

# LIGHT DEPARTURE

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*For Doug Thayer*

There was a knock at the apartment door. My companion, Carr, slouched at his desk, tinkering with a delicate butterfly he'd just formed from a piece of thin copper wire he'd retrieved that morning from the gutter outside our building. The wire butterfly slipped from his thick fingers and fell to the tile floor. He glanced nervously at me through a pair of plastic, square framed glasses, his gray eyes cartoonishly big behind the thick lenses.

"Maybe that girl again," I said, looking up from the open suitcase on my bed, half full of the sixty rare bootlegs I'd amassed over the last two years. Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Led Zeppelin, The Doors—all bands I'd loved in high school. "I think she wants you," I told Carr.

At least once a week the teenage girl from across the hall, always heavily made up and in a low-cut v-neck t-shirt, knocked at our door. To practice her English, she'd tell us coyly, snapping a wad of pink gum between her glossy lips, as she interrogated us about life in America and what we thought about Italian women and if we ever felt sexually repressed by all the rules we had to follow.

There was another knock, louder and more insistent. I winked at Carr. "It's all that smoldering manliness you radiate. Why don't you see what she wants?"

"Hey, I don't even look at her." Carr's voice pitched higher and cracked. "I've never even talked to her. I wouldn't know what to say."

I lifted my suitcase, testing its weight. "Confidence, elder," I said.

Carr rolled his eyes and exhaled an annoyed groan as he stood and left the bedroom. But he returned quickly.

“She try putting the moves on you?” I asked.

“No. It’s some African guy,” Carr whispered. “He says he knows you. Michael, I think.”

I looked up from my suitcase. “Michael? Here? I baptized him in Bologna. Tell him to come in.”

“That’s against the rules,” Carr said, fingering the corner of the small mission rulebook in his breast pocket.

“You want to tell him that?” I asked. “A new convert. A new member of the church.” I straightened my tie in the full-length mirror next to my bed, frowning at Carr’s reflection. “How about you tell him to have a seat in the stairwell, elder?”

“Fine,” Carr said.

And then, incredibly, Michael was there, smiling as he long-stepped across the room with his hand extended. “Allred,” he said. “A prayer answered. At this hour, I didn’t think you’d be home. I was ready to walk the streets searching for you.”

“I can’t believe it,” I said, shaking Michael’s hand. His presence felt unreal. I hardly recognized him. He wore some kind of traditional African clothing, a long blue shirt embroidered with gold thread around the neck and the sleeves, loose-fitting pants, and a black, flat-topped hat without a brim.

The last time I’d seen Michael, almost two years before, his limited wardrobe consisted mostly of baggy warm-up pants and faded sweatshirts with sleeves so long that only his fingertips were visible, handouts from a Catholic charity that assisted refugees. At that time, he’d only been in Italy a couple months, living in a drab tenement apartment outside Bologna and working at a shoe factory. He’d immediately invited us in, eager to talk. There was a humble, asexual quality about him, I remembered, something so refreshingly unlike the bravado and perverse innuendo we often experienced when speaking with Italian men.

After I left Bologna, Michael and I had written monthly. He promised to visit me in Trento, if he could get time off from work. And then he promised to visit me in Vicenza. Soon, though, Michael's letters came sporadically, and by the time I transferred to Ravenna, there hadn't been a letter in months. I'd tried his number in Bologna but found it disconnected.

"Didn't I promise to visit you?" Michael said, straightening the black hat on top of his head. "Yesterday, by the grace of God, I ran into the Bologna missionaries. They said you leave tomorrow. I wanted to say goodbye."

"What a surprise," I said. "And you." I touched the gold embroidery on Michael's sleeve. "What's this?"

"A gift from my parents," Michael said. "A *dashiki*. Very popular in West Africa, very comfortable in the summers, though Italians hate it. Too colorful. Too ethnic. I suddenly become a suspicious person. We work in their factories and pick up their trash, but they'd prefer not to see us." Michael stepped back to look at me. "And you. More grown-up. You were still a boy in Bologna."

"I send pictures home and my parents say the same thing." I slid the chair from my desk toward Michael and then sat on my bed. "You've met my companion, Elder Carr."

Michael sat, placing both hands on his knees. "I have," he said. He tipped his head toward Carr, who'd retreated to his bed, an open Bible propped up on his chest. He'd slipped on a yellow sweatshirt, raising its peaked hood. The hood cast a shadow over his broad face.

I felt the need to explain Carr's palpable silence. "Elder Carr isn't much of a conversationalist," I said, loud enough for Carr to hear. "But he's working on it. Right, Carr?"

"Perhaps this silence is a virtue," Michael said, turning to Carr. "Wisdom is the reward of listening. My mother always told me that." Michael turned back to me, his gaze falling on my open suitcase. "You're ready for the journey, I see."

“Almost,” I said, running my finger along the blunt edge of an open shoebox on the bed, a pair of Gucci loafers snug inside, a recent purchase, along with some Brioni hand-sewn ties, I’d bought with money my parents sent me. I had this image of myself after the mission, striking a charming, cosmopolitan pose—*la bella figura*, as Italians called it—at church and on dates, in a blue silk tie and designer shoes that glowed like caramel.

“And these shoes,” Michael asked. “These beautiful shoes are yours?”

I lifted one from the box, savoring its solid weight and the smooth touch of the cool leather on my palm. “A gift to myself. Something to remember Italy by.”

“May I?” Michael asked.

I passed the shoe to him. “What do you think?”

Michael delicately held the loafer with both hands. “Double monk-strap, Goodyear welting, hand-stitched calfskin, and look at the detailing on the leather. You’ll make quite an impression on the ladies.”

“You still work at the shoe factory?” I asked.

“Not anymore,” Michael said, examining the shoe’s leather sole. “But I learned a few things there, more than I care to about something I could never afford. I also learned that Made in Italy really means Made in Italy by Africans. Nigerians, Kenyans, Moroccans, Somalis. Every day at work was like an African Union Summit, but instead of debating economics and politics we made shoes.” He returned the shoe to me. “Now I work in a home furnishings factory. All very boring, but much closer to my apartment. And it pays more. You didn’t get my letters?”

“It’s been months,” I said. “I began to think you went back to Nigeria.”

Michael slapped his knee. “Why am I still shocked by the incompetence of the Italian Post when every morning I see my mail carrier in the café drinking espresso and reading *la Repubblica*? I moved apartments three months ago and am still waiting for my forwarded mail. But in the great scheme of things, these are small problems.” Michael rubbed

his palms together. "What's important is that you'll soon be with your family. They'll be glad to have you home."

"I'm only home a couple weeks," I said, "and then it's off to Brigham Young University. They accepted me for fall semester."

Michael's dark eyes moved to the ceiling. "Praise God. All is well when we let him take control." He touched his chest. A sly grin creased his lips. "And I, too, have some good news. I've won a visa to America. Fifteen million applicants, and I was one of fifty thousand. I still can't believe it. In two months, I interview with the American Embassy in Milan. If all goes well, I'll be in America by November. Can you believe this miracle, Allred? An American citizen. God is faithful, isn't he?"

"A blessing," I said, almost in a whisper. "You deserve it. After all you've been through."

"A new beginning, yet so many unknowns," Michael said, the energy draining from his voice. "I'd be a fool to think I can start a new life alone. By nature, I'm prideful, but I mustn't let pride bring me low. Maybe what I ask is too much, Allred. Forgive me if it is, and then we'll never speak of it again. But you once showed me a picture of your parents' house. Big and beautiful. Plenty of rooms. I was hoping I might stay with them for a month or so. I'll be a mouse, but not even a squeak. I can help. I can clean. I've read that there's opportunity in Seattle. Colleges. Jobs. Just until I find work and an apartment. I'll pay them back."

I was touched by Michael's request. I imagined myself, soon standing at the pulpit in front of my ward, recounting Michael's story: a man fleeing the political and religious unrest of his country for a better life, the treacherous journey at sea, a refugee in a foreign land, his conversion, and now this miraculous golden ticket to a new life in America. And then three months later Michael would suddenly materialize for my ward, smiling, shaking hands, the very fruit of my mission. That Michael would land in my apartment the night before I was to leave Italy, that, against the odds, he'd won this visa, that I could help him

build a life in America—all this seemed beyond coincidence. It seemed the hand of God.

“Of course, I’ll speak with my parents,” I said. “I’ve told them about you. How could they say no?”

I looked at Carr, who lay inert on his bed. His wilted black socks had sunk around his chunky ankles, exposing two pale, hairless swatches of goose-pimpled skin. I hoped he was listening, hoped he understood this is how he needed to love and serve others, by opening up rather than crawling into himself.

“Thank you,” Michael said softly, letting go a long breath. “What a relief to hear those words. God will bless you and your parents.” He interlaced his fingers and touched them to his forehead.

“Though I’m sure the members in Bologna will miss you,” I said. “How are they? The Rossi family? Brother Pavone?”

Michael stared at his interlocked fingers. “Honestly, I haven’t been to church in a long time,” he said. “Many months.”

My stomach tightened. “Was there a problem? You didn’t feel welcome?”

“Nothing like that,” Michael said. “Everyone was kind. It’s just that I’ve changed. My life has changed, my beliefs. I cannot pretend to be something I am not. I cannot be something different from how God created me.”

“I don’t understand.” I could hear my voice ticking higher, an undercurrent of panic there I had to check. “You have doubts?” I suddenly felt the need to teach Michael, just as I’d done in his small apartment, to quote scripture and bear testimony, to answer questions and resolve his concerns.

“It’s because of somebody I met,” Michael said, “somebody I love deeply. I cannot be with him and be Mormon. And I want to be with him.”

A noisy motor scooter passed on the street below, but its shrill whine couldn’t penetrate the silence in the room. I felt the clunky thud of my heart. I picked a loose thread from my luggage and worked it

between my thumb and index finger until it formed a tight ball. I let it fall through my fingertips. I'd known, maybe intuitively, from the very first time I met Michael. "You're gay?" I asked.

"Perhaps I've always been," Michael said. "I remember in grade school, a feeling whenever I saw an attractive boy. Why did I find boys attractive? I thought God had made a mistake. Maybe my father suspected. He pushed me to sports. Soccer, boxing, running. But the feeling wouldn't go away. As a teenager, I told my pastor. The demon, he called it. He made me promise never to tell anyone. He told me to pray and read the Bible, to cover my private parts when bathing. But still those feelings. In Nigeria, people talk about gays with such disgust. And in the news, beatings, killings. I thought of a new start. I would leave the demon there. That's what I told myself. That's why I invited you into my apartment. A new faith, a new beginning. But really, I wouldn't admit then that I left Nigeria to find the freedom to be myself."

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. I wanted to fix Michael, to find the words that would steer him back, to persuade him of the error of this path, yet I felt something in me sinking, drifting beyond my grasp. "You have to pray for strength to overcome this," I said. "It's just weakness, the natural man."

"And I believed that, too." Michael spoke slowly, patiently, as if he were now teaching me. "But how can this love be wrong? Abasi. That's his name, a Kenyan who knows what I know about the shame and loneliness of hiding a secret. With him, I feel only acceptance. We've found a community in Bologna, other Africans and Italians like us. Christians. There's so much love there, Allred."

Michael looked at the floor. "I know this isn't what you expected, Allred, but to be dishonest, to hide, is weakness. After meeting Abasi, I vowed to no longer live a lie. No more shame and guilt." A faint chime sounded. Michael frowned at the silver watch on his wrist. "This is a lot to tell you. Maybe too much. I wish there was more time, but I must go. The last train to Bologna will leave soon. I must work tomorrow."

Michael stood and pulled a slip of paper from his pant pocket. “My email and cell number. You can write or call after you speak to your parents. Please, tell them I won’t be a burden. Tell them it will only be for a short time.” Michael stared down at the paper that hung between us. “But if the arrangement doesn’t work, if circumstances change, I understand. It will never change my gratitude. The missionary lessons. Your letters. Your friendship, Allred. You helped me through dark times, brother.” Michael touched my shoulder. “It’s late and you’re still packing. I’ll let myself out.”

I listened to Michael’s footsteps in the hallway, and then to the heavy closing of the apartment door. Through the open double window above my bed, the sun was setting over the Museo Nazionale, reflecting warmly on its terracotta roof. Beyond the city, the Adriatic Sea was a gray ribbon spread over with a blue-ochre sky.

Carr was still sprawled across his bed, the Bible fallen over his round belly, his chest rising and falling rhythmically.

I touched the Gucci shoebox on my bed. The loafers’ silver buckles radiated light. The pleasant aroma of polished leather was intoxicating.

I gazed at the slip of paper in my other hand, suddenly resentful and angry by Michael’s talk of needing me to start a new life in America, and then his revelation—abandoning the faith, loving a man—after I agreed to help. I sensed something new in him that I disliked: the conspicuous tribal clothes, the hint of political activism, a lack of humility and meekness. I rubbed my thumb over the neat rows of letters and numbers Michael had written in blue ink. The thin paper felt insubstantial. It could fall through my fingers, under the bed or behind the nightstand—and cease to exist.

I quietly opened the wooden armoire next to my bed. My mission clothes hung in a neat row, the slacks frayed around the cuffs and belt loops, the shirts, once as white as new snow, now tinged a dull yellow and smelling of mildew, all ravaged by two years of walking and riding bikes.



With no intention of filling my suitcase with these tattered clothes, I striped a pair of gray slacks from a hanger and pressed them into a tight ball, the thin slip of paper detaching from my fingers and disappearing into the swirl of worn fabric. I dropped the slacks into a plastic wastebasket next to my desk.

“You should give those clothes to someone,” Carr said. His voice, suddenly filling the quiet room, surprised me. He stared at me, his mouth a gaping, disapproving hole. He sat on the edge of his bed, bent toward me, his face still shadowed by the sweater’s peaked hood, a ghoulish inquisitor.

“And who’d want old clothes?” I asked, dropping a white shirt into the wastebasket.

“What about that guy from Senegal who sells CDs?”

“What guy from Senegal?” I had no idea who Carr was talking about.

“The guy in Piazza del Popolo. His clothes are all torn up and dirty.”

I stripped another pair of slacks from a hanger. “Should I give him my nametag, too?”

“I just think it’s wasteful,” Carr said, “throwing away all those clothes.”

“Of course you do.” My eyes flicked quickly down into the wastebasket and then back to Carr. A creased corner of the paper peeked out from under the gray slacks. I wondered if Carr could see it from across the room.

I quickly pulled more shirts and slacks from the armoire, their metal hangers clattering to the floor. I dropped the clothes into the wastebasket and then reached into the armoire for more when Carr spoke again. His eager rush of words startled me:

“Your parents will say yes, right? They’ll let Michael stay for a month in that big house. Just for a month.”

I turned to Carr.

“I don’t know.” My voice sounded strange, too high, trembling slightly. “They’d wonder why this man I baptized doesn’t go to church.

Even if I didn't say anything, what if Michael tells them? They wouldn't like it."

Carr gestured emphatically with those huge hands. He looked agitated, a pink flush, like a fresh sunburn, seeped up out of his collar and colored his fleshy jowls. "Then he can be your roommate. Utah Valley University's close to BYU. He can go there. You can help him get started."

I looked at my open suitcase, at the bootlegs laid in neat rows, at a thick stack of envelopes bound with a rubber band, letters from my friends. Soon they'd be home from their missions. We'd planned to room together at BYU. In a steady back-and-forth over the last two years, we'd constructed a college life of long road trips, late night movies, and pretty girls. Michael didn't figure into that plan.

"I have roommates," I said.

"But you can help," Carr said, his voice imposing and emphatic. "If you really think about it, you'll find a way. And then you'll take that paper out of the garbage."

We both looked at the wastebasket, overflowing with pants and shirts.

I was tired of pretending that I wanted to help Michael. "He's not the person I baptized," I said, pressing my open palm into the mass of clothes and hearing a puff of air and then the thin crackle of paper. "If he were still that person, it would be different. I'd help. But what he does now. He's chosen a different life. He's not my responsibility." I stood and pulled the orange drawstrings of the plastic bag lining the wastebasket.

Suddenly, Carr was on his feet, rushing toward me. I stood to block him, but with a heavy swipe of his arm, he shoved me aside, and then stooped down, rooting through the clothes until he found the paper.

I was incensed. Something in me burst, a hot flash of anger and revulsion for all of Carr's grating piousness, boorishness, and social ineptitude I'd had to endure in our two months together.

I lunged for his fleshy throat, but he swatted me away. My head knocked against the armoire door, my legs collapsing beneath me. My eyes brimmed with tears, though I didn't know if I was crying or laughing.

“Take him home with you,” I said, as Carr retreated to his bed, the paper cupped in his hands, as if it were one of his fragile wire creations. “And what can you really do for him? You? You with all your good intentions.”

Night had darkened the bedroom windows. My head pulsed with a dull pain. My arms and legs felt leaden. The floor seemed to quiver and jerk as I set my hands on the bed and stood up.

I carefully placed the Gucci shoebox in my suitcase, next to the bootlegs and the letters. I didn’t say anything to Carr that evening, or even the next morning as I lifted my luggage onto the express train for the mission home in Padova. I watched Carr from the train window. He sat on a wooden bench, a train schedule spread over his lap. His new companion would arrive in a few hours. I felt light and at ease, finally done with Carr, untethered and free from all his strangeness and self-righteous judgment.

The train lurched from the station and picked up speed, Ravenna receding into the green and gold countryside. I stared down at the cement ties of the adjoining track ticking hypnotically past. The train cut through a vast, rolling wheat field. I squinted. The wheat was a blinding, silvery white, shimmering and rippling in the breeze. For a moment, I experienced a dull guilt that radiated from my guts and washed up over my chest and shoulders. But when I touched the suitcase under my seat, the feeling subsided. Soon, I thought, one life would end and a new one—my life after the mission—would begin.

But in that new life, I soon came to know a persistent and troubling disappointment, even as the names of people and places, the finer details of that once consuming mission life, blurred and dimmed. With time, the Brioni ties, probably cheap designer knockoffs, lost their stitching and then completely unraveled. The bootlegs were unlistenable, static and the boisterous crowds drowning out the music. And the Gucci loafers—somehow they were different from what I remembered buying, too effeminate, too elaborate and showy. “Oh no,” my friends would shriek whenever I wore them, “Allred’s got his fairy shoes on again.”

Something from that time, though, seemingly impervious to decay, remains vivid and unforgettable: the image of Carr, like a sun-drenched still life, parked on that bench as the express pulled from the station, the open railroad schedule on his lap, his pudgy features—a face so placid and serene, turned in my direction but not seeing me. It was the same gaze I encountered years later one breezy April morning as I rounded a corner in downtown Salt Lake and saw Michael striding toward me. His unexpected presence stopped me cold. I wanted to hide my face until he passed—but there was no escape. Our eyes met. I braced for a scathing, venomous look, the hard set of a mouth and accusing eyes. But nothing. He was smiling, a bounce in his step, a man at peace with the world. He looked at me as Carr did so long ago from that wooden bench—as if he never knew me.