

The scriptures tell us that in the Last Days, wickedness will increase upon the Earth. When the Mormon Church sees a rise in the number of gay members, they believe the end is upon them. But sometimes, being gay provides just the right ingredient to create saints.

The Last Days Linger

by Johnny Townsend

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THE LAST DAYS LINGER

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

Townsend’s “works are on a cutting edge of history.”

Walter Jones, Assistant Head of Special Collections, Marriott
Library

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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Contents

Introduction: LGBTQ Literature for Mormons	25
The Italian	28
The Pro-Anti-Nephi-Lehies	40
The Washing Away of Sins	49
Peppercorns at the Preppercon.....	56
Shadow Boxing.....	65
Thar’s Gold in Them Thar Teeth.....	76
MoreMen Tabernacle Queer.....	89
Two Much of a Good Thing	98
The Shedding of Blood.....	114
Recruiting Gays	123
Train up a Child	137
Birds Don’t Fly in the Rain.....	147
The Curse.....	156
A Mormon in Morocco	163
Faith-Demoting Stories.....	177
Bread and Pottage.....	191
Stuck Up.....	204
The Power of the Penishood	215

Johnny Townsend

About the Author 223
Books by Johnny Townsend 227

The Italian

I first met Sandro three months after I moved out of my family's apartment in Vomero. I didn't want to be one of those Italian men who lived with his parents until he turned forty. Nineteen and ready to face the world, I found a dingy place in downtown Napoli but of course could rarely afford to eat out. One day, though, I stepped into a tiny pizzeria and ordered two etti of pizza bianca—their cheapest pizza. I could see on the scale that the young man behind the counter had placed almost three etti on my paper. Just as I was about to protest, he put a finger to his lips and announced, “Due etti,” and told me what I owed him. He winked as I walked out the door with my free etto of pizza, and I knew I had to go back. To see him, of course, not for another free bit of food, though I had to admit that possibility was tempting as well.

Two weeks passed before I could afford another such extravagance. When I walked into the pizzeria, Sandro was behind the counter, singing “Biancaneve,” every bit as animated as I'd seen Rino Martinez on RAI. “I'm paying you to work,” a middle-aged man thundered from the rear of the store, “not to sing.” But Sandro continued to mouth the words as he greeted me with a smile. He stopped just long enough to ask if I wanted two more etti of pizza bianca.

He remembered me.

I wanted to order something more expensive this time, but even the pizza bianca was stretching my budget. After he handed me my slice and I turned over my lire, I decided to be bold and not immediately walk out the door. I took a bite, savoring the rosemary, and tried to think of something clever to say. Sandro looked to be about my age, perhaps a couple of years older. He was tall, a good 1.75 or 1.78 meters. His dark brown hair partially covered his ears, and his half-filled moustache wiggled like a caterpillar when he continued to mouth the words to the next song.

I wondered what his moustache would feel like against my lips.

“I’m Gaetano De Luca,” I said. I wanted to reach out and offer my hand, but the glass counter was too high to make that practical.

“Alessandro Rizzi,” he replied. “My friends call me Sandro.”

“I’m not paying you to make friends,” the middle-aged man shouted from the back.

I grabbed a pen from my pocket and tore a piece off the back page of a book I was carrying. “Here’s my number,” I said. “Maybe we can hang out sometime.”

Sandro smiled and began singing, “Lisa se n’è andata via.”

“Try selling some pizza,” the man shouted from the rear.

I let my fingers touch Sandro’s just a little longer than necessary as I handed him my number. He called two days later, and we decided to meet at Piazza Nazionale, just a couple of blocks from the pizzeria. I was wearing American jeans and

a T-shirt that said, “The Cars,” with a photo of a girl smiling behind a steering wheel. Sandro was also wearing jeans, but his T-shirt was plain white. I was mesmerized by his nipples and flat stomach. Clearly, his boss didn’t let him take home much leftover pizza.

“Want to get some coffee?” I asked.

Sandro shook his head. “I’m too poor to do anything that fun,” he said. “I even had to call you from a pay phone since I don’t have a line myself. Do you mind just sitting for a bit?”

I shrugged, unsure if I wanted to admit my own poverty this early. At the same time, I didn’t want him to think I felt he was beneath me. “Do you like working in the pizzeria?” I asked. “Any plans to do something else?”

It was his turn to shrug now. “I’m a zingaro,” he said. “No birth certificate. No ID. I’ll never be able to get a good job.”

“A zingaro?” I repeated. “You look awfully pale for a gypsy.”

“There was probably an American serviceman somewhere in my family tree.” He grinned.

“Where are you from? Your accent’s different.”

“Up north,” he replied, but his smile faded. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

I nodded. “My father works for *Il Mattino*,” I said after a moment. “I’ve got a job in the newspaper’s mailroom. You have to know someone to get even a low level position anywhere in this town. It’s a start.”

“Sound a little stuffy,” said Sandro, wrinkling his nose. “I just want to be free.”

“It’s easier to be free when you have money.” I was thinking more about my own situation than his and didn’t realize how my comment might sound until after I said it.

He shook his head. “I feel free every day of my life. Even with Cerasuolo breathing down my neck at work.”

I took a deep breath and blurted out what I’d been thinking since the first moment I’d met him. “Do you feel free enough to spend the night with me?”

Sandro’s face first registered surprise, but he followed that expression with a big smile. “Does tonight work for you?”

We walked to my apartment on Via Parma, Sandro explaining that he lived just a few blocks away on Vico Tutti Santi. Scaffolding covered the building next to mine. Empty cardboard boxes and dog feces dotted the sidewalk. Still, the neighborhood wasn’t as grungy as the ghetto on the other side of Via Roma. I showed Sandro into my apartment. I couldn’t give much of a tour, as I only had the one bedroom. Sandro was trembling as I took his hand.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I-I’ve never done this before.”

“But you sounded so smooth back in the piazza.”

“Well, it’s all about putting on a show, isn’t it?” He smiled nervously. “I’ve *wanted* to do this for a long time. I’ve thought about it a lot. It’s just a little scary now that it’s happening.” He paused for a moment. “Have you...?”

I nodded. I'd had sex with a cousin when I was fourteen and then later with a boy in my liceo. And then with a teacher in my liceo. But it was hard to do much while still living with my parents. That only gave me a few months in my own apartment without supervision, and I didn't have enough money to go to any clubs where I might meet men. Since I'd never done anything sexual as an adult, either, I was almost as nervous as Sandro. I pulled off his T-shirt and he pulled off mine. We took our own shoes off, and while I wanted to be the one to pull his pants down, I let him finish disrobing on his own. We stood staring at each other by the foot of the bed.

"You're not a zingaro," I said, pointing. Sandro was circumcised. His brow furrowed at my statement and he started to protest. "You're a Jew," I concluded. "That's okay. I have nothing against Christ-killers."

Sandro's mouth fell open.

"Cretino." I laughed. "I'm kidding. As many hang-ups as Catholics have, I'm glad you're Jewish."

Sandro looked at the floor with a weary expression, and I vowed to learn more about Jews so that even my jokes wouldn't be so prejudiced. But I had something more pressing on my mind right now. I pulled Sandro close and hugged him loosely, rubbing my hairy chest softly against his bare chest. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

We climbed into bed together and began kissing. Knowing this was Sandro's first time, I made sure to go slow and make the event memorable. After such a long wait myself, I wanted to go slow for my own benefit as well. Two hours passed before we finished. "I feel like I should offer you a cigarette," I said, "but I don't smoke."

“I don’t smoke, either. You have any music you can play?”

I slipped a cassette into my player, and soon Al Bano and Romina Power were singing “Felicità,” low so as not to disturb the neighbors. “Kind of sappy, I know,” I said, “but I’ve liked Romina Power ever since I learned her father was gay.”

“Gay,” Sandro repeated, looking at the ceiling. Then he turned to me. “Can I see you again sometime?”

I smiled and reached over to give him a kiss.

We began dating regularly, calling each other boyfriend right from the beginning. One afternoon we walked through Capodimonte park. Another afternoon we caught the funicolare up into the ghetto. On yet another occasion, we strolled around Piazza Carlo Terzo, memorable not because Sandro let his arm touch mine as we sat on a bench but because we witnessed a Camorra killing not five meters away. We walked along the waterfront one evening in the rain. Sandro showed me the spot on Castel dell’Ovo where he worked his first job as a fisherman, a job he loathed but which gave him enough money so he could move from a rented room to his own apartment. Sandro’s hours at the pizzeria were awful, so we couldn’t see each other as often as I wished. He slept over two nights a week, even if we didn’t have much chance to do anything other than talk about pizza and mail and then have sex. He invited me to his place once, but the one time was enough. The place was so damaged from the earthquake a couple of years before that I was surprised it hadn’t been condemned. We spent every other of our nights together at my apartment.

“Maybe you *are* a gypsy,” I said one evening after we’d been talking about movies for a while. “You know so little

about Totò and Nino Manfredi and Claudia Cardinale. A Jew would be better educated.”

He smiled but didn't answer.

We went to a neighborhood bar for some acqua Ferrarelle, a real luxury, and Sandro put a coin in the jukebox, singing “Sarà Perché Ti Amo” as he danced across the floor. He finished on his knees, taking my hand in his and giving it a kiss. I looked about nervously. Napoletani weren't the most progressive of people. A young woman drinking an aranciata said “Finocchi!” and then walked up to us as if she might hit us.

“Valeria,” she said, her hands on her hips. When her frown turned into a smile, we introduced ourselves as well. “My brother Gennaro's gay,” she went on. “Dad beats him every time he stays out all night.” She shrugged. “But what's a guy going to do?” She lifted her hands upward in frustrated supplication. “Dad would absolutely murder me if I stayed out, and that's no exaggeration.”

“What time do you have to be home?” I asked.

“10:00. Enough time to have a little fun, but not much. Gotta be heading back now.”

“You two should come over to our place some night and dance,” said Sandro. It was the first time he referred to my apartment as ours. I found I liked the sound of it. That night after we made love, I asked if he wanted to move in.

“We've only been dating six weeks,” he said.

“Seven.”

“Seven,” he conceded.

“Do you love me?” I asked.

He smiled. “It’s just that getting married so soon seems like something people in my family would do.”

“Your gypsy family?” I asked. “Or your Jewish one?”

The following Sunday, Sandro moved the few clothes and other belongings he had into my apartment. Perhaps with our combined income, we could now eat out in a real restaurant once in a while or go see a movie. There were posters for a new Fellini film plastered all about the neighborhood next to the various death notices for area residents who’d recently passed on. I wanted to go with Sandro to Sorrento and Castellammare. I also wanted to take him to Capri to see how beautiful it was, though I wasn’t sure anything was more beautiful than looking at him across the table from me in the kitchen first thing in the morning.

About a week after we officially became a couple, two Mormon missionaries knocked on our door. Sandro came up to see who I was talking to and grew even paler than usual. “Non ci interesse,” he said curtly and shut the door. Later that night, he awoke from a nightmare, sitting bolt upright in the bed. “You okay?” I asked, taking his hand.

“Y-yes,” he replied. “I am now.”

“What does ‘el dair’ mean?” I asked. “You kept saying it in your sleep. Are you Spanish?” Maybe that accent he had wasn’t even Italian.

“Non ne voglio parlare.”

“But why, sweetie? Why don’t you want to talk about it?”

“Non ne voglio parlare,” he said again. He put his head back down on the pillow, and I let my arm drape across him as we both fell back to sleep.

We had Gennaro and Valeria over most Saturday nights for the next little while. Sandro could mimic any singer he wanted, entertaining us with “Una Notte Che Vola Via,” “Una Sporca Poesia,” “Romantici,” and “Maledetta Primavera.” How he could sound just like Loretta Goggi was beyond me.

One night, Gennaro asked if he could stay over. I kissed him on one cheek while Sandro kissed him on the other as we said no.

Things were getting worse at the pizzeria. Cerasuolo was yelling at Sandro more and more and once slapped him across the face. “You’ve got to find another job,” I told him as we undressed that night, looking at the mark the man had left.

“I can’t,” Sandro replied. “I’m a gypsy. I don’t have any papers. No one will hire me.”

“I talked to my father. He knows someone who can get you a job as a door to door salesman.”

“No!”

“Then get a job in a café,” I said. “Get a job in a libreria.”

“I’m a gypsy,” he repeated. “I don’t have any papers!”

“Stop it,” I said, pulling Sandro down onto the bed beside me. “Tell me the truth.”

“I-I’m a gypsy.”

“Sandro.”

And then it came out. Sandro was really Keith Stovall of Orem, Utah. He’d been a Mormon missionary here in Italy and had known before the end of his first month that he never wanted to go back to America. He studied the language longer each day than the time allotted and had a good ear to begin with, so by the time his two year assignment was nearing an end, he could convince most people he was from “up north.” Neapolitani had such a sloppy accent to begin with that anyone speaking crisply seemed uppercrust.

“I couldn’t go back to my family,” he said, “once I knew I was gay and needed a man. They’d be so disappointed.”

“What did you tell them?”

He shook his head. “I ran away in the middle of the night. I never told anyone anything.”

“But Sandro—I mean, Keith—they must be worried sick.”

“Don’t call me Keith. My name is Sandro now.”

“Sandro, you’ve got to call your parents.”

He put his head in his hands. “What could I possibly say?”

“Even the truth is better than what they must be imagining.”

“I’ll think about it, Gaetano. Really, I will.” He smiled. “You’ve already made my life better than it ever was before. Even getting slapped at work can’t change that.”

But I couldn't let the man I loved continue in that job. I understood now why Sandro didn't have any papers. He didn't want anyone to know he was American. Of course, even as an American, he wouldn't be able to work without a permit. But if he wanted to pass himself off as an Italian, that really did put him in the same position as the gypsies. Unless...

I knew a guy at the newspaper who said he knew a guy in the Camorra. I arranged to meet the man and ask to have a birth certificate and ID made. I expected it would cost enough that I'd have to talk my father into a small loan, but the guy with the Camorra agreed I could pay simply by transporting something for him. He didn't say what it was and I didn't ask. But a week later, someone showed up at my apartment with a camera, and a few days after that, Sandro had his papers.

"Jobs still aren't easy to find around here," I said, "but at least now you have a fighting chance."

"I would take any job in the world as long as I could come home to you every evening."

"Now you're sounding like Romina Power."

"Or at least like her father."

Three more months passed. Sandro did call his family. Instead of being relieved to hear he was okay, once his parents learned about me, they hung up the phone and made no effort to contact him again. My father was unhappy about my living arrangements, too, but said that as long as I didn't tell anyone at the newspaper, he wouldn't disown me. When my mother invited Sandro over for dinner, I knew we'd passed our biggest hurdle. Sandro entertained everyone with an a capella rendition of "Storie di Tutti i Giorni" that left even my father impressed.

“You know,” he told me over the phone the following day, “your...friend...has a strong presence in front of people. He’d make a good tour guide. I know someone who runs a tour company in Pompeii—he did some advertising with the paper—and I think I can get him to talk to Sandro. If you want.”

“We want.”

I didn’t tell Sandro until the appointment was confirmed. “Make sure he knows you can give tours in both English and Italian,” I said. Sandro had to call in sick in order to meet with the owner of the tour company, which left Cerasuolo yelling and making threats, but Gennaro filled in for the day and eventually took over the position when Sandro got the new job.

We promised to help Gennaro find something better, too.

A month later, once we’d finally saved a little money, Sandro and I held a party at our place to celebrate a new beginning. Gennaro came with Vittorio, a guy he’d just met over the counter at the pizzeria, and Valeria came with Stefano, a guy she’d met over an aranciata a couple of weeks earlier, who was cuter than any of the rest of us. Sandro sang “L’italiano” quite convincingly but saved his last performance until after the others had left. “Tu Cosa Fai Stasera?” he asked.

And I answered by holding out my hand.

Faith-Demoting Stories

On Tuesday night, I was just washing the Tupperware container in which I'd heated up a bowl of Nalley beef stew when I heard a knock on the porch. I dried my hands on the kitchen towel and walked to the front door. No peephole, but I did have a speakeasy hatch at face level. When I opened it, I was surprised to see two fresh, young, white faces.

Mormon missionaries.

Ugh.

“What can I do for you?” I asked.

“We're representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” said the dark-haired young man on the right. “I'm Elder Burnett and this is Elder Clayton.” He motioned to the sandy-haired man to his side whose face appeared expressionless.

The man who I assumed was senior companion seemed to be waiting for me to introduce myself in return. “What can I do for you?” I repeated. Why I didn't just shut the door, I didn't know.

“Have you ever wondered where we came from before we were born?” Elder Burnett continued. “Have you ever wondered what the purpose of life was? Have you ever wondered where we'll go when this life is over?”

I shuddered, remembering the approach well. I should just let them know I was gay, I thought. I should tell them I was ex-Mormon. “Thanks, guys, but I’m not interested. Best of luck, though.” I started to close the speakeasy hatch.

“Sir,” Elder Burnett said, putting his face right up to the opening, “I have to tell you that I feel very impressed by the Spirit right now. I know that you are a lost sheep who the Lord wants to return to the fold. He has sent us here specifically to find you.”

I hesitated with the speakeasy hatch. Even though I’d left the Church twenty years earlier, shortly after returning from my own mission, it was impossible to totally rid myself of the residual effects of my past. I still hesitated every single morning before taking that first sip of coffee. I still thought of apricot trees when I ate popcorn. I still wondered, ever so briefly, if the black guy in line at the grocery store next to me had been less valiant in the Pre-Existence. The ridiculous feelings and thoughts disappeared almost instantly, but they did appear for that instant, at pretty regular intervals.

And now I wondered if this young man really was receiving inspiration from God. But I knew it was much more likely a family member had given them my address and asked them to reconvert me.

Only I hadn’t spoken to my family in years, long before I moved to Seattle. No Mormons knew where I lived.

“The Spirit is telling me that you once knew the truth and then denied it, and that you need to listen to our message, that deep down you want to.”

I'd broken up with my partner five months earlier and still hadn't started dating again. It was hard to even think about getting back out there after being in a committed relationship for eleven years. I had friends I hung out with, and that was enough for now.

Only it wasn't enough. I'd considered marrying a woman next time, just so I might finally have the chance to be a father. It wasn't too late. It could be an open relationship for both of us. Though, frankly, the idea sounded disastrous. Perhaps there really was a god, and he or she was looking out for me.

I closed the speakeasy hatch and then opened the front door. "Come in, Elders," I said. "I'm Jesse. Jesse Lawrence." I shook their hands and ushered them inside, expecting I was going to regret this. I motioned for them to sit on the sofa while I sat in the recliner that Lamar had given me.

He'd already found another guy.

Maybe I'd meet someone new at Fred and Joel's party this weekend.

"We have a short message we'd like to share with you," said Elder Burnett.

I laughed. "But you know I used to be Mormon and am already familiar with your message."

Elder Burnett smiled. "You need to hear it again so you can feel the Spirit once more, so your testimony will come back. Why don't you start us off with an opening prayer, Brother Lawrence?"

Whatever. I bowed my head and began to speak, trying to see if there was any way to make myself believe I was actually

talking to anyone besides the three of us in the room. I couldn't. But there was no reason not to let these guys have a chance to mark off teaching a missionary discussion on the stat sheet they would be sending in to their zone leaders next week.

Elder Burnett and Elder Clayton took turns as they recounted the story of Joseph Smith's First Vision. There was no point telling them there was a whole series of accounts of that infamous first vision, and most of them contradicted each other in significant ways.

I wasn't going to be reconverted. I was wasting their time and mine. I was leading them on.

Lamar had told me he loved me only a week before he moved out. How could anyone ever believe anything anybody said?

"You felt that, didn't you?" asked Elder Burnett. "You felt the Holy Ghost testifying that what we've been saying is true."

"If you know so much about me," I said, "tell me what I do for a living."

"I sense that you're a meteorologist," said Elder Burnett. He put his finger to his chin. "But not on TV. Like for the government or something."

I worked for NOAA. I stared at him a long moment, my eyes narrowing.

"And what's the big crisis going on in my life right now?"

"Uh..."

"What is the Spirit telling you?"

“You’re grieving the loss of a relationship.”

What the hell was up? I didn’t have any Mormon coworkers. No Mormon friends, not even on Facebook. Who was feeding him this information? I instinctively glanced upward toward the ceiling and then bit my lip in disgust.

“Can we come back tomorrow and talk to you again?” asked Elder Burnett. Elder Clayton appeared to be perfectly happy letting his companion drive the meeting.

I wanted to say no. I should have said no, I knew, both for their sake as well as my own. “Sure,” I agreed.

“Here’s a copy of the Book of Mormon,” said Elder Burnett, handing the paperback to me. “Could you read the first ten chapters of 1 Nephi before we meet again?”

I knew exactly what they were doing. I’d followed all the sales principles myself back when I was a missionary in Ohio. “No problem,” I said.

“Elder Clayton will offer a closing prayer now.”

After the elders left, I stared at the Book of Mormon on my coffee table. I’d read the damn thing from cover to cover ten times already. But I picked it up and started reading again. It might have been a compelling story, at least this part of the book, if I didn’t also remember every article I’d ever read about the DNA of Native Americans, about sources for the names used in the book, about how the “witnesses” to the existence of the gold plates admitted they’d only seen the plates with their “spiritual eyes.”

And then there was the story of Laban, which would have proven the book an unreliable source of morality even if I didn't know all that other stuff.

This was why I still read the *Salt Lake Tribune*, even though it had been years since I'd set foot in Salt Lake. It was why I still sometimes went over to reddit and read postings on r/exmormon. I not only needed to hear the harmful ways the Church impacted lives, but I also needed to find ways to help those still entrapped. A letter to the editor here, an op-ed there, a few comments on threads other people had started on reddit. Lamar had wanted me to be a plain old atheist, but I could never quite stop being an ex-Mormon atheist. I kept thinking, "If I could just help one other person..."

The next day at work, I reviewed information for two studies I was working on. One was an ongoing analysis of temperatures on mountain peaks, but right now, there was a forest fire raging in British Columbia, and I was also frantically gathering data on how the heavy smoke cover affected both high and low temperatures in northwest Washington State.

In the Last Days, the world would be destroyed by fire.

Did the scriptures say "fire" only because no one had invented the concept of global warming in Biblical times?

I had to cut Mormons out of my life altogether if I was ever going to fully heal. My next partner, if there ever was one, deserved that from me. I deserved that for myself.

I picked up a Sweet Onion Teriyaki Chicken sandwich at Subway on the way home and then jumped on reddit for a few minutes while waiting for the elders to return. An exmormon with the username TransgenderSonsofHelaman posted a link to

an article about how one of the General Authorities kept telling a particular faith-promoting story in his talks, but how the details of the story had been proven to be “embellished,” so the apostle had been forced to retract it. Another poster commented on how the Church still promoted polygamy by making almost all of the new names given to women in the temple the names of Brigham Young’s and Joseph Smith’s plural wives. Yet another poster did a statistical analysis of the number of times the Second Coming was mentioned during General Conference over the past thirty years. Now that the year 2000 was well in the past and Jesus still hadn’t returned, the frequency with which the Last Days were mentioned grew less and less for each conference.

“Welcome back, Elders,” I said when Elder Burnett knocked on my door around 6:30. “I’m sorry to waste your time. I’m just not ever going to want to be Mormon again. If you’d rather leave and use your time more constructively somewhere else, I understand.”

“The Lord sent us to talk to *you*,” Elder Burnett said. “May we come in?”

I directed them to sit on the sofa again. Elder Burnett asked me to say the opening prayer, but I refused. “Brother Lawrence, you’re being hard-hearted. You need to have a willing heart if you want the Holy Ghost to touch you.”

“Elder,” I said, “have you studied much of Greek or Roman mythology?”

Elder Burnett frowned.

“I mean, you’ve heard of Zeus before, right? Jupiter?”

“Yes,” he replied cautiously.

“Would you feel comfortable if I asked you to open tonight with a prayer to Zeus? Or Minerva?”

“Of course not.”

“Your god is as real to me as Apollo is to you.”

Elder Burnett continued frowning for a moment. Then he said, “Elder Clayton will say the opening prayer.”

They went on with their lesson, explaining the Plan of Salvation, almost identical to the version I’d taught all those years ago. Mormons were consistent if nothing else. When they finished, Elder Burnett asked, “Did you read any of the Book of Mormon like you promised?”

I smiled at the manipulation. “Yes, I did. Elders, I don’t believe in the Church and I never will. I don’t want to try to tear down your faith. If you find that the Church is a positive influence in your lives, that’s great. But it isn’t that for me. I will never set foot in a Mormon chapel again, and I will never waste another moment of my life reading made up scriptures.” I knew I’d been harsh, but they just didn’t seem to be able to take a hint. Which was probably because I was sending them mixed messages. Part of me had enjoyed their company. At least I wasn’t spending the evening alone. And for all the negative feelings I had toward the Church, part of me had enjoyed being a missionary, had enjoyed going to Sunday School, had even enjoyed dressing up in a robe and green apron in the temple.

I supposed it was like two lovers who stayed together too long just because they were comfortable with each other.

Better that Lamar had left me now than ten years from now.

“Brother Lawrence,” said Elder Burnett, using the “testimony voice” I knew so well, “it makes me sad that you don’t want to be part of the gospel of Jesus Christ and share in its blessings.”

“Elder Burnett,” I replied, “it makes *me* sad that you can’t respect my right to make decisions regarding my own life. It makes me sad that you don’t want to be a part of the exmormon community.”

Elder Burnett’s eyebrows furrowed. He looked at Elder Clayton a moment and then turned back to me. “My biggest fear is that you’re going to regret your decision one day, maybe ten or twenty or thirty years from now. You’re going to regret leaving the Church.”

I put the copy of the Book of Mormon they’d given me on the coffee table in front of them. “I’m really worried you’re going to regret staying,” I said. “You’re going to wake up one day and realize you wasted your life and you’ll never get those years back.”

Elder Burnett’s frown was more pronounced now. He almost looked angry. “Didn’t you used to have a testimony?” he asked. “Can you honestly tell me you didn’t?”

“Didn’t you used to believe in Santa Claus?” I countered. “Can you honestly tell me you didn’t?”

Elder Burnett looked completely stumped. There was a silence of what seemed to me thirty seconds or more. Finally, I said, “You understand that it all works both ways, don’t you,

Elder? I can use every one of your arguments leveled against me against you.” I shook my head. “But I don’t want to. Like I said, if you find meaning in what you believe and it makes your lives better, then by all means, keep believing.”

Elder Burnett picked up the Book of Mormon and absentmindedly tapped his fingers on the cover. “I have one more question,” he said softly. He took a deep breath and then asked, “Are you happy?”

If I told him the truth, I realized, it was admitting he was right. But what did it matter if he left here with a faith-promoting story about how his unrepentant investigator admitted that life without the Church was unhappy? “Not especially,” I said. “But I wasn’t happy as a Mormon, either, which is why I left in the first place.”

“Are you sure you didn’t leave because you wanted to sin?”

At that moment, I caught Elder Burnett casting the briefest of glances at my crotch, and I *knew*. “Elder,” I said, employing the same testimony voice I still remembered perfectly well how to use, “the Spirit is telling me that you’re gay, and that I should help you leave the Church.” I’d told him only a moment ago I didn’t care if he stayed, and I still didn’t, but I couldn’t resist showing him how his tactics felt when they were used against him.

Elder Burnett’s mouth fell open, and Elder Clayton jumped away from his companion a couple of inches. I never approved of outing people and now regretted what I’d said. I should have just shown them to the door and let them feel they’d “won.”

“Br-Brother Lawrence, the Spirit is telling me to invite you to church this Sunday. Will you come?”

“Elder Burnett,” I returned, “I’m going to a party with a dozen gay friends on Saturday evening. Will you come?”

Elder Burnett stood up without another word, grabbed his companion’s shoulder, and pushed him toward the door. They left without even saying goodbye.

Well, perhaps I *had* been a bit of a prick. I could try blaming it on my heartbreak, but it was probably just me. Maybe Lamar was right to leave. If my “dramatic change in life circumstances” made me susceptible to adjusting my life in any way, maybe I should start seeing a therapist or life coach.

It was Wednesday evening, so I sat through a few reruns of *The Big Bang Theory*, staying up late enough to watch the new episode of Samantha Bee’s *Full Frontal*. She didn’t seem very funny tonight. It was hard to laugh when the world seemed to be falling down around your ears.

Yet another forest fire started in BC the next day, adding to the smoke. It was so thick even hundreds of miles south that I couldn’t see the Seattle skyline. Buildings only a few blocks away looked like they were enveloped in fog. I spent the next couple of days focused solely on my work. I was going to help make the world a better place, and I was going to do it through science.

When I returned home from work Friday, I found Elder Burnett sitting on my front step. Elder Clayton was nowhere to be seen.

I really hadn't meant to spark a faith crisis. Losing one's belief system wasn't so terribly different from losing a limb. I still felt phantom pain all the time. And it wasn't so terribly different from the realization that global warming was more than an opinion. When there was a warm, pleasant day in early spring, one couldn't simply enjoy it without realizing all that it portended.

"Come in, Elder," I said, unlocking the door.

"It's Dirk," he clarified.

I nodded, directing him back to the sofa while I changed out of my work clothes. Then I grabbed us both a cold Coca-cola. He sipped his and sighed. "So?" I asked.

"You know perfectly well what happened," he said, but without any bitterness.

"Why don't you tell me?" I pressed.

"Well, I *am* gay, and you really forced me to face that for the first time. Then, too, I was upset that my plan hadn't worked."

"Your plan?"

"I read your editorial in the *Salt Lake Tribune* a couple of weeks ago about gay rights for Mormons, revealing all that personal information about you, and I saw in your bio you lived in Seattle, so since I was here I looked you up. I figured I could try to psyche you out." He shrugged. "But that obviously didn't go very well."

Clever young man, I thought.

“I wanted to bring you back to the Church. I figured if I could bring back a gay Mormon, maybe that would help make up for being gay myself. Besides, I wanted a good story to tell the other missionaries, to tell my parents, to tell my kids one day.” He paused, looking at the floor. “I don’t have any *real* faith-promoting stories. I don’t think it’s such a sin to have wanted just one.”

I laughed. One could laugh, of course, without being happy.

“So what now?” I asked.

“I called my parents and told them I wanted to come home. They said they wouldn’t pay for my ticket, that if I wanted to come home, I had to get a job in Seattle and pay my own way back.”

“Lucky you weren’t in El Salvador,” I said.

“Can I stay with you until I find a job?”

For the first time, I realized that this young man would be about the age of my own son if I’d ever had any kids. “Sure,” I said. “I’ve just got the one bedroom, but you can sleep on the sofa.”

“Thanks, Jesse.”

Well, I didn’t want him calling me Dad, did I? “Do you need to go back to your apartment and get anything?”

He nodded. “It’s not much, but I’ll need the extra shirts and my Preparation Day clothes.”

I grabbed my keys. “I’ll drive.”

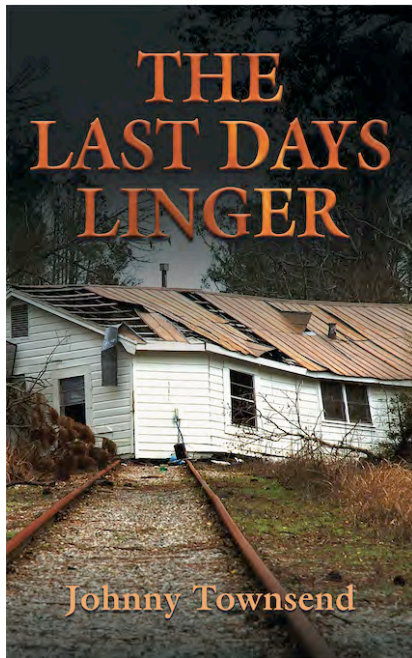
“Thanks,” he said again. “And Jesse?”

“Yes?”

“Is it really okay if I come to the party with you tomorrow night?”

I laughed, and I did actually feel a little happy this time. “Always follow the Spirit,” I said, clapping him on the back. “Always follow the Spirit.”

He smiled, and we went outside and climbed into the car. I turned on the air conditioner, and we set off together through the haze.



The scriptures tell us that in the Last Days, wickedness will increase upon the Earth. When the Mormon Church sees a rise in the number of gay members, they believe the end is upon them. But sometimes, being gay provides just the right ingredient to create saints.

The Last Days Linger

by Johnny Townsend

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