

Under the Long White Cloud

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Chapter 2



OUR FLIGHT FROM Auckland skirted the North Island's western edge until we reached the southern coastline and flipped 180 degrees over the Cook Strait to descend into Wellington. Just when it seemed we would crash into the rocky bay, the wheels touched down on solid ground. President and Sister Herran, who oversaw the missionary work and the well-being of 200 missionaries in an area that stretched from midway up the North Island down to the bottom of the South Island, met us at the airport. They had been in New Zealand for two years and had one more to go before they returned to Utah. Once again, we loaded up in vans and drove to our office in the city center.

We zipped alongside a blue bay, up a forested hill, and finally, shot out of the Mount Victoria tunnel. Green mountains rolled into the distance, covered in bright white houses, while the valley below bustled with cars. The van crept through the winding, senseless roads until we reached the mission office where Ghuznee Street meets The Terrace.

The office occupied one floor of a white, four-story building with aqua trim and a flat roof, designed in a blend of International and Art Deco styles. Thick stucco walls curved at each corner and each alternate level contained a balcony on both sides. Besides our office on the third floor, the building held a lounge area on the ground floor with a small kitchen and pool table where college-age Latter-day Saints in the area could gather, while the second level held offices for facility management and religious education personnel. The top floor was an apartment, and above that was an open roof with a spectacular view over the city and the slices of blue harbor peeking between the skyscrapers. The inside smelled damp, almost moldy, but in a pleasant way, like an old blanket.

Two senior missionary companions managed the mission's logistics from the office: a pair of elderly ladies who served together as friends and a retired couple from Utah. Upon our arrival, they

presented different orientations about driver's licenses, mission cars, supplies, and our financial situation. Like every missionary, my parents (or the local congregation) paid a flat \$400 a month to keep me out in New Zealand. It would hardly cover the actual costs of my day-to-day life, but my peers serving in South America paid \$400 a month as well, money that more than addressed their expenses, so it all equaled out. Each fortnight we would receive \$145 for groceries and other basic needs. That was our only expense since we would live in a mission-rented flat and drive mission-owned vehicles.

That night, we slept at the large brick mission home in the Tawa suburb of Wellington; the elders bunked on one side and the sisters on the other. The next morning, I had an interview with President Herran. He was in his fifties, and, at 6'2", barrel-chested, with short hair, long nose, and prominent chin, rather intimidating. The most disarming feature of his formidable stature were his eyes, one bright green, the other a pale blue. I nicknamed them "justice and mercy." Direct eye contact with either eye exposed your soul to his laser-like stare. Before his assignment in New Zealand, he worked as an executive at UPS. Unlike regular missionaries, mission presidents don't apply; Church headquarters keep their ear to the ground for financially stable empty nesters who could willfully step away from life for three years to serve in an uncompensated position.

Before I left, Benjamin stressed this interview's importance and urged me to set a good first impression, so I told President Herran that I was there to work hard and obey the mission rules. I must have looked very young and terrified, but he smiled, thanked me, and proceeded to tell me about my first assignment in a place called Whanganui in the far northwest corner of our mission.

"Now, we haven't had missionaries there for a while, Elder Farnsworth, but it's a beautiful little town and you'll love it," he said. "The Church members can be a little rough, but don't mind that, they're going to love you," and he chuckled. I gathered there was

more he didn't tell me, that Whanganui wasn't exactly fertile ground, but nevertheless, I felt excited to know the name of my first area.

After breakfast and once President Herran finished interviewing everyone else, we drove back into the city center, unaware of the baptism by fire that awaited us: proselytizing in the streets of Wellington. They called the activity "street-contacting" and "tracting". I paired up with a seasoned missionary and for the next five hours, we approached strangers on the sidewalk with an offer to learn about about our Church. Luckily, my partner was Elder Richards, a stocky Australian who served as an assistant to President Herran. His normal area covered the city center, so he was accustomed to street-contacting on a dense, urban sidewalk. Richards was fearless and stopped young and old, rich and poor, male and female with a Book of Mormon in hand and a smile on his face. I soon started to follow suit, albeit less confidently or cheerfully, with much more discretion for whom I approached.

I had spent very little time in cities as a child—the only comparison I had to Wellington was Manhattan, which my mom and I had visited for a senior trip the previous fall. New York, as it had for millions of people before, seized my affection with its tall buildings, blistering pace, and tangible culture. Though Wellington was a fraction of the size, I looked for comparisons, pleased to walk among diverse people, shops, and architecture again. What the city lacked in size, it compensated with natural beauty. We meandered to the harbor to admire the moody, teal water that stretched to the bay's opposite end, stenciled mountains further afield. Back over the city, the bushy, home-spotted hills rose behind the tall offices.

We circled the city for two hours, grabbed some lunch back at the office, and descended again into the throng for another three hours. Most people ignored us, but only one person was rude, a bleached older gentleman with a long, striped scarf who said "go to hell" as I greeted him at a parking meter. Overall, I survived, moved

past each dismissal, and learned how to stop someone on the street to place a Book of Mormon or a pass-along. It was unclear to me then how frequently I would street-contact throughout the next two years, though I would do it nearly every day to come. I also didn't realize that it would be a full year before I saw Wellington again. Its beauty and charm gave me a glimmer of hope that New Zealand might suit me after all.

Our mission was divided into seven different zones; four on the North Island: Palmerston North, Hawkes Bay, Hutt Valley, and Wellington; and three on the South: Nelson, Christchurch, and Southland. Each zone divided into three districts. A district had between three and six companionships responsible for an area as small as a suburb or spread across multiple towns. A peer leadership hierarchy aligned with the zones and districts. Each district had a single elder assigned as the district leader (DL), and at the zone level, two elders served as zone leaders (ZLs) while one sister missionary served as the sister training leader (STL). Above them were two elders assigned as assistants to the president (APs) who lived in Wellington City. They welcomed new missionaries, trained the ZLs, and helped President and Sister Herran with random tasks.

Whanganui was in the Palmerston North Zone, and my bus dropped me in "Palmy," an hour inland from Whanganui. Elder Werner, my new companion and trainer, waited for me at the bus station along with the zone leaders, Elder Piripi and Elder Lindell. Werner was 5' 9" and very skinny with a mousy face and short wispy brown hair that danced lightly in the wind. He looked frail next to Piripi, a large Māori who would later play college football and rugby, and Lindell, a stocky carpenter from Tasmania. We went straight to the ZLs flat to talk about Whanganui and learn the details that President Herran had withheld in my interview.

As it happened, seven and a half months ago, two companions lived in Whanganui until one fateful day when an old man in the local congregation poisoned a missionary with a bad glass of water. It's unclear whether the poison was intentional, but the missionary stopped breathing, turned purple, and ended up in the hospital. Somehow, this was a lesser sin compared to the general disinterest the local Church members expressed for missionary work, and President Herran used the incident as an excuse to yank the elders from Whanganui. Now, Werner and I were to pull what Piripi and Lindell called a "white-wash" and revitalize the missionary efforts in the town. They also warned us about a small group of flirtatious teenage girls in the congregation, including one who called herself Sugar.

"She's not even cute, bro, so don't worry," said Piripi.

The ZLs relayed these sordid details with experienced nonchalance while Werner and I listened anxiously next to each other on a loveseat. Maybe I should have been more nervous, but part of me hoped it would make for a good story, and besides, everything was already so foreign that I absorbed it like any other shock. With that heartening introduction to Whanganui, we set off west for the coast, the ZLs behind us with a trailer full of beds, furniture, and bikes.

Our flat was a small two-bedroom unit that sat midway up a hill on Parsons Street less than a mile from the city center. It shared one too many similarities with a trailer home, long and wide, elevated with a slat-covered crawl space underneath, and little to remark in terms of interior design. None of that bothered me; I knew I wasn't paying that much to be there, nor did I expect creature comforts—who needed purse or script? The front steps led into a living room, big enough for a couch and two wooden desks. Down the hall was a small kitchen on the left, a bedroom on the right, and at the end of the walkway, a bathroom and another bedroom, 450 square feet in total. Our hot water was either broken or turned off. For a few days before a plumber came, I boiled a pot of water, stood nude

in the tub, dipped my soapy washcloth in the hot water, and rubbed across my torso, arms, and legs, before dumping the remains over my head to rinse.

The house's best feature was the view out the back from our living room window. Behind a sheet-metal fence, the yard dropped off twenty feet into a small pond complete with nikau and palm trees and a small canoe. Exotic birds popped over the fence into our yard and nested in the trees that stretched from the oasis up to our eye-level view. A few days later, we knocked on the neighbor's door and asked if we could look at his yard, which he obliged, though he declined to hear our message. After we set up the flat, the ZLs went back to Palmerston North and Werner took me to a bright yellow supermarket called Pak-n-Save to stock up on a sorry selection of pasta, fruit, and cookies.

Over the first several days, a story my dad had relayed from his mission began to make sense. Homesick, distraught, and unable to speak a word of Portuguese, he had contemplated jumping in front of a bus, harming himself enough to earn a ticket back to the United States. To return due to homesickness would have been shameful, but returning because he was injured in the field of duty, well, that was honorable. I had always found that a little dramatic, but now I understood. Each day was misery. It was cold and dark, rained constantly, and since Elder Werner and I didn't even know each other yet, let alone a soul in Whanganui, the days passed in slow, incremental disappointments. The Māori name for New Zealand is Aotearoa which means the Land of the Long White Cloud. It felt more accurate to call it the long gray cloud.

I still thought often of my parents, siblings, and friends, and the homesickness I felt in the MTC doubled in the absence of other elders and manufactured training-center optimism. My parents had

slipped a handwritten letter in my suitcase before I left, and unable to tear myself from their pages, I reread them every morning. The letters contained needed words of encouragement and advice, though my frequent reading failed to actuate their pertinent wisdom. My mom told me not to take things too seriously and to find joy and humor in my duty. Instead, each day felt like drowning in a pool of mud. I strained against the heavy loneliness, hoping to grab onto any form of satisfaction, but it was all I could do to keep my head above the surface.

The only way to combat this was to enter a monk-like state—grim, unreasonably obedient, and pedantic—as if to sever any connection with my past life. It was impossible not to think of home, and when I did, waves of guilt dragged me into more unhappiness and led to further attempts at faux impassivity. It didn't help, either, that every night I dreamt of someone from home. School teachers, friends, family members, and co-workers all made their way into lucid dreams. They became so routine that I could almost predict who would appear the next night. Like some fantastical Dickensian purge, I dreamed away anyone who anchored me to the past until my mind was empty and I slept in peace.

My dad's letter advised me to remain curious and learn as much as I could about the new people and cultures around me. This also proved difficult. In truth, I was less concerned about others' stories than I was about their capacity to join our Church, nor could I see beyond my present malaise.

One place I could distract myself was in our routine. Each day we followed roughly the same schedule. We woke up at 6:30 a.m. to exercise. I managed a few pushups in the brisk unheated living room before wrapping myself in blankets and waiting for a turn in the shower. At 8:00, we had personal study, and at 9:00, companionship study, reading from the Bible, Book of Mormon, and other scriptural material on our approved study list. Then, for the next twelve weeks,

we did an extra hour of study where Elder Werner taught me how to teach the lessons with awkward role-plays and frequent tips from our manual. We memorized six sets of lessons, though not verbatim. The goal was to learn the scriptures and the flow of doctrinal principles yet remain flexible to questions and tailor the lesson as we saw fit.

At 11:00 a.m., we ate a quick lunch and left the apartment for the day until we came back for dinner at 5:00 and then went out again from 6-9:00 p.m. After we returned in the evening, we planned out our next day in thirty-minute blocks and relaxed until our scheduled bedtime at 10:30. The only exception was Monday, our Preparation Day, or P-day for short, when we emailed home, shopped, and wandered around Whanganui until 5:00 p.m. when we resumed our missionary duties.

While regimented, what we did between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. was up to us. Every area had a binder full of one-page contact cards containing names, addresses, phone numbers, and lesson notes from old investigators and less-than-active members who weren't attending church anymore. In Whanganui, we had two area books, one for each side of town the last elders had left behind after the poisoning. We grabbed a fold-out city map from the town visitor center and spent hours arranging the names across the map down to the specific street, marking little x's wherever someone lived. Then we loaded up our backpacks with contact cards, pamphlets, and Book of Mormons and biked from neighborhood to neighborhood to see who still wanted to see the elders.

Our success rate was abysmal. Eighty percent of the people had moved and if they hadn't, they expressed little desire to welcome us in. Regardless, we thinned the area book and acquainted ourselves with the city along the way. When we didn't hunt names from the area book, we biked to the city center to street-contact for an hour or two, a lesser thrill in Whanganui than Wellington; the pedestrians never overwhelmed us and after a week or two, the faces became fa-

miliar. The best time to find new people was after dinner and we knocked on doors in the dark until people started to complain. The locals took it personally to receive an unexpected rap on the door after dark in the winter. Often, they answered in pajamas. Their readiness for evening comfort bemused me, but it soon became clear that the city operated on a solar schedule. Stores closed and the streets emptied at 5:00 p.m.

Whanganui possessed a certain acquired beauty, yet I had missed the golden years by two decades. At one point, it was the fifth biggest city in New Zealand but had since fallen out of the top ten, not to any meaningful population loss, however; it simply stopped growing in the 90s, surpassed by other centrally located cities. Still, on a sunny day, it was picturesque. A wide river coursed through the city center as it made its way the last few miles to the coast. Like many mid-size New Zealand towns, Whanganui offered a visible art community with several quality museums and, in this case, glass-blowing galleries.

Coming from the suburban United States, I thought Whanganui looked shabby, based solely on the age and state of the weather-worn houses. Dingy or not, I loved the architectural selection in each neighborhood. Most common was a New Zealand spin on a squat Victorian single-family home called villas, graced with decorative embellishments, and made entirely of wood with a small verandah and bay windows in the front. Bungalows were also prevalent, similar to villas but without small extravagances and with the addition of a tin roof. Most lacked persistent attention and looked moldy from the rain, yet a tidy villa or bungalow added a splash of history and color to the street.

Another common style was state housing units, each with the same basic blueprint, relics of post-WWII government initiatives that put thousands of New Zealanders in single-family homes. State houses appeared in almost every neighborhood but were more com-

monly strung together over a few blocks or down either side of a street. Some houses were brick with ceramic tiled roofs, while those made of wood suffered the same fate as the villas and decayed in the humid climate. Both builds followed a simple layout with a large living area, combined kitchen-dining room, and three-to-four bedrooms off the main hallway.

Finally, there were the modern, mid-century homes, often white-washed stucco and single-level with a sunroom, floor-to-ceiling windows, and flat roof. These were often found in the town's wealthier areas like St. Johns Hill or Durie Hill. The neighborhoods like Whanganui East, Springvale, Aramoho, and Whanganui Central contained a mix of villas and bungalows with the occasional street of state houses. Surprisingly, the closer you got to the beach, the worse the homes got, and neighborhoods like Gonville and Castlecliff were full of state housing save the rows of seaside cottages on the streets closest to the water.

We spent most of our time on Victoria Avenue, the main street in the city center of Whanganui. Pretty much every town in New Zealand, even the smallest, had a disproportionately large city center for its population compared to American standards. Each individual neighborhood outside the city center also had its own set of shops like a dairy or small bodega-like grocery store, pub, and other small businesses, yet none were busy enough to justify any street-contacting, so we stuck to Victoria Ave and walked past the shops down to the river, a mile there, a mile back. Most were restaurants: Indian curry, Thai, Turkish kebabs, Chinese, and fish and chips. Also common were cheap import stores and tourist shops that sold stuffed toy kiwis and jewelry. The store quality and clientele improved the closer you got to the river: banks, real estate agents, and boutiques popped up in the last quarter mile. We explored the shops on P-days, and after it felt like we had met everyone in town, began to pop in and out of the stores as we street-contacted, inching our way to our weekly goal of

150 new conversations. If we stopped a handful of people each day, we would hit our target, especially with the hours spent door-knocking in the evenings.

As we went door to door in September, we heard mention of the America's Cup and the slightest trash-talk from the Kiwis. The America's Cup is an annual yacht race between two countries, and in 2013 it happened to be USA vs. NZ. I had never heard of the America's Cup—I suspected that less than one percent of American's knew about it. Our disinterest aside, the race broke the ice with old, white New Zealanders who quickly pointed out their early lead, up 6-0 in the best of seventeen race. Soon, however, the American's began to pull back even as New Zealand was only one victory shy of their ninth win and the cup. Each day the race got tighter, and the receptiveness at the door started to wane. 8-5, 8-8, and finally 9-8 in the American's favor who somehow pulled out a dramatic seven-win streak to claim the title. Now our nationality was against us, and at every other door, agitated men hurled accusations and cursed "the Yanks." Perhaps it was below my duty, but I couldn't help but feign an innocent face and ask about the race to stir up a heated reaction.

Besides door-knocking and street-contacting, we filled our time with the members of the local congregation, known in the Church as "wards." Our ward had roughly eighty regulars who came on Sunday. A third were Māori, another third were Polynesian, mostly Samoan, and the rest were Caucasian, more commonly referred to by the Māori term for Europeans, Pakeha.

My first sabbath happened to fall on the first Sunday of the month, a day reserved for anyone in attendance to approach the pulpit and deliver a testimony in a type of spiritual open mic. The only testimony I remember was that of a grandfatherly Samoan named Brother Tuivasa who belted out the words to his favorite hymn before he smiled widely at the crowd and sat down. That also happened to be the last time I saw Brother Tuivasa at church.

The ward's leader, or the bishop, was a large Samoan named Ron Savea. He was a serious man with stiff black hair, head like a bowling ball, and enormous arms and hands. Bishop Savea worked at the local tannery and years before had served a mission to the Philippines. He was militant in his faith and expectations for the ward members and the missionaries. He relayed as much in a somber interview in his office.

As promised, Whanganui did have a gaggle of young women enthralled with the elders, though all, including Sugar, lacked the conversational skills to talk to us. Elder Piripi was right; the temptation to flirt was not too great. The only girl we befriended was Kowhai. She was in her early twenties and had joined the Church a few months earlier. The ward was particularly hard on her so she took to the elders. Frankly, we didn't know how to give a girl in her twenties religious guidance and were happy to have someone our age to whom we could talk about anything else.

Each ward generally has a family or two who takes particular interest in the missionaries. In Whanganui, that family was the Chan Mows. Aleki and Sefina were both from Samoa, the Chan Mow name a remnant of Chinese immigration from a century before. They had two boys in elementary school, and on school holidays, we played touch rugby with them in Springvale Park. The Chan Mows became our surrogate parents. Sefina fed us any time we visited, bowls of rice and green curry or island dishes like sapaui, pani popo, and all manner of pork. Aleki cut our hair and boxed off my widow's peak so that I had a flat, sharp line across the front of my head. Anytime we had a lesson with an investigator, he joined us or told us to bring them to his home.

The ward seemed grateful to have two able-bodied young men back in the congregation. I became the ward pianist and played for our church meetings, evening devotionals, funerals, or any occasion that required a song. Our service took on physical responsibilities, as

well. On Saturday mornings, we put on a pair of jeans and a hoodie, name tag clipped to the outside, and went from house to house to mow lawns, turn over gardens, or move furniture.

I enjoyed our service at Te Hiti te Kohanga Reo, a Māori language immersion school for children, the most. One of our ward members, Wata Waipipi, managed the school and the small flats that surrounded it. She was a stern woman, tall and slender, with a head of curly, golden hair. When we talked, she stared at us austerely through the bottom bifocals of her glasses. As a pillar in the Māori community, it was important to stay in her favor. She could introduce us to anyone in Whanganui, but of course, her goodwill came at a cost. Every Tuesday morning we worked the land around the Kohanga Reo in Castlecliff. At the time, the plot contained only the school and flats, though Wata envisioned a full-scale marae, the name for a complex to serve the local tribe complete with a carved meeting house, kitchens, and other amenities. Our job was to tame the plants and weeds that thrived in the temperate greenhouse climate.

We spent most Tuesdays wrangling the flax bushes that grew wild along the fence line and between the flats. Flax is native to Aotearoa; eight-to-ten flat leaves fan out in thick green stalks from a single root, and in the center, a dark brown reed, an inch in diameter, shoots up several feet before budding out with tiny red flowers. It's a gorgeous plant, one frequently painted in the foreground of a hillside or ocean view, yet at the kohanga reo, it was seemingly endless and stubborn. We cut the bushes back inches from the bottom with a razor blade, wound the grass-like stalks around our elbows and fist, bound them all up with a final blade of flax, and loaded the bundles into a large canvas bag which the school shipped to a plant to turn the stalks into paper for the classroom. Wata expected us rain or shine, and when it wasn't flax, we weeded the garden, repaired handrails, and scrubbed grime from the buildings. Kowhai spent a lot of time at the school and helped us with the labor. Besides Wata's

respect, our reward for a few hours work was a platter of sandwiches with fresh tomatoes and cucumbers from her garden.

Despite all we did to fill our time, even after five weeks in Whanganui, I wasn't happy. The homesickness was nearly gone, beaten out of me with each new rejection, and I focused now on our lack of success or at least the success I imagined we should have obtained.

Two things are clear to me now. First, I imagined, like most missionaries, that I would be insanely effective thanks to my own exceptionalism. Arrogantly, I thought myself more personable, smart, and hardworking than your average elder. Life to that point had been constructed for my success and I assumed I would breeze through missionary work as I had through high school. When faced with a little resistance, small signs that I wasn't special or able to succeed on confidence alone, I faltered. The second thing I've realized is that I simply misunderstood the cadence of missionary work. Slogging through the area book and knocking on endless doors felt so ineffective. We should work harder, I thought, unsure what working harder even looked like.

In consequence, I bordered on self-loathing and an unhealthy relationship with God. I prayed for strength but castigated myself in my nightly journal entries. I wasn't patient enough, I wrote. We spent too much time with the Chan Mows and not enough time preaching the gospel (whatever that meant). Had I taken an honest assessment, I would have found a young man adapting to the discomfort of stress, high expectations, and disciplined living, not a sinner in the hands of an angry God, as I presumed.

For all the ways I thought we fell short, my inner pity could not keep us from finding new people to teach. The area book unearthed several interested individuals, and door-knocking added a few more. One of the first houses we were invited into was Mark Falk's. It was

a damp day, every color reduced to a muted shade of grey, and we drove with our map open on our laps through Whanganui Central visiting the tiny black x's. Mark's house was not unlike others on the street—a white, one-story villa—only his was more decrepit than usual, and in the cold rain, rather forlorn. As we approached the gate, two pit bulls shot from the front door and charged the fence followed closely behind by a man in a grey t-shirt and an unbuttoned blue-checked flannel rolled up at the sleeves. He had a sprinkling of buzzed red hair on his head and a tattoo on either arm. Sure that we had stumbled upon a skinhead and hoping to avoid abuse, I turned to leave when he shouted, “Elders!” and led us through the gate, a dog in both hands.

No one had yet recognized us, and with a silent glance at each other, Elder Werner and I followed him into his kitchen. The house was dark. A warped wooden floor led down the hallway, and homemade art covered the peeling walls. Mark sat us down and made a cup of hot chocolate with raw sugar. Then, he leaned over, an elbow on his knee, and in fierce, conspiratorial tones, launched into his story.

Mark was in the middle of a custody battle for his thirteen-year-old son, though it was a war of ideology as much as visitation. The courts disrespected fatherhood, he said. Not only that, he was black-listed from the New Zealand job market. The floodgates opened to a whole slew of anti-government political theories and segued into his art, both anarchist and Judeo-Christian at the same time. When he finished, he pulled down an almanac to find the exact location of our hometowns in Utah and New Mexico. We left with an invitation to come back.

I didn't know what to think of Mark or what a missionary lesson would look like in his home. Still, his rough and passionate personality fascinated me, and we went back to see him each week. For a man so hell-bent against the law, he had an unironic love for the Books of Moses and the Ten Commandments. To our surprise, he took the

lessons seriously and came to a handful of Sunday meetings in a black leather jacket.

Mark wasn't our only investigator. After a month, we had four or five regular visits we could make, all to equally distinct personalities. There was a Māori family with a Rastafarian dad—dreadlocks, lion flag, and copious amounts of weed that lingered in the air. We taught a young guy with terrible anxiety who never left his apartment but played the trumpet and showed us all his jazz vinyl records.

More than anything, it started to seem that people took a greater interest preaching to us than hearing our message. Whether out of politeness, inexperience, or boredom, we listened. One irony of missionary work is that you talked to an inordinate number of religious zealots. Crazy attracts crazy, and I suppose we were equally enthused, not that we saw ourselves that way; I still felt like an American teenager on an extended study abroad with my real life back home. Every week, someone from a different Christian faith invited us into their home to argue biblical interpretations and doctrines. I happily "Bible-bashed." To combat my misery, I had been voraciously reading the scriptures, manuals, and other materials on our approved list. A Born-Again or a stubborn Anglican gave me a chance to practice my new knowledge, not that the conversations were fruitful. Each of us defended a position without granting an inch and ignored the stalemate to declare ourselves the victor.

Most of these inter-faith battles lasted one visit, but there were some families with whom, despite intense arguments, we developed a mutual respect and begrudging affection. A single mother and her seventeen-year-old son, whom I referred to as our "Jehovah Witness friends" in my journal, let us in late even if we came unannounced, and saved us from long, aimless nights pestering less-active members. Each visit opened a new discussion topic—baptism, resurrection, salvation, Jehovah. We disagreed about everything, though backed our respective positions with scripture. What started as earnest attempts

to convince the opposition of our view turned into intellectual debates, and our conversations branched into personal avenues, each of us talking about our families, life outlook, and goals.

Another family, a middle-aged 7th Day Adventist couple, invited us to join them for studies several times. It was unclear to us where exactly they lived. Our first visit took place in their friend's home, who, as we walked in, burned incense and meditated in the living room, legs folded in a lotus. Confused, we entered a small bedroom to commence our study, again, another opportunity to preach and to be preached to. They must have liked us, or perhaps considered us malleable, because a few weeks later, we drove with them out into the forested hills east of the city to a farmhouse, another friend's, to sing songs and read from the Bible. Everyone welcomed us in, and though I suspected we were partially the night's entertainment, we enjoyed ourselves.

We met our fair share of irreligious detractors, as well. While no scholar, I considered myself thoughtful and attempted to find answers to the negative things we heard. Most destructive were those who used incidents in the Church's history to unhinge us. Accusations against Joseph Smith, both truths and falsehoods, left me confused and frustrated, especially since we couldn't study anything outside our canonical scripture or information on the Church's website. Lucky for me, the Church had just published a slate of transparent essays that dove into our history to acknowledge historical mistakes and peculiarities. They provided valuable context and helped me move past the criticisms we faced proselytizing.

I never quite understood why people would be so keen to tell us unsavory details about our Church. Did they see it as a service, as if they genuinely sought to save us from a religion they assumed we didn't understand? Perhaps. Yet, it always felt more like vitriol than concern. And in the worst cases, some seemed adamant to tear down our faith. I'm just a kid, I often thought, shocked by the stark ob-

jections. Thankfully, equally common were genuinely friendly people, who, while not interested, encouraged us in simple ways—with a glass of water, a cup of Milo, or some biscuits.

After six weeks, another companionship joined us in Whanganui, and we split the area in half. We taught more people in Whanganui Central and East, so we took that side of town, including Durie Hill, not that anyone listened to us there. The new guys claimed Castlecliff, Gonville, Springvale, and St. Johns Hill. Their names were Elder Bonner and Elder Taufua. Bonner was an Arizonan, brand new to the mission, just like I had been six weeks ago. Elder Taufua was a large Tongan from Auckland with soft eyes and a sympathetic smile. He was only one transfer period away from going home and had just finished serving as a zone leader in Christchurch. Elder Taufua's experienced demeanor comforted all of us. Elder Werner no longer bore the responsibility as the most senior missionary in the area, and with a Bonner around, I was no longer the newbie. The presence of a new missionary gave me perspective on my own growth, and I recognized my insecurities and struggles in Bonner, grateful to have six weeks under my belt. They took our old flat on Parson's Street, and we moved to a small bungalow on Niblett Street in Whanganui Central.

New elders relieved the mounting tension Elder Werner and I faced in our companionship. More than anything, we annoyed each other. Each Friday, as part of our planning session for the next week, we had a "companionship inventory," a time to solve problems or even share petty annoyances that plagued the partnership. My distress led me to blame Elder Werner for our lack of success. Wasn't he the senior companion? He should know what to do, and if we didn't work hard enough, it was his fault. Most egregious, he tried to have fun, an attitude I still saw as fundamentally opposed to real missionary work despite my mother's encouragement to loosen up. El-

der Werner had a different sense of humor and was squirrely—I told him as much and asked him to drop the SpongeBob quotes while we door-knocked. I, on the other hand, was too serious and uptight. He was tired of the incessant whistling I employed to distract me from thoughts of home. No wonder he told dumb jokes—he had to keep some level of sanity. Elder Werner was patient, however, even though I was utterly miserable to be around. Before Whanganui, he had only five months of experience in New Zealand and served in a booming area in the Hutt Valley before joining me. Now, here he was, dropped into Whanganui alongside a depressed eighteen-year-old with a perfectionist complex.

Elder Taufua became like the buddha to Werner and me. Whenever our frustrations grew too ignorable, we exchanged with him and Bonner for ventilation. Taufua wouldn't engage in drama and possessed an uncanny ability to deflect complaints. Whenever I steered the conversation that way, ready to whine about Werner, he flipped the conversation on its head with rhetorical questions. Sometimes he just ignored me and posed a deep question.

"You won't believe what Werner did the other day," I'd say. "He tried to rap in front of an investigator."

Taufua would stay silent, then ask, "Why are you here, Elder Farnsworth? Why are you in New Zealand? What led you to this point in your faith?"

If you tried to ask him the same question, he gave a soft giggle, rolled his eyes, and said, "I don't know!" and then proceeded with his earlier line of interrogation. Nevertheless, the abstraction worked, and I always felt more serene after an afternoon with Taufua.

I learned from him in other ways. One Sunday, Bishop Savea asked both of us to speak at an evening devotional in front of the ward members. I prepared dutifully, scoured the scriptures, and ultimately bored the audience with a long and technical address. Taufua, on the other hand, approached the pulpit, sang a Tongan hymn in a

beautiful baritone, and sat back down two minutes later. The audience wept and swayed to his voice, and afterward, surrounded him in affectionate, grateful hugs. I sheepishly clutched my handwritten notes, frustrated that I still hadn't learned from the MTC. Doctrine wasn't everything.

In addition to Bonner and Taufu, we began to spend a lot more time with our district leader, Elder Delgado. I had gotten to know Delgado the previous transfer on an "exchange" where we swapped companions for a few days. As the younger missionary, I joined him in Fielding, a town halfway between Whanganui and Palmerston North, while his companion came to Whanganui for a few days.

More memorable than the town was the spirited Delgado from Malaga, Spain. He had vibrant blue eyes, wore shiny, slim European suits that looked like plastic, and talked with lispy velocity. Confidently, he told me he was the only missionary from Spain to ever serve in New Zealand, a claim I accepted on charisma alone. For the next two days, Delgado and I walked everywhere. That was fine with me; it felt like we were busy, though, in hindsight, we hardly saw anyone. The Delgado method could curiously fill a day without completing any work. All afternoon he talked about his favorite mafia films and Real Madrid.

Delgado's flat, in contrast to ours, was full of food. It was a culinary revelation; snacks, spices, curry, and meat stocked the fridge and shelves. Nevertheless, Delgado ate Nutella and bread every meal. Rumor was he saved the money to buy an Xbox when he got home. Our stipend wasn't ours, so to speak, and should have been returned to the mission office, yet he had accumulated hundreds when he left for Spain a year later. I leered at their food supply in jealousy and awe. Elder Werner was of a particular breed of elder who survived on instant noodles, in this case, Mi-Goreng, which he claimed was the most delicious concoction under ninety-nine cents, so delicious, in fact, that he ate it three meals a day unless a member fed us or I

cooked. The noodles came with small packets of soy, hot sauce, and fried nuts, a staple for the malnourished and unable chefs on the mission.

One night, all four of us from Whanganui stayed with Delgado in Feilding before a conference. We arrived at 8:00 p.m. with an hour to spare before we called it a night. Delgado buzzed with excitement, eager to play host to this most glorious of nights, the rare mission sleepover. We drove straight to a Māori marae and slipped into the back of the large, intricately carved meetinghouse called a wharenuī. Inside, a tangi was underway. In the Māori culture, when a person dies, they rest for several days in the wharenuī while family and friends come to pay their respects, mourn, and celebrate the deceased. Some family members will sleep in the room with the body.

This evening, fifty people gathered to share memories and sing songs together. It was beyond insensitive for us to attend, especially uninvited, yet here we were, five Pakehas and a Tongan in suits and nametags piled onto a bench in the middle of a funeral. None of us had any idea what we saw or the tangi's cultural importance (well, Taufa probably did, but at this point in his mission perhaps he was tired of correcting the faux-pas of his white companions). We got a few strange looks, yet one asked us to leave. Back in the Fielding flat after the night at the marae, we listened to Delgado churn the rumor mill about other missionaries and their legendary disobedience. I listened wide-eyed and slightly disbelieving yet entertained.

A week later, back in Whanganui, I visited another marae, this time with a formal invitation from Kowhai, our friend from the ward. Taufa and I were working together in my area when she called and told us to come see her at Te Ao Hou Marae up the river in Aramoho. She joined us at the front gate to perform a welcome ceremony. On formal occasions for important guests, both in or out of the Māori community, the ceremony includes a powhiri, where a warrior challenges the visitor with a small war dance. In one hand,

he holds a spear, and in the other, a small tree branch which he lays on the ground following his dance. The visitor picks up the branch as a sign of peace. We weren't special enough to merit the powhiri, so we skipped to the next part, the call of welcome, the karanga. A woman stood at the base of the wharenuī and began to chant and sing in Māori.

Kowhai, our surrogate leader, responded with her own call as Taufā and I walked silently behind her. More songs and gifts usually follow, but again, we weren't significant, and the occasion was not one of honor or celebration—it was another tangi. We made it to the wharenuī's front steps, lined with men and women, and placed our foreheads and nose against theirs and breathed in deeply in an act called a hongī. Some women offered their cheeks, so we exchanged a small peck as we went down the line. Once again, our hosts proved more gracious than we deserved. No one was a Church member except Kowhai, yet they welcomed us into their community and fed us.

Midway through the new transfer, a senior Church leader named Elder Tomlinson toured our mission. He served as the Pacific Area President, responsible for the Church's administration in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. The trip included stops at several zone conferences for a full day of training with the missionaries. Before he came, President Herran asked each elder and sister to write a five-minute "talk," (Latter-day Saint slang for a speech at church) and said he would pick two of us at random to deliver the talk to all the assembled missionaries and the Tomlinsons. I had an immediate prompting that he would call on me, and over the next week, I prepared my remarks. I also asked Elder Bonner to give me a haircut. Was he qualified? He had brought clippers with him to New Zealand, so that had to count for something, plus I didn't trust Aleki

Chan Mow not to make me look too stylized and preppy. We kept our hair short, so in theory, it wouldn't be too hard to trim.

Sure enough, President Herran asked me to give my address, which I did, my back to President and the Tomlinsons who sat behind me on the stand. When I sat down, a pudgy twenty-four-year-old elder from England I had met at the MTC tapped me on the shoulder and asked, "Elder Farnsworth, are we friends?" Sure, I guess we were.

"Then I must tell you that someone butchered your haircut," and he pointed to the crown of my head. I ran my hand up the back of my neck. It was short and freshly clipped until I neared the top where a patch of untouched hair flopped out a good inch longer than the rest. Whether or not President Herran and the Tomlinsons got a good look at this bushy protrusion, I do not know, though I don't think they could have missed it, staring at my back for five minutes. Bonner never cut my hair again.

Three months passed in Whanganui, and another transfer was upon us. Taufa reached his end and prepared to return home to Auckland. Elder Werner was leaving for Hawkes Bay. I would stay behind to train a new missionary from Samoa, but since visa problems delayed his arrival, I was to join Bonner and his new companion in a threesome until mine made it to New Zealand. In many ways, Werner's departure was a relief. We still hadn't overcome all the challenges in our companionship, and now that I was the longest-tenured missionary in Whanganui, I could determine our pace. At the same time, I couldn't hide behind him anymore. Whatever success or failure the next months brought were on me. At least I wasn't depressed anymore.

Delgado was also leaving the district, assigned as a zone leader in Hawkes Bay. Over the last couple of weeks, we endured his constant

predictions about the transfer. He was positive he was “going ZL.” His ambition knew no bounds, and when we saw him in person after the transfer news broke, his eyes gleamed with pride, and he prophesied that this was one step closer to becoming an assistant to the president. It would never happen. Three months later, Delgado was dishonorably released as a zone leader after he slept in and shirked the rules, condemned to spend the rest of his mission in ignominious inconsequence. The last time we all met together, he initiated a water balloon fight that took us down to Castlecliff beach. We stalked each other like primitive hunters through the maze of wind-beaten shrubbery. I shrugged my shoulders and joined in. Tomorrow they would all be in their new areas while I remained here in Whanganui, hopefully capable of the cause.

Werner, Taufa, and Delgado’s departures demarcated not just a spiritual and responsibility shift in Whanganui, but a temporal one that also signified my successful acclimation to New Zealand life. That is to say, I had been sufficiently instructed in the surface-level stereotypes and cultural quirks of the country, the quotidian rituals that made one feel like a Kiwi. I ate Whitaker’s chocolate (though treasonously, I preferred Cadbury), devoured Tip-Top ice cream and mince-meat pies, inharmoniously adopted the slang, and learned that I could scatter a flock of sheep if I honked the horn as we rushed by a paddock on the highway, driving, of course, on the wrong side of the road. At meal appointments, I doused my bread pudding with ice cream, heavy cream, and custard. These acts, as they became habitual, helped me feel like a New Zealander even if I were not one of them, nor would ever be. In their performance, however, I began to forget that I had ever wanted to serve in France.