

# The Interview

*John Bennion*



Tom looked at the sweat shining in the palms of his hands. Wiping them on his slacks, he opened the door into the stake president's office and sat in a chair against the wall. A man behind a desk placed a paper onto a stack, stretched his chin upward while he unbuttoned his top button, and pulled his shirt open at the collar. He glanced at Tom over his glasses. "You here to see President Williams?"

"Temple recommend," said Tom. He touched his pocket.

The man nodded toward the door marked "High Council." "They're still going strong." He stood and leaned across his desk, his hand extended. "I'm Brother Clark."

Tom rose to shake Brother Clark's hand. "Tom Mathews," he said and sat in his chair again.

Brother Clark glanced at the clock. "Not much longer." He leaned back in his chair. "Actually, they've been improving. Their meetings only go over a half-hour now." He lifted another paper from the stack on his left. "They've got too much work to do."

Tom rubbed the place above his right temple where the hair was thinning. Then he stood and walked to the bulletin board. There was a calendar with a picture of the Provo Temple at night. Next to it was a Happiness-Is-Family-Home-Evening sign.

"You're getting married, right?"

"Yes," said Tom. "How did you guess?"

"President Williams mentioned it when he got your call." He wrote something on a paper. "When's the happy day?"

"The first of next month." Tom walked back to his chair and sat down again, pulling at his pant legs where his garments were creeping up.

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Brother Clark took off his glasses and stretched back, his hands behind his head. "President Williams said something about this being the one he'd been waiting for. It's a joy for him to see good marriages happen. Used to be your bishop, didn't he?"

"Before my mission." Tom put his hand to his front shirt pocket and took out his recommend. "I was his priests' quorum assistant once." He looked at his new bishop's signature; underneath was the blank for the stake president's.

"They don't make them much better than him." Brother Clark pointed a thumb toward the meeting room.

Tom nodded, frowning. "Dad said he's aged quite a bit."

"Especially since he's been stake president," Brother Clark said. "I've watched a lot of people come in here. They talk to him, then they leave, and go on with their lives. They don't see him drag himself home after a night of interviews." Brother Clark stood to reach more papers from a file cabinet. "The worst on him are the young people, I mean, the ones just back from their missions. They come in looking like they've just walked out of a seminary filmstrip, but later I read in the paper, 'Marriage to be performed in the home of the parents of the bride.' I wish they could see how he looks after they leave."

Tom rose and walked to the door leading out. "I'm a little thirsty," he said, shutting the door behind him. Out in the hall he bent over the fountain, then turned to look into his old ward's trophy case. Some of the awards had his name engraved on them. "100% Attendance." Bishop Williams had given him that one. "Aspen Valley Woodlore Contest — 1st Place." "Stake Basketball Champions." These too, had been won under Bishop Williams's direction. Next to the trophies was a colored map of the world with pins stuck where missionaries were. None were in France, his old mission. He tried to find Fontainebleau and couldn't.

He walked down the hall to the priests' old classroom. The sun had shone through the east window, pleasantly warm on Sunday mornings. Bishop Williams had planned camping trips with the quorum in this room and told stories from his mission. Tom had anticipated his own.

Bishop Williams taught them about the gospel, waving his arms and laughing, scrawling words and pictures across the blackboard, making his quorum stand and repeat memorized verses. "The first principles and ordinances of the gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance. . . ."

Tom turned back toward the office, pushed into the restroom, and washed and dried his hands. He watched himself in the mirror, then flicked off the light. The fan died with a rattle and he returned to the hall.

He looked out through the front door at his car; he could leave now. Standing by the water fountain, he touched his stomach where it was tight and took a deep breath. Then he shook his head and turned back to the office.

He waited at the door, listening. Finally he heard voices and went in. George Peterson, a high councilman, turned when the door opened. "Tom!" He reached for the younger man's hand, drawing him close with his other hand on Tom's back. "It's been awhile; we were happy to hear the good

news.” Tom nodded and returned the handshake quickly. He turned away to look through the door into the high council room, seeing the stake president still talking to several high councilors, smiling and gesturing. Tom looked at the lines in his face, at the shoulders, sloping more than Tom remembered. President Williams saw him through the doorway and beckoned Tom in.

“This is Tom Mathews, one of the best ever to come up through the Aaronic Priesthood. Brother Gilger, Brother Christensen,” President Williams said, nodding to the other men. “Yes, Tom’s finally decided to settle down and start building the kingdom.” He beamed at the others. Tom smiled briefly, then moved back, waiting until the president was finished. They walked together past the clerk into President William’s office.

The older man closed the door and they stood facing each other. He put his large hands on Tom’s shoulders. “You’re looking good. It was a joy to hear your news.” Tom hesitated, then laid both hands nervously on the president’s arms.

“Well now,” President Williams sat behind his desk, “let’s have the whole story. How did you meet —” he looked at a piece of paper on his desk — “Carolyn?”

“At institute. We had the same class and the teacher asked us to be on this committee together.”

“Oh, a little match-making, eh?” Tom didn’t smile. The president looked at him. “Well, you know this can’t be final until I pass judgment. That’s what we agreed, wasn’t it?” He smiled across at Tom.

The young man nodded, holding his hands tight against his knees. He looked straight at President Williams, silently. The smile faded from President Williams’s face. He leaned forward, picking up a pen from his desk and turning it in his fingers.

“We kind of lost touch with you clear out in Denver.”

Tom nodded.

“You worked for your dad’s old partner out there, didn’t you? Ah . . . what was his name?”

“Monte Daniels.”

“Oh, yes. Lived in our stake awhile.” The president leaned back, talking easier now. “Cement contractor, isn’t he?”

“I tied iron for him.”

“Then when you came back you met your fiancée at school?”

“Yes.”

The president folded his hands across his middle. There was silence. He stuck his finger into his collar and pulled on it, then leaned forward again. “Something wrong about the wedding?”

“Yes.”

The clock whirred.

“You want to talk?”

“Yes.”

Silence. The president rubbed his forehead. “You have cold feet, Tom?”

“No.”

President Williams turned his chair to one side. "Did you get involved?" Tom was quiet.

"You know you can be forgiven for that if you have." The president turned suddenly to Tom. "Did you get sexually involved?"

Tom shook his head. "No."

Brother Clark's chair squeaked in the outer room.

"I don't think I can do it." Tom looked at his hands.

"Get married?"

"Yes." Tom looked up. "You asked me if I'd slept with Carolyn. I wish I had."

"What? What did you say?"

"I wish I had. If I'd done that, I could repent and then go on. It'd be over then. But I can't repent of what I am."

"What you are? I don't —" The older man pushed his hand along the side of his face and up through his hair. "Maybe if you'll just tell me exactly what's happened." He put his hands together on the desk.

"It started on my mission," said Tom.

"What did?"

Tom opened his mouth, then shut it.

"Something happened on your mission?"

Tom let his breath go out. "I had a junior companion once who wasn't — ah —. He didn't get up on time, didn't study, didn't like to go out. Home-sick." Tom looked up at President Williams then back at the corner of the desk. "I talked him out of going home every week for a month. Every night I prayed that he would stay. I don't even know why I did it." Tom felt his face and ears grow hot. "We fasted one Sunday. After church we went up on this hill outside of town. I prayed, then he prayed. He stayed on his knees a long time then started telling me how he was going to work harder and a lot of things like that." Tom looked up. "It made me feel glad," he said, his voice thick.

"I imagine it would," said President Williams frowning.

"That night after prayer, I lay in bed. I just kept looking at him. When I thought he was asleep, I got out of bed and prayed again. Then I went over and stood by his bed and —" Tom looked at his hands.

"Go on."

"It was creepy. I got this idea of blessing him. Of putting my hands on him and blessing him. So I knelt down and I did." Tom's voice was shaking but he didn't take his eyes off the president.

President Williams spoke slowly. "You loved your companion and had been through quite an experience with him. Be careful not to misinterpret what happened. I don't see —"

"What was wrong was how I felt. I was warm all over and I couldn't move my hands. I just kept —"

"Touching him," the president finally said.

"Yes." Silence. "I touched him."

"Where did you touch him?" the president asked, looking out the window.

"On the chest." Tom put both his hands on his own chest.

"He didn't wake up?"

"I almost hoped he would, but I thought he didn't. I was wrong. The next day while he was studying, I walked up behind him and put my hands on his shoulders. He jumped up and shouted, 'Don't ever do that again!' That week I was transferred to the mission home."

"Are you sure you were transferred because of what happened?"

"I think so. When I first got there, the mission president gave me a long interview. No questions. Just talked. About how nice it was to come home at night to a wife and children. He told me about seeing his wife pregnant with their first child. 'It was the greatest thrill of my life,' he said."

President Williams rubbed his eyes.

"At the end he was really serious. He said that some elders got weird ideas and were sent home. He said that it's a waste because if they'd just control themselves until they were home, even if they did have powerful tendencies, then they could get married to a good woman and that would settle them."

"Maybe he was jumping to a conclusion about you."

"No he wasn't," Tom said quickly.

"Maybe you're jumping to a conclusion about yourself."

"No." Tom moved forward on his seat. "After I was in the mission home, I started thinking, fitting some things together."

"Like what?"

"Once before my mission, a bunch of us were riding around after Mutual. We ended up parking at the reservoir. I was sitting next to Stacy Bingham and I knew she wanted me to kiss her, so I did." Tom frowned. "It wasn't anything like I thought it would be."

"You didn't like it?"

"I pushed her away. She said she wanted to go home."

The president smiled, then stopped. Tom hurried on. "Another time was when I was much younger, you remember, when we lived next to Sweeny Hansen." Tom's face was red and he watched the president as he talked. "One day I was playing out back and Sweeny was in his garden. He stopped to urinate and saw me watching through the fence. He came over laughing. He didn't do his pants up. He said something. I can't remember now, but I can still see him standing there. I could never stop thinking about it."

President Williams looked at Tom a moment, then spoke slowly. "I don't want to minimize what you've said, but you've confessed to me, and a lot of young men are confused about themselves as they grow up. It passes."

"Bishop, I'm thirty years old."

They both waited. "Have there been other times then?" President Williams asked.

"Yes."

Silence.

"Like what?"

Silence.

“You need to tell me.” The president waited. He turned in his chair. “Does Carolyn know any of this?”

“No. I tried a few times but I never could figure out how to say it.”

“Do you think she could handle it?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you think you have a problem, how come you got engaged?”

Tom was silent.

“Tell me how it happened, Tom.”

“I told you we were in the same class. So we started studying together.” Tom looked up. “I liked to talk to her. It’s really hard to talk to most people, but we could go on for hours about anything. I just enjoyed knowing her. But then she started doing things like taking my hand, holding my arm against her while we walked somewhere. I hated it.” Tom swallowed. “But what could I do? I couldn’t say, ‘Please get your hand off me.’ Once I just said we should break things off. Then every time I went into the institute, she was there. She didn’t understand. It was like slapping her face every time I passed her without saying anything. So I stopped going to institute. But then my bishop called me in. After that I went back. I saw her and we talked; we started doing our homework together again. She thought it meant something. Instead of being easy like before, it seemed like she expected something.”

“It’s called wanting to get married.”

Tom didn’t smile. “Later our institute teacher called me in. ‘You know Carolyn loves you,’ he told me. Then he started talking about all the missionaries who come home and wait for the perfect girl. They get too fussy and then they’re thirty and not married. He thought I didn’t want to marry her because of her looks.” Tom hesitated. “It started me wondering. Maybe I was confused. Maybe if we went ahead and got married, things would work out, so I proposed.”

“Do you think she’s pretty?”

Tom looked at the floor. “I guess so,” he said. “But I feel only friendship for her. When she tries to get close, I feel uncomfortable.”

“It begins with friendship.” The president frowned.

“I know that, but don’t you see?” A bead of sweat ran down Tom’s face. “I enjoyed her as a friend and I like her as well as anyone I’ve met, but I can’t marry her.”

“Just because you’re not sure you like girls?” The president gripped the side of his desk then sat back down. “Tom, you’re like a son to me, and I don’t want to see you hurt. If she’s the fine girl you seem to think she is, love could grow.”

“Sexual love?” Tom asked. “Do you believe that would grow?” He slumped back in his chair. “I don’t anymore.”

“If all you’ve done is what you’ve told me, then —”

“Then it would be great.” Tom stared at the wall.

“Something happened since your mission?”

Tom spoke slowly. “You remember how I was working for Dad right after my release?”

“Yes.”

“Well, maybe three months after I came home I got this letter from an elder who had been in my mission. He said he was living in Salt Lake and couldn’t we get together and talk about old times. It surprised me. I hardly knew him. Later I figured out why he wanted to talk to me. By ‘old times’ he meant my experience with my junior companion.”

The president shifted his recommend book.

“Anyway, I’d go up to Salt Lake every week for doors or lumber or something. Well, the next time, I decided what the heck, I’d stop in. At the very least we’d talk a little French and then I’d head back.”

Tom watched the president as he talked. “His place was just northeast of Temple Square. One of those old narrow, two-story houses made over into a bunch of apartments. When he answered the door, his hair was long. His shirt wasn’t buttoned and he didn’t have his garments on. Three other guys were sitting in chairs inside. They smiled and nodded, but he didn’t invite me in. He just said we should go get something to eat. We went to a restaurant, and all the time talked about the job he’d had in Los Angeles and what was wrong with the Church.

“He’d forgotten his wallet, so I paid for the food. Then he thought we should go to this place for some music and dancing. It had been quite awhile since I’d just gone out and had fun, so I went along. It was downstairs under these old apartments and the only sign was a faded apple on a board outside. Some of the girls were dancing with girls and guys with guys.” Tom stopped and waited.

The president looked at his hands, then he looked up at Tom. “You stayed?” he said finally.

“Yes. I stopped in the doorway but Rick — that was the elder’s name — he pulled me on down.” Tom was talking quickly now. “I wanted to get out of there at first; but I was curious, I guess. Rick, well, he moved around, talking and having a good time.”

“How long did you stay?” The president’s voice wavered.

“A couple of hours. Rick would touch my hand and then he’d lay his arm on my back.” Tom looked up. “It seemed all right in that place for him to do that.”

Tom could see President Williams trying to control his frown. Something burned in Tom’s stomach.

“I went to see him every week for a while when I went in for Dad. Then I started getting uneasy about the whole deal. I usually paid when we went to eat. He was always trying to get me to come and stay with them. Rick said they were almost out of money and that they needed to know if I was staying or not, so they’d know what to do. I felt bad for them but I left anyway.” Tom stopped. “They took turns with each other.”

“Did you?”

“No.”

“Why did you leave?”

“One day we went over to the community center to play tennis; when we were finished, one of the guys got hold of my garments while I was showering.

He was waving them like a flag, trying to make me feel foolish for wearing them.” Tom felt disgust flood him. “I grabbed my things and left. I realized that I couldn’t wear my garments and still mix with people like that.”

“You’ve never told any of this to Carolyn?”

“Not to anyone.”

“Think again about how she’d take it if you told her.”

“It won’t work, President.” Tom slid forward on his seat. “Oh, I think she’d forgive me. Or she might think she could reform me. Maybe she could, but I can’t handle the thought of any pressure that way. One time this girl came to Rick’s apartment. She said that she knew she could change me if I’d just give her the chance.”

President Williams rubbed a hand down across his face. He held his fist closed on the top of his desk.

“Carolyn just wouldn’t get it,” said Tom. “It was hard for me not to go back to Salt Lake. I had to keep away from bus stations too, because I’d see people waiting there and I’d want to talk to them because I knew what they were waiting for. What would life be like for her, married to me?”

“Have you ever gone for professional help?”

“In Denver. I was making a lot of money and I saw all kinds of counselors. Two years. Some told me that because Mom and Dad had only one child I had unnatural desires. Some said my mother was dominant in our house so I was weird. Then there were those who said that my urges were perfectly natural. They wanted to arrange contacts for me.” Tom felt sweat dripping down his back. The president had put one hand to his forehead and was leaning forward, elbow down against his desk.

“I knew I could never be happy that way, knowing what I know about the Church, but like I said, I’d still walk to the bus station or through the park and talk to the people there. I didn’t get involved with any of them though, I just talked and felt lonely. Other doctors gave me shocks while I looked at pictures. Then some gave me chemicals to make me vomit when I got excited.”

The president cleared his throat again. “We have some professionals in the Church who have developed certain methods.”

Tom started to say something, then he stopped and said quietly, “I’d be glad if you helped me with them. But I don’t think they’ll do any good.” He thought. “Do you?” he asked.

The president was silent. “Ah, sometimes they help,” he said, looking down at his hands. “They aren’t always successful.”

“I don’t think there’s a cure.” Tom realized he was talking too loudly and he softened his voice. “I am the person I am. What I need to do is to learn to accept and live with it. I can learn to control it so that I don’t bother anyone with my strangeness.”

“Do you think you can hold your breath for the rest of your life?”

Tom said nothing. The president cleared his throat. Then he reached over and closed his recommend book.

“I had a chance with Carolyn until just being friends wasn’t enough for her.” Tom sat back and started again, trying to keep his voice level. “I’ve



tried to break it off, but I couldn't pass her without seeing pain in her face. What can I tell her? I like her. I've never talked with anyone like her. But I still look twice when I see certain people walking on the street." Tom felt his body tightening again.

"Have you made any contacts since you came back?"

"No! And I never will."

"You've given up on just going through with the marriage?"

"I can't. When I was seeing Rick, we went to this sauna place. It was really just a cover for men who wanted to get together. Rick went there to make contacts, but I just went along. Most of the men were forty or so. One time we were leaving. We'd walked about three blocks away when we saw this guy getting out of his car. He was in the sauna every week, really friendly. When he was about twenty yards from his car, he saw us. I raised my hand to him, but he ducked his head and hurried past us. Then he went scurrying down the street looking both ways to see if anyone saw me wave at him."

President Williams let his breath out.

"Then we passed his car. It was a station wagon with a briefcase in the front seat. There was a lady's hair brush and a baby bottle next to it. On the back bumper was a Happiness-Is-Family-Home-Evening sticker. Rick laughed, 'There's somebody who has his cake and eats it too,' he said." Tom sat looking at his hands. "I could never live like that. I couldn't be that kind of a hypocrite. But I'm never going back to them."

The president nodded; they were quiet. Tom took out his recommend and pushed it across the desk to President Williams, who folded it. Tom sat looking at the floor. Then he rose and walked to the door, stopping with his hand on the knob.

"What will you tell her?" The president moved wearily to the window, his back to Tom. Tom could see that his shoulders were bent.

"Just that we can't get married. We haven't sent any announcements yet, so we'll only have to tell our families."

"It's going to be hard on her."

"I know." Tom wiped his hand across his eyes.

"She'll want to know why. You can't break it off without giving her any reason at all." The president slumped into his chair.

Tom's throat and chest were tight; he felt a buzzing in his head.

The president started to say something.

"God, it scares me," Tom said. "Can't you see it scares me? How can I be wrong my whole life? You know sometimes when I'm out at my parents' place and I get up in the morning, I forget. It feels great, walking around without thinking about it. I've read nothing and heard nothing that says I'd have a good chance of changing by getting married. Isn't that right?"

The president nodded. "Probably," he said.

"I've thought about it and I don't want to be that way. I don't want to do that to her. After what I've told you, could you sign my recommend — want me to get married?"

The president didn't move.

"I think of being with her . . . after we're married. What if . . . what if I can't respond to her. Maybe I won't be able to love her physically." Tom's cheeks were wet.

The president's face was white. Tom, looking at him, knew that he saw the depth of Tom's fear. The president was blinking his eyes quickly.

"I could stand getting married except for that," said Tom.

"You can't give up," the president whispered.

"What am I going to do? You said a minute ago I was like your son. So I am your son. I'm a homosexual. Your son. When I touched Rick, I felt good about it. Sexually good. When Carolyn touches me that way, my skin crawls."

Tom sat down, his hands clenched. He felt his neck tightening again. Tears ran down his face. "I feel like an insect pinned to a card. I can't do. I can't move. I've prayed and prayed and I feel 'You're going to be all right.' And that is good, but it doesn't tell me what to do."

The president looked straight at Tom.

"What *am* I supposed to do?" said Tom.

The president didn't take his eyes from Tom.

"I can't do it. I can't do anything."

The president waited. Tom walked to the window and leaned his face against the cool glass. Neither spoke.

"It's better with it out." Tom said finally. "I waited too long to talk to someone." His shoulders started shaking. He looked back at the president, saw him blinking quickly, his face twisting.

"What are you going to do?" President Williams asked.

Tom walked to the door. "I'll tell her. I'll just tell her all of it."

"What then?"

Tom shook his head. "Then I'll probably be back." He started to open the door.

"Tom," President Williams said.

Tom looked back.

"Remember, you're still my son."