

BRING ME THE HEAD OF EZRA TAFT BENSON

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Tickets to the auction are in short supply. The auctioneers selected the Beehive House on South Temple for the occasion because of its spacious accommodations. The banquet room has been prepared with rows of cushioned chairs and a lectern near the curtain that leads to the storage room. Nobody knows what exactly will be auctioned. The Mormon Church has made few official pronouncements. But the ushers offer cryptic assurances: *Everything must go*.

The bidders trickle in slowly. Some look excited. Others skittish as stray cats. The room is warm with murmurs. At times it sounds like a voice rising and softening, the way static crackles on an old radio. Collectors from around the world sit near the front, while a cohort of historians in tweed jackets and wire-rim glasses occupy the back. The Osmonds are said to have sent proxy bidders. The Romneys have declined an invitation. An elementary school class that had the good fortune of winning tickets through the lottery system is on the balcony. They look bored.

Outside, the crowd on South Temple murmurs behind the police barricade. A mix of fundamentalists, apologists, skeptics. They hold signs. They chant. Some are cosplaying Mormon history: there are several Brigham Young impersonators, bearded, each with a harem of Victorian-clad women in tow. A man carries a satchel of prosthetic limbs and calls himself Ammon. Older men in blackface profess to be Lamanites. Applause. Jeers. The cameras are rolling. Utah has not been this relevant since—well, Utah has never been relevant.

The old man sitting next to me leans over and whispers, “Are you here for a look at the golden bible?”

After scanning the balcony and not seeing my wife among the unemployed Tabernacle Choir singers, I whisper, “I’m an agnostic observer, nothing more.”

The old man adjusts his glasses and mumbles, no doubt upset that I’ve broken the first rule of Mormonism, which is you can be a liar but never say anything false. The difference is crucial.



The first item for auction is a silver-plated sacrament tray used at the 1897 Bicentennial. It’s followed by a 1920s-era milk bottle produced by the Deseret Welfare Society. Then Michael Ballam’s hymnal, Kirtland Safety Society bank notes, and a VHS copy of *The God Makers*. Stamps. Inkwells. John Taylor’s broken pocket watch. After each sale there is a light applause.

As part of the court-mandated settlement, the Church is not required to admit to fraudulent activity, but after months of speculation it is clear that Mormonism, every scrap of it, is officially for sale. As of 10:59 a.m. tomorrow, the Church will have liquidated nearly two centuries of artifacts hidden in its vaults and raised sufficient funds to pay creditors and plaintiffs of the class-action lawsuit. As of 10:59 a.m. tomorrow, the Church will cease and desist all spiritual operations. As of 10:59 a.m. tomorrow, all priesthood blessings will be null and void, all temple garments will fail to offer protections against ballistic projectiles, and all handshakes—whether in this world or the next—will only be handshakes. This is all in the official proclamation signed by the soon-to-be former prophet.

Still, others are certain that at precisely 11:00 a.m. Mountain Standard Time tomorrow the graves will open and the morning of the first resurrection will commence. Others insist that without the Church we

will no longer enjoy the protection of the Almighty and the Russians will invade. As goes Mormonism so goes America, they say.

There are all kinds of theories as to what happened and why the Church would dismantle operations, but nobody really knows. One General Authority, who wished to remain anonymous, told the local newspaper, "We had a good run, but even Eden had to fall."



None of this would have been possible without Orel T. Talbot. Brother Talbot told his friends. About a year ago, he knocked on my door and said, "Mormons stole the dog." This was before the whistleblowers, and the raids, and the mass excommunications. Before Official Declaration 3. This was before anybody knew the auction was coming. Brother Talbot was going door-to-door telling people something funny was happening at church. Why else was the Bennions' parakeet not in its cage? And the day before that the Knudsens came home to an empty fishbowl. And now the dog. "Facts are stubborn things," Brother Talbot said, "and there are no coincidences." Do parakeets just fly away? Do goldfish commit suicide? "Is it not written," Brother Talbot said, "that when the seals are opened and Babylon rises in the desert that the crust of the earth will heave and the animals shall vanish as a sign of things to come?"

"It doesn't say any of that," neighbors sneered.

"Just wait," Brother Talbot said, stuffing hands in his pockets as he left porch after porch. "The Church is hiding something."



The auctioneer calls for the next artifact. It is Brigham Young's pizzle, preserved in a tincture of brandy. A few people gasp, but most remain in quiet awe. The pizzle, unremarkable in size and girth, floats gently

in the spirits. It auctions for a reasonable price to the Icelandic Phal-lological Museum.



People called Brother Talbot kooky. His parents were as fascinating as drywall. A mother who sang in the choir and canned peaches. A father who ate beef and potatoes at every meal and volunteered in the Boy Scout troop. Somehow, he turned out weird. “He talks like a grandpa,” the kids in Sunday School said. Some of those who spread rumors about Brother Talbot and his perpetual bachelorhood were annoyed he always won the chili cook-off at the annual Halloween potluck, but most were jealous of his left hand. From far away it looked like any other hand attached to the wrist of a sixth-generation Mormon of good pioneer stock. Wrinkled like wet newspaper that dried funny on the porch. But it wasn’t just any hand. That was the hand that shook hands with Ezra Taft Benson.

It happened sometime in 1988 or thereabouts. His mother had sent him to the store for a dozen eggs, and the boy found himself face-to-face with the prophet who was sitting cross-legged in the aisle in dirty overalls, opening the cartons and first shaking and then holding up to his ear each egg. The salmonella outbreak had been all over the news. Brother Talbot watched until the prophet had curated a dozen eggs to his liking.

“The Lord did not invent salmonella,” the prophet said, struggling to his knees, “and neither did the devil. Do you know what that means?” The boy stood there petrified with fear. “It’s a communist plot,” the prophet whispered. Then he stretched out his hand, which Brother Talbot took and helped him to his feet.

He tried to leave but the prophet pulled him closer. His face had a weird sheen to it, like a stone in a riverbed, and his breath smelled of old cheese. He placed one hand on young Brother Talbot’s head and with his other arm raised to the square pronounced a blessing: *The Lord knows*

the tears upon thy pillow, but remember, my son, that the devil rides upon the waters so if thou remainest clean thy skin will turn white and delightful and the avenging Angel shall pass over thee. For inasmuch as thou hast entertained angels unawares, thou shalt be clay in the potter's hand to bring to pass a strange and secret work, yea, for thy lips shall be a murmur but thy hand shall part the clouds of unbelief, and power will be given unto it to sift the wheat from the tares, and lo, by thy hand shall the fowls of the earth and the fishes of the sea be gathered unto Zion and then thou shalt find rest in the shadowed valley until there come one mighty and strong to breathe life into thy bones unto the confounding of thine enemies.

At which point the prophet ceased the impromptu blessing, chuckled a little, dusted his overalls, and shook the boy's hand vigorously. It would be more than fifty years after that fluke encounter in a grocery aisle before Brother Talbot washed it.



Robes from the tabernacle choir auction for pennies. Bruce R. McConkie's Ouija board commands a slightly more respectable price. The elderly gentleman behind me has the winning bid on a handwritten letter from Spencer W. Kimball to George Lucas permitting the prophet's likeness serve as a model for Yoda. I mumble congratulations.

For the next several hours bidding remains tepid. It's mostly Level 2 vault artifacts. Nobody seems interested. Beneath this hesitancy I notice that belief itself is on sale. The bidders are cautious, afraid to purchase their intimate desires, afraid to own a piece of history, afraid this might expose their longings. As Brother Talbot often told me, among the Mormons there is a Goldilocks problem: it's easy believing too much and sad believing too little, but believing just enough, belief amplified with reason—that's unbelievable.

I try calling my wife, but she doesn't answer the phone.

I fidget in my seat. I can't shake the feeling that this outrageous auction is merely a brilliant marketing campaign. For months now, the

fundamentalists have been certain the grand confession in Declaration 3 is all a ruse to separate the wheat from the tares. They are convinced this will be their Captain Moroni moment, content to sit back and wait in their smug self-righteousness. But it is not a ploy. There will be no rapture or grand reveal of a man behind the curtain. The evidence is indisputable. The Mormon faith has burnt up as fast as you can set fire to a scarecrow. All these years on the yellow brick road only to discover there is no emerald city named Kolob. Or to put it in terms the apologists can understand: It was as if we had completed the Tower of Babel only to peer through the clouds and find there was only sky. There were no heavens to reach into, no angels singing, no Gods to pull down and kill to appease our existential dread.



The Sunday after the grocery store hand-shaking incident, everybody knew. People kept turning around in their pews to catch a glimpse of Brother Talbot. In Sunday School, they wanted to touch his fingers, feel the grooves in his palm. They wanted to know if it had turned colors, what it smelled like, if it tingled, if he could reach beyond this world into the next, and whether he'd tried to do any miracles.

"Miracles?" he wondered with boyish naiveté.

"Like walking on water, dummy."

"I know how to swim," Brother Talbot said.

"My hamster died."

"Yeah, why don't you resurrect McKay's hamster?" someone said.

"Do hamsters get resurrected?" Brother Talbot asked.

"Don't be a pussy."

"Yeah, do it," someone said, "say the words."

"Prophets just have to stretch out their hands and it happens."

"No, you have to wait for it to feel weird."

"Feels the same as always," Brother Talbot said, balling his fingers into a fist.

“Don’t be like that, dummy. You basically shook hands with God.”
Brother Talbot shrugged.

It went on like this for months. He refused to let anybody touch it. Not the doctor, not the bishop, not even his parents. He wore a glove for a while but wanted to avoid the appearance of evil and being mistaken for a Michael Jackson fan. He stopped playing the piano. He stopped tying his shoes and let the laces flop around in the dirt. The baseball coach tried to recruit him to pitch, saying he probably could throw a 90-mph fastball now and it would be a sin to waste that gift. He never opened doors. He never clapped. He got a paper cut and just watched the finger bleed, relieved but slightly disappointed that he was still mortal.

Eventually, he warmed up to his newfound fame. He toured the state delivering Sunday firesides. When he raised his hand at the pulpit a hush fell over the room. His photograph was in *The Friend*. He had that church smile, almost plastic the way it bent across his face, with a hearty sitcom laugh track that checked all the boxes of being friendly, safe, normal, holy, and just a touch mysterious. My wife said her parents took her to see him speak when she was a teenager. They beam with pride whenever they tell the story of how she accidentally brushed up against Brother Talbot’s left hand when they both reached to grab bread off the sacrament tray. “And that’s why I’ve been the organist for over thirty years,” she always says with that Mormon half-smile.

Everyone said Brother Talbot was destined for spiritual greatness. He wanted to prove them right. He dipped a finger in the sacrament water, but it was less wine than a mildly chemical porta-potty water. He lay hands on an asthmatic high priest and commanded his lungs inflate, but he died three days later of a stroke. During the wildfires, the only houses that burnt down in the neighborhood belonged to less-actives who refused his prayers. One of the popular girls, Brynleigh-something-or-other, whose parents let her watch *Jem and the Holograms*, told him he could finger her.

Brother Talbot didn’t understand. “Like when the dentist rubs the fluoride on your gums?”

"No, silly," she laughed, "like rubbing the pit out of a peach, if you know what I mean."

"I don't eat fruit," Brother Talbot said.



People are growing impatient when the Level 4 vault artifacts appear. The room is once more full of murmurs. There are the Kinderhook plates and the lost 116 pages. A taxidermized white salamander is brought out in a cage, donated from the personal collection of Dallin H. Oaks. There are few bids for these well-known relics. The Church accountant tracking sales is noticeably disappointed.

"What about the golden bible?" the old man beside me inquires.

The accountant consults with the auctioneer. The two men shuffle through papers. Another well-dressed man enters from behind the curtain where all the auction items are stored. The auctioneer approaches the lectern.

"We can confirm there has never been a golden bible," he says solemnly.

The rumor spreads quickly into the street. One of the fundamentalists lights a Molotov cocktail but it is snuffed out by some ex-Mos. A group of unemployed Tabernacle Choir singers bursts into an impromptu hymn.

"Can you believe it?" the old man says incredulously, a little embarrassed or perhaps trying to convince himself it can't be true. "The spirit of God is like a fire burning."

It's like he doesn't understand that burnt children love matches.



By the time I met him, Brother Talbot's celebrity was a mixed bag. For every testimony meeting professing, *Brother Talbot cured my hemorrhoids!* there was a neighbor saying they heard from the bishop that one of the sister missionaries visiting a less-active member whose

stepdaughter broke up with her unbaptized boyfriend claimed Brother Talbot was caught kneeling beside some kid's bed giving him a blessing in the middle of the night.

He laughed when I asked him about it during my usual Wednesday adjustment at his chiropractor clinic. "Don't believe everything you hear," he said, showing me his pale, gnarled hand while rubbing my feet in clove oil.

I wanted him to touch me with that weird, decrepit hand of his, always fascinated by the possibility there really might be something divine about it, but I was too ashamed to ask.

Sometimes, after a night of too much Dr. Pepper and NyQuil, he would come over and rant. How many years had he spent aligning spines and twisting cricks from necks? How many pinched nerves had he liberated? His essential oil blend cured measles, HIV, and arthritis. And yet the Brethren ignored his requests for brunch, the bishop refused a 2 percent tithing reduction, and he was still home teaching the same jackasses with his father.

"The Jews got a reprieve from the desert after forty years," Brother Talbot said, "but here I am."

I started checking up on him with phone calls. Or a word or two through the slits in our shared backyard fence. On Saturday mornings, I accompanied him to the grocery store, where he liked to taste the free samples. His step was not as brisk, his eyes a bit more glazed than usual. He wasn't sleeping on account of the missing pets. I fixated on the gimpy hand that grabbed toothpicks full of cubed cheese, pineapple meatballs, and bread-and-butter pickles. I had never seen him touch anything with it before. After roaming up and down the aisles one Saturday, we were sitting outside the bakery with a tray of samples when a young father with three kids in tow asked if he could join us. There was no room in the food court. Brother Talbot reluctantly agreed, but almost immediately the young father motioned to his calzone wedge.

"I saw you touch that," he said, "would you mind if I taste it? I'll give you my smoked wieners."

Brother Talbot stared at the doe-eyed, unblinking children. He sighed and gave the young father a look that said, *No calzone will ever be our calzone.*

“What about a handshake?” the father asked. Brother Talbot stretched out his hand. “No,” the father said, “the other one.”

“It’s just a hand,” Brother Talbot said. He walked away.

Both the father and I stared at the half-bitten calzone oozing marinara.



The auctioneer smiles as he presents the sword of Laban along with an arrowhead once belonging to the Lamanite formerly known as Zelph. He narrates an exotic but inaccurate history of steel production in the early Americas, then describes how the arrowhead might have been used in circumcision rituals. One of the historians marches from the rear of the banquet room and hands the auctioneer a statement indicating the sword originated during the Habsburg dynasty. And the arrowhead, an independent chemical analysis reveals, is petrified cow shit.



I remember walking down the street with Brother Talbot as he put up signs on all the lampposts for the missing pets. Behind us, some of the neighbors were discreetly taking them down, but either Brother Talbot pretended he didn’t see them or was too busy deciphering the mysteries in his head.

“They’ll probably turn up sooner or later,” I told him, not knowing what else to say. I could see his face scrunching behind his glasses like a constipated caterpillar. Feeling as though I had upset him, I added, “Or maybe the animals know something we don’t. I’ve heard that right before earthquakes all the worms burrow deeper.”

“Worms have been around for millions of years,” he said, “they feel invisible things before they’re real.”

"Because they're blind and have brains as thin as a thread," I joked.

Brother Talbot sighed. "They got no faces, but I bet they're smiling down there," he said, "not knowing what a CTR ring is."

We kept walking. Sometimes he crouched on a lawn and traced fingers over animal footprints in the mud as if they were some kind of clue.

"I'm tired," he said.

"It is getting late," I said.

"No," he said, "I'm tired."

We kept circling the neighborhood.

"What could they possibly want with all these animals?" he said, putting up another flyer.

"I guess only mystery allows us to live," I shrugged, repeating something I'd read by a dead poet.

"I'll tell you a mystery," Brother Talbot said when we finally circled back to the porch. The sun was down. Our shadows stretched into other shadows. "My grandfather rode to Cottonwood Gulch with the posse that killed those Indians way back when. He'd bounce me on his knee and tell me how he ran out of bullets pinned inside a barn when the Paiutes came in and shot up the stall where he was hiding. There was blood all over his clothes and hands but not a scratch on him. They hanged six or seven of the Indians. He even pulled on their legs to make it go quicker. He used to let me smell his hands. Never washed them. Pale things that smelled like burnt pennies, like that old Indian blood."

I didn't say anything. My mouth was dry. The moon was a thin white smile in the sky. I could see my wife shuffling nervously at the window, worried I was getting strange ideas from *that strange man*. No doubt she was ruining the day she invited me to church to hear her play the organ, hoping her fingers would make me a believer.

Brother Talbot shrugged as he folded up the flyers. "The thing about mystery, kind of like water, is it's always slipping between your fingers before you get it to your lips."

He shook my off-hand in his and pulled me closer. He winked. Or maybe his eye twitched.



The auction continues. It's late. The clock is ticking. All items must be sold before the 11:00 a.m. deadline.

I'm a little confused when two high-ranking General Authorities—prophets, seers, and revelators of the former Latter-day Saint leadership—are wheeled beside the podium. Their hands are folded at the waist. They have penitent faces.

They are auctioning themselves.

The auctioneer reads a biographical description. They are men gifted in discernment with a talent for gestures of serious contemplation. They are learned in a folksy jokes. The auctioneer tries to drive up the price by proclaiming that General Authorities might be of particular value as political consultants, or perhaps as commodity speculators, or as a perfect Christmas gift for the sentimental believer.

In the end, both men are purchased by the Utah Society for the Equitable Treatment of Housewives—an offshoot group of Ordain Women—once it is confirmed that after the disassembly of the Church the men will still turn water into wine. The General Authorities are wheeled away.



"I'm just an ordinary guy," Brother Talbot told me. "I eat vegetables. I read the funny pages. I hit a hitchhiker on the highway once and just kept driving. I say my prayers." This was the night before Official Declaration 3. The next morning the bishop would read the pronouncement from the pulpit, but that night Brother Talbot confessed to me he had washed his left hand for the first time in almost fifty years.

"My sin is I got no faith but all I got is faith," he said. "It's hard to shake the feeling of a beautiful lie."

My wife took the news hard. I'd been trying to tell her all these years it was all a sham, but the heart is a mystery machine and it wants what it wants. I watched her talk to Brother Talbot in the chapel. After she left, he sat alone in the pew. He still had the same church smile as always, but his eyes were a pair of empty shot glasses. He stared at the fingers on his left hand, gnarled and stiff from years of unuse. He tried to open and close the fingers. Eventually, he quit trying.



The Beehive House is emptying out when the auctioneer announces: "Bring me the head of Ezra Taft Benson!" People trickle back inside.

A skull is brought in on a silver platter. It looks remarkably average.

Other bones of deceased apostles, supposedly, are also displayed. The few remaining bidders are allowed to inspect the bones up close but are forbidden from touching. We bend over and stare into the empty eye sockets. Someone whispers they look less like saintly relics than the bones of household pets.



The problem is reverence, I used to tell Brother Talbot. That's what kept me away. Reverence, I told him when he came over around the time the Church started bugging his house, is the drug the Mormons feed you. Get up in testimony meeting and say my wife has inappropriate dreams involving one of the Three Nephites and everyone feels the Spirit burning in their bosom. But the minute you voice something real, something too close to the heart—our leaders sure do talk like used car salesmen—well, that's when Mormons get on their high horse about reverence. Anyone who wants you to revere the absurd and call it holy has a few tricks up their sleeve.



In the final hour, the auctioneer announces that the Church has agreed to create a memories market. He smiles, as if this is the grand finale. For a price, he declares, anyone can forget Mormonism. It is the final act of restitution, the auctioneer explains—forgetting the sin occurred and stepping out the door with a clean slate. It will be an open bid. Pay what you believe your memories of Mormonism are worth. Once payment is received, a Church delegate confirms, a priesthood blessing seals the memories as lost to you forever.

A loud chorus of boos and laughter fills the Beehive House. People throw wadded-up paper and even shoes. The auctioneer hammers the gavel, but the murmuring continues. He pulls aside the curtain, hissing at the archivists. He looks back at the shouting crowd inching closer to the podium. The gavel echoes through the banquet room.

“You won’t try?” I whisper to the old man next to me. “It might work.”

He shakes his head with the look of a holy fool, a little like Cinderella right before the clock strikes midnight hoping she can keep dancing in glass slippers.

There’s no forgetting, he says. It’s too intoxicating, all this belief. This is the one thing the Church can never auction. Yes, he says, the temples will be razed. The bishop’s storehouses will close and scripture will be used as toilet paper, but the memories will live on. The hymns, the prophecies, the rumors, the dread, the prayers, the shame, the testimonies, the spite, the blessings, the love-bombing—it will all live on and on like ivy tangling around an abandoned house.



It’s a few months later when I find the bones in a thrift shop downtown. I’ve been looking diligently. The newspapers didn’t even print his obituary. They ran a thousand articles on his hand but couldn’t speak kindly of the Lord’s anointed just this once. Nothing about how sudden or suspicious or just plain sad his disappearance was. Once the auction

was over, they tossed his bones in the dumpster and changed the channel to other fires burning brighter across the world.

But not me. I know the signs of the times.

The phalanges are nicely bleached and it's obvious all the gnarled fragments are genuine and this isn't some Frankenstein thing piecemealed together from a Salt Lake cemetery or a Hollywood prop. I'm ashamed to say I did doubt, briefly, whether these were the bones of dogs and cats and parakeets or holy men. But I knew they had to be something. Not just a jumble of atoms calcified by luck and time, but something real and inexplicable.

Hurrying home, I lock the door behind me and put the hand with the other artifacts in the basement: the glasses, the toothbrush, the cuff links, even a half-eaten piece of toast with Brother Talbot's bite marks along the edge, all of the knickknacks arranged into a little shrine. I set aside the typewriter with the latest draft of Brother Talbot's biography and light another candle. I check the voicemail, but there's nothing from my wife. The sheets on her side of the bed are unwrinkled and tucked neatly under the mattress. With my eyes closed, I can almost smell her perfume.

I hold the hand close to my lips—his off-hand in mine—and, breathing gently, it's almost like I can feel it pulling me toward the other side. There's a murmur over there. It's almost imperceptible, like a ghost tap dancing in red-hot shoes on my heart. Far away but close. I try to sync my breaths to the murmur that tightens around me like a bird singing about its cage as I bow my head reverently here—here am I.

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