



# THE GENEALOGY OF DELLA B PAULSEN

*A Story by Joseph Peterson*

I am Della Paulsen; I know it. Even if Billy says I don't look like me. Rational—that's what it's not. It just isn't rational to think a damned silly hair cut is going to change me from me. How the hell should Billy know anyway. He's just a boy, and I've known him only a few months. That's right; now I'm being rational.

But this didn't start with Billy. When I was four, my father, Eldridge Paulsen, came home to my mother after being on the range with the calves. Liz and I sat in the loft. Father was angry again, and probably drunk too. "Heard something," he said, "something about you."

"Oh God, Eldridge," mother said, "what now?"

"Heard something about Huey and Louissa—about your mother and father."

Mother looked at the floor.

"Why didn't you tell me?" father asked.

Mother still looked at the floor.

"You should have told me, dammit!"

Mother started crying, her shoulders rocking up and down.

"Then it's true!" father yelled. "You're the child of Louissa Romney and of God knows who else."

Mother's shoulders rocked more violently, and she sobbed aloud.

"Goddammit woman," he said and he rubbed the top of his head with both hands. "Goddammit, why didn't you tell me?"

She only cried.

"I had to hear it from that son of a bitch, Christensen. And me married to a woman who doesn't know who her father is!"

Mother stood crying, her head down. Father clenched his fists and stood in front of mother. Then, in one liquid motion, he struck mother across the eye with the back of his closed fist. She collapsed. And her head seemed to bounce almost comically off the planks of the floor.

Suddenly, father looked up at me. His face winced and he said, "You go to bed now or you're next." He was walking out the cabin door as I hurried to get in bed. And the cabin was dark, and Liz was crying beside me. But I couldn't hear mother, so I reasoned that she was dead.

"Is mommy all right?" Liz asked.

"I'll look." I crept from my bed and looked over the edge of the loft. "She's just lying there. Not moving."

I fell to sleep that night beside my mother on the cabin floor. And I understood, even when I was four, that mother was the child of sin. And I knew that in many ways, I was too. I wasn't myself for a time.

And again, when I was eight, my father's arthritic blue mare fell on top of me as I was galloping her across the lower field. At first she got to her feet, grunting, and stood over me. Then I stood, got dizzy, and blacked out. I know this will sound strange, but I then felt myself leave myself; and I stood over myself looking into my face, a dead-pale face except for the blood-stain freckles that spattered my nose and cheeks. The one part of me stood over the other part. I remember asking myself, "Whose blood is on my face?"



I often saw my face that way—from outside myself. As I grew older, my face leered at me through mirrors. And as I reached puberty, mine was a face of somehow fallen purity, for I was an enticing sixteen-year-old. The whiteness of my skin, a nude ghost gazing at me from the other side of a steamed bathroom mirror, poignantly contrasted the candy red of my plump lips and the sweeping rouge and face paint that I had begun to use (rebellious against my prudish mother). During that time I caught visions of myself reflected back to myself from store front windows and the surface of the irrigation pond that high school girls skinny dipped in—leaning languidly against a buggy, standing naked in the warm mud, popping apricot halves into my mouth and cleaning the dark juice from my lips with long fingernails. Through all these visions of myself, I was held in a trance by the blood-spot freckles of my absolute white face.

Of course Billy's wrong. It's not rational to think a hair cut's going to change a person. But I still wonder whose blood stains my face. My mother was the child of sin.

Grandpa Huey married Louissa Romney in 1883, but

he didn't sire my mother. The clandestine love affairs of my ancestors cut my lines, set me adrift. Blood mingled. No record kept. Louissa Romney—the damned woman—she cut me adrift.

Be rational now, Della girl. What does Billy know. He's only a boy—a boy like all the others, wanting to throw you down and grunt on top of you in the grass. Oh hell, Billy! I am Della Paulsen.

Grandma Paulsen has traced mother's genealogical line as though it hadn't been severed—all the way back to a man named Jeromy Devereaux Frank, a man who deserted the army in the Mexican War. He lived with a cleaning woman named Mildred Christiansen in Boston only long enough to leave her with child and with his name. Jeromy Frank and Mildred Christiansen would have been my great-great grandparents; and their daughter, born soon after Jeromy Frank had left his wife, was Sarah Frank, Grandpa Huey's mother. She would have been my great-grandmother.

When she was eighteen, Sarah left her mother in Boston to marry Delbert Langden, a land and slave owner in Rome, Georgia, Sarah lived in Rome until Delbert Langden sired Grandpa Huey and went to fight the northern forces as a confederate foot soldier. I sometimes try to see Delbert Langden in my mind, but all I see is a dead man sprawled in a southern meadow, a dark hole in his face, flies clustered around his eyes, mouth, and nostrils. He was shot in a skirmish; nearly a month before Huey was born.

And now Huey's dead too, drowned in a canal.

On my last birthday Grandma Paulsen gave me a copy of mother's supposed genealogy. All those names, those damned, cursed names, scrawled in India ink across the pages and the lines that tie the names together.

Grandpa Huey was a man I often saw but only came to know—really know—a week ago yesterday. My first memories of Huey were those of seeing him bathe in the muddy canal that ran across the lower corner of his homestead plot. Several friends and I would hide in a cedar tree across the road on a swell, and we would watch as the dusty old man stripped to his temple garments and walked barefoot down to the edge of the canal with a tin cup in one hand and a wash rag in the other.

We little girls would gasp and flutter among ourselves as he stripped half the undergarments off, exposing half his body. We would giggle as he rinsed the exposed half carefully, wiping the opaque-white hair of his chest and arm pits with the ragged cloth. Then, without ever totally exposing his body, he would put clean undergarments on the washed half and expose and wash the other half.

It seemed beautiful to me. Even though I tittered enthusiastically with my friends, my hand over my mouth, and laughed at Grandpa Huey's sagging belly and wrinkled breasts. His actions—the scrubbing, the rinsing off with the tin cup, the placing of the wash rag over a dried sprig of sage to dry—these actions seemed to me the actions of a devout priest handling holy objects. It was profoundly beautiful to me—even as a little girl.

As we grew up my sister Liz and I had the task of looking after Grandpa Huey, straightening his things in

his homestead, washing his dishes, and laundering his clothes—none of which Huey would allow us to do. So we had to be careful. One of us would divert his attention while the other quickly cleaned up or smuggled his extra set of clothing into an old shopping bag.



One day about three years ago in deep winter, we went to his homestead—logs rotting from the center and frame windows—and found Grandpa Huey squatting against a small wood stove in the warmer of the two rooms. He was wearing his grey hood like always and had a thread-bare quilt wrapped around his narrow shoulders. It was my turn to divert his attention.

Which was easy to do, because Huey had lost most of his teeth, his hearing, and half of his face by that time. He had had skin cancer since a young boy, a disease that had irritated his eyes while he was young and had turned malignant while he was old. I remember when it started eating his face. A small red dot on his upper lip, it had a peculiar odor—like potatoes rotting in a limestone cellar—and it had eaten his nose and most of his face (which was amputated in a Provo doctor's office and thrown into an incinerator—an inanimate handful of flesh). He had gotten so blind that Liz and I could almost smuggle clothes in the same room with him.

When we started talking he sat like some idol—cross-legged with the quilt around his shoulders, his boots so large they barely hung around his boney feet, his pants on backwards, and his white eyes peering out from the blackened center of that grey hood. (Grandpa Huey always bought the largest size of boot in the mercantile so as to get the most for his money; he wore the filthy hood so as not to scare us children, whom he loved—so as to hide the festering ugliness that was left of his face; and he wore his pants backwards so as not to wear holes in the knees.)

When I was eight, Huey finally gave in to the doctor's requests. He came to us and removed his hood, revealing great purpled patches of flesh and open sores over his lips and eyelids. "This," he said, "is why I wear this hood—this ugliness that is me." I distinctly remember the smell of his face. Three months later, Huey returned to us behind a plastic mask—his prosthesis. The cancer had been worse than any of us had supposed, and Huey's insistence on treating it with a poltice of ground juniper and sage had done nothing to arrest the disease—and he was terrifying to us for a time. His nose and the whole right side of his face had had to be voided him, and in their place he wore a flesh-colored piece of plastic that covered half his face: a plastic nose that yellowed with years and a plastic cheekbone that had the translucency of decay. He began to wear his mask again when he made a little girl cry. As he had tried to take the girl in his arms, she had screamed to her mother and quivered with fear.

Over the years my mother's two older sisters went through the same process, first Aunt Virginia and then Aunt Emma. I remember Emma. She came back to us one day—I think I was thirteen then—came back to us another Aunt Emma—the real Emma hidden behind the

workings of a plastic surgeon.

That day in deep winter three years ago, as Liz and I smuggled Huey's clothing, he told me about coming to Utah. Liz was busy in the other room. Sarah had taken Huey to Utah when he was five, crossing the plains during the summer and dropping down into the Great Basin in early fall. Sarah Langden wanted to go on to San Francisco to live there with her half-sister Virginia (from Mildred Christiansens's second marriage), a spinstress who ran a boarding house. As though to derive comfort in their mutual celibacy.

But John Gardner found her in Utah.

He descended upon Huey's mother at a time when Mormon women in Utah couldn't offer what a Georgian could offer, and John Gardner wooed her into Grantsville—then only a few wooden structures, a stone church, and the beginnings of cottonwood and poplar windbreaks. John Gardner wooed her into the two-room homestead that still stands in Grantsville south of the high school in a field of ancient apricot trees.

John Gardner was an embittered visionary convinced simultaneously of the truthfulness of the Mormon gospel and the corruption of its administration. As a young man he had been among the Saints in 1847 when they had entered the Salt Lake Valley. He had fallen in love with the daughter of a Danish convert, a girl named MaryAnn Larsen, and he had planned to marry her.

His stake president, a fat bald man with a red face, a man of about fifty-five who had two wives and was looking for a third, approached MaryAnn and proposed, telling her that the spirit had directed him to her and had set her apart as a helpmeet and celestial mate to him. But the Danish girl proclaimed her love for John Gardner.

And the Prophet Brigham Young had called Gardner on a colonizing mission then to Grantsville, but the rigor of the call was such that a woman would be a hindrance; better to send for the women after the men had built rudimentary dug-outs, made ditches and canals, and cultivated at least some of the land. After being in the colony for three years, John Gardner had sent for MaryAnn Larsen, only to find that she had married the stake president and borne him twins. Gardner always felt that his call had come not from God Almighty, but from a lustful stake president.



John Gardner baptized Sarah in the canal that ran across the corner of the homestead plot (regrettably a lower corner, so that flood irrigation was impossible and the land worthless—by most estimations). Huey used to tell me about seeing his mother coming out of the water dressed in white, the gown she wore clinging to her belly and thighs in golden circles. The white so bright that it blinded him—his cancer—and he had cried. Wept even when he told me about it, as though the whiteness of it refracted inward on Huey to burn him there. John Gardner married Huey's mother then, and he set about the task of making the homestead. Now green and orange lichens grow on the logs, and the chinks made of lime mortar reinforced with horse hair have become the

bed of fly eggs, the bloated insects dying and falling silently to the floor.

I don't know John Gardner, just as I don't know most of my ancestors who died before my birth. But last Christmas I listened while mother talked with Grandma Paulsen about Gardner. "Yes," Grandma said, standing over a chipped sink, peeling the withered carrots that came from the root cellar in mid-winter. "Yes, I knew your grandmother, Sarah Langden Gardner." (Grandma didn't understand that Sarah was not my mother's grandmother.) "I also knew that man Gardner. Sarah was a talented woman—one that man Gardner didn't deserve. Why, she knew everything. Even how to keep carrots!" Grandma Paulsen punctuated her assertion by bending one of the rubbery carrots.

"I wish they would last longer," said mother. "Don't taste the same."

"No, no they don't. But Sarah knew how to keep them. Packed them in snow and straw. Lordy, she was talented. Quilts! You should have seen that woman quilt."

"Oh?"

"Yes, and cardboard doll houses. You know, from shoeboxes. She could make them just as real as anything. That man Gardner never deserved a woman like that." (Grandma Paulsen could purse her mouth till the red of her lips disappeared.) "I remember one day he got up in fast meeting and told about finding the grave of a dead Indian in a gully. Imagine it; he's walking down this gully when he finds the skeleton of an Indian—or so he said—this Indian lying there in a blue-clay pad on the side of the gully. He said the gully side had washed away and uncovered the grave. He told us there that he saw in a vision to the times when the Indian was alive, and a Lamanite prophet had blessed the Indian that when his corpse was disturbed he would resurrect. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," mother said.

"Then, see, he told us—I can hardly believe it, even to this day—that the Indian resurrected right before his eyes. Said that he could see the flesh forming, the bowels and loins coming back to their original vigor, the skin forming over the muscles, and finally, the hair growing to full length. Just like that—he said it in front of everyone."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, as I stand here. That man Gardner was a picture, I'm telling you."

My mother has told me that she once thought of Gardner as a crazy man.

In the fall of 1872, Gardner came to Huey and asked him if he thought he should be baptized. So, on a Saturday morning, several Relief Society sisters gathered on the banks of the canal in the apricot orchard and sang a few hymns, and a stocky fellow with one bad eye—a milky glaze covering the lens—gave a speech on being born of the water and of the spirit. Then John Gardner took Huey Langden down into the waters of baptism, the whiteness of the baptismal clothing in the morning sun almost unbearable to Huey's eyes. But the water had been cold and dark, and Huey was immersed in it.

Huey used to talk a lot about his baptism, and about his mission.

When Huey was seventeen, his stake president called him to preach to the Lamanites. So for a time, Huey spent his days with the Indians where they camped in the red-sand bottoms of a wash outside of St. George. He couldn't talk with them, so he simply stayed with them, sitting beside a spring infested with frogs and tadpoles, watching the long-breasted squaws walking throughout the encampment, some with pot-bellied children riding their hips and clinging to their arms.

Huey watched the frogs and the squaws. Sensing that both had lives of fleshy animality—rhythms that for Huey seemed the cadence of God. Huey told me that they for him contained a simple—but powerful—kind of holiness.

"A dark squaw whose protruding belly was pocked and stretched by the birth of her infant son," Huey once told me, "whose breasts had lost their form, lay dying in the morning of one of my visits to the spring. A urinary infection. And the processes of life and of death, of birth and decay seemed whole and good to me that morning. The squaw died while I watched."

He had tried to bring the gospel to the Indians—to bring light unto the heathen—but he had realized on looking into the dried manure left by the squaw behind a mesquite bush that there was a simplicity in primitive life that he himself had lost, an immediacy to base reality—existence in this decrepit, mortal sphere; and he had decided—on seeing in that squaw's dropping the broken bones and the yellowed teeth and the ragged fur of a mouse—decided that he had no right to approach these people, the Indians, about God. They knew God! They knew in a sense more immediate than he could know; they knew—their life had taught them.

Seeing the droppings made Huey realize that Jesus—as envisioned by most men—was a sham; that Christianity was a laughable, but lamentable, illusion. In a piece of dry squaw dung he had a brief glimpse of what is.

The next spring Huey returned to Grantsville to be reconverted by Louissa Romney, the brown-eyed daughter of a rancher, a girl who wore powdered corn on her nose to cover her dull-red freckles and the pores around her nostrils.

In 1883 Huey took Louissa Romney to wife; she bore him two daughters, Virginia and Emma. Many in town will tell you that she bore him four, but we who know are convinced she bore him only two. Linda (my mother) and Coleen, the youngest, are not Huey's. Virginia was born in 1884 and Emma in 1885. After that she refused to bear him more children. Told him her body wouldn't stand it and refused to lie with him. So she had no children, until in 1891 she bore my mother; and in 1895 my Aunt Coleen, a girl Huey cherished.

By conjecture, Huey didn't sire the latter two. And conjecture is, after all, a kind of history in itself. Word in town had it that Louissa was messing around. With Bishop Peters. (My cousins gather after our family reunions to talk in hushed tones about mother and Aunt Coleen: "Do they look like the Peters?" a girl cousin asks; "Yes," another concludes.)

Peters was an old man by then, but wealthy, and he

had four grown boys who worked his ranch. His wife, a broad-hipped old woman with a dark mole on her neck, had died the winter before of gangrene. The infection seeping into her left buttock and up until it choked her dead. I've heard old women tell that she died because she refused to pull old Peters's boots off, and the man—outraged that his helpmeet should balk at his requests—had chased the woman out of the cabin they lived in, down through a salt wash and across some flats where his boys were branding calves in a makeshift corral. As the old man passed his boys, he grabbed his double-B branding iron and branded the old woman through her dress—on her left flank—as she crawled through the fence. The old women say that the infection came from that wound. And killed her.

So, in early fall, Huey moved back to his homestead, just in time to catch the drying apricots as they fell from the trees, and put it on the willow roofing above the kitchen to dry further without putrifying.

And during that time, Louissa walked to town to tell of how he had abandoned her. But many in town, principal among them the grocer's wife, a woman whose dried skin hung in flaccid bags below her armpits and whose eyelids fit but loosely around the eyeballs, didn't believe Louissa, for she was prospering unaccountably without a man. And the grocer's wife always lowered her eyes upon seeing Louissa.



Louissa spoke to Huey again in late September, telling him she needed wood for winter. So Huey borrowed a team and wandered the hills looking for downed cedar just before snow. "On one afternoon" he told me, "there was a grey mist through the air and a dull circle of lighter grey around the sun, which atmosphere produced a lurid effect among the shadows of the trees. I saw then the faint outlines of spindling personages standing in a world somehow changed. On one side a gangly spastic walking through the hills on spiraling stilts; on the other a three-legged woman. Trees, all of them."

He gathered cedar until the skid was full, and he turned toward the small house he couldn't live in after Louissa had papered the walls with rose-covered swirls and dart-shooting cherubs.

When Huey unloaded the wood Louissa hadn't been home, only the daughters, the older two tending the younger two. The three older girls went to play, and Huey was alone with Coleen.

And he was holding her in his arms when he was struck to the back of the head, and was still lying unconscious on top of her when Louissa came to the house with her father. Huey had broken three of Coleen's ribs when he fell on her and he had bled all over her.

"Dear God, what has he done to her?" my grandmother shrieked; and her father had pulled Huey off the small girl. He lay unconscious until the next morning, when he awoke lying on straw in the cellar of the town hall—an improvised jail cell.

"All I know," I was later to hear Aunt Virginia say, "is that one minute he was playing with Coleen in the front

room. Emma, Linda, and I left to play under the trees, and when we came back with mother, why, there he was, laying on top of Coleeny. And Coleen bawling, and covered with blood. That's all I saw; I don't know anything more than that."

"It was Bishop Peters," I heard my cousin whisper. "He hit Grandpa."

But Louissa had insisted that it was child abuse. Maybe incest. So Huey regained consciousness in the cellar of the Grantsville Town Hall.

They had to send in a lawyer from Tooele because Grantsville had none until sometime after the depression. So the lawyer John Nelson came to Grantsville in a buggy to talk to Huey in the cellar, where Huey had spent two weeks in solitude. The timbers creaking at nights. Alone in the cellar, he had been content—the darkness and warmth interrupted only when his bishop had come to talk to him, asking if there were anything he needed—food from the Relief Society, maybe something to read.

John Nelson asked Huey to plead insanity. Which, of course, he did.

Standing upstairs in the town hall, Huey had listened stoically while Judge Josiah Pratt had sentenced him to spend six months in the newly completed state mental hospital in Provo, a five-story structure with Romanesque pillars. A period of six months to begin in three days—long enough to travel to Provo.

Huey told me about the hospital one day as he was pruning apricots: "It was white," he said, "shining white. It stood at the end of Provo's center street. I traveled with Grantsville's marshal, and the man drove the buckboard up the dirt road, past the long pasture that separated the building from the town. Lord it was white.

"At the time I thought I'd be out in six months, but it wasn't until the spring of 1908 that I was to see the outside again. I thought I'd live my last years in that place." Huey was squatting in the crotch of one tree clipping small limbs, and he got down to squat in the crotch of another tree.

"You see, child, the hospital was set up in those days so that the worst were on the top floors. I suppose that way less crazy people'd climb out of the windows and disappear into the mountains or desert. Understand?"

"Yes," I had said.

"Almost ten years in the white house. Lord." Huey was wearing his hood, but I could feel the expression on his face.

"Like I say, the further up you was, the crazier they thought you was; the craziest was on the top floor. And the craziest person in there was a negress named Deborah. We called her Queen Deborah. She was the highest. They started me on the third floor. Told me that as I got better I would work my way down, and finally out the door. I started on the third floor with the sex offenders."

"Sex offenders?" I had asked.

Huey paused and moved to the crotch of another apricot tree. "You have to understand, child, that the people thought I had done evil things with your Aunt Coleen. When I fell over on her, see, I hurt her—but not on purpose. The people thought I had been evil with my little Coleen."

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hat's a sex offender?" I had persisted.

"A sex offender is a person that gets kicked out of his family and home. The damnable thing about it is that kicking him out makes folks feel better about themselves—at least for a while. I was a sex offender, I guess, and they put me on the third floor with the rest of them in a room next to a man who later became my best friend. Hyrum Prested. He told me about the things in the hospital and showed me around. Hyrum had been fixed; I mean, see, they made him so he wasn't a man."

(I had seen my father rope young bull calves to the ground and tie their legs in a bundle. He would then cut a piece of rawhide from the inside of the back leg and he would tie it around the bull calf's testicles. I had watched the bull calves standing alone on the range with their heads down between their front legs, some rolling their eyes and hanging their tongues, some bellowing pathetically. And the rawhide would dry and shrink, severing the animal's sexual glands. Even when Huey told me about it, I knew exactly what he meant by "fixed." I was later to learn that Huey too had been fixed. He died faceless and emasculated.)

Huey could see that I understood.

"Six months; that's what the judge told me when I first went, and I could have got out after those months except for the white. The halls, the beds, the ceilings and floors—everything was white. Everywhere I looked."

Huey squatted in the crotch of another tree.

"It was my eyes, child. Grandpa's eyes don't like white and everything in that hospital was white."

Then Huey laughed and said, "I had a friend in the hospital who whittled on the same piece of wood for years. Mostly because he had no knife."

I laughed too.

"He sat on a cot with the wood between his feet, and he worked it with his hands. And there was a Britisher named Alfred Willoughby-Snade. A fat man. He used to be offended if you called him by anything beside his whole name. 'Good morning, Alfred Willoughby-Snade,' I would say. 'Good morning, Huey Langden,' he would say. He owned a bar near London. That's in England. He was raised by a Chinaman and wore his head shaved until he was twenty or so, and he called himself a Confucianist—that was, until the missionaries found him in his bar and made him a Mormon.

"He used to leave his teeth out—he had wooden ones because his real teeth had rotted—but like I say, he'd leave the wooden teeth out on his table, except for when he was eating, and he talked with a kind of rasping mumbo-jumbo because his head would almost collapse when he shut his mouth. When he opened his mouth, his head seemed a great, hollow cave.

"Yes, I remember Alfred Willoughby-Snade well. He always needed my help. He knew I was a Mormon and he looked me up to talk to. 'I need to talk to you, sir,' he would tell me. And he would talk for hours on end, but I could never be sure of what he was saying. 'There are things that visit me, he would say, right in the middle of a conversation on the weather. 'Awful things come to

me, and I need the Lord's constant companionship.' "

Huey would affect a British accent.

"And he would end his conversations most often when the attendants came to take him to dinner, with the words 'so you see, sir, I truly need your help.' "

"There was another fellow who didn't know what his left arm was going to do. He would be sitting at the table ready to take his medicine, when his arm would jump up without his knowing it and grab this old, gray-headed nurse by her. . . Well, you need not know where he grabbed her."

I laughed long and hard.

"His name was Williams. He wasn't very old—thirty or so. At least talk had it that he was only thirty. This seemed impossible to those of us who had known him and lived with him, because Williams had the looks of an old man. You know what I mean. Swollen joints, dark eyes."

Huey became solemn.

"One night I went into his room and found him crying out loud because his left hand had been beating him. 'Make it stop,' he said. And I said, 'Why, you don't look beaten. What are you crying for?' But he didn't answer. He just laid there crying, 'Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop.'

"My best friend there was named Hyrum Prested. He was from Ogden—a non-Mormon. They had him in the hospital because, well. . . Just because."

"Why, Grandpa?" I insisted.

Huey looked at me. "You're young and this might seem hard for you to understand. But Hyrum wasn't like most men in that he didn't take a woman to wife. Understand?"

"Yes."

"But Hyrum wasn't sick—least not until they started giving him treatments. There was a pool, or a wooden tub rather, that they filled with water, and they hung you there from a board in the water all day. Hyrum didn't need the hospital."

Queen Deborah, the negress that lived on the fifth level, was a being that for Huey held a kind of mystique during his ten years at the mental hospital. He spoke of her only once or twice. And then only when he was safe inside the homestead John Gardner had built for Huey's mother.

She was a pot-bellied negress who lived most of her life on the fifth level of the mental hospital—two levels higher than Huey's. But he made it, ascended to her and met her during his ninth year.

"In January," Huey told me, "they finally moved me another level higher—the top floor. And when I finally made it, I had the sense that I was almost through, that I had gone so far into the whiteness of the hospital that I could now start on my way out. See?" His hood was low, covering his face, and he couldn't see me, nor could I see him. "I was one of the ones that could help, and my assignment was to change diapers on the fifth level. Grown men and women there in diapers—large infants mostly. That is how I knew Queen Deborah. She was fat, with long arms and legs, and a protruding navel the size of a silver dollar, and she had carbuncles across her forehead and shoulders. She used to sit cross-legged and mostly naked in her room. I bathed her. At nights you

could hear her chanting and hissing—almost like she was coughing up something from the bottom of her throat.”

Huey paused. Sniffed. “Deborah, she knew things I can only guess at. At nights, you understand, she would chant and wail. She would horrify me. One night an attendant told me to go to her and change her and bathe her. She was wet from head to foot with her own urine, and as I rolled her over onto a washing cot, she told me something.”

Huey stopped a brief moment.

“She said, ‘You and me, we one and the same. I know you and you know me.’ I washed her, changed her, and rolled her back over onto her mattress.”

They released Huey Langden from the hospital in 1908, almost forty years ago. Many years before I was born. And I have grown up knowing Huey Langden as a crazy man; a man with a grey hood and no face; emasculated; wearing his pants backwards and walking in his too-big boots through the apricot orchard, shoulders hunched forward; a man whose presence terrifies children.



In recent years, I’ve tried to know him better. Especially as I read through the yellowed pages of my Grandma Paulsen’s genealogical trees—the binders full of pioneers’ pictures (buffeted people). I don’t know. Perhaps tying myself into the complexity of all that, clinging to father Adam would make me what I am (or what I am meant to be?).

And also, I’ve loved him in recent years. His homestead is a sacred place. I have gone there without fear of seeing myself—the one part of me peering wide-eyed at the other me, the two of us never one. Oh God, I have liked Huey’s place.

A week ago yesterday I took Grandma Paulsen’s binders of genealogical trees to Huey’s place. But the homestead was empty. I placed the binders on the box where he keeps Delbert Langden’s gun and the pillows Sarah made for him, and I went to look for him. As I rounded the back of the cabin, I saw Huey going to the canal to bathe himself. And I quietly went to the cedar tree where, years before as a young girl, I had brought my friends; and together we had fluttered and giggled at the spectacle of the old man bathing. Huey was never without his undergarments, the guardians against sin and corruption he had received in the Mormon temple. When he had bathed, he had stripped half of the garments, untying them carefully and exposing half his body, and he had gently washed and rinsed the exposed half; and then he had replaced the clean garment and exposed and washed the other half.

But that afternoon a week ago yesterday as I watched alone from within the cedar, Huey stripped off the garment totally and plunged into the canal. Immersed himself in the dirty water.

For a long time, Grandpa Huey lay in the black mud on the shore, shoots of swamp grass extending past his eyes towards the unbroken sky, gnats sounding in his ears.

The sun was whole to me that afternoon; and Huey lay for a long time in the mud, until getting up, he left a black indentation with his aged body. A mark fossilized in my memory.

He looked through the cedar tree and saw me. I began to cry as I watched the old man’s broken body, his stoop, his rheumatism, his emasculation, and the space that had been his face. Oh God, a buffeted man. He limped up the canal bank and wrapped an old rag around his nakedness. Then he came to me and sat with me in the lower limbs of the cedar tree.

“Della girl,” he said, “for all the history of grief there has to be one of joy—one doesn’t go without the other.” He coughed and seemed nervous. I wept. “Even if we don’t share blood, Della, I know you. And I’m sure you know me.” And then he left me in the tree and ambled back to his cabin.

Three days ago some of the boys in town found Huey’s bloated body bobbing in the eddies under a small falls. Huey had drowned while bathing.

Yesterday I sat in the funeral with Billy. My father, smelling like the beer he had drunk all morning, sat on the other side of me, and next to him my mother.

A young brother from the ward was talking about the resurrection.

“Your hair’s different,” whispered Billy.

“Yes.”

“Get it cut?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” he said, “sure makes you look different.”

My face felt suddenly hot and I wept. Oh hell, Billy. Why did you say that for? It’s just not rational to think a hair cut’s going to make me something else. Oh hell, Billy. My face was hot, and I cried during the rest of the funeral.

After the service the girls served refreshments, and Relief Society sisters stood like rocks in the cultural hall, in one hand sugar cookies on a doily, in the other fruit punch in a cup.

“Want to leave?” Billy asked.

“Yes.”

After Billy was through with me it was dark. Billy kissed me hard on the lips and left me in the gravel road in front of my house. The crickets were loud. My father was snoring on the couch in the front room when I came in, and I decided to go to Grandma Paulsen’s genealogical trees, the binder full of people held together. I had left it in the homestead, Huey’s blackened home, so I walked there. Pushed back the plank door and entered the larger room with the stove, the room where Huey had kept his pillows and muzzleloader. And I wept. Oh hell, Billy. I am Della Paulsen. I tore the pages of the genealogy out of the binder and ripped them one by one into long strips. Then into small squares. I let them fall in patches on the floor. And I wept. Dammit, I am me! And when I had finished, I sat in the patches of torn paper on the floor and looked up to find Huey’s plastic, prosthetic face, hanging by a string on the blackened wall. Watching me as I cried and wiped my tears on the torn genealogical trees.

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