

Moonstone Award winner, 1995 Brookie & D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest Winner

HOMECOMING

By Michael Fillerup



*"Just one thing, Elder. You make a decision, you and the Lord, and you move on.
No regrets. Regrets'll kill you."*

HAVE YOU FASTED AND PRAYED ABOUT IT?

Yes.

But exiting the 747 in his dark suit, white shirt, and red-and-blue striped tie, he looks back circumspectly, like Orpheus ascending, as if expecting any moment to be ambushed from behind, or for the smiling stewardess waving in the doorway to evaporate before his eyes.

At the end of the tunnel, he pauses, scanning the crowd for Welcome Home signs. For her—there! Sandwiched be-

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.

tween her parents, the bullfrog-bellied bishop, the home-made, whole-wheat mom. The left corner of his mouth spasms as he takes two steps forward—slow, clumsy, uncertain steps, like an infant learning to walk. Turning her plain but pretty head aside, wincing, she betrays him with a half-kiss.

Then hugs, handshakes, everyone smiling awkwardly; shotgun wedding smiles. No one asks about it, or why; everyone politely ignores it, as if his face has been badly burned or disfigured and inquiring is just not the tactful, proper thing to do.

But he feels it, at church, at the post office, at the gas pump, their judgmental Mormon eyes boring through the back of his head.

Give it six months, Elder. It takes that long just to get your feet wet.

Within a week, she breaks it off. With tears, kisses—flat, dead, oh-so-ordinary, cousinly kisses. It isn't *that*, she insists. She'd been thinking about it for some time, actually. Long before. . . .

He sits quietly beside her in the used pickup truck he has just bought to christen their new life together, the engagement ring hiding in a little black velvet box buried in the pocket of his blue jeans. He feels, and knows, he looks silly, fatuous, childish. Almost twenty-seven, he had been the oldest full-time Elder in the mission, yet he doesn't look a day over seventeen: soft, choirboy bangs, peach-fuzz cheeks, a head shaped like a filbert nut, a little peg for a nose. He smiles brokenly. "Oh." Never venturing the obvious: Why didn't you tell me before? Why didn't you say something sooner? Why didn't you—

That night, he has a dream. Entering the churchhouse, he is greeted by a throng of skeletons in hooded white robes. Within the din of chattering teeth and holy organ music, he recognizes the voice of his father, a cold, cynical cackle: "Welcome home, son!"

He wakes up to a jagged moon peering through the window like a skullface as the smell of wet sagebrush and the damp dust of a thousand summers wafts through the rusty screen. The cottonwoods are creaking like old men in old rockers. He wipes his hand across his sticky, bald chest, wondering at what point he removed his priesthood garments.

Whatever you decide, Elder, I want you to know I'll always love and respect you, no matter what.

Every morning thereafter, as he pours himself a bowl of cold cereal and unfolds the newspaper, he will stare across the empty dinette table and think back to that late summer afternoon driving down the interstate in President Hawkins' blue Ford Taurus.

But why, Elder? You've only been out two months. There's got to be a reason why?

He had no concrete answer other than her 2x3 photograph in his wallet and a newspaper clipping he kept hidden in his dresser drawer back home. It is a brittle, yellowing photo of a naked little boy with bowl-cut blond hair standing in knee-deep grass amid a forest of long-haired men and halter-topped women in cutoff jeans. Battered old VW vans with LOVE and PEACE in psychedelic cloud-print fog the background. The caption reads: BOY BREAKFASTING AT THE WORLD EARTH DAY FESTIVAL.

The story underneath relates matter-of-factly how the boy had been walking around with a bowl of cold cereal—only the milk remained, discolored by the sugar-coated nuggets already eaten. The boy stopped, the article said, urinated in the bowl, lifted the bowl to his lips. . . "County Health officials have been called in . . . Child Protective Services. . . No restroom facilities. . ."

"That's you," the man he used to call Father had said the night before leaving them for good. "Don't you never forget it! That's you, and it'll always be you!"

Just one thing, Elder. You make a decision, you and the Lord, and you move on. No regrets. Regret'll kill you.

But he will remain in town. He will take a job stocking shelves at True Value Hardware and move into a smaller, cheaper apartment on the west side. His hair will creep over his ears and collar, but no farther. Sundays he will attend church faithfully if masochistically, grieving inside each time he sees her holding hands with the bristly blond who has returned from Stockholm speaking expert Swedish and telling tales of miracles and healings at his hands. The banker's son, the banker-to-be.

He will watch in silent anguish each time her belly swells like a brand-new planet and the children appear one by one as she strollers them down the narrow aisles of Stratton's Market. He will smile at her little deacon with the silly cowlick when he offers him the sacrament tray and at her daughters as they advance from the jungle gym to pom-and-cheer to high school cap and gown.

And he will watch, wincing, the day she leans over (so happy, so proud, threads of gray gleaming in her short, sculptured hair) and plants a public kiss on her husband's cheek as he (his proud mane salted silver) rises to take his newly appointed place upon the stand. With just a moment's hesitation, he will raise his right arm to the square with the rest of the congregation, pledging his allegiance, regardless.

And sometime later—a day, a week, a year perhaps—his new bishop will sit behind the big, burnished desk in the modest office smelling of homemade bread and solemnity, listening with cupped hands and beetled brows as he confesses his second and third sins.

"Bishop, I'm in love with a woman who's married to another man."

And he will be gentle in his reply: "I know, brother. You just have to do the best you can. We all do." ☞



ANNUNCIATION

On which day
did Mary feel the nudge
of that mind,
sharper than an elbow,
stronger than the kick
that Joseph saw billow her gown,
just before he looked deep
in her eyes and laughed
with joy.

—MIKAL LOFGREN