

Fast Offering

William Morris

Welden Shumway wasn't so much scandalized when Brother B left his wife and took up with a young gentile woman as he was confused. Why would a priesthood holder ignore his covenants like that? Welden had asked his parents, but they had look embarrassed and said something about the seven-year itch and mid-life crisis and had quickly assured him that their marriage was as strong as the rock the wise man built his house upon, and that he needn't worry about them getting a divorce even though they sometimes fought. So Welden was left to puzzle out his own answer.

Brother B was what Grandpa Twitchell called a "dynamic individual." He was, or had been until taking up with the gentile woman, the most popular seminary teacher at the high school. He was always getting mentioned over the pulpit at missionary farewells and presenting at firesides. Welden had mainly avoided him. There was something about Brother B's personality that repelled him. He wasn't fake, but he also wasn't ever comfortable to be around. It's as if he were a magnet that needed to pull people to him. He seemed to enjoy having a crowd. Welden didn't much like crowds.

As Welden thought over the situation, he decided that Brother B's problem was that he was a man of charisma. King David had been a man of charisma and so had his son King Solomon. And look at what had happened to them. President Reagan was a man of charisma, so it wasn't always a bad thing to be. But Welden was pretty sure that Nancy was his second wife. He'd have to check his collection of *Time* magazines to be sure.

Charisma was a dangerous thing for a man. If not kept under control, it led to priestcraft and unrighteous dominion, and, Welden was now certain, adultery.

This realization came as a relief to Welden, who was now thirteen and, even more than a year after being ordained was still bound and determined to keep the oath and covenant of the priesthood. It was a relief because, even though he secretly thought that he cut a fine figure in the gray, pin-striped three-piece suit his mom had ordered for him, he knew that, like his dad, he was not a man of charisma. But he was still fascinated by those who were. And the women they attracted.



In fact, he was curious enough that when the first Sunday in May rolled around, he quickly volunteered to take over one of the fast offering routes that was open because several families in the ward had decided to go spring camping up on Cedar Mountain. So, while the other deacons grumbled about having to pick up the routes of vacationing quorum members, Welden snagged the one that would take him to where Brother B was now living. He shuffled through the collection envelopes quickly. Brother B's name wasn't on any of them. Welden thought about asking if one needed to be made for him, but thought better of it since he didn't want to specifically be told to stay away from the place. Instead, he took one of the worn envelopes from his normal route, asked for a fresh one, and then didn't toss the old one. When he got home from church, he crossed out the old name with a black marker and wrote "Brent Brinkerhoff" on the next line. He did his normal route and the one he was filling in for, returned those envelopes, and then informed his parents that he had forgotten about one and that they didn't need to worry about driving him—he'd take his bike.

He rode his purple banana seater slowly along the gravel to the side of the road, careful to not veer off into the soft pink sand, which was pocked with perfectly symmetrical, concave doodlebug traps. When he was younger, he had enjoyed faking out the doodlebugs by rolling a small pebble down the edge of

the crater, hoping to catch a peek of the bug that lurked at the bottom. But afterward, he had observed a red ant actually fall prey to the trap, wandering too close to the edge of the crater, which gave way. The more the ant struggled, the faster it slid, the fine grains of pink sand working their peculiar physics, the doodlebug's jaws snapping around the ant's thorax, almost slicing it in half. Well, after that Welden left the doodlebugs alone. Any enemies of the red ants were friends of his.

As he rode, Welden pondered why the town had been so fascinated by Brother B's actions. Saints shouldn't gossip, but today, while they had been waiting for their Sunday School teacher, Lindsey had said it wasn't gossip to talk about it because everybody already knew what had happened. The girls had then proceeded to condemn Brother B for leaving his wife, to sympathize with him because no one liked Sister Brinkerhoff very much, and to proclaim that the other woman was very pretty. They said all that in a way that Welden couldn't tell whose side they were on and if they scorned or envied the gentile woman.

Maybe the reason the girls wouldn't stop talking about it had something to do with that charisma again. Things like this didn't happen in Kanab. Maybe they did among the gentiles and Jack Mormons, but there weren't many of them and they tended to keep quiet about it. And sure, things like this probably happened all the time up north, even among active members. But all kinds of things happened up north: divorces, drugs, bankruptcies.

Welden stopped his bike for a moment and glanced up at the red canyon walls. When they hiked the canyon, his friend Brandon liked to pretend they were astronauts on Mars, but Welden could never see the landscape as anything but home. Mars was up in the sky; the red rocks and dirt, the olive sagebrush, the green cottonwoods surrounded him here. They were just as much a part of this corner of Zion as he and his family were. But, he had to admit, sometimes the people seemed alien to him. Brother B definitely fell into the alien category.

He turned into the short gravel cul-de-sac that jutted off 100 North. There were four shabby houses on the road. All small. All without big front yards. All crowded near the road. The house

he was looking for was at the very end. It was a downgrade from the well-maintained two-story Victorian Brother B had lived in with his wife. Welden found it strange that Brother B was living only eight blocks from where he had been. Welden had always imagined that people who shacked up together did so in the trailer park down by the creek if they didn't have money or in the development south of town if they did.

When he got off his bike, Welden noticed that the pant legs of his gray, pinstriped suit had gotten dusty. He brushed them off as best he could, but some of the fine pink sand had settled in. His mother was not going to be happy. He straightened his burgundy paisley tie and sprang up the steps. The penultimate step creaked so much he was afraid it was going to break under him, so he jumped up onto the porch and landed with a thud much louder than expected. He decided that since he had already announced himself, he should ring the doorbell. There wasn't one, so he rapped his knuckles on the frame of the worn aluminum screen door. The effect was more a rattle than a knock, but he figured he'd been loud enough that if someone were at home, they'd at least peek out the window and see him and maybe open the door. After all, who turned away a young man in a suit?

There were sounds within the far part of the house and then steps. He swallowed as they got closer, and then the inner door swung open, and he found himself almost face-to-face with Brother B's gentile woman, separated only by the torn and patched mesh of the screen door.

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but she was less *People* magazine pretty than Sears catalog pretty. Definitely prettier than Sister Brinkerhoff, and she seemed to have a nice figure beneath the faded sweatshirt with the unicorn on it and the ripped jeans, which were tight enough that he could hear his mother clucking at them in the back of his head. Her hair was a loose tangle and she had wrinkles at the corner of her eyes. But she set his heart beating faster still the same—just like it did when he was around Lindsey and Kimberly and some of the other Beehives and Mia Maids in the stake. When she smiled and said in a soft voice, “Hello. Can I help you?” he stared at the door mat. It

said “Come In Or Stay Out!” and since he didn’t want either choice, he found the courage to get right to the point.

“Hello. My name is Welden Shumway. I’m from the ward. The Third Ward. I’m not the normal deacon who has this route. I’m filling in because Levi’s off camping and, anyway, I’m here with the fast offering envelope so that you can help out the poor of the ward and such.”

He looked up at her face in time to catch her raising her eyebrows and noticed that she had kind eyes, which he hadn’t expected. They were gray and brown and not really striking and vivid like a Brooke Shields or Marie Osmond, but they were exactly the right size for her face, and he smiled at her.

“If this is something for Brent, I’m afraid he’s not here right now,” she said.

He nodded. Seeing her was half of what he had planned; now he was uncertain how to proceed. It wouldn’t be right for her to invite him in, her being alone in the house. He could offer to come back, but that seemed complicated, and yet he didn’t particularly want to just ride away like a doofus. He had gone to the trouble of preparing the envelope, and it wouldn’t feel right to toss it.

“Would you mind giving this to him when he comes back?” He slipped the envelope through a gap in the screen door. Valerie took it from him.



Valerie hadn’t wanted to take it, but it seemed the easiest thing to do. She had a vague sense of what it was, equated it in her mind with the passing of the basket in a normal Christian church, but she was unclear on why it was personally delivered by the young man currently standing on her porch in a cheap polyester suit, sweating in the warm May sun, although she liked his funky tie and the shy-but-wry smile he was willing to give her through the screen door. She thought about inviting him in but had nothing nice to serve but bourbon or Coke, and she knew neither of those would go over well. Her mom, overdue for a sponge bath, was groaning in the back bedroom, and there was

no telling when Brent would be back from Glendale. So she took it and said, “Thanks.”

He stood there staring at her through the battered screen door as if he was expecting something else. She couldn’t imagine what, yet a familiar feeling began to build inside. Mormons were always pretending to walk on eggshells around you, always silently expecting something of you. At first it seemed like they were being respectful and nice, but before long it just became annoying because they seemed to think that their stepping lightly was some real obvious signal. But you never knew exactly what they meant, and they never had the balls to just up and tell you what they wanted from you so you could either get with the program or tell them to go to hell—come in or stay out. She didn’t want to turn all those old feelings on the boy, so she smiled, wished him a great day, and walked away from the door. She didn’t close it because that would have been rude, so she heard his muttered, “Thank you, ma’am. Have a good one yourself!” and then heard him shamble down the steps.

She watched the boy ride away on his ridiculous purple bike and couldn’t help but admire the fact that he was riding a bike in a suit and had done his duty and delivered the envelope thing. After all, they had both braced themselves for intrusion after intrusion. Brent had been such a pillar of the community that it seemed likely that the campaign to pry him back would be intense. But none had come. Only the boy. Maybe the adults thought adultery was catching. She laughed, wished Brent was there to share the joke.

Her mom moaned again. She glanced down at the envelope. Brent’s name was written in pencil on it below what looked like a different name crossed out with a sharpie. Apparently the Mormons were thrifty even when they asked for money. She tossed it onto her dresser on her way to fill the bucket so she could bathe her mom.



Brent didn’t get back until the following Saturday. He called once from a supply run to Glendale but couldn’t talk long. More

crews had been brought in as the forest fire had spread, but it was early in the season and since no other caterers had arrived, his team was cooking for everybody on site. He arrived smoky and sunburned. She made him shower, although he insisted on saying hello to her mom first and telling her about how the fire had finally been brought under control, then she fed him french fries and a pork chop. He was grateful, said he was sick of all his meals being leftover eggs and pancakes. She apologized for the lack of a salad, but he said that once he got paid, there'd be plenty of money for salad and fresh food. She wanted to say that she wasn't sorry that they didn't have money to buy salad, only that she was sorry that she hadn't thought to buy at least a head of iceberg because she knew he liked salad with his dinner. She didn't say it because she knew he wouldn't hear it right. He was so worried about money, even though between her mom's disability and what she made cleaning motels part-time, they would be okay. But she knew that he wanted more for them and worried what would happen if he wasn't able to find a permanent job soon, since that was the main thing she was scared would come between them. Not so much some wounded manly pride not like the boyfriends that straggled through during her time in Vegas, cute guys who didn't contribute much but you didn't need to make much of an effort for. God, what a disappointment and relief it had been when her mom had needed her to move back to Kanab even if it was hard taking care of her while also working at the motel.

But she knew that even if he had said that they would be just fine and had reiterated that leaving his house and savings to his wife was the right thing to do, she was very aware that he wasn't used to living poorly like she did—seriously poor, not teacher poor. She worried that might wear away at him and damage the intense connection they had. Yet he was a smart, charming, hardworking guy, and though teaching religion to teenagers didn't exactly suit you for any other type of career, she had to believe that there would be something for him out there even though times were tough. And then her mind wandered to the envelope on the dresser.

She'd wait to mention it to him. She'd talked it over with Mom just to be clear. But the envelope had triggered memories from her childhood. A knock at the door. Strangers on the porch. Cans that always had a beehive on them but never contained honey. A turkey. Sometimes a chicken. Fresh rolls. And sometimes some sort of sheet cake. She couldn't remember when that all had started or when and why it had stopped, and Mom didn't want to talk about it, but she was happy to remember the food itself. Mom was like that now, wanting only to talk about food in vivid detail and the political situation in bland generalities and sports in grand pronouncements. But the details from her mom were enough to bring the vague memory into slightly more focus.



She brought it up later as they lay naked in bed, legs intertwined. He had backed his upper half away from her so that he could better gaze at her nudity. She loved his fascination with all of her parts. And that it went beyond her breasts, which were still pretty great, drooped just a bit, but did not yet sag, and then she had that familiar mini-panic attack: what if he only wanted her for her body? What if in the end he was no different from the guys she had met in Vegas. But no. The sex was just a bonus. They had come together because they were both broken in ways that complemented each other. Both lonely people who had been silently crying out for someone who understood that loneliness. Someone to join forces with. Someone you could be yourself with. Someone to stand hand-in-hand with, backs turned against the prying, judgmental eyes of the rest of the world.

And maybe that had been the problem with that wife of his. She was too self-contained. Brent had said that he had never felt like she had really needed him, and with no children, they hadn't had something to need together. He admitted it had been a mistake to turn that wish to be needed onto his students. He'd done good work, of course, but his heart had only been in it because he hadn't yet known that what he had been looking for was her.

Of course, maybe Carol was cracked open and broken now. That thought hurt a bit but was nothing compared to how right it was being with him—how right they were together.

“A young man stopped by last Sunday,” she said.

“Oh?”

“He had an envelope for you. He said it was for an offering.”

Brent rolled his eyes and shifted in the bed causing the sheets to brush across her butt and thighs. The high thread count sheets were the one luxury they had. She wasn’t sure where Brent had bought them. She had always been fine with plain old cotton sheets from Wards, but now she’d only be satisfied with the high thread count kind.

“I put a twenty in,” she said. “But I didn’t know how to fill out the form or what to do with it. Does the boy come back the next Sunday and pick it up?”

He sighed and rubbed his face. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I told them not to bother us. I’ll find out what happened and repeat my request in a more forceful way.”

“No,” she said. He looked surprised at that. “I mean, yeah, tell them not to bother us, but I want you to give them the money. Your people helped me and Mom out a few times.”

“You don’t have to pay that back. There’s no debt there,” he said. “I recommend just letting it go. It was nice that you got the help, but it was freely offered, and you don’t need to give it a second thought.”

She bit her lower lip. She hadn’t thought about it in that way. It bothered her that he had said that she thought it was a debt. But maybe that’s how she felt deep inside. That there was a debt and that paying it back would create even more separation. Rid themselves of any ties at all to the Mormons. Of course, that wasn’t really possible. Not in a town like Kanab. And she didn’t think that there was any hidden motivation. She just wanted to acknowledge their help and give them something with which to help someone else. It was just an offering. No need to make it more complicated than that. She said as much. He nodded. One thing she liked about him was that he really listened to her.

Heard what she was saying and seemed to actually process it. “That makes sense,” he said, “and is very thoughtful. We can’t really afford it, but then again, we could be a lot worse off, and the Glendale gig helped a lot.”

He kissed her on the forehead.

She tweaked his nose.

“Okay,” he said. “Where is it?”



Brent had never expected he’d be holding a fast offering envelope while standing naked in front of a dresser in the bedroom of his girlfriend. He was irritated that the ward had found a way to worm itself into their space. Not that he had turned his back on Mormonism. Or: he had, but only because he had found something better. Or maybe not better, but what he needed. He just hadn’t known that he had needed it even though he and Carol hadn’t needed each other for years. Not really. Being the childless couple always willing to show up and pitch in at every meeting, activity, service project, crisis—always there with a hand, a shoulder, a smile, a word, a sympathetic ear—it had seemed fine for awhile. A noble way of accepting God’s will. Their family would form in the next life. For now their family was their ward and stake. But he had grown weary of their only intimacy being the sharing of intimate moments they had had with others. Young Sister Mason had another miscarriage. Michelle’s father had taken her out of school. The Chamberlains were behind on their rent. Jason got caught drinking a beer. Sister Gibbs was found wandering the streets again. And he had grown frustrated that their only plans had become what they were going to do to help remedy the situations they became privy to. He had his kids; she had her widows and young mothers. That kept them busy.

And it’s not as if he had started out with intent in his heart. He had heard about Valerie and her mom’s struggles once or twice, but his formal calling and job had always been with the youth of the church, and he had always assumed the Relief Society sisters would have seen to their needs if they had been

dire and help had been welcome. Carol had never mentioned them, but she'd always had so many other people to talk about. That was the thing, wasn't it? You took care of your own first, and there was always so much need just among the members that the non-members only got attention at the holidays and in extreme cases.

And then he and Val had run into each other at Ace Hardware. There was no way she was going to be able to install the grab bars herself, not with tile involved. And so he had offered to help. And her weary, hesitant, perfect smile had peeled away all the crud his soul had accumulated. He had seen his and Carol's frantic good works for what they really were: wonderful, Christ-like actions to be sure, but they had thought they had been patching all the holes in people's lives when they had actually been trying to fill the deep canyon between the two of them. From there, it had all been inevitable. Not the grace he had been looking for, but it was the grace that had been given him.

He knew they all thought him a hypocrite. He didn't feel that way, though he missed the young people. He missed their awkward yearnings, fumbling grasping to hold on to the dreams of their parents, things said in baby blessings and ordinations and family home evenings, while still reaching out for what they wanted. Or thought they wanted, what their bodies wanted, not so much carnal satiation (although there was always that) as a sense of their own self, of some autonomy. He missed them, but everything he had told them was still true, and he was still true to it even if the way he lived that truth had turned unorthodox.

And who knew what the future held? They were in a holding pattern at least until the divorce went through and likely until her mom died. But after that, a change of location might change things for them financially and maybe even spiritually. For now, though, he had no interest in re-engaging with the Third Ward and the people in it—to be expected to wither beneath their self-righteousness—and so he changed his mind. He decided that it wasn't strange to hold a fast offering envelope while standing naked in the room of his girlfriend. It was awesome. And to

return it with her name on it? Awesomer. Not because he wanted to tweak Bishop Gibbs, but because this act of kindness was so in character for Valerie. Made him love her even more.

“Brent,” she said. “Do you need a pen?”

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”



They talked about how to return the offering. Brent figured he'd just put it in an envelope and mail it, but Valerie insisted on returning it to the boy who had dropped it off. She said that he was the only one who had had the courage to darken their doorway so he should be the one to take the money. Her description of the deacon, or possibly teacher, in question didn't match up with either of the Rasmussen boys, who usually took the southern part of the ward. But then Brent figured out that it must be Lawrence's boy Welden pinch-hitting. This made him hesitate. Welden was a good kid. A little too shy, a little too smart for his own good, but a good kid. His dad was a good man. But he and Lawrence had never gotten along. He had always had the feeling that Lawrence didn't approve of the way Brent had been so involved in the lives of the youth. Once after a stake youth fireside, Brent had helped Shonna Russo and Vance Pugh with some relationship difficulties they were having. A few minutes later, while they were putting away chairs in the cultural hall, he had told Lawrence of the evening's near-miss drama, and Lawrence had said that it would have been better if they had broken up since they were only sophomores.

“There's no reason that kind of thing needs to be encouraged,” Lawrence had said.

Brent had explained that he hadn't encouraged anything that hadn't already existed and that it was healthier for Shonna and Vance to work things out, that the last thing they needed was to be disapproved of because that just led to them either seeking out healthier relationships or taking their own in an unhealthy direction.

Lawrence had replied that you can't expect children to have healthy romantic relationships. And Brent had said that a lot

of people don't have healthy romantic relationships so that if there's the possibility that this could grow into one, it shouldn't be discouraged as long as the two keep themselves temple worthy. Lawrence hadn't said anything after that. He'd just kept on folding and stacking chairs.

Brent saw that conversation in a different light now. Maybe Lawrence did too.

So was that why there was a fast offering envelope for him? He'd made it quite clear that he wanted no contact with the Church for the moment. Maybe it was a passive-aggressive message from Lawrence or even Bishop Gibbs. . . . But whatever. Val wanted it returned. He would swallow his pride to make his woman happy.

He called Sunday morning when he knew the Shumways would be at church and left a message telling Welden that Valerie had decided she wanted to make a fast offering donation. He could pick it up anytime that afternoon.



They were watching football in the back room with Mom when they heard banging on the screen door.

Val made him grab the envelope from the dresser and go answer the door, although once Welden and his father were inside, she glided out from the hallway and hovered just behind him. Brent wanted to reach out a hand and pull her forward, but he and Lawrence were already standing in classic showdown stance, alert, wary, waiting for the other to make a move.

"Well," he said. "Thanks for coming."

"Yes," Valerie said. "Thanks, Welden. You stopping buy with the envelope reminded me that my mom and I received some help from the church back when I was a teenager, and I decided that I wanted other people to get some help just like we did."

"Yep, it was all her idea," Brent said, making sure he looked Lawrence in the eyes as he said the last two words. "Okay. Here's the envelope." He held out the hand with the envelope in it to Welden.

Welden stepped forward to take it, but then withdrew after a look from his father. "First, Welden has something to say," Lawrence said.

Welden glanced at Lawrence and then at Brent and then at Val. He kept his eyes on her as he said, "I'm sorry to have bothered you. I shouldn't have done it, and I know it wasn't a nice thing to do."

"Wait a second," Brent said, even though he had promised Val that he would not make things awkward. "The boy doesn't need to apologize for being bold and extending an opportunity to help the poor and needy."

"He shouldn't have done it," Lawrence replied, his lips thin with anger or annoyance.

Brent wanted to ask Welden why he had brought the envelope, but he knew young teenage boys and knew that even with Welden he'd get a shrug of the shoulders and a "dunno."

"Maybe so. Maybe so," Brent said. "But he did. And Valerie just explained why that turned out to be a good thing." He glanced back at her. She was smiling, her eyes bright.

Brent held out the envelope to Welden again.

Lawrence angled in front of his son, his hand extended. "I'll handle it for you," he said. "This offering is a special case, and so it's not in Welden's priesthood stewardship."

Brent felt Valerie tense up behind him. He felt a twinge of desire to object, blow up the whole scene, but he knew that feeling was just because he hadn't been around adolescent drama in awhile. Back when he had been Brother B, he'd always been the one the drama got directed to. The other seminary teachers and youth leaders had always looked to him to smooth down ruffled feathers, balm hurt feelings, reprimand misbehavior and discourtesy. There was part of him that knew that he was good at it, that was proud of how he could help the youth through all their tempestuous flare-ups, and there was a part of him that was happy to be free of it all, that yearned for something different. And there was a part of him, the deepest part of him, that missed it all in a way that wasn't healthy, that missed being the center of the maelstrom of hormones and hurt. He missed it but was so grateful that Valerie had saved him from it, and he hoped Carol would find her way to whatever it was she needed to get to a healthier place in her life.

Valerie stepped up next to Brent and took his empty hand in hers. “Welden was kind enough to drop it off,” she said. “I’d like it if he could take it to your bishop himself.”

Lawrence looked at Welden. It was a look Brent had seen many times before. The ever-shifting calculus of parental authority and teenage agency.

“Go ahead, Welden,” Lawrence said, nodding in the direction of his own outstretched hand. Brent fought off a smile. Valerie leaned into him.

The envelope edged from his hand into Welden’s.



On the car ride over to Bishop Gibbs’s house, Welden unwound and rewound the tie that held the fast offering envelope closed. He still thought Brother B was wrong to have done what he did, but he was confused by the fact that something in Brother B had changed. Something that made Welden like him more. He had turned his charisma magnet down or something.

The car came to a stop along the side of the road.

“We’re here, Welden,” his dad said.

Welden looked up. Bishop Gibbs’s driveway was full of cars.

“Be quick about it, Welden. It looks like Bishop has company. You just need to give it to him. I already called and talked to him about the situation before we picked it up.”

Welden nodded. “Dad,” he said, “I was just thinking about Brother B and his—the woman he is living with now. It was nice of her to want to give a fast offering.”

“It was.”

“That’s the principle of the harvest in action.”

“What’s that?”

“She and her mom received help from the Church even though they weren’t members. Then years later she is given the opportunity to help others, and she chooses to do so. The seeds that were planted with her were finally ready to be harvested.”

“That’s a good point, Welden.”

“Well, it’s a start.” Welden had his hand on the door handle now, cracked it open just a bit. “I know you’re mad that I did

that, and you're right that I should have said something to you and Mom first, but I just felt like I should do something, especially since all the girls are very upset about Brother B. Plus I was curious to see them. But I'm glad I did because even though she is an adulteress, she obviously has a good heart. She just wasn't raised with the light of the gospel."

"Welden," he put a hand on his shoulder. "Please don't call her that. Her name is Miss Adams."

Welden bit his lip. "Yeah, I guess that's not a good thing to call her, even if it's true. But if I see her around, I'm going to call her Sister Adams. Even if she hasn't been baptized yet, she's still our sister, right, Dad?"

"Yes, Welden. That's true."

"Good."

Welden hopped out the car. Stepping carefully around the doodlebug traps, he made his way along the pink sand and up the driveway to the bishop's house to deliver Valerie's offering.