Sunswath

First Place Winner in the D.K. Brown Fiction Contest

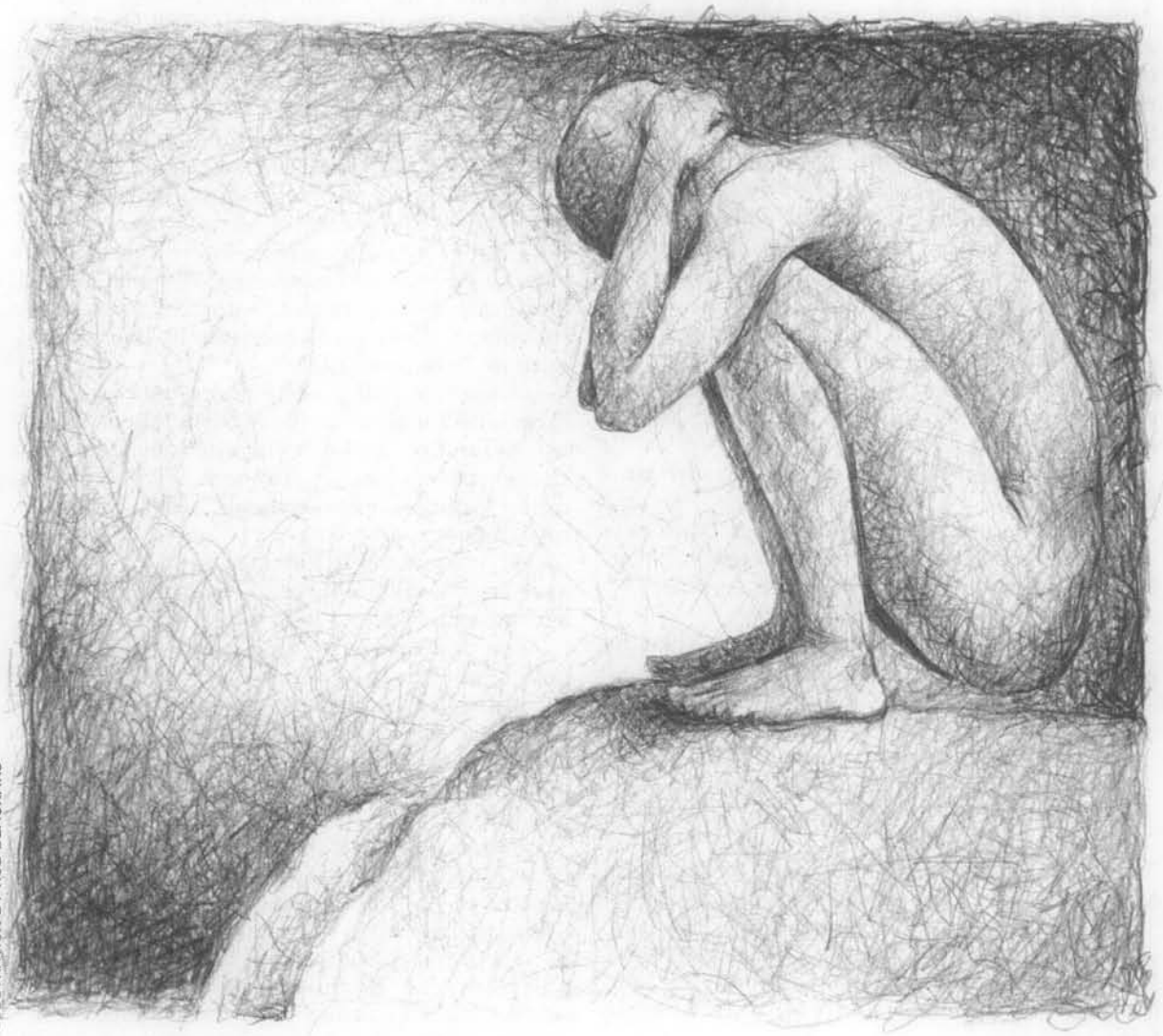

ILLUSTRATION BY ROB BLACKARD

By Levi S. Peterson

Mid-summer we visited Harlan's sister and brother-in-law in Logan, who had raised Harlan. It was the first time I'd ever met them face to face. Harlan was suspicious about going, but when they promised they'd stay off the topic of our unmarriage, amorals, and irreligion, he said okay. You'd have a hard time finding more tolerant and liberal Mormons, Winifred being a professor of nutrition at Utah State and Milton being an ear, nose, and throat specialist. They bought Carter (our little boy) and Harlan and me swimming suits, mine at a maternity shop, and we went waterskiing and sunbathing at Bear Lake, staying overnight in their motorhome, which is almost as big as a Greyhound bus. Winifred drove on the way through Logan Canyon so that Milton could play Old Maid with Carter. The canyon slopes were layered with great grey limestone cliffs.

Harlan raised his voice over the rumble of the motorhome: "Rocks have essence of a sort. If you try you can communicate with them. A rock won't let you down. Lately Bill Thorden and I have been working on a fence for the BLM out the other side of Hanksville. Suppose at lunchtime I'm sitting with my back to a boulder, I can feel it and it can feel me. There's a current between us."

Winifred said, "That's a pretty way to put it. Mormons believe the earth has a soul so maybe

we also believe rocks have souls."

"Not seriously, you don't," Harlan said.

"Don't we believe the earth has a soul?" she called back to Milton.

"Yes, that's certainly true. Yes, I think so, I think we do."

"You never spoke politely to a rock in your life," Harlan said.

"Well, I certainly respect rocks," she said.

The lake was utterly blue: bright sun and drifting puffs of cloud; powerboats churning among listing sails. Winifred sat on a little throne of sand, a beautiful woman of fifty-five—legs muscled and tan, belly flat, silver hair cut square. She talked about Harlan as a child. Once he had climbed a tree and couldn't get down, his tennis shoes wedged in a crotch. The fire department came with flashing lights and wailing sirens. They sent for a saw, thinking they'd have to cut off a limb. Then somebody thought of untying his shoe laces and lifting him out. A wind was coming in directly from the lake, bringing a slow surf. Milton steered his powerboat past us, Harlan in tow on a pair of skis, crisscrossing the wake. Carter sat by Milton. They waved, and we waved in return.

"When he was little, did he get along with your kids?" I said.

"It would surprise you how he let Edith persecute him, considering she was two years younger. But he and Keith didn't have much conflict."

"Was he broody and black?"

"Well, no. Serious minded, however. Has he got broody and black?"

"Quite often."

"That's just too bad."

"I apologize for us not being married," I said.

"I'm not saying a word about it. We promised."

"I am very bitter toward the Church."

"I supposed you were."

"Even if I come back in, I'll pray to Heavenly Mother. No more prayers to Heavenly Father."

She rubbed a wrist and looked over the lake, very uneasy. Mormons think God is married—Father and Mother God. Our Mother in Heaven isn't active. We aren't permitted to pray to her, so I do.

I was excommunicated the spring before I met Harlan. When I got home after my trial the lights were off, and I had to let myself in. When Mom came I wasn't surprised to see Dad wasn't with her. She said he had gone out to the ranch. Of course she was crying; had been for several days.

"The informer, it turns out, was Dad," I said. "And who told Dad? You did."

She couldn't deny it. She had a gaunt, barren face, a cotton print dress, flat heels, bare legs: a religious anorectic; a conscientious alien to self esteem; a perpetually violated virgin. Her cheeks were grooved—shadowy little runnels carrying tears to her chin. One summer night I confessed to her that during a during a dismal year at Weber State I had managed to have sex with five guys. I hoped telling her would help me quit; maybe help me not be so angry.

When we left Logan and started home for Boulder Harlan drove by a back road over a mountain named Monte Cristo. "What have you got against your sister?" I asked him. " She and Milton both seem like wonderful people. You've been hiding them from me."

"They disgust me," he said. "Talk about conspicuous consumption. Like hogs at a trough, they use up a hundred times their fair share of the world's resources."

"Winifred's doing research on cholesterol. Venison is much better for you than beef."

"Very bright, very professional, isn't she? And she believes in the Book of Mormon. Good God!"

Coming out of a canyon into Huntsville we saw a sign that said *monastery*. "My gosh," I said. "It's not very smart to let a bunch of monks get a toehold in Zion; monkhood might be catching, with no cure, like AIDS."

I made him pull in. The monastery was a big farm with Quonset huts for barns, sheds, dormitories, and so on. Over the one they used for a chapel rose a cross. In another they had a retail outlet for bread, eggs, and milk; also for rosaries, medallions, and books.

"What happens if a pagan buys a rosary?" I asked the monk in charge of the store. He wore a black scapular over a long white robe.

"You don't look like a pagan to me," he said, pulling out a tray of beads.

I also selected three medallions. One was in honor of Our Lady of Guadelupe. "When you convert," the monk said, weighing the enameled pendant in his palm, "you will have to make a trip to Mexico to visit her shrine."

I wandered among the book stands collecting a little armload—*The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux; The Rule of St. Benedict; Of the Imitation of Christ*; some others. The monk was happy. He patted the sack into which he had slipped the rosary and medallions and books, saying, "Now you have been warned. Remember that."

"Yes, thank you for reminding me," I said. "Something like that is pretty easy to forget."

"What in hell are you doing?" Harlan whispered as we left.

"There aren't a lot of bookstores in Boulder," I said. There aren't any, of course.

"Yeah, but those books!" he said

A month later, Winifred and Milton phoned asking if they could visit us. In the middle of the night before they came I got up to take Carter to the toilet. Harlan had been in camp with Bill Thorden all week. After I had put Carter back in bed, I went into my room and lit two candles on a little table covered with a white cloth. Midnight is when nuns and monks say matins. I wanted to pray for Harlan in a way that would do him some good. The rosary was on the table but didn't

touch it. You're supposed to say prayers while you finger the beads—ten Hail Mary's for each Our Father. I had an idea Catholic prayers would be easier to say than Mormon prayers: if God listens to Catholics, who are in the wrong, why wouldn't God listen to me? My wanting to say some Hail Mary's was actually very irrational. You have to understand our Heavenly Mother isn't Mary; she's truly half of God, not just the foremost of the Saints. No matter. I couldn't get past that rosary coiled on the table. Who ever heard of a Mormon lighting candles on an altar?

It being a hot night I slipped off my robe so I was naked. I would like to know somebody's true opinion about God and a naked body. I have thin cheeks and a long jaw and a broken nose (a gift from my father in my twelfth year). I'm not tall, and my legs are toothpicks, and I have hardly enough bottom to make a decent cushion for sitting. So imagine a pumpkin bulging below my corrugated ribs, gleaming orange-white in the candle flame, reflections of Eve and the commencement.

How do women who have quintuplets survive all the umbilicals tied into their womb like so many IV's draining, draining, draining? I don't think I have a gift for mothering. When I first get pregnant and vomit all day I think about abortions. Speaking of umbilicals: there's one between me and Harlan. He has a lump of coal inside, bigger than his two fists, pure poison. His blood circulates around it, soaking its surface; some of the blood dies, turns yellow. It trickles through to me for dialysis. My body cleans it, takes out the particles of coal, and sends it back. I have worried for a long time about his sediment building up inside me. Calcification of the will, so to speak; depression. I've got enough of my own; I don't need his.

After breakfast I went frantically to work cleaning up our little house, not too much, just the living room, which is also our dining room and kitchen. The linoleum was littered: plastic blocks, bread crusts, dried mud, and in a corner, for God's sake, a cereal bowl full of chicken droppings which Carter had harvested. He played they were eggs.

Early afternoon Winifred and Milton pulled up in their motorhome; flowers emerged, he in a yellow jump suit, she in a pink dress, maroon sandals, a thin maroon belt. They had brought a gift for Carter, a truck with batteries and a remote control. Milton got down on his hands and knees and showed Carter how to operate the truck. Looking up, he said he wanted to put on a gala dinner that night in the motorhome. They both marveled over the view we have through the plate glass window—across the road, the Thorden's weathered frame house with Virginia Creeper climbing the rock chimney; beyond that an orchard and a couple of alfalfa fields; then red slopes dotted by solitary pines; beyond that, Boulder Mountain, smoke-blue with timber.

Later Milton and Carter went for a walk and Winifred began leafing through one of my Catholic books. Her voice was a murmuring alto, very comforting: "I'm supervising this graduate student who's a Catholic. She's researching what happens to proteins in microwave cooking."

"Catholics aren't so bad," I said; "It wouldn't be much stranger being a Catholic than being an elephant trainer."

"Oh, no. Mabel is a very, very fine person."

"Do you think God listens to Catholic prayers?"

"Oh, I would certainly think so."

"Probably not, however, if it was a Mormon saying them," I said.

Her laugh was all nerves. "Are these Harlan's?"

"Mine."

"Have you been saying Catholic prayers?"

"I've been thinking about it. When I try, I can't make enough spit to swallow."

"I wish I knew about Harlan," she said. "I would feel so much better if I knew he lived by some little shred or scrap of the gospel. Does he ever pray?"

I shook my head.

"I thought of him as my own," she said after a while. "Though not exactly. I tried to raise him in stewardship for Mother and Father. We told him to go on calling us Winifred and Milton, we didn't want him to forget.

"That was probably for the best."

"I have strange feelings, seeing your smock," she said. "I had two babies of my own. Maybe I should have had more. Though you can't go on forever."

"Nuns don't have any babies," I said. "They're married to Jesus and they call him the Spouse of Virgins."

She looked at our bookshelves. "You have such weighty books. You are both very intelligent. He was very gifted. He used to debate. Also he used to sing and paint. One of his paintings took a prize in the Utah State Fair. I can't believe what has happened to him. He finished the course work for a master's in computer science, and then he quit. You tell me he drives steel posts with a jackhammer. It makes me dizzy thinking about it. I had a testimony, at least I thought I had a testimony, that he would magnify himself through painting or music."

Mormons have an optical way of putting things. Does magnifying yourself mean that you use a lens to make yourself appear bigger than you really are? Or that you are bigger to start with than you appear?

After Harlan had got home and showered, we crowded into the motorhome and watched the production. Winifred set paper plates and plastic glasses on a blue tablecloth. Milton, wearing an apron, chopped salad, stirred sauce, and sliced French bread. Carter climbed into Harlan's lap and settled into the crook of his arm. I would be

grateful if Carter didn't look so much like me: emaciated ribs, a frail chin, bulging eyes, an unhealthy skin. Milton was expounding on motorhomes, chiefly to Harlan, who smiled a little, nodded slightly, not listening, his eyes gone elsewhere. Harlan has sandy hair, somewhat receded; a wispy beard, tiny ears, a delicate mouth; very handsome in a mournful way.

Our dog whined at the screen door. "Guess old dog wants some supper too," Carter said.

"I imagine," Harlan said.

"I want to hear the song about Fido."

"Not now."

"Yeah, now."

Harlan winced, hummed a pitch, sang: "Oh, I have a dog, his name is Fido, I raised him from a pup; he can sit on his back legs if I hold his front legs up."

Milton applauded. Carter said, "Jesus, that's funny."

Milton said a long blessing on the food—pork chops, white grape juice that looked like wine, a chocolate cake. Carter stood on his cushion and pointed at the cake. "I want some of that."

"Just shut up," I said. "He's saying the blessing."

Milton said amen and things were terribly silent. I could smell dead ants.

"There's this corporation trying to put together a golf course deal out in Smithfield," Milton said, serving Carter a chop.

"We are against it," Winifred added. "We want to see Cache Valley made into a rural monument, something like the Lake District in England—the farmers and the enlightened public working together to keep Cache Valley worth visiting and living in."

"Tell me something funny," Carter commanded.

Harlan said, "I saw a flying mule the other morning. A levitated mule, an ass drifting above the earth."

"Oh, no, you never."

"One of our mules had got himself onto a laid down trunk of a juniper, a big old one. From where I lay in my bedroll I couldn't see anything but his neck and ears above a little tree that was in between. He looked like a floating donkey in a painting by Chagall."

"Who's he?"

"Don't bother to find out."

"I certainly have no taste for Chagall," Winifred said. "A child could paint better than he did."

While Milton sliced the cake, Winifred said, "Is there something nice we can do for you two? Something you'd let us do?" A large black fly butted and buzzed in a lamp. "Wouldn't you like to go to San Francisco for a week? And let us pay for it?"

Squinting, Harlan followed the fly to another lamp.

"You could go in September or October. Or whenever you like. We'd pay for airfare and lodging and meals. Everything. And we'd love to keep Carter while you're gone. Between the two of us and the next door neighbor we could manage very fine."

He said, "We couldn't do that."

"But wouldn't you love it? It would be so good for you. Or somewhere else if you don't want to go to San Francisco."

He turned to me for help. "We couldn't do that, could we?"

"No," I said, "it wouldn't be right."

"So what are you making of yourself up here driving fence stakes with a jackhammer? Just what are you coming to?"

"I'm civilizing myself. So's Lora."

"Oh, fiddle," she said. "You're thirty years old and you're already senile. You really are."

"We consider it an act of civilization to stay away from places like San Francisco."

"Not me," I said. "I'd just as soon go. It'd do us good to break out of here once in a while."

"To San Francisco?"

"Well, somewhere."

"We just had a trip to Logan last month," he said. "But, all right, say we raise some money and take a trip somewhere."

"We wish there was something we could do for you, some way we could help you," Winifred said.

"Don't cast us off," Milton said.

"We don't mean to cast anybody off," Harlan said. He turned back to me. "Go ahead, think up a little trip. Think of a place we ought to visit." start here

"We don't need a trip," I said. "What we need is to get out of here. To move."

"I thought you liked it here."

"Sure, I liked it. That was when I thought you liked it. I want to move where there aren't any cliffs."

When I went into the bathroom after tucking Carter in bed, Harlan was on the toilet. The room was so small I had to climb over his legs to get to the shower. "That was nice of Winifred and Milton, offering us a paid vacation," I said. "But I guess it's a nefarious plot to rehabilitate us."

"You're damned right it is," he said.

We lay side by side on our bed, no clothes, no sheet. "I see you've been worshipping false gods again," he said. I hadn't removed the candles and white cloth from the little table.

"I'll put it away in the morning."

"Hell, let it stand. What do I care?"

"We need something," I said.

"We've got something."

"You talking about dying, that's what we've got."

Later I said, "Shall we make love."

He scratched his beard, a grainy rasping. "Do you want to?"

"No, but if you want to I don't mind."

"I guess not," he said.

The first time we ever went into Buller's Gulch and saw the tiny ruin, Harlan was ecstatic: "In this place you can hear the past; eternity is tangible here." Crosslegged in the clean bright sand, he folded his arms and closed his eyes. Carter lolled asleep in a packapoose on his back. I sat on a boulder and listened, hearing, as he said, many things in the summer silence, audible inaudibilities.

I said, "Maybe it's God."

"Sure. You can call anything God."

"I mean God the Father. And God the Mother. Also God the Son and God the Holy Ghost."

"The Holy Christian Quadrumvirate. You are anthropomorphizing. The evidence for Christianity exists in human fantasy, not in the material world."

"So where is the evidence for anything else?"

"It's scientifically proven that all matter is unified through the laws of physics. I can hear the electrons. They exist; they buzz like bees in a blooming tree. That's God. But I can guarantee you it isn't personal."

He disappeared through the tiny door of the ruin, which stood beneath an overhanging cliff. After I had nursed Carter, I peered in. My irises expanded, slowly shaping images: creviced walls of stacked stone, bark shredding from roof poles, Harlan kneeling before a hole in the floor, in one hand a digging stick, in the other an ear of corn no more than four inches long. "It's at least eight hundred years old,,' he said.

After lunch, he shelled the tiny kernels and ground them on a flat rock. He carefully shook the meal into my open palm, saying, "First the meal, then the batter. A little grit makes no difference; that's how the Anasazi ate it. Every adult skull they find has severely worn molars." Taking his aluminum cup, he climbed the narrow slickrock defile we had come down, knelt at a tiny catchpool, and dipped water. Returned, he splashed a little into my palm and stirred the paste with twig.

"Just a taste for each of us, washed down by water from a natural cistern. This way we'll know authentically how it was for the Anasazi." he dipped his finger into the paste, licked it, sipped from the cup.

He said, "Do this in remembrance of my body."

"Lord, don't say that. That's from the Sacrament prayer."

"This is a sacrament. So that we can have the grace of the Old Ones."

"That's not how the Anasazi would have done it," I said. "They would have scattered the cornmeal to the four winds, with some pollen added."

He pushed my hand upward. "Go on, lick it clean."

"That's nothing to make fun about," I said, scraping my palm across the rock.

Toward morning when I came back from the bathroom Harlan was awake. "Lord, I wish they were gone," he said.

"They try to be nice. They love you an awful lot."

"I'm just getting goddamned frantic."

I reasoned it would be good for him to make love. If you make love you are still alive, aren't you? Of course I was just a big torpid snail in the purple dark. Where were my lace panties, my see-through nightie?

On the day of her consecration St. Therese of Lisieux had a vision of a mantle of snow upon a statue of the Child Jesus. Because she loved snow she knew Jesus had been thinking kindly of her. Life wasn't easy in the convent, but Therese took each hardship as a special blessing. A sloppy nun splashed dirty water on her in the washroom; she didn't try to avoid the splashes. A fidgety nun disturbed her during meditation and prayer; she

didn't protest, didn't move elsewhere. As she lay dying she was haunted by an unbelieving voice that seemed to say, Dream on, you poor deluded nun, till the night of the annihilation overtake you. How kind of God! How wonderful, how merciful! Every hardship was a gift that helped mortify the flesh, helped her know this world was unreal.

So I was somewhat sorry for what I was about to do. I took Harlan's hand and kissed his fingers. I stroked his shoulder, walked my fingers across his breast and over his belly, slid my hand down the outside of his leg, brought it slowly up inside his thighs. When we had finished, we lay tangled, my leg over his, his arm under my neck, his fingers in my hair. A breeze sifted cool through the screen.

Very softly, voice wavering, he sang a fragment: "Where the evening primroses are blooming, out on White Mesa so fair." He said, "You're so fine." Then, hoarsely: "Three days ago I saw a primrose growing in a sandstone crevice. I lay down by it and looked close at its white petals and at its pistils dusty with golden pollen. I named it Lora."

Had he actually done that? My God, I didn't care. Mother in Heaven, I said, don't let me let him die; I can't accept that much mortification of the flesh.

After lunch we headed over the Burr Trail in our Datsun pickup, Winifred and I in the front. Every time I slowed for a dip or curve, dust caught up with us. I was happy to see the manful grimaces in the rearview mirror, though of course I felt guilty. I said to Winifred, "There's something to be said for polygamy. I can see some advantages in sharing a man with other women. A man can get to be quite a burden."

"Oh, I don't think so. I'm personally very thankful for the Manifesto." Later she said, "Is it quite different living with a man you aren't married to?"

"No, I don't think it's very different at all."

"Do you think it would be nice to be married?"

"Yes, it would be nice," I said. "However, I don't think we really fit. Somebody cut me out with pinking shears; my edges don't match his."

"My word. I was afraid there was something."

"He wants mothering, and I'm not a motherly person."

"Of course you are," she said.

"Well, I wish you could take him back."

"Take him back?"

"You can't, but I wish you could."

"You have your little boy," she said, "and of course another on the way. Please don't get discouraged. Milton and I, our edges didn't match up so perfectly either; we just overlapped the torn edges and sewed ourselves together." The tires rumbled and pounded on the corderoy road; gravel clattered against the fenders. "Of course, when you do that you lose some material, don't you? A bit of your self disappears."

We parked at the head of Buller's Gulch and set the ice chest in the shade of a pinyon. Then we hiked into the gulch, using ancient footholds to clamber down the defile. Milton and Winifred were astonished by the tiny ruin.

"Obviously a five foot man would have been extraordinarily tall," Milton said, his eye glued to his camera, his finger triggering the shutter. "There, honey, that ought to justify the science of nutrition. It just shows what good foods have done for modern man."

We followed a trail along the side of the gulch. Pausing at the base of a gigantic boulder we saw petroglyphs—spirals, zigzags, circles; creatures with stick-like bodies: bears, deer, men, women, eerie humanoid beetles. Milton jerked into action, kneeling, craning, snapping, advancing, happily muttering, "Holy Moses, get a load of that!"

"These figures are quite rudimentary," Winifred said, "like something four and five year olds do in the nursery school."

"But aren't they marvelous? Doesn't that look like an ear right there?"

"Oh, darling, not an ear! Now look at this strange creature." She pointed toward a beetle-man with flaring shoulders. "I do admit you could almost imagine the stirrings of civilization."

"I hope not," Harlan said.

"Where's an ear?" Carter said.

"It isn't an ear," I said. "It's a spiral."

"The ear is a funnel," Milton said. "You can transcribe a spiral onto a funnel very easily."

"What do you mean, you hope not?" Winifred said to Harlan.

"The hydrogen bomb wasn't known to the Anasazi. Neither was direct mail advertising."

"I don't think those are things you should judge civilization by."

"You think civilization is a wheel; you think every time it goes down it comes up again. Actually civilization is a ski jump, and we're racing toward a catastrophe."

Carter was tugging on Harlan's pants. "I wanna drink, Daddy."

"Everyone, is entitled to their own opinion," Winifred said.

"You're a Christian, aren't you? You believe in Armageddon, don't you?"

"No, not exactly, I don't."

"Well, I'm not a Christian, and I do believe in it, and it can't come any too soon to suit me."

He gave Carter a drink and took his hand, continuing along the trail with Milton and the dog close behind. Winifred remained, staring after them. "That was certainly an aggressive gesture," she said. "I'm not sure what I did to deserve it."

"You don't need to take it personally. He's very cranky about the end of civilization. He'll be disappointed if it doesn't come soon."

"What on earth does he believe in then?"

"Simplicity. That's why we moved out here, so that we could simplify. This was Walden for us."

Hiking in Calf Creek one day we found a dying ewe in a little hollow. She lay on her side, neck outstretched, flanks panting; the iris of her unblinking eye was large and yellow, its pupil bottomless. From her vagina protruded the hindquarters of a dead lamb. Nearby a living first born lamb stood on trembling legs. Our dog advanced to the ewe, sniffed suspiciously, jumped back when her legs thrashed. Her spasmic hooves had cut two arcs in the soil.

"What's the matter with her, Daddy?" Carter said.

"She's gong to die. Which is the fate of all living matter. But she's going to die now."

Carter stared, his lips pouted, his little red tongue sliding in and out.

"Shall we pull the lamb?" I said.

"Not me," Harlan said. "It won't do any good anyhow. She's done for."

I tried. The ewe kicked with a fresh surge, emitting strange coughing grunts. I gave up and stood back, rubbing grit and crusted from my palms, saying, "It's so pitiful."

"Death is a chemical condition," Harlan said. "It has no emotion. It's a fallacy, so to speak. Think about your knees. I've had some luck with that lately. Knees are hinges, very mechanical like the hinges on a screen door. When people begin to think about cruelty and pain and suffering and death, when they begin to make something out of them, that's when they go wrong. A rock doesn't wring its hands and wail and lament."

Somewhere in my esophagus a thistle had stuck. There's a zoologist who has devised a mathematical measurement of parental attrition for the benefit of offspring; he has figured out units for measuring the increased probability of death for a parent with each altruistic gesture toward an offspring.

"I'm going to puke," Harlan said. He got onto his hands and knees and vomited; he remained so, whimpering and drooling.

"Is he going to have a baby?" Carter said.

"No, you can vomit for lots of reasons besides being pregnant," I told him.

I squatted by Harlan, hugging him, patting his back, rubbing his shoulders. "Let's be Christians again," I said.

Harlan, Carter, and Milton had left the trail and angled upward toward a high crest. Winifred and I took our time, skirting certain boulders, climbing over others, coming at last to a jagged sandstone top which fell away in a sheer drop. The land was open in all directions, scooped, carved, wrinkled: canyons, valleys, slickrock pavilions, forests of juniper and pinyon, ridges, buttes, and peaks. A cloudbank mounted in the westward sky, through which sunswaths broke.

"Unbelievable! Magnificent!" Milton was saying, hastily reloading his camera.

Harlan and Carter sat on the cliff, their feet dangling into the void.

"Please bring Carter away from the edge," I called to Harlan.

"He's all right."

"Please, I would like him back here."

"I don't wanna come, Mama," he shouted.

"Harlan!"

"Get back there, son," he said, taking his arm.

"I don't wanna," he wailed.

Harlan helped him up, and I seized his arm and pulled him away. He kicked me, and I shook him. Harlan remained on the verge, hunched, feet dangling, hands flat on the rock.

Winifred took a seat close behind him, curling her legs and propping herself with an arm. She squinted against the wind and grasped at her flying hair, vexed. "Windy places seem to have their own rules," she said. "I suppose we have to submit to them without complaining." A tiny spider wandered on Harlan's shoulder. "Gracious," she said, "you're being invaded." She flicked the spider into the wind, then brushed his shoulder half a dozen time.

"Let me go," Carter said, still twisting in my grasp.

"Will you stay away from the edge?"

"No." So I clamped his neck harder and missed something Winifred said to Harlan which made him heave up his legs and pivot about to face her. I heard her say, "I can't go home and leave you like you are. What will Mother and Father say to me?"

"You expect a big confrontation with them, I suppose."

"Don't make fun of me. You know I can't believe anything else."

"No," he said, "you couldn't."

"When you first came to us, one Sunday you were impossible in Sacrament Meeting, wiggling and whining and picking quarrels with Edith, and I took you into the foyer, Milton staying with Keith and Edith, and I whipped you. You said, You aren't my mother, and I cried as hard as you did and said, I have to be."

"Well, my God," Harlan said, "don't bring up sad old things like that. Think about something objective. Think about the fact that satellite orbits are in the form of a wobbling ellipsis."

"Will you come away from here, Harlan, away from Boulder, away from fence building? Will you get into something with a future. Will you marry poor Lora?"

He stared at a nearby rock, then gave it a backhanded shove. It disappeared over the edge. "What do you think?" he said to me. "Should we get married?"

I said, "I think we ought to get off this cliff."

"Why don't you go back to school?" Winifred said. "We'd help you all the way. It's no disgrace for you to accept a litle help."

"Certainly not," Milton said. "You could go right on with that master's degree."

"And Lora too," Winifred added. "She could go on with her schooling if she'd like to."

"Absolutely!" Milton said.

"Where would we go?" Harlan asked me.

"Maybe Colorado State. They have a good school of environmental studies."

"Please," Winifred said.

"We'll see," he said. He swung around again, legs dangling, head bent as if he was studying the jumbled terraces far below. From the west a minor squall advanced in a canopy of clouds, stirring dust and trailing veils of mist, new sunswaths appearing in its wake. "It's very grand, isn't it?" Winifred said. "A person can feel very religious in a place like this."

He said, "There's no reason other than the peculiarities of the Earth's chemical composition why a person couldn't walk up one of those sunladders."

"Yes, like Lancelot crossing a chasm on the edge of a magical sword."

"No fantasy to it; really, authentically, if we knew how to transpose our atoms, if we knew how to suspend the electro-magnetism of our bodies, we could climb a beam of light."

She knelt very close behind him. "This wide, wonderful wilderness means everything to you, doesn't it?"

"I would like to wink out of it. Turn the light off, that's what I'd like to do. After all the stir and frenzy of the Big Bang, all this absurd, senseless, chaotic careening of particles through the universe, I wish somebody could reverse it, could send it back, return it to the original purity of the First Great Black Hole. By God, that'd be a Second Coming worth talking about."

"That's very quaint, very poetical."

"Except he means it," I said. "Come on," I said to Carter, "let's go hunt for lizards."

"Hot dog," my little boy said, starting to forgive me.

I got up at dawn the next morning, gave Carter bread and jam, and took him out to feed the chickens and the lamb. When I had settled down to milk, Harlan came from the house, chest bare, feet bare, hair mussed. He picked his way carefully through the corral and sat on an upturned bucket. I went on squeezing the cow's teats, spurting milk into the rising foam.

"I didn't sleep very well," he said. "I couldn't get my mind off what Winifred and Milton want us to do. Which is go back to living on their money and learn how to be decent people again."

"You slept some," I said. "Your snoring sounded like a hay baler."

"Anyhow, I have a plan. I see a way to go. My mind is made up."

"So what's your plan?"

"We'll tell them we've been touched; they've got through to us; we want to repent, want to change our lives, want to give ourselves a total overhaul—getting married, getting back into the Church and everything. Furthermore, we want to move up to Logan and enroll in Utah State, which has a good wildlife resources college, so we can be close to home and all its wonderful influences and not be deceived and misled by the philosophies of men."

I said, "They'll know you're lying."

"We won't overdo it. We'll act confused and uncertain about it all so they'll think it's for real."

"So why do it if it isn't for real?"

"I want them to be taking care of you," he said. "I've worried an enormous amount over what will become of you and Carter and the new baby. But Winifred and Milton, they're good people; they're absolutely the salt of the earth. They'll help you till you can get on your feet."

"So where are you going to be?" I asked. Suddenly I knew. "No," I said frantically, "that isn't a way out."

"That's what I want to do," he said. "It would be a great relief."

"No, I don't agree to it. Not at all. Not one little bit."

"You'll be a lot better off," he said. "You'll be a whole lot happier."

My landscape was the underside of a cow; pungent uric odor; silky Jersey hairs, swimming and snaking like waterweeds through tears.

"I want you to let me go," he pleaded. A blackbird warbled from a fencepost down the road. It said, If a person is beyond repair, it isn't a mercy to keep him on life support machines; sometimes pulling the plug is the right thing to do.

We had corn flakes and orange juice in the motorhome with Winifred and Milton, who were overjoyed. She hugged Harlan and held Carter on her lap, kissing his cheek over and over, saying finally, "Phone us the day and we'll come back down for the wedding."

"Given the time of the year," said Milton, "perhaps we should act immediately to rent you an apartment. Later, if it doesn't suit you, you can move to something else."

Winifred marveled: "This couldn't have come about by natural means. I feel so holy in this place. You might say, what poor circumstances for such a momentous event, this cramped dining nook, nothing better than orange juice for making our celebration. But, no, what a beautiful sunshiny morning, what dew on your hollyhocks, what high blue mountains, what a tranquil rural villge—what a place for a memory! I won't ever forget." She was weeping.

"The Boulder ward holds Sacrament Meeting at eleven," Milton said. "We thought we'd attend before heading for home. Would you like to come along?"

"No," Harlan said, "not yet; later on we sure should get into that again." He looked at me.

"Maybe you'd like to go. Maybe you ought to dress up Carter and go."

"I wanna go," Carter said.

"Take him," I said, "but me, I couldn't do it just yet."

At twenty to eleven they drove away in the motorhome. Seated on our steps, Harlan tossed a cobblerock from one hand to another; then he strolled across the road to the Thordens'. Although I was still in shock, an idea had come to me. I got into the Datsun and headed for Escalante, where there's a tiny Catholic church visited once a week by a priest who drives from Cedar City.

An hour later I knocked on the door of a small, battered trailer. I was in luck; the priest answered. He was in shirtsleeves, his stiff collar unbuttoned and a little askew like the bumper on our pickup; he was bald, somewhat portly, sad. He held a small frying pan and a can of hash.

"Do you mind coming back?" he asked.

I said, "I need to talk to you. You can go ahead with your lunch. It won't bother me any."

He let me in and turned to a tiny gas stove. I sat down and swept crumbs from the tablecloth. He was frowning, holding his head aloof from the sputtering, smoking pan. "Do you have a problem?" he said.

"What I need to know is what happens to suicides on the Other Side."

"Are you quite depressed?" He looked very lonely; at least I couldn't help feeling lonely for him.

"It isn't for me. It's for somebody else."

"You ought to get in touch with the authorities," he said. "I mean, with a counselor or a psychiatrist."

"There's none of that kind of people around here. Besides I don't think it would do any good. He has wanted to die for a long time."

"There's a psychiatrist who flies down to Cedar City every Wednesday for public health services. If you don't have money the state pays."

"Do you think you can keep a person alive by praying for him?" I said.

He spooned hash onto his plate and set the pan to soak in the sink. He uncorked a wine bottle and poured a glass. He sat and spread a paper napkin over his lap. Prayer is always useful," he said. Then he crossed himself and began to eat.

"So will he go to hell if he kills himself?"

"That depends on his state of mind. When a distraught person commits suicide it isn't necessarily a mortal sin. In the opinion of the theologians most sinners of any kind don't posess enough knowledge to be damned; they go to purgatory instead. However, only God really knows."

"He wants to walk off a cliff onto a bridge of air. He wants to feel his atoms shucking off as he falls, like sparks off a space shuttle when it reenters. He wants to dwindle and diminish till he's light as a feather and will never hit the ground but will blow away on the breeze."

He stared at me, solemnly chewing. "Do you have your own minister somewhere you might talk to?"

"No, sir. I used to be a Mormon but they excommunicated me."

"We have a mission if you're interested."

"I couldn't be anything but a Mormon, thanks just the same. Someday I'll go back."

"Is this person devout?"

"He's very undevout."

"I'll give you the mental health service number. You'd better give them a call."

"The truth is, I want him to die. I'm tired of it all."

He divided the remaining hash wih his knife.

"We're not married," I said, looking down at my belly. "We've got a boy who is three. I've stood all I can. Harlan and our little boy and now this new one inside me—I'm very, very tired. I think maybe it would be the right thing to let him go. He suffers a great deal. I don't know why. Even if you say, Look, stupid, quit suffering, he still can't do anything about it. He just goes on hurting, month in and month out."

"If you can forestall him and don't, that would be very bad," the priest said. He got up, found a pencil, and scratched a Salt Lake phone number on a card. "Call them long distance first thing in the morning. They'll help you work something out."

I took it but didn't bother looking at it.

"I'll say special prayers for both of you. Also for your little boy."

"What will God think of me if I let him go?"

"Suffering is no excuse for anybody," he said.

I stood in the street thinking, unable to go home. it's no fun watching a dead man move, hearing him talk; it's easier to walk away, to let him die of simple neglect like the deformed babies the Spartans exposed on hillsides. I drove up New Canyon, west of Escalante. The road curved and dipped, gradually rising in the trough

of the canyon. At a beautiful bend of the creek I parked and got out. I was lightheaded and dizzy: sun and midday heat; odor of willows and aspen; slopes textured with outcroppings, cliffs, ravines, and timber.

My eyes hunted for gnarled old trees, oddly shaped boulders, patches of blue lupine. Oddly, they found a sheep. Across the creek stood a deserted sheepcamp, a wagon domed with aluminum sheeting, stove pipe protruding. Beyond, a solitary ewe traversed a barren ridge, a stray from a herd driven to lower pasture. She ambled, meandered, paused to nibble and once to stare; yet before I was ready to give her up she disappeared over the ridge, leaving me with a vacancy, a palpable absence; a sense, perhaps, of the miraculous; also of doubt that I had seen anything at all.

A burdock plant at my feet said, Go back to your lost sheep; feed him supper.

From Thomas a Kempis are these words, these units for measuring the altruism by which parents die for their offspring, or a brother for his siblings: Thanks be to Thee, O Thou Creator and Redeemer of men, who to manifest Thy love to the whole world hast prepared a great supper, wherein Thou hast set before us to be eaten, not the typical lamb, but Thy most Holy Body and Blood, rejoicing all the faithful with this sacred banquet and inebriating them with the chalice of our salvation.

It was mid-afternoon when I got home. Winifred and Milton were still there, restless and worried, unwilling to leave till I showed up. We exchanged smiles, kisses, hugs, gratitudes, talk about our wedding. They climbed into the motorhome, too quickly sober; they waved from the windows, scarcely recognizing how their hope had dwindled.

Harlan was packing for his return to camp—folding fresh sheets into his bedroll, placing flour, coffee, and canned peaches into his grubbox. I helped a little, waiting for a chance. He was melancholy and lethargic, entirely gone inside himself. Carter and I went out and gathered eggs, then gave hay to the cow and pellets to the lamb. The lamb, half grown and thick wooled, had a docked, nervous tail. When we carried it home from Calf Creek we tried to find an owner. None of the sheepmen claimed it so it was ours.

Harlan came out to milk, still moody, scarcely glancing at me as he passed through the corral gate. Carter followed him and, as he settled into milking, leaned against his shoulder and peered into the bucket.

"People learn by watching," I said. "There's hardly anything you can't learn by standing close and watching carefully. That's why in the old days they used to apprentice boys to shoemakers. They watched, then they made shoes."

"That's likely true," Harlan said.

"For example," I said, "women could bless the Sacrament if somebody would let them. They've been watching for centuries and they know how."

Carter said, "I don't wanna go to Logan; I wanna stay here with the animals."

"Well, you've got to go," Harlan said.

"No," I said, "we aren't going to Logan."

"Yes, you have to."

"No matter what you do I've decided to stay here," I said.

Did you ever try to hold water in your cupped hands? Harlan could see it dribbling out and didn't know how to stop it.

"Please don't do it," I said.

"My mind is made up."

"He needs a daddy," I said. "I need a husband."

He frowned and mulled, white cheeked, close to shock, I'm sure.

"You're outvoted," I said. "If you do it, it's on your own. As for me, I will pray for you seven times a day, starting at midnight. And I will think about you every minute I'm awake. Please don't do it."

Carter and I went into the house. I put a white cloth on the kitchen table. I brought my candles from the bedroom and lit them. I took a loaf of bread from the breadcase. I set out glasses and a decanter of water. I set out the Doctrine and Covenants, open to the sacramental prayers.

Harlan stood in the door, the milkbucket in hand, the dog peering between his legs. "What does that mean?"

"We can at least try it," I said.

I seated myself on the bench behind the table. He crossed the room, strained the milk at the sink, put the bottle of new milk into the refrigerator. He rinsed the bucket and the straining cloth, all the while giving me oblique glances.

He went into the bathroom, Carter following. "Will you eat with me?" I called.

He came back, drying his hands. He took in the table, the burning candles, the bread, the water, the holy book. "It violates me," he said. "It's grotesque. It's unreasonable. It's wrong."

"We don't have anything to lose."

He sat down. Carter climbed onto the chair next to him. I tore bread and gave each of us a crust. From the Doctrine and Covenants I said the blessing of the bread. I poured each a glass of water and said the blessing of the water.

"Is this all we get for supper?" Carter asked.

"It's enough," I said. He took a mouthful and chewed, then lifted his glass with both hands and gulped.

Harlan stared without seeing; he was on a faraway cliff, yearning for a sunswath. I tore a morsel from my crust. This is for him, I said to Heavenly Mother; he suffers so much; help us both to bear it.

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