

Gifts of the Spirit

Michael Fillerup

BROTHER RICE, THE FIRST COUNSELOR, says the bishop thinks the young people might be more responsive to someone who, oh, speaks a little more their language. Then he smiles, hands me the Sunday school manual, Course 16, and extends his hand in fond thanks and congratulations. "Sister Mahan," he says, "the bishop feels you'll be perfect for this calling!"

I don't accept the manual or Brother Rice's liver-spotted hand. I'm still wondering what, exactly, the bishop means by that, "speaks a little more their language"? Does he categorically assume that anyone under forty "speaks their language" or at least a comprehensible dialect of it? Does he know something about me he should not?

But how could this be? Aside from what he has deduced from a few passing words on the Sabbath and a yea-nay temple recommend interview last month, I am a veritable stranger. On the Ward Talent Survey, Ryan ambitiously checked off such utilitarian skills as carpentry, cross-country skiing, auto mechanics, and hang-gliding, while I had to scan the hundred-odd items twice in vain before marking a modest "X" beside the nebulous "OTHER."

I suppose the bishop has his reasons, inspiration being among them. I suppose too that in his eyes I appear not much different from the other young mothers in our ward: a little self-righteously harried and hassled but doing my Sunday best to conceal it while struggling to stay within one size or ten pounds of my honeymoon figure (whichever proves easier). I attend my church meetings regularly, support Ryan in his calling as Scoutmaster (the reward, or penalty, for Talent Survey candor), and wear my dresses tea-length, or just below the knee. A good role model in other words.

The bishop has no reason to think otherwise. I passed my interview with flying colors, although I must confess an untimely twitch when he neared the end of the script: "Sister Mahan, is there anything in your past that is unresolved or any transgression that has not been reconciled with the proper church authorities?"

I bowed my head and said no.

"Is there any reason in your mind why you should not attend the House of the Lord?"

Again the twitch, the wince. And again: "No."

You see, I have this little problem, or perhaps not a problem but a gift. Can the two be synonymous? Gift and sin, sin and gift? I stand condemned, on the one hand, for committing the act, but equally on the other if I hide it under a bushel. Omission or commission. Damned if I do, damned if I don't. I have this problem with my problem. It's my license to fib a bit. Sparingly. Betimes. When moved upon by The Spirit.

I do have other sins, not of this fold—call them "resolved on paper." Is it wrong to use the one to fertilize the other? As long as the tree bears good fruit? God's gift? Or fertilizer for a very different farmer? The whole thing, as you can see, gets rather complicated.

There is desperation on Brother Rice's pallid face. If he does not find some willing teacher, the mantle for today's instruction will fall upon his scrawny shoulders. I do not want it to fall upon mine.

A year ago I taught the Star A class in Primary with a clear conscience. In fact I quite enjoyed it. There was something refreshing, even stimulating, about having a captive audience of little people with trusting faces full of simple faith and innocence. When I told them Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish, they did not refute my words with adolescent skepticism. No, their little eyes bulged and their mouths widened as if they themselves were being swallowed by the sea beast. "What kind of fish!" they gasped. "Wow!" And I could tell by the upward curve of their lips and the sparkle in their eyes they believed every word, nothing doubting, just as my two little girls believe. And the stories were all right there in the scriptures. And there was safety and security in that.

Course 16 is another matter. It has nothing to do with discipline. Brother Rice assures me this group has matured well beyond the obnoxious spitwad stage that is the trademark of the deacons. These young people, he says, are thirsty for knowledge. They are beginning to probe, to question, and, yes, to challenge! This intrigues me on the one hand and halts me on the other. It very obviously scares the daylights out of Brother Rice, who confesses meekly, "I just don't relate very well to that age . . . an old-timer like me."

Fortunately, I have an easy out. "Brother Rice, I would *love* to teach this very exciting and challenging class, but . . ." I smile apologetically. "Didn't you know? We're moving in two weeks."

Suddenly Brother Rice looks ill. "No, I didn't know that," he replies glumly. "Is—I mean, did Ryan get another job?"

"He's being transferred to Sacramento—we are."

Brother Rice nods with that solemn resignation of one who has received tragic but inevitable news. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that." Then

as an afterthought, "We'll really miss you." He smiles and I note the stress lines like a ring of thunderbolts around his eyes. Then I do something very stupid. I let pity get the best of me. When I could turn and walk away with a valid excuse and a clear conscience, instead I put my hand on Brother Rice's shoulder like a good sister: "Of course, I could teach the lesson today . . ."

In a flash youth and vigor have returned to his haggard countenance. The sad scales have fallen from his eyes; the creases have vanished from his cheeks. For a fleeting moment, I am the Master Healer who has commanded him to take up his bed and walk. I must confess a surge of pleasure and power as he grips my hand and gasps, breathlessly, "You will?"

I smile. "It's for the Kingdom, right?"

This time he offers me the drab gray manual as if it were a rare and precious gift. But there is something suspect in the way he winks at me. Twice. "Ten minutes," he says, tapping his watch.

Judging by Brother Boyack's meticulous yellow highlighting, next up is Lesson Eleven, "Hold to the Rod." Objective: To help students gain a better understanding of and appreciation for the scriptures. I skim the material and grimace: it's a yawner. The Sandman's going to be my guest speaker. I suffer visions of a gallery of high school heads nodding off one by one.

Then I panic! I must not allow this to happen. After all, I am the Chosen, the one who speaks a little more their language. I am supposed to be better, an improvement. These young people, who are they expecting? Mother Cool? Ms. Hip? A Sunday school messiah? No, but someone a little more scintillating than Brother Boyack, alias Mr. Computer, the pompadoured C.P.A. who put them to sleep every week droning on in his nasal monotone. I am not a teacher by profession or by any other means than parental default, yet for some reason it is essential that I succeed here. I sense this is a test, and not of my pedagogical prowess.

All right then. I'll start out with an informal "get-to-know-you" session, followed by an ad hoc version of Celestial Jeopardy. One thing is certain: I will turn to the manual only as a last resort. I'm bucking church policy, I know, but I have a special mission here: survival without egg on my face. And who knows? Just maybe, if I am very fortunate, I will be inspired to run some genuine AC/DC through the iron rod.

The hall buzzer rasps a rude warning: five minutes! I rush around the little classroom rearranging the chairs in an intimate semi-circle. Then I sit centerstage, the dreaded lesson manual on my lap, and wait.

Two minutes later the Barton boy trudges in—gloomy Paul with the Ben Franklin glasses, droopy brown bangs, and weary eyes of his father, the astronomy professor. *Weltschmerz* written all over him. I recognize him from his periodic cello solos in sacrament meeting.

"Hello, Paul! How's it going today?"

Is this speaking his language?

He plops down in a folding chair, chin in hand. "Fine," he mumbles to the linoleum floor.

Next enters one of the Collins boys. Six-two, six-three—they're all giants nowadays. A white bread face scatter-gunned with pimples and picked scabs. His head is oddly elevated in back, like a blue jay's.

"And you are . . ." Glancing at the roll. "Troy?"

A friendly smile. Shades of my little Star A's! "Yes."

"And how are you today, Troy?"

His pimpled forehead buckles. "Well . . ." A deep, ponderous sigh. "Well . . ." Another sigh, deeper. Troy, Troy, easy. A simple "fine, thank you" will do. "Well . . ." Mulling it over like Hamlet. "Not too good," he says. "I guess I went to bed late . . . And I didn't spend much time with other people . . . I don't play sports . . . and I don't belong to any clubs at school . . ."

"I see."

Then Becky Lynn strides in, the bishop's daughter. The bossy body of her mother and the mild-mannered lips of her dad. Strawberry blond hair cut straight across her freckled forehead like Heidi of the Alps. She drifts over to the window of frosted glass, shoves it halfway open, and pokes her head outside, sucking in the fragrance of the pines. It is our first sunny day in weeks. Tulips are blooming in every yard. Lilacs are frothing like a purple dessert. Becky pulls her head back inside and sighs, pleadingly, "Ohhh . . . Sister Mahan, can we have class outside today?"

My first test. Am I going to be a letter-of-the-law stick-in-the-mud like Mr. Computer? Is Sister Mahan going to be hip or square? Well, why not go outside? I, too, am a sun lover—was a beach bum in my day—but I also know the narcotic effect of sunshine. I'll lose them to the tulips. Troy and Paul are eyeing me curiously, waiting. I am momentarily reprieved when two more enter, Kim Felder and Susan Rogers, young debutantes in long satin dresses with puffy sleeves and ruffled hems. A pair of Scarlett O'Haras. Kim, the glamorous one with the water skier's tan, crosses her legs and stifles a yawn. Naturally swarthy, Susan appears even more so in wedding white. I nod to them. "Ladies . . ." I am sorely tempted to bow. I remember their type. "Prom night?"

They look at each other and titter.

Next comes a tall, blue-eyed blond with shoulders like a Valkyrie and a bored-to-tears look. She obviously did not attend last night's prom. She is wearing a blue velour blouse with a V-neck that plunges daringly down into her cleavage. Her navy blue skirt is as skimpy as a cheerleader's, but her bare legs, peppered with black nubs, are molded more for rugby than for pom-and-cheer. She withdraws a chair from our cozy semi-circle and

tilts back in the corner, arms crossed, head back, chomping on a wad of gum.

I scan the roll sheet. "Charlene?"

She looks up, her square head rolling to the side in a half-shake, half-nod. "Tate," she says in a husky voice. "Misty."

I know her type as well. Biding time.

At that instant my objective for Lesson Eleven takes an uncalculated twist. I am thinking, and I am not certain why, exactly, but: I just want to get through this thing without suffering or inflicting any damage.

Mark Norris slips in last, closing the door politely behind him. Bristly blond hair, military shoulders, Popeye forearms. Casually formal in a short-sleeved blue shirt, slacks, and striped tie. Nodding curtly, he sits down next to Troy.

"Can we, Sister Mahan?"

Becky Lynn. Staring out the window again, humming to herself.

"The suggestion has been made," I say, "that we hold class outside today. All in favor?"

Four hands immediately go up, then a fifth, Troy's, after he has had sufficient time to weigh the eternal pros and cons of his decision. Gloomy Paul looks at me and shrugs.

"Outside it is!" I exclaim. "B.Y.O.C.—bring your own chair!"

With the usual clatter and conversation, we migrate outside and set up the folding chairs on the grass in a replicate semi-circle: Becky, Mark, Kim, Susan, Troy, Paul. Misty, who has not brought a chair, stretches her long body sideways among the dandelions and props up her head like a drowsy Cleopatra.

It truly is a magnificent day! The sky is spotless save a tiny twist of cloud, like a stray handkerchief or a stitch of mischief clothing. The view too is impressive: snow-patched peaks to the north and forests of ponderosa pines to the south. Festive weather. Hardly conducive to teaching or receiving hard core gospel doctrine. And yet, a thought: on pastoral occasions like this, didn't the Savior deliver his most poignant sermons? And by what means? Ah! Parables. Stories. Fictions. A sower went forth to sow . . . And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites . . . A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me . . .

But here I stop and caution myself: watch it.

A red convertible cruises by, the bare-chested passengers waving beach towels as the driver gives his horn a teasing beep. Kim and Susan turn and wave. I remind myself that even the Master did not have to compete with sports cars and M-TV. Becky Lynn's eyes roll, cloud gazing, as Kim Felder inhales the scent of fresh-cut grass.

I say the opening prayer, then introduce myself. "Sister Mahan, in case

you don't know me . . ." Searching their indifferent faces, I abandon the "get acquainted" activity and try another tack.

"I assume—at least I hope—most of you have reached that inquisitive stage where you have serious questions about the gospel. That's good. That's healthy. I'd like to pursue an 'Everything You Always Wanted to Know But Were Afraid to Ask' format. So if you have any questions—any gospel-related questions—please, ask. If I don't know the answer, we'll find one. Together."

Kim and Susan are waving stealthily to another passing car. The bushy-headed driver guns his engine playfully. Kid's stuff. Grow up, will you? Kim looks at me, smoothes her satin skirt, and smiles apologetically. Misty remains on her side, plucking blades of grass. They are sixteen and seventeen, going on infinity. High school juniors and seniors. What are their plans?

Kim Felder sighs. Incipient ennui. "I'm going to the Y." Of course. Foreordained from birth. An "MRS." major?

Susan is going to the local university, where her father teaches physics. Paul too. These professors' kids. Mark, Troy, and Becky are juniors. Misty? She shrugs, flicks a blade of grass. "I don't know." A Nowhere Woman. A drifter. I vaguely know her stodgy father, the county assessor who also serves on the stake high council.

They all seem young yet old. On the threshold. Kim, Susan, Paul, Misty. It occurs to me that in October I will be exactly twice their age, and suddenly I too feel young but old. In June of the year they were born, I was standing on the Pacific Coast Highway in bell-bottom jeans, sandals, and a Levi jacket over a Poor Boy tanktop, and nothing on under that. My hair, which had always seemed so straight and plain and boringly brown, was chopped short like a boy's and hidden underneath a Yosemite Sam hat. A little under six-feet tall, I was cursed with the mammoth breasts of my mother, and I was trying to hide that (or "those") as well. I carried a white duffel bag stuffed with an extra pair of bell-bottom jeans, another tanktop, some junk food snacks, and a few female necessities, which did not include makeup, mascara, or anything you would call "cosmetic."

You see I was not going to be a hypocrite like my father the stake president. I was going to practice what I had been preaching for the past year-and-a-half, masquerading as a hippie at Taft High School. At last I was calling my father's bluff and leaving home to do and be the real thing. I was fed up. In my teenage eyes, my mother was a house cow who mooed to the patriarchal whims of my father; she was a baby-making machine without a brain, and I frankly told her so. In her eyes I was poisoning my little brothers and sisters with the wicked likes of Mick Jagger, Jim Morrison, and the philosophies of Susan Taylor: seminary's a drag; church is worse. Marx was right: dope them with Jesus. A bunch of fat cats preaching peace but

sending boys to war so they can make a dirty dollar. The Great Mormon Dream: a swimming pool in every backyard and two station wagons in every garage.

My father didn't like it. I was tarnishing his sterling image. How dare I straggle into sacrament meeting with a daisy painted on one cheek and MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR on the other! Who did I think I was? We had rules in our home ("There is beauty all around, when there's love at . . ."). If I couldn't abide by those rules, then I'd just have to . . . Go ahead, say it! *Say it!* Cast out, like Satan's blackballed one-third. Bold words for a poor little rich girl. I won't last a day without my tape deck. Easy for me to damn the establishment I'm sponging off of. I'll come running home, begging home. I'm just a little girl, a spoiled rotten little rich girl.

Okay, Mr. Clean. Have it your way, Mr. Stronger-Than-Dirt.

So I stuck one thumb out, inserted the other in the pocket of my jeans, and, trying to appear as tough and manly as possible, waited for my first official ride while the rest of my senior class primped for graduation. The early bird surfers were out, the sun had barely burned through the morning fog, and I was heading north to nowhere.

"Some of you may have testimonies," I say.

A few nods. Susan Rogers surreptitiously touches a handkerchief to her boxer's nose.

"Some of you may think you have. And others . . . well, you're searching. And that's good too. Eventually you'll all have to find out for yourselves. You can only live on borrowed light for so long."

Stop-and-go rides up the California coast. The bearded driver lighting up a joint, passing it back to me: "Wanna hit?"

I shake my head. Not yet. Although I look the part, I'm new to this. Time. I need time.

But that is the real beginning. That is when I learn how, or discover that I even have it. You say no thanks but you feel funny, and phony, and you want to take his mind off it. So you begin talking. It starts with a little joke or anecdote, but once you get going, the words keep flowing with the road, and he keeps nodding, smiling, driving. That's the main thing. And soon you're an off-ramp, a town, a city past his destination. And you get better at it, better fast. Because the better you get, the longer you stay out of the rain, out of the cold, out of the night. And something else: if you're good enough, it will keep his eyes on the road and his hands out of your pants.

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to discuss today?"

The sun is a warm balm on the back of my neck; I can feel layers of history, my personal Ice Age, melting.

"Nothing?"

Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge in an old milk truck. The long-haired driver with the guru beard and the mellow voice, thick and honeyed,

uttering two words: "Here okay?" Oddments rattling in back. Sergeant Pepper on the eight-track: Picture yourself in a boat on a river/with tangerine trees and marmalade skies . . .

I already am.

Berkeley at 1 a.m. A skinny student in blue jeans and nothing else dashes out of a brick apartment building, bare feet pattering across the pavement, long hair flying like a banner. Slapping two slices of bologna in my hand: "Peace, brother! It's the same shit wherever you walk! We're all stuck in it together!" Dashing off. Quick patter. Then sirens. Night screams. The cold northern sky where the stars dissolve into powder. Upper windows opening, heads popping out: "The Pigs! The Blue Meanies!" I hunker behind a telephone booth and watch through warped glass the flurry of billy clubs windmilling through the mob of stringy-haired girls and bearded boys shielding their heads with their hands. Gimme shelter in a room of wall-to-wall people, stinking of sweat, jasmine, and hash. Mexican felt paintings and black light posters. Easy Rider, a headbanded Jimi Hendrix kissing the purple sky. Half-naked bodies covering the floor. A voice: "Find some floor."

"Nothing in particular you want to talk about?"

Troy's index finger goes up, down, then up again. His eyes pinch shut in earnest; his face is scabbed like a martyr's. "I'd like to learn how to get closer to God."

"Okay, I think the lesson ties right in with that." I flip through the manual to Lesson Eleven. "'Hold to the Rod.' What do they mean by that, Troy?"

Suddenly the yellow warmth has gone damp gray. I look up to see the solitary cloud has burgeoned and blotted out the sun, like a mote in the golden eye. Kim Felder crosses her bare arms with a shiver. Misty looks up, smirks, plucks another blade. The surviving threads of sunlight are snagged in the pines like blond hairs in a brush.

I feel the hairs on my arms stiffen but not from the sudden chill. One more Sunday and I will disappear into the easy oblivion of these young people's lives, and this bothers me. Instead of merely getting through the lesson without inflicting or suffering damage, what pearls of wisdom can I impart? What red flags should I wave? And at what cost? To me? To them? On the one hand, they ought not travel that rough and meandering road when they can take the streamlined route to celestial marriage, pure parenthood, et cetera. On the other hand, if I could turn the clock back seventeen years, would I play my part any differently? Some scenes, yes, definitely, but others . . . ? It's the gift: there's a price tag for the privilege. Then again, I ask myself: what would I have the good Course 16 instructor tell my daughters twelve and thirteen years from now? It is far safer, and

easier, to plod through the objectives and then smile, shake hands with them, and go on down the road.

"Okay, so we get the iron rod from Lehi's dream—those who cling to the rod will find their way through the mists of darkness. And what are they, the mists of darkness?"

"Temptations," Mark mumbles. "Isn't that what they are?"

"Exactly. But what's the iron rod to us? I mean, what *is* it?"

Midnight, fifteen minutes past, and I have been alternately standing and sitting on a freeway on-ramp outside of Roseville for three hours. It's chilly, cold for California, and the cars, when they come, screech tightly around the corner and roar mockingly by. I'm tempted to creep onto the freeway proper and stick out my thumb in violation of the on-ramp law. Do I dare? Think, Susan! Think! If the cops come. I'm traveling naked: no driver's license, no I.D. Clouds hang from the sky like cobwebs. Any second it's going to rain. I can feel a premonitory fizzle on my skin. The creepy crawlies. I'm famished. Have eaten nothing since the Hostess Twinkie I bought at the 7-Eleven this morning. I'm down to my last dollar and counting. I feel like crying—no, I am crying, crumbling at the thought of hot chocolate and donuts on a rainy Friday night watching the Tonight Show in the bean bag chair in the step-down family room. My father's voice suddenly not so terrible. My mother in the kitchen in her big flowered dress, the fat on her upper arms shaking as she magically converts little mounds of dough into cinnamon-frosted sweet rolls just for me. I close my eyes and can almost smell them baking. Mom? Momma?

And then my voice travels elsewhere, a notch higher. Father in Heaven? Father? I am on the verge when a car, a blue VW bug, comes to my rescue. There's a woman inside who reminds me of someone. She leans across the passenger seat, rolls down the window and smiles. "It's awfully late to be hitching. You want to come to my place and crash?" I know her face: black pageboy hair and dimples like little parenthetical smiles. She is thirty-five, maybe a little younger, and she is beckoning me in the voice of my mother: Come.

She smiles again. At that instant she is an angel. "Get in," she says.

But I balk. Why? Something, a hidden hand tugging at my denim flaps. Then I do the unbelievable. "No thanks," I say. "I think I'll keep on truckin'."

She smiles. Flashes her wonderful teeth. "Okay!" and as her VW puttters down the road, I'm thinking, wondering, chastising: Susan, what on earth have you done? Manna from heaven and you toss it to the dogs! The angel of deliverance and you wave her on!

And just about that time the rain starts. The clouds rip open and dump on me. Punishment, I'm thinking, God's wrath for rejecting his sweet messenger.

I take off my Levi jacket, put it over my head, and crouch down over

my duffel bag, praying for the end of the world or sunrise, whichever comes first.

Forty-five minutes later she is back: the angel in the blue VW.

"Looks like you still haven't gotten a ride."

I shake my head. I think I even smile, wishing my dimples were half as charming as hers.

"Wanna crash?"

I smile again, reach for my duffel bag.

We drive a mile or so to her apartment where she gives me dry clothing, a pair of soft flannel pajamas delicately spotted with little pink flowers, and tosses my wet things into her dryer.

"Hungry?"

I nod.

She warms up a bowl of chicken noodle soup, sets Saltine crackers on a plate, pours me a jumbo glass of orange juice. Then apologizes for her lack of victuals—her word—and winks. "Shopping day tomorrow."

The simple meal is like a post-fast feast. I indulge ravenously as she smiles, talks. She's a teacher at the community college. History. I note the posters on her living room wall: Tatanka Yotanka and other warrior chiefs. The warm soup and crackers swell in my belly like a beautiful birth. A hide-a-bed, the sheets turned down, awaits me. Does heaven come any closer than this?

She wants to know a little about me, so I tell her. "You're welcome to stay," she says. "For as long as you like." She smiles, looks at my cupped hands. "More soup?"

I shake my head. "No thanks. It was great!"

"I want to tell you something," she says, and the smile is still there but something has shifted in her voice. Her hand reaches across the table and gently, tenderly, clasps mine. It is the first touch of love I have acknowledged in a long, long time, and it frightens me. "I don't want you to be afraid," she says. "Are you afraid?"

I shake my head. Simply. Dumbly. She looks nervous which makes me nervous. What she says and what I think I hear her saying get all jumbled. It is something about who she is, what I am, what we all are, and why.

The next morning she drives me to the freeway on-ramp, northbound. She presses a five dollar bill into my hand and motions to the Bob's Big Boy across the street. "Good luck! I'd join you, but I've got to work." She smiles her lovely smile, but it is marred by a sadness: the dimples are little frowns.

"The iron rod?" Troy looks at me with beetled brows. "The scriptures?"

"Yes! Yes! The scriptures! And how do the scriptures help us? Mark?"

He lifts his chin from his doubled fists; color floods back into his knuckled cheeks. "It's the word of God," he says.

Typical. Cautious. I can barely hide my disappointment. "Kim?"

Uncrossing her legs, a half yawn. "They can help you solve problems."

"Okay. Like what kinds of problems?" I gaze across the street at the singled rooftops soaring into the mountain skies. Rim of the world view, an island jutting above the sea of evergreen. Kim's home, Susan's, Troy's, Paul's just down the street. Mormon Hill.

She replies, a bewildered beauty. "What kinds?"

"Yes. What kinds?"

"Well . . ." That voice, that Valley Girl smile, so many light years away.

Midnight again. Stuck again, stuck in Marysville at midnight. Again. I have just walked under the railroad crossing to the outskirts when I hear voices, loud voices singing dirty white girl songs. And then I'm running, running for my life. Poppa! Poppa! I'm a little girl being chased by the Gordons' German shepherd. It's jumping all over me, biting my pony tail, tugging, tearing. Poppa! Poppa, help me! My father is charging across the street with no shirt on and half his face lathered with shaving cream. He scoops me up in his arms and turns his back on the animal who keeps snarling and biting and chewing and tearing all the way back across the street and into the house, and when he puts me down, his back looks like hamburger and I'm crying, Oh Poppa, Poppa, Poppa! But his hand is stroking my head as he whispers in my ear, "It's all right, baby. It's okay now."

I hear their voices growing louder, filthier, and I'm running scared. There is nothing but a black sea in front of me, Outer Darkness. I stop. Turn. I count six of them, running. Dear God, Father . . .

Then headlights burst through the tunnel like a sunrise, the sun I pray for every night now. I leap up and wave my thumb pleadingly. Zoom! Quick draft. Brrrr! Shoot! Damn! Then brake lights, a double blood grin backing up to me.

It is another angel, except he's black this time. A big young black man and his beautiful girlfriend with a long Nefertiti neck and a multi-colored tunic and jewels like an African queen. Maybe they're just married because a ring is sparkling on her fingers and his hand is on her chocolate thigh and both of them are wearing that love-sick look that prompts acts of compassion.

"You are one lucky Josephina!" he says. "Where you headin' to?" His voice is deep and sweet like molasses.

"Paradise!" I answer. It is the spot on the road map where my finger landed this morning when I quite literally closed my eyes and took a blind stab.

"Say what? Hey, sister, we're *all* going to Paradise eventually, but where you headin' for the here and *now*?"

"Paradise."

I slam the lesson manual shut. "Okay, how many of you actually read the scriptures?"

Troy's hand goes right up, then, tentatively, Becky Lynn's. But I'm losing them. Kim and Susan are gazing off again, looking for red convertibles. Mark is picking a scab on his Popeye forearms.

"What about you, Misty?"

She looks up. Flicks grass, nods.

"Okay, let me tell you something. When I was your age . . ." I can tell by the weary revolutions of their eyes they have heard this cross-generational sermon a thousand times too often. I re-open the manual only to find a list of points for helping students read the scriptures: Attitude, Motivation, Fasting, Prayer.

All right then. To the quick. "Look," I say, tossing the manual on the grass. "Listen. I did some things when I was young, way back in the Stone Age. Things I'm not very proud of. I left home, you know. I wandered for a while." Misty looks up and shakes her head with a condescending smirk. "I've slept in graveyards, in the back of pickups." They're unimpressed. "I've cleaned outhouses and shoveled manure for a meal. I've been places and seen things you can't even begin to imagine."

Kim's and Susan's eyes have returned to my general orbit. Mark folds his muscular forearms. I need something now, something to knock that complacent smirk off of Misty's face. "I've been a beggar, a thief." Yawn. "I've kissed Death with a two-by-four!" My voice is growing louder, more strident. I hate them for making me do this. I love them for making me do this. "I've been to hell and back." Nothing. "I'm a murderer. A butcher. One day I went and killed the little life inside of me."

There is absolute silence. I think you can hear the gnats mating. Every pair of eyes, including Misty's, are upon me. Is this speaking more their language?

"I've been to hell," I say. "Believe me." My God, what have I done? They are waiting, all of them, and there is no turning back now. So I tell them a little about it. Not everything. Not yet. I do not tell them where the words come from or how you put them together: that is a gift you must find and refine on your own. Nor do I tell them how, if you are good at it, you can string out a ride as Scheherazade stretched out her life one thousand and one nights; nor how, if you are exceptionally blessed, one night the fat caliph will tell you to stay, and you will shrug and say, I'll think about it, but your first moment alone you will close your eyes, clasp your hands, and whisper to whatever version of God you happen to be addressing at the moment: "Home. Finally at last I'm home."

They listen, shifting uncomfortably in their chairs, except for Misty who continues to feign indifference amidst the dandelions. The wind through the pines sounds like pressing a seashell to your ear: oceanic sighs. More

chills. The clouds have darkened like a fire-blackened aftermath. Crematorium skies.

"You drift, you wander. You're a ship without a rudder. Walking in darkness at midday. And it's no fun. Just like the scripture says: wickedness was never happiness. Never."

It smells like rain, the pavement does. The acrid asphalt of a thousand summers, a thousand freeway on-ramps. I close my eyes and feel the old magic welling up again. "You drift, you wander. One, two, three years . . . and then one day you come back. You've been drifting from Mexico to Canada and back, and tonight you're in a cantina on a beach somewhere south of Ensenada. It's just a big shack, really, stinking of sweat and beer. The walls are covered with old black-and-white photographs of bullfighters in action—colorless effigies pressed onto paper. There are two or three natives at the bar, but mostly cocky young Americans with hair to their shoulders and cutoff jeans, rocking mockingly to the trumpets blaring from the juke box. Two pot-bellied fishermen sit at a table like *papier mâché* Hemingways emptying bottles of Tecate. They look like permanent fixtures, as permanent as the prickly pear dotting the Baja hillsides and the clump of red chilies on the wall. So does the woman with them. She's easily fifty but still wears her hair long and straight, like broom bristles. An old broom, dirty bristles. She pinches a cigarette in one hand and fondles her glass with the other, sipping socially. Her skin looks as stiff and cracked as the leather strips holding her chair together. Her shoulders are bare and blighted with freckles and moles, and when she smiles, there is a conspicuous space between her front teeth. You watch as she reaches across the table, grips the bigger man's hand, and appears to say, Please? You try not to stare. But when you look into your glass and see her face smiling up at you, it's a kind of revelation. You see your future in a one-inch well of amber fluid. Cheap Mexican beer.

"You get up. You would excuse yourself except there's no longer anyone to offer excuses to. You walk along the beach, past carousing crowds of half-strangers and psychedelic vans, until you're sitting alone on the rocky cliffs overlooking La Bufadora, 'The Blowhole.' You watch the black Pacific sliding in and sneaking up under the rocky lip and then exploding skyward through the little mouth like Old Faithful, throwing silver foam to the stars.

"You close your eyes and listen to the thunder of the sea. What you hear is the crash of bottles and the drunken laughter that started to die two months ago but ended totally yesterday when he led you by the hand into the little clinic as if you were a criminal or a spy, something to be hushed up and hidden away. The office was spotlessly sterile, yet it felt like you were underground, in a sewer, and the doctor, no matter how young, how tall, how clean and handsome in his pure white smock, is forever old and

gnarled in your mind. The drops of sweat cling like maggots to his black mustache as he whispers to you in a language you only half understand, as he reaches for the silver instrument with which he proceeds to pick the life out of you, except it feels more like a little vacuum sucking your insides out until there's nothing left up there but a big black void that no matter how much you fast how much you pray how much you eat how much you love how much true and false stuff you shove up there, it's always forever after empty. Void.

"And then you hear him laughing somewhere amidst the bonfires. So you stop a moment. You look up at the stars again and begin counting: a million trillion zillion, each one its own little heartbeat, an ancestral eye winking back at you. And in a flash it all comes back: the twinkling of an eye, the sands of the seashore, the myriad stars of Abraham. And you're thinking, wondering: Is this my fate, my destiny? To wander like the prodigal son, wallowing in pig slime for the next ten years until my pride finally breaks and I go hobbling home, tail between my legs? What tail? What legs? How else do you chart your way through all the roiling ocean broth? God and his guardian angels gazing down through binoculars, watching for fallen sparrows . . ."

I open my eyes and they are still with me, even Misty, listening in the manner of the Star A children and my own little girls, with perfect trust and understanding. I'm a little incredulous on all accounts, and I almost tell them so.

"I've never shared this with anyone before, not even my husband. It just never seemed right. I've been saving it, I guess, for just the right moment. Maybe I didn't want to throw my pearls to the swine. No. I don't mean that exactly. Sacred. It was too sacred to share with just anybody, anytime."

And there's silence again. The wind, peripheral traffic, the distant moan of the afternoon train passing through town. A few shafts of sunlight have pierced through the clouds like tiny spotlights.

"What . . ." Misty puts her fist to her mouth, clears her throat. "What happened? After that . . ."

I smile, cup my hands, and close my eyes again. "Two years later you're in a village in the highlands of Ecuador where the people wear rags and live in plank shacks on stilts over a sea of green sewage. Striding along in your clean white blouse and dark skirt, you are a giant, Gulliver in Lilliput. You carry your books and give candy to the children who wear almost nothing yet giggle as if they are being perpetually tickled, and you are humbled and amazed. Never amidst the swimming pools and split-level palaces of the San Fernando Valley have you witnessed such pure and spontaneous joy. Every home you enter reeks from underneath but you are

offered the last tortillas in the house and you must accept or it is a sin in their humble eyes: their sin.

"You are a personal favorite of the *Hermana Consuela* who is not much older than you but has already borne six children in as many years and is very close to her seventh. One day she says to you, '*Hermana*, will you deliver my baby?' You try to explain that you are not a doctor. 'But,' she protests in her bewildered Spanish, 'you have been to school!' Again you try to explain. She laughs. 'So what? You still know more than the doctors here!' And then you both laugh: there are no doctors in the village.

"Your next trip to the city you buy a do-it-yourself medical manual and study for the big day which comes two weeks later. And six months after that *Hermana* is back with her baby boy in a bundle. You smile and tell her, 'No, no. No need to bless him twice. The Elders have already given him a name and a blessing . . .' But she shakes her head sadly and hands you the bundle and you can feel it already growing cold in your arms.

"There is no time for fasting or prayer or asterisks or excuses. The faith in the *Hermana's* caramel eyes forbids it. '*Por favor*,' she pleads. 'Heal my baby.'

"The Elders are gone and there is not time anyway so you put your hands on the baby's head and to the shock and amazement of your senior companion, Sister Wilder from Laramie, Wyoming, you state, boldly and without apology, '*Juan Ramon Consuela*, in the name of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Priesthood . . .' And by the time you are saying Amen you can feel the little bundle warming up like an electric blanket, and the *Hermana's* arms are around you, and Sister Wilder is shaking her head, maybe wondering what she will tell the mission president, if anything, but smiling as well as tears stream down her cheeks. And you . . . Well, then you know. You know and you can never ever deny it without . . . not without . . ."

I open my eyes to a now anticipated silence. I eye each of them individually, holding Misty's blue eyes a few moments longer. "Because sometimes," I say, "the end justifies the means. Just sometimes it does. I can't tell you when exactly. You have to listen . . . here." I press my fingertips to my chest. "But you can't do what I did. You've got to be better than that, better than your parents even. You've been sent to earth at a special time, for a special purpose. And you have to prepare now, you have to be ready. Because you just never know. You just never . . ."

And I had them. They were mine.