

Third Place Winner in the 1986 D. K. Brown Fiction Contest

YOU— A MISSIONARY STORY

By Paris Anderson

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKERS THOUGHT YOU WERE BOTH cops – narcotics agents. If they were legal, the Spanish speakers thought you were CIA. If they were illegal, they thought you were Immigration and avoided you at all costs. Which, you thought, was great, because if you couldn't find them, you didn't have to teach them.

They had good reason to think you were narcs. The way you dressed—dark suits, white shirts, ties, ugly shoes—the plain car you drove, your haircut and the fact that there were always two of you together, were all signs of government agents. Another reason they thought you were narcs was that you told them you were.

When you were first asked, a week after you arrived in L.A., you responded truthfully. Two black girls, each about ten, walked up to you in a 7-Eleven and asked, "Are you narcs?"

You laughed and said, "No, we're Mormon missionaries."

Then your companion, who was just crazy enough to go on a mission and remain true to himself, taught you to play along. After two months as Larry's junior, you went to a house near the USC campus one Thursday evening to teach the Plan of Salvation to a family named González. As you pulled the projector and a film from the trunk, a little black boy walked up and asked, "Are you cops?"

Without any hesitation you answered, "We sure are. Do you want to see our rocket launcher?" The boy got excited and said he would. You pulled the screen from the trunk and set it up part way so it looked like a launching tube sitting on a tripod.

The whites of the boy's eyes grew, and he asked you to shoot it. You tried to think of an excuse for not firing, but could only say, "Uh . . . uh . . ."

Larry quickly came to your rescue. He said in a stern voice, "We can't right now. We've got an appointment in that house. We're going to shoot down some airplanes with the family there."

The boy's jaw dropped in awe, then he ran off. When he was at a safe distance Larry smiled, and you softly chuckled. You

packed the screen as if to store it, picked up the film, then followed Larry carrying the projector to the house. Sister González greeted you warmly at the first knock.

The meeting went very well. Sister González seemed quite touched when you suggested she might be able to live in heaven with her boy who died in infancy. You couldn't understand Spanish very well, but you saw in their faces that the two girls, young women really, were genuinely interested by what you said. They spoke English well, but spoke only Spanish at home out of respect for their parents. Larry spoke Spanish very well and had become great friends with Brother González. If the rest of the family would be baptized, which was almost certain, Brother González would surely join them out of love for his family and for Larry.

As you open the door to leave, Sister González took your hand and squeezed it, then asked something you couldn't understand. As you had become used to doing when you didn't understand, you smiled and nodded in agreement like a dribbling buffoon. Sister González smiled at your response and let you go. You were very happy to have pleased her.

On the outside, walking toward your car, Larry said, "She thanked you for coming and invited us to dinner Sunday night."

You smiled.

"Problem is we have an appointment Sunday night that we can't put off. We'll have to go to dinner early and can't stay."

You nodded.

On the curb by your car sat the boy with two of his friends. The boy said, "We saw a lot of airplanes, but none of them blew up."

You didn't know how to respond, but Larry calmly shrugged his shoulders and apologetically said, "We missed. We're not very good yet—we're new."

The boys turned to each other and laughed wildly. Larry smiled at them, and you both got in the car. As Larry drove, you silently thought about how good it was that he had taught you to occasionally play the part of a cop. Now work was not quite as monotonous.

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After a few blocks Larry stopped at a light and checked his appointment book. The light turned green, and Larry set it down. "We don't have any more appointments tonight. I'm dead."

You knew he would drive directly home, and you silently approved, not being fond of tracting after sunset.

When you got home and were in the apartment, Larry put some water on to boil for Macaroni-n-Cheese, then sat at the table to read his Church history book. You sat on the other side of the table to study your disgustions. You soon grew bored and went to bed thinking Larry would wake you for dinner as he had other times.

He didn't this time.

The next two days went as planned. The only incident worthy of note happened Saturday afternoon. A greasy drunk at the bank held an electric door open for you, then asked for a tip. Larry gave him a quarter.

Sunday morning you arrived at the González house to take the family to church in your car. As you pulled up to the curb, the boy with whom you joked came running to the car smiling brightly. Larry stopped the engine, and you opened the door to get out.

When Larry was out and by your side, the boy said, "You aren't real cops, are you?"

"No," you said, "we're Mormon missionaries." The boy laughed, and suddenly you felt a burning, irrepressible desire to touch him. You put one hand on his shoulder and pulled him tight. The boy responded immediately. He looked up at you with

dazzling eyes and a brilliant smile. You smiled back with equal radiance. You and Larry walked toward the house—you with your arm around the boy. At the doorstep the boy said good-bye and ran off.

You knocked, and the door opened. The whole family was ready to go, and you all walked out to the car. Brother and Sister González and Mari, the younger daughter, got in the back seat. Stella, the older of the two, sat in the front seat between you and Larry. She looked very nice, as did her sister. She seemed to be very excited to be going to church—she was very talkative and would often rub her shoulder or arm against you or Larry. It was a fleeting pleasure, but one you savored nonetheless.

Stella was a solid looking girl, like most Latins, but she carried the weight much better than any Latin you had seen. She was very unlike her sister, Mari. Mari was as atypical as a Corvette in a John Deere factory. She was thin—delicate—had gentle curves and fairly short hair. She had very light skin—not bleached white like yours—rather olive tan. You first thought she was American until you heard her rich Spanish.

Larry drove into the lot of the church and parked. Everyone walked into the building, and Larry found a sister missionary to take the girls and Sister González to Relief Society. Then you, Larry, and Brother González went to priesthood. When the meetings were over you all went to the investigators' class for Sunday School. This week Elder Cruz, a Mexican-American from Texas, was the teacher—Larry was last week. Cruz gave a fine lesson, and all the investigators seemed to understand and enjoy it. You went to sacrament meeting and sat toward the back. During most of the meeting Brother González seemed bored and

restless, but Sister González seemed sincerely interested in the speeches. Sacramento meeting ended, and you went out to the car.

On the way home Sister González said several times that the final meeting was beautiful. Each time Larry nodded and said, "Yes, it was."

Mari sat in the front on the way back. She wasn't the coquette her older sister was, but her presence was appreciated almost as much. Brother González fell asleep on the way back, and no one disturbed him until you arrived at their home.

You got out of the car and walked the family to the door. On the doorstep, after everyone else had gone in, Sister González turned to remind you about dinner and invite you to stay until then.

Larry told her about the appointment you had later. He said, "Thank you for inviting us to stay, but we have other things we have to get done before dinner."

Sister González smiled and told you dinner would be at 5:30. You both smiled and nodded. Sister González turned into the house, and you walked back to the car.

On the way you said to Larry, "We don't have anything to do this afternoon. Why don't we stay?"

"I may not follow the rules as closely as other Elders, but I'm still careful about being around investigators' daughters too long."

You nodded as you recognized Larry's wisdom. As you neared the car you looked around, but couldn't see your little friend. You got in the car, and Larry started home. You fell asleep after a few blocks, and Larry didn't wake you until you had arrived.

Larry parked, and you got out of the car and staggered to the old building. Larry opened and closed the door for you, and you groggily walked up four flights of stairs. You leaned against the cracked and peeling wall as Larry unlocked the apartment door, then kicked it three times to open it. You walked in before him and fell on your bed. The bed springs screeched and yawned. The noise didn't bother you, in fact you considered yourself lucky to have it—Larry slept in a bag on the floor. He closed the door, then lay down on his bag. Both you and Larry fell asleep quickly with your ties and shoes on.

When you awoke, it was 4:47 by your digital—just enough time to look in the mirror before you left. Your tie was twisted around backwards. After a moment in the bathroom you followed Larry out to the car.

You lived outside of your tracting area, so the ride on the way out was fairly long and boring. Larry chased a speeder to make it a bit more exciting. The ride was more exciting and went much faster, until the speeder pulled over. Then Larry had to slow down. Soon he parked in front of the house and got out. You got out and looked for your little friend. He couldn't be seen anywhere. You followed Larry to the house. He knocked before you had both feet on the doorstep, and momentarily Stella opened the door and asked you in. She wore a different perfume than she had on for church. It had a faint, powdery, flower smell. If you closed your eyes you could imagine the little blue flowers that grew in the cracks of the road near your cousin's house. You felt a slight

twinge of homesickness when you opened your eyes and found yourself in L.A. standing before Stella. You stared at her and realized being in L.A. wasn't all bad. She was a beautiful girl. Mari was prettier, though. She didn't flirt the way Stella did, but you found her quiet reserve more appealing than Stella's boisterous lure.

Larry pulled on your sleeve to get you into the house, and Stella led you both into the dining room. She asked you to sit in the two middle seats on the side of the table set with four plates, then went into the kitchen.

You sat, and soon Brother and Sister González came in and sat at the head and foot of the table. You wondered who had been invited to sit at the three seats on the other side, and you wondered which of the two girls would sit at your side. Sister González answered part of your question. She said to Larry she had invited her three sons, and they should be here in a few minutes. Larry had stopped translating everything for you several weeks ago, but you understood "three sons" and assumed.

The girls came in carrying an American-style dinner they had prepared themselves. Stella set a Crockpot full of beef stew on the table and sat by Larry. Mari set a plate heaped with biscuits in front of you and sat at your side. You were disappointed that Stella sat by Larry, and at the same time elated that Mari sat by you.

There were a few moments of small talk you couldn't understand, then Brother González asked Larry to say a prayer. He was almost finished when the front door opened and three young men walked in. Larry quickly finished, and the men sat down. One by one they introduced themselves and shook hands with you and Larry. The first two, Mario and José, had bushy moustaches and spoke English. The third, Juan, was clean-shaven and, like his sisters, spoke Spanish. When they shook your hand you knew two of them would be baptized, but not by you and not for a few years.

Mari stood and dished out the stew. The biscuits were passed. Mari returned to her seat and everyone began to eat. The stew was very tasty, but the vegetables in it were too bright for homemade. The girls were probably opening cans to make you think they were good cooks. Canned or not, the stew was much better than Macaroni-n-Cheese. After swallowing the first two bites, you realized you were famished and began to eat as if it were Fast Sunday tomorrow. Brother González said something and set the napkin holder and several pieces of silverware in front of Mari. Everyone laughed, and you wondered what was so funny. As you reached for another biscuit, Larry leaned over to you and whispered a translation.

"Brother González said, 'If we run out of stew, give him these and I'll go get a few of Mom's old books to feed him.'"

You laughed, and when they saw you laugh everyone laughed harder. You blushed, then finished the bowl. They offered more, but you refused. Soon the others finished. Larry said he hated to leave so quickly, but a meeting was scheduled in twenty minutes and you had to go home first. The family acted mildly disappointed, but said they admired you for working so hard. Larry spoke to the three sons and was able to set an appointment with the shaven one. Mari shook your hand warmly at the door, and

you began to sweat ferociously. You hurried out the door to the walk. The door closed behind you, then Larry jogged to your side. Dusk had passed and darkness was building, but you could still recognize your little friend as he ran from the corner to your car.

"Hi, Missionary!" he yelled from about twenty feet.

"Hi, kid!" you yelled back. Larry was in the car, but got out to watch you and your friend.

"What ya' doing?" the kid asked as he slowed to a walk.

"We're going to teach a meeting real quick, but I'll be back . . ." You turned to Larry.

"Wednesday."

"I'll be back Wednesday. I can talk to you then. I've got to hurry right now."

"OK," the boy said. "See you then."

You waved, then jumped in the car. You slammed the door and waved again as Larry pulled away from the curb and sped to the light two blocks away. He turned right, drove several minutes, then turned onto the neighborhood scuz street. The drunks had come out for the night. Most were pacing the sidewalk as if looking for some wonderful object, and a few sat in door frames or on the curb looking disappointed as if they had found the object and had found that it wasn't as enviable as they had thought it would be. Most of the shops lining the street were pawnshops or liquor stores. Larry stopped at a traffic signal.

By the light coming through a large store window on the next corner you could see a ring of men beating the hell out of an old drunk.

You said, "Larry, do we have time to play policeman again?"

"I guess we have to make time."

The light changed, and Larry jack-rabbit to the next corner and screeched to a halt in the middle of the lane, making it look official.

"What's going on here?" he yelled as he got out.

You were the closest to the curb and stood just outside of the ring when a young, long-haired drunk answered, "This guy broke a bottle over a five-year-old girl's head, and we don't think that's right."

You looked back to Larry for guidance. He stood motionless, a flash of hatred and anger had warped his features. Then without a word, he turned and walked back to the car. You stood still for a moment, confused—unsure of what needed to be done. You quickly ran to Larry's side. "What should we do, man?"

"What the hell do you want me to do?" he yelled. "Should I stop the fight or join in? I want to kill that guy, but I'm a missionary. What the hell am I supposed to do?"

He turned away and walked around the car. You looked back at the ring of bewildered drunks. The old man had slipped out and was crossing the street—his face dripping blood. You heard Larry's door slam and rushed to get in your own.

After a block and a half of silence Larry said, "When we get home, why don't you call and cancel the meeting tonight? I don't feel like teaching—I don't have the spirit."

HAVING BIRTHDAYS

I don't remember the first house
but in my wary travels through this city
it seems I keep occupying houses and moving on.
Surroundings changed. That first neighborhood,
houses had gingerbread and sugared windows;
many of my companions were animals.

We wandered a long time without noticing
landmarks; it seemed the houses were far apart,
the countryside pastoral to look at
but dangerous; anything might have happened;
there were giants whose intentions were
never clear. Furniture in the houses was large
but there were always hiding places.

In one house there were books.
After that the animals took names:
Bagheera, Black Beauty, Bambi.
There were always books then, every house was crammed,
and later on the journey there were heroes:
Tarzan, Flash Gordon. Houses were closer together
or I took longer strides, growing
impatient sooner with the place I was.

The terrain became difficult.
At salient points were castles but never on my path.
Coming to houses I found the furniture smaller
and some of the heroes I discovered
were real, had voices, even knew my name.
By this time I knew I was there
to look for something, and in every house I opened
cupboards, rapped for secret panels,
before I hurried on.

The houses loom now close together,
the streets are narrow and when I look back
some of the buildings I searched through and left
still look more promising than anything ahead.
It doesn't take me long to case a house or cross a street.
Whatever it is I had better find it soon;
I can't see how the city extends from here
but people say after than last house on the outskirts
the last street ends so abruptly
that you fall off the edge of the earth.

LOUISA McDONALD