemed very fun anymore. Wickedness never was happiness. We managed to make it over to Dauphine, where at least we could breathe. But here we saw two buff men in assless leather chaps and harnesses.

I still couldn’t breathe.

“This is why Utah is declaring porn a public health crisis,” Dylan muttered.

“Nudity isn’t porn,” said Mallory.

“It’s—it’s 3D porn,” Dylan replied.

I felt a tingling in my groin and wished it were cool enough today to have worn a jacket to cover myself. But no, it was fifteen degrees above normal, and the bulge in my jeans was there for everyone to see. I hoped no one noticed. At least not the other Singles. Was the sexual energy of the French Quarter my final temptation before achieving grace? Jesus had gone into the desert for forty days to be tempted. I’d essentially gone into the “wilderness,” too.

But I was no Jesus.

Maybe Heavenly Father was showing me that I could face temptation and still be strong. Perhaps that was the sign I had asked for, proof that I was going to be okay. At the very least, it was proof that gays really were decadent, that there was no way

to be a “decent” gay. I was always wondering if it was possible to be a good gay. God was giving me the answer.

“Thank you, Heavenly Father,” I prayed silently, looking upward.

I saw two men kissing on a balcony.

I looked back to the street. There were more people here showing off their costumes—a man in flowing green silk, covered with sequins, ostrich feathers, and pheasant feathers; a couple of guys in military camouflage; a woman dressed as a nurse with an old-fashioned cap; two men in lab coats holding a sign that read, “Free breast exams.” A witch and a clown walked by, holding hands. A few women passed, wearing plastic breasts over their breasts. Five men dressed in cheerleader uniforms stopped in the street and shouted. “P-A-S-S! We’re the Pansies Against Silly Sports!” Then they chanted an obscene cheer. I tried to block out the words, forget what I’d heard, but even as we moved on toward Burgundy, the words kept ringing in my ears.

“Get some spit! Show some sass! Make it fit! In my ass!”

Dylan and Gabe looked repulsed, but Mallory and Piper were laughing. A Robot Rubio walked by, following fast on the trail of Trump with a stuffed ginger cat for hair. A man dressed as a penis walked by, holding hands with a woman dressed as a vulva. A few shirtless men strolled casually along, and a woman dressed as a Dalmatian. But by far, most people were dressed in their everyday clothes. They were taking pictures of the ones who’d put forth a little effort for the day. I felt like an outsider, the way I’d felt most of my time in Brazil. The way I felt every week in church. The way I felt every day of my life.

A guy wearing nothing but tiny white bikini briefs walked by. Well, he was wearing something else, too, a chain with a padlock around his crotch.

“Guys,” I said, “this is too much for me. I’m heading back to the Marigny.”

“Oh, Tomás,” said Piper, “be a sport. We’re going to be out here for hours. You’ll be bored waiting by the car.”

“It’s okay,” I replied. “You guys stay out as long as you like. There are things in the Quarter I just can’t unsee. I’m heading back.”

“You’re such a...such a...” Mallory pointed to the woman dressed as a vulva.

Really, I thought? A woman was going to say that to me? It was obvious we were all being influenced by the sin everywhere about us. I had to get out of there. I waved good-bye and started walking south along Burgundy. The closer I got to Esplanade, the thinner the crowd became. I passed two vampires and began to relax.

I’d done it. I’d proven myself as valiant as the sons of Helaman. It was one thing to face temptation and resist, which I’d done, but it was another thing entirely to make the decision to reject temptation in the first place. To avoid giving it a chance. That’s what a righteous person did. You made righteous decisions. A bare-breasted woman with doubloons glued to her nipples came around the corner but I turned my gaze away.

And stopped in my tracks. A firm, modestly muscular man with straight, sandy hair was headed my way. Wearing nothing but his white Mormon garments. And carrying a book: *Behold, I*

*Come Quickly*. I'd read the book discussing Christ's second coming only a month ago.

Second coming.

I wanted to come three times with this man.

God always tested those he loved, I told myself. I was going to be strong. I *was* strong. I stood my ground as the man approached me.

"Is that open mouth an invitation?" he asked. "Or are you just happy to see me?"

"I...I..."

The man laughed. "I love Mexicans. Want to come back to my place?"

"I'm Colombian," I said.

The man shrugged. "¿Quieres ver mi pinga?"

I stared at him.

"¿Qué quieres chuparme la verga?"

What was Heavenly Father doing to me? It wasn't fair. I'd already won. The man reached forward and rubbed his fingers along my zipper. He smiled. Then he took my hand. No, I told myself. No.

We started walking. "It's good luck to fuck a Mormon on Mardi Gras."

"Why's that?" I asked stupidly.

The man just laughed in reply. We crossed Esplanade, turned toward Rampart, and stopped in front of a dilapidated Victorian badly in need of paint. Someone had stolen one of the cornices. The man grinned at me while he fumbled with his keys. He was a racist. I was no more than an object to him. There was still time to escape. God was testing me. Or maybe it was Satan. But I was going to be firm. I was going to the Celestial Kingdom.

I followed the man inside. And what I found instead was heaven.



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