

The Man at the Chapel

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I WROTE TO MY MISSION PRESIDENT for the last time almost two years ago during the final week of my mission. I think I expressed my love to him and my gratitude for the example of faith and commitment he and his wife had shown me. I was sincere, and I believe I still am when I assure myself these emotions have not changed; but I am disturbed at the resentful thoughts of him that return more frequently now than during the first eighteen months I was home. My resentment troubles me.

I know I am making him a scapegoat; he too readily personifies my ambivalence toward eighteen months of excruciating confrontations with myself. I know I don't understand the positions he had to take in order to meet the responsibilities of his calling. Still, too many faces haunt me — too many images return to me that seem to have no relevance in my present life. The pain and dilemmas come back at the times I most want to forget them, and he looms behind them all.

I don't know what happened to the disheveled man and woman who knocked on the locked doors of the church foyer in Jonesboro, a few miles south of Atlanta. By chance all of us were there — it was a Tuesday morning, and we had interviews with President. I was more concerned with the flaws in my companion than with the welfare of penniless travelers or even of our few investigators. President must have endured far too many complaints like mine. I can't remember what remedies he had for an ailing companionship; I hadn't wanted to blame myself enough to listen.

I do remember the dull faces that peered in the door as my companion spoke to President in the Sunday School room. Elder Lessee let the couple in. The man explained as he stared at the carpet that he had been in Florida looking for a job which had not panned out. He and his family had stayed longer than they had anticipated, had not planned to be jobless so long, and

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needed just enough money to get back home to Wisconsin. If we would lend them the money, the man said, he would pay it back when he resumed his former employment there. I wondered how long it took to drive from Georgia to Wisconsin. The woman glanced obliquely at the trophy case as she excused herself to return to a crying child in the car.

I realized I hadn't seen a space for contributions to wayfaring families on the tithing slips, but I knew that many of the local Protestant congregations provided relief funds and even sleeping facilities in their churches. I guessed that such services were necessary functions of Christianity in the mission field.

I assured the man that we could help them, he only needed to wait for President, who emerged a few minutes later with my tearful companion. He looked surprised at the unexpected visitor who stood, with his hands in his pockets, by the door. I leaped up to make officious introductions, then sat by my companion in a burst of exemplary righteousness. As I explained the situation to her, President withdrew farther into the hall with the man, then sent him back to the foyer until he could finish interviews.

Sister Goodliffe and I tried to make conversation with the man and Elder Ryan pulled some pamphlets from the missionary rack and asked if he would like to read. The man smiled politely and said no thanks, he thought he'd better wait in the car with his wife, leaving us to ponder the cosmic influences that must have led them to the doors of the true church at this hour.

When President emerged with Elder Lessee, we waited expectantly to see Mormon welfare in action. Instead, President told us to go home and he'd see what he could do. I asked if we could all give five or ten dollars (my father wouldn't mind, I knew), to get the family at least a few more miles toward home. He told us it wouldn't be necessary. I asked if we had some kind of fund for these occasions, like the Baptists did, and he said no. Not much could be done if they weren't members of the Church. People did this too often, taking advantage of charities.

So we left him with them. I remember a grimy toddler staring out their car window as we pulled away from the parking lot. I am quite sure that President must have given them help or money himself. I hope so. I really wish I *knew* that he did.

I began to understand over the next ten months how naive I was to believe my church could relieve the poor and hungry of the South, let alone the whole country or the Third World. I began to see that giving one of my consecrated mission dollars to every unfortunate person I met would soon make me as penniless as any of them. Sometimes I pondered the potential justice in relinquishing all that I had, but I never gave everything away. I still had enough to buy groceries every week. I did not learn on my mission, except maybe vicariously, what it really meant to go without.

So why am I angry with my mission president and the Macon Ward when I think of Mary Johnson? I hardly knew her. The sisters before us had taught her, and the elders had baptized her in spite of the reluctance of the bishop and the ward mission leader, Brother Dickey. He had told those sisters, just as he had told us, that they shouldn't tract in the "Projects." Those areas were

simply too dangerous, and converts there only brought welfare and inactivity problems into the ward.

True, but what could those sisters have done? When they called at a home where Mary worked, the lady of the house let them in, listened for a few minutes, and let them out again. Mary overheard, asked for one of the pamphlets they left, and called the sisters that night from a laundromat pay phone.

She lived in a hot, barren Project apartment with her three youngest children and was frequently visited by her grown children when they lacked a place to stay. She had no electricity or phone. She had sacrificed those services to pay the gas bills, more concerned about cooking food and warming the apartment in winter than lighting the three squalid rooms. In summer the rooms stayed relatively light until almost ten o'clock if the family unlocked and opened the doors and windows. Although the neighborhood crime rate was high, Mary felt safe as long as it was light.

I could hardly make myself believe, when I met her, that Mary was the woman who had, of her own initiative, called the sisters. She seemed stupid and sullen at first. Her eyes were dull and averted as we introduced ourselves as the "new sisters." She let us in without a word. The conversation was strained. I felt her spirit momentarily, though, when Sister Alder brought out the lariat her family had sent from home. We went outside to watch her rope the kids and garbage cans. Mary hung back in the door, embarrassed at the attention we "white girls" were attracting among the neighbors, but the children were so delighted that Mary finally dropped her inhibitions and laughed, long and rich and free. She met our eyes a few times after that and walked us out to the car when we could no longer see in the apartment.

I still have difficulty believing that Mary ever summoned the nerve to commit to the demands of the restored gospel. In her case, the commitment meant more than the tithing mite she could pay from each meager paycheck. It meant she had to endure the stares of her neighbors each Sunday as she got into the car of an uncomfortable member of the ward missionary committee for a ride to a white church, to a chapel finer than any building she had ever been in. It meant sitting alone because even the best-willed members felt too foreign to approach her. It meant clinging to the always temporary sister missionaries for support, understanding more with each new pair why we could do so much more easily than the "real" Church members boost her in her baptismal promises.

Mary had shown so little trust and confidence in us that I was surprised when she was waiting for us one Sunday, lurking like a backward teenager in the foyer's alcove. She looked right at me and said, "Sistah Anderson, I got to talk to y'all."

We couldn't find an empty room. Finally, we went through the stage door and sat on the steps in the dark. I could see Sister Alder's pale face in the dimness but nothing of Mary except her eyes turned toward me. They glowed with tears and disappeared as Mary leaned into my arms and sobbed for almost five minutes before she could speak.

She simply wasn't surviving financially. The paycheck she brought home from full-time housework wouldn't even pay the gas bill. Her twelve-year-old daughter wanted to come to church with her, but she didn't have a dress to wear. Cedric was on the free lunch program at the elementary school: without that she probably couldn't feed him enough. Her oldest son had left his girlfriend and had come home to stay. She didn't know for how long. He didn't have a job.

I thought of the bishop and the ward mission leader and wondered if they would find the time and money to help beyond the obligatory tokens. I wondered if either would have the self-control to spare us a sermon. I felt helpless as Mary pulled herself together and looked away in humiliation. We all went into sacrament meeting, late, and sat together on a back bench. I couldn't take the bread and water. I felt too guilty, sick at the luxuries of my race and geography. The woman who spoke talked about decorating our homes so they would be beautiful places for our families. I couldn't believe it. I don't remember what her husband discussed.

Mary asked us to drive her home after the closing prayer. We protested briefly, hoping the next two meetings would offer her more, but gave in, breaking mission rules to take her home in our Church-owned car. We returned and sat miserably through the rest of the meetings.

Later, at home, I couldn't summon the energy to pray for strength. Perhaps writing a letter to President that day was a prayer, in my mind. At least I knew he existed; I had seen him and shaken his hand. Maybe I hoped he would have better access to an answer than I did. Maybe I couldn't understand the answer, though — I didn't hear back from either him or God. I didn't even hear whether the ward found any solutions, because I was transferred five days later.

I left some of my clothes behind for Mary's daughter — a meaningless sacrifice, since I had gained weight and they hardly fit anymore. I don't know whether Mary ever got them or whether she ever brought her daughter to church. I don't think I would feel differently if I knew what had happened. Nothing will change that Sunday.

Trying to explain my emotions now won't alter what happened. I was only a spectator then, even when I was drawn in and petitioned by the actors. Now I'm only an outdated witness, accusing authority and deity of callousness with only a dim knowledge of any higher operations. I know that, at least in part, my anger was fundamentally rooted in sign seeking. I wanted miracles that would make my mission president and all the hierarchies he represented as reassuring as my father, who performed wonders without price or prerequisite every day in my "real" life, two thousand miles away. I wanted salvation from ugliness and poverty the way my father provided salvation from freeway breakdowns, untyped college papers, and unpaid expenses. I didn't want to understand a God who did not demonstrate the same reliability for his daughter Mary — or for me.

Or for Melanie, the girl I met in Mableton with my last companion, Sister Laurence. I sometimes feel an urge to call my mission president and confess

the lies I told him that month. I'm almost certain he knew something of them. Since he never pressed us to confirm his doubts, I have hope that we had his partial, uncertain approval. However, I don't think he knew the extent of my blatant disobedience in a situation that could have threatened our lives and that troubled my companion's conscience and peace of mind even more than my own.

Jim, a young man from the Smyrna Ward, called early one morning with a referral. He stammered through a description of his night shift as a convenience store security officer. Melanie, a girl who worked at a store on Fulton Industrial Boulevard in one of the most crime-ridden areas of the city, had called for his help when threatened by an exhibitionist. During the two hours he spent with her, he brought up the subject of the Church, to which he had belonged for six months. He asked us to visit her.

We did, of course. We pulled up to her apartment building with some trepidation. It was in a bad part of town, and we had to enter a dark, filthy hallway to find her door. Melanie answered in her nightgown, unconcerned about who saw her that way. She let us in with no questions and invited us to sit on her grimy sofa. A two-year-old boy with no diaper peered at us from the kitchen, and a little girl a year younger slept on the floor. After my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I saw a deep welt under Melanie's right eye. Her eye wasn't swollen, but the welt was so dark it was almost black and must have been six or seven days old. I tried not to let it distract me as we talked to her.

We didn't manage much of a discussion. Melanie did most of the talking. She interrupted herself frequently with inanities and digressions, laughing heartily at her own jokes. The two most complete stories she told us were accounts of the exhibitionist the night before and a high school experience in which two Mormon missionaries had nearly succumbed to the enticements she and her girlfriend had offered during a postcurfew joyride.

We had few investigators then, although we had been working hard. We longed for something to replace the hours of fruitless searching and empty report sheets. I knew Sister Laurence and I were both straining to see potential in Melanie. I kept trying to see divine manipulations in the exhibitionist's appearance on the night a Mormon security guard would be free to chat with Melanie, who must, somehow, be more receptive to the gospel than we could discern.

We returned two days later. Melanie was dressed this time, wearing jeans and a T-shirt with an obscene message on it. She was very glad to see us, and we managed to present more of a discussion. She listened intently to our promises that she could have her husband and children forever. She shifted.

"I want the kids, but I sure don't want my husband forever," she said, jarring us with her raucous laugh. "Why do I want to spend forever with a guy who beats the hell out of me?"

Suddenly serious, she told us how she hoped every night he would not come home, how, when he did, he was likely to pound her until she was senseless. He had assaulted and abused both the children. He kept the car keys, drove Melanie to and from work, and each payday picked up her minimum wage

check and kept it. I think of this now and cannot believe she was ignorant and frightened enough to have permitted such a lifestyle, but the world was different there. I was beginning to cower to it almost as much as she did.

My companion and I walked back to the car in silence. I was remembering too many things I had been trying to forget — old acquaintances caught in the same traps: alcohol, drugs, abuse, and neglected children. Desperate lives that fed on pain, misery, and betrayal. Friends who suffered and yet mercilessly betrayed my attempts to help or understand. I wanted to forget we had ever met Melanie before she could feed my disillusionment.

Sister Laurence was dumb with horror and outrage. She had never encountered anything like this. I wanted to explain, to warn her, but I could only smile dimly as she stared at me, her eyes and mouth wide open. Although we still had several things to do that day, none was important enough to keep our minds off Melanie. I called the mission home when we came home for the night, but President was out of town. I talked to his wife, wondering at the naiveté in my voice as I pleaded, “I know it’s not our calling, I know we can’t take care of everybody, but isn’t there anything we can do?”

Her compassion was genuine and immediate. I cried with relief as she assured me that we should try to find help. She told me to call LDS Social Services and assured me that it would be appropriate to call our bishop. She asked me to call her with an update.

The Social Services office was closed for the night, but we called as soon as it opened in the morning. I explained the situation to the secretary. She asked, “Is she a member?”

I reminded her that we were missionaries and that Melanie was one of our investigators.

“Has she been to a state agency?”

I explained that I understood the state could do nothing for the children without knowing their legal entity, and they had no birth certificates.

“Does your bishop know about her?”

I told her no.

“Well, we have to charge twenty-five dollars an hour. Can she pay for that?”

“No.”

“Can your ward finance it?”

I told her thank you, I’d call the bishop.

“Tell him he needs to send us the referral. It has to go through the proper channels.”

I hung up, shaking with anger, and called the bishop. He was at work. I told his wife I would call that evening.

We saw Melanie that day. She woke up to answer the door and looked relieved to see us. We sat down to tell her what we had not yet accomplished but didn’t get through it all before her husband kicked open the door. My heart nearly stopped. Melanie hardened and Sister Laurence looked as though she were going to shrivel where she sat. He stared at us.

“Who’s this?” he demanded.

"The missionaries I told you about." Melanie spoke in a belligerent, toneless drawl.

He looked at my companion, then spun to glare at me.

"Get the hell out of here. Don't come back."

I stood. "Come with us," I said to Melanie. "We'll take the kids."

"No, you'd better go," she answered. Her eyes pushed into mine. She mouthed silently, "I'll call."

We left, brushing past her husband in the doorway, horrified to be abandoning her. He slammed the door behind us. We heard him shouting before we were out of the entry hall.

Unable to concentrate on missionary work, we went home and called the mission office. President was still not back. We tracted halfheartedly until we knew the bishop would be home. He explained with some frustration that he had his hands full with ward members and simply could not stretch himself or the ward welfare fund any further, especially for someone who wasn't a member of the Church.

I believed him, but I couldn't accept his position. My church, my religion, my faith could do nothing for a woman too ignorant and defeated to help herself. I could see no solution to the circumstances that made her what she was or that put her in that position, but I wanted something to get her out, to give her the option, if nothing more to try again.

We didn't have to call President that night. The phone was ringing when we returned to our apartment. I listened to Sister Laurence recounting the details as I changed out of my missionary dress. Her voice was touched with hysteria by the time I returned to the front room. She handed me the receiver. I knew who it was, but still his voice startled me.

President said he understood my concerns and that Melanie's situation was very serious, but he also knew better than I did how dangerous that kind of situation could be. He reminded me of the all-important rule that missionaries not get involved with the personal problems of their investigators. He told us not to see Melanie again.

The questions I'm asking now occurred to me then, but I was too close to the situation to articulate them. The one that seems most obvious now was at that time little more than a dim paradox plaguing me throughout my mission. How could I teach the most fundamental principles of morality and existence without becoming personally involved? Further, how important *was* my safety? I could not risk my own safety without risking my companion's also. We both had families who loved us and worried about us and would suffer if we were hurt. On the other hand, our reverence for gospel forbears is at least partly based on their willingness to transcend mortal fears and serve God in spite of threats and dangers.

We missionaries certainly risked ourselves each time we solicited an invitation into a stranger's house, even in the suburbs. We increased the hazards when we walked and tracted our way through the poorer sections of our area. I'm sure none of our leaders ever guessed the frightening route we drove twice a week, long after dark, through the worst industrial sections of Atlanta to

teach two young boys to read. Still, they did know there were risks. We all hoped that the Spirit would protect us in our righteous purposes. I knew that looking for danger, indulging my passion for adventure through a false sense of supernatural protection, was foolhardy. I did not know where to draw the line between being foolish and exercising faith.

We hadn't asked for Melanie or for the brutalities of her existence. Yet we were there, her only link to a civilized world and, as far as we could see, her only hope for deliverance.

I hung up the phone, went to bed, and stared into the darkness all night. Was God testing my obedience? Or my ability to discern his will? Or did he simply see no other way of helping a defenseless woman and her children?

Melanie called the next night, just as we were leaving to meet an investigator at the church for a homemaking meeting. She was hysterical. Her husband had just gone, leaving Melanie's head spinning from his assault. Both children were screaming in the background. She was afraid the little boy's arm was broken.

Her husband had left his spare car key on the dresser. Melanie wanted us to take her to the warehouse where he worked so she could take the car and leave the state. She didn't know where she would go. I was sick. I told her we could do nothing for at least two hours. She calmed and assured me he would be at work all night. They would be safe until I called.

On the way to the church, Sister Laurence demanded to know what the conversation had been about. I told her, and we were silent for the rest of the ride. Our investigator didn't come. We hung back at the doorways, feeling awkward and alien without a legitimate reason to be there. We examined the stocking reindeer and cotton snowmen with forced enthusiasm, then eased our way out of the cultural hall and into the darkness of the empty chapel. We sat in the center and, without any signal between us, dropped to our knees between the benches and prayed in silence.

I don't know how long it was before I noticed Sister Laurence looking at me. She whispered, "Can we say a prayer together?" She bowed her head and waited for me to speak. I prayed for Melanie and for us. I asked that Melanie's husband be kept all night in the building where he worked, especially when we took her to the car. I prayed the car would start, once we got there, and that we would be forgiven for disobeying our leaders. I prayed for a witness that we should help, that we would know we were doing the right thing.

I stopped, and we both stayed on our knees, pleading silently for an answer. I felt nothing but stubbornness. Sister Laurence followed me out to the car, and we drove home. We loaded everything from the refrigerator into a bag and drove to Melanie's house. She came out to meet us as the headlights flashed across the building, and we went into the apartment to help her carry the whimpering children and the single suitcase to the car. We drove down Fulton Industrial to the warehouse. We turned the headlights off and crept around the lot with only the parking lights until we found her husband's car. Sister Laurence and I each gave her the fifty dollars we kept for emergencies in accordance with the missionary rulebook. Melanie took the groceries and the money

with characteristic flippancy and said, "Well, thanks. I really appreciate this."

She put the children in the long Ford sedan and, after two halting starts, drove away.

We trembled in fear and relief all the way home. We lay awake all night, waiting for Melanie's husband to call, or break down the door, or suddenly appear in the bedroom. We expected, in the morning, to hear from Melanie herself, telling us that she had come back, that the car had broken down, that she had decided to give her husband another chance.

When the phone did ring and we heard President's voice, we were sure that our disobedience had been revealed to him and he was calling with severe chastisement; but his voice was warm, his confidence in our trustworthiness apparently unshaken. I lied to him, telling him that everything had worked out, that Melanie had moved in with her parents in another state, that there was no longer anything to worry about.

We never heard from Melanie again, and we saw nothing of her husband. She may have gone right back to him, one hundred dollars richer and with a few more groceries than usual, or she may have gone straight to another just like him. The further I get from the experience, the more I convince myself she somehow put herself right back into another hopeless situation. I am distant enough from that world now that I can tinge my memories with self-righteousness; I catch myself believing that Melanie's contributions to her own plight somehow made it foolish for us to help. I can see the help we gave her as the futile token it was.

She still comes to me, as Mary does, and the family in Jonesboro, and hundreds of others for whom I could do nothing, who made me hate myself for my blessings and ineffectiveness. President is always there, too, behind them, less distinct and urgent but representing the selective conscience of the enchanted world I live in. I want to reach to him and bury my face in his white shirt, obliterating the spectres around me. I want them to go away and him to stay, but they are too large for my will. They will reverberate, absurdly, in my eternity, and so will he.