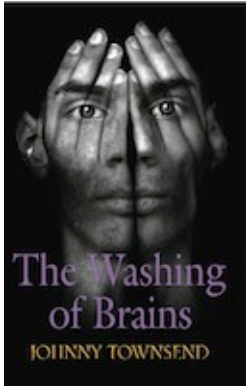




The Washing of Brains

JOINNY TOWNSEND



A world-weary man becomes a widower for the third time. A budding feminist tries to make a political statement by giving birth to her "illegitimate" son in church just before Mother's Day. Missionaries in Rome try to prevent a terrorist bombing. The Prophet devises a plan to reverse global warming. A Salt Lake bishop is overwhelmed by his congregants' secrets. An unhappy bartender reminisces about the affair he had with his mission president in Paris.

The Washing of Brains

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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.”

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

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

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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*

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 a finalist for the 2007 Whitney Award for Best Short LDS Fiction.

The Washing
of
Brains

Johnny Townsend

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The Girl from Treponema

The young woman at the window grimaced in my direction, giving her best approximation of a smile, her teeth showing a long history of meth. She didn't need to tell me her name. Some customers one remembered instantly. I pulled Cathy up on the computer and saw that she had three pieces of mail waiting, two regular and one DSHS. We had the mail separated for more than 3000 clients according to type: 1st class, DSHS checks, special, oversize, Affordable Care, EBT cards, and so forth. Most of the people who came to Mailing Address were homeless, or addicts, or mentally ill, sometimes all three.

I had Cathy sign for her check, handed her the mail, and wished her a good day. Since I knew she liked macaroni and cheese, I also handed her a coupon before she walked away. I tried to clip a few coupons every week for the items I knew various customers liked, though I only had time to hand them out if the line wasn't too long.

I quickly flipped through my small stack to make sure I still had the one for kitchenware. Sharonda was due to stop by sometime over the next few days. She had a phobia about washing dishes after cooking. Rather than rinse her pots and pans, she'd set them out in her back yard so the food wouldn't stink up her apartment as it rotted. When all the pots from her kitchen were eventually outside, she'd either break down and wash or, more often, go out and buy new ones. Last week, she'd

come in crying, saying that when she went to go set out her latest pan, she discovered someone had stolen all the others sitting in the yard. I'd started looking for coupons as soon as I returned home. She could always go to Goodwill, of course, but she wouldn't be caught dead eating from pots someone else had cooked in.

A Hispanic man came up to the window next, so I used the Spanish I'd learned on my mission to Honduras decades ago and that I practiced with my husband now. The man withdrew \$60 from his account and shoved it into his pocket. The morning dragged on, one client after another after another appearing at the window. I opened an account for a guy who wanted to deposit \$20 "for emergencies," and I handed out a daily allowance for one of our payees who was not able to budget his own money.

"Time for your lunch break, Buddy," said Chrissy, another one of the tellers, coming to relieve me. This week, Chrissy had blond hair with magenta trim, making her look younger than her forty years. She and I took turns throughout the day, working the window, sorting and labeling mail, and then going back to the window. There were three tellers, three case managers, our actual manager, and a couple of volunteers on any given day.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be back in half an hour." I grabbed my jacket and headed out the building. Most of the others ate in the mail room, and I usually did, too, but lately, I'd felt the need to get away for a few minutes each day. I'd been working here over ten years, ever since moving to Seattle after Hurricane Katrina destroyed my apartment and thousands of other homes in New Orleans.

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One my coworkers there had been unable to face starting over at 46 and killed herself. I had been only 45 at the time and had used half of my savings to buy a ticket to Seattle, once the computers in Hammond were up and running again.

The sun was shining brightly in Seattle today, and the temperature had warmed to over fifty degrees. I looked out over the Sound, the snow-capped Olympics on the far side. Working in Pioneer Square, right on the water, was always a little nerve-racking. These were the oldest buildings in town, all vulnerably brick, built above “underground Seattle.” The early inhabitants had suffered so many problems with the water, spouting toilets for one, that they’d eventually built a street one floor up over the original city. People could still visit the former ground level buildings for a fee, interesting enough, but I was never able to get the idea out of my mind that in any sizeable earthquake, we’d all be the first to go. If we weren’t killed by the quake itself, there was always the tsunami we were unlikely to escape.

Things like devastating hurricanes had a way of warping how one viewed the world.

I knew Antonio was going to die.

I turned the corner and walked up to 1st Avenue, passing a chunky black guy masturbating in an alleyway. A few feet farther on, a white guy in a wheelchair, with two prosthetic legs, was urinating against the side of a building. He seemed unperturbed that his stream was hitting his feet as well.

I ducked into a Thai restaurant and ordered. There was no lack of eateries in the neighborhood. One served passable New Orleans cuisine, but I could never eat there without thinking of Don, who’d died of pancreatic cancer just before the hurricane

hit. Even after all the time we'd been together, he hadn't left a will, so his brother inherited the house and the car, and I moved into a tiny apartment in St. Roch. My friends had warned me against the neighborhood, about 97% black, but ethnicity had not turned out to be the problem. I'd just bought a stackable washer and dryer, the most expensive available because it was also the smallest, when I had to evacuate by bus, taking just one suitcase. I'd never seen my apartment again.

I sat near the plate glass window facing 1st Avenue, watching people walk by. At least half of them were tourists, oblivious to the other half who were destitute. This was the only neighborhood I could afford when I'd moved here in 2005. Then I met Antonio and we bought a house together in Hillman City, the first house for either of us in our own names. He was a laborer, mostly cement work, still hunky at fifty, but breathing had become more and more difficult over the last year, and finally I was able to convince him to see a doctor.

The career I'd wanted to have. Back in the mid-90's, I'd dated a guy with full-blown AIDS and become frustrated with both the care and the information available to patients. "Do you think both sides of your brain work?" Stevens asked while we were shopping one evening for a new pillbox. He still used make-up then to hide the black Kaposi's marks.

"What do you mean?" I'd asked in return. I tried to remember what the right side of the brain was responsible for.

"Why don't you go to medical school so you can be sure I get the treatment I need?"

I'd already earned three English degrees by this point and was an adjunct at two different schools, but I enrolled in remedial math and started over again.

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Stevens was dead by my third semester. But I kept at it. Physics, anatomy, histology, statistics. I remembered struggling with chemistry, irritated when the solution in the back of the book was different from my answer on a homework assignment. I went over the problem again and again, and I kept coming up with the same wrong answer. So I stopped by the professor's office to ask about it, and he said dismissively, "You're right, obviously. The book's wrong," and ushered me out the door in a manner indicating he thought I was being a show-off. It had never occurred to me that I might actually be good at this stuff.

A couple of semesters later, it had been excruciating in Genetics class to have to tell the professor after every single exam that he'd graded my answers incorrectly. He always said, "Oh, I see. You're absolutely right. Sorry about that," and adjusted my grade. Was that really supposed to be my job?

Only a few minutes left for lunch. I pulled out my cell and called Antonio. "How's my honey feeling today?" I asked. He'd lost at least forty pounds in the past six months.

"Not so good, Buddy. I tried to pull some dandelions in the yard and got winded in five minutes."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll take care of it."

"But you're doing everything," Antonio protested. "I'm not dead yet."

I stared out the window. A man with a huge herpes lesion on his face walked by. "I wish..." I said. "I wish..."

"There's no wishing," Antonio said sternly. "And there's no praying."

I'd hung onto a belief in God decades after being excommunicated from the Mormon Church, but these last few years, I'd joined Antonio in becoming an atheist. Still, enough residual Mormonism lingered to make me wish he'd never taken up smoking when he was a teen. "Want anything special for dinner tonight?" I asked.

"I'll fix burritos," he replied. "You like my burritos."

So did he. I'd suggested months ago that we eat his favorite foods every day. That meant tacos five to six days a week, and burritos when he was feeling depressed. "See you in a few hours."

"Love you, Buddy."

I walked back to Mailing Address, put in the code to the office door, and reopened my window. "Arthur was here," said Chrissy. "He was asking for you."

Arthur was one of our regulars who came almost every day. He only received at best three pieces of mail a month. He didn't come for that, of course. He came because we were his only social outlet.

I found some mail for the next customer, but one piece was missing. With over twenty boxes of mail spread out all over the office, there was no telling where it was, or if we'd already given it to the customer and simply forgotten to scan it. Two people withdrew money, one deposited money, three asked if they had any mail but didn't, and four more people picked up checks.

During a lull, I logged in the fifteen new EBT cards we received today.

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“Need you back at the window,” said Tyresia, just out of college and working here almost six weeks now. She still acted like a student, studying at work just for fun when things were slow. I couldn’t remember what it was like to be that young.

I pulled up the metal grid over the adjoining station and asked an Asian man if I could help him. He thrust his ID at me without saying a word. Lots of the customers never talked to us. Which was often better than if they did.

The next person asked where he could take a dump, and I directed him to our Hygiene Center downstairs, where customers could use the bathroom or bring their laundry. The staff in that department handled all the laundry, at no charge, of course. They just had to wear thick gloves when emptying the customers’ pockets, because of the needles.

Telling people where to go to the bathroom. It was a far cry from curing HIV infections. Or treating cancer.

Or prolonging life in any meaningful way at all.

I thought back to my Cell Physiology class, where the professor had been so consumed with a textbook he was writing that he completely abandoned students in the lab. We tried to figure everything out on our own, but every single one of us received low marks for that portion of the grade. I had the highest GPA in the class by the end of the semester, and even I ended up with a B.

I wondered if I should buy some ice cream for Antonio on the way home. I never had any myself, needing to keep in shape. But Grocery Outlet had a sale on Häagen-Dazs for 99 cents a pint. Tres Leches, Antonio’s favorite.

Of course, his taste buds weren't working well these days because of the medication.

I had wanted to save the world.

I remembered my Biochemistry class, the single hardest class in over twelve years of college courses, far harder than Organic Chemistry, which had actually been kind of fun. But Biochem—sheesh. I'd made out over five hundred note cards while hunched in my library cubicle, drawing each of the molecules I needed to understand. I learned dozens of complicated pathways and knew every step, able to draw every molecule from start to finish.

I interviewed five years in a row for medical school. In the end, the dean told me I just didn't have the right personality to be a physician. It was a terrible blow, and the insecurity from all those years as a Mormon, constantly being told I never measured up, came flooding back. But then I met Don, an ex-JW, and I worked hard to leave the last vestiges of Mormonism behind me forever.

Mail was sorted for the day, so all three teller windows were open now. I asked Susie about her Chihuahua with cataracts while I withdrew some money for her, asked José about his aunt who'd been having seizures, and asked Phuc about his new job at a warehouse in Sodo. But mostly, I just smiled and handled the transactions as quickly as I could to keep the line down. With three of us at the window, things were moving along pretty smoothly.

"What did you think of that windstorm the other day?" asked Chryssie during a slow spell. A man had been killed in Seward Park when a tree landed on his car.

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I thought of an old boyfriend in Lakeview who'd drowned in his attic.

"Freaky," said Tyresia. She began talking about how the storm had knocked over all her daffodils.

"You okay, Buddy?" asked Chryssie. Tyresia turned to stare at me.

"I think I might leave early, if that's okay with you guys."

"Sure, sure, we'll see you tomorrow. Feel better."

I clocked off the computer and picked up my jacket before heading back out the door. An obese man in a motorized wheelchair was staring at rust-colored water bubbling out of a manhole on the street. I turned the corner and saw three gobs of spit in a row on the sidewalk. I trudged up to the gem and fossil shop on 1st, looking through the window at a three-foot high geode, the purple amethyst crystals forming a breathtaking cave. A piece of natural artwork I could never afford as a nobody making minimum wage. I looked about me, at the intricate brick, stone, and cement work around the windows, doors, and along the roof lines of most of the buildings in the area. For a dilapidated neighborhood, it was still quite beautiful here. Things could be worse.

I thought about the blood Antonio sometimes coughed up.

A long-haired Native American man walked past with a short Latino man, sharing a cigarette. They were followed by a well-tailored white man who trotted up the steps to a law firm. A professional making a difference in the world. Then a middle-aged woman probably only a couple of years younger than I

was tapped me on the shoulder. Pus was oozing from a sore on her face.

I thought of my Microbiology class, where we had to bring samples of our own *E. coli* to culture in Petri dishes. I'd sung "The Girl from Treponema" to my lab partner during one class. She'd laughed, wagging her finger and saying, "Better watch out for her!"

I'd also volunteered to correct the lab manual the professor had written. Lots of grammar errors on every page. But I realized now that my offer had probably been pretty obnoxious.

"Come on," I said to the woman, putting my hand on her arm. She was someone I had never seen before. "Let's get you signed up for some help." I walked back with her to Mailing Address and stood with her in line until Chryssie's window was free. She was still the best at registration. And she could set the woman up with a case manager after she finished.

I walked five blocks to the bus stop near the old train station and headed for Grocery Outlet, where I picked up that pint of ice cream I needed to make sure Antonio knew how much I loved him.

The Laban Justification

I was two weeks away from finishing my mission to Moscow when President Carruthers ordered me to the mission home for an emergency interview. “Elder Miller,” I told my companion, “I think the jig is up.” I looked down into his shocked face. He was only about 5’6”, three full inches shorter than I was, but he had a strength which always made him seem taller, even now when we might be facing excommunication.

“*Blin!*” Elder Miller said after I hung up the phone. “Elder Olson, if you go down, I’m going down with you.” He put his hand on my arm.

Going down was part of the problem.

In some ways, my call to Russia had been a godsend. All the missionaries here used the title of Elder or Sister, so I never had to tell anyone my first name. It had been difficult growing up in Sandy, Utah with the name Laban. While it was no longer terribly common for Latter-day Saints to give their kids names from the Book of Mormon, when they did, it was usually Ammon or Samuel or Nephi or the name of some other hero. Laban, of course, was the bad guy murdered by Nephi at the command of God, for refusing to hand over the family history to Lehi. “It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.” So off came his head.

My parents, clandestine liberals, in an attempt to make Nephi's murder more humane, had named me after a villain. "We need to restore life to the man who died to give us the Book of Mormon," my mom told me when I complained the first time kids at church teased me.

"Because of you," my dad repeated when I complained the twentieth time, "Laban lives on."

It wasn't much consolation. But out here in the mission field, I could be a normal person for the first time in my life. Elder Olson.

And then Elder Miller had been assigned to me just as I was nearing the end of my mission. After three days with him, I had to face the fact that I was never going to be normal, whatever my name. I was still gay despite two years of dedicated service to the Lord, and I knew almost instantly I wanted to marry Elder Miller. He still had a year left, but after we made love for over an hour on our two-month anniversary, I told him I would faithfully wait for him back home until his return. He smiled and said, "And I promise I won't have sex with any other missionaries until we're both together in Salt Lake again."

"Then you'll start having sex with the missionaries on Temple Square?" I teased.

He tweaked my nipple, and I almost cried out. Given that the district leader and his companion were on the other side of a very thin wall, that might have proved awkward. But since President Carruthers was demanding to see me now, it looked like we had been overheard at some point, after all. We'd had three and a half great months together, though, and even the shame of being sent home dishonorably couldn't change that.

I put my arm around his shoulders. They were heavily muscled, as was most of Miller's body. He was no Aleksey Lesukov, though I felt safe with him on the street, knowing that potential *khuligany* would be intimidated. I suspected he was overcompensating for his height by working out during Quiet Hour every morning instead of studying. My own body wasn't as firm, but my companion never made me feel less attractive because of it.

"I hope I haven't ruined your life," Elder Miller said softly. "Do you think the president knows?"

"Teancum," I whispered, "you're the best thing that ever happened to me. No matter what." A love song from Alla Pugacheva drifted through the wall from a neighbor's apartment, and I smiled.

"He's not asking *me* to see him. It can't be about our relationship."

I leaned over and kissed him. "For couples in love, everything is about our relationship."

It had been miraculous to discover our attraction, then our love, and ultimately, that we'd both been cursed with horrific first names. Despite the years of teasing Elder Miller had already suffered, it was impossible not to ask for "tea and cum" when we made love. As it turned out, he gave me "cum and tea" instead, a full load of semen in my rectum, followed by a stream of urine. I'd been quite startled the first time, but now the activity was just a normal part of our nightly routine. Afterward, my companion would give me "head." Of course, the way he put it was, "I'll give you back your head." A stupid pun that should have made me groan, but I smiled every time he said it.

“When does the president want to see you?” Elder Miller asked.

“Right away,” I said. Then I paused.

“What is it?”

“He asked me to come by myself, leave you with the other two elders. He’s not even asking the district leader to come with me.”

“How strange,” Elder Miller mused. “Missionaries never go anywhere alone.”

My companion was right. If this was about Miller and me, we’d both have been summoned. Something else was up. Even so, asking me to come alone was definitely odd. “I guess I’d better get moving.” I shrugged. “It’ll take an hour to get to the mission home from here.”

It was early summer, already quite hot, with a thick haze from a nearby forest fire hanging over the city. I decided not to wear my suit jacket, despite the formality of meeting with President Carruthers. If it was bad news, a coat wouldn’t make a difference in any event. Serving a mission here had been eye-opening, so few baptisms, and so many members going inactive. My parents were always sending me updates on General Authorities who grew ever more ancient and feeble, but who were still forced to fly to different states almost weekly in an attempt to stop the leakage. There was a “Boise Rescue” and a “Denver Rescue” and a “San Jose Rescue.” Buddies from my ward who were now serving missions in Spain and Bulgaria and Japan were all telling me that members were leaving. The zone leaders let slip just a couple of weeks ago that the Church had dissolved the one existing stake in Armenia. It was difficult not

to worry that the Church itself was dying. Elder Miller and I would also be leaving Mormonism behind as soon as we finished our missions, since no one in the Church would want us once they knew our secret. But we were still doing our best to build the Kingdom while we could. It wasn't about getting bonus points with God, though. It was kind of like when my grandpa planted an oak tree the day my sister married and moved into her first home, even though he knew he would never benefit from the tree himself.

I stepped off the metro below Muravskaya and climbed up to the street. A charcoal-colored Lada Samara drove by, and I paused to admire it. I didn't want to be sent home. In fact, I didn't want to go back to Utah at all. No one could *make* me leave Russia. I could try to get a job here teaching English or something and keep attending Elder Miller's ward. Of course, it was quite likely he'd be transferred another two or three more times before the end of his mission. I could hardly become a nomadic wanderer teaching English on street corners. Perhaps it would be best to go back to Salt Lake, enroll at the U, and find an apartment we could share when he finally joined me.

For the first time, I understood what it must be like for parents to be away from their kids for two years.

I slowly walked the last ten minutes to the mission home, taking in the cars and passersby and the sound of muffled Russian conversations. Mission headquarters was on the third floor of a rather boring building. I began trembling as I climbed the stairs. Sister Carruthers opened the door with a smile and ushered me in, so motherly I couldn't help but start to feel safe again. She looked as if she hadn't gained a single pound despite bearing five children, the youngest two still teenagers living

here in the mission home with them. “Go on in to his office, dear,” she said sweetly in English. “He’s expecting you.”

I walked carefully down the hall, passing one of the AP’s. Elder Grenier was from Marseille and was the first decent Assistant to the President we’d had during the last two years. So many elders in the mission hierarchy let their power go to their heads. Our last zone leader took to making prophecies about the rest of us during zone conference. Always way off the mark, but then he would just blame us for our lack of faith when they didn’t come true. Elder Grenier looked at me curiously now but still smiled in his usual friendly way. I knocked on the president’s door and heard a deep voice call back gruffly. “Come in, Elder Olson.”

How did he know it was me and not one of the office staff, I wondered? Maybe he really did have the power of discernment. I realized with a sinking feeling this was probably not going to turn out well, whatever he knew or didn’t know at this point. I pushed the door open and went in.

President Carruthers, a trim man in his upper fifties, sat behind his desk, his hands clasped, looking very serious. He’d served in the Air Force for years and was all about order. Even when missionaries made the smallest infractions, he called us out on them in our quarterly interviews. We had to read our mission rulebook at least once a week and mark it on our stat sheet. I could only imagine what the man would say if he learned what Miller and I were up to. One of the rules was to love our companions, but I expected the president wouldn’t appreciate our interpretation of the law.

In front of the president’s desk sat another gentleman in an expensive suit, a Russian, maybe in his forties, a bit stocky, probably a local member. The president wasn’t wearing his

jacket, but the Russian was wearing one, and something told me this wasn't a good sign. Did he have some grievance with me? I didn't even recognize him. The president stood, and we shook hands across his desk. He motioned to the other man, and the two of us shook hands as well.

“Zdravstvujtye,” I said. “I’m Elder Olson.”

“You don’t need to know this gentleman’s name,” the president interjected, still in Russian. “Please sit.”

All three of us took our seats, while I looked from the Russian to the president and back to the Russian again. *“Zdarova?”* I asked.

“Elder Olson,” President Carruthers began, “the Lord has a special mission for you.”

Boy, he wasn’t wasting any time. But at least he wasn’t talking about sex. Perhaps this was an emergency transfer. Sometimes other elders were constantly at each other’s throats and had to be separated. Then a “gentle” elder had to go in. It had happened to me twice before, but this time I had to get out of it. “I’ve only got two weeks left,” I reminded him.

“We need you to make a deal with some guys in the Russian mafia.”

“What?” I turned to look at the Russian man, whose face remained blank. I clearly hadn’t heard right. So many words in Russian were difficult to make out, even after all this time. I turned back to the president.

“It’s going to be very dangerous, Elder. That’s why we want a missionary to do it. If you are killed while on your mission, you automatically qualify for the Celestial Kingdom.”

That I understood. I frowned and looked more deeply into the president's eyes. Unlike the other elders, this man did receive inspiration for all the missionaries serving under him. Knowing that Outer Darkness probably awaited me as a fallen gay Mormon, I found the idea intriguing. Still, there was no point in going to the Celestial Kingdom if Elder Miller wasn't there.

Sometimes missionaries had special assignments like finding a building where we could open a new branch or, more often, find a smaller one when we had to downsize. Sometimes, we were asked to translate Church literature, or interpret when "greenies" had to see a doctor or experienced a problem with their visas. But nothing like this. I couldn't help but suspect that another reason the president wanted a missionary for this assignment was that if I were caught by authorities, whatever crime I was committing could more easily be passed off as the act of a stupid young American. I continued frowning.

"This gentleman will tell you where to go and who to meet," President Carruthers said. "Then you'll probably be driven somewhere with a hood over your head to meet some other people, who will then take you to meet someone else. God only knows what'll happen next or where you'll end up." He sighed. "But what we hope is that you'll eventually be brought to the right men and be able to negotiate the purchase of three nuclear devices. You know, some of the ones that 'disappeared' when the Soviet Union collapsed."

I closed my eyes tightly and shook my head to clear it. I was here to bring souls to God, not participate in international intrigue. Why wasn't this something the CIA was doing instead of me? I'd heard that returned missionaries were often recruited by intelligence services, but I wasn't an RM yet. And surely an

American would be sitting next to me instead of a Russian if I were being recruited right now. I had a reasonable talent with the language, but this assignment would clearly involve the use of many words I wouldn't know. Why didn't this Russian guy do the negotiating himself?

Then suddenly I felt my heart responding in recognition to the truth the way it did the first time I'd tested Moroni's promise. I was being asked because my life was less valuable. Perhaps the president did know I was gay.

"How will I get the bombs to Moscow?" I asked. "Or wherever it is you want them? And why exactly *do* you want them?" Mormons had killed people before, of course, back at Mountain Meadows, and we'd had the Mormon Battalion before that, but flat out bombing people seemed extreme. Then again, the Book of Mormon showed the Nephites slaughtering hundreds of thousands, even millions, in the name of God. And wasn't there a story in the Old Testament where God commanded the Jews to circumcise all the men among a group they were pretending to assimilate, and then kill them all while they were too sore to fight back? One never really knew what Heavenly Father was going to demand.

The two men exchanged glances. "Normally, this would be on a need to know basis," the president said slowly. "And the Russians don't want me to tell you any more than I already have. But since you're risking your life, I suppose you deserve the truth. We're always taught to be honest in our dealings with our fellow men."

I frowned again, not sure I was buying any of this. From the movies I'd seen, the people most at risk were always kept in the dark. Even the early Saints were lied to about Joseph Smith's polygamy. *Chert*, even we ourselves were lied to until a

couple of years ago. My parents had told me about Joseph's long-denied wives years before I heard the Church admit anything. I wondered what would happen if I said no to the president right now. Or what might happen if I said no after I heard everything he had to say.

I felt a chill. I wanted to hold Elder Miller.

"It's global warming," President Carruthers said simply. "Turns out it's real."

"Yeah?" I tried not to sound surly but I couldn't fully control my tone. My parents had believed the science for years, but I'd never met many other Mormons who felt the same. Even those who did always just shrugged and said, "Heavenly Father will take care of everything." So what was I supposed to do now? Destroy oil refineries in Saudi Arabia? None of this was making any sense.

"Elder Olson, you know how strongly we Saints take the call to be stewards of the Earth." He chuckled, but there was no mirth in the sound. "The Prophet in Salt Lake has spoken directly to me about what must be done."

I tried not to show my surprise. The Prophet had barely spoken for five minutes at each of the last two General Conferences. It was difficult to tell if he was even able to follow the proceedings. But then there was no real reason Heavenly Father couldn't step in and restore his health when it was needed.

"He said he fell asleep watching *Nova*, and when he woke up, he knew what had to be done," President Carruthers explained. "He says we must act immediately if we hope to avoid total disaster for the entire planet."

I thought hard for a second but couldn't connect the dots. The Book of Mormon had one brief passage about the need for the Nephites to reforest the land after they'd foolishly used up all the natural resources, but it was only my parents who ever talked to me about issues like that. I never heard such things mentioned in Sunday School. "So who are we going to blow up?" It was either the policies of the American government or those of Chinese leaders which were causing the most carbon pollution, if I remembered news stories I'd heard before my mission. Of course, we were never allowed to read newspapers or watch TV out here, and the situation might have changed in the past two years. Was I going to help deliver nukes to Washington, DC and Beijing and Lord only knew what other godforsaken city?

Der'mo. Surely, I wasn't seriously considering going along with any of this. I just wanted to go tracting with Elder Miller. Split a vatrushka with him while on break and lick the kvark off his lips.

The Russian man leaned toward me and whispered, "Yellowstone." I could barely understand his pronunciation.

"Elder Olson," the president went on, "you may not know this, but the Earth is warming at an incredible rate."

"Yes, I did know," I replied. "Didn't you?" I wondered why David O. McKay hadn't said something about it in the 1950's when it might have made a difference. For that matter, why hadn't my parents done anything themselves? Why hadn't I when they told me?

"All nations must work together to slow it down immediately and ultimately reverse it."

I looked at the Russian, who must either be a government agent or tied up somehow with the Mafia. Was this Heavenly Father's way of forcing everyone to make peace with one another? I'd always been taught that coercing people to do the right thing was Satan's plan.

“Sacrifices have to be made.”

I'd never heard any of this urgency in General Conference.

I bit my lip. Maybe that was because I'd been lazy as a teenager and never watched every session. Even for the devout, those conferences were awfully tedious. But I would have heard something from the beehive if anything momentous had ever been stated. My folks often pointed out that none of the prophets had said much of anything very consequential in over a hundred and fifty years.

The dots still weren't connecting.

“Heavenly Father knows our actions will help prepare the world for the Second Coming. When Gospodin Ivano—” The man held up a hand and President Carruthers stopped. “When the Prophet approached me with a plan, I located this man and asked for his help.”

“I don't understand.” I was sweating, and it wasn't only because of the increasingly stuffy atmosphere in the room.

President Carruthers rubbed his hands together as if cold. “We have to set off three nuclear weapons in Yellowstone National Park,” he said. “Try to initiate a supervolcanic eruption.” He looked from me to the Russian. “The truth is, I've done some research since the Prophet first contacted me, and we

probably need to set off two or three supervolcanoes across the planet in order to accomplish very much, but this one act will force the world to acknowledge the severity of the problem and follow our lead.” He sighed. “Of course, the Church will never get credit for our work.” He shrugged. “That’s the way it always goes.”

At this point, the Russian man finally began to speak, though I had to ask him to repeat himself and clarify various points several times before I understood the plan. An eruption in Yellowstone would cover most of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Colorado...and Utah in one to three meters of ash. Sulfuric gas would mix with water and create aerosols which would significantly cool the atmosphere. Even a normal volcano, if its eruption was large enough, could cool the Earth by a degree or two, for at least a couple of years. A supervolcanic eruption would be hundreds of times larger, and though the cooling effect it created would also be temporary, it might be enough to give people a chance to take other measures which could finally turn runaway global warming around. For his part, the Russian assured me his government was fully, if unofficially, behind the plan.

“But how many people is this going to kill?” I asked, dumbfounded at the outrageous proposal I was hearing.

The Russian shrugged. “90,000 in the first few minutes,” he said. “Several million more over the next few weeks. Depends on how long the eruption continues.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“Elder Olson,” President Carruthers said carefully, “you do understand that killing twenty million people is the *best*

outcome. If we don't stop global warming, *billions* of people are going to die.”

I stared at him. Then I cocked my head. Even in this upscale building, I could still hear music from a neighboring apartment. Sekret, it sounded like. For a brief second, part of me wondered if I was being filmed, if this was some sort of Russian prank show. Or some bizarre Abrahamic test before extending my mission three extra months and calling me to be the new AP. But the tension in the air told me this was all really happening. “But Utah,” I said. “Idaho...”

The president nodded gravely. “The Prophet understands. It's all part of Heavenly Father's plan. Just as Jesus Christ was sacrificed to save the souls of all mankind, Mormons are the sacrifice to save humanity itself.”

My heart was beating so hard it hurt. I put my hand on my chest. I wanted Elder Miller. I wanted—

“A few members in these areas will make it through because of their food storage,” the president went on. “And eventually, survivors will gather in Jackson County, Missouri, as foretold by prophecy.”

I stared at the floor, remembering how Brigham Young had said he'd rather be dead than face having to live the law of polygamy.

“Elder Olson,” President Carruthers continued, “once you acquire the nuclear weapons, you'll direct them to a place that this gentleman will tell you about. Your part will be done then. You can finish the last few days of your mission a proud man.”

“And then go home to Salt Lake.”

The Washing of Brains

President Carruthers glanced at the Russian man again. “I can give you an extension for one transfer,” the president said.

“So that I can survive murdering everyone I know and love.”

Everyone but Teancum. Oh, my heck. What was I going to tell Teancum? Perhaps I should leave the Church right this minute and not do this terrible thing. I should go public and warn people what was being planned.

As if anyone would believe me. I knew what would happen if I said no.

The president rubbed his hands together again. “Well, I’ll leave your departure date up to you,” he said. “Of course, there will probably be some restrictions on air traffic after...” He wiped his forehead, and for the first time, I wondered if he was going to tell his three grown children in Utah to evacuate. Or if he was willing to sacrifice them as well. President Carruthers took a deep breath, smiled, and extended the official offer. “Will you accept the Prophet’s call to serve?”

I was silent a long moment, staring at the moisture on the president’s forehead. I remembered a pivotal scene from *Total Recall*. My parents had always let me watch R-rated movies.

And look where that had gotten me.

“Do you understand what the Lord expects of you, Elder?”

Even with liberal parents, I’d made a lifetime of sacrifices to be a faithful Mormon, but even that hadn’t made me a good person. Homosexuality was next to murder. Why not go the next step and make just one more sacrifice for the Lord? After

all, I was damned to Outer Darkness anyway. I turned to look at the Russian man.

“Elder?”

“*Ya ponimayu*,” I said heavily.

The president and the Russian stood, smiling grimly, and offered their hands. I shook them both listlessly.

I wasn’t even allowed to go back to my apartment to say anything to Elder Miller. The Russian man dropped me off with directions which I followed in a daze, a suitcase full of cash in one hand and instructions on how to wire the balance once the weapons were secured. Three days before my two years were up, I walked back to my apartment. It looked dirtier than it had before.

“Oh, my god!” Elder Miller shouted, running over and squeezing me tightly. The other two elders looked on disapprovingly, either for the disrespectful words my companion had uttered, or merely for the fact that we were hugging. The district leader demanded an explanation, though surely the president had made up some story for everyone already. I led Elder Miller to our bedroom and closed the door, and we began kissing in a wild frenzy.

“I thought I was never going to see you again,” he said, wiping his eyes. “Why did you leave without saying goodbye?”

I looked at him and started crying, overcome by the first emotions I’d felt in days. How could I tell him I’d just arranged to kill his entire family and those of all his friends? Why hadn’t I asked the Russian mafia to kill me? Why hadn’t I simply jumped into the Moskva River by myself? Looking into my

companion's eyes, I suddenly remembered that Laban wasn't the only problematic character in the Book of Mormon. While Teancum was a hero, he was only a hero because he'd successfully killed Amalickiah and Ammoron, who themselves were the cause of so much death and suffering. Nephi was a murderer. Teancum was a murderer. I almost laughed, realizing that Laban was the one bad guy who'd never murdered anyone. Until I came along.

“Talk to me,” Elder Miller pleaded.

I pulled him onto the bed beside me and held his hand. Should I tell him I'd also just destroyed the Church we both loved? Somehow, knowing there were no more temple recommend interviews in my future didn't make me feel any freer. I kept looking into Miller's trusting eyes and felt more pain than I had ever thought possible. How did Nephi ever look his wife in the face after what he'd done? How did he even manage to look himself in the mirror?

Perhaps it was easier to follow the Lord's commandments before there were mirrors.

For the first time, I wondered if Jesus had chosen death not only to atone for humanity's sins but also for his own, in helping create a world so full of misery for so many people in the first place. Perhaps I could ask Teancum to kill me. It would be an act of compassion on his part. And I knew he loved me enough to do it. But the last thing I wanted was to turn him into a murderer, too.

“Laban...”

I leaned over and kissed Elder Miller on the forehead. “We're leaving tonight,” I said. “I have connections. I can get

us both jobs, maybe somewhere down in Kazan where nobody knows us.”

“I don’t understand.”

I kissed my companion first on both cheeks and next on the lips. Then I told him everything. It was harder than any confession I’d ever had to give to my bishops back home. Elder Miller was staring at the floor when I finished, and I wondered if we were finished, too.

“When we made our vows in the temple,” he said softly, “we promised to give up everything. I guess this is everything.”

Did “everything” include “us”? I felt my hands trembling. Why I should regret the loss of one relationship when I’d just arranged to destroy millions of others, I didn’t know. But the fact that I did made me feel like a piece of shit.

Jesus had to shit, didn’t he?

Elder Miller reached over and began unknitting my tie. He gently undressed me, gave me his cum and tea, and then “returned” my head before I threw my garments back on and headed to the bathroom. The district leader demanded again to know more details about my absence, and I closed the bedroom door in his face. He kept knocking for another half hour as Elder Miller and I lay together in bed.

It occurred to me that I’d never wondered before whatever became of Laban’s widow after God ordered her husband’s murder.

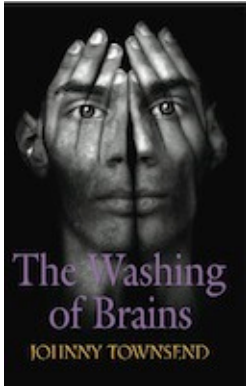
Did Judas leave behind someone he loved?

The Washing of Brains

Elder Miller and I would have to change our names, I realized, suddenly feeling melancholy. And we certainly wouldn't be using the new names we'd been given the first time we went through the temple. Nothing scriptural in any way. My companion rested his head on my shoulder, and I put my hand on his chest.

After it was clear the other elders had finally gone to sleep, my companion and I packed our clothes and crept quietly out of the apartment.

We'd found low-level jobs and an apartment in Kazan by the time ash started falling in Salt Lake, but by then the honeymoon was already long over.



A world-weary man becomes a widower for the third time. A budding feminist tries to make a political statement by giving birth to her "illegitimate" son in church just before Mother's Day. Missionaries in Rome try to prevent a terrorist bombing. The Prophet devises a plan to reverse global warming. A Salt Lake bishop is overwhelmed by his congregants' secrets. An unhappy bartender reminisces about the affair he had with his mission president in Paris.

The Washing of Brains

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