



HIS passion for order made Willoughby Sacks a fine editor. In his work with the Church Curriculum Department in Salt Lake City, he had always taken a certain joy in finding imperfection and rooting it out—"Ahah!" he would grunt gleefully, and with his nonphoto-blue pencil he would circle a broken font. Then he would snort, "Oh no you don't!" as he eradicated the minutest unjustified type with a dramatic flair of the same pencil.

And Willoughby's life reflected the same passion. In his breast pocket he carried a large notebook in which he organized and regimented his life. In meticulous detail, Willoughby noted his appointments, his financial dealings, and his thoughts—hopes against hope that his life would offer him complexity to challenge him.

But it never did. At least not until he met Thelma. She seemed to fill the bench she sat on in the Church Office Building cafeteria, but something about her—maybe it was her face—had that aura of confidence and spirituality that was so appealing to Willoughby. And then she spoke: "Please pass the salt." At once Willoughby's heart was melted. With those words—Willoughby could never forget them—the dam burst and the two of them spent what was left of the lunch hour in blissful conversation.

She was a secretary in the Genealogy Department, and even though she had hips so broad they drooped off either side of her chair, and even though—Willoughby noticed—she cracked her knuckles when she was nervous, he decided that for the first time in his thirty-two years, he was in love.

She reminded him of his mother.

Except that Willoughby's mother had a passion for order that matched Willoughby's. When he was in school, Willoughby had an astrology project. He decided to duplicate the stars on his bedroom ceiling—the North Star there, perfectly in the middle; the big dipper over there, in an exact relationship to the North Star; Scorpio over there—"Ah, yes," he had said when he finished.

But then his mother saw the project: "Willy," she asked, "isn't Scorpio's tail curved a bit too much?" and without waiting for an answer, she climbed on a chair and peeled three of the paper stars from the ceiling and replaced them (exactly where they had been, Willoughby thought). In Willoughby's bedroom, his mother meddled with his constellations for more than a half hour.

Editors' Note

This story received an honorable mention in the 1983 D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest.

THE SURE WORD

BY JOSEPH PETERSON



Dejected, Willoughby left the room while she did it.

That day in the cafeteria, Willoughby tried to decide what about Thelma reminded him of his mother. Maybe her hips. Thelma was four inches taller than Willoughby, but he felt comfortable around her; he didn't feel that old uneasiness that he had always felt around other girls. She wasn't anything to be uneasy about—even Willoughby had to admit that. Just a decent girl, a secretary down in Genealogy.

One day, overpowered by his emotions, Willoughby asked her for a date. It was taco day in the cafeteria, and Thelma had hot sauce across one side of her ample lower lip. She rolled her hand once, cracking each knuckle in succession, and Willoughby somehow didn't care. In one of those awkward

pauses in the conversation, Willoughby asked her: "*Gone with the Wind's* playing down at the Avalon. Are you free on Thursday?"

At once, she stopped chewing her mouthful of taco. "That sounds neat, Willy. Love to go with you."

For years, only his mother had called him Willy.

As they drove down to the Avalon, Thelma and Willoughby were quiet and serious. The situation seemed to call for it—a first date and all, and with somebody who works for the Lord. Thelma even talked about her conversion to Mormonism: "I was at college in California—USC—and I just got to the point that I needed to know if there was a God." She was quiet for a long moment, toying playfully with the door handle on the passenger's side of Willoughby's Volkswagen. Then all of a sudden she sneezed violently. She took a crumpled hanky from her purse and dabbed at her flared nostrils. "You know, I just got to that point when you can't go on any more. I needed to know." She began to dab at her eyes with the hanky.

Oh no, Willoughby thought, she's going to cry.

And she did. Her voice got higher and higher in pitch until it finally broke. "Then one night," she sniffled, "I had a dream—a wonderful dream that changed my life." She blew her nose into her hanky. "Excuse me, I have the flu or something."

"A dream?" Willoughby asked.

"Yes, a wonderful dream that changed my life. I was carried away to a mountain top on my mattress, a beautiful mountain, and I saw Jesus and two young men in dark suits and white shirts." She wiped her tears and looked out the window at the cars on State Street. Again, she sneezed violently, rocking the Volkswagen on its springs. "Jesus told me that two young men had a message for me and that I was to listen to them."

"Wow," Willoughby said, "he meant the missionaries, didn't he?"

"Yes." She sniffed and cracked her left thumb knuckle.

"Wow, that's nothing short of miraculous. It's not everyone who has a miracle. Wow."

"How were you converted, Willy?"

"Oh, I wasn't ever converted; I was born a Mormon."

"Oh?"

"That's right. I've never had a miracle—I just sort of knew all along about that stuff."

Again the conversation slowed. After a moment, Thelma shifted her weight in the seat, moving almost imperceptibly closer to Willoughby. Without warning, she reached over and took Willoughby's hand. He stiffened, unconsciously accelerating the Volkswagen.

"Willy," she said in that mellifluous voice, "do you believe that God can bring two people together?"

He felt the back of his neck prickling and he unconsciously accelerated more. "I mean," she said, "do you believe that we were meant to be?"

"Well, uh, I haven't really . . ."

When Willoughby looked down he was going forty-five. Lordy, he thought, forty-five in a twenty-five zone. And he drove past the Avalon without stopping. Thelma blew her nose into her hanky when Willoughby turned around.

A large party had started—southern girls with southern accents, a large southern mansion down an interminable tree-lined lane, cigar-smoking men talking of seceding from the Union—when Willoughby and Thelma entered the Avalon Theatre; getting lost had made them late for the movie. In the darkness, Willoughby found two seats near the front of the audience—two seats on the aisle, a few girls toward the center of the row.

Having sat down, Willoughby felt a draft, and looking down, he noticed to his absolute horror that his zipper was down. Again his neck was prickly—something like hot salamanders.

He lurched forward, folding both arms into his lap.

Lordy, he thought, what to do? Zipping up, and from a sitting position, was not the kind of thing one did with a date. He sat perplexed. Then he experimented: Maybe if he put his elbow on the arm rests and dangled his hands nonchalantly into his lap he could . . . No, Thelma would surely notice. Perhaps he could do it one-handedly. No, not that either; zipping up is definitely a two-handed proposition.

Even more to Willoughby's horror, a girl from the center of the row stood and made her way to the aisle. Some people stood to allow her passage. She came closer, swishing through the seats in her skirts.

Lordy, what now?

With hot salamanders crawling all over his neck and shoulders, Willoughby stood and held both hands over his zipper. The girl passed. Willoughby sat down relieved.

Then it hit him—you dummy! he thought, you missed the perfect chance to zip yourself while standing. But surely the girl would return, and wouldn't he have to stand for her again! He planned and waited.

"I never did think Ashley was that good looking," said Thelma. "Did you?"

"No, never noticed that he was."

The girl returned, and Willoughby stood and readied himself. At the precise moment the girl was in front of him and he was sure Thelma wouldn't notice, he zipped himself.

Oh, the relief. For a short moment—only for a very brief second—Willoughby felt as one saved from an inexplicable embarrassment.

But something was wrong—very wrong. Willoughby felt a tugging at the front of his pants and the girl stopped abruptly. "Hey," the girl said, "let go of me!" Lordy, the hot salamanders started at it again. "Hey, my dress is caught somewhere."

Willoughby stood petrified. Scarlet was making a pass at Ashley, and a deep masculine voice barked, "Down in front!"

"Hey, turn loose of me," the girl said louder.

And then a girl opposite Willoughby, across the aisle, started giggling uncontrollably, pointing at Willoughby's zipper. "Look at that, would you!" she gasped, pointing.

"Down in front!"

Hot salamanders danced over Willoughby's entire body. He felt drained—exhausted by it all. Then Thelma reached her arm around Willoughby's shoulder and broke the spell: "Willoughby, you've zipped her up. She's stuck in your zipper, Willy. Would you like some help, Willy?"

He worked frantically at his zipper, trying to free the skirt. But to no use. It was hopelessly stuck.

"Would you please sit down in front!"

Thelma then took the zipper from Willoughby and gently worked it from side to side as he looked on helplessly—until the skirt was free. The girl continued, tittering, to her seat. Willoughby sat down.

But, regrettably, he had neglected to zip himself up after Thelma had freed the girl. Lordy. So he resigned himself to it.

When Scarlet had come back to the destroyed Tara and knelt to feel the earth, running the dirt through her fingers, then Thelma took Willoughby by the hand and played with his fingers. "I've had a dream," she whispered into his ear, "or a vision." She sniffed. "I'll tell you about it later." She toyed with Willoughby's pudgy thumb.

In the Volkswagen, he asked her about the dream. "I dreamed it was me," she said, "having your baby when Melanie had Ashley's." She pulled her left index finger and popped the joint loudly. Then she rested her hand on the seat next to Willoughby's ear and played with the thin wisps of hair on the sides of his balding head. She sniffed. "You know, Willy, the Lord told me in that dream—for the second time—that you and I are foreordained to union."

A shiver went down Willoughby's spine, starting from the ear Thelma toyed with, ending with a sharp tingling at the tip of his tailbone.

"Haven't you felt it too? Isn't it inevitable—you know, meant to be—like the dirt at Tara?" she said.

"Huh?" Willoughby said.

"Like the dirt in Scarlet's hands—isn't it meant to be?"

Willoughby thought instead of Atlanta—the wild-eyed horses running everywhere, screaming women and children darting through black streets, explosive flames lighting the night sky. Lordy.

"Don't you feel like God has brought us together?" she urged.

"Well, uh . . ." They were rounding the corner heading towards Thelma's house and Willoughby said, "Well, uh, here we are."

"Yes," she said, "here we are," and she sneezed.

Zippering up, and from a sitting position, was not the kind of thing one did with a date. He sat perplexed. Perhaps he could do it one-handedly. No, not that either; zippering up is definitely a two-handed proposition.



When Willoughby turned off the engine, he turned to Thelma to thank her for the wonderful evening. Tears were in her eyes, so Willoughby didn't speak. She reached forward, placing a hand on either side of his face, and she pulled his fat cheeks into the expression of a carp. "Oh, Willy," she said, "my precious little Willy-boy." With that, she pulled him forward and Willoughby closed his eyes tight. Lordy, she's going to kiss me, he thought—and she did. She brushed her ample lips over the crown of his head, leaving saliva that Willoughby could feel for some time afterwards.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Willy. I couldn't help myself."

"No, it's all right. Don't worry about . . ."

"It's my flu, Willy. I was up all Tuesday night with nausea."

"Nausea?" Willoughby wiped the crown of his head with his sleeve. "It's all right. I don't get the flu easy." Willoughby had lied horrendously; his mother once said he could catch the flu over the phone.

"Oh Willy!" Thelma said, and she pulled at the latch of the door. The springs and shocks of the car groaned when she stepped out. Putting her head through the window, she said, "Willy, God can tell you too. He will tell you, if you ask him. Ask God, Willy." And she walked into the house.

When Willoughby got home, his mother was asleep on the davenport. After helping her to bed, Willoughby went down to his own bedroom, to find that after all these years, the North Star had fallen from its place at the center of his bedroom and was lying face down on the floor. He picked it up and tried to stick it back to the ceiling. But to no use. The tape was old—dried and ineffectual.

He put the star on a shelf, undressed, slipped into his pajamas, and knelt to pray. He had never demanded anything of God. He felt—as he did about other relationships—that he had no reason to expect anything of God; and for this reason, his had always been a simple faith. He had never had a miracle—no chorus of angels, no healing, no proclamation from an oracle. He had never needed one to believe.

But tonight, he asked something important of God; he had to know too. "Father in heaven, if it be thy will, Father, tell me too. Tell me what you told Thelma."

He waited. No results.

Willoughby strained his muscles and squinted his eyes hard and asked with more intensity. "Please, Father, enlighten me. Is Thelma to be my wife?" He strained his muscles so hard that he got a charley horse in his thigh, and he had to hobble from his bedside around the room, colliding like a cripple with his desk and knocking his bronze Statue of Liberty from his dresser top. But the charley horse wouldn't stop. He grunted, he wheezed, and finally he fell over onto his bed. "Please God," he hissed through his clenched teeth.

He lay there puffing until the pain subsided. "Please," he whimpered, starting to cry. Straining his muscles, blowing hard breaths through his teeth, and squinting his eyes hard—Willoughby demanded God to tell him: "I have to know. Tell me!" The words sounded throughout the room in a voice that seemed, to Willoughby, not his own.

It was the aching sense of the silence that enfolded him after those words that made Willoughby begin to weep anew, not the pain, and he lay on his bed crying in his pajamas until his mother, hearing the noise, came down to his bedroom.

"Willy?" she said softly as she sat on the bed.

"Yes, Mother."

"What's the matter, dear?"

"Nothing, Mother. Nothing."

"Why, you've had another nightmare—haven't you?"

Without waiting for his answer, she lifted him in bed and pressed his head to her bosom. "Did you see a monster?"

"Yes, Mother."

Willoughby wasn't feeling well the next day. While he was brushing his teeth, he thought about the saliva Thelma had kissed onto his forehead the night before. He could almost feel it still, and he rubbed the spot with a wash rag.

He saw Thelma in the cafeteria coming down the line with three doughnuts stacked like a Leaning Tower of Pisa on her plate. She sat by him.

"Good morning, Willy."

"Hello."

"And how are we this morning?" she muffled through sugar-glazed dough.

"Fine."

She looked at Willoughby for a moment, swallowed hard, and cracked three knuckles on her left hand—finishing with the dull pop of her thumb.

"About last night," she said.

"Yes?"

"Do you think I got a little carried away?"

Willoughby waited a long time to answer. She glanced down at her remaining doughnut and cracked the knuckles of her right hand one after the other—one, two, three, four, a pause, and five. There was always a pause before the thumb. Then she put the last doughnut into her mouth.

"I don't know," he said finally.

"Don't know?" She chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "Did you pray about it?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well, I don't know. That's all. He just didn't tell me."

"Oh," she said. She wiped her hands vigorously on a napkin and took Willoughby by the hand. "You know, Willy, maybe I did get carried away—maybe not. Keep praying. I know that God will tell you."

Back in his office, Willoughby was editing a service guide for ward-house janitors—transpose this, a comma here, indent this five ems, a hyphen between *self* and *motivated*—ah, the process was good. He was feeling better now. Again Willoughby felt the old and profound satisfaction of an orderly manuscript. Capitalize *church*, delete *etc.*, change *differant* to *different*, boldface this heading for consistency—Ah, yes; the simplicity of order.

Then his phone rang and Elder Jensen was on the line. "Willoughby, how are you?"

"Fine, Elder Jensen, and you?" Jensen had always been Willoughby's idol; he was the image of control—complete self-domination, while at the same time complete devotion to the ends of the kingdom. He worked as administrative aid to the Twelve.

"Fine, fine. Listen, I'm working now with the brethren on a communique for stake presidents—a meeting planning guide for next year. Frankly, we're having some trouble with the wording. Would you mind coming over to the administration building for some time to give us a hand?"

"Not at all, Elder Jensen."

Willoughby headed for the administration building, pencil in hand. Old Brother Thorson sat like a three-headed dog, guarding the entrance to the building. Thick glasses, yellow teeth, and a too-accurate notion of propriety—Brother Thorson's job was to guard the brethren: "After all," he once told Willoughby, "with people shooting popes and gurus, we can't be too careful with ours."

He had the voice of Cecil B. DeMille's God—a resonant boom that always made the hearers feel somehow in need of penitence; and to enter, one had to get from Brother Thorson a "blue card," ostensibly an introduction card, but even more a security measure: "This is to introduce Brother/Sister -----, who is here to see -----." So, when Willoughby entered the posh building—gold plated, lead crystallized, and Arnold Friberged—he got in line to get his blue card.

Two tourists were directly in front of Willoughby, standing nervously in flowered shirts, maps and pamphlets jutting out of every pocket, a camera around each neck. In front of the tourists, a fat woman with a powdered mole who hitched and shrugged at her brassiere. Then, three businessmen—bald, all of them—looking at their watches.

At the front of the line, an old woman argued with Brother Thorson. Her tangled hair floated around her head in a static field, and her light green eyes shone out of her ashen skin. She wore a snagged double-knit with black nylons and white shoes—which, Willoughby noticed, had holes so large that her toes peeped out promiscuously. A brass safety pin held a yellowed hanky to her breast.

The old woman pointed to a very lanky man who stood beside her and told Brother Thorson, "Hank and me, we come from Springville—all the way—to see the prophet today." Hank was silent, but also nervous. He combed his hair to cover a thin spot on the top of his head. His pants looked to Willoughby as if they had been tailored for an elephant—certainly not a man of Hank's physique—and Hank had gathered the billowing pants at his side and tied them in one bulging knot to keep them up.

Hank was holding a cat in his hands that was equally

lanky and much more nervous. In fact, Willoughby was surprised by the cat's ferocity. A wiry calico, it writhed in Hank's hands and hissed and struck with extended claws at Hank's face. Willoughby saw that its underparts were white, and while he watched, the cat freed itself and climbed Hank's arm to his shoulder. Hank grabbed it by a hind leg, wrenched it from his shoulder, and held it at arm's length upside down. The cat twisted and wiggled fitfully in the air.

The old woman argued loudly with Brother Thorson, who leaned back in his leather chair and pushed his belly out at her. Willoughby thought that if Brother Thorson had such an inclination, he could perch his dinner plate on the shelf of his belly—thus reducing the distance between food and mouth. "I'm sorry, sister, but even if you were the president of the United States you couldn't get in to see the prophet without an appointment."

"Just ask the prophet; I know he's expecting us."

Brother Thorson punched a few numbers on his telephone and spoke in a low whisper. Then, covering the receiver, he asked the woman, "Your name?"

"Huh?"

"Your name please."

"Oh," she said, "my name. It's Rachel."

"Rachel?"

"Yes, Rachel."

"Rachel what?"

"Just Rachel." Rachel scratched her belly.

"Rachel," Brother Thorson said into the phone. "No," he said after a moment, "it's just Rachel—nothing else, apparently." He turned his back to Rachel and spoke softly into the receiver. Then he asked, "Your stake?"

"I don't know."

"She doesn't know," he said into the receiver, and nodding his head, he said, "Yes, yes—that's right." Finally he hung up and turned to the woman: "You don't have an appointment. I'm so sorry."

The businessmen checked their watches, the fat lady backed up against a wall and shifted her girdle, and the cat leaped to the floor and almost bounded up the marble stairs before Hank could catch it.

"Hold on there just a minute," Rachel demanded, and she took Hank by the elbow and with the cat, they walked over into the corner. Looking up into the ceiling of the room, past a chandelier into a distant corner, she began to mumble.

Then it struck Willoughby: Tourists! Lordy, the people in front of him were not members of the Church, and they were witnessing a crazy woman. What would they think?

"Hello," Willoughby said, "may I help you with something?"

One tourist was friendly; the other (whose knobby knees seemed obscene to Willoughby—bare and unabashed as they were below the tourist's plaid shorts) was reticent. "Yes," the friendly one said, "we're new in town and we heard that this was a good place to take pictures and visit."

"Oh, visit—" Willoughby said, "you must mean the Visitor's Center. No, that's around the corner and to the north." With that, Willoughby helped the tourists out the front door—and felt relieved, because Rachel was back arguing with Brother Thorson.

"God spoke with me just now," Rachel said, "and he says the prophet's here in this building, and he says the prophet's supposed to see this cat." She pointed at the

She reached forward, placing a hand on either side of his face and pulled his fat cheeks into the expression of a carp. Then she brushed her ample lips over the crown of his head, leaving saliva that Willoughby could feel for some time afterwards.



animal hanging upside down under Hank's forearm.

"Sister Rachel, I find it hard to believe that a woman who communes so closely with God wouldn't know the name of her own stake."

"I never pay attention to those things."

One of the businessmen asserted himself: "Elder Hinckley is waiting for us."

"Hold on a second," Rachel said. She walked away from the group and again gazed into the same upper corner behind the chandelier. She mumbled.

Willoughby couldn't resist; he looked hopefully into the same corner. What did she see there? God, pray tell? Then Rachel looked at Willoughby and saw him staring into the upper corner where God was; and then Willoughby looked at her. Her eyes bore in upon his, and he was suddenly uncomfortable. She looked back to the corner and mumbled.

Willoughby was looking into the corner when Rachel started arguing again with Brother Thorson: "God says the prophet is to see Ephraim."

"Ephraim?" Thorson asked.

"Yes, Ephraim, my cat. The prophet is to see my cat."

"I'm sorry, but the prophet is a very busy man."

Rachel's face burned. "I'm telling you, and I speak with the sure word—if this was Joseph's church, why, I'd be upstairs right now talking with the prophet—and not down here talking to some snooty secretary. Things have changed, I'm telling you. No more miracles, no more prophecy, no more believing in them. This church isn't Joseph's. God doesn't talk to this church."

"I'm sorry, Sister Rachel, you'll have to come again some time."

"God says no. Why, even *he* heard God," she said, pointing at Willoughby. "Didn't you? You heard God talking with me just now, didn't you?"

Lordy, what now? Willoughby stood petrified.

"Didn't you?" The woman rushed over to Willoughby and pulled him by the sleeve over to Brother Thorson's cherry-wood desk. "Didn't you?"

This isn't happening, Willoughby told himself. The salamanders returned and started their ritualistic dancings around Willoughby's neck and shoulders.

"I could tell when I saw you," the woman said, speaking with her face directly in Willoughby's, "that you were a man who knows God—who talks with him daily. I was right, wasn't I?"

Brother Thorson leaned close to Willoughby's ear and whispered: "You know, I've heard it's sometimes good to humor them."

"Huh?" Willoughby said.

Brother Thorson was silent. He smiled at the woman with his yellow teeth.

"Oh," Willoughby said, "uh, yes, uh . . . I did see him."

A small laugh came out of Rachel's black mouth and she said, "I thought you saw him." Then she rushed over to the elevator, pushed the button, and said, "Come on, Hank—we're going to see the prophet!"

Brother Thorson gasped and his belly rocked up and down as he pushed buttons under his desk. The fat woman with the too-tight lingerie sputtered, "My, oh my!" and "Well, I never!"

Immediately, a man in a dark suit rushed from one of the doors in the room. Brother Thorson pointed at Rachel and said, "There."

"I'm an aide to the prophet," said the man. "Could we talk in private—perhaps outside?" And with that he opened the front door. Rachel hesitated and walked out. Hank, still holding the nervous cat, stood with a dull expression on his face.

"You too," Brother Thorson said to Hank, and he smiled at him with his yellow teeth.

Hank grunted as he left.



When Willoughby entered Elder Jensen's office, the secretaries were rushing from desk to typewriter, to phone, to transcriber. One recognized Willoughby and pushed her communicator: "Elder Jensen, Brother Sacks is here to see you."

"Willoughby," came the voice from within the office; "come in."

"Good afternoon, Elder Jensen."

"Afternoon, Willoughby. I'm sorry but this is going to have to be a rush job. See, we need to have this out in the field by next week. I think the wording's wrong."

Willoughby hadn't heard a word Jensen had said. He interrupted him: "May I ask you a question?"

"Yes, Willoughby, what is it?"

"Do you believe in miracles?"

"Certainly."

"And in revelation?"

"Of course!" Elder Jensen said. "Now, as I was saying, the wording is all wrong. Elder Monson thinks we need a graphic here, but you know how long that takes. Mostly what I'm worried about are these paragraphs from here to here." Jensen made two marks on the manuscript.

"What kind of miracles, Elder Jensen?" Willoughby interrupted.

"I don't know—the miraculous kind, I suppose." Elder Jensen underlined a sentence. "Now take this part here. I don't think it has the punch we want. I want those brethren out there in the field to know that I support them in every way—that we here in Church administration are sensitive, and that we are aware of individuals' needs. I don't think this sentence gets that across. Do you?"

"Well, let me see. Uh, no, I guess not."

"This has to be top notch, Willoughby," Jensen said. "The ending might need some looking at. See what you can do."

"Elder Jensen?"

"Yes, what is it—quickly, I have a meeting in ten minutes."

"There's this girl, see, in Genealogy. Her name's Thelma, and she and I, well, we were . . ."

"Fine, fine—Willoughby, I think it's great. Ready to tie the old knot, eh? Well, congratulations. And both of you working for the Church. Ought to make for a righteous family—stalwarts in Zion. Fine, Willoughby."

"Thank you, Elder Jensen, but . . ."

"You might also look at this line. We use the term *prioritize spiritual interaction*—you know, the way a leader should deal with those seeking his guidance and counsel, the way a leader should sense the counselee's needs. I'm not sure if the wording works. Here, you take the manuscript with you back to your office and have it back in two hours so I can give it to Correlation. And thanks, Willoughby. We appreciate your help in the kingdom. I need to get some things for the meeting now, so we'll be seeing you in a couple of hours."

"Goodbye," Willoughby said as he left the office.



The sun shone brilliantly in the square. Willoughby sat on the edge of a fountain, in front of a statue of Joseph Smith and Emma—the two holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes as though they could see celestial glory there.

Looking at the statue, Willoughby decided to ask God again about Thelma, and he clenched his arms to his abdomen and bowed his head. Tell me, he prayed silently. Please, Father in Heaven, tell me.

"What is it you want to know?"

It was a voice! Willoughby was sure it was. His ears had heard it. Please, he prayed further, tell me about Thelma.

"What is it?"

Willoughby had heard it again. But it was a high voice, raspy and sharp. Willoughby looked up into Rachel's face; she had been standing directly in front of him while he prayed. Willoughby's first impulse was fear—fear of the woman's ugliness, her floating hair and dead-white skin, her huge sagging belly and long breasts. "God has sent me to you," she said. "What is it you want to know?"

"Who are you?" Willoughby asked.

"I am Rachel, the greatest mother of the House of Israel; the other mothers are fakes—they got no right."

On the other side of the square, Willoughby could see Hank leaning limply over a drinking fountain. Over his back was a burlap sack, in which, Willoughby reasoned, was Ephraim the cat.

"Oh," Willoughby said.

"You saw God when I talked with him, didn't you?"

"Er, yes, ah—I did," he answered, remembering Thorson's advice to humor the feeble-minded.

"I knew you did," Rachel answered triumphantly, and before Willoughby could do anything about it, she moved close to him and pressed his head to her bony breastplate. "You are mine now," she said. "Forever linked to me in the everlasting covenant." Then she stood back at arm's length and Willoughby looked up

into her green eyes. They shone luridly. She extended her hands and placed them on Willoughby's head firmly and closed those green eyes. "I set thee apart," she began, "as an elder in the New Order of Zion and as one of my husbands in the eternal worlds. And I do it in the name of Israel, Jesus, and anything else that's sacred. Amen."

Lordy, what next? Willoughby thought.

She stood back and looked Willoughby in the eyes and asked, "What do you want to know?"

"It's Thelma," Willoughby whispered, and he began to cry—which seemed out of place to Willoughby. But he wept in spite of himself.

"Thelma?"

"Yes, my girl friend. God has told her that we are to be married. Why doesn't God ever tell me anything?"

"Thelma!" Rachel said violently, and she turned her head and spat a small mound of phlegm onto the concrete. Willoughby looked at it for a moment that seemed awkwardly long. "You, my son, are not to marry anybody! You've covenanted with me, the mother of Israel. You are one of my eternal mates. You will share with Hank the honor and power of the celestial worlds. And don't you forget it!"

"No!" Willoughby yelled in a voice that seemed not his own. And again, "No!"

With that, Willoughby got up and ran through the square, past Hank and Ephraim, into the Church Office Building. At his back, he heard the old woman screaming, "You've made a promise before God! He will curse you; I'll see to that!"

Willoughby's belly grumbled in the silent elevator all the way to the twenty-first floor, and he had the insane impulse to wipe the slobbery kiss from his forehead, where Thelma had put it the night before. When he got to his office, he put Brother Jensen's manuscript on his desk and took his lunch from a shelf. His mother—bless her soul—had packed Willoughby's favorite: bologna. And not just any bologna; it was square, so that not one bite of the sandwich—not even one corner—was without meat.

As he ate, the phone rang. It was Thelma: "How's my Willy-poo this afternoon?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Nothing wrong with ol' Willoughby," he answered.

Thelma started talking about a meal she was planning: "It will be just like Thanksgiving—and we'll invite my mom and pop and you can invite your mother . . ."

Willoughby's stomach didn't feel well. In fact, it began to feel not at all well.

Thelma continued: ". . . and then after ice cream with chocolate—I guess I've told you about the chocolate topping I make; my own recipe, you know—then we'll tell them about . . ."

Willoughby dropped the receiver and vomited into his wastepaper basket. He sat perplexed and surprised at what he'd done—tiny bits of bologna, none of them square, not by any stretch of the imagination. Some completely amorphous; others irregular and crippled in form. Chewed up bits of bologna.

And he asked himself under his breath, "How can any of this be redeemed?" Then all was silence except for the distant drone of Thelma's voice in the receiver.

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