

Chapter 1

My name is Kenny Feller, onetime agent of the Restored Gospel on Planet Earth. All told, I've been on a mission from God once, twice, thrice, maybe four times. Depends how you count. Anyway, that's what this whole story is about: my three or four missions from God, the ones I may or may not have had. I don't know. Keep reading and see what you think. Stay open to shit. At least that's always been my policy, to the extent I've had one.

First things first. Don't worry. I'm not going to try to convert you. Those days are long gone. The way I see it, everybody's got to find their own path. If you ask me for advice, I'll give you some, sure. Maybe it will help. I *have* seen a lot. But, in the end, you choose your own path—if you're smart. That's what this whole story is about: how I came to learn that lesson, poked my head right through the diaphanous veil between this world and the next. (There. I used my new word for the day—*diaphanous*.) If this story doesn't rock your world, well, then it doesn't. No skin off my nose.

It should, though.

I feel prompted to start by telling you about the day I met Jared—a genuine holy moment if there ever was one. It was Friday, August 17, 1979—twenty months into my two-year mission. My previous companion had been reassigned to a new senior companion, as often happens. So I had the first half of the day to myself until Mission President Dewey hand-delivered my new companion. I was home alone in my apartment in Sedro-Woolley, Washington, eating out of a jar of peanut butter with my first two fingers. I was reading a contraband issue of *Rolling Stone*, the magazine's effect, on the whole, being one of slackening my resolve. (On the plus side, I had found my new word of the day—*numinous*—as in “Supertramp's latest offering, *Breakfast in America*, is numinous.”) Had it been a mere month or two earlier, you would have found me gravely digesting the Book of Mormon to no effect. Reading and learning nothing. Praying into the vacuum. Struggling mightily for the gospel without profit.

And therein lay the burr between my ass cheeks, the *vexation*, if you will.

It just hadn't worked out as advertised, the whole deal. Growing up in church, we always prayed to Heavenly Father as if He was involved in our lives—imminent, sneaking notes into the knife pocket of your corduroy pants. This was supposed to be even more the case once you were on your mission. You go on your mission, study, strive, and pray to be found worthy, and you experience the power of God in your life, in what you say and what you do. The kicker was that the whole experience was meant to launch you into Mormon Manhood, which was one miracle after another, blessing upon blessing.

So goes the Party Line.

Like I said, it just hadn't worked out as advertised, the whole mission thing. In my entire twenty months sharing the gospel, my companions and I had shepherded a total of two seekers into the waters of baptism. Two. Just one day a week, P-day, we were allowed to write home to our families. In my case, it was my stepfather, six stepbrothers, and my mother. I lied like a two-term congressman in my letters home. All sorts of miracles were happening.

By the time Jared showed up, truth be told, I was just going through the motions. I had come to the conclusion that the best I could hope for in terms of a Mormon Manhood was just being my stepfather, except for the part about being an asshole. God was real, sure, I mean in the sense that He existed. But He didn't really work in the lives of Latter-day Saints, and if not in Latter-day Saints' lives, then whose, for fuck's sake? The whole thing was a long con, a well-intended long con. The best you could hope for was just to grit your teeth and try as hard as you

could to be a really good person, but don't expect a leg up from Heavenly Father—empowerment. You were fucked. All those stories you read in the Book of Mormon, they were just metaphors or poetry, object lessons we could apply to our lives as we strove to live the gospel. Or fairy tales. I don't know. At least, that was the conclusion I came to sitting on my couch reading *Rolling Stone*.

God just didn't work anymore like He did in the olden days, Book of Mormon times. If He ever did in the first place. We were fucked.

Then Jared showed up.

Anyway, that's what this whole story is about—Jared showing up and making a new man out of me. Keep reading and see what you think. Stay surprisable. At least that's always been my policy.

So, like I was saying, there I was—it was about 12:45 in the afternoon—reading the *Rolling Stone*. My companions and I lived in an apartment across a field from a loading dock of some sort. Big, banged-up trucks would pull in and pick up stuff or leave it, I assume, and then drive away, all day and into each night. They had this PA system above the loading dock and messages were always issuing from it, telling the drivers and the forklift guys what to do. Thing was, the speaker was broken or shorted out or something, and you could barely make out what they were saying. All you heard, especially at our apartment way across the field, was *Serft, serft, serft! Nokka-guy-rye, too-bladdum. Too-bladdum!* Stuff like that.

So I'm sitting there reading and in walked Dewey, Jared in tow. I stuffed the magazine under a cushion as the door creaked open. Dewey held out his hands, palms up, and motioned toward me with a nod. His diamond chunk cufflinks glinted like the teardrops of an angel. Then he made the same gesture toward Jared. As if on cue, Jared spread out his arms and said, "Kenny Feller, as I live and breathe!"

Dewey closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd clearly had his fill of the charms of Jared Baserman. "The question," he said, "is not how you came upon the knowledge of Elder Feller's Christian name. That will pass uninvestigated. Rather, let us leave such questions and pursue immediately the matter"—here he lifted his hands in front of himself delicately, like a maestro—"of proper introductions." He gestured toward Jared. "Elder Feller. This is Elder Baserman, fresh from the Missionary Training Center in Provo, and before that resident of the environs of Boise, Idaho. Famous potatoes, they say."

Then he gestured toward me. "And, Elder Baserman. This is Elder Feller, he of vast soul-winning experience and nearing the end of his mission, a fitting senior companion for someone such as yourself."

So there I was, looking for the first time upon Jared Baserman. I must say, I was stirred not in the slightest. Really, it's hard to be surprised when you first gaze upon any given Mormon missionary. You always get what you expect, thanks to the church's unflinching insistence on conformity. And Jared didn't disappoint. Everything was regulation, starting with The Suit. (I'll tell you about his hair later.) Those suits, they suck the idiosyncrasies clean out of any organism. He looked mass produced.

He looked like a dork, though it wouldn't have done you any good to point that out to him. Turns out, Jared was actually excited about the suit, seeing as how it was the first one he had ever owned. He was like an accessory after the fact to this crime against style. He didn't care. I think it came from him being so at home in his skin. He accepted himself. Hells bells, he even liked himself.

Cap-a-dap toenum! Cap-a-dap toenum! Mala! Mala! Mala! the PA across the field announced.

I'd seen enough of Dewey's mannerisms to interpret his introduction as my prompt. So I rose and leaned across the coffee table to extend my hand to Jared. He leaned forward, keeping his feet planted on the floor, as if he was magnetized to Dewey's proximity by the mission president's personal vibrations. He shook my hand with a shy smile. I would come to see that, for all his joking and indiscretion, Jared was, at heart, a bashful guy.

"Elder Baserman," I said. "Welcome to the Sedro-Woolley mission! We're doing a marvelous work and wonder for God." That was a lie, as was Dewey's assertion that I boasted "vast soul-winning experience." Not that my previous companions and I hadn't worked hard at proselytizing. We had. It's just that, for all that work, we had a dismal baptismal record, as previously noted.

"I'm all about marvelous-ness," Jared said with the overly serious look of a county fair pie judge. "Count me in!"

The PA from across the field said, *Spig! Spig! Spig! Doe-bomb!*

Dewey stared at Jared and puckered his lips doubtfully. He appeared to think of a response before thinking better of it. "Yes, well, the fields, as the authors of scripture assert, are 'white and ready to harvest.' So, no time like the present. What say, Elder Feller, that you take Elder Baserman here and introduce him to the rewarding toil of the loyal missionary?"

Taking the hint, I tucked in my shirt, cinched up my tie, grabbed my backpack, and walked outside, motioning to Jared to follow. I squinted up at the sun.

"Nice out," I said, by way of a conversation starter.

Jared looked up appraisingly and adjusted his name badge. "Yeah. It's so nice out, I think I'll leave it out."

"What?" I said.

"Unless that offends you," he said, deadpan.

Now, looking back at that double entendre, I'm struck by how it shows just how nimble and resourceful Jared's brain was. He came up with that quip instantaneously, at the speed of thought. And, at the time, I thought it was pretty funny. In fact, myself, I've used it any number of times since. But, back then, standing there with my new junior companion—my greenie—my primary concern was to communicate something non-judgmental yet alarmed. Something that was senior companion material but also made me seem like a normal guy. I think all I marshaled was a pained, equivocal look, like my plumbing was backed up. In response, Jared was blank as a slate. The silence was his punch line. He never missed the punch line. That was one of the things about Jared.

"Okay, look, you're new on the mission," I said to Jared, trying to sound like a senior companion. "Like you were told at the MTC, when it comes to success on a mission, it's a matter of staying attuned to the promptings of the Holy Ghost. That's when God will empower you." I know that sounds really Party Line of me now, for a guy who wasn't a gung-ho Mormon at that time, or at least a guy who wasn't sure what kind of Mormon he was at the time. Realize that I could tell Jared was being coy with me—what was he really all about?—so why should I be the first to tip my hand? As far as he would be able to tell, I decided, I would be the Vanilla Missionary of Rectitude. "Everything begins and ends with prayer."

"Amen, my brother," Jared said.

"Good luck, gentlemen!" Dewey called as he stepped outside and walked to his car.

"So," I said. "Let's approach Heavenly Father in prayer."

We folded our arms, closed our eyes, and bowed our heads. After a moment's pause, I stole a glance at Jared. He was eyeing me with a friendly smile.

"Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for this opportunity to share Thy gospel," I began. "We know that Thou lovest all Thy children. But we also know that not all of Thy children are open to Thy gospel. We ask Thee now to send us Thy guidance. Direct us toward those people whose hearts are prepared to hear about Thy Plan of Happiness. We ask Thee now to speak to our hearts and show us the way."

We stood in silence. A dog barked somewhere. I could hear a throaty car, a testosterone torpedo, no doubt, knifing through the dead air, rumbling up the street toward us. As it neared, the sound from the stereo inside grew louder. I could make out, ever clearer, the sounds of Ted Nugent, the Motor City Madman, the Ten Fingers of Doom. As he passed us, the driver yelled out of his window, "Smoke 'em if you got 'em!"

I winced and opened one eye to glance at Jared. He hadn't twitched a muscle.

"We say these things in the name of Thy son, Jesus Christ," I said as the sound of the car faded into the distance. "Amen."

"That house," Jared said, closing one eye and pointing his finger like a six-shooter toward a blue and white rambler halfway down the block.

Believe it or not, right then, standing with Jared in front of our apartment, I felt something. A stirring. My first ever. Or maybe I just thought Jared was yanking my chain and I wanted to be contrary.

"I feel impressed that we need to go in that direction," I said, pointing the way down a stately lane of hedges.

Jared squinted down the lane apprehensively. "Shouldn't we get the same answer?" he asked, scratching the back of his head. "Maybe we should try again."

The faraway dog barked again. "Yeah," I said, following Jared's gaze down the lane. "That would make sense, wouldn't it?" I adjusted my backpack and stretched my neck side to side. "Tell you what. You pray this time. I'll agree with what you pray. What do you think?"

Jared stared at me for a moment. "Sure," he said, smiling. "Let's give it a whirl." He closed his eyes, rubbed his palms together briskly in front of his face, interlaced his fingers, and cracked his knuckles. "Heavenly Father, we have this message about Jesus Christ that we want to share. You know the one. We just need someone who will listen to us. Please show us who to ask."

We stood there bowing our heads for, I don't know, ten or twenty seconds. When I looked up at last, Jared was murmuring to himself.

"What'd you get?" I asked.

"Well, what I heard was that I was wrong about going that way," he said, nodding in the direction of the blue and white rambler. Right at that moment, an older woman, bulky as a barn, came out on the front porch of the rambler and favored us with look of grim menace, squinting furiously. Then she shook her head as if in disbelief and retreated inside. "Instead, we should go to"—here, he closed his eyes—"the house next to that one." He opened his eyes and looked at me seriously. "On the money."

I pursed my lips. "Well, I didn't get anything. This time."

Jared looked at me. "This isn't working very well," he said flatly.

Indeed. There we were, two young men—kids, really—not distantly removed from our days of feckless recklessness, and we were purportedly about God's solemn work: saving gentiles. I think we both realized in that instant how ridiculous the whole scene was. (It actually

had occurred to me before that point.) What kind of a Master Plan was it for God to hinge the expansion of His kingdom on shoulders as sloped as ours? I think Jared and I came to an unspoken understanding right then and there that neither of us was really up to this. We were just well-meaning young men trying their best to do the right thing, to choose the right.

So there we were.

“Why don’t you take the lead this time? That’s what senior companions do, I guess,” Jared said.

So we went about it. Here follows a distillation of the rest of that day of tracting. Interpersonally, we hit it off, as different as we were. Had I gone to high school with Jared, I probably wouldn’t have pulled within a million miles of him. I had all sorts of so-called friends in high school. All sorts. And Jared would not have been one of them. As we walked from door to door, we shared our stories about growing up as Mormons. We got along famously, as my mother would say. In terms of missionary success, though—different story. Not a nibble. At most of the doors we knocked on, Jared wouldn’t say a word. But he’d toss out some *riposte* after we left. (The thing about Jared: I came to learn that he wasn’t always cracking jokes out of insecurity or as some sort of defense mechanism. He sincerely thought he was funny. It was only the Christian thing to do to share his gift with us, after all. “I’m the funniest man in America,” was what he would tell me on his deathbed.) We’d flop at every door, and Jared would find a way to frame it in the comical. Effortless.

To wit:

Old man working in garden: We walked up slowly, and when our shadows passed over his work, he looked up and squinted. “Mormons,” he said, as if we didn’t know. Then he went back to his work and addressed himself to his plants. “You come out here, with nothing better to do, and pester us innocent citizens. Go get a real job!”

As we walked away, Jared said to me, “We tried, sir, but McDonalds wouldn’t have us.”

Young woman comes to door: “Good evening, ma’am, I’m Elder Feller and this is Elder Baserman, and we’re missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

She smiled kindly. “We have our own church, boys,” she said. “Thanks, anyway.”

As I was taught at the MTC, I followed up immediately with, “Oh, what church do you attend, ma’am?”

“Thanks anyway, boys,” she said. As she closed the door, keeping her face visible in the shrinking crack, she repeated: “We have our own church, boys. We have our own church, boys.” We heard the deadbolt click home.

“She probably had to get to church,” Jared said dully.

Bare-chested man scratches belly, holding side of door: When I started in, he held up his hand to stop me, as if he had something to offer. He lifted one leg and let loose with the loudest, most alarming fart I had ever heard—and I grew up with six stepbrothers. Then he nodded tersely, as if to say, “Take that!” and slammed the door. As we walked away, Jared said, “Easy for him to say!”

Older man answers doorbell: “Good evening, sir,” I started. He jumped in. “So I’m supposed to take life advice from a couple of kids? I’m supposed to listen to you for the Meaning of Life? Do either of you guys even shave yet?”

“We—”

“You don’t know shit,” he continued. “Go live life some and then come back and we’ll see if you’re so cocky.”

As we were walking away, Jared said, “I resent that. I’ve been shaving my legs for well over a month now!”

More, much more, of the same followed.

Around 6 p.m., we took thirty minutes for a dinner of sandwiches I had packed that morning and an apple a piece, sitting on a park wall and bouncing our heels against the bricks as we talked. We chatted and got to know one another some more. When it was just us, you couldn’t shut him up—and he wasn’t always cracking jokes. Jared told me about his family. I could tell he really missed them. His father cried when Jared left for the mission at the airport. That really impressed me, as I had never seen my stepfather cry. I mean, it’s common for Mormon men to cry, often when bearing their testimony or relating some “spiritual experience.” As a general rule, Mormon men have soft hearts. Not my stepfather, though. I mean, I think he think he loves the Savior. Who’s to say? My stepfather had two settings on his emotional dial: Mad and Off.

“My dad,” Jared said, looking up at the clouds. “He’s a good guy, really good. I guess he’s the kindest man I’ve ever met. He’s really the reason I’m on a mission. I mean, I believe, but it means so much to him. I’m doing it for my family, too, my twin sister. It’s really important that I return with honor. Really important.”

“That’s cool,” I said with a nod. “My dad . . . the church is everything to him, too. But I wouldn’t say he’s particularly kind. In fact, I guess he’s kind of a hard case. My mom, her favorite saying was: ‘You just wait till your father gets home,’ when she’d bust me for something. To which I’d say: ‘He’s not my father.’ Without fail, she’d back off and later say: ‘Okay, Kenny. I’m not going to tell your father about this this time.’ But, I think he knew anyway. And he’s not my real father. He’s a piece of work, that’s for sure. But anyway, I believe, too.”

Then Jared told me about the “spiritual experience” he had at a family reunion, which led directly to his decision to enter the mission field. The way he described it, it was like a vision or something, just like in the Book of Mormon, and the Bible, too, I guess. I mean, in the Mormon Church, a lot of people talk about receiving “impressions” from Heavenly Father. Usually, it’s related to vague matters, things not empirically verifiable or, if verifiable, of piddling significance—for example, finding one’s car keys. Also, it’s my experience that most people saw the hand of God in hindsight. In the middle of the miracle, they were oblivious. Heavenly Father was as subtle as moonlight. You’d look back and there would be His footprints in the damp grass. Also, coincidences—Mormons tends to see God in improbable coincidences. *That must have been Heavenly Father!*

“It wasn’t something I was making up, you know,” he said. “Like when you’re at a Testimony Meeting and you say ‘I know’ and all that shit. I mean, this came upon me. I think it was the power of God.”

“But why would Heavenly Father do that for you?” I asked. “I mean, no offense, but you don’t seem like some spiritual giant, a Man of Valor. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to work? You know, you receive power from on high in proportion to your worthiness.”

“No offense taken. And the answer to your question is I have no fucking idea why He did it. Fucking. I suppose I should say flippin’ now that I’m actually on my mission.”

“Hell, yeah!”

Jared laughed, which was something he didn’t do much. Not that he was glum. Far from it. First off, he was funny as hell, but most of his jokes were delivered with a humorless affect. Secondly, he just didn’t find other people funny—or at least as funny as he was. “I like you,

Kenny Feller,” he said as we sat on the brick wall. “Elder Feller, he of vast soul-winning experience.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That was a load.”

“I had already used my spiritual powers to discern that,” Jared said, placing two fingers on each temple and closing his eyes.

“Elder Baserman,” I said, popping the last of my sandwich into my mouth and dusting off my hands. “You are without question the strangest companion I’ve ever had, and I can say that after only a half a day with you. It’s only going to get weirder from here, isn’t it?”

He lifted his gaze and studied the horizon. “Indubitably,” he said with a smile.

A word, before I go any further. I want you to understand that everything you’re reading, it’s all provable. I say this at the outset because I’m certain that—not too far in—you’ll feel compelled to dismiss it all as horseshit. Understandable. All the stuff about Jared and his visions, and the miracles, and the assorted sexual congress, the God of the universe striking people dead. But I can substantiate it all, every bit. I’m not saying that I understand everything that happened to us, Jared and me. I’m not saying that a lot of it wasn’t baffling, because most of it was baffling and, by turns, titillating, aggravating and—so help me—simultaneously profane and inspirational, if such a state is even possible. What I’m saying—the point I’m making—is that I constructed this retelling of those three turbulent months primarily from eyewitness accounts.

Not that eyewitnesses are infallible. But at least they’re earnest.

That means I busted my hump to chase down all the players in this drama and gather their recollections. A number of them resided outside the greater Skagit Valley, so it took some wayfaring on my part to conduct my interviews. *So what did you say? Then what did he/she say to that? What were the exact words he/she used? How’d that make you feel?*

And so on.

The way I saw it, I had to reconstruct every conversation, every scene, get it perfect. After all, I was on a mission from God.

For example, I had a number of meetings with Algernon Briskey, erstwhile bishop of the Sedro-Woolley ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—Pious Briskey, specifically. Or maybe it was Evil Briskey. There’s the rub. Jerusha’s the one who came up with the whole Evil Briskey/Pious Briskey thing. Just to needle me, I think. It kind of became a shorthand for Jerusha and me—a running joke. Was that Evil Briskey or was that Pious Briskey who did that? Her mind was made up: There never had been a Pious Briskey. There was only Evil Briskey, villain to the bone. I think she blamed him in large part for what ended up happening to Jared. Me, even though I used the phrases Evil Briskey and Pious Briskey, I wasn’t so sure. Had there ever been an Evil Briskey?

We ended up calling it The Briskey Enigma.

After what we all went through, I’ve come to the conclusion that evil is tough to nail down. What is evil? I think most people who are evil—and, believe me, I think there are plenty of evil people out there—they don’t necessarily see themselves as evil. That is, they have rationalized their attitudes or behaviors. It was for the Good of the Community, or something like that, perhaps Protecting the One True Church. You know. Also, I’ve come to believe that evil—real evil—is insidious. It comes on slowly over a person and tricks them into going down a darker path. Evil is deceptive to the evildoer. People who are in a cult don’t think they’re in a

cult. They just think they're normal people—believers. My point is, they've been deluded by the evil itself. I think now that Joseph Smith believed some, maybe all, of his lies, in some way. Evil tries to hide, like God.

The thing about Pious Briskey—if there even is a Pious Briskey walking upright among us—the thing is you are inclined to believe him. At least I am. Reason being, he cuts down on Evil Briskey so freely. He is so upfront about how sinful he had been before his conversion to his offshoot brand of Mormonism. The way Briskey tells it, the Garden variety Mormon Briskey—Evil Briskey—was a lout. The Pentecostal Mormon Briskey—Pious Briskey—well, he isn't perfect . . . but he is aware of his failings and plainly devoted to God's glory. At least that's how he tells it. Once he was lost. Now's he's found. It makes you think, "Only an honest person would talk about themselves like that. He must be sincere." At least, that's what he makes me think. I don't know. Jerusha tells me not to be a dumbshit.

We'd always meet in the food court of the Cascade Mall.

"Tongues and visions," Pious Briskey said, putting a French fry in his mouth as the food court buzzed around us. "I remember once when I was bishop, it turned out that somehow a car in the parking lot had caught fire. Full up in flames. Well, someone in the foyer saw this going on, and ran into the chapel to tell me. When he got inside the chapel, I was in the middle of a benediction and everyone had their heads bowed. So this guy, rather than shouting out, 'There's a fire in the parking lot!' he stood in the back of the chapel and waited for me to finish. When I was done, he sneaked up to the dais and whispered in my ear. And what did I do? Instead of yelling out, 'There's a car on fire in the parking lot!' I told the guy to go get my First Counselor and have him deal with this situation. My point is, that's how stifled things were at our church. And not just ours, all Mormon churches. When I was a non-spirit-filled Mormon, I was proud of how reverent our services were, all hush-hush and sober-minded. Bah! Now I see that we were squelching the Holy Spirit. We weren't reverent. We were asleep—asleep in the light. We weren't letting the Holy Spirit move! I say Jared was a godsend. Others don't and that's their prerogative. He changed me—and I think he changed you, too. Am I right?"

"No doubt, I'm different," I said.

"He who has ears to hear . . ." Briskey said, waving grandly.

So it went.

Now, all that said, it's my own eyewitness observations from those months in Sedro-Woolley that fashion the backbone of this story. Because of the Elbow Rule—"always stay near enough to your missionary companion to hear him at a whisper while outside the apartment, and do not separate for long periods of time within the apartment"—I was present for almost all the stuff Elder Baserman, Jared, battled through.

And I'm as earnest as the day is long.

Back to that first day of tracting with Jared in Sedro-Woolley. After we finished our meal, we returned to our Holy Work. That is, until the last call of the day. It was approaching 9 p.m. Dusk was falling. As we were walking to the door of our last house of the day, Jared caught hold of me by the elbow.

"Hold on," he said. "The people in there. There have been innumerable misconstructions. Negative anagrams." He nodded toward the house. "They. They are against us. In fact, I think they followed me from Boise." At first, I thought it was one of his jokes again.

“Of course they’re against us,” I said. “But here we are, still knocking on their door. Welcome to the mission field. Everyone’s been against us today. In fact, this was pretty typical. Get used to it because, I’m telling ya, this is what it’s like. Everyone hates our guts. It’s been like this for me for the past twenty months.”

“No, this is different. These people have been waiting for us. They really hate us.” He looked at the house nervously. “They want to hurt us, man.”

“What are you talking about? Listen, it’s been a rough day. Let’s just make this our last call for the day. Let’s just get this over with and we can go back to the apartment. You haven’t even had a chance to settle in. You’ll put away your stuff, get your stuff arranged. I’ll make us some chili. You like chili?”

Jared stared at the house before turning his gaze to me. “The Musical Fruit,” he said, with the worried look still on his face.

“So let’s do it,” I said with a smile. “Odds are, they aren’t even going to want to hear what we have to say. Slam-bang, then we’re done. Go back home. Have some chili. Plan tomorrow. Maybe get a little reading in. Slam-bang. Then lights out at 10:30, unless you’re too tired, then we can sack out earlier. That’s cool.”

Jared pressed his lips together doubtfully.

“Come on, man,” I said. “Let’s do this.” I motioned to the house and glared at him. He looked unconvinced.

“You do all the talking, okay?” he said.

“You want me to do all the talking? Fine. That’s cool. But tomorrow, you’ve got to start talking to people.”

Jared followed me to the door, where I rang the bell. Before the chiming had finished, the door was open, and we were looking into a woman’s face. “Latter-day Saints, at our door!” she said cheerfully, speaking through the fence of a tooth-filled grin.

“Well, don’t just stand there like bumps,” the woman said, motioning us forward. “Come in, come in, gentlemen! My name’s Lisa P. We have some refreshments waiting for you.”

Jared followed me in. I looked back at him with raised eyebrows as if to say, “See? No danger here!”

“Daryl is excited to speak with you,” she said over her shoulder.

She ushered us into the kitchen, and there at the table sat Daryl, I assume, every bit as overfed as Lisa P. and polishing a handgun longingly. It was a hell of a handgun, too, a real Avenging Angel kind of thing: The Deathbringer. I looked around the room and saw guns everywhere. They were mounted on the walls like prize bass and left derelict on the counters like Pop Tart wrappers. And Bibles. Guns and Bibles. Daryl snapped his gum in his mouth.

“Sit,” he said.

Lisa P. motioned for us to sit. A pitcher of water with no glasses and a plate Oreos sat on the table. “This is my husband, Daryl,” she said. “Tell us all about yourselves!”

I dove into my story, putting a definite pro-church slant on matters. I knew, as all Mormons know, that we are the church’s public relations agency—walking billboards, if you will. That means we had to portray the church is the kindest light possible and to present ourselves as the best, most well-scrubbed people in the land—people you’d like to be. I looked to Jared as I spoke and it was clear he didn’t want to say a word. As I had been taught at the MTC, I knew my goal was to move the conversation toward spiritual matters as quickly as possible. “It sounds like you may be familiar with us,” I said. “What do you know about the church?”

Daryl looked at me as if I hadn't said a word. "Now, you Latter-day Saints had some front-page news recently, didn't you? All over the news."

"Sir?"

"Well, just last year, your prophet—that's like your pope, right?"

"I really don't know about that, sir," I said. "The prophet speaks for God in this dispensation. He's a special witness for Christ."

"So, he talks to God and knows what God's thinking?"

"Well," I said, getting the uncomfortable sense I was being cornered.

"Would the prophet ever tell you—tell your Church, I mean—to do something if it wasn't, say, God's will?"

I could tell by the glee on his face that he was about to lay the whammy on me. "No, sir," I hesitated. "God would never let the prophet lead us astray."

"Well, your prophet, he had some exciting news last year's what I hear."

It was then I noticed that he kept looking at a piece of paper on the table top that looked like some kind of flyer or brochure, something like that.

"Some big news," he repeated. "He said that blacks could hold the priesthood. First time in more than 150 years."

He leaned back and snatched a glance at the flyer on the table. He spun the handgun around like a warden with his clutch of keys. "So, big news."

I could feel the sweat on my upper lip. I glanced at Jared. He looked like he had swallowed a turd.

"Finally, after 150 years, black people could have the priesthood, leastwise, black men could, right?" He nodded toward his wife. "So what does that mean now?"

I opened my mouth but he cut me off. "It means that, without the priesthood, they didn't have the power of God, didn't it? It means black folks couldn't set foot inside your temple. It meant they couldn't do your ceremonies—your ordinances—to get into heaven. Into"—here he glanced at the brochure in his hand—"into the Celestial Kingdom. No blacks in heaven. Why is it that black men couldn't hold the priesthood until 1978?" he asked, not really asking.

Finally, an opening. I recited the lines President Dewey gave us all. "No one really knows why black men couldn't hold the priesthood until 1978, but—"

"Now, that's not entirely true, is it, boy? In fact, all your prophets over the years, they've seemed to know the reason why. It says here that your prophet Brigham Young said that blacks were cursed with the curse of Cain and that they couldn't, therefore, have the priesthood. And, what's more, blacks couldn't receive the priesthood until the Second Coming. All your prophets said that was God's will, keeping the priesthood from black men. Most of them vociferously. It was God's will that blacks couldn't hold the priesthood. Period. Well, that sounded okay in the olden days, but these days it sounds downright stupid, and racist. It sounds like your Church is racist."

"Racist!" interjected Lisa P.

"So your prophet now was in a fix," Daryl continued. "He wanted to give blacks the priesthood so everyone would stop calling the church racist. But how does he do that without saying all the past prophets were wrong on this matter? Prophets can't be wrong, can they? Your whole Church is built on the prophet always telling you God's will correctly. You said it yourself: 'The prophet would never lead the Church astray.' Your prophet was in a fix. So what he decided to do was, he decided to give blacks the priesthood but not tell anyone how or why. Whenever someone says, 'What about all the other prophets who said it was God's will that

blacks should not receive the priesthood until the Second Coming?’ he just tries to change the subject. Did God change his mind about blacks? Were the past prophets wrong about what God thought about blacks? And if the past prophets could have been wrong, what’s stopping your current prophet from being wrong about the all the other stuff he’s telling you now?”

I took a deep, slow breath and considered my options.

He looked at Lisa P. and back at me. “How come your Book of Mormon says that when dark-skinned folks convert to Mormonism they will become . . . ‘white and delightsome?’”

As I had been trained at the MTC, I began, “Maybe we shouldn’t take up any more of your time here” and started to rise from my chair.

Daryl held up his hand to stop me. “How is it that every prophet before this prophet has said blacks were cursed with the Curse of Cain, and therefore couldn’t have the priesthood? Now, suddenly, God changes His mind. Blacks can hold the priesthood.”

I was frozen halfway off my seat, my hands on the chair’s arms. “Sir, I—”

“Boy, here’s the bottom line for Mormonism. One or more of the following people must be racist: Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or God. Which is it?”

“Sir, the prophet Joseph Smith—”

“Joseph Smith was a lying sack of dickheads!” Lisa P. finally erupted.

“Yeah,” said Daryl. “And let’s talk about Joseph Smith.” Here he flipped open the brochure and began reading to himself. “Here: ‘Joseph Smith married more than thirty women, some of whom were as young as fourteen years of age. And he married ten women who were already married to other men.’”

“Now, that’s just a lie,” I began.

Here, Jared jumped to his feet, and shouted, “Joseph Smith only had one wife, Emma, and he was faithful to her to the end of his life.”

The man shot up and pointed the gun inches away from Jared’s crimson face. “You little shit-eater!” he yelled. “Who are you to talk down to us?”

Jared shouted back. “I testify to you that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God and that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true and living church on the face of the earth!” He bent to pick up his backpack and added, “And, in the name of the holy Melchizedek Priesthood, I call a curse against you from on high!”

“You little fucker,” Daryl boomed.

Jared rose and headed for the door, leaving me frozen in my chair. Then he turned to face Daryl and Lisa P. “You have a spirit of contention!” he shouted.

“You little fucker!” the man shouted and stormed after Jared, berating him and waving the gun. His wife followed him, leaving me alone in the kitchen. I gathered my backpack and started after them. The man shouted curses at Jared, who shouted over his shoulder, “You have a spirit of contention!” He marched ahead of them, picking up his pace, which led the man and woman to jog forward, to the extent they were able. By the time I reached the front door, they were halfway down the block, shouting at one another as they jogged. I had to sprint to catch up to Jared, and as I passed the couple, the man huffed out, “You . . . little . . . fucker!” He waved the gun weakly in my direction.

I caught up to Jared and looked over my shoulder to find that the couple had stopped, clearly out of gas.

“Come on!” I shouted to Jared, slapping him on his shoulder. We turned the corner and slowed, eventually stopping at the base of a huge tree.

“Holy shit!” I said, leaning over with my palms on my knees.

Jared gasped heavily and leaned against the tree. “They . . . they . . . had a spirit of contention,” he said, dropping his backpack at his feet.

I watched Jared leaning against the tree and it hit me: He had been right. They were against us. I mean, I don’t think they were from Boise. But they saw us coming up the street and they grabbed their flippin’ brochure, and they put together their plan of attack. It wasn’t much of a plan: just some water, some woebegone Oreos, and a brochure. And the gun. I suppose the gun was part of the plan somehow. But we walked right into it. And, somehow, Jared knew it beforehand.

“Spirit of contention,” Jared said breathlessly.

And that was how I passed my first afternoon and evening in the presence of Elder Jared Baserman.