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## The Archaeologists

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## *The Archaeologists*

## 1.

Glass, like so many delicate things, is surrounded by mysticism. Before the advent of synthetic glass, humans used natural glass created by the lava of volcanoes and the strike of lightning on desert sand. The Maya relied on obsidian, that solid blackness created from the blood of the earth, for mirrors and scrying, and fashioned it into sharp blades to slice the necks of sacrifices. An old legend says that a group of sailors accidentally discovered how to create glass when their vessel carrying sodium carbonate shipwrecked on the shores of Judea. When they brought the soda onto the sand and built a fire, a strange liquid spilled from the ashes, and when it cooled, it glistened, like ice hardened into permanence, like another state of matter. Translucent, created by chance, as malleable as prophecy, glass became the perfect medium for acquiring spiritual knowledge. Once they discovered glass's fundamental ingredients—sand, soda, lime, and heat—glassworkers created lenses for monks to magnify religious texts, jars to hold the ashes of the dead, crystal globes for seers to see all the world.

When I was six, I learned to read by studying scripture, sounding out the poems of prophets as I gathered with my family around my parents' bed every night. We took turns reading from the Book of Mormon, engrossed in stories of prophets who prayed all day and night. I was born into the Mormon Church by devout parents: a "child of the covenant." Before I learned to read, even from the time I was conceived, I listened to scripture. My mother carried me to church every week, before and after my birth, and not just on Sundays. We were there for Sunday school, Monday family home evenings, Wednesday Primary, Saturday baptisms, and endless potlucks, funerals, service projects, and social events. Prayers marked the beginning and end of every get-together. In prayers we promised God our faith; in scripture we listened to God's promises to us. Before my mouth had even formed, I was immersed in our language, belief built into my very bones.

Although Mormonism was officially founded in 1830, it really began in 1823, when, after a long prayer, Joseph Smith received a vision. There was a burst of light so bright that Joseph shielded his eyes; when the

light softened, he saw an angel sent from God. The angel, whose name was Moroni, told Joseph that deep in a hill called Cumorah lay a golden book of scripture, written by ancient American prophets and buried by Moroni himself in 421 CE. At night Joseph went to the hill near his home in Palmyra, New York. He brought his wife, Emma, with him, handed her the horses' reins as he climbed from the wagon. The shovel rested on his shoulder as he hiked westward, his form fading into the trees' shadows. Emma waited, alone, in the dark, as the horses snuffed and blew. From far away she heard the thuds of the shovel striking the ground. The horses chewed their bits. Finally Joseph returned, carrying a bundle wrapped in sackcloth. He had been instructed by the angel not to show the plates to anyone, so Emma didn't ask to see inside the cloth as her husband guided the horses home. She understood that buried in the ground where Joseph dug that night was the matter of faith, pure as gold, maybe, but much more delicate.

It was sixteen years before his death when Joseph found the golden plates. The rest of his life he spent building the Mormon denomination, converting over 16,000 people, including my own sixth-generation great-grandfather, Joel H. Johnson. Joel married five women (yes, at the same time), and for the next 151 years little Johnson descendants multiplied, grew up, and married Mormons, birthed Mormon babies, and lived Mormon lives, down to my grandmother and mother, to my own birth in 1982. For most of my life I believed, like all Mormons, like my ancestors, that Joseph found the plates, engraved with strange characters, and translated them into the Book of Mormon, the foundation of the Mormon religion. Belief, though, is a strange thing—it tends to shift with the light, like visions.

I read somewhere once that in the centuries after the discovery of glass, doctors began to take in patients they called “glass men”: people who suffered from an unusual psychiatric disorder of perceiving themselves as being made entirely of glass. The glass man feared he would shatter if touched, and he insisted that other people keep their distance. He wouldn't sit without a pillow and wore padded clothes, always shielding his body. He feared death, so to guard against danger, he believed himself into fragility, protected himself, and thus felt secure. Of course it was a delusion of safety (although maybe not of fragility), but what was the glass man without his translucent, breakable body? He was just a man, like all other men, a mash of flesh and bone and blood. A man of glass had power. He knew his own mortality better than anyone, so

much better that he had to convince others of how breakable he was. Sometimes, doctors or friends took it upon themselves to cure a glass man of his delusion: they lit his straw bed on fire, making him jump, or cruelly poked a needle in his skin. And that's when the glass man shattered.

I grew up in New York, only two hours from where Joseph Smith dug up the plates, a member of the Mormon minority in the Northeast. No one else in my school district was Mormon, and even on Sundays in church only about 150 people sat in the pews. But I didn't feel out of place. I felt unique, special, as though I'd been gifted some lovely piece of truth, just like Joseph, something no one else had or understood or believed. And so I set myself apart, maybe even above, everyone else.

The Book of Mormon was the dictionary, the poem, the story, the field guide to the Mormon world. I knew the book and the doctrines better than the pop culture of the time, but when I tried to explain my world to nonmember friends, I'd get tongue-tied and frustrated. "Well, Mormons don't really believe in a typical heaven," I'd tell a curious listener. "We believe there's the celestial kingdom for the righteous, which is split into three tiers; then there's the terrestrial kingdom and the telestial kingdom—but people will go wherever they're happiest." Suddenly it would sound confusing and unreal and they'd give me a skeptical look. So I would go home and read, for clarity. *Straight is the gate and narrow is the way, and few there be that find it.* And I would feel better.

It was my world, and I grew up in the folds of its books, the warmth of its words, the magic of its origins. Long before he became an angel, the prophet Moroni had traveled all the way from South America (the setting of the Book of Mormon) just to place the gold plates in the Hill Cumorah, just so Joseph could pull them out centuries later. I loved the destined adventure of it, the story of a God-sent angel planting the golden kernel. Even inside the book, a mystical tone hovers in the antique phrases: *If you have faith you hope for things that are not seen, which are true. Even if you can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you.* I believed in the plates despite never having seen them, and that gave me beauty and it gave me power. To see is easy; to believe is a higher form of art. Believing requires fortitude, and willpower, and such extreme self-confidence in your feelings that you deem them the only evidence that matters. I can't help but think on that night with Joseph, how Emma must have longed to see under the cloth, to feel the smooth gold, to trace the impressions of the carvings. But I understand why she didn't. I know the seduction of belief.

Magic and mysticism, of course, only last until your bed is set on fire, or you discover the trick is just a clever use of mirrors. Growing up, I found reasons to question things about Mormonism, but belief often means ignoring or justifying or accepting some questions as unanswerable. What I did understand about my faith was enough for me. Long after I grew up and left home, when I was twenty-nine, two major things happened: I got divorced and I started graduate school. The combination of a failed relationship and returning to school, all at an age that's a preamble to middle-aged realism, spurred me to push my belief as close to knowledge as possible. If my religion was true, and I thought it was, it would stand up to scrutiny, as I thought it always had. And so I finally started to let myself look beyond Mormon answers to existential questions.

I began gently: I watched a documentary on religion called *The Nature of Existence*. A man travels around the world, asking everyone from Catholics to atheists to archdruids of Stonehenge what they believe and why. "Everything created is one thought in the life of God," a rabbi says, and a science-fiction writer answers, "The opposite of faith is a tendency to ask questions," and an atheist proclaims, "There's actually no more evidence for God than for the lunatic's belief that he's Napoleon." A Mormon is featured too—"God can only tell us as much as we can grasp"—among hundreds more, people across the world talking about what they know, or think they know. It seems incredible to me now, that at twenty-nine, for the first time and suddenly, I understood just how small, how miniscule my world was. But I had lived one way and lived one language for almost three decades. Now my world was a speck on a map, it was one way of thinking, it was faith in one man, just one among billions, who claimed God gave him an earthbound book that held the one and only-ever truth. By the time I turned off the TV, I realized that I must be one of two things: either blessedly lucky to be in the minority who knew the one truth of life, or completely and utterly deluded, a tiny breakable being in a tiny breakable world.

In Mormon temples, the celestial room is an ornately decorated space for meditation and silent prayer, with crystal chandeliers and white carpet and light glinting everywhere. I went there often, trying to curb the desire to further question my faith by holding on to its rituals. Large mirrors hang opposite each other in the room, so that when you look into one, you see reflection on reflection on reflection, thousands of yous and thousands of mirrors stretching onward into illusive eternity. How often I stood in that room, looking deep and wondering.

This is what I discovered: For years before he climbed the Hill Cumorah, people knew Joseph Smith as the “glass-looker.” Joseph claimed that he had looked through an enchanted piece of glass and had seen where a seer stone was hidden. Once he retrieved the stone, he placed it in a hat and saw visions of buried treasure. The glass looked like an ocean wave and the stone, a pale potato.

Men who believed in seer stones paid Joseph to look, to guide them to fortune. Joseph led followers over hills, through trees, into fields. Wherever he stopped, the men drove their shovels into the ground. They dug, dug, and then *clunk!* They swore their shovel hit something. Joseph instructed them to be perfectly silent, so they wouldn’t perturb the evil spirits protecting the gold. But inevitably someone made a noise, and Joseph shouted—the treasure was starting to sink. Frantically the men dug, cleaving the earth from itself, chasing the phantom chest. But the deeper they dug, the deeper into the ground the fortune dropped, burrowing away, slipping from them, falling down, down, down, plummeting through the crust, the mantle, all the way to the earth’s core, which glittered like the very gold they sought.

In church when we talked about Joseph, we only talked about the angel and the plates, never the glass and the treasure hunts. But after *The Nature of Existence*, after I started to wonder and question, I started to research. When I read stories about Joseph sticking his face into his hat so he could have his visions, I was staggered. Here was the great prophet of the Mormon Church pocketing a common stone and making money off his disciples: a side of Joseph incompatible with the honest, selfless stories of official Church biographies. It was at once so hugely comic and so terrifyingly scandalous that I became afraid, and I felt a hard, heavy weight in my stomach, as though my heart had plummeted, landing in a ball of hot, tight muscle.

I started reading everything my Church leaders had told me not to: scores of anti-Mormon Web pages and records of Joseph’s court trials for his treasure-seeking scams, proof of secret marriages he hid from Emma, his counterfeit translations of Egyptian papyri. I studied Mormon apologist responses, books about world religions, and essays about language. I dug up everything I could find, held it up to the light, saw how delicate and sharp it was. I read an essay called “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic,” where the words were large and unfamiliar. Language, it said, creates truth. We craft knowledge as we speak. And truth, I saw, was as fragile as words, and when your very language has been nourished on the prophecies of scripture, it’s difficult to disen-

tangle your beliefs from the everyday nouns and verbs of your native tongue. Especially when the language is as seductive as it often is in scripture. *For now we see through a glass, darkly*, Paul said. Yes, for some prophets are designed for low lights and mirrors.

Only after I began to see the vastness of it all, of Joseph's world and my own, I left the Mormon Church. Whatever truth I once grasped became too slippery to hold. But I still wonder, sometimes, what Joseph saw when he held up that glass to his eye. Shadowy figures maybe, or the golden hue of easy fortune. A future joke he'd tell his friends. Or maybe he saw the people in the twenty-first century who would become members of his visionary religion, the fifteen million Mormons who know Joseph as I once did, as a prophet, seer, revelator—not as a man who looked through glass and saw it for what it was: sand, soda, lime, fire, and endless possibility.

## 2.

Archaeology is the space between guess and proof. I learned this as a child, when I lost the mouthpiece to my clarinet. My parents had taught me to pray when I needed help, so I prayed, and searched, and found nothing. Perhaps it was a problem of faith, I thought, so I prayed and looked again, and still it wasn't there. Always a little stubborn, I repeated the process a third time, searching longer. And there, in a corner behind the stairs, I found the mouthpiece, covered in spots of mud like blemishes. The find was evidence of the endless powers of prayer, and since I never considered that maybe the persistent search had revealed the mouthpiece rather than the prayer, I wedged it into the story of my faith.

After I started looking into Joseph Smith's history, listening for things beyond what a missing mouthpiece could reveal, I prayed to hear the voice of God. A last, desperate attempt to see if everything I'd learned could be trumped by some profound, all-encompassing spiritual experience. I wanted to hear that my religion was not a fraud, not a scheme or product of a glass-looker's stony visions. So I prayed, but all I heard was silence. I didn't return to church after that. I know better than to keep searching for things that aren't there.

And yet. I recognize the conundrum: where once I took finding a lost possession as a sign, now I took silence as a sign. Once, I found meaning in something that happened, now in something that didn't.

"All I have are my experiences, and my experiences, being finite, cannot reveal the infinite to me."

So. I doubt many things: experience, time, words like *eternity* and *omniscience*. I doubt people who seem to know truth to be a solid, unbreakable thing. I envy their confidence in their perceived purpose in life, even while I disdain their unwillingness to scrutinize the inevitable discrepancies between faith and evidence.

I try adding up all the time I spent investing myself in my faith, to see what is lost, what might be recaptured. But this is a useless and incredible exercise. I can't know where I'd be without my years of faith. Sometimes I want to travel back to 1831, when my great-grandfather Joel attended Mormon meetings and decided to join the Church, to see what spoke to him, what experience moved him to change his whole life, ask him if he, too, saw visions of generational followers. I'd ask him what he felt when he met Joseph Smith. He'd doubtless tell me of his encounters with a spiritual force, which I'd argue against with my piles of evidence, and we'd sit there in stalemate, the weight of 151 years of Mormon ancestry as heavy as scripture.

In the 1950s, an amateur archaeologist named Tom Ferguson traveled to southern Mexico to dig. Tom knew the Book of Mormon, had read it many times, memorized his favorite verses the way a poet learns a sonnet. He believed Joseph Smith translated the golden script through a godly stone. He knew the ancient prophets who wrote the book spoke of horses, barley, gold, iron—and he also knew that these things didn't exist in the pre-Columbian Americas, the time and place the book was written. Scientists and archeologists outside the Church pointed to these anachronisms as proof that the book was Joseph's own fiction, but Tom considered these anachronisms small discrepancies. He set out to reconcile them by looking for artifacts that would prove the truth of the Book of Mormon: ancient earthenware decorated with artwork of barley and figs, fossils of horses, the glint of gold and iron embedded in layers of sediment. The prophets were inspired men of God, he believed, so he sifted through two thousand years of earth, searching for them in broken bits of pottery.

"These artifacts will speak eloquently from the dust," Tom promised the Church leaders who funded his quests, before the earth yielded anything. For the next decade he searched through all types of dirt. Umber clay, chocolate soil, beige loam. I study his letters and watch the slow decline of his faith the deeper he digs, as certainty begins to yield: "I hope it happens during our lifetime. It could." Then the crisis. After ten years of peering into wide, deep holes, the earth revealed nothing. No archaeological evidence that could verify the Book of Mormon was writ-

ten by ancient American prophets. “Prophets,” Tom finally concludes, “are nothing more than mortal men like the rest of us.”

Joseph Smith died at age thirty-nine in a prison after being charged with polygamy. As the story goes, a crazed, gun-wielding mob broke into the jailhouse, where Joseph was standing at a second-story window. When they shot him, the force of the bullets pushed his body through the glass, and as he fell down and down, with his last breath he cried out, “O Lord, my God!” His body slammed into the ground and then—

Well, what then? Did he enter a dark tunnel with a circle of promise at the end? Was death the end of his visions or the beginning? Did he meet some type of god? Reincarnate? Attain nirvana?

And what of his followers? What happens after the fall of a prophet, when the crutch of faith is ripped away and God is buried with him? I no longer know if there’s anything after this life, after all, or anyone above it. Which makes life devoid of measurable purpose beyond my own selfish happiness. I am fearfully aware that my body is simply a mass of sinewy wires and pulsing electrons, not amplified by spirit matter as I once thought. But how can that be? I consider the possibility of life created by chance. I can’t understand how my body isn’t amplified by spirit. It feels like it is. But religion was all one great trap for me, of feeling something I’m not sure was ever there. I mistrust my own history, my ability to find truth in anything. I’m angry with Joseph for being such a trickster but begrudgingly grant that he was a brilliant man. Perhaps a believer himself. But no, he wasn’t, was he? It was all just some great hoax. Still, I’m so grateful to be disillusioned, relieved that I now recognize reality for what it is. Except when I realize, with a clarity that defies itself, that disillusionment is understanding that I can never know reality at all.

### 3.

Archaeologists construct entire cultures from things they find embedded underground. They turn an object over and over, brush it off, translate its code. An urn reveals the life of an ancient people. A shard of glass, a dull blade, anything the ancients touched and used. They study it closely, see what is there, was there, how things might have been.

On one archaeological expedition, researchers in Peru discovered a mass grave of forty-three sacrificed children. Bones crushed, hearts offered to the gods. Probably, the archaeologists guessed, disaster struck this Peruvian city and the people feared the wrath of the gods. A famine or earthquake maybe, wielded to disrupt the land and complacency. So they appeased their deities by offering the most cherished things they

had. Sometimes, salvation is expensive. Its price rises 43 percent. Belief lies in the bones of the children, remains buried for eight hundred years under seven feet of dirt.

The archaeologist in the news photo kneels in front of one of the little skeletons, head down as though in prayer. Yet his eyes are open, searching through the black holes of a child's skull. Does he wonder how the children died? Beyond the slitting of throats, or the clubs, I mean. Did the children know they would be sacrificed? Did they stand with eyes closed, anticipating a cut of honor, proud to save their people?

Or did they scream? And cry? And curse the beliefs of the adults who held the knives?

He may not know. He may not even wonder. He picks up the bones, carefully, as new evidence of history. There is truth in the artifact, its physical presence, the very thereness of the thing. He holds it in gloved hands, probes its past. Gently, now: feel for what is gone.