

# The Seduction of H. Lyman Winger

*Michael Fillerup*

THERE WERE TIMES, ESPECIALLY LATELY, when he wondered if he were doing any real good—any human good—other than keeping the Mt. Taylor 2nd Ward safely afloat and on course.

Maybe it was the weather. Monsoon season in the mountains—that late-summer jungle smell and heat. Something. Take this morning for instance. He had arrived forty minutes early for a bishopric meeting he himself had earlier cancelled. Now he had two hours to kill before putting on his bishop's face for sacrament meeting. The All-American greeter.

Time to kill? Lyman ran his fingers through his slicked back hair, more gray than brown now, more silver than gray, and sighed wearily. Nine years and still no hint of release. President Jensen had made that clear at his last stake interview: "Bishop Winger, you're an inspiration to all of us!"

Inspiration? Lyman glanced at the glossy calendar photograph of President Spencer W. Kimball staring down at him with a reprimanding half-frown, half-smile. "The September pinup," Lyman used to quip to his counselors, in an earlier time, when levity was his refuge and relief.

Two hours. He tried scanning the ward list for inactives—*less* actives: political correctness had even infiltrated the House of Israel—to target for President Jensen's new COME UNTO CHRIST campaign. Adams . . . Agle . . . Aiken . . . In years past he would have prayerfully searched the list until a name jumped out at him and then followed up with an immediate and impromptu housecall. After the initial surprise (shock sometimes, offense less often), more often than not the ailing member would break down and emit a tearful confession, not of sins committed but of loneliness, depression, despair. "I was sitting here, waiting, praying for something . . . How did you know, Bishop?"

The Spirit. The Holy Ghost. A lucky hunch. Fate.

Afterwards Lyman had always felt a near mystical lightening of his burdens, like at the end of a long, arduous hike when you finally drop your backpack and feel buoyant, airborne.

But those moments were rare now. He blamed himself more than anyone or anything. Bishopric burnout. He had grown weary in the work. The stapled sheets of paper felt like lead in his hands.

He considered writing Jenny a letter, but just the thought of putting pen to paper, or print to screen, exhausted him. Instead, he opened the Book of Mormon on his burnished oak desk and searched for random inspiration: "And by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls . . ." But the words were empty, dead. He felt nothing.

He rose slowly from the padded swivel chair, cranked open the window of smoked glass, and greedily inhaled the scent of imminent rain: fresh, clean, evergreen. A shaft of sunlight broke through the gray cloud mass like a conduit from heaven. Like a spotlight. A vision. He thrust his hands outside, palms up, gathering gold dust.

Across the asphalt fire lane, on the ground floor of the new apartment complex with the fashionable but impractical Spanish-tile roof, he noticed a young woman stretching out in front of the sliding glass door. Tall and trim, she was wearing a skin-tight Spandex suit, aquablue, that showed off in frank detail her athletic contours. Legs locked, she bent forward slowly, her buttocks swelling like a pair of perfect blue melons. As her blond ponytail dropped to the floor, her face appeared upside down in the triangular frame of her legs, like a cabaret dancer, and she smiled at him—and winked?

Lyman ducked away from the window. Had she really seen him? Traded eyes? If so, what on earth could she be thinking? Caught with his eye in the keyhole? The bishop no less! His sagging jowls flushed with embarrassment and shame.

There was a loud knock, followed by two soft ones. "Bishop Winger?" A male voice. A young baritone. "Bishop, I'm sorry to bother you. I know I don't have an appointment, but . . ."

His name was Curtis Walker. Lyman would remember at that first interview a slender, narrow-shouldered young man with the dark, high-blown hair and pointed beard of a Shakespearean actor. A handsome face gone hollow. Sitting in the stiff-backed office chair, head bowed, lean legs extended, he looked thoroughly defeated. A tiny gold ring was pinned in his left ear. (Stylish: a sign of the times. Several high school boys in town wore earrings and even noserings now, although Lyman had warned his young priests that no one with face jewelry would administer the sacrament—not in his ward!) His baggy shirt drooped to mid-thigh, like a tunic. Midnight black, with shooting stars and crescent moons, it looked

more befitting Merlin the Magician. The plunging neckline revealed an abundance of chest hair and a glossy purple scar that curved around the base of his throat like a pukka shell necklace.

Mumbling morosely, he told a sordid tale of big dreams and great expectations run amuck in the fleshpots of L.A.—sex and drugs and money dripping through his fingers. “Like water,” he said, choking on his words. His lean, pianist’s fingers, the nails chewed to the cuticles, trembled as he spoke. He balled them into fists and began pounding, or rather tapping, softly but persistently, his thighs, as if he were too drained of life and energy to club himself any harder. He wept, begging for forgiveness. “I’m sorry, Bishop. I’m so sorry.”

They talked about repentance, a plan to get back on track. Fasting, prayer, scripture study. No, he wasn’t ready to partake of the sacrament yet—that would take some time. They scheduled another interview, two nights later. Lyman knew he had to stay on top of this one. Sister Killearn with her chronic corns and recalcitrant teenagers could wait. (“But they don’t *like* the scriptures, Bishop! They say they don’t like them at all! What am I doing wrong?”)

Curtis struggled awkwardly to his feet, like a cripple trying to walk, wincing as if he were in great pain. Lyman hustled around his desk of neatly stacked papers and embraced the young transgressor, noting the bony protrusions of his shoulder blades and the smell of garlic on his breath.

Tonight she was sitting in her beanbag chair in front of the TV intermittently licking an ice cream cone while folding laundry. Her knees were drawn up to her chest, her nightgown taut over her knees, like a little girl at a slumber party. She looked so perfect and unblemished from afar, like a senior portrait in which any pimples or moles are cunningly airbrushed away. She reminded him of Jenny—tall, limber, blond. The potted plants, the beanbag chair, the cinder block bookshelves. Student furniture, student stuff.

But when she held up a pair of frilly pink panties and gave them a crisp shake, Lyman looked back into his office and glanced guiltily at President Kimball’s photograph.

He who looketh upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery in his heart . . .

I’m looking, not lusting. Admiring. Paternally.

Paternally?

A knock. One hard, two soft.

Curtis.

They had been meeting three times a week. Progress checks. He was still praying vigorously, fasting weekly, poring through the scriptures. He

was eating better as well. His cheeks looked fleshier, tinged with a healthy blush. He still wore the pointed beard, the gold earring, the magician's smock, but—give him time. Rome wasn't built in a day. Besides, Lyman liked Curtis. The young man intrigued him. Each interview he uncovered more pieces to the puzzle. He had served a mission in Ecuador, assistant to the mission president. He was an Eagle Scout. Born and raised in Kanab, Utah, where his father served on the high council and his mother taught Gospel Essentials. Why had he come to Mt. Taylor? A fresh start, new faces. No job yet, but he was still looking. Ambitions?

Curtis stroked his dagger beard thoughtfully, like a chess champion contemplating his next move. "I think I'd like to teach."

Lyman raised his brow approvingly, although somewhat surprised. "Teach what?"

"Children," he replied. Sarcastically? It was hard to tell. He was like that, or becoming more like that. Less gushing, more cryptic. Every so often something would slip out. His smile was like a piece of white thread you twist and twist until it suddenly spasms.

Lyman gave him the benefit of the doubt. "I meant what subject?"

He answered deadpan: "Tolerance."

Lyman tossed his gray suit coat on the dresser, set a steaming mug of cocoa on the night table, and plunked down on the king bed with an everlasting sigh. He loosened the stranglehold of his necktie, then his belt, reminding himself to be more faithful to the gods of Nutrisystem. Outside the wind howled as the ponderosa pines swayed like brooding dancers. Mourning women. The house seemed so quiet by contrast, so empty. Jenny gone, Nikki at her stake meeting. It must have gone overtime again. That, or she and Kathy Simpson were solving some imminent world crisis. He felt an overwhelming loneliness challenged only by fatigue.

He switched on his answering machine and waited for the inevitable. The reviews were mixed.

"I think he showed a lot of courage, Bishop. I just hope we can help."

"How could you let that young man desecrate the House of the Lord like that! Good heavens!"

"As Bishop, it's your responsibility to control the spiritual climate of sacrament meeting. Today you failed us . . ."

"Ex that jerk before someone *really* gets hurt!"

Lyman leaned back against the headboard, closed his eyes, and groaned: "Oh Father, what am I going to do? What would *you* do?"

Sipping the hot cocoa as if it were a slow-acting anesthetic, he recalled in agonizing detail that morning's fast and testimony meeting: Curtis marching boldly towards the stand at five minutes past noon, sec-

onds after Lyman had risen to the podium to close the meeting; the awkward moment's hesitation as Lyman glanced conspicuously at the clock, deferring to Curtis with a cordial smile that cautioned, silently: Okay, but keep it short, please . . .

He had started out fine, proclaiming in a humble voice barely above a whisper that the Book of Mormon was true, God lives, Joseph Smith was a prophet. In the front pew Sister Marks had nodded her blue-haired head approvingly, along with Brother Marks and the rest of the Old Guard.

"Bishop Winger is a true servant of God," Curtis had stated. "He's a great man. A champion of the underdog."

There had been a noticeable pause during which Lyman, presiding on the stand, had scrutinized more carefully Curtis's backside. Instead of Merlin's gown, he was wearing a white Musketeer shirt with balloon sleeves and black toreador pants that hugged his tight, round buttocks like leotards. Lyman had reminded himself not to judge a book by its cover. It's what's inside that counts. The heart, not the clothes, make the man.

But as these thoughts had flashed through Lyman's mind, Curtis cleared his throat and raised his eyes to the ceiling, like a martyr burning at the stake. Like Joan of Arc or Abinadi. "I know God loves us," he had said. "I know God loves all his children, no exceptions. The Samaritans of Christ's time were considered the lowest of the low, the scum of the Earth. Yet Christ not only loved them, he sought them out. He spoke of the Good Samaritan. Likewise the lepers."

Curtis had looked down, up, heavenward. "Brothers and Sisters, the AIDS virus is our leprosy, and AIDS victims are the lepers of our time."

Sister Marks had looked angrily ill, as if Curtis had just scratched her BMW with pruning shears. Burly Steve Burgess, on deck to offer the benediction, had blocked a cough with his fist.

Curtis had swallowed hard, his Adam's apple moving up and down like a golf ball trapped in his throat. "God loves these modern-day lepers and Samaritans. Yes, they're a little different. But they need your love and fellowship too. Brothers and Sisters, I need your love and fellowship, and I say this as a gay Mormon man, a modern-day Samaritan."

For the next half-minute the silence was so intense Lyman had thought he could hear snowflakes tapping on the rooftop. His congregation was stunned. Under any other circumstances, it might have seemed comical, cartoonish, with eyeballs springing from their sockets and jaws dropping to the floor.

One of the Lewis twins, bug-eyed among the other deacons, had broken the silence: "He's a faggot?"

The Old Guard had eyed Lyman like a conspiring Sandhedrin. *Do*

something! *Say* something! Don't just sit there! You're the bishop!

Lyman had motioned to Steve Burgess to proceed to the microphone, but the muscle-bound mechanic was paralyzed in the soft theater chair. Lyman had risen, thanking all those who had shared their testimonies, and had closed the meeting himself, without a hymn.

Lyman heard a jolt, followed by the metallic reverberation of the automatic garage door opening. Nikki! He cracked open his scriptures and waited eagerly as her busy little body sashayed through the door, like a Wagnerian soprano in miniature. "I'm home!" she announced grandly.

Lyman looked up nonchalantly and smiled. "How'd it go?"

"Great!"

"That's nice," he said, returning to 2 Nephi. All these years and he still couldn't let her inside. "Any news?"

"Not really."

A bad sign. Usually she came home brimming with gossip. Silence meant she was protecting him.

"So what did you think about our little fast and testimony meeting?"

She smiled sympathetically. "Well, I'll tell you what Cindy Burgess said she'd do if one of her boys got up in sacrament meeting and said he was gay. She said she'd throw him out on his ear!"

Lyman looked outside where two pine trees leaned into one another like disconsolate lovers.

"And what would you do, if one of our kids . . ."

Nikki started to laugh but her smile twisted into a frown that he couldn't quite decipher. Turning her back to him, she reached behind her neck and began unzipping her floral Sunday dress. "You know, whenever I see a good-looking guy like Curtis who—well, who's the way he is—I can't help thinking, 'If he just met the right woman . . .' Now isn't that stupid?"

It was cold out. A galaxy of frozen stars sparkled on the smoked glass window, but he cracked it anyway, surprised to find a stranger sitting at her dinette table, a woman about her age, shorter, bustier, but athletic like her hostess. She was darker too, an Indian maybe, with a thick black braid trailing down her spine. She was wearing purple pajama-like sweats, and they were laughing over cups of something—coffee, tea? Lyman cranked the window shut, uncertain why the unexpected presence of this outsider so greatly saddened him.

"I hope that doesn't change things. Bishop?"

Lyman tried to control whatever it was he could feel happening to his face. "No," he replied, the word pushing past his lips like a breech birth. "Why should that change anything?" But mentally he tried to retract his

embrace their first meeting in his office. Of course it mattered! Of course it changed things! It changed everything! He wanted to read Curtis the riot act: homosexuality was a sin. A sexual sin. Second only to murder. Like fornication. Like adultery. Worse. Much. It was unnatural. Terrible.

But pardonable? Lyman looked at the uncompromising eyes of Harold B. Lee, the November pinup.

He who is without sin, let him cast the first . . .

He who looketh upon a woman to lust after her . . .

And he who panteth after a man . . . ?

He heard it everywhere—in the foyer, in the church parking lot, in Gospel Doctrine class.

“We’re all born with the light of Christ. From birth we know right from wrong, and that kind of thing’s just flat out wrong! Evil! Why do you think there’s AIDS? It’s the Lord’s punishment against those people.”

“They say that if the mother isn’t modest and the son sees her naked when he’s young, he’ll become sexually aroused but he’ll feel guilty because it’s his mother. They say that’s what causes homosexuals.”

“We’re all created in God’s image. God wouldn’t put a girl inside a boy or a boy inside a girl!”

Born or conditioned? Nature or nurture? The sins of the mothers! The fathers! Lyman longed for an earlier, simpler era when black and white were rigidly defined. Nowadays the lines were perpetually obscured. Hybridizing tares and wheats. Cross-breeding sheep with goats.

The whole world was going to Hell in a handbag! In the big cities down south high schools were installing metal detectors to keep guns out of the classroom. Grade school kids were peddling crack cocaine on the playground. He had witnessed the horror stories on the nightly news. Long hair? Earrings? Do you indulge in Coca Cola or other caffeine drinks? Get real, folks! Sometimes even he blushed during his youth interviews.

Mt. Taylor was different. The lead story on the local news wasn’t some gruesome murder or driveby shooting but the winterfest or the annual book fair at Windhover School, which was precisely why he and Nikki had fled their southern California homeland twenty years ago, an ironic reversal of Curtis’s bad fortunes. To Lyman, Mt. Taylor often seemed a storybook land the darker, meaner other-world was trying to infiltrate via newsprint and TV. Some said it was inevitable, but it didn’t have to be. Not here. Let the rest of the world go to pot, but not their little village in the pines. They could put their foot down—feet!—feet down! Like two years ago when a radical group tried to sneak New Age hokum into the elementary school curriculum. President Jensen had mobilized

all three wards as well as several other Christian sects in town to counter the movement. Lyman had done his part; Nikki too. Testifying at school board meetings, circulating petitions, writing letters to the editor. "Brethren," President Jensen had admonished, "we must arm the Saints, especially our youth, to do spiritual battle with the adversary."

But it had always been like that. Growing up in the only Mormon family in his neighborhood, Lyman had sensed it at an early age, in every arcane ritual in and out of their home, whether Family Home Evening on Monday night or Mutual on Tuesday or Saturdays picking pears at the stake welfare farm. And every Sunday morning when Mr. Levy trudged across his driveway in his bathrobe to retrieve the morning paper, stopping, squinting, rubbing his booze-blasted eyes as if trying to erase this bizarre suburban mirage, a primly dressed tribe of nine squeezing into an old Plymouth station wagon. Like a ludicrous college prank. Like a scene from *Candid Camera*. Different. Crazy. Peculiar.

It was an attitude. Us versus Them. Mormons had the whole truth, the others didn't. God gave Mormons commandments, standards, the fullness, the higher law, and it was their duty to preserve them. If they failed, nations would dwindle in unbelief, the Constitution would hang by a thread, the moon would turn to blood, Alpha would devour Omega. Occasionally this was stated dogmatically from the pulpit by a local priesthood zealot, but for the most part it was unpronounced. Assumed knowledge. They were sacred keepers of the gate. Preservers of the word. Stewards of the kingdom. God's chosen.

Dear Bishop Winger,

We appreciate any help you can give our son.  
God bless you.

Martin and Susan Walker

Scanning the congregation from the podium, Lyman at first was relieved by the absence of Curtis Walker. Earlier he had cautioned him over the phone: "If you bear your testimony today, I hope you don't say anything that will force me to ask you to sit down. I think that would be embarrassing for both of us."

Silence. Lyman had counted the seconds: one two three four. "Are you telling me you're going to censor my testimony?"

"No, I'm just saying . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm just saying what I said: don't embarrass yourself."

"Or you?"

"Me, you, the ward . . . the Lord."

But when the opening hymn commenced ("As I have loved you, love



one another; this new commandment . . .”) and still no sign of Curtis, Lyman was skewered by his own hypocrisy. How many times had he told his congregation church was a school for sinners, not a country club for saints? Maybe Curtis was right. Maybe they really were the modern day lepers. Christ said love the sinner, not the sin. He went amidst the liars, thieves, harlots; he shared the spotlight on Calvary with a murderer and a thief. “This day you will join me in Paradise.”

Later, when the Hixon boy offered him the sacrament tray, Lyman pinched a tiny crust of the broken white bread and wiped it on his tongue, but it turned to mud in his mouth.

As snowflakes splattered on his windshield, Lyman thought of Jenny’s last letter home. “BREED ‘EM YOUNG UNIVERSITY,” she had scrawled for the return address. Then: “The Winter Demons have come early, dumping more white graveyards.”

Jenny and her melodramatics! She was lonely, depressed, but too proud to admit it. Her roommates had been keeping her up until 3:00 a.m. every morning talking about boy problems, engagement problems, how many missionaries they had on their string. “Stupid nonsense,” she had scribbled furiously. So now she hid out in the downstairs lounge playing Rachmaninoff while watching the snow. Each white flake was an angel coming down, a free-falling suicide. “I guess they just couldn’t stand it up there anymore. Or maybe they were kicked out for free-thinking, do you think? Nope. Sorry. I repent. That word. Not allowed here. They’re just snowflakes. Or maybe the bad guys won after all and God’s being cremated? Or how about the ashen remains of the Spirit prisoners? Residue from the fires of Hell? Maybe they’re torching all the free-thinkers.”

Jenny. She had always been a loner. Even the year she ran on the track team, between races, while the other girls were flirting with the boys or giggling in their little groups, she would be off by herself reading Kafka and Ibsen.

She had never showed much interest in boys, a relief to Lyman and Nikki during her high school years. “A late bloomer,” Nikki had said. “When she leaves for college that’ll change.”

So far it hadn’t. “Give her time. She’s shy, that’s all. It’ll just take the right kind of guy to bring her out of her shell. Look at you!” Nikki still viewed herself as Lyman’s social savior.

He worried, though. What if . . . Suppose . . . ? He didn’t say this to Nikki but wondered if she shared his fear. What if what? What if she was? What if she wasn’t? So what if she was or wasn’t? That shouldn’t matter. Shouldn’t was the key. What? One of ours? Of course not! It’s always the weirdo down the street.

Weirdo?

He kept thinking of incidents where he had failed her. Their other children, Derek and Stefanie, had marched uprightly to the church-sanctioned drummer. Missions, temple marriages, children, elders quorum president, Primary president.

Jenny was a different number—had been from day one. The other young women had snubbed her for being vocal and rocking the ark. He recalled Sister Sampson's lesson on "Individual Worth." Mid-way Jenny's hand had shot up: "How does that make us all special, if *everyone* is a child of God? By definition, everyone can't be unique." Moans, groans, eye-rolling and head-shaking. There she goes again! The bishop's kid!

They had damned her for thinking and so, to a degree, had he.

Braking at the intersection, Lyman switched off his wipers and watched the snowflakes crash softly on his windshield. The rapid accumulation of flakes created an impressionistic picture in white lace. It was an underground hostel, an ice cave, where Curtis and the other misfits of the world huddled in secluded corners, quietly holding hands, while Jenny pounded the keys of a baby grand piano.

"I noticed on the Ward Talent Survey you marked acting and directing. And you said you attended acting school in L.A."

Lyman gripped the plastic receiver and closed his eyes, reconsidering. He took a long, deep breath. "Curtis, I'd like you to direct the ward road show."

Lyman waited through the anticipated silence.

"You'd be working with the youth mostly. The actual production isn't until April, but I need a commitment now so the kids—"

"Have you prayed about this, Bishop?"

"Of course," Lyman said, but this was another half-lie.

"Do you think they really want me—I mean, after . . . you know?"

"I don't care if they want you. *I* want you—the *Lord* wants you."

"Thank you, Bishop. I won't let you down. I promise."

No scriptural references forbidding homosexual acts? And just where did he get *that* little piece of folklore?

Lyman ran his finger down the *Topical Guide to the Scriptures*, shaking his head: LEV 18:22 Thou shalt not lie with mankind . . . it is an abomination; DEUT 23:17 there shall be no sodomite of the sons of Israel; ISAIAH 3:9 (2 NEP 13:9) declare their sin as sodom; ROM 1:27 men burned in their lust one towards another; 1 COR 6:9 nor abusers of themselves with mankind; 1 TIM 1:10 them that defile themselves with mankind; JUDE 1:7 as Sodom and Gomorrah going after strange flesh; GEN 13:13, 18, 20

men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly . . .

His conversations had been getting more bizarre, leaning more and more dangerously over the edge. Women were the niggers of the church. Why couldn't they hold the priesthood? Joseph Smith ordained Emma and Eliza R. Snow—that was a fact. He also carried talismans and crystals. He blessed a handkerchief and gave it to Wilford Woodruff—"Put this on the heads of the afflicted and they'll be healed!" Back then miracles and visions were encouraged, not snuffed out. Not like now. If it's not in the *General Handbook*, it's evil, wicked, Satan speaking.

"I mean, you realize Joseph Smith was a manic depressive?"

"A *what?*"

"It's typical of men of religious genius."

"Religious gen—"

He was a kook, a nut, an encyclopedia of heresies. He was gay for pity's sake! Yet Lyman listened to him, mesmerized. Arriving for a nine o'clock appointment, he wouldn't close up his office until after midnight. He had learned to schedule Curtis early and block out the entire evening. One moment Curtis would speak with a stubborn defiance bordering on arrogance, his hands fluttering like spastic birds: "You and your inspired programs! Look what they've done for me! I really tried to put my shoulder to the wheel. Can I help how I was born? Am I a victim of my Maker? God's little accident? If so, there are lots of little accidents running around. Lots. Lesbians, mostly. And returned missionaries—like me. You may think I'm your first but don't kid yourself. You've got others. Plenty. I know for a fact."

A moment later he would be slouching in the office chair, his El Greco face drooping, the penitent prodigal: "Thanks for listening, Bishop. You're a true friend. I know you're in a difficult position. You want to do the right thing, but you also feel an obligation to uphold church tradition. It's a head-heart, justice-mercy tug-of-war, but you'll win. You're a great bishop—one of the few I've known who cares more about people than making money."

Lyman was touched, moved—flattered? He stiffened, cautioning himself. Flattery. The devil's hammer and sickle. But the instant the seed of doubt was planted, Curtis countered as if he had read Lyman's mind: "And I'm not just saying that to butter you up. I don't play that game, although you probably think I do."

During their interviews Lyman often sensed a powerful spirit burning inside his little office. He too had questioned the superstructure of the church and its obsession with prolific mandates and large and spacious buildings. Lately there seemed to be more and more church and less and less religion. He found himself, on certain issues, agreeing with Curtis.

"You're right. We don't teach, we indoctrinate. We smother these kids

with programs. My daughter Jenny . . . ”

But following such conversations, driving home, Lyman always felt guilty of betrayal, like chicken Peter denying the Christ.

Still, Lyman wanted to ask him questions. When did he first realize . . . Was it a sudden revelation or a gradual unfolding? Is it like you kiss a girl and nothing happens, you kiss a boy and it does? He didn't ask. He was afraid to, although he freely admitted that he couldn't think about the act—a man and a man. It was too repulsive.

Oh? And what was so un-repulsive, so superior, about a woman and a man? Coupled. Locked. Or two women?

A man and a woman—that's how God decreed it. It was natural.

Natural? What if you have a natural attraction to the same sex? Isn't *that* natural—for you? Who's to say what's natural?

Look at the animal world. A male deer mates with a female. That's natural. A buck trying to mate with another buck would be unnatural. An aberration. An anomaly.

Then why did God create me this way? Unnaturally?

Why did he create alcoholics? Lepers? Cripples? Schizoids? We all have our crosses to bear.

A cross? To bear?

They went around and around. Lyman was trying to be open-minded, understanding—he really was. He was trying to understand *him*.

“Doesn't God love all his children?”

“Of course he does. He loves us but not everything we do. Just as I love my children but not everything they do.”

“Jesus Christ is a woman. A man, yes, but a woman too. All of God's children are conceived female. One little chromosome changes us. It makes you male, female, Downs Syndrome. We're all women in embryo. It's only a matter of time, Bishop. Only a matter of time.”

Early Sunday morning he cracked the smoked glass window and found the ponytailed blonde sitting at the dinette table in pajama-sweats eating a bowl of cereal or something. Her swarthy friend, also in baggy sweats, swept into view and set a carton of milk on the table. She slid her bottom onto the blonde's lap, laced her arm around her neck, and gave her a long, tender kiss on the lips. They executed the maneuver as smoothly as two skilled lovers, or a seasoned married couple who move together as one.

Lyman looked away—sickened, he assured himself. It was gross, disgusting. Yet he edged back towards the window and watched until the blonde helped the brunette up off the floor and led her gently, by the hand, out of view.

Lyman stared at the legal pad covered with mindless scribble: ovals, X's, spirals, and, conspicuously, in the lower left corner, a big circle with a carefully darkened dot slightly off-center—like a target, he thought. Or a woman's breast. No, a target, he corrected. Get your mind out of the gutter. You're the bishop.

He gazed around his office for reminders: the framed calligraphy on the far wall, compliments of Sister Newton: "Wherefore, be faithful, stand in the office which I have appointed unto you; succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees. D&C 81:5."

It was Monday, Family Night, when good bishops, good Latter-day Saints, ought to be home communing with their wives and children. But he felt so alone in this, utterly alone. He knew it was largely his fault. The past few months he had gradually distanced himself from his two counselors, cancelling bishopric meetings or speeding through the agenda. He had no confidants—not Nikki, not President Jensen . . . He couldn't fathom taking his petition to the stake president, the iron rodder who snacked on bitter herbs.

Worse still, his prayers had left him confounded. Grand visions fired by passionate conviction and resolve one moment clouded into mists of darkness the next. What was happening to his mind, his soul, the world? Wasn't anything just plain yes or no, true or false anymore?

Hunting was true. Absolute. You went out, you shot a deer. You killed it, skinned and ate it. That simple.

And if you didn't eat it? Killed it for sport only?

He no longer trusted his judgement or his bishop's gift of discernment. Would the spirit abide in a tainted vessel? Physician, heal thyself!

He stared at the window and saw nothing but fog and ice frothing on the smoked glass, his eyes, his life. Diverting his eyes, he tried to think of sunnier times, family days and nights. Returning home from business trips, his children swarming him like locusts, searching his pockets for candy and souvenirs, finding nothing, frowning like sad clowns: "Dad?" And just when it appeared as if tragedy had struck—ta da! A handful of Mars Bars would magically materialize in his hand, and his three precious little ones would jump up and down, clapping, shouting, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"

Rising slowly from his swivel chair, he exited his office, and wandered down the empty hallway into the foyer where he encountered the glass trophy case for the Mt. Taylor 2nd Ward. The lack of championship trophies and overabundance of sportsmanship and participation certificates seemed a sad metaphor for his ministry.

Pressing closer, Lyman studied his reflection on the glass, but the face staring back seemed foreign to him. The jowls were soft and pouchy, the

eyes tired and diluted, with little saddlebags drooping underneath. The delta of wrinkles fanning out from the corners of his eyes had deepened and widened, curving mournfully downward, like rows of sad, crooked mouths. The age spots on his cheeks had burgeoned and darkened, like splashes of mud. His hairline had retreated another quarter of an inch. The peninsula of salt and peppered hair that occupied the top of his skull was fast becoming an island surrounded by a moat of glossy pink flesh.

He placed his fingers on his lower left cheekbone and pulled slowly downward. The flesh grew flat and taut but the lines remained, like pencil marks. Like the irrefutable rings in the cross section of a tree trunk. By nature he was not vain, had never given his physical appearance much time, thought, or concern. But all of these, in concert, reminded him of one irrefutable fact: he was growing old.

He returned to his office and looked at the smoked glass. He wanted in the very worst way to break his private pledge. If he could crack it just a hair—one little peek into paradise might melt his winter malaise. He glared at the December photograph of President Joseph F. Smith, a sage-like face with wire-rim glasses and a long, stringy confucian beard.

It's not what you think. It's not *why* you think.

He listened for Curtis's saving knock. The rescue.

Silence.

"I know this is hard for a lot of you. It's been hard for me. But I think—I mean I really believe this is what we have to do. We each have to ask ourselves: if this were my child, how would I want him to be treated by his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?"

Steve Burgess, the elders quorum president, stared at his black binder while Nate Simpson, Lyman's first counselor, stroked his crabapple chin. The other members of the Ward Correlation Council, squeezed shoulder to shoulder in Lyman's office which suddenly seemed no bigger than a rabbit hutch, dropped their eyes on the pale blue carpeting.

Sister Frazier, the Relief Society president, was the first to look up. "I agree with you, Bishop."

Lyman removed the lid from the little green candy jar on his desk and offered it to Brother Zartman, the executive secretary with the pink-patched face. He dipped his scab-crustured paw into the jar and removed a handful of Reese's Pieces. Lyman motioned for him to pass the jar around.

All month Lyman had been mentally rehearsing for the debate.

"Do you believe Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of the world?"

"Do you believe God loves all his spirit children?"

"Do you consider yourself a follower of Christ?"

And all month he had listened to the voices of his pioneer forebears

howling through the night. Every time he had looked at the grim ancestral photographs on his bedroom wall, his great-great-grandfather's graybeard would catch fire as he raised what remained of the arm he had forfeited to frostbite at Winter Quarters, shaking his stump angrily: I didn't sacrifice *this* for *that*!

Of course, Curtis hadn't made things any easier. The ward members weren't ostracizing him half as much as he was ostracizing himself. Why couldn't he just come to church and participate like everyone else? No, he had to dress like Merlin the damn magician and preach his oddball doctrine—the philosophies of Curtis! He had to make a spectacle of himself. Everything was a statement, a crusade.

"Does this mean the rumor's true? Brother Walker'll be directing the road show?"

Lyman eyed Ken Sawyer, the sunbleached Young Men's president, keenly. "Is that a problem?"

"Well, no—it shouldn't be I guess. I mean—well, it shouldn't. But maybe for some of the youth . . ."

"You let me handle the youth."

"I think we need to do anything we can for him," Sister Frazier said.

Nate Simpson removed his bifocals and wiped them with a Kleenex. "Well, yeah, I suppose we ought to help—like if a bank robber were shot down trying to escape, you wouldn't just stand there and watch him bleed to death."

Bank robber? Lyman tugged at his collar. A drop of sweat escaped from his armpit and crawled down his rib cage. He smiled at Sister Frazier. "Is it hot in here, or is that just me?"

Brother Burgess passed him the candy jar: "Bishop?"

Nikki curled up behind him, running her foot up and down his hairy calf, pressing her milk cow breasts against his back, cooing in his ear. Nothing happened. He tried to give himself a little help, but it was hopeless. He closed his eyes and shook his head. No. Stop. It wasn't working. She was big, bawdy, gross—they were. Bossy tubs of fat that sloshed, sagged, wobbled.

He closed his eyes and tried to summon up passionate nights from his past but instead saw Curtis perched on their oak headboard like a grinning Cupid miming their would-be moans and groans and oohs and ohhhs as they stroked and thrust and humped and grunted, whispering in his ear throughout: Normal? Godly? Superior? The only true and ordained way? Righteous? Once the erotic heat takes over, we're all fools, Bishop! The greatest of human comedies.

"Brother Walker, have you engaged in any homosexual activity?" Ly-

man tilted back in his swivel chair, distancing himself.

"Ninety percent of all males have engaged in some form of homosexual activity—if they're being honest."

"I'm not asking about 90 percent. I'm asking about you. As your bishop." He inserted a qualifier. "Since your confession."

Curtis bowed his head and stared at his cupped hands with the same forlorn look of abandonment Jenny had worn that hot, muggy day in Provo when Lyman had waved goodbye to her at the Heritage Halls dormitory.

"Curtis, I don't want to lose you," he said, quickly correcting himself. "We don't."

This time he had an appointment: Wednesday, 7:00 p.m. Every other time he had tried to catch Curtis at his eastside apartment the blinds had been drawn and the lights out. Once he had heard soft rock playing inside. He had pressed the doorbell, knocked loudly, called his name.

No answer.

Tonight the windows were darkened, but the porch light was on and an envelope was taped to the door with neat block letters in red ink:

Dear Bishop Winger,

I'm going back to Tinsel Town! For good this time. I met with Pres. Jensen Thurs. night. There's no hope—none. (Not in this life.) Thanks for your friendship. You are one of the very few.

Love, Curtis

P.S. See you in Paradise.

The quarterly youth fireside was at Sister Johnson's house, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Church Standards but Were Afraid to Ask." After the opening song and prayer Lyman, the guest speaker, randomly drew three-by-five cards from a Tupperware bowl and read the anonymously scribbled questions: "Why can't we date until we're sixteen?" "Is it true only Mormons can go to the Celestial Kingdom?" Although painfully predictable, he responded to each with an appropriate blend of gravity and humor.

However, the last card he drew didn't contain the question he posed: "Here's an interesting one. 'What is the church's stand on homosexuals?'"

The mohawk heads of the Lewis twins catapulted to attention. "You mean queers?" Larry grunted. Terry pinched his nose: "Fairies?"

Titters, giggles, a fake fart in back. This was going to be even harder than he had anticipated. "No," Lyman corrected calmly. "Homosexuals." He waited for the next wave of giggles to pass, then tried to explain the difference between having a same-sex preference and committing homo-



sexual acts. The former, maybe you can't help; maybe you were born that way or maybe it was conditioned, or maybe it's a combination. Anyway, that's irrelevant. We all have weaknesses, right? For some people it's alcohol, for others it's a bad temper. Whatever. But we can control our actions. It's not a sin unless we act—

J. D. Walters's beefy arm went up. "Didn't Christ say to think it is to do it in your heart?"

Lyman was prepared for this one. "Yes, that's true. And I suppose if we were all perfect, sinful thoughts would never even cross our minds. But for most of us—you may be the lone exception—"

Chuckles. Elbows. Nods.

"You may be the exception, J. D., but I think if we were judged by our thoughts, the rest of us would earn a one-way ticket to the Eternal Hot-house, if you know what I mean."

More chuckles. Elbows.

"So to get back to your comment, yes, we're accountable for our thoughts, but I think we're judged mainly by our actions. It's being able to control the urge, resist the temptation . . ."

Gangly David Christensen in the gray turtleneck sweater pushed his Ben Franklin glasses up on the bridge of his nose and asked, hopefully it seemed, "But can a gay person go to the temple?"

David? Lyman felt a little sick inside. His legs grew wobbly and the family portrait above Sister Johnson's fireplace clouded over. He momentarily gripped the velour sofa to steady himself. Poor David who had always been so solemn and compliant during his annual bishop's interview; who prayed morning, noon, and night, read the scriptures fervently, fanatically. Plagued, it seemed, by an obsessive conviction to be good. Solemn to the point of sadness. A loner like Jenny, except he lacked her intellectual acumen for self-defense. Lyman wanted to reach out and embrace him, to apologize—but for what? David's condition? Or his own ignorance? Or was the problem too comprehensive, too complex? God's law, or his handiwork? How do you apologize for God? Can you?

"Good question, Dave. Likewise, can they hold the priesthood?"

Heads were shaking; sour mouths set firm. David waited.

"Let's go back to the previous question. Is it a sin to prefer the same sex?"

"Depends on how good it is," wisecracked Larry Lewis.

"All right, let me re-phrase that: is it a sin to have a same-sex preference? I like guys but not girls? Instead of girls?" Unanimous nods. The McCarty girl tilted her auburn head and twisted an eye; her valley girl gape. "Hunh?"

Patience, Lyman reminded himself. Patience.

"Have I committed a sin?" he asked gently.

J. D. Walters piped up. "You bet! Burn, Bishop, burn!"

"What sin, J. D.?"

"Well . . ." His freckled face contorted, like a parody of the proverbial dumb jock. "Because you like . . . guys?"

Okay, here was the knockout punch. Do or die time. "J. D, suppose you look at a girl and think, 'Wow! I'd sure like to sleep with her!' Have you ever done that?"

J. D.'s face burned beet red. "So if you never have sex . . . ?"

Lyman smiled. They were getting it. Progress, slowly but surely. It would take another generation of wandering in the wilderness before the old traditions died out for good, but these young people—hope! Here was hope!

Lyman winked at Sister Johnson, gawking beside the potted fern in front of the plate-glass window. They'd have to hire a crane to lift her chin off the floor when this was over.

"Okay," Lyman said, "let's suppose you're a single man and you hold the priesthood. Is it okay to have sex?"

Silence. Dead dumb silence. They had turned into a forest of tree stumps. Heidi McCarty's mouth had opened wide enough to swallow a basketball. He would lose them if he didn't make his point quickly. "Of course you can't! You can only have sex if you're married, right? So what does a single person do?"

J. D., sensing Lyman's impatience, spoke hesitantly. "They don't have sex?"

"Yes! Exactly! They live a chaste life. Same deal with a homosexual."

There were vigorous nods, smiles, even a little back patting. Let's end it here, Lyman thought, on a high note. He threw in the modern day leper analogy, offered the benediction, and the young people attacked the Safeway fruit punch and Oreo cookies spiritedly.

Slipping into the bucket seat of his Pontiac Sunbird, Lyman looked up through the sun-roof at the stars and smiled. He'd done well—we had, he corrected, chatting aloud to God. I really think the light clicked on. And David—I've got to talk to David. Please help me help David . . .

Turning onto Aspen Drive, Lyman looked up at the residual moon, a silver crescent at the top of a blacked-out sphere: the mouth of tragedy. He wanted to spin the lunar wheel and reverse it, making top bottom and bottom top. Like the old Primary song: "If you chance to meet a frown, do not let it stay; Quickly turn it upside down, and smile that frown away." An answer? To whose question.

As his headlights swept across the tarnished black shell of an old Subaru wagon, a big metal beetle rotting at the end of the cul-de-sac, he felt his soaring spirit plummet from its heavenly height like a skydiver with a bum parachute. It was not the junky vehicle that brought him

down but the personage standing beside it. In a white tunic, beige slacks, and white deck shoes, he was standing with arms folded in the yellow cone of the streetlight like a celestial messenger patiently waiting to be beamed home.

Lyman pulled into his driveway but didn't press the remote to raise the roll-top door. It occurred to him that Curtis had never been inside his home—no reason in particular; they had always met at the church. But Lyman didn't want him in his home tonight, or on his property, for that matter. In light of tonight's meeting, Curtis's sudden appearance seemed an anticlimactic intrusion.

A what? No, that didn't make any sense? What was it then?

Lyman slid out of his bucket seat to intercept Curtis, who was sauntering across the pavement, his skinny, bearded, all-white image reminiscent of John Lennon on the cover of the *Abbey Road* album.

"Hello, Curtis!" Lyman tried to sound cheerful and upbeat although in truth his bowels had twisted like a garden hose with a bad kink.

"How did it go tonight?" Curtis asked. The streetlight picked the gold ring out of his ear. "The fireside?"

"Good," Lyman said. "Very good."

"That's what I heard." He flashed his know-it-all smile.

Heard? Lyman hadn't left the Johnson home five minutes ago. How could Curtis have heard? Did he have spies? Did his pierced ears stretch to China? Was he—ah, hell, of course. He was Joseph Smith, remember? Maybe he'd been God, too, in a prior life.

"It went fine," he repeated.

Curtis smiled again, but differently this time. The smart aleck smirk had given way to a tentative tremor. His wiry arm circled Lyman's bearish shoulders. "That took a lot of guts," he said. "Thanks." Curtis hugged him tightly, like a lover, like a friend.

Lyman was stunned. The stars overhead had all fallen and were swirling madly around his head like mosquitoes or runaway atoms. As he staggered towards his front door, the hidden sensors around the driveway reacted to his body heat, showering him with light and momentarily blinding him.

"That's a start!" Curtis hollered.

Lyman's hand froze on the brass doorknob. A what?

"A foot in the door," Curtis said. "One small step for a man, a giant leap for mankind."

Lyman looked back and saw Curtis nodding as if they were old allies. War vets. A light flashed on in the house across the street, like a big square eye opening. Lyman tried to smile back, but something—a hand, a claw, something fiercely tangible—gripped him by the shoulders. "No, it isn't," he muttered, fishing for his house key. Turning, hollering: "No, the

hell it isn't!"

Curtis called back coolly. "Otherwise it's not fair."

"What?" Lyman bellowed. "What's not fair? You're accepted. Full fellowship. Full brotherhood—if you play by the same rules."

"Not with my spouse."

"Your *what*?"

"My lover's coming up from L.A. I'm not going to give him up again. President Jensen's going to tell me to. Maybe even you will. But I won't. I can't. You wouldn't give up your wife, would you?"

Lyman cupped his hands over his ears. No. He wasn't hearing this, seeing this. He couldn't bear to look at Curtis, his pixie smile and pointed beard. He closed his eyes and in his mind two naked men materialized, one hairy, the other smooth, intertwined like two big alabaster snakes. He shook his head, trying to blur the image.

"No!" he roared. He was angry now. Past patience, past long-suffering, past gentleness, kindness, persuasion. He was hyperventilating. He could hardly talk. Brother Hancock was right, Sister Marks was right—all of them, 100 percent correct. Give them an inch and they'll take a yard. Give them a pew and they'll take the whole tabernacle.

"What does a single LDS man or woman do? They can't just go out and—and copulate at will. They contain it. They sublimate. No, it's not easy. Sure it's hard—darn hard. But it can be and must be controlled. If you want to be a member in good standing. If you want to bear the priesthood. If you want the blessings of the temple."

Curtis shook his head sadly. He looked disappointed, hurt. "You're comparing apples and oranges, Bishop."

Lyman charged, head down, fists clenched, reminiscent of his high school football days. Curtis stood his ground, unflinching, and Lyman pulled up short of plowing into him. They were nose to nose, Lyman inhaling Curtis's garlicky breath. "How? How is it different? How are you an apple, me an orange? You people don't want equality, you want preference! Asterisks! Special house rules."

"You've got a choice, we don't. You choose to be single."

"How do you know? Suppose I'm born a eunuch—where's my choice?"

"I'm part of God's creation. This is my sexuality, not my cross to bear."

"Okay—all right. Suppose someone likes doing it with three-year-olds or with horses or sheep or elephants. Does that make it okay?"

Curtis's expression remained neutral. A mug shot.

Lyman taunted him. "Hey, God made me that way! Can I help it? Where do you draw the line, Curtis? Where?"

"What right have you got to draw it?"

"I don't but God does."

"How do you know that's where he drew it?"

"By revelation! By the voice of God! And if you don't accept that—what's the point of being in the church? If you only accept what you think you feel you want to believe—whatever's easiest—"

"Don't you see? If so called revelation can change—blacks receiving the priesthood for instance—then God's commandments can change. They're relative to a particular time and place. It's only a matter of time, Bishop."

"A matter of—" Lyman was tired of arguing, defending, accusing, debating. He was tired. "No!" he hollered, waving off Curtis, waving off the world. "No!" all of the way back to his porch where he stopped and gazed into the little hemisphere of glass on the door. His reflection stared back at him like Jacob Marley's ghost, and he studied it as if for the first time, far more creased and pouchy and oppressed than he had remembered, like the worm-eaten portrait of Dorian Gray. "No," he groaned. "No no no no."