

Candle in the Darkness

by Benjamin Crowder

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A kitchen. Mother, a forty-five year old homemaker, is making rolls on a table center stage. There are chairs on the left and right sides of the table. A Book of Mormon sits on the surface.

JEFFERSON

Walks onstage, slings backpack onto a chair, and sits down. He's a 23-year-old college student majoring in philosophy.

Smells good. Casserole?

MOTHER

(Nods.) Grandma's recipe. A new family moved into the Moores' house this afternoon. Lopez, I think. Twin girls in kindergarten.

JEFFERSON

(Notices Book of Mormon on counter. Picks it up and looks at the inside cover. Reads his mother's testimony.) Oh, not again.

MOTHER

What? *(Looks up.)* They need the gospel, Jeff.

JEFFERSON

Mom, they just barely moved in, like two hours ago, and you're already giving them a Book of Mormon? Give them some breathing room. A week or two, at least.

MOTHER

Can you get the casserole? *(Hands him a hotpad. He opens the oven and removes a casserole.)* Why procrastinate? Now's as good a time as any.

JEFFERSON

So's next week. It's not like they're going to die on you before then.

MOTHER

Mixes batter in silence.

JEFFERSON

Just let 'em be. People need their space.

MOTHER

People also need the gospel.

JEFFERSON

Yeah, but we don't have to shove it down their throats, do we?

MOTHER

(Silent.)

JEFFERSON

I don't mean *you*, it's just...shouldn't it be more natural? Less forced?

MOTHER

(Still silent.)

JEFFERSON

No, that's not what I mean. Well...it *is* what I mean, but I...look, there are better ways to share the gospel. You don't have to be so pushy and in your face. Like this guy at the mall today. I was waiting in line, minding my own business, and he gives me a passalong card. He seriously thought I wasn't a member.

MOTHER

Maybe you should shave more often.

JEFFERSON

Well, yeah, but he wouldn't stop talking. Wanted to give me a Book of Mormon, have me meet the missionaries. Heck, he even talked about baptism!

MOTHER

Didn't you tell him you're an RM?

JEFFERSON

I almost did at first, but I wanted to see what he'd do.

MOTHER

You should've told him. But can you really blame him for wanting to share what he knows? We do have that commandment to go out and preach the gospel to all the world, remember.

JEFFERSON

I know. Jesus didn't say to go out and push the gospel on all the world. That was the problem with this guy. I could totally tell he didn't even care about me — he didn't want to get to know me, wasn't interested in anything about me. The only thing that mattered to him was whether I'd end up in the waters of Mormon. Just a statistic.

MOTHER

Not everyone's like that.

JEFFERSON

You have no idea how annoying it was. He was going about it all the wrong way. For one thing, if you've really got the Spirit of God burning inside you, I don't know if you really even need to *try* to share the gospel.

MOTHER

I don't quite—

JEFFERSON

What I mean is, if you've got a bonfire in your soul, you can't keep the light inside. It streams out of your eyes, your hands, your mouth. Everything you say and do. That's how Jesus was.

MOTHER

And that's not how this guy was, I take it?

JEFFERSON

Well, I don't know how much of the Spirit he had — maybe it was a bonfire, maybe it was a starter flame — but I couldn't tell because he got in the way. Like an obnoxious salesman. He might have the best product in the world, something I really, really want, but if he's pushy and annoying, I'm not going to buy. All he had to do was just be nice and friendly and let the gospel come out on its own. It's not a baby that needs to be pushed out; it's a...a...a river. It just...flows. Naturally.

MOTHER

Maybe he doesn't know how. Maybe he's never seen anyone do it that way. Maybe he's had a rough life.

JEFFERSON

Well, maybe, but that shouldn't have anything to do with it. Not really. And this is such a better way. It's not forced, it's not artificial, it's so...so beautiful. There were times like that on my mission, when all the pieces fit together just right and the Spirit flooded in because there wasn't anything getting in the way. Like a perfect harmony. Resonating.

MOTHER

There are other ways to share the gospel, too, and most of them are pretty good.

JEFFERSON

Look, maybe they are, but they're just not as effective. Like pebbles in your shoe. I mean, it's not just Mormons, it's a lot of people. All those Mac people, for instance. I don't *care* how nice their dang computer is, can't they just leave me alone? And the matchmakers. Don't even get me started on them.

MOTHER

(Smiling.) That reminds me, there's this girl I want you to meet...

JEFFERSON

Very funny. I'm serious, Mom. Pushiness drives people away. Just look at all the thirty-five year old bachelors out there, playing video games all day long. If their moms hadn't kept trying to get them married off, maybe they wouldn't have turned out like that.

MOTHER

So are you going to turn out like that?

JEFFERSON

If you keep trying to set me up, maybe I will. Remember that last girl you told me to call?

MOTHER

I didn't *know* she was married.

JEFFERSON

That's why you should just let me find my own dates. The more you push girls on me, the less I want to date. Same with that guy at the mall — the more he talked about the gospel, the less I wanted to hear. And I'm a member! Push, push, push. You keep pushing and you're going to knock them off a cliff.

MOTHER

(Slowly.) Not always.

JEFFERSON

Well, maybe there's exceptions, but for the most part they're just making a bad name for the Church. It's really bad press. Yup, that's us, the annoying chatterboxes who don't know when to shut up. What a great way to get converts.

MOTHER

(Quietly.) Sometimes persistence pays off.

JEFFERSON

Ha, like those multi-level marketers? Come to the meeting and get a free pizza. And sell your soul.

MOTHER

Sits down at the table.

I ever tell you how I joined the Church?

JEFFERSON

Yeah, some girl had the missionaries come over when you were in high school.

MOTHER

(Slowly.) There's...there's more to it. About that girl. You see, my family wasn't really religious when I was growing up. We didn't even go to church on Easter and Christmas, that's how religious

we were. Your grandparents weren't bad people, mind you, they just didn't see the need for it. Still don't. Anyway, my dad lost his job at the plant and we moved to Utah, because that was the only place with any openings. I was a junior in high school, and I wasn't too happy about moving and leaving all my friends behind. The kids at my new school tried to make friends with me, make me feel at home, but I just folded my arms tight and ignored them. I was a pill. This one girl, though, Jennie O'Hara, the word got out first day in class that I wasn't a member, and as soon as the lunch bell sounded she was by my side with a Book of Mormon in her hand. Guess she'd been carrying it around with her all day. Maybe all her life. "Hi, I'm Jennie, I'm a Mormon," she said. I'd heard Utah was crawling with Mormons, like honeybees all over the hive, but I just plain wasn't interested. She could keep her religion to herself as far as I was concerned. So I said a quick "That's nice" and walked off. But she kept following me around every single day, in between every class, there in the cafeteria every day at lunch. I couldn't get away from her. She just wanted to be nice, but it really got on my nerves. After a while I just started ignoring her. Didn't talk to her, look at her, anything. But that didn't stop her. In fact, she started reading scriptures out loud to me. Anywhere — in the hallway, cafeteria, at the bus stop. Not real loud, just enough for me to hear. I *hated* it. Religious mumbo-jumbo. But after a while, no matter how hard I tried to ignore her, the words started getting in. Scraping through all my pride and foolishness. It took a long time, but all those scriptures about joy and happiness and the love of God eventually got through to me and trickled into my soul. One day we were in the cafeteria, eating. Well, I was eating. She hadn't even touched her lunch. She pulled the Book of Mormon out of her backpack and started reading that scripture in Enos — "And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed. And I, Enos, knew that God could not lie; wherefore, my guilt was swept away." And I started bawling. Right there in the cafeteria, right in front of everyone. It all hit me like a tsunami, all that emotion I'd been bottling up since the move, and you know what? It felt good to let it go. As soon as I did that, there wasn't anything blocking the Spirit anymore. I almost thought I heard an angelic alleluia up beyond the ceiling. That weekend I started meeting with the missionaries, and before I knew it I was baptized. You know the rest of the story.

JEFFERSON

How come you never told me about Jennie?

MOTHER

Jennie... She never gave up on me. She cared about me. Always asked how I was doing, how I liked our new neighborhood, how classes were. When my grandpa died, she left me alone for a while. Knew when to back off. Of course, she was back a week later with a bunch of Book of Mormon scriptures about the afterlife, but it took a lot of persistence to bore a hole through this thick head. And heart. Religion wasn't for me, it was for other people. People who liked praying, liked sitting in church on Sunday for hours on a hard bench. Not me.

JEFFERSON

I guess persistence does pay off sometimes... But maybe...well, what if she *hadn't* been so pushy? I mean, you still might've joined the Church, and maybe she could've shared the gospel with so many more people.

MOTHER

What if? You could fill the whole world with what ifs, and it wouldn't change the past. What if she hadn't gone to college back East? What if she'd had a friend there, or at least someone that wrote her? What if she hadn't... (*Trails off.*)

JEFFERSON

What?

MOTHER

Never mind.

JEFFERSON

Never mind?

MOTHER

No. Jennie was... She really *did* care. I wasn't just a number to her. She was a pretty new member herself — got baptized a year or two before we moved in. That girl was one of your bonfires. Her family situation wasn't too good, you know. Her parents were members way back before she was born, but they both went totally inactive. She didn't even know they were LDS until she was twelve or thirteen. 'Course, they weren't really LDS by then, not really. Abuse, neglect, lots of other baggage. It got pretty bad. And yet somehow she climbed out of that hole and got baptized. What a testimony she had. She had to keep burning or else the darkness would...would...swallow her up.

JEFFERSON

So why have you never told us about her?

MOTHER

I lost track of her after she left for college.

JEFFERSON

You could look her up. Call her. I bet she'd love to hear from you.

MOTHER

No, I don't think... (*Trails off.*)

JEFFERSON

C'mon, she gave you the Church! The least you can do is give her a phone call.

MOTHER

I can't call her.

JEFFERSON

Why not? You're not talking to each other? What happened?

MOTHER

It's...it's not that. Not...no. No. One letter. Just one letter could've made all the difference. But I was busy. School, work, dating. Jennie, now, she wasn't too busy. She'd share the gospel with anyone who'd listen. And even those who wouldn't. I wanted to be like her, so brave, so willing to open my mouth and testify. But I couldn't. I don't know if it was the fear of man or what, but I'd just stand there watching her while she'd talk with the other kids at school about Joseph Smith and sacrament meeting and tithing and everything else under the gospel sun. She opened her mouth and saved me. And when it was my turn to open mine and save her, I dropped the ball. And now she's dead.

JEFFERSON

She's *what*?

MOTHER

She wasn't a bad girl, not really. Just made some bad decisions. The last time I saw her was at the hospital. Her parents called and asked me to come by. She looked bad. Shriveled, scarred, all translucent and clammy like a fish. The meth and heroin destroyed her, but I could still see that love for God and Jesus shining out of her somehow. Like a candle.

JEFFERSON

Dead? She's...she's *dead*?

MOTHER

I...she...if I'd just written her. Shared my testimony. A scripture. Anything. But I didn't. And the darkness...the darkness swallowed her up. Gone. I could've stopped it. Just one letter...

JEFFERSON

Man, if something like that's going happen to anyone, it ought to be someone like that guy at the mall.

MOTHER

(Anguished.) Jeff! Don't wish that on *anyone*. Ever.

JEFFERSON

Sorry. I didn't really mean it. He just... *(Trails off.)*

MOTHER

You can't see his heart.

JEFFERSON

I'm sorry. *(Silence for a few moments.)*

Picks up a spatula.

It's not your fault, Mom.

MOTHER

(Silence.)

JEFFERSON

I mean, she did have her agency. She's the one who made those decisions.

MOTHER

(Slowly.) But just one word might've—

JEFFERSON

There's a million things you might have done. But you did what you did, and it's done. You can't keep killing yourself for Jennie's mistakes.

MOTHER

Her bad choices don't erase the good she did.

JEFFERSON

No, I know. *(Pauses.)* She did do a lot of good. I wish I could've met her, before. Her fire had to have been contagious. Mine...I mean, it was so easy for me to keep it up on the mission, but now it just drones along at room temperature.

MOTHER

Hands him a passalong card.

JEFFERSON

(Quietly.) Thanks.

Takes the card.

MOTHER

(Sighs.) Mind helping me bring this over to the Lopez's? We'll get the rolls later.

JEFFERSON

Picks up the casserole.

I guess that's the trick — if you know what you want, and you know it's good, you just keep going until you make it. *(Silence.)*

MOTHER

What is it?

JEFFERSON

I was just...thinking.

MOTHER

Raises eyebrows.

JEFFERSON

Well, I wish I'd tried a little harder.

MOTHER

In Russia?

JEFFERSON

Yeah. I made it through the two years, but did I *really* make it? Enough to get a “well done, thou good and faithful servant”? Maybe some of those people would have accepted the gospel if I just hadn't given up so early so many times. I didn't want to offend them, didn't want to be pushy and annoying. Maybe I offended God instead.

MOTHER

(Silence.)

JEFFERSON

What if my good wasn't good enough?

MOTHER

(Silence for a few moments.) You did what you did, and it's done.

JEFFERSON

(Silence.) Yeah. I guess you're right. But that doesn't make it any easier.

MOTHER

Let's...let's go take this over before the food gets cold. Before it gets too late.

JEFFERSON

(Nods. As he stands up, the Book of Mormon catches his eye.) One sec. *(He stops to write in the book, then picks it up and takes it with him.)* Okay.