

The Third Nephite

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SHORTLY AFTER SUNRISE OTIS WADBY WAS DRIVING TO WORK in Circleville. He stayed nights with his son in Junction, his wife having expelled him from his home in Circleville because he had taken up with fundamentalist notions. She had said, "If you don't think any more of me than to believe in polygamy, then we just as well call it quits right now."

This morning, tense and distracted over rumors about church trials and excommunications, Otis picked up a hitchhiker, a thing he ordinarily wouldn't do. The hitchhiker was a runty fellow: hollow chest; scrofulous neck; Adam's apple big as somebody's elbow; yellow mustache running from nose to ears like a shaggy hedgerow dividing his face into plowed, pitted properties; bleary eyes. He said he was a Mormon.

"Well, then," said Otis, who was bald, stout, and bespectacled, "what do you make of polygamy?"

"Mmmhmmm," the puny fellow said. "Pretty much, yessir. I make pretty much of it."

"What do you make of all the compromises with mammon and the world which the Brethren have let the Church drift into?"

"It's a dirty shame. It's always been a marvel to me how people will truckle and compromise every chance they get."

"In particular," Otis said, giving the steering wheel a belligerent shake, "what right did Wilford Woodruff and all them have to call off polygamy just because the government of the United States said they had to?"

"It's a terrible mistake to give in to the Feds on anything," the little man agreed, pulling off a cowboy boot and peering into the shank. "Once you do, it's just like busting your grandma's porcelain pot. You never can get it glued back the way it was before."

"You know, you ain't altogether misfavored," Otis said. "You talk a lot of sense. What's your name?"

"Name I go by in this dispensation is Simpson."

"What do you mean, this dispensation?" Otis snorted. "I suppose you was around in some other dispensation."

"Well, truth is, I was." He leaned toward Otis. "I gotta be choosy who I tell this to. Take it or leave it, I'm one of the Three Nephites."

"I just imagine you are," Otis said. "You look just exactly like one of them fellows."

"I ain't telling no lie," Simpson protested. Coughing, he whacked himself on the chest. "Been in Las Vegas for a while. Was stuck there, didn't know what for. Waiting my mission call, you might say. There was this big hotel fire across the street. I shinnied up one of the ladders, fought my way down some corridors, smoke everywhere, me coughing and spitting. I pried open an elevator door, climbed down the cable, hung by my knees into the cage, seen this passed-out lady, knew why God had kept me in Vegas for so long. I slung her over my shoulder and clumb back up the cable. You shoulda heard the crowd roar when they saw me coming out the window onto the ladder. Dang near ruined my lungs. The smoke is what I mean."

Otis didn't say another word. He drove through Circleville and let the little lunatic out at the far edge of town. Then he drove to his own house to deliver a bundle of quilt blocks his daughter-in-law had sewn for his wife. His place was a nice rust-brick bungalow with a covered porch and a carport. It seemed a shame to knock at his own door, but he didn't dare barge in.

Polly opened the door. "I was just thinking of you," she said sourly. She was short and heavy and wore a flowery print dress, ankle-high work shoes, and nylons rolled halfway down her calves.

"Viney sent you these quilt blocks," he offered.

"Well, then, give them here," she said, opening the screen door a tiny crack.

"I need to use the toilet," he said.

"Use the one in the feedstore."

"It's broke."

"Use the one in the service station across the street."

"Maybe you got a leaky faucet you need fixed?" he said hopefully.

"Why aren't you ever here when I really need you?" she said. She paused. "I do have some rabbits you could look at." She came out and led him off the porch and around the house. In the back yard were six rabbit hutches.

"I can't make out whether they're bucks or does," she said.

"Well, my gad, that's easy," he replied, pushing her aside and reaching into a hutch. He pulled out a weaner rabbit and turned it upside down in the crook of his arm. Squeezing its genitals between his fingers he said, "Look there, it's kind of like a tube, ain't it? That's a buck." He seized another. "There, this one's got kind of a furrow in it. That's a doe."

Polly was on tiptoe, peering over his arm. "Looks the same to me," she said. "There's a kid coming today to buy some."

"Get rid of these damned rabbits," he said. "What do you think people think of me with you keeping a bunch of rodents in the back yard?"

"Yeah," she said bitterly, "what do people think of you slipping around preaching polygamy every chance you get? I heard they're going to cut you

off from the Church; I heard you've been called before the high council."

"Who says I've been called before the high council?" he said indignantly. "Seems like I'd know about it if it was so."

She squinted at the sun. "Don't get in my way," she said. "I've gotta dig carrots." She rummaged in the toolshed for a shovel and walked to the garden. She stamped and pried with the shovel, breasts heaving and arms quivering.

Otis dangled a sheaf of carrots by the tops and knocked off dirt with a stick. "You know, you're sure something nice. You're as sweet as a package of M&M's. I'm moving back in. I'm so lonesome I'm just dang near dead. I wake up in the middle of the night and I got nobody to rub up against."

"No way are you moving back in," she said.

"Ain't you just a little tiny bit lonesome for me, sweetie?"

"It's too late. They're going to cut you off, and then we're finished for sure."

Otis came close and she smashed a clod and looked away toward the neighbor's corral. He put his arms around her from behind, although because of her buttocks and his belly his hands came short of clasping. "You wouldn't let a man have just a little grazing in the pasture, would you — a man that's been starving for weeks and weeks?"

"If you'd give up those silly ideas," she said.

"Just a little romp, just this morning. There ain't no need to tell anybody else about it."

"Get your hands off my breasts."

"They're so nice," he said.

"You aren't going to graze in my pasture," she said. "Never again."

He drove to the feedstore on Main Street, which he and his brother Angus had inherited from their father. He was astonished to see the runty hitchhiker trundling a wheelbarrow full of digging tools around the corner of the store. "I been hired to dig out your sewer line," Simpson explained. "Seems your toilet don't work."

Inside Otis accosted Angus, who stood behind the service counter scrutinizing sales slips. Angus wore bib overalls, and his thick gray hair sprouted backward like grass bending in a heavy wind.

"That waterskeeter thinks he's one of the Three Nephites," Otis said.

"I don't care if he thinks he's King Solomon," Angus replied. "He can dig, can't he? I'm getting tired of running across the street to the service station everytime I need to relieve myself."

It being Angus's month to manage things, Simpson continued picking and shoveling and Otis went fuming back to the office. A two-by-six plank, set on edge, divided the office; the brothers had ordered it installed after their falling out over Otis's fundamentalist ideas. There was a roll-top desk on either side. On Otis's side were shelves lined with religious books — *Precious Truths Cast Away*, *Awake, Zion!*, *The Errant Keys: Where Does Latter-Day Authority Truly Lie?*, and so on. In a corner on Angus's side, hanging by its neck from the ceiling, was an effigy, a life-sized, straw-stuffed replica of Connor Stuart, Otis's fundamentalist friend. "That son of a bitch has led you astray, and I just

want you to know what I'd do with him if I was king of this county," Angus said the day he tied a gallows knot in a rope and strung up the effigy.

Otis shuffled papers, trying to concentrate on invoices for rock salt and cattlegrub medications. From time to time, he glanced respectfully toward the effigy hanging in the corner which, in an odd way, *did* look like Connor Stuart, having hooked eyebrows and a shaggy mustache scribbled in black crayon on a floursack face. Nobody deserved worship more than Connor. When the stake president had summoned him for trial, he hadn't backed down an inch on the revelations he had received.

Otis closed the office door to have a talk with the effigy, he of course serving as mouthpiece for both parties. "So," he said for Connor, "you went over to your own house and laid your hands on your wife's big knockers and got steamed up and lustful. About one more minute and you would've sold me out just so you could go into your bedroom and do what the animals do."

"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," Otis mumbled.

"Just tell me this," Connor demanded: "is it an honor or dishonor to be excommunicated from a church that has fallen into apostasy?"

"Oh, it's an honor, a real honor."

"Then answer me this: do I have the Holy Ghost or don't I?"

"That you do! You've got him, no question about it. Your telephone dials direct to God. It's you who's got the keys to this dispensation."

"Well, now, I never personally made no such claim about the keys," Connor said modestly. "All I said was somebody somewhere has got them, and it sure ain't the president of the Mormon Church."

"I'm going to do something big and get myself excommunicated," Otis promised. "I'll quit sneaking around and lying low. I'll come right out into the open and preach from the rooftops."

Leaving the office, Otis gave the effigy a brotherly pat on the shoulder. In the mill behind the feedstore he helped Lester, the hired hand, mix and sack a batch of chicken mash. Otis stacked while Lester filled and sewed. As he deposited each sack, Otis gave it an impolite bump, imagining it was Polly, who deserved a little shaking up. "You think it tickles me to think about marrying another wife, don't you?" he said bitterly to a sack clutched in his arms. "You think I'm an old ram that's still in rut. Dammit, Polly, it ain't so. If God told us we couldn't be saved in any other way, if he said we couldn't know our election was sure without living a celestial law of marriage, who are you and me to raise the puny arm of flesh and say no?"

Around ten o'clock he returned to the service counter to inventory the chicken mash. As he entered the room, voices died abruptly. Angus labored over a sales slip for Sarmantha Kinch, who tapped her car keys on the counter. Cauley Wexler and Jerald Garfront leaned against the counter, both studying the progress of a spider down a dangling light cord. Simpson, taking a break, lounged redfaced and sweaty in the front doorway, tipping from a bottle of strawberry pop.

"Well, hell," said Cauley, who was an outsider, "why are we all standing around with a finger in our nose? Why worry about telling the truth? Otis,

I'm proud of you. I don't care what you believe. Anybody who stands up to the Mormon Church, by gosh, I respect that man."

Angus reamed an ear with the eraser of his pencil, saying grimly, "Congratulations, brother, you've finally went and done it."

"Done what?"

"Got yourself called up before the high council."

"What liar says I been called up? Seems like I'd know about it, don't it?"

Jerald had stepped back from the counter. "I never meant to pass no stories along. I just heard it happened."

Sarmantha, close to eighty, patted her pile of gray hair, from which old-fashioned horn combs rose like pitchforks from a haycock. "All I got to say, Otis, is there's a great sorrow on the Other Side. Your poor father and mother watching down from heaven above while you deny the Prophet and make light of the promises you made in the holy temple! That poor wife of yours! Thirty-seven years she's waited on you hand and foot and this is the thanks you give her."

Simpson swallowed the last of his pop and belched. "Now I'd conjecture you was married in the St. George Temple," he said. "I know some things about that temple which would boggle your mind. You'd think they was impossible. For instance, did you know the rafters ain't held together by nails nor wood pegs nor rawhide binding, just by the power of the priesthood? Chew on that a minute. Just the magnetic force of the priesthood keeps them timbers together."

"That is the damnedest story I ever heard in my whole life," Otis said.

"You been in the attic of the St. George Temple?"

"No, and you ain't neither."

"I've been places might surprise you," Simpson said, tapping his nostril three or four times.

"Is that really so about those rafters?" Sarmantha asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Simpson affirmed. "It's really so."

Otis walked down the street for the mail, knowing he couldn't do another thing until he saw whether he had a summons. He said good morning to the postmaster; and while he dialed the combination of his box, he whistled as if he hadn't a worry in the world. There was nothing except orders, bills, and advertisements. He felt wobbly and weak as he returned to the feedstore and took a drink of milk from the refrigerator in the storage room. He went out back to the mill and helped Lester sack a batch of rolled barley mixed with molasses and vitamins for cows. He threw the sacks down with contempt, once in a while giving one a kick. He imagined each one was Cyrus Lambert, the stake president, with whom he was grappling in mortal combat. "Cyrus, you pig bladder," he said, "quit playing cat and mouse with me. If you're going to cut me off, well, go on, get it over with. I can't take this waiting."

By and by he looked up to see Simpson in the doorway. The little man had flaring jaws but hardly any chin at all, as if a contractor had graded a nice, smooth cut-and-fill between his Adam's apple and nose and had set up his bristling yellow mustache as a drift fence to keep sand dunes off the highway.

When Lester had shut off the mixer, Simpson said, "I come back to apologize. My big mouth has run away with me. Look, ain't it a monster?" He opened as wide as a hippopotamus's mouth and pointed down his gullet with a finger. "How can a fellow with a mouth like that keep from offending people? He can't, that's all there is to it."

"That's all right," Otis said. "Water breaks out of everybody's headgates once in a while."

"I was wondering about an advance so I could buy some lunch."

"That's Angus's department."

"I looked around. Can't seem to find him."

"Likely you've got some good in you," Otis said. "Answer me straight. Do you want to bust out of that story book you been living in? Do you want to give up the lies and untruths that has been swarming around in your head like flies in a pigpen?"

"Absolutely! You better believe it!" Simpson cried.

"All right, I'll just test you. I'll take you to lunch where you can get some education."

They climbed into Otis's car and drove across town to Connor Stuart's place. Fronting the street was a large building of prefabricated metal where Connor's men serviced and repaired the diesel trucks and semis he hired out around the state. Behind was a double mobile home where lunch was in progress. Connor's first wife, Geraldine, let Otis and Simpson in. Connor waved a hand and went on eating. Also at the table were his new wife, his mechanic, and one of his drivers. The newcomers pulled up chairs as Geraldine set two more places. Otis served himself some green beans mixed with bacon bits and passed the dish to Simpson.

"Oh, boy!" Simpson said, ladling out four or five spoonfuls.

"Might be somebody else would like a little," Otis said.

"Oh, there's plenty," Geraldine assured. "Try some of this meat loaf."

Cindy, Connor's new wife, put down her knife and fork, looking as if she wanted to be helpful but didn't know how. She was Connor's secretary and dispatcher: nylons and half high heels, blouse with tucks, hair nicely curled, eyes shadowed, a fine-looking young woman. Nobody would have said that about Geraldine, who had bow legs, wispy yellow hair, and lips that could never quite close over protuberant teeth.

Lunch progressed quietly. Geraldine spoke briefly about the signs of the times. The driver asked Cindy about a truck that was on the road. The mechanic asked Connor for his opinions on dove hunting. "One dove makes no more than a mouthful," Connor said. "It's like making a meal on hummingbird tongues."

Connor had thick brown hair, a honed knife-blade nose, a black bushy mustache. He buttered a crust, spread a little marmalade, then pushed the dish down the table to his guests, saying, "So where are you from, Mr. Simpson?"

"More or less from Las Vegas. Last station of duty, you might say," the little man replied, cheerfully slathering his bread with marmalade.

"From Sodom and Gomorrah," said Connor.

"Yessir, that is correct. A sewage pond, that's what Las Vegas is. One night I seen a murder about to happen. Down the alley behind the Vegas Greyhound station I seen a man about to take off another. Had a .357 magnum pressed to his temple. I says, Hold on there, you son of Cain, this is salvation speaking; hold on there and God'll shortly assist you by killing the mangy dog with a disease. Victim looked syphilitic, to be truthful. I saved this feller from a life sentence. Talked him out of his gun and sent him home resolved to look for a job come Monday morning."

"Now you've ate, your mouth has got big again," Otis said.

"Geraldine, pass Otis some of that nutcake," Connor said. "How's the wife? I haven't seen her in some time."

"Hardhearted as ever," Otis said.

"I wish I could talk to Polly," Geraldine said. "Maybe I oughta look her up. I saw her day before yesterday in the merc, but you know how things are there, everybody watching like a hawk."

"Don't fret yourself over Polly," Connor said. "No water's going to come out of that well." He took a toothpick from a dish in the center of the table. "The rumor I hear is Otis has been called up. I wish it was true."

"I went down to the post office to see if I had a letter," Otis protested. "There wasn't any. That Cyrus, he's playing cat and mouse with me."

"Hogwash!" Connor said. "He's got no reason to excommunicate you. It takes somebody valiant to merit excommunication."

A flush came up Otis's neck. Connor reached for his hand. "I just wish you were willing to go up to Golgotha with me."

The mechanic said, "I'm sure standing by you."

"Otis is going to stand by me too," Connor said. "God wants you to make a move, Otis. He wants you to take another wife. Then you'll get that letter."

"I just ain't had the courage."

"It's Sister Marva God wants you to take."

"Can't he find me a prettier one?" Otis lamented, rolling his eyes toward Cindy.

"A pound of pretty isn't worth an ounce of dung," Connor said. He turned to Cindy. "He's got a deep spirit, that Otis, but he doesn't know everything there is to know. He's got celestial marriage and worldly marriage all mixed up. Go on, sweetheart, tell him how it is between you and me."

Cindy stared at her plate and mumbled, "I couldn't."

"I'll tell him," Connor burst out. "She says she isn't ready for a baby yet. So I say no carnal knowledge then. When she's ready, I'm ready. Till then we sleep together for a test. There, that's what celestial marriage is like. You take that Sister Marva, Otis. I've already had a discussion with her. I've said, Otis will be coming around, count on it. Go take her, brother."

Connor motioned toward a bookshelf. "Now to other matters. Get me the scriptures," he said to Geraldine. To the right of his plate he laid out the Bible, in front the Doctrine and Covenants, to the left the Book of Mormon. "Mr. Simpson," he said, "Otis has brought you to this table to hear the word of the Lord. I hope your heart is receptive."

"Yessir," said Simpson, "I'm one of the most receptive fellows I know."

Connor fixed his eyes upon the little man and began, his voice accelerating until his words were whirling thick and fast. He bobbed, grimaced, pointed, and chopped, saying, "Back in the days of President John Taylor when he and two-thirds of the apostles were on the underground and the Church was in receivership to the federal government and the gates of hell were open wide and the winds of evil blew unto the furthestmost corners of the earth, President Taylor, speaking to a small assembly in Bountiful, prophesied that the day the Church caved in under the pressures of its enemies and foreswore and annulled the sacred principle of celestial marriage, on that very day it would cease to be the one and only true church of God Almighty and would be no more than an excrement upon the face of the earth, a mess of vomit regurgitated out of the bellies of Moloch and Baal."

Simpson fidgeted with a button on his shirt, one eye squinted, his nose wrinkled. As for Otis, he followed every word with great concentration, fearful that some little sound or meaning might escape him. Admiration ran through him like millet through a sluice, and he vowed to repent of his pusillanimous ways.

When at last Connor had finished, Simpson said, "I'm very favorable toward all them ideas. I recall one time being in a bar in Missoula, Montana, and a big feller, drunker than a skunk, actually, which by the way, I would like to make a comment on the character of that city, which a whole lot of people don't appreciate enough. . . ."

"Hold up there, you prevaricator!" Otis shouted. "Ain't you got no respect for the truth when you hear it?" He explained to Connor, "This runty rascal thinks he's one of the Three Nephites. He can tell you more lies in two minutes than you and me could think up in a month."

"Well, now, I ain't no prevaricator," Simpson insisted. "You take it or leave it, it don't make no difference to me, because I certainly wouldn't of brought this matter up in the present company, but now that you mention it, the truth is I *am* one of the Three Nephites."

Otis rose and seized him by the shoulder. "No more of that wormy talk, you weasel."

"Sit down," commanded Connor. "Let's hear him a little."

Simpson glared at Otis. "You're lucky I don't thrash you. I may be one of the Three Nephites, but that don't mean I don't have a temper. I'm going to tell you a sacred, heartrending story even if you won't believe it. I was there when Moroni buried the plates. By gad, that's the absolute truth. Me and him seen the destruction of the Nephite armies by the Lamanites. Oh, it would've wrung your soul with the very dregs of bitterness to see them armies dwindling, battalion by battalion, platoon by platoon. When it was just him and me, hiding in the trees, him digging a hole in the hillside for them gold plates, he says, Crithee-ahhad — that was my true Nephite name — Crithee-ahhad, I hope you can reconnect with them other two Nephites that gets to wander the earth till the Lord comes again, because it's going to be hell for lonesome if you can't. And I says. . . ."

“Heavenly Father, strengthen me,” Otis said, stamping from the house with a slam of the door. He circled his car ten or twenty times before he calmed down enough to sit behind the wheel. Shortly he heard thumping from inside the trailer. The door burst open and Simpson leaped out and crashed to the ground.

Connor and the mechanic stood on the porch. “He’s possessed of an evil spirit,” Connor said, wiping his hands on his pant legs. “It isn’t him talking in his own true personality. It’s a clever demon. Hank and I are willing to lay on hands for casting it out, but if he’s going to fight, let him sink into the infernal pit where he belongs.”

“Amen,” said Otis.

Having returned to the feedstore, Otis did some bookkeeping at his desk for an hour or two. He had a hard time entering figures into the calculator because his mind was on Marva Brinkerheisly, whom even a sex fiend wouldn’t have thought of molesting. She was a spinster school teacher of thirty-five or forty, a towering, gaunt woman who resembled an elk in the late stages of malnutrition. Otis could see how polygamy worked. When a man was young and randy, God let him choose among tasty, appealing women like Polly. Later God called him to accommodate the leftovers and wallflowers, who had as much right to exaltation as anybody else.

Hoping that God wouldn’t think he was like Jonah, balking over his call to Nineveh, Otis retired to a storage room for prayer. He knelt in a crevice between an old unused stove and a stack of bagged oats. “Oh, God,” he prayed, “kindly send me a sign that I’m supposed to marry Sister Marva Brinkerheisly — a big, sharp, unmistakable sign, if you please. It seems to me she’s a little over the hill when it comes to having babies. And me too, Heavenly Father — I ain’t sure I’ve got what it takes to raise up a posterity with her. However, all things are possible with you. Amen.”

Suddenly there was a terrific noise in the stove pipe, a descending clamor of scratching and flapping. Something thumped into the pit of the stove and wings beat against its walls. “Who’s there?” Otis cried. Then he choked up with gratitude. It couldn’t be anything but a dove, the Holy Ghost in person. He jerked open the stove, mumbling, “Thank you, Lord.”

Out tumbled a magpie. The black and white bird fluttered upside down on the floor, then revived and with a squawk shot toward a high bright window. It struck the glass, bounced, and spiraled to rest upon a sack, lying at a cant, panting, its beak open.

Otis seized the bird, whereupon it clamped upon the flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Roaring, he dashed through the storage room, through the office, past the service counter where Angus looked up with open-mouthed surprise, and out the door, where he heaved the bird into the air. With another triumphant squawk, it launched into flight.

“Oh my gad,” said Simpson, who stood at the corner of the building with an air rifle in his hands. A boy stood beside him. “I was just showing him how to adjust this gun for windage,” Simpson explained in a mollifying tone. “There’s them magpies in your elm around where I’m digging. I sure didn’t

think that crazy thing would loop down your chimney. However, it's good to see it ain't hurt any." He handed the rifle to the boy. "Here, sonny, maybe you oughta light out for home."

Otis walked around and peered into the trench Simpson had dug along the foundation. The little man pointed at an opened pipe. "Right there is where the roots was clogging your sewer. Won't be long and you can enjoy your toilet again."

"I want you to know something, Mr. Simpson," Otis said. "If it was suddenly my turn to manage this feedstore, I'd fire you in two seconds."

"You'd be exactly right. I'd fire me too if I was in any position to do so. In the meantime, I'll try not to knock any more trash down that chimney."

A little later Otis helped Lester sack a batch of horse pellets. When it was his turn to stack, he hugged the hundred pound bags with great tenderness, supposing they were Marva. Looks in a woman weren't so important. It was a sweet temperament that counted. He imagined the ways he would charm Marva, also the ways she might charm him in return. "Here," he said to her, seated at the breakfast table, "have a little sugar on your germade, also some of this cream," whereupon she said, "You're so gallant." Then they were no longer at the breakfast table but in the bedroom, whereupon Marva didn't look like herself but like Dolly Parton, in whose blond tresses and pillowy breasts Otis buried himself.

In the late afternoon, tending the service counter, Otis saw school children straggling toward home. "Heavenly Father," he said under his breath, "if Marva will just be somewhere that I can talk to her without anybody hindering, I'll take it as a sign that you have ordained this marriage."

He drove to the elementary school and, having circled through deserted halls, put his head into Marva's room and found it empty. He went out the back door and saw her far across the playing field taking down a volleyball net. He said, "I had in mind a place that wasn't quite so public, Lord." Then, remembering Jonah, who had ended up in the belly of a whale, he added, "Sorry, Lord, you know best."

He strode across the grass, meeting Marva in the middle of the field. She towered over him, the net bunched in the crook of her arm. Her bony shoulders filled out her blue serge dress like springbars in a tent; a gold and amethyst brooch clung to the leveled plains of her chest. She said, "If you're looking for Mr. Smollit so you can apply for the janitor's job, he's probably in his office."

"I was thinking maybe I could do some janitoring for you."

She bit her lip and with hands suddenly atremble shook out a portion of the net and tried to bunch it more neatly. "Here, let's fold it up proper," Otis said, taking the trailing end and stepping away.

"Oh, yes," she said, "that would be so very helpful."

When they had folded it, Otis said, "Now I'll just carry it for you."

"Oh, you don't need to do that, Brother Wadby."

"I just might call you Marva and you might just call me Otis," he said. "What do you think of Otis for a name? There was a German prince named Otis. The first Otis we know about in our line came to Philadelphia in 1872."

"My gracious, the antiquity of your family!" she said.

He said, "I'll sure have to watch my language around you, you being a school teacher and knowing the pretty things that oughta be said."

"No, not at all. I like men who use bad grammar. It seems they'd know what to do in an emergency."

"I do have to say I've got a knack for getting things done. If the mill busts down, I don't shilly-shally around. I get on the phone and get a part ordered two minutes later. Sometimes I've jumped in my car and made it up and back from Salt Lake with the piece we need the same day it busted."

"I'm sure you do have a knack for getting things done. I just know you do."

From a distance they heard shouting, then barking, then more shouting. A large gray dog suddenly careened around the corner of the schoolhouse and loped across the playing field. A rod or so from the couple the animal halted. Someone had recently trimmed its body, leaving ribbons of hair dangling from its ears and a wiry mane circling its neck. In its mouth was a rubber doll. It began to bark belligerently, its great deep voice strangely muffled by the doll.

A man, wildly waving a shovel, broke around the corner of the schoolhouse. It was Simpson. The dog resumed its flight. "Stop that vandal!" the little man shouted. Arriving beside Otis and Marva, puffing and heaving and greatly vexed, he cried, "Why didn't you grab him while you had a chance?"

"Who had a chance?" Otis protested.

"Dogs is the bane of civilization. They bark all night, bite strangers, and befoul sidewalks with dung. There was this family from California gassing up at the station across the street and the little gal's doll fell out and that puke of a dog snatched it up and made off. Don't you understand what it's going to do to the tourist industry if everybody in this city just sets back and lets depredations like this go on unchecked?"

Otis said, "You talk about depredations! It seems like to me you're a bigger liability to this town than a hundred dogs."

Back at the feedstore Otis tended the service counter for a final hour after Angus and Lester had gone home. He brooded on the ability of one misbegotten soul like Simpson to frustrate the plans of the Almighty as they related to him and Marva. Still he wouldn't concur with Connor's claim that the runty fellow was possessed of an evil spirit. It would be a pretty poor specimen of an evil spirit that would trifle with a person as unfavored as Simpson.

Soon the bell over the outside door jingled and Polly came in. "I need ten pounds of rabbit pellets," she said.

As he weighed the pellets in the storage room, Otis had a little chat with the scales, which he imagined were Polly. "Now, honey, you know I wouldn't of gone to see Sister Brinkerheisly if I hadn't been called of God to do so. That's the absolute truth, sure as I'm alive."

The scales said, "What you was called of was your male appendages, you billy goat."

As he handed Polly the parcel of pellets, Otis said, "If I was home I sure as hell would talk you into getting rid of them rabbits."

"Well, you aren't home," she said, "so I guess I'll keep them. I sold three of those weaners to the Jorson kid this afternoon. Two does and one buck. He's getting into the breeding business."

"You sure they was two does and one buck?"

"I told him they were according to my best light. However, I said if time proved otherwise he could bring any or all of them back and I'd replace them with some others."

Otis followed her onto the steps and watched her walk down the street. She had rolled up her nylons and put on her Sunday flats and touched up the little circle of curls around her head. He could have cried, she looked so nice.

At dusk he locked the store and headed for Junction. All day he had been as taut as barbed wire on a new fence; but now, as the car picked up speed, he began to relax. Then ahead he saw a man thumbing at the side of the road. Sure enough, it was Simpson. Otis pressed the accelerator and raced by. In the rearview mirror he saw Simpson shake a fist. Suddenly, a couple of hundred yards beyond, a front tire blew out with a boom and the car lurched from side to side. As Otis wrestled it to a halt, the shredded tire emitted a loud thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk. Climbing out, he saw Simpson jogging toward him. He grabbed rocks and began heaving, shouting, "Back off, you loony. Stay your distance!"

About thirty yards from the car, Simpson paused, scratched his head, and squatted, watching in the dusk while Otis placed the spare tire on the wheel. "You know," he called, "if I could get up a little closer, there's some things I could tell that you'd give plenty to know about."

"You get any closer and I'll brain you with this jack handle."

"You ain't exactly being hospitable," Simpson yelled. "Seems like to me I done you some good favors today."

"Favors! You coyote! I can't remember a worse day since the time a horse fell on me when I was a kid." Otis grunted and tugged, working as fast as he could.

Finally Simpson rose and shouted, "I better warn you, I'm getting mad. I'm getting ready to dust off my feet on you."

Otis pounded on the hub cap, gathered his tools, and threw them clattering into the trunk.

"Listen, you mealy-mouthed pervert," Simpson hollered. "You just dirtied on your last chance for salvation, that's what you done. The Lord sent me this way to kick you out of your orbit around that pestiferous, piratical Connor Stuart. Are you grateful? Hell no, you ain't. You're surly, mean, and peevish. Come Judgment Day, God's going to wipe his hindparts with you and flush you down a toilet, and I say good riddance to bad rubbish."

Otis stood with his mouth agape. Suddenly he couldn't see Simpson. He took a step or two, blinked, stared again. The runty man had disappeared. On either side of the road were open fields, low wire fences, dry, shallow ditches — no hiding places whatsoever. Otis trotted down the road, paced back and forth where Simpson had been. "My God, he's gone!" he said.

His hands trembled until he could hardly insert the key into the ignition. Once the engine had started, he turned the car around and sped back to Circleville. He went into the feedstore, stacked his fundamentalist books on his desk, then sat and dialed the telephone. "Marva," he said, "Sister Brinkerheisly, that is to say, this is Otis Wadby. Forgive me for my wicked intentions. I came over there this afternoon to propose that you and me get married. Probably you wouldn't of had me which would have been just exactly right. You're the finest woman there ever was but I'm all locked up. I'm going home to Polly."

Then he got on a chair and unnoosed the effigy which had dangled in the corner for six months. He carried the limp, straw-filled body into a darkened storage room, where he laid it tenderly on a stack of wheat. "Connor," he said, "the reason you didn't have any luck casting an evil spirit out of that scrawny, emaciated little boar is he really is one of the Three Nephites." He could hear Connor's indignant protest. "I know he don't look like one," he replied. "Furthermore, he's foul-mouthed and dissipated. But when it came to the big act, honest to God, I seen him do it. He evaporated into thin air — poof, in the twinkling of an eye, he was gone." Otis stroked the effigy's head and fingered its shirt collar. He said, "I can't go along with you, Connor. It seemed like to me I could see the Holy Ghost standing right behind you, but I still can't go along."

He drove to his house and went up the steps. He hesitated only a moment, then went in without knocking. Polly was at the kitchen sink, finishing her supper dishes. He deposited his books on the dining table and sat down. "I'm back to stay," he said. "I've given up on fundamentalism."

She watched with an open mouth while he leafed through the volumes. "This one," he said, hefting *The Errant Keys: Where Does Latter-Day Authority Truly Lie?*, "is one very fine book."

He went outside, she following. He threw the books into the incinerator barrel, doused them with gasoline, and set them afire. Lighted by the dancing flames, he and she stood awhile. "Don't cry," she said, brushing his cheek with her fingers. "We oughta be awful happy, hadn't we?"

"About them rabbits you sold that Jorson boy," he said. "Tomorrow I'll go over and check them out so we can get him squared away with what he needs."

"Do you want a little supper?" she asked.

"It seems like it's an unholy thing to do just now," he said, "but I'm damned near dead for lack of a romp."

"Sure enough, I'll fix you some supper later," she said.