

“MORMON LEVIS” - Short Story from *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination*

(Also anthologized in *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* and *The River Underground: An Anthology of Nevada Fiction*)

Excerpt

Tight, like two long cigarettes rolled in denim. We call them white Levis, Mormon Levis, but they're actually albino beige. I suck in my stomach, zip up my pants on the way to the window in my bedroom, split the venetian blinds to check the night and see if Shelley's pulling into my driveway. Not yet. I walk down the stairs and see my long legs reflected in the mirror at the bottom. Daddy Long Legs. Leggy legs. Legs made for walking and dancing the whole night through.

Where did you say you were going, Mattie? my mother asks as she pretends to dust the piano with the dishtowel in her hands.

To the movie.

What's playing?

A western.

I hear Shelley's horn. Thank heavens. I'm out of here. Out the door. Bye, Mom.

Remember your curfew, Mattie. And don't be chasing after those boys you think are so cool. You know better.

My eyes brush past my mother's eyes and the picture of Jesus on the wall behind her. Sunrays coming out of his head. Light like the sun on his forehead. Jesus is always looking over someone's shoulder it seems. Sure, Mom. Bye.

The door sounds final as I slam it, sealing me off from my house. I'm released into Friday night.

Hey, Wondah Woman, Shelley says after I slam the door of her brown Plymouth that looks like a tank. She backs into the street that separates me from the desert: the rim of Las Vegas, the edge of the plate. My house is in the last subdivision in town. The desert is my front yard.

Hey, Wondah Woman yourself, I say. Tonight's the night.

“THE GIFT OF A BROKEN HEART,” an essay appearing in “Sunstone: Mormon Experience, Scholarship, Issues, and Art,” July 2008, Issue 150, p. 18-23.

Excerpt:

Just what is faith? Is it a finger pointing to the moon? Is it a finger pointing to the moon which is a reflection of the sun?

I wish I could say how solid my faith has always been, but I've had my bouts with cynicism, with loss of trust and pie-eyed innocence. My faith has changed shapes through the years—sometimes seeming thick, then thin, tiny, then huge. It hasn't always been impressive and exemplary. I've sometimes felt I had no faith, but in truth, it has always

been there, somewhere, quietly persistent and alive in my core. This seed.

In the mid-nineties, after the end of a series of seismic events in my personal life which totally crushed the sense of who I was and what I was all about, I found myself in the middle of a disconcerting wilderness, caught in the twist of what Joseph Campbell calls “the hero’s journey,” confused in the labyrinth. I entered into a seven-lean-year-plus period which felt more barren than the sands of Egypt. I hadn’t been attending the LDS church for fourteen years, though so habituated was I to weekly attendance at church I sometimes found myself sitting on the pews of other churches on Sunday morning.

When I realized I was not surviving this journey with much grace, that I was indeed free falling toward an emotional crash-and-burn, I heard about a therapist who specialized in clients with deeply religious backgrounds. After listening to me carefully, she concluded I had deep spiritual roots and that I needed to stop denying my need for spiritual expression.

“THE SCHOOL OF LOVE,” an excerpt from the short story, “Criminal Justice.”

"I need to tell you this before I tell you about that. I've baked lots of bread, nursed babies, and made quilts. I send thank-you notes and vote (even worked in two senatorial campaigns) and will do almost anything to avoid anger. Once upon a time, those things meant you were a good person, and I try to be good. I try hard. What else do I need to tell you before I talk about Highway 89 and those Highway Patrol cars?

Maybe I should admit I don't believe in heroes. The blacks and whites of my childhood are grey now, spattered with exposes of presidents and major-league ballplayers. And everybody seems to be carrying a handgun. Funny, I'm pausing, wondering why I try so hard to be good if I don't believe in it anymore. . . .

Whatever it is, I'm used to being dealt with respectfully, so when Patrolman Littlefield tells me to bend over and put my hands on the trunk of the car, I am confused. I'm bending over the trunk of a car I've never seen before today. I'm being asked to bend over from the waist, bend over and spread my hands out on the cold metal while foreign hands ride up and down my sides, not quite reaching around for my soft spots, staying clear of those taboo places, frisking my sides, patting them officially, checking. I stand up. My first tendency is to laugh. "You've got to be kidding. This is a little play you need to rehearse. I just happened to come along--a female lead."

“AND THE DESERT SHALL BLOSSOM,” an excerpt from the novel:

One drop of water. That’s how the Colorado River began. The drop escaped from a crust of snow and fell to the frozen ground where it quivered, as if it were a liquid jewel. Other drops followed until a mountain niche was filled to overflowing.

Timidly, the water trickled over the edge, then gained momentum until it rushed over cliffs and sprayed the air. It swirled and leapt and gathered strength until one day,

Lieutenant Cardenas and his men, the first Spanish explorers, peered over the lip of a canyon and watched this water churning like a devil's belly far below. The *conquistadores* knelt, crossed themselves, then turned back to warn others away from the river none could possess.

Many tried to cross, and many failed until Father Silvestre Vélez de Escalante's leather boots squished the soft clay of the river's bank as he paced back and forth, waiting for slow water time. He barely survived at *El Vado de los Padres*, but his accomplishment gave other men ideas.

“HOW I GOT CULTURED: A NEVADA MEMOIR,” an excerpt from “Fremont Street:”

. . . as I walked along the concrete sidewalk lining Fremont Street, I imagined tables surrounded by men with slicked-back hair, standing at the tables forever until they were covered with cobwebs and their pointed fox faces stiffened with frost. Yet they still rolled the dice to decide who would be lucky or unlucky, who would win or who would lose, even though they suspected the decision was made before dice were invented.

If you've ever been to Las Vegas, you've been to Fremont Street. You've seen the flashing lights that hide the simple lines of the asphalt street, the fact that the street begins and then ends, the fact that no one ever stays there. You know it's only a street to walk on until you reach the doors that open in, then open out again. You know it's a black ribbon of asphalt rolled out on the desert floor until it passes through a bouquet of brilliant flowering lights which attract the honeybees and you and me. You sniff its scent, want to hold it in your nostrils like cigarette smoke.

But you know you're walking into a daylily in reverse, still open at night, inviting you to sniff its perfume. And you know when a flower never closes, it isn't a flower. It's only Fremont Street.

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