

O c k h a m ' s
R a z o r

a n o v e l

A l a n M i c h a e l

W i l l i a m s

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4392-3527-0

ISBN-10: 1-4392-3527-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009903443

“I am a Child of God” was written by Naomi W. Randall in 1957. Lyrics
are from memory.

Lines from *The Book of Mormon* are from 3 Nephi 6:18.

Author website: www.amwilliams.com

Published through BookSurge.

“A finished person is a boring person.”

– Anna Quindlen

* * *

For my mother.

And soy yogurt.

P o i n t e S h o e s

The cafeteria is empty except for him at a table and a few girls studying together at another. When Brendan sees me, he raises his book so that I can't see his eyes. Is he having second thoughts about us hanging out today? My stomach churns. Maybe I make him as nervous as he makes me.

At his feet lies a bag: one of those pullable, luggage types. Much bigger than anything needed for community college. I walk up to it and point: "What's that for? Going somewhere?" Somewhere with me?

He glances at the bag. "Oh, my books and stuff are in it from the week. I don't have time to go home to drop it off. Sometimes I don't go home for a while but stay at my cousins' house because they live closer to the college." He turns a page in his book. Its cover is a purple dragon.

I park myself across from him. Your cousins', huh? No wonder I haven't been able to get a hold of you. Your little

sister keeps telling me you're not home.

I peek around the book to see if he's actually still reading. He's not. He sets it down and notices my fingers tapping the table, so I politely put my hands in my lap. He looks at my face, so I smile.

He smiles, too. "Here, there's something I want to show you." He unzips his bag and pulls out two pieces of pink, crusty fabric. "Smell them!" He shoves the objects toward my face; a musty scent pushes me backwards.

"No, thank you," I say. "What are those?"

"Pointe shoes!" His big brown eyes are bright.

Footwear of the ballerina type?

"They get worn out like this and then I sew new ones," he says. "Well, I'm supposed to sew new ones instead of buy them. But I barely have time for that. I also barely have the money to buy new ones. Anyway, these were my first pair and it's sort of a custom for dancers to keep them. You know...like a memento." He repeats the word 'memento' quietly to himself as he rubs his palm along the heel of one shoe. His eyes meet mine. "Sorry," he says, with a laugh. "I like the way certain words make my lips move."

He shrugs because I'm gawking at him. I forgot how odd he is. Odd in a good way.

The girls across the room are packing up their things, ready to depart. I look at the clock; Brendan and I agreed to meet at three o'clock sharp. Here we are after not having seen each other for almost a year. He's as cute as I remember with his anxious smile and fluffy, almost-black hair. An eager shyness. Never-before-kissed lips. I don't think he could handle what I

want us to be. He's seventeen and Mormon.

I reach around for my backpack and out comes a giant, green citrus fruit. "Guess what this is." I plop it on the table.

He frowns, holding his pointe shoes in queue.

"A pomelo!" I say. "Isn't it funny-looking? It's so big and round and can't do anything. I picked it up at Tacoma Boys before coming here. Maybe we could share it or something? Do you like citrus?"

He pays no attention to it. He just gazes straightforward. I put the pomelo toward his face, but he doesn't even flinch. I sniff it for myself and roll it back into my bag, certain its feelings are hurt. I'd take a juicy pomelo over crusty pointe shoes any day.

"Hey," I say. "Can I get the phone number for your cousins' house? I try to call you at your dad's all the time, but no wonder you're never there. Why didn't you tell me you're staying at your cousins'?"

He scratches behind an ear. "You call all the time?"

"Not *all* the time. Geez. I've only called...I don't know...maybe three or four times since you gave me the number? Your little sister answers the phone. She wondered who I was, so I told her I'm Micah."

"She already knew your name...Micah."

My face lights up. "She did?" Your sister already knows about me? Wait a second. Why exactly would she know about me?

"Anyway," he says. "Pointe shoes are typically only worn by women during performances, but a lot of ballet companies want their men learning pointe, too, during practice." He

fiddles with the crusts, scanning their insides. "Helps their feet and ankles grow stronger."

"In zis dance company," I say in a French accent, "we have ze most beautiful men in ze world with ze strongest feet and ankles. Follow me. I want to show you to zem backstage..."

Brendan shakes his head, annoyed. He unzips his bag and puts his pointe shoes back in. He picks up his book and lifts it in front of his face. The purple dragon strikes a fatal blow.

I push it down and a glare is just beyond it. "I'm sorry. I was just wondering how I'm supposed to call you if I don't have a good number for where I can reach you."

He stares into the distance. "You don't have to call me, actually."

My face scrunches. "But I want to! You don't want me to?"

He stuffs the book into his bag. "It's not that, Micah. It's just that I would never call you, so I don't think that's very fair. My dad has long-distance disabled, and it's the same with my aunt and uncle's house. There isn't anyone they need to call that's long-distance because my family is all in this area."

I pull my cell phone from my pocket. "Well, I have free long-distance, so I can call you like I already have been. I promise I won't tell anyone you're gay or anything, so could I please have the number?"

He swallows and sits blank-faced. I turn around to see if there's anything behind me that he's actually staring at. A vending machine. How interesting. Your family is important to you – I get that – but you know you shouldn't hide behind them, right?

“My aunt and uncle are way religious,” he says. “More so than my dad – and pretty much everyone who calls is part of the Church. Do you understand that? I suppose you would. So, I guess if...” and he puts his hand out, palm up.

I give him a questioning look.

“Your cell phone?” he says, like I’m daft.

I grin big. I hand it to him and he pushes his cousins’ number into my contact list. Afterwards, he tinkers at my phone’s settings, exploring the technology.

“When I talk to my mom,” I tell him, “and the issue of my gayness comes up, I just talk freely even though she’s Mormon. I know it’s different because you and I are different people. And we have completely different moms –”

“Of course we have different moms.”

“– but won’t your family have to come to terms with you being gay, too? At some point down the road?”

He shuts the phone and hands it back. “Just don’t call too much. We should go. I need to be home before dark.” He stands with a firm grasp on the handle of his bag and heads for the door, the bag rolling loudly behind him. Like he’s in an airport or something. Rushing to catch a flight.

Well, I am not in such a hurry, sir. I open my phone to give the new listing a name. I’m surprised to find it already reads

PEOPLE I CARE ABOUT.

Brendan turns to me from the cafeteria exit. He flashes me a cheesy smile.

* * *

We walk along Hilltop. The wheels of Brendan's bag grind on the sidewalk behind us. He said he wants to go somewhere where we can be entirely alone because he has something else he wants to show me. Something other than pointe shoes. Something that might come as "a shock."

We're going to the duplex of my friends Travis and Alicia. They aren't home, but down in Oregon to investigate a theatre school. They gave me keys to their place so that I could feed and water their cat, Natasha. I told Brendan that we can stay at their place for a while, and there, he can show me whatever he wants to show me.

"They're your friends, right?" he says.

"Right. And they won't be back until tomorrow evening." I can't believe we're going to be alone together! My stomach tosses about.

"Why are we going to their house instead of your apartment?" he says. "Isn't it weird to be in someone else's house when they're not home?" His expression is serious. "Shouldn't we just feed the cat and leave?"

I raise a brow. "They're my friends. Plus, I have two annoying roommates that I don't want to deal with right now. And, we'd have to catch a bus to get downtown and I'm broke."

"How will you get home then?"

"I'll walk. It's not far. Besides, I don't have a huge bag that I lug around carrying everything I own."

He glimpses back at it and halts. "It doesn't carry everything I own, Micah. And if you planned to walk home anyway, then why would you mention the bus? I'm the one pulling my bag, so why should it concern you? Furthermore,

if we did take the bus, I could have just loaned you \$1.75.” He pulls at the bag and continues forward, now worried – uncertain his hostility was at all appropriate. “I still want to meet your roommates eventually,” he says.

Why would he want to meet my roommates? I just said they’re annoying. More importantly, why would he want to meet my annoying roommates unless we’re going to be hanging out a lot more after today?

“If we make this a regular thing,” he says. “I’m just sayin’.”

His thick hair is unstyled and bushy, which makes me want to pat it. What if I grabbed your hand, Brendan? No. Not a good idea.

A car passes us on pothole-ridden pavement. “I used to have a car,” I say. “Well, still do. It’s sitting in my mother’s driveway waiting to be sold. When I realized most of my income went to gas, insurance and repairs, I decided to get a job close to where I live. Now, I walk everywhere. It saves me a lot of money.”

“Good idea,” he says. “Even though my dad’s house is in Gig Harbor where it’s impossible to get around without a car, I never plan to get one. At least, I want to hold off until absolutely necessary. I take the bus to school, to dance and wherever else. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound stuck-up before. I want to make sure that you have well-thought-out thoughts. Okay?” His smile is a fretful one.

I beam back to put him at ease. Warm air is coming from his nose. I cup my hands over my ears because they’re cold in this April air. “For the record,” I say, “I’d like to be in

charge of my own thoughts. That's why I left the Church." I smirk.

He says nothing. Then, a moment later: "That... wasn't funny."

"Oh."

We're here. He hauls his bag up the few stairs of the porch and waits as I unlock the door. Natasha greets us on the other side, meowing. We're not her owners, but she doesn't care. She's hungry and must be fed.

Brendan goes through the kitchen into the living room. His bag makes a clumping noise as it goes from tile to carpet. "Come," he says. "Sit!"

"Just a moment!" I say. Natasha is rubbing my leg, purring at the sound of food hitting her dish. She has enough water. I replace the bag of cat food in its nook under the kitchen sink. I open the fridge. Lots of yogurt. Must be Alicia's new staple.

Brendan is sitting cross-legged on the couch, shoes off, a book on his lap. It's not the same dragon book from earlier, no. This time he has a notebook of some sort. Is that a journal? *Is that* what he wants to show me? His inner secrets? I can't know those! I'll go crazy!

He rubs his palms together to warm them. He picks up the notebook and opens it to a bookmarked page. "Here," he says, patting the cushion beside him. "I saved a seat just for you."

I dash by him. "I need to use the bathroom first." I lock myself in it.

He barely knows me. He's barely ready. Why isn't he

more scared of being alone with me?

Brendan and I first met at Tacoma Community College a little over a year ago. Most days, we'd only catch each other in passing, and then I graduated a month later. But we traded emails and actually used them.

Early emails were about random events and ideas, nothing serious. Infrequent, too. From my end, he was a crush I wanted to keep at a distance. For one, even though I can tell there's mutual attraction, he's four years younger than I am. That's within the lawful boundaries of the State of Washington – a seventeen-year old with a twenty-one year old – but our age difference does seem a little much. For two, even though we're both raised Mormon, he's much more faithful-to-the-faith. It's not up to me to tell him which path to take as a gay Mormon, much less tell him he should be with me. My path has been away from the Church, but that's not necessarily the path he should take. If he stays in the Church, he has a tough road ahead of him; I can be there to support him as a friend.

Yet, although I chose friendship between us, his later emails got personal, hinting at romantic. I've recently thought to myself: what if he and I could be a couple? What if the main reason gay Mormons have to choose a path is because they almost never find each other? I've found him and he's found me. We can work out all the complex religious logistics later!

I proposed we hang out; he was up for it. A week ago, he emailed me the number to reach him at his dad's house; I called and we agreed on a time and place. Everything was in order.

But then, a few days ago, he wrote: *"I'm having dark thoughts. Maybe we shouldn't hang out. I think gay people corrupt me. This unfortunately includes you, Micah, so I hope you don't take offense."*

His words intrigued me – and also put me back into friendship-mode. You're gay, Brendan. Does that mean you corrupt yourself? I typed: *"I'm just a guy. Just another person. It'll be all right."*

The next day he wrote: *"I feel alone in some ways, Micah, and sick in others. Like I'm not normal and that being gay is a trap for young Saints who could have been. Like, it's a social, spiritual and psychological disease. I feel dead. Yet, I want to be alive. Afraid, afraid..."*

The first day we met, I said: "You're gay, right?"

He inspected the cafeteria, and then whispered: "How did you know?"

"I just do. Though part of it is how you look at me."

He turned red and excused himself. When he came back, he had a bright smile and said that he liked me, too.

Too? I thought. How did he know that I liked him? Everyone thinks I'm straight! He's perceptive!

Yesterday's email read something like this: *"Micah, how is a person supposed to feel when their aunt tells them that homosexuality is an addiction, stronger than any drug addiction? Here I am, taking down the pictures of Christ on my wall and putting up pictures of ballerinas and pointe shoes. On the other hand, it would be nice to see a friend whom I haven't seen in a while. So yeah, let's meet up. I don't know what you see in me exactly, but I'm not too worried about that. See you tomorrow!"*

I unlock the bathroom door and peek outside. He doesn't appear the least bit concerned about any of that right now. He's perusing his journal.

I scootch next to him on the couch and notice he hasn't put on deodorant today. His pheromones make the world grow pleasantly fuzzy. I never got the chance to be close to you like this at school. This is surreal.

He hands his journal to me. "Actually, here..." He grabs it back and flips to a specific page. "This is the entry I want you to read first."

The cover is made of corrugated cardboard. "Why are you letting me read this?" I say. "Aren't journals supposed to be hidden away in the secretest of places?"

"If we're going to be friends, then we should at least be honest with each other. And, by the way, 'secretest' is not a word."

He wants to remain as friends. All right. I can handle that.

His handwriting is swirley, like lots of flower petals. I brush my fingers across the page to feel how the pen has dented the paper. I imagine him at home, writing zealously under a bright lamp in a dark room, unable to contain the burning desires within! He's reading, too, over my shoulder. With him this close my hormones are spiraling out of control.

The name 'Micah' pops off the page once – twice – thrice. He thinks about me this much?

In the next paragraph, so do the words 'have sex with.' He thinks about me too much!

"Brendan!" I shut the journal. "I can't read this. This

is too honest.”

He rolls his eyes and reopens it to the entry. “Oh, just read it already.”

My throat grows dry. What is he expecting from me? Scientific objectivism? I meet his eyes. He looks down at the page and lifts his brows. *Fine*. I’ll read the dang thing.

The entry is about a peaceful picture he’d seen of two men – brothers perhaps – lying blissfully in a grassy field together. They’re staring at the clouds. Something about... maybe love isn’t about finding that perfect person. Maybe it’s about thoughtfulness instead. Sex with me would be... “*thoughtful?*”

“According to this revelation,” I say, “I am fated to become your sexual guinea-pig.” The last paragraph of the entry has semi-erotic details. We meet for the moment of rapture where?

He seizes the thing from me. “That’s not what I meant! Although I guess it could mean that. Is that what you think it means? Me using you? I never thought about it like that.” He rereads his writing.

“I know that’s not what you meant, silly. It’s just that you’re a virgin, so sex is –”

“Oh, no!” he says. “I absolutely don’t want to have sex until I turn eighteen or most likely way later.”

“Okay,” I say. “But what I meant is, as you get older, you’ll meet other people and sex will be less of an issue. You’ll start judging based on other characteristics. Like, for instance, if you and I got together – and I’m not saying we should get together or anything – this is just an example. You would

probably leave me later on as you decide which characteristics you like and don't like and see that there's lots of other people that..."

His blank expression tells me I'm talking too much. "Micah. Quality is much better than quantity." He gives me a toothy smile. He returns the notebook to his bag and hops up from the couch. "Do you think there's anything here we can eat? I'm vegan, so I should probably check for myself."

You're...vegan?