

Monson

Two years after his wife's passing he was awake and alone in the Rotterdam Hilton because the others had booked hotels with Dutch-sounding names. The big concrete structure with modern design held his comparatively action-figure-sized 6-foot-2, 85-years-old, and 240-pound body, covered in white undergarments and ready for bed, safely and firmly six floors above the brick-lined intersection that was home to Dutch people who lived quietly and were currently under the barrage of a heavy rainstorm and he thought back to his home in Salt Lake City where people did not live so quietly, and also to Sao Paulo where people lived even less quietly.

As the senior apostle of the Mormon church he was to say an important prayer tomorrow while Dutch translators spoke into the earpieces of the hundreds in attendance. He opened the window to better hear the rain's tapping on the cobblestone six floors beneath. The room had no other sounds besides these. He was grateful for the noise. The church's prophet of the last decade, President Hinckley, was "not doing well," President Eyring told him just minutes ago, then there had been an exhalation, all but directly stating that he, President Monson, may address tomorrow's congregation with a new status.

In the bathroom, he waited in front of the mirror and ran the hot water and waited, unwrapping three complimentary, wax-covered soaps of different flavors, all placed next to other little things, all there for his use. One of the soaps was black licorice. He did not like the Netherlands. If he was to be in a foreign land, he would prefer to be in Sao Paulo where it was loud.

Being thrown into Sao Paulo at nineteen-years-old was like a second birth for him. Perhaps even more of a second birth than kindergarten as a baby. He thought back on the blueprint of his kindergarten classroom, comparing the alienation inside those four walls, the backpack cubbies, and the recess area to the entire country of Brazil and the alienation he'd felt those first few months in Sao Paulo. It was true that all objects and persons on his side of the wall, after his mother dropped him at Hawthorne Elementary, were brand new to him. His mother would see cases of grape juice at the grocery and the light-brown carpet inside their home. He too would have seen the grape juice perched high on a shopping cart at Paul's Market, if it were not for the necessity of kindergarten. But it was precisely because of the necessity of kindergarten, he saw unfamiliar grandma-faces and play bricks, which were nothing but cardboard boxes covered with burgundy paper, he had discovered, throughout his 8 am – 3 pm day.

Sao Paulo was a more intense kindergarten from a certain perspective. Fellow missionary, Elder Day, caused him to realize, "we don't see *anyone* or *anything* from our past life... for two years." He was already a month into it, when Elder Day caused him to realize it, despite it being his barefaced reality— not only would he not see his family, but furthermore he would not "see *anyone* or *anything*, apart from that which he brought in his suitcase," for two years. "Any *nao* aliens," they had joked. For every part human, the Brazilians were equal part alien, and he to them, likewise, those first months. It was his fourth night in Sao Paulo when he tried at a joke, "how does the cowboy call to his filha?" to a group of kids outside the Fazenda de Oliveira. Going against his better instincts he shouted, "feeee-ha!" with his head back and hands cupped to his mouth, with the same joviality that entertained children in Utah and earned Sister Sheffield's compliments, "isn't he great with children," and "taking notes mia maids?" But it

was after shouting this that he no longer could pretend their laughter was not cruel. He saddled his bicycle, not able to understand their words, he had stood there above his bicycle.

His cell phone went bright with a message. “We are praying for his comfort now.”

“Heavenly Father. Please give him comfort. In the name of Jesus Christ Amen,” he whispered.

He snapped the third soap into little pieces. He pressed the soap crumbs into little flat discs and dropped them evenly across the bath water.

“Father, may he make it through the night. Not tonight.”

“Father, according to thine will.”

In front of the mirror, the reflection of his face showed heavy, lifeless creases at the junction between chin and neck. The wrinkles transitioned gradually, neverminding the bags beneath either eye, he skipped those, to a smooth forehead where the skin was pulled tight, almost perfectly tight, to the eye, but not to one’s touch. He touched it, noting to block his eyes’ reflection, and noticed the glimmering bald center had borne the shape of an inverted window’s peak, which, he wished his wife could see him now— time had lampooned his life-long chopping board hairline so flat that, at times, it juxtaposed the priesthood brethren’s assortment of hairlines so starkly that it provoked comments from the congregation. Many had noticed and commented. His priesthood brethren’s hairlines each culminated in a sharp widow’s peak, or were bald like his now, and were all paraded for decades because stickum soaked slicked-backs were the style of the century following David O. McKay. Back there in Salt Lake City. This bald spot, shinning in the mirror, was the product of incremental, unnoticeable changes— from kindergarten into this—the changes had been unnoticeable along the way. He once took a leak wearing roller skates in kindergarten, the extra six inches above the toilet were exhilarating. The extra two-something feet now, unnoticeable. Quick changes are far easier to spot. Had his leaks not been taken from the same height as the previous day, and so on for eighty years? Slow changes just happen, he thought angrily, they are never decided on, for, or against. It was Tolkien, was it not, who once said: one can spend a lifetime climbing a ladder only to discover it is propped against the wrong wall.

He averted his eyes down and away from the mirror.

There was this dangerous mirror and there were these accidental thoughts, and he knew better than to not suspect the two were related. He left the mirror permanently and went to the tub.

He switched off the water, making the room go quite except for the select rain droplets whose tapping carried six floors, through the window, and then again through the bathroom’s doorway. It was not many. He stepped into the tub and noticed the reflections on water’s surface. The image included himself.

He stepped out of the tub and dried his wet shins.

He dialed President Erying.

It rang twice. He canceled the call.

He went back to the tub, but this time focused on points away from the reflection, the water’s surface was like a two-dimensional flat landscape intersecting his legs, it cut mid-shin, bobbing around a freckle on his right leg. The skin around his belly was tight. The skin around his arms, wrinkly. He was used to it. He had seen a lot. He had seen people die as he administered to them. He’d seen them get weak. He’d seen them loose interest in life. He’d seen them gain a burst of energy. He’d seen their eyes gloss over. There were many details in the

three-folded hospice brochure, 'A Loved One Passes', regarding death's stages that he had found quite helpful and accurate, not having even realized death had stages prior to reading it.

At which stage did President Hinckley stand, he wondered.

His phone was ringing. He dried his hands to answer the call.

"President Eyring, hello."

"President Monson?"

"Yes President Eyring."

The old men were soft-spoken as they addressed each other by President.

"The prophet is not doing well."

"Dear, what is the latest?"

"I am afraid yes. Well, he is on chemo...."

"Is Elder Nelson with you?"

"Yes President, it's not looking great" the former heart surgeon joined on speaker phone, "the chemo has leaves the immune system vulnerable, you know, and some disseminated infection hit him hard."

"Should they stop?"

"The chemo?"

"Right."

"It does give him a chance to extend, but he is ninety-seven..."

"Right. Okay. Let us pray for his comfort," he invited the two brethren after a long pause. He pushed speaker phone and balanced the phone on the tub's porcelain wall and bent gently to his knees to avoid splashing. A soft "ready" came through the line and he began his prayer slowly, "Dear Heavenly Father... Please comfort President Hinckley, prophet, seer, and revelator of your church on the earth today... Please provide him with comfort tonight... according to thine will... so he may pass the veil... according to your timetable. In the name of thine son, Jesus Christ, Amen."

They exchanged goodbyes. A "thank you", "goodnight", and "thank you President" came through the line.

He clicked the red button to hang up, only to discover a new silence, reverberating his eardrums more intensely than before.

It might be tonight.

"Please not tonight."

He turned to look at the bathroom's entrance. Through the doorway he could see that the room's hardwood floor was so black it was almost purple. This option was in the catalog when he and his wife did their remodeling, maybe four years back.

He counted the number of years in his mind.

There was no rain. It was still silent.

He dried his lower half and left the bathroom to check on the rain. The paint on the drywall was cakey, he thought of the unbearably meniscal number of sound waves that must be bouncing off of them.

When he reached the living room, the window was only half open. He opened it fully but it did nothing, because he had learned before about the eardrums needing much more than twice the sound to hear twice the volume.

He dressed himself, using his wrinkled arms to pull a white, mesh undergarment over his tight belly. He looked down at his stomach, again like he stood in the bathtub, and watched his stomach rise and fall with the cadence of his breath. The links of white mesh circles clung tight

to his wet stomach, pulling themselves taught against one another and making the skin underneath visible. The skin indeed was remarkably tight. When he stood above his bicycle after shouting *filha* to the children outside the Fazenda de Oliveira, it was similar to how he stood now.

That day wasn't his first time being mocked. He had always felt like an outsider in kindergarten and was mocked accordingly. In grade school's following years, however, he was better able to hide his outsider's mentality by pretending in certain ways when talking to people. This type of pretending stopped the mocking but led to an indifference on behalf of his classmates with respect to him. Later, on his mission, he learned to hide it just the right amount and people liked him. But yes, because he was an outsider in kindergarten, he could say with authority: to be mocked by six-year-olds at nineteen-years-old is worse than at six-years-old. After shouting *filha* to the circle of children outside the Fazenda de Oliveira, he pretended the situation could be improved by calling "Tchau!" over his shoulder while peddling away, uphill to catch his missionary companion Elder Holt who had peddled out of sight beyond the hill's apex, thus violating the mission rules detailed in the 'white handbook' booklet that rested inside his button-up's front pocket. He wished Elder Holt had seen the laughter, so as to make it less cruel and make it belong to something other than solely the memory of the children, his own, and the passing Avo who witnessed it.

The evening after he shouted *filha* to the children outside the Fazenda de Oliveira, he and his mission companion Elder Holt knocked the door of a rich man who distributed steel to much success. The rich man took him in as a guest and smiled at him many times with straight, white teeth and sat him down inside a room of clean furniture. From the tribulations of missionary life, the dark ashes of his trials were ignited by fire. Bearing testimony of the gospel made his bosom burn in Sao Paulo, especially in the late evenings when the air was cool and dark. When he did so hungry on an empty stomach, the fire of his testimony was the only thing inside of him.

"Mr. Santos I know Joseph Smith saw God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ." With broken Portuguese, his nineteen-year-old self looked the rich man whose culture he did not understand in his eyes and bore testimony of the gospel. "And through Joseph Smith restored God's power on Earth."

There is a page in his journal from that very week which reads, "The burning sensation when I bear testimony of the gospel is not only the Holy Spirit, but also is the upside of a refiner's fire. These are little checkpoints wherein the Lord reminds me, 'you're on the right path Elder Monson,' as I wade through the obstacle course which He has designed SPECIFICALLY for my growth, how fortunate am I. Like a sword that must be forged at high heat, I too must pass through the Lord's refiner's fire in order to become a useful tool in His hands."

And for these checkpoints he was grateful, the fire within him pushed the lingering tribulations of the day—being mocked by six-year-olds—vertically upwards and out of his body. The tingling sensation of the refiner's fire started at the heart and spread outward, replacing everything else, and everything else tingled itself upwards and out the top of his crown. To feel the Holy Spirit in such a foreign land with no connections to home, to have his bosom burn simply by bearing testimony, spoke to the gospel's truthfulness and universality.

The rich man's face was still and did not hesitate to look back into his eyes. The rich man's breath was drenched in alcohol, a smell that he did not understand at the time, and the rich man breathed heavily through his nose hair. Looking into the rich man's eyes he bore testimony again. "He gave Joseph Smith power to be His prophet. Like Moses. Like prophets you read in your Bible," he testified.

“Prophets. Sim. Like Moses or Noah,” the rich man said.

“Yes senior, like Noah too,” his companion Elder Holt replied.

“Joseph Smith.” The rich man said aloud. “He is in America?”

“Joseph Smith is gone. But God’s power, the power He gave Joseph Smith is not. This power has been passed on from prophet to prophet until this day. We have a living prophet today in America.”

“How do American Mormons transfer their power?”

“Death!” he said excitedly, “when the prophet dies...” He turned to his companion for help. He understood the rich man but did not have the vocabulary to answer the rich man.

“When one prophet passes away, the next highest in seniority takes his place,” Elder Holt said.

“God does not select him? Who decides who is the next senior? You see, this interests me, I am a strong man in the steel business and I know power does not transfer easy.”

“No, God selects him,” he answered, but again was stopped by his limited vocabulary.

“Because God oversees the process senior,” Elder Holt explained, “God makes John Doe, erm, Luis Lima, what’s a common Brazilian name?”

“Luis?”

“Luis Lima. Yes. Let us say, God wishes Luis Lima to become prophet at 60 years old. He will oversee it all. He will make Luis Lima an apostle at say 30 or 35 years old, such that...”

“I see, I see,” the rich man cut him off with a downwards hand motion, “an apostle at 35 so he can become prophet at 60.”

“Corrigir! You is intelligent, a speedy learner Mr. Santos,” he said to the rich man.

The rich man stared at him for a drawn out second and then, following his averted gaze, laughed at him. For the second time that day, he became the subject of cruel laughter.

“This a very meaningful compliment coming from you,” the rich man said sarcastically while laughing genuinely. “This one’s Portuguese is far more standard.”

“Yes I know.”

Elder Holt smiled, “this is only his fourth day in Brazil.”

“Bullshit”

“Yes, though he studied the language for two and a half months in America.”

“Two and a half months!” the rich man pointed at him, “You is intelligent. You is a speedy learner!” Laughing loudly, the rich man bounced up and down causing his belly to go outwards and inwards.

“I do God’s work!” he tried joining in the positive energy. “You can have the same. In your life...”

“Okay okay,” the rich man said, “how does a young boy pretend to have such wisdom?”

And for the second time he bore testimony directly into the rich man’s eyes, “Mr. Santos, this is a very nice home. You is a very successful man. Yes, I young. But I know. But I know the gospel is true.” He pulled out his scriptures, inside the cover was tapped the portrait of a man with a long beard and thin glasses. “I know this man. This man is a prophet. He is a true prophet of God. He talks directly to God. His name is George Albert Smith.” And for the second time that day, the burning fire tingled the chaotic, worldly ‘other things’ upwards and out of his body.

The rich man ran his fingers over the photograph, “how do you know he speaks to God? And not the back of his mind?”

“Good question senior. I pray about it. And the Holy spirit....”

“The Holy Spirit communicates by a feeling of peace and comfort,” Elder Holt explained.

“Yes, that is what I feel. The Holy spirit is here. Right now,” he said sequentially with long pauses, inspired now to let go of his inhibitions. “This feeling. I feel it. You feel it. This is the Holy spirit. The Holy spirit is telling you, George Albert Smith is God’s prophet. And this is God’s true church on the earth today.”

That night, underneath a scribbled ‘January 4th 1947’ he documented their entire conversation and crafted his philosophy on the nature of spiritual knowledge— a nuanced, doctrine-based perspective which, similar to a Socratic dialogue, was framed and motivated by his real-life conversation. “How do you know? Do you ever doubt?” the rich man had been animated when probing the two boys on their knowledge at critical points. “I know because of the Holy Spirit,” he answered, then admitted to the rich man, “But I do doubt sometimes. That is human.” But it was his simple description of knowledge and his invitation to action that opened the rich man’s heart: “I look for truth,” he said, “I can see, you look for truth too. This is a personality thing. Right? Part of wisdom is knowing how much you know. I know that I do not know everything. But the surest things, those are the ones I feel myself. I read the Book of Mormon. I pray to ask God if it is truth. I get an answer. You will have the same. Do not trust me. Test the book. Do not trust me. Test the book.”

In the following page, two canteen-sized circles were traced onto the paper, one labeled ‘classical knowledge’ and the other, ‘spiritual knowledge’. In the Venn diagram’s overlap is written, “the prophet’s knowledge of God” as the pinnacle example, as the single bullet point, because the prophet is in a “unique position to obtain spiritual knowledge directly through his eyes and ears”.

Tucked into the leaflet of the same journal is a photograph of him and the rich man standing in the chapel before the rich man’s baptism. Both are dressed in white garb holding stiff, happy faces. And in the rich man’s hand, a Portuguese translation of the Book of Mormon in the gorgeous blue-and-white cover which it used to be distributed in, shipped in crates of four-hundred and fifty to Sao Paulo’s mission home once a year.

But it was 2008 now and his cell phone vibrated with a new message.

“Please call if still awake.”

He closed President Eyring’s text, opened, and then again closed it. He set his phone down and turned on the television.

There are permissible times to ‘zone-out’ in one’s life, and he knew this, having over forty years of marriage and responsibilities at the church headquarters that sometimes required him to relax by eating food and watching cable news, a form of psychological damage control for the greater good that even his father would have approved. It was analogous to him, or his father, advising a struggling church member to take a long walk before calling for divorce.

He could clearly envision his stern father, now, approving of him taking three Ambien. But he had none and the food here was too foreign and the television too unfamiliar and his heart raced too fast as he paced on the hardwood floor. The television played a Dutch program about a kindergarten in the forest. As a kindergartener he did not have forests, only his mother’s meals, his brothers and sisters, friends at church, and wooden blocks on the light-brown carpet. Prints of the prophet’s face were on display in their books, their home, and in their chapel. When he was six years old he saw the prophet in person at the Granite Stake Tabernacle speak about the value of hard work, about waking up at 4 am to throw baseballs against his neighbor’s barn, and about becoming the best pitcher in Utah Valley. “The prophet speaks to God,” his mother had taught him. He *had* known it.

He grabbed the cell phone from the nightstand.

A lump of something rose in his throat as he dialed President Eyring's number.

"He passed," came through the line.

"Okay."

"And you..."

"Right of course," he said absentmindedly, "I'm going to need to go."

"Right"

"Thanks for the news President"

"Thanks President"

"Thanks"

With the rain stopped now, there was only air passing in and out of his nostrils. He leaned in, switched the lamp off, and lay down. As the church's new prophet, he emptied his mind and closed his eyes to speak with God.

When he opened his eyes, it was slowly and through the slits of squinted eyes. He saw a big stomach covered in white undergarments, his, and a notch in the fabric just above his navel. The circles in the mesh were pulled open just like before. The whole mound rose and fell in cadence with the sound of air passing through his nostrils.

He called President Eyring again.

"Are you with him?"

"Yes"

"And he passed?"

"Yes, he is with our Father now."

"Remarkable."

"It's really quite..."

"No."

"Sorry?"

"No actually," he said firmly. "Actually, actually, I've been meaning to discuss a few insights..."

President Eyring waited for him.

"Can you catch a cab to my hotel?"

"I'm in Salt Lake," President Eyring chuckled, "I was at the hospital with President Hinckley remember?"

"Oh that's right. Let me try Elder Oaks, Elder Oaks is here."

"I..."

"Okay"

"No problem,"

"Thanks President."

"Thanks"

He tried Elder Oak's phone but there was no answer. Who else was in Rotterdam? Elder Hallstrom. He tried Elder Hallstrom's phone but there was also no answer. He did not want to be alone at 85 years old in the Rotterdam Hilton. Old men should not be left alone. Was it not Tolkien who wrote about this?

He lay back down on the mattress. The alarm clock read 2:32 am. Each number composed of eight rectangular segments, either on or off, to make the time show 2:32. The two was composed of five segments glowing red. Next there was a colon. The three was nothing but a two who's bottom left segment had been shifted to the right. The final digit was also two. He

lay there on his side and let the alarm clock's red light spill into his open eyes. Soon, the two's bottom segment would shift right to make 2:33 am.