

Rook

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LAST WINTER, AFTER HALF A CENTURY of faithful church service and during a temple session, I abandoned my position at the temple veil, removed my robes, and demanded to be released. By nightfall, I had completed a letter to the church requesting that my name be blotted from its records. With my wife's shears, I cut the sacred marks from the breast, belly, and knee of my garments. While my wife continued her daily work for the supposed salvation of the dead, I kept to the church-owned apartment we lived in behind the temple, considering what use to put the years remaining to me.

The other temple workers visited me, attempting to coax me from a course of behavior they called foolish and damaging. They demanded to know why I had so suddenly abandoned the church. Had I done something wrong recently? Was there some monstrous sin lurking in my past? When I insisted I possessed nothing but ordinary sins, they ventured other, more esoteric explanations: sins of thought, the pernicious influence of the media, the rise of communism, the new world order, demonic possession. Our conversations foundered as they insisted with growing desperation that there must be some cause and I insisted there was none, until everyone fell silent and my wife fled the room in tears. Then they would bear *solemn testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel* and beg me to *return to the fold*. I would bear testimony in kind, telling them that though I still believed in the gospel I would never set foot in chapel or temple again. Disturbed, their faith grown thin-lipped and impatient, they gave their excuses and left.

By mid-April I had driven a wedge between myself and practically all other Mormons, and thus was left largely alone and in peace to continue dismantling my faith. I enjoyed the time I suddenly had for myself, a time undisturbed except for Wednesday afternoons. While reading each Wednesday, I would hear a knock at the apartment door. Not only a knock, but Brother Gerber's own distinctive knock: six rapid strokes, one for each letter of his surname. *I will not under any circumstances answer the*

door, I told myself, for I knew that if I did the remainder of my day would be ruined. *Do not answer the door*, I commanded myself. Every time I was convinced I would not answer, until Gerber knocked a third time, eighteen strokes in all. I kept hearing the strokes toll in my head, G/E/R/-B/E/R, G/E/R/B/E/R, G/E/R/B/E/R, until the page before me was hardly a page and I could no longer string sense into the words. If I did not answer, I knew, Gerber would take further steps, calling my name perhaps, or peering through my curtains. Somehow I felt this would be more alarming than if I simply admitted him.

Gerber came equipped with what he called a "spiritual moment," a short, pithy irrelevance such as "As I have loved you, love one another." This, he usually reinforced with some prefabricated anecdote intended to startle me into feeling the spirit. Bearing his testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel, he told me they all missed me, that they prayed daily for me to embrace the church. *You're a sixty-eight-year-old priesthood holder*, he told me (in fact, I am seventy-one). *Put the last of your life in God's hands*.

Mostly I was friendly. I said I agreed with him but that I couldn't come back. I was not a sinner, I said, but the church had become unbearable. I had no intention of coming back. I would die outside the church, I told him, and I was prepared to go to hell.

Shaking his head slowly, he chirped a mixture of doctrine and popular sayings at me, lines like *Endure to the End* or *Slow and Steady Wins the Race* or, pretending it was something Jesus said, *I didn't say it would be easy, just that it would be worth it*. Even after I explained that Jesus never said this, he continued to try to use it. After his first few visits, I learned not to respond, letting him babble until he expunged his stock of anecdotes and stood to take his leave.

At the door, as a last ditch attempt, Gerber always invited me to play Rook with him and his wife.

No, I always told him, I had no intention of playing Rook with him. I had given up playing Rook at the same time I gave up Mormonism.

He looked astonished. *What's wrong with a little Rook?* he always wanted to know.

"Everything is wrong with a little Rook."

"What exactly?"

"I don't care to play."

"No," he said, shaking a cancer-spackled finger, a vein pulsing on his forehead. "It can't be as simple as that."

"Why does it have to be Rook? Why not Bridge?"

"You play Bridge with face cards."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Good Mormons don't touch face cards."

"There," I said. "There's the first problem. Tell you what, Gerber," I

said. "I'll come play Rook if we can use face cards."

"But Rook is played with Rook cards."

"You could play Rook with face cards."

He shook his head vehemently. "The Lord has counseled us against them."

"You're a seventy-year-old man, Gerber," I would tell him. *I*, at least, knew *his* age. "You're hardly impressionable. What's the danger?"

"I could become a gambler."

"Be serious."

"I am serious. Even if I didn't, a young person might see me. *Whoever you are, there is some younger person who thinks you are perfect—*"

"—How much longer are you going to deceive them?" I asked.

"Brother," he said, "open your heart."

"I'm not playing Rook. I have no intention of ever playing Rook again."

He would keep posing Rook-related questions to me, questions for which there was no acceptable response, as I shut the door.

Once alone, I paced up and down the apartment considering how I should have handled the situation. *Rook!* I shouted at the empty couch. *Why this insistence on Rook? I am no longer in the church and I no longer play Rook. You must never bring these things up again,* I said, stabbing my finger at an imaginary Gerber. *You have become a burden to me. Please leave and never return.*

That futile and impotent exchange might have continued for months except that one Wednesday, as I reiterated to Gerber that there was no dark reason behind my leaving the church, he blurted out, *Maybe something to do with the death of your granddaughter?*

It was the last thing I expected of him. I didn't know he even knew. I had forbidden my wife to discuss the death with anyone, and I myself had told neither Gerber nor anyone else anything about it.

My granddaughter's suicide had taken place at the end of the previous summer. Though I'd like to claim it was a surprise, in all honesty it was not. My granddaughter, like my daughter, was prone to a severe, debilitating depression which was never adequately treated. She'd been twice hospitalized. She frequently threatened to kill herself. It was clear the potential for suicide existed, yet when she finally did kill herself, she hadn't threatened to do so for months.

My daughter, discovering her daughter's body hanging from the center beam of her suburban two-car garage, her bare feet knocking against the windshield of the BMW, had suffered a mental collapse and had to be hospitalized. She had remained under care since the suicide; there was no indication that she would ever be released. Her husband, an accoun-

tant—an opportunist—hired a lawyer and began divorce proceedings. He claimed he had meant to do so before his daughter's death, that his decision had no connection to his daughter's death or to his wife's illness.

Here my wife and I face death daily—decrepit old temple workers are every day dropping like flies—yet my wife could not face our granddaughter's death and our daughter's breakdown. At first, she had severe difficulty making it through a day. She became slow and visibly older, her hands shaky, her Parkinson's worsening. I, on the other hand, had navigated the death quickly and successfully. I had approached the death pragmatically and objectively, analyzing it, facing it, and then progressing past it. It had not affected my relation to the church, nor had it affected my relationship to anything or anyone. It had been a terrible thing, absolutely terrible, for a short time, but it had quietly dissolved for me into the great, undifferentiated past.

My leaving the church, I informed Gerber, had nothing to do with my granddaughter's suicide. "It has nothing to do with my granddaughter," I said loudly, pounding my fist on the book I had been reading.

"But the spirit told me," Gerber insisted, a look of supposed inspiration on his face. "The spirit doesn't lie."

I could not stop myself from cursing aloud. Before I was fully aware of it, I had grabbed Gerber and was shaking him, propelling him toward the door.

Yet, turning the doorknob, I reconsidered. It was foolish to expel Gerber though he deserved it. I had already acquired a reputation for evil among the temple workers. Gerber was precisely the sort of person to recount his expulsion in a way that would cast me in the worst possible light. I did not personally care what anyone thought of me but there was my wife to consider, her feelings.

I suddenly left off trying to open the door. Dragging Gerber back to the couch, I forced him to sit. I sat beside him, one hand on his shoulder should he attempt to rise.

His comb-over had come loose and hung in a crisp haze over his glasses. His magnified eyes, I saw as I folded the hair contrary to nature to hide his bald spot, had grown skittish.

"Forget all that, Gerber," I said. "You are always welcome here."

He was regarding me rather suspiciously. I smiled tightly to reassure him.

He said, "If what I said about your grand-daughter—"

"—let's leave the question of my grand-daughter aside," I said.

He opened his mouth, closed it again. I carefully removed my hand from his shoulder. He remained seated, his hand rising nervously to pat

his displaced hair.

"Would you care for something to drink?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Water?" I asked. "Apple juice? Tea?"

"Please don't offer me tea," he said.

"Herbal tea, Gerber," I said. "Mormons can drink that."

"*Avoid the very appearance of evil,*" he stated softly.

"Don't be silly," I said.

When I put the kettle on for myself, Gerber stood. He told me that he didn't want to upset me, but if I wanted to break the Word of Wisdom he felt he should leave.

"It's perfectly all right, Gerber," I said. "I told you, it's herbal. Relax a little," I said.

"I don't feel well," said Gerber. "My head. I should go."

"It isn't black, Gerber; it's herbal."

"Please," said Gerber. "Don't make me stay."

In a state of some irritation, I walked around the living room, finally sitting down beside him. He flinched.

"I'll strike a bargain," I said. "If you drink a cup of herbal tea with me, I'll come back to the church."

"Please," he said. "Just let me leave."

"Why not pray about it?" I asked. "See what God says?"

"I already know what God wants."

That essentially exterminated all we had say to one another. I stared at him. He stared at the floor. Eventually, carefully, he stood and made his way to the door.

"Well," he said, opening it.

I nodded.

He went out the door. Once out, he regained some of his nerve. He stopped, turned around. "Say, why don't you and the wife come around to play Rook with us, just like old times?"

I shook my head. "I have no intention of playing Rook," I told him.

"What?" he asked. "Given up Rook?"

We'd been over it a hundred times before.

"You've given up both Rook and the church at the same time?" he asked.

"There's no connection, Gerber."

"But you gave them up at the same time," he said.

"My granddaughter had nothing to do with this," I said, raising my voice, watching him stumble awkwardly back off the slab and onto the grass. "Not with the church, not with Rook."

"I wasn't talking about her," he said. He looked at me a while. "If you change your mind," he said, "drop by about eight."

"I'm not coming," I said, and closed the door.

Every Wednesday I continued to brew herbal tea, Gerber first claiming he had to leave and then looking on nervously as I drank it. Once I had finished, he would beg me to return to the church, beg me to play Rook with him. I refused him on all counts.

After a month, my wife told me she'd heard I was breaking the Word of Wisdom while she was in the temple.

"It's herbal."

"That's not what I hear," she said, arching neatly plucked eyebrows. "Word has it you are throwing people out of the apartment as well."

"Not people," I said. "Gerber. And against my better judgment I ended up not throwing the fellow out."

"It's not your apartment," she said. "It belongs to the church."

"I pay the rent," I told her. "I'll throw out whoever I want."

The thought of Gerber gossiping, detailing my habits to the other temple workers, falsifying and exaggerating our interaction, was more upsetting than I dared at first admit. It set me completely against the man. Thus, when the next Wednesday came and I heard his knock—G/E/R/B/E/R—coming first once then twice more, I steeled myself. I did not answer the door.

Gerber began to call out, saying it was only him, asking me to open the door. Then he was at the window, peering through the gap between the curtains. Then he was knocking at the door again, saying it was only Brother Gerber, *like the baby food*, calling that he knew I was in there, please open up.

I knew he would return and tell everyone how I was in the apartment but would not open the door. Between sessions they would speculate about me and the so-called sins I had committed. They would talk incessantly about me. In the end my wife would overhear and would somehow feel hurt and betrayed. She would blame me, take it out on me.

G/E/R/B/E/R. G/E/R/B/E/R. G/E/R/B/E/R.

Despite my resolve, I felt after several more assaults on Gerber's part I had no choice but to let him in. It was the lesser of two evils, immediately painful but with fewer long-lasting consequences.

I would be reserved and polite, I told myself. As always I would conduct myself as a gentleman. I would let Gerber in but would give him no gossip to tell.

I ushered him in, telling him I was sorry for the delay but that I had been reading and absolutely needed to finish my chapter. He asked what I was reading, breaking into smiles upon discovering it was not only a book about Mormonism but a book that had garnered First Presidency

approval (I was reading it only because it was the only thing in the house I hadn't already read). My interest in religious texts, Gerber claimed, was a pleasure to see.

"You're coming back, brother," he said.

No, I told him. I had no intention of returning to Mormonism. I believed in the doctrine, I informed him, believed it to be true. But I had no intention of ever coming back.

"I can feel the spirit here with us," he said. "Can you feel it, brother?"

"There's nothing here."

"Brother," he said, falling to his knees, "will you join me in prayer?"

I asked him to stop referring to me as brother. I told him to get up, I had no intention of praying. I had given up prayer upon giving up the church.

He bowed his head. I observed his lips moving silently.

I calmly told him that as long as there were Mormons like him I had no intention of returning to the church. He pretended not to listen, his lips still moving. I told him nothing had changed for me, that I intended to die without ever entering a chapel or temple again. I was speaking louder and faster. Gerber continued praying, his eyebrows raised, his eyes closed, his arms crossed.

I fell silent before he did. Yet eventually he came awkwardly to his feet, sitting again on the couch. "Brother," he said in a hushed, wheedling voice. "The Lord wants you to come back."

He was offensive to me, I told him. He had no sense of propriety. He should be locked up and kept at a distance from real people. He and everyone like him.

Looking up pale-faced and mock-transfigured at the light fixture, he seemed not to have heard.

He had no right to come into my house in this fashion, I told him. He wouldn't know the Holy Ghost if it struck him in the face. He kept looking up. I said some other things as well, even after it was clear he wasn't listening.

I allowed my words to grind down to bony silence. I sat there. Picking up the book beside me, I began for distraction to thumb through its pages. I told myself I would sit still a moment to regain my composure and then stand and walk to the door. I would open the door and hold it open, without heat, until Gerber, taking the hint, departed.

"Before you can make it back, there's a final, difficult hurdle," Gerber said.

"I'm not coming back," I said.

He just nodded, serene.

"I won't," I said. I closed my book, preparing to get up, but somehow couldn't help myself: "What hurdle?"

He looked me in the face. "You need to face up to your granddaughter's suicide."

I swept my arm back over my head and flung my book at him. The corner struck him hard on the temple, the book falling onto the couch beside him. He closed his eyes and removed his glasses. Lifting his hand to the side of his head, he pressed it against his skin. He drew the hand away, looked at it dumbly. Closing his eyes, he pressed the hand against his temple again.

"I'm sorry, Gerber," I said, without moving from my seat, "but you were becoming unbearable."

His eyes still closed, he rose to his feet and pitched to the floor.

I stood, prodded him with my slipper. Getting down beside him, I rolled him face up. I said his name. Then I said it again, a question mark after it. The side of his head was already discoloring, and the fall had split the rim of flesh above his eye. I shook him, slapped his cheeks. He had no interest in coming conscious.

I called an ambulance, then sat on the floor beside him, breathing into his mouth as his lips went slowly fishbelly blue. Paramedics rushed into the apartment. They examined his eyes, convulsed him back to life, strapped an oxygen mask across his face. They trundled him out the door.

I stood in the quiet, rubbing my arms. He had been wrong, of course. He knew nothing about it. My granddaughter's death was in the past. As for me, I was living fully in the present.

I sat down and tried to read.

Gerber had been asking for it, I told myself. I hadn't meant to hurt him, but he had been unbearable. I had left the church not over any sin or over my granddaughter but only because I had not a thing in common with the church. That was what for seven decades I had needed to face up to, and I finally had. I had been long-suffering, I told myself. I had already put up with more than most people would, both from the church and from Gerber.

I put down the book and went into the bathroom. I closed the door. Taking out my teeth, I put them in their glass. Removing my shirt, I looked at myself standing in my disfigured garment, fingering the awkward holes on the chest, over my belly, over my knee.

I slipped my teeth back in, clacked them together. I had no regrets, I informed my reflection. What had happened to Gerber was not my fault. I was not to blame. Nothing would bring me back. I was glad to leave, happy to be a free man.

I kept telling my reflection that.

In a few hours, I was starting to convince even myself.