

# ★ A MAN AT THE BAR ★



Illustration by Jillair Heinricke

BY MICHAEL HICKS

A few days ago I took the number 22 bus into downtown San Jose to hunt for some old short story collections at a used bookstore. I like short stories and I sometimes write them. Anyway, I sat in the back, in one of the seats that fan along the side and faced the aisle, where I hoped to get some inspiration from the people who usually sat there—Mexicans, blacks, old men in khaki jackets, alcohol on their breath. You know, all that Hemingway-type stuff. Well, for a long time I was the only one sitting there, nothing to do but read over and over the "MARIA -y- EDDIE" that someone had felt-penned in big letters across the blue vinyl seat on the opposite side. Looking up, I memorized the phone numbers of Debt Counseling and Retirement Jobs Inc., then sat for awhile trying to decide which placard—the Army's or the Navy's—was, in fact, the most enticing. At about the eighth stop three black men with shorn Brillo-pad heads got on and came to the back. When they sat down, one of them gave me a sort of funny look: I was much too blond, too clear-eyed for this spot. And I knew that. But I didn't pay too much attention to him, because the man who had come in after them had caught my eye. Standing a few feet away from me with his arm up like that, he looked a lot like a man I met on my mission. It really bothered me. Suddenly, writing the story of that chance meeting on another bus seemed important, though at first I couldn't say why. I picked my notebook up from off the seat, and took the pen out of my front pocket.

It was just before lunchtime and the sun shone down through the grey flower-boxed buildings, paving the streets with gold, and artificially lighting up the headlamps of Volkswagens, which were, of course, the only cars. Elder Rushton and I stood on the sidewalk of Steinhartstrasse, just between Hofstrasse and the other street. I'd only been out a week and still not eaten in an authentic German restaurant, so that Thursday my companion was making good on his promise to take me out to one.

"On one condition," he said.

"What's that?"

"That you do some offhanding on the bus."

"Offhanding?"

"It's just like it sounds." The green and yellowish bus had turned a corner and was pulling up to where we stood. "Now don't be nervous," he said, trying to comfort me, "there's nothing to it." Elder Rushton was always trying to comfort me like that. We got on the bus, holding out the passes with our pictures on them. The door hissed shut.

"Danke, danke," the driver said. As I put my pass back in my suit pocket, Elder Rushton began to explain.

"I'll stay here in front. You go to the back, look around, and find a guy you think would be receptive. Then just grab a space on the bar next to him and start up a conversation." The bus began to move and he patted me on the shoulder. "Try and get an appointment for a discussion, or at least get him to come out to church."

I looked at the row of men, my field white unto harvest. It was an odd thing about German busses—the seats were thought of as somehow reserved for old women and small children. There were none of either on this bus, but the men stood anyway, arms hanging from the passenger bar. I had noticed this in the Germans—a cold, constant deference to almost anything, even if it was nothing at all. One of the men was reading a paperback book, the cover of it folded back in his hand. A couple of them were speaking to each other. But most of them just faced the windows and the street below them in silence, looking as though they were facing the firing squad or destiny, or something. They were not at all happy faces, but they looked resolved and awkwardly content. I felt my companion's hand slide off my shoulder as I began walking toward the back of the bus.

The air inside the bus was stifling, but outside warm and scented—it was the kind of spring day in which you imagine that somewhere an unseen hand moves through the countryside, letting flocks out of their pens, unlatching the doors of barns, the gates of zoos, every creature left to wander the green, unimaginable hills. I remembered the zoo that day, and my father, and long days' excursions into the wilds with a little elephant shaped plastic key. That had been Dad's favorite place to take the family before the accident. After the word came that the disability would be permanent, they sent Dad home from the hospital and we never went to the zoo again. Once in summer I asked him if I could take him there, but his simple, gravel-voiced "No" told all: Dad hated being on Church welfare, hated Mom's having to work, and food left on doorsteps, and Relief Society cakes. I understood then that he might never, indeed, could never again take pleasure in studying the lifestyles of caged animals. Reaching up, I took my place next to the selected man. The zoo, the chrome bars of father's wheelchair, the Wednesday afternoon therapy visits, and through it all, that constant "holding to the iron rod" as Mom used to say it—there was something about bars, about metal, that ran through all of my years and held them together, kept them in place. The bus tipped a little as it turned a corner and my arm stiffened.

I'll never forget that guy. He was tall and fat, his head the roundest I had ever seen. One of his ears was cauliflower and made him look a little like a loud wrestler I used to see on channel two, except the wrestler's hair was blond and sweaty. This man's was short and black with a couple of white bald spots, scars, I guess. His eyes, set in two black rims, were vague and reddish. Beneath his long, waxy rain poncho gleamed an old white shirt, and in his hand he carried a beat-up looking black radio.

"Beautiful weather we're having, isn't it?" I said in my best German.

He didn't speak. He didn't even look at me.

"Do you ride the bus often?" That was pretty poor, I admit, and again he did not respond. I tried a different tactic.

"Are you interested in religion?"

"Religion?" the man said, his features suddenly animated and boyish. I had gotten right to the heart of things and it had worked. The man chuckled. "Religion?" he said again, turning to my face. "Why boy, I'm an angel. You didn't see my wings?"

An angel of God never has wings, I remembered.

"See," the man went on excitedly, tugging at the flaps of his poncho. "Aren't they pretty?" I realized that it hadn't rained the whole week and stepped back a little. "You see," he said, "there are good angels and there are bad angels. But I'm a good angel." He spoke quickly, his voice shrill and rather wheezy, as if it were being propelled by a mighty rushing wind.

How to handle this. "Uh, have you ever heard of the angel Moroni?" I asked.

He turned back to the window, wrinkling his forehead. "Must be a bad angel."

"Oh, he's a good angel."

"I'm a good angel."

"You see, this angel Moroni . . ." I said, wondering at myself. I explained, of course, how Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith and told him about some plates of gold on which were written a history of the ancient inhabitants of—

"I know God," he said. "We're very, very good friends. He talks to me all the time, any time I want him to."

"God talks to you?"

The man held up the radio. "Right here. I just turn on the switch and . . ." He flicked on the knob with his finger. No sound came out. "See, listen to him. He talks to me all the time."

"So you do believe God speaks to men today?"

"Not to men," he said, shaking his head. "Just angels."

"But then angels speak to men, don't they? You're speaking to me."

He squinted. "You look more like a *boy* than a man to me."

"Alright, they speak to boys."

"*Wunderbar!*" he shouted. His voice was suddenly operatic, and the other passengers all turned to look. Avoiding their eyes, I looked to Elder Rushton for comfort. But my companion was hopelessly engaged in some conversation with a short, bearded man wearing a sport-coat and a grey hat. The man moved his hand gracefully as he spoke. I looked back at the fellow next to me, who was now flicking the radio on and off as if it were some rapid fire mechanism.

"We'd like to come visit you some time and tell you more about Joseph Smith and the Church he restored . . ."

"And Moroni?" He stopped with the radio.

"And Moroni." I pulled a pad and pencil from my pocket, unsure just how I was going to write with one hand. "So then, where do you live?" I said, thinking I knew already.

"Where do I live? Why, in heaven boy."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot."

"You can't visit us. Only we can visit you. Both bad angels and good angels. I'm a—"

"'Good angel', yes, I know. Well, maybe you would like to come visit our church?"

"I certainly would." The bus was slowing down and he leaned with it. "I've got to get off now, boy."

"Well, here, let me give you our address and times." I fumbled in my pocket for a card, my last chance, but somehow pointless.

"Danke shon." The bus had stopped. He reached down and took the card from me, then turned and went out the door with his radio in one hand, flipping my card in the fingers of the other. The doors flapped shut. I could hear him on the sidewalk promising loudly to come to church, when I felt a hand on my shoulder and jerked.

"It's only me," Elder Rushton said in English. "We get off at the next stop." I looked over at him, then back to the sidewalk where my contact had disappeared into a stream of shoppers. Just for a moment I wondered what cage he might now be returning to.

The waitress set two paper coasters on the dark wood table, then the glasses of ice water. One of the teenagers in the booth across from us got up, went over to the other side of the room, and dropped some coins into the red, chrome-edged jukebox, which began playing a soul tune that was popular in the sixties in America. As we waited for our plates of schnitzel, Elder Rushton was giving me an account of his offhanding.

"... So it turns out that he's a college professor—can you believe that?—a college professor. He teaches over at the University there in Freiburg, but he lives here in town. He wouldn't give me his address—he's real smart, real cautious, you know—but I really think he's interested. He's coming to church on Sunday." He lifted his glass and took a sip from it, as if he were toasting himself. "So tell me about your guy."

"There's not much to tell," I said.

"A loser, huh?"

"No, not that, exactly. He's coming to church too."

Elder Rushton started playing with his napkin, folding it different ways, and after a minute he spoke again. His voice was very solemn. "You know, I saw that guy you were talking to. What made you pick him anyway?"

"Well, he looked to me like someone who really needed the gospel."

"Listen, I think there's something you need to understand about this mission." He took another drink. "You see there's all kinds of losers around, people who, like you said, look like they really need the gospel. But we need leaders here, not losers. We need fathers, men who can contribute something and make the church out here strong. Now did that guy look like a father to you?"

"I don't know."

"If he was, he probably didn't know he was," he said, half under his breath. "Let's face it, you could tell just by looking at the guy that he really needed help. And right now, that kind of convert would just drain the Branch. We don't need more drains on the Branch, we need men who can feed it and build it up. I'm probably not saying this very well but... you understand what I mean, don't you?"

I nodded.

"I know you meant well and all, I can't fault you for that. But, don't you see, right now that's just the way it is." The waitress set our plates on the table. As we ate, I didn't say much, but he kept explaining this all to me in different ways, and it made more and more sense.

When we finished eating, we still had a half-hour to kill, so I persuaded Elder Rushton to go with me and help me pick out a present for my father. No special occasion, I

told him, just had the urge. We walked a few doors down to a porcelain shop next to the Kaufhof department store. Sitting inside a glass case by the front door were a pair of glazed, hand painted steins with lead covers. I knew I'd have to starve for a few days for these, but Elder Rushton said that every missionary had to get some sooner or later, and it seemed worth it at the time. The lady behind the counter took them out, wrapped them in tissue paper, then put them in a box and tied it with string. On the way to an appointment that afternoon we stopped at the post office by the depot and sent the package airmail.

When Sunday rolled around, Elder Rushton and I went to church very early. He had to warm up the place for Priesthood and prepare the sacrament, and I practiced some hymns on the small pump-organ in the corner. Services would begin at nine and run till about twelve. Ours was a small Branch, only fourteen or so active members, if you counted the Habermeyer's active. They didn't show up that day for any of the meetings, and when afternoon came, it occurred to me that neither of our offhand contacts had either. On the bike ride home I mentioned this to Elder Rushton, who had apparently forgotten all about them. He didn't say much, but it didn't matter. I had already learned my lesson. Thursday night just before bed we had both knelt in our garments, bare knees to the rug, and prayed that I would be able to seek out and find those spirits who would truly grace God's kingdom. I promised in the future to be better led by the spirit.

About a month after that, I got a thank you card from America with a note on the back that read something like this:

Dear Son,

Thank you so much for the lovely mugs. One of them was broken in transit, but I think with a little Elmer's it'll be just fine. We're putting them in our bedroom on the dresser where your father can see them. He is not doing so well lately—spends most of his time in bed and I'm a little worried about that. But he does think of you a lot. Sometimes I find him just laying on his back praying and thanking God for you, our dear missionary son. We are both so proud of you.

Love,  
Mom

And it was late on a Monday night a few weeks later that I got the wire saying that Dad had passed away in his sleep early that morning. I didn't go home for the funeral. I didn't even ask to, and Mom said it was just as well.

From our position on the El Camino I guessed it would be at least another half-hour till we got into San Jose. I put my notebook back on the seat. The three black men had gotten off, and "MARIA -y- EDDIE" again made vicarious love on the opposite seat. Above my head, printed phone numbers still beckoned toward freedom from debt and offered jibs to the elderly. The Army and the Navy still warred over my recruitment with promised manhood. And the man at the chrome bar had moved to the front and found a seat next to a fat lady. Closing my eyes, I leaned my head against the window glass and felt the soothing motion of the bus, slowing and stopping, pulling out again, turning in and turning out, like the ceaseless movement of waves against the sand. You know, there're times when guy would give more for a back seat full of bad angels and an old man praying in bed than for all the college professors in the world.