

The By-pass

Lewis Horne

IF I LOOKED UP THE ROAD from the irrigation ditch, I could see the churchhouse bumping stiff and dark against the sunset's blaze. "The old churchhouse," people called it now. "The old churchhouse," said Reuben Crandall, standing beside me on the bridge. His troubled feelings about the matter rumbled with his words. "My old man helped build it," he said. "It breaks my heart to see it."

"It breaks your heart?" I said.

"It breaks my heart," he said. "You think I don't got me a heart?"

Reuben hadn't been in any churchhouse, old or new, since I could remember. But he had his point. Now that the new one was finished for use, carpeted and painted, spic and span for worship, the wrecking machines were taking on the old building tomorrow. After everything was cleaned away, there'd be small chance the new steeple was tall enough for us to see it from where we stood. The new churchhouse was not two stories high with a peaked roof over its red brick walls and a pile of steps to climb to the whitewashed double doors in front. Its steeple was skinny as Reuben's arm while the old one didn't have a steeple at all. But we could see its roof.

"People got no right to make fun of my religion," he said.

"Since when were you religious?"

"It's the making fun."

"Not making fun of your religion, Reuben. We're just getting a new churchhouse. You know how hard it was for Hattie Belle Johnson to climb those steps. We're making it easier for her and Tom Sitrine and the old-timers. We're getting a new electric organ in place of that old pump affair. We're getting more classrooms and a new gymnasium. People kept stumbling on the cracked concrete of the basketball court out back. We'll have air-conditioning."

But I had a heart, too, and it didn't beat strong behind my words. Reuben couldn't place every creak in the floorboards the way I could. He didn't know you had to ease the swinging doors to the foyer shut behind you or you'd set a clatter. He didn't know the ratchet of the front overhead fan.

I knew the pit that lay under his heart.

Tobias, one of my grandkids, came running up. "Grandma wants to know if you're ready to leave."

Unlike Reuben, I wouldn't be seeing much of any steeple even if I talked like "we" would. I lived in town now, in a house Melba and I had built. My boy Ephraim ran the farm. He was in the "new" bishopric, the one that had superintended the ward during the building of the "new churchhouse." He'd probably be part of the old bishopric pretty soon. He's a good man. I say that for him, whether you think I'm opinionated or not. He might have shared some of the feelings Reuben and I felt. We hadn't talked about it. But I knew he'd worn away many hard hours getting the new building up.

"Good seeing you again," Reuben said, roughing young Tobias's hair, but speaking to me. "Best not keep Melba waiting."

I watched him climb into his car where he'd parked it by the mailbox. His Su died almost four years ago. It pained me to think of him going to his empty house without Su to nag and him to gripe, the two of them to cuss. They were the sort who got along best nattering, even with Su's bad heart and diabetes. Then there was Reuben's drinking. Hitting the old sauce, as they say, something that his breath was seldom clear of.

He'd be driving right by the churchhouse. And he'd be grumbling while he did it.

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Reuben Crandall was what some people called a reprobate, an "old reprobate." Fair enough. But back when I knew him early on, he was "a young hellion." Not long after getting home from the War where he'd been with the Seabees in the Pacific, he'd married Gayla Su Libhart. Theirs wasn't an interrupted romance. It was new for both, though they'd known each other all their lives. But Su was five years older, and over some of those years, five of them makes a difference. When Reuben was a Boy Scout, Su was a boy-crazy teenager. When he was a teenager, she was a working woman in her twenties, keeping books at the lettuce packing shed. By the time Reuben got back from the war, Su had divorced Darwin Poole and had an eight-year-old boy named Norry, a smart-aleck eight-year-old boy, a mouthy eight-year-old boy. When she stopped where Reuben was irrigating to ask if he'd seen the smart-aleck boy playing in the irrigation ditch, he knew her right away. They talked a bit. Even though he hadn't shaved, he asked her if she'd like to go to a movie next Friday. Afterward, they had a beer at the Waldorf. She didn't look five years older, he decided. She looked like some of the girls he knew in Honolulu.

Su was small, bony, dark-skinned. She had short curly hair and a moody, almost truculent, look to her face as though she had too much on her mind and was muttering to herself as she tried to sort it out. But she'd

always give you a smile, what smile she had, and she would sometimes, like her mother, give you a glimpse of her claws though without as much malice as the old lady would. Su would skewer someone with an aside and then laugh in a way that suggested she didn't mean what she said when you knew that she knew what she was doing and intended it the whole time. She hadn't accidentally let a single word "slip." So-and-so loves those dollar bills, she'd say. Somebody else beats on their kids too much, never could understand what Verone saw in him. But then, Oh, she'd laugh, I like So-and-so, I like Somebody else. I like Verone, too. They're good people.

I don't want to make Su sound mean, not when she's in the grave. I wouldn't want to make her sound mean even if she was here to defend herself. But there were things about Su—the way there are about all of us—that Reuben must have ached about even as he laughed. Reuben and Su have been friends with Melba and me ever since they married, and dark-skinned Norry was friends with our own curly-headed Ephraim, through all their growing up.

On our way back to town, Melba asked, "So what's Reuben up to these days? The world still against him?"

When I told her what he'd said about the churchhouse, she told me, "I feel the same way. So do Ephraim and Rose." Rose is Ephraim's wife. "But isn't it like Reuben to complain about what's got to be? He don't complain about something he could make a difference with. He still stink of drink? Still complain about Su?"

"He's a lonely man," I said.

"And that boy Norry is no help for him."

Melba didn't dislike the Crandalls. But she'd never been friends with Su the way I'd been friends with Reuben. After all, Reuben and I had grown up together the way Ephraim and Norry had. Where Su was skinny and fierce, Melba was big and smiley. Even in high school, she was what you'd call motherly. Now, she was a big woman, big around the hips, big in her smile, big in the quiet sympathy you could hear in her voice. She had a pretty face. If you felt bad and she smiled at you in her pretty way and put her hand on your shoulder or your arm or your knee—she was the sort who had to touch you when she said something to you—and she said something as simple as "Oh my," you couldn't help feeling better because you knew that here was someone who cared about you and your twisted soul. She was that kind of person. It was in her nature.

If she seemed to be grumbling now, it was because she could feel in some way the loneliness Reuben was feeling just by knowing he was feeling it. That feeling would take her straight to Norry, who was no help to Reuben or anyone else, she said.

"I know how Norry was raised," she said. "I know that Su wanted him to be friends with Ephraim because Ephraim is such a stable and easy-going boy. Maybe being around Ephraim would keep Norry in line." Some

people would say Ephraim was a “dull” man to be around, but everyone liked him and his gentle, trusting, easy-going ways. He had his mother’s nature. “I don’t believe he was much of an influence on Norry, but no one person can be to blame for that.”

“Still, it’s too bad things have to change,” I said, going back to the churchhouse. We passed the cemetery and crossed the irrigation canal. I thought about Su under the ground. I thought, too, about our little one, the straggler, our fifth, our last, who was out there in a tiny box under the ground, too.

“Things are going to change,” she said. “Whether you and Reuben like it or not.”

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Within a week, I was out at Ephraim’s again, helping put up some shelves in the storeroom for Rose’s canning. On my way out, I passed the rubble of the old churchhouse, but I only shook my head at the wreckage no one had started to haul away yet. On my way back, I saw Reuben stopped there, leaning against the car in his rumpled khaki shirt and trousers, reading a book.

That’s right. Reading a book.

Early August. The middle of a hot afternoon. The sun smashing your forehead and eyelids to a squint.

“What the sam hill,” I said. “Must be a good book.”

“Haven’t read one of these in a long time.” He held up one of the westerns he and Su used to read, their living room and bedroom piled with paperbacks.

I said, “We sure used to play at that stuff as kids, didn’t we.” So did Ephraim and Norry when they were growing up. “I remember Hoot Gibson, Tom Mix—”

“There was a bunch of them. How come you were always the bad guy?”

“Was I? I guess because you always wanted to be the good guy.”

“Did I?”

“Sure enough, Reuben.”

“That’s a laugh, isn’t it?”

“What’re you reading a book out here for?” His khaki shirt was damp under his arms. His forehead was sopping up into his brush-cut and still thick gray hair. One drop of sweat hung from an overgrown eyebrow. “You’ll ruin your eyes.”

“Stupid, isn’t it?” he said.

I said, “When you coming for dinner? You know Melba and me want it. You can see what I been doing to fix the place up. The invitation’s been open—well, you know how long the invitation’s been open.” Since Su died.

Just before we moved to town over three years ago. That's how long it had been. "I'm still fixing. Melba's always got something she wants done, even in a new house."

"I'm not a town man," he said. "You know that. I'd as soon be shot. Sometime I'll surprise you though."

It wasn't fun to think of Reuben alone in his house. No wonder he was reading Louis L'Amour in front of a heap of boards and bricks and cement chunks on a heat-stroke kind of day.

"Why didn't I play the bad guy?" he said. "I bet you Norry played the bad guy with Ephraim and the other kids. Do you believe in sin?"

I waited for my face to settle before taking that question. "Yes," I said, though I couldn't remember the last time I used the word. Something bad, something wrong. Those were the kinds of words I used. Some kind of human activity.

"Drinking's a sin," he said. "Cussing's a sin. Smoking's a sin. That right?"

"Reuben, are you trying to call yourself a sinner?"

"Killing's a sin. Not doing what you're supposed to do. That's a sin."

He held the book as though he was ready to dip his nose to it any minute.

"Now if all this was in a book," he said, "I wouldn't be standing here." He pointed with Louis L'Amour to show that "this" meant everything spread out around him, the wreckage of the old churchhouse, the spiffiness of the new, with Reuben himself included—along with probably everything he'd done or had done to him. "Maybe Norry would be if this was a book, standing here, I mean, depending on the kind of book it was. Maybe Norry would be here. Things come out right in books. You know Willy Child is buying out Norry's half of the Sand and Gravel? The two of them don't get along no more. I'm not sure Norry is carrying his share of the work. I'm not sure but the Sand and Gravel won't go better without Norry there messing around."

"Those boys made it a good business."

He gestured to the rubble. "Somebody should clean this place up." The "place" would be part of the parking lot for the new churchhouse. After the rubble was cleared away, someone would spread the surfacing for a parking lot. They'd put out some shrubs and flowers and a bit of lawn. Already, I had problems remembering what the old place looked like. The dusty brick, the torn boards, the bits of twisted iron. Bits and pieces.

"I suspect embezzlement's a sin, too."

Norry had always been a problem, even when he was eight years old, and Reuben married his mother.

"I was too little to help much," he said, "but I remember my old man up on the beams when they were putting on the roof of the old building. He'd come down here after milking, and big and slow as he was, he'd

climb up there and work while others was laying brick. I was scared he might fall, and I wondered why somebody else couldn't do what he was doing. But he didn't know how to lay brick, he said. Every man does his bit."

"So Willy Child is buying Norry out?"

"Do you remember when Chad Snowhill got killed? It was Norry. He admitted it. Course it was night and the Snowhills didn't have their car lights on. But who else would be driving home drunk and run into them?"

"That could have happened to someone sober."

Reuben tossed the book into the front seat of the car. He started to rest his elbows on the top, but the metal was too hot. "You remember after that? That woman in town? Getting out of her car with a bag of groceries?"

"You're not saying that was Norry—?"

"Drunk that time, too. Nobody living knows it to this day but me and Norry. And now you. Months later, when he told us, Su and I tried to shoo him to the police. I should have turned him in myself. That was a sin."

This one caught me off guard.

"Sure ain't much like a book, is it?"

Front page news it was. Who could have driven away leaving the woman on the ground and her child—four years old, five—in the car hysterical? No hint of who the driver was. Not a trace. What kind of car had he driven? No one knew. How could such a person live with himself? Yes, I remembered. Lots of people remembered still.

He chuckled though he plainly didn't think anything was funny. "It's a hell of a thing to think about. But what can you do?" He touched the top of the car again gingerly. "Breaks your heart, don't it?"

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So I knew that Reuben had a lot on his mind. Don't we all?

Melba and I were lucky. Friendly as Ephraim and Norry were growing up, Ephraim never lurched into Norry's ways, and our girls grew up fine. They all found good husbands. Some of them have kids. Ephraim tried what he could with Norry. He tugged a bit here, a bit there, but Norry had no interest in Scouts, in church, in any of the good-boy stuff that Ephraim had a natural good-boy interest in. They stayed friends, though, maybe because Ephraim was never a talker and, not being a talker, he was never a preacher. He was a doer. Norry talked and, headstrong like he was, he "did" as well. But where Ephraim might be slow, he was sure and steady. Where Norry could be quick, he was like a rabbit, jumping and leaping, covering lots of ground, but not lighting long anywhere.

Melba couldn't believe that Norry had driven hit-and-run. "And Reuben's known it all this time?" She was baby-sitting. Pregnant with her third, our oldest girl was off to the doctor, so we had her two daughters for

a couple of hours. Melba took the two little ones and a storybook into her lap. "He should of told the police himself," she said as they settled. "No wonder he's looking so dark and down these days. Norry's health can't be good either, can it? He had that triple by-pass right after Su died. Hardly forty years old at the time. Reuben must have a lot on his mind."

"Forty-four."

"That's what I say. Norry was hardly forty years old when he had the by-pass. But then Su had a weak heart, and so did her mother. It must be in the blood. It takes my heart to think of people unwell."

"A bouncing old horse like you," I said.

She read from a collection of Book of Mormon stories for children. This time, it was about Samuel the Lamanite preaching repentance. I pretended to read the newspaper, but I did like to hear Melba read. I liked the newspaper better when she read it out loud. When she read, giving each syllable the time it needed, I felt I was looking into a stream of water, all of it clear enough you could see the rocks cool and plain at the bottom.

Her reading made the house feel more like home, too. We'd left most of the furniture on the farm for Ephraim and his family. Here, too much of the stuff was still bristly with store feeling. The rug hardly looked walked on. The couch and chairs felt as stiff as when the men from Montgomery Ward carried them in, and you wondered if the drapes and blinds had been up long enough to need dusting. The place didn't yet have our smell.

Melba had said at the time that the strain of his mother's death must have been too hard for Norry. When you're not used to keeping your anger back and your impulses, it must be hard to hold back on sorrow. He and Reuben were both sober for the funeral, however strong they smelled. Melba was Relief Society president when we were on the farm, and she kept people moving in and out of Reuben's house. Meals. Extra food. Cleaning. "Let those two sit around the house by themselves!" She'd liked to have spirited out the liquor. "What would Su think if they showed up drunk at her funeral!" "Ah, Melba," I said. "Well, then, tipsy!" So they were sober, Norry's head shiny with its premature baldness, his brown eyes teary, his dark cheeks flushed. Then a couple of months later, he was in the hospital.

With Su's loss still fresh, I went a couple of times with Reuben to see him. The two of them didn't talk much, Norry with needles stuck in him, so I said how I was sorry to see Norry down and out, how I hoped he would soon be better, how I'd like to help out if anything had to be done. That kind of thing. All the kinds of things that I knew Reuben was trying to say. Sometimes Willy Child was there. But he didn't have much to say either. Those were tough visits. It was better when Norry's wife and their two teenage kids were there. This was one of the times they weren't living together, but they were still married. They were trying to be nice in front of the rest of us, Su still on our minds; they talked a lot about nothing, making

jokes about the tubes and the machines Norry was hooked up to. "Don't turn off that machine before I come back," she said as she was leaving. We all laughed the way we were supposed to. She moved back into his house when he got out of the hospital.

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The next time I drove by the churchhouse, the rubble was cleared, the parking lot leveled, ready to be surfaced. The new churchhouse was low and flat with green sod and shrubs around it. The steeple by the entrance looked sharp as a needle. I could barely see it from Ephraim's driveway.

Ephraim said that Reuben had been in church last Sunday. "I told him it was good to see him," he said. Reuben told him Melba and I would split our britches in surprise, and Ephraim laughed and said he was right and we would likely do that.

"In the new churchhouse?" I said. "The way he hated to see the old building go, I'm plain dumbfounded."

So was Melba.

"Too much goes too quick," Reuben told me later.

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Not three months after Reuben started going to church, Norry was back in the hospital. His last move, his last rout. His wife had moved out again and his two boys were away, one in California working, the other in the navy. Norry and Willy Child weren't seeing much of each other anymore, not after their partnership broke up though Reuben said they were still on speaking terms.

I think we all knew it was his last time. In pain, Norry had called Reuben just as Reuben was leaving for an AA meeting. "Can you come to the house?"

"That's what scared me," said Reuben, "that he actually called me. He said he was hurting. Norry's never admitted to hurting before. He only ever hurt with little things that an ordinary man wouldn't complain about. The bad things? Forget it. They didn't bother him. I got to his place in time to take the ambulance with him."

The doctors pulled him through that first night, Reuben said. Norry was in intensive care for three days.

The night before he died, I was alone with Norry for a few minutes. Reuben was late. Norry's face still had the flush that went with his drinking. His baldness was red and splotchy. But he had a pallor behind, down inside. His brown eyes, glistening with a touch of moisture, looked tired. Those quizzical wrinkles of his lifted into his forehead. He had a tube for oxygen that he sometimes breathed through.

"Reuben's got the guilties," he said, his voice slow and broken. He'd been one of the kids who call their parents by their first name. "Su and Reuben."

"You mean the way he's going to church?"

"I don't know why," he said. "I don't have them, the guilties, and if anybody should, I should. I put five thousand dollars into the church building fund. Did you know that? I like to think I paid for the steeple. You look surprised. Ask Ephraim. He can tell you. Five thousand dollars. Reuben don't know it. Why does Reuben have the guilties? Why should he have to get around this?"

"I don't know." I thought of Norry hit-and-running the woman in town. I thought of her groceries spilled over the street and of her little boy screaming. I thought of Chad Snowhill and the country road at night. "Some people get the guilties, and some people don't," I said.

"He wishes I did."

I remembered when Reuben told me about the hit-and-run. "Because Reuben thinks you're a sinner?"

"Did he tell you that?"

Me and my mouth.

The machine beside the bed had lights on it, gauges, needles. "That's keeping me alive," he said. He had a needle on the underside of one hairy arm. Then back to Reuben. "He never told me I was a sinner. Maybe I should have felt like a sinner. Maybe I got a rock instead of a conscience."

Outside, the sun was going down, and I was wishing Reuben would hurry.

When he came in a few minutes later, Norry grinned and asked, "Hey, Reuben, you think I'm a sinner?"

Reuben just looked at him, wary.

"Sinning belonged to the old churchhouse; that's what I say," said Norry. He'd always had a bit of a giggle, and he giggled now. It sounded weak. He didn't sound like the hell-raiser he'd been trying to be all his life.

"You don't mean that," snapped Reuben.

"About the old churchhouse? You better believe it."

Reuben didn't speak. I think he felt, like me, that Norry was doing a kind of hospital bed swagger. He might be picking up something impish and willful from the machine and the IV. Or from somewhere else.

Norry shifted his eyes to me. "Ephraim asked me for money, for a contribution," he said. Reuben looked puzzled. "For the churchhouse, Reuben. You got a new churchhouse. And you got a steeple. That's my contribution."

"You can't put back what's gone," said Reuben.

I thought Norry was going to giggle again. "I never tried," he said. "Never intended that."

We talked a bit more. But Norry seemed to be tiring. It was a strange

conversation, going in two or three different directions, like me and Melba talking while she was paying attention to the grandkids. I knew that Reuben was puzzled to learn that Norry had given money. I knew that Norry chuckled to himself over Reuben's perplexity. I knew, too, that Reuben was trying to take hold of something, something he wanted for himself. More was gone than the old churchhouse. More was missing than he wanted to admit. Norry simply shrugged; it was gone, and either there was nothing he felt he could do or nothing he wanted to do about it. I knew Reuben had Norry hitched in his mind to the new churchhouse. But what he connected with the old I don't believe he could say.

Isaiah said, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Norry would never say this. Maybe Reuben wanted to. But maybe with the old churchhouse gone, he thought it was too late.

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So Reuben had the guilties. Not Norry. We left him that night, saying, "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah," he said, "see you tomorrow." Later, when the nurse entered, he told her to "pull the plug." So I heard after. I imagined the lights on the machine going out, the needle on the gauge collapsing. Norry was gone by morning.

At the funeral, Reuben told me, "I'm not pulling the plug on them." He meant Su and Norry. Probably he meant Norry's wife and kids, too.

He kept going to church. He kept going to AA meetings. He sang hymns all the way to Chandler, he said, driving and singing the distance every week. "'Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel,' 'Give Said the Little Stream'—all of them," he said. "Not since I was a kid. I didn't know I remembered so many." Not so long before he died, he went to the temple. "An old reprobate like me," he said. "You ever dream that would happen?" But Su was waiting for him over there, over beyond, and if he didn't set it up for them to be together, which was one thing he wanted—not the only thing, but one of them, believe it or not—who was going to do it? With clean or unclean lips. That's what he said.