Sun, Moon, and Star

Christopher Kimball Bigelow
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Sun, Moon, and Star

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Christopher K. Bigelow

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Bruce Wayne Jorgensen, Committee Chair

John Serge Bennion, Committee Member

Douglas H. Thayer, Committee Member

20 March 1998

Date

Richard Y. Duerden, Graduate Coordinator


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There is one glory of the sun, and another of the moon, and another glory of
the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory.

(1 Corinthians 15:41–42)
PART ONE
CHAPTER ONE

Smoot was working in the hallway that split the missionary bungalow down the middle. He was daubing plaster into the smaller pocks in the hall’s graffiti-covered walls. The bigger pocks would need Babakian’s more expert touch so the plaster wouldn’t look like it was melting. They normally would have been out knocking on doors, but the mission president had given them special permission to renovate the house—known missionwide as the Zoo—because the owner wanted to sell it.

“Mate, come look at this,” Babakian called. Smoot found him crouched in their bedroom near the foot of Smoot’s bed. He had cleared away some dirty laundry. “Have you ever noticed this wire before?” he asked, pointing at a cord tacked along the baseboard.

“No,” Smoot said. “Where does it go?”

“I’m more interested in where it comes from."

Babakian pulled Smoot’s bed away from the wall, exposing more wire. “Move that end,” he ordered. Smoot bumped into the nightstand, knocking books and pamphlets from that morning’s study to the floor.

Dropping on all fours, Babakian followed the wire. It disappeared into a hole drilled two feet below where Smoot rested his head at night.

“I think we’ve had a phone freak living in here,” Babakian said. He crawled along the wire in the other direction, moving fast as if chasing a snake. He plunged after it into the closet.

“Mate,” he shouted, his voice muffled by suits and white shirts. “Go
unplug the phone and bring it here.”

When Smoot returned with the phone, he saw a pile of his silk ties on the floor. Babakian must have bumped the hanger he kept them draped over.

“We’ve got a dial tone, mate!” Babakian yelled a moment later.

“So what,” Smoot said. “We don’t want to hear when the zone leaders call early.”

“You don’t understand. This is probably an illegal trunk line. Some poor wanker rigged himself up to talk to his girlfriend at home. Give me an overseas number.”

Thinking it was probably the middle of the night in Utah, Smoot started to say his parents’ telephone number in West Jordan. But then he stopped. Babakian’s finger remained poised.

“Scratch that,” Smoot said. Then he gave another number, a Salt Lake number.

“Duh, we need the overseas code,” Babakian said, hanging up again.

Smoot ran to get the Melbourne phone directory. In a few moments Babakian handed him the phone. It sounded strange to hear America’s one long ring instead of Australia’s two short rings. He felt his scalp prickle.

“Is Samantha there?” he asked after an unfamiliar voice said “Third-and-P,” the greeting Samantha insisted on. The receiver clunked down. Smoot pictured the echoey, wood-floored kitchen of the house Samantha rented at the corner of Third Avenue and P Street in Salt Lake City. He’d practically lived there the summer before his mission.

“Hello?” Samantha said.
“Samantha, it’s me. Dennis.”

Babakian smiled. “Your sheila?” he asked. Smoot waved his hand in the negative, though the answer was more complicated than that.

Samantha said, “You sound like you’re on the moon.” Her voice sounded warm and throaty. He hoped she didn’t have someone in her bedroom.

“I’m in Australia.”

“Wow. Isn’t that overdoing it a bit?”

“I’m on a mission.”

“Wow again. So that was it. Deep down you really believed.”

“Let me talk to her,” Babakian said, grabbing the phone.

“G’day, I’m Elder Babakian,” he said. “Elder Smoot is a good bloke. You going to marry him when he gets home?”

Smoot watched as Babakian’s face went from smiling to puzzlement.

“I don’t reckon that sounds—”

Smoot wrenched the phone away.

“Sorry,” he said into the receiver.

“Who was that?” Samantha asked.

“My companion.”

“Funny, Mormon missionaries knocked on our door just last Saturday. First time ever while I’ve been home.”

“Did you let them in?”

“Nah, they woke me up. Anyway, I got enough of that crap from my dad. So Dennis, why are you calling me?”
“I guess I wanted to let you know what was up.”

“Is this some missionary thing of repairing past hurts?”

“No, I just had an unexpected chance to make a free overseas call. At least I hope it’s free.” Smoot looked at Babakian, who gave the thumbs up.

“Did you notice I never tried to reach you at your parents’?” Samantha asked. “I don’t believe in pressuring people. I’m not a pursuer.”

“I dialled your number a few times, but I decided it might be better to leave things alone. You know, with the way things were headed.”

“Whatsoever,” Samantha said. “You sure did more than just leave things alone.”

“Well, what you did that night freaked me out.”

“I gathered that.”


“Yeah, Elsie’s here. Her boyfriend left her cold too. Our new roommate’s named Brenda. House always smells like pot now.”

“How about you. Any new boyfriends?”

“Nah. Maybe, now I know you’re in Australia on a freakin’ mission.”

“Oh, so you still—”

“Hey, it’s only been a few months. I’m not a rebounder. Elsie’s on her next one but she’s trying too hard.”

“Your voice sounds like you might be smoking again.”

“May as well with Brenda in here.”

“So you mind if I call you later? My companion wants to use the
phone.” Babakian was making hang-up motions. Smoot complied.

But what Babakian wanted was to ask questions. “Hey, I thought we were mates,” he said. “No major girlfriend’s ever come up. She sounded sexy.”

“We’re not supposed to have confession sessions,” Smoot said. But that was dumb because they’d filled dozens of door-knocking afternoons with stories of their pasts. Babakian knew about Smoot’s pot smoking during high school, and Smoot knew about Babakian’s punk rock days before he joined the Church.

“Come on, mate. What she do that freaked you out? Got you by the short and curlies one way or the other, I reckon. She shift your gears? You didn’t take a dip, I hope.”

“No,” Smoot said. He went out into the hall and stirred up his plaster. A few moments later he heard Babakian on the phone. From the tone of his voice, Smoot guessed it was one of his old punker friends.
CHAPTER TWO

For Smoot, becoming companions with Babakian was like moving to the next level in a video game. The setting was more challenging, the music was weirder, the opponent wilder and more unpredictable. Not that they were exactly opponents—Babakian had said more than once that Smoot was the best Yankee companion he’d had. But the day after they found the phone line, Babakian went on another toot.

Smoot knew it was coming when Babakian came back from the shower with his eyebrows peaked into boomerangs. That was a sign he was thinking intensely about something and becoming either dangerously righteous or dangerously rebellious. Smoot wondered which it would be today.

After personal study Babakian spent longer than usual on his knees, and Smoot could hear him muttering and gasping during his prayer. During companionship study he was more focused on the scriptures than usual and more bossy—so it was looking like a righteous day. Those were worse for Smoot than the rebellious days, which often involved some fun.

Sure enough, during breakfast Babakian announced that it had been too long since they spent a full day knocking on doors. They usually worked on the house in the morning and then did missionary work in the afternoon, and they had both frankly agreed that it was quite nice that way. But a toot could change everything.

When 9:30 arrived Babakian was kneeling over a street map of the area. “Elder Smoot,” he called. It wasn’t a good sign when he called him that
instead of mate. “Today the Lord is going to send us to someone golden. And I feel inspired that he’s going to do it through you.”

Smoot sat down Indian-style across the map from Babakian. They glared at each other for a moment. Then Elder Gibb from the other companionship patted Smoot on the shoulder as he and Elder Layton went out the door. “Have a fun day,” Gibb said, smirking.

When the door shut, Babakian caught Smoot’s hand and pulled him up into kneeling position. “Pray for the street, Elder,” he said. “It’s going to come to you, not me.”

Smoot prayed out loud that the Lord would tell them which street to start working on. Then he stared at the map with Babakian.

“Again,” Babakian said. So Smoot prayed again.

“You distracting the Spirit by thinking about that old girlfriend?” Babakian asked.

“No, it’s just that I don’t necessarily believe—”

“Didn’t sound like she was a Mormon.”

“Not baptized, but her dad’s a Tongan who joined over there and moved to Utah. But then he married a nonmember white woman.”

“I’ll tell you what. You work hard and keep up with me today, and you can call her again tonight.”

“I hate it when you start pulling rank and telling me what I can and can’t do.”

“Somebody’s got to stir us up once in a while. I’m a natural leader, you’re not. Oh, one other thing. If you talk to her, you have to teach her
something about the gospel. I don’t get the impression you were doing much of that when you were with her.”

“Give me a freaking break.”

“I’m serious. If you do it, we’ll count her on our stats. In fact, I’m counting her as an investigator starting now.”

“Oh, great. I’m breaking several mission rules and probably breaking the law by stealing phone time, and you want to count her? That sounds about as stupid as paying tithing on money you stole.”

Babakian’s eyebrow boomerangs were growing tighter and higher.

“Hey, we haven’t had a new ’gator in two weeks. It’s all one big kingdom. How do you know the Lord doesn’t intend you to get her into the Church and marry her?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve received revelation on that.”

Babakian jumped to his feet. “No, but I have that you’re supposed to discern our street this morning. So which one is it going to be?”

Smoot let his finger divebomb to a random spot far enough away that they’d have to take a tram, which would eat up some time. Babakian was dangerous to unleash on the public in a mood like this.

* * *

In the tram, Babakian placed tracts on several empty seats and bothered an old woman until she accepted a copy of the Book of Mormon, of which he had at least a dozen in his backpack instead of the usual two or three. Smoot also thought he glimpsed, unaccountably, a hammer in there. Babakian had made Smoot load his own backpack with an old filmstrip projector they
found in a closet at the Zoo. Most of the missionaries carried around videocassettes now because almost everybody in Australia had VCRs, but this was an inner-city area where fewer people had them.

As they walked to Avondale Avenue, Babakian kept ahead of Smoot by a few paces, speeding up if Smoot overtook him. By the time they rounded the corner of Avondale, his fists were clenched and he was scowling. Smoot could almost hear him thinking, *By damn, I’m going to force this stupid missionary program to yield some results.*

They quickly fell into the rhythm of tracting. Two no-answers, one peek-through-the-curtains-and-disappear, two more no-answers, a “Got-me-own-religion” slam. Babakian slapped a pamphlet on each doorstep. Usually when they tracted they would comment and tell stories and have as much fun as possible, with the occasional answered door almost an unwelcome interruption. But during a righteous toot they marched silently between doors.

One housewife did debate with them through her reinforced screen door for about ten minutes, but she wouldn’t make an appointment for when her husband was home and she wouldn’t open the door to accept a copy of the Book of Mormon. “Hate to tell you boys,” she said, “but the local op shop has plenty of your books on the shelf if I ever feel the need to read one.”

“Where is that op shop?” Smoot asked. He was part of the hip minority in the mission that rejected the usual missionary uniform of flappy, cheap, pin-striped suits and wide ties for the thin-lapeled, funky-patterned suits and narrow ties found only in opportunity shops. The mission president never
seemed to notice. Babakian wore them too, but he elbowed Smoot. The woman smiled and gave them instructions before she faded back into her house, leaving just the screen door shut though Melbourne was undergoing one of its sudden cool changes.

"Only if you personally make three good Book of Mormon placements," Babakian said. "And if it's pretty much on our way back to the tram."

Most of the houses in this part of Melbourne were small and close together with almost no front yards. Many were decorated with wrought-iron lacework along the eaves and porch posts. So when they came to a large house set back farther into the block, Babakian regarded it for a moment before marching to the front door. "Looks like it's a boarding house now," he whispered as they listened to someone fiddling with the doorknob on the other side.

A long-haired, bearded old man stood before them holding a hand of playing cards. Behind him three more men peered at the missionaries from their seats around a card table. Smoot smelled cigarette smoke and unwashed bodies.

"G'day, gentlemen," Babakian said as he stepped forward into the room. "We're servants of God here to teach you about the meaning of life."

The old man stepped back and let Babakian pass, and the seated men put down their cards and stared at Babakian as he walked around the table and stubbed out their cigarettes. Smoot couldn't believe Babakian's nerve. He watched to see if Babakian inhaled the cigarette smoke; Babakian had been a
smoker before he joined the Church and admitted he still enjoyed the fumes. But Babakian kept a disgusted look on his face. His boomerang eyebrows were peaking again.

“So what are your names?” Babakian asked after he sat down in the vacant chair. Smoot and the displaced old man looked at each other, but neither one moved.

One man stood up, fished out his half-smoked stub, said, “I reckon I’ll go pick up me cheque now,” and walked out the front door. The other two men rose, looked at each other, and started giggling. Then they left through an inner door.

Babakian sat with his arms folded, and after everyone else had left he looked over at Smoot and the old man. “Well?” he said. “Come over here and sit down.”

When they were both seated, Babakian began removing things from his backpack. He took out some pamphlets, a copy of the Book of Mormon, a filmstrip cannister, a cassette tape, and—to Smoot’s surprise—two pieces of wood and the hammer.

“So what is your name?” he asked the old man.

“Richard,” the man said hoarsely. He started picking his beard.

“Richard, do you believe in God?”

Babakian spent the next half hour teaching the man the first discussion about God, Jesus Christ, and Joseph Smith, only occasionally asking Smoot to read a scripture or show a flipchart picture. Normally they would have alternated concepts, but things were different during a toot. Richard sat
picking his beard with his tongue sticking out, sometimes letting out a soft raspberry sigh. He surprised Smoot a couple of times by answering Babakian’s questions coherently.

When it came time to introduce the Book of Mormon, Babakian pulled two nails from his shirt pocket and picked up the hammer. Putting one piece of wood on top of the other, he hammered in one nail. Richard retracted his tongue and blinked with every strike. Someone cracked open an inner door and then shut it quickly.

“This nail represents the Bible,” Babakian said, handing the wood pieces to Richard. “This bottom piece is us, and this top piece is God. But what’s wrong with having only one nail?”

“It took more than that to crucify our Lord,” said Richard, wincing as he pulled a hair from his beard.

“True, but remember this nail represents the Bible.” Babakian took back the wood and pivoted the pieces into a cross. “See, with only one nail you can twist things any way you want.” Then he pivoted the pieces into various positions, calling out the names of different religions: “Anglican, Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Catholic, Jehovah’s Witnesses . . .”

Babakian then realigned the wood pieces and hammered in another nail. “But look, with the Book of Mormon the Lord has brought his true religion back into line. Men can’t fool with that, mingling their own philosophies with the Bible and calling it religion.”

“May I keep this?” Richard asked, touching the head of each nail.

“Sure, if you take this too,” Babakian said, sliding a copy of the Book of
Mormon across the table. “And if you promise to read some passages before we come back.”

Richard picked up the book and flipped through it upside-down. Babakian turned it around for him.

“Cigarettes,” Babakian said, holding out his hand. “Your body is a temple, and those defile it.” Richard bit his tongue, then pulled the pack from his pocket and handed it over. Babakian tucked it into his suit coat pocket. Smoot remembered with irritation that they had not used the filmstrip projector he had been lugging around all morning.

After a prayer, Babakian asked if they could come back tomorrow. Richard looked at them both and didn’t answer, which Babakian took as a yes.

* * *

“Cool teaching tool,” Smoot said as they backtracked to a milk bar they had spotted earlier down another street. “But I don’t think Richard’s accountable enough to be baptized.”

“Oh, come on, Elder. He may not be on our same level, but he’s definitely accountable enough. I feel an assurance he’s the golden one the Lord had in mind for us today.”

“Spoken like a true prophet,” Smoot said. But he was relieved because the toot seemed to be ebbing.

“So do you have a picture of her?” Babakian asked as they finished wolfing down Four-and-Twenty meat pies and gulping Big M strawberry-flavored milk outside the milk bar. Smoot had just been thinking about Samantha as he chewed some gristle and stared at the colorful cigarette and
ice cream posters covering the milk bar windows.

“No,” he said, spitting a flavorless blob onto the ground.

“Ask her for one tonight,” Babakian said. “If you want, that is.”
CHAPTER THREE

“So have you ever read the Book of Mormon, Samantha?”

“What is this? You trying to convert me?”

“What have you got to lose? Your life’s going nowhere. You still working at Musicland?”

“Yeah, but they gave me a key.”

Samantha was two or three years older than Smoot, who wasn’t twenty yet. She had about a year under her belt up at the University of Utah, which it had taken her four years to do.

“Well, do you have any scriptures at your house?”

“Believe it or not, Brenda has some. Nice leather ones with her name in gold on the front.”

“You can read those, then.”

“She uses the paper to roll joints. She’s almost through the whole Old Testament.”

“You’ve got to be joking. I hope the ink gives her cancer.”

“That’s what I said, not that I hope but that it probably would.”

“Well, so you could still read the Book of Mormon.”

“If I were to look into Mormonism, first thing I would do is take a class somewhere. Not read some boring old scriptures all by myself.”

“Look in the paper. They sometimes advertise institute classes for beginners.”

“What’s in this for you?”
“Hey, I’m a missionary. I want to see people join the Church. And who’s to say things couldn’t work out between us if we had some religious values in common.”

“Yeah, right, like I’m going to wait two years for you to come home.”

“It’s closer to a year and a half now.”

Samantha just snorted. As his first girlfriend, she had been the one who made him realize that some of Mormonism had sunk into his head after all. He had spent his high school years smoking dope, playing Dungeons and Dragons, and listening to Rush. He attended church to appease his parents, but he passed the time thinking up D&amp;D adventures, and sometimes he even left Sunday School to get high with Walter Crawley. Then after graduation he’d met Samantha at a night club called the Pink Submarine, and pretty soon they were doing everything but intercourse—and they only avoided that because Smoot couldn’t quite overcome his upbringing that sex outside of marriage was next to murder in seriousness.

“Do you reckon she’s going to read the Book of Mormon?” Babakian asked after the phone call ended. His eyebrows were level by now.

“Doesn’t look like it yet,” Smoot said. “But she encouraged me to call back again.”

“What does she look like?”

“Oh, you know those half-breed women, best of both worlds. She’s not too big like a Tongan woman, but she has nice skin tone and great features. Great hips and boobs. Long, straight, black hair. Only thing that bugged me was she wore fake-looking colored contact lenses. The green just didn’t go
with the rest of her. Plus they didn’t fit right, and sometimes you could see a
little bit of brown.”

“She smart, or stupid?”

“Pretty smart, I’d say. She’s witty, and she reads a lot for entertainment.
We took an astronomy class together at the U, and she got a better grade than
I did. It was only a C, though. I was still toking a little at the time.”

“I’m going to help you convert her,” Babakian said. “You watch, maybe
she’ll become your wife. It’s my turn to ring her next.”

* * *

A few mornings later they finished sanding the walls of the Zoo’s main
hall for painting. At lunch Elder Gibb took several photos of the missionary
graffiti. “It’s fifteen years of history, dudes,” he said. Smoot had found the
names, home towns, mottos, emblems, and mission dates of two people he
knew. One of them who finished his mission in 1987 had written, “Procreate
in ’88.” No missionary with any hipness missed visiting the Zoo sometime
during his mission to make his mark, and most of them went home with
brown or red kangaroo skins covered with signatures and doodles on their
leathery, furless backsides.

For their third visit to Richard, Babakian packed some hair clippers he
had purchased at the op shop near Richard’s house. He had relented and let
Smoot go suit shopping that first day even though Smoot had not been
instrumental in placing any copies of the Book of Mormon during the rest of
the afternoon’s tracting. Smoot had found one good suit that fit, but he didn’t
buy it because one of the pants pockets had been stained yellow by some

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dribbling old man.

“What are the clippers for?” he asked. He had assumed Babakian was going to get one of his flatmates to try cutting his hair. He was always trying to save money because the church back home in Perth was supporting him. His parents wouldn’t have anything to do with paying for his mission or even writing letters to him. They were immigrants from Albania or Algeria or Armenia—Smoot could never remember which.

“The Lord has given us a lump of clay named Richard,” Babakian said. Smoot thought, *So there are some traces of the toot left over after all.* “Today we’re going to clean him up and help him look more like a Latter-day Saint.”

When they arrived at Richard’s, Babakian asked if they could meet somewhere more private. Richard took them up some stairs to his room. One of the men from the first day whooped when they passed him and some mates in the hall. “Still letting the Bible bashers get you, huh, Richard?” he called.

Richard’s room was small and sparse. The open closet contained only five or six shirts and pants on hangers. On the dresser top were an eyeglass case, a pack of cards with a rubber band around them, and some opened and unopened cans of soda. On the nightstand was a dust-filmed glass of water, a tube of ointment, two prescription bottles, a full ashtray, the nailed block of wood from Babakian’s demonstration, and the copy of the Book of Mormon with no bend in its spine. The floor was covered with bits of debris—sunflower seed shells, lint, food crumbs, paper scraps, toenail clippings. A bed and chair completed the furnishings, and drifts of dust and
lint were visible in the corners. Smoot could see no photos or art, no signs of music, no other books, no newspapers or magazines.

The first thing Babakian did was empty the ashtray into a trash can out in the hall. “You won’t be needing that anymore,” he said. “Don’t even let your friends smoke in here.”

Then Babakian pulled the chair into the center of the room and sat Richard down. At first Smoot thought they were going to give Richard a priesthood blessing, but then he remembered the clippers. Babakian grabbed a towel hanging from the closet doorknob and draped it around Richard’s shoulders.

Soon long strands of greasy grey hair were falling to the floor. Richard stopped blowing his quiet raspberries when hair stuck to his tongue, but other than that he showed no signs of caring about the haircut. Babakian was scowling at Richard’s head from under boomerang brows. The beard came off, and Richard ended up with a choppy crewcut.

“You’ll be in the priesthood before you know it,” Babakian said as he pulled his own electric razor from his backpack. He turned on the razor and put it into Richard’s hand, and Richard applied the razor to his cheek but didn’t move it around until Babakian nudged him.

“Here’s the plan,” Babakian said as Richard ran his hands over his face and head and blew concerned raspberries. “First of all, we’re bringing a vacuum next time. We’ll teach you the third and fourth discussions today and the fifth and sixth on Friday. We’ll come pick you up for church at ten o’clock on Sunday morning—please be showered. That afternoon we’ll hold a
baptismal service for you. You reckon that sounds all right?”

“Already been baptized,” Richard said.

“I’m talking about being baptized by the proper authority into the only true and living church on the face of the earth.”

Richard didn’t say anything.

“It’s settled, then. Let’s have a prayer, then we’ll tell you more about the restoration of the gospel in these latter days.”

After they finished with Richard—he had fallen asleep while Smoot read him a chapter from Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon—Babakian wanted to return to the op shop. At first Smoot thought he was searching for a suit for himself, but then he purchased the same suit Smoot had earlier rejected, which would have been way too short in the legs and sleeves for Babakian. “Think this will fit Richard?” he asked.

When they got outside, Smoot said, “Dude, I think what we’re doing is just as bad as the hard up missionaries who baptize the Asians.” The local membership list was full of unknown Asian names from the government-housing highrises close to downtown, which had been taken over by refugees from southeast Asia. “Richard obviously isn’t fully accountable.”

Babakian whirled around and yelled, “It’s not my fault if Richard’s the only kind of person this idiotic missionary system works with.”

Smoot looked up into the sky as if for lightning bolts.

“Mate, it’s like they set us up to fail,” Babakian said. “They put up a hundred hoops for us to jump through, and if we don’t make every one we aren’t worthy to be led by the Spirit. And then they give us the blandest, most
boring costumes and scripts they can think of. I’m really getting sick of it.”

“Well, a mission is all about submitting and being obedient.”

“That’s bull. I think the Lord is heaps more intelligent and creative than this church looks like. This is just lowest-common-denominator crap.” Babakian plucked the little white handbook of missionary rules from his shirt pocket and tossed it into the bushes. Some Article of Faith cards imprinted with his home address scattered in the dirt below.

“Hey, let’s just move ahead with Richard. I don’t think he’s ever going to be anything but a lump of clay, though. And we’ve still got to borrow a trailer and haul all that rubbish to the tip.” The backyard of the Zoo was full of broken bicycles, old mattresses, worn-out furniture, suitcases with split seams, and other junk.

“To hell with my budget,” Babakian said. “Let’s go have Chinese.”
“She wants to know why you went back to the Church,” Babakian said. He was sprawled out on his bed talking to Samantha. Smoot was looking through a lingerie ad that had come in the mail.

“Tell her it’s just a gut feeling with me,” he said. “I’m not sure I’m too thrilled about it, but the alternatives make me queasy—literally.”

He still sometimes wondered why he hadn’t taken the chance to lose his virginity. “Why don’t you tell her how you joined the Church,” he said a few moments later.

“Oh no, I don’t think she’s ready for that yet,” Babakian said into the phone, guaranteeing that Samantha would draw it out of him, which she did after a brief exchange.

“I’m a bit like Joseph Smith,” Babakian said.

Oh brother, thought Smoot.

“My first spiritual encounter was with the dark side. Hold on, Samantha, let me start at the beginning. I’m an electrician by trade, and I worked on a job with a Mormon bishop. I had a mohawk and tattoos and pierced nipples. I was a bit of an anarchist. I believed that the forces of destruction were just as valid as the forces of creation—and a lot more interesting. Anyway, this bishop drew me into questioning my path in life. The way he did it was to make me feel I was closed-minded if I didn’t explore everything that came my way, including Mormonism. I tried to turn it on him and ask if he’d explored anarchy, but he wiggled out of it by saying he’d
already accepted Mormonism and therefore saw anarchy through the eyes of a Mormon as something to be opposed.”

Samantha’s voice came squawking through the phone. “Well,” Babakian said, “he said it in a way that convinced me. I hadn’t fully accepted anarchy, so I couldn’t turn the argument around the same way. So I agreed to meet the missionaries and started taking the discussions over at this bishop’s house, mainly because I liked the bloke—not that I was at all intrigued by his lifestyle or religion. I thought he was quite vanilla, actually, but he had a good sense of humor and knew how to make me think. He was hitting me at a time when I was sort of questioning anyway how committed I wanted to be to my current pathway. I was in a punk band that was gaining a following throughout Perth, and I was being invited to live in an anarchist squat, and I’d snorted heroin and was considering shooting up. So anyway, I did a bit of what the missionaries asked as far as reading scriptures and trying to pray, but I was more focused on trying to figure out if the other direction was the way I wanted to go. One night I was writing about all this in my journal—I didn’t realize at the time what a Mormon thing that is to do—and some kind of demon attacked me.”

Samantha’s voice squawked again. “No,” Babakian continued, “I didn’t see anything. But I’m telling you, it was a real force. It freaked me out. I stayed up the rest of the night hugging my dog, who was pretty jittery too. They can sense the unseen world. And in the morning my mother said she’d been terrified all night because she felt evil in the house. Anyway, at first I felt pretty intimidated and thought maybe I would just go with the flow to avoid
any further spiritual attacks, but I talked it out with the bishop and the missionaries and they gave me spiritual advice that worked, so here I am.”

Babakian listened to Samantha, then continued. “Oh, you know. Prayer, reading scriptures, receiving priesthood blessings, fasting, avoiding bad influences. I dropped my band flat, which was the hardest thing by far, way harder than cigarettes. The most basic reason I joined the Church is because I figured if an evil force wanted to stop me, it must mean the Church is good. But I’m not sure I’ve cut through all the bull yet. The momentum has carried me this far into a mission, but I’m beginning to wonder if the Church has got its systems worked out a little too well.”

Babakian paused for several moments while Samantha spoke. Then he said, “Well, I do think the Church understands the purpose of life and the basic teachings will help us get there—but I think there’s a lot more to life than the Church. They say we should be in the world but not of it, but I think we take that too far. I’m more a thirteenth Article of Faith man.”

Samantha said something, and Babakian quoted: “‘If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.’ Anyway, my favorite Mormon scripture pretty much sums it up: ‘As man is, God once was, and as God is, man may become.’”

“That’s not a scrip—” Smoot started to say.

“Shhh,” Babakian said with his hand over the mouthpiece. “A prophet of God said it, so it’s scripture.”

After a while Babakian and Samantha started talking about Polynesians. Babakian said he knew quite a few in the Church in Perth, and
during his mission he had worked with a Maori companion and a Samoan companion. Smoot knew the Samoan—it was Elder Ta’ala, who was famous throughout the mission for being able to stuff a whole Big Mac into his mouth and chew it up and swallow it. It was also known missionwide that during the Ta’ala companionship Babakian had shown up at a zone meeting with a black eye, which he claimed he got playing basketball, but everyone knew Ta’ala had popped him one for some unknown offense.

“Now that’s the kind of teaching I like,” Babakian said after he hung up. Samantha had not asked to speak to Smoot, and Smoot had not asked to speak to her.

“Yeah, talking about yourself the whole time,” Smoot said.

“I’m counting that as the first three discussions on our stats,” Babakian said. “We’ve got two good investigators now, Richard and Samantha.”

“You going to bring up Samantha at correlation meeting?” Smoot asked. Correlation meeting was when they met with leaders of the local congregation to report and coordinate missionary efforts.

“Hah,” Babakian said. Then he reached under his bed and pulled out his electric guitar and small amplifier-speaker box. Not wanting to hear Babakian set more Church children’s songs to punk rhythms—that’s honestly what he was doing—Smoot left the room and wandered in the main hall, which had received its first coat of paint that morning. He wondered how much of a coat of paint his own soul had received since he came on this mission.
CHAPTER FIVE

Richard was not ready when they arrived at his boarding house at ten o’clock Sunday morning. Babakian had brought his own razor again just in case, which was indeed needed. Smoot’s stomach turned when he glimpsed Richard’s stained underpants as Babakian helped him climb into the op-shop suit, which fit him tolerably well. Babakian had brought him one of his own white shirts and a tie, and in one of the Zoo’s closets they had found an abandoned pair of the black Forward Thrusters the squarest missionaries bought at Mr. Mac in Utah. When he was dressed, Richard looked like a Rip Van Winkle missionary.

Sitting next to Richard in priesthood meeting, Smoot was aware of Richard’s boarding-house smells of cigarettes and body odor. Several members gave skeptical glances at the trio of Smoot, Babakian, and Richard—and Smoot didn’t blame them, with Richard shuffling along blowing air around the obscene blob of his purplish-pink tongue. A few members greeted Richard, but Smoot could see in their eyes they were acting out of duty. Richard’s clammy, limp handshake caused more than one grimace.

During Sunday School, Babakian accompanied Richard to class while Smoot ran some errands related to that afternoon’s baptism, such as choosing a white baptismal jumper from the Relief Society closet and starting the font filling with water. Brother McIntyre, the ward mission leader, stood with Smoot for a few minutes watching the font fill. The water looked so green
Smoot wouldn’t have been surprised to see a clump of moss shoot out the spout.

“We haven’t had a convert stay longer than a fortnight for two years now,” Brother McIntyre said. “Fiona Taylor was the last one. She’s fantastic—she’s Young Women president now. Anyone can get baptized, but I reckon it’s the new members who make it to the temple who stay.”

The closest temple was in Sydney. New members could take out their temple endowments after they had been baptized a full year. Sitting through endowment sessions in the Provo temple during his three weeks at the missionary training center, Smoot had felt like he was in a religion from Star Wars. The planet-creating movie, the Hollywood portrayals of Satan and Adam and Eve, even the synthetic mesh garments he wore beneath his robes—it all seemed very science-fiction. It would be cool if it were true, and for all he knew it was. He remembered that when he was given the Aaronic Priesthood at age twelve, his dad had compared it to the Force.

“Elder Babakian has had only two baptisms on his mission,” Smoot explained to Brother McIntyre. “They were the kids of an inactive sister.”

“Could I have seen a tattoo of a skull and crossbones through his shirt when he took his suit coat off?”

“Yeah. He was a punk rocker before he joined. Those aren’t freckles on his ears—they’re old piercing holes.”

“What about you, Elder. Any baptisms?”

“One, but I’ve only been out a few months. It was in my first area, Bairnsdale in the country. We found him tracting. He had just got out of the
shower. He told us to come back later, so we did."

The main emotion Smoot had felt about Calvin Tomkins was jealousy. Watching Calvin respond to the discussions and the Book of Mormon had made Smoot wonder what he was missing. He envied Calvin’s spiritual experiences, but he couldn’t quite believe in them enough to imagine having his own.

"So is he still in the Church?" asked Brother McIntyre.

"As far as I know. It was a small branch, so they gave him a calling right away. They won’t let him slip away. He’s been the only baptism since missionaries came back to Bairnsdale about a year ago."

The branch had been a strange experience for Smoot after growing up in big Utah wards. They met in a rented house and used a wet bar for the sacrament table. There was no nursery, and all the priesthood holders met in one class instead of dividing up into quorums. The members said *damn* and *hell* but were fanatical about not drinking Coke. The missionaries were told to be careful walking under the eucalyptus trees behind the house because koala dung didn’t come out of white shirts.

"Well, we can pick up Richard Sunday mornings for a few weeks, but we can’t keep that up forever," Brother McIntyre said. "He’ll have to learn to make it here on his own. You blokes need to move on to new investigators. I can’t imagine what calling we could give him—perhaps an assistant in the library."

A few minutes after Brother McIntyre left, Babakian found Smoot still standing by the font. His eyebrows were in boomerangs because he had caught
Richard smoking in the toilet.

"He was taking a long time, so I went in after him," Babakian said. "I smelled tobacco smoke. I call his name, then I hear a phht and the toilet flushes."

"Where is he now?"

"Elder Gibb is interviewing him for baptism." Gibb was the district leader.

"Hope he doesn’t lie," said Smoot.

"I made him recommit to keeping the Word of Wisdom," Babakian said. "I reckon he understands what he’s doing."

During sacrament meeting, Smoot was surprised when Richard knew the words to "There Is a Green Hill Far Away." They had not been able to figure out what had made him such a shell of a man. One time he told them he was originally from Scotland, and another time he said he had worked as a plumber on the *Queen Mary*. At some point he had a wife and kids, but he could barely remember their names and did not apparently know their whereabouts.

Besides Elder Gibb and Elder Layton, Brother McIntyre and his family were the only ones who attended Richard’s baptismal service. Sister McIntyre gave a short talk about baptism and the Holy Ghost, and then Babakian stepped into the font with Richard, who looked like a mental patient with his choppy crewcut and white jumpsuit. Richard would not bend his knees properly, so Babakian had to dunk him three times. When he came up the third time, he blew a large plug of snot from his nose.
Smoot felt what might have been a spiritual warmth as he confirmed Richard a member of the Church and gave him the gift of the Holy Ghost, but his blessing that followed was short and generalized. At least he felt less nervous than he had baptizing Calvin.

“Satisfied?” Smoot asked Babakian on the tram after they had taken Richard home.

“There’s got to be a better way,” Babakian said. He played air guitar the rest of the way home.
PART TWO
CHAPTER SIX

Smoot was transferred soon after Richard’s baptism, and Babakian was left behind at the Zoo to finish up the remodeling work with another companion. Smoot was sent to spend the hot Australian summer in Lilydale, a comfortable, prosperous suburb east of Melbourne at the foot of fern-covered Mount Dandenong, which wasn’t much higher than the foothills in Utah. Lilydale and environs seemed a lot like the United States to Smoot, with big highways, big homes, big yards, and big shopping centers. Living close to downtown in the Zoo had been claustrophobic at times, but the newer eastern suburbs had no charm or character this far out.

Smoot’s companion in Lilydale was Elder Passey from Kansas City, Missouri. It quickly became apparent that they had similar temperaments and approaches to life—but the problem was that they were both a little too mellow and lenient. They both just naturally woke up at 8:30 every morning instead of 6:30, as prescribed in the mission handbook. For companionship study, instead of spending an hour with the tedious missionary study guide, they read aloud one chapter each morning from the Book of Mormon, alternating verses. And when they got to the roadblock in 2 Nephi where several chapters in a row quoted obscure passages from Isaiah in the Old Testament, they flipped ahead to Jacob 1 without either one having to say anything.

Passey was a master of filling time with activities other than knocking on doors, which they both agreed they despised because no one was ever
home and if they were, they were irritated to have missionaries bothering
them, which Passey and Smoot agreed they both would have been too. Smoot
told Passey how his neighborhood in Provo had a Jehovah’s Witness defense
system. If someone had a Jay-dub knock on their door, they would start
telephoning neighbors to warn them not to answer their doors. Passey said he
thought sometimes similar things happened in Australia. The nation didn’t
have whole neighborhoods filled with Mormons who were friendly with
each other, but Australians were almost that friendly.

Besides, as the Aussie summer intensified it got too hot to spend much
time outdoors fully clothed and everyone went on long holidays. Smoot was
certain that the Australian sun was hotter and brighter than in North
America; it was harder to look at, and it burned his cheeks, forearms, and
neck faster. And the Australian flies were awful. They were bigger, noisier,
and more aggressive than any flies he had ever seen, bumping ticklishly into
his brow or earlobes three or four times before he could swat one away. For
some reason they seemed to be attracted to white shirts, and dozens would
ride on the missionaries’ backs if given the chance. Now Smoot fully
understood why the Aussie bushwalkers wore those hats with the corks
dangling all around the brim, as well as the joke about a spastic swat to one’s
head being the Australian salute.

In the mornings Passey would usually say something like, “I need
more film for my camera,” and all four missionaries in the flat would climb
into the baby-blue Toyota Corolla assigned to the district so they could cover
some rural areas—but they never went out in the bush unless a remote
member invited them for tea, which was the word even Latter-day Saint Australians used for dinner. They would go to one of the big shopping centers, and the errand would take all morning as different missionaries thought of different things they needed to shop for. Once in a while one of the missionaries would attempt to say something about the Church to a friendly cashier, but Smoot wasn’t aware of anything concrete resulting from such contacts. The mission had a program in which missionaries holding clipboards stopped passersby in public places and asked them to take a survey, which amounted to a few loaded questions such as, “If you knew your family could be together after death, would you do what was needed to ensure that?” But the Lilydale missionaries never used the survey approach because once missionaries had been asked to leave a shopping center for doing that, or so Passey said.

Another thing Passey was good at was dropping by members’ homes just in time to be asked to stay for tea. Smoot rarely had to buy groceries in Lilydale because they ate out every day for lunch and were fed by members nearly every night. They had four or five core families with whom they spent the whole evening once or twice a week, and they were constantly trying to make new member contacts by approaching members at church or calling them on the phone. They had a skit they would present on the first visit encouraging the family members to refer their friends who might be open to listening to the gospel, but if they visited the family beyond the first time it was always purely social.

They also let community service suck up more than its allotted share
of time. They were supposed to work two mornings a week at a sheltered workshop for mentally disabled adults, but they usually stayed for lunch and part of the afternoon. It was strangely comforting to work on repetitive tasks such as filling baggies with rubber gaskets and stuffing envelopes, and the workshop supervisor kept the radio on a rock station that Smoot enjoyed.

Few activities made time fly by faster on his mission than those days at the sheltered workshop. But he felt a little guilty because secretly he was entertained by the quirks and foibles of the mentally disabled people, which probably wasn’t exactly the kind of charitable attitude the community service was designed to encourage.

Not that they didn’t get a little bit of productive missionary work done. One family had them teach the six discussions to their great-aunt visiting from England, who accepted it all very graciously but went back to England without having been baptized. At another member house they tore themselves away from the TV long enough each visit to help the oldest son learn the missionary discussions in preparation for his mission to the Philippines. Smoot couldn’t imagine living and working in the midst of the poverty he’d heard returned missionaries describe, although missionaries had a lot more baptisms there.

A few weeks into the companionship, Smoot calmed his slightly itchy conscience by proposing they tract one hour a day, just so they could stay in practice and feel like fair-dinkum missionaries. One older lady they met tracting invited them back for two discussions but finally admitted she just enjoyed their company, not their religious teachings—but they were welcome
for bickies and milk anytime they wanted, and they took her up on it a few
times and counted it on their stats.

So five months passed quietly and painlessly. Smoot had to admit he
wasn’t making much progress spiritually. For a few weeks he had tricked
himself into thinking that the Holy Ghost was prompting him through an
occasional L-shaped tingle on his right cheek, but then he realized the tingle
couldn’t be from the Holy Ghost because it came really strong one time when
they caught sight of a girl sunbathing in her backyard—unless it was the Holy
Ghost telling him she was to be his wife, which was highly unlikely. The
most troubling thing was that one day while sorting gaskets next to his
favorite Down Syndrome woman at the sheltered workshop, he found that
he couldn’t think of his temple name. He wasn’t sure what the name was
really for, but newly endowed members were given it their first time through
the temple and told to remember it for the rest of their life. He recalled that it
was an Old Testament-sounding name, so that afternoon he went home and
paged randomly through the Bible, but he didn’t see anything that triggered
his memory. This lapse bothered him more and more as time went on, and
he began to pray more earnestly for help to remember the name. He even
fasted once about it.

By the time Smoot’s next transfer came, he was feeling downright out
of favor with God because he and Passey had taught no discussions for seven
weeks and he still couldn’t remember his temple name. Once he had almost
talked himself into accepting that Isaac was the name, but he knew it wasn’t,
although he was ninety-nine percent certain his name began with a vowel.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Sitting in the mission president's office on Old Burke Road in North Balwyn on the day of transfers, Smoot wondered if he should ask President Badger about his trouble with his temple name. But President Badger was eager to talk about Elder Babakian.

"I'm sure you've heard about his erratic behavior," President Badger said.

Indeed Smoot had. Babakian had become the most talked-about missionary on the mission grapevine. He had not done anything bad enough to be sent home, but he was definitely acting weird. He had talked one companion into taking paid jobs at a music shop, but then a member spotted them and reported them to the mission president. He had gone running through the deserted streets of the small bush town of Horsham in the middle of the night in his garments because, as he told the rest of his flatmates when they caught up to him, he was "running from the devil," claiming he had awakened to a dark figure with red eyes standing next to his bed. Another report said he awoke one morning claiming to have been spirited away in his sleep by witches to Mount Dandenong—and what was strange was that he produced dirty feet and a sprig of fern as proof. Walking home from evening visits, he was known to urinate on the sidewalk when no one was looking. After his showers in the mornings, he walked around nude in the flat until 9:30, refusing to wear even garments. When the Horsham missionaries presented the branch sacrament meeting program

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once, Babakian volunteered to do a musical solo and played such a bizarre, discordant piece on the piano that the branch president went over and stopped him. When teaching investigators, he refused to follow the standard six discussions and instead gave rambling personal accounts mingled with obscure scriptures and deep doctrine, such as that humans were gods in embryo and that the Savior probably had wives and children during his mortal ministry. He was pushing the missionary dress code too, slicking his hair back over his ears so he wouldn’t have to cut it, wearing colored shirts and sometimes no tie, and occasionally putting a silver hoop in his left ear.

"You’re the missionary he’s spoken highest of," President Badger said. "But I’m not going to make you his companion again. I’m going to put you in the same flat with him. See what you can do to calm him down and help him follow the program. He has only a few months left, and I don’t want to send him home in this state of mind. If he doesn’t snap out of it, I’ll have to pull him into the mission home and baby-sit him myself. But I think he’s still salvageable. I don’t want to have to humiliate him. Also, Elder Smoot, I’d like you to serve as district leader in Dandenong."

Smoot felt honored to finally be brought into the president’s inner circle this way. Nearly three-fourths finished with his mission, he had not yet been made even a senior companion, let alone a trainer, district leader, or zone leader. But it was one thing to be brought into a mission president’s inner circle and quite another to be brought into Heavenly Father’s. Neither Heavenly Father nor Jesus had made themselves known to Smoot in any recognizable way even though Smoot had asked them to numerous times
with all the faith he could muster. He wasn’t seeking for a sign, but he was looking for what he thought of as some kind of special effect—a voice, a light, a dream, not anything as dramatic as a vision or an angel but something recognizable. He had come on this mission and lasted this far through it—wasn’t that way more than enough? He had given up a woman who was really quite attractive to him and who was probably more beautiful and intelligent than he would ever be able to snag again. He didn’t want to have to start brown-nosing God, but maybe that’s what it took.

Babakian met him at the train station in Dandenong. Contrary to reports, Babakian’s hair was shorter than ever, spiked with mousse and almost blue-black, as if he’d dyed it.

“You gained weight,” was the first thing Babakian said to Smoot.

“We got pretty soft out in Lilydale.”

“Well, I’m the opposite of you, mate. I’ve been biking it in the bush. Try to grab my thigh.”

“No, thanks. Where’s my companion?”

“Splitting off with mine. We’ll be doing a lot of that, if I have anything to say about it. But you’re district leader now, I reckon.”

“Yeah, whatever that means.”

Babakian guided Smoot to a taxi queue and helped him load his suitcases, and soon they were on their way to 101 Gladstone Street. Babakian sat companionably up front with the taxi driver, and Smoot sat in back staring out the window at the streets of his fourth area. Dandenong was definitely grittier and less rich than Lilydale but not as old and crowded as the inner city.
They were passing a lot of big apartment complexes, which were especially bad for tracting.

"Born-agains are big here, mate," said Babakian. There was no partition between the front and back seats as in most American cabs. "Missionaries can't walk down the street without someone yelling 'Bible-bashers' as they drive past. Sometimes people even throw rubbish."

"Sounds fun," Smoot said, noticing for the first time that Babakian had a small spike in his left ear. And his voice sounded a little husky.

"Youse Jehovah's Witnesses?" asked the taxi driver.

"Most definitely not, mate," said Babakian. "We're Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormons. Have you ever had a look at the Book of Mormon?"

"Nah, I don't read much," said the driver, and Babakian proceeded to talk him into accepting a copy. He seemed to be doing missionary work just fine—but there was an undercurrent about him that was bothering Smoot.

The Dandenong flat appeared less battered than most missionary flats, though a sour smell of bad cooking and poor housekeeping hit Smoot as soon as Babakian opened the door. "The other blokes are on a member visit and probably won't be back until late."

Smoot noticed a single unmade bed in the corner of the lounge room, near some French doors that opened onto a covered porch. "Who sleeps here?" he asked.

"I do," said Babakian. "Elder Harwood snores something fierce, so he sleeps in the back bedroom alone."
Sleeping in separate bedrooms was a big no-no. The mission rules clearly stated that missionaries weren’t to sleep in the same bed but were to sleep in the same bedroom.

As Smoot slung his suitcases onto the unoccupied bed in the front bedroom, Babakian flung himself onto Smoot’s companion’s tidy bed and clasped his hands behind his head.

“So, I’m sure you know the question I’m dying to ask,” Babakian said.

“No, what.”

“How’s your sheila? You been keeping in touch by mail?”

“Yeah. But I assumed you would call her a few more times before you left the Zoo.”

“That I did, mate. She’s pretty cluey.”

“Well, did she tell you she was going to a group called Mormons in Transition?”

“What the hell is that?”

“A support group she found in the newspaper. People trying to leave the Mormon church who get together every week. She said she’d rather come at it from behind than waltz in the front door like everybody else.”

“Well, anti-Mormon rubbish can backfire on them. I saw Godmakers after I was baptized and it increased my testimony.”

“I don’t see how it’s going to help her. She’s just going to hear a lot of bitching and moaning about insensitive bishops and unclear doctrine.”

“I pray for her every night,” Babakian said, which took Smoot off guard because he had not thought to mention Samantha in his own prayers, though
he thought of her several times a day. He had been disappointed that no letter from her was waiting for him at the mission office when he passed through that morning.

*So do you remember your temple name?* Smoot wanted to ask next, but instead he said, “Tell me about my companion. What’s his name again?”

“Don’t get me started, mate. I can’t stand Dunlap. Look at this stupid thing.” Babakian sat up and threw Dunlap’s pillow to Smoot. A pixilated photo of a big-nosed girl with lots of curly hair was imprinted onto the pillowcase, with a dialogue bubble from her mouth saying, “I’m waiting for my missionary.”

Babakian was rummaging on the nightstand. “And look at this,” he said, throwing Smoot a pad of letter-writing paper with a corny missionary cartoon on the corner of each page and a sheet of stickers to put on envelopes with slogans such as *I love Australia, Repent and be baptized*, and *Please send cookies*.

“Dude must have raided the Missionary Emporium,” Smoot said. The Missionary Emporium was a chain of shops in Utah malls that sold missionary-related kitsch. He suddenly realized what was bothering him about Babakian—he could see that Babakian was wearing a colored T-shirt beneath his white shirt. That didn’t necessarily mean he didn’t have on his white temple garments underneath the T-shirt, but the weather was still warm, so why would he need an extra undershirt?

Babakian looked abruptly down at his chest and then walked out toward the kitchen.
“You want some yellow death?” he called—mission slang for macaroni and cheese.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Elder Dunlap was an overweight guy with too much enthusiasm of mouth and too little of body. He and Babakian’s companion, Elder Harwood, burst into the flat at about 10:00 that night, sending Babakian diving for the volume on his personal stereo, upon which had been playing some music by a punk band from Los Angeles called X. From what Smoot could tell so far, Babakian disrespected Dunlap but didn’t want to set off Dunlap’s alarms. Dunlap was the kind of guy who would tell the zone leaders and mission president anything that was amiss. “He talks the talk,” Babakian had said, “but he doesn’t really walk the walk—he’s too fat and lazy.”

“Oh, welcome, Elder Smoot,” Dunlap said when Smoot emerged from the bedroom, where he was almost finished unpacking. Dunlap rushed down the hallway and gave Smoot a crushing bearhug, then pushed him back down the hall into their bedroom and shut the door.

“I want to start out our companionship on the right foot,” he said, kneeling at the side of his bed and straightening his girlfriend-pillow. “There are some weird vibes in this flat”—he rolled his eyes back toward the lounge room—“and I don’t want them to get to you and me. You’re district leader, so who do you want to pray?”

Smoot blinked and fell to his knees, already feeling quite a bit of distaste for Dunlap. He had a pock-marked face; short, greasy-looking, dirty-blond hair; and unusually wide-open blue eyes that reminded Smoot of a Dr. Seuss drawing.

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"I guess you, because it was your idea," Smoot said, dreading the thought of spending the next several months with this person. He wore Polo cologne, which Smoot had heard other missionaries referring to as horsey sweat.

"Please bless us to work hard and obey the rules and withstand the temptations of the adversary and those influenced by him," Dunlap said during his prayer, which he spoke in an excessively humble, spiritual tone that made the hair on Smoot’s neck bristle. "Please help us find some good ‘gators. Please help the born-agains to act like Christians and leave us alone."

"We don’t have any investigators?" Smoot asked, enjoying the abashed expression that passed over Dunlap’s doughy features as he strained to undo his shoes and socks.

"This is a tough area, Elder," Dunlap said, his eyes solemnly round. "There’s a born-again group meeting in every other empty warehouse, and the Jay-Dubs have two Kingdom Halls within our district."

Dunlap turned out the lights promptly at 10:30 but spent nearly half an hour talking on the phone in his bed with one of his friends from the missionary training center who was working in the next district over. Smoot overhead him say something about meeting for lunch the next day at a restaurant on the border between their two districts.

"You awake?" he asked Smoot after he hung up the phone. "I have earplugs you can borrow next time if you need ‘em. And you might with Harwood down the hall—sometimes I can hear him snoring through two doors."
After another few minutes, Dunlap said, “Well, Elder, I think tonight is the night for me. I haven’t had a good dream in over a month.” Then he let out a cartoonish laugh that ended in a snort.

Smoot rolled over and faced the wall.

The next morning, Dunlap’s alarm went off at 6:30. Dunlap groaned, sat up with his garment top askew on his shoulders, heaved himself out of bed to go empty his bladder, and then crawled back in and opened the scriptures onto his belly. He was asleep again just moments later.

Smoot lay motionlessly in bed, unable to fall back asleep but unable to motivate himself to get out of bed. Closer to 7:00 he heard the other missionaries stirring—Babakian had always been a fairly energetic morning person. Smoot saw him enter the bathroom wearing earphones and a robe. He had never worn a robe at the Zoo, so again Smoot wondered if Babakian was still wearing his temple garments.

He thought he heard the front door slam before 8:00, and sure enough when Dunlap got up a few minutes after 8:00 the other two were gone.

“Where would they be going this early?” Smoot asked Dunlap, who was inspecting his underwear with a frustrated expression.

“Oh, I don’t know. They do that almost every day. They won’t tell me anything except they’re working on a special project related to missionary work.”

Dunlap made a huge breakfast of four eggs each, a whole pound of bacon split between the two of them, and potatoes cooked in the grease. When Smoot got out of the shower, Dunlap was polishing Smoot’s shoes in
the bedroom.

“What the hell are you doing?” Smoot asked.

“Haven’t you ever heard of serving your companion?” Dunlap said with an ingratiating smile. His fat hands were surprisingly deft with the shoes. Smoot couldn’t bring himself to tell Dunlap to leave his stuff alone.

They left the flat at about 10:30. “You probably need some groceries and stuff,” Dunlap said. “Let’s go to the Dandenong market.”

The market was a large enclosed area with booths selling everything from fruits and vegetables to leather coats and video games. Smoot noticed a lot of antagonistic stares at his missionary badge and then at his face, and often people steered clear of the missionaries. He heard some variation of “Bible bashers!” several times, and once someone hit him on the back with a wadded-up food wrapper.

They passed a booth for a born-again congregation called the Potter’s Hut. A woman called them over, but Dunlap muttered not to go because she just wanted to bash. “Missionaries tried running a booth here,” he said after they were safely past the born-again booth. “But it was a disaster. People passing by would throw trash into the booth all day long, and some born-agains started passing out anti-Mormon literature nearby. Then they even started showing The Godmakers at their booth. Anyone who stopped just wanted to argue and mock. So the missionaries gave up and went back to tracting, I guess.”

“Do we do much tracting here?” Smoot asked, picking over some tomatoes.
Dunlap gave him a surprised glance as if shocked that Smoot would ask such a blunt question.

"Well, not really," Dunlap said, hefting a tomato in his pudgy hand. "You’ve been out longer than I have, so you know how it is. We try to work with members, mostly. Like this evening, I thought we’d go introduce you to the Wingates, whose daughter had a friend get baptized once, though she went inactive within a few weeks."

"What about this afternoon?"

Dunlap turned toward him again uncomfortably. "It’s your call, I guess. We do have a permagator we could visit, but they don’t let us teach them anymore. And they’ll insist on calling you by your first name. What is it, by the way?"

"Dennis."

"Mine’s Jonathan, but people’ve always called me Waldo."

When Smoot said he’d bought everything he needed, Dunlap said it was time to go back to the flat for lunch. "I have a special treat for you," he said. "My mom sent me a jar of real American mayonnaise, Best Foods brand. I’ll make you a tuna sandwich with it. No more of that runny Australian stuff. I also have a bottle of real American ketchup. It will be hard to go back to that sour Australian stuff."

"So I take it you don’t like Vegemite."

"Oh, I don’t know. A member showed me one way I actually quite liked. She put it on an English muffin with avocado and cream cheese. It was pretty tasty. Hey, I might need to lie down for awhile. I’ve got a bit of a
headache.”

The next morning Dunlap was sick, so Smoot went out with Harwood because Babakian offered to stay home and clean the house.

“He deserves the break,” Harwood said after he and Smoot left the flat. “We’ve been putting in tons of effort lately. We have about a half a dozen good investigators.”

“How did you get them?” Smoot asked.

“I’m under oath not to say until a few more details are worked out. Babakian is freakin’ brilliant. I think he’s going to revolutionize missionary work, reach people missionaries have never even come close to using the old ways. The Lord didn’t give him so much talent for nothin’.”

“You haven’t formed a secret combination, have you?” Smoot asked. He had recently read the parts in the Book of Mormon about the Gadianton Robbers and their secret oaths and covenants. Harwood had an antsy, condescending air that bothered him.

“Very funny,” Harwood said. “Elder Babakian is really onto something, and I’m doing everything I can to help him.”

They both slowed down as they reached the milk bar at the corner. Smoot said, “Where are we going, anyway?”

“I thought you knew,” said Harwood.

“Well, where have you been tracting lately?”

“Tracting? Babakian and I haven’t tracted once since we got here. And I don’t think we ever will. I’m not a freakin’ door-to-door salesman. But I’ll go knock on a few doors if that’s how you want to waste—oh, I mean use the
time."

"I'm not a big fan of tracting either, especially with all these apartments around here. Could we go visit any of those investigators you've got?"

"No, definitely not," said Harwood. "Babakian's got things totally under control with them. But I do have another idea I haven't tried in a while. My trainer taught it to me."

"What?"

"We buy a train ticket and ride the train all morning to downtown Melbourne and back. It's air-conditioned, and sometimes people will talk to you."

"What if we get caught out of area?" The mission had strict rules about leaving one's assigned area, and downtown Melbourne was especially off limits.

"We won't even get off the train. There's a lot of cool scenery between here and there. Some of the coolest graffiti I've ever seen."

They began walking in the direction of the train station. As they passed through Dandenong's small downtown area, which had a handful of mid-level skyscrapers, Harwood pointed to a nightclub called Impulse with shiny, reflective metal walls.

"Wait right here while I pop inside for a second," Harwood said.

"What the hell for?" Smoot said.

"One of our investigators may be in there, but I don't want her to see you because she'll get confused."

Smoot stood on the corner, watching with some paranoia for passing
members who might report a lone missionary to the mission president. You weren't ever supposed to be out of sight of your companion except in the bathroom. You couldn't even go down a different aisle at the grocery store—Smoot's trainer had lashed out at him for that in Bairnsdale.

Harwood came jogging back a few moments later. "She wasn't there," he said.

On the train, Smoot probed for more information about Babakian. "He seems more calm than I expected. I've been hearing a lot of weird rumors about him."

"Well, since he got with me and started this project, he's had something worthwhile to sink his teeth into. He's one of those restless geniuses, I think. The standard missionary program drives him crazy."

Smoot decided to risk it. "I thought I noticed a dark T-shirt under his white shirt. What's up with that?"

Harwood appraised him for a moment. "With this idea we're working on, sometimes we need to be in casual clothes. We're doing some lifting and cleaning and stuff. So he just puts on his missionary shirt over his T-shirt sometimes when we're through."

"Is it community service or something? Dunlap and I could use a service project."

"Well, maybe the time will come for that, but it's up to Babakian. He has to let this unfold in just the right way."

"I hope you guys aren't breaking mission rules in any big way."

"Not really. But we're waiting until we have some results to show
President Badger before we start asking permission to do anything out of the ordinary."

"Do the zone leaders know?"

"No, and we'd like to keep it that way for now, if you don't mind. The main thing you can do to help us is keep your fat companion off our backs. He's just a lazy bum himself, but he tends to be a tattletale. He's the main reason we're being so careful, not you."

Far from looking for opportunities to speak to people on the train, upon which ridership was quite light anyway this time of day, Smoot and Harwood actually moved someplace more private when an Italian widow dressed in black sat too near them.

Harwood sat back and stared out the train's window for a while with an amused smile. Then he leaned forward again and said, "Smoot, if I show you something, do you swear on your mother's grave that you will keep it to yourself?"

"You mean right now?"

"Yeah." Harwood reached down and pulled up his left pant cuff and then pulled down his sock. Smoot saw a tattoo of the angel Moroni blowing his trumpet on Harwood's inner calf.

"Wow, is that real?" he asked, running his finger over it. The tattoo still looked a little red around the edges and felt scaly to the touch.

"Damn straight it's real. Babakian has one on his chest. The guy got the tip of the trumpet a bit high, so you can sometimes see a bit of it even when he's got a tie on."
“How much does something like that cost?” Smoot asked, thinking it was quite cool.

“Well, it was custom, so it was expensive. Mine was about a hundred bucks, and Babakian’s was probably double that.”

“I wonder what would happen if President Badger found out.”

“I don’t know, but I’d rather ask for forgiveness than permission.”

“No way would you’ve ever got permission. I don’t think you’re supposed to get tattoos once you’ve been endowed.”

“Well, that’s why I’m glad mine isn’t in a noticeable place. Babakian really went out on a limb with his. He better not try to do washings and anointings in the temple anymore.”

It didn’t surprise Smoot when Harwood wanted to go aboveground in downtown Melbourne just for a minute, so he could stop by a newsagent that sold current editions of USA Today and check sports scores. “I’ll pay your fare to get back on, dude,” he said. “Please? I bet you’ve never seen such long escalators. And there’s this Mexican restaurant you’d love. It’s way overpriced, but it’s the only place in Melbourne you can get anything halfway authentic. Aren’t you sick of Asian stuff? And there’s a place that sells cheap ‘roo skins and cool-lookin’ boomerangs made by real Aborigines.”

On the way home that afternoon, they talked about music. Harwood said Babakian was really expanding his horizons musically. He especially liked an Australian band called Midnight Oil that Babakian had him listen to. Smoot said he’d thought he’d heard of them before, probably from when he was Babakian’s companion but maybe even back home. Harwood said that
anything harder than Midnight Oil turned him off, but he saw tons of good power in Midnight Oil’s use of music to wake up Australian kids to political injustices and environmental concerns, especially related to Aborigines.

“Babakian asked a question that makes total sense to me,” Harwood said at one point. “Why aren’t there any Mormon Beatles? Why have the Lord’s servants left rock and roll almost completely alone as a force for spreading the gospel?”

“Well, what about the Osmonds?” Smoot asked.

“Dead and gone, and they were corny anyway,” said Harwood. “We’re talking rock and roll like U2 or REM. Or I happen to really like Rush, but Babakian says they’re poseurs. But anyway, stuff that is really high quality and original. Why let the adversary have all the good music to himself? All the good stuff that has been produced in the twentieth century, anyway. I mean, Mormons could break through to the world better if we appropriated some of the music forms, which really do have a lot of inherent goodness. We’re not talking raunchy stuff like Aerosmith, the Rolling Stones, or Led Zeppelin. We mean really thoughtful, moving stuff like Pink Floyd.”

Harwood was reminding Smoot of that scene in The Wizard of Oz when the Scarecrow is finally given his diploma and starts spouting stuff about square roots and isosceles triangles. Babakian had obviously been filling Harwood’s brain with his personal beliefs and doctrines, apparently even more persuasively than he had fed them to Smoot back at the Zoo. Not that Babakian’s ideas didn’t have some value, but it was a little creepy to see Harwood act almost like a groupie.
“Now that Mormon pop crap Dunlap listens to,” Harwood continued, a tone of disgust entering his voice, “that stuff may as well be flushed down the toilet. It’s totally unoriginal and emotionally manipulative. It’s the same thing as when Dunlap puts on that fake spiritual voice when he’s saying a prayer.”

Smoot caught himself looking over to see if Harwood’s eyebrows were lifting into boomerangs—but of course they weren’t.

“If the Lord tried to raise up musicians as good as Paul McCartney and John Lennon, the Mormon culture wouldn’t let him. We can tolerate only pap from within our own ranks, but we sure don’t have a problem turning to Hollywood and the rock and roll industry for stuff that really feeds our brains.”

“It sounds like Babakian’s really gotten to you,” said Smoot. “So does your new project have something to do with all this music stuff?”

Harwood looked up sharply. “Maybe.”

“Well, I really do wish you the best. I think Babakian has a lot of good ideas. I just wouldn’t want to see him move so fast he flames out and takes you with him.”

“Hey, I’ve been in the mission long enough to know that stuff like tracting is just a waste of time. Maybe it worked in the nineteenth century, but this is the future now. Maybe Babakian will be so successful that the Church will recognize the value of better exploiting the media and letting members use their God-given talents in more original, compelling ways. Jeesh, listen to me talk. Babakian could explain it better.”
Two or three stops before Dandenong, Harwood walked up and down the aisle of the now-crowded train holding up a Book of Mormon, but no one talked to him or even made eye contact, he reported to Smoot when he sat down. When they disembarked, Smoot left a Book of Mormon lying on his seat. Copies of the Book of Mormon discovered in unexpected places had converted people before—there was that Church film about the Italian man who fished out a coverless copy from a trashcan in New York City and spent years trying to find out which church published it so he could join. Too bad missionaries couldn’t afford to plant copies of the Book of Mormon all over town—that would really be flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon, as the prophet had asked.

When they passed the Impulse on the way back to the flat, Harwood again poked his head inside. Then he waved Smoot on, shouting, “Babakian’s already here.”

Smoot walked the rest of the way home alone, fearful of what the devil might be able to do to him without a companion to protect him. He did not want to be like Babakian and Joseph Smith and have his first spiritual experience with the dark side. The hair on his neck stood up when a dog growled at him from behind a fence, but that was all. He was actually more grateful than not for the darkness because it hid him from marauding born-agains.

Dunlap was snoring lightly in his bed when Smoot walked in. A half-eaten pan of Rice Crispy Treats lay on the floor beside him.
CHAPTER NINE

Before Smoot knew it, weeks were passing. That seemed to be the way of missions: days crept by, weeks went faster, months flew. Contrary to what Babakian had said about splitting off with Smoot a lot, he seemed to be avoiding much interaction. The two companionships didn’t cross paths often at the flat—Smoot and Dunlap were there most of the time, and Babakian and Harwood were there very little. Smoot suspected Babakian didn’t want Harwood and Dunlap getting together, with Harwood blabbing too much and Dunlap taking notes for his next chat with the zone leaders or President Badger. And Babakian had Harwood so wrapped around his finger that maybe he didn’t want to bother with Smoot asking him harder questions. Maybe he even suspected that President Badger had sent Smoot down to Dandenong partly to watch him.

President Badger had telephoned Smoot after the first week, embarrassing him by catching him home at about 3:00 in the afternoon when they should have been out working. Smoot told him that Babakian seemed to have calmed down, that he wasn’t running around the flat naked or talking about demons and witches or doing anything weird at church as far as Smoot had heard. From what he could see, Babakian and Harwood were getting out every day and doing some good proselyting—not necessarily tracting, but something that was getting results because they had a bunch of investigators. Babakian had even cut his hair short, and Smoot had never seen him wear anything out of the flat but a white shirt, though he didn’t mention the dark
T-shirts underneath.

“Well, that’s good to hear. Keep an eye on him, and if you notice anything I should know about, you give me a call.”

“OK, President,” Smoot said, but then he felt a little guilty after he hung up. He probably should have mentioned the tattoos, the connection with the nightclub, and the loose following of the rules about companions always being together. But he had not seen anything really alarming, such as Babakian spending time alone with women or getting drunk—and besides, he was more than a little curious to see exactly what Babakian was up to. Sitting by the phone, Smoot decided Babakian could be trusted a bit longer with his unorthodox approaches—maybe he really would make a breakthrough. The Lord knew they all needed one.

Passey had demonstrated a genius for wasting time outside the flat, but Dunlap was a master at staying in the flat and making it seem productive. He would get dressed in his shirt and tie and spend the whole morning flipping through old Ensign magazines and cutting out pictures to mount on posterboard for missionary lessons and presentations—as if he’d ever have the opportunity to use them without investigators. Or he’d spend the whole afternoon baking zucchini bread to take to his favorite members—and the missionaries would eat half of it themselves. Or he would pull out the white pages and do phone contacting, ringing people at random and asking them if they’d like to have missionaries drop by to present a free Book of Mormon and a lesson about God. One person agreed, but the address turned out to be outside the district’s proselyting area, so Dunlap filled out a referral card and
sent it through the mission office. About every third day Smoot would suggest they tract for a couple of hours, not so much to find golden investigators as simply to get out of the flat. Two middle-aged women let them in one time, but it was pretty clear they were lesbians so the missionaries didn’t return.

Smoot got so bored with Dunlap’s puttering around the flat that one day at a newsagent he bought a couple of thick paperbacks to read, a Tom Clancy and one by Stephen King with a sinister clown on the cover. That seemed to do the trick as far as making time pass quicker, but Dunlap nagged him about it, so he carefully removed the cover of *Jesus the Christ*—which looked way too intellectual for him to read—and put it around the Stephen King novel. Pretty soon Dunlap started wanting to have companionship study midday, since they never got around to it in the morning, and Smoot again came to dread slogging through all those scriptures on different topics and practicing the discussions, which he had not done much since his first area. Something about religion was incredibly boring to him—Babakian was right, why did God have to let it be that way? Dunlap seemed to eat it up like one of the instant-pudding snackpaks he was always spooning into his mouth. Smoot made Dunlap wear earphones when he wanted to listen to his Afterglow or other Mormon pop music. Once, when Dunlap folded all the garments Smoot customarily jammed into his dresser drawer, Smoot threw a fit and said the f-word and wadded them all up again.

“You really should sort your colors,” Dunlap said, subdued after Smoot’s uncharacteristic outburst. “It’s disrespectful to the Lord to let your
garments go grey.”

Maybe if the Lord made himself known to me, I would keep my garments whiter, Smoot wanted to say. But instead he said, “I really don’t think the Lord cares how I do my laundry. I’m sure garments keep themselves white in the celestial kingdom.”

One day the zone leaders made a surprise visit at about 10:30 in the morning. They caught Smoot and Dunlap dressed in ties but without their shoes on and eating a late breakfast. Dunlap immediately fell into brown-nosing mode, offering to make the zeds some pancakes with real maple syrup shipped from the States, saying one of his overly earnest, spiritual prayers over the food, and making comments about how much he was looking forward to getting out and tracting that morning. The zeds each wolfed down a plate of pancakes, draining several inches from Dunlap’s syrup bottle as he watched helplessly, then told the missionaries to put on their shoes because they were splitting off with the zeds for a day of tracting. Though more than half the doors were no-answers, the day actually produced three halfway-decent callbacks between the four of them—but no copies of the Book of Mormon were placed or first discussions taught. The zeds hung out at the flat from 5:00 till almost 7:00 waiting for Babakian and Harwood, but as usual they never showed up. Dunlap fixed the zeds beef stroganof while they waited and sang them “I Am a Child of God” in Maori, which he had learned from his last companion.

At one point, a zed sat on the unmade bed in the lounge room and looked around with interest. Fortunately Babakian kept his gear in the
bedroom he should have been sharing with Harwood. Dunlap looked like he wanted to spill the beans, so Smoot said, “Sometimes Elder Babakian comes out here to sleep because his companion snores too loud.”

“Man, you ain’t a-kiddin’,” the zed on the bed said. “I lived in a flat with Harwood in Footscray. Dude sucks air through a kazoo, it sounds like.”

“Those other two must be working hard,” the other zed said as they left.

“Doing what, I couldn’t tell you,” said Dunlap.

“Well,” the zed replied, “their stats look good, so they must be doing something right.”
CHAPTER TEN

Late that night, leafing through the pile of mail the zeds had left on the kitchen table, Babakian asked Smoot, "Any word from Samantha?"

"No. It's been over a month. I've written her three times without an answer."

"I think it's time to call her again," Babakian said.

"I can't afford it."

"I'll figure out a way."

So Babakian and Smoot's first split-off together involved going to the Impulse nightclub and using the manager's phone in an upstairs office. Babakian said the manager owed him a favor. Passing through the nightclub area, Smoot thought he recognized Babakian's metallic-blue guitar resting against a speaker up on the stage.

The woman who answered at Third—and—P said that Samantha had moved out.

"Where did she go?" Smoot asked.

"I think to her dad's," the woman said.

Smoot then had to struggle to remember Samantha's Tongan last name so they could dial Utah information and get her father's number. After several minutes on the phone with the operator, who Smoot was surprised to realize had a strong Utah accent, he felt reasonably confident about the name Tukuafu. The first number under that name turned out to belong to Samantha's uncle, who gave Smoot her dad's number.

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“I reckon Ian’ll string me up when he gets this phone bill,” Babakian said. He was staring at a flyer advertising a concert by a band called Rameumptom. Why did that name seem so familiar to Smoot? The flyer had a photo of a sultry-looking female singer in a tank top with a platinum-blonde crewcut and a nose ring.

Then Samantha’s voice said hello. Smoot said, “Samantha, is that you? It’s Dennis here.”

“Oh, Dennis. Wow.”

“So what in the hell happened to you? Why haven’t you written me? What are you doing at your dad’s?”

“The last month or two has been really weird. Really weird. And it’s kind of your fault. It started with that Mormon transition group I was going to.”

“Hey, I never told you to go to an anti-Mormon group.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have found it if you and that Aussie guy hadn’t gotten me stirred up about religion.” She pronounced Aussie with an s-sound instead of a z-sound. “I’m really kind of screwed up now.”

“How?”

“I met this hippy guy named Richard Carter at the group. He was really charming, and he had some cool religious ideas. He said the Mormons had some truth but sold out to the mainstream long ago. He invited me to a little religious group he has going with some friends of his.”

“Don’t tell me they’re into polygamy.”

“No, but they are into free love. But that’s not the worst. It turns out
they take LSD as their sacrament.”

“And you took some.”

“Not knowing fully what was up, yeah. I’ve eaten ‘shrooms before, and I thought it would be like that, lots of pretty swirling shapes on the ceiling. I thought it would be like a fireworks show in my brain. But I guess I had what you’d call a bad trip. I’m still wigged out from it.”

“Samantha, I’m sorry.”

“Well, I can’t even think about religion now without it coming back.”

“Without what coming back?”

“Everyone started turning into these bizarre animals, and I was starting to realize there’s really no such thing as human beings, and it totally terrified me. I can’t talk about it anymore.”

“Wow.”

“I just hope it goes away soon. I’ve been watching TV nonstop to keep my mind off it. It’s such a creepy feeling. I can feel it almost hovering nearby, waiting for a chance to get back into my head. If I look into a mirror, I start to imagine myself turning into one of those animals. Even the rearview mirror in the car.” Samantha may have been crying at this point.

Smoot sat wordlessly clutching the phone for a few moments, and then Babakian grabbed it away.

“G’day, Sam, what’d you say to spook Smooty-boy?”

Then Babakian hung up the phone. “She was crying,” he said.

“She had a bad LSD trip,” Smoot said.

“What?” Babakian said.
They tried her again the next day but there was no answer. Smoot hung around and was not surprised when Babakian went up on stage and started fiddling with the equipment.

"So what does Rameumptom mean?" Smoot called, walking over to the stage with a Coke the bartender had given him. From the sound of it, the word came from either the Old Testament or the Book of Mormon.

"Remember those dissenters from the Nephites who started their own religion, the Zoramites? The rameumptom was that high stand they built in the top of the synagogue where they said those bizarre prayers. You can read all about it in Alma 31."

"So you play your songs here?" Smoot asked.

"Not yet," Babakian said. "We play our first gig this Friday night. Tonight we get to rehearse till 8:00 on this stage, get a feel for how we'll actually sound in the club. You wanna listen? Harwood will be here soon."

"What about Dunlap?"

"Dunlap is under control."

Smoot sat back at the bar and waited. Soon Babakian came out on stage in a black T-shirt and tight black pants. He was joined by the crewcut woman on the flyer, who took center stage with a microphone, and another woman dressed in what looked like an old prom dress took her position behind a bank of keyboards. A stocky, bald man in cutoffs and a leather jacket worn over his bare chest sat behind the drums, and a guy with shoulder-length hair and a striped shirt with suspenders picked up a guitar. Smoot spotted Harwood back at the control panel, looking over a sound technician's
shoulder as he fiddled with knobs while the band started warming up.

A few early patrons were drinking and playing pool, and most didn’t even look over at the stage when Rameumptom launched into its first song. Smoot immediately recognized words from the Primary song that began, “I’m so glad when Daddy gets home, glad as I can be.” The next song featured Babakian chanting “Lilburn Boggs” as the two women sang about the persecutions of the early Mormons. Another song was about Joseph Smith’s experience with the devil just before the First Vision, and in another song Smoot heard mention of the Gadianton Robbers from the Book of Mormon and references to Cain and Master Mahan, though he couldn’t remember who Master Mahan was in the scriptures. Another song was based on the Primary song about the golden plates that the Book of Mormon was translated from, and the most rollicking song of the set was “Popcorn Popping,” with the lyrics sung verbatim by all the band members. It made Smoot laugh out loud.

The music sounded great to Smoot. Babakian’s lead guitar was punkish and snarly at times, but the rhythm section brought him back to earth and the keyboards and female vocals balanced him out. His thick, dark eyebrows were boomeranging by the second song. Sometimes the lead singer picked up an acoustic guitar, and sometimes the songs veered off into minor chords. Rameumptom played quite complex, moody music, with varying tempos and rhythms and intricate textures of sound. Smoot would have definitely bought the CD.

When the band finished playing, Babakian announced the upcoming
gig and most of the dozen or so patrons applauded. Smoot walked up to the stage, where Babakian was talking with all the band members except the drummer, who had disappeared. Smoot saw the lead singer move over and try to put her arm around Babakian, but Babakian moved away and flashed her a look of warning.

Then Babakian was sitting on the edge of the stage with his legs swinging, and the lead singer was sitting next to him. Smoot congratulated them and expressed his honest enthusiasm for the music. Then he said, "What are you going to do after your gig on Friday, invite everyone to a cottage meeting and teach a first discussion?"

Babakian laughed, and the lead singer put her hand over her mouth and looked back at the other band members, who had started unplugging equipment and coiling cords and cables. Smoot thought a look passed between the lead singer and the bass player in the striped shirt. Harwood was up on stage helping, but no one seemed to be interacting with him. He was wearing jeans and a denim shirt, Smoot noticed.

"Kylie's agreed to come to church this Sunday," Babakian said. "I'm going to teach Gospel Essentials. Maybe Eric and Greg and Terri will come." Babakian said the last sentence loudly, turning back toward his bandmates on the stage. Harwood was beaming with his hands on his hips, but no one was looking at him except Smoot.

Afterward the three missionaries walked home together. "I haven't got all the details worked out yet, obviously," Babakian said, "but the important thing is to gain a following first. Then we'll start concentrating on getting
everybody off the grog and cigarettes. Everyone in the band except the drummer has already quit smoking."

"What are you going to do, start a rock and roll branch of the Church?" Smoot asked.

Babakian gave him a dark look. "That's one thing the Church has still got to learn to do, I reckon—tolerate a little more diversity. Australia's not the only culture with a bit of tall-poppy syndrome. Like I said, I'm not sure how it's all going to pan out."

On the way back to the flat, the same dog growled that Smoot had noticed the night he walked alone. Dunlap was asleep on the couch in his clothes, which was unusual for him because he undressed even to take a nap midday. Smoot was unable to rouse him, and Babakian put a blanket over him. "Beached whale," Smoot heard Babakian mutter under his breath.

While he was pouring himself a glass of milk, something bothered Smoot about the kitchen. Then he realized what it was: no signs of Dunlap having cooked anything all evening. He opened the fridge again and counted the pudding snackpaks, but he couldn't remember how many there had been previously.

He snooped around the couch again, this time noticing a blue-striped cup he recognized from a takeaway shop near the flat. He pried open the lid and saw what looked like the residue of a chocolate thick shake.

Passing from the hallway into the kitchen, Harwood called, "Should I have got you one too?"
“She’s talking crazy,” Babakian whispered with his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone in the nightclub office.

Smoot put out his hand, and Babakian gave him the phone.

“—has a chain of produce shops, and he said I could manage a few of them—”

“Sam, this is Dennis. What are you talking about?”

“I’m coming to Australia,” she said. “My dad has a cousin in Perth. Her husband has offered me a job.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Too many weird vibes in this valley. I’ve got to get out of here. My dad thinks it’s a great idea, and my mom could care less.”

“What you need is some good spiritual counseling, Samantha. Have you tried to contact the full-time missionaries? Or maybe you need some kind of psychiatrist or something.”

“Hey, all I know, Dennis, is that since I started thinking about these plans I’ve been doing a lot better.”

“I still think you should contact the missionaries.”

“Maybe I will if I feel like it at some point, but not now.”

“Has your dad offered to give you a priesthood blessing?”

“What?”

“I guess not.”

“Dennis, I’ve got to hang up now and call my cousin.”
"If I give you our number, will you call us at the flat?"

"No. My dad’s bill is already big enough. But I promise I’ll write."

"So when would you be coming?"

"I don’t know yet. Look, I’ve really got to go. I’ll be in touch."

Babakian took the phone from Smoot and hung it up. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

"Pretty freaky," Smoot said.

"I reckon you could be right about her needing a shrink."

"If she does come, maybe we could help her."

* * *

On the day of Rameumptom’s concert, Babakian was on a toot because it hadn’t sold very many tickets in advance. He spent the day around the flat doing calisthenics, reading scriptures, and cleaning. Dunlap and Smoot went out tracting in the morning for an hour, then Dunlap went home to take a nap and Smoot walked with Harwood to the Dandenong market to hand out concert flyers. Before they went inside, they took off their ties and missionary badges.

"You sure you don’t want to come tonight?" Harwood asked Smoot at one point. "We could give Dunlap another shake."

"That’s not cool," Smoot said. "What if it hurts him? How many times have you done it?"

"Only twice now. It’s a legal drug, nothing harmful. Eric in the band gets them."

The Sunday after the concert, Kylie and Terri came to church. They
were relatively tamely dressed, and Kylie had taken out her nose ring. Kylie stayed right next to Babakian, and Terri stayed right next to Harwood. It looked to Smoot like they were on some kind of double date.

Out of curiosity, Smoot dragged Dunlap to the Gospel Essentials class. Three or four other members were there: an Italian convert who didn’t speak much English, a couple who had recently returned to activity after most of their adult lives away, and the slow-witted bachelor who handed out programs each week in sacrament meeting. Babakian taught a pretty straightforward version of the plan of salvation, drawing circles on the chalkboard to represent the premortal life, earth life, spirit paradise and prison, and the three degrees of glory. He brought up that favorite quote of his, “As man is, God once was, and as God is, man may become.” He quoted Genesis 1:27, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” He quoted Matthew 5:48, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” explaining that perfect meant complete. He went off on a tangent about how if a mother and father giraffe have a baby giraffe, the baby grows up to be like the parents, with all their powers and skills and attributes and reproductive capacities. Kylie let out a little laugh at that point, and Terri grabbed Harwood’s knee with a big smile. That’s the same relationship as between God and us, Babakian said. “We grow up to be like our Heavenly Parents. Do you want to be able to create planets of your own one day, Kylie, and populate them with your spirit children?”

“Sounds fantastic, I reckon,” Kylie said. Smoot overheard Terri
whisper to her, “Sounds like science fiction.”

“He should be focusing more on the atonement,” Dunlap whispered to Smoot. “He’s making it sound like everyone grows up to be like God whether they obey the commandments or not.”

“Raise your hand,” Smoot whispered back.

So Dunlap did, and when Babakian called on him he pointed out that only through following the Savior and repenting of our sins could we receive a fulness of the Father’s glory. The highest degree of glory was reserved for those who were baptized into the only true and living church on the face of the earth and who endured to the end in righteousness. This life was a probationary state, a big test.

A sober look passed between Kylie and Babakian, and Terri looked closely at her fingernails. Harwood leaned back and stretched his arm across the back of Terri’s chair.

“Well, I have a special announcement,” Babakian said. “Kylie has agreed to be baptized a member of the Church. We’ll hold the service this afternoon after sacrament meeting.”

***

Babakian and Harwood gave Kylie her last few discussions during a cram session in an empty classroom. As district leader, it fell to Smoot to interview Kylie to determine her worthiness for baptism. He had never conducted such an interview before, though he had glanced at the instructions and heard some details about how they went.

Kylie wanted Babakian to come with her for the interview. Smoot
began by saying, “I want to congratulate you on this great choice. You won’t regret it. We just want to make sure you understand the solemn obligation of this covenant with the Lord.”

“Oh, she does,” said Babakian. “She’s already quit smoking.”

“Good,” said Smoot. “Are you prepared to follow all the other commandments, including paying tithing and keeping the law of chastity?”

Kylie looked at Babakian and shifted on her chair. Babakian gestured for her to speak.

“I’m on the dole, but I reckon I can still pay tithing. I’ll have to keep track of me busking tips better, though.”

“Have you ever participated in same-sex relations or had an abortion?” Smoot asked. He had heard that if an investigator replied yes to either of those questions, they had to be cleared for baptism by the mission president.

Babakian’s eyes got wider, and Kylie considered for a few moments without looking at him this time.

“I’m pretty sure I had a miscarriage once, but I didn’t do anything to cause it. And I’ve slept naked with girlfriends, but I don’t think we did anything you could call sex.”

That was good enough for Smoot. “So you’ve read the Book of Mormon, and you feel you have a strong conviction of the truthfulness of the Church?”

“Tony has read me some from the book of the Mormons. I trust him completely.” She smiled at Babakian and put her hand on his knee. She was quite beautiful and feminine despite her short, bleached hair, Smoot thought.
She had big brown eyes, well-defined cheekbones, and a dime-sized freckle to the left of her left eye.

Smoot couldn’t see any reason not to approve her for baptism. He signed the form that Babakian held out, then he said, “You’re a fantastic singer, by the way, Kylie. I hope your talents can contribute to the Church.”

“Tony sure reckons they will,” she said. Then Babakian stood up, and the interview was over.

When Babakian lifted her out of the water in the baptismal font, Kylie’s white dress clung to her skin. Dunlap made an unintelligible noise, Harwood gaping, and Terri put her hand over her mouth. Babakian walked her up the stairs to the women’s dressing-room door.

As Babakian waded back through the font to the men’s room door, he gave two thumbs up.

“Don’t forget to pull the plug,” Harwood called.

A counselor in the bishopric tapped Dunlap on the shoulder and handed him a new set of scriptures still in their shrink-wrap. “I have to dash to a meeting,” he said, “but please give these to—to our new convert with my congratulations.”
CHAPTER TWELVE

During the next week, Dunlap suddenly began showing more initiative about tracting. “If they can do it, so can we,” he said. “Let’s make it our goal to baptize someone during our companionship. I’ve had only one my whole mission. Can we, please?”

“Maybe if we make zucchini bread for all our neighbors, one of them will join,” Smoot said.

But Dunlap was apparently serious, because he heaved himself out of bed the next morning right at 6:30 and headed for the shower.

“Hey,” Smoot heard Dunlap yell, “I don’t think the other guys came home last night.”

“What makes you think that?” Smoot called from bed.

“They’re not here now, for one thing.”

If it were true, it was a serious enough breach that Smoot probably needed to call the zone leaders. But he didn’t want to jump to conclusions.

While Dunlap was in the shower, Smoot saw a figure pass in the hallway. It was Harwood, headed for his bedroom. He wondered how long this had been going on.

He got up and went toward the kitchen for a glass of milk. “Hey, you’re dressed already,” he called to Babakian, who was sitting on his bed in the lounge room pulling off his shoes and socks. When Babakian saw him, he started pulling his sock back on.

“Yeah, we have an early appointment today,” he said.
Smoot stood in the doorway with his glass of milk, debating whether to confront Babakian, who brushed past him on his way down to Harwood’s room. “What are you blokes doing up so early?” he asked Smoot.

“Dunlap wants to baptize someone like you guys did. I think he’s turning over a new leaf. Maybe you and Harwood should have given him an extra-strength milkshake last night.”

Babakian shut the door to Harwood’s bedroom without saying anything else.

Dunlap followed the official recommended missionary schedule all day long, having an hour of personal study and an hour of companionship study, leaving the flat right at 9:30 for a morning of tracting, taking only one hour for lunch, tracting again all afternoon, taking only an hour for dinner, then visiting three members during the evening, staying no longer than an hour at each, asking them to turn off the TV, and trying to bring up missionary work in conversation. Smoot went along willingly, but he couldn’t envision either one of them keeping it up for long. Dunlap looked miserable by the end of the evening, and his usually enthusiastic social personality was becoming quite mechanical. He kept ungracefully cutting people off to turn the conversation back to the missionary agenda.

The other two missionaries were already in the flat when Smoot and Dunlap returned at 9:30, right on time. Babakian was in a jokey mood, even bantering with Dunlap, who he usually avoided whenever possible. Dunlap looked pleased, confused, and threatened all at the same time.

“We went tracting today,” Babakian announced. “Haven’t done that for
awhile.”

Harwood looked sour.

“Well, congratulations,” Dunlap said. “Welcome to your mission. If you guys haven’t been tracting, how have you been getting investigators?”

“Creative proselyting,” Babakian said, and winked at Smoot.

* * *

Rameumptom had another Friday-night concert planned, Smoot had noticed from a flyer posted on a telephone pole near the flat. Dunlap had fortunately not noticed the flyer. Just before 10:30 Babakian poked his head into the bathroom while Smoot was washing his face to say that Eric the bass player was getting closer to baptism and would attend church the next Sunday.

Then Babakian suggested the four flatmates all have prayer together before they went to bed. They knelt together in the lounge room, and Dunlap said it.

“Um, Elder Babakian?” Dunlap said. “I’ll move in with Harwood if you want to take my place with Smoot. I can handle the noise with my earplugs. I think there’d be a better spirit in the flat if our sleeping arrangements were up to par.”

Harwood made a noise of protest, but Babakian said that would probably be fine.

* * *

Smoot awoke with a start at about 1:30 in the morning. His first coherent thought was that maybe Babakian and Harwood had made a noise
sneaking out. He got up to empty his bladder and felt relieved to hear familiar snores coming from behind Harwood’s closed door.

But when he padded into the kitchen to take a swig out of the orange juice bottle, Babakian’s bed looked empty. He walked across the lounge room and sat on the corner of the bed. Sure enough, it was empty. He ran his hands over the sheets to see if they still felt warm, and they did. Where could Babakian have gone? His shoes were still at the side of his bed where Smoot had noticed them the night before after the prayer.

As Smoot sat there, he heard a bump and a strange cry outside the French doors near Babakian’s bed. Thinking a cat or some other animal was messing around out on the porch, he opened the doors. Babakian and Kylie were moving around unclothed on a blanket.

Smoot backed away from the doors, leaving them open. He saw Babakian’s head turn toward him, and he heard him say “Damn!”

With his hand over his mouth, Smoot ran into the kitchen.
“It was the first time,” Babakian shouted, snatching the phone from Smoot and slamming it down. “We barely started.”

Smoot picked up the phone and started dialing the mission president’s home number again. His hands were shaking, and he wondered if he might throw up. Wrapping the blanket tighter around him, Babakian strode across the room to the porch. “You better go,” Smoot heard him say to Kylie, who was hopping into her pants.

“Sister Badger, I need to talk to President Badger,” Smoot said. “It’s kind of an emergency.”

President Badger said hello. “President, I just walked in on Elder Babakian having sex with a woman,” Smoot said, his voice gulping. Dunlap appeared in the hallway just in time to hear.

“Keep him there,” President Badger said. “We’re on our way.”

Babakian stayed in silence on the porch, and Smoot asked Dunlap to please go back to bed.

“Was it that woman he baptized?” Dunlap asked.

“Yes,” Smoot said.

“I can’t believe it. Baptize them and then fornicate with them. I knew that guy wasn’t right.”

“Hey, just shut up and go to bed. We don’t know the full story.”

Smoot followed Dunlap into the bedroom, wrapped himself in his sheets, and wept as silently as he could.
* * *

When Smoot and Dunlap returned from tracting near the mission home, which is how President Badger ordered them to spend the morning, Babakian was shooting baskets alone in the driveway of the mission home. Dunlap marched past him without making eye contact and went inside. Smoot rebounded the ball and held it to his chest.

"So where's Harwood?" he asked.

"President’s interviewing him now. They better let him finish his mission. Terri would have hooked up with him, but he never pursued it. I swear, he didn’t."

"So what happened to you?" Smoot asked. Babakian had spent the morning in a disciplinary council with the mission president and his counselors.

"Well, I'm not wearing any underwear, and I fly out to Perth this afternoon."

"I don’t understand why you let it go that far."

"I was deceived by an angel of light."

"What?"

"I’m serious. From the time I met Kylie and started pulling together the band, spiritual stuff was happening. Once when I was thinking about whether it was right to go out on a limb like that, a flash of light went off near my bed. It was really precise, linear, and white, not a bluish blurb like from a camera. I knew it was supernatural. At the time I reckoned it was from God, because how could Satan have known what I was thinking at that moment?"
He can’t read minds. But President Badger had a point that he probably just took an educated guess.”

“Wow. So if I ever see a light, I can’t assume anything.”

“What’s going on with you?”

“Well, President is going to start fresh with four new missionaries in Dandenong. So we’re all going our separate ways. I don’t know where yet. He sure put me on a guilt trip about not reporting irregularities sooner.”

“I don’t necessarily think the band was a bad idea. It’s with Kylie that I got messed up.”

“President said that you became a law unto yourself.”

“Well, the flash was only the start. A few nights ago an angel came to me and said I was free to do whatever was necessary to bond Kylie to me, because I was to be an instrument for saving her. The angel said that just as Nephi had been ordered by God to break a commandment and cut off Laban’s head to achieve a greater good, I might be required to sacrifice my chastity to keep Kylie with me long enough for the gospel to start sinking in.”

“That is the most bizarre thing I’ve ever heard. What do you mean, a real angel?”

“Yeah. He came to me in the middle of the night by my bed in the lounge room. He was all in white, and he glowed. He looked a lot like how Joseph Smith described Moroni.”

“Aren’t you supposed to shake their hand or something to see if they’re good or evil?”

“President Badger asked me that too. I didn’t think of it till afterward.
Mate, I’d sure like to try it now."

"I don’t understand how you thought sex was going to save Kylie."

"She’s got a lot of problems. She was sexually abused by her father, and she has eating disorders. The way I saw it, and I was thinking God saw it this way too, is that she needed something physical to bind her to me. Then as things got sorted out she would bind to me spiritually too."

"So are you going to marry her, or what?"

Babakian held open his hands for the basketball. He dribbled for a moment and shot a layup. "I almost married her at the Dandenong magistrate’s, but then the time came for sex before that could happen. And she is still rather antimarriage. In fact I have a hard time imagining her faithful to one man, unless she got a strong enough grasp on the gospel."

"So are you going to come back and get her, or what?"

"I haven’t crossed that bridge yet, mate. But President Badger says I should try to completely forget about her. I’ll have to seek personal revelation on it."

"But you don’t have the gift of the Holy Ghost anymore, if you’re excommunicated. So how are you going to get personal revelation?"

Babakian dropped the ball. "I don’t know, mate. I don’t know."

The first thing Smoot did when he got inside the mission home was find a set of scriptures and look up the word shake in the index. Then he flipped to section 129 in the Doctrine and Covenants and read:

When a messenger comes saying he has a message from God, offer him your hand and request him to shake hands with you. If he be an angel he will do so, and
you will feel his hand. If he be the spirit of a just man made perfect he will come in his glory; for that is the only way he can appear—ask him to shake hands with you, but he will not move, because it is contrary to the order of heaven for a just man to deceive; but he will still deliver his message. If it be the devil as an angel of light, when you ask him to shake hands he will offer you his hand, and you will not feel anything; you may therefore detect him.

He didn’t know if he’d ever have a heavenly messenger visit him, but he wanted to make sure he knew what to do if he did.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dunlap was sent to Tasmania, which was considered an honor because only eight missionaries served there at a time, so only a small percentage of missionaries ever got to go. The chosen few got to ride down on the *Abel Tasman* overnight ferry, which was considered the mission's greatest legitimate adventure.

Harwood was made Smoot's companion, and they were assigned to the mission home as clerical help. Harwood was responsible for all the mission finances, and Smoot handled everything else, including arranging travel, typing letters, ordering and dispensing supplies, and filling out reports. The senior missionary couple that had been doing the clerical work trained Smoot and Harwood for two weeks before departing for a small branch out in the bush. It was clear that the President wanted to keep an eye on Harwood and Smoot, but living in the mission home was a perk because it was air-conditioned and cleaned weekly by a maid, and they got their mail right when it came in, and they picked up on most of the scuttlebutt about happenings missionwide. Besides, they got to spend their days doing productive work in the comfort of an office. No more tracting!

One afternoon about three weeks after Tony Babakian left the mission, Smoot looked up his parents' home phone number in Perth and dialed it. Tony answered, and he and Smoot enjoyed a good hour of catching up. Tony had already started jamming with some old friends in hopes of forming another band—but they didn't have a lead singer yet, and Tony definitely
wanted a female. His bishop friend was keeping in close contact and helping Tony find work as an electrician, but nothing permanent yet. Tony had not yet taken the plunge and gone back to church, but the bishop was helping him get psyched up. All his musician friends smoked, drank, and took occasional recreational drugs, so Tony wasn’t sure how long he would last without breaking the Word of Wisdom. He said he felt a certain spiritual emptiness, but it was a relief to be out of the pressure cooker of missionary life and to have his freedom and privacy back.

“Do you think you’ll be rebaptized in a year, or however long it takes?” Smoot asked.

“I really don’t know, mate. I’m not sure I’m a Mormon at heart. I believe the doctrine, but I don’t think much of the fruits. The Church is like a combination of the military and a vast, conservative corporation. I’m just not sure I’m interested in the white-shirt standard.”

“Well, I think you should keep trying to find a way to have your cake and eat it too,” Smoot said. “I think the Church needs more shaking up. I agree it’s too boring.”

“By the way, you haven’t said anything about Samantha. What’s the latest with her?”

“I got a short letter saying her plans were still going forward and I probably shouldn’t bother writing back because she might already be gone.”

“You think she’s still coming to Perth?”

“I haven’t heard otherwise.”

“So maybe I’ll get to meet her.”
“Yeah, maybe.”

* * *

Not long after the conversation with Babakian, Harwood answered a telephone call from an American woman who was looking for a missionary named Dennis Smoot to come teach her about the Church. Harwood transferred the call into Smoot’s office and then came and grinned in the doorway while Smoot talked to Samantha.

“I’m here, Dennis.”

“You mean Perth?”

“No, I mean Melbourne.”

“I thought you were going to Perth.”

“I am, but I’ve stopped here for a while. I want you to come give me those discussion things or whatever they’re called.”

Smoot spun around in his chair and stared out the window at the green space behind the mission home. A freeway ramp on tall pylons cut through the greenery not many yards away.

“I guess I don’t see why not. We don’t have any other investigators.” Technically Harwood and Smoot were supposed to be proselyting in the evenings after the office closed, but they mostly visited members, went shopping, or stayed home.

“Come tonight, and we’ll fix you dinner.”

“Who’s we?”

“I’m staying with a single woman in Caulfield. She’s a devout member of the Church. My dad’s cousin helped me hook up with her.”
Smoot’s heart was beating hard as he and Harwood waited on the doorstep for Samantha or the other woman to answer the door. Finally Samantha came with a big smile on her face. Her hair swung around her jawline in a new bob. She was not wearing the fake green contact lenses. She looked paler and a little fuller in the face, and she seemed to move faster and more choppily than Smoot remembered. Maybe she was just nervous.

They sat in the lounge room, where they were joined by the older Maori owner of the house, whose name was Sybil. During the initial small talk, Samantha and Smoot kept their eyes on each other. Harwood had an amused expression. Sybil looked stern.

“Come help me make a salad,” Samantha said to Smoot, and he stood up and followed her into the kitchen. Harwood looked down at his feet with an indulgent grin on his face. He kept rubbing his leg where the tattoo was.

In the kitchen, Samantha gave Smoot a big hug and let her lips hover close to his face so he could kiss them. But he broke the embrace. That was all he needed, to get sent home dishonorably after lasting this long.

“Wash your hands,” she said, moving to the sink with him. She picked up a head of lettuce and smacked it against the porcelain to loosen the core. Smoot squirted some liquid soap into his hand from the dispenser. Then he turned on the faucet and washed his hands. Samantha put down the lettuce and said, “I think I need to wash my hands too.”

He broke lettuce and she sliced tomatoes for a few moments in silence. Then Samantha said, “Do you want to hear my plan?”
"OK," Smoot said, afraid to look at her eyes.

"I go to Perth in three weeks. When do you finish your mission?"

"About two and a half months."

"I want to invite you to come to Perth when you’re through."

"I’m not allowed. We have to go straight home."

"You’re a grownup, Dennis. You can go to Perth if you damn well please. Don’t you want to see if things can work out between us with me as a Mormon?"

"Oh, so you’ve already decided to be baptized?"

"Well, at this point it would take a pretty dramatic revelation of something wrong with the Church to make me not give it a try."

Smoot’s mind was churning as he thought about the possibility of going to Perth. He could let the mission president drop him off at Tullamarine Airport as if he were going home to Utah, and he could make sure he had a layover in Sydney and then double back to Perth. He would have to let his parents know somehow.

"How could I afford a plane ticket to Perth?" he asked.

She smiled. "I’ll get you train tickets. That’s how I’m going from here. Did you know the railroad tracks to Perth have the longest stretch of pure straightness in the world?"

"And where would I stay there?"

"My dad’s cousin will help. He’ll probably even give you a job."

Smoot felt excitement spreading in his gut. He really had no desire to return to Utah. He quite liked Australia—the friendly, no-nonsense people,
the weather, the laid-back lifestyle, the European-flavored yet down-to-earth
culture. He would love to experience Australia free of the constraints and
limitations of missionary life. And if Samantha was going to join the Church
and become his girlfriend again—well, they might even be able to be sealed in
the temple together.

“You know, I think it could be a real possibility.” He turned to her
again and would have kissed her this time, but Sybil came into the kitchen.
They instantly broke their embrace.

“Youse better be more careful,” Sybil said. “No more pairing off in a
separate room. I’m a returned missionary. I know the rules. I’m going to be
your chaperon.”

Samantha frowned and went back to slicing tomatoes. “I think that
would be smart,” Smoot said. “We really do have a lot of strict rules, Sam.”

After dinner, Sybil took the lead in getting the first discussion started.
“We’ve already read Alma 32 together, elders, and I’ve taught her to pray,”
she said. “Samantha seems quite willing to plant the seed of the gospel and
see if good fruit results. She’s promised not to cast it out through doubt or
disbelief.”

“Unless something comes up I really can’t handle,” Samantha said.

* * *

The teaching went smoothly. Samantha was more quiet and
concerned-looking during some parts than others, but she did not argue
against anything. Sybil read the Book of Mormon with her every day, and she
would not permit the missionaries to come over more than twice a week,
though Sam telephoned Smoot daily at the mission office. It was Sybil who, during the fourth discussion, committed Samantha to be baptized on the Sunday before she was scheduled to leave for Perth.

Harwood graciously allowed Smoot to perform both of the ordinances. Sybil gave a short talk about the Holy Ghost while a dozen or so missionaries and ward members waited for Samantha and Smoot to change their clothes. As he performed the confirmation, Smoot felt more spiritual warmth than he ever had, with tingles going up and down both cheeks and meeting at the top of his scalp. He kept the freestyle blessing part short and resisted the impulse to allude to himself and his possible future role in her life. Samantha seemed genuinely happy and peaceful, and Sybil cried.

After the service, as they were walking out to the cars, Samantha pulled Smoot into an alcove in the meetinghouse and pressed her wet lips against his.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One thing was still bothering Smoot—he still could not remember his temple name. He decided that before doubling back to Perth, he would visit the temple in Sydney, the only one in Australia. Perhaps praying throughout the endowment session and hanging out in the celestial room would help him remember the name. He viewed breaking the mission rules by not going straight home as more of a transgression of an arbitrary law than a sin in and of itself. Adam and Eve had been put in a position where they had to transgress in the Garden of Eden in order to progress, and Smoot felt he was in a similar position.

He had to spend fifty Australian dollars to take a taxi from the airport to the temple, which was surprisingly small compared to the temples in Utah. The mission president had signed a new temple recommend during his exit interview, and Smoot felt strangely proud to show it to the kindly old man behind the counter at the temple entrance. Some youth from the Lilydale Ward were in the temple performing baptisms for the dead, and Smoot greeted them warmly. He was definitely on a spiritual high. He wouldn’t have been surprised to hear the Holy Ghost whisper his forgotten name into his ear.

In the middle of the endowment session, just after the flourescent lights were turned up signifying passage into the terrestrial stage, Smoot suddenly saw that the witness couple at the altar had changed. The more he looked, the more he got the crazy impression that it was Babakian and
Samantha up there. Sure enough, when the couple turned around to take their seats, it was Babakian and Samantha, holding hands.

Smoot gripped the arms of his chair and breathed deeply. Was this some kind of vision? The spiritual humming in his chest had grown stronger and warmer and was radiating out to his hands and feet. Could he be deceived in the temple? Members were told that Satan had no influence in the temple, but Smoot had previously tried experiments of thinking about bad things during endowment sessions and had found it was quite possible.

Besides, such a vision was not unheard of. When the early pioneer Mormons were listening to rival leaders trying to persuade their allegiance after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, many saw a vision of Brigham Young transformed at the pulpit into Joseph Smith in face and voice, and that was their answer as to who was the rightful replacement.

But what did this mean? Was Samantha, whom he had influenced and prayed for and baptized, not to be his? Was he not meant to join her in Perth and build something wonderful? Was Babakian, who had fallen so far and demonstrated such a lack of valiance, to be rewarded with this beautiful bride?

Smoot was shaking by the end of the endowment session and was barely able to get through the veil with a temple worker’s help. He lingered in the celestial room for nearly half an hour, at one point almost weeping. He prayed silently a dozen or more times for help to decide what he should do. After he changed back into his street clothes, he walked for several minutes around the temple grounds, feeling Australia and Samantha slipping away
from him. But to be replaced with what?

He knew what he had to do. In the back of the taxi to the airport, he did begin to cry. The driver silently offered him a box of tissue.

At the airport, he cashed in a blue ten-dollar note for twenty-cent pieces, hoping he wouldn’t need that many. Then he found one of Australia’s squat, green pay phones and dialed the telephone number of Samantha’s cousin. An answering machine picked up. He would have to take his chances that she would hear his message.

“Samantha, it’s Dennis. I’m not coming. I’ve had—I’ve had a revelation that you’re supposed to be with Tony Babakian. His phone number is 967-0431. Please call him. He doesn’t know anything about our plans. Maybe you can help save him. I saw you holding hands with him in the temple. I’ll write you when I get home. I’m sorry. This is for the better.”

Then Smoot found a postal kiosk and put the train tickets into an envelope and addressed it to Samantha in care of her cousin. On the back, he wrote It’s for the better. He didn’t know the postal code, but he thought they would probably get there. He hoped she would be able to get a refund.

Taking a deep breath, he lugged his suitcases down the concourse toward customs to see what he could salvage of his itinerary to Utah.

Somewhere over the Pacific several hours later, Smoot abruptly woke up from a doze. Yes, there it came again, sliding squarely into his consciousness: an Old Testament-sounding name that started with a vowel.
Sun, Moon, and Star

Christopher K. Bigelow
Department of English
M.A. Degree, April 1998

ABSTRACT

This fictional novella takes place during the narrator Smoot’s two-year mission to Melbourne, Australia. It chronicles the intertwining of the lives and destinies of three main characters: Smoot, a Utah native who struggles with carnality and lack of conversion and spirituality; Babakian, an Australian convert who used to be a punk rocker and has become frustrated with Mormonism’s blandness and conformity; and Samantha, a nonmember part-Tongan Utahn with whom Smoot was involved before his mission. Speaking generally, the novella is about how Babakian misuses his creative powers of art and sexuality, how Samantha explores the gospel and changes her life, and how Smoot matures spiritually and learns to sacrifice.

COMMITTEE APPROVAL:

Bruce Wayne Jorgensen, Committee Chair

John Serge Bennion, Committee Member

Douglas H. Thayer, Committee Member

Richard Y. Duerden, Graduate Coordinator