

Beauty from Ashes
A Mormon's Story of Divorce

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Introduction

I have something to say.

Every once in a while, our own experiences simultaneously torture and enlighten us in a way that we are intensely compelled to share them with others. I had an experience with marriage and divorce from which others might glean comfort and understanding. The single purpose of my publication of this book is to give searching people a voice.

Of course, I wrote this book from my own perspective. Really, who else's perspective could I have used? Therein lies the subjectivity of the book, but also its merit. I remember wandering through Internet sites and bookstores when the whole terrible prospect of a failing marriage opened up in front of me. A marriage which, I thought, would be unbreakable, because I had done all in my power to base it on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I looked for hours and days, feeling feeble and starved. What was I looking for?

A voice.

I never found a voice in those places that could speak in harmony with my own. Sure, there were self-help books written by secular psychologists. There were theological discourses on the subject which were also somewhat useful. And of course there was the occasional light in the darkness supplied by God's mercy and the instruction of His Spirit. However, there was nothing personalized and modern I could find on paper to help me traverse the obscure pathway on which I found myself.

I felt alone.

So, after I had clawed my way back out of the abyss, I knew I had to create such a text. Anyone who desires to read it may, of course. My more specific audience, however, is believers in God who have found themselves in the throes of abusive and degrading marriages, have suffered consequent crises of faith, and who have been forced to watch the spouse they love suffer a living death before their very eyes. The book will also testify of the spectacular miracles that occur during and, in my case, after such trials.

Events in the book have been combined to produce a truthful impression on the reader of what actually happened. I've added dialogue to foster a story quality. I've changed most names to protect the anonymity of those involved in the history.

You will notice that the book doesn't flatter or vindicate me. That's not its point. I have tried to truthfully exhibit my humanity. Neither do I pretend that the spiritual insights I experienced during this period speak in any official capacity for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the church to which I belong. That is not my role. My intention is that my own experiences may be of use to someone else.

May these pages help you find a voice on your own behalf or on behalf of someone you love. May you find the Savior as an ally in your heartache, as expressed by Isaiah on the next page, and hold on to the hope that He will forge you a new heart out of the ashes of your mortal experiences.

-Jennifer Rebekah Hederlig

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“The Lord hath anointed me . . . to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness . . .”

Isaiah 61:1, 3

Chapter 1

I loved Sundays after church! Jacqueline, Nellie, and I always found a few hours to do some relaxing amid the madness of our zillions of church and school responsibilities at Brigham Young University.

This Sunday afternoon, the weather was nice.

For those of you who have never lived there, Provo, Utah in February isn't *exactly* "nice" unless you happen to hail from the poles, are part abominable snowman, or are from one of those places where people's hobbies include ice fishing, sitting with naked men in saunas, and eating plate after plate of steaming "haat dish." Sure you might hear a native Utahan say something like, "It's just *a little* below freezing. Let's slap on the old sandals and go out for a picnic!" But for the rest of us, this would be no true indication of nice weather. In fact, most of us would be more likely to say something like, "Before we go outside, let's save ourselves a trip to the hospital by amputating a couple of future frostbitten toes."

Well, Nellie and I aren't Utahans, and Jacqueline had resisted her American Fork heritage ever since she could remember, but we decided anyway that using the local dialect and calling the weather "nice" was the key to our escape from the confines of a three-bedroom, six-woman apartment.

We moseyed on over to Kiwanis Park where we were relieved to see that other BYU students had rejected the locals' observation of the weather and that couples were, therefore, not sprawled out over the grass by the dozens making out.

Single girls really hate seeing that!

And we were as single as they came. Naturally, then, the conversation turned to boys as we strode across the open field, uninhibited by the sucking noises and indecent scenes that one typically heard and saw somewhere below knee level at Kiwanis Park.

"I tried to tell him why I want to study disease, but I had already lost him at 'Clinical Laboratory Science!' Ahhhh!" Jacqueline's dark blue eyes rolled underneath thin, orange brows. "It's only because 'women in science' isn't in any one of the Five Categories of Acceptable Conversational Topics here at BYU."

At this, a sweet peel of Nellie's laughter rolled out across the hilly terrain. "Oh no! There are categories? That explains a lot about my dating life. What about 'women in math?'"

"Nah, don't worry Nellie-bellie," I responded with a flippant wave of my hand. "You're so sweet, guys don't care what your major is. Jacqueline on the other hand . . ."

I knew I was in for it now, and I was right. The little Scottish-looking face scrunched up into a vengeful pucker. In a verbal joust, Jacqueline would always win. Always!

“Yeah, well, apparently English Teaching majors are experiencing a dearth of dating, too!”

At this, we sniggered, acknowledging our common situation in spite of our different educational focuses.

“What are these conversational categories anyway, Jacqueline? I mean, I’m the social communications expert,” I smirked sarcastically, “and I’ve never heard of them.”

“Ahem,” the master cleared her throat, “the Five Categories of Acceptable Conversational Topics include, first, roommates; second, family; third, the mission; fourth, your own accomplishments; and fifth, your major.”

“Hummm. Confined, perhaps, but at least it’s straightforward!” I shrugged.

Wool-covered red hair shook in the dim winter light. “Nope.”

“What do you mean ‘Nope?’” I protested.

“Not straightforward at all, nor fair. The fifth category has a gender-based addendum tacked onto the end of it by Happy Valley culture.”

“Oh great!” Nellie smiled widely and cast her eyes toward the clouds. “More reading, less sleep! Unless it’s *not* the kind of addendum that comes shrink-wrapped with my math books.”

“No, Nellie-bellie, it’s purely verbal, and short! It simply states that if you’re a woman and you’re actually in a major that will allow you to get a job after you graduate, you’re not allowed to talk about it with available members of the opposite gender,” Jacqueline sighed as she concluded.

More sarcasm and wit followed this comment, including my defense that as I teacher, I would only be making slightly more than the allowance my mom used to give me for dusting her knick knacks. Eventually, we got cold and began to make our way home in the growing darkness. There were people to visit, planning meetings to attend, and prayer with our ward (or congregation) a bit later on. But it sure was nice to take a break.



The winter of 2006 had turned to spring and then to an unbearably scorching summer. At this time, I learned something: Pneumonia really is no fun. Especially when you repeatedly go to the doctor and are sent away with a flu diagnosis despite your insistence that you are going to die at any moment. On top of that, it was the summer, and the observable heat in Provo is a veritable inferno even compared to my home town, Albuquerque. The heat seems to descend upon Provo in May, right after it stops snowing, pushes its way up to 100°, and stubbornly stays there until August. Combine that condition with fever spikes of 102°.

The doctor had sent me home three times before. I had been dragging myself into his office quite regularly the past little while seeking his professional company. I finally went into his examination room, sat on his little table, and refused to leave unless he gave me a chest x-ray. It's amazing how far a little bit of defiance goes.

When the x-rays came back, the doctor scrutinized them incredulously, blushed, and immediately rushed at my back with his stethoscope insisting sharply, "Really I didn't hear anything!"

I drove myself home operating my standard vehicle, pills in hand, believing I would suffocate even as I read the instructions.

When I arrived there, shirt soaked through with sweat, hacking up a lung roughly every ten seconds, there was a message waiting for me.

A young lady in my ward was in the Psych Unit at the hospital in Orem. She had been contemplating suicide.

Fifteen minutes later, I was there. I knew this young lady. I was the Relief Society President, the head of our women's organization, so I had helped with her issues before. Surprisingly, they let me see her, even though I wasn't family. All of her family was on the East Coast, which I guessed the hospital knew. I stayed for about an hour or so, and then I drove myself home. Again.

Finally, there I was in the air conditioned apartment to stay. I trudged down the hall and opened the door to the room that Jacqueline and I shared. What a sight! My bed! Sigh! I undressed quickly and blissfully lay down.

Seconds later, the door flew open. "Hey," I heard Jacqueline's voice exclaim, "the guys from 311 invited us to eat watermelon with them in the rec room. Are you coming?"

"Is there a bed there?" I asked feebly. Jacqueline looked scandalized!

I really didn't want to leave my dark, cool bedroom. But, how often did I get the chance to exclusively associate with males my age? I think that I brushed my hair before I went down, probably, but I truthfully don't remember. Probably grabbed a clean shirt, too. Maybe?

Next thing I knew, I was in the rec room trying to muster some social finesse among giant, juicy watermelon slabs and grinning twenty-something-year-old men.



A week passed. My antibiotics had run out. I returned to the doctor. The pneumonia had spread to the other lung as well, but he refused to give me any more antibiotics, because he somehow assessed that I was getting better. I also had developed pleurisy, which is an infection in the membranes of the lungs and ribs. For practical purposes, pleurisy means living in fear of a laugh, a cough, a sneeze, or a deep breath. Imagine someone simultaneously cracking open your rib cage

with a spiked club and soaking your open wounds in the lime salt and chili mixture that my Mexican friends like so much. Then imagine experiencing that delectable sensation multiple times an hour for two months . . . while you're trying to teach nineteen-year-olds Spanish and missionarying at the Missionary Training Center, which is especially problematical, because laughter is an essential part of the teaching experience.

In order not to have a mental breakdown due to the boredom of staying indoors for sixteen to twenty hours per day, I had picked up some reading: Dante's *Purgatorio*. Granted, Dante's *Divine Comedy* is not the sort of thing you usually read little snippets of right before bedtime. Not unless you enjoy dreams full of human suffering and bizarre medieval symbolism, that is. However, I was determined to celebrate progress from not having the strength even to watch movies to being able to at least lie down and read. This Italian master's work was the only thing sitting around in my apartment that I hadn't read.

That's when I received a phone call. It was Rocky, one of the boys who had invited us to eat watermelon in the rec room. For some strange reason, he invited me to go play Frisbee golf with him that coming Friday, a few days hence. I told him I was recovering from pneumonia, but that I would do my best! Hey, anything to get me away from Dante!

What Rocky's thought process was at this point, I don't know. I was by no means beautiful or charming the night I had met him. I expressed this to Jacqueline as she crashed onto the couch, face eager with merriment. "I don't know, Jenny!" she exclaimed. "Maybe he thought, 'Well, she looks like death warmed over! Perhaps she'll go out with me!'"

"Thanks, friend," I retorted, stifling a painful laugh.

"How the heck are you going to play Frisbee golf, anyway, huh? You can barely work a three-hour shift every day in an air conditioned building!"

"Air conditioned, but smelly," I defended myself. "If I can withstand the stench of being in a closed space with ten teenage boys who have been gorging on cafeteria food for the past seven weeks, I'm pretty sure I can handle a little round of Frisbee golf!"

"Maybe you're right," Jacqueline chuckled just in time for Nellie to sweep in the door carrying a stack of books.

"What do you two look so amused about?" she questioned. We smiled mysteriously in return. A second later, Nellie had plunked herself down comfortably on the carpet, flip flops falling off casually in front of her. As soon as we had summarized the situation to her, she let out a thunderous laugh, tossing her hair back and dropping to lounge on one elbow, head in hand. "Rocky Warren?" she whooped incredulously. "From the rec room? Well, Jenny, maybe you should look like a granola chick and cough up Silly Putty in front of guys more often!"



The day of the date came. I showered, combed my hair, and carefully considered the clothes I put on for the first time in weeks. I settled on a pair of khaki shorts and a solid blue t-shirt. As I tied on my Asics, the knock came. I opened the door and saw Rocky standing there along with an athletically-dressed couple. The boy in the couple, Jaime, lived in a basement apartment across the way. He chatted easily with his date, a girl I recognized from a neighboring ward.

We arrived at the course and started strongly, sinking shots in two to three tries. The men, of course, were trying to show off for us womenfolk. I was flattered in some way. I always thought it was rather comical when boys tried to show off, but I figured it was the thought that counted.

Interestingly, though, the course became more difficult as we went on, and showing off became more challenging for the men. There were several difficulty factors that arose just around the first turn.

First, there were the trees. The Frisbees like them, it turns out. More than once, I found myself at Rocky's side picking through bushes and branches, joking, laughing (still cautiously), and finally stumbling upon the brightly colored disks.

Then there were the hills. Let's just say they looked easier to climb up from the top than they did from the bottom. I huffed, puffed, and coughed (very painfully) quite often as Rocky covered up the awkwardness by expressing how impressed he was with my Frisbee skill despite my being half-dead.

Finally, there was the water trap. Oh, the water trap! It was a pool of stagnant, dark green water filled with weeds and algae that was about twenty feet across and about twice as long. If I were a desert traveler in Arabia who hadn't had a drink in days, I wouldn't drink from the pool, and I wouldn't let my camel drink from it, either. As a matter of fact, I would stay as far away from it as possible due to the smell!

To my astonishment, I had successfully cleared this water trap using only one disk. Both members of the other couple had cleared it as well, both with one disk. Now it was Rocky's turn.

He expertly put one foot forward, blonde bangs settling upon blonde eye brows, face scrunched up, tongue slightly protruding between clenched teeth. The throw was beautiful . . . for a couple of seconds. However, as the orange disk made its way back toward the Earth, it slid off at a peculiar angle. A second later, it had turned completely on its side in the air. Then it landed perfectly vertically in the sludgy water.

Rocky's eyes widened. He raised his hand to his face and tensely bit his first knuckle. His expression was similar to that of a kid who has realized at that exact moment that the BB he had intended for the sparrow had instead sailed over the wall and through the neighbor's window.

"Dang!" he whispered under his breath. Suddenly remembering I was there, he shifted his bright blue eyes toward me and explained with a grimace, "I borrowed these!"

He picked up another disc, this one yellow, from the grass beside him, assumed his Frisbee-hurling position, and let fly! Again, the disk sailed beautifully for a moment, tilted to the side, and then plunged fiercely into the putrid water, cutting it like a knife. Again, Rocky bit his knuckle, muttered to himself, and picked up another disk from the ground beside him.

Moments later, all three of Rocky's disks were somewhere in the pond.

In a flash, he and Jaime materialized at the pond's edge! They proceeded to problem solve in a very manly manner. Their voices rose and fell on the breeze, their eyes squinted to this place in the water and that place on the bank as they gestured broadly over the squishy mud.

Jaime's date and I stood on a bald spot on the course above. I had some ideas on how to retrieve the Frisbees, but Rocky and Jaime were definitely "in the zone" at this point. I wasn't sure they'd welcome my opinion. Strategic enlightenment of this kind was definitely a masculine endeavor in their eyes. Every once in a while they'd glance at us and smile or announce what they intended to do.

Finally, the best they came up with was to wade into the filthy water and feel around with their hands. Brilliant! It turned out the water was only knee deep. The boys found one of the disks, at least, after a search of about five minutes and left the pond triumphant.

As for me, I felt like I was going to fall over dead. My post-pneumonia hyper streak had officially ended. I would be lying if I were to say that I was anything but relieved when Rocky turned down a series of streets and then headed north on to State Street, in the direction of my apartment.



Rocky seemed like a nice guy, and I was happy when he asked me out again. And then again, the next week. And then again, the week after that. We went out to ice cream, to church functions, to a concert in Salt Lake, and even to his mother's house.

And then it stopped. I had no idea why. Had I done something less than benign at the concert? Did the mother not like me? And the questions continued. But not to an insane degree. I'd never been one to obsess over the whys of relationships. Even if the reason for this cessation of contact was simply that he didn't like me anymore, that was fine, albeit disappointing.

Strangely, though, my friends were outraged over Rocky's decision not to ask me out again. The feminine assumption in Provo culture is that wedding bells can indeed begin to chime after only a few dates. This, of course, terrifies young men and seems to discourage them from asking out women at all. I had no desire to impose this strange law upon Rocky, so I smoothed my friends' rage over casually, and when they saw that I wasn't put out about Rocky's stoppage of attention, they forgave him and treated him with the same friendliness that they always had.

A few Sundays later, I saw Rocky talking congenially, blonde bangs resting upon blonde eyebrows, with Cindy, a petite sweetie from apartment #101. As I watched the exchange, it was obvious that Cindy liked him very much.

Within a few weeks, Rocky and Cindy were “official.” They dated for the better part of the semester and then broke up. Cindy never really told any of her less intimate friends why. She only said that it was a good thing for both of them.

Rocky moved out of the complex that summer. I wasn’t worried. I figured I was much more likely to date and marry at home, in New Mexico, where I would be returning within the year.



“Why Dean Gustafson, as I live and breathe, how well you look today!” I know. It’s straight out of *Hello Dolly*. Summer had turned to fall, and after . . . how many weeks of scarce male company, what did I have to lose? I knew Dean would never ask me on a date, but I did enjoy teasing him and watching him squirm. And he enjoyed it too, because he had a hard time asking girls out! Everyone needs a little attention, right? Consequently, Jacqueline, Nellie, and I would often approach him and try out our pickup lines on him. Dean was aware that this was our purpose, because we had informed him of it ourselves, so as he saw us approach, a humorous yet embarrassed smile would light up his face and his dark eyes would jig with anticipation.

Now, you have to understand something about Dean Gustafson. He grew up in Blanding, Utah. Don’t know where Blanding is? Congratulations, you’re normal! It’s a little town in southern Utah that I only know as the place my family would stop for gas and dinner before finally reaching Lake Powell. Well, Dean grew up in this place where everyone knows everyone else, you can’t step on anyone’s toes at school lest you suffer the consequences at church, and Coke is a four letter word that merits a nice slap in the face if uttered around your mother.

The point: Even Provo was tough on Dean. There were non-Utahans there, after all, and some of them didn’t even go to BYU! Some of them hadn’t gone on missions. Some of them had tattoos and even, *GASP!*, more than one piercing in their ear! Now, I’m not saying that any of things are *good*, but, well . . . hopefully this slightly shady list helps you understand Dean!

But still, everyone really liked Dean. What wasn’t to like? Despite his constant deer-in-the-headlights look (especially when he was around me or Jacqueline), he was kind, spiritual, hard-working, and pretty good-looking to boot. Actually, really good-looking. When we were alone, guyless in apartment #203 on Friday nights, we would often amuse ourselves by trying to predict what Dean would do if we were to invite him over and one of us were to just walk up to him and plant a kiss on his mouth. A former roommate predicted that he would not stay in the apartment for long after said kiss and that the only evidence that he had been there at all would be a “large, Dean-shaped hole in the wall.”

Believe it or not, all of our tormenting of Dean actually had a productive end. It led us to think that while Dean may utter a blood-curdling scream if one of us were to ask him out for real, there were probably other guys in the apartments who *weren't* from Blanding, Utah. Dean tolerated us. Did that mean that other boys might go one step further and actually consent to join us on a date if we were to invite them?

The question intrigued us, so we made a group goal. Once per month, we would ask out a cluster of men from our ward on a group date. We would try to ask out guys who lived together or at least knew each other to minimize the awkwardness.

Now, there's something else you need to understand in order to grasp this story. Mormon Dating Norm #1 states that a young woman is generally forbidden to ask out a young man. She must wait for him to ask her out. If she asks him out, she's a feminist or, even worse, a feminazi (I never understood this term, myself), and if you were to go on a date with her, she would likely engage in radical behaviors such as expressing opinions and opening doors for herself. She may be majoring in something other than Humanities or Education, and if the relationship were to progress to marriage, she would likely refuse to immediately drop out of college to become a Mormon baby-making factory!

Now, do you sense the sarcasm? The situation was not really that extreme. In fact, most men at BYU had a brain in their heads, and most of them at least grew up watching modern TV, so they didn't expect to date only Mrs. Leave It to Beavers. However, throughout my years at BYU, many of my male buddies expressed to me that while they understood that the surrounding women had grown up in the late 20th century, they were still a bit squeamish about women asking them out, and they would likely not reciprocate by initiating a second date.

Nevertheless, my roommates and I were women, first, with a mission who, second, had nothing to lose. We sallied forth, a group of non-distressed damsels seeking worthy knights!

The first apartment of men we asked out was #112. The date went swimmingly, according to our assessment. We did pizza and games at our apartment. Next was #209, which was ice skating. For me, the date kind of flopped, because my date had weak ankles and couldn't skate much. And then, we asked out another apartment the next month, and the list goes on. We had a lot of fun. We made a lot of friends. However, no guy-initiated dates resulted.

Around the return of the warm weather, Nellie hit it off with a guy that wasn't in our ward, and a different roommate had moved to Europe for a semester. Yet another had received her mission call. The dating coterie was broken up.

But, we were satisfied. We'd done our part to further our futures. No one reciprocated, but what could we do about it? Instead of sitting around whining about it and losing our self-esteem, we had been proactive. And it had felt great!



Ah, Ward Prayer! The last refuge of any socially-inept nerd, and the delight of every socially-savvy prima donna. And everything in-between. Why, you may ask, pray *en masse* yet again when you had just spent all of Sunday doing so at church? Well, Ward Prayer wasn't only about praying. Although it only took up a few minutes of your Sunday evening, Ward Prayer was really about bonding with your ward, seeing who was new, getting to know your bishopric, and, yes, acknowledging at the end that we were all dependent on God to lead us in our busy and somewhat turbulent young lives.

Aside from the prayer, I went for more practical reasons. With my heavy responsibilities toward the women of the flock, Ward Prayer was an opportunity to get things done. I made appointments, set up meetings, clarified who was living where, verified who was in charge of what, and observed people's aptitudes and what my intuition was regarding prospective "callings," or church service assignments.

It was at the end of one such busy Ward Prayer that Jacqueline pulled me aside. She was looking particularly lovely that night. She wore a bright green sweater and her curls were pulled up into a bun. *These guys must be brain-dead!* I thought to myself. *They've got a beautiful woman standing in front of them and they are terrified out of their minds because her IQ is higher than theirs!* I chuckled to myself.

My expression deterred Jacqueline slightly in her mission. She had opened her mouth to say something clever, I could tell, but shut it abruptly upon seeing my amusement. "What?" she grinned.

"Nothing," I promised. "It's just that you look good, but none of these men are schmoozing you. Hey, I've got a new pick up line! It's from *Milo and Otis*. Wanna go try it out on Dean?"

Jacqueline continued to grin, but she shook her head from side to side slowly with her orange eyebrows raised indicating that she had something else in mind. She lifted her chin and pointed across the room with her lips. Since there were roughly eleven thousand people on the other side of the rec room, I wasn't entirely sure to whom or what she was pointing. I shook my head subtly and narrowed my eyes to indicate that I was confused. "What?" I asked.

Jacqueline moved in closer to me and stifled a laugh. "Check out Junior Asparagus!" she said in a low voice. My eyes followed hers and, sure enough, there stood the real-life version of Junior Asparagus from *Veggie Tales*. Except, he wasn't green. No, he was dark, almost black. His skin, his eyes, his hair. He was tall and lean. He wore a deep blue jersey of some kind. The top of his head sported an astonishing shock of dark curls. And his eyes . . . well . . . they reminded me of a seal's eyes. Deep and wise, yet playful. He definitely wasn't African-American. Maybe an islander? But, no.

What a strange-looking person! I thought to myself. Before I knew it Jacqueline had me by the hand and was dragging me in his direction. The crowd parted as we came through, and the little circle in which he was standing opened up to receive us. Its members eyed us amiably. Standing at its head, of course, was Nellie! She was the friendly one after all. "Hey, Jacqueline, Jenny! This is Giuseppe Ponzo, Josh's new roommate. They call him . . . wait, what do they call you?" she inquired of the new stranger.

“Gius. Josh say this make more easy for Americans. Is like ‘Gus,’ but *italiano*. My mat-er, she call me ‘Zander.’ She like *muito* the great king, *Alexandre o Grande*, so she give me for *nome do meio*.” He spoke all of these words, including the foreign ones, in a deep German accent.

“A *nome do* . . . what?” Nellie questioned.

“His middle name, right?” I piped in. His eyes rotated slowly toward me and regarded me with interest that I thought to be academic. “Oh,” I endeavored to explain, “see, I have this thing with languages.” He continued to stare. “I’m sorry,” I reached for his hand. He took it and held it. “I’m Jenny. Where are you from?”

It turns out that Gius was from Italy originally, but he had lived many other places in the world. He had been Josh’s mission companion in Brazil, and he had come to BYU to study. We discovered all of this by listening to a combination of Gius’s own attempts to communicate and Josh’s translation of his words from Portuguese to English. *Interesting*, I thought to myself. *I would like to get to know him. Maybe they’ll invite us for watermelon.* Gius’s eyes danced my direction periodically in the midst of my thoughts and our group’s conversation. Apparently, he had something other than watermelon in mind.



I’m fairly certain now that it happened in a different lifetime and to a different person.

I was home studying. The phone rang. As usual, I didn’t answer it. But Jacqueline did. I hated phone calls, as usually they indicated someone was about to add something to the zillions of responsibilities that were already crushing me.

She handed me the noise box with a grin on her face. I simply grimaced. *What’s with the grin?* I wondered as I put the receiver to my ear.

I took a breath to begin speaking, and right as I did, Jacqueline mouthed with shining eyes, “It’s a boy!”

It took a split second to recover. I think I managed to do so before I spoke the hello in my most confident tone.

The voice on the other end was tremulous. Sweet. Yet, determined. The English was broken. The German accent was strong. And I knew it belonged to the curly-headed, dark-skinned look-alike of Junior Asparagus.

“Jenny?” it asked.

“Yes?” I responded brilliantly.

“This is Gius. Um . . .” there was a pause as he searched for the words. “You go to *ein* date with me?”

Ha! He must have had it all written down beforehand! was my first thought. But as my teacher brain disconnected and my personal response kicked in, I marveled, *How brave! These English-speaking pansies don't even have the guts to do what he just did!* After all, how long had it been since one of my male ward-mates had managed to pry himself away from his videogames and ask one of the six of us out? Two months? Three?

I refocused enough to accept the invitation, make logistical arrangements, and hang up the phone.



We decided to walk to the Brick Oven. That way we could talk. Well, in a manner of speaking, anyway. Gius didn't exactly speak English. He'd been in the country about a month, and his English included German articles, some syntax thrown in from Portuguese, and Italian gestures and expressions of emotion. For example, "I have a headache," would sound something like, "I have *ein* ache head" with a loud explanation afterward that it caused him much *dor* and followed up with a good old fashioned *mama mia!* Nevertheless, Gius's lack of English didn't hinder him in the slightest from telling me anything and everything about the last couple years of his life. He prattled on and on, as if nothing in the world could possibly be as natural as walking with me on a date to a pizzeria, without being ashamed or shy, full of confidence and life.

Gius told me all about his mission to São Paulo, Brazil. I unscrambled humorous stories about his Mission President, tender tales of his companions, and amazing stories of the people he taught the Gospel. Once inside, he sat across from me, forehead moist with perspiration, wrinkled in concentration, while his brown eyes held me in comfortable and earnest conversation.

Honestly, I was surprised that I understood as much of Gius's communication as I did. The fact that I knew Spanish really helped, because while the charming accent and many of the articles and pause fillers were German, the syntax and cognates were all Italian and Portuguese, which descend, like Spanish, from Latin. In this way, my love of Spanish mixed somehow into the interest I had in getting to know this new acquaintance.

But, even beyond the linguistic details, I understood Gius because of his warmth and sincerity. It's easy to understand someone, anyone, when there are no games and no hidden messages.

Our dinner was good! Really good! We had brick oven pizza and soda. We both ate heartily. I ate as much as he did, and not only didn't he mind; he didn't even notice! He just talked and talked about Italy, his dramatic relationship with his Mafioso father, Italian society, and *pizza bianca con mortadella*. His mouth worked relentlessly on these stories whether full of sauce or empty. I listened with fascination and asked him questions. I didn't contribute stories of my own, because I soon realized I had never met anyone like him before. I was content to learn, and he was content for me to simply be the recipient, as if a dam were bursting, as if he'd waited ages to say what he was saying and finally had an audience.

“Now, how long have you been off of your mission?” I asked him.

“Oh, couple month,” he responded.

Ab, I thought, *he hasn't been able to talk to a female as a friend for years!* No wonder he was a veritable chatterbox!

“So, how did you find the Gospel?” I had been waiting to ask this one! It's pretty personal, but as he seemed so willing to share everything about himself, I thought it fair game.

He took a swallow of pizza and root beer and refocused. “Well, I study be pilot in Brazil when I is sixteen-years-old. I have *ein* friend who is meet *com* the missionaries there, but he no think learn Gospel seriously, you know? But I know he see missionaries, so one day I is in flight school library for look at books, and I find Book of Mormon. I get it and start read. I finish in two, three days, and then I find missionaries by mine friend. I baptize in like two weeks, I think,” his eyes darted toward the ceiling to check his memory on this account. “Yes, two weeks I think is. Anyway, I go to church ever Sunday, and I meet Tia Candid, who take care of me like mom. Mine stepdad, the German, one Sunday tell me that if I go to church, I no can come back and live in *das . . . das* house.” His eyes eagerly checked to see if he'd found the right word. I smiled and nodded, so he continued. “When I return from church, all mine things outside. Mine mom, she is Brazilian, she no have problem with Church, but mine stepdad, he is atheist, and he is very angry *comingo* for baptize. So I take stuff and live with Tia Candid *até que* mine mission.”

I was touched. I've always admired integrity, and this was integrity of the highest kind. Gius's family was rich. His German stepdad owned some huge plant in Europe, and he was one of the wealthiest men in that part of the country. He owned a mansion in Recife and another in northern Germany. But, Gius's family had disinherited him.

“So, how did you pay for your mission,” I asked him as I smacked down a bite of crust.

“Well, I finish pilot school and work as commercial pilot for *ein* time. I make *multo* money and save. I no plan go to mission. Brazilian Air Force offer scholarship to me to Brazilian Air Force Academy in São Paulo, and I accept. I is excited! But then mine Bishop, he invite me to office and say, ‘Giusseppe, you will serve in *ein* mission?’ I pray about and then tell Air Force that I go to mission and no to academy. I receive mine mission call *ein* time later, and it is to São Paulo! In Missionary Training Center in São Paulo, mine companion and I watch Air Force planes fly over and I think, ‘Wow, could be me fly planes!’ But go to mission is decision correct,” he ended matter-of-factly.

It was obvious that Gius and I came from different worlds. He explained to me lightheartedly how, after his mission, he had returned to Italy. He knew that his stepdad, who was then back in Germany, was still antagonistic toward his new lifestyle. So, he headed to Italy, where his biological dad seemed happy to receive him. However, after a few days, conflict arose. One night, an argument came up between the two. The dad was drunk, and he became destructive. “He

break everything in house,” Gius remembered. “At night, I sleep with *ein* knife under mine pillow. I know I must go, but where? I no can go to Germany. I have no *oportunidade* in Brazil. Is very poor there. So, I call Devin.”

Devin lived in Utah and was Gius’s trainer in the mission. The two had stayed in touch. Gius absolutely idolized Devin. In Gius’s mind, Devin was a safe place. “Devin say I come live in United States and go to school. I go to buy ticket, and I have no money in account. I call mine mom, and she say she spend it when I is on mission, because mine stepdad angry with her and stop give her money.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “So I guess she need it. So Devin help me buy ticket. The day I must go to airport in Rome arrive, and mine dad, he tell me in morning he take me to airport. But, *ein* hour before we supposed go, he no is in home. I walk through *die* street with purpose find him and go to regular cafes he stay at all day, but he is there in none of places.”

“Then, I turn for go home, and I see the mafia friends of mine father. They say to me, ‘Giuseppe, you go today to America! You father must take you to airport now.’”

“But I tell them, ‘Know you where is he? I have no see him.’”

“They say, ‘No, we have no see him, he is no *ein* good father. We take you to airport!’”

“So they drive me to house and we get mine stuff. Then they take me to airport. They descend from car and go *comigo* inside airport. I tell them they no can pass security, but they say, ‘Is okay, we take you to airplane.’”

“The security guys let them pass because, *não sei*, maybe they know they is mafia. So they walk with me to airplane and talk about how mine father is terrible father for leave me with no one carry me to airport, and they give me 3,000 Euros and tell me if I have trouble in America, they have people in New York will help me. So then I fly Salt Lake and Devin he pick me up at airport. Then he take me to Carl’s Junior! I never taste something so good in all mine life . . .”

And then, Gius was off on another part of his story.

I didn’t have any stories like this. Perhaps that is why I was fascinated. How could someone from such a different background than me be in America and sitting in front of me espousing the same values that I loved? Gius’s life had shown that he placed importance on qualities such as reaching out to his family, forgiveness, discovering God’s plan for him, sharing the Gospel, living by faith, and practicing integrity. This was just the way I had tried to live.

His sacrifice to live true to his convictions seriously impressed me. But to add to the effect was his attitude toward his own story. He didn’t let his triumph over adversity and his great personal sacrifice transform his head into an overinflated inner tube. In fact, Gius was almost casual about his story, as if he might say any minute, “Well, I know that anyone would have done what I did.”

We walked back to Centennial, our apartment complex, where he invited me to his apartment to look at a picture that he took in São Paulo. This photo supposedly proved absolutely

the existence of the mysterious *chupacabra*. I told him it looked like a dead dog to me, at which point he squeaked indignantly, “What? *Ein* dog? Is *cane* very strange with teeth very big!”

I smiled. He smiled back. Our eyes met in merriment and understanding and, suddenly, we were both a thousand years old and we had known each other our entire lives.



As I reflected on the date later on in my apartment, I felt a sense of peace. Would we have a future? Who knew? And honestly, it felt as if neither of us really cared. Regarding the status of “us,” it felt as if we were merely old friends.

Chapter 2

So, why am I Mormon? Once one of my good friends, who is not a Mormon, answered this question on my behalf before I had a chance to. Another friend had inquired it of me in front of her. With an annoyed tone, she expressed, “She’s Mormon because she was raised Mormon!”

No. That’s not it. True, I don’t know if I ever would have found the Church on my own had I not been raised in it. Not many do. There are few of us in the world. And I wouldn’t be one to let myself be stopped by the missionaries on the street or answer my door when two complete strangers knocked on it. I’m busy, and I don’t like to be bothered by people. I’d be too annoyed to listen to my deeper instincts, I think.

Nevertheless, I must say that I believe I am Mormon because I chose to be so. I have always shamelessly questioned everything. Faith, in general, is not my gift. Knowledge is my gift. I’ve always been an avid learner, and as a consequence, I have always required evidence. And as my knowledge has increased, so has my faith. I remember seeing other children at church walk up to the microphone during our version of “open mike” every month and express their “testimony” of the Gospel. I clearly remember asking my mother when I was five years old how those children could have a testimony of the Gospel when they were so young. I knew I didn’t know that what my parents had been teaching me was God’s revealed word, and I knew that the other children couldn’t know either.

I’m not sure if I was right or wrong. I know enough now to doubt my five-year-old reason because I have seen that some people have the gift of faith and always know the realities of the Gospel. I’m simply not one of those people.

And, so, I began pondering and struggling with finding the truth at a very young age. As a kid, I tried to cope with the complexity of my thoughts and doubts by losing myself in soccer, art, and writing. As I grew older, I began reading books, taking long walks, and having discussions with my friends, none of whom were Mormon. I decided to live what I had been taught and to see what happened.

It worked. I had some very powerful experiences.

I began to learn through the insight of the Holy Spirit. My eyes were opened to the intricacies of God’s plan and the beauty of the truths He had always placed on the Earth for the benefit of His children. I felt His love. I gained a testimony of His scriptures, His prophets in all times and places (at least the ones we know about), and in the Restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

After that, there was no doubt. So, for example, when my friend dismissed my Mormonism as a symptom of my upbringing, I begged to differ. I had worked way too hard at finding out what is

real in the world and what simply are the stories that we make up to make ourselves feel better about this life. I am a Mormon because I choose to be. Period.

And, there never would be doubt again in my life. At least, not regarding my choice of what I was going to believe and how I was going to live. Boys . . . that was another issue.



Y Mountain was usually less steep. The moon was out and the lights of Utah Valley shone brightly. Our friends were there with us as our steps increased in both number and heaviness. Yet, we walked the switchbacks cheerfully chatting, puffing, and playing our usual game of who could make the other group members laugh the hardest. Gius walked up ahead very athletically. If I were to mention the mountain and if he were to speak English, he may have said something like, “Mountain? Oh, are we climbing a mountain?” His lean jean pant legs trucked tirelessly while he prattled away to Josh in Portuguese without ever having to pause for breath. Soon, the boys disappeared.

I was pretty winded. I stopped for a breath at one of the lookouts and gazed over the thriving metropolis of Provo. If you added to those the lights of Orem, Pleasant Grove, and American Fork to the north and Springville and Spanish Fork to the south, it made for a decent-sized nightlight. The trail leveled slightly at the end of a switchback to form a kind of lookout point bordered by a thick, wooden railing. I draped my arms over it and, seconds later, decided that it would be an even better idea to sit down on the bottom rung, swinging my legs out over the mountainside.

I caught my breath and enjoyed the view. Soon Jacqueline was by my side gasping words about crazy people she’d seen literally running up the face of the mountain on previous trips, ignoring switchbacks and treacherous, exposed faces just to grab a tough workout. The pace that Gius and Josh were setting reminded her of the aforementioned delusional people.

Just then, the two people in question came vaulting off of some undetectable side trail. They skidded to a halt behind us sending up miniature clouds of dust and causing loose rocks to slide down the mountain trail.

As they screeched their way to a stop, Josh reported, “We found a more direct way up to the top.”

“We go many foot up,” stated Gius confidently, crossing his brown arms over his chest.

“We got to the top and then turned around,” Josh clarified.

“But we go up with *you* now,” added Gius, uncrossing his arms and leaning forward. His posture seemed to assure us that the exploring was finished and they would not abandon us again.

I glanced up at the dark Italian as he walked up to where I was sitting and leaned his elbows against the railing.

“How you doing?” he asked casually.

“Just fine,” I lied. “And you?” wondering whether he could see signs of my great physical exertion in the moonlight.

“I is okay,” he stated, “Ready continue?”

“Sure,” I responded. Jacqueline scowled at me. I dragged myself up and pointed my toes uphill. I didn’t want to put a damper on the boys’ excitement, after all. I’d run plenty of distance races. I knew how to torture myself a bit for the common good.

We reached the “Y” and climbed to the top. Josh dared us to lie with our heads down slope and look at the city. To our surprise, all of us did it *and* none of us threw up. However, it was a quite dizzying experience, and this sensation gave us all an excuse to turn right-side-up and lie on our backs, savoring the moonbeams.

Jacqueline, Gius, and I all lay there together and looked up at the night sky. Josh was entertaining some friends on the bottom part of the “Y.” It turned out that Gius liked to make up thrilling fantasy stories. He was a huge Tolkien fan. He told us about one adventure that he and Josh came up with about a wizard who lived inside the mountain. His name was Dard, and he and Josh had been to visit him and had nearly been killed by him. Then Dard decided somehow not to kill them, but to endow them with magical powers for the purpose of saving Utah Valley from the powers of the wizard’s dark brethren. Gius and Josh were really elves, Dard told them, and they were destined for this mission. The two elves confronted the dark wizards in the mountains, and a great battle ensued. Gius and Josh won it using magical staffs that presented themselves to the elf warriors in a valley by a stream. And so the story went on and on and on as we lay on our backs gazing at the midnight stars.



The Monday night following our introduction to Dard’s amazing magical battles, a group of us gathered to socialize. The activity started officially with our new friend’s warm, accented voice calling out quietly, “*Guten* evening, my childrens.” Gius’s brown eyes sparkled with playfulness and his full lips smiled broadly as he spoke. A dozen young adults sat in our apartment listening with amusement to our new “family home evening dad,” or activity group leader.

I sat in a chair next to the couch where he was sitting with Josh and Jaime.

“Tonight we play a soccer activity at *die* school crossing *die* street. There is no grass, only earth, and there is . . . um, *como falla?*” he turned aside and mumbled a word to Josh in Portuguese.

“Stickers,” Josh responded.

“Yes, stickers,” he repeated, “so everyone need wear shoes . . . shoes in truth, no sandals.”

Most of us had come in the proper attire. Jaime and Josh had issued phone calls an hour or so before announcing the activity and corresponding wardrobe requirements. Only a few girls who hadn’t been home giggled, as they were dressed in button up shirts and flip flops. “We’ll be the goalies,” one of them announced.

“Goalie, *what?*” Gius squeaked indignantly. “A goalie need be prepare awesome! Need be most tough and most prepare in all team for be goalie!” His arms flew wildly as he spoke as if to compensate for the intensity of emotion that could not be expressed quickly or articulately enough in English. The girls giggled some more.

We walked across the street to a school that had an adjoining dirt field on its north side. I walked with Jacqueline, who was wearing her Guatemala soccer jersey, and we chatted about an upcoming church activity that our Relief Society women’s organization was in charge of planning. Josh and Gius led us, talking expressively in Portuguese and laughing about some theme that obviously entertained them very much. Josh was wearing a beat up white t-shirt, and Gius wore his deep blue jersey that proudly sported only one word: “Roma.”

We dropped our water bottles behind the backstop and tightened our shoelaces. Josh and Gius picked teams.

Josh picked Jacqueline. Gius picked me. Jacqueline was the goalie for her team, and Gius, after his tirade about the underestimation of a goalie’s value, was the goalie for our team. I put myself in the midfield.

Let the game begin!

By the early twenties, I found that the male psychology had generally evolved to consider females like me into the equation during sporting activities . . . well, in the case of most of the men, anyway. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I didn’t mind the stragglers. I thoroughly enjoyed messing with the males who still possessed dated views of female athleticism. Normally, I would merrily target the Neanderthal men during these games, and some sort of paradigm shift would occur on their part sometime between the time I took the ball from them and the time they heard it swish into their team’s net. This shift never included an epiphany such as, “Wow! Where has that Jenny been all my life?” Quite the opposite. I would be added to the “untouchables” list. I had threatened them in their own realm! Horrifying scream! However, it did serve to broaden their views of female athleticism . . . or even to make them aware that *there is* such a thing.

But aside from the playing around with individual family home evening brothers, I found myself dropping back frequently to help the fullbacks defend the goal. Gius was getting too much action by my estimation.

While back on defense, I found myself the blithe observer of Gius’s goalie . . . I don’t even think “skills” is the right word. It was more like “Gius’s goalie persona.” He’d creep up the field

while we were on the offensive and, as the ball flew back past the midfield point, his eyes would widen. He would run swiftly backward until he reached the goal, arms flailing. A mixture of broken English and Italian would tumble haphazardly from his mouth with such conviction, as if he was sure his gibberish made complete sense to everyone else. He would jump up and down. He would crouch down and focus, suddenly paralyzed, in preparation for springing upon the ball. He would . . . sometimes block it. If the ball did end up in Gius's hands, he would hold on to it very solemnly for a few seconds and then throw it out to one of our players. If he didn't stop the ball, he would sprint past the open-backed goal, retrieve it, and kick it up to one of our players standing at center field, eyes dark and intense, as if we didn't have a minute to lose. And then the whole fascinating charade would start all over again.

I have to say that Gius the Goalie was so entertaining that I nearly forgot that I was supposed to be serving as a catalyst in the chauvinistic reformation of certain players. I even forgot that I was a midfielder and that I had obligations to the offense as well as to our endearing goalie.

Nearly an hour after the start of our friendly little game, we were losing pretty badly. Gius had ended up picking the girls with sandals. I got the feeling he didn't want them to feel excluded. They were playing offense, because Josh and Jaime were hitting our defense so hard we couldn't spare putting any decent players up front.

Josh took a shot. Gius's hands bolted to the left and easily grabbed the ball. Instantly, he threw it to the ground at his feet. He had passed the center point before anyone even noticed him. Frightened that he had left our goal goalieless, I dropped back into that position as he drove the ball toward the opposing posts. Everyone was so surprised at this turn of strategy that Gius arrived at the other end of the field totally unchallenged. He wound up and took a shot. Jacqueline was ready for him! But, no matter. The ball veered off to her right just inside the goal post.

The whole episode took less than ten seconds.

Gius turned around beaming to face both teams. Nobody moved. Everyone was still stunned, except for Jacqueline, who was now returning with the ball and a look on her face that seemed to say, "Geez, what's everyone's problem? Never seen a yelling Italian keeper run across the field to singlehandedly assault the other team's goal before?" Right about then, the joking started.

"Hey, Gius, did you have sort of a pressure build up?" a big, muscly guy on the other team smirked, grabbing him by the shoulder.

"Yeah," chimed in Jaime, "we weren't keeping you busy enough in the box!" he turned to Josh. "We really ought to give him more to do back there!"

Gius pretended to be indignant at their taunts as he smacked the back of his right hand down into his open left palm and exclaimed, "Man, I only try win for mine team! Is very important win for show Italians know how play soccer," and other such exclamations. But he couldn't even come close to wiping the grin off his face and ceasing the boisterous dancing of his eyes.

Gius kept himself up at forward for a couple of more plays and had a couple of good balls and near misses. When he was out of breath, he jogged back to our goal and resumed his former position. I went back to my midfield.



As I came to know Gius, I observed that many of his actions repeated in principle what I would later think of as, “The Great Goalie Charge.” He would act to make the experience memorable for everyone. Yelling Latin mass over the corpse of a baby bird that he and Josh had buried in the courtyard, taking a break on the way to his apartment to do pull ups on a depressed girl’s balcony, pouring root beer over his Golden Grahams at a fundraiser breakfast, etc. Each time, he would listen to the laughs with pleasure and then respond verbally in a way that added to the hilarity. I liked that. It was refreshing and . . . well . . . just plain fun to be around.

I walked back to the apartment complex with my goalie buddy as he expounded to me the virtues of the national Italian soccer team in fragmented yet excited English. After our small scrimmage had ended, I had made the mistake of bringing up the Argentine gold medal in men’s soccer during the last Olympics. I’d served my mission in Argentina, and was very proud of the medal. We made our points rapidly back and forth. Yet, despite his lack of fluency, it didn’t seem like he was the one trying to keep up with me. The argument was impassioned but not serious, and soon we arrived at Centennial. He headed into his apartment with Josh and Jaime, Jacqueline and I turned around the corner to head over to ours, and all the while the thought drifted through my brain, *That kid is pretty neat. I think I’ll try to keep him hanging around.*



I told you before that I’m not the kind of woman who would sit by the phone agonizing as to whether or not there was going to be a second date. Well, I still wasn’t. I didn’t feel any pressure concerning Gius. I have always been one to appreciate good friends, and Gius and I seemed to have some kind of a bond.

However, the phone did ring a few days after the soccer game. I heard Gius’s voice on the other end of the line. And it wasn’t just asking to borrow a pouch of *maracuja*, either. A second date was arranged, though shrouded in mystery as “*ein* surprise. I just see you at you apartment at six o’clock Saturday.”



Wow, he’s way late, I thought. I pattered around the apartment finding things to do. The day was hot and clear. We had decided not to use our air conditioning, because it was too expensive. Thus, our balcony door was open and a hesitant breeze stole past the blinds.

As I stuck my head into a bottom cabinet to rearrange some pots, I suddenly heard the *ding*, *ding* of one of those bells that paper boys always have on their bikes in the movies. A moment later, I heard, “*Buona sera, bella!*” sounding from outside in the parking lot.

I walked toward the sound, and the first thing I saw was the head of curly black hair tilting up at me from the shade in the parking lot. The second thing I saw was Gius's wiry body mounting an old-school tandem bike. When I reached the balcony, he rang the bell again for effect, *ding, ding* and grinned up at me.

Gius was wearing the same Italian soccer jersey that he had been wearing just about every time I had seen him those two weeks. He dismounted the bike and moved closer to the balcony. "Sorry be late," he spoke as he gestured toward the bike, brown eyes brooding. "It take me some time get *die* bike. They no want let me take it, even when I show them money. In Brazil, it work. This people here say bike is only for sell, not for let borrow. But I talk with *der* guy for *ein* long time and he finally say okay." At this last part, Gius folded his arms across his chest and replanted his feet, like guys always do when they're proud of themselves. "You come down now, and we go somewhere."

In no time, we were riding up 900 East, which is usually full of reckless college students driving and busy apartment life, and that day was no exception. We had several near misses with motorists, and people kept yelling things at us, but how could I possibly remember those details? The strong shoulders in front of me were a distraction. They were covered loosely in the blue jersey, moving slightly to the rhythm of the peddling. "We go see Devin and Candy." *Swoosh! Honk!* "Devin is like my brother." *Screech!* "He tell me come to Utah and help me out *die* first couple week." *Whistle! Lookin' good!* "He let me live there with him and his wife. They is very good people!" *Sprinkle, sprinkle, sprinkle! Splaaassh! Sorry!* "Devin is my trainer in the mission. He teach me *ein* lot. I am very grateful to him." *Hey, a tandem! Why didn't I think of that?*

I decided quickly that I liked Devin and Candy, but I'm not sure whether or not they were impressed with me. I arrived at their apartment covered with sweat and road grime, standing uncertainly beside a bright, vibrant Gius who comfortably thought of them as family. We had some small talk, and they seemed like nice people. However, I don't think they were expecting us, and a bunch of Candy's family members showed up to take them somewhere very shortly after we arrived.

But not to worry! The date didn't end there. We left Devin and Candy's apartment and, two minutes later, we were pedaling up a large residential road that went toward the foothills. We passed LaVell Edwards Stadium. We passed the Missionary Training Center. We passed the Provo Temple. I stared at Gius's pedals and panted, legs burning, and let loose a hoarse, "Where are we going, by the way?"

"Is *ein* surprise," his controlled voice returned.

I was a bit annoyed that I didn't know where we were going. How could I pace myself if I didn't know how far I had to go?

Luckily, the chain fell off a few seconds later. We both worked to put it back on, hopped back on the bike, and in no time we found ourselves trying to wipe the chain grease off of our hands

and onto the grass of a basin park at the foot of scenic Rock Canyon. We finally gave up the clean hands goal, and Gius untied the picnic basket from the back of the bike.

We lay on the grass and munched on some sandwiches.

“Is hard be pilot and live standards of *die* Church,” he mused, gesturing with sandwich in one of his hands. Small crumbs showered off of the bread, and tiny bugs in the grass stood ready to hunt them.

I let the bugs distract me as I suppressed a sigh and thought, *Oh, great! Here comes the confession about the wild drinking parties and multiple sex partners!*

“This is why I decide no to fly more. Before, I go to parties with my pilot friends. They get girls drunk and then go other places for sleep with them.”

Okay, we’ve passed the point of no return. I thought. *Here come the naughty stories.*

“But, even before I have *das* Gospel, I no have desire do that things. I drink beer, sometimes, with them, and girls like me and start flirt with me. But just before the time comes have sex with the womans, I feel bad and go home.”

Silence.

Is that it? I thought. *That can’t be the end of the story!*

“I have a friend, Pablo, who like study with the missionaries very much. He never get baptize, but is better be around him, because he never try to force me do those bad things. Tia Candid like him very much, and try help him out, but . . .”

Okay, we’re off to the next subject, I thought. *I guess that really was the end of the story!*

I was impressed by Gius. Of course, having been introduced to the Church in his late teens and without having had any kind of principles-based upbringing, I expected that Gius had lived the lifestyle of a young, handsome, affluent pilot. Why wouldn’t he?

So, I asked him.

“Well,” he responded, the half-eaten sandwich still tossing up and down in his hand, “there is something inside my mind always that say to me when I start do bad things, ‘Zander, you . . .’ Here he stopped to clarify. “ ‘Zander’ is mine middle name. Is mine more . . . personal name.” I nodded that I understood, and he continued. “Anyway, the voice, he say ‘Zander, you should no do that.’ I follow *die* voice, and that what prepare me find *das* Gospel.”

My mind turned then to my fellow students, the kids in my ward growing up, and even to my own family. How many of us, who have had the guidance of the scriptures and solid role models for our entire lives fell into unclean living despite it all? How many of us had willingly jeopardized

our birthright for a good time at one moment or another? Many. Maybe even most. So, how had this enigma of a man resisted all of these temptations without any moral training, modeling, or reinforcement? He must be, I concluded, a very sincere person. What other explanation was there?

At that moment, I felt a profound respect for Gius; the kind of respect that welded me to him emotionally right there in the shadow of Squaw Peak. From one moment to the next, I had the irrevocable feeling that I wanted to be close to him. He felt . . . safe. He would not betray my most precious wish in a future companion: integrity. He had recognized the voice of the Spirit in his life, and he had obeyed it. In order to do so, he had sacrificed some opportunity, personal appetites, and even family connections. I had tried since I was a little kid to make this kind of dedication to the right the driving force in my life. I must say that sometimes I failed in small ways. Nevertheless, I had succeeded generally, and so had he.

I cast my eyes up at the mountain, trying to comprehend this sudden flood of feelings and thoughts that had welled up in my being. They were all a tangle in my mind. After a few moments, one sudden thought materialized out of this intricate collage of inner events: My connection with Gius was no longer low-stakes. It had happened. I had connected to him, and because I had, my life would be affected by his presence in it. I had skin in the game. And I was thrilled!



The wind blew through the courtyard lazily. The leafed branches of the old trees shook vaguely as their dancing shadows played discreetly on the uneven concrete. All was quite normal for a hot, summer Sunday afternoon at Centennial. Well, everything except for the decorating schemes on the outsides of apartments #110 and #112, which were right next to each other. #110 displayed a huge French flag that was attached to the balcony above it. French soccer jerseys further decorated the wooden exterior as they hinged on their hangers in the breeze. A huge sign in French read (or so they say), “France forever!” The exterior of apartment #112 had an identical décor, except it was all for the Italian team.

A young man named Brett, who had served his mission in France, was the decorator of apartment #110. Of course, Gius was the decorator of apartment #112.

This was the day of the World Cup championship game between France and Italy. Jacqueline, Nellie, and I were wandering from apartment to apartment on Relief Society business. Every once in a while, we’d hear eruptions from one or both apartments and large strings of exclamations in French or Italian, respectively.

Finally it all ended. The door of #112 flew open. Gius sprang up the stairs of the basement apartment like a man who had just won a million bucks. His countenance was happier than I had ever seen it. He wore his blue soccer jersey. He faced the French display, planted his feet, put his hands on his narrow hips, and gazed at it triumphantly. He waited.

Within the minute, Brett sauntered out of his apartment and, without mounting the stairs said good naturedly to the grinning Roman, “Great game!” He smiled awkwardly to himself and threw a glance up at Gius.

“You, too!” Gius responded, hands still on hips, radiant smile never faltering. “I think French peoples surrender more easy!”

Brett cast his gaze down briefly, as if he had been expecting this. He then recovered, looked up at Gius, grimaced, and said, “Well, we just couldn’t compete with the glory of Rome!”

At this, Gius let out a high, loud squeak, his characteristic laugh. He threw his hands up in the air, turned 180°, faced the Italian flag, and yelled something exuberantly in Italian about the *patria*, turned again, and practically jumped down the steps toward Brett to embrace him. Brett kept on smiling conservatively and let himself be dragged into his apartment by Gius, who we could then hear yelling happily in Italian to Brett’s roommates.

I was amused. I know, I always say that. I decided that I wanted to help Gius celebrate, somehow. So, I rummaged through my cupboard and found a cake mix. I baked it up and then frosted it in the fashion of an Italian flag. Then my roommates and I called him up and had him come over. He strode in the door with a stuffy look on his face, an Italian flag draped over his shoulders, as if he were a dignitary gracing us with his presence. But as soon as he saw the pastry, he fell apart completely. His rigid posture drooped. His mouth fell open. His hands shot out toward the cake. Within a fraction of a second, Gius was jumping up and down and yelling happily, “Is the flag! Is the flag!” He then bolted over to the table, knelt on the chair, laid his head on the table, and put his arms around the cake.

How he kept his ample hair free of frosting, I’ll never know.



Gius and I hung out quite a bit. He’d drop by the pool while I swam, I’d drop by his apartment when I knew he was back from his landscaping job. He’d invite us over for *katofer*, we’d invite him over to help us make homemade peach *gelato*.

One evening, I was off work. He came over, and we decided to go for a walk.

This was one of the things I loved about Gius. Rather than inviting me out for long, expensive activities, he stuck to grass roots stuff that gave us a much more genuine context in which to get to know one another. The only somewhat customary date we’d been on had been our first.

Gius showed up at my apartment with a Frisbee. We passed HogiYogi on the way to Kiwanis Park, and we each bought an ice cream cookie sandwich for a buck. A very *large*, ice cream cookie sandwich. I had a hard time racing the heat to finish mine as we traversed the blaringly hot pavement through the neighborhoods east of 900 East. Honestly, I think I would have had a hard

time finishing the sandwich anyway due to its formidable size, but then Gius insisted that I try his sandwich, as well. I had ice cream coming out my ears!

I felt comfortable around Gius. I thought he might be wondering why I wasn't pursuing him like a ravenous hyena, as many of my fellow young women would do whenever a young man showed even the slightest interest in her.

I explained, "I dated a guy at home for a couple of years on and off all during college." *Drip. Drip. Drip.* Strawberry ice cream dribbled onto my shadow. "We had a good time together, but I didn't really fall for him until after the mission."

Gius readjusted the Frisbee in the crook of his arm and got a better grip around the remainder of his cookies. "What that mean 'fall for'?" he asked.

"It means that I fell in love with him," I responded frankly. With Gius, I was reminded, I couldn't hide meaning for the sake of social tact, or he simply wouldn't get it. I continued, "I had known him for a long time, I respected him, and when I returned from Argentina, something inside of me changed. Suddenly, I was madly in love with him." I sighed. "I never thought I could feel that way about someone. The thought of being apart from him, even for a few hours, was painful."

He listened actively. "So what happen? Why you no marriage with that boy?"