

A Prophet's Story

The prophet was standing at the window of his sixth-story apartment, looking down at the people walking the plaza between the Joseph Smith Memorial Building and Temple Square, when he had a thought that made him smile. He wanted to go to Wal-Mart and buy a garden hose and an Almond Joy. It was something other men his age could do, and it made him smile to think of the simple pleasure of it—to put on a short-sleeved jumpsuit, get in a rusty pickup, and shop unnoticed among the crowds. Of course, the prophet knew the idea was absurd. Such a thing would put Church Security into fits and probably create a mob scene. Someone might take his picture and put it up on the Internet. Besides that, he didn't have the time. He had work to do, and there wasn't room in the schedule for the prophet of the Lord to follow a whim and go shopping for something he didn't need.

Seeing the smile on the prophet's face, Scott, the prophet's secretary, asked, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," the prophet answered, "I just had a funny thought."

Known in the Church as S. Travis Widdison, Scott was a competent secretary who had worked his way up the ranks of the public relations department. Now in his fifties, he was a seasoned aide who honored the prophet almost as much as he honored the prophet's priesthood office. Dressed in a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a modest blue tie, Scott sat at his desk, back straight, sorting through a stack of papers. "What was your thought?" he asked.

"It was nothing," the prophet said, turning back to the window. "Just something funny."

At seventy-nine years of age, the prophet stood tall and thin. He had light freckles on his fair skin like a youngster, but he was beginning to lose his hair, which once had been bright red but now had become pinkish-yellow. He had served as a General Authority for thirty-eight years. Before that, he had been a husband, a high school principal, a bishop, the father of two daughters, and most recently, a widower. Now he was the president of the Church and the presiding high priest. According to Mormon teachings, if God wanted to speak to the world, he would speak through this man, through his prophet.

Standing at the window, the prophet watched a young family down on the plaza as they talked and pointed up at one of the windows a few floors below. For a moment he felt more like a human being than God's mouthpiece. "I was thinking it would be nice to go to Wal-Mart," he said to his secretary.

"Why would you want to do that?" Scott asked.

"To buy a garden hose," the prophet answered.

Scott paused. The prophet turned and saw the puzzled look on his face.

"And an Almond Joy," the prophet added. "I was thinking it would be nice to drive a pickup to Wal-Mart and get a garden hose and an Almond Joy."

"You don't have a pickup," Scott said, "and I can get you an Almond Joy. What would you do with a garden hose? You don't have a garden."

"I used to have a garden," the prophet said. "I used to have a pickup."

The prophet understood why he had given up those things, and he had no regrets about it. He also understood that it was his own people who wouldn't tolerate him cavorting around like a normal person. It was not that they would stop him, of course. Not even Scott would physically restrain him. But they would stop him in the same way they constrained the Holy Spirit, by using their narrow imaginations to bind God's sway in their lives. The Latter-day Saints knew their prophet only as a prophet, as a man who always wore a suit and was perfect, or nearly perfect; a man who had no personal needs, who would never think of having needs. They envisioned him as being different from themselves. Not as a person who ate food or listened to music or watched TV. Instead, they revered him as passionless—a perfected image of what they believed they would never become.

Years ago the prophet had seen black-and-white pictures of the Brethren in their swimsuits out at Saltair on the edge of the Great Salt Lake. There was a picture from the 1880s of several apostles in striped prison uniforms, having been jailed for polygamy. Things had certainly changed. Today the Church's

public relations department wouldn't allow the apostles to be photographed if they weren't in their suits and ties.

"The apostles used to go swimming at Saltair," the prophet said to Scott. "I've seen the pictures."

"Did they?" Scott said. He got up from his desk and walked around to the filing cabinet with a stack of papers.

"In the scriptures, prophets sometimes got into trouble in the marketplace," the prophet said idly, thinking about Isaiah and even Jesus. "Look at John the Baptist and Abinadi. They went to prison. Joseph Smith went to prison."

"Read the *Church News*," Scott said, opening one of the filing cabinet drawers. "Prophets don't go to jail anymore. They don't go swimming at Saltair either."

The prophet turned back to the window to watch the people on the plaza. He didn't want to go to jail, but a swim might be nice. He thought for a moment about the distance people placed between themselves and their leaders, between themselves and God. Perhaps some of the people on the plaza would follow him anywhere, even into prison. He suspected some of them would, and the thought humbled him.

"Well," Scott said, "I'm glad you're not going to jail."

"Yes," the prophet said, amused.

"No Wal-Mart either, I assume?"

"No," the prophet said, "I've got no business at Wal-Mart. At least, none that I know of."

Claude Winn was in the garage changing the oil on his motorcycle when he heard the message on the radio. Claude was a big man with a gray and black beard and a sun-browned

baldpate on the top of his head. The hair he had left was long and tucked behind his ears, growing past his collar in the back. A retired appliance repairman, he lived in a two-bedroom ranch house along the Kansas River, two miles outside of Eudora, Kansas. When the message came on the radio, he was kneeling before his motorcycle, with words from the Book of Acts spinning lazily in his head. Staring at his reflection in the pan of dirty oil, his baggy eyes emerging from the pink-and-blue detergent film, he heard a voice say, "A message from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

Once when Claude had attended a small-business convention in Salt Lake City, he had awakened one morning with the thought of visiting the Mormon temple a few blocks away. But he'd dismissed the idea and attended his meetings instead. Years later he spoke to two missionaries who had been riding their bicycles in the rain. Standing outside the hardware store in Eudora, soaking wet in their suits, the missionaries had told him they had a living prophet. It sounded too good to be true. But now, kneeling before his motorcycle, he sensed his last chance to find out for himself.

He looked up from the oil pan, seeing everything anew. Tools hung neatly above the workbench. A box of Christmas things sat on a high shelf. His wife's car, which hadn't been moved since her death, sat mutely beside him. Nothing there could hold him. Only his motorcycle seemed alive, a vehicle to a new reality. He put the pan of dirty oil on the workbench, knowing it wouldn't take long to lock up the house. In a matter of hours, he could shut up his former life against the future.

He was ready to go by four o'clock the next day. He had gone to the post office and had the mail delivery stopped. He'd

emptied the refrigerator and wheeled the garbage can to the street. He'd left a note for his son in Topeka, who had a key to the house. "I'm going to find your mother," it said. Maybe his son would understand. Claude's wife had been the daughter of the bookkeeper at the appliance store where he learned his trade back in 1960. When he got his own shop, she did the books. When she was tired at the end of a long day, she would give him her hand and smile and close her eyes. He believed no woman in the world was more beautiful. They worked hard and got old, bought a motor home and made plans to fish in Alaska, to see the fall colors in Vermont, to run the Florida Keys. Then she died one afternoon while driving home from Lawrence with groceries in the car. Her heart stopped and she crashed into the only tree within a mile of the scene.

After that, Claude became unmoored. He walked through the house and sometimes called to his wife, forgetting she wasn't in the next room. He began talking to God, who wasn't there either. He stopped shaving, stopped cutting his hair. When it was light, he rode his motorcycle all over Kansas. He rode to Missouri and Arkansas, going nowhere. He rode and prayed, looking for signs. At night he stared at the TV, listening dumbly to its stories about the Loch Ness monster and the space aliens who built the great pyramids. He watched reality shows, gazing indifferently as the characters vied with one another. He watched politicians and preachers shout and wave their arms. He saw weapons of the future, he saw the factories where peanut butter was made, he saw microchips placed in the eyes of the blind. None of it made sense.

So he turned off the TV and got a Bible. Not knowing where to begin, he decided he may as well start at the begin-

ning and read every word. It took him four days to read the whole Bible, day and night, hardly sleeping. But he still didn't understand, so he read it again. For weeks he prayed and read all night and rode his motorcycle all day. His hair got long, his beard grew long. Someone told him he looked like a sixty-year-old Jesus. But none of his searching had made sense until now. He left the note to his son on the kitchen table, beneath the keys to the motor home. He left another note for his daughter, Tracy. "Take Benson fishing," it said. Benson was Tracy's boyfriend from California. He wore suspenders and round wire-rimmed glasses and Claude had never liked him. That no longer mattered. Only one thing mattered. He was going to Salt Lake City to see a Mormon prophet.

Sometimes the Spirit spoke to the prophet in an actual voice, in plain English. "Wait," it said, or "Call him now." Other times it came like a feeling or a notion, a streak of pure intelligence. It was so much different than the voice of the devil, which the prophet also knew—that Old Scratch who spoke incessantly. The devil's words came through like static from a broken TV in another room. "You're an old man and they're not listening," the devil would say. A moment later the same incontinent spirit would tempt him: "They worship you. Tell them to do the limbo." The devil could chatter all day like an anxious monkey, but the prophet didn't take heed. Instead, he followed the whisperings of the Spirit, heaven's voice of economy and restraint. There was no superfluity with God, who spoke when needed and that was all. The next day, as the prophet said his morning prayers, the Spirit spoke clearly. "Go to Wal-Mart,"

it said. This wasn't the devil playing games. The prophet knew this was God's true voice, a confirmation of the strange idea that had come the day before. The Spirit wanted him to act. "Go to Wal-Mart and wait upon the voice of the Lord."

"Very funny," Scott said when the prophet told him the news. They were in the prophet's office, which was modestly decorated in walnut and leather, a large oil painting of Brigham Young behind the desk. "You should write for the funny papers," Scott said.

The prophet sat at his desk, hands before him, fingers intertwined. "I'm supposed to go alone," he said, looking back at Scott, "and I need you to help me."

Seeing that the prophet was serious, Scott shut the office door. He sat across from the desk, looking squarely at the prophet, waiting for him to speak, but the prophet remained silent. "Well," Scott finally said, "you can't go. The Prophet of the Lord doesn't go to Wal-Mart. Especially not alone. You don't go anywhere alone. It's just not possible."

"It's possible," the prophet said. "Anything's possible."

"You can't go," Scott said. "It's dangerous, it's irresponsible."

"I'll need a pickup," the prophet said, unperturbed by Scott's attitude, even expecting it, given the man's piety.

"I know we don't always agree about things," Scott said, "but this is ridiculous." He stood up and began pacing the room. "Have you told anyone else?" he asked.

"You're the only one who knows," the prophet answered. "I'm going to need a beard too," he said. "Can you find me a make-up artist?"

"Prophets don't wear beards," Scott said.

"Joseph F. Smith had a beard," the prophet said. "Get me a red one like his, to match my hair."

Scott was nearly shaking now. "Have you ever been to Wal-Mart?" he asked. "Do you know what it's like? I can tell you, it's a low-brow clientele—no place for a prophet."

"All God's children, I'm sure," the prophet said. "And besides, I'll be in a disguise. Joseph Smith wore disguises several times," he offered.

"Because he was being pursued by mobs," Scott answered. "Is that what you want? Do you want to see what a mob looks like? Do you want to start a riot?"

"There won't be a riot," the prophet said, hoping it was true.

Scott sat down and thought a moment. "Is this ... are you ... following some sort of impression?"

The prophet took a note pad from his desk drawer. He looked at Scott, eyebrows raised in earnest, and then started making a list.

"Do you know why?" Scott asked. "Do you at least know that much?"

The prophet shook his head. All day long he'd listened for more guidance, but the Spirit was as still as a sleeping baby.

"Can I pick out the Wal-Mart?" Scott asked. "Can I map out a plan, follow you in my car?"

The prophet thought about this. "Yes," he said, handing Scott the list. "Plan it out, but keep it between us. And find me a jumpsuit too," he said, "something in light blue. And a nice pair of tennis shoes."

Claude Winn put on his leather riding chaps, tucked his gray-

ing hair behind his ears, and put on his helmet. He pressed the start button on his Honda Goldwing 1800 and rode the twelve miles from his home to the junction of Interstate 70. From there he headed west toward Salt Lake City, an eighteen-hour ride. The interstate lay before him like a concrete ribbon for hundreds of miles, and he imagined his past peeling away in layers as he rode. Crossing the flatlands of Kansas and eastern Colorado, he felt his childhood disappear. Next came the arrogance and godlessness of his young manhood. As he passed through Denver and into the Rocky Mountains, he felt the early years of his marriage sloughing off—the time when his children were small and feeding his family was the only thing that mattered. Soon he was riding the shoulderless freeway through narrow canyon passes crowded by eighteen-wheelers and carloads of summer tourists. The north side of the freeway was walled by rocky cliffs that rose hundreds of feet into the sky, while the south side dropped down into the Colorado River. It was through this stretch that he lost the latter years of his working life when he believed he was building a legacy. Every dozen miles or so, the old mining towns appeared, built up against the mountains like the ancient sandstone cities of the Hopi. Driving those last miles into Utah, he lost the only thing he had left to hold on to, the lonely miles he'd ridden since his wife's death.

Except for food and fuel, he stopped once, sleeping for a few hours behind a rest stop outside of Denver. In his sleep he dreamed of the Mormon temple floating above the Great Salt Lake in a pink, translucent glow, held in the air by hosts of wingless angels in white robes. Once he arrived in Utah, riding up through Price and Helper, Spanish Fork and Provo, he

was completely empty. What was left inside him hummed with the roar of the motorcycle's engine. As he rounded the point of the mountain and entered the Salt Lake Valley, a sign looming at the side of the freeway said *This is the Place Monument*, and he knew this was the place. Cruising the eight lanes of I-15 into Salt Lake City, the freeway decorated with leftover images of the 2002 Olympics, Claude felt euphoric. He could see the temple in the center of the valley. "Go to the temple, to the center," the hum within him said.

The city had changed since he'd been there last. It was no longer the dusty Western cowboy town he'd remembered from years before, his memory of it muddled with hoary images of John Wayne movies. State Street was a wide, direct shot through the valley floor toward the capitol building, lined with the new government buildings, steel-and-glass high-rises, and expensive specialty shops. The traffic was heavy and pedestrians stepped on and off a new light-rail system. Near the city center were leather-clad, body-pierced punks; richly dressed, urbane women; harried businessmen wearing cufflinks and shiny leather shoes. The whole city seemed a hub of worldliness, momentarily distracting Claude from the hum that had driven him a thousand miles. But then he saw the temple, walled in like a shrine. At the corner of Main and South Temple, traffic slowed to a crawl. Shoppers and tourists walked alongside the ten-foot concrete Temple Square walls; hundreds more milled around on the wide, curved sidewalks weaving among the fountains and pools in the plaza facing the temple. A great statue of Brigham Young stood at the gates of the plaza, his stern face set, his hand and arm gesturing to the ground.

Claude turned his big motorcycle onto South Temple

where the traffic was halted. At a pedestrian stoplight in the middle of the block, a horse and carriage with a driver in a top hat waited to give carriage rides to tourists. But Claude's eyes were drawn to another sight: a lanky, wild-eyed man in a dark three-piece suit standing on the sidewalk outside the gates of Temple Square. The man was shouting at the passing cars and sweating visibly in the dry summer heat. He had deeply tanned skin and a massive wave of white hair on his head. He held up a cardboard sign written in florescent orange that read ZION IS FLED! Claude knew the man was either a devil or a prophet, that this ground was a land of devils and prophets.

Claude turned north on West Temple and parked his motorcycle on the street. Coming around the corner on the sidewalk outside the wall that separated the city from the sacred inner grounds, he was sore from his ride through the night and still had on his big riding boots and leather chaps over his Levi's. His denim shirt was rolled up at the sleeves. His beard was parted in the middle from the long ride, his long hair sprouting wildly from his head.

Up ahead the man with the cardboard sign was shouting at the cars, standing near the gates of Temple Square like some hound of hell. The preacher stood next to a three-wheeled bicycle that had a basket full of pamphlets and books. Propped against the bicycle was a tattered piece of plywood crowded with florescent orange letters. GO YE OUT FROM AMONG THEM! it said. In the midst of his shouting, the man took up a bundle of pamphlets and waved them above his head. "Our prophet is fallen," he railed at the passing cars. "The Church has become Babylon! Behold, the Corporation of the

First Presidency has invested in the R. J. Reynolds tobacco company!"

Claude stood and watched the man, sounding the hum of the spirit that had driven him.

"I know from whence I speak," the man cried to the onlookers. "I was once an elder among you." The preacher moved erratically between the street and the sidewalk, amidst shouts and honking horns, shoving his literature at the rolled-up windows of passing cars.

Standing a few feet away, Claude called out: "Are you a prophet?"

The man turned on Claude, seeing him for the first time. "No," he shouted. "I am no prophet. Only God's voice is holy!"

"I came to see a prophet," Claude said.

The man looked up at Claude's face with shifting eyes. "The burden of the Lord which Isaiah did see," the man said, "was hot coals on his tongue and an ache in his belly." Up close, the preacher's brown face was almost gray, his eyes the eyes of a madman. "The children of Israel passed through on dry ground," he cried, "and the chariots of Pharaoh were drowned in the sea!"

Looking over the man's shoulder, Claude watched a Salt Lake City police car creep between the congested lanes of traffic, sounding a single blast of its siren. Two officers emerged from the car in crisp black uniforms, their silver badges shining in the sunlight. The preacher took hold of Claude, lifting himself to Claude's ear. "The judgment of this generation is upon them," he said in a bitter whisper, but Claude sloughed off the man's grip. One of the officers took the man by the back of his neck and said, "Come on, Billy. Let's go."

"I'm not on Church property," the preacher protested. "This is a public sidewalk."

"You're creating a disturbance," the officer said. "Let's call it a day for now."

The preacher squirmed in the policemen's grasp as they carried him to the squad car. "Behold, the inhabitants of Zion are terrible!" he shouted. "Who can stand them?" But Claude wasn't listening. He was already headed toward the gates of Temple Square, his beard parted, searching for the true and living prophet.

As far as the prophet knew, Scott had done everything he'd been asked without betraying their plans. The secretary had selected a nice Wal-Mart in a good neighborhood on the east bench; he borrowed a white pickup, a 1978 Ford F150, from his brother's plumbing company; and he planned to drive his own Geo Metro, following along behind the prophet. Scott snuck a make-up artist up the service elevator of the administration building, a tattooed, thirty-something woman with a shaved head, hemp choker, and a tee-shirt that said "Earth Mother Clothing." The woman was new to Utah and didn't seem to know the Mormons had a prophet. At least, she didn't noticeably react when she saw him in his light blue jumpsuit with the fake belt and the black insignia over the left pocket.

When the make-up artist was done, the prophet looked at himself in the mirror and smiled to see his face clothed in a red and gray beard that touched his chest. He felt a kinship with his brethren of a century before, those grand men who'd worn top hats and long coats and carried walking sticks. A few

minutes later, he and Scott slipped down the back stairway to the parking garage where the pickup waited. Soon the prophet was driving down State Street, his elbow out the window, feeling what other men might feel on a lonesome afternoon drive through the city. He put a hand to his beard and thought of the biblical prophet who disguised himself with ashes on his face; he thought of the Book of Mormon prophet Abinadi preaching in disguise.

Following Scott's directions, the prophet drove to 3300 South, where he was supposed to turn left, heading east toward the bench. He wasn't seeking heaven's guidance when it happened. He wasn't seeking the Spirit's voice. He was simply enjoying the feel of the steering wheel in his hand, the afternoon sun on the cars, the warm sounds of summer. But that was the moment a still, small voice spoke. "Turn right," the Spirit said. Without a question, the prophet signaled, checked his mirrors, got in his right lane. He made the right turn and headed west, out across the valley.

An hour before the prophet turned right, Claude Winn stepped inside the gates of Temple Square, the hum of the Holy Spirit quivering within him like a gyroscope. The first thing he saw was the flowers, like a beautiful Edenic garden. There were flowers of every color in low-walled planters along the sidewalks, small blossoming trees, and perfectly manicured tracts of green grass. Claude took a deep breath, knowing he was on holy ground, the worldliness of the city behind him. The beautiful gray-and-white assembly hall, the famous rounded tabernacle, and the temple itself with its gothic spires and

mournful rounded windows—they stood tall among the trees like ornaments in a crown. He thought he should have cleaned his dirty boots. But then a young woman appeared before him, a beautiful angel like Eve in the garden. She wore a navy blue jumper over a white shirt. She had long blond hair and a full, pleasant face, her teeth straight and white. “Hi,” she said. “Is this your first visit to Temple Square?”

Claude’s spirit burned like a fire. “You have a prophet,” he said.

“Yes,” the young woman said, “you mean like the Gallery of Prophets? Sister Hope is just starting a tour.” She directed Claude toward a squat, squarish building. “If we hurry we can just make it,” she said. Claude struggled to keep up in his leather chaps, his legs stiff from the long ride. “So where are you from?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Kansas,” Claude said. The Spirit was a spinning centripetal force, humming delicately, and Claude was afraid he might lose his balance.

“That’s great,” the young woman said. “I know a sister missionary serving in Kansas.”

Claude didn’t think he would ever be going back to Kansas.

Stepping through the doors of the Visitor’s Center, the young woman said, “Sister Hope, here’s one more.” Claude took in the building’s space, the high ceiling, the museum-like displays. A group of fifteen or twenty people was gathered around Sister Hope, a young woman with shoulder-length, curly brown hair wearing a white blouse and a black skirt. The group consisted of three or four families of various ages and sizes—parents, children, grandparents. “Hello,” Sister

Hope said to Claude. “Please join us. We’re about to tour the Gallery of Prophets.”

Claude felt the gyroscope tilt forward as he walked with the group toward the prophets, each one portrayed in a life-sized diorama running along the back of the curved high wall of the building. “Adam was the first prophet,” Sister Hope said. “Prophets are men on earth who speak with God.” The next display showed the prophet Noah standing with a long beard in a long robe, preaching to the people, his arms outstretched to the sky. Behind him was a partially constructed ark; before him men and women laughed and pointed in derision. Sister Hope explained the story of Noah and his ark, saying that Noah preached for a hundred years to people who didn’t listen to him. “Prophets give a voice of warning,” she concluded.

Looking at the next display, Moses parting the Red Sea, Claude knew his own life was being parted. Everything before this day was on one side of the divide, everything after that was on the other side. Sister Hope showed them the Old Testament prophets who testified of the need for obedience, men like Isaiah, Daniel, and Malachi. She explained that the New Testament had prophets, too, men like John the Baptist, the Apostle Peter, John the Revelator, men who preached mercy and redemption. Claude moved with the group, listening carefully to Sister Hope and lingering to read every word on every plaque. It was like a story he’d always known and had only forgotten for a moment.

When Sister Hope showed them the ancient American prophets with names like Nephi, Abinadi, and Mormon, Claude laughed out loud for joy, causing Sister Hope to clear

her throat, displeased. As the group passed through a display featuring paintings of the modern-day prophets, from Joseph Smith to the present, Sister Hope said the Holy Ghost was a still small voice that quietly testified of truth. She explained things that modern prophets had revealed, truths poured out on the earth as thick and sweet as cream, and Claude could barely contain himself. He wanted to leap into the air. "God is in the shape of a man!" he wanted to shout. "Baptism is offered to the dead! The priesthood is restored!"

This new knowledge moved through Claude like electricity, as real as the gyroscope sensation within him. Reaching out, he touched the shoulder of a woman standing beside him, a pear-shaped woman in a pea-green dress. He whispered in her ear, saying it was all true. The woman smiled pleasantly as she inched away from Claude. A few moments later, she was speaking to Sister Hope, looking suspiciously back at Claude and gesturing as she spoke.

Then Sister Hope brought the group to a spiral, crimson-carpeted walkway that ascended to *The Christus*, a great white marble statue of Christ. She stood at the bottom of the walkway, inviting them to ascend to the statue, asking them to take a moment at the red velvet ropes to meditate on the loving kindness of the Savior. Moved by her request, Claude walked softly behind the group, his eyes fixed on the great statue of Christ enrobed in a cloth that came over his shoulders and covered his left breast. Christ's arms and feet were bare, revealing wounds. His beard was parted, his long hair falling in curls upon his shoulders. Above and behind him, a rich blue field like outer space was adorned with glowing stars.

When Claude reached the red velvet rope, he knelt among

the group in his leather riding chaps, causing the mothers to draw their children closer. Claude tucked his long hair behind his ears and then lifted his arms to *The Christus*. Shutting his eyes, he saw a vision of the spear being thrust into Jesus' side, flooding the Savior's body with water and blood. Claude began to weep aloud, unaware that other members of the group were backing away, turning to descend the crimson walkway. When Claude's cries turned to shouts of praise that echoed through the building, Sister Hope moved to a nearby information desk where a gray-haired sister picked up a phone and began to whisper distressfully into the receiver.

The gyroscope lifted Claude to his feet, carrying him out to the brilliant sunlight where the flowers burst like flames along the sidewalk's edges. The trees blossomed like burning bushes testifying. In every direction he saw the children of God milling about sleepily, seeing or not seeing God's power in and through all things. When he saw a Polynesian missionary with a small, leather-bound book, he asked, "Is that the book that speaks from the dust?" She nodded, absently handing him the book. Claude leafed through the hundreds of pages that were as thin as onion skins. Standing on a low wall that enclosed a narrow garden of flowers, he lifted one arm to the vaulting blue sky and began to read in a loud voice, "Alma said unto him, believest thou there is a God?" The crowds of people stopped at the sight of this great preacher in leather and denim, his beard dried and curly in the arid Utah heat. "Will ye deny again that there is a God," Claude read, "and also deny the Christ?" Laughing, Claude shouted the words to the gathering crowd: "I have all things as a testimony that these things are true."

Standing on the low wall, Claude didn't see Sister Hope. He didn't see the two men in dark suits with tiny wires descending into their collars. As the two men emerged from the crowd, Claude bent his knees and lifted his arms before the faces of the people. With the exulting flowers and trees as witnesses, with the holy temple just a few yards away, he let out a wordless, joyful shout that mingled with his laughter and tears. One of the men spoke into his lapel as the two of them carefully approached Claude, taking his arms from the sky and holding them at his side, the book of scripture falling to the flowerbed. "This is private property," one of the men said. "We're going to have to remove you."

A moment later, laughing, crying, stupidly tugging against the grasp of the men as they carried him away, Claude testified to the crowd: "I've seen the The Christ, he proclaimed, "and I have all things as a testimony." Outside the gates of Temple Square, the same two Salt Lake City police officers emerged from their cruiser and put Claude in handcuffs. Claude called out to the people standing next to the horse and carriage, the people crossing the busy street, the people along the walls of Temple Square. "A voice speaks from the dust," Claude shouted. "The Mormon book speaks from the dust," he cried as the officers put him in the squad car.

The prophet was driving west on 3500 South when the Spirit spoke again. "Right," it said, and the prophet turned right through a maze of new retail businesses on both sides of the street—discount stores, restaurants, specialty shops. He drove a block and saw a Wal-Mart ahead on the left. He signaled

and turned into the expansive parking lot. Slowing at a small stop sign in the middle of the lot, he checked his mirror and saw Scott behind him in the Geo, waving, speaking into his cell phone, mouthing words. The prophet parked the truck and began walking toward the store. "This is all wrong," Scott said, racing up behind him. "I told security you were going to the other Wal-Mart. We need to go back before something happens."

"Something's already happening," the prophet said, not looking back. Compelled by the voice in his mind, he pressed forward into the crowded store, full of people and noises, colors and smells. Nodding at the greeter, a man his own age, the prophet had an odd feeling, something beyond the strange sensation of walking through a Wal-Mart with a pasted-on beard, wearing a jumpsuit and tennis shoes. Sensing that Scott was still behind him, he whispered sharply over his shoulder, "Stay back." A heavy woman in front of him glared back for a moment. She was wearing stained pink leggings and a filthy white shirt and flip flops. She looked away before he could offer her a smile. Soon a middle-aged man was walking beside him, tall and wiry, his skin blackened by a lifetime of cigarette smoking and outside work. Approaching the check stands, the prophet walked around a young mother with four small children tugging on her. Overhead a TV tuned to the Wal-Mart Network gave tips on outdoor grilling. To the left a group of teenage girls was gathered around a display of brightly-colored swimsuits. "Just stuff it," one of the girls said. "Like, rude!" another responded.

The prophet walked toward the far wall where he saw the words "Home and Garden." He had wanted to be an ordi-

nary man of his age shopping for trivial things. For one afternoon, he'd wanted not to be a prophet. But now the scripture rang in his mind, "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets," and once again he remembered that nothing was trivial. He reached the garden hoses and picked the first one he saw, a twenty-five-foot yellow hose wrapped in a spool the size of a small car tire. He glanced at the end of the aisle where Scott stood with a puzzled look on his face. Then the prophet headed toward the check stands where the candy bars were displayed. He would get his Almond Joy. He would stand in line and wait on the Spirit.

The check stands were busy. Lines of customers flooded beyond the checkout area. He stood in the line behind a pleasant-looking, middle-aged woman who was buying a pair of jeans and a package of light bulbs. The woman looked back for a moment, nodded and smiled. The prophet stood patiently with the dozens of other shoppers, his garden hose and Almond Joy in hand, the whole store humming like an ancient marketplace. He was waiting upon the Lord when the Holy Ghost spoke a sentence the prophet couldn't possibly mistake.

A Salt Lake City police car screeched to a halt in a Wal-Mart parking lot on the west side of the valley. One of the officers got out and threw Claude's door open. "Get out," he said. "Come on, we've got another call." The officer took off Claude's handcuffs. "We're going easy on you today, preacher," he said, slapping Claude between the shoulder blades. The policeman got back in the car and the officers sped off, leaving Claude spin-

ning in a sea of cars in every direction, stores all around, four lanes of hyperactive traffic feeding into and out of the parking lot. For a moment the worldliness of the city closed in on him, but then he felt something else too, the Spirit driving him forward, the gyroscope within. "Testify," the Spirit said, and Claude walked toward the crowds of people at the Wal-Mart entrance.

Stepping inside the store, not knowing what he would say or do, he went to an unoccupied check stand, climbed up onto it, and raised his hands above his head, just as he'd done a few minutes before on Temple Square—like Noah in the diorama. He stood there a moment, silent, unnoticed. "Testify," the Spirit said in a voice like courage. "People," Claude shouted, drawing the crowd's attention, "there is a book," he said. "The book speaks from the dust. God speaks through every particle of dust."

The checkers stopped their work, the shoppers fell strangely silent. Claude looked out at all of them, taking in their beautiful faces, the faces of God's children. In the silence, he whispered to them. "I've seen the book," he said, "in the hands of an angel near God's temple."

The silence lasted only a moment. Claude heard a roar like ten thousand motorcycles on ten thousand highways. He saw the flashes of fire like a dream of endless rows of brake lights on the highway at night. All the people before him were looking around, searching anxiously. A woman with platinum-colored hair wearing yellow jeans cried out, "What's going on?"

"It's motorcycles," someone said, "lots of motorcycles."

But Claude knew it wasn't motorcycles. He knew it was

the Spirit, just as he knew it was the prophet coming toward him through the crowd, a man in a red beard with red hair and a firm look of resolution in his eyes.

The Holy Ghost had spoken one sentence to the prophet: "I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh." Scott had absently touched the prophet's shoulder, saying "no" and "don't" like a distracted man while the prophet put his garden hose and Almond Joy into Scott's unresisting arms. The big bearded man in riding leathers stood atop one of the check stands, crying out, "God speaks through every particle of dust."

The prophet, in his tennis shoes, fake beard, and jump suit, walked through the confused crowd and toward the big man on the check stand. He heard the Spirit like the roar of a mighty wind. He saw tongues of fire lick the air. In the gathering crowd, some people murmured while others spoke truths they'd always known but had never given words before.

The bearded man reached out with one hand and helped the prophet mount the check stand. "In the last days," the big man said, "God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."

The prophet knew the scripture was from Acts and that it was about the Day of Pentecost. "On my servants," the prophet said, "and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

"What's going on?" a woman in a postal uniform said.

"They're drunk," a hairy man in a black muscle shirt responded. He looked around at the people murmuring and tes-

tifying, then at the two men on the check stand. "All of you are drunk."

Above the buzz of the crowd, above the roar of the Spirit, the prophet spoke in a loud voice: "I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath."

"Blood and fire and billows of smoke," the big man in leathers said. "The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood."

Then the woman in the postal uniform spoke: "Before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord."

"You're all drunk," the man in the muscle shirt said. He took a cell phone from his pants pocket. "I'm calling the cops."

"Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord," the prophet said, "shall be saved."

The prophet's arrest made national news, as did the grainy security-camera images of Claude and the prophet preaching from a Wal-Mart check stand. With the help of the Public Relations Department, Scott braved the media onslaught, serving in his role as S. Travis Widdison, spokesman for the prophet. Calling upon obscure allusions to the Old Testament, Scott bolstered the faithful and confused reporters. Media pundits bantered over the news of the Mormon prophet being arrested in a fake beard. The Saints consoled themselves with stories of the virtues of persecution. The cover of one national magazine featured the prophet's mug shot and beneath it the words, "Once a cult, always a cult." But when the news broke of a Congressional finance scandal in Washington, D.C., the world forgot its short-lived fixation on the Mormon prophet.

Claude ended up selling his home in Eudora and buying a house in West Valley City around the corner from Walmart. Every Wednesday afternoon, Claude and the prophet had lunch. The prophet taught Claude the gospel and the hazards of Church bureaucracy, while Claude taught the prophet what it was like to ride a motorcycle in the cool evenings out across the salt flats. No one seemed to notice the prophet in his tennis shoes and jump suit eating fast food every Wednesday with a man who looked like a sixty-year-old Jesus.

Months later, the prophet was standing at the window of his sixth-story apartment, watching a young family on the plaza. He was thinking of all the truths that waited to come forth, truths in every science and art, bursting from the mouths and hands of saints and sinners alike. From time to time, the prophet was given to see the children of God in marketplaces and shops and streets, their hearts so full of love that they could barely keep from weeping. God had so much more to reveal—through his Spirit first, then through his Son. Standing at the window, the prophet smiled. He waved, trying to get the family's attention while God moved through all the world, the entire planet as divinity's megaphone.

Do Not Mix with Bleach

He sits alone in the kitchen of a small, narrow basement apartment. It's 11:00 p.m. and the room is quiet. His shirt is gray. His pants are green and faded. He's divorced and he doesn't know why. He's at the kitchen table, buttering a piece of toast. The staccato scraping of the butter knife saddens him. With pinched fingers he carefully sprinkles cinnamon sugar onto the toast. He has no appetite. He levels the sugar with his index finger until the toast is covered with an even brown layer that soaks into the butter.

He licks the tip of his finger, thinking not of the toast, but of a girl he dated once in high school, a girl named Karla who wore his ring on a chain around her neck because it was too big for her finger. Karla had a long, thin neck. Her skin was smooth and seemingly poreless. He loved her with a young love that strikes him now as having been a kind of despair.

He eats the toast and thinks about her death. Ten years ago his mother, who stayed in that town long after he was gone, told him the news. Karla had become a young mother