

## 'Atta Boy

Kristen Carson

LATHAM RUNYON WONDERED WHAT TIME he ought to close his window. It was going to be a tongue-hanger today. But for now, the morning was still dewy and bearable.

He pulled his half-glasses up to his nose. It might help him feel more like buckling down to work, because all he really wanted to do was sit in the kitchen with the phone on his lap.

He could imagine the questions Ada would ask if she found him. Question number one would be: *You know that phone won't ring like that, don't you? Wall phones have to stay on the wall to work.*

Yeah, yeah. Still, the urge to clutch that phone, somehow, some way, had him bolting from his chair every time the cicadas started a new chorus outside his window. Their hums sounded just like a phone line taking its breath before a big, healthy, household-interrupting jangle.

Question number two would be: *Who are you expecting to call?*

That one he could not answer, because this was too big, too sacred to speak out loud.

He checked his watch. He wondered what time Elder Sperry's plane would land at Philadelphia International. It'd have to be early, with all there was to do today.

The rumors had flown for months. Wylie Siltman was about to grip the stake center pulpit for the last time. He'd signed his share of temple recommends, hurried away from the dinner table for his share of stake meetings, sent out his share of missionaries.

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God was giving Wylie Siltman a rest.

That was why Elder Sperry flew into Philly today, to choose a man to replace Wylie Siltman.

Well, Elder Sperry wouldn't choose the man. God would. Latham Runyon knew how these things worked. Elder Sperry's job was to come and stand among the men of the stake, waiting for God to point out the right fellow.

And for weeks now, every time Latham passed Erval in the church hallway, every time he went over to Erval's house, his good buddy joked with him, "Watch out, Latham. You're next."

"Don't plan a vacation this year. They're comin' for ya."

"Suits on sale at Penney's, my wife tells me. Better get yourself a good Wylie-Siltman one."

"Wylie's is looking kind of worn," Latham had told him.

"Yes, well, think how yours will look if you don't start out new."

And Latham hated to make too much of this, but somewhere deep down, he felt that the Lord Himself had swept His eye over this sandy spit of land and looked straight at Latham Runyon.

So, even though Latham wanted to sit in the kitchen and hold the phone, he made himself sit at his desk. He looked straight through his half glasses at the paper rolled into his Selectric. He pretended he had urgent work to do, even if it wasn't all that urgent. The chapter manuscript wasn't due for months yet. November 15, 1976, said the contract. And here it was, only August. But this was as good a time as any.

He could hear Ada stacking up the clean plates from the dishwasher. He could also hear Kate asking for the car. She said she'd have it back by something o'clock.

All those distractions echoing down the hallway. Now he remembered why he always worked in his campus office, deep in the History Department.

But if he went there, how could he hear the call when it came?

He sat back, smoothing down the bristles of his salt-and-pepper hair. The breeze blowing through the curtains carried the zing-zing-scring of Haffner's circular saw next door. Latham didn't know what Pete Haffner was working on over there, but he'd been at it every Saturday for a month now.

Latham himself had been banned from those weekend-homeowner projects. Actually, he kind of liked them. He just didn't know how, once

the gutters were hung, they ended up slanted the wrong way. And then the patio door never opened right once he'd fixed it. The last straw was the tree. Was he supposed to know that when you cut a tree, you planned which way you wanted it to fall?

Ada wouldn't even let him fix the fence it fell on. She pled—no, she insisted, in that sing-songy, nodding-forward way of hers—that he stick to what he knew best. “You just write your *articles*, correct your students' *papers*, and leave the *handymanning* to somebody *else*.”

Like Pete. Whose noise was another reason Latham worked on campus on Saturdays.

Except for today.

Today he worked at home. Where he could hear the phone when it rang. Where he could get to that phone in seconds. He couldn't waste a minute of their time, because he knew they had a pretty full day on their hands.

This eye-of-God feeling came to him one day as he looked up at the door of his cramped office and saw young Divens. Latham had put down his turkey sandwich and invited Divens in. He had taken off his half-glasses and clamped the bows in his teeth as the student talked about the problems on page four of his second draft.

And as he handed the paper back to the boy and shook his hand and sent him on his way, and picked up the turkey sandwich again, it just hit him: What he had just done was like old Wylie, welcoming a young missionary home, shaking his hand, sending him out into the world to find a wife and build a life. And he had a vision of himself, rising from the desk in Wylie's orange-carpeted office.

Latham didn't know where this picture of himself came from. It just popped up, like a swimmer from the depths.

And he didn't know whether the picture had *significance*, you know, because not all his pop-ups did. He wouldn't want them to, particularly the ones about crossing the railroad tracks just as the train appeared out of nowhere. Or the ones where he found himself kissing some woman that wasn't Ada.

So when Erval sat beside him in Sunday School and looked over the many red underlinings in Lat's scriptures and winked, “Careful there. Those are the scriptures of a future stake president,” Latham could not help but wonder if this vision of himself sitting behind Wylie Siltman's

broad, imposing desk, this vision that came out of nowhere, did not have *significance* after all.

It matched a feeling of portent. Something was about to happen to him. This feeling came to him lately, like a tap on the shoulder, just before he'd wake up. It came to him when the afternoon sun hit the quad outside his office. Usually he'd look out the window and think of the Snickers bar waiting for him down in the basement vending machines. But lately, he just sat there rubbing his four o'clock shadow and feeling that God had his eye on Latham Runyon. God was telling Latham Runyon to be ready for the thing that was about to happen to him.

It was no use running from the eye of God. Where could you go? Why would you want to get away from God, who saw something in you that he liked? Who whispered your name to the soul of Elder Sperry, who sat on an airplane somewhere above the earth, snapping his briefcase shut just as he was about to land?

At that, Latham looked at his watch. 8:42. Drive time to the stake center was two hours. How much gas did he have in the tank? How much time to shower, shave, and be on his way? Twenty minutes?

But why wait? They hadn't a minute to waste today.

Latham pushed the off button on his Selectric and rolled his chair away from the desk.

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The shampooey water ran down his face. He rubbed his head hard to hurry it along. Then there were suds trailing down his back, slow as an elevator at rush hour. He danced in the spray to hurry them, too. Here he was, sealed away from the world, away from that phone that he just knew was ringing for him right now. Somebody should invent a cordless phone, he thought, to untether him from the one in the kitchen.

When he finally turned the water off and reached for the towel, he had a comforting thought: If he missed the call, they would try him again. Wylie would. Wylie knew Latham and liked him.

Now Latham was a realistic man. He knew how these things worked. Wylie would hand Elder Sperry a long list of names—and Latham knew the names on that list didn't just land there willy-nilly, like crumbs on a couch cushion. No. Somebody had to think of your name and put it on there.

And Wylie would think of Latham, because Wylie often pulled

Latham aside in the hallways to quip about their common problems. "How are things down at Boxford State?" he'd say.

"Longer meetings, tougher tenure, and students that can't spell," Latham would tell him. "And how's it going up at the big U?"

"Three more years and they give me my rocking chair," Wylie'd laugh.

Yep, Wylie'd remember Latham Runyon and put his name down.

Then Elder Sperry would call in every man on that list; and while he distracted you with friendly small talk, he sized you up stealthily, trying to feel whether God's finger was pointing right at you.

Now Latham stood before the steam-clouded mirror. He squirted shaving cream into his hand and swabbed it over his face.

It was not the best face, to be sure. He imagined how it would look to those sitting beside him in conference tomorrow. There he'd be, his arms folded as he sat on a hard metal chair way at the back of the gym, looking for all the world like Joe Mormon, with the standard white shirt, the standard wing tips, the standard bald spot, and the standard case of scriptures with a sagging, broken spine.

The young fathers nearby would look at him and think, *I hope I don't become that in twenty years*. Their young wives would study his pocked cheeks and try to imagine just how bad the teenage acne had been. And teenage girls would decide that he was, no doubt, ten times cornier than their own dads.

He was esteemed as naught, even in his own family. Watching him narrowly as he dozed, they would sit ready to jab him hard at the first hint of a snore.

Then, when his name echoed forth from the pulpit and he stood up, his seat-neighbors would look up from their chairs, surprised. They would kick themselves mentally for not taking note of him sooner, for not recognizing his eminence.

His children would look up. *Our dad? God wants our dad?*

His wife would bow her head humbly and compose a few eloquent remarks, in case they summoned wives to speak.

And as he walked up to take his new place, people would look up from their seats, squinting at him. And when he reached the stand, Elder Sperry would smile, remembering: *Oh, yes, him. The one that likes Great Biographies, just like me*. Elder Sperry would shake his hand, motion him toward his very own theater-style seat, a far cry from the metal chairs at the

back. Elder Sperry would make him say a few words at the pulpit, where Latham could look down on all those surprised people, who were still taking it in that Latham Runyon was their new stake president.

He could see Ada putting it in the Christmas letter. He could see far-away friends opening the envelope and sitting down in shock when they got to the paragraph about the last stake conference.

People around here would have a new respect for him. He would wear that patina of authority, the one that made people hush a little when he walked down the church hallway. They would part, opening the way. They would listen to his speeches, sure that he had something great and wise to say. They would want to look righteous and dutiful and have no food stuck in their teeth when they met him and he held out his large dry hand to shake their small clammy ones.

And with that, he wiped the last bits of shaving cream from the front of his ears. He hung his towel behind the door and marched to his underwear drawer.

Someone knocked at the door. "Lat? You in there?" Ada poked her head in. She looked him up and down with one raised eyebrow. "You have a phone call."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her close. "Do I, now? Who's it from?"

He kissed her and she pulled away, giggling. "I *think* I'd better take a message."

"No, wait!" He jerked open the drawer, pulled out his underwear and scrambled in, hopping across the floor.

But she was gone.

Picking up the shirt he had discarded across the bed, he buttoned it so rapidly, his fingers felt scraped and raw. With one last zip of his fly, he flew out the bedroom door and to the top of the stairs. He was just ready to come down when his wife stared up at him from the bottom.

"That was Lois Kilby."

"What did she want?"

"She didn't say. She just asked for you."

Latham had a dark feeling about this. He trudged back to his room and sat on his bed. It probably had to do with the emergency room. He didn't have time to run off to emergency rooms today.

See, other men got nice families to home teach, the kind whose houses smelled of Sunday pot roast and fresh-baked rolls, the kind where

the mother neatly folded her apron and beamed over her whole brood as they gathered for the official monthly visit.

But no, they assigned Latham to people like the Kilbys, with a waifish, undernourished mom who flipped light switches as if she expected that small act to burn down their trailer.

Other men got families with scrubbed children, who answered your questions about how school was going.

But Latham got the Kilbys, whose sons walked, wordless and sullen, through the living room, regarding him like a big, greasy engine block ruining their mother's couch.

Other men got families with fathers that figured their taxes in long-form and fixed their roofs *before* they leaked.

But no, Latham got James Rutherford Kilby, nonmember husband of Lois Kilby.

And on that day they handed him the Kilbys' address on a little piece of paper, Latham Runyon girded up his courage and set out to pay his respects to the head of the Kilby household. He wound his way through Pine Meadows, dodging the stares of children out on their bicycles, of young men leaning into their open car hoods. Peering at the numbers tacked on the trailer prows, he finally found No. 44 and faced two men, sprawled in lawn chairs beside the puny metal steps that led to the front door.

Latham had swallowed hard as he got out of his car. He looked at the scrawny blond man. He looked at the beefy one with the shiny forehead and the lumberjack beard. He looked at the cans of Schlitz on a rusted metal table between them.

"I'm looking for James Rutherford Kilby," he said, fighting down a crackle in his voice.

The big bearded one looked at the scrawny one. "Ruthe'ferd?" He shook, seized by a big, sinus-clearing snicker. "That yer real name, Rut? Ruthe'ferd?"

"Shut up, Mugly." The blond one scooted forward in his chair.

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Rut was good for three things in this life: He could guzzle beer, he could tinker with his candy-red Honda, and he could . . . well, Lois Kilby turned up pregnant last year—surprise!—and out came Rut's first daughter.

In truth, it was the ugliest baby Latham had ever seen, with jowls



roomy enough to store softballs. But he chucked her little double-chin anyway because God had sent him over to be nice to the Kilbys.

Maybe God thought Latham, of all the men at church, might understand Rut Kilby best. After all, Latham too had spawned his own surprise offspring. It happened about ten years ago. Ada had barely sent the youngest of their two daughters off to first grade when she got the news and wept all weekend.

And Latham had once owned a noisy little Yamaha back in the summer after graduation, although Ada and grad school convinced him to give it up.

And Latham had tossed back a beer or two himself, back in his pre-Mormon frat-boy days. Perhaps God knew that Latham would not only pity Rut's soul, but his tastebuds, too, for if there ever was a lawnmower beer, Schlitz was it.

It was a peculiar friendship. Home teaching always was. Normal friendship grew like a pot belly, fed on things too good to pass up. Like with Erval. Latham and his good buddy Erv sat for hours, asking each other questions like, "If God is omniscient, then how can we be free to act?" Or, "Were the fishes and the loaves invented on the spot, or were they matter borrowed from somewhere else in the universe?"

"Uh-oh," their kids would say. "The dads are playing Stump the Rabbi again."

With Erval, there was a give-and-take. I borrow your ladder, you borrow my book. Memorial Day at your house, Fourth of July at mine.

But with the Kilbys, it was just give and give and give. Call people who don't call back. Care about people who don't care back, not even about themselves.

And now, today, when Latham prayed nothing would come between him and his phone-that-might-ring, the Kilbys rose up before him, needing . . . well, who knows what they might be needing? It could be anything from baby aspirin to bail money.

This was a test. He knew it. God was watching him. God was saying, *Why should I give you the big jobs if you won't do the small ones?*

And with that, Latham Runyon got up from the bed and clumped down to the kitchen phone.

He lifted the black handset and stuck his finger in the first hole.

He paused a moment, just to feel the phone vibes. Anything coming through on this line? Anything quivering with portent?



Was God still watching?

Probably. He swung the dial around and put his finger in the next hole.

When he had dialed all the numbers, he leaned back against the counter and watched the second hand on the clock over the fridge.

Busy signal. Latham dropped the receiver into its cradle, quickly before the busy tone snickered, "Just kidding!" and Lois Kilby's tired and breathy little voice suddenly said hello.

He heard the back door close. In came Ada, shuffling new mail in her hands. "Get hold of the Kilbys?" she said.

"Couldn't get through." He tried hard to look sorry about it.

He walked back to his desk, settled into the chair and wiggled his fingers over his Selectric keyboard, waiting for the next sentence to clack out.

But nothing came.

And no wonder. It had been a hard morning for a thinking man. Interruptions, distractions—how was he ever going to get this textbook chapter written?

He sat back in his chair. The window before him revealed, beyond the crew-cut edges of the shrubbery, a world lazing its way to lunchtime. The tall oaks across the street waved as if unimpressed by the breeze that pushed against them. A piece of white fuzz, bobbing along like a tiny visiting spaceship, rode that same breeze past the crab-apple branches.

He swiveled in his chair. He looked across his broad desk. Beyond the messy part, with the pencil can and the stapler and the yellow legal pad awaiting his jottings, it looked not much different than Wylie Siltman's desk. Latham could almost see somebody like young Divens, sitting across from him, with his pretty fiancée, eagerly awaiting his wise, stake-presidential advice.

*"Now, when Sister Runyon and I got married . . ."*

*He sees Divens reach over to the arm of his sweetheart's chair and squeeze her hand.*

*Pressing his temple fingers against his chin, he looks straight into Divens's eyes and carries on: "Sister Runyon and I made the decision that we'd have a weekly date, without fail."*

*Divens and Sweetheart look into each other's eyes. A shy smile spreads across her face.*

*Latham goes on. "It doesn't have to be . . ."*

Just then, Ada burst through the office door. "Well, look what came

today!" she said, plunking herself down in the spare chair. She straightened out the folds of the letter in her hand.

Latham quickly put away his templed fingers and his wise face. He grabbed the folder on his desk and lifted his reading glasses up to his nose.

"Do you remember my old roommate Helen?" said Ada.

"Mmm." Latham frowned at the folder as if pinning down a thought blown wild by the gust of Ada's interruption.

"They're coming here!" She squinted down at the letter, mumbling its handwritten words: "Baltimore . . . Washington D.C. . . . seeing the sights. Philadelphia around the ninth. Love to get together. . . ." But of course! What day is the 9th?" She got up and squinted at the calendar on Latham's wall. "That's a Thursday. I don't see why not. I'm sure we could go out to dinner or something. What do you think, Lat?"

Latham looked up from his folder. "A Thursday?" His mind raced. But what if the call came today? His life could change in a minute. Suddenly, that calendar would overflow with meetings and church visits.

And weren't all the stake presidency meetings on Thursday nights? How could he tell his own new high council, "Sorry. Can't be there. Friends in from out of town." Obscure friends. People he barely remembered and whom, if he never dined with again, he would not miss.

"Latham? That Thursday looks good to me. Shall I call her?"

He looked at the calendar again. Why couldn't that call have come already? How much patience could God wring from a man who only wanted to know what was about to happen to him?

He looked at Ada. "I don't know."

"What? Why don't you know?"

"I'm not sure what I've got going then."

"But there's nothing on your calendar here."

Latham peered at it over his half glasses. He might need a bigger calendar. He might even need a big spiral-bound date book like his wife's.

She gave him *The Look*. Oh, but he knew why all her little piano students faithfully practiced their lessons! Under Mrs. Runyon's *Look*, one's intestines shifted around like cats in a burlap bag.

"Latham, don't you like Helen and Bob?"

"I like them fine."

"Then what's your problem going to dinner with them on the 9th?"

"Nothing! I just don't know if I can or not. Now, I've got work to do, Ada."

She stared, the letter hanging from her hand. Then she left the room.

He turned back to his typewriter.

But he couldn't work.

He rose up out of his chair. He stepped into the hall and opened the front door. Then he burst out of the house and into the August heat of the day.

It could be the last great thinking walk of his life, if that call came today. He circled the block, plucking a leaf or two off the neighbors' hedges, staring back at small dogs yapping from behind picket fences. He nodded to men pushing lawnmowers, to women standing before their flower beds with their hands on their hips, to Pete Haffner, standing in a little pile of sawdust, peering up through his safety goggles.

He returned with arcs of sweat seeping through his shirt. And in the cool murmur of his house, as he approached his study, he glanced down the hall where his wife stood in the kitchen.

"Lois Kilby called again," she said.

"Did she say what the problem was?"

"Something about water on the kitchen floor."

Latham frowned. That should be simple. Let Rut crawl under his own kitchen sink. If the Kilby pipes were foredoomed to ruin, better by Rut than Latham.

Ada stood at his study door. "Are you going to see what you can do to help the Kilbys?"

"I don't know, Ada."

There was The Look again. He forged on, in spite of it. "I don't know if I will have time to get to it today," he said.

"What is this 'I don't know' business? How can a man not know his day is free when there's nothing on his calendar here to say it isn't?"

Latham sat back in his chair and studied the visible will working itself across his wife's face. The last thing he needed right now was a wife glaring at him, her dark eyebrows raised in puzzlement, her arms folded in a way that said, "*You're not the man I thought you were.*" The last thing he needed was a wife who could say so to Elder Sperry.

Latham sat there, squeezed between that big, empty space on his calendar and the nagging little secret that ate at him like a chigger under his belt.

He would have to tell her that secret.

"Come on in, Ada," he said, motioning her to the spare chair. "Shut the door."

She looked at him, puzzled. She pushed the doorknob until it clicked. She sat in the chair. He could see the wheels in her head working, guessing. *Dread disease? Pink slip? Midlife urge to chuck it all?* She studied his eyes like a doctor checking pupil dilation.

He went on. "I could get called today. Elder Sperry is in town, you know. Interviewing for the new stake president. I have a feeling I could be called in."

By now, her jaw hung open. She looked as if she remembered something from far away and long ago, something like faint warning bells he had set off back in their dating days, warning bells she should have heeded, warning bells that, at this moment, clanged like fire alarms. She looked away at the far wall, rose slowly from her chair and reached for the doorknob. Looking back at him one last time, she opened the door and left the room.

Latham stared at his typewriter. *She needs some time, that's all. Let her get used to the idea.*

Just as he finished a new paragraph, she poked her head in the doorway again. "What kind of people are they calling in for interviews?" she asked.

"Oh, bishops. High councilors."

"But you haven't been any of those."

Latham's hands froze over the keyboard. "Gosh darn it, Ada! I've got work to do!"

She disappeared.

So, it was going to be one of those days, was it? His woman thought he was a fool? And this was the woman he depended on and loved, in spite of having to part curtains of her drying hosiery in the bathroom?

If he was a fool, then what of all those premonitions? He hadn't asked for them to wake him up at four in the morning, to sneak up on him as he leaned over to tie his shoes, to breathe down his neck as he stood before his bookshelf, fingering the spines until he found the book he wanted. What was he to make of thoughts that whispered to him, *Maybe you shouldn't start an article right now because you won't get to finish it very soon.*

Huh? Where did all this come from?

Why would his mind play tricks on him like that? Why would God send premonitions that were useless and cruel, actually? Why would Erval

see greatness in him that wasn't really there? Why would they call only bishops and high councilors and not him? If God wanted him, He could bypass a little protocol. Was anything impossible for God?

Ada appeared in his doorway again. "Lois Kilby's on the phone."

Latham slunk to the kitchen, despairing. Elder Sperry would never get through to him today. He held the phone to his ear. Sister Kilby's thin little voice came over the line. "Could you please come and have a look at where this water's comin' from?" she pleaded.

Latham hung up the phone with the frown of a man who just learned his car was \$3,000 sicker than he thought. "I don't know why I should worry myself about the water on Rut Kilby's kitchen floor when Rut himself isn't home to worry about it."

"Oh?" said Ada. "Where is Rut?"

"Off to Mugly's. She says they're barbecuing a billy goat."

Ada's eyebrow shot up. "People do that?"

Latham nodded his head slowly. Nothing Rut did surprised him anymore. "And Lois can't get him there because Mugly's phone is cut off again. Oh, what's the use of all this? I go out there every month and they stand on their little trailer steps and they look so sincere and tell me, 'We're planning to come to church next Sunday. Sure thing. Oh, yes, we'll see you there.' And Sunday rolls around and where are the Kilbys? Sitting in the row next to us? Sitting in any row at all?"

"Coming in late?"

"Hah! They're too shiftless to even come late! And there I am, the chump that believed their promises for the 473rd time."

"How much water are we talking about here? Where's it coming from?"

"I didn't ask. I didn't think. Why would I? I'm Mr. Oops, remember? I'm the husband that doesn't know an elbow joint from an elbow ache. I'm the guy you've told," he imitated her high voice, "'Please, Lat, don't patch that nail hole.'"

"Okay, maybe these people deserve you. They make promises they don't keep, so God gives them a home teacher who can't help them." She beamed over her own logic.

He looked at her miserably. Then he lapsed into her voice again. "'Please, Lat, let's just call somebody who knows what they're doing.'"

"That's it!" She snapped her fingers. "Why don't you call Erval, Mr. Fix-It himself. He'll know how to help the Kilbys."

Latham just stared at the phone. Would it ever ring for him today? Would it ever ring and not be the Kilbys?

"Never mind," said Ada. "I'll call myself. I've got to ask Ruthalin something anyway."

Latham unfolded himself from the kitchen chair. He shuffled into the living room, fell back into his La-Z-Boy and stared at the ceiling. By now, he couldn't even remember what Elder Sperry looked like, even though he had seen the man's picture dozens of times.

"Uh-huh. . . Really?" said Ada, in the other room. "I see. Well, yes, I know, uh-huh."

She poked her head into the living room. Holding her hand over the receiver, she whispered, "Guess what Erval's been doing today? Waiting by the phone just in case Elder Sperry calls!"

Latham sat up in shock. They couldn't want Erval! What about his own premonitions? What about Erval kidding him that "it's gonna be you, Latham. You watch out"? After good buddy Erv's gentle kidding, Latham couldn't take it if he had to watch Erval walk up to the stand tomorrow, grip the pulpit, and pause to take control of his emotions. He couldn't take it, watching all of Erval's ten kids troop into the small room to see their dad set apart. Why, the room wouldn't hold them all. That was one reason to reject Erval right there!

But what if it was Erval? Who would Elder Sperry and God like better? Didn't DeVere W. Sperry have something like ten kids himself? Yes, Latham had seen the picture in the magazine, published when the man first ascended to his position: the wife with her new perm; the handsome older sons in their blazers; the thirteen-year-old son trying to change a smirk into a smile; the older daughters, their souls aged from washing loads of dishes and braiding many, many heads of hair; and the youngest daughter, her hand resting on her father's knee, her smile revealing a corn row of baby teeth.

Somehow the photo looked so right, so General Authority. So much like Erval's family photo, with its fresh-scrubbed, frame-filling look.

That would impress Elder Sperry. Not that he'd see the picture, but he'd hear about all those kids. It'd come out in the interview. "Ten? Why your wife's got her ticket to the celestial kingdom for sure!" he'd tell Erval.

And Erval'd get the job, because he was so right for it. He'd get the job, all because of his wife's willingness to be pregnant for 64 percent of their sum total married life, so far.

And what had Latham's own wife done to distinguish him? Well, after two kids, she had told him it was fine for him to have his premonitions of six children, but he wasn't the one throwing up here.

But now he saw that he'd been had. His phone hadn't rung yet. It might be ringing at Erval's house now.

No. Wait.

It couldn't be. His wife was tying up Erval's line just now, talking to Erval's wife. "Yes, the store in Spelerville said they sell it, but not in bulk."

Suddenly, Latham's mouth stretched into a villainous grin. He'd make sure Erval never got that call. He'd drag him out to Rut Kilby's house where Elder Sperry could never find him.

He rose up from the chair and walked to the phone. He twisted the pushpins in the bulletin board while Ada finished talking to Erval's wife.

Then he took the phone. He composed his face. He cleared his throat. He licked his lips. "Hello, old buddy," he said. "Whatcha up to today?"

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The deed was done. The phone cord hung there, swinging a little until it came to a rest.

Deception left him limp, famished. He opened the fridge. He took out a plate from the cupboard and began to build a sandwich. As he layered the lettuce over the meat, he felt his wife behind him, puttering over the mail on the table. She was awfully silent back there.

"Well, go ahead. Say it." He spackled brown mustard over his bread. "Go ahead and tell me that every fool between here and the Delaware River is waiting by his phone today. And I'm just one of them, right?" He turned to look at her. She pressed her lips together. She had words there, he knew it, but she held them back like driftwood against a dam.

"Every guy with a temple recommend and a white shirt ran out and got a haircut, in anticipation of sitting in front of Elder Sperry today, right?"

"You did the haircut, too?"

What? She hadn't noticed the white walls he'd been wearing for two days now? Yes, he did the haircut! And took his white shirt into the cleaners. Heavy starch, please. He took it himself because he didn't want to tip her off. This was too big, too sacred.



Too stupid.

He tossed the knife into the kitchen sink, letting it clatter violently.

He sat down with his sandwich. It was altogether too quiet in here.

"Well, say something, will ya?"

She pulled out the chair and sat across from him, looking at her folded hands. "Well, I *do* have a little *theory* about this," she said, rubbing at her knuckles.

He put the sandwich down and shoved his tongue against the bread stuck on the roof of his mouth. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear it. He looked at the bulletin board, the fridge magnets, the cupboard handles, anywhere but at her, afraid of what she might think of him right now.

That didn't stop her. "I'm thinking there must be an *awful* lot of men out there that want an 'atta-boy from God."

"Humph."

He stood and put his plate in the sink.

He plucked the car keys off the hook.

He trudged out to his Impala, opened the door, and sat on the hot seat.

*An 'atta-boy from God, my eye.*

He backed out of the driveway.

He didn't need any 'atta-boy. Maybe some other fool out there did, but not him.

Maybe the guy that counted the money at church needed one. He was the one who stayed long after everybody else went home, and balanced the accounts down to the last penny, and never embezzled any of it.

Or maybe the Scoutmaster, the guy that dodged the misaimed arrows of inexperienced little archers, and rubbed down bad cases of poison ivy, and gave the hot dog off his roasting stick to some kid who dropped his own into the ashes.

Or maybe the church custodian, the guy that shined the glass on the door for the seventy-ninth time that week, complaining that nobody listens when he tells them to push the door open by the handle, not the glass.

Yes, it was true Latham wished God would notice that, every time they assigned him to home teach, they gave him the bush route, sending him out to find the folks that didn't want to be found.

But that didn't mean he needed an 'atta-boy.

No, just because he wished God noticed how he knocked himself

out to be nice to Rut, even following him out to Mugly's house to look at his pet rabbits, that still didn't mean he needed an 'atta-boy. But since we were on the subject, didn't God know how tough it was to stand in a rabbit hutch on a hot day in July, willing yourself not to faint dead away and end up with your face lying in the packed dirt, just inches from the rabbit raisins?

Didn't he wish God noticed him bringing M&Ms to Rut's teenage sons? Or swallowing the sour taste in his mouth every time Lois held her baby out for his admiration? Or listening to the Kilbys promise, for the 473rd time, that they really would come to church next Sunday?

Nobody knew what Latham had to put up with! But God knew. And couldn't God just let everybody else know by having Elder Sperry call him today?

Latham guessed not. Not when so many other chumps with raw haircuts were bugging Him about it, too.

And he swerved in to the Pine Meadows trailer court.

\* \* \*

Erval was there already, tucked under the sink, his hammer-looped pants and his work boots sticking out. Yep, tucked into a tight little place where Elder Sperry could never find him.

And he was singing. At the top of his lungs. "Whut shall we dooo with the drunken sailorr, whut shall we dooo . . ." His work boots gripped the vinyl floor as his tools clanked and his flashlight beam jiggled and his lips whistled all the parts where he didn't know the words.

What was it about Erval, always singing like a goof, as he worked? He sang when they fixed widows' roofs. He sang in the van on the way to the temple. He sang at the cannery. With his mouth open and his face all sincere, it was, actually, less like singing and more like yawning *waaay* too loud.

And furthermore, what did Erv, the Mormon farmboy from landlocked sagebrush, know about drunken sailors?

No matter. Erval was the kind of guy God liked best, because Erval sang while he worked, like people in Disney movies. And Erval hurried out here. And Erval could torque a wrench. He knew what to do about things. He could help people.

All Latham could do was profess. Now if Latham had been trained in a nice, practical, close-to-the-earth subject, like Wylie Siltman and his

chicken genetics, then he would be as useful as Erval. But no, he professed history, which meant idleness and reading stacks of books, books with possibly dangerous ideas.

Yep, Erval was the kind of guy God would invite up for a weekend at his lake cottage. As for Latham, God would merely wave in the hallway and say, "How's it goin'?"

Just now Erval scooted out from under the sink. "Well, hello there, Lat!" He ran his hand through the last-stand hairs at the top of his head. He considered the piece of pipe in his hand. "I thought the joint was just loose, but the pipe's eaten away." He looked at Lois. "Your husband's gonna need to get some new pipe."

"I wonder if Rut's coming home soon," said Lois Kilby. She picked up the phone, then stopped in mid-dial. "I keep forgetting. Mugly's phone is cut off."

Latham stood there, watching her hold the phone to her little caved-in chest. Suddenly he knew that if God had wanted Erval, he could've tracked him down, all the way out here to the Kilbys' house.

And if God had wanted Latham, he could have done the same thing. All those hours wasted, sitting by the phone. He had failed to see the beauty of being found here. Why, if the phone had rung for him while he sat in Rut Kilby's kitchen, the whole room would have waited in suspense while he answered. They would have seen his face blanch and his pulse race and his posture straighten. Had somebody died? Been in a terrible accident?

And he would've hung up the phone and said, "I'm sorry. I've got to go now. Erval, will you be all right, finishing up here?"

"Is something wrong?" Lois Kilby would've said as he reached for the keys in his pocket.

And he would've smiled warmly, his kindly leader's smile. His Considered One, maybe even Chosen One smile. And she would've known when he walked away that something indeed had happened, something that elevated him off the ground and made him special and he was *her* home teacher and she and Rut really would show up at church next Sunday, just to see what had happened to *their* home teacher.

Except that nothing *would* happen to their home teacher, because God liked Erval better.

"Well, what do we do now?" said Erval as Lois left to fetch the crying baby at the back of the trailer.

"We hope Rut gets back here and buys some new pipe for his sink."

"But when? We can't leave Sister Kilby without water."

Oh, yeah. God liked Erval best. But Latham couldn't stand him.

"I guess we better run to the hardware store for some pipe," said Erval.

We? Latham looked at Erv, at the sweat beads on his brow, at his twisted tuft of hair. The last thing he wanted was to go anywhere with Erval Feldsted. Latham would just stay right here where . . .

He looked around him.

. . . where three greasy griddles poked up out of the sink and spots of ketchup scum stuck to the Formica table and the newly wakened baby rubbed her eyes and glared at him and—

Oh, never mind! He'd go to the store with Erval!

But he didn't want to.

He didn't want to listen to Erval talk about tubing and flux and goose-eggs gotten under other sinks. He didn't want to trail him down the aisles of True Value like a seven-year-old following Daddy, scared of getting lost. How could anybody lose Erval? His whistling betrayed his every move.

On the way back to Pine Meadows, Erval pointed up the street. "Tell you what! Let's stop for a root beer float."

Latham Runyon peered through the heat waves rising up from the asphalt. He saw the Tastee Freez sign blinking up ahead.

"Don't bother," he spat out.

Erv looked at him, whistled notes dropping like shot birds.

"Let's just get this over with, okay?" said Latham.

"Ohhh-kaay." The Tastee Freez passed by, and Texaco station and the Aqua-Marine Boats. Erval slapped the steering wheel. "It is gettin' kinda late, isn't it? I sure let the day get away from me, sittin' by the phone, waitin' for that call. You know how it is, dontcha?"

"Oh-ho-ho, not me! You'd have to be *crazy* to want that job."

\* \* \*

They rode back to 44 Pine Meadows in blessed, non-whistling silence. They tromped up the steps. They laid the new pipe on the sticky table.

Lois Kilby appeared with her baby on her hip.

"Won't be long now and you'll be all fixed up," Erval chirped. "Welllll, look who's here!" He bent down to the baby. "Is dat a good thumb

you got dere? Do you like dat thumb? Yeah? Yeah?" And he smiled and rubbed the barely blond baldness of her head, loving that baby even though it was the ugliest baby on earth.

That was the last straw.

Latham slapped Erval on the back, a mighty, body-staggering blow. "Gotta go, old buddy! Good luck."

As he stomped down the trailer steps, he shook off his brittle smile. He kicked Erval's tire. He drove out of Pine Meadows, fast, with the speed bumps clacking his teeth together, hard.

When he reached the main road, he turned for the woods instead of town. Something about the woods felt snug and private; and as he guided the car around the curves, he waited to feel hidden.

All week, he had felt the eye of God upon him. He had felt on display. He had felt spoken to. *Be ready for the thing that is about to happen to you.*

Right. Sure. The eye of God was upon him, all right. And it was amused.

He could see God telling his friends, "You wouldn't believe how these conferences light a fire under the unlikeliest fellows. It's like they all want to be an Elder Sperry."

Well, yeah, who wouldn't? The Elder Sperrys were so fun, so off-the-cuff with their sermonizing because they knew their scriptures well and they injected real personality into the characters.

And you knew God liked the Elder Sperrys of this world. Why else would an Elder Sperry have been called to travel the planet, doing God's work?

And when he landed at your pulpit and he spoke in his fun, off-the-cuff way and his eyes swept the room and looked right at yours for a moment, you felt you had made a special connection with this man that God liked. Oh, how you would love to play Stump the Rabbi with an Elder Sperry! And you knew he would love to play it with you too, because when he caught your eye a second time, that connection told you that you could be like him, that you had what it took, that he detected it when he smiled in your direction.

And remember! He hadn't always been an Elder Sperry. He had once been a man like yourself and some other elder had flown into town and turned Brother Sperry into President Sperry. It happens to the least among us. It could happen to you.

So you did the kinds of things the Elder Sperrys did. You wore a white shirt without fail. You did your home teaching every month, even if they stuck you with the bush route. You underlined stuff in your scriptures and made notes in the margins. Then you gave really good talks at church, flipping your scriptures willy-nilly, as ideas came to you on the spot, because you knew them so well. That's what you did so that you too might be an Elder Sperry someday. It could happen. It really could. You had the goods. You felt it.

And so did everybody else.

Latham sped along the pavement, under the arching trees that blocked the waning sun. Something about the road looked familiar. Wasn't this the way to Mugly's place? Yeah. Backbone Road.

He came to a cut in the woods. There it was, Mugly's grubby white house back there. Crawling to a stop, he rolled down his window and sniffed.

The tang of campfire rode in the air. A wisp of smoke rose behind the house. He wondered: What does barbecued billy goat taste like?

Not that he *really* wanted to find out. He eased off the brake and reached for the window handle. Looking down at the next bend in the road, he put the car in gear.

Then he heard the dog barking.

It appeared from around the corner, a loping thing, yellow as a sweat stain. It moved like the Secret Service, spotting a gleam of gunmetal.

Latham gripped the window handle, pumping hard, rolling up as the dog ran down the rutted dirt apron surrounding Mugly's house.

"Gyp! Gyp! Shut up!" Rut, straddled across his Honda, rolled around the corner.

Latham fumbled for the gear shift. He could still get away, unrecognized, he was sure.

Rut squinted down the drive at Latham's car. "Get back here!" he called to the dog, following, staring.

Latham watched him come closer, paralyzed.

"Oh! It's you!" Rut's smile uncovered his spacey teeth. He looked down at the dog. "Stop that, Gyp! Get back there! Well," he rested his hand on the roof of the car, "what are you doin' all the way out here? Come on in! Don't be a stranger!" He waved heartily toward the plume of smoke in the back.

Latham's stomach fell to the floorboards. But he turned for Mugly's

dirt yard. He heard the hootings of the forest through the window that he never quite got closed up.

Mugly, sprawled in a lawn chair, tossed a branch in his hands and leaned forward to poke the coals. And there, above the glowing ash, hung the goat, trussed up by its legs on a surprisingly sturdy-looking spit, considering who built it.

Rut was as busy as a picnic committee, setting up another lawn chair beside the campfire. "What have you got for the man to drink?" he asked Mugly.

Mugly leaned over the arm of his chair, the aluminum squeaking and groaning. Digging through a small cooler, he pulled out a can of Schlitz. It hung there from his paw, dewy and dripping.

"He can't have that," Rut stage-whispered. "He's from church! What else ya got?"

"How the hell would I know?" Mugly, scowling, dropped the can back into the ice and settled back in his chair.

Rut sprang away to the house.

Latham sat down, his chair tilting on the uneven ground. He looked at the clearing around him, at the dog curled up now in a bed of dried pine needles, surveying all with a blinking alligator watchfulness. He looked at Mugly, twirling that stick, scowling at the carcass before him.

He swallowed. "Did the goat do something bad?"

Mugly slowly rolled the stick in his hand, staring into the flames. "He ate my tombstone," he finally said. And he poked the stick into the side of the goat. Pink juices dribbled out, falling to the fire below with a hiss and a cloud of steam.

Latham pulled at his shirt where it stuck to his skin. He'd welcome a little breeze right now, but the tall pines guarded the air here, keeping it all rabbit-hutchy and close.

Mugly looked him up and down. "What're you out here for, anyway?"

"Uh, I was just at Rut's house, fixing his sink."

"You? Fixing his?"

"Well, not me really, but my . . ."

Mugly snorted. "That's Rut all right. Useless as tits on a boar."

Latham heard the slap of the screen door behind him. "Look what I found!" Rut held a can of Coke aloft. "Course, it's still warm." He held it out to Latham.



Great. Another thing he didn't drink. Maybe Rut's wife was one of those caffeine-as-long-as-it's-cold Mormons, but Latham had kicked the habit right after joining.

He took the can. Not knowing what else to do with it, he rolled it between his hands.

"Here, let me stick that in the ice for ya." Rut shoved the Coke into the cooler. He stood up, thumbs in his belt loops. "How much longer, Mug?"

"Five minutes less than the last time you asked."

"Oh, I'm goin' for a ride. Hey!" He looked at Latham. "Why don't you come along? Be near midnight, I guess, before old Bill here is cooked."

Mugly spat, insulted.

Latham gaped at Rut. No way was he going to stay around here 'til midnight, or eat any of that goat, or—he glanced under Rut's lawn chair and counted the empty cans.

Three.

—or get on that bike with the grinning Rut. "Nah," he held up his hand.

"Oh, what's the matter? You don't like bikes?"

"On the contrary. I had one once."

"Well!" Rut looked him up and down. "Well, be my guest." His arm swept across his bike. "Take her around the block."

Latham climbed on. He kicked the starter and the bike roared to life. Rut nodded, impressed with his home teacher's bike-man prowess.

Latham rolled on down the dirt. He wobbled toward the road, nosed the tire onto the pavement, picked up speed. *Around the block*, indeed. How about all the way into town? And then, how about not coming back? He saw himself roaring up his own street, cutting the motor a block from his house, rolling the bike quietly into his garage. He saw Rut, waiting, mystified out in the woods, hot-wiring Latham's own Impala when he caught on. (*Be my guest. Take her around the block. Anything. Just let me out of here.*)

Or maybe Rut would catch him before he got out of the woods. Then he and Mugly would handle it all themselves. Oh, Latham had a good idea what the two of them would do to anything that "ate their tombstone," whatever that meant. Rut and Mugly had probably seen *Deliverance*. Heck, they might've inspired it.

Yep, this had better be the end of the block. Latham swung the bike around in a wing of gravel and turned back.

But as the fat little front tire rolled over the patch veins in the pavement, as the faded center lines whizzed past, something old in Latham Runyon woke up. How long had it been since he felt the breeze on his face? Why didn't he do this more often? This must be what other men felt like, men who spent their weekends in duck blinds, on trout streams, in speed-boat races.

And why did he never get a chance to feel like other men? He was part of the White Shirt Army, that's why. The Stump the Rabbi crowd. His weekends were all booked up, slinging applesauce at the cannery, riding in the van to the temple, fixing widows' roofs (or, at least, looking busy beside the real fixers).

Back at the clearing, he gunned the bike and rolled up beside the campfire. Rut rose from his chair, shaking a bottle of ketchup. "Hey, there. I thought you'd come back through the woods. There's a way around, you know." He reached into the cooler. "It's ready now." He handed Latham the can of Coke.

Latham held it, cold and dewy, in his hands. As a dribble of sweat ran, tickling, down his back, he felt the can's evil caffeine rays taunting him. He sat in his chair, bracing against the slope.

Rut nodded toward the can. "At least old Bill here didn't get all the groceries, right, Mug? But he sure made a bad habit of it."

"That he did," Mugly grunted.

"How many times you suppose he broke into your kitchen, Mug?"

"Too many, that's how many. And this time he broke off the door-knob."

"Aw hell, what do you care? Now it matches the rest of the house."

Mugly glared from under the doughy wrinkles across his forehead. "He ate my tombstone, that's what I care."

"Oh, it was just an ol' pizza. You can get another one."

"Uh-uh! It was the last one at the Quikmart."

Latham wiped his hand from the shine on his forehead down over the late-day stubble on his chin.

Mugly arose from his chair with a mighty man-of-the-woods groan. He unsheathed a knife hanging on his belt and cut a hunk of goat-flesh. "Looks all right to me." He poked the knifed meat into his mouth, then sawed away another piece.

Another thread of sweat bathed Latham, in front this time, sliding until trapped by the hairs above his navel. He yanked at his stuck shirt, fanning himself. He tugged at his collar.

Rut shook the ketchup bottle and squirted it along the summit of the trussed-up animal. He took the next chunk of speared meat from Mugly, swirled it in the dripping ketchup and held it out to Latham. "Eat up."

Latham took the knife. Pepperoni-flavored perhaps? No, old Bill here was probably murdered too soon for that. "I've never had goat before." He stuck it in his mouth.

"Me neither."

"Yep."

"What's the weirdest thing you ever ate?" said Rut.

"Muskrat," said Mugly.

"I had shark once," said Rut.

Latham chewed up, swallowed. "Mexican food," he said.

They stared at him.

"On the Mexican side of the border." He pointed south.

Rut frowned. "Yeah, but what was it?"

"Beats me. But it was weird."

"Hear, hear!" They raised their cans.

And Latham Runyon raised his can, his sealed-up virgin can of Coke, and clinked it with theirs. It felt good in his hand. Very good. Very different from his body, which felt like he'd dressed in rubber gloves straight from the cannery. And he held that can aloft and aloof while they took a swig from theirs.

And he remembered how, all these years, he'd carefully avoided the Bad Red Can at the department picnics, even at his own family reunions. He'd always reached for the 7-Up, even though it tasted like gum just before the flavor wears off. And all for what?

So he could sit before an Elder Sperry someday, wearing his white shirt, carrying his worn and well-underlined scriptures, and claim that his lips had never touched the bad stuff. Or even the half-bad stuff.

He looked at his watch. 4:38. Surely Elder Sperry had his man by now. And that man, whoever he was, wouldn't have time for years hence to sit in the woods like this. He wouldn't even have time to look at a picture of the woods.

*Well, too bad for him.*

Latham gripped the can firmly. He pulled the tab. He poured the cold brown brew down his throat.

And he sat in the woods, laughing at Old Bill stories as Old Bill disappeared, chunk by chunk.

"So dumb," said Rut, "he couldn't sleep on a hill without rolling down it."

"Ugly, too."

"I wouldn't talk ugly if I was you. Have another bite, Runyon. And then I'll show ya that very hill. You'll see what a . . . Hey, Mugly, where'd my bike go? Oh, there it is. Come on, I'll take ya."

Latham counted the empty cans under Rut's chair.

Five.

"I don't think so."

"You don' wanna . . .?"

"Just tell me how to get there."

Rut grinned. He slapped Latham Runyon on the back. Down the road thataway, he said. Left at the chain between the posts. Latham nodded amiably, already losing track of the swoops and swerves of Rut's hands. Yeah, yeah, something about the fence line, and going right at the fork in the path.

Latham gunned the motor. He lifted his legs from the ground and rested his feet on the little pegs. He looked back at Rut Kilby and grinned.

And as he roared away, it seemed to him that this was the best he had ever gotten along with Rut Kilby and yet the wildest, most removed from the White Shirt Army he had ever strayed. He knew what might happen next. Some sort of genuine buddyship would blossom, despite Latham not trying hard anymore. And then Rut Kilby would make good on his threat to darken the church doorway.

And Latham could see his own reward: God calling him aside in heaven and saying, "Thank you for saving the soul of James Rutherford Kilby. As a token of my appreciation, I'd like to invite you and Rut to a little picnic."

And Latham would say, "You and Rut go on without me."

That's right. Latham Runyon didn't need an 'atta-boy from God.

He guided the bike behind the chained post. Trees sailed past. Low branches snapped him on the forehead. Gnarled roots bumped under the front tire. And the wind sheared his face and dried his smiling teeth as the fence posts whizzed past.

At the fork in the path, he frowned. Right? Left? Oh, what did it matter? He'd find his way back to Camp Deliverance.

He hung a left.

He rode along, where greenery crept over the trail and the lush mayflower leaves reached across for their neighbors and the tips of baby boulders humped out of the soil.

He loved the speed, the feel of his loafers resting in the notches where the big boys tucked their leather boots. He wanted leather boots with mean square toes. He wanted to grow a beard. He wanted to wear a plaid shirt to church tomorrow, to say "bullcrap" in front of Erval.

He loved the noise. Still grinning, his forehead warm with a low-grade rebellion, he racked the gears till they rang out through the woods. And he sailed on.

He did not see the stump.

It had once been the base of a mighty chestnut. Broad enough to air out a sleeping bag, it sat behind the fronds of a proud little sapling. It sat there, flat, with weathered edges, waiting.

And when Latham Runyon blasted through the proud little sapling and met the stump and left the bike and whirled through the air and widened his eyes just like Evel Knievel when he knows he won't make the landing ramp, the stump swore that it heard Latham Runyon cry out, "Dear God! Help meeeee!"

\* \* \*

He was a small man, salt-and-pepper hair, close-cut. He rose up from his metal chair just seconds after Elder Sperry called his name.

Latham Runyon adjusted his cast-bound arm and turned his head—well, not far; it still hurt too much—and watched the man walk up to the stand and grip the pulpit and struggle for words.

And Latham looked across the room. He saw Erval's upturned, awe-struck face, one in a sea of upturned, awe-struck faces, all of them wondering why they had not noticed the man before, why they had not studied him long enough to detect the secret burden he carried up until Elder Sperry called his name. All of them, wondering what this man had that they lacked.

And Latham looked at the man. There were plenty of things this man didn't have. No scrapes on the side of his face, for one thing. No sling cradling his arm. No bruises.

And Latham felt the eye of God, before it turned away to rest on the man at the pulpit. That man would need His help, looking after the likes of Latham Runyon.