

Realíssimo

Ryan McIlvain

At nineteen, a Mormon missionary in Brazil, I felt foreign in every part, *torn* from language.

“Boy, it’s *cold* out,” I’d quip to the natives.

“No, Elder, *hot*,” they’d say. “The word is *hot*.”

At night I wrote letters to my congressman, to old flings. I wrote Mr. Goodman, my senior English teacher, asking how classes were going and could he send me some poems to read?

From my congressman: a form letter. From my ex: an unsigned Christmas card. From Mr. Goodman: not a word. He must have thought I was evangelizing. He must have read between the lines until he saw what wasn’t there.

A year later, as if to prove I’d shed my greenness, I saw my first dead body. It wasn’t twenty feet away. It was lying in the middle of a narrow careless street in Betim, an hour south of Belo Horizonte. My companion and I were on our way to knock the doors of poor people (we called them *humble*), to give them our saving pitch, do whatever it was we did.

The body—black, limbs splayed like a doll’s—couldn’t have been much more than my age (twenty), couldn’t have been much more than ten minutes dead. *Where was God ten minutes ago?* I thought nothing so grandiloquent. I thought, *He could be sleeping. He could be passed out drunk. He could be lazing in the shade of silent stacked favelas.*

In the center of his heavenward forehead was a dot—red, centrifugal, like a Hindu girl’s *bindi*.

We kept walking, two twentysomething *americanos*: white, upper-middle class, et cetera. What was the etiquette for passing a freshly dead body? Where in the missionary handbook was *this*?

We kept walking and, oddly, I wasn’t scared. Or, rather, I wasn’t scared until after. In retellings I collapse this distinction for

brevity's sake, for immediacy's. Here was the apparent victim of a drive-by. He couldn't have been much more than ten feet away. He couldn't have been much more than ten minutes dead. *If we'd passed by only a few minutes earlier . . . But we were protected, we were on the Lord's errand, et cetera.*

We kept walking and, gradually, we quickened our pace, passing over the doors of strangers and going straight to Cristiano's, a recent convert. Had he heard shots? A commotion? His face was a question mark. Did he know about the dead guy at the top of his street?

Cristiano jumped to, called the neighbors, got the story. Another bad apple. Into drugs, into dealing. Cristiano didn't know him personally, but he knew the type. Lost without the guiding light of the Lord, et cetera.

Whereupon Marilena, Cristiano's sister, called out from the kitchen. She wanted to know what the fuss was about. "*Um cara foi pagado lá em cima,*" Cristiano shouted. A kid up the street got offed.

But listen. The scene does not end here, as it should. In memory, floating free of chronology, I pass the body for the first time, my companion and I. We keep walking, keep quickening our steps stepping away from the unquick, as suddenly a girl—overweight, underdressed—crests the hill, running toward the body. She falls at its side (was he a boyfriend? a brother?), throws her head back in a biblical wail. *A dead ringer for Mary at the foot of the cross.* I didn't think that either, but I certainly might have. The dying Lord wasn't winning popularity contests. Neither, apparently, was this corpse.

Why hast thou forsaken me again? the girl might have cried. Why me? Why us? Oh why not him? Then the girl might have thrust a trembling finger at my back, at the back of my white dress shirt, my dark slacks, my polished shoes disappearing down the hill.

By the end of my mission, and out of respect for the dead, I'd killed off the boyfriend, the brother, completely. I'm talking about in my letters home. The guy had been dead all along, of course. But in the first letter home I'd resurrected him, mostly for my mother's sake. "The other day we saw a guy lying flat on the

sidewalk. He was on his back, sleeping in the shade of stacked favelas.” Months later I felt to revise the history: “You remember that sidewalk sleeper I told you about? I think he might have been dead. Anyway, I didn’t want to worry you . . .” Later still, a survivor’s braggadocio set in. “He was definitely dead. We saw the bullet hole in his brow. We didn’t run. We didn’t need to. We were protected. We were on the Lord’s errand . . .”

In those last letters I disclosed a number of other redacted details: how we lived off fruit trees as the monthly stipend waned; how kids coated their kite lines (illegally) with ground-up glass, a downed line spanning two branches nearly invisible, and razor sharp; how we kept a low profile during the month of the World Cup when the bars belched out shirtless men drunk on *cerveja* and nationalism. . . All of which had been real, *realíssimo*, if a little less so now. By now it was so much fodder for a homecoming talk. It was retrofitted with import, with significance. The hand of the Lord made a cameo now, but the first cut was always just what it was: a body, and a spreading dot, and an unthinking urge to get past.

In my last area I rehearsed these stories bi-lingually, as I did everything. I spoke English with Americans, trying to get my feet back under me, and with Brazilians I spoke an improved if still distinctly outsider Portuguese. I imagined what I must have sounded like to natives, what with my spit-shined vocabulary, my formal diction, what with the grammar kind ladies congratulated me on, *Muito bom, muito bom*. I imagine it still: “Hello, how do you do? My name is Elder McIlvain. ‘Elder’ is a title given to missionaries. For example, you will notice that my companion, Elder Black, uses the very same title. I explain this because I have found that many people are curious about such things . . .”

I was going on twenty-two months in the field. I was desperately trunky, what with two months left. “I will explain to you what ‘trunky’ means because I have found that many people are curious about such things. Every four to six months, missionaries move to new cities and receive new companions with whom to work. Toward the end of a missionary’s two-year term of service, often he will move to a new city and not even bother to unpack his clothing and other belongings into a dresser. He will live out of his suitcase

or, in old times, his trunk. Moreover, he will exhibit certain laziness and will think about home very often . . .”

So I was trunky, dreaming of tow-headed girls, but I was also nostalgic for the place I'd yet to leave. I missed cheese bread already, I missed stray dogs, watered sidewalks. I missed bent trees whose blossoms smelled vaguely of semen. I missed Jesus, ecstatic, portentous, alive.

I missed native companions (Elder Black was from Georgia), how they spoke, how they cooked, how they sat on their haunches. Elder Black was all right, I suppose. We laughed a good bit. We quoted movies to each other. But there was a distance there. He actually insulted my handwriting. He talked endlessly of baseball. I once made the mistake of reading him a poem of mine. He laughed out loud. “I can tell you're trying to be deep and all, but I'm sorry.”

On Wednesdays we rested, or tried to anyway. We bought our groceries, wrote letters, did laundry, cleaned the apartment. The afternoons were usually given over to lazing, but on occasion Elder Black got gregarious: he set up soccer games with other missionaries, organized hiking trips, barbecues. One Wednesday afternoon we all made kites out of plastic bags. (We used legal string.) We took the kites to a field on the outskirts of town. The sun shone. The wind blew. The kites shrank to the size of postage stamps in a scrubbed blue sky. Toward evening the other missionaries drifted off, two by two. I sat cross-legged in the grass with my journal, a hopeless case. On my day off, I read through the previous week's entries: remembered scenes, bits of dialogue, favorite verses from the Bible. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

I looked over at Elder Black. He was reeling in his kite, ostentatiously chewing gum, and laughing to himself, which made me laugh. I was a month from going home. I felt the air sitting lightly like a song in my throat.

“Hey, Black,” I called.

“Hey, McIlvain,” he called back.

“You got anything pressing to do back at the apartment?”

“*Nada, amigo. Nadinha.* I'm getting back to nature.”

“Me too,” I said. “Okay then. We'll wait for the fireflies.”

I read for a minute more, then I just sat there. Then I stood up. Wordlessly I moved to a stand of mango trees near the edge of the field. I picked up a windfallen mango, hefted it, and then threw it into the deeper woods beyond, the fruit felling leaves and oak branches on its way, producing a burst of satisfying cracking sounds.

I heard footsteps behind me and turned around. Elder Black gripped a green, spotted mango in his right hand. "I'll do you one better," he said. "Two-seam fastball." He cocked back his arm, hopped once, then twice on his back leg, then whirled around and fired in the opposite direction. The mango described a shallow arc toward another stand of trees—too knotty to be apple, too squat to be oak—and then thunked against a low bough, dropping what sounded like large pinecones and loosing a shiver of white fuzz. The fuzz—snowy scrim—updrafted and eddied on the breeze. It finally settled on the ground around the tree, coating its prodigious roots.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A kapok tree," he said.

"A kay-what?"

Elder Black smiled. "They don't have them in the States. My last companion taught me. Here. I'll show you how to make a Brazilian snowstorm."

We walked to the nearest tree. Against the trunk, its bark gray and papery, my companion put out his hand to steady himself. He reached down and retrieved from between two roots a small green pod. Cleanly burst down the middle, its white fibrous insides showed. "It's like cotton but it's not," Elder Black said, prying at the seam. "These sides peel back until it's just the fluffy seeds hanging on the branches. Well, anyway." He chucked the pod straight up into the canopy of green. A few leaves wafted down before another cloud of white, like an annunciation. He bent down for more pods and I followed his lead, collecting a handful and unloading it into the tree. The white stuff shook down in successive waves. It fell on my hair, my neck. It faintly tickled. I was chuckling with the sensation. And then suddenly I was laughing. And then suddenly—boyishly—I was putting my arms out, spinning and spinning, letting the white stuff coat me, letting it swirl all around me, letting it all fall down stark and mute

against the darkening air. Over the steady whoosh of my spinning, I heard Black laughing, too. We laughed in chorus, he and I, and hardly knew why we laughed. Of course the pitch of such a moment could not sustain itself much longer, of course the feel of such a moment could not survive retellings, but still we spun around, laughing, and still my writer's heart took courage, beating *remember this, remember this, remember this, remember this.*