

DISPATCHES FROM KOLOB

Ryan Habermeyer

Dear President Russell M. Nelson,

For centuries, the pope has been addressed as *Your Holiness*, and they call the Dalai Lama the *Enlightened One*, and that Hindu Bhagwan fellow is the *Fortunate One*, and I have it on good authority the ayatollah prefers the title *His Excellency, A Most Divine Judge of Beards*. I know you know this. You are the prophet, seer, and revelator of the one true Church. Yes, sir. The Mormons. You knew before anyone else if the sun would rise this morning. You know my middle school science project was how Mozart makes lima beans grow faster. You know my wife ran off with the guy who sells lawnmowers on TV. You know what I ate for breakfast. You know what you ate for breakfast. Hell, you probably know what Jesus ate for breakfast. You know, even if you don't know you know right this second, that I am just off Route 59 writing this letter. You know you are the prophet, but I'm going to call you brother, brother prophet, because that was good enough for Jesus, which is precisely why I'm writing.

Brother prophet, you probably already know about my neighbors. Heber and Sophronia Peck? I'm sure the bishop provides you weekly updates on all the half-ass faithful members in our congregation. We Mormons are a long-suffering bunch, so every congregation has a handful. Which means you know poor Heber was the one who planted the idea to adopt in her head because he was unable to plant anything in its proper place. They flew halfway across the country to that orphanage and that's where they found that scraggly, bearded little nuisance of a teenager mopping the floors. Jesus. That's what the orphanage director said. Jesus. Not like your gardener, *Jesús*. Born in one of those villages

nobody can pronounce outside Baghdad but, thanks to the Big-W he grew up in Albany. His stepfather was a brewmaster at the Beverwyck Brewing Company before it closed.

Don't ask me how he ended up in the orphanage. Heber, as I'm sure you know from his file, was tickled pink the boy was a real Middle Easterner, like the original Jesus. This is the original Jesus, the orphanage director told them. Said something about how the crucifixion didn't take. Forgive my blasphemy, brother prophet, but that's what she said. Sophronia thought it was a cruel joke, but the longer they looked at that sad man-child mopping the floors the more convinced they became he was *the* Jesus.

Two weeks later he was walking around our neighborhood. The adopted son, Jesus of Albany.

Wasn't long after they brought him by the house for introductions. I was watching cartoons in my underwear. Are you a cartoon man, brother prophet? I picture you knowing everything about *Looney Tunes*. Great minds think alike. Just call me Wile E. Coyote. That's what my daughter used to call me. We would watch cartoons together when I wasn't on the highway. Mr. Coyote is very trickery, she used to say. Coyote with a keg of dynamite waiting to turn roadrunner into breakfast. Why does coyote want to blow up *beep beep*? To send him to Jesus, I used to say. Why does Jesus want *beep beep*? He's lonely. Like us? We watched Coyote fall off a cliff and disappear into a cloud of dust at the bottom of a canyon. Then he is there again chasing *beep beep*. He always comes back. Maybe coyote is Jesus? she would say. Then we played the game of oiling daddy's guns and drove around for an hour with the siren looking for coyotes to shoot.

Forgive me, brother prophet. I've prayed for the Lord to take the scramble out of this egghead, but sometimes prayers are like letters to the ACME Corporation. I was talking about boy-Jesus of Albany. Shook his hand and said I hoped to see him on Sunday. But his handshake left me suspicious. Then there were the neighborhood rumors.

How he listened to the *Ramones*. Watched anime. Showered without having to be reminded. Ate his meals without complaining. A little bit of a rabble-rouser, if you ask me, hunting through the dictionary for words like *bourgeois* and *disestablishmentarianism* just to get a rise out of folks. Weeks after he arrived, he got suspended when he stood on a desk in biology and announced to the rest of the class dissecting a pig was animal cruelty.

And the swine that is cloven-footed ye shall not touch, he told the principal.

But in all fairness, the original Jesus was also something of a smart-ass, brother prophet, and he sure told the Pharisees a thing or two.

Despite this little outburst, boy-Jesus actually preferred the company of animals to people. That was the only reason he agreed to come to the youth duck hunting activity pioneered by yours truly. I'm the Young Men president, brother prophet, but I'm sure you've read all that in my file along with the other sixty-seven letters I sent. It's a rather impressive dossier, is it not? I think I got a good chance for exaltation. Boy-Jesus showed up that morning with his own decoy. Carved it last night, he said. I knew he was lying, but I swear, brother prophet, it was the most amazing decoy I'd ever seen. Straight from God's workshop. And my father was a three-time champion with one of his duck decoys on permanent exhibit at the world-famous Ward Museum. When the hunt was finished, I went to see it, wanting to hold that miracle for myself, but as God is my witness it swam off.

Later that evening, when I invited myself over to talk with him about the duck—and about shaving that nasty bird's nest off his face so he could come to church and stop being a heathen—I found him in his room with a pigeon in his lap. I'd seen it in the gutter earlier that morning. Whacked it twice with a shovel and tossed it in the garbage. And yet, brother prophet, the boy had resurrected it and mended the broken wing. It fluttered about the room. It ate out of his hand. It's a dove, boy-Jesus told me. It's a pigeon, I told him. He shook his head and smirked.

I tried changing the subject, telling him the more frequently you shave the prettier your wife will be. And where's your wife? he wanted to know. I thought I'd test him a little so I said, Well, son, she stepped out. And do you know what boy-Jesus of Albany said, brother prophet? He looked at me without blinking, a little dreamlike, and said, No. She followed the stars and fled into the wilderness these one thousand two hundred and threescore days.

I must admit, brother prophet, I felt a burning in the bosom when he said it.

Then he turned up the radio. *Public radio*, brother prophet. You like politics? I asked. They're bombing Gaza again, boy-Jesus said solemnly. And that upsets you? I folded my arms across my chest and leaned against the door. I am come to send fire on the earth, the boy-Jesus said, but what will I, if it be already kindled? I don't remember hearing that in the Gospels, I told him. The boy-Jesus looked me in the eye and shrugged. I did hundreds of things you people didn't bother to write down, he said. Sometimes I wonder if when God made hormones, he ruined the plan of salvation.

It went on like this for a while. I'd see him around town scheming Lord knows what. Turns out the boy spoke a little Arabic and knew all about the Maccabean revolt and how to grow pomegranates. And yet, brother prophet, if that boy was the messiah, why wouldn't he come to worship with us? Why did he spend every Sunday talking with the hobos and girls with tattoos? I know without a shadow of a doubt we belong to God's church, the only true and living church on the face of the earth. What kind of messiah would shun his chosen people?

Ted used to say the messiah would come like a thief in the night. Ted knew all about the messiah. Ted sold lawnmowers on TV. He had lots of time to think. He knew about the apocalypse too. Ted believed in everything. An anti-nihilist. He was driving home one night when he got a flat tire. Saw a lavender cloud. Followed it past the barbed-wire fence and over the plateaus where he found machines digging a crater.

Filling it with a strange liquid. The sea of glass, Ted told a dozen of us neighbors. Prophecy fulfilled. Amen, the neighbors said. The end of days, Ted said, bowing his head. He'd come back from the sea of glass to tell us about it, to inspire us to prepare. Showed us his footprint where he'd stepped in it. With an apocalypse it is never the end of things, Ted told us, it's only the beginning.

You want to talk about an apocalypse? As luck would have it, boy-Jesus finally showed up in the chapel with a clean shave. It was testimony Sunday. You know how that goes. We heard witness from the mouth of babes. Then Josephine Sandgren shared a dream of an angel who gave her a potato wrapped in gold foil and commanded: *Eat and speak with the tongue of angels*. Ida May Bollwinkel said she got a flat tire on the highway and the three Nephites fixed it. Early Sheasby talked about how he was out hunting and saw a curelom. Others testified after Jesus was resurrected he visited the Aztecs, then visited other nations turning some skins black, others yellow, but the righteous remained white. Another preached that the sheep not of this fold are on other planets, which makes Jesus the first alien.

Later, when I asked what he thought of the service, boy-Jesus said, I should have never stayed on the cross for you people.

If it's a miracle you're looking for you should come to the Pinewood Derby, I said.

If I'm being honest, brother prophet, I just wanted to test the boy's powers of carpentry. But by now I was also a little fond of the kid. Am I ashamed to say I wanted to believe this boy was the messiah? This world is rotten to the core. Ted's going to save us, my wife used to say. Out in the desert, there in Kolob Canyon, that's where we'll be safe, she said. But there are so many Jesuses in the world it's hard to know which one to believe.

Still, over the weekend I watched the boy carve that little block of wood until it looked like something from the heaven of Dale Earnhardt, may he rest in peace. For a moment he turned me into a believer and

as we were walking to the chapel, I told him maybe next year we could build a quantum engine for the car. I told him the joke about Stephen Hawking and the Buddha having a steam in the sauna when a quark and Schrödinger's cat walked in. Trust me, brother prophet, it's a good clean joke and you'll never think of hadrons the same again. You know what he did? Nothing. Stared at me, clueless. The messiah, creator of worlds without end, and he didn't get the joke about the particles he created?

The night got worse from there. The car placed sixth. The bishop lost quite a bit of money.

It gnawed my mind all night. Who was this Jesus of Albany? Maybe his disciples had taken him off the cross and he'd been wandering ever since. Or maybe he was a little orphaned smart ass. Or maybe there's a reason my mother called me Abraham. But the heavens don't open for me like they do for you, or my neighbor Ted who sells lawnmowers on TV. Ted who told my wife about the desert and the red dragon with the seven heads. You need to see things at an angle, she tried to explain. But I could never be angled. I've always been the shortest distance between two points. Not long after she said Ted had anointed her his number four and maybe someday I too could be a number. I bet sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night with the weight of the cosmos on your conscience, brother prophet, and the only thing to bring you peace is to walk down to the vault and dance around with the Liahona and swing the sword of Laban. Damn, I wish I had a sword of Laban. All I have is the highway. Forgive me. My handwriting is a little sloppy. I'm writing this on the hood of the car outside of La Verkin. You ever driven down Route 59 at night, brother prophet? The wind makes a tunnel of your ears. Everything feels surrendered, a broken movie reel spitting out images and noise. They gave me a badge to hunt Mexicans out here, brother prophet. But now I just drive and drive. Staring at ribbons of sand wondering if she's in a bunker somewhere or if she finally got angled enough to untether from this earth. Wondering if

I'll ever see my little girl again. Sometimes I'm driving and I hear her voice. *Beep-Beep*. And it feels like Wile E. Coyote had an accident with the TNT inside my chest. You ever seen what the body does when it's too close to a bomb, brother prophet? They say it turns to pink mist, but I've never seen that. The truth is to be born is to be bombed and we're all little pieces of Christ, aren't we? That's why we came to this earth. Little by little he's stitching us to him whether we want it or not, like Frankenstein's monster.

And the boy-Jesus? Well, he had been busy trying to redeem himself from the Pinewood Derby debacle. How might a teenage recluse from Whatsitstan make amends in Zion? Glad you asked, brother prophet. He signed up to play in the annual basketball tournament. Believe it or not, boy-Jesus was a terrible athlete. Clumsy, flat-footed, and genuinely ignorant of team play. A decent dribbler, sure, but mostly he missed layups, refused to play defense, and was occasionally cited for flagrant fouls. He couldn't shoot worth a damn, but in the pregame huddle his prayer was otherworldly. So the coach, yours truly, said the hell with it: if he prays like that throughout the tournament there's no way we can lose.

He warmed the bench as the team's official pregame, halftime, and time-out prayer-giver. Before the first game, he prayed that the opposing team would have their bowels filled with compassion. They practically let us steal the ball. In the knockout round, he prayed the poor in heart would be freely given the bounties of heaven. We scored half our points on free throws. By the time the semifinal started, there were girls in the crowd holding signs that said *Dreamy for Jesus* and *Jesus is All-Star*. At halftime, boy-Jesus prayed that the Lord might take charge. And so, near the end of the game, I put him in to play defense. And like a sacrificial lamb, he stood in the paint and took a charge. But before we could celebrate, he pulled the referee aside and admitted his feet weren't planted. Call reversed. The other team made the free throws. Game over.

One newspaper said there was a riot in the gymnasium, and another said we sang hymns and ate Jell-O. They're probably both true. The Lord says do not associate with babblers of gossip, but all the rumors I've ever heard are true. It's true my wife ran off into Kolob Canyon to wait for the apocalypse. It's true the constitution hangs by a thread. It's true I saw an orphan boy sitting on the curb in the parking lot who may or may not have been given an atomic wedgie by his friends. It's true he had a welt under his eye from someone who threw a basketball in his face. It's true I heard one of the parents in the parking lot mumble *Maybe we ought to crucify him again*. It's true I told the boy this was just a little apocalypse and the one that matters was still to come. It's true he said he wanted to go home, not this shitty excuse for Zion but home-home, away from these people who held in the highest virtue an unlimited capacity for boredom, people who revel in their worship being exactly the same week after week, people convinced that repetition is the first law of heaven, people for whom faith is just theater. And it's true I said these are the last days and nobody gets the home they prayed for and then he just stared at me with big weepy roadrunner eyes, like this had all happened before and he couldn't believe it was all happening again, and he said he would walk away from this, just like he had before, so what could I do but cuff him and put him in the trunk? There's nothing sinister about it, brother prophet. Perfect love casteth out all fear. Isn't that what he said? I happen to love the apocalypse we've been promised and intend to see if fulfilled.

I've been driving the highway ever since, eluding the coyotes and roadrunners of this world. When we came to the end of the highway, we kept driving. Boy-Jesus has wandered the desert before. Sooner or later, we'll find Ted and the bunker. And then we'll go down. And wait. And wait. And maybe sometimes we'll come out to watch the sunrise, and maybe sit by the highway and watch the birds circling the sky as they swoop down on the roadkill, devouring without words, without sounds, flying away in awkward swoops along the highway which cuts

through the earth, through us, in a straight line that somehow crafts an angle. We'll dream of fire and brimstone, sure, but also of coyotes and roadrunners lying down together. But mostly we'll keep Jesus safe in the bunker, waiting, keeping him hidden until we know what to do with him.

Your Brother in the Faith,

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