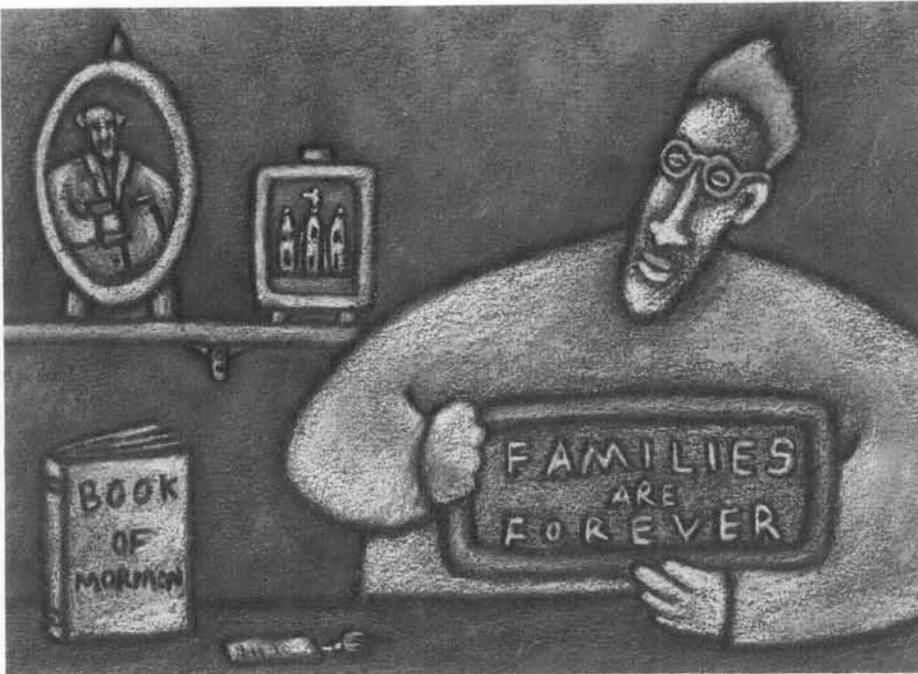


THE POSSESSED

By Michael Hicks



I BUY MORE books than I read. Some books have sat on my shelves for years without my having done more than pull them out, flip through them, and replace them. Lately, my shelves have grown thick with such books. And when I study this profusion, I realize that one can rarely be more than a steward over books. One never really owns them. Read or unread, my books remain forever apart from me, heavy, impenetrable, like bricks in an imaginary wall that keeps me from what Wallace Stevens called "nothing that is not there / and the nothing that is."

The LDS Booksellers Association convention held each August in Salt Lake City isn't about books, but it is about possession. True,

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some books are on display amid the dozens of booths that neatly line the convention hall. A few booths display only books. But their caretakers are generally bored and lonely, bereft of clientele. The busier booths offer more (in the form of less) and less (in the form of more): goods that can be owned, used, manipulated, and consumed in a way that books can't.

Ironically, many of these goods still rely on the power of the word. They not only are inscribed, it is for these inscriptions that the objects exist at all: the otherwise ordinary tote bags that read "Relief Society," for example, or the iron-on patches that affirm "Families are Forever." What is troubling is not so much the offhand way in which these objects disseminate the quasi-sacred inscriptions, but rather the objects' contempt for the sanctity of use. To me, an object becomes holy by the use it serves and by the goodness of the per-

son who uses it. In former times, if a good man or woman carried provisions with a bag or kept out the cold with a patch, that was enough to sanctify bags and patches. The modern equivalents require printed messages as guarantors of sanctity. To omit these messages would be to neutralize the objects, to denote "mere" bags and patches.

One also encounters at the convention innumerable inscribed objects of play, from foam-rubber Frisbees that say "Keep on Tractin'" to bags of taffy-pieces whose centers declare "I ♥ the Book of Mormon." To me, the worth of play is measured in the restoration of vigor it provides to the doer of good works. Amusement is redemption for good people. But the profusion of inscriptions on these recreational objects testifies that, to some people, play's redemptive power has waned; playthings must be sacralized by religious jargon. And the irony is that, as the words try to elevate the objects, the objects end up engulfing the words. For by tying religious sayings to disposable, even ingestible, objects we assert their degradation: the words may sanctify everyday life, but ultimately we own them.

Christian religions usually decry the visual on behalf of the invisible, yet construct enormous repertoires of images. In one sense these images simply supplant the word for the sake of the masses of illiterate faithful. (To paraphrase Savonarola: icons are the bible of the people.) But they also reduce mysteries, those things that are essentially and irrefutably unseen—and thus terrifying—into things that are not only seen but, like books, are portable. This convention hall is coated with portable images, from needlepoint temples to cartoon Joseph Smiths. And as I rummage through some prints depicting pastel scenes from the afterlife, a salesman gently reminds me that "a picture is worth a thousand words." That worth subsists not in the sharpness of the images, but in the margins and frames. They tell most clearly what the pictures mean: order, enclosure, confinement. To buy an image is to circumscribe one's vision against the terror of the invisible world.

Despite scriptural renunciations of it, jewelry remains inextricable from the image-repository of Christianity. The principle of jewelry is to consecrate potentially useful minerals and ore to useless ornaments. The gods of some religions demand such a consecration to their own worship, yet forbid it to their worshippers. But the arrogance of self-ornamentation seldom fails to seduce religious folk, perhaps because of their obsession with subduing the unruly earth: gems are trophies

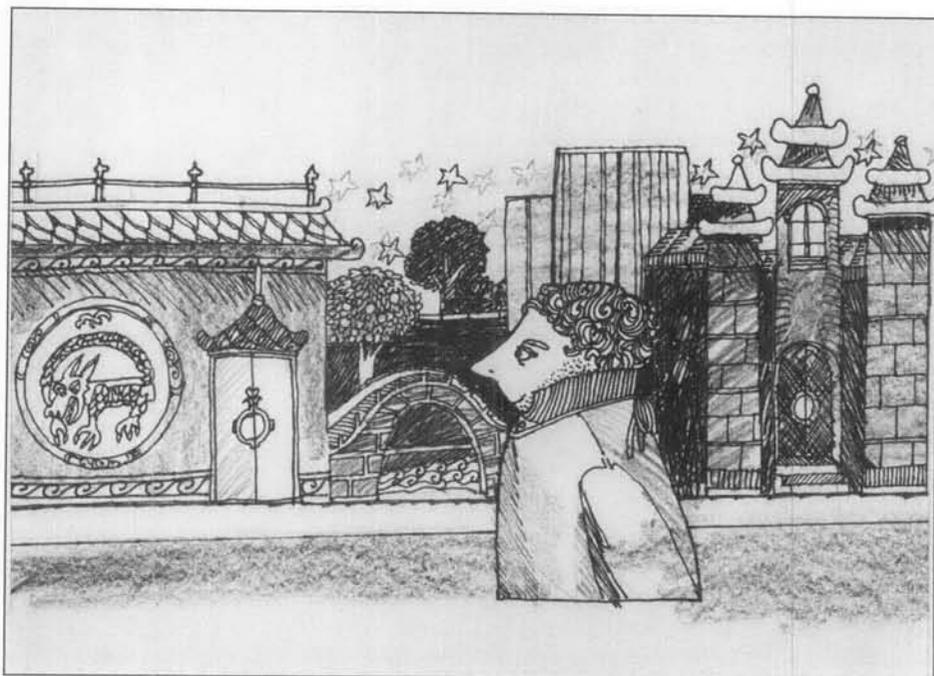
of that subduing. Hence, it comes as no surprise to see jewelry occupying so much space at the convention hall. Some of the jewelry is inscribed ("For Time and All Eternity" necklaces), some not (Moroni tietacks). (One can even be treated to a view of "The World's Largest Sterling Silver CTR Ring," a ring wider than a fist.) I suppose that this plethora of ornaments denotes a rather typical mongrelization of sacred and profane impulses, by which one may adorn oneself with trinkets made holy by their markings or casts. But one is also struck with these ornaments' abundant, subtle parodies of utility. The Moroni tietack, for example, represents itself as a thoroughly useful object. But it is useful only for securing a tie, which is a purely symbolic sort of tether, a gripping of the throat, a leash.

However delectable and bizarre their wares, it is the exhibitors' company names that reveal the obsessions of our culture. Some of the names imply authority, by appealing either to cultural legacies (Pioneer, Homestead) or to assertive metaphors (Cornerstone, Covenant, Trusthouse). Others speak of futurity and progressiveness (Embryo, Rising Generation). But many suggest how much we want to retreat from the marketplace into the house of nature, to recover our bonds to a subdued but estranged earth. Such names run the gamut from macrocosmic to intimate (Sun, Horizon, Great Mountain, Wellspring, Eagle, Acorn). Emblazoned above the convention booths, these names suggest how desperately we want to salvage ourselves from a system whose god is the principle of possession itself. The God of nature is a God who made us, bought us, owns us, yet eternally relinquishes us to ourselves. His antithesis is a god who is made, bought, and owned, inescapable yet forever beyond our grasp.

LIGHTER MINDS

THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE SALT LAKE FORTUNE COOKIE FACTORY

By Paul James Toscano



I know this story is true because VerDon Flake, who told it to me, couldn't have made it up. And his sister, LaPreal, who told it to him, had it first hand because she was actually there when it happened. Besides, I have corroborating evidence.

It started right after Ardel Maxfield retired. He had been the message stuffer at the Salt Lake Fortune Cookie Factory since 1968. And when he left, they replaced him with a newcomer named Phil Kajerian, whose profile reminded everybody of the Joseph Smith death mask, except he had black curly hair and a permanent five o'clock shadow.

Anyway, everybody at the factory was sur-

prised that they gave Ardel's old job to someone so young and inexperienced. And, later, people said that this decision was responsible for all the trouble. Phil was the type who kept to himself, read thick books at breaks, and did not contribute to the company birthday fund. But he seemed competent and level-headed.

In spite of what you may think, stuffing messages into fortune cookies is not so easy. In the first place, you're in this room all day by yourself, wearing a surgical gown and gloves, loading the cookies and just the right mix of messages into the stuffing machine. (They don't do it by hand anymore due to high labor costs.)

Everybody agrees that the trouble began within days after Phil's promotion. Com-

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plaints came pouring in from Chinese restaurants all around town. The whole tone and content of the messages suddenly went weird. Instead of the usual "You are a kind and sensitive person," or "Soon you will experience unexpected good fortune," the messages had become eerily specific, like, "Your lost sun glasses are under the passenger seat of your Volvo," and "Your wife wants you to pick up some pizza on the way home."

Incredible you say? Well, here's where the corroborating evidence comes in. One day, when all this was going on and after indulging a craving for egg roll, I broke open my very own fortune cookie and read, "The waitress just over-charged you by 87 cents." I checked the bill, and it was true. It made me shiver. But how could the cookie know?

That's the question they were asking at the Salt Lake Fortune Cookie Factory, where, according to LaPreal Flake, the big wigs were not at all amused. The front office was knee-deep in order cancellations from bulk buyers who were complaining that the fortunes were frightening their ordinary, decent customers, and attracting the lunatic fringe. There was a report that a group of spiritualists had attempted to hold a seance in the Gung Ho Restaurant at high noon and that many peo-

ple were crowding into the effected eateries during peak hours only to order a diet cola and fifty or sixty fortune cookies. The entire Chinese restaurant industry was being threatened. Something had to be done.

It was Callas Harding, the heir-apparent to the presidency of the company, who responded decisively and with dispatch. He hauled Phil up before the board of directors and gave him an ultimatum: "You're making us look like a bunch of crackpots and you're killing our business. It's got to stop!"

Phil seemed genuinely puzzled. Was this not a Fortune Cookie Factory?

Of course it was.

And were not the messages in the cookies supposed to be fortunes?

Of course they were—the kind that say "This is the first day of the rest of your life" and "You can turn defeat into victory."

But those are not really fortunes, protested Phil. They're only sentiments, like what you'd read in a greeting card. A fortune cookie is different. It looks to the future. It predicts. It knows.

The board was appalled and Callas turned red. The effrontery! People don't crack open a fortune cookie so they can be scared out of their wits. All they want is a little, vacuous,

verbal bon-bon. (It's about all the dessert you can expect in a Chinese restaurant.) And who do you think you are to be telling us about fortune cookies. We've been in this business for generations. And you're nothing but a—

a—
LaPreal was not quite sure what they compared Phil to, but it was not complimentary. The upshot was that Phil got the sack that very day. The Salt Lake Fortune Cookie Factory is not unprogressive, but there are limits even for broad-minded people. It wasn't long before business became again business as usual.

And that's the story just as I got it from VerDon. Nobody knows for sure what happened to Phil. But about two weeks ago, I read a curious item buried on one of the back pages of the newspaper. It seems that somewhere in Vermont—I can't recall exactly where now—a local bakery reported that spirit-writing was mysteriously appearing in the icing on cakes.

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