

# DUTIES OF A DEACON

Theric Jepson

I never got to do it when I was a twelve-year-old Mormon boy even if it is, technically, as much a duty of a deacon as passing the sacrament—and I doubted anyone in my presidency ever did it when they were twelve either. Certainly, the boys we're responsible for had never done it so, when the bishop referred Jake Miller's widow to me, at first I wasn't sure I'd heard her right.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"It's just a little one, mind. Digging up my tulip bulbs. Pretty little thing, but still."

"A little what?"

"Orangey-purplish, I suppose, but I don't see how that makes a difference."

I've been told that once Sister Miller starts calling you she never stops. I was starting to understand the tone of voice that this intelligence was always shared in.

"I'm sorry, Sister Miller. An orangey-purple *what* is digging up your tulips?"

"Dragon. Haven't you been listening?"

"You're sure it wasn't a squirrel?"

"Squirrels digging up tulips?" She laughed.

"My wife says last week she had one—"

"Please, Brother Mamamama. Perhaps inadvertently now and then, but squirrels do not as a matter of course dig up tulips."

"It's Mamawala."

“When can you get some deacons over?”

I crunched my face and thought. “I’ll bring some Wednesday night. About six.”

She grunted and hung up. I thumbed through my contacts and called my second counselor and brother-in-law, Tare Williams.

“I dunno, man. That sounds more like a gig for a home teacher.”

“The bishop sent her to us. It’s in the Doctrine and Covenants.”

“I dunno, man.” He was obviously eating chips. “All right.”

“Let wee President Wilkins know, would you? Have him pick another deacon to go with us. I’ll pick them up quarter to six. You want a ride?”

“Nah. She’s close by. I’ll just take my bike.”

“We’ll have to go straight to Mutual.”

“Ah, yeah. Good point, man. But nah, I’ll meet you there. Give me a ride to Church though? Bring your rack?”

“Yeah, all right.” And there went twenty minutes getting that stupid bike rack back on my Yukon.

I got to the Wilkinses’ at 5:40 and Deacons Quorum President Tim Wilkins ran right out wearing his full Boy Scout uniform, including merit-badge sash and beret. He’s as short as a short seven-year-old and as serious as the middle manager who indexes every draft of every memo.

“Hello, President Mamawala,” he said as he clambered into my SUV’s front seat. Possibly illegally. My own children are too young for me to have ever looked up the front-seat laws of Oregon. “I’m very excited for us to engage on this priesthood duty.”

“Oh, me too, President Wilkins. Me too.”

He directed me to the Pilner residence where both Harry and his twin sister Melinda shoved through the front door and raced to the car. Harry got through their door first, but she had her seat belt on before he even got to the sidewalk.

“Hello, Brother Mamawala.”

“Hi, Melinda. How are you?”

“My Mom said she’s not driving just one of us, so I’m afraid that obliges you.”

“That’s quite all right.”

Harry pulled himself panting and red-faced into the seat on the other end of the bench from her, glaring.

“Harry doesn’t think I should be allowed to come.”

“She doesn’t have the priesthood! And this is a priesthood duty. Tim told me. He like gave me a scripture and everything.”

“Which,” Melinda said cheerily, “he never looked up.”

“It was in the D&C. I can’t find things in there.”

I saw my front-seat compatriot almost speak, but he bit his lip and pressed his back into the seat. He was getting better at this.

“Anyway, I can come, right, Brother Mamawala?”

“Of course, Melinda. We’re just headed over to Sister Miller’s. Do you all know her?”

They knew her.

When we arrived, Tare was melting over his bike’s handlebars and talking to Sister Miller who did not seem impressed. When I pulled up, she looked at me and gestured at her face in what I think was a question about his goatee.

The kids piled out and ran over to Sister Miller. She frowned at Melinda. “Please tell me you’re not a deacon,” she said.

“I’m better,” said Melinda. “I’m the Beehive class president. I’m Tim’s counterpart.”

Her brother shoved her with a bit of shoulder. “No you’re not.”

“Sure I am. Remember when the bishop called Sister Korematsu? He said the Relief Society president is the bishop’s partner in keeping up the temporal and spiritual health of the ward.”

“No he didn’t.”

“How would you know? You and the other deacons always read comics during ward business. I’m surprised Tim’s okay with that.”

“I’m not okay with that! C’mon, Melinda! You know I’m not!”

“As we’re on church business, I would think you of all people would call me President Pilner.”

Sister Miller looked ready to speak so I jumped in. “So, dragon? Where was it seen last?”

“You’ve done this before, I assume?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Sall right, sister,” said Tare. “Did one on my mission, you know. Big mother. Two days after I was made zone leader too, so I had no idea what I was doing. Pretty raw, though. Lost a hecka good tie. Trainer called it hash paisley. Man, I miss that tie. I had that, might still wear one to church.”

If I can read minds—and my wife tells me I can’t—Sister Miller was reconsidering her opinion of our bishop. “This way.”

She had a strip of dirt alongside the driveway on the south side of her house. Mostly marigolds, but patches where something had been digging through it. “You see?” she said. “Dragon.”

I nodded as wisely as I knew how. “Sure.”

Tare crouched down. “Yeah, it could be.” He pulled up what I guessed was a tulip bulb. “Check it.”

The kids rushed in front of me, but I got a sense of some scratch marks on the bulb. Tim spoke first. “But how do you know it was a dragon?”

Harry had the answer: “Duh. Nothing else’s got claws like that.”

Melinda was skeptical: “Don’t duh him. You don’t know anything about claws. Plenty of things have claws.”

Tare held up a hand. “Hush. If you look in there—Hang on.” He took a step back into a patch of sunshine, then twisted his wrist. As the sun caught the bulb’s scratches, they reflected a weird iridescence. I felt my stomach drop. The kids though . . .

“Cool!”

“Can I see it?”

“Will it hurt if I touch it?”

“Stop it. You’re not a deacon.”

“I’m better than a deacon.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Anyone saying anything is better than anyone else in the household of Christ is being ridiculous.”

“Shut up, Tim.”

“Don’t tell him to shut up!”

“I told Mom this would happen! You always take each other’s side!”

“That’s not true!”

“Sure it is. False friend. False sister. Why don’t you just kiss already!”

“Shut up, Harry!”

“Ew. I hate you!”

All this happened in no more than six seconds. Preteens are exhausting. If the bishop gave me this calling to prove that Belle is right and three kids are plenty for us, it was working.

Tare snapped his fingers. I didn’t know snapping was something to excel at until I saw Tare chase off a coyote, but trust me—it is. The kids froze and looked at him.

“Look. Yes, catching dragons is priesthood jive. Doesn’t make it exclusively so. Deacons are supposed to keep the chapel clean, but who polished the baseboards for Mutual last week?”

“That was us!”

“You bet it was. Same with dragons. We can do this together.”

“You’ll be great at it, Melinda.”

“Thanks, Tim.”

Remember, she’s like two feet taller than him.

I cleared my throat. “What do we need, Tare?”

“Nothing, man. It’s cool. Sister Miller. Hey. You got, like, a paper bag, like from the store?”

Sister Miller just looked at him. “You served a mission?”

“Yeah, you bet. Adriatic South Mission, ’eleven to ’thirteen. All in Kosovo. I was there when—when—but nah, story time later.”

“I thought you were married?”

“Yeah, crazy, right? I totally did not think she would wait for me. But those Mamawalas are faithful folk, eh, big bra?” And he slugged me in the arm.

“Brother Mamamama. Are you in charge here?”

“Yes, ma’am. Just waiting on that paper sack.”

“Paper—oh yes! Dear me. Let me get that.”

She clattered inside and Tare broke down the plan with fewer surfing metaphors than expected. I’ve always loved the guy, but half the time I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’m not sure if I’ll more miss him or just be glad when he takes my sister back to BYU this fall. But since he’s joining her in the accounting program, I may well be seeing them both down the hall in my dad’s offices soon enough.

When Sister Miller came back, Tare had Tim and Melinda hold the bag. Melinda chose the back and Tim the opening. Then the rest of us formed an awkward polygon around the bag’s opening and started clapping. It took a while to get the rhythm right.

“Yeah, I don’t know why, but it works best when you’re at the same speed as the human heart. Which by hecka cool coincidence is the same beat as ‘Stayin’ Alive’—still a raw song. Though not an appropriate movie and you should totally not see it.”

He got us at the right rhythm just as some judgmental neighbor walked by. I felt like I was part of the lamest breakdance circle of all time. Then. There it was.

Just like that.

Orangey-purple but really more silvery-rainbow than anything.

Sister Miller screamed, but she kept clapping. I heard she was the organist for years and years until she decided that the sacrament hymns needed to swing. Maybe it’s true.

“Okay, then.” Tare made eye contact with his three clappers. “Let’s move back. Slowly. Slowly, Harry. There you go, man.”

The dragon followed us into the bag. Shortly, we were behind Melinda who squealed and said, “I can feel him!”

Tare nodded at her. "Go."

She grabbed onto the dragon through the paper and Tim folded down the opening with maddening meticulousness.

"Faster, Tim!"

He crumpled it down, smashing the opening into a ball, then he pulled it away from Melinda and stood, holding the bag above his head. Melinda, still crouched on the ground, looked up at it. And we all watched as the dragon thrashed a bit, then was still.

"Huh," I said.

"Told you it was cake, man."

"So you did."

"After Mutual, if it's cool with y'all, I'll bike it up to the hills. Or maybe down to the coast."

"Okay," I said, echoed by the kids.

"Just so long as I never see it again," said Sister Miller. "Awful little thing."

"I thought he was pretty," said Melinda.

"I never said he wasn't pretty," snorted Sister Miller. "I'll call the bishop and tell him his irregulars pulled it off."

"Thanks much, Sis Mill." Tare held up his hand, but she just glared at him and stomped inside. The kids didn't leave him hanging though, and each slapped him five. He loaded his bike onto my rack and took the front seat before President Wilkins could—busy, as he was, trying to hold the door for Melinda and make it seem incidental.

She sat between the boys. As I started up the car and Tare fiddled with the a/c, she said, "See? That wasn't so bad. I was a big help."

Harry grumbled.

"You were," said Tim. "Really. The best. Could not have done it without you."

"Sure we could have."

"C'mon, Harry," I said. "Won't kill you to thank her for her help."

"Yeah, thanks, whatever."

“Hey, Brother Mamawala?”

“Yeah, Melinda?”

“I didn’t know Sue was your sister.”

“Suhrita? Really? We look, like, exactly the same.”

Melinda shook her head at me in the rearview mirror. “C’mon, Brother Mamawala. Don’t be racist.”

So I just drove. All was silent for a while, until Melinda spoke again. “So, we make a pretty good team.”

Even in the already red summer evening, I could see Tim blushing in my mirror. “Yeah. You bet . . . President Pilner.”

“We should, like, do more service projects together. I mean—with everyone else too.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll talk to Sister Benson about it. You’ll talk to her too, right, Brother Mamawala?”

“That would be great.”

She was silent a moment, then had another brainstorm. “Hey, Tim. Maybe we’ll both get called to the Asiatic South Mission! Catch more dragons together!”

Tare turned around in his seat. “Adriatic, little sister. But heck yeah you two made a good team. For sure. Maybe your brother will even be as cool as my buddy Sanjay here someday.”

“Yeah,” said Melinda.

“Yeah,” said Tim.

When he turned back around, I growled, “Thanks a lot, Tare. You’re going to the next Bishop’s Youth Council. And you’re sitting between them.”

“For sure, bra.” He raised his right hand to the square. “I always sustain you, don’t I?”