

# Moving On

*Michael Andrew Ellis*

So I'm down in Payson helping my father, Wymond, move his new wife's things into storage. The landowner Peg has been renting from is selling out to developers who want the farmland. It's early on a fall Saturday, and Peg, her neighbor Midge, and I are in the kitchen boxing things up. The guys Wymond recruited to lift the heavy stuff haven't shown. Neither have my married, older siblings. But I expected that. They're boycotting this move—and just about anything Wymond does nowadays—to show Mom their unqualified support. Even though I'm here against their wishes and hers, I'm on Mom's side, too.

We are all adults.

Wymond blows into the kitchen just as Midge is stretching a length of tape across the top of a box of wine glasses. She's straddling the box and pressing the sides in so the flaps are flush. Wymond waves his hands wildly.

"No, no, just interlock the flaps. Don't you think so, Peg, dear?"

"She mentioned it," says Midge, "but it's glass. So tighter's better."

Midge appears to be in her late forties. I know she's Mormon, too, because her garments show when she bends over. She has auburn hair with pink highlights, and she's wearing two studs in one ear and a dangling peace sign in the other. Her earthy T-shirt proclaims in fat lime letters, "Every girl loves a dirty cowboy." No wedding ring that I can see.

Of the three of us children, I guess I should be the most upset. For one thing, I learned about everything in Wymond's letter that arrived a week before I was to come home from my mission in the Ukraine. He explained that he'd lost his testimony for the various reasons he listed and that he was tired of "living a lie" being an active member of the Church. He said he hadn't

wanted a divorce, but that Mom had rejected *him*, because he couldn't be the man she'd married anymore.

Mom's email soon followed, once she knew herself, I guess. In a departure from her usually uplifting and encouraging emails, she spoke of her resignation and her ensuing depression, and how she couldn't help but feel an unbearable sense of failure. She'd tried hard to hold things together over the years. All of us children knew that.

By the time I'd come home, it wasn't home anymore. The house I'd grown up in had been sold. Wymond had taken his share of the sizable amount of equity and disappeared. Mom had moved into a smaller place.

"A little tape won't hurt, Wym," says Peg. "'Specially on them boxes with the fragiles." "Wym" is Peg's pet name for Wymond. It fits.

"Take no chances with glass, 'Wym,'" I say, agreeing.

"I just think that interlocking the flaps is more practical," says Wymond, adjusting his glasses. The big transitional lenses are dark from his having just come inside. "It's a temporary move. No sense in dealing with all that tape, Peg."

Peg starts to say something, but then just shrugs. Midge, undeterred, moves her hand back and forth over the tape to smooth out any bubbles. She seems to enjoy flouting Wymond.

Two years younger than Wymond's fifty-two, Peg looks even younger. Maybe late thirties, early forties. Being part Japanese has helped. She has round brown eyes and small pink lips, and the orange hair that comes from bleaching brown hair blond. Long and straight, it's wound up and pinned with a pencil. Except for the youthful look, I don't see what has attracted Wymond to Peg over Mom. And even on that point, my old seminary teacher, Brother Wright, used to say that forever love is forever *young* love, meaning each spouse sees the other as on the day they first fell for each other. That's the way it's supposed to be.

I first learned about Peg when I finally met Wymond for lunch at some sub joint a full month after I'd been home. (I said he'd disappeared. He hadn't met me at the airport, nor had he come to my homecoming sacrament meeting, and I could never seem to

reach him by phone either, until he called me about doing lunch.) I was raring to dump on him, but before I could get a word in, he announced his engagement to Peg. Said he'd found her in the library at the U researching Wild West women, and that she's the one for him. Said they'd been vacationing in Hawaii for the past few weeks, that he'd meant to call, but hadn't known quite what to say at the time, and thought it would be better in person. To show him how much I thought of him moving on with his life so fast, I left without finishing my sandwich. I didn't attend the wedding up at Sundance either. Later, when I finally answered his phone calls, he asked me to help him move Peg's stuff. Said we could talk. I wanted to. I wanted to blow up at him. I wanted to make him feel bad. That's what got me here, mainly, but more than all that was my mission president's instruction to me before I came home that I was to love my father, no matter what.

My cell phone buzzes. It's Ash. She texts, *how's it going?* I text back that we've just been boxing stuff, haven't talked yet. She encourages patience. I punch in an eye-rolling smiley.

Ash and I are practically engaged. My high school sweet heart; she waited for me. I haven't proposed yet, but we're talking marriage. I never realized how many ads for rings there are around here until I thought about buying one.

Wymond's saying we ought to get the piano on the pickup first, and then pack smaller boxes around it. His whiny voice is coming from the front room. I walk over and find the front door open. A Home Depot pickup is backed up to the stairs, its tailgate down, just about level with the porch. Wymond has never owned a truck, and he especially hates the souped-up monster ones, as common as chapels around here.

"By ourselves?" I ask. "How many pianos have you moved before?"

"What else are we gonna do? My guys are no shows, and no priesthood peter goody-goody is gonna help an apostate without wanting something in return," says Wymond, except he qualifies "apostate" with the implication that God has damned him somehow.

Just to get through the day, I'm trying to shrug off his swearing and his barbs toward the Church. Brother Wright used to say that

people like Wymond get bitter. They leave the Church, but can't seem to leave it alone. Maybe it's from some sort of subconscious self-loathing. I don't know for sure. But I do know that Wymond seems so small now compared to the man and a half he once was in my eyes. I remember him leading our family in regular scripture study and prayer. I remember the fun family night activities he used to come up with. I remember the priesthood blessings he gave me when I was sick or worried about something. He even ordained me an elder and participated in setting me apart as a missionary. But now, he's just like any other man of the world.

"Who'd you call?" I ask.

"No one you know. Now, don't just stand there like a jackass. Grab hold."

At one end of the piano, Wymond's looking from one side to the other, feeling for a handhold. I come stand at the other end with my hands in my pockets.

"We need help," I say. "And will you please stop swearing so much around me?"

"What the, that's not even a swear. It's a *bona fide* animal that stands around looking stubborn stupid. Come on, we'll just take baby steps."

"Hold your horses, Wym," says Peg, entering the room with Midge. "Don't go breaking your back on my account. Midge here just called her husband."

"We don't need church help."

"Help is help, Wym," says Peg. "We'll take it."

"Yeah," I say, "who said anything about church? Her husband's coming."

"They *always* want something in return," says Wymond.

"Well then," says Peg, in all innocence apparently, "I don't mind whipping up a green jello salad for them."

"It's not like we want your soul or anything," says Midge, grinning.

Wymond smirks. Then we all turn as some hulk fills the doorway. He's wearing a tight, earthy T-shirt too, except its fat lime letters read, "I'm the dirty cowboy." His muscles are toned and

distinct, and he looks like he just stepped out of an Arnold Friberg painting. A skinny young man stands behind him.

Midge introduces Jack and their son, Billy.

“Let’s wrestle this piano then,” says Jack. “I eat pianos for breakfast. Places, men.”

“Careful with them legs, boys,” says Peg. “That was my grandma’s piano.”

Shuffling, we roll the piano toward the door and then, heaving, just about make it through when Wymond cries out for a rest and drops his corner. Bent over and breathing heavily, he blows a lock of his long, gray, positively juvenile hair from his eyes and rubs his wrists. We ask whether he’s all right. He nods and coughs. Peg brings him a cup of water. He gulps it down and hands the cup back.

“I’m ready,” he says, hoarsely.

“Good on ya,” says Jack. “On three then, One—”

“Don’t count, just lift,” says Wymond.

We get the piano onto the truck. Wymond’s gray mop is matted down on his forehead. He removes his glasses and cleans the lenses with his shirt. I glimpse the expanse of pale, hairy flesh where I used to see cotton mesh. He murmurs a thank you all around.

“Where you moving to?” asks Jack.

Breathing out audibly, Wymond steps back onto the porch and hitches his cargo pants up from their default slack position below his protuberant belly.

“My place is small,” he says, “so we’re moving Peg’s stuff into storage till our ranch house is built.”

“Sounds great,” says Jack. “If you need help on the next move, just holler.”

“We’ll be sure to do that.”

*Yeah right, I think.*

“So, what’s next?” asks Billy.

“A dresser. Lots of boxes,” says Wymond. “Just fit them in around the piano. We can get the other furniture on the next run.”

\*\*\*

In the master bedroom, I find Peg’s dresser. Its five drawers have already been stacked up on the floor. I pick up two. The top one

has panties of various pastels, some feminine hygiene products, cheap jewelry, and other personal items, including a framed photo of Peg and a man in a ten-gallon hat embracing each other in a Western setting. As I pass Peg in the hallway, she winces and draws a pair of undies over the picture.

“The ex,” she explains. “Been meaning to get rid of that.”

Mom told me that Peg was married before. Although I don’t know much about Peg, my first thought at the time was that the whole situation was made more complicated, what with Wymond and her coming together, respectively, from broken marriages. Brother Wright told me once that most marriages fail because of selfishness. I know that’s true for Wymond. I remember him fighting with Mom about money, household chores, and his spending too much time doing stuff without her.

Then I notice that Peg’s holding a porcelain wedding cake topper—a cowboy groom and his bride in dated formal wear, dancing—and I ask her about it.

“Yeah, it’s your dad’s and mine, from our wedding. It’s real special, because my grandma and my mama used it, and I’ve used it twice now.”

Funny thing, the Wymond I knew before my mission despised cowboy culture: the swaggering presence, the pickup trucks, the hyper-patriotism, and the country music that extols it all.

“Wymond’s not the cowboy type,” I say.

“You’d be surprised,” says Peg. “He ain’t dressing the part yet, but he’s a cowboy.”

When I reach the front door, Jack is waving in another pickup. It’s backed up toward the house at an angle to the rental. Wymond comes out laden with a couple boxes, and then Jack introduces us to the reinforcements, the Knox brothers, who live nearby.

“Great,” says Wymond. “Grab just about anything. Lady’s got lots of stuff.”

They go inside, and he deposits his load. I set my two drawers on the tailgate of the empty truck, off to the side, so they’re not in the way when the dresser comes.

“Why don’t you cover that piano, Wym?” says Peg. “They’re calling for rain, you know.”

She's holding a taped-up box labeled "China."

"It's kind of tough to do that now, dear, with all these boxes in the way," says Wymond.

"You gonna tie it down, then?"

"It's not going anywhere. Look." He steps off and lifts the tailgate. "See? This'll be up."

"Well, can't someone ride in back to keep an eye on it? It was grandma's, you know."

"Sure, I guess," says Wymond, "if it'll make you feel better."

"What about this china, Wym? Set this up there and it's right near tipping over the side."

"Put it on the other truck."

"Can't you just tuck a tarp in around that piano, Wym?" says Peg, squinting at the sky.

"I just don't think we need to, hon," says Wymond. "We're only going down the hill."

"I'll cover everything, Peg, and tie it down," I say, as I take the box of china from her. It's evident that Wymond's reluctance to be guided by a woman hasn't changed.

"Do what you need to, then," says Wymond. He turns to go inside right when the Knox brothers are coming out with the dresser. He sidesteps just in time to avoid smashing his face against Howie's back. When they've passed, he tries again, but this time he meets Jack's hairy arms carrying out the dresser's remaining three drawers. Finding all this amusing, Peg and I smile at each other, and maybe, we're laughing inside, too.

When he's finally gone in, I say to Peg, "You got some rope, and a tarp maybe?"

Nodding, she stares ahead absently, then says, "Wym's a good man."

Not quite a question.

"He can be," I say.

"I expect we're all a mix."

"Yeah, a little lower than the angels and all that."

"If you believe in angels."

"Either way, we fall short of our potential more than not."

"Ain't that the truth."

Peg interlocks her fingers and stretches, cracking her knuckles. She walks to the swing at the end of the porch and sits down. Then, just as I'm about to go hunt up some rope and a tarp, thinking she forgot, she waves me over, saying, "Wait, let's take a breather."

She smooths a loose strand of her orange hair back in place and pats the seat beside her. I tell her I'll stand, and I lean back against the rail. She licks her lips.

"What's your mama like, Chase?"

She wants to know how she measures up. I push off the rail, turn around, and grip it. The empty truck is filling up with furniture and boxes. "Peg, listen," I say, "I'm just here to help out, that's all."

"It's a simple question."

"You'll have to ask Wymond, then."

"I expect she's a better woman than he lets on."

It figures. I want to tell her she expects right, that Mom is *the* better woman. But it doesn't seem right to spite her. I turn to face her.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I just think it's better I don't say anything one way or the other."

"I ain't trying to make you take sides," she says. "I know whose side you're on. Just curious, that's all. You're twenty-one, right?"

"Yeah."

"You got a girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"Thinking marriage?"

"Possibly."

"Ain't you return missionaries supposed to decompress some before you up and get hitched?"

Amused by this, I say, "Usually, it's a good idea, but Ash and I have known each other a long time."

"'Ash,' that's a pretty name," she says. Then, leaning forward, she plants both boots together, rests her elbows on her knees, and clasps her hands. Her expression is no-nonsense. "Listen, you don't have to tell me about your mama. Maybe it's no fair question. Maybe I'll meet her sometime. But there's something you gotta understand, to smooth things over with your daddy, cause he still wants a relationship with you."

"What's that?"



“Let me ask you a couple questions. Do you know, today, about every trial, frustration, disappointment, failure, success, and so on, you and Ash will meet or have together?”

“No, course not.”

“OK, then, do you know, today, how you and Ash will feel about each other ten, twenty, thirty years from now, when all that time is filled up with the experience of life?”

“I hope it’ll be the same, but deeper.”

“That’s a good hope, for sure. My point is people change, Chase. They can become a completely different person from the one you married, from the one you’ve known since childhood, even. And I’m just talking about in a lifetime. Your daddy says you Mormons commit yourselves to an eternity with one partner, mostly. Such highfalutin expectations! What I’m saying is you shouldn’t hold what happened against your daddy, son. That’s life. He’s still family.”

“Let’s not go there. It’s not you I’m upset at. Anyway, I can and I will hold it against him.” I start to walk toward the door, then turn back and say, “But you know, I will tell you something about my mom. She didn’t put up with Wymond’s crap. She put him in his place, as her equal. And he seemed to get along fine, as long as he treated her as such. Now, he’s getting older, and you’ve married all the old-age problems and dispositions my mom had steeled herself to endure from the get-go, and through eternity, even. At least she has memories of a kinder Wymond Helm that would’ve got her through.”

Peg pushes off. The swing creaks, complains.

“Well, different women, different touch brings out the man you want,” she says.

I step closer. “You don’t know Wymond then.”

“You two just gonna sit on your asses and jaw all day while the rest of us load the trucks?” says Wymond from the doorway. He’s red-faced and straining to carry a heavy box, but he’s let a smile twist his habitual scowl, which softens the severity of this tongue-lashing. Just a little.

Peg digs her heels in to stop the swing. It rocks violently.

“Let me get that stuff for you,” she says to me. “And you just might want to think about how much your girlfriend may have changed already in the two years you been gone.”

\*\*\*

Wymond has let me drive. He sits on the opposite side of the bench near the open window and neglects his seatbelt. Billy’s in back, keeping an eye on the load. Jack and the Knox brothers follow us in the other truck. Our two trucks pace down the hill. On the other side of the valley, the underbellies of clouds hang in tatters, a sign of rain bearing down on us. Wymond and I haven’t spoken since we left the house. I don’t know why I haven’t torn into him yet, or what I’m waiting for. Exercising restraint, I guess.

“I suppose by now you want some kind of comp inventory with your old man,” says Wymond.

“Yes,” I say, cautiously, “we haven’t talked about the elephant in the room. You’ve made yourself scarce.”

“You wanna go first, then?”

“Sure, I—”

“Wait,” he cuts in. “Let me. I know Ash waited for you. You thinking of getting married right off your mission?”

“Don’t make this about me,” I say. “This, this here, I want to talk about what you’ve done.”

“You’ll be making the same mistake I did, Chase. What is it, you want the sex? You two can’t keep your hands off each other?”

“Oh yeah, right, that means a lot coming from the general authority on shotgun weddings.”

Wymond smoothes his hair back with both hands, looks out the window, then back at me.

“Chase, son, what are you and Ash going to live on?”

“She’s got a part-time job and just a year of school left.”

“A part-time job,” he says with a smirk. “What’s going to happen when she has to quit because a kid comes along? Are you going to give up your education? Rent, utilities, groceries, insurance, a car and gas, a dozen other expenses. The burden is on you in Mormon culture. Young love is all fairytale and fantasy till you throw real life into the mix, believe me.”

“I have a hard time taking advice from the likes of you, *Father*,” I say, trying to switch the focus away from me.

My cell phone buzzes again. I know it’s Ash, but I don’t look at it.

“Yeah, well, it’s in the application that things get screwed up. You’ll see,” he says. “You gonna answer that?”

His face is flushed and his hand grips the door handle.

“Just because *you* screwed up doesn’t mean the principles aren’t sound,” I say, preachy-like. “I may not be married yet, and maybe some of my ideas are just ideals, but I’ve seen good marriages. I’ve seen old couples who talk of the thrill of holding hands across the kitchen table, after all their years together. That’s enduring love. I want that. And I wanted it for you and Mom.”

We turn onto the street where the storage shed is located.

“You can’t judge a couple by their Facebook page, son. Anyway, your mom and I never had that depth. After a while, our marriage was practical, mundane, planned out—no spontaneity. The daily routine sucked the marrow out of it, left a dry bone. I stuck with it for the sake of you kids, and because I couldn’t face that I wasn’t happy.” Here he pauses to compose himself, then continues, “Someone once said that you want to marry someone who, when you’re both empty nesters and out on the porch together, you can still have a stimulating conversation with. I think your mom and I would have fought all the time, or longed for release in respective silence. But enough of this, we’re here.”

I key in the code Wymond tells me and we pass into the maze of pathways and metal boxes when the rain hits.

“Thank you for covering the load,” says Wymond. “Save me a lot of trouble with Peg.”

A little surprised, I nod. Then, considering what he’s said, I realize he’s right about one thing. Looking back, my parents didn’t seem to enjoy being alone together. Their conversation was mostly about day-to-day things: who’s taking the kids where, what happened at work, whose turn it was to do such-and-such chore, and so on. There was no forget-the-world passion between them, for the cares of the world were always at the forefront of Mom’s mind. She’s the biblical Martha, if there ever was one.

I think of Ash's text waiting for me, her sometimes hyperactive concern for me, and wonder if I'm not in some way considering marrying someone like my mother.

We sit in the trucks and wait for the rain to quit before we start unloading. The air between us heavy, Wymond and I hardly speak. Ash buzzes me several times, but I don't answer. Wymond hears it and just smirks. Then, after we've unloaded the trucks and locked up the storage box, he and I begin the drive back to Peg's. The others don't come back with us. We get another shower. The windshield fills with raindrops; the wipers sweep it clear. I ask the question that has been gnawing me the last hour or so.

"Did you think that because we kids are grown up, the divorce wouldn't affect us?"

"No, but I did expect you to be adults about it."

"It's kind of funny how 'being an adult' about things seems to mean you tolerate all sorts of bad behavior."

"No, it means you understand that different people live different lives, for better or worse, and you have to respect that. Not everyone's Mormon, son."

"But you're not supposed to be one of *them*. You're supposed to be one of *us*. Why did you have to leave everything?"

"I told you why in the letter. Enough said."

"No, it's not. You could've had faith."

"Could've, would've, should've. I don't have much more to say about it. What's done is done. I did love your mother, and I do care about her and you kids. I'm not heartless. She got half my 401k, which wasn't chump change, half the money from the sale of the house, and I'm paying her alimony, long enough for her to get trained and find a job."

"Money covers a lot of sins, doesn't it?" I say, disgusted he thinks his magnanimity makes everything all right.

"Who knew an RM could be such a smart-ass?" he says, grinning. "How is she doing?"

"You wanna know because you think you're obligated somehow?"

"I do have some obligation—"

"But not to care."

"I would like to know, really."

“Fine. She’s moving on, too.”

“Come on. You’re not being sincere.”

I grip the steering wheel at ten and two, my wrists arched, my knuckles white hot.

“You don’t have to care anymore. What is it you’ve just got to know?”

“That she’s finding a way to be happy again.”

“She’s not. She blames herself. She cries every day. You left a huge hole, and there’s nothing you can do about it now, so just drop it.”

“It’s not her fault, son. Tell her that. It’s not anyone’s fault. It’s just life.”

“No, Father,” I spit out, my voice quivering. “It *is* your fault. It’s all your fault. Your loss of faith in the Church destroyed everything.”

He stares straight ahead, solemn.

“Fair enough,” he says at last. “I’ll take it. I am sorry. I am. But after being one woman’s project for more than twenty years, you want to free her from her need to ‘fix’ you and free yourself from the idea that you need to be ‘fixed’ to be accepted. Sometimes, you show more love and respect for each other by separating than you do by desperately holding it together.”

I relax my grip on the wheel. Out my window, the valley is a crisp fall green, the air clear of the afternoon haze, and the western range dark and hard beneath the setting sun. I wonder why he thinks Peg will be any different, but don’t say anything.

“Look,” he says, when the silence has become unbearable, “if you do end up marrying Ash sooner than later, against all my advice, I’m here to tell you that no mere mission companionship prepares you for what she wants. You’ll see. How often did she buzz you since you got here? It’s already started. She’ll want you to meet the image of a man she has in mind, and if for any reason you’re not that man, she’ll want you to *change*.”

“Isn’t that the point?” I ask. “To lose yourself, to find yourself? What if the person you *really* are is on the other side of that sacrifice?”

“No, the point is to know yourself, first.”

I pull up to the house and turn off the engine. I feel sad that so much in my life I was so sure about has changed, and there wasn’t anything I could do to stop it. I jangle the keys.

“Listen, son,” he says, “two lives collide like atoms, and it’s beautiful or destructive, or both. Just don’t treat marriage like it’s something to check off your TO-DO list, all right?”

\*\*\*

We find Peg on her hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen tile with a thick sponge. Midge is gone. The house is empty. A shell.

“I’ve got you all boxed away,” Wymond announces cheerfully.

“Don’t you keep a lid on me too long now.”

Standing over her and reaching down, like he used to do with Mom, Wymond pulls Peg up from the floor. They forget I’m here, or else Wymond is telling me “in your face” when they kiss. It’s no peck on the lips. I lean against the kitchen doorway, watching them, and I wonder how it is that they seem to have a good marriage, even without the gospel in their lives. It doesn’t seem possible, or fair, but they do, somehow.

And I will have to learn to swallow it.

Now my dad is leading his wife in a kind of waltz around the kitchen, increasing speed as they whirl. They spin and spin, and then their clasped hands swing around and knock a small, taped-up box off the counter. It flies into the wall and then drops on the tile with a thud. Peg falls to her knees.

“Oh God, Wym,” she cries.

“What? What is it?” he asks.

She shakes the box gently, and we all hear the muffled sound of one piece of solid something.

“It’s our cake topper,” she says, relieved. “You had me worried, Wym. It’s such a fragile little thing.”

Later, sitting alone in my car in the driveway, I text Ash and tell her we need to talk.