

**LGBT Mennonite Fiction:
A Panel from Mennonite/s
Writing VII**

An Excerpt from *Plain Love*

Andrew Harnish, *University of North Dakota*

Chapter 1

For most of his young life, Isaac Bowman imagined himself holy. At fourteen, eager for the prestige of membership, he joined the

Kuernerville Mennonite Church. His testimony, delivered in a voice that, though deepened, was still a touch squeaky, neatly juxtaposed the promptings of the Holy Spirit with the example of his parents: his father who worked so hard on the dairy farm, his mother who led him in prayer each night. During nightly prayers in the enfolding darkness of his bedroom it was possible to admit any transgression, fear or frustration. There was never a need to mention longing. And so much to be thankful for: his studies going well, another fine harvest, steaming suppers spread on the table, his father's allowance that not every young fellow had to farm.

The only intrusion, apart from sin, was scrutiny: the eyes of his parents, or any adult in the congregation, pausing too long upon him. For if they peered closely, always the chance they might spot what lay beneath his starched white shirts, his prayers of thanksgiving, the brief prayers for righteousness he muttered nights his mother knelt by his bedside, the silent prayers for relief from the yearning that sprung on like shattercane the instant his guard faltered.

Still, at least, the appearance of holiness. Outwardly, Isaac seemed to measure up so long as he stuck to what was familiar – chores, studies, banter with his sisters, prayertime – and ducked any activity that might prompt inspection. Trouble was, the passage to manhood could not be completed “under a bushel,” in isolation. New thresholds needed crossing, and each attempt to avoid them prompted showerings of the very scrutiny he was working so hard to dodge. Horror at this, horror that multiplied. Each moment with anyone but his mother had the potential to be shattered by questions he could not bear to contemplate: “Who are you sweet on, Isaac?” “How's your love life?” “Which of the girls has your eye?”

Sputtering relief, therefore, on the back porch that balmy mid-September evening, when his father started to go on about driving.

“We got to get you started on the pickup. You're sixteen and a half, for goodness sake. When I was your age, I was already running the cab tractor, Pop's Roadmaster, and Dale Nissley's combine.”

Isaac scrambled for the usual excuses. “But Dad, I really don't need a license. Anywhere I want to go, I can walk.” The farms of Isaac's closest friends all within a couple miles, though they didn't get together often now that Isaac was studying so much.

His father leaned back in his rocker, took a slow sip of his milkshake. “That's all well and good, Isaac-boy. But what about when you start courting?”

It was a trap. Panicked by milder horror, Isaac had blundered in. His father's ruddy face glowed in the fading light; his bright eyes sparkled.

"Once I have somebody to court," Isaac said, in spite of a jumping stomach, in spite of clamminess, "then we can worry about driving."

His father just chuckled. "Now that right there is exactly the *wrong* way to be thinking. You'll never find somebody if you can't drive. And anyhow, how do you think you're going to get back and forth from that college if you don't have a license?"

"They have buses."

"Not out here they don't, and Mother and I won't have time to go running you around like some Pharaoh. You just need to do it. You can't keep making excuses. You got to drive to learn how to drive."

A spark against the pinking sky, the silver jewel of a jet, a white plume unfurling behind. The words unclogged a long-impacted blockage and revelation came pouring out. "You got to drive to learn how to drive." So perhaps the same was true of courting.

"Okay," Isaac mumbled. "Once my next exam is over."

His father chuckled. "All right. But I'm going to hold you to that."

But Isaac was too consumed to do anything more than nod. The revelation resounded as he rushed in from the porch, bounded up the steps and slammed the old wooden door to his bedroom, "You got to drive to learn how to drive" transformed to "You got to court a girl to know how to court her. You got to court to *want* to court. Courting, your sinful longing will be extinguished. Purity will flood your heart."

So simple, but for far too long, the idea had eluded him, all the months of prayer and combat with the Deceiver over unspeakable sin. Now, at last, revelation, sparkling like the jet still visible through the window, the vapor trail widening behind. Revelation – or at any rate, that is how it seemed. A boy of sixteen, beset by unspeakable longing, will look for revelation in just about anything. Therefore: courtship. The lack of pure desire no sign of unfitness; courtship would light the spark.

Thank you, Lord, Isaac whispered, his reflection slightly askew in the graying, spotted mirror. The answer arriving later than preferable, but still in plenty of time. Nine months in the schoolhouse. Three more months of summer, and then college, freedom from the farm. But courtship in the meantime.

And *who* to court was not really a question. The folks who needed Isaac about his love life were always saying who he ought to like, the sharpest girl in the congregation: Mary Elizabeth Zim-

merman. Lack of interest no longer a problem. Interest would come. Indeed, it was already starting. A smile, not unattractive, there in the mirror, though Isaac's neck was too long. Soon, he would talk to her. No need to decide exactly when, right now.

In bed that night, such relief at the revelation, joy at the routing of sin. Holy light seemed to fill the bedroom, to swell in his lungs, his blood, and amid this release, quiet astonishment at how long he'd indulged in uncountable sin.

Awe, when the wisps of facial hair had first appeared among the boys his age in the schoolhouse, muscles, light spritzes of pimples, and nothing to keep Isaac from sitting there and taking in all of it. Caught, he'd pretend to stare at something out the window, or one of the bulletin boards, the Map of Missions dotted with the beacons of its bright red stars, and keep looking until it was certain the gaze of the other boy had dropped.

This was how the earliest hints of wariness were established, by those narrowed eyes, by those lifted eyebrows, by those frowns. Even then, deep down, there must have been some sense of sinfulness. Why else the excuses: He was just looking; didn't everyone? Surrounded by all of the strong, fragrant bodies, how could they not? Still, the insistence: it was not wicked; it was a miracle, each glimpse was.

Years of this, from twelve, thirteen, all the way to the previous August, the yellow-striped tent of that year's evangelist pitched on the lawn of the meetinghouse. Cars rolling in from Old Order churches across the county, the buggies of a few Amish, families whose farms were close enough for an easy ride. Each night, the same message. The Judgment of the Lord is coming. Prepare your heart. But each night, the rangy evangelist featured a different iniquity: war-making, immodest women, covetousness. And then on the final evening, the visiting preacher took a seat on one of the chairs behind the little lectern, and the congregation's minister took the pulpit. Lloyd Wenger's face, usually so doughy and peaceable, taut with the urge to keep up. The pastor began with a long story about the Wal-Mart recently constructed on the lot behind his house on what had been prime farmland.

"Progress, the world calls it," he'd continued, "And you can understand that yearning – for gadgets, for drink, for fancy cars. Life is difficult. It's lonely. Of course it is. The world is fallen. That's why we turn to the Lord. But the trouble is as time ticks on, folks just keep getting farther and farther from God's word. They don't read this book." He raised his Bible. "They don't fellowship with each other in church. They don't tithe properly, sacrifice. Why would they, when the world promises them everything they want

can be had on this earth, when they've lost the sense of what it means to deny themselves? And it's happened so gradually folks have hardly noticed what they've done. Years ago, in the weak churches, women stopped veiling their hair before God. Men bought televisions, subscribed to the papers. They started wearing ties. 'What does it matter?' they said, back then. 'We still go to worship.'"

So many ensuing evenings, Isaac had replayed this sermon, rebuking himself, convicting himself with it, even as he insisted it did not apply to the thoughts that still gripped him whenever his guard slipped.

The pastor's voice calmer now. The eye carried that familiar softness. "What has happened in the meantime, brothers and sisters, is that there has come to be no difference between the church and the world. Between 'God's people'— people who think they're holy — and folks who've turned their backs on the Lord. My brother Jonas, he has a couple rental properties in Lancaster city," said the pastor. "Right by one of his places on Lemon Street, two men just bought a house. Nice men. *Church-goers*, so I'm told. One Sunday night, my brother saw them himself, walking into the Methodist church together, holding hands. Like man and wife."

"Progress, the world calls it," the pastor had intoned calmly. "But understand, brothers and sisters, the Lord weeps when he sees that. He weeps at our pride. He weeps at our boldness, at our rejection of what is written very plainly in his Word. And the Deceiver *rejoices* at our failings. These relationships, this so-called 'lifestyle,' this is just the sort of worldliness that in the book of John, Christ warns us about. And more is coming, brothers and sisters. In some places, it already has. Some of you have seen in the papers that it is called *marriage*. Not yet in Pennsylvania, praise God. But up in New York State, they have this mockery of the Lord's covenant. Over in New Jersey. Fifteen miles from where we sit, they have it down in Maryland. And I am afraid, brothers and sisters, that it is just a matter of time before it comes here, before we see men and women in our township, making a mockery of the commandments of God. But we have nothing to fear so long as we keep ourselves apart. So long as we keep to the Lord's covenants. So long as anyone who the Deceiver tries to tempt into unholiness turns to Scripture, rebukes every forbidden thought."

The night was warm, but under his white shirt, Isaac broke out in a thick, cold sweat. The sweat ran down his armpits, coursed down his back. He gouged his palms with his fingernails, bit his bottom lip till it bled, but still the roar of sin continued through the

closing hymn, overtop the benediction, so loud that it seemed it would bring the service to a halt.

Somehow, Isaac got through it. In bed that night, he closed his eyes, mouthed the words the preacher had intoned so sorrowfully. *Two men. Two men.* Under the thin sheet, all across his body, sweat broke out afresh. A glimpse of his longtime crush Luke Sauder, but no dreamy lift of the spirits, no quickening of the blood. Instead, shame, clamminess, disbelief that for so long there'd been this indulgence in sin, this denial of what, as the pastor had said, was written *so plainly* in Scripture the rocks might as well have cried it out.

The next week, the pastor's sermon was more general. It concerned lust, no special weakness, perhaps the most common failing of all. Satan rejoicing, the Lord weeping at every wicked thought. Therefore, women be modest. Therefore, everyone guard your hearts. Desire for a woman *could* be holy so long as she was your wife, or would be soon. So folks courted and did the way it had always been done in the congregation: married young.

In the months that followed, a rising sense of isolation, different from the quiet distance of books. The other young men, after all, could find young women. The young women could find young men. Rufus Keener with Darla Weaver. Mary Sensenig with Benny Rohrer. Luke Sauder with Gladys Nolt – that wound still palpable, the courtship of his oldest crush. But for sinful longing, what outlet *for the rest of his life?*

So: angry prayers, tearful prayers, prayers of resignation. For weeks Isaac would keep from touching himself and then the urge would become impossible to resist, and the sense of disgust afterwards would be as seething as the Deceiver's triumph. All the while, at school and in the meetinghouse, shy glances toward the women's side, a quiet thirst the more desperate for how unquenchable it was. But gradually the knowledge, the dawning certainty, with the Lord all things – so yes, even this – was possible. And finally, revelation, on of all places the back porch. Courtship: the means to spark desire, praise God.

Once more, Isaac's father's words sounded, the translation that had so inspired. "You got to drive to learn how to drive." So: "You got to court a girl to court her." There in his bed, warmed by that holy light, Isaac drifted toward sleep.