

Richard Golightly: A Novel

Ryan Shoemaker

Conception

“They’re up there now,” Bishop Gray croons from the pulpit. His eyes move to the chapel ceiling. “Billions and billions of spirits waiting to inhabit mortal bodies, warriors saved for these last days, ready to battle the adversary in his strongest hour, and they need us, brothers and sisters, to bring them into this world.”

The words crackle in Jackie’s ears. An ardor fills her breast. Later that day, she discards her diaphragm. John finds it under a limp lettuce leaf in the trash bin.

“What’s the deal, Jackie?” he says.

Shocked, she looks up from the cutting board where she slices carrots. “All those spirits,” she says. “I don’t want to be an old mother.”

“But Jackie”—he’s still holding the diaphragm—“you’re only twenty.”

“Ten children,” she says. “Do you know how many years that takes? Think of our posterity. They’re waiting for us.”

Posterity. The word sends a thrilling ripple through John’s groin.

Birth

4:30 A.M. Dark fluids seep from Jackie. Somewhere in the distance, a garbage truck’s hydraulic lift whines shrilly. She mistakes this sound for the singing of angels.

John feels on the edge of consciousness. Again and again he swallows hard at a scalding acidity in the back of his throat. The room tilts and then rights itself. He sees a fuzzy incandescence around the edges of things.

“A beautiful baby boy,” the nurse says, laying a white bundle on Jackie’s breast.

“Richard,” Jackie says. “That’s what we’ll name him.”

Pale and nauseous, John is suddenly lucid. “You’re joking,” he says. “Isn’t that your ancestor who fell in the . . .”

Jackie looks at him fiercely. “Back then, it happened to a lot of people.”

An Inspiring Name

The child is named after Richard Mordecai Golightly, his great-great-great-great grandfather, a man who pulled a handcart across the plains in the winter of 1857, worked a sugar beet farm in southern Utah with his six wives, cranked out children into his seventies, and expired one moonless night when he fell into a well while searching for the privy.

Excerpt from Richard’s Baby Blessing

John: *Richard, we bless you that you’ll never wander dark paths and lose your way, that you’ll never stumble into those abysses the adversary has dug for the righteous, that your feet will always be planted on gospel sod . . .*

Siblings

Kyle, Nick, Olivia, Katie, Curt, Cindy, Libby, Jack, and Jeffery.

A Family Vacation to San Francisco

Jaws slack, passers-by stare as the Golightlys file out of their Ford Econoline van. Their eyes swell as more and more children emerge. A woman taps John on the shoulder. Her index finger stabs at the sky. “The environment,” she says.

Early Years

For his eighth birthday Richard receives a small black tag inscribed with the words *Future Missionary*. He wears the tag to church, to school, to sleep, to the community swimming pool. He gives an illustrated Book of Mormon to a Protestant boy at school and invites him to Primary.

Favorite Foods

Richard loves Jell-O, pot roast, black licorice, and tuna casserole.

First Date

Richard is sixteen. He irons his white shirt, removes the lint from his suit jacket. The girl's name is Heather. Richard drives his mother's mini-van. His parents sit quietly in the back of the van while Richard stands in a vaulted entryway and shakes hands with Heather's father, a portly bearded man, an attorney.

"You like the painting?" Heather's father asks as Richard eyes the print hanging on the wall.

"She's not wearing any clothes," Richard says, "and she's standing in a clam."

"It's Botticelli's *Venus*," the man says, staring at the woman's creamy thighs. "Gorgeous. Stunning."

Secretly, Richard disapproves.

Second Date

Cookies, punch, Parcheesi, Uno, the Ungame. Richard takes Heather home at 9:30 P.M. That night he sleeps well and rises promptly at 6:30 A.M.

Lactose Intolerance

After overindulging at an ward ice cream social, Richard learns he's lactose intolerant.

Valedictorian, Penrose High Graduation

The first line of Richard's speech: *Infinity is not a number, but a direction. Similarly, our human potential . . .*

There's a sound, like the chugging of a lawnmower moving through thick grass, louder and louder. Richard pauses, looks up from the sheaf of papers on the podium, and squints into the radiant sky. A small Cessna appears suddenly from the north and buzzes low over the crowded stadium. People gasp. They duck under their plastic chairs. The pilot, a man with a short haircut and shades, laughs hysterically in the cockpit, and his passenger, a blond woman, presses her naked breasts against the cabin window.

Superintendent Abbott shoves Richard away from the podium. "Uhm. Yeah"—Abbot looks at the microphone as if it's something he's been asked to eat. A siren wails—"Folks. Yeah. Don't be alarmed. The chief of police feels we should evacuate the stadium. Exit in an orderly fashion, please."

Called to Serve

Richard's mission call, an excerpt: *You are assigned to labor in the Honduras San Pedro Sula Mission. You will prepare to preach the gospel in the Spanish language . . .*

Jackie pulls a map from the coat closet and spreads it across the dining room table. She's on the phone with Grandma Golightly.

"Yes, he just got his call," she yells into the phone. "Honduras. I see it right here on the map. It's in southern Mexico. . . . I'm sure they do. . . . These days everyone has a washing machine and microwave."

Richard dusts off his old junior high Spanish assignments. For dinner, Jackie makes tacos. John buys a piñata, which the family blithely pulverizes with a broomstick after dinner.

Farewell Talk

Richard, excerpt from talk: *I echo the words of that first great prophet of this dispensation, Joseph Smith, who looking out over his beloved Nauvoo for the last time, said: "I go as a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of sin and offense before God, and before all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall be said of me—he was murdered in cold blood."*

Richard weeps, Jackie weeps, John weeps, Grandma and Grandpa Golightly weep. Aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces weep. Heather weeps, friends weep, babies weep. Priests and high priests sleep. Bishop Sanders eyes his watch and nervously taps his wingtips. A deacon brings up a fresh box of Kleenex.

Missionary Training Center: Provo, Utah

Savory Salisbury steak, spaghetti with a rich meat sauce. Richard puts on weight. He devotes himself to learning Spanish. In fact, he never speaks a word of English. Brian Holland, his companion, occasionally forgets Elder Golightly's name.

Airport

Richard mutters goodbyes in Spanish. "*Voy a convertir el mundo,*" he says. He embraces Jackie, embraces John, affectionately

shakes Heather's hand. While he's away, she promises to plan their wedding.

First Night in Honduras

Fleas, ticks, chiggers, earwigs, gnats, roaches, rats. Bats, beetles, mice, mites, lice. Spitting spiders, jumping spiders, barking spiders, flying spiders. Fire ants, Azteca ants, parasol ants, tuxedo ants. Screaming monkeys. Diggers, gougers, itchers, stingers, stabbers. Iguanas. Mosquitoes.

Return with Honor

A letter from John, an excerpt: *Richard, an honorable mission is the foundation of a successful life. I truly believe that. Too many squander the experience. You might feel it's not in my character to say this, but let me impart some advice my father gave me right before I left on my mission. "Son," he said. "Keep it zipped."*

Richard's First Baptism

Richard and Pedro Sanchez wade into the dark, meandering river. Piranhas nip at their heels, crocodiles dismember a yak corpse on the opposite bank, primitive savages beat drums in the distance.

Coming up from the water, Pedro embraces Richard and intones a string of high, lispy *Gracias* in his ear. Richard feels Pedro's hand clamped tightly to his right buttock. "What a strange custom," Richard thinks.

Altercation

A letter from Richard's companion, Elder Parker, to Guadalupe Rancho de la Lengua, an excerpt translated from Spanish: *What I wouldn't give to get some distance between me and this new elder. What's his name? Golightly. That's right. What kind of name is that? Every morning I have to wake up to his chipper voice and that stupid grin on his happy face. I want him to stop shining my shoes. I think I'll scream if he says even one more time with that dreamy look in his eyes, "Elder, these are our days in the history of the Church." The only thing that makes it bearable is you, seeing you across the chapel on Sunday, getting your letters. When I get back to Utah,, I'll send money for a plane ticket. We'll drive up Provo Canyon in my Mustang. We'll eat lunch in a grassy meadow above the tree line. You can make those cheese empanadas I love.*

Richard confronts Elder Parker about a letter he finds on the bathroom sink. Parker denies everything. Richard also expresses concern over Parker's lack of interest in their morning companionship study. "You'll never understand our love," Parker says, and then, right before kicking Richard in the groin, screams, "Put this in your journal!"

More Companion Problems

An excerpt from Richard's letter to John: *I just got transferred to a city off the Mosquito Coast called Trujillo. I'm now companions with Elder Ramirez. He's from Caracas and tells me he used to be a cage fighter, but gave it up when he joined the Church.*

I don't think he quite understands what we're supposed to do. He's always trying to sell our investigators these Rolex knock-offs. He has a bunch of them looped around a string he's tied into the lining of his suit jacket, and at the end of a discussion, he opens his jacket and starts making his pitch. It's quite awkward. Do you think I should speak with President Hurley?

One night Richard is suddenly awoken from a mildly erotic dream about Heather. They're in a city he doesn't recognize, sitting in the back of a taxi that's speeding through empty streets. Inexplicably, they're both dressed in purple leisure suits. Heather delicately kneads the back of Richard's neck.

There's the sound of naked feet moving over saltillo tile, a book falling, the swish of fabric. Through the pale darkness, Richard watches Ramirez thumbing through his wallet, pulling out crisp dollar bills, ogling Heather's senior picture.

"Elder," Richard asks. "*Qué estás haciendo?*"

"*Amigo*," Ramirez hisses, and then in a broken, effeminate English, says, "the only thing in this world that gives orders is balls." His hair sticks up. His eyes are wild. "*Silenzio, Elder.*"

Dear John

Heather hasn't written in months. Richard assumes her heavy course load in family science at BYU must be the cause, and then one day a letter arrives. Instead of emanating the pleasant scent of Heather's Chanel No. 5, the letter reeks of dirty diapers.

Heather, excerpt from letter: *It just happened so quickly with Phil. I mean, it was just a group of us watching The Never Ending*

Story, and Phil and I were crying during all the same scenes, like in the end when Bastian and the Empress are sitting there and she has the last grain of sand from *Fantasia* in her palm. Everyone got tired of the movie and left and it was just the two of us, and I was like, "This is my favorite movie of all time," and he was like, "Yeah, mine too." It was like it was meant to be. I mean, we love the same movie. It was a sign. Anyway, since I'd already planned our wedding, all I had to do was replace your name with Phil's on the invitations. That's why it happened so quickly. It was crazy. I forgot to write. Forgive me. So have a good mission. There's someone out there for you. I'd write more but I have to feed Lizzy. She's been fussy lately. It think she has a rash.

That night Richard quietly weeps into his pillow.

A Letter from President Hurley

An excerpt: *Elder Golightly, next week I'm sending a new missionary your way, an Elder Casper from Vernon, Utah, fresh from the Missionary Training Center. I'll expect you to train him well. Teach him to preach the gospel with boldness. Teach him Spanish. With increased responsibility come greater blessings.*

Looking over your last letter to me, I see you're contemplating a major in pre-law when you return to BYU. As an attorney, I advise against it. As you see, I'm as big as a house. It came upon me suddenly in my early thirties. Too much sitting in courtrooms and conference rooms, too many lunches at Essex House and Jean Georges, all those billing hours to make partner. I let myself go. I can't even buy pants off the rack anymore. My knees are shot. If I could go back, I'd be a logger or a fisherman or a gentleman farmer. I'd learn how to cobble shoes. Law is death, Elder! Death and pain and loneliness. I'm a tender soul and they think I'm a monster. Find success serving the Lord, Elder. That's the secret.

A Trainer

Richard's advice to Elder Casper: Don't drink the water, don't pet the dogs, don't believe any girl who confesses her love for you, don't ride horses, don't eat the dried fish, and never share a bed with your companion.

They hike wooded hills, wade sewage-choked streams, knock doors. They smile. They push pamphlets and Book of Mormons on the unbelieving. They pray for the poor and needy. They implore inactive members to return to church.

One day, a little boy stops them. He's digging in a trash heap. His fingers and cheeks are stained black, and he wears an extra-large T-shirt with *Don't Piss Me Off, Butt-Munch* printed across the chest.

(Conversation with boy translated from Spanish.)

The boy points at Richard's black nametag. "That's my name, too."

"Your name?" Richard is baffled. He feels he's missed something.

"Elder," the boy says. He smiles. Strangely, his teeth are white and straight. "Elder's my first name."

Richard laughs and drops to one knee in front of the boy. "Elder. And where did you get a name like that?"

The boy stares at his grubby bare feet, suddenly shy. "My mommy said it was my daddy's first name, just like yours. You and my daddy have the same name. Do you know where he is? I never met him."

Elder Casper grins dumbly as he fumbles through a pocket-sized English/Spanish dictionary. "What's he saying? I caught about a third of it. His father. Is his father interested?"

"Let's get out of here," Richard says.

The Triumphant Return Home

Richard appears at the end of the jet way. His suit is in tatters. He has jock itch and an intestinal parasite. He has about him the smell of the jungle. The camera flashes blind him. He sprints through a paper banner that reads *Well done good and faithful servant*. All weep.

Engagement

BYU. They both stand in the Taco Bell line. Richard orders a grilled stuffed burrito. She orders three soft tacos with extra cheese and a side order of pinto beans. Her name is Linda Slack. Three months later they marry.

Marriage

. . . *For time and all eternity*, says the wizened temple worker.

Richard leans over the altar, lips quivering, puckered, unsure. Contact.

Newlyweds

Richard and Linda live in a basement apartment off Center Street. At night they hear the couple above them make raucous love.

They take a pottery class together at the Orem Recreation Center. Richard feels something deeply spiritual as he kneads the clay. He's making a Christus statue for Linda's birthday.

"Mount Timpanogos?" the instructor asks.

Richard runs a scraper over the mound of clay. "No, the Christus statue in miniature. It's almost done."

The instructor leans forward. He peers at the clay over his spotted glasses. "Yes, the Christus. Yes"—his mouth hangs open—"yes . . . a very modern interpretation."

A letter from the City of Orem's Parks and Recreation Department, an excerpt: *Dear Students, we regret to inform you that during the firing process there was an unforeseen malfunction in the kiln's heating coils, causing an explosion that damaged all the pottery. None of it was salvageable. We are deeply sorry. Please find the enclosed check for twenty dollars to cover this inconvenience. We hope to see you again, maybe this fall for our tile painting or quilting classes.*

Pharmaceutical Sales Representative, Logan and E. Salt Lake Valley

Lipitor, Zithromax, Simvastatin, Ambien, Allegra. Richard sells them all. At church, he feels a strange discomfort each time an older high priest casually asks if his company sells Viagra and if by chance he might have a free sample in his car.

First Home

Richard and Linda buy a home in Nibley. There's a willow tree in the front yard, a jungle gym out back, a view of snow-capped mountains.

"Kids, a dog," the real estate agent says, his voice echoing off the bare walls. "A place to grow old."

The Birth of Scott Richard Golightly

Nausea, the bitter tang of bile, a growing belly, an alien life squirming beneath the stretched skin, perennial fatigue, a small

cramp in the lower back, thirty-six hours of labor, an emergency C-section at 3:00 A.M.

“It’s your uterus, Mrs. Golightly”—it’s the morning after the birth. Doctor York stands above Linda. He sighs deeply—“the uterus is damaged, too thin to endure another pregnancy. I wouldn’t advise having another child.”

Richard stands at the hospital window and looks down on a city park where a pee-wee football league drills. “An Isaac,” Richard thinks, tapping the glass. “At least I’ll have an Isaac.”

Elders’ Quorum Chili Cook-Off

Presidency meeting leading up to the annual Nibley Third Ward Elders’ Quorum Chili Cook-Off, an excerpt:

President Golightly: “I don’t know about this flier. I don’t know if I’m comfortable with it?”

First counselor: “Is it the chili pepper? Is it the sombrero it’s wearing? Is it the curly, black mustache? Is it the big accordion the pepper’s playing?”

President Golightly: “No, it’s not that.”

Second counselor: “Is it the flaming cauldron of chili next to the pepper? Is it the color of the flames? Are the flames too red?”

President Golightly: “It’s not the chili or the flames. It’s this text I’m having problems with, this part under the pepper about how the evening’s sure to end with a bang. It’s . . . It’s crass.”

Bishop Golightly

It is proposed that we sustain Richard Mordecai Golightly as bishop of the Nibley Third Ward. All in favor please manifest it by the raising of the right hand. Any opposed by the same sign.

“What is this?” Richard asks his first counselor Chuck Pendleton.

“Well, Bishop, that’s Sister Verken’s cable bill. The ward’s been paying it for the last five years.”

“We’ve been paying for the premium cable package? A hundred and twenty a month so she can watch HBO and Showtime?”

“She’s ninety years old, Bishop. She can’t even go outside anymore. She doesn’t have any family.”

“A hundred and twenty a month. Tell her we’ll pay for the basic cable package. There’s nothing wrong with PBS and the Dis-

covery Channel. I happen to think *Mythbusters* and *Cash Cab* are the best programs on TV right now.”

Thirty-Third Birthday

A note from Scotty stapled to a birthday card for Richard: *Here is your birthday card. Inside is a coupon for a hug. I glued a magnet on the back. Put it on the fridge so you won't lose it. Use it when you need a hug. Love you. Scotty.*

A Great Honor: The Sederberg Sales Award

Hank Tudor, Vice President of Sales for Seabrook Pharmaceuticals. An excerpt taken from his speech at the annual Seabrook sales meeting awards dinner in Indianapolis: *Though I can't say I know Richard that well, I have an immense respect for him. I haven't seen him much on the links or at night in the hospitality suite, but all of you know I don't remember anything when there's an open bar or a guy in a golf cart handing out free drinks (pause for laughter). Seriously, folks, it's an honor to award Richard the Sederberg Sales Award for our top sales rep.*

Anniversary Dinner at Fredrico's

“I wonder what this could be?” Linda asks, taking the large, gift-wrapped box from Richard and giving it a little shake. “Maybe that Pilates set I've been talking about?”

“Pilates set?” Richard says. “This is a hundred times better. A thousand.”

Giggling, Linda tears away the wrapping paper. Her laughter stops. She stares at what's in her hands: a black metal box with a handle, four stainless steel plates attached to the top of the box, a meat thermometer. “What is it?” she asks.

“A sun oven.” Richard cuts a piece from his calzone and spears it with his fork. “You can cook a turkey in that thing. Trust me”—he leans forward. His voice is a whisper—“when the economy fails and we're thrown back into the Stone Age, you won't be doing Pilates.”

Trouble at Work

A letter to Richard from Sal Rose, Western Regional Senior Manager for Seabrook Pharmaceuticals, an excerpt: *Last Thursday I received a telephone call from your client, Doctor Gupta, closing his*

account with us. He would not say why, but when pressed, Doctor Gupta admitted that over the last few months he felt you were trying to foist your religion on him. He mentioned a number of pamphlets he'd received from you as well as visits whose purpose, he felt, had more to do with talking religion than business. While I value and respect your personal beliefs, your job at Seabrook is not a platform from which to proselytize. Please desist from doing so. Cordially, Sal Rose.

Becoming President Golightly

It's Saturday morning. The kitchen phone rings.

"Hello," Scotty says. "Hello. Hello."

The voice is low and breathy, practically unintelligible, broken by sobs and sniffles. "They want me to be stake president. Pray for me. Pray for me."

Scotty moves the phone to his other ear. "Who is this?" he asks.

Father-Son Time

"Now, Scotty, here was a fine figure of a man," Richard says, hefting a worn copy of Richard Mordecai Golightly's autobiography *Kicking against the Pricks: A Life on the Range*. "My namesake, a man who could lift the backend of a wagon or walk fifty miles a day. And that's when he was in his seventies. He once wrestled a savage Indian for a pot of honey somewhere outside Omaha."

"Didn't he have a bunch of wives?" Scotty asks.

"Well, those were different times," Richard says.

"Didn't he like fall into a well or something and die?" Scotty says.

Richard shifts uneasily in his chair. "It was a dark night. Somebody moved the outhouse. Maybe it was a joke. One of the neighbor boys trying to get some cheap laughs." Richard sighs and stares out the living room window. He watches his neighbor, Rob Munson, apply another coat of wax to his new Mercedes. "A shame, really," Richard says, setting his hand on Scotty's shoulder. "He could have lived another decade. Yes, that was when a man was a man, when you could see what you were made of by pitting yourself against the elements. Don't you ever think about that," Richard asks, "pitting yourself against the elements?"

“I dunno,” Scotty says, wiping his thumb under his nose and then onto his jeans.

Richard kneads Scotty’s bicep. He’s shocked at the loose flab there, at the gelatinous quiver under his fingertips. He looks at his son’s round face. His skin’s so pale, almost translucent. Richard has a sudden idea, a revelation. He rubs his palms together.

“What do you say, Scotty? This Saturday. Ten miles up to Box Elder Peak. Pit ourselves against the elements? We’ll take some beef jerky.”

Growing Health Concerns

Richard, an excerpt from his journal: *Kids these days! Waddling around with their guts hanging over their belts. All that fat and sugar they’re shoveling down. There’s no self-control. They can’t do anything that requires a little discomfort. At the first tingle of pain they throw their arms up and quit. It’s a pity we can’t pull a handcart across the plains every ten years, pit ourselves against the steel-hard earth and fierce blizzard winds. That would be the life. That was when a man was a man.*

President Golightly Chooses a Scout Camp

Pale Horse Survival Camp, an excerpt from its brochure: *No basket weaving at this Scout camp, no cafeteria stocked with Fruity-Pebbles and crème brûlée. If your son wants to eat, he better sharpen a stick and get out in the woods. That’s how we live here: off the fat of the land.*

Your child will spend the week living in primitive shelters. He’ll feast on cattails, nettles, yard greens, acorns, and an assortment of wild game. He’ll track cougars, hike to the top of Bald Mountain, and fashion clothing from animals he’ll track and kill.

When the food shortages finally hit, when governments collapse, when formal education is worth nothing, this is what you’ll want your son to have: the knowledge and confidence to survive.

A Poor Decision

An internal memo from Mark Bailey, legal counsel for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to the First Presidency, an excerpt: *In August, we received a number of complaints from members of the Nibley Utah Stake, whose sons attended Pale Horse Survival Scout Camp outside Ketchum, Idaho, a camp chosen, they said, by Richard Golightly, president of the Nibley Utah Stake, who felt that*

Camp Grizzly, the stake's usual choice of camp for the last five years, had become too lavish and costly, and missed the rugged spirit and survival focus of early Scouting. After seeing Pale Horse's nominal registration fees, these parents agreed with President Golightly.

When the Scouts returned from Pale Horse at the end of July, many parents claimed they couldn't recognize their sons. Many had lost a significant amount of weight. Their faces were painted black and most wore fur loincloths made from either rabbit or possum. Additionally, all carried what looked like primitive weapons—spears and hatchets—fashioned from wood and stone.

In the weeks following, it seems most of the boys had difficulties re-adjusting to their old lives. One boy killed a neighbor's pet rabbit. Some prefer a shallow hole in the backyard over their beds. A few only speak in clipped phrases and grunts. Their psychologists, however, believe they're making wonderful progress and should return to school in January.

On multiple occasions I've tried to contact the owner of this camp, a Sergeant Silko, but his staffers tell me he's involved in some kind of government project in Jalalabad. They're unsure when he'll return.

While President Golightly, whose son Scotty also attended the camp, never intentionally misled parents about the purpose of this survival camp, he does admit that he left out certain particulars, namely the tracking, hunting, and killing focus of the camp. Had they known this, most parents claim they would not have allowed their sons to attend. Further, many parents are also angry their sons didn't bring home more merit badges.

Linda Changes the Locks

The front and back doors won't open. Richard's key doesn't fit the lock. He pushes at the door, pleads through the solid oak in a whisper, dials Linda's mobile, and stares up at the dark windows as the phone rings and goes to voicemail. There's a white envelope under Linda's potted geraniums.

Excerpt from Linda's letter: *You're gone all the time trying to make your little heaven on earth and you don't see your own house has fallen apart? Do you even know me anymore? Do you even know your son? He didn't even want to go to your stupid camp, but he went to make you happy. Now look at him. All he does is sit in the basement all day tying sticks together and beating that awful drum.*

You're always so worried about the wicked world, always sounding the

warning that if we don't watch and listen our lives will fall apart, always so quick to judge. Your family's falling apart and you don't even see it.

Living in the Church: Day 1

Richard can't move into the Holiday Inn. There would be talk, rumor. He lives in the stake center.

There's the discomfort of the hard floor, the scratch of the carpet, a bed of forgotten clothes he took from the lost and found box in the library. A child's faux-fur coat is tucked under his chin, his feet are wrapped with a foul-smelling basketball jersey he'd mistakenly used as a pillow. Outside the wind blows branches across the windows. The building creaks and moans.

Living in the Church: Day 3

Richard buys a small air mattress from a sporting goods store. He bathes in the baptismal font and dries himself with a blue gingham tablecloth somebody left in the Relief Society room. He scours his shirt collars in the bathroom sink. In a strange way, this primitive living vaguely reminds him of his mission, minus the malaria, monkeys, tropical rot, and intestinal parasites. He feels twenty years younger.

Long Nights

Richard lies there, teeth chattering, the night an endless discomfort as he thinks of Linda and Scotty. Who are their closest friends, what are their hobbies, their favorite books, their aspirations, hopes, and wishes? He doesn't know. What do they fear? Darkness, fog, wind, lightning? What do they fear most? Richard suddenly knows. The realization is like the shock of cold water. This loneliness and separation—this is what they fear most.

Caught

Sister Grover, returning to the church late at night to retrieve a piece of forgotten piano music, discovers Richard walking down the hallway, naked and slightly damp, wrapped only in a blue gingham tablecloth. She freezes, face as white as the cinderblock wall, her mouth a dark, gaping hole. She runs. Richard contemplates chasing her through the parking lot to explain things. Instead, he quickly retreats to his office.

Release

A letter of resignation from Richard to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, an excerpt: *What does it profit anyone if he has the praise of man but not of his family? I went about the Lord's work with my ends in sight. I gave the littlest to those nearest me. I became a stranger to my family. I was desperate to be remembered by strangers and acquaintances. I lost perspective.*

A New Calling

Richard teaches a Sunday School class for the fourteen and fifteen year olds.

A questionnaire Richard gives his students their first Sunday together, an excerpt:

1. *Name your two closest friends.*
2. *Name one of your hobbies.*
3. *What is your favorite music group?*
4. *What is your favorite sport?*
5. *What is your favorite song?*
6. *What are your aspirations, hopes, and wishes?*

Rhodophobia

Richard has a deep and inexplicable fear of the color red. Staring at the rich crimson of the raspberry jam Linda puts up every summer, he feels a sickening jolt in his lower stomach.

Dental Hygiene

Richard brushes three times a day and flosses regularly. He visits the dentist twice a year. His teeth are white, hard as granite.

Retirement

Genealogy consumes Richard. He traces his lineage back to Adam, disappointed he can go no further. He speaks proudly of Richard Mordecai Golightly's long journey across the plains but turns reticent when Linda reminds him that he and Benedict Arnold are distantly related on his father's side.

A Secret Vice

Hidden in the pantry behind a fifty pound sack of black beans, Richard keeps a case of Dr. Pepper. He can't help himself. He loves the taste.

Second Mission

Stricken, shrunken, half his former self, Richard starts and ends the day with a tall glass of Metamucil. But still he accepts the call to work in the stake cannery. Because of the many complaints, he's prohibited from manning the jalapeno pepper station during salsa production.

Richard tries to explain to Linda how he thought everyone loved spicy salsa.

Golden Years

Richard can't remember the names of all his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. At family reunions, he presides over the great congregation and smiles to himself, wondering how Abraham felt as he contemplated the sands of the sea.

International Aid

A letter from Richard to Edward Magugavi, an excerpt: *They sent me a picture of you. Truthfully, you're too skinny for an eight year old. But it's understandable. I've watched the Travel Channel's Bizarre Foods. I have a pretty good idea what dinner looks like in Zimbabwe. In Honduras, I once ate a goat bladder stuffed with some kind of summer squash. It wasn't pleasant. Did I already tell you I lived in Honduras for two years? I know something about tropical afflictions.*

Hopefully the twenty dollars I send every month will reach your dinner plate. If not, let me know. I'll send it to you directly.

Chin up, Eddie. Hope you don't mind if I call you that? Life will get better. Soon the great Jehovah will declare His work done and usher in a thousand years of peace. It'll be paradise, plenty to eat, Eddie. No roundworm and dysentery. Paradise awaits you, but don't count on it. Live life to the fullest. Hug your brother. Kiss your mother. Find your paradise now.

Death

A floating sensation, the ringing of bells, a long tunnel of light leading upward. Richard moves into the white billowing mist. A man in a loose white robe greets him.

"Brother, follow me," the man says. "So much work to do, so little time."

"You look familiar," Richard says. "Did I know you?"

The man stops. "I forgot to introduce myself." He thrusts his hand forward. "We're related on your father's side. Arnold was my name, Benedict Arnold."

On the other side of the veil, on the other side of town, Richard's eight-year-old grandson Baxter stands before a mirror, trying on a small black tag inscribed with the words *Future Missionary*.