

The following was submitted to a 2021 essay contest at Brigham Young University honoring Jane Thompson and connecting her legacy to students' lives.

Off-white

In a well-known portrait of Janie Thompson, she is not wearing a white dress. Her ringless fingers are not lightly placed on a husband's shoulder or knee. Rather, she is draped in an off-white tunic, wearing only gold necklaces for jewelry, one hand on the piano, the other holding a microphone—alone.

The script is the same whether you are the lead in a Golden Age musical or a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: get married and have a family. If anyone was familiar with scripts, it was Janie, a lifelong member of the Church who put on over 2,000 shows during just her first four years as a director at BYU.

Only she did not perform the role expected of her. She was born in 1921, unmarried by 1941, with no family of her own through the end of her life in 2013.

When I saw her portrait, which hangs in the Richards Building, I wondered what loneliness lurked behind her unblinking smile, what melancholy those Coke-bottle glasses concealed. It was a melancholy I anticipated in my future as much as I suspected it in her past.

When I had my first crush on a guy, who loved to tell me about his girlfriend, I thought of myself as Eponine in *Les Misérables*, yearning for a romance that I knew would never materialize. For a time, I would lie awake at night and sing to myself the song “On My Own,” an action that felt more right than trite in the moment. Per the script, I was mourning a marriage I would maybe never have. On the finite list of futures the Church imagines for queer members is celibacy—or the image of a gray, gay bachelor in a bathrobe, crying his mascara off in an apartment of mahogany furniture.

I wonder for how much of her life Janie thought that her moment of marriage was coming soon, that she was like Cosette in *Les Misérables*: waiting by the ivied gates of her house for a lover to arrive and woo her with a duet and full-pit orchestra. As much as a person dreams of having Cosette and Marius's romance, the trouble with living your life like it's *Les Mis* is that you are about as likely to die in the arms of your secret crush as you are to marry him. That pesky Eponine factor.

If the younger, heartbroken me squished himself into the role of the lonely gay man, Janie never played the maiden knitting quietly in her kitchen. She was never on the ward's list of unfortunates to minister to because she was too busy ministering to other people. During her career at BYU, she sewed costumes, wrote music, built sets, conducted rehearsals, brought food to students in need, visited orphanages and hospitals with her performers, and toured with them to every inhabited continent. She created the performing groups now known as the Young Ambassadors and Living Legends, which continue to inspire faith in Jesus Christ to this day.

Besides a director, Janie considered herself a mother. Her life expanded the scripted definition of motherhood to include her students, whom she affectionately called her children. As the groups she founded continue to perform, so too does her posterity keep growing and blessing the world.

Understanding that there are significant differences between my situation and Janie's, I would contend that she taught me that a single life does not have to be an eternal wait at ivied gates. She taught me to unsubscribe from the narrative that my marital status limits my capacity to bless other people—a lesson I hope she might also teach the third of adult Church members who are single according to a 2015 Pew Research Study. According to Janie, a path “on my own” is not alone since I can enjoy a wealth of meaningful connections and work.

I understand Janie's portrait differently now. In it I see a template of a future portrait of myself: standing in front of the red ruffles of a curtain, wearing an off-white blazer, my eyes—with their mascara intact—gazing out at a crowd of loved ones as I sing a solo with pride.