

Mornings

Linda Sillitoe

I

Friday morning. June sky like denim through the bus windows. The last day before the weekend, Marc repeated to himself, like a gypsy muttering a chant.

He swung off the bus four blocks before his stop and walked. He watched the sky behind the city's buildings, how the reappearing yellow streaks along the clouds' curve faded to cream. He watched the leaves flash in the morning breeze that was gusty enough to lift his hair and cool his throat. He made a mental note to brush his hair in the elevator.

He walked quickly but snapped a memory of the flower banks, scarlet, periwinkle, and gold. Had they always been so vivid in June? Had he always paid attention to the morning sky? He'd read an article the week before on terminal patients who told how beautiful the world had become, how they gloried in it as they grieved. Mark had read with a shock of recognition. Now the article haunted his odd moments. But why? he wondered. I'm not dying. But then, neither was he a gypsy.

The Church Administration Building was near now and no longer towered in his vision unless he tipped his head all the way back. Marc remembered his pride when the building went up, the squared-off base, the aggressive concrete, then the arrogant height. It overshadowed the famous temple and tabernacle, the Lion House and the Beehive House. His children could spot it from any place in the valley. "There it is!" they would shriek from the back seat of the car. "Daddy's building!"

He pushed the revolving door, as instructed by the sign. June disappeared in a rush of cool air and in gleaming floors surrounding the hush of carpet. As Marc waited for the elevator, he reached into his jacket pocket for his brush.

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Sister Anderson was on the elevator when it stopped. She wore a light blue dress and low heels. The dress flattered her bluish-silver hair and her sweet, blue eyes. She and the other building hostesses took people on tours.

"Why, Marc."

"Good morning. How are you?"

"Why, I'm just fine." She beamed as she watched him brush his hair. "Oh, your grandmother was so proud of those curls," she teased. "We girls thought she'd never let your folks cut your hair."

"Hair like this is really a nuisance."

"Oh, but you were such a beautiful child." She tapped his arm playfully. "That's why they always chose you for an angel in the Christmas program."

"I remember," Marc said, rolling his eyes. She laughed.

"Poor boy," she said gaily as the doors hissed.

Marc stepped out of the elevator. His office was in the missionary department. He was two minutes early. Exactly right.

It was ten o'clock before the telephone rang, but by the way his heart caught, Marc knew he had been waiting. It was Nancy, a college friend who'd worked with him on Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign. Lately he and Kate seemed to run into Nancy and her husband everywhere, at every party, fireside, discussion group. The four became friends.

"Marc," Nancy said with her usual energy, "I'm working with a committee here at BYU to give input on women in the missionary program."

A ragged, familiar click muffled her next words. Marc listened through a light etching of static. ". . . you remember we talked about it a little at Judy's house?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, it's crazy, but I can't seem to get current statistics. I've talked to the staff in the managing director's office, but they just put me off. All I need to know are the percentages, Marc. The number of women who go, their ages, the number of baptisms and so on."

It sounded so simple. Careful, Marc thought, and took a breath. It was always safe to repeat. "You've discussed it with the managing director's office?"

"Have I discussed it with them! Listen, Marc, could I get those figures from my stake president, or a mission president, or a regional representative or anyone like that? They're not confidential, are they?"

Careful. "I don't know what their official status is. Let me ask around and see what the problem is."

But she would not be put off. Couldn't she hear the static on the line or, if not that, the distance in his voice?

"Oh, we've tried all that. Martha tried, too. She got Dr. Ehlert to call. It's no use. I just wondered if you have that information available, and if it wouldn't cause you any problems to get it for me. . . ."

"Well, that's not exactly my area," Marc said.

"I know, but —"

"I'm sure the information is on computer file, but it would take someone with the right code to get it."

"Oh."

"If I become aware of any materials that have been mailed to the local leaders, I'll get you a copy. There wouldn't be any problem with that."

"Okay." She sighed. "Thanks. Say hello to Kate."

"Right. 'Bye, Nancy."

Marc heard her hang up, aggravated no doubt, but he kept the receiver against his ear. My turn to listen, he thought grimly. There it was — a definite click ten seconds after Nancy's. Sweat broke out across his back and under his arms.

Marc stared into the perforations on the earpiece. What I wouldn't give to get a look at that ear, he thought. He imagined himself screening all the employees in the building for a particular cartilage pattern, or an orange tinge above the lobe, and managed a wry smile. Then he slammed his fist down on the desk.

Whose ear was it? A man's? A woman's? Someone in management? How long had it been listening? Had his jokes about Church Security brought the ear to his line as he became paranoid? No, he comforted himself, it probably was Ralph who worked three partitions away and had an eye on his job. Maybe even Betsi, the young secretary who flirted and pouted at the reception desk. When his line lit up, did she lift the receiver to listen? And if it was only Betsi or Ralph, then why this clutch in his guts? The last day before the weekend, he told himself again.

He wheeled his chair to the typing desk and worked on reports until lunch.

"There he is," Phil announced into his curled fist as Marc approached the crowded round table in the cafeteria. "It's him, my friends, Brother Blueblood."

Marc ignored him and began unloading his tray before the last empty chair. "Hi Pete, Ben, Mike, everyone."

"Ev-eryone," Phil muttered, moving his fist to one side like a microphone that shouldn't pick up his aside. "Humble guys like me are listed as everyone." He paused for effect. "Just because I'm not related to six different buildings at BYU!"

Phil's on a roll, Marc thought, sitting down. "Just three buildings," he corrected, suddenly hungry as he stirred the French dressing into his salad.

"Oh, just three!" Phil tried again. "Cement and stones compose Marc's bones. . . ."

"Holy heck," Mike interrupted, "who put a nickel in Phil today? Dig in, Marc. You look like today had better be Friday."

"Half over," Marc grinned, a flash of his morning walk zipping through his mind. Pete, across the table, grinned back.

"Actually, Marc," Pete said softly, "I've never figured out why you don't run for office with a name like yours."

"Think I'd get elected?" Marc asked.

Most of them, Marc knew, thought him a flaming liberal, even among them, let alone the whole of Utah. Sure enough, they all hooted and Phil slapped him on the shoulder.

"You just gotta be careful of one thing," Phil said thickly, pausing to swallow a mouthful of strawberry pie. "If someone asks you about the ERA, tell them that when the Church magazines got correlated it was replaced by the *Ensign*."

Not much laughter. An old joke.

"Speaking of the ERA," said Mike, "here comes the girl who started in Genealogy on Monday. Healthy looking, isn't she?"

"What does she have to do with the ERA?" Phil asked, as the girl approached. "She's too pretty to be a libber."

"Not a darn thing," Pete said reverently, his eyes following her past their table.

Marc thought the girl might be eighteen, no more. Her cheeks reddened as she felt their eyes on her. Her auburn hair was swept into a barrette above each ear, and her white, cotton dress swung as she walked.

"Why don't you just grab her?" Marc asked, a trifle bitterly.

"Hey, hey!" Mike objected. "Are you so enlightened you can't appreciate a thing of beauty?"

"And a joy forever," Ned smirked.

"Now me," Phil said, "I'm a man after Joseph Smith's own heart." He rolled his eyes.

They all laughed. It felt good, Marc thought. Then he saw the girl glance back from another table, her face flaming.

"Okay, Phil," Marc said, stifling guilt with irritation. "When do you bring out a book on Joseph's wives? All of them. Complete with dates of marriage."

"It's in the works," Phil said, but his grin faded.

"Seriously," Marc probed. "Your research doesn't affect your feelings for the Church, right? So share it with the world, not just this little table of closet liberals."

"Who's a closet liberal?" Phil snorted. "I'm just a closet moderate!"

"Actually, it's a good point," Ben said, as they warmed toward another discussion that would send them back to their departments late, but with their adrenaline flowing. "Who does the history belong to? To us? To the membership? To the Church? What *about* all the information we have? Why not let it all hang out?" He glanced over his shoulder nervously. "I ask that philosophically, of course."

"People have trouble just living the basics," Phil said, a single line appearing between his brows. "We have access to a lot of esoteric stuff. It doesn't have anything to do with salvation."

"Come on, no serious stuff on a Friday," Mike objected. "We had staff meeting this morning and I'm still overwrought."

Phil affected his drawl again. "We're all overwrought. Except maybe Marc who's overwrought and doesn't look like he sleeps nights. If you don't want that doughnut, boy, pass it over and save yourself some indigestion."

Marc spun the saucer a few inches toward Phil. "You deserve it."

"Is that remark directed at my figure?"

"Nope. You're in a bishopric. You need all the quick energy you can get." They all smiled.

"You're right about one thing, Phil," Marc said. "I'm pooped. Kate and I talked half the night. We keep doing that."

"Talked!" Ben said. "How long have you two been married?"

"Too long to be up all night doing anything," Phil put in.

"Nine years," Marc said. "You mean you guys don't ever talk with your wives all night?"

"You mean like when we were in Scouts and slept under the stars?" Mike asked. "Naw. My wife talks all right, but by the time the kids conk out, I'm too tired to do more than grunt and snore. Now maybe if she'd quit talking, it'd be worthwhile to stay alert!"

"Now you're talking," Ben said, waving his fork between two fingers like Groucho Marx's cigar.

Pete was watching Marc closely. "Well, what do you mean, talked? Has something happened? Nothing serious, I hope."

"No, nothing's wrong. We just got into a big discussion."

"About what?"

"Oh, everything. Our kids. Our parents. Our lives before we met. Why we married — really, I mean."

"Holy cow," Phil said.

"And you're still married today?" Ben said, but no one laughed.

"It's amazing," Marc said. He wanted to stop explaining, but couldn't. "One of us will say something, and there's this silence as a whole stretch of our lives slides into place. Revelation by the chunk."

"Revelation!" Phil pounced. "Did you hear that? Get this man back to his terminal before he tries to usurp high office."

"Sounds great," Mike put in awkwardly.

"Nobody leave," Phil said as Marc collected his empty dishes. "I almost forgot. New spot quiz."

Pete groaned.

"Everyone describe yourself with one word. Hyphens allowed. Go."

"Over-qualified," Mike said.

"Underpaid," said Ben.

"Perspicacious," said Pete.

"Overbearing," Phil added with a sigh.

"Halfbreed," Marc said and picked up his tray.

There was a pause. "Nope," Phil said. "You're a liberal, so that couldn't have been racist."

"You're right," Marc said. "Here, stack your trays on mine and I'll dump them."

Before Marc left work that day, he slipped three sheets into his binder, then placed it in his attaché and turned the key. The heading on each page read "Female Missionaries" and the year the data represented. He and Kate were having dinner with friends in Provo. He would post a legal-sized envelope with no return address to Nancy at BYU.

II

Callie centered a huge plant on the coffee table as soon as Marc set it down. He grinned at her and straightened. "Home sweet home?"

"I guess," she sighed, tucking a wisp of brown hair behind her ear.

It was 10:45 Saturday morning.

"One more trip should do it," Marc said. "Do you want to ride back with us or unpack?"

"I'd better go."

"Very wise. You're better off not trusting klutzes like Craig and me." He tried to be more a friend than a home teacher, but there was always a shadow of constraint. He berated that shadow in himself.

Still, she laughed. "Thank goodness my ex took the boys today. He hasn't seen them for months."

"Kids aren't much help when you're moving," Marc sidestepped. "Come on Craig," he called as the screen door banged behind them. "One more time."

Craig was inspecting the duplex foundation. "I can see why you'll pay less rent," he said as they all crossed the yellow lawn to the truck.

"How come?"

"The limestone is starting to crumble. Did you check the basement?"

"There isn't one, really. Just a shelf."

"Ought to look that over," Craig said, turning the key in the pickup. Callie looked worried.

"That's the landlord's headache," Marc said. Callie had enough to worry about, uprooting two little kids just to move a few blocks. At least this house was still in the ward. He and Craig could continue as her home teachers. Home teaching could be tedious, but it wasn't hard to be concerned about Callie.

The mattresses were awkward to lift. Craig insisted on hoisting the double mattress on to his shoulders, leaving Marc to steady, more than lift, the other end.

You could trust Craig to be at the bottom of the stairs under a washing machine, Marc thought. Then he immediately wondered if somehow, even through the way he positioned himself, he took the easier part. Thank goodness the stove and refrigerator were part of the rental.

They sat on boxes in Callie's small living room and ate tuna sandwiches and drank lemonade from styrofoam cups.

"Imagine thinking of lunch the night before," Marc said, nodding toward the ice chest. "Efficient."

Callie looked embarrassed. "It was the least I could do. I really appreciate you helping me. With my dad in the hospital—and movers are so expensive—"

"Don't mention it," Marc said. "Some people will do anything for a tuna sandwich."

As usual, Craig seemed only half tuned to their conversation. He cleared his throat formally. "Well, Callie, that was really good." He dusted the crumbs

off his jeans on to the carpet as he stood. "Now that you're just around the corner from the ward, we'd sure like to see you at church sometimes."

A little of Marc's lemonade slopped on the floor. "Whoops," he said, dabbing with his napkin. He threw Craig a dark glance. The first time they'd visited Callie they invited her to come to church. She didn't speak for several tense minutes. "My husband and I were very active before the divorce," she said finally, and that was all.

Marc had been afraid she'd never let them in again, so he talked Craig into avoiding the subject of church attendance. Marc and Callie discussed books, politics, Callie's children, and her struggle to support them. Craig usually said little.

"I guess you remember what time the meetings are?" he asked now.

Callie's cheeks flamed. Marc stood also. Why doesn't he just hand her a bill? he wondered.

"I think so."

"Callie, I forgot to bring back the Potok book you loaned me," Marc said hurriedly. "But will you trust me for the other one anyway? I'll bring both the next time we drop by."

Callie looked at him blankly before her eyes responded to the shift in topic. He saw her brows, her mouth, relax. "Sure," she said. She almost smiled as she looked around the living room. "But which box?"

"Oh. . . ." He glanced at the stacks of boxes and felt blood in his face. "Of course. Okay," he began again, edging Craig toward the door, "you unpack and I'll find your book."

"It's a deal."

Marc reached past Craig for the doorknob.

"Thanks again," Callie said.

"Any time," Marc waved, and then they were on the porch.

Marc was halfway into the truck before he noticed he still had Callie's house keys in his pocket. "Go ahead," he told Craig. "I'll jog home. Do me good."

He saw Craig shake his head as he drove away.

Callie said nothing when she took the keys, just stared at them in her hand.

"Well, see you," Marc said, moving away.

"Marc."

He turned back. She was twisting the keys slowly. "Marc, I can't come to church. Not right now."

He looked back at her through the screen. "Callie, it's okay. . . ."

She interrupted him. Her blue eyes seemed almost black, but maybe it was the dimness of the room compared to the sun baking his shoulders through his shirt. "I can't talk about it yet, but. . . ."

"You don't have to," he said, hoping she would.

"He beat me," she said, her voice perfectly expressionless. "He —" She stopped, her eyes staring over his shoulder.

Marc looked at her, a small, brown-haired woman, tired, hot, in jeans and an oversized sweat shirt. He was wordless. Where was Craig to ask if she

wanted a blessing? Where was Kate to throw open the screen door and put her arms around her?

"Callie," he said, "I'm sorry."

She looked at him, almost startled. The glaze was gone from her eyes. She shrugged a little, tried to smile. "Oh, well. It's just that I can't. It's complicated."

"Callie, it's okay." He hoped his look through the screen, his hand against it made his words count.

"I know," she said. She touched her fingertips to the wire grid that printed his palm, then stepped back. "Thanks, Marc."

He lifted his hand, wheeled, and ran toward home.

By the time he panted through the front door, he felt better. It was quiet. No one was in sight. He looked into the kitchen and found Kate sitting by the large window that overlooked the backyard. The kitchen table was heaped with books, magazines, notes, and her Relief Society manual, as well as the children's brightly scribbled art.

"Hi ya," Marc said, heading for the sink and a glass of water. "Been able to get anything done?"

"Surprisingly, yes," she said. "The boys are outside sailing their blocks in the wading pool."

Marc stepped to the window for a look. "Great. Where's Karen?"

"I think she's still in the family room. She wanted to play with the family home evening supplies, and I said she could if she just uses one packet at a time."

He dropped into a chair beside her. "You certainly look well prepared for one measly little lesson." He smiled at the way the sun lit her dark hair.

"This is no measle, my friend. This is double pneumonia. I'm thinking of calling in sick myself."

"Oh, come on. You?"

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, then gazed at him. "Marc, it's on being involved in the community. You know how Betty and Eileen are. According to them, we should censor the elementary school library and tear down any theater that shows R-rated movies."

He laughed. "Yeah, I know. But what about that corner near the school that still needs a stop sign? And who volunteers at the senior citizens center? Who's worrying about the unfenced canals? Who's babysitting for an inactive single mother, for Pete's sake?"

"Good ideas," she said, touching his forehead with the end of her pencil as if she held a magic wand. "Did you get Callie moved? Gee, we ought to take her a casserole or something later this afternoon."

Marc hesitated. "Let's not overwhelm her." Seeing into the dark corners of people's lives wasn't easy. "Find someone else of the same description if you feel you must feed the world."

"Okay. Well, if the red flags wave us down in Relief Society tomorrow, should I tell them about Sharon? Is it too personal?"

He considered. "It's up to you, honey. It makes the point."

I wouldn't go into all the details. Maybe I could just explain that it was a toxic pregnancy. And the doctor thought the fetus was dead, but the tests were inconclusive. If they hadn't done an abortion, my sister would have died."

"Yes," Marc said, "they'll understand that."

"No, Marc. If Eileen and Betty had their way, the abortion wouldn't have been done. Sharon wouldn't have had a chance." Her voice wavered.

"Maybe it's too hard to talk about, though. Too recent." He flicked a tear from her cheek.

"Well, it's just that even the Church's stand on abortion isn't as rigid as theirs."

"Mimeograph it? Pass it out?"

"But will they believe it, coming from me? She turned her mouth down comically, though her eyes shone wetly. "I'm rumored to be a feminist," she said in her mime whisper.

Marc saw that the pulse on one temple had become a tiny pickaxe. He kissed it, a hand lingering on her hair. "Beats me," he said.

Downstairs Marc watched Karen from the doorway and wished he had film in the camera. Three dolls and a hairy chimp were propped against an overstuffed chair facing Karen who held a picture book about Joseph Smith.

He listened to her artificial voice as she pretended to teach, and winced. Did he and Kate sound like that? He was about to warn her he was there, when one bare foot kicked the book. It fell forward, slamming shut.

"Karen?"

She turned and glared at him. He crossed the room and sat down beside her on the floor. "Something wrong?"

She didn't answer.

"You were telling stories about Joseph Smith?"

After a minute she nodded. Her lower lip came out. His mind raced. What could it be?

"I found out what they did," she said, her voice accusing.

"What who did, Karen?"

She looked up, her eyes angry. "They shot him, Daddy. They killed him."

"Oh." Marc leaned back against the chair, pulling her with him. "I know they did, baby."

"Who did it?"

"Well, a mob of men came at the jail he was in, and there was a gunfight. They shot Joseph."

"But who? What were their names?"

"I don't — I don't know their names, Karen. The men painted their faces so no one would know them."

He didn't dare touch her, her control was so fragile, but he scooted a little closer. "Karen, they didn't understand Joseph. They thought he was wrong. They thought he was bad."

"They didn't have to kill him," she said, and suddenly she was crying.

He gathered her in. "Well, Joseph went to heaven. . . ." Marc began.

"I don't care!" she cried out, then sobbed harder.

He pulled her on to his thigh and held her so her face wet the front of his shirt. His hands cupped her small ribs, his fingers soothing the shaking.

"They didn't have to kill him," she said again, the words jerking and falling.

He held her hard, suddenly unable to separate her pain from his own, familiar now like a wound at the very core.

"I know," he whispered. The cover picture of Joseph in the Sacred Grove lay near his knee. He closed his eyes, pressed his face against her curls. "I know," he said again. "I know, I know."

III

Marc woke in a cold sweat, the dream alive in his mind. He checked the clock. Sunday was the only morning the alarm did not ring at six, but it was only six-thirty. He stared at the ceiling, then swung his feet to the floor. More sleep wasn't possible, tired as he was.

He dressed, looking at Kate's dark curtain of hair. He hoped her dreams were good. The carpeted stairs were quiet under his loafers, and he let himself out the back door.

Immediately he was glad he was up. The sky was peach and robin's egg blue. The birds exercised their morning voices. Flowers and grass were dewy, but the air was already warm. The day was going to be a scorcher.

He unwound the hose and attached the hand sprinkler, watering the vegetables, then the flowers. He arched the spray so millions of glittering needles became fireworks, disappearing mid-air in the shade.

Marc could smile at what he remembered of the dream. It was like a spy novel. In it, he was working intensely, and the sense of danger was high. Now he couldn't recall what he and the others were trying to gain or protect. Clearest in his mind was the segment that woke him. He'd been whispering confidential information to a key friend in the network, standing almost toe to toe.

With a jolt that sent spray onto the leaves of the peach tree, Marc recognized the man — Bishop Thomas! The bishop who had sent him on his mission. Now Marc concentrated. He'd been telling the bishop the heart of the plot, he remembered. And the bishop was listening, looking past Marc to something else. There was a shift in the dream then, some small interruption, and Marc paused. It was then he caught the bishop offguard. A change, a shadow, passed over the familiar, homely features, and suddenly they were sinister. In that instant of the dream, Marc knew with a sickened heart that everything had changed. He felt himself spin into reverse gear as the bishop's eyes turned back to meet his own. Marc looked deep. Yes, behind that friendly regard there was a knowing — a sneer? — he had never seen before. Close to panic, Marc had groped for a counterplot fast, one convincing enough to fend off this double agent. Everything was in jeopardy, he realized, as his tongue swelled in his mouth.

Marc sprayed the water high into the air and watched it fall. He could read the dream easily enough. He needed a week's vacation to relax, play with

the kids, play tennis with Kate, fix up the yard, and get everything into perspective. But that would subtract a week from their California vacation to visit Kate's folks. He couldn't do it.

He caught a movement from the corner of his eye and looked up at the back wall of their split-level house. It was Kate, lifting the wicker blind with one arm. Her green nightgown fluttered as she waved a plastic bottle with the other hand.

The bottle meant Nicky had wakened her, wanting an early morning snack. They felt guilty giving him a bottle now that he was two, but he still insisted on it. He might fall asleep drinking it, Marc thought, and that could mean an hour with Kate before the Sunday rush really began.

He turned off the tap, wound the hose quickly, and slipped back into the house.

At first he thought Kate was drifting to sleep. He lay down carefully beside her without touching her. She turned, raised her head and looked at him. "Morning."

He slipped an arm under her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "Sleepy?"

"No." She sat up suddenly and faced him, her legs curled under her. "I've been thinking."

"Oh," he said. Hardly an adequate response, but he would rather close his eyes right now and touch than hear and think. There has been too much, he told himself, too much to think about.

"Marc?"

He opened his eyes and managed a smile. "Thinking seems pretty strenuous this early in the morning."

She regarded him steadily. She *had* been thinking.

"Are you all right, Marc?"

"Sure. We're always thinking these days, aren't we?"

"I guess so. I feel like I'm on a hanging bridge. I hate it, but I can't go back and for some reason I don't want to reach the other side. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes." He laughed. "You just reminded me of the fast one Phil pulled at lunch Friday." He told her about the one-word descriptions.

"And you said 'halfbreed'?"

"Yes, I did. Brother Blueblood."

She said nothing. Her green eyes filled. He took her hand, and her tears and words came at the same moment. "But Marc, you are honestly the best Mormon I know." She shook the tears off, swallowed, and lifted her chin challengingly. "What don't you do that you should?"

"A typically Mormon question," he teased. "Fraught with guilt."

"Yes, but see, I really *am* a halfbreed. A convert. I can remember what it was like to be outside the Church in all that space."

He raised his eyebrows, opened his arms again. She snuggled close, but didn't miss a beat in the conversation. "I've been thinking about it. It's hard to explain, but in college — when we met —"

"I remember," he said, sliding his hands under her nightgown.

"I knew I wanted to dance. I knew I wanted my degree. I assumed I'd marry some day, but there were so many other decisions, so many paths to follow. Do you see what I mean?"

"I'm not sure." He stilled his hands. His mind felt still, too, weighted and weary.

"Well, with you — you were always so sure. You knew you'd go on a mission and you went. Later you knew you'd get married and have a family. You knew you'd finish school, and then a good job would come along. I mean, you *knew* all that."

"But it was what I wanted."

"I know. But you never really considered anything else. Do you see what I mean? Those had always been the things you would do." She sighed and gave up. "Oh, I can't explain it."

"But wait." He propped himself on an elbow so he could see her face. "Have you always felt like a halfbreed? When you joined the Church, you did the expected things, too. Got married in the temple, had a baby, then another baby, then another baby." He stared at the front of her nightgown.

"I get the point!" she said, shoving his elbow suddenly so it slid from under him and brought him down beside her. "I know. That's what I meant. I joined the Church and wanted to be a throughbred like you."

"Do you still? Do you want to feel all the way Mormon?"

Her eyes left his and moved to the window opposite the bed. "What does that mean?" she asked vaguely. "Mormons say you're with them or against them. Us, I mean. One way or the other. So either I am or I'm not. What does how I feel have to do with it?"

"How we feel seems to be everything these days."

She sighed. Then she sat up and looked hard at him. One hand smoothed his forehead, her fingers passing lightly over his eyelids. "But you, Marc. You're not a halfbreed."

"I'm not sure it's a bad term, except in the racist sense. But I do feel out of synch — a feminist and a priesthood holder. An employee of the Church, both paid and volunteer, and yet, somehow, an enemy."

Her eyes widened. But Nicky's wail tore through the bedroom. "Oh no," she said, "he's stuck again." And she was gone, the hem of her nightgown trailing as she whirled through the door.

As Marc waited on the bench for sacrament meeting to begin, he wondered what Kate had been about to say. Nicky was on his knee and Michael squirmed restlessly beside him. It was tough to get the boys through three hours of meetings with the hardest meeting last, so Marc wouldn't let them take out their books until the meeting was well underway.

Where was Kate? he wondered for the twentieth time. Karen had gone to look for her, but neither had returned. Marc sat Nicky on the floor and blocked the aisle with his knees. A hand punched his shoulder and he looked up. It was Pat Moran, beaming at him.

"How you doing, Marc?"

"Fine, Pat. How are you? Have you seen Kate?"

"Oh, she's coming. Hey, tell her for me she did a good job with the lesson. Tell her not to let them get her down."

"Who?"

Pat laughed as if he'd cracked a joke. "There are some of us who really appreciate her lessons. I think she could persuade me of anything," she said, without answering his question.

"I'll tell her."

Pat swayed down the aisle clutching her two-year-old with one hand and holding her baby to her shoulder with the other. A diaper bag was slung high on the opposite shoulder. Her older daughter carried Pat's purse over her small shoulder, with both hands steadying it against her thin side. Pat was expecting another baby soon. She looked like Mother Earth, Marc thought with a smile. Kate looked frail in comparison, pregnant now for what they'd agreed was the last time. They hoped for another girl.

Soon Kate would take a casserole to the Morans, conveniently packaged so it could be used immediately, refrigerated a day or so, or frozen. And a few months after that, Pat would be on their doorstep with a huge peanut butter jar full of her applesauce cookies.

"No, Nicky," Marc said, reaching to pull up his socks. Nicky had rolled them to his shoe tops. He set Nicky on his knee firmly enough that the boy's light curls bounced. Nicky stared at him as if he were being unreasonable.

"You're right, Nick," Marc said. "It is unreasonable. So humor us." He kissed Nicky's head. With these curls, he thought, this kid will end up playing the angel in Christmas pageants, too.

Marc recalled the elder's quorum Christmas party. A bunch of them got on the subject of who should do the dishes. Later, as Mark scooped potato salad onto plates, Pat had poked him in the chest. "You know what?" she'd asked, loudly enough for the entire line to hear.

"What?"

"I guess you know I'm not pro-ERA," she grinned, "But I sure wouldn't mind having a husband who was!" She burst into laughter, and everyone in earshot laughed, too.

There was Kate, entering the chapel with Karen by the hand. He looked at Kate closely. She was smiling. It wasn't until she faced him, sliding past him into the pew, that he saw the glitter in her eyes.

"I told you," she muttered, still smiling. She sat down on the far side of Michael, who was slowly falling asleep. She moved still farther down the bench and adjusted Michael so his head was cradled on his arm.

Marc nodded toward Michael and winked at Kate as the bishop's counselor began the meeting. One fewer to contend with, the wink meant. Kate stared a second, then smiled back, but her mouth was tense. She looked away. Marc felt his stomach squirm, empty since it was fast day.

The welcome. The opening song. The opening prayer. Announcements. Three babies to bless, one baptized child to confirm. The sacrament song. The deacons took their places along the aisles and the noise level dropped.

The bread tasted slightly stale. Marc held the tray for Nicky, then Karen, then Kate. He handed Nicky a new book, once the tray was gone, and tried to concentrate on the state of his soul.

The list began. This morning he'd seen to the garden and lawns, talked with Kate, helped dress the children, led a discussion in the elder's quorum, paid their monthly tithing, volunteered for next week's farm assignment, signed up for the monthly temple day. He'd avoided controversy when the subject of polygamy was raised in Sunday School. He waited but felt no glow of blessing.

Okay, Marc thought. I'll settled for the approval of my fellow Saints along these benches. We give that to each other, week after week, the recognition we're doing what's right. We're here, we believe, we tithe, we serve. He looked at Nicky, who was using his fingers to burble low sounds. We endure, he amended.

But he caught sight again of Kate's tense neck and shoulders. And we judge, he added. He closed his eyes for a second and sighed. They do. I do. Each other and ourselves.

As far as Marc could tell, his fellow Saints knew the same God he'd always known — the God one approached on one's knees, confessing all one dared, always tarnished. Maybe that's why we need to meet so often, Marc thought. We reassure one another.

But his new God, the secret one he'd encountered by accident recently, cared nothing for his rationalizations, his recriminations, his inadequacies. If he began that sorry litany, the God withdrew. No, he had learned that all he could do was review the store in his heart, and occasionally something in it would shine. Then, bathed in a sudden radiance, he would find himself shaping from his wordless emotions only, "Thank you." It was as if he and the God whispered "thank you" back and forth in the intimate dark.

Marc looked up as the deacons walked down the aisles again and realized he'd omitted something from his list. This boy, Jason — Marc had spent a few minutes with him after he saw Jason bolt through the lobby and out the glass doors.

"What's wrong?" Marc had asked as he approached, then he saw Jason's scarlet face and stopped. What else could be wrong with a thirteen-year-old boy who fled priesthood meeting?

Jason rubbed his shoes against the grass over and over, as if scraping off mud. He and his friends had bought a magazine, he said, and together they'd looked at the pictures of naked girls. Then he'd won the toss to take it home, and he'd looked at it some more in bed that night. After a while he couldn't help what he did with himself. Marc put a hand on Jason's shoulder and they talked, then went back inside.

Careful not to look directly at Jason now, as he handed Marc the tray laden with cups of water, Marc rejoiced that he was no longer an adolescent. He held the tray for his family, then took a cup of water.

As Jason moved silently to the next row, it happened. Something eased then lit behind Marc's eyes. The bread had been dry as ashes, but the water was a thimbleful of light.

The rows of shoulders shifted. The sacrament was over. Michael still slept on the bench. Karen reached for the book bag and removed a small box of crayons and a coloring book about Jesus. Nicky dangled from the back of the pew in front of them until Kate touched his shoulder and showed him his bottle.

Marc took Nicky and tipped him back in his left arm. What a miracle it would be if he fell asleep, Marc thought, looking into the wide, alert eyes.

Marc stretched his right arm along the bench until his fingers touched Kate's shoulder. She smiled at him and moved a little closer. Nicky drained the last swallows of milk as noisily as soda through a straw. Suddenly he hurled the empty bottle into the air.

Marc's hand shot from the bench, caught the bottle as it arched toward the pew behind them. Kate's sigh of relief joined his own and a chuckle rose from the back benches. He ducked a smile toward their friends, tucked the bottle into the book bag, and set Nicky on the bench beside Karen with a book.

The counselor conducting the meeting finished bearing his testimony to the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, then invited the congregation to express its belief. He sat down. There was a pause.

Marc had considered sharing his feelings about the new God. But he wasn't sure that everyone else didn't already know what he'd been so slow to learn. Perhaps he'd been the only one caught at the throne of the authoritative God, whispering his bargains, his pleas. He hadn't even told Kate yet about this tentative, surprising light.

His first memory of it was after he went to lunch with his father. "I'll get the tip," Marc had offered when his father covered the bill with his hand.

Their waitress had been in her late twenties, pretty, but with dark smudges under her eyes. Her right hand wore a plain gold band, and her required high heels were scruffy in back.

Marc noticed her shoes as he reached into his wallet for the few dollars that would have bought his whole lunch in the cafeteria. Behind them he saw the twenty dollar bill they'd earmarked for Nicky's birthday present. He pulled it out, shielding it with his hand, and put it under the bread and butter plate.

He wrote a check for Nicky's present and worried how to justify his extravagance to Kate. They couldn't afford it.

That night in bed he found himself reviewing the day, trying to pinpoint the source of his well-being. Suddenly in the dark bedroom he saw the minor events of the day before him on a low table or altar. The guilty twenty dollar bill gleamed, then burst like a flare in his heart. The new God spoke to him without words.

Listening to Eileen Evans begin her remarks, Marc decided such experiences were not for relating. They were too soft, hidden, and subjective, yet clear as candlelight in the interior of the self.

"We had such a fine lesson in Relief Society this morning," Eileen was saying now, her round face smiling below her cap of curls. Marc snapped to attention. "It was about our responsibility to be involved in our community."

Marc winked at Kate, who raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Of course, many of us have worked for years and *years* giving compassionate service. But too often we don't look past our own sisters here in the ward." Her voice went up a note just as Marc began to relax. "I can tell you, it is a witness to me that our leaders will tell us what we can do and which issues are worthy of our concern. We know what they are!"

Marc listened to the rest disappointed. Pornography must be halted; homosexuality cannot be tolerated; abortion must be totally outlawed; the Equal Rights Amendment must never be ratified.

"What happened to the stop sign?" he whispered, but Kate was studying her hands, as if listening closely to an opponent in a formal debate.

He breathed more easily when Eileen sat down, and a young woman he didn't know took her place at the microphone.

"Brothers and sisters," the woman began, "I am just so thankful for my home and my husband and our babies. It just makes me sick, the women who go out and work and leave their children. . . ." When she steadied her voice, she went on. "I'm sorry to be emotional, but I just wish every woman could be as content within her home as I am. Oh, I know it can be boring, and some days we all just about go crazy — " Her voice caught on a laugh or a sob, Marc wasn't sure which, and the congregation stirred with sympathy, "but we know this is what we should do."

Marc's stomach growled. Usually fasting was not difficult for him. He was used to it. But colors swam before his eyes. When his vision cleared, he realized he was angry.

He remembered an evening a few months ago when he and Craig visited Callie. She was depressed and Marc finally got her to tell them why.

"It's Brad. My ex. He's mad at me because I had an attorney friend call him because he missed two months of child support." She met Marc's eyes. "He threatened to move out of state and never send us another cent."

She looked at the bedroom door where her boys slept. "If he does that, we'll have to go on welfare. I can't make enough proofreading and editing to keep us alive. He's already cut the boys from his health insurance."

Marc remembered how he and Craig had shifted in their chairs. As if she understood their discomfort, Callie smiled at them.

"Oh, he wouldn't do that," Craig said.

The smile vanished. "My friend, Anne — her husband did just that. She went on welfare, and the state tracked him down and made him pay. When she got a job, he quit paying and moved to another state. She couldn't make enough to have her babies tended, so pretty soon they were back on welfare again."

Then suddenly she was on her feet. She paced the length of the small room, then whirled on them. "I'll cut my wrists before I use food stamps!" she exploded.

Sitting in church, Marc remembered how he'd tried to convey friendship, but he'd felt like an enemy.

Now Brother Loring was finishing up. His testimony had praised those that preceded it. He advised the sisters to heed the advice of the priesthood.

Automatically mouthing “Amen,” Marc felt a tug of disloyalty as if he were, again, the enemy.

Then Lane Meeks put in a few words about his newborn son, followed by several Ames children bearing rapid-fire testimony. The former bishop spoke nostalgically for a few minutes.

Marc tried to relax. His stomach churned. Adrenaline on a fasting stomach is potent, he thought. No wonder people have had psychedelic experiences during fasts.

Kate held Nicky on her lap. Marc could see she was weary. Her energy was short these days, and he guessed she’d expended enough this morning to drain her for the rest of the day.

He tapped her shoulder and held out his hands to Nicky, lifting him over Karen’s lap. He fastened his watch on Nicky’s round arm just below the elbow, and held it to Nicky’s ear. Then he closed his eyes, wishing away the beginning of a headache. He opened them again when something crossed his arm. It was a microphone cord.

“I heard somebody say something about a prophet,” Karen’s voice said loudly, and Marc pulled the microphone back from her mouth. “And I just want to say I know about Joseph Smith.”

There was a ripple of amusement, which Karen ignored.

“I know he was a good prophet, and he never did anything bad.”

Marc had a sudden vision, a Karen ten years from now, her blond hair still shining, her voice strong, a determined young woman speaking her mind. He felt tears warm his eyes.

“A man after Joseph’s own heart,” Phil’s voice mocked as Marc’s eyes blurred. Again he saw the red-haired girl in the cafeteria. Marc blinked.

Now it all spun around him like a film projected at too high a speed. He sat half dazed through Karen’s closing “Amen” and Kate’s opening, “My sisters and brothers.” He felt helpless. Why must Kate speak? Why today?

He urgently wanted her to sit down, to be quiet. He held Nicky closer to keep his own hand from tugging at Kate’s hem or elbow. What’s wrong with me? he wondered. He was trembling.

He looked at Kate. Despite her pregnancy, just beginning to show in the tailored dress she wore, she looked almost as young as the afternoon he met her; the same light behind her face, the same irony that surprised her listeners into laughter. But he saw that the hand holding the microphone quivered. Not like Kate.

“The Church has given me a lot,” she was saying. “I guess I grabbed it like a life preserver in a sea of experience! It gave me a new home, a community, a way of living. And it gave me Marc.” Her voice snagged, but she smiled and swallowed.

And I gave her this morning, Marc thought in sudden horror, on which to be on the wrong side. For a second the room tilted.

True, he’d seen Kate as floundering in that sea, glad for the life preserver that towed her to his ship. Now it was her ship, too.

But for the first time he wondered if she had been swimming instead of floundering. Or floundering and swimming toward one of the many shores she'd described. While he had simply affirmed the easy, pleasant, right voyages that had lain charted for him all his life. Someday — how had it escaped being today? — would she look at him and see in a blinding instant not a rescuer but a double agent who ensnared her in a hopeless plot?

He felt weak. That flash had taken only a minute, he discovered.

"I love to cook," Kate was saying tightly. "I love playing with my children. I'm very lucky to have them."

What is she doing? Marc asked himself. Then he realized she was reciting her credentials, her passport for safe passage. She didn't mention her college degree or her dancing experience.

Nicky yelled. Marc glanced down and saw one of his hands clutching Nicky's thigh, gripping it so tightly his knuckles were whitening. Nicky yelled again. Marc shifted him to his shoulder and stood, ducking his head a little. He walked quickly from the chapel, knowing even as he did how ideal he appeared — the helpful father.

In the foyer, Marc set Nicky down and stared out the glass doors. Kate's voice came from a ceiling speaker, but Marc couldn't take in the words. He was amazed to see the sky outside absolutely blue, the trees quiet. Still, there was something in the air. He picked up Nicky and went outside.

On the sidewalk in front of the chapel, Marc breathed deeply. He looked all around at the undeveloped fields that backed the subdivision, and the long, two-lane streets that ran through them. He could almost see the intersection by the canal. It was at the top of a little rise. As Marc drove toward it one day last summer, he'd spotted a child bobbing and rolling in the canal. The scene had had the simultaneous clarity and unreality of a nightmare.

A glance showed the intersection empty, and Marc accelerated through it, passed the child, screeched to a stop, and ran to the canal's edge where he threw himself flat. He edged farther and farther out on the bank, his right arm extended. The second before the child reached him, he thought the little body would wash past, but his fingers touched cloth, he grabbed, got a better grip, and pulled the child — a little boy — up on the bank.

He was still working on him when a sheriff's car squealed beside him and a deputy sheriff and the boy's parents jumped out. Looking at the parents, Marc felt himself go limp and cold all over. He handed their boy, now crying, to them without a word.

When he detailed the story to the sheriff, he mentioned his race to the canal.

"You didn't stop?" the sheriff said.

"What?"

"There's a stop sign at that intersection. You didn't stop?"

"No," Marc said, ready to laugh at a lame joke. "I didn't stop."

"Getting in a wreck wouldn't have helped the kid," the deputy said.

"The intersection was empty. I saw that."

"Well, I won't give you a ticket." The deputy rubbed the back of his sun-burned neck.

Marc, in front of the chapel on Sunday, grinned again with the same bafflement he'd felt staring at the deputy as weed scratches stung his arms and his knees still trembled. What to say to someone like that? he wondered again.

Thinking that somehow brought Marc around a mental corner to what he'd tried all weekend to forget — that listening ear on his telephone at work in the Church's headquarters. The static buzzed in the back of his brain.

Holding Nicky's hand, he walked to the edge of the grass and stared over the fields between the redwood fences and the swing sets. Once the fields had been alive with rabbits, he'd heard. He had a quick image of himself as a rabbit, paralyzed by the inevitable roar between two headlights on a dark road.

But half a dozen strategies erased that picture, breaking the paralysis. He pictured himself with an ear to the receiver and an eye out the door toward the secretary's desk. He imagined complaining to his supervisors about the faulty phone line. Sometimes he could return calls from Ralph's phone. Whatever the method, he could hop. He need not stay still.

Swiftly Marc lifted Nicky under his arms and tossed him high into the dizzy blue sky. He felt the answering jolt on his spread hands clear into his shoulder sockets. He flipped Nicky's little body so it lay across his arms. Nicky was breathless with laughter.

Two steps to the lawn and he was swinging his son in circles high and low, around and around in the yellow day until both sprawled on the tailored grass. There they watched blue sky, green grass, and the red and white chapel circle them gaily. Any time now the church doors would open and their people, tired and talking, would come out.

