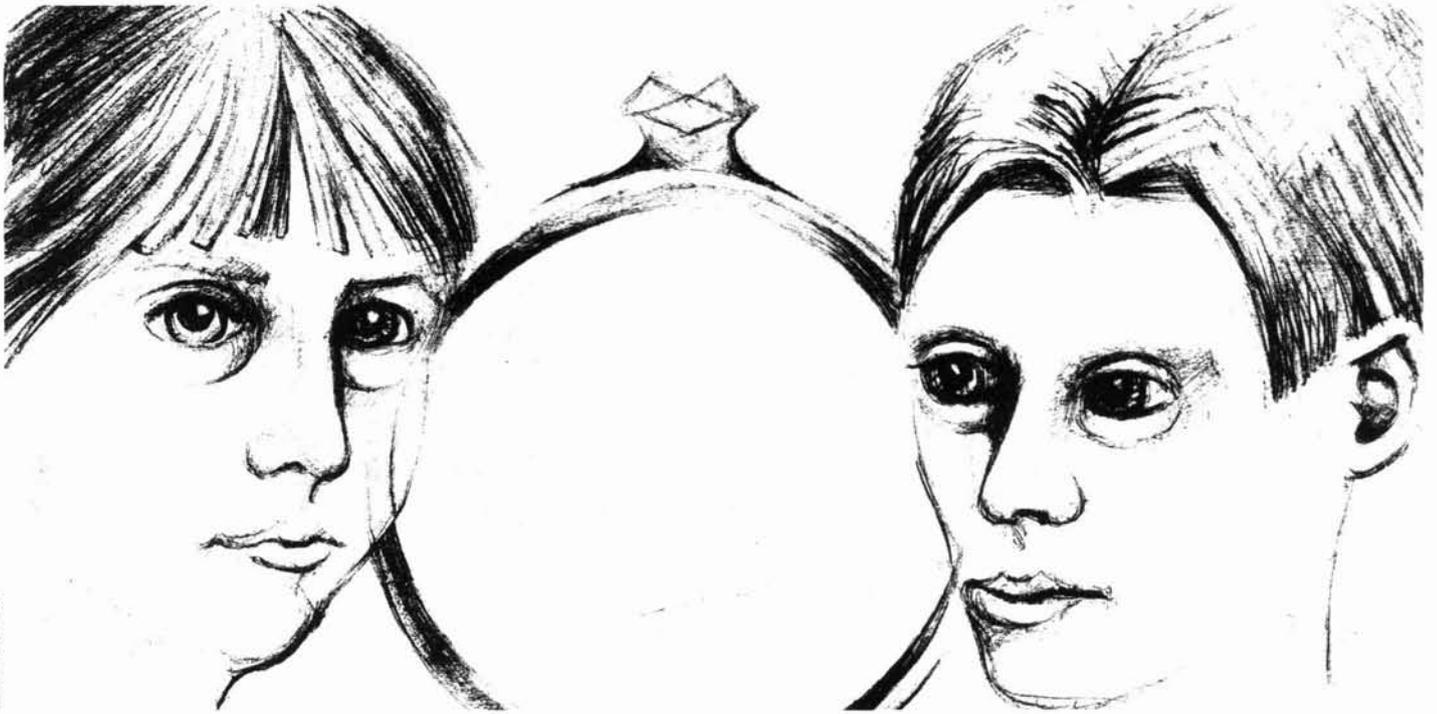


1993 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Winner

MISSIONARY FAREWELL

By Michael Fillerup



MATTHEW CHATTERLEY

A week later, he removed the ring from her engagement finger. "Just friends, okay? I'm doing this for the Lord, not for you. Not even for us."

THEN HE SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT APPLES, BIG red ripe ones, perfect on the tree, how we each start out like that, but every sin thereafter is a big or little bite out of us, depending. This girl, this Rachel, she'd been gnawed right down to the core. "But the seeds!" he exclaims, his suntanned cheeks peppered with hope, jubilation. "The seeds can be planted and a whole new tree with perfect fruit can grow—right, Brother Conklin? That's the Atonement, isn't it? If you really, really believe?"

But his hefty older sister, the one they called *La Gordita*, has been playing the what-if game, planting seeds of her own: "What if when you get back, she needs to repent—*again*? I know someone just like that, a good friend in fact. Abused as a

MICHAEL FILLERUP is the author of *Visions and Other Stories* and *Beyond the River*. He lives with his wife, Rebecca, and their four children in Flagstaff, Arizona.

kid. Her stepfather, her uncles used her like Kleenex. Everybody's easy before she started junior high. It's a pissed on world, a pissed on life. My friend, she finally got married, sure, but she's so screwed up now they haven't had sex yet, and it's going on four years. I'm just trying to warn you, Jake. Believe me, I've been there. Still am. Always probably forever will be. Two kids, two men, no husband. I'll be waiting tables till the millennium. Once you're in the garbage heap it's damn near impossible to climb back out."

"Sour grapes," he says. "Maybe my sister's just jealous because she doesn't have someone like . . . well, not to sound conceited or anything, but someone like me. And Rachel does. Or will. Maybe. I mean, I'm still—what do you think, Brother Conklin?"

I've met her only once, at church: a shy, self-conscious, willowy girl with dishwater blond hair half-hiding her face, John Lennon glasses on an Afghan-hound nose. A gun-in-the-back

smile. He says she knew he loved her because it took three weeks for him to kiss her and even then they never went all the way. Some kind of personal record. He knows she loves him because the last time on her silver-duct-tape–bandaged sofa she withdrew her hands abruptly and stared at her sandals, counting crumbs on the ragged carpet. Her verdict: “If you don’t go on a mission, Jake, I don’t want anything to do with you.”

A week later he removed the ring from her engagement finger. “Just friends, okay? I need to stay focused now. If I can do that, if I can keep my head in the game, God will bless us—do you know what I mean? I’m doing this for the Lord, not for you. Not even for us.”

Big sister talked him into that: “Don’t you think it would be better if . . . Don’t you think it’s only fair that . . . Don’t you?”

Afterwards he went to Hunan West for moo goo gai pan, but everything tasted fecal. He called her that night and repented: “Will you marry me?”

She wept two years in one night.

He dreamed of threshing Laban’s fields for seven years while Rachel waited naked in her tent.

The night before departing, he stopped by looking very missionary in his white shirt and navy blue suit, his curly brown hair clipped off at his ears. “We all have this perfect Mormon girl in mind,” he says. “You know what I mean, Brother Conklin?”

I smile, nod. Sure.

“But . . . well . . .” Then he proceeds to tell me a little something about fresh red apples, seeds. We stand in the cramped entry of my claustrophobic apartment where boxes remain stacked five high, a stubborn refusal, or hope. Six months ago, he and his fellow priests moved all my earthly belongings out of the fine white house with the vaulted ceilings and into this red brick building where the train moans plaintively at midnight and the laughter of my children resounds every other weekend. Sometimes. Back then, he still wanted to play pro baseball, a catcher for the Texas Rangers, chest and shoulders swelling in his sleeveless T-shirts.

I wish him well, tell him how proud I am, how he’s made the right decision. In Sunday quorum meetings, I have told him countless times about the proverbial best two years of my life in Ecuador. “Seattle? *¡Que bueno, amigo!*” I remind him he will have the rest of his life to be married. “An eternity, Jake!” Maybe.

There is nothing else to say now. Hands hidden in his pants pockets, he awkwardly scans the room—dirty dishes stacked like leaning towers in the sink, newspapers scattered on the shag carpeting. The stink of old kitty litter; of solitude. Eventually he smiles, but it is like a crack in a brand-new windshield.

A honk outside rescues us. The handshake, the hug, a little joke at the door (“Well, I got rid of another one . . .”). Another smile, a half-salute as a curly brown head appears around the corner: “Jake, hurry! Dad’s waiting.” It is a perfect miniature of the Boy Scout I carried halfway up the Bright Angel Trail six years ago. These eternal *deja vus*. He wraps his thick arm af-

fectionately around his little brother’s neck and rubs his knuckles into his scalp. As they skip along the concrete walkway like a couple of school kids, I want to call out like Friar Laurence: “They stumble who run too fast!” Or bearded Prospero: “Tis new to thee!” Instead I holler, “*¡Vaya con Dios!*” He stops, turns, wrinkles an eye. “God be with you,” I whisper, and softly close the door. 



JACQUELINE

Jazz (terrible jazz) played
Until rain dispersed the parade,
The swan-flocks beat wings and bugled,
Jabbed frogs from muddy cold Thames.

I ducked hail & lightning, prayed:
“Some night when my hands steady
I will dance the stars North.”

The plane home caught fire,
Passengers called amens.
I imagined, Jae,
My voyage ending in flames
And you composing my requiem:
Your slim body mortared black, “E”
Pedal center-point, hands paralleling keys F1
And G1,
the congregation a vortex
of heat and blow-back.

One Christmas finished us;
Your answering machine stores *sorry*
In three tongues.
Seven lines is my limit—seal a cordial card,
Lick stamps, send it North to your prosperous lodge.
Under falls I first kissed you I left you: Snoqualmie,
Its surrounding forest dark as a garret
Under eaves, moonlight peeling from the cataract.
I could say I was stone, innocent of consequences,
Free-falling to dislodge another. But I’m guilty
Because you matter—the blurred sea cannot cover you.

—SEAN BRENDAN-BROWN