

Song of Shiblón

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I AM TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD.

I lie in the golden light of a Korean September afternoon. I have curled myself up on the musty, avocado-skinned sofa that occupies a large corner of the living room. A small living room in a small apartment, which occupies the floor above a cosmetics store that seems to sell only furniture.

We made our pilgrimage to the post office first thing in the morning and returned proudly—two American missionaries bearing letters from home through the shop-lined streets. Up the stairs behind the cosmetics store, I leave my shoes just inside the door, slumping onto the sofa with a lunch of chocolate Digestive cookies. I have moved very little since then. Laundry can wait. The rest of the week I will spend in walking and working and worrying, but today I can spend in comfort. My companion is asleep, and I am alone with my thoughts. Monday is a missionary's day of rest.

Shifting to my side, I fish for the mail from a pile of flotsam that has accumulated in the dust on the vinyl floor beside me. A letter from home is a token of love. I have grown to understand this well enough that actually reading the letter has become secondary in importance. I look at the envelope with the red and blue striped border, the airmail stamp printed with a whitewashed front porch and an American flag: so foreign.

Beneath my letter from "The Christensens" (i.e., my mother) and a letter for another missionary, which I have picked up by mistake, I find a letter from the mission president. Previously employed as an expert in time management, President Hong has a policy of responding to each letter we send him, which means one letter each week to each of approximately one hundred and seventy-five missionaries. (Note to self: try writing a letter to your grandparents this afternoon.)

The effort to decide between reading a letter and going back to sleep is too great, and I tear into my letter from the president in order to pre-empt further thought.

Dear Elder Christensen,

Thank you for your letter dated August 20. I am pleased to see that you have been working hard there in Yosu. I was, however, surprised and disappointed by the feelings of discouragement and depression that you expressed in your letter. Pray for comfort and continue your efforts. I know that your dedication will pay off.

I stretch out on my stomach, propping the ancient, slobber-stained pillow under my chest. I'm puzzled. Discouragement? Depression? Of course these are feelings that I've had often enough while on my mission, but I don't remember writing to the president about them. Not recently.

I look out through the screen at the red neon cross mounted above the Presbyterian Church across the street. Willing myself to stand up, I slide the window closed with a rumble, turning the screw that serves as a latch. I shuffle across the floor to the bedroom where my companion is still sleeping and lie down on the lumpy futon in preparation for my weekly (weakly) attempt at letter writing. But my mind is still working over the letter from President Hong.

My usual "I'm-working-hard" letters to the president rarely merit any reply beyond the requisite, "Keep up the good work." I recall writing only one letter in August to which I was hoping to receive a reply:

Dear President Hong,

I have a scriptural question for you. In the parable of the talents, the talent is taken away from the lazy servant and given to the servant with ten talents. My question is why wasn't it given to the servant with only four?

He didn't answer my question. I didn't mean to sound discouraged or depressed. I just want to know why things are the way they are.

I am twelve years old. The late afternoon gathers in tints of yellow and orange, and I know it's time that I start making my way back. I close my book, carefully pressing a Kleenex between the pages to save my place, and look out over the reservoir.

The water is beautiful—diamond-studded corduroy waves. I wish I could stretch out and glide away on its surface. Instead, I turn back to the footpath that leads to the dust-choked road that winds back to the campground.

The temperature is comfortable, a remarkable achievement for an Oklahoma afternoon. I walk slowly through the crowds of nameless trees. In the fall, the leaves will turn brown to match the road. I prefer it this way, with the thick summer foliage that gives this corner of the state its "Green Country" nickname.

In the distance, I begin to hear them: kids, other boys, playing football or soccer, or something. I pause, take a deep breath, and continue on past the weathered rappelling tower, the top of which I plan never to see, past the cement slab where pancakes and sausage will be cooked in the morning. I close my eyes, tasting tomorrow's maple-soaked breakfast; I open them again upon tripping over a tree stump. Ahead of me opens a weedy, treeless field, rimmed with station wagons and elaborate tent contraptions.

Dad and I arrived last, following our yearly tradition of getting lost, and we have been relegated once more to the rock-infested spot farthest from the pancake slab. I wander over and lean my head against our Volkswagon van. Dad is attempting to assemble our tent—a large, terracotta ordeal supported by metal pipes designed to separate repeatedly during the assembly process. I don't have the heart to tell him I'd rather sleep in the van.

We cook dinner on last year's fire pit. The sun has set long before it's finished cooking, and we use plastic forks in the fading light of an electric lamp to fish around our crumpled squares of tinfoil for bits of oily meat and crunchy potato. Afterward we discover we've forgotten the marshmallows, so we make our way to a neighboring fire to beg for s'mores.

Late in the darkness, I wander away and pass unnoticed through a gaggle of boys playing capture the flag. I move downhill in the darkness, past the old amphitheater with seats made from native sandstone. I push through the tangled underbrush, a hand extended to ward off the tingle of spider web strands and then make my way down to the shoreline, careful not to look out at the water just yet.

In the moonlight I find a large rock right along the water's edge. I sit Indian-style, pelvic bones sharp against the rock and legs rubbing against its sandpaper surface. My ears tingle, and finally I look out over the lake, filling my lungs with air. This is my time, each moment rolling towards me like silver on the water. Just me. The stillness around me is like a warm hand on my shoulder. I sit here for over an hour.

Later, I lie on my back in the van. Two sections of pipe from the tent have been left home with the marshmallows. It's an answer to prayer. It's also past eleven o'clock, and I can see stars through the dusty windows. In the distance I hear other fathers talking and their sons performing some tribal ritual that involves running and screaming.

I turn to look at my dad, cramped into the space beside me, and feel sorry for him. He could never say it, but I'm sure he had higher expectations than this for the weekend. I want to tell him thank you. Thank you for bringing me. Thank you for being who he is and for letting me be who I am. I want to tell him, but I don't. He is, after all, my dad. I turn my head again and examine the torn cloth ceiling of the van until I drift into sleep.

I am fourteen years old. It is late in the day and as usual I'm feeling stuck in the bellybutton of time. My tailbone is beginning to ache against the hard blue plastic seat, making it impossible to sit still, and Mr. Benne's lecture is even less interesting than "Earth Science" would suggest. I remember a *Reader's Digest* article about a man who tried to slow down time by doing things that he hated—it works. Even the hourly rush through claustrophobic hallways would be a relief. My only alternative to coma is the lecture, so I lift my head from the desk and try to massage away the red mark certain to be on my forehead.

Mr. Benne asks a question. "Does anyone know the answer?"

I think I do, so I raise my hand.

"Does anyone know the answer? Anyone? Listen, folks. You need to start doing the reading."

I bring my hand back down. A girl named Brenna sits next to me: not the chunky Brenna with sandy hair who plays in the band, but the skinny one with short dark hair and glasses. She turns to look at me, eyebrows raised. We've had this discussion before.

"You do see me sitting here, right?" I whisper.

"That is just weird," she says. She's kind of a cute girl, not least of all because she can see me.

Knowing that I'm otherwise invisible again today, I reach into my backpack and pull out a surprise I had planned to save for after class: a blue, paperback *Book of Mormon*, looking considerably more haggard than when I last saw it this morning. I lay the book on the grimy surface of the table we share and throw Brenna a significant look, which she fails to catch.

I rip a sheet of lined paper from my binder and quickly write: *This is that book I told you about.* I tap the paper against her elbow. She takes it from me and holds it under the table as she reads. Her response comes in blue ink: *Oh.*

I write again: *It's a really good book. You should read it.* I slide the book over to her. *I know the pictures are a bit condescending, but it's really good anyway.*

She responds: *What does "condescending" mean?*

As Mr. Benne explains the formation of seastacks, Brenna and I slide the paper back and forth beneath the sputtering fluorescent lights. I feel a thrill. I'm connecting with someone. I'm sharing something important.

I gave Brenna the *Book of Mormon* on Tuesday. Today is Thursday, and she gives it back to me as we are herded into the classroom. She says that she doesn't know when she will have the chance to read it, and she knew that I would want to have it back. The bell rings, and I don't have the courage to tell her that I had intended that she keep it. She never mentions it again.

I am nineteen years old. Today is my turn to be interviewed. Brother

Weeks is my favorite of our three teachers, and I silently follow his immaculate white shirt down the hall. We step through the glass doors, and the world outside is beautiful—something easy to forget within the institutional confines of the Missionary Training Center. The February air is sharp and clean: refreshing after the flatulent atmosphere of the dormitories. The shrubs are still struggling with their first attempt at green, but the grass is a painstakingly trimmed model of the rewards of perseverance.

We choose a bench along the shade of a covered walkway, and the bite of the cold cement seat removes any lingering trace of drowsiness. Brother Weeks starts the interview with the usual questions.

“How are things going for you?”

“Fine.”

“You seem to be doing pretty well with the language.”

“Thanks.”

“Are there any questions or problems that you’re having?”

“No.”

“Anything I can help you with?”

“Not really, no.”

The interview falls into a lull.

“You seem like someone who has Short Interview Syndrome.”

He has caught me completely off guard.

“What?”

“You just seem like the kind of guy who gets glossed over because he’s doing pretty well on his own.”

I smile. I’ve never heard it put into words like that. It’s nice to know someone understands, that maybe someone else has been invisible, too. The two of us just talk. We talk about school and the future. I want to write plays, and he likes to write music. We both have sisters. Um. . . the conversation falls into a lull again, and we return to the classroom.

Lying on my futon, I write my letters with only one eye open. The other seems to have fallen asleep already. I have succeeded in crafting another letter to my family about the joys and challenges of missionary work. I’ll write to my grandparents next week.

I tell myself that, if this is September, then my release in February is only four months away. I wonder what missionary stories I will tell when I get home. I haven’t seen any “golden conversions.” I haven’t even been a zone leader or a trainer. I get rejected a lot, but that’s not what people want to hear. I do work hard, though. I guess I should take comfort in that. But there are times when I feel envy for elders who lack focus and can’t resist goofing off.

I took the precaution of setting my alarm, and now it jars me back to consciousness: it’s five o’clock in the afternoon. I roll off of my pillow

and thump my companion with it. We have an hour to shower, get dressed, eat dinner and get out of the house.

My companion goes back to sleep as I pull out my blue leather scriptures. On a regular day I read them in the morning, English and Korean for a half-hour each. On days like today, I only read them in English for about fifteen minutes, praying silently that the Second Coming will not catch me in the midst of my sloth. Today's chapter is Alma's advice to his son, Shiblon. I'm glad it's a short one, because I have things to do.

Eventually I close my scriptures and slide my letter from President Hong beneath my futon with the ants and paper clips.

I try to remember the chapter I've just read. Shiblon always seems to blend into the background between his brothers: Helaman, the perfect one, and Corianton, the bad boy. Just the way things are, I guess. But I make a note to read the chapter again before bed tonight. Short interview elders should stick together.

I go to the shoe pit and shine my shoes with a brown color that I had originally translated as "night," but which turned out to be "chestnut." I chop up some potatoes and carrots to fry with the rice for dinner. My companion won't thank me, but it needs to be done.

From the aluminum wardrobe I pick out my suit—the navy today, I think—a red and black checked tie, and a white shirt that has gradually become a shade of gray. More character that way, I think.

It's time to start another week.