

## 1986 D.K. Brown Fiction Contest Winner

## A COURT OF LOVE

By John Bennion

WHEN I RETURNED from my mission, the sky was cloudless over Utah. I felt like a full seed flung between earth and heaven on my way toward becoming a sexual being. I would soon find someone besides Amy to marry, becoming one flesh with a woman. To my right rose the blue-green Rockies, with Cedar City, Nephi, Spanish Fork, and finally Provo, tucked up against them. Directly beneath the jet fewer mountains caught the rain and the ground was arid, spotted by green only if there were a spring or a house. Fifteen minutes before landing, I saw Rockwood, a small town of tree-lined streets, surrounded by desert. With my hands cupped against the glass, I traced my eyes along Main Street and the lane that led to the cluster of trees around my house—then the wing was in the way. “That’s where I live,” I said to the man next to me. “That’s Rockwood.”

“How long were you in Houston?” he said.

“Two years.”

I’d given him a Book of Mormon with the angel Moroni embossed on the cover. I was trying to end my mission the way I’d begun it—with whole vision. He extended his hand to return the book. “Here,” he said. “An interesting idea though—Jews fleeing Jerusalem and finding the promised land in America.”

I put my hand out. “I want you to keep it.” I was having trouble keeping my mind on my duty to him. The plane circled the Salt Lake airport. “Finish it.” I found the place for him. “It says here if you read and pray—”

“Moroni Chapter 10, verses 4 and 5,” the man said without looking down. He took two leather-bound books out of his briefcase, grinning like a child at me. “I’ve got my own.”

“You’re a member? You flippin’ scoundrel. Why’d you lead me on like that?” His face was gleeful. He had played the missionary game with me, being not only condescending, but at the same time wistful, as if he could borrow righteousness from my condition.

“I wanted to see what kind of approach you elders use in Houston. I like that. ‘Do you enjoy reading?’ No one would answer ‘no.’ The man paused, looking at the books in his lap. “You’re lucky, you know, to have been out so recently.” He smiled at me. “Flip. Ours was ‘geez.’ You’ll lose it, though.”

“Fine by me. Where did you go?”

“Pennsylvania. Hard work, but—” the man laughed, “—the best two years of my life.”

“When were you out?” I wondered if my time in Houston would be the best years of my life.

“Almost twenty-five years ago. We went for two and a half years then. I was supposed to go to England but with the war, I stayed in the States.” I turned to watch the plane land. “You got a girl?” He waited for my answer, obviously curious about me as a being on the edge of sexual experience.

“No,” I said finally.

“You get a Dear John?”

“Yes.”

“Me too. I dated her for a year and a half before I left. I was out three months and she wrote me off, so I just found another when I got home. My mission president told me to be engaged within six months, only took me five.”

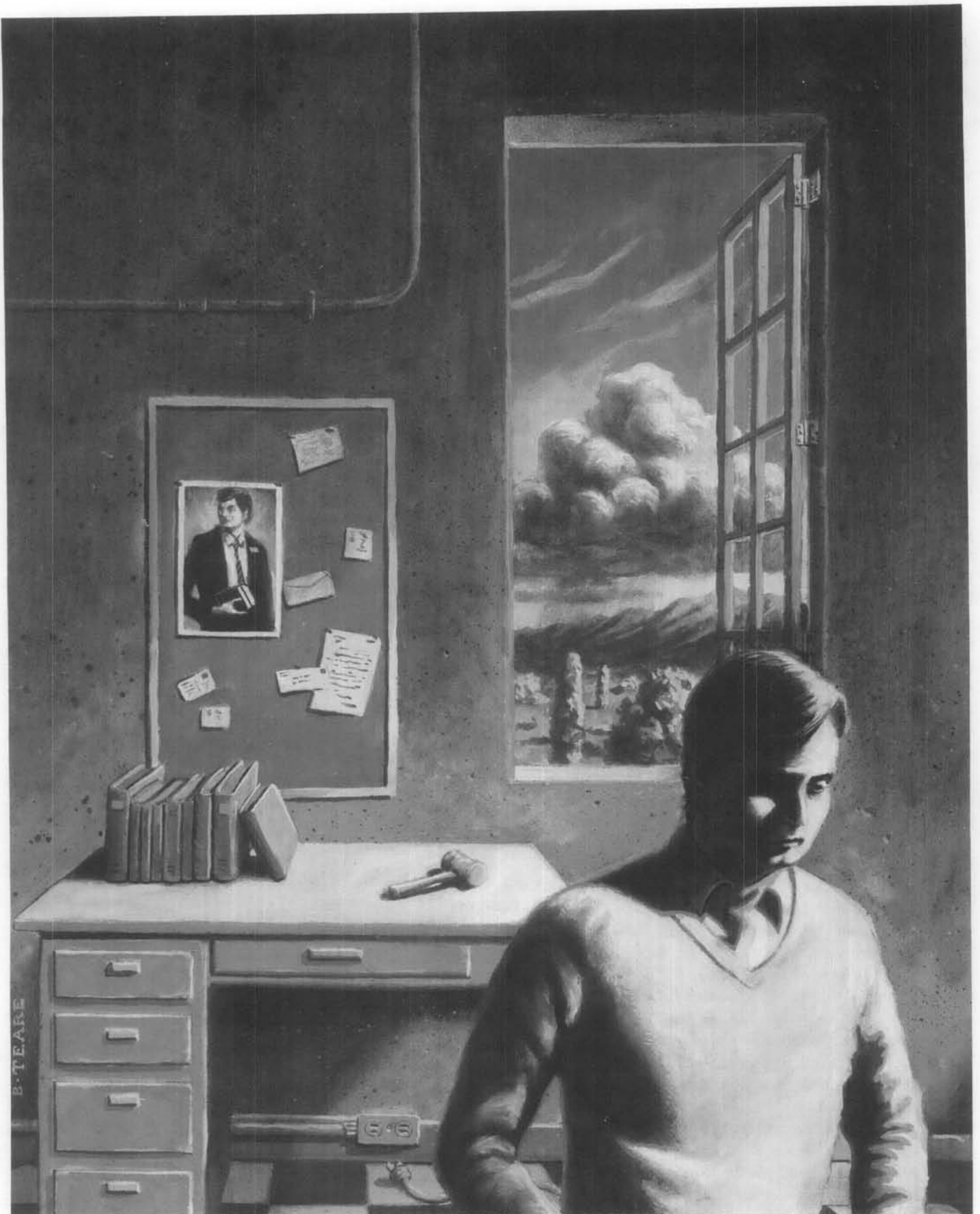
My president, a retired college professor, in the last of a two-year series of interviews, full of advice and the brotherhood of the priesthood, had told me to begin school as soon as possible. “Take your time,” he’d told me. “Get to a university and enjoy yourself.”

I watched the terminal to the right. “I’m in no hurry.”

He jostled me with his elbow. “That’s what they all say. But in a day or two you’ll be sitting on some girl’s living room couch, holding her hand, nervous because you’ve been away from she-males for two years. You won’t last any longer than I did.” A stewardess leaned across the seat opposite, reaching her arms over her head for an elderly man’s bag. My seatmate glanced toward her then caught my eye. “I know you,” he said, held by his memories again. “I was you. The next few months are like ripe plums.” He gripped my hand and lifted himself out of the seat, following the stewardess up the aisle. I remembered how anxious my two older brothers became when everyone around them talked like that. I also worried that, seeing Amy, I would focus on her sexuality, as this man was focused, and that I would then be overwhelmed by the frustration of my loss, and be unable to meet her as a friend.

In the terminal, I saw my mother first; Dad followed behind. Seeing them, something relaxed inside; I had long anticipated the pleasure. Everyone had always said my father’s face and build

JOHN BENNION is a freelance writer in Woodlands, Texas.



were similar to Henry Fonda's, but I was surprised at how much he had aged. My mother was smaller, more compact, darker haired; I couldn't think of a movie actress who would age to look like my mother.

"You've gained weight," she said, putting her arms around me.

"Looks fine to me," said Dad. His voice was gravelly and rich. The sound of it came back quickly; it seemed that there had been no two-year gap between this hearing and the last.

"I meant it as a compliment. You were so skinny, there wasn't much to get a hold of before." Her arms squeezed harder.

My father stood, performing now what he had planned before—a personal ceremony. He put a hand on each of my arms, staring directly into my eyes. "Glad you're safe." He gripped my shoulders. We moved to the baggage check. I took one bag and Dad the other. "Y'all," he said, "I think this is the way to the car." I looked at him and he grinned. "Just trying to make you feel at home. But let's get out of here. Too damn many people."

"David, don't talk like that."

"This place is enough to make a preacher swear."

"Let alone you," said Mom and Dad was silent. There was a stiffness between them I hadn't remembered. I wondered if it had always been there and I had been too naive to perceive it before.

We drove southward past the point of the mountain where my great-great grandfather, James Darren Rockwood—bodyguard to the prophet Joseph Smith and father of our town—had been imprisoned for illegal cohabitation, having three wives. His son had also been a polygamist, one wife before the Manifesto, one wife after, for which he had been excommunicated. We crossed the gravel bar left by Lake Bonneville, and drove westward across the desert, passing nothing for sixty miles but sagebrush, jack-rabbits, and a few cedared bluffs, a distance the jet had crossed in a few minutes. My father talked about the war and the students who had refused to go. "I'm in favor of doing your duty, but I don't sanction war either."

"They show the quality of their minds when they take to drugs and free love," said my mother. "It's all a package with them." My father didn't respond.

I felt ignorant because of my two-year absence from anything worldly. I didn't know where the troops were, which side was in possession of what cities, or what kind of fighting it was. Before I left, when I was just a boy, I hadn't been interested, and my only occupation for two years had been to do the Lord's work on the earth. An effort was made to insulate us missionaries from anything worldly. As we drove through the desert toward Rockwood, I thought with ambivalence that my town was the same as I was—isolated and protected. My grandfather told me once that the people in Rockwood weren't affected much by the Depression; they raised all they ate, self-sufficient. Time was a slow cycle from season to season, steady and languid. As we topped the ridge and drove down the tree-shaded lane toward home, the air turned cool and moist. "No different," I said as we passed the neighbor's houses.

"Did you think it would change in two years?" said my dad.

I pulled myself out the window and sat on the car door, the wind blowing my hair. "Hey, I'm home," I shouted. Brother

Williams looked up from loading seed into his grain drill, resting the sack on the hopper and waving his hat. Sister Sorenson, who taught me in Sunday school and had become my good friend then, looked up from her hoeing to wave.

"Get back in here." Mom was pulling on my pant cuff. "Save your breath for your homecoming sermon."

"Only don't use that volume when you talk," said Dad. "You'll blast them out of the benches."

I noticed that the trim needed painting. Our house, built by James Darren, was a two story adobe brick, the largest in town. "I'll have time to fix it up now," I thought. Time was an open space before me. I had nothing to do but what I wanted, which was to work next to Dad on the farm, enjoying home and town with no pressure from school or from the Church. I could stretch myself with solid physical work while I looked for a girl. Most of the ones my age would be married now to the missionaries who came home last year or to the boys who didn't go on missions. Like Amy. I thought about her letter being a Dear John. There had been more to it than that. "The memory of our love is very important to me." But.

"Well, how does it look?" said Mom.

"Needs painting," said Dad. "I've been meaning to get to it, but it seems so many other things are more important." He avoided my eyes. I had never known him to put off work. We were quiet walking inside.

After I unloaded the pecans from north of Houston and the sea shells from Galveston, my gifts for them, I changed into the oldest pair of jeans and the oldest t-shirt I could find. "Why are you wearing those things?" Mom asked. "We're going straight to town on Monday to get you new clothing."

"Leave him alone," said Dad. "I know how he feels." His voice had a force which surprised me. I looked at the two of them, trying to figure the ways they had changed. "I'm glad you're home," Dad said. "I went through it twice before with your brothers, but with you it was different. I kept imagining you getting some parasite or dying from heat prostitution." He emphasized the last word, making it a joke.

"Prostration," said Mom.

"Right," said Dad. "I didn't have any idea what either word meant."

I touched his arm.

"Sorry, I should have known," she said as she left the room, frowning. Dad looked at me and shrugged.

We sat at lunch. I felt Mom's eyes on me. "Am I so different?" I said.

"Not really."

"When's the crew coming?"

"Simon and Elizabeth will be here in the morning, Carl tomorrow evening. One night together in this house is about all anyone can handle."

"Oh, it's plenty big," I said. "When James had all three wives in here there were twenty-five. We're fewer than that."

"Maybe that's what started the foundation sagging, all those

women in one house," said Mom. "I can't imagine not having my own place for me and my children."

"No wonder James Darren spent all his time working outside," said Dad.

"Charley called."

I smiled. "What did he say?" He was my best friend, hadn't gone on a mission.

"He wanted you to call him back."

"What's he been up to?"

"He works in Salt Lake, comes home weekends. But he's still not married. Still cATTIN' around like you and him did before you left."

"Still," I said. "When'll he ever settle down?"

My mother smiled. "Okay, so I'm a busy-minded woman." She paused. "Amy lives here with her husband."

I concentrated on my food. "How is she doing?"

"She's sick as she can be."

"What's wrong with her?" I half stood out of my chair.

"She's sick with child," said Dad. "One inside her belly and another one in her bed."

"David, he can't be that bad," said Mom. "Though I think he's a little tyrant." Mom looked down at the table. "Don't you ever be like that."

"Thank you for telling me one sin I won't have to worry about for a while."

She smiled and touched his cheek. "You forget we raised two missionaries before you. I know what's on your mind."

"Now how would you know that?" said Howard's father, his voice angry. "Don't pin him down like that." He pushed his chair away from the table. "Well, I don't have time to sit around all day. Back to work for me."

After finishing, I went out into the barnyard. It looked like someone else's place, not my father's. He had always taken loving care of everything on the farm. The plow was leaning against the fence, its greaseless surface red with rust. Some boards were loose on the barn. The milk cow had sores on her udder. She had pushed on the fence around the hay stack so she and her calf could reach through and eat. Dad hadn't fixed it, and they'd soon smash it flat and ruin more hay. I got a hammer, some staples and some baling wire and began fixing the hole. I imagined someday taking over the farm from Dad, working it until every field produced its best, every animal was fat. I thought that I could take it back to its prime, if he were winding down. One of the things I'd have to face, I knew, was my own father's mortality. I looked across the road, watching Dad walking down the road, his shovel in his hand. He stopped at Sister Sorenson's, who was widowed as a young woman some years before my mission. Since then she had rented her farm out and raised her three children by herself. Dad started digging in the ditch in front of her house, cleaning the weeds out of it. I knew it was important to help others, but I wished Dad had done his own work first.

Charley called back that night. He'd arranged dates for a dance in Salt Lake. "Becky has a cousin visiting," he said. "I

thought about you as soon as I found out she was here." His voice held some kind of mirth.

"Thanks loads." I was anxious to see and talk to girls, to try to get Amy out of my mind, but I wasn't sure about going to a crowded dance on a blind date with somebody's cousin. I couldn't tell from his voice whether old Charley was just happy reindoctrinating me into the world of women or whether he was chuckling because of what the cousin was like.

"Give me a few days," I said. "Tell them we can't make it and just you come over."

"It's all set up. You can't get out of it."

Despite my nervousness, I was glad, anxious to see what the girl looked like. I wore my suit and tie, but Charley, who rang the doorbell, pushed me back inside with one hand on my chest, before the dates in the car could see me. "I'm not going anywhere with you dressed like that. Don't you own a pair of levis?"

"Just ones with patches on the knees."

"Well, they'd be better than this outfit."

I took my jacket and tie off and changed to a plaid shirt, but I had to wear my suit pants. We walked out to the car together. I felt like a fool for being so nervous, as nervous as I had felt approaching the first door of my mission. After knocking, my companion had turned to me and said, "You take this one." I thought as fast as I could, but when the woman answered, I was unable to speak. "You go to church?" I finally blurted out. My companion didn't help, laughed at me all the way back to the apartment.

"Howard, this is Becky Summers," Charley pointed to the front seat. She was a pretty, blond girl, and she pressed herself quickly across Charley to shake my hand. "And this is her cousin, Wanda Johansen." Wanda was plainer, but with a nice smile. She had the most enormous breasts I had seen. I got in and looked at the back of Charley's head, disappointed that I was already focussed as the man on the plane had predicted.

Becky looked over her shoulder at me and giggled. I knew they had planned this so they could watch my first time with a girl for two years.

"Country looks good this year," I said loudly.

"It's nice in Sanpete this year too," said Wanda. "That's where I come from."

"Not as pretty as Houston, though. It's green there twelve months a year."

"You boys are so lucky to be able to go on missions all over the world," said Wanda. When I moved my head, I could see Charley's smirk in the rear-view mirror.

"Did you know that Houston had a hurricane while I was there? We once had our apartment demolished by a tornado." It wasn't even true. But I spent the next hour describing the weather conditions in Houston, without giving anyone else a chance to speak. I finished as we drove into Salt Lake. As I talked, I watched Wanda, trying to discover if she understood that she and I were the object of a joke. Walking into the dance, I didn't know whether or not to take Wanda's hand, so I did nothing. Once inside we sat for awhile, no one speaking. The band was playing a watered down version of "Fool on the Hill" and Charley and

Becky got up to dance.

"Do you want to shake a leg?" I said, feeling like the man in the song. I thought I'd never recover.

"Sure," she said. On the floor I placed my hand in the middle of her back, held her other hand, already sweaty.

Do you want to know something?" Wanda said.

"What?"

"I think my cousin is wild."

"Oh."

"I'm not that way at all." She moved closer and the tips of her breasts bumped against my chest. After all my wanting to talk to a girl, look at and touch one, it was strange how uncomfortable I felt. She was nice looking, but I couldn't relax enough that her physical presence wasn't overwhelming. If I could have talked to her, I would have moved beyond that barrier.

"Have you got a girl?" she asked.

"No." I felt like wearing a sign that said, "No, no one else is interested in me," but that would cause more problems than it would solve. I had heard of girls who would sit next to a guy they thought might be a returned missionary, prime husband material, brushing against his thigh to see if he were wearing temple garments. I noticed other girls looking at me. Wanda watched me watching and moved closer.

On the way home Charley drove to a rise west of town, where he and I had gone to park with girls before my mission. The last time I had been there, Amy was with me. Through the evening as Wanda moved closer and talked less, I decided she might not be as dense as I first thought she was. We got out and walked along the edge of the valley, looking over the town.

"One time I was walking not far from here enjoying nature and I discovered more than I was ready for," Charley said. "Married people."

"Well," said Becky. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," said Charley. "It's just that they, ah—how can I say this in front of a returned missionary—they had partially or possibly completely disrobed."

"Still, so?" smiled Becky. "They were married; I think it's kind of romantic."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you they weren't married to each other." He looked at me—the same look as the man on the plane, the same look as my mother. "And you'd be surprised if you knew who they were."

I realized that, despite our closeness before my mission, the gap between Charley and me was wide. It wasn't that I was offended by talking about immorality. I had seen the unhappiness between immoral husbands or wives among the people we taught in Houston. One missionary was excommunicated for fornication. But it saddened me more than shocked me the way Charley assumed it would. What offended me was that Charley, once my best friend, was trying to shock me.

Wanda made incredulous noises.

"Good Lord," I said.

"Hard to believe, isn't it," said Wanda.

"Flip, I'm tired," I said.

"Flip?" said Charley. "You said 'flip.' Is that a Southern word?" He laughed. "Flip, you make me feel warm all over," he said to Becky, putting his arms around her. "Must be the spirit."

"Don't be such a clod," said Wanda to Charley.

I was only about two miles from home. "Thank you for a wonderful evening," I said to Wanda. Sliding down the hillside, I started through the brush in the direction of home. Though Charley shouted after me, I didn't turn back. But then neither did Charley follow and try to talk me out of leaving. I felt bad for Wanda; she wasn't to blame. Under other circumstances she might have been a nice person. Still, I had difficulty thinking of any of the three in a Christian manner.

The lights of town lay eastward. The sky was moonless, making the stars even brighter. The constellations burned in the clear air, not muted as they had been in Houston. It was good walking, good to be alone again after so long. It was the first time I'd been alone since I came home, the first time I had been alone for two years except for showering and using the toilet, and even then my companion was always in the next room. Traveling two by two, as the New Testament instructed, kept missionaries from sin, but it was a burden.

Suddenly I saw someone moving ahead of me through the brush. I crouched and saw that the person was going the other way—a woman, taller than Wanda. She looked back over her shoulder toward the spot where I was hiding. I stood. "Is everything all right?" I asked.

"Yes."

I walked forward.

"I was just out looking at the stars," the woman said quickly and I could tell she was Sister Sorenson. "Just look at them." She turned toward me, carrying a blanket which she wrapped around herself, despite the warmth of the evening. "Where are you coming from?"

She talked and moved nervously, and I supposed I had startled her. "I was to the creek with some friends. I wanted to be by myself, so I thought I'd take the short way home."

"I saw your lights. I thought it was teenagers parking." She grinned at me.

"Not the place for a returned missionary, eh?" I smiled, glad to be talking to her, one of my favorite people.

"Not really, probably be good for you. Leads to good things."

I looked at her. "Not you too."

"Me too?"

"All I hear since I've been home are innuendos about getting married."

A small smile showed on her lips. She opened her mouth to say something, but shut it again. She looked away from me at the mountain to the north of Rockwood. "Do you know when I had my first baby, it seemed like everyone in town was pregnant, where before I didn't notice anyone."

"Are you trying to insult me?"

"No one talks about getting married like returned missionaries do. But it's better than loneliness."

I looked at her. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be."

"Do you still miss him?"

She was silent. "I'd better get back in to the kids."

"Yeah, if you saw us pull in you must have been out here more than an hour." I waved my finger at her. "And who's watching the kids?"

"They can take care of themselves for that long." I was surprised at the bitterness in her voice. "Sorry. I just get tired of them sometimes. Anyway Kerry is almost eight."

I said nothing.

"I'd better get back in." She touched my arm. "It's good to see you again."

"Same with me. Do you know you're the only person I've talked to since I came home who has made any sense."

"Counting your mother and father?"

"They are different. I can't really tell how."

She walked faster. "What am I doing? I've got to get my horde bathed. See you Sunday."

"Yeah, Sunday." I stuck my head inside the door. "Hey," I said to the three kids. "Don't give your mother a bad time tonight. She deserves a rest." They looked at me surprised.

I walked across the lane toward my own house, hoping I hadn't hurt her feelings. Before I left on my mission, I hadn't noticed the strange turns toward bitterness that she had shown tonight. Either she had changed while I was gone, or she thought of me as an adult now and was honest with me, or both. Everyone seemed different before. I started thinking that part of the change was a new awareness of the world and people in it that had come to me through being in Houston. I moved slowly across the lane, into my own yard, smelling the night air. Mom was in the kitchen. "Oh, I didn't hear you drive up," she said. "Did you have fun?"

"Sure. Loads."

"What happened?"

"Charley and I are different now, that's all. Where's Dad?"

"Ward teaching."

"Who are his families?"

"Just Sister Sorenson. And here he is now." Dad opened the front door.

"That was a long visit," said Mom.

"Only an hour. Those kids. They asked me to tell them two stories each."

I was tired after my long day. I started up the stairs toward my bedroom, only half listening to what Dad was saying. "You taught just the kids?" I asked. A warning had started in my head, holding me.

"No. She was there too. We had a good visit. Hey, maybe they'll give me Howard for a companion. Then I won't have to go by myself. It's just too hard to drive clear in to town to get someone so I can come back here to one family just across the street from my own home."

I listened to my father's loud cheerful voice and wondered why he was lying. Or maybe it was Sister Sorenson. Then I remembered the blanket she had been carrying and the angle of my father's body toward her as he had dug in her irrigation ditch,

and the mysteries of the evening clicked together for me. It was an intuitive leap on little evidence. My only defense is that I was a newly returned missionary. In my heightened awareness of my own importance, in my exaggerated trust in my body and mind as perceiving instruments, I made the leap carelessly. It was only chance that my suspicion proved correct.

Saturday the rest of the family came to honor me at my homecoming. My two brothers and my sister, Elizabeth, and all their kids made nineteen people, counting the babies, around the table. "You're either going to have to stop having kids or we're going to have to get more leaves for the table," Dad said before the blessing. Despite the bustle of everyone around, I knew Dad was watching me because of my quietness, aware that something had changed.

Elizabeth sat beside me with her baby in a high chair and her husband next. They were married just after I left on my mission and they touched eyes over their new child as they took turns feeding him. My older brothers and their wives sat across, one married five years, the other seven. They didn't look at their women: they interrupted each other when they talked. I thought of Amy, wondering how the two of us would be if we were married? Everyone talked at once—a babble of noise. I actually held my hands across my ears. Dramatic.

"Children, quiet down please," Mom said.

My oldest brother looked at me. "Don't worry, Howie. Your time will come."

"My time for what—deafness?"

"Marriage."

"Not yet."

"Don't rush him."

"I suppose he thinks his kids will act better." My brother took more ham.

"Do you expect us to believe that you didn't notice any long-haired Texan women?"

"He's got one waiting in a room in Salt Lake until he can break the news to us."

Mom knew I was embarrassed. Dad spread his arms out, and I was afraid he would tell them to leave me alone, calling the hounds to the scent, as he had so many times when I was little. "I'm glad all of you could come," he said instead, the emotion breaking his voice. "I love all of you." The words intensified my awareness of his hypocrisy—smiling over his family, the picture of a good church member, touching the hand of the woman he was cheating. As I said, I was prone to dramatics on the basis of hunches; I stood and left the table, pushing the back door open and moving through the trees in the orchard. Soon Dad came out and put his hand on my shoulder. I moved from under his hand. "What's bothering you, son?" He waited. "Too much, too fast?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Everybody's changed while you were gone."

I looked out at the dark green trees around Sister Sorenson's house. "Right."

"That isn't it, is it?"

"No."

"What is it, Howard?"

"I saw Sister Sorenson last night."

"Did you have a chance to talk to her?"

"I mean I was talking to her while you were supposed to be ward teaching her. You lied to Mom and me."

Panic came into his eyes, but with visible effort, he fought it down. "I don't see . . . ?"

I turned and walked toward the house. Because I couldn't hear his footsteps, I knew he had remained under the trees, looking after me. I moved through the kitchen and started up the stairs toward my room.

"Come finish your dinner," Carl said.

I walked up the stairs without turning.

"I thought you might sit and talk with us," Mom said.

"I'm still tired from the time change." I shut my bedroom door behind me. I had shocked him, then left. Doing that temporarily made me feel better.

Soon someone knocked and Dad came in. I spoke quickly before he could begin an explanation. "I know you met her there."

"Did she tell you that?"

"I cut through the brush from the creek. I got mad at Charley and came home that way."

"How long were you there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, did you—?"

I waited, watching his embarrassment. "I didn't see you with her." He relaxed some and the slight doubt I had allowed myself disappeared. "Stop lying to me."

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"I don't know."

"I love her."

"Love?" I had difficulty saying the word. "How did you let it happen?"

He motioned me quiet. "Don't ask that."

"Now that solves everything."

"I don't have an answer."

"Great."

"At least not one you would understand right now."

"What are you going to tell Mom?"

He was silent. "That is between me and her." He looked at me. "You leave it that way."

I said nothing.

"I'm glad you're taking this so well."

My thighs and arms were shaking. "How do you know how I'm taking it?"

"I don't." He stood in the doorway.

"Please go away," I said.

"Yes, but I'm going to go through this weekend. The kids are all here. Give me that much." He leaned against the doorway. "God, I'm tired," he said. Then he left. The image of his face with its deep, downward lines hung in my memory, making me shiver. I looked at the shut door, angry now at what he had asked of me. I wondered what Mom would do if she knew. She'd probably leave him, go to live with one of my brothers. I heard

voices downstairs and tried to imagine what Dad was saying to them. "Howard's not feeling so well."

Sister Sorenson had taught me the gospel with vitality and force. I had thought that if anyone was converted she was. I lay on my bed, wondering how it had started. Passing in the street, working together on church projects, helping her with her ditches which needed cleaning each spring because she had no husband to do it, visiting her home every month for ward teaching. She might have joined him one night for the midnight water turn. That made her calculating. He may have asked her to help him move a canvas dam at night, though he could have easily done it himself. They were both calculating. I hated them both for what they were doing to Mom.

I thought about how it had started with Amy and some of my old feeling for her came back, a feeling I knew was wrong because she was married now. While the rest of the kids in MIA painted the scenery for the Church roadshow, we crept separately down the stairs to the furnace room. "This is our own Mutual Improvement Association," she laughed. I was filled with wonder at the pleasure of my arms around her. We kissed, holding ourselves tight against each other. She undid her bra and let me curl my hand around her breast, a sin which had burned when I tried to pray it out of my soul before my mission. We listened for the door to open at the top of the stairs. The next time we went down Brother Thomas surprised us, or nearly did, and we each had to have interviews with the bishop for kissing in the cellar. "You are lucky you didn't go farther," the bishop said. "Some things are so sacred they can only be performed inside the bonds of marriage." We dated as seniors, and I couldn't believe that I would ever want to be with another girl. We had restrained our passion; fear kept us back. "Fornication is next to adultery which is next to murder in seriousness," the bishop said. I imagined that nothing could be so sweet as touching her, that we would be married after my mission. But she had waited eighteen months, not twenty-four.

I rose suddenly. Taking the box filled with family photographs, I lay my parent's pictures in a row across the floor according to their ages, from their wedding to now. I was always surprised by my mother in her wedding gown; she was thin-waisted, her hair a downward curve on each side of her face. I could easily imagine in the early pictures my father and mother loving each other, making love. I tried to see her aging body as Dad saw it. Sister Sorenson was thirty. I quickly shoved the pictures into the box. "You are weak," I said and had no more feeling for the person my father was.

Before long my sister Elizabeth came up, but I asked her to leave. "I'm sorry, I'd like to talk, but I'm worried about my homecoming speech tomorrow. I want to make it a good one." Then because I told her I would, I reread the journal entries which described the people I had converted, reliving the joy I felt with them when they accepted the gospel into their lives.

Toward late afternoon, I finished my talk and decided to act as if nothing had happened between my father and me. As he and I went out to feed the cattle, he pressed his lips onto Mom's cheek. She touched her hand to the spot and her eyes went sad. I was the only one who noticed, and I wondered if he had done



it for me to see. Dad drove to the middle of the field then shut the truck off. He was nervous but he took me by the shoulders and looked full into my face. "When you do find a woman, love her. That's the best thing a man can do; the hardest thing a man can do." Tears stood in his eyes. We fed the rest of the cows without talking. That evening we all were in the living room. Everyone else played cards, but I didn't feel like it. I lay on the couch pretending to doze.

As we walked into church, I saw Amy across the room. She was slightly fuller, but not in the belly. She looked more like a woman than she had before I left. Mom pointed to Amy's husband sitting behind the pulpit. "He's second counselor in the bishopric." He was a stocky man, a little older than me. He turned to the bishop, talking about something, full of his own importance. Watching Amy, I remembered the pleasure of loving her. I didn't want to talk to her, but she saw me and crossed the room toward me.

"It's good to see you," she said, nervous, looking away from me toward her husband.

"Yes," I said. Her eyes seemed veiled, tired and sad, I imagined, but then they caught mine and held them. She smiled and I wanted to get away from her as all my old feeling came back. If I could have, I would have taken the next plane back to Houston, anyplace to get away. "Why didn't you wait?" I wanted to ask.

"Well, Howard!" I turned toward the cheerful voice behind me and saw Wanda. "Becky doesn't go to church so I came alone."

"I'll talk to you later," said Amy, smiling with what I interpreted as wistfulness. I watched her walking away.

"I'm sorry about the other night," I said to Wanda. "Charley was getting to me, but it was pretty rude of me to leave."

"It wasn't the best situation I've been in either."

I looked again for Amy, but saw instead my father moving through the people who stood waiting for the meeting to begin, laying his hands on their arms, joking, friendly with everyone, as he had always been. Mom moved a little behind. I couldn't see her face until she turned half toward me: it was animated, laughing at one of Dad's jokes. She leaned toward him, whispering something. Dad put his hand on her arm. I couldn't see Sister Sorenson and her children yet.

"Becky is so different from when she was younger." Wanda looked at me; I could tell she was uncomfortable. Everyone was uncomfortable.

Brother Ault passed, smiling and shaking our hands. "It's good to have you home." I wanted to be alone. Sister Sorenson came in and took my hand in both of hers before I could think. "I hope things go well for you," she said. After she left, finding a seat behind and to the left of my parents, I still felt her touch on my hand. Several people turned and looked at Wanda and me sitting together.

"Look at them," said Wanda. "That's what I hate about small towns; they've already decided something about us."

I wondered how she could be so perceptive about some things and so dense about others. Maybe the denseness was an act. I

looked at the ward members, some of whom were still glancing toward Wanda and me.

"Well, I'll see you. I've got to go sit on the stand," I said. I sat next to Amy's husband, who shook my hand vigorously. "Brian Samuelson," he said. "I'm second counselor in the bishopric."

"Howard Rockwood," I said.

"Yes, I know."

Wanda sat on the first row. I looked toward the back of the room, away from the people, many of whom were smiling and trying to catch my eye. I would have to speak to them soon. I had missed marrying Amy because she couldn't wait, as my father couldn't wait. The bishop rose. "I'm pleased to welcome you to Elder Howard Rockwood's homecoming," he said.

The meeting started with everyone singing "Ye Elders of Israel." I kept my lips pressed together. Barney Thompson stood to say the opening prayer. During the prayer I watched Sister Sorenson from partly closed eyes, trying to imagine what she and my father thought about in church. The thing between them must be kept in a box somewhere that they only opened at night when they were together. They would both go crazy otherwise. Then came the sacrament song. "Again We Meet Around the Board." I watched the deacons moving down the rows with the trays of broken bread. The room was quiet except for a few fussing babies. I wanted to walk to where my father sat and stop him from taking the sacrament. A person ate damnation to himself when he took the sacrament unworthily. I wondered if I believed that. My mother's arm was threaded in Dad's. How would her face be when someone told her about him?

When I was fourteen, Mom said I couldn't go to a dance in the next town. I talked to her for an hour in her room, until she was flustered. She turned to the wall and said, "No. No. No. No. No."

"You're nothing but a thick-headed bitch," I shouted, running out of the house. Nearly an hour later when I passed her room, she was still sitting, staring at the same place on the wall.

The deacon stood in front of me, the tray of bread extended toward me. I automatically took a piece and passed the tray, feeling the texture of the bread on my fingertips. The deacon was still watching, so I put the bread in my mouth and swallowed. The yeasty taste drew the saliva sharply, unpleasantly. With the taste on my tongue I tried to think about my speech. Instead I looked at Amy and remembered the grayness of her eyes. Amy's husband folded his arms, brushing against my sleeve. I looked at Amy, remembering kissing her.

After the prayer for the water, before the tray of small cups could get to me, I left the stand, aware that everyone was watching, and went into the bathroom. Standing in front of the urinal, I thought about what my father had done. When I was finished, I waited in the doorway, just out of sight, until the sacrament was over and the bishop was talking again. It was almost time for my speech. I could stand and describe what I knew. In the early days of the Church they did that. Dad, having been a missionary and having received the Melchizedek priesthood, would be excommunicated for his sin. He would be ignored by most of the members of the ward, a trial for him, but my mother would be hurt the most. I couldn't think clearly about



what was best.

An excommunication court is a court of love, they said. It can make a person realize his sin, which is the first step toward repentance. Knowing and not saying makes a person a party to the wrongdoing. Still, I didn't know of anyone who had told the bishop about someone else's unworthiness. Of course I wouldn't know if someone told in private; the bishop would keep it confidential.

In 1930 my great-grandfather, James Darren's son, had been excommunicated from the Church for taking a second wife, forty years after the prophet's manifesto said it was wrong. She had been thirty years younger than he was. Apparently he had found another channel for his vigor than the one his murderous father, the vigilante, had used. Members of the Church still remembered what he had done, having developed a revulsion toward polygamy as strong as that toward incest. Kids who went to the cemetery for a thrill said they could still hear him, moaning. He was warning others against his mistake, people said. Once I found in my father's bedroom the metal box where my great-grandfather's diary was kept. "August 15, 1934. It has been three years since anyone in Rockwood has talked to me." I knew that the date of death on his tombstone was 1934.

At the pulpit, the bishop talked about his own mission, years before. Then he introduced me. I stood and moved to face the people. "In a Spanish speaking part of Houston lives a widow woman and her children, five of them. It was my first area before I moved to teach only anglos. We had passed the house many times on our bicycles; the kids were always dirty and running wild. We knew from talking to her neighbors that she saw men in the evening for money." I looked out at the audience. Not even the babies were making noise. Everyone was waiting to see how much detail I would go into about the woman's life. When I heard Amy's husband clear his throat behind me and murmur something to the bishop, I felt like going into specific detail. "So we didn't go there. One day we had passed her house and I had the strong and certain feeling we should go back. When we knocked, no one seemed to be home. The door was open a few inches so my companion pushed it farther to call inside. There was a goat there, but no human was home. My companion wanted to leave then. But I made him walk around the house to the back." I couldn't develop much interest in my own talk. I took a breath and went on. "They were all there under the shade of a blanket. She was trying to give water to one of her children who had a high fever. We told her who we were, and she didn't want to talk to us at first. "Go away," she said. "Can't you see I have trouble today." I told her about the power the priesthood has for healing the sick. Then she let us lay our hands on her child to bless him. When we passed again that evening, she was waiting in the road for us. "My son is well," she said to us. I looked over the audience, remembering the weeks of teaching Sister Mendez. Her eyes had grown brighter and more clear as she learned the truths of the gospel. "She began surprising us. When we came to teach, she would give us the gifts of her sacrifices. 'Last night I told the men to go away. They are no longer welcome here,' she said one night. 'Today I took my wine and poured it out in the garden. I smashed

the bottle.' One day she said nothing but her house had been scrubbed, the children bathed." One by one she had packaged the sins of her life and laid them aside, an arduous labor. Watching from the outside, I knew her steps were firm, steady, as she moved toward her own salvation. She had been a simple sure woman, believing everything we said. Gripping the podium, I let her clear spirit fill me and I spoke to the people of Rockwood from that feeling.

After all the visitors had left our house, abandoning the tables which were covered with cookie fragments and empty paper cups, I lay on my bed and thought about Amy. She and her husband had been to the reception. He was shorter and heavier than me, guiding Amy though the crowd with his hand firm on her elbow. I didn't have a chance to talk to her alone, and I didn't want to talk to her with her husband.

In the darkness I thought about putting my hands on Amy, as her husband had, of taking her clothes off. I moved out of my bed and prayed. "Lord, I give you this gift. I will no longer think about her." But the thoughts returned. The next day I stayed in bed, pretending to sleep. Finally, late in the morning, I heard my mother's footsteps, light, walking up. She knocked; I saw her come smiling through the doorway.

"Oh, you're awake," she said.

"Yes. I guess I woke up when you knocked."

"I just wondered if things were all right."

"I don't feel good."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Let me get the thermometer."

"I already took it. A hundred and one. I took an aspirin." I was surprised at the lie. From the window I could see that it was raining, hard. When I was young, running in the rain had made me feel clean.

When I heard Dad come into the house, I went down the stairs and out into the field. Soon he followed, walking along the lane toward me. I heard his footsteps and felt something, a coat, laid across my shoulders. "You're sick," he said. "Killing yourself won't help anything." I let him lead me back to the house, glad to have his arms around me.

**I**n the old house I sit in a wooden rocking chair in the high-ceilinged living room. To my left my father reads the newspaper, glancing from behind it out the window. I look past him at the white skirt of light around the street lamp in front of Sister Sorenson's house. My mother sits on the floor and packages odd socks and baby shirts in manila envelopes. "They always forget something," she says.

I wrap my arms around myself, against my mother's sad and my father's nervous eyes. The only sound is the rocking of the chair, the hard sound of wood crossing wood. A beat up, a beat back, waiting to understand.