

First Place, 1989 Brookie & D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest

THINGS OF THIS WORLD

By Michael Fillerup

“SO HOW'S TONY DOING?”

I ask but don't want an answer. Gazing out the kitchen window, across the chaparral-frocked canyon and up, up, up at the adobe-colored mini-mansions studding the terraced heights . . . I already know. Living in one of those, building half the others—that's how my favorite cousin Tony's doing.

I take a sip of cranberry juice and, through the curved distortion of the glass, watch the sun hovering above the green hills of La Costa. I'm wondering if my good Aunt Josie hasn't special-ordered it for the occasion, to nonchalantly impress us. Like the Swedish pancakes and fresh strawberries and cream for brunch, and the “light” dinner she's preparing now. Three hours before sundown.

Outside, Spanish chimes are tinkling in the light Pacific breeze.

“Oh, he and Terri are doing fine—they're just fine!”

Aunt Josie wipes her hands on the dishtowel. Even cooking she wears a skytone silken dress, long and loose, like a sari. She's looking good. Great. Some skilled surgeon has removed a decade from her face. The network of little wrinkles I recalled under her eyes is barely visible, like a pattern of pencil marks erased. Her figure, too, has been revamped. She's dropped twenty pounds since we last saw her at a Larson family reunion seven years ago.

“They got the new little girl, you knew that. . . .”

Another. That makes two adopted towheads.

Aunt Josie takes a head of cabbage from the refrigerator, a big black space-age vault, and proceeds to slice it up on her built-in cutting board. Tanya and I watch, perched on bar stools.

“Tony's finishing up another home,” Aunt Josie says. “It's just up the street.”

“Another little quarter-million project?” I smile to show her I'm only joking. Aunt Josie smiles, too, but hers is slow and slightly strained, like invisible strings tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Tanya's giving me the eye. Watch it, she says without saying so.

I'm only kidding. Really.

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Just watch it.

Okay. All right. I promise.

Have promised. Myself. I'm determined, for once, to keep my mouth shut. I must not ruin things. We're on vacation. Relax. Enjoy. Unwind.

“Well, this one's closer to a million,” Aunt Josie says. She's not boasting. If anything, she looks a little embarrassed. When Tanya asks if we can see the house, Aunt Josie grimaces. The kitchen light has shaped a reddish halo around her coiffure. The threads of gray are also gone. She says she'll call Tony at work and see. “He's so busy right now. . . . He'd really like to see you, Stan, but right after work he has to take a group of Scouts on an overnigher.”

“Don't worry,” I say, smoothing the airspace in front of me. “I understand . . . completely.”

I really don't want Tanya to see a million dollar home. After the initial elation, it will depress her for a month. Worse than postpartum blues. I really don't want to see Tony either. I mean, I'd like to see Tony, I'd love to. But not Tony's house or Tony's car or Tony's tennis court.

“So what did they name the baby?” Tanya asks.

“Charlotte,” Aunt Josie says.

“Charlotte. That's pretty,” Tanya says, but I can tell by her split-second hesitation she's unimpressed. Charlotte. Too Southern maybe. Or arachnid connotations. Tanya's very picky about names. She's picky about a lot of things. She knows what she wants. That's why I married her—one reason anyway. She's got a mind of her own. She's a beauty, too.

Was, she corrects me. She won't let me call her beautiful anymore. Pretty, nice looking, attractive . . . okay. Beautiful? She'll flash her calves and run a quick finger along the crooked blue roadmaps, or grab a hunk of her stomach: “Can you pinch an inch? Or six?” “Motherhood,” she says. “You pay your dues.” She doesn't say this bitterly, a little tongue-in-cheek if anything, *que será será*; but I catch occasional hints of resentment in her eyes, the way sunlight picks out glitter in broken glass. Well, too bad! *Beautiful*. Dark brown hair to her hips and almond eyes to match. Fifteen years and she still rings my bell.

Outside I see the fruits of her fleshly sacrifice. Pam and Joy soak in the jacuzzi while little Matt charges around the patio like the Tasmanian devil. A junior whirlwind. I follow the downward slope of the canyon into a blue lagoon where ducks drift about like Chinese characters spelling out a coded mes-

sage: STANLEY GO HOME. Just south lies the perfect green of the golf course.

"Did you see your dad while you were in L.A.?" Aunt Josie asks. She's slicing bananas now, into neat little chips.

"Tuesday."

Tanya gives me the eye again: Don't lie.

"And how's he?" Aunt Josie asks. She already knows: another divorce; back on the Special Interests circuit.

"Fine."

"That's good," she says, but the sudden delta of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes betrays her false delight, and her plastic surgeon's handiwork. She still holds my father personally responsible. The negligent bishop. Get thine own house in order!

Over brunch we ran through the rest of my family: Neil's in Boston, Anne's in Provo, Mark's in San Francisco and loving it, Peter's in Bakersfield and hating it. Yvonne? "We had lunch with her on Monday. She's fine."

Aunt Josie takes a large bowl from the fridge, scoops out a mound of whole-wheat dough, and begins kneading it on the breadboard. Her freckled arms shake as her hands work the dough. She's making some of her blue ribbon bread, just for me. After my mother died, she used to drive all the way from North Hollywood once a week with three or four loaves wrapped in tin foil, still warm. She would drop off the bread and take my little sister Yvonne home for the weekend. It got to be a family joke, sort of. "Going home for the weekend, Yvonne?" She loved going to Aunt Josie's. We all did. As time went on, her stays got longer and longer until she finally stayed for good.

I look beyond Aunt Josie and into the living room where broad oak beams rise to form a cathedral ceiling. Sunlight slants through the glass like an Easter vision. I still haven't quite recovered. Yvonne said Uncle Eddie and Aunt Josie had moved into a real nice home, not a palace.

"That's good," I say, "that Tony's doing so well."

Tony was my buddy growing up. Two years older, he was one of those blue-eyed blond prodigies who could do anything he put his mind to and tried everything in sight. Skiing, surfing, karate, kayaking, scuba diving . . . things kids like me only dreamed of but . . . what? Some inner restriction we Bodily boys imposed upon ourselves when our father dragged us to the Army Surplus to buy us boots two sizes too big ("You need a little growing room. . ."). Whatever new fad or craze came along, somehow, no. Not meant for us. Someone else maybe. . . .

It wasn't all easy for Tony. He spent his teenage years experimenting with drugs and sex and good times. Eventually he went straight, repented, and served a belated mission. He started his own contracting outfit, à la Uncle Eddie, while earning a night school degree. He got dollar-wise, computerized his business, jobbed out all his work, and made a quick fortune. He married a svelte blond divorcée who, for reasons undisclosed, was out of the maternity business.

"Poor Terri," Aunt Josie says. "She wanted so much to give Tony children." I'm thinking, How old fashioned. Give Tony

children. How Biblical. Give me seed, lest I die. Despite forty years in southern California, my aunt is still, deep down, rural Utah. Made in Panguitch.

She's gazing out the window, dreamy-eyed, a sentimental smile. "Oh, that Matthew! He's just full of it, isn't he? Just like a little Kilpatrick!"

Since our arrival this morning she's been eyeballing my little boy. Why this bothers me I don't know, but I feel an urge to wrap my arms around him like a possessive kid with a toy: "Mine! Can't have!"

Aunt Josie stuffs the dough into little tin pans, covers each with a small dish towel, and puts them in the oven. Tanya's stroking the kitchen counter as if it were alive. "Isn't tile awfully expensive?" She's taking mental notes for her dream-house. "Someday when we have enough money to build. . . ." It keeps her going. Hope precedes the miracle.

"Not really," Aunt Josie says. Aunt Josie knows.

She removes two fryer chickens from the fridge and peels off the plastic. Stripping the chicken, Aunt Josie grits her teeth: the veins in her hands swell like little blue cords. She tugs until the stubborn skin finally slips over the end of the drumstick. It's like pulling off a turtleneck sweater.

I'm watching her, thinking, why does she have to dress up like that, just to cook a couple of birds. Who's she trying to impress?

Then I feel guilty about my feelings. During my vagabond days, whenever I stumbled into L.A., it was Aunt Josie who always took me in. Hair to my shoulders, Levi jacket, bell-bottom jeans, a guitar case in my hand, a knapsack over my shoulder, I'd knock on her window at three A.M. Uncle Eddie would answer first, gruff back then, an early bird working man: "Yeah? Who is it?" "Stan!" "Who?" "Stan Bodily!"

Then Aunt Josie. "Stan?" A rustling of sheets. "I'll be right there!"

She would bed me in Tony's old room and feed me a king's breakfast the next morning, asking about my travels and adventures, never criticizing my tumbleweed existence—encouraging it perhaps? Getting back at my father through me?

Wait. What's the matter with me? My aunt and uncle are wonderful people. They've just returned from L.A. where one week each month they rent an apartment and do temple work. Uncle Eddie has been a bishop, a high councilman, a stake president. Aunt Josie has served as Relief Society president, Young Women's president, Primary president, at the ward and stake levels. Uncle Eddie spends ten bucks on posterboard for his gospel doctrine class. He builds custom bookshelves, no charge, for the ward library. I ought to be ashamed. I ought to know better. I *do* know better. I *am* ashamed. My aunt and uncle have worked hard, from humble saw and hammer beginnings, to achieve their present status. They have lived fruitful lives, and the windows of heaven have been opened accordingly. I should rejoice in their good fortune and prosperity. My cousin Tony's, too. What's wrong with me? I don't want a Mercedes. I don't need a tennis court. A big home means more housework.

I look up and smile. "Aunt Josie takes such good care of me.



I left home on my own accord. I was going to be the Mormon Bob Dylan, remember?

My favorite Aunt Josie!"

Uncle Eddie enters wearing a golf shirt as bright as the sunshine outside. Tall, lean through the hips, broad Kilpatrick shoulders and a gritty, overbiting grin. He leans over and gives Tanya a hug. Her third today. "I can't resist a pretty face," he says. Tanya turns her head and blushes like a little girl. "Oh, Eddie. . . ."

Uncle Eddie wants to show me his new computer. Another one. It spells. Edits. Plays pinocle. Pick any word in the Bible and it'll summon up every scripture with that word. "Oh, like a concordance," I say, downplaying it.

"Yes, but this is much better than a concordance. Come on, I'll show you!"

I follow him into his study. More oak, more polish. Press a button and cupboards open, lights flash, the desktop unrolls. I'm on the Jetsons.

Uncle Eddie inserts a floppy disk. The machine purrs like a sleeping animal. "Now, hear that? It's loading the whole Bible." He flashes his stallion smile and asks me for a word. "I don't know. . . . Adultery." He pecks at the keyboard and the letters A-D-U-L-T-R-Y appear on the screen. When he hits ENTER, the monitor blinks a green alert. His spelling miscue spawns an old memory—or a thought: my father the Harvard graduate squatting down in his three-piece suit to snatch an empty 7-Up bottle from the gutter, back when you could redeem them for a nickel.

I hear my kids in the jacuzzi, laughing and splashing. This is a real treat for them. Back home I find flyers in the burn box. I unwad them: Girls Softball, Gymnastics, Music Camp, Cheerleading Camp. "Pam," I ask, "do you want to join?" She shrugs. "Nah!" "You're sure?" "Un-huh." Off the hook? Or early knowledge? Too early.

Uncle Eddie's still trying to get the correct spelling for adultery. He's a fine scriptorian but a miserable speller. His bulky forehead furrows as he tries odd combinations: ADULTARY, ADULTREY. He asks about my dad, is Bill still teaching?

"I think so. Yes."

Uncle Eddie can't resist a dig. Or else he doesn't know better. "If Bill had worked steady, he'd be retired now, too."

Is there an echo of premonition for me as well? Two years in Mexico City, a year in Guatemala, two years in Alaska. Living like God's lilies of the field, without purse or scrip. Tanya used to nod, yes, yes. But the nesting instinct. Roots. "The girls are getting older. They need a place to call home. . . ."

Uncle Eddie finally hits the magic key—ADULTERY. The screen spins like a slot machine as a stream of scriptures streaks by. Little letters scurry about like green ants arranging themselves in the manner of a marching band. Uncle Eddie turns to me, beaming with pride. "See? Every scripture in the Bible with the word adultery!"

I'm tempted to tell him my fingers are faster.

I WANDER through the house, upstairs, wondering if I'll get lost. Doors, doors, doors, I twist the brass knob on a double set and slip inside. Covered with a thick, satin spread, a king-sized bed sits like an enchanted isle in the middle of a room half the size of my mobile home in Pinetop, Arizona. I look, snoop. The master bathtub is a swimming pool. I could sleep my three kids in the walk-in closet. The champagne-colored carpeting sparkles like the real thing. I feel guilty stepping on it. Any moment a voice from on high will command me to remove the sneakers from my feet.

Creeping over to the bed, I brush off the seat of my Levis and plop down on the edge. Suddenly I feel beat, drained. I fall back flat, arms out, the satiny spread billowing up around me. I'm on a cloud, floating. As my eyes close, I notice a triangle of sunlight pointing at the seascape on the wall. I listen to my kids below, slap-happy, splashing. Joy's pre-teen shriek: "Math-hew-ew!" "Heeey!" I hear Aunt Josie calling: "Tony! Stan!" We're going down the "big slide," a thirty foot spiraling tube, built by Uncle Eddie. Aunt Josie is bringing us graham crackers with pink icing. Candy apples, too. Tonight we're going to the show, *Swiss Family Robinson*. Tomorrow, the beach. Bodysurfing at Santa Monica pier. Corn dogs and pink lemonade. Tonight after the movie Tony and I will play Monopoly and Stratego until the lights go off upstairs; then we'll sneak into the kitchen and "steal" the midnight snacks Aunt Josie has left out for us and crawl into our sleeping bags, underneath the pool table, and scare the hell out of each other with horror stories. I'm eight nine ten eleven. I don't want this weekend to end. Ever. This isn't special guest treatment. It's always this way at Aunt Josie's, always an event. When she takes me home Sunday night, I feel a huge hole growing in my stomach. The house stinks of fresh paint, thanks to my father, the home improvement nut. To this day that smell drops lead in my blood. The furniture is still covered with old sheets. Ghost effigies. Usually we eat pretty well—eggs, cheese, whole-wheat bread, huge boxes of navel oranges. Milk by the gallon. But the weekend before big shopping, the fridge is bare. So I sit in my darkened bedroom munching dry macaroni, trying to fill the void in my gut, feeling very sorry for myself, and guilty, too, even then, of betrayal. Wishing I were someone else's kid.

It's not that my home in Woodland Hills is junky or run-down: it's quite nice, really, a four-bedroom rock roof-and-stucco, a cut above Aunt Josie's, yet it seems so deadly dull in contrast, even with six kids whooping and hollering. My father is always teaching some picayune night class, or he's hog-tied at church meetings—his phrase, hog-tied. My mother is always tired, the laden housewife, or playing Mozart on the piano. She's sitting on the sofa, stroking my blond bangs as she reads me a fairy tale out loud. My father's in the kitchen—a rare cameo—opening the mail. He rips open an envelope with his teeth and slaps the crisp paper on the counter: "Sears!" His tearing grows louder, more vicious. The veins in his mighty forearms are writhing like snakes. "Fed Mart!" Slap! "Gelsons!" Slap!

My mother in the florid muumuu marks her place and goes to him. Her voice is soft, a flower. "What is it? What's wrong?"

I'm pretending to read, pretending nothing's happening. But he's still grumbling, slapping: "Penneys . . . Bullocks . . . May Company. . ."

"William?"

I look up just as his arm crosses his throat, a death stroke, and slashes across her chest, knocking her to the floor. She sits in her pool of loose clothing, glaring up at him, her tears coming stubbornly: "You big bully! You big. . ."

My father's eyes and mine bounce around the room like pinballs trying to avoid each other, but there is an inevitable intersection. Deep freeze. My expression is obvious: fear. His is more complex. Twenty-five years and I'm still trying to decipher it. Not wholly anger or hate or humiliation. Fear, but a different type. Not of saber-toothed creatures panting after you. . . . Or maybe so. Too close.

My father holds my eyes a split-second longer, then gathers up his mail and ducks out the back door. At that moment I hate him, and not because he's just decked my mother.

I wake up to the smell of Aunt Josie's chicken delight, drifting upstairs. The arrowhead of sunlight is gone; the bedroom is totally in shadow. I hear the Spanish chimes, and Matthew's high-pitched squeal: "Hey, you guys, hit the deck!" I get up, leaving my imprint on the soft bedspread, a big shallow hole I make no effort to fill.

I wander into the guest room, one of three. One whole wall is covered with framed photographs. There's a family portrait: Uncle Eddie and Aunt Josie with slender Sara on the left; to the right, Tod the returned missionary, then Tony, blond hair in a pony tail and John Lennon glasses. And next to him, smiling sassily in miniskirt and fishnet stockings, Yvonne, a busty little twelve-year-old my father couldn't handle post-Mom. I'm long out of the picture, ever since Tony made the quantum leap to high school. He's into girls, cars, grass. I'm still a junior high honor roll jock with a guitar.

More Tony. The clean-cut missionary, Eddie's indomitable grin. Night school cap and gown. Tony and Terri in front of the L.A. Temple. Tony and Terri with their first little girl, a miniature Shirley Temple blond enough to be their original. So . . . you can buy kids, too? What next? Ah! Of course. Like a before/after sequence. . . . In picture one, Terri looks like a stuck-up Roaring Twenties girl, Charleston slim and flat-chested, except for oddly pear-shaped hips. In the next frame she's a Lady Clairol Cleopatra, still stuck-up, but the battleship hips are gone, transplanted to buxom upper regions, like some great oceanic shift. Re-figured.

"There you are!" It's Tanya, finding me out. "We've been looking for you."

"We?"

"Me and Aunt Josie."

Tanya scans the photographs, smiling at soldier Eddie, at Aunt Josie in wedding white ("She was really cute . . ."), at butchered and freckled Tod and Tony. Her eyes stop on Terri's "after" picture. So does her smile. Her soft, gourd-shaped face slowly hardens, like pottery; her lips part, a sad crack. "It's not fair," she whispers.

We've discussed it before. Vein stripping. Liposuction. A

breast lift, too? Will our insurance—nope. Not a dime. Look, just forget it. It's petty vanity, that's all. We've got the sewage assessment. Piano lessons. I've got to buy school clothes for the kids. No one looks at my damn legs anyway.

"Let's go," I say, taking her by the arm.

THE sliding glass door opens and in come the kids, dripping. Aunt Josie tells them to stay right there while she fetches some towels. She uses that word, fetch. Arms folded, teeth chattering, wet skin contracted, my half-naked children look like shriveled little refugees. They're not at all. Pam's on the skinny side, but she's also the tallest kid in her eighth grade class. Basketball material if she had the gumption. She's into music. She could be a brain surgeon, but wants to be a cellist. So far I've kept my mouth shut. Joy's the athlete. Super thighs. She can outrun any kid at Pinetop Elementary School. Matthew? Wavy golden hair and a baby beer gut, he's a fat, little cupid with Gobot Transformers and Robocops on the brain.

After the kids dry off and change, we gather around the dining table for our "light" meal: chicken broccoli with a dozen side dishes, including three loaves of Aunt Josie's prize-winning bread, jacketed in tinfoil. My kids are gaping. They've never seen so much food at one time. Not on our table. After Uncle Eddie says grace, they stare at the cornucopia, dumbfounded. Where to start? Joy leans my way and whispers, guiltily, "Dad, can we eat?"

"Dig in, kiddo!" I say, trying to put them at ease.

Aunt Josie serves the mashed potatoes, heaping mounds on my plate. Feed that boy! Before he starves to death! She means well. She always does. Dorothy's kid. Filling in for little sister—little dead sister.

"That's plenty, thanks."

"Are you sure?"

As Tanya reaches for the fruit salad, I note the untanned stripe around her ring finger. Monday at the beach she forgot to take off her wedding band. When she waded out of the surf, it was missing from her finger. Easy-going Tanya shrieked and charged back into the frothy waves, thrashing around frantically, as if searching for a drowning child. Big and bosomy in her black one-piece, she'd looked like a sea lion in sackcloth. We searched the chilly waters for an hour before I finally convinced her it was hopeless. "My wedding band," she kept sobbing. It was totally unlike her, carrying on as if this were an irreplaceable loss. It wasn't an expensive band: we'd bought it at a second-hand shop just before the ceremony, an impulsive change of heart: Sixties iconoclasts, up until then we had been snubbing "irrelevant" traditions like ring exchanges.

Later, after Tanya had calmed down, I stupidly tried to minimize the loss, reminding her that it wasn't even part of the temple ceremony. "You do the ring bit after, remember?" She said she knew that, but it's still symbolic. The officiator even said so. The ring. No beginning, no end. Eternal. When I said we'd get another, she looked at me and sneered (also very un-Tanya): "When, the Millennium?" Tuesday morning she apologized. "It must be the week before my period . . . or

something."

The kids have shrugged off their initial shyness and are gorging themselves as if it's their last meal. Aunt Josie is telling us about Tod's boy. "Remember how Tod won the youth speech contest for the stake and then the regionals, and then went up to Salt Lake to compete in the Tabernacle? Well, now his boy's doing the same thing. He won the stake and the regional. There's a write up in the *Church News*."

Tanya's excited for him. "That's great!" She nudges Pam. "See?" Pam shakes the brown bangs from her eyes and mumbles like her father: "No, I'm blind."

She may be blind, but I'm not. I'm staring at the sauced chicken on my plate, which has transformed into a slab of prime rib my father has worked double-overtime to put there. . . . He's doing his executive best to ignore my voluntary abstinence. So are my brothers and sisters. My sandy-haired stepmother rolls her eyes: Good grief! Here we go again!

My father makes a little joke. Something about Stan eating rabbit food. I pick at my mixed veggies, wondering when this meal will finally end so I can grab a yogurt from the fridge and stuff my mouth with sunflower seeds. Although it's fast Sunday and my belly's howling, I'm trying to appear as unaffected as a yogi: Let the sky fall. Let whatever.

All semester my father has been nagging me about college. Get those applications in, Stan! Tonight's the night I tell him I'm not going. I'm joining the Peace Corps instead. I want to do something for humankind.

He almost pukes. Humankind? Go on a mission! Get an education! Then you can save the damn world! He's had it with me. First I quit the football team, then the hair, now this. What about med school? Law school? My 4.0 GPA will go to waste. He quotes scriptures: Don't hide your talents under a bush.

I quote my own canons: March to your own drummer.

He's sitting behind the big walnut desk in his study, wearing the smart suit and tie of his generation. I, too, am in uniform: tie-dyed tank top and ragged blue jeans. I'm on my high horse again, enumerating the sins of my country: we're the biggest, fattest nation on the planet. Ecological bandits. We poison the air, the water, ourselves. Vietnam? *Whose* freedom? We've got no right. . . . Our Big Stick mentality. We're not wearing the white hats this time, Pop. We don't ask—we do! No, I haven't registered for the draft. No, I will not. Let them put me in jail. Let them try.

Tonight he doesn't give me his standing lecture on the Plan of Salvation, only this caution: Think about what you're doing, Stan. You can always repent—the Lord forgives. But people don't always. Rarely in fact. Don't burn your bridges.

I have no bridges to burn.

What is it you want, Stan? What do you really want out of life?

I'll tell you what I don't want! I don't want to work sixty hours a week at a job I detest just so I can have a big house and a big car and can take a two-week vacation every summer!

He tries reverse psychology: Watch it, or you'll end up a teacher like your old man.

There's nothing wrong with teaching—if you want to. You

teach because you can't do anything else.

Now I've done it. The pink and blue capillaries in his cheeks are swelling, cracking; his face looks like an old fresco about to explode. Don't lecture me on what you don't know anything about! Don't lecture me! I'm your father!

You're nothing!

"Stan? More mashed potatoes?" Uncle Eddie offers me the whole bowl.

"No thanks."

"You haven't touched your chicken," Aunt Josie says.

I cut off a sliver and fork it into my mouth, chewing it like gravel.

"How about some bread?" Aunt Josie reaches for the platter.

"No thanks."

"No bread?" Aunt Josie frowns.

Uncle Eddie's mountainous brow furrows. "It's good bread, Stan."

"Maybe later."

"This is *really* good," Tanya says, buttering another slice. The kids, cheeks bulging, nod in assent. I gaze outside where the red rind of the sun is being sucked into the Pacific. As the gauzy sky goes through its menstrual changes, a scripture comes to mind: the moon turning to blood. A violent beauty. The ocean tightens and buckles: a hundred thousand flashing swords. The armored ranks of Israel. Or Fort Knox in quilt-work.

Aunt Josie says Tony can't make it, but Tod may stop by later when he gets off work. He's so busy, you know. He's taking the boys backpacking in Alaska this summer. Deep sea fishing in Mazatlan, too. Hang-gliding. That Tod, you know. Tony and Terri are going to Acapulco with some friends. Just a week this time. Sara's husband, Steve, he's writing a screenplay.

"How's your job?" Uncle Eddie asks.

I shrug. "It's a living."

"Now what is it you teach?" Aunt Josie asks.

I dip my head, put a fist to my mouth, and clear my throat. "Music."

"And social studies," Tanya says. "Stan was almost made a supervisor."

My foot gives Tanya's a warning nudge. Ix-nay.

"Stan went on a river trip," Tanya says. "Last summer."

Uncle Eddie lowers his fork. "Did you say river trip?" His mouth fills with ivory. I've touched an envious chord and I can't believe how much it pleases me. "The Colorado," I say. My face is nonchalant but inside I'm frothing over. River trip. Grand Canyon. My little Southwest adventure.

Uncle Eddie is rising from his padded velour chair. He disappears into his study and returns with a stack of color photographs. "Here, look at these, Stan!" He, Tod, and Tony floating down jungled corridors in pontoon boats. Posing in front of vine-strangled ruins. Surrounded by gaping brown villagers. Tall, fair, broad-shouldered, they look like the Three Nephites bringing light and truth to the New World. Even Uncle Eddie, with gray corkscrews springing from his droopy chest and swim trunks hanging like a saggy diaper, appears godlike among those little brown people.

"When. . . . How. . . ?" Tanya is gawking like the adulating villagers in the photographs.

"It was Tony's idea." Uncle Eddie grins. "He was building a home for a fellow who used to. . . ."

Central America. Why not? Eddie and the boys.

Tanya's snatching glances at me. How long have I been folding and unfolding my paper napkin? It's worn to shreds. What is she thinking, feeling, that compels her to blurt out, "Stan does a lot of hiking!"

Aunt Josie cups her veiny hands and tilts her head. "Hiking. . . that's nice."

By the time they finish their second helping of pineapple upside-down cake my kids can barely move they're so full. They push their chairs back and totter toward the playroom like overstuffed penguins. Soon I hear the clicking of pool balls and Pam playing a racy boogie-woogie on Aunt Josie's pseudo-organ, the Fun Machine. I do my best to tune out the computerized calliope accompanying her.

As Aunt Josie and Tanya clear the table, the doorbell rings—magic chimes. Aunt Josie's slippers swish across the sparkling carpet. I hear a familiar foreignness: Tod and Margie and their little tribe of seven. Instinctively, Tod ducks his balding head as he passes through the doorway. He grins, grips my hand. "Hey, long time no see!" He seems truly glad to see me. Margie looks plump in her paisley smock—expecting number eight?—plump and cheerful. She smiles at Tanya: "So you're the one with all the hair! I'm envious!" She turns to me, "And you're the musician!"

"I play a little guitar."

"Stan writes songs," Tanya says.

"Used to."

"Will you play one for us? You sing, too, don't you?"

I politely decline, but score two points for Margie.

The seven kids race by before I can even count them. Aunt Josie introduces us to Sean, a photocopy of his dad: that same Neanderthal brow, one eye slightly askew, watching out for sucker punches.

"So you're the new Demosthenes!" I say, shaking his hand.

He crinkles his bum eye. "Who?"

"Good luck with your speech."

He grins, nods, and scampers off. Yep. He's got the Kilpatrick look. Come on, world! Let me at 'em!

The little Kilpatricks know the ropes. Foraging through closets and cupboards, they drag out a mini-trampoline, board games, video paraphernalia. In seconds the house looks like Circus Maximus.

We adults stroll into the living room and occupy the two facing sofas: Tanya and I on one, Uncle Eddie, Aunt Josie, and Margie on the other, and a huge coffee table like a cherrywood continent between us. Tod spreads his work-weary six-six frame across the floor. He's wearing his three-piece pinstripes. Two of his younger boys are taking turns bouncing on the mini-tramp while, in the playroom, his only daughter pecks out "Give Said the Little Stream" on the Fun Machine. I secretly urge Pam to scoot her aside and dazzle us with a few bars of "Clair de Lune."

The conversation is slow, banal, predictable. Tod's building a new home in Escondido. Three acres. He's first counselor in his ward. Margie's the Young Women's president. Jenny's in the school play. The boys are hooked on soccer, Scouts, three-wheeling. Tod's law practice is thriving.

Aunt Josie updates Tod and Margie. More of the same. Steve's writing a screenplay. He's a bishop now. Eddie's going to help him finish their new house. Steve bought an airplane, did you know that? A little Cessna.

Margie asks about our kids. She's a big, round, happy woman. Happily freckled.

Tanya does the talking. Pam's in the gifted class. Joy's a fourth-grade track star. "Flo-Joy," they call her. Matthew—well, he starts kindergarten in the fall.

Tod wants to know what I'm doing in the Church now. "I teach Primary, Star A." Dare I intimate they don't call paupers to the power positions anymore?

Count your blessings, Stanley! Who wants to be hog-tied at church meetings every night?

Sour grapes? Again?

"So what's in Pinetop?" Margie asks. Not digging, just curious. Yet that California hauteur . . . as if all the world's waiting in line for a passport to sunny San Diego.

"Work," is my answer.

"Oh? And where do you work?"

"The public schools," I say—confess.

"Well, that must be nice, having three months off."

"You mean three months unemployed."

"Oh, I didn't think of that. What do you do all summer?"

"Scrub toilets."

Tanya elbows me. "He does not! He cuts firewood and does odd jobs. He used to teach summer school."

"Never again!" I flash my teeth to show everyone I'm kidding.

"Hey!" Tod says, rising from his beached whale position. "Why don't you get a job out here! I'll bet they pay twice as much." Heads are nodding—Uncle Eddie's, Aunt Josie's, Margie's; Tanya's, too, although she knows better. It's unanimous. Yeah, Stan. Sure, Stan. Go for it, Stan.

I'm waving my hands—back off, folks! Wait! Hold it! Listen. . . it's a December morning, a week before Christmas. It's been snowing all night, so they call off school. It's still dark out, and the snow's coming down like salt from a giant shaker, slow and steady. I clip on my skis and within fifty yards I'm poling through national forest. Silence. Nothing but the sound of my skis swish-swishing through the woods and the snow falling like baby's breath and the pines creaking like rocking chairs, old people rocking in the woods, and there's no clock, no schedule, no have-to-be-home-by. . . .

Tod and Uncle Eddie are smiling, nodding; and Margie; even Tanya, who hates snow, is smiling. There is an audible and envious "Aaahhh. . . ." Suddenly I feel much better, *years* better. I tell an Arizona joke and everyone laughs. Soon I'm persuading Tod and Margie to detour through Pinetop en route to Lake Powell next summer. "We'll hike down to Havasupai. You've never seen anything like it in your life. A hundred foot

waterfall in the middle of the desert. . . ."

As I'm expounding on the virtues of Northern Arizona, my boy sneaks into the living room, cuddles up beside me, and whispers in my ear. Out of the corner of my eye I catch Aunt Josie's sentimental smile, so sweetly approving, and it rankles me. Am I the evolutionary climax of the meanest sonuvabitch in Southern California? The bad genes cleansed?

"What, Matt? I can't hear you."

He whispers louder. He wants one of his little plastic dinosaurs. "Dad," he pleads, "can't you get just *one*?"

I explain that all of his dinosaurs are back in Pinetop, five hundred miles away. That's ten hours, Matt, going sixty-five.

Time, distance, logic are of no moment to a five-year-old. He won't quit. "Please, Dad, Pleeeeeeeez. Just *one*?"

Why is he being so damn persistent? Kids. It's just how kids are.

"No, Matt, I can't."

"Dad?" He's in agony.

"No! I said no and I mean no! Now quit bugging me!"

His head drops and he mopes off, his face melting into a basset hound look. Aunt Josie's face melts, too. "Ohhh. . . ." I look the other way. Tense, hard. As Matt disappears around the corner, I hear Tod's two youngest boys: "Well? Where is it? Let's see!" Matt's voice, an egg cracking: "I don't have it." "See! We knew you didn't!"

I glance at Tod, who appears embarrassed on my behalf. His kids surely have nifty Gobot cars that can grow wings and fly. I smile and shrug, to put him at ease. Not your fault, Tod. It's kids, just kids.

"Tyler!" he hollers. "John! Stop that right now!"

Silence, then a tiny voice: "Stop what?"

"You know."

They stop, but I re-feel a hundred old hurts. Hey, Bodily, when are you getting your Care Package? Hey, Saggy Socks!

Aunt Josie calls to my little boy. "Matthew? Come here, Matthew. . . ." He reappears, small and circumspect. Aunt Josie thrusts out her arms. He takes a cautious step, then makes his break. I'm up, reaching across the coffee table, grabbing his arm and pulling him around, into me. I scoop him up like a bride at the threshold and fall back on the sofa clutching him tightly to my chest as he tries to wrestle free: "Dad! *Da-ad!*" Squealing angrily, fluttering his little legs as I tickle his ribs in apparent play. I hold him closer, tighter, tickling. I don't look at Aunt Josie until his piercing cries become little belly laughs: "Hey, Dad! *Da-a-ad!*"

IT'S eleven-thirty when Tanya and I finally put the kids in bed. Usually there's an elaborate ritual, but tonight they zonk right out. They don't even ask for a bedtime story or a drink.

Tanya and I go downstairs where Aunt Josie is waiting with tall glasses of cranberry juice. Bowls of tortilla chips and guacamole dip sit on the coffee table. We retake the two facing sofas, Uncle Eddie and Aunt Josie, Tanya and me. We're no sooner re-settled than Aunt Josie's up, striding off. "Oh, Eddie, you left the light on in your study again!"

Tanya gasps teasingly. "Eddie, don't you turn your lights off?" Uncle Eddie winks at her.

"No he doesn't!" Aunt Josie says, returning. She slips an arm around Uncle Eddie and gives him a peck on the cheek. "But I love him anyway."

"When I was a kid," Uncle Eddie says, "my mother used to follow me all over the house turning lights off. She had to, of course, to save money. But, oh! I hated it! Just hated it! I told myself—told her, too, I think—'When I grow up, I'm never going to turn off a light in my house!'"

"And he doesn't, either!" Aunt Josie says, smiling affectionately. "Sometimes I'll come down in the morning and he'll be asleep in front of the TV with every light in the house on!"

Tanya laughs; I smile.

Maybe it's the late hour, or the cranberry juice (Mormon wine?), or the cumulative residue of the day—or twenty-five years of residue—but somehow our tongues have been loosened. It's nitty gritty time. I can feel it. I caution myself: Stanley, keep thy cool.

Aunt Josie tests the water by bringing up Yvonne.

"Oh, Yvonne *Kilpatrick*," Tanya says.

Aunt Josie notices her sarcastic edge. She smiles, the telltale deltas at the corners of her eyes betraying her. "Oh, but you can see why she changed her last name, can't you? From Bodily. . . ." Aunt Josie glances left at Uncle Eddie, then across at me, searching for a euphemism. Her hands move tentatively to her abdomen, then roll up and over in a great pouring forth motion. "I mean, being as well-endowed as she is."

My response is instantaneous. "You're kidding. That's not why she changed her name."

Aunt Josie looks thoroughly baffled, as if I've just posed an advanced calculus problem or the notion of a partless, passionless God. "No? Then why do you think. . . ."

"She didn't want to be one of us, a Bodily."

Aunt Josie shakes her head. She's chewing her lower lip. "No, I don't think. . . ."

Uncle Eddie cuts in, a rare defiance. "It was a women's lib thing!"

Now Aunt Josie is shocked—double shocked. She looks persecuted, ganged up on. She turns to Tanya for support, but Tanya's neutral, at least in face. Aunt Josie smooths the front of her skytone dress and gazes off, the pious peacemaker. "Well, I don't agree."

I want to pursue this. If it was just the name, purely the name, why Kilpatrick? Why not Larson, Mom's maiden name? And why. . . .

Tanya's giving me the eye: Cool it. But it's Aunt Josie who keeps the fire burning. "Yvonne's so much like your mother, you know. Dorothy was kind and gentle, she was. . . ."

Now it's Uncle Eddie's turn to be shocked. His bulky forehead damn near cracks in half. "Dorothy? She was spoiled rotten!"

"Oh, Eddie! She wasn't either!"

"Josie, you used to yell at her all the time. Oh, she matured, sure—after she got married. She grew up a lot. And after that, I don't think there was very much wrong with her, but back

then, when I first met you. . . . I really didn't like her, to be honest. Not at first."

Aunt Josie, defending the dead, turns to me. "Your mother was an artist, like you, Stan. She was the type that liked to have nice, artistic things all over the house, and your father would come home with ten heads of lettuce and say, 'Here! Feed the kids!'"

I dip a chip into the guacamole and bite into it, a slow crackle: "You can't eat a painting." I can't believe what I've just said. Neither can Tanya.

"Your father was always putting you kids down," Aunt Josie says.

"Oh, that was just Pop!"

"Well, maybe, but the way he used to yell at you, and then he went and threw you out of the house. . . ."

"He didn't throw me out!" My tone is growing louder, harsher. I think I'm almost yelling. Tanya squeezes my thigh. I look at all of them: "Well, he didn't! I left home of my own accord." To Tanya, with self-scorn: "I was going to be the Mormon Bob Dylan, remember?"

"Why did you leave?" Aunt Josie says, challenging.

"Because. . . ." I'm stumped. Tanya's shaking her head. She can't believe I'm defending my father. "I don't know," I say, "maybe for the same reason Tony left!"

"Tony came back!" Aunt Josie says.

"I came. . . ." But I'm stumped again. I gaze from face to face, stopping at Aunt Josie's. "You think my father killed my mom, don't you?"

Aunt Josie glances sideways down her sleeve, picking a piece of lint there.

"DO you wish Tony had come?"

"Yes. . . . No. I don't know."

Tanya laughs through her washcloth. "That's a good answer."

The lid's down on the toilet and I'm sitting on it, chin in hands, watching a thread-thin trail of red ants make its way across the carpeted floor. Seeing these almost invisible invaders in the house gives me a malevolent pleasure as they grow larger in my mind and sink their giant jaws into Uncle Eddie's woodwork.

Tanya's at the sink, garments dropped to her waist, breasts wobbling slightly as she scrubs her face. In the double mirror they are huge albino figs, wrinkled around nipples big as thumbs. I can hardly recall when they were firm and supple, new.

I let out an audible sigh. "I'll breathe a lot easier when we leave tomorrow."

Tanya pulls the washcloth from her face and looks at me in the befuddled manner of Aunt Josie. "Why?"

I give her my look, the don't-be-a-dolt look. "Come on."

"They *like* you, Stan. They really do."

"Sure. They can afford to."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Come on! Don't play Aunt Josie with me. You know!"

"No I don't."

I don't know either. I don't know what I'm trying to say. I don't know what I'm feeling, or trying to feel or unfeel. I keep seeing my father, the Ivy League M.B.A., chasing broken rainbows in Century City, finally settling for a quasiprofessor's job at Valley Junior College; sulking in his study, staring at his hands: "Stan, everything I touch turns to shit."

"You know Tod's boy, the silver-tongued orator?"

Tanya, dabbing white cream on her face, smears it all around until she looks like a kabuki dancer. "I think that's neat," she says.

"Sure it's neat! It's wonderful! Commendable! And it was no less so when Tod won the Church-wide thing twenty-five years ago. But let me tell you something about Tod's fabulous award-winning talk. Oh, he wrote it, with some help from Uncle Eddie, I'm sure. But guess who they came to for senior editing? Guess who polished the thing and got rid of all the *can't hardly's* and *up to Utah's*? Guess who had to give Tod a crash course in articulation and delivery?"

Tanya wrings out the washcloth, waiting. "So?"

"So! No one seems to remember *that!*" I'm standing, fists clenched. In the double-mirror I look ridiculously reduced: a little boy's face on an old man's body. When I close my eyes and open them, it flip-flops.

Tanya hitches up her garments. "You've got a real chip on your shoulder."

I hate that word, chip.

I sit back down, staring at the trail of ants which has become a strand of red hair, Aunt Josie's twenty-five years ago. Aunt Josie taking me and Tony to the beach, to the movies, to Buddy's-Bat-Away. All the financially forbidden fruits.

"I could have been a doctor."

Tanya laughs. She can't help it. "You didn't want to be a doctor."

"Well, I didn't want to be a damn . . . I didn't want to be what I am."

Then there's silence as Tanya scrubs her face briskly, furiously, as if trying to erase an indelible stain. Now I've done it. I've blown it again. Tanya can put up with just about anything but self-pity. She's going to kick me in the butt and straighten me out. I've got it coming and here it comes!

I hear the water go on, then off. Tanya wrings out the washcloth and slaps it on the sink. She takes a deep breath. Round five. But then she surprises me. She gently pulls my hands from under my chin and slides onto my lap, stroking my hair as my mother used to. Her other hand has settled on my thigh, the pale stripe on her ring finger obscured in shadow. She leans a little closer and says, very softly, "I have no regrets."

Then I feel like crying. I don't want to. I don't want to ruin things although I already have. I hold it back. I slip my arm around her waist and begin rubbing her belly, gently, up and down. As I feel her animal warmth seeping through the fabric of my jeans, my head falls against her shoulder. "No, I didn't want to be a damn doctor." ☞



THE MOUND AT BRYN CELLI DDU

In the waning summer she sat waiting, silent,
 Old woman shrouded in wet grass dully shining
 In the faint morning, I followed the misty road
 To where she dreamed, in the wide fields of dark
 Mona, mother of Wales. The gate moaned, as I walked
 Into her dreams, the call of days not counted.

She smelled of oldness, cold stone smooth and creased
 By seasons, worn by rain and summer winds.
 I saw them, builders, standing behind the upright stones,
 Old men from the time when magic touched the land.
 Within her grass-clad bosom, her grey stone embraced
 Their dead, where my feet shuffled their dust and shook
 Raindrops onto their bones. Red flames burned
 When they sang for their gods, who are silent now, gone
 Away, winter cold melting away to white summer clouds.

I touched the stone walls, and they sang of worlds
 Passed on, where raven haired priestesses died, red
 Under Roman steel, of red-painted faces staring
 Into shadows, of white ships bearing mail-clad warriors
 Into darkness across the sea. The mist drifted like silk
 Onto her face, and she sang forlornly to herself
 As I left her behind, leaning into the salt breeze.

She sings now in my mind, soft and low, murmuring,
 And the standing stone remains, still rising
 Dark and mournful in my dreamlit mornings.

—DOUGLASM. JOLE