

Pioneers

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MY WIFE, FREIDA, COULD HAVE WORKED FOR Cecil B. DeMille or Steven Spielberg, given her cast-of-thousands knack for the spectacular. Take tonight, for instance. In the name of fellowshipping, and to beef up our numbers, she's invited two other families to join us in our weekly Family Home Evening activity. She's also borrowed a life-size model handcart from the Millets, made ten trail signs (wooden, authentic, hand-carved), and staked them out at odd intervals along a bumpy dirt-bike trail behind Witherspoon Park: NAUVOO, MISSISSIPPI RIVER, COUNCIL BLUFFS ...

Sixteen of us, ages five to fifty, have gathered around the first trail sign, reluctant teenagers in Teva sandals and Oakley sunglasses, the younger children in costume: blue jeans, straw cowboy hats, paper bonnets, long loose cotton dresses to the ankles. Big, blue-eyed blondes, the seven Boyak girls look like a tribe of Swedish immigrants, while the Huntingtons bear the swarthy genes of the south. We (the Tolmans) are a 50-50 mix.

Following an opening song and prayer, Freida introduces tonight's lesson, "Our Pioneer Heritage," and objective: on this balmy midsummer night, we will take turns, by family, pushing and pulling the Millets' handcart from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley, stopping at each trail sign to read the note Freida has diligently thumbtacked to it.

While Freida fields questions from the children ("Is it a race?" "No." "Do we get a prize?" "Maybe."), my eyes and thoughts drift south to the grassy playing field where a middle-aged man in a tie-dyed t-shirt is chasing two mop-haired boys around a fortress of wooden logs and rope nets, growling like the cowardly lion of Oz. Their happy shrieks are echoes from a time not long ago when I too pursued my son around the jungle gym: "I'm the Hot Lava Monster! The Hot Lava Monster! Grrrrrr!"

"Hey, Dad!"

Andrew motions for me to join him at the front of the handcart, an unfinished plywood box with a wagon wheel on either side. "Come on! We'll be the pullers. Mom can be the pusher!"

Pusher? This unwitting allusion to my 1960s youth elicits an unexpected grin as I step over the handle, resting on the dirt, and position myself beside my son. The cart and its load are laughingly light by pioneer standards, yet the handle, a two-inch thick pine dowel, feels like lead in my hands. Gripping it, my son innocently taunts me with one of my own aphorisms: "Come on, Dad! Be a help, not a hurt!"

Freida hollers from the rear: "Hey, let's get this show on the road!"

Straight ahead, the sun is slowly being sucked under the hilly horizon. Framed in Rubenesque clouds, it's a gaudy image, idolatrously surreal, like the Golden Calf caught in quicksand. From its fiery center, a steamy pink residue floats towards the blue-gray mounds amassing overhead. The swollen sky looks and smells like rain. I estimate thirty minutes before the first drops. Silently I pray for a swift, hard downpour that will chase us under the ramada and rescue me from tonight's ordeal.

We drag the handcart along the narrow trail, the Boyaks and Huntingtons sauntering alongside us in the surrounding weeds and wild flowers, chatting innocuously. I wear a smile throughout, even when the Boyak girls break into song, like the Von Trapp family: "Put your shoulder to the wheel push a-lo-ong! Do your duty with a heart full of so-ong! We all have work! Let no one shirk!"

Pausing at the second trail sign, MISSISSIPPI RIVER, Freida gazes north where a jet plane is angling above the silver peaks, red, white, and blue lights winking on its wings like patriotic stars. Interlacing her fingers behind her neck, with a quick but disciplined motion she lifts her hair up, deftly withdrawing her hands so that the strawberry blond coils settle gently, like soft little springs, on her shoulders. This motion, which in words sounds long and calculated, takes a fraction of a second and seems as natural and routine to her as taking a breath of air.

We relinquish the handcart to the Boyaks. Andrew snatches the envelope thumbtacked to the wooden sign and pretends to read: "Bad water. Half your party gets dysentery and croaks." He grips his throat, gagging, and flings himself back-flat onto the dirt, his skinny bare legs issuing a few spasmodic kicks, like a cartoon death. His clownish antics have not escaped the obsidian eyes of Connie Huntington, a lithe little gymnast who inherited her father's poker face and her mother's bewitching black hair. Noticing her noticing him, Andrew claps his hand over his mouth in mock horror and adds a couple kicks for an encore. Freida casts him the Evil Eye, momentarily throwing ice on his antics, and then proceeds to read the true contents of the envelope, the first of several excerpts she has photocopied from the pioneer journals of her ancestors:

Leaving New York, we went by train and boat to Iowa City and after a short delay, to one of the worst journeys that was ever recorded. We were light hearted and worked with zeal preparing our hand carts. Because of the great demand for carts of

the previous companies, the wheels were made of green material. We met morning and evenings for devotional exercises. On one of these occasions Brother Levi Savage, who was returning from a mission, spoke and portrayed the intense sufferings the saints would have to endure if we started so late in the season to cross the plains, the thoughts of which made him cry like a child. Captain Willie sternly rebuked him for such a speech. He was afraid it would dishearten the saints, and told us that if we would be faithful and do as he told us winter would be turned to summer. But subsequent events proved Elder Savage was correct ...

As Freida's voice summons up spirits from the dust, I begin rewriting in my mind procrastinated passages from my personal history:

I met Freida at a Spring Singles Dance. I'd just turned forty, but she was six years from crossing that middle-age milestone that seems to stand up and scream with quiet desperation: LAST CHANCE! (for temple marriage, eternal family, exaltation, et cetera). Ironically, I'd resigned myself to Celestial Singlehood, which is to say I was no longer looking for a mate, eternal or otherwise, only occasional companionship to share a movie, a concert, a meal, an evening of TV and microwave popcorn.

I'd been coaxed to that evening's function by a well-intentioned friend who introduced me to Freida (who looked as unenthusiastic as I felt). Commiserating over the punch bowl, we soon discovered we'd both planned a backpacking trip into the Grand Canyon over Memorial Day weekend. "Small world!" I proclaimed, and when she smiled her teeth sparkled as if half the Milky Way had taken up residence there. By the time a crew of resurrected Credence Clearwater wannabes had finished a tortuously long rendition of "Susie Q," we agreed to hike the Grand Canyon together.

Unchaperoned? Well, why not? We were both mature adults, temple-endowed, returned missionaries. We shared the same code of ethics and virtue. Who needed a chaperon?

Our only child was conceived in a moment of ecstatic sin in a dome tent on a sandy bank at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, as a chorus of frogs sang approvingly in the faint trickle known as Monument Creek. Afterwards, lying together on my sleeping bag, her head on my chest, I asked the inevitable:

"Was that your first time?"

"Could you tell?"

"I wouldn't know."

She gave my arm a gentle squeeze. "I love you," she whispered, and we dozed off like that.

We were married civilly that week, and eternally shortly after, following the requisite channels of sackcloth and ashes. An insightful bishop kindly spared us the humiliation of public confession and abbreviated the standard year's probation prior to a temple sealing.

Colleen and her seven daughters maneuver the handcart towards Council Bluffs. Bradley Boyak nudges me in the ribs. "See? That's why you need ... more kids!" I laugh, nod. Is that right? No kidding? Like my son the thespian, I too am playacting, but in an altogether different manner. I seriously wonder if I'll be able to complete this abbreviated journey to the Promised Land. Gazing down the dirt trail that gradually wraps around the northern rim of the park, I find it hard, near impossible, to believe that only two years ago I finished first in my age category in our local Mountain Man Triathlon: a mile swim across Emerald Lake, thirty-two miles on bicycle around the lake's paved perimeter, and a four-mile run up Jackson Mesa and back.

Up ahead Billy Huntington, sporting a thick, dark mop spilling over shaved sidewalls, is flirting with the oldest Boyak girl, a double-braided Brunnhilda wearing a too-tight t-shirt that proclaims, rather ironically: ABSTINENCE: I'M WORTH IT! Freida is strolling alongside Gary Huntington, a big, burly accountant with a sailboat, a palatial home on the golf course, and a brand new head of hair, partly subsidized by a hefty life insurance windfall: a little over a year ago he lost Cheryl to a fast-acting cancer that sneaked into her pancreas and devoured it termite-like in a month.

Freida's arms are folded just below her chest, so that it appears as if they are hoisting up her breasts, supporting them like shelves. They look especially full tonight, milk or love-laden, thanks to the tight cut and fit of the flimsy cotton fabric. Her suntanned hand lights on Gary's shoulder, gently as a bird, and slides smoothly down the length of his arm. It's an innocent gesture, as simple and spontaneous as a little girl's smile, and she has no idea how deeply it wounds me.

Wedging myself between them, I ask Gary if he's been to the lake lately? When he asks me if I've lost weight, I laugh, patting my belly. "I think I've gained a little, actually." Call this a pink lie: survival. Freida nods reassuringly. "Oh, he has. He really has."

When I tell Gary it looks as if he's lost some, he beams proudly: "Ten pounds!"

"Watch that Sizzler salad bar or you'll start looking like me!" Bradley Boyak says, sneaking up behind us.

"Salad bar nothing!" Colleen cuts in. "Try Dairy Queen Blizzards!"

Everyone laughs but Freida.

At Council Bluffs we sing the first verse of "Come, Come Ye Saints." Cynthia Boyak reads the note tacked to the trail marker:

We left Iowa City on the 15th of July 1856, in what is known as The Captain Willie Handcart Company. This Company consisted of 500 souls, 120 handcarts, 5 wagons, 24 oxen, and 45 beef cattle. We were happy in the thought that we were going to Zion, and the 100 miles all went well, the scenery being beautiful and game

being plentiful, and the spirit of joy reigned in these Camps of Israel. However, on the 4th of September, our cattle were run off by a band of Indians. This proved to be a great calamity.

I'm not superstitious by nature, especially when it concerns religion. I prefer to picture God as a benevolent, loving father rather than the Old Testament vindicator of hellfire and fury. However, I'm no revisionist whitewasher either. God will temper justice with mercy, but justice will be wrought, sometimes down to the seventh generation.

Consequently, from the moment I learned Freida was expecting, I begged Heavenly Father not to punish us as he had David and Bathsheba, delivering up a dead child. "Do anything you want to me," I pleaded, "but not Freida, not the baby."

Nine months I waited on pins and needles, all the time hiding my anxiety from my wife, assuring her that everything would be fine, just fine, although in my dreams I was forewarned of a troglodyte-looking creature as my solitary heir. In the delivery room, when the baby's head crowned, I rushed forward to count fingers, toes, eyes, ears. Ten, ten, two, two. Perfect! Our child was a perfectly beautiful blue-eyed baby boy.

I treasure that moment of delivery, as I do the moment of conception and all of the good things leading up to it. And if this is the price I have to pay *ex post facto* for Andrew's unblemished birth, then I've got no complaints. God may work in mysterious ways, but I don't believe that he operates in ledger-book fashion—not if the Atonement is a bottomless pit that no amount of sin and misgiving can overflow. I don't believe that my present condition is the result of past transgressions or payback for private covenants years ago. And that's exactly what makes this whole thing so damn difficult.

Freida continues talking to Gary Huntington, talking right through me. She doesn't do this to be rude or to inflict pain. That's just Freida.

"Gary," I say, pointing to the handcart. "You're up!"

Gary calls to his two teenage boys, who reluctantly surround the handcart, mumbling and murmuring in the manner of the two original Lamanites. They quickly get into the spirit of the occasion, however, trotting side by side humming the *Bonanza* theme.

Bradley Boyak hitches his blue jeans a little higher on his bullfrog belly and invites me to join him and Gary for a racket ball game. "You ever played racket ball?" No, but I'd sure like to. Tonight? Oh, no, not tonight. Tonight I have to ...

I invent an excuse: grade papers, mend the garden hose, fix a leaky faucet, build a garage, pole vault over Mt. Rushmore. Anything.

Bradley nods. Maybe some other time then.

Sure. Yes. Please. By all means. I'd really like to.

Colleen floats up beside me like a big Hawaiian queen in her multi-colored muumuu and wraps a motherly arm around my bony shoulders: "Brian, are you cold?" Caught off guard, I almost topple over. "A bit," I reply. This is a blue lie: the long-sleeved shirt and baggy pants are intended to conceal the hasty disappearance of my flesh. The extra t-shirt underneath adds false bulk. I smile extra big, extra wide, even as the Invisible Agent, my Unholy Ghost, gives the corkscrew in my gut another sadistic twist.

Everything hurts now. I bruise like a banana.

I remind myself to walk, laugh, smile. Whatever happens, I absolutely must smile. Last night, during what I'd thought was a private moment, Andrew sneaked into my bedroom and caught me hunched over in the rattan chair. "Dad?" When I looked up, his face grew small and sad, like a balloon losing air. He was wearing his new baseball glove on his left hand, holding a ball in the right. He must have heard me groan.

"Don't you want to play catch?"

"No no—it's not that. Of course I want to play catch. I always want to play. It's just that—bad day, Andy. I got a little bad news is all."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

When I got in bed later that night, I found his teddy bear, Snuggles, propped up against the headboard. A half-joke. Warm fuzzy comfort.

Another time it was Freida. Late one night she crawled out of bed and shuffled down the hall and into the kitchen. An hour passed before she returned.

"You okay?" I whispered.

My iron-willed wife began sobbing in her pillow. I turned over, groping for her face in the dark, framing it gently with my hands, kissing her tenderly. "Hey, what's wrong? What's the matter, sweetie?"

"I'm worried," she sniffled.

"Worried? What about?" I asked

"You!" she barked angrily.

I tried to laugh it off. "Me? You don't need to worry about—"

"I heard you mumbling—then you got up—all the weight you've been losing—the doctors—"

"I'm fine," I insisted. "I got up to pee, that's all. You didn't want me to pee in the bed, did you?"

She laughed—a small, cautious laugh. Over and over I reassured her, kissing her cheeks, her chin, her eyelids, everything except her potent lips: I'm fine, fine, feeling better, stronger every day.

I curled up behind her, my front to her back, and kissed the nape of her neck. Several minutes passed before she reached back, grasped my hand, and placed it gently on her belly, her fingers silently counting mine in the dark.

The next morning we joked about it, embarrassed, self-conscious, uncertain what to do or say.

"I mean, you wake up in the middle of the night and suddenly you say to yourself, 'Now what's *really* important?'"

"Don't kid yourself," I said. "You were just trying to seduce me."

"You wish!" she said, and her smile caught momentarily, like a bad lock, as she read my mind: you're right. And: she's right. Intimate little jokes that were no longer funny.

Dusk has buried the last bit of sun, and the pine tree silhouette fringing the horizon has turned to midnight lace. We plod on past a solitary home, a humble crackerbox where fruit trees spill over a chainlink fence and a wiry teenager, naked from the waist up, sits on a tree stump finger picking a steel string guitar. Drawn by some primordial magnet he doesn't comprehend, my son has drifted to within three feet of Connie Huntington. Does he have any idea his gait is miming hers exactly, stride for stride?

Gaining the Missouri River, we take over again, Andrew jockeying his way to the rear. "Boys in back, girls in front!"

Billy Boyak reads excerpt number three:

Now the weather was getting cold, rations short and work hard and sister Eliza became weaker with the cold and hunger each day. One of those cold bleak days her life of hardship ended and she passed away and was buried along the trail. With hope and courage, we joined the company and the little ones trudged along day after day, until their feet would bleed and yet I was unable to assist them, only with encouraging words. (Many times I wrapped a blanket around them while I dried their frozen clothing by the fire.) I remember well the last time we crossed the Platte River. It was almost sundown when I got to camp. My clothes were frozen so that I could scarcely move. I stood by the fire with a blanket around me while mother dried my clothes by the fire. She often said she would be the happiest woman alive if she could reach Zion with all her children.

Sometimes the pain is almost unbearable, like the weekend Freida took Andrew to a soccer tournament in Albuquerque, while I stayed home, ostensibly with a strained back. Saturday morning Jim Reynolds, an old running buddy, stopped by to see how I was doing. He had no idea the spasm in my spine was nothing compared to the rodents chewing up my insides.

I looked like hell: baggy sweat pants, baggy sweater, ski cap, whiskers dripping from my chin. I could barely make it from the sofa to answer the front door. Jim tried to appear oblivious, but he couldn't miss the stains on the floor and the dirty dishes stacked in the sink.

We talked. When's Freida coming home? Tuesday. You okay for

food? She left a two-year's supply of frozen dinners. Still going to work? In body, not spirit.

Then I began shaking uncontrollably, hot and cold needles streaking and freaking up and down my body everywhere, and just as suddenly I was itching all over, clawing my arms, chest, legs, my stockinged feet.

Jim looked worried, but I told him I was okay, just a little chilled. He said, "Hey, I've got just the thing! Let's get you over to the Athletic Club and put you in the Jacuzzi. That'll warm you up real good!"

It sounded like a good idea, but it backfired. The instant I slipped into the hot, bubbling water, my eyes blackened, my body melted, and I went under. Jim pulled me out, helped me to the concession stand, and bought me a 7-Up, thinking that maybe I needed a sugar fix. He had to carry me in his arms, like I was a baby or his bride, into his Land Cruiser where I vomited over and over until there was nothing left inside me to spew out. Curled up in his front seat, dry heaving, I told Jim I wanted to die. It was the first time I'd admitted it to anyone.

Then he started bad-mouthing Freida. "She should be here, nursing you, not gallivanting off to Albuquerque." But I told him no, stop, shut up. Just shut up, please. You don't know what you're talking about. You mean well but you don't understand. I made him promise not to repeat what I'd said to anyone. "You're my best friend, Jim. I have to count on you." That was a yellow lie: Freida's my best friend. Was.

Jim said okay, have it your way, but I looked like a clock slowly winding down. He said I looked like Death eating a cracker.

Fortunately, it's a short walk to the next trail marker, and I let Andrew and Freida do most of the work up front. Bradley Boyak walks alongside, enthusiastically informing me that there really wasn't all that much game on the plains until the farmers came and started growing crops. "Well, buffalo maybe, sure, but as far as the other ..."

I finger the plastic vial in my pants pocket, debating whether to pop the lid and surreptitiously slip one of the turquoise blue capsules into my mouth. If I do, within thirty minutes, the dagger will be withdrawn from my gut, leaving only a residual ache and sting for the next four to five hours, but my body and brain will close up shop, and I'll be a walking zombie for the rest of the night. That's the tradeoff, as Dr. Clark likes to call it.

Each blue capsule is a last temptation, a micro dose of suicide, which is why I try to hold off until bedtime. Usually.

"Hey, loser!"

It's Andrew, reminding me that I'm falling behind again. I release the vial and mentally slap the offending hand, as if it were a disobedient child's. Bradley reads the excerpt at Winter Quarters:

One night when we were to go to bed hungry, Sister Rowley got two very hard sea biscuits, that were left from the Sea Voyage. She put the biscuits in their frying pan and covered them with water, and placed them on the fire to heat. She then asked our Father in Heaven to bless them, that there may be sufficient amount to feed our hungry children. When she took the lid off, we were all happy to see the pan full of food. We all thanked our kind Father in Heaven for such a wonderful blessing.

The second hardest part will be trying to explain to my son something I don't understand myself. First, there were the doctors, a whole slew of specialists. We held a family fast, then a ward fast. I've received three priesthood blessings. After the first one, administered by Jim Reynolds, Andrew glowed with innocent optimism.

"You're going to be all better now, right, Dad?"

I glanced at Freida whose smile looked as if it were being held up by guy wires.

"God willing," I said.

My son's instant grin confirmed what was given in his mind, for what reason could God, who is perfectly good, possibly have for not healing his ailing father, a righteous priesthood holder, a high councilor, and, of course, his one and only dad?

Blessings two and three were administered in more exclusive company, minus Andrew.

I keep postponing that inevitable talk, not because I'm secretly hoping for a miracle cure, but because once I state the obvious, things will never be the same in our home again. They are different enough now, but at least we maintain a charade of normalcy. And I want to preserve that for as long as possible. In the meantime I mentally rehearse the script, hoping that when the moment arrives, Andrew will know his lines better than I know mine.

As we cross the Platte River, a little irrigation ditch that even the smallest in our pioneer party can leap with a single bound, Bradley hands out sticks of beef jerky. "Here, have some pioneer snack!" I thank him and take a giant bite, chewing voraciously, although it, like everything else I put in my mouth now, tastes fecal and raises havoc within. When I think no one is looking, I spit it out like a wad of tobacco. But I'm too slow on the take, and one of the Boyak girls catches me. She kindly averts her eyes, embarrassed for me, and I avert mine.

Fort Laramie is a boulder at the top of a ridiculously gentle rise that sucks and squeezes the oxygen from my lungs. By the time I reach the summit, I'm panting like an asthmatic. Breathing is futile, like trying to blow up a balloon with a hole in it. I smile at everyone: Freida, Andrew, Gary, Bradley, Colleen ... "Nice scenery," I gasp, motioning to a weedy area where thistles with fat purple bulbs and cheap yellow flowers bloom.

Eying me nervously, Gary reads the note:

We were delayed at times on account of our handcarts becoming rickety, having been made of green timber. We would have to wrap them with rawhide, saved from the animals that had died or been killed for beef. The hide was cut into strips, and these were used to wrap the rim of the wheels when the tires became loose. The end of a strip was fastened to the felly by means of a small nail to hold it in place. As the weather became cooler with more storms, the tires tightened up, and the hide strips wore through and the pieces were left hanging to the wheels. I remember pulling some of these pieces off and roasting the hair off and eating them.

I'm still trying to comprehend the lessons I'm supposed to learn from this. Empathy for the chronic sufferers of the world? Gratitude for the little pleasures in life, like enjoying a sunset meal with my family? Pride gone before the fall? Or is this a crash test of my spiritual mettle?

I search the scriptures daily for comfort and relief: If I walk into the very jaws of Hell, fret not, for you have trod a thousand miles in my moccasins. Am I greater than thee? You will give me no trial or temptation greater than I can bear ... There must be opposition ... Those you love, you chasten ... (Then, Sir, love me a little less, please.)

Or are you reducing me to a cross for someone else to carry? Is this Freida's trial too? Unconditional love, patience, long-suffering? But why instruct her at my expense, or vice versa? Is this your way of pushing the envelope? Putting our feet to the refiner's fire? But why burden us both? And why create crosses? Hasn't the planet got enough to go around already? All the screaming orphans! You know I really think sometimes this would be a whole helluva lot easier if I were suffering frostbite and cholera to build the New Jerusalem. At least I could go down swinging, and leave some kind of legacy behind. Something besides stained sheets and a bottle of pain killers. Because right now I'm not feeling one bit noble or courageous, in case you haven't noticed. Right now I'm feeling weak, tired, humiliated, degraded, ashamed, abandoned, used up, worn out, cast off, and pretty pissed off at life, death, the universe, and just about everything in it!

Do you, Richard Tolman, comprehend the fabric of eternity?

I know that line! I KNOW ALL OF THAT! Doing a job on Job. Curse God and die. Thy ways aren't my ways. You see the big picture, I'm living in the lowly here and now. To you it's the twinkling of an eye; for me every day's hell freezing over and thawing out again. I hate this! Do you know what it's like—of course you do! You know everything! Then tell me, how do you do this graciously? How do you do it without being a pain in everyone's butt including my own? How do you—oh, I know. I know I know I know I know I know. But, Father, I wanted to grow old with her, not without her.

It's our turn again, already, to drag the handcart. "Come on, Dad!" Andrew hollers, grabbing me by the hand. "Let's get in back! Let's be pushers again!"

Yes. Let's. And thank God it's downhill. This quarter-mile trek has exhausted me. I feel, and probably look, a hundred years old. I'm counting the minutes until I can swallow that sweet blue capsule that will mercifully deliver me to another time and place, where I inhabit a new and glorified body that can outrun, outjump, outbike, outswim, outlove anything remotely resembling what I've turned into. On the outer edge of the park, healthy young couples are swatting tennis balls like speeding comets inside a chain link cage. The clouds are big black boxing gloves colliding in slow motion as lightning pulsates ominously on the mountain. Freida begins singing in her soft, haunting alto: "Come, come, ye saints, no toil nor labor fear ..."

By the time we reach Independence Rock, a slightly bigger boulder than Fort Laramie, my body is numb but nauseated, the double ache you feel when the novocaine wears off. I turn away from the group, trying to gather myself and clear my eyes, which are blurring around the edges, like windows frosting up in winter. I resist the pending blindness, nagged by an irrational fear that if my eyes shut now, they may never reopen. Emily Boyak reads:

On the 12th of October, Captain Willie was forced to cut our rations again, this time to 10 ounces for men, 9 for women, 6 for children and 3 for infants. Leaving the Platte River, we soon came to more hilly country. We dragged along, growing weaker every day with our provisions getting lower. We had to leave everything we had no immediate use for and toiled on in our weakened condition with very little to eat until we came to what was known at that time as the 3 Crossings of the Sweetwater. Here the last dust of flour was dealt out, and the next morning we found 18 inches of snow on the level. Captain Willie and a man by the name of Elder left our camp in search of help.

One night I woke up drenched from the waist down, and not with sweat. I let out a grotesque groan: "Noooo!" Freida rolled over to comfort me, stopping abruptly as her hand searched the sheets: "Brian? Oh, Brian!"

I crawled out of bed, peeled off my soaked garments, and ran a hot bath. In the meantime she changed the bedsheets, covering the wet spot with a towel. But I hid in the bathroom until the alarm bleeped at six-thirty.

"Brian!" she said, knocking on the door. "Brian, I've got to get in there! I've got to get ready for work."

I didn't look at her when I passed by. I couldn't. She didn't say anything about it, which was good in some ways, worse in others. When I re-

turned from the office that afternoon, there was a box of DEPENDS on the bathroom sink. That night I stayed up until she went to bed, then curled up on the living room sofa. I'd barely dozed off when I felt the soft press of her body behind me, her voice whispering in my ear. "I want you in there, with me."

"I won't wear those damn things!" I said.

"That's okay," she said. "It was a bad idea."

There were moments like that, when she could be so gentle, handling my ego like a delicate little bird. But other times the stress and strain wore her patience threadbare, like that awful afternoon in Dr. Clark's office, after shelling out another thousand dollars for more x-rays, lab work, an alphabetical battery of acronymic procedures signifying nothing.

"So what you're telling me," Freida said belligerently, "is there's nothing wrong!" She crossed her arms threateningly, like a hit man with a bone to pick, or several to break. She wanted a name for the damn thing—a fancy, ugly, polysyllabic, Latin-sounding, validating name.

Dr. Clark cleared his throat and clarified. "Whatever the problem is, it's not showing up on the charts."

"So it's psychosomatic!"

"No. The pain is real—very real. And his condition is obviously ... We just can't detect—"

"Psychosomatic!"

As they tilted with semantics, I sat on the edge of the examination table like a little child being metaphorically cut in two, Solomon-style. They sounded like a cranky husband and wife bickering over the spoils of their imminent divorce. I had become a third party in the debate, having given up hope months ago.

"I don't know how long, if that's what you're asking. It could be years."

"That's not what I'm asking!"

"Look, we'd nuke the damn thing if we knew what it was!"

A week later Freida and I had it out, more or less. It was Christmas Eve, and we were up late wrapping a few last minute gifts to slip under the tree. I wanted to talk about it, she didn't, but I kept pressing her, like a pathetically desperate lover, until finally she said what I knew she'd been thinking for some time: I was selfish, obsessed, a one-track boor; all I ever thought or talked about was myself, my silly condition.

I exploded. I roared at her. "YOU THINK I ENJOY THIS! YOU THINK I LIKE BEING THIS WAY! YOU THINK—"

She closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath, choosing her words carefully. "When we got married, I think we both had certain expectations ..."

"Expectations! What you're really saying is, if it were cancer or leukemia, that would be different. But somehow this is all my fault!"

I waited several moments, then answered for her: "The bottom line is, you can't respect someone like that—someone who allows something like this to happen. And you can't love someone you don't respect."

No answer. A rough, angry tearing of paper. Creasing and folding.

"Is silence assent?"

"Pass me the Scotch tape, will you?"

I imagine myself back in their lonely camp, tired, hungry, my flesh burning wherever the cold has chewed it to the bone, and no relief in sight. My eyelids close without resistance as the first faint drops of rain tickle my face. For a moment I see myself charging down the mesa a few desperate feet ahead of the pack, the salty sweat from my terrycloth headband dripping in my eyes, half-blinding me, the lactic acid hardening like cement in my legs and arms. Every stride I can hear terrible snapping sounds. They may be twigs or they may be bones. If they're mine, I can't tell. I'm beyond pain or thanksgiving. My eyes are pinwheels, the world around me a psychedelic blur of blue, brown, and green. Yet I hear Freida's voice above all the others cheering me as I stagger like a drunkard across the finish line, feel her hands on my shoulders easing me down onto the pavement, her lips softly touching mine. I hear words of love and praise and miracle whispered in my ear, words I thought had been lost at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

When I look again, Freida is watching me with the most peculiar expression, a mixture of fondness, love, compassion, and fear. Her eyes seem to ask, across the mass of friends: You okay?

I almost smile. I almost bow my head and say yes.

She grabs the handle on the handcart and orders everyone to heave-ho: "Let's go, we've got weather! Let's high-tail it to Zion!"

As if on cue, a crooked scimitar splits the blackened sky. Seconds later a bomb explodes and the mountain roars like a badly wounded beast. Suddenly it looks and sounds like a scene from *Götterdämmerung*. Any moment Wagner's Valkyries will swoop down to gather up the warrior dead.

The sixteen of us swarm the model handcart, speeding it past Fort Bridger without stopping as the summer rain pellets down. Plucking the note from the trail sign, Freida reads one-handed as she walks and pulls:

When we broke camp, we waded the Sweetwater Springs. Here the country began to level out again, for we could see the campfires for hours before we reached them. In traveling after night through the frost of that altitude, my brother, Thomas' right hand froze while pushing on the back of the handcart. My brother, John, over-

come by exhaustion, was laid by the roadside to await the sick wagon. When he was picked up, he was frozen in 2 places on the side of his body nearest the ground. When Thomas got to the fire with his frozen hand, it soon presented a sad picture. It had swollen up like a large toad. That night we had to make camp without water. Twelve people died and in the morning 3 more died. All 15 were buried in one grave. Mother had to melt snow to thaw our hair from the ground where we slept. My brother, John, and I had pulled together on the same cart from Iowa City. We toiled on, doing the best we could, until he became disabled the evening we reached South Pass. My two younger brothers, Richard and Thomas, being too small to render much service.

Five minutes later we are all gathered around the barbecue pit near the ramada where Freida staked the last trail sign: SALT LAKE VALLEY. The sky is a big ugly bruise, but the rain has softened to intermittent spittle, more refreshing than annoying. Kneeling beside the lacquered wooden bucket, Bradley flicks a switch that sets his automatic ice cream-maker in motion. Freida offers some closing remarks about our debt to our pioneer ancestors, admonishing us to demonstrate similar faith and resolve in our equally trying times. "Our trials are different," she says. "Theirs were snow, hunger, thirst, disease. Physical villains. Ours are much more subtle and devious and cunning ..."

"Like MTV," suggests Colleen gravely.

"Or Democrats," quips Bradley Boyak.

Colleen reads the last excerpt:

When we arrived at the last crossing of the Sweet Water, Cyrus H. Wheellock of Don Jones' party met us with provisions. He could not restrain his tears, when he saw the conditions the saints were in. Some of the people were so hungry that now they had food they were unwise in eating and died from the effects of it. Louisa herself was very sick and while traveling next day lay down on the snow and begged Mother to go and leave her. We had been 3 days before relief came and many had died with hunger and cold. 14 being buried in one grave at Pacific Springs. My brother John and Thomas were both badly frozen. But on the 19th of November 1856 Mother was truly rewarded for her faithfulness in arriving in Salt Lake City with all her children. Although she had laid her frail, sweet stepdaughter Eliza on the plains, she was privileged to bring all her lambs to the fold. As soon as she arrived, she had a piece of sagebrush removed from her eye, which had been causing her a great deal of pain for some time.

Sometimes I hear him howling late at night, flinging hail like wedding rice against the glass, calling me out. The morning after I can see his breath and fingerprints on the window, marking the spot where he's been watching, like a peeping Tom or a cat burglar casing the house. I imagine him in different guises. Maybe he's a used car salesman, Tex Earnhardt with a ten-gallon hat and a bolo tie, straddling a brahma bull: "Come take advantage of our Mother's Day sale! A one-thousand-dollar rebate

on all ..." Maybe he's Monty Hall screaming, "Come on down and Let's Make a Deal to End All Deals!"

More often, though, he comes not as a dark-hooded clansman but the kindly, frosty-haired grandfather with swollen arthritic knuckles who from his sickbed mesmerized my child's mind with bear-hunting tales. He puts his gnarled hand in mine and leads me towards the translucent veil where I can distinguish the sketchy silhouettes of my father and mother on the other side, waiting eagerly to greet me. I hear sweet angelic music, and voices as tranquil as the sound of summer rain.

I step boldly forward, but each time, nearing the threshold, I'm stopped by reconsiderations. Am I being lured away prematurely? Seduced by a little travail? Once I cross the line to that kinder, gentler place, I'll never be able to cross back again; this border check is final and unforgiving. The smiling attendant in white asks if I have fruit, knives, or other mortal contraband? He doesn't tell me in advance what or how much I can take with me. Or is this the great leap of faith? Discarding all earthly pleasures and pains to move on to a bigger and better? Are we ants in a jar blinded by the security, or insecurity, of the known?

Come, follow me.

Try it, you'll like it.

But he doesn't tell me that I just may miss the smell of peppermint and jazz and woodsmoke on a cold winter morning. Doesn't remind me I'll never again stand on top of Engineer Peak gazing across the Colorado Rockies, or watch my boy execute a slide tackle or bear his testimony in Japanese at his missionary farewell; or make love to my wife, or cook her a Spanish omelet, or make her laugh. Not in this life. And he doesn't tell me that someone else will.

As we commence the closing song, the last verse of "Come, Come Ye Saints," Gary Henderson leans towards my wife and whispers in her ear. Their half silhouettes look like two pieces of a puzzle that could fit perfectly together. She turns and smiles at him oddly. It is a gesture of friendship, but not altogether friendship. I'm surprised at what a striking couple they make, but not altogether surprised. And I wonder: What am I doing here, beside Bradley and Colleen, when I should be over there, between Andrew and Freida?

We squeeze under the ramada for refreshments, Bradley's homemade rootbeer floats. The kids devour theirs in seconds, then sprint off to the playing fields, half of them tossing their Styrofoam cups into the trash can, the other half dropping them thoughtlessly on the ground.

"Pick that up, you litterbug!" Colleen scolds one of her errant seven.

As the Boyak girls play Keep-Away with a soccer ball, Andrew assumes a catcher's crouch behind a paper plate in front of a ponderosa

pine. He punches his fist into his baseball glove and hollers to me: "Come on, Dad! Throw some smoke!" Freida flashes me her Milky Way smile, the one I can't refuse. I trot over to accommodate.

Andrew tosses me a fluorescent green tennis ball and begins flashing fingers between his skinny bare thighs. I paw the imaginary rubber, shake off his first sign, okay the second. Leaning back, I cock and lift my left leg while wrenching my right arm geekishly behind my back, delivering a cool sidearm fastball, at the ankles, in the manner of Don Drysdale. I tell my son nice catch, waita block that plate! I add a little play-by-play, from my sandlot days, dating myself: "Runners on first and third, two outs, bottom of the ninth, Mantle at the plate, Maris on deck ... Here's Drysdale with the windup, the pitch—curve ball, got him swinging! Mr. Clutch takes three and sits down!"

Grinning, Andrew glances over at Connie Henderson, watching from under the ramada. Her thread of a smile quickly widens to a half-moon. Noticing me noticing him noticing her, Andrew looks away, happily embarrassed.

The tennis ball feels like a shotput in my hand. Every pitch is a cigarette, shaving two hours off my life. Or two years. Yet for a moment, surely the first this evening, perhaps the first in months, I enjoy a brief respite, call it peace. And to me it's as miraculous as those three sea biscuits were to Freida's starving ancestors crossing the Plains.

So I wonder, second guess: Does God grant us these occasional Kodak moments as a celestial carrot to keep us going, enduring to our predestined end? If it's a trick, a holy ploy to persuade me against my will, it almost works.

I look at the ramada where Freida is laughing, her voice floating effervescently above the crowd. If I exit early, she'll have as many suitors as Penelope panting at her door. And unlike the crafty Queen of Ithaca, she won't have the luxury of unweaving by night what she has woven by day. She will remarry in time. Of course the lucky fellow will have her on loan only. But I wonder: while she is sharing her life and body with someone who is at his best while remembering me at my worst, will these last two years obscure the previous eleven, and in her heart will she belong to this stranger, although by eternal covenant she'll be mine? Or will she? Is there reneging on the other side? If the heart plays more or less fondly?

But my selfishness is showing, or my humanness. If I truly love my wife, won't I have that other inevitable talk, the one I can't even begin to script in my mind? Or is this where I draw a line on the law of consecration?

Another silver flash above the peaks, followed by more mountain bellows, and a shot of cool summer spray. As Gary and Bradley begin

packing up the ice chests, the women holler to the children who stam-pede across the field like a herd of wild ponies. We load up our vehicles and say our farewells. Gary magnanimously offers to return the handcart to the Millets—he insists—sparing me the burden of dragging it back the half mile I brought it. (Thank you, my priesthood brother, or did you know all along?)

By the time we arrive home, the rain has stopped and the clouds are breaking up. Seth, running on the infinite energy of youth, rounds up his friends for a short game of flashlight tag. Exhausted from her Cecil B. DeMille production, Freida collapses on the living room sofa to catch the last ten minutes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. I tell her to go to bed, I'll take care of things. "After a performance like that! What a show! You really outdid yourself—"

She smiles and thanks me for all my help, extends her hand. "I never could have done it without—"

I load the dishwasher, sweep the kitchen floor, and call Andrew inside. It takes a while, but eventually he bursts through the back door, hot and winded. By the time I trudge upstairs, he is sitting up in bed, poring over strategy manuals for his Wing Commander game. I plop down beside him and wrap an arm around his bony shoulders. Kisses are out: he's too old, too tough, too almost junior high.

"Good night," I say. "Don't forget to say your prayers!"

"Okay."

"I love you, Andrew."

"Love you, Dad."

I linger in the doorway admiring his perfect little face, and the way his chest lifts and settles like a gentle ocean swell. There's something I need to tell him, something about Connie Huntington and the secret smile that passed between them, but I'm not sure exactly what. Is now the time for our inevitable talk?

He lowers his Wing Commander book and looks up, annoyed. "Do you have a staring problem?"

I smile, blow him a mock kiss. "Don't forget—"

"I know, I know."

When I reenter the family room, Freida is crashed out on the sofa, while Worf the Klingon warrior tries to negotiate peace with a bizarre-looking hermaphrodite from Planet Somewhere. Freida's face appears to have aged in her brief sleep. Scrunched against the sofa pillow, her lips look swollen and pouty; her mouth sags sadly, and the skin around her eyes appears wattled. Threads of gray are tucked strategically behind her ear. And I realize, for perhaps the first time, that she too is growing old. I bend down, brush her ringlets back, and kiss her tenderly on the cheek, as if for the last time.

Then I slip out the sliding glass door, past Freida's flower garden, and kneel in my private spot between two gambol oaks. My eyes rise to the heavens where a half-moon is squeezing between two bulging black clouds, like a breech birth. When its full face appears, I see this image: Death eating a sea biscuit. Splitting it with me. That skull-faced smile. It's a fluorescent tombstone, the dimmer, lesser glory I may inherit if I'm judged solely by the intentions of my heart.

I bow my head, close my eyes, and begin my nightly talk with my Father. Tonight I don't debate the justice of my plight or petition for an early release. I don't rant and rave about my powerless position. Tonight I thank him for carrying me safely to the Promised Land. I assure him I'm not being facetious. I thank him for those priceless moments on the mound throwing sidearm strikes to Andrew, and for fifty-one years on this beautiful planet, eleven years with beautiful Freida. I thank him for the pioneer men and women of steel plodding across the wind-swept plains, wearing rags on their feet, pulling strips of rawhide from the handcart wheels and chewing them for dinner.

Ten minutes into my prayer I'm feeling better, stronger. I think maybe I can skip the blue pill tonight. Just maybe. But first I have some questions about this wonderful promise called Resurrection, our bodies gloriously restored to their youthful prime and vigor. I ask him what if you never had a prime? Suppose you were born armless or legless or eyeless or clueless? Then what of body restoration? Or suppose you prefer blue eyes to brown, or the nose is a little too hooked in your opinion, the hips a bit too wide? Will there be plastic surgeons in heaven? Or will it be more like shopping for new clothes, a mix and match of body parts with racks and racks to choose from? Will we be uniformly bleached celestial white? Or will brown, black, red, yellow, and California tan be among the color options? Will there be mountains to climb, races to run, kisses to give and receive? Or have I run my last footrace, in the here and in the hereafter?

I tell him it's all academic, beside the point. I want Freida. I want Andrew. Anything else is icing.