

Outsiders

M. J. Young

MY FRIEND JUNIE and I were Utah Mormons. We knew no blacks till we were teenagers. The summer I was sixteen and she eighteen, the Peace Corps hired Dad to train volunteers. It was then that Junie and I were initiated into a larger world.

The PCVs, as we called the trainees, would go to Brazil, provided they got through Dad's program at Alta, Utah. They would have to show basic emotional stability and some mastery of Portuguese—or an aptitude to learn it—before the government would pay their ticket to Rio. For now, the government had paid their room and board at the Wintergreen Hotel, where program directors had covered the walls with pictures of Brazil. In the lobby were posters of Sugar Loaf. At every landing in the stairwell were scenes from Carnival: devils, angels, dancers in sheer yellow gowns; fat Negresses with turbans around their heads and bananas hanging over their faces; floats that looked like orchards. In the cafeteria was a huge image of the *Cristo*—Jesus beckoning, arms outstretched against the sea, unrecovered from crucifixion. "Come on in," he seemed to say. "To my arms. To Brazil." The picture took up half the wall.

I worked around the *Cristo*; Dad had got me a job bussing dishes. The work fit me because I was fat. Junie, my glamorous friend Junie, got the artsy job. She drew pictures for the language classes.

We had a hotel room to ourselves, between two newlywed couples, one white, one black. Above us was the lounge. We could feel the drumbeats of In-na-god-da-da-vida and Fresh Garbage when some

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PCV put a quarter in the jukebox. There was someone who played "Heard It Through the Grapevine" every night, sometimes two or three times. Someone else loved "The Age of Aquarius."

My tastes were not so sophisticated. On the lamp table, I had a picture of Bobby Sherman, the deliciously blue-eyed star of "Here Come the Brides," sassy singer of "Hey Little Woman, Please Make Up Your Mind." I would put Bobby face down when I undressed for bed. Other times, when Junie was using the bathroom or wandering outside, I would kiss Bobby's shiny, back-cover lips. Sometimes, when the PCVs were attending culture classes, I would give the jukebox a quarter for Bobby's song:

Hey, little woman,
Please make up your mind,
You've got to
Come into my world
And leave your world behind.

I imagined swaying hips.

I had never been kissed. Junie had been kissed many times. She said she couldn't possibly count how many, though I begged her to try; and she tried, remembering details of smell and taste and setting. She said the boy who escorted her to the Junior Prom had tried to unbutton her blouse. "He wanted inside," she said.

"Inside?"

"My pants."

I made voodoo lips. "I might like kissing," I said. "But sex sounds icky."

"I wouldn't know," shrugged Junie.

But she seemed to know a man's body all right. She drew a dozen naked men before she liked one enough to write in the Portuguese names for the body parts. She sat on the bed, surrounded by her nudes, labeling everything in a language neither of us understood. *Cabello. Brazo*. Her hair was golden and hip-length. It touched the bed. It touched the naked bodies of her men.

Later, she drew naked women, one for each of her male failures, and matched them up, the best with the best, the worst with the worst. She put my face on one of the women and paired me with a guy whose biceps had turned out square.

"Is that how you picture me?" I said. "With Mr. Robot-arms?"

"It's not you," she insisted, but the likeness was too strong.

"Are you going to save these things or what?" I asked, averting my eyes from their privates.

"Sure. Could be worth money someday. I'm going to autograph them," she said. "Everyone who's kicked out of the Corps will get a pair. Consolation prize, you know? My best work I'm giving to those guys there." She pointed to the wall. On the other side was the black couple.

At night, sometimes, we would listen to them. We put a glass to the wall and took turns pressing our ears against it. We heard them laughing.

Laughing. Silence. Laughing.

Once I said "Icky!" loud enough that Junie clapped her hand over my mouth and whispered, "Shut up!"

The black man had put a sign on their door, which is the only Portuguese phrase I've retained: "*Terra de nunca nunca.*" Never Never Land.

The PCVs were mostly recent graduates of mostly radical universities. They drank beer. They had vats of pungent wine at the Saturday night dances. When Nixon shook Neil Armstrong's hand on the lounge television, the PCVs hissed.

My favorite was David Marx, a gentle, bearded intellectual with wire-rimmed glasses. I heard him tell my father one day that this business of not letting blacks into our Mormon temples was "rather shitty." "You let them join," David said, "but not go to your shrines. It's sort of like not consummating a marriage, isn't it?"

Dad made some response, and David went on, talking about the alleged curse of Cain. He spoke softly; Dad spoke softly. There was love and resistance in their arguing.

Did I mention that I worshipped my father? I did. He was my revered commander, my gentle, omniscient patriarch. When he prayed, he talked to God. Sometimes I felt as if the ceiling would open and angels descend to grant his desires. He prayed for the poor and prayed that his children would grow to empathize with them, to love all nations of the world, to never lose themselves in wealth or lust. He prayed for our prophet, for our missionaries, for the leaders of the nations. He prayed that the Soviet Union would open its doors and let the gospel in. He prayed for the PCVs.

Junie worshipped David Marx. On Saturdays, or after Portuguese lessons and dinner, he took her up into the hills that in winter would be ski slopes but in summer were covered with sego lilies and bluebells and sunflowers. He showed her a waterfall. He kissed her, she told me, the way no one ever had. She did a chalk picture of the waterfall, made it look lacy, surrounded it with dots of pastel that were wildflowers, arched two barely visible rainbows over it. On the grass beside the fall, blurred by its mists, lay a man and a woman, their skin gleaming like chocolate.

"For them?" I asked Junie. I pointed to the wall that divided us from *Terra de Nunca Nunca*.

She shrugged.

The black woman's name was Giselle. Her husband was Adam. Sometimes Giselle talked to me. When I picked up her dishes, she said, "How's my Moh-mon gal?" or "When you joinin' up to the Corps?" She told me once, when we were both in the hall and her husband was using the men's room, about her sunburn.

"Too much time in the pool," she said, pulling her tank top so I could see the rosy-gold line on her shoulder. "Had to sleep unclothed," she said. Her lips were full and burnished. They curved around "unclothed" as though it were a note of music. Her head wagged to some rhythm I could not hear, and I saw that she was testing my innocence. From the lounge, faintly, came croons of betrayal from Marvin Gaye. ("Doncha know, I heard it through the grapevine. Honey, honey, yeeah.")

"I didn't know you could burn," I said to Giselle.

"Honey," said Giselle—at the same instant Marvin Gaye said it—"Honey, ooh, you Moh-mons, you don't know shit 'bout us. Do ya?" She winked playfully, and her hips began to move. Adam came out of the men's room, still zipping up. He left his hand near his crotch as his wife moved to him, slowly, full of music, full of desire.

She laughed the laugh I knew. She said, "My old man didn't mind me naked. Not much. Didja, old man?" Giselle winked at me again. "*Ciao*, Moh-mon," she said. "You sweet li'l thing, you." They moved away from me down the hall, their motion slow, luxurious, painful. They had Afros I wanted to touch.

Junie stayed out late with David, later every night. I listened to Giselle and Adam and kissed Bobby Sherman's slick mouth.

Then, halfway through training, Ernie Kann was hired as a dishwasher, and I fell in love.

Ernie was Mormon too, working to finance his upcoming mission. He owned a red convertible, which he hoped he wouldn't have to sell for his mission but was afraid he might. He had eyes as blue as Bobby Sherman's. And at a Saturday night dance in the lounge, Ernie Kann asked me to "boogie."

I looked at Junie, who was holding David's hand near the wine vat. Junie was mad at me because I hated what she was wearing: a curtain, draped over her right shoulder. I had told her the truth about how she looked—that she was pretending to be Venus. Junie waved, to let me know she had seen me with this boy, but she was mad.

After two dances, Ernie asked if I wanted to jump on the trampoline outside. "It's like flying to heaven," he said and took my hand before I could answer.

The trampoline was barely visible. Its coils glistened in the moonlight.

"Let me jump a minute first," Ernie said. "After all that dancing and stuff, I need to settle down. This settles me down. Maybe it's just the exercise that does it."

His shirt was white, ghostly. He sprang up, arms overhead. "Can you see me?" he said.

"Yes!" I shouted.

"I'm reaching!"

"I see you!"

"God!" he screamed. "GOD!" And again, "GOD!" Leaping up, flying, a rocket—a glorious impotent rocket, launching again and again and again. He was laughing, screaming, dancing in space, then slowing his jumps to little springs. He fell to his stomach and bounced there until he was still. "You probably can't do that," he said. "I mean fall on your—you know—your bosom. At least maybe you shouldn't. You don't want to damage them, right?" Laughing again, he reached out to me. "Come up," he said.

We started small, bouncing. Ernie's hands came around my waist. "Bigger," he said, and I did. I jumped, leapt, soared, higher, higher. We were in sync, Ernie and I, flying together beyond the earth, beyond the support of black canvas. We were dancing to the rhythm of space, the drumbeat of gravity. We were making love to the whole sky. "Hold me," he shouted, and I did that too, then heard him just above my ear, and cried out with him:

"GOD!

GOD!

GOD!"

The air was cold, the stars a cyclone of glitter. I could almost imagine an answer.

Junie, when she came into our room, was wearing the curtain over her left shoulder. It was near midnight.

"So," she said, sitting on my bed. "Can Ernie Kann?"

"Shut up," I answered.

I felt her hand on my forehead, smoothing my virginal nerves. "Don't hate me," she cooed. "Please."

Ernie kissed me a week later. "You don't know how to do this stuff, do you," he said afterwards.

"Not really," I said.

"I'll bet your roommate does."

"Junie? Yeah, Junie knows about kissing."

"How many boys has she kissed?"

"Maybe a million."

He wasn't surprised. He had never seen a girl as good-looking as Junie, he told me, and kissed me again, licking my lips open, pronouncing me "not bad."

I hated him then and never got over it. I knew what he was doing. He wanted me because I was as close as he could come to her. He kissed me with his eyes closed. Both of us pretended I was Junie.

We rarely mentioned her, though once he asked if she was "nice."

"Nice enough," I said.

"Will you tell me something," he said, "and not get mad at me for asking?"

"Depends."

"Does she wear falsies?"

I laughed my child's laugh and said Junie didn't need padding there.

"No padding?"

"She's big enough."

"How big?"

"I've never measured," I said, hating him more for this new, this misguided intimacy.

I remember the conversation so well because that night turned out to be traumatic: Junie never came home. She was in the cafeteria the next morning, avoiding my eyes. I told her I wasn't a virgin anymore. I lied this way to make her think it was her fault. She didn't believe me. She said if I ever talked that way again, she would tell my dad.

"All right," I said. "I'm a virgin."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding," I said. "Are you?"

"Oh, shut up."

"Junie?"

"What?"

"I want you to not do it anymore."

"Just shut up."

"Please."

She started to cry. I cried too.

Dinner the next night was greasy beef stroganoff over greasier noodles. Carrots for the vegetable. Chocolate cake for dessert.

Dad was talking to Giselle and Adam. Junie and David were at the same table, so I joined them. They were all laughing. David was telling a joke about a Jewish nurse, a joke I didn't understand.

"I was raised Baptist," said Adam. "A P.K. Preacher's Kid, you know? So every morning, Daddy sang God's praises in the shower."

"Hallelujah," said Giselle, and then again, making it bluesy. "Hallel-looo-jeh." She moved her fingers beside her face. I could imagine them tinkling. "Praise the Lo'd and shake yo' body," she said, fingers moving, rings shimmering.

Adam laughed. "My old man. Loved God. Loved people. Loved dogs 'n cats."

"Rats and mice," put in Giselle. "Cockroaches 'n ants." She was finishing her song. "Dat preacher man," she said, "Lived in a gah-bage can. Coon't bear to kill the bugs." She clapped once.

"One time," said Adam, "one time an old junkie took my Daddy's wallet, and my Daddy chased him two blocks, caught him, took him home to supper, and three months later, what do you think, that old junkie's decided to preach the word himself. Far as I know, he is singing God's hymns now."

"That's beautiful," said Dad.

"Another time, this skinny ole' granma, she knocks on our door, says if she could just have a sip of broth she'll live till tomorrow. Daddy gave her soup and bread and two strips of bacon and you know, that granny is living at my house to this day and raising Cain."

"Could be why you left, y'ole buzzard, huh?" said Giselle.

"Could be. Plus that I want to make a difference. Go places I'm needed, right? Wanted."

"So you come to Salt Lake Utah," laughed Giselle. Everybody at the table joined her laughing.

"Here first," said Adam. "Here first."

Giselle turned to my Dad. "We went," she said, "to Temple Square the other day? You shoulda seen the looks we got. I could almost hear the Mormon people locking doors on us. Click. Click. I had to laugh then too. I had to say, 'Hey, y'all, we jus' visitin'! We not goin' try nothin'! Hey, we let you be! You jes' stay right there in yo' temple, now.'" She laughed again.

Adam didn't laugh with her this time. Adam watched my father. "Must be hard on you," he said. "Cause I know—I *know*— you can't think it's right to keep up walls like that. You can't feel good about a church that locks its doors to someone."

Dad explained that we let blacks join the Church; it was just the priesthood they couldn't have, just the temple they couldn't enter.

"But you can't support that policy," said Adam.

Dad sat up very straight. His eyes were full of compassion, but deadly serious too. You didn't question my father's faith. "I support that policy," he said.

Adam chewed his lip, nodding slowly. Giselle watched him, watched Dad, watched me.

"Why," said Adam, "why do you hate my people?"

"Now listen," said Dad, but Adam slapped the table.

"Who do you think God is?" he demanded, his voice getting full. All the PCVs were watching now. "Who you think he is, some maitre'd of some club?"

"If it were my church—"

"It is your church."

"No, Adam. Not for me it's not. It's God's church for me. God has, for some unseen reason, ordained this trial of faith. Don't you understand how it is for us? For me? I promise you, it is a trial of my faith to be restrained from giving the priesthood to your people."

"Trial of your faith?" Adam mimicked. "Your faith? Hell, man, you're *in*."

"I'm not in charge."

"Come on, Doc."

"When I was a missionary in Brazil," Dad said, "I had three black converts, and Adam, I loved them. Loved them like my kids. Do you know how that felt to tell them—"

"How it felt! You're asking me if I know how it felt? Let me ask you, Mister Sir, what do you know about how it feels?" He stood. "You never been a slave," he whispered, then shouted it for the whole cafeteria to hear, "YOU NEVER BEEN A SLAVE!" He picked up his chocolate cake with both hands and held it ready to throw at my dad. Giselle yelled, "Hey!" and then, quietly, "Lover, calm down." Adam squished the cake in his fists. It came out between his fingers as though it were his pigment. He shook off what was left, then raised both his arms until they were positioned like Christ's, whose huge image was a shadow behind him. He howled, "FEEL!" and ran for the stairs, Giselle after him. When she caught him, he screamed like he was dying, and she hugged him hard, saying, "Lover, lover, lover, lover."

David pulled Junie close, held her with both arms, just as Giselle was holding Adam.

"Lover, lover," Giselle was saying. It looked like she was suckling him.

Dad handed me his dishes, then Adam's and Giselle's. The chocolate cake was glopped on the floor.

"Someone ought to get that up," Dad said softly. "Before a person slips on it." His eyes moved back to the stairs. I thought he might cry.

I wiped the cake with a napkin. When I looked up, Ernie was watching me from the kitchen. He kissed the air as though there were no distance between us and moved his head to sign a rendezvous at the trampoline. I looked away. I did not want to jump for God that night. Not with him, not with him.

Adam and Giselle were going to their room. I knew that when I finished bussing, I could hear them love. They would find that private rhythm, the music only they could hear, that was part anger, part betrayal, part love, part need. Adam would go inside her, groaning, and she would kiss him, touch him, accept him, call him precious names. They would do mysterious, invisible things.

