

2002 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

BLESSING GIVER

By Eugene Woodbury

THE BISHOP'S WIFE MET ZINA AT THE DOOR. "HE'S not well," she said. The emotion in her voice betrayed how much she appreciated the visit. In the otherwise closely-knit community of Zealand Station, the phobia of contagion had made outcasts of the family. Even the bishop's family.

She led Zina up the narrow stairway to Joshua's bedroom. When they entered the room, the bishop strode across the room to stand with his wife. Dr. Hansen stood next to the bed, jotting down readings from the monitor above the headboard. The room was dark and musty. The lingering cool of the morning was almost gone. The air smelled faintly of antiseptic and bleach. The sunlight streaming around the corners of the curtained windows painted a brilliant chiaroscuro on the hardwood floor.

Zina sat on the edge of the bed. She touched Joshua's hot, moist forehead. "How are you feeling, Josh?"

"Not so bad, Zee." His voice was slow and labored. "I'm going to be all right, aren't I?"

"Sure. You're going to be fine."

Dr. Hansen somberly studied his instruments. He knew otherwise—and because he knew it, Zina knew it. She heard the thought as clearly as if he had spoken it aloud. She closed her eyes in dismay.

"What are you going to do, Zee?" Josh implored. "Are you going to do your keeping?"

She glanced up at his father. Then back to the boy. "I . . . I just wanted to see how you were, Josh." Lord, how he believed in her. She almost said aloud: *Don't, Josh, don't believe*. Instead, she said, "I've got to go now." She left, before he could object, before his thoughts could follow her and stop her and pull her back.

S HE PUSHED THE door open, stepped out onto the porch. Behind her, the bishop said, "It's not fair to you, I know." The door swung back on its spring and thumped against the frame.



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"Yes," she stated coldly, "you should have come in the first instance. Or not at all."

"You did not want me to. I do not need your gift to know that much."

"But you did, anyway." Her voice trembled. "Other children have suffered, other children have died. What about them?"

"I had hoped there would be other recourses."

"And now there are none? You are the bishop. Why aren't your prayers good enough?"

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Hardly more than a moment. But a moment long enough. She accused him: "You didn't bless him. You didn't bless Joshua."

His reply lacked all conviction. "His grandfather pronounced the blessing."

"But you are his father."

"When I blessed the Jensen boy, I knew he would die."

"Then it was God's will, wasn't it? Isn't that what you believe?"

"God's will is an easy thing to believe in when it is not your son."

"And Josh's grandfather. . . . What blessing did he pronounce?"

"He said what we both wanted to hear."

"But was it true?"

"I don't know."

"So how would I?" she asked. Her voice died to a whisper. "I do not hold any priesthood. Do I?"

The veracity of the statement muted him. His face turned gray. Hearing the sudden tumult of his thoughts, Zina felt herself hollow out inside. Her eyes blazed. "And neither am I a witch!"

"No—Zee, I didn't mean. . . ."

She wouldn't let the hurt show. She knew exactly what he meant.

YOU'RE A PROBLEM to them, Zina," Kani Zakes always told her when these things happened. He told her the first time when she was eight and her friends were getting their baptisms and confirmations. He had succeeded in the task as well as the bishop had, which, in the end, had left Zina neatly balanced on the beam halfway in between the two, if not slightly in his favor.

"Just like it says in the Bible," Kani'd lecture her, "He who is

not against us is on our part.' What they forgot to add is 'whether you like it or not.'" He grinned and rocked back in his wheelchair. "I've always thought it too bad Zealand Station wasn't more Catholic. A few miracles and they'd make you a saint. Make you a sign of faith, at any rate. Hell, even I qualify in that department. Folks all over town tuck their kiddies into bed at night, warning 'em what happens to crotchety old agnostics who don't say their prayers at night."

"Deny not the gifts of God," she'd quote back to him. She'd heard it so many times herself.

Kani'd slap the stumps of his legs. "It's no gift," he'd chortle. She never knew whether he meant her or himself.

AND NOW SHE repeated to the bishop, "I am not a blessing giver." She was not, but she wanted to be. Kani was more right than he knew. She wished to be counted among the saints, hear her name mentioned in testimony, taste the respect paid those men of stature. She knew the ordinance. She had memorized it the first time she'd heard it. But she was not a saint. She was not Mormon. She was not a man. She could never be a blessing giver.

"You are a blessing giver when you act as one," the bishop told her, "if you have faith."

"How convenient faith can be, always finding the exception to the rule."

"The convenience is of God's choosing."

"Then God should do the asking Himself."

"I'm asking for it now. Is that not enough?"

"No, it is not enough! I never even considered it was possible until you thought of it! What miracles will you expect me to conjure up next? What other gifts will your God bless me with that I never chose to accept?"

The bishop shook his head. "I don't know, Zina." His eyes met hers. "And at this moment, I do not care. I am asking you to save my son's life. I won't pretend to be acting out of altruism."

"And if I do not wish to know—"

"Then that is your choice."

"You've known all along how I would answer."

"And so did you."

She turned away so he would not witness her capitulation. "And if I can heal as well," she asked bitterly, "whom shall I not heal?"

He had no answer for her. She began to weep. He yearned to comfort her as he would his own son—she felt that strong, penetrating emotion in his heart, but she would not permit it.

She composed herself, controlled her feelings. She would do her keeping—for Joshua she would—but she would not let them think her a witch. Whatever she did, she would do it in the name of their God. "If you bless me to heal Joshua," she said to the bishop, who was and always had been her friend, almost a father to her, despite Kani's best efforts, "then I will try."

He did not seem to understand what she had said at first, his mind numb as it was with apprehension and guilt. Then the relief washed over him, buffeted him so strongly he had to

bow his head and brace himself against the door frame to steady himself.

KANI'S WHEELCHAIR CLATTERED over the planking between the stockyard pens. He chuckled. "Sounds like Saul going to the witch of Endor."

"Damn you, Kani," Zina said crossly. "Not you, too."

But of course Kani would say so, too. She was a keeper. That's what he called her first time he saw what her quicksilver mind could do. But he liked to remind her: "Either way, don't make you a blessing giver."

"That's not my fault."

"What does the bishop expect of you, anyway?"

"He wants me to give Josh his blessing."

Kani turned somber for a moment. "He's not doing so well, I take it."

Zina shook her head.

"Damnedest thing I ever seen, a virus like that—kids dying one by one, and never within the same incubation period." His wheelchair ground to a halt alongside a silted pond clogged with swine. "Carl!" Kani called out. "You done in there?"

The burly man ambled up to the fence railing, hands cupped together. Kani held out the knapsack and Carl spilled in a handful of vials. "That's all of them, Kani."

Back in his grungy office Kani sorted out the vials and began scanning the batch numbers into the blood plasma analyzer that chugged away in the corner. Zina stacked the vials in the tray as Kani passed them along. After a while, working there in silence, Kani said, "So if the bishop intends you to heal the boy, how exactly does he mean you to do it?"

"He gave me the blessing."

"Literally, you mean?" said Kani, genuinely surprised. "So what did he bless you to do?"

"To know what to do."

"But you don't know what to do."

She shook her head.

"Well, there you go."

"But I think that I could, somehow," she said, "if I just knew how. But I've never healed anybody of anything before. I've usually just done findings and rememberings."

Kani sat back in his chair and pondered. "I'll tell you what, Zee. Most of what I know about the inside of pig I know from looking at a pork chop. But I do know how to run that machine. It tells me what a pig's blood ought to be versus what it is. The diagnostics take care of the rest. I figure if you can take a look at what a mind ought to be versus what it is, maybe that will tell you the same kind of thing."

"People are not like pigs."

"I've known a few," Kani grunted.

"Anyway, it's not like I have a lot to compare to. The problem is, people say, 'Tell me what I'm thinking,' like it's a parlor game. But they really don't want me to. All I hear is them thinking, 'What am I thinking, what am I thinking?' over and over. Even when they don't do that, what they do think is so scattered and fragmented. You ask somebody to think of the places where maybe they lost something. All they think about

is how they don't know where they lost it, and how upset they are about it, and what's going to happen as a consequence."

"So just how is it that you end up finding things?" asked Kani, even though he knew the answer.

"Well, you trick it out of them. You get them to think of something else so they let go of the memory you need."

"I think that just might be it."

Zina nodded, yet she felt dissatisfied with Kani's conclusion.

"It was the bishop, you know."

"What's that?"

"The first time, the first time I did my keeping for somebody else, it was when I found the Merrill boy. It was the bishop who asked me."

Kani gave her a disconcerted look. She had found the boy, out on the Noharbor, drowning in the river bottoms during a flash flood. She had watched him die, could do nothing, and she had hated the bishop for weeks afterwards.

His thoughts told her she could stand to do some remembering herself.

ZINA PEEKED AROUND the door jam to Joshua's room. "G'day, Joshua," she said, "know what time it is?" An old joke, it was. He smiled, despite his discomfort.

That was why Kani called her keeper. She could always keep time, keep it for other people, deep down in the core of the brain, where the body melded with the soul and gave rise to the pulse of life.

"Three thirty-five," said Joshua.

Time was the one consistency. A child's mind sang a simpler tune than that of an adult, but even a child hid so much, disguised, retold, un-remembered everything. Kids lied like crazy, just like their parents. That was the burden of the blessing giver—to remember things right: the promises of God, the covenants of the people of the faith. When the bishop laid his hands on her head and pronounced the blessing, she really had expected revelation, but she had felt pretty much nothing except the gentle pressure of his hands.

But she *had* remembered, gradually at first, and then more and more. She remembered the first time she knew who she was, how she wasn't like the other children, how she could step outside herself, watch herself be herself, know how there were two parts of her that came together as one. How the two parts talked to one another—and did what each other said, even when they ought not to. It was what the Bible preached, but even the true believers could barely believe it was really true.

She knew the boy had little sense of where his body stopped and his soul began—and would not know what to do even if he did. Instead she said, "I want to play a game with you, Josh, a keeping game. We're going to play it in Brother Johanson's loft. You know, that high loft in his barn above the stables. Now you close your eyes."

He closed his eyes. She stroked his cheek as she spoke. "Josh, you're going to get out of bed, put on your overalls, go downstairs. There you go, out the door, down the street, past the church, through the pasture to the barn. You know that



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*I am right behind you. When
you fall, I will catch you.*

loose board under the window on the east side? That's it, climb up the ladder to the loft. Now, Brother Johanson, he's just finished the spring mowing, so the loft is pretty full. When you get up on a bale, you know that if you fall backwards you won't be able to catch yourself because there's not a rail there. And you know if you hit the back of your head right on that beam that holds up the loft, maybe--well, probably--it would kill you. Sure would hurt a lot. A lot more than it hurts right now."

She paused. She watched him, in his mind's eye, running down the street, cutting through the pasture, crawling through the broken board into the barn, scampering up to the loft. Like he did all the time when he was well.

He stood there, balanced, waiting.

"Now Josh, listen to me carefully. This is very important. You can't see me, but I am following you. I am right behind you. When you fall, I will catch you."

It was an impossible thing, what she was asking, even as real as she had created the image in her mind. Zina's vision clouded with tears. She took a deep breath, bit her lip, and went on. "I want you to fall back, Josh. Fall backwards, and I will catch you. You must believe me. I will catch you. You can't look to see if I'm there. You have to have faith in what I say."

But he couldn't do it. He would start to fall, fear would overcome him, and he would catch himself, stumbling wildly on the precipice. Each time Zina would step forward, touch

him on the shoulder, whisper in his ear, "I will catch you." He would glance around, and she would not be there.

Zina stepped forward, and just as he began to fall, caught him before his instincts could react.

"I will catch you," she whispered again.

This she did again and again until his heart finally believed her more than his instincts did not. He let go, let himself fall. His body accelerated downward. His head would strike the beam, his skull would fracture, blood and brains splatter on the joists.

At that moment when he abandoned himself to fate, to pain and annihilation, she caught him, held him in her arms. Brother Johanson's loft faded away. A shrill tone knifed through the blackness. She felt her body rudely jostled. The room swayed, brightened, sharpened into focus.

"No!" cried the bishop's voice.

When Joshua fell and she caught him, the EEG monitor went flat, screamed an alert. Dr. Hansen pushed Zina out of the way, hunched over Joshua.

Zina steadied herself, gripped by a strong sense of disorientation that was not hers, she realized, but Joshua's. He was no longer inside his body. When he let go, she had taken him inside herself.

Where am I?, he asked. And then, *That is my father?* The bishop's hands were on Dr. Hansen's shoulders, driving him back from the bed.

"There is always more pain in mercy than in justice," the bishop said.

"He's in coma," Dr. Hansen protested, flushed and distraught.

Zina glanced around the room. Josh's mother stood by the door, hands clasped. *Mother*, said Josh. The impulse was overwhelming: *Mother*. Zina felt the words form on her lips. She tore her gaze away. Unsure of her balance, she sat on the bed, stared down at Joshua's body.

Me, said Josh. *Am I alive? Can I go back?* He was buoyant, inquisitive, free from pain.

"Yes," said Zina. "Hush, be quiet." Saying that, he fell, as he imagined it, asleep.

She reached back into his mind. At first, his mindscape was as quiet as a morning sky at sunrise. The patterns were unfamiliar, until she realized that looking *at* was always the reverse image. Her right was his left. She was used to looking *in*. Now, to be part of his mind, she had to turn herself around in her point of view, like reading a map in a mirror. She had to make his right *her* right.

She recalled a picture in a textbook about perception and the mind. It was a picture of an upside-down face, but with the eyes and mouth flipped around normal-like, in a smile. When you look at people, you focus on the eyes and see the face in relation to the eyes, and so the picture looked almost pleasant, even upside down. But turn the face right side up, and you

recognized it as a distorted, ugly grimace.

Zina saw the distorted ugliness and it saw her. At once she was surrounded.

goaway, it hissed at her out of the darkness, at the distant horizon of Joshua's mindscape. She recoiled. Shadows reached toward her, circling, probing.

Again it burst upon her, like a swarm of locust.

goaway.

"Who are you?"

The swarm rose in crescendo and died. *we are many*. It was a statement of being, not of definition. *we are many*.

"Why are you here?"

It repeated itself: *we are many*. She asked again, and it repeated itself again. *we are many*.

They were not wise, they were not strong, they were simply many. They wanted more.

She thought about the ten pigs.

Kani told her the story, and it wasn't a fairy tale. "Seen it myself," he insisted. "People who say pigs are smart, they don't know what they're talking about. Maybe smart for meat on four legs, maybe smart compared to your average cow."

He said, "So, you've got ten pigs in a pen, you take out one, slaughter it, hang it in the smokehouse, dump the offal back into the slop. His nice, smart siblings gobble him up. The next day, you do the same thing. Nine days later, you come to get the last one, and the fool animal looks up at you, and it's happy 'cause all it thinks when it looks at you is all that good food you brought the past few days."

Kani shook his head. "A dog, now, a dog would catch on. That's the difference in smarts—being able to think outside your own appetites."

That's the difference in smarts, as Kani put it. But this swarm, it was all appetite, there was no reasoning with it, but she tried. "You are killing this body," she said.

who are you to speak for this body?

"I am—" she hesitated. "I am its keeper."

keeperkeeperkeeperkeeper. Like a mantra. *keeperkeeperkeeperkeeper*. *what will you keep us from*.

"From killing."

The swarm roared like a wave upon the breakers. *we do not kill*.

"You have already killed."

then it is our nature to kill.

"And so it is ours," she whispered.

the carrier weakens. we cull the flock.

This was rationalization. "Then who culls you?"

The noise grew fainter.

do not kill us, keeper. the blessing giver did not kill.

"I am not a blessing giver," Zina whispered.

nonononono. Fainter and fainter: *give us a host, keeper, a host you do not keep*.

Zina could kill them. She could block their control, cut their tendrils, and the body unfettered would destroy them. But she hesitated. She had lied. It was not her nature to kill. There was some sentience about them—rationalization requires sentience. But there must be conscience as well. There

must be, and she could not rationalize well enough to clarify to her own satisfaction the difference between murder and killing.

give us a host.

She pushed them back, bound them until they could not escape. “Josh,” she said, “It’s time for you to go back.”

He awoke and forgot where he was. Before he remembered, she drew the swarm out of him, into a prison in her mind, and slipped Joshua back to his own body. At once the EEG lines sprang back to life. His autoimmune levels jumped from depressed to supernormal. Dr. Hansen sprang to adjust his patient’s electrochemistry to prevent the flood of agents already pumped into his bloodstream from overwhelming the body’s resurrected metabolism.

Josh looked up at her. He touched her arm. “You caught me, Zee.”

She smiled and clasped his hand in hers. She got to her feet, still dazed. She felt the bishop’s arm around her shoulders, escorting her from the room into the quiet hallway.

“Are you all right, Zina?”

The swarm buzzed angrily in their chains. She pressed the palms of her hands against her temples. They were tearing free, and by dark virtue of their sheer numbers, were proving stronger than she had suspected.

we are many.

“I did not kill them,” she gasped.

we are legion.

And now she could not kill them. The swarm’s weakness along the mind’s circumference had been no indication of what would happen when she held them at the center. Relieved of the burdens of the boy’s dying body, they now reacted with their original, primal frenzy. If they proved uncontainable, her body would reject them, and they would surely find another victim.

She twisted away. She stumbled down the stairs, out the door. Bile welled up bitter in the back of her throat. The world dissolved into a blur. She fled from Joshua, from the town, from the people, fled blindly on her homing beacon, until she tripped and slammed against a fence post. She fell on her side and sank down in the mud. The dim outlines of the stockyard drifted into her senses. The mud oozed up around her, wrapping her in a cool wet blanket. The swine gathered around her. One nudged her with its snout.

Zina gazed at the swine, at their dumb innocence, their blind obedience to her will. She lectured her prisoners: There are enough of them here that if you disperse among them, they will survive, and so will you.

yes, they replied, let us into the swine.

She let them, and for a very short while, a few moments, each separate hive of the horde was content within its host.

Those moments passed.

A pig staggered off, plowed into the tepid water and collapsed, its brain burned up with fever.

“No!” shouted Zina.

The fever spread like wildfire. The frenzy became a stampede. The water was quickly choked with the drowned and

the dying. Zina ran after them. The bishop had followed her, and now he caught her up and away. She struggled against him, but he held her in strong arms and carried her back to the gate, fearful of what she might do to spare the swine.

“Get ‘em out of the water!” came Kani’s voice. “Out of the water!”

Carl waded through the mud heaving the animals onto the bank. In the hot, bright, sunlight the dirty water steamed off the carcasses. Carl wiped his face with his sleeve. His hands shook. “I’ve heard of heatstroke getting to them, but never like this. Never like this.”

“Get a kit!” Kani yelled. “We’re drawing blood on all of them!” Carl took off running. A sudden pall of silence fell across the yard. Kani shifted his gaze to where the bishop sat in the mud, holding Zina in his arms, staring off into the distance, frightened and amazed. Kani understood at once. “That’s twenty head you owe me for, Bishop.” He jabbed at the joystick of the chair, wheeled it around.

From where she sat in the mire by the gate, Zina watched the swine die, watched their life pulses flicker out, like that of the boy in the river bottoms. The brains of the swine were individually too small to succor the mass of their whole multitude. The entropy of each pig’s death sucked existence from them, one after the other, until they too dissipated into the elements. Dust to dust.

She felt enormous sadness, though not for them. They were creatures of no will. The will of a healthy child, the innate, protective will that made the body a refuge for the soul, that kept body and soul so tightly bound together, could destroy them. Their vector had been the disease, the fabric of the viral RNA. And though the virus spread widely in epidemic, they killed only individually.

In those few short moments after Zina had released them into the swine they had been content, until one of their number spied another, and then its only driving impulse was to possess the other, even to destroy its host in order to draw what it needed to attack the other. Having no will, when the assault was complete, their masses undifferentiated, their appetite redoubled, insatiably, suicidally—

Worthy of no pity.

She grieved, rather, for the swine. She had led them innocent to the slaughter. She wept, and let the bishop comfort her. “They suffered because of me.”

“There is always more pain in mercy than in justice,” the bishop said.

BUT THERE IS more joy also. The bishop brought her back to his home, where his son, bright-eyed, growing stronger, welcomed her with the redeeming love and affection that only a child can bestow upon his keeper. ☺



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