

An Episode from the Memoirs of Elder Thomas, A Somewhat Less than Good and Faithful Servant

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[TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19.] BROTHER DUVALIER—THE BRANCH president—had us out to his farm for dinner tonight. Which is to say, he had us out to milk cows with his farmhand while his wife made us dinner.

It strikes me as a little odd that I seem to be spending so much of the best two years of my life providing free labor for local ecclesiastical leaders. Even so, I diligently went ahead and put my shoulder to the wheel, or more literally to the crap-covered beast.

We did get a new investigator out of it, though, when President Duvalier introduced us to the farmhand, a timid guy named Cliff Littlewood with greasy hair and a shocking, fuzz-covered underbite.

He called Cliff over and said, "These are the elders, Carlisle and Thomas. They have something they want to talk to you about." Then he walked away, while Cliff sort of shuffled his feet and looked at the ground.

I had no clue what Duvalier was talking about, but apparently he and Carlisle had arranged it all beforehand. Carlisle stepped right up, shook Cliff's hand, and boldly set an appointment for tomorrow night, easily dismissing Cliff's weak objections. It reminded me a little bit of the calf-roping event in a rodeo I once saw on TV. Carlisle had Cliff down on his back in no time flat, three legs tied with a flourish and one good leg twitching within five seconds.

Then Carlisle took off to the other end of the barn to talk to Duvalier, while Cliff and I set about plugging finger-length nipples into pulsating metal suction devices.

After we got the milking done, he took me to a back room where they keep the sick heifers and it was pretty amazing to watch how good he was with them. He was a sweet guy, he really was.

There was one heifer in there whose nipple was all ripped up and infected. Cliff had to stick a catheter up the hole of her teat to let the milk out or else she would have had a swollen udder to go with her torn teat. She was obviously pretty displeased about the whole thing. She was stamping her hoof and it looked like she might give poor Cliff a kick until he coolly sort of put his hand up onto her side and held it there. He was pretty firm and pretty gentle at the same time, and the cow calmed right down and let him finish what he was doing. It blew my mind, actually, but not as much as it blew my mind when he told me how she had ripped her nipple.

Apparently, she had been sleeping peacefully in a big pile of manure and hay with all the other cows one morning when Cliff came in to wake them up. He yelled or whatever he does when he wants them up, and they clambered off their knees to get their morning milking.

But this one cow had been sleeping with her hoof resting on her teat. So when she got up, her hoof shredded it. Just like that.

I couldn't believe it. I had no idea such a thing was possible.

"Wow," I thought, "we live in a world inhabited by animals capable of stepping on their own teats."

I asked Cliff if there was anything he could do besides sticking a catheter in the cow's wound. He said there wasn't much, short of aborting the calf the cow was carrying so she would stop producing milk—which wasn't an option, he explained, because if a dairy cow isn't producing milk then it's not much good at all.

See, it's just like the bishop said it would be: I'm learning something new every day.

[Wednesday, November 20.] We went to Cliff's house today. He and his wife, Sylvia, live in the basement of a split-level down the road from the Duvaliers.

Up close, Sylvia wasn't exactly ugly, not the way Cliff was. She just looked a little malnourished. She had the body of a thirteen-year-old, small and thin, like she had a thyroid condition. Everything about her seemed fragile. Even her hair, which looked as if she had cut it herself, was brittle and uncertain. Her eyes bulged a little and she looked nervous the whole time.

In fact, they both seemed nervous. But we taught them the first discussion anyway. It was pretty crazy. We told them the Joseph Smith story and they kept asking whether it was God or Jesus who came to the sacred grove. Carlisle would say it was both and they would ask if there wasn't

only one and he would say there were two, actually three. They would ask which one and he would say both and they would begin again. It went on like that for a while until I was ready to call it an unidentified flying object and leave it at that. But they eventually agreed to nod their heads and stare dumbly.

Anyway, they said they would read the Book of Mormon, although they looked uneasy about it. I think either they don't know how to read or else they think the devil will get them if they read our book. Sometimes it's hard to tell.

Carlisle and I had a little argument about them when we got back. Sort of. I guess I didn't argue very persuasively.

I was just trying to say that I think Cliff and Sylvia didn't seem to want us to teach them all that much. I mean, they obviously didn't. They didn't understand what was going on and they seemed reluctant about reading the Book of Mormon and also about letting us come back. They just gave in because they were afraid to say no.

So I said I felt sorry for them. I told him I thought maybe we ought to leave them alone or give them a while to think things through before we come back. It was pretty stupid, it really was, because it's not like I was unsure about it or anything and I was talking like I was unsure of myself. The only thing is, I'm a missionary so how can I tell my companion that I don't think we should teach two of the few people who will even let us through their door?

Of course, Carlisle picked right up on that. He said, "Elder Thomas, if you didn't want to teach people the gospel, why did you come on a mission? If missionaries just walked away from everyone who seemed a little hesitant, there wouldn't be eight million members, worldwide." That was his most salient point. The rest was personal attack-type stuff.

He said I have too much "fear of man" in me; I get a little nervous about teaching the discussions, so he figures I'm just trying to get out of doing it. Carlisle should think about a career in the foreign service, he's such a brilliant diplomat. He said I was trying to cloak my fear behind false concern for Cliff and Sylvia, but if I was really concerned I would do everything in my power to bring them unto Christ.

Okay, maybe the guy's right. I don't always feel that comfortable teaching and maybe it's a little contradictory for a missionary to hesitate to share the gospel. But, first of all, I've been out five months and I'm really starting to get better, and, second, I don't find Cliff and Sylvia particularly daunting anyhow. So I don't think I'm cloaking anything. And furthermore, all I'm saying is that maybe we should be mellow with them, because it seems like they're the type of people who have concerns and stuff, but are just too timid to voice them. It's not cool to steamroll people like that.

Cool or not, though, Carlisle won the argument and we'll probably be riding the Littlewoods pretty hard over the next little while.

[Thursday, November 21.] No Littlewoods today—it was Flood the Earth Day. The mission president apparently had this great idea that all the missionaries in the mission should do nothing but walk around for one day and give everyone Book of Mormons to plant as seeds in their hearts. We weren't supposed to set up teaching appointments or anything, just give out books. So we tracted all day and barely managed to unload three.

Still, it wasn't a bad day. Tracting is a bit like exercise. It's never enjoyable to do, but you have to admit you always feel good about having done it afterwards.

[Friday, November 22.] We went back to the Littlewoods today, but we didn't teach them. I think the plan was to give them the second discussion and challenge them to be baptized, although I can't be too sure as Carlisle, being the senior companion, doesn't always divulge his secrets to me.

Cliff stammered for a while when we showed up and then told us his TV wasn't working and so now wasn't a good time to have the discussion. Carlisle argued with him a little, his point being that our presentation was not a multi-media event and so lack of television wasn't necessarily a detriment. It was a well thought out and rational point, if you were moron enough not to see the guy didn't want us around.

These people really have a tough time telling Carlisle no. It was interesting to watch, actually. The whole thing reminded me of something I read in a dog-training manual once. With dogs, everything is based on dominance and submission. So the trick to training dogs, according to this book, is to convince them that you are the dominant one, the leader of the pack. The dominant dog gets to tell all the other dogs what to do and they just do it, whether they like it or not. Like if the dominant dog wants to eat a submissive dog's bone or something—if the dogs know each other well enough to have established who is dominant—then the submissive dog will just give up the bone and do nothing about it except maybe look a little depressed or something. Carlisle is the dominant dog.

And the Littlewoods are the sort of people who just go around assuming that everyone else will always be dominant. So poor Cliff wouldn't tell Carlisle a clear no, he would just sort of mumble about the TV being broken and then look down at the ground, almost exactly like he was afraid Carlisle might growl at him and bite.

I guess it sort of worked out, though, because Carlisle eventually gave up and rescheduled the appointment for a couple days from now.

[*Saturday, November 23.*] Tracting today. We did the card trick where you both look at the map and pick a street then write each street on opposite sides of a card and shut your eyes so you don't know which side of the card your street is on and turn the card around a bunch of times. Then you pray to see which side of the card the Lord wants you to tract on. Once you've both agreed on a side of the card, you go to the street written on that side. That way, your egos don't get involved—nothing but pure, unfiltered revelation.

But I didn't really feel like tracting then, at least not with Carlisle, so I kept saying the opposite of whatever side he picked. He got pretty frustrated after a while, which was gratifying. After about twenty prayers he decided I'd better say which one I felt prompted on first. So I did and we still couldn't agree. He kept mumbling how we just didn't have the Spirit and how I needed to be better about getting up on time. After a while he said we would just go to the street he picked.

So we went to his street and he said he'd go first. No one was home for the first seven houses. Finally at the eighth house this woman answered the door and Carlisle gave his spiel: "Hi. I'm Elder Carlisle and this is Elder Thomas. We're missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and we're in the neighborhood giving away free copies of the Book of Mormon today. Would you—"

And she said, "Young man. You can take that book and you can stick it up your ass." Then she slammed the door.

Carlisle looked ready to cry. He decided we'd better just call it a day after that. I suggested we go try my street, but he ignored me so we just walked home.

He left a copy of *The Miracle of Forgiveness* close to my study desk before he went to bed.

[*Sunday, November 24.*] Church today. President Duvalier had to speak for about forty minutes because Brother Arsenault, the scheduled speaker, didn't show up. I was surprised, because Arsenault is one of about five people in this branch who show up regularly. Must have had stagefright. So Duvalier ended up talking for forty minutes on the importance of obeying your leaders, which basically means him. His wife was the only one listening.

We taught the Littlewoods again after church.

It didn't go very well, even though Carlisle taught all my parts for me, which was upsetting. Usually he just repeats my parts once I finish, but this time he actually taught the entire discussion from beginning to end.

Anyhow, Cliff freaked out hard when the baptismal challenge came up, while Sylvia just sat there and got all shifty-eyed. He didn't know

what to say, so he told us they'd think about it. I don't think he realized that we were actually going to ask them to do anything beyond just letting us preach to them.

Of course, he tried Old Faithful—"I've already been baptized"—but Carlisle explained that his baptism was invalid, the product of the Apostasy. This, however, didn't do the trick and Cliff would only agree to think about it and pray. He won't openly disobey, but he's not so submissive that he can't think of a way out of making a firm commitment.

I don't know. Maybe Carlisle's right to push them a little. I mean, who knows what is best for people? One thing, though, it's frustrating to study and pray and memorize your discussions, and in your head you start to become a pretty good teacher and you feel the Spirit and all that, and then have your senior companion shut you out of the conversation.

[Monday, November 25.] P-day again, finally. We went to Charlot-tetown and played basketball with the elders there. We're spending the night because there's a Missionary Broadcast tomorrow and our branch doesn't have a satellite dish. I'm looking forward to waking up tomorrow and finding that I'm not alone with Carlisle.

[Tuesday, November 26.] Missionary Satellite Broadcast from Salt Lake. How marvelous it is that we can hook up with the rest of the missionaries in the world as a great and mighty army, and so on. That's all I really heard, then I tuned out. I'm sure it's pretty marvelous and everything, but it reminded me a little too much of the MTC.

Anyhow, I wanted the time to think about the Littlewoods. I'm not really sure what I think we should do; not, of course, that Carlisle would ever let me in on the decision-making.

I'm wondering if it's such a hot idea for us to teach them right now. They don't seem to be enjoying it much. The whole time we're teaching them they're sweating it out, waiting for us to leave so they can be alone again.

But the problem is, they are exactly the sort of people who could use the gospel. I mean, what could suit them better than being told that they're loved by God himself and that they are, in fact, his children and they're destined to be divine?

After all, if I don't want to teach people who will listen, then what the hell am I doing here? I don't know. Maybe it's that I don't think these people are all that willing; they're just afraid to say so.

[Wednesday, November 27.] Home again. Carlisle borrowed a TV from the branch and we showed the Littlewoods a video tonight: *What Is Real?* I don't know why we showed them that one. It has this weird, disjointed

story line. Even smart investigators have a hard time figuring out what's going on. But I guess Carlisle figured it had to be good because it came from Salt Lake.

The Littlewoods didn't seem to care too much one way or the other. They just looked worried and said it was real nice and that sort of thing. Carlisle bore his testimony, which is ironic because I guarantee he doesn't get it. He asked me to bear my testimony after he was done. I said, "Of what? Church videos or just the church in general?" He said he thought a testimony of church videos might be appropriate under the circumstances. I wasn't sure if he meant the camera angles or the ideas, but I was afraid to ask so I testified, and boldly I might add, that *How Rare a Possession* was the best one.

Tomorrow morning we'll study the art of testimony bearing for companion study. He'll explain to me how we need to build testimonies of various parts of the gospel, like church videos, so that we can share more effectively.

Something cool happened, though, after we finished affirming the church's prowess in filmmaking. Carlisle challenged the Littlewoods to come to church on Sunday. They tried a couple of different excuses and Carlisle shot them all down. Then they said they didn't have a car and since it's winter they didn't think they'd be able to walk. So Carlisle said we could give them a ride in our car. And Cliff stood straight up and looked at the floor bravely and said, "No." Just like that.

I jumped right up, before Carlisle could start arguing with him again, and shook Cliff's hand, then Sylvia's, then said we understood and walked out the front door. Carlisle had to follow me. He was a little mad because we didn't reschedule an appointment, but he figures we see them often enough that it shouldn't be much of a problem to do it tomorrow. He says they are the perfect investigators and he thinks they'll join the church. They're humble and teachable. "Teachable," in this context, must mean too poor, ugly, and downtrodden to put up much of a fight. All Carlisle has to do with a "teachable" person is give him a light tap on the shoulder and he'll go tumbling headlong into the waters of baptism.

[Thursday, November 28.] We went back to Cliff and Sylvia's this morning but no one answered. I was sure they were home but I didn't tell Carlisle that. I could just see them in there hiding from us in their home, all afraid we'd find out they didn't want us, and then they'd have to confront us and wait for us to yell at them or kick them, or whatever it is they're afraid people will do to them.

Since they're our only investigators, we spent the rest of the day driving around finding inactives, most of whom seemed a lot like the Littlewoods.

[*Friday, November 29.*] New money came in from the mission office. I sent Dad twenty bucks for using his calling card and I bought postage for all the letters that have been sitting on my desk since last month's money ran out a week ago. Carlisle counseled me to be more frugal. He's a very useful guy to have around.

I went shopping too. I got a lot of lettuce and tomatoes and stuff. I think I'm going to start eating better.

Carlisle was telling me all day about this great feeling he's having about the Littlewoods. He said he thinks we could have them baptized before zone conference next month.

[*Saturday, November 30.*] The Duvaliers had us out for dinner again tonight—a good, sturdy, farmer's dinner.

Carlisle started to do the dishes afterwards and I ducked out and headed for the milking barn, where I knew Cliff would be. I wanted to talk to him alone—just so we could speak about something other than the church, maybe let him know I liked him for reasons other than the fact we might be able to baptize him.

The wind was blowing off the iced-over Northumberland Strait, over the bare fields and around the barns and greasy old tractors. I tugged shut my jacket and rushed across to the foggy windows and golden lights and the sweet-sickening smell of milk inside.

The cows were all strapped into their stalls, but I didn't see Cliff, so I went back to the sick room.

He was huddled over a heifer, lying still on her side, and was looking close at her rear haunch. It was spooky actually, with the wind outside and the moaning cows in the other room and this dirty man kneeling over a sick cow in the harsh light of a dangling bulb.

I asked him what was up and he answered sparingly, "Infected."

I looked over his shoulder and saw that he was telling the truth. About a good square foot of her right haunch was covered in a very deep-looking, raw sort of messy wet scab.

"What happened to her?" I asked.

"Don't know." He was really opening up to me.

"So what are you doing?"

"Gonna hafta cut it out."

"Why? I mean, won't it just scab over or something?"

"No, it's infected," he said. I figured he knew what he was talking about even if it was futile to try and get him to explain it to me.

He sat silent for another few minutes, touching the wound with his fingers every once in a while, inducing the cow to writhe in a lackadaisical, bovine sort of way. But he was very soft about it, as gentle as a person could be about something like that. I thought again of the way his hand

had calmed the cow with the torn tit the first night we met him.

"Maybe you can help me," he turned and looked up at me.

"Sure," I said, "whatever you need."

He walked across the room and got a short, clean-looking knife off one of the benches, then came back and knelt over the cow again. "You hold her down."

"Aren't you going to anesthetize her or anything?"

He just looked at me, and I'm not sure if it was blankly to let me know that he didn't know what anesthesia was or, incredulously, as if anesthetizing cows was some kind of city slicker idea. Either way the answer was no.

I knelt down too, and put both hands firmly on the cow's side, ready to push her back down if she tried to get up.

"No, like this," he said, and reached up to the side of the cow's head and held one hand at the top of her neck. "All you have to do is hold her neck. If she can't move her head, she'll think she can't move her body."

I'm sure she would have preferred anesthesia, truth be told, but he was right. Stupid thing didn't move an inch the whole time, although she whined like crazy.

He held her skin taut with his left hand and began to scrape away at the outer layers of her wound with the knife in his right. The cow would try to lift her head every once in a while, but I'd just push it back down and she'd stay put.

It went on like that for a long time, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, and I could hear Carlisle and Duvalier in the other room. Carlisle was calling my name, but I obviously couldn't come right then and I didn't exactly want to see the guy all that much anyway. So I kept quiet and held on to the cow's neck.

Then, sort of abruptly, in mid-scrape, Cliff said, "She was pregnant."

"Was?"

"We had to kill the calf inside her because what with the infection and cuttin' it away now, we figured she wouldn't be able to handle the stress."

"Yeah," I said, "but didn't you tell me a dairy cow is useless without a calf? I mean it's not going to make any milk if you kill the calf, right?"

He sort of chuckled at me, which was strange. It was the first thing I'd seen him do that gave any clear indication that he was aware I was a kid and he was an adult.

He said, "She wouldn't be giving any milk any more at all if she was too weak to birth her calf when it came up. A dead cow ain't no good to a farmer." He paused. "Sometimes you gotta give up now for later—no sense hurting a thing worse than she's already hurt just 'cause you're in a big rush to get some milk."

Cliff the philosopher. I thought about that one for a second. That is, I started to think about it but was interrupted by Carlisle roaring into the room all in a fury.

"Thomas, what the heck are you doing?" he blazed, while Cliff looked down and continued to scrape. "You can't just leave your companion. We're supposed to be *unified*. Do you know what I thought? I thought you were out in the car listening to the radio. You have to tell me when you want to go somewhere and I'll go with you. Otherwise, I might think you're trying to break the mission rules."

I struggled to digest all that, and he continued, "Anyway, I'm glad you found Cliff 'cause we need to set up a new appointment, eh Cliff?" He patted Cliff on the shoulder. "How's tomorrow at seven?"

Cliff turned and looked up at Carlisle and started to answer him, but was cut off.

"You don't have any plans, do you?" Carlisle stated.

"Well, no," Cliff answered.

"All right then," Carlisle said, "we'll be by at seven. Come on, Thomas, maybe we can get back to town and do a little tracting before 9:30."

"Uh, well, I'm trying to help . . ." But Cliff already had his left hand up by the cow's neck. He looked up at me long enough to nod goodbye and then went back to his work.

[*Sunday, December 1.*] Church this morning. Nothing spectacular happened.

The Littlewoods wouldn't answer the door again when we came over. Carlisle was pretty mad. We went outside the building to see if they were in there, and you could see Sylvia peeking out through the blinds and all the lights were on.

Why is it only apparent to me that they want us to leave them alone and why are they so incapable of just explaining it to Carlisle?

All they can think of is to hide from us and hope we will leave them be. I wish we would. I mean, the only difference between them and someone who slams the door in our face is that the Littlewoods are afraid of loud, banging noises.

But I saw her there watching us through the blinds, a grown woman hiding from a couple of teenagers, and that was finally it. After yesterday and today I've seen all I need to see. They don't want us and they're never going to say anything and it's pathetic.

[*Monday, December 2.*] P-day again. We drove by the Littlewoods on our way to Charlottetown this morning and we saw Cliff taking his trash out. Carlisle pulled over and I rolled down the window and he tried to set up an appointment. Cliff gave some excuses like he usually does. I

guess Carlisle was probably going to argue with him and keep persisting or whatever. But I sort of cut him off.

Nothing major or anything. I mean I didn't beat anyone up or anything. I just spoke faster than Carlisle for once.

Cliff said something like, "Tonight's not so good."

Carlisle started to answer, but I interrupted him, "Yeah, that's okay, we understand. If you're too busy, that's no problem."

Carlisle tried to talk again, but I said, "You know, Cliff, if you don't want us to come around anymore, we understand that too. All you have to do is say so. Do you want us to keep coming by?" I knew, if the answer was no, all he needed was a chance to say it once. Even if Carlisle tried to argue with him after that, it would be easier for Cliff to stand his ground once he had claimed some. Especially if I backed him up a little.

"It's just that we have our own religion and we don't want to join another one."

Carlisle began to speak, "Cliff—"

But I spoke louder, "Okay. We'll stop coming by. Maybe we'll see you over at the Duvaliers sometime." I rolled up my window.

Cliff looked at me and mumbled something and walked back inside. Carlisle looked at me too. He said, "What'd you do that for? We could have baptized those people. I had a feeling about them. You can't do something like that without discussing it first."

I just kept my mouth shut and waited for him to start the car. I'll explain it to him later.