

In these stories, a missionary copes with the startling discovery that his companion has been translated off the face of the Earth. A lonely woman gives birth to a child fathered by one of the Three Nephites. A schizophrenic woman leads a secret life no one in her congregation suspects.

Behind the Bishop's Door

by Johnny Townsend

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A photograph of a muscular man's back and arm, with a chain wrapped around his waist and hand. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his muscles. The background is dark.

Behind the Bishop's Door

JOHNNY TOWNSEND

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

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*

“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*

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.

“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*

“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

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

“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)

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

Let the Faggots Burn: The UpStairs Lounge Fire is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, Patheos

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*

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*

“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

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

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

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

“This collection of short stories [*The Mormon Victorian Society*] featuring gay Mormon characters slammed [me] 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)

“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

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 *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

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

“Among the most captivating of the prose [in *Off the Rocks*, in a piece reprinted from the collection *A Day at the Temple*] was a story by Johnny Townsend illustrating two Mormon missionaries who break the rules of their teachings to spend more time with one another.”

Lauren Childers, *Windy City Times*

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*

Gayrabian Nights “was easily the most original book I’ve read all year. Funny, touching, topical, and thoroughly enjoyable.”

Rainbow Awards

Lying for the Lord is “one of the most gripping books that I’ve picked up for quite a while. I love the author's writing style, alternately cynical, humorous, biting, scathing, poignant, and touching.... This is the third book of his that I’ve read, and all are equally engaging. These are stories that need to be told, and the author does it in just the right way.”

Heidi Alsop, Ex-Mormon Foundation Board Member

“If you like short stories and you’re interested in the lives of Mormons, you should be following the work of Johnny Townsend. Since he writes from an ex-Mormon perspective, believers often dismiss Townsend’s work as biased—or as *a priori* ‘an attack on the church’—but I think that’s a mistake. Johnny Townsend writes his characters with a great deal of compassion and empathy, whether they’re in the church or not...or somewhere in between.”

C. L. Hanson, *Main Street Plaza*

“Townsend is a wonderful writer with a wry but sympathetic eye for humans’ frailties, and the ways in which religious belief both exacerbate and console them. [*Despots of Deseret* contains] more vibrant parables about doubts and blasphemies that hide beneath a veneer of piety.” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

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

In *Missionaries Make the Best Companions*, “the author treats the clash between religious dogma and liberal humanism with vivid realism, sly humor, and subtle feeling as his characters try to figure out their true missions in life. Another of Townsend’s rich dissections of Mormon failures and uncertainties...” Named to Kirkus Reviews’ Best of 2015.

Kirkus Reviews

In *Invasion of the Spirit Snatchers*, “Townsend, a confident and practiced storyteller, skewers the hypocrisies and eccentricities of his characters with precision and affection. The outlandish framing narrative is the most consistent source of shock and humor, but the stories do much to ground the reader in the world—or former world—of the characters....A funny, charming tale about a group of Mormons facing the end of the world.”

Kirkus Reviews

The Washing of Brains has “A lovely writing style, and each story was full of unique, engaging characters....immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

“Townsend’s collection [*The Washing of Brains*] once again displays his limpid, naturalistic prose, skillful narrative chops, and his subtle insights into psychology...Well-crafted dispatches on the clash between religion and self-fulfillment...”

Kirkus Reviews

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The Translation of Elder Bauman

“Let’s go kayaking,” said my companion, Elder Bauman, as soon as we got off our knees Wednesday morning.

I was shocked by the suggestion. What was he thinking? “The Devil has power over the water,” I replied.

“We won’t be in the water,” said Elder Bauman. “We’ll be in kayaks.”

I shook my head. “No, Elder. Let’s do something else for P-Day.”

Elder Bauman sat on the edge of his bed and rubbed his chin. I thought about saying something gentle to guide him. We weren’t allowed to sit on our beds during the day. We might fall asleep and be unproductive. I’d already had to report my companion to the zone leaders once for such an infraction. My senior companion was always breaking the mission rules. But given that today was Preparation Day, I decided to let it pass.

“We rode the Ferris wheel down on the Seattle waterfront last week,” Elder Bauman mused. “And we watched the boats going through the locks the week before.”

“Both activities which brought us in contact with water,” I reminded him. We’d suffered the consequences both times. The following day after each event, an investigator we were

teaching had gotten upset with me for absolutely no reason and turned away from the gospel. “Why don’t we go to a museum?”

Elder Bauman frowned. “How about going on a hike?” he countered. “I hear Mt. Si is an easy one.”

I was shocked again by the suggestion. We were expressly forbidden from doing anything that put our lives at risk. People got lost and died while hiking all the time. “That sounds dangerous,” I said.

“A thousand people hike that trail every week, Elder Randolph.”

“Where did you get those figures?” He hadn’t been sneaking time on the Internet again, had he?

“From Brother Torgeson.” Elder Bauman’s jaw tightened. “And don’t you curl your lip at me.”

We continued to discuss what to do for the day’s outing over the next several minutes. It turned out my companion had already gotten information from Brother Torgeson on which bus to catch from which corner to get us out to North Bend, so I finally assented. It might give us something to talk to Brother Torgeson about next time we stopped by his place to try to reactivate him. We put on our jeans and P-Day shirts, grabbed our jackets, plastic gloves, and a plastic garbage bag each, and headed downtown. Elder Bauman wasn’t happy that my compromise required us to pick up trash for half an hour before catching the bus, but he knew my philosophy—Righteousness Before Fun.

“This is Right Below Fantasizing,” he muttered as we walked along scooping up discarded McDonalds cups and empty cigarette packs.

I wasn't sure exactly what he meant by that, but I knew he was sinning by saying it. I almost insisted we turn back home. But to be honest, I kind of wanted to get out in the wilderness for a while, too. I was from Chicago, where the lake was about the only bit of Nature close enough to visit. From our apartment on Capitol Hill, Elder Bauman and I could see the Olympics in one direction and the Cascades in the other. I'd forbidden a trip to Snoqualmie Falls once a few months ago because of the water issue, and I'd always regretted it. Not enough to suggest we go there on another P-Day, but enough that I hadn't fought very hard today against going to North Bend.

I wasn't sure why I even felt the need to fight at all. I suppose it was simply that I felt if Elder Bauman was suggesting it, there had to be something wrong with it. He'd sat on a bench in Cal Anderson Park for two hours one afternoon last week, refusing to talk to people about the Church, while he listened to music on his earbuds. He said he was listening to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but he also refused to let me verify. Another day, he'd spent over an hour—an hour!—in the conservatory in Volunteer Park looking at the flowers. An hour we should have been working for the Lord.

Who wouldn't be suspicious of anything Elder Bauman said?

“Kind of makes you want to go to Starbucks, doesn't it?” asked Elder Bauman, sniffing an empty coffee cup.

“Don’t be disgusting.”

He was never going to make it to the end of his mission. I still had sixteen months to go, but the mission president had already told me if I kept up my good attitude, I’d be senior on the next transfers and a district leader soon after that.

I couldn’t wait to be higher than Elder Bauman. Even if he was no longer my companion by that point, I could still show him the way to be a good missionary. It was as important to strengthen weak members as it was to baptize new converts. That’s why we kept stopping at Brother Torgeson’s house.

Before long, we were on the 208 heading east, Elder Bauman looking out the window, nodding his head to the music coming from his phone. I thought about talking to one of the other passengers about the Church but decided that since it was P-Day, the Lord wouldn’t mind if I closed my eyes for a few minutes.

Suffice it to say that the trail entrance was not an easy walk from the bus stop in North Bend, but we eventually made it to the starting point. “Want to race up the mountain?” asked Elder Bauman with a grin.

“We might get separated.”

Elder Bauman smiled. But he knew that being apart was one of the biggest sins in the mission field. “We could go up on different paths,” he suggested. “You can take the trail and I can go through the forest.”

“Why don’t we join that couple over there?” I returned. “We could tell them we’re missionaries.” I didn’t want to do

that any more than he did, but I knew I needed to make such a suggestion to end up at the compromise I wanted.

We walked up the trail together without any other company. Elder Bauman kept asking me to listen to the bird calls. I quizzed Elder Bauman on his scripture verses.

“I’m the senior companion,” he said. “I’m supposed to be guiding you.”

“Feel free,” I said.

Elder Bauman stopped, put his hand on trunk of a fir tree, and wiped his brow. “Elder Randolph,” he said, “you may well end up a General Authority one day if you don’t change your behavior...” I smiled. “...but you’ll be the one everybody hates. You’ve got to lighten up.”

We didn’t talk for the next twenty minutes. My mother had told me something similar my last year in Seminary. My bishop had told me almost the same thing in my interview before sending off my mission papers. Even my stake president had pulled me aside after setting me apart and then given me a warning. “Don’t be a dick,” he said.

I suspected these people were all just spiritual peasants. People who didn’t have what it took to rise to greatness. The mission president here thought I was wonderful. He was much more in tune with the Spirit than my bishop had ever been.

When Elder Bauman and I made it to the top, we stood and stared at the incredible vista for several minutes while we rested. A few other hikers milled about, oohing and aahing as well. The Celestial Kingdom would be so much better than

this, I wanted to tell them. It was *important* to be a good Mormon.

“Don’t do it,” Elder Bauman warned.

“Do what?”

“I see that look in your eyes.”

“It’s called the Spirit.”

“Try living without the Spirit for a while.”

My mouth fell open at such heresy. Elder Bauman’s eyes narrowed, his jaw tightened, and he pointed to the trail back down. “I’m walking back without you,” he said. “If you try to catch up to me, I swear I’ll punch your face out.” With that, he took off down the trail.

I was going to have to report him.

I waited a few minutes and then began strolling casually back down the mountain. I could use this opportunity to really commune with Heavenly Father. The going was much easier in this direction, obviously, and I felt relaxed for the first time in ages. I found myself pausing to look at the view through the trees when possible, pausing to caress the needles on the nearby trees, pausing to smell the earthiness of the area. I felt light and free and wondered if Elder Bauman’s negativity had been keeping me down. Perhaps I should request an emergency transfer.

I remembered something my father had told me. “Don’t put on a show.”

But my righteousness wasn't a show. I really was righteous. It wasn't prideful to say so. And yet as I continued on the path downward, I began to wonder if I should apologize to my companion. Or at least buy him a hot chocolate. I wouldn't say anything about giving in, but he'd know that my going into a coffee shop at all was a major concession.

I could be humble as well as righteous.

My plans evaporated, though, as soon as I reached the bottom of the mountain. Elder Bauman was nowhere to be found. Had he strayed off the trail? Had he joined up with another hiker and shared a beer? Had he gone back to the bus stop and headed home without me? I tried to call his cell phone but there was no reception. I realized again how irresponsible the man could be, and how much he needed my guidance.

There'd be no hot chocolate tonight.

I waited for an hour. Then two. Finally, I walked back to the bus stop alone and caught the bus back to Seattle. I was fuming by the time I reached our apartment. But my companion wasn't there, either. I was so mad I slapped the kitchen table. When Elder Bauman still hadn't arrived by 5:00, the time P-Day officially ended and we had to start proselytizing again, I called the zone leaders.

"I'm going to have to tell the mission president you didn't stay with your companion," said Elder Crenshaw.

The zone leaders called the president, who called the police, but it was too late in the day to start a search party. Rescuers combed Mt. Si the following day but couldn't find

even a trace of Elder Bauman. The mission president phoned his parents. Elder Bauman hadn't called home to say he was leaving the mission. The police tried tracking him down through his debit card, but there had been no transactions. There were no pings from his cell phone.

I never saw Elder Bauman again. But four months later at a zone conference, while I was still getting used to yet another senior companion, the mission president made an announcement. "I'm sure you're all still wondering about Elder Bauman," he said. "I'm sure you're all still concerned about him. But after much prayer and fasting, it has been revealed to me that Elder Bauman was translated. He is no longer on this Earth."

There was a gasp from the missionaries in attendance. This had only happened once before that we knew about. A missionary in another country had been driving a van full of missionaries and had been swept away crossing a creek, or by a flood, or something. I couldn't remember the exact details. I just remembered it had something to do with the Devil and the Devil's power over water. All the missionaries had been saved, except the driver, whose body was never found. His mission president finally declared that the missing elder had been translated.

And I'd been in the presence of greatness myself and not realized it.

It was almost like walking with a beggar and not realizing it was Jesus. I pinched my arm hard to punish myself.

I wondered if Elder Bauman being with me had been the influence he needed to attain the level of righteousness that allowed him to be translated.

But he'd been the one translated, not me. Maybe there was something I could have learned from him.

Maybe I wasn't as humble as I thought I was.

I really did want to be good.

The rest of the zone conference went as usual, concluding with all of us bearing our testimonies. Then Elder Croft and I started back for our apartment. "I'm exhausted," he said. "How about we call it a day and don't work tonight?"

I opened my mouth to protest, and then I stopped myself. "All right, Elder," I agreed with a sigh. We continued on toward the bus stop. "Why don't we listen to some music instead?"

The Tree of Li(f)e

It was the last day of Girls Camp, and I was ready to go home, but our leaders had one final adventure for us to experience. We'd already had the fun of scripture chases, learning to crochet, and standing up in front of everyone detailing what we thought our temple marriages would be like. I'd asked my mom to send me to band camp, but she'd heard about the flute scene in some raunchy comedy and refused to even consider it. Then I'd asked to attend soccer camp, but she'd said soccer wasn't ladylike. So here I was in the woods.

If it had been Girl Scout camp, that might have been okay.

"I'm hungry," Brenda whispered. She was my best friend from Young Women. Well, to be honest, she was my *only* friend at church. Brenda wanted to be a pharmacist when she grew up. I wanted to be a psychiatrist or, if I couldn't get into med school, at least a psychologist. The other girls all wanted to be wives and mothers. Nothing wrong with that, of course. In fact, I wanted the same thing. It just wasn't *all* I wanted.

My mom said I thought too much. For her, that was a bad thing. For Mrs. Kavanaugh, my English teacher, it was good.

For my Sunday School teacher, it wasn't even an option. "Thinking leads to doubt," Sister Keenan said, "and once you start doubting, you're already too deceived to be saved."

So I didn't think too much about church. That strategy seemed to have worked well enough so far.

"Quiet down, girls," said Sister Moyes. She was the Beehive instructor, mine and Brenda's teacher, so I knew her best out of all the adults here. "We'll eat after this one last activity. Now follow me."

The fourteen girls taking part in Girls Camp trailed dutifully behind Sister Moyes and Sister Bonner. Sister Grisham followed behind the group, making sure no one lagged behind. We walked deep into the woods where there was no longer any trail. I kept a sharp eye out for poison ivy. And snakes. Wasn't Girls Camp supposed to be safe, I thought? The mere presence of an adult wasn't going to keep a bear at bay.

But maybe the prayer we offered this morning would.

"Here we are, girls." Sister Moyes pointed to a rope tied around a tree which led off through the woods until it reached another tree, and then led off still farther beyond that. "Sister Grisham, get out the blindfolds."

Brenda looked at me with a frown, and I could tell this wasn't going to be a particularly fun way to end the week. But I allowed Sister Grisham to tie the blindfold across my eyes. I was then directed to the rope. Susan was in front of me, and Brenda behind me, with Marian after her.

"Ooh, Zoey," Brenda whispered to me. "I'm afraid."

“It’ll be okay,” I whispered back. “They won’t let us get lost.”

“Tommy was attacked by hornets at the Father/Son outing.”

“Sister Moyes won’t let anything bad happen to us.”

“Does she have power over Nature?” Brenda countered. “It’s not like she has the priesthood or anything.” Perhaps I should suggest she become a lawyer rather than a pharmacist, I thought.

“Well, Brother Carson is back at the campsite.” We always had at least one priesthood holder to supervise the women leaders.

“Fat lot of good that does us now.”

“Just think about the juicy hamburgers waiting for us at the end.”

I could hear Brenda rustling in the leaves behind me. “Okay, Zoey, okay.”

“All right, girls,” announced Sister Bonner. “I’m going to read Lehi’s Dream to you from 1 Nephi.” In a somber voice, she proceeded to read the vision we’d all heard a hundred times already in church, about Lehi traveling through a dark and dreary wilderness, only able to find his way by holding fast to the iron rod. Some people were distracted by a large and spacious building and all the people inside who were laughing and having a good time, but Lehi persisted and made it to the Tree of Life, which had the most delicious fruit. Those who wandered away from the iron rod were lost

in the wilderness or drowned in a river. Only those who held onto the rod were saved.

“So you girls have to make it to the Tree of Life, where we’ll have a delicious fruit salad for lunch. Don’t let go of the iron rod under any circumstances. Follow the iron rod and you’ll always be safe. Any questions?” I raised my hand but couldn’t tell if anyone was able to see me or not. “Yes, Zoey?” asked Sister Bonner.

“Why is this iron rod so limp?” There was a twitter among the other girls.

I could hear Sister Bonner sigh. “You need this lesson more than anyone else,” she said. “Judging from how poorly you did in the scripture chase, I’ll bet you don’t even read your Book of Mormon every day.”

She was right about that.

I’d also worn a sleeveless top to Sunday School once last month, and Sister Keenan had threatened to bring a potato sack to make me wear if I ever did that again. “I’ll cut arm and leg holes in the sack and bring it with me every week from now on,” she said.

“Wouldn’t a potato sack with arm holes cut out still be sleeveless?” I asked.

I had to go talk to the bishop after class that day. I didn’t really mean to be a pain in the butt. I wanted to be a good girl. In fact, I wanted to be a great girl. A great woman. My mom insisted that coming to Girls Camp for a week would help me better myself. So I’d come along, though I’d

bargained for a ticket to the Scripps Spelling Bee in return. Mom had shaken her head but agreed.

“Now, girls,” Sister Bonner said, “start walking. Step carefully and slowly and don’t let go of the iron rod no matter what.”

I could hear rustling in front of me and figured the other girls were on the move, so I took a step forward. I heard a branch crack under my foot but kept going. “I hate this,” Brenda muttered behind me.

“Let’s just get it over with,” I replied. I was thinking about the fruit salad waiting for us at the end of the activity. Not the substantial meal I was hoping for, of course. Brenda wasn’t the only one who was hungry.

We walked on mostly in silence. A couple of the girls ahead of me giggled and whispered every once in a while. For some reason, we all seemed to feel it would be inappropriate to talk out loud. I could hear leaves rustling and twigs cracking. I brushed up against bushes, got stabbed in the side once by a large fallen branch, and tripped over a small log.

“Don’t let go of the rope!” Sister Moyes shouted.

I felt around until my fingers touched the rope again, and I latched on more tightly. I contorted my face a couple of times, trying to force the blindfold away from my eyes just enough that I could cheat, but the blindfold was large and well secured. I heard Marian cry out in pain once, and Sister Grisham urging her to keep moving.

It seemed like ages before we even reached the first tree. The tree that had looked like it was only thirty feet away.

This was going to be a long activity, I realized. I patted my way around the trunk and reached for the new rope leading us onward. “Good, good,” I heard Sister Bonner murmur. “You girls are doing just fine.”

I thought about the point of the lesson, to teach us the importance of reading the scriptures. But if Heavenly Father truly wanted us to learn important life lessons from them, why did he make them so boring? The Young Women leaders went out of their way to make all our activities interesting and understandable. They *wanted* us to learn from every single task they assigned over the past week. Even roasting marshmallows had somehow been imbued with meaning. But it seemed Heavenly Father went out of his way to make learning difficult.

Even difficulty wasn’t the biggest problem. I was in Honors math, taking an extra hard algebra course, but that was challenging, which wasn’t the same thing as difficult. And it certainly wasn’t boring. Boring was not an incentive. Good teachers were anything but boring.

Wasn’t Heavenly Father supposed to be perfect?

I felt something land on my arm and jerked quickly to make it fly off. I brushed up against another bush and hoped I didn’t get Lyme disease. The good news was that the Young Women budget was pretty low. I was sure the sisters couldn’t afford to buy much rope. This would all be over soon.

Suddenly, off to our right, I heard a click, and music started playing. Ariana Grande’s voice filled the air. Then the music was turned low and I could hear Sister Bonner whisper softly above it. “Let go of the rope,” she said. “Come over this way. Over here we have music and Coca-Cola.”

No one in the group, of course, was dumb enough to let go of the rope. Well, I assumed as much, anyway, even if I couldn't see for sure. Sister Bonner's whispered temptation continued, but we all kept plugging forward. This wasn't even a real test, I thought. We *knew* not to let go of the rope if we wanted to get through this, have lunch, and get home.

A couple of trees later, I heard Sister Grisham's voice off to the left. "There's food over here. Just let go and come eat." I heard her shake a bag of chips, tear it open, and munch down on something crunchy. I giggled.

"You think this is funny, young lady?" asked Sister Moyes.

"I was remembering something that happened at home the other day."

"Keep your mind on the gospel," she returned tartly.

Whatever.

I thought about the last General Conference, being forced to watch every session at home dressed in my Sunday best. The prophet had looked so frail. His brief talk had sounded disjointed and forced. I watched the other members of the First Presidency and the Twelve on the stand as others spoke before the crowd. Not a one of them nodded off, surprising for such old people. Or maybe I simply missed it because I was nodding off, too. But Dad made us take notes, and after every session was over, we had to give a summary of each talk.

If Heavenly Father really wanted us to learn, would he make Conference so tedious? It was even worse than Sacrament meeting. And that was saying something.

Even learning to crochet was exciting in comparison.

Another branch scratched my arm, and I almost cursed. I stopped and let go of the rope for just a moment to feel my arm. The branch had drawn blood. Darnation. Was it so gold-danged important that we stay off a real trail to learn our lesson? I couldn't wait to get home, take a shower, and get back to my books. I was reading *Twilight* at the moment. Now there was a Mormon book I could get behind. Feeling blindly about me, I stubbed my toe on a root. I gritted my teeth and managed to grab hold of the rope again.

"That's good," I heard Sister Moyes whisper. "Hold to the rod, the iron rod."

I wondered if she was close enough to hit if I swung my arm out. It was too hard to gauge, so I just took another step forward instead. This couldn't go on much longer. They'd made their point. I wanted to eat.

"Zoey," Brenda whispered behind me, "give me a heads up next time you come across briars."

"Sorry."

Suddenly, off to the left, we heard something large crashing through the bushes followed by a loud growl. A couple of the girls squealed in terror, but I was pretty sure bears didn't growl in alto. I kept plodding forward.

After what seemed like an eternity, I could sense we were out of the woods and in a clearing. More light was

coming through the blindfold, and I stopped tripping over branches. There was a fresh breeze. A few feet farther on, Sister Grisham said, “Stop right there, girls. Now you just have to wait for a while before we do anything else. No talking whatsoever or you don’t get lunch. Stand here in complete silence and contemplate your relationship with Heavenly Father and the scriptures.”

Yeah, I thought, *that* wouldn’t put us to sleep.

A couple of minutes later, the sound of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir drifted across the clearing from what seemed a far distance.

Where was Ariana Grande when you needed her?

Two minutes passed. Then five. Then ten. This was *really* getting tiresome. I felt the rope grow taut at times and then slack and then taut again and then slack. The choir was still singing softly. “Come, Come, Ye Saints” right now. I tried to make an intellectual exercise out of it. How would a psychologist analyze the experience? Sensory deprivation sometimes led to enhanced emotional responses, I remembered reading somewhere. Was that why lunch had been delayed, too? Well, that wasn’t really sensory deprivation, was it, I thought. I was definitely feeling the sensation of hunger.

Five more minutes passed. Then ten. Then fifteen. What in the world were the leaders thinking?

The choir suddenly stopped singing. I heard Sister Bonner’s voice from far away. “You can take off your blindfold now.” Even in my relief, part of my brain registered the lack of a plural in that command. Odd, I thought.

I pulled off my blindfold. Brenda wasn't behind me. Susan wasn't in front of me. I was the only girl left still holding onto the rope. The others were thirty feet away, standing with the adults next to a table on which sat a portable CD player and several bowls of food. I let go of the rope and started over.

"You were the only girl who didn't instinctively know to come to the sound of the angels singing," said Sister Moyes. "Why do you think that is?"

My face felt hot. I didn't understand what was going on. Sister Grisham motioned to the other girls, and they hungrily began digging into the food. "Why didn't you come to the Tree of Life?" asked Sister Moyes.

Because I was holding onto the damn iron rod, I wanted to say, but I felt too confused to speak. I looked at the other girls, Brenda scarfing down the fruit salad, Marian thirstily drinking a glass of apple juice. They had learned something from this experience that had escaped me, I realized. And I was usually an A student.

How did they *know* what to do?

They must have been feeling the Spirit, I thought. Something I couldn't seem to accomplish. I had gotten lost even while keeping to the path.

"What have you learned today, Zoey?" asked Sister Moyes. Sisters Bonner and Grisham were staring at me intently, the hint of a smile on their lips. I felt a flash of anger.

The most obvious thing to learn, I thought furiously, was that following the rules got you nowhere. I always did everything I was supposed to do but still seemed to end up the black sheep. Well, I did *almost* everything, I conceded, but then who was perfect? I tried to calm down and not act like a child, hoping to brush this all off. The iron rod was just another potato sack.

“Well?” Sister Moyes insisted.

I opened my mouth but then closed it again. I *had* learned something, I realized. I had learned that these people not only believed boredom was a good teacher but that humiliation was as well. My algebra teacher didn't behave like that, even when I got the question wrong.

So was I wrong to learn now? I didn't *want* to learn anything from this experience. It would be admitting that they were right.

But I learned I couldn't trust Brenda. I learned that although I was only thirteen, I would never be coming back to Girls Camp again, Scripps ticket or no Scripps ticket. With a deep feeling of disappointment, I think I also learned I'd never understand God, and I wondered for the first time if there was even a God out there worth understanding to begin with. Wouldn't God know at least as much as my algebra teacher? I felt a sudden desire to do better in class.

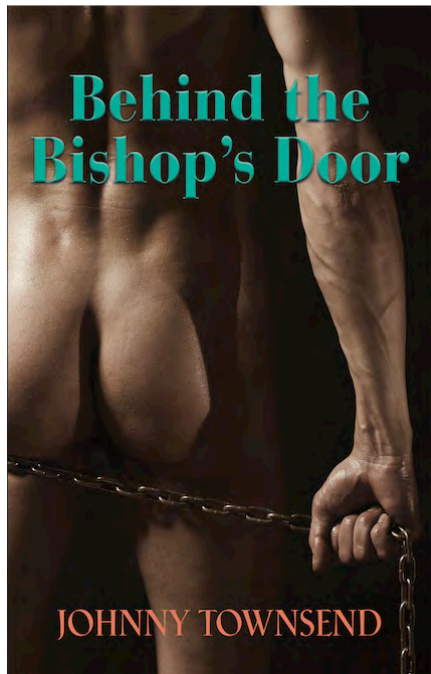
The thing I learned which made me the saddest of all, though, was that I might never understand the human mind, no matter how many degrees I had behind me. Kudos for that, Sister Moyes, kudos for that. Maybe all I was cut out for was motherhood, after all.

“Answer me, young woman!”

What could I say now that wouldn't get me in trouble with my parents? Mom still might keep me from the spelling bee if I got a bad report. I looked back behind me at the rope hanging motionless between the last tree and a post in the middle of the clearing. A small, brown and white bird hopped sideways along its span.

“I learned that wild animals growl in alto,” I said. Then I walked the rest of the way over to the table, grabbed a bowl of fruit salad, and began to eat.

None of the other girls spoke to me during lunch, not then and not later on the long, boring ride home.



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