

2001 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Starstone Winner

DESPERATION

By Ethan Skarstedt

I GRIPPED THE STEERING WHEEL AND MUTTERED under my breath, “Stupid punks.” A group of missionaries was clambering about on top of the sign at the entrance to the Missionary Training Center, getting their picture taken. They were dressed in their gym clothes and acting like crazed monkeys as they waited for the light to change so they could cross the street.

Erica punched me in the shoulder, “Jeff!” There was a warning note in her voice.

“What was that for?” I asked, taking my other hand off the wheel to rub the point of impact.

“I can’t believe the attitude you have about missionaries. They’re just kids.”

“They ought to show a little more dignity.”

She rolled her eyes. “They’re only nineteen. What do you expect them to act like? You just like getting them into trouble. The more names you turn in to the mission president the better, eh?”

I glanced over at her, an incredulous look on my face. “Hon! I had to deal with an awful lot of those kids as companions. They ought to act like the Lord’s anointed, not undisciplined little punks. Maybe if they acted like missionaries instead of kids while they were in the MTC, they’d get a little work done when they got to the field.”

“Oh, good grief!” She turned to look out the window.

A group of missionaries coming from the athletic field wandered up to the crosswalk. They grinned like fools and started yelling and waving at the people in the cars waiting for the light to change. The people in the cars waved and yelled back.

“Where ya goin’, Elders?”

“How’s the food?”

“Ya get ‘Dear Johned’ yet?”

Just before the light changed, a tall, blonde elder sporting a healthy tan leaned to the window of our car and said to Erica, “Hey! How are you today?” I drove into the MTC before she could answer. Punk.



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AS AN MTC security guard, I hate most the night of the 4th of July. It’s a holiday the mission presidency lets go of. With three thousand-plus missionaries in residence, you’d think they’d crack down on a holiday where the primary method of celebration is to trigger incendiary devices. Not so.

On the 4th of July, the curfew is pushed back until, “the fireworks are over.” To the missionaries, this means they get to stay up until 11:00 or 11:30, in casual clothes, milling around in a screaming, jabbering, flirtatious mass in the parking lot at the south end of campus. To security guards at the MTC, it means we have to watch the crowd wildcat out of control until 11:30 and then step in and try to calm things down with bullhorns and machismo.

I stood on the MTC’s eastern sidewalk, just south of the main entrance and east of Building 18M. The smell of trampled vegetation and fireworks swirled through the night air along with the frenetic crowd noise of the missionaries to the south of me.

It was almost time for the show to end. I was supposed to watch for and stop anyone using the confusion to jump the fence into the MTC and, conversely, to discourage missionaries from jumping out. There were about fifty people, BYU students mostly, milling around the east fence. None had done more than hang on it.

Officer 418 called me on the radio just as a young woman at the fence started to jump up and down, screaming, “Elder Smith! Elder Smith!” and waving a handkerchief. Twenty yards to my north, two elders, one in a bright yellow shirt, made a break for the fence. I sighed and began walking in pursuit. Keying the mike on my radio, I said, “418 from 408, standby.” If it couldn’t wait a minute, he’d call me again.

At the fence, a tight cluster of young people stood together—three or four males, the rest females. The young man in a bright yellow shirt was hugging the girl who had been screaming.

When I arrived at the fence, a lone missionary stood on my side of it. I looked across. “Are any of you missionaries?” They all shook their heads and avoided looking at Yellow Shirt. He still had his arm around the girl and wore a sullen look. I pointed at him, “What about you? Are you a missionary?”

He looked me straight in the face. “No.”

I turned to the lone elder on my side of the fence and asked him, “Well, are you a missionary?”

He nodded, and I said, "Where's your companion?" He pointed across the fence at Yellow Shirt. "Right there."

I turned to look across the fence again. "Elder, you can either get back over the fence right now, or you can just keep movin' all the way home. I don't even need you to tell me your name; I can get it from your companion."

Yellow Shirt took his arm from around the girl, "What are you talkin' about? I don't wanna go home. Whaddaya need my name for?"

His manner was aggressive and I was beginning to lose patience. "You just denied being a missionary, and you are, at this very moment, breaking one of the cardinal rules involved with being a missionary. Unless you come back over the fence, right now, you may as well call your parents to come and get you."

He silently clambered over the iron. The people he had been with cast dark looks my way and wandered off down the sidewalk, calling their good-byes.

The two elders followed me off a short distance. I stopped and faced the two of them. "What are your names, please?"

Yellow Shirt replied, "Elders Smith and Nash."

I looked up from my notepad, "First names?" They just looked at me. This breach of MTC etiquette puzzled them. I repeated the question, "First names?"

Yellow Shirt's companion spoke, "Michael and Joshua."

I kept my pen poised and unmoving, "And you are?"

He glared at me for a moment before saying, in an exasperated tone, "Elder Nash!"

I remained poised, "Michael or Joshua?"

"Joshua!"

"Thank you, Elder Nash." I turned to Yellow Shirt. "Elder Smith. You want to explain to me what you thought you were doing?"

He bristled, "What are you talkin' about?"

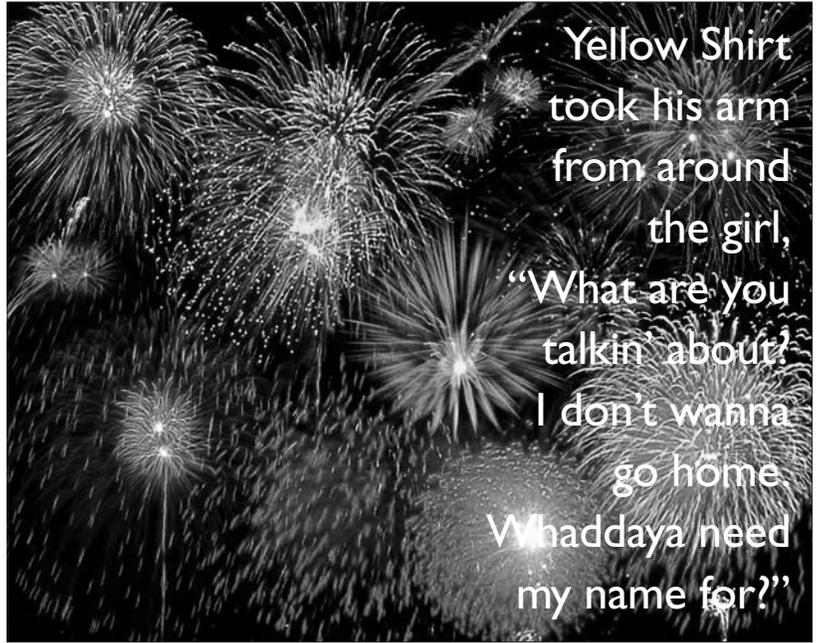
I put the notepad back in my pocket, "Elder, the mission president is going to hear about everything you've done tonight. I'd suggest you fix your attitude before you talk to him. But, of course, you will. You've got lots of practice putting on a false face for your elders, don't you."

Elder Smith looked at me and sneered, "Look little man, I didn't come here to obey your stupid rules. I came here to go on a mission. So shove off!"

I had thought that I was immune to attitudes like his, so my sudden rage took me by surprise. My heart beat faster and my hands clenched and unclenched. Quietly, I said, "Oh, Elder, I'll enjoy writing this one up."

He was yelling, "Why? What are ya gonna say?" He stepped toward me, trying to intimidate me with his greater height. His companion laid a hand on his arm, and he shook it off. I said nothing—just stood there, looking up into his face, seething.

The radio crackled, disturbing our pool of silence, "408 from 418. We need your assistance here at the south lot. . . ." The voice jerked away from the mike, "Hey, cut that out!"



To the south, I heard the sharp crackle of ladyfingers going off. The sound ricocheted among the buildings along with laughter and screaming. I couldn't tell if the screams were of pain or light-mindedness. Without another glance at Elders Nash or Smith, I ran towards the south lot.

LATER, AROUND TWO in the morning, I found myself in the tunnels. The access tunnels under the MTC are my specialty. I know every inch of them. Usually, they're very quiet, and I patrol them to avoid the noise of elders as much as to inspect for intrusion. I especially needed the quiet tonight. The incident with Elder Smith would not leave my mind, and whenever I thought about it, I started to seethe all over again.

There are two distinct sets of tunnels at the MTC; one is called the 'Old,' and the other, the 'New'. Despite what the missionaries think about secret passages to the temple for visiting General Authorities or bomb shelters or any of a thousand other wild speculations, these tunnels exist solely for the purpose of maintaining the MTC's plumbing and electrical systems.

All through them, breaking the dusty, concrete smoothness of the walls, are splotches of lighter gray paint covering graffiti:

"Elder Jones Rules!!! Venezuela, Caracas '96-98!"

"Berlin Germany Rocks!"

"Elder Jones is a polesmoking faggot!"

I was staring at a locked door leading to one of the elders' dormitories. On either side of the gray metal of the door hung dry wall, carefully cut and nailed in place. At least that's what used to be there. Now, only crumbling fragments hung from the framework. It was clear how the missionaries responsible for the fresh batch of graffiti I had just discovered had gotten in. They had simply kicked a hole in the wall, probably during the fireworks. On my notepad, I had a list of names, missions, and hometowns which I had gleaned from their scribbles.

My radio/phone rang, breaking the echoing silence, “Jeff! We’ve just had a call from Building 12M, room 323. . . .” The front desk clerk’s tone was frantic. I took a cue from his voice and sprinted towards the pop-up nearest 12M. He continued, “An Elder Biggs says his companion is lying on the floor, bleeding from the neck.” I switched my handset from telephone to radio function on the BYU police dispatch channel and keyed the mike, “Dispatch from 408. . . .”

They replied immediately. “Go ahead, 408.”

“Send an ambulance to 12M in the MTC. I have a report of an elder down, bleeding from the neck, unresponsive. . . . I am en route.”

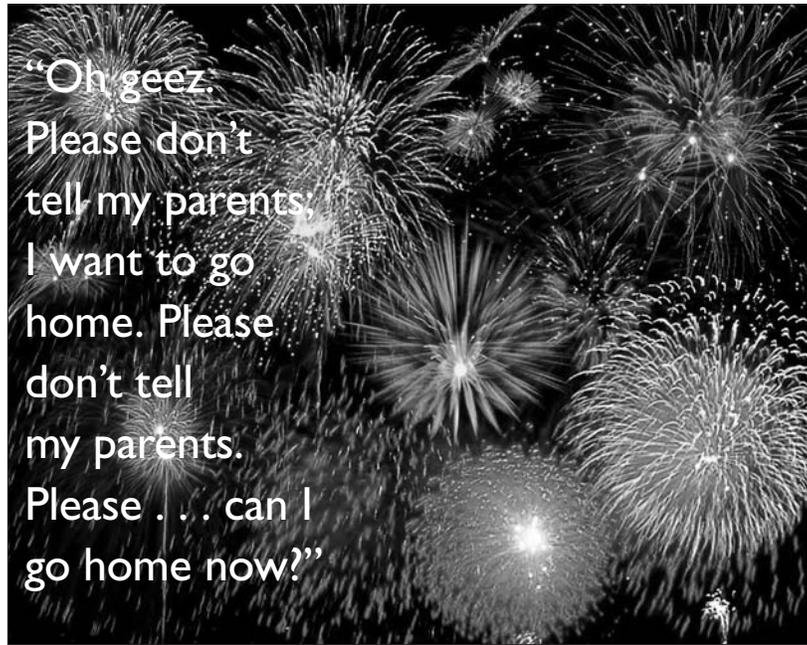
“I copy 408. Ambulance on its way. Break . . . 27 . . .”

Another voice, that of a BYU police officer, crackled over the airwaves, “This is 27, go ahead.”

Dispatch said, “27, respond to the MTC, Building 12M, medical emergency. Unit 408 will meet you.”

I broke in as I climbed one-handed the ladder in the pop-up nearest 12M, “Negative 27. Unit 418 will meet you at the north door of 12M. Break . . . 418 from 408, did you copy that? Room 323.”

Brian’s voice, “This is 418, I copy. 12M, 323.” I twisted the key and dragged the north doors of 12M open. The stairs were



empty and echoing. I took them three at a time.

Room 323 was on the third floor, far side of the building. My keys jingled in my hand as I ran down the dark hallway through the cloying smell of BO and deodorant.

Standing in the doorway of room 323 was an elder with his head bowed and his arms folded. I spoke, “Elder. . . !” He looked up at me and put his finger to his lips. I grabbed his shoulders and shoved him aside. I could barely see an elder lying on the floor of the room. Six or seven elders knelt around him, arms extended to his forehead. I pulled two aside and looked at his prostrate form.

Adrenaline poured hotly through my body before my brain kicked in and my thoughts started turning over swiftly. He was breathing. His shirtfront was a mass of red. A marbled pattern of blood, black stains, and dirty gray carpet surrounded him. Under the heels of one of the kneeling elders lay a hunting knife, blood on the blade and handle. That changed things from tragic accident to possible assault. I couldn’t allow the room to be disturbed any more than it already was.

The “voice” for the blessing they were giving cut off in mid-sentence when I pushed him over backwards. He flailed, and his eyes opened. Before he could speak, I roared, “Out! All of you!” I shot my gaze around the room. “Move it! Out!”

They all stood up and filed out. I looked down at the wounded elder. Closer inspection revealed that the bleeding must have slowed since soaking his shirt and the floor. A dime-sized hole lay in the hollow of his throat. Bits of white cartilage showed through the bright red blood welling up. His eyes were open, and he whimpered. Blood flecked his lips and teeth. I spoke to him.

“Elder. Tell me your name.” My mind raced as I tried to think of everything you were supposed to do in these situations. I didn’t dare apply pressure to his throat. I could only try to keep him awake until the paramedics arrived.

The bleeding boy whimpered his reply to my question, “Elder George.” He began to buck and jerk, “Help me! Oh my gosh! Help me! Is that mine?” His eyes found the blood on the floor and his shirt. “I’ve got to go home. Got to go home! *Oh! My gosh!*”

I put my hands on his chest to hold him still, repeating the words, “Calm down, Elder. Calm down.” He tried to control his breathing by holding his breath. When he did, air bubbled and hissed out the hole in his throat. I keyed my mike again. “Dispatch from 408. The elder has a punctured throat and windpipe. He is still conscious. External bleeding is sluggish.”

“Copy 408.”

I said to the wild-eyed youth under my hands, “Elder, I don’t see any more significant bleeding. You’re gonna be alright. The ambulance is already on the way.” Comprehension glimmered in his eyes as he hoarsely said, “OK.”

“Elder, tell me what happened. How did you get hurt?”

He answered in a frantic whine, “I don’t know! I was asleep, and I guess I heard a knock at the door, so I got up and answered it. I guess the guy standing there stabbed me, and ran away or something. I started calling for help. Then I guess they turned the lights on, and . . .”

There lay the knife and the wound to go with it. Maybe the elder sounded unsure of himself due to shock. I kept him talking, asked him about his hometown, his family. . . .

About a minute after the elder told me he had been stabbed, Officer 27 arrived. His name was Aaron, a young, full-time, BYU police officer, and a friend of mine.

He knelt down next to the elder and said to me, "What's the story?"

"I've been talking to him, trying to keep him awake. You better ask him what happened, though."

Aaron held my gaze for a moment before he turned back to the elder, "What happened to you, Elder?"

"I think I was asleep, and I . . . I heard a knock on the door. I think I tried to answer it, but I fell out of bed onto that knife there." He waved a limp hand towards the knife at his feet.

I caught Aaron's eye and shook my head. Aaron stood up and stepped away while muttering something into his radio.

The paramedics arrived a minute or so later along with the watch commander and a forensics team. After a moment, Aaron asked me what was up. I told him, "When I asked him, he told me he answered the door and someone stabbed him."

Aaron pulled the watch commander, a tall gray-haired gentleman, aside and spoke to him for a few moments. As the paramedics worked, the watch commander knelt and again asked the elder what had happened. The elder told him he had gotten up for some unknown reason, tripped in the dark, and had fallen on the knife.

A minute later, the watch commander motioned me outside the room and said, leaning close with folded arms, "Do you think someone stabbed this young man?"

I thought about it for a minute, "No, sir. I don't. I don't know what happened, but I don't think he was stabbed." He nodded and went back into the room. I looked up and down the hall. Aaron was interviewing the elders standing around, one at a time. I recognized one of them as the elder who had stayed inside the fence, Yellow Shirt's companion. He had his head in his hands and didn't see me.

I stepped back into the room in time to hear the watch commander ask the elder what had really happened to him, no crap this time.

The elder started sobbing. He grabbed onto the commander's arm, "Oh geez. Please don't tell my parents; I want to go home. I did this. Please don't tell my parents. Please . . . can I go home now?"

The watch commander put his hand over the elder's and said something I couldn't hear. The elder nodded and seemed to relax as the paramedics lifted him up in the stretcher.

I followed them. Just as I was stepping outside after them, an elder brushed past me. I started to tell him to get back inside the building but stopped.

It was Elder Smith, still wearing his yellow shirt. Tears ran down his face, and his nose was running. He stood next to the stretcher as they lifted it up into the ambulance and said, in a startlingly clear strong voice, like an angel might sound, "Hey Elder George, we'll be praying for you. We'll see you in the mission, OK? You just get better."

I heard Elder George croak, "OK, Elder Smith, I will."

Elder Smith raised his hand in a wave as the ambulance doors shut, "Keep the Spirit!" he yelled.

Elder Smith turned around to go back into the building but paused when he saw me. Before he could speak, I said, "How do you know Elder George?"

He brushed his tears away, stood a little straighter, and said, "He's in my district. I've been trying to get him to stay, but . . . I guess he just didn't want to be here." His voice trailed off, and he seemed to slump a little bit. He looked at me and opened his mouth to speak.

I knew he was going to mention the incident at the fence, probably apologize or something. I cut him off. "Have a good mission, Elder." He hesitated, nodded, and went inside.

THE NEXT MORNING when Erica came to pick me up in our little, beat-up Geo, I slumped heavily into the passenger seat.

"Awww, you poor man," she said sardonically. Then more seriously, "Long night, honey? Did you turn very many missionaries in to the mission president?"

"No." I said, closing my eyes. "Not one." ☹



A VENTURE

She could see now that an individual life is, in the end, nothing more than . . . a shifting of light

—Harriet Doerr

All of my days lead to this: one woman standing and backlit by a setting sun, a silhouette that gives no hint of sharp detail, or if she'll be standing there tomorrow. And I face her with my hand shading the best I can make of this, one long draw as my history spills like an arc of solar wind swirling in the atmosphere.

And I know before I decide that most love comes to this: a night's deep sea, a venture into shadows, or simply a slight shift of precious light (where the ghost-like image of what this will be is pressed to the lips in a sun-lit stream that's limitless).

—BARRY BALLARD