



LOST

By Matthew Allen Bland

*I was young
and adrift
until a
Latter-day
Saint family
provided me
with an
anchor.*

As the rising sun gradually brightened the passing landscape, it faded my own reflection in the bus window—a rough character looking back at me. I was glad to see it go.

I'd spent another long night trying to sleep while yet another bus carried me to another unknown place. For months this had been my life, stopping whenever my money ran out, continuing on as soon as I'd pulled together enough cash for a few burgers and a bus ticket. I had been drifting across the country like a lost soul.

When I stepped off the bus in West Yellowstone, Montana, USA, I had \$12 and an empty stomach. I hadn't seen a bar of soap or a razor for days, and every stitch of clothing I owned was as filthy as I was. Wishing for a hot shower, I tipped the brim of my hat against the wind and lit a cigarette. I must have looked distinctly disreputable.

A painting of a mountain valley with a wooden bed frame in the foreground. The title "AND FOUND: ME" is overlaid on the top half of the image.

AND FOUND: ME

The Question

“Do you believe in God?” The question came from the other side of a king-sized bed where Dale was bending down to tuck in the drooping edge of a fitted sheet.

I finished my side of the bed as I thought about his query. “I guess so.”

“You go to church anywhere?”

“Not right now. God and I, we like to leave each other alone.” I meant it as a wisecrack, but instead of laughing, Dale’s eyes looked a little sad behind his glasses.

“What about you?” I asked, feeling a little awkward.

“I’m LDS,” he answered.

We were moving slowly around the room, cleaning as we spoke. “Never heard of it,” I said. “What’s ‘LDS’ stand for?”

“Latter-day Saints,” he answered. “The full name of the church is actually The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You know, the Mormons.”

“Isn’t that a kind of horse?” I asked.

“No,” he laughed, “you’re thinking of ‘Morgans.’”

“Sorry,” I said, a little embarrassed.

“No problem.” He smiled. “You believe in God. Mind if I ask what you believe, exactly?”

A New Frame of Reference

That’s how it began. Before the month was over, I had taken the missionary discussions and was baptized. I remember standing waist-deep in the warm waters of the

Somehow, by the end of my second day in town, I found a place to live and a job cleaning rooms at the Branding Iron Motel. I was assigned to “shadow” another housekeeper for a couple of days while I learned the ropes. He was a clean-shaven, unassuming young man, small in stature, with a kind heart and quiet nature. His name was Dale Belnap. We seemed to have little in common besides our age, but we quickly became friends regardless.

Once I learned the ropes, housekeeping tasks became routine, so as we changed sheets and vacuumed floors, we talked to pass the time. I’m not sure how the conversation found its way to the topic of religion, but about halfway through our first day, Dale found courage to ask me what turned out to be the most important question of my life.



I sat on a fallen tree near the river's bank as I was confirmed a member of the Church. All around me were the smiling faces of the members of the local branch.

Fire Hole River, dressed all in white and nervously eyeing the small herd of buffalo grazing on the far bank. Dale lowered me

into the water's liquid embrace and raised me back into the living world.

A few minutes later, dried and dressed in my best clothes, I sat on a weathered fallen tree near the river's bank as I was confirmed a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. All around me were the smiling faces of the members of the local branch. I'd only known them for a little while, but already they'd given me acceptance, fellowship, and friendship.

Also in attendance were several members of Dale's family, including his mother, Ellen. My own mother abandoned me as a young child, and I possessed no frame of reference for Ellen's selfless compassion. I found it confusing. Had Dale led her to believe I was someone who deserved such kindness? After that first awkward hug, I decided I would tolerate my discomfort until she chose to have nothing more to do with me. I knew it wouldn't take long.

I was wrong.

Ellen already had a more accurate notion of who I was than I did. She understood I was a child of our Father in Heaven. The missionaries had taught me this truth, but childhood experience had obscured the full beauty of this principle, keeping it from my realization until years later.

Time passed, and even though Dale had left for his mission, I became friends with several other members of Ellen's family. Quick to love, they treated me more like a brother than a friend. They seemed genuinely interested in who I was. During the holidays, when I was most accustomed to feeling the poignant absence of family, Ellen and her children took care to help me feel as though I was part of theirs. They actually seemed rather fond of me, and at some point an odd notion occurred to me. Maybe—just maybe—I wasn't quite as worthless as I supposed.

Ellen

More time passed, and Ellen became a powerful source of wisdom and love. When I found myself in need of counsel or a kind word, I could always find a stool in her kitchen, where she patiently listened while I poured out the sadness and fear I carried. She washed dishes or rolled



bread dough, and I sat on a stool, forearms resting on the counter.

“Are you excited?” she asked speaking of my mission call as she washed another plate and deposited it in the drainer beside the sink.

“I guess so,” I responded a little doubtfully.

She turned to look over her right shoulder at me. “You don’t sound very excited.”

“It’s not that I’m not excited, because I really am. I’m not worried at all about my mission. God will take care of things. It’s just—”

Ellen waited patiently, and I continued: “I’ve told you how I drifted around for awhile before I met Dale. Well, I don’t really want to return to that. When I come back from my mission, I won’t have a job or any money. Even if I had the cab fare to leave the airport, I wouldn’t have anywhere to go. There’s no home to return to. No family. Nothing.” I shook my head in frustration. “I want to go, Ellen. I think I’d be a good missionary. But if I just walk away from my job and my apartment, then what am I going to do when I get back? I’ll just end up homeless until I find something, and I don’t want that.” I looked up at her, hoping she’d understand.

I was apparently the one who didn’t get it.

She turned off the water and began to dry her hands as she turned to face me. “Matthew, that’s just silly.” There was something sad and a little incredulous in her expression. “You have to know by now that we would never let that happen. We will be here.”

“You will?” I felt a little foolish. I was trying to figure out how this whole family thing worked. “Um, thanks,” I managed a little sheepishly. Ellen laughed and turned back to the sink.



In retrospect, I probably should have offered to finish the dishes.

Harvest

When I received my mission call to San Antonio, Texas, USA, Ellen Belnap took me shopping and even bought me the shoes I would wear out over the course of the next two years. Once I left, she wrote me consistently, offering insight and encouragement that contributed a great deal to the wonderful experience that my mission became.

Because of the Belnaps, I had a place to return to and a family who welcomed me home. Their love gave me permission to stop punishing myself with loneliness. It no longer seemed necessary to keep running from place to place. My eyes were open to a dizzying array of possibilities.

Our Savior’s love blessed the Belnaps, and rather than keep that love to themselves, they chose to share it with me. Because of their love, strange ideas like college, marriage, and happiness began to creep into my mind. Before, such notions had only existed as dreamy elements of other people’s lives, but now they actually seemed possible. Their love carried me into the Church, encouraged me as a missionary, and taught me to believe in what I could be. Without their encouragement, I may never have served a mission. Because I did, 40 other families were welcomed into the warm embrace of the Savior’s Church, including the family that my wife and I are now raising in the gospel. ■