Badge and Bryant, or, the Decline and Fall of the Dogfrey Club

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Badge and Bryant Braunhil were first cousins, but they could have passed for fraternal twins, having—both of them—bright blue eyes, big grins, and unkempt blond hair. They lived in Linroth, a Mormon town in northern Arizona. Their houses were just a block apart, and Bryant always came by to accompany Badge to school or church or the Saturday night movie.

Their parents thought they were bound to be a good influence on one another, which they were until their fourteenth year, when they underwent a physiological change. Almost overnight they took up the use of the bad language they had heard their older brothers and the town loafers and wastrels using. With a casual affectation of long-established experience, they talked about doing dirty things with girls and created hilarious parodies of the bishop and their Sunday School teacher. Ambling along in the darkness after a movie or evening church, they were prone to belch, break wind, and write their names in the dust with urine. They vehemently denied being in love with any girl—though secretly both had given their hearts to LillieDale Mortensen, whose family had moved to Linroth at the beginning of their freshman year in high school.

On the last day of their freshman year, Badge and Bryant learned that a junior boy and a senior girl from one of the up-country towns had suddenly had to get married. The sturdy, heavy-set junior boy had already acquired a prominent five-o'clock shadow and a sullen, indolent voice that had settled into the bass range. The senior girl had a thin, sallow face and long brunette hair that brushed her frail shoulders. At dismissal time,

Badge and Bryant had seen the girl walking toward her bus with a sober—perhaps even frightened—look on her face. This development provided the dominant topic for their conversation on their lazy stroll toward home on that hot May afternoon.

Bryant, for his part, responded to the sudden wedding with consternation. He was not as ardent as Badge in breaking the commandments, feigning a taste for irreverence and wrongdoing chiefly to maintain his cousin's esteem. Bryant had been an initiate for only a short time into the secret order of those who know that human beings create offspring in the manner of cattle, horses, and hogs. It was one thing to accept that the dignitaries of his town—the bishop, the high school principal, even his own father—begat offspring by connecting to a female. But it was quite another thing to accept that someone near his own age could get a girl pregnant—a fact that began at once to work a curiously cautionary effect upon him. He sensed already that his interest in girls had became more complicated. It wasn't enough that he had elevated LillieDale Mortensen to a station far beyond lust or passion. He also had an obligation, he now recognized, to respect all girls more consistently than he had lately done. In particular, he recognized an obligation to refrain from banter about such things as falsies, the padding with which girls supposedly stuffed their bras, and the bloody rag, the derisive term his schoolmates applied to sanitary napkins. He was to regard all girls as his sisters.

In contrast, the misadventure of the junior boy and senior girl had triggered Badge's vivid imagination. Even as he and Bryant strolled along, he envisioned the couple in their scandalous act, imagining them in the back seat of a car or in a hay loft, where older friends claimed to have done the deed. With a stroke of creative insight, he moved from imagining the junior boy and senior girl in their covert copulation to imagining himself similarly engaged with LillieDale. With that one small step, rich possibilities suddenly burst upon him. Here was new fodder for the daydreams into which he compulsively retreated while milking cows, chopping wood, or suffering through a sermon in church.

At fourteen, Badge had not yet abandoned the habit of fantasy in which children universally engage. From his earliest memory, he had been a scop, a bard, a creator of tales with himself at the center. Countless times, he had leapt effortlessly over a house or

curled his body into a circle and rolled down a hill with the speed of an automobile or dug a hole so deep that it came out on the other side of the earth. He had mastered mustangs, flown biplanes, conducted duels with swords high in the rigging of a sailing vessel. But never before this last day of school in his fourteenth year had the inexhaustible potential of romantic ardor as a subject for his fantasies presented itself to him.

He had been in love precisely seven times before the advent of LillieDale. This phenomenon had first occurred when, at age five, he had said, "I like the looks of you," to a girl he had sat beside in the back seat of a car while on a stake Relief Society trip with his mother and other members of the stake Relief Society presidency. But compared to the buxom, full-lipped LillieDale, such loves were mere dross and refuse. No wonder then that the misadventure of the junior boy and senior girl who had to get married ignited a mimicking impulse. With a rumble and a jolt, the ecstatic shame of bedding LillieDale in disallowed circumstances locked itself into a preeminent position among Badge's aspirations. With scarcely a moment's reflection, he recognized a consummate theme for the fantasies of an entire summer.

How is it that a person can aspire so eagerly, so ecstatically, to an imagined shame for both himself and his beloved that either of them would have done almost anything to avoid in actuality?

Hardships that prove excruciating in actuality may be borne in fantasy with a good deal of stoic resolve. Boys at play happily imagine themselves in combat conditions that in the real world leave adult soldiers—if they survive—shattered in mind and body. Furthermore, the excoriations of conscience may be borne with much greater fortitude in a daydream than in real life. In fact, in Badge's case, conscience saw no reason whatsoever to be alarmed. The theology preached in the Linroth church house held that God sternly disapproved of fornication—and had the guardians of that theology ever considered the matter, they would undoubtedly have held that God disapproved only a little less sternly of an imagined fornication. However, Badge was so malnourished in theology that it had never occurred to him even to conjecture whether God might pay attention to a person's daydreams.

Also, if Badge had reasoned further on the matter, he would

have granted that his neighbors sided with God on the issue of fornication. It is a fact, however, that the human species diverts itself from the tedium of polite behavior by the contemplation of scandal. By simple instinct, Badge understood that, despite their mandate to openly disapprove of an unseemly deed, his neighbors would be subliminally grateful for the distraction its contemplation brought to their otherwise monotonous lives.

When Badge and Bryant had completed their leisurely meander from the high school, they seated themselves on the edge of Badge's porch. Badge needed to expatiate further upon his newfound pleasure, it being his nature to emote, enthuse, and think out loud. He also felt obliged to orient his less imaginative cousin to the satisfactions with which such a wedding swarmed. First of all, Bryant would need an acceptable partner. Obviously, it wouldn't do to direct his attention to LillieDale, given Badge's proprietary interest in her. Badge's duty to his cousin could be satisfied far short of that. Any one of a half dozen other girls in town would do.

"How about we make a pact?" Badge said abruptly. "We'll promise each other to get a girl pregnant. I mean, before we're married to her. And that's how we'll get married."

Bryant grimaced with bewilderment. "Which girl are we going to get pregnant?"

Badge snorted. "We can't get the same girl pregnant. We'll get different girls pregnant. Their fathers and brothers will come after us. They'll rough us up and drag us in front of the bishop and make us marry them. It will be a shotgun wedding, plain and simple." Then, as something of an afterthought, he added, "For example, you could get Panella Wall pregnant."

"Panella Wall! She's a total scag."

"Don't be so dang fussy."

"Well, then, *you* get her pregnant!"

By consensus among the boys in the shower room after PE class, Panella Wall actually fell into a middle rank for dating purposes—the she'll-do-in-a-pinch category. Certainly, she was no queen like LillieDale Mortensen. However, although she had a large nose, an awkward gait, and a tendency to take the lead while dancing, she was a good-humored, lively conversationalist whom

Badge and Bryant had walked home from evening church more than once.

"Besides," Bryant went on, "what's wrong with getting married the regular way?"

"Well, hell, lots of things are wrong with it."

Bryant shook his head. "A girl won't let us do that to her if we aren't married to her."

"Sure, she will," Badge insisted.

"What do you know about it?"

"If you lick their earlobe, they let you do it," Badge asserted.

"Who told you that?"

"It doesn't matter who told me. It's true. If you lick on their earlobe with your tongue, they're helpless. They more or less pass out. So you won't have any excuse for not getting married that way. It's easy to do."

Badge got up from the edge of the porch, opened his pocket knife, and began to carve a tiny image into one of the wooden pillars. "This," he said, "is the sign of the Dogfrey Club, which you and I now belong to."

"What's a Dogfrey Club?" Bryant asked.

"It's just what I'm telling you."

"Where did you get that word? I never heard of any club like that before."

"It's just a word I made up."

Bryant got to his feet and ambled to the pillar. He peered at the minute figure, which looked something like an old-time cannon with a muzzle sitting on top of wheels.

"That's your you-know-what," Badge said. "That's the sign of the Dogfrey Club, the club that guys belong to who have to get married. That's the sign that you and I promise each other faithfully never to get married except by a shotgun wedding."

Bryant took another look. "That doesn't look like my you-know-what," he said.

"Well, that's what it stands for," Badge insisted. "Today is May 17. Every year till we are married we have to come here on May 17 and look at this sign of the Dogfrey Club and promise all over again to have a shotgun wedding."

A Dogfrey Club struck Bryant as taking clubs a little too far.

He believed that, in general, clubs were a good thing. He and Badge had formed thirty or forty of them over the years. That is, Badge had thought them up and Bryant had endorsed them. Nothing had ever come of any of them, of course. Badge never bothered to shut them down formally; he just stopped talking about them, at which time Bryant knew they were finished. However, setting up a Dogfrey Club had ominous implications—something like consecrating motor oil instead of olive oil for healing the sick, which their older brothers had been warned not to try because a couple of fellows in Utah had tried it and had been killed by a bolt of lightning.

For one thing, a decent, church-going Mormon girl like Panella Wall was not a likely candidate for getting pregnant before she was married. The only girls in town who might be considered good prospects along that line were the two Gentile Fortnight sisters, whose parents lived in a big trailer on the west side of town. Hannah Fortnight might have passed as a she'll-do-in-a-pinch specimen, but Lucinda was a scag by any measure. Nonetheless, they had their followers, the Keefer boys, a clan from two families whose Mormon mothers had married arrant, break-wind-in-your-face Gentiles.

This pack of boys had lately been declaring their collective success with getting a hand up under the skirt of one or another of the Fortnight girls at the Saturday night movie. Billy Keefer, a ten year old, had gone one better than his older exemplars by claiming that he had been forced to satisfy the sisters' insatiable demands by resorting to a makeshift dildo, an extendable rubber stopper for soda pop bottles, which he flourished before his listeners by way of inarguable evidence.

Such an egregious lie needed no open rebuttal from the likes of Badge and Bryant, who happened by chance to be among Billy's listeners one Sunday afternoon. But as the Braunhil cousins had strolled on from this chance encounter, Badge fulminated with scornful indignation that Billy—a mere gnat, a cockroach, a maggot—should presume upon their credulity, whereas the silent Bryant shrank from the image that the ten year old's vaunt called to mind. It had seemed to him then, as it again seemed on the hot May afternoon at the end of their freshman year, that sex was too delicate, too problematic, too fraught with ambiguity, to trifle

with by inventing such a superfluity as a Dogfrey Club. Sex being what it had turned out to be, as much of a messy necessity for human beings as for animals, you shouldn't come to it via the back door by not even taking the trouble to get married first when getting married was what you had in mind all along.

That summer when the boys were fourteen droned on, failing—like all other summers—to live up to anticipations formed in mucky, frozen corrals during the dismal months of winter. But toward the end of the summer, Badge's father proposed that the boys spend a few days with their Uncle Trevor and Aunt Sybil in Phoenix. Obviously, midsummer wasn't the best time to visit Phoenix, but given that they had never been there and could hitch a free ride down and back on a cucumber truck, it would make a nice, safe, inexpensive break in the summer routine. Badge's father had, in fact, already spoken to one of the truck owners, Diff Greenfleck, who was a good, steady, church-attending man and could be counted on to keep the boys out of trouble in transit.

On a Monday morning Badge's mother delivered the boys to the cucumber-loading shed halfway between Linroth and its somewhat less respectable sister-town of Saller's Cove. Diff's truck was backed up to a dock, and Diff and a couple of Apache helpers were stacking crates of cucumbers on the truck bed. Several pickups and a tractor and wagon waited to be unloaded. Their owners stood nearby, watching while an agent for the pickle factory weighed their cucumbers. Having spoken politely to the men, Badge's mother made sure each boy had his lunch, admonished them both to behave themselves, and left. With her departure, the men resumed interrupted conversations. Paying no attention to Badge and Bryant, they sprinkled their speech with swear words of the sort permissible to men who made some pretension of being good Mormons. Shortly, Diff and his helpers finished loading the truck, and Diff threw a tarp over the load and began to tie it down. However, the end of his rope was frayed and he had trouble feeding it through the first grommet. At that point one of the farmers said something that made all the men laugh. Bryant knew it was a dirty joke though he couldn't figure out precisely why. Badge, who had older sisters and knew more about the anatomy of women than Bryant, saw the point; but he didn't feel

authorized to laugh, not being an adult. Sorting out an adult identity was perplexing, to say the least. On the one hand, both boys envied the insouciance, the slouching ease, with which the farmers casually tossed off an obscenity every few minutes. On the other hand—instructed by the secretive lore of their extended family—they esteemed that Braunhils were of a caste sublimely above the ordinary, whose scions were obliged by destiny to shun levity and unclean thoughts.

A half hour later they were on their way in Diff's truck, Bryant in the middle because he found sitting there more tolerable than quarreling with Badge over who got the seat by the window. Diff was a likeable sort of fellow despite having a jutting hawk-beak nose and cheeks that drooped into discernible jowls. He talked slowly, drawling out his words as if he had to pause mid-word to let his thoughts catch up with his language. He seemed glad for the boys' company and confident that they would want to know about his wife's hemorrhoids and his son Kenny's prowess as a football player, also about the strengths and weaknesses of every one of the players on the five teams in the county summer softball league—he being an enthusiastic participant, sometimes playing left field and sometimes third base.

Some of Diff's traits bothered Badge, particularly his drawl and apparent assumption that whatever interested him would interest everybody else. But generally, both boys felt at ease in his presence. They also liked his wife, a tall, willowy, flat-chested woman, not really pretty but very nice, as Mormon mothers were supposed to be. Besides Kenny, Diff had two other kids, a peaked-looking daughter of twelve and a sniveling boy of eight, but that was nothing to hold against Diff who couldn't help what kind of lackluster kids God gave him—Kenny not being much of a looker, either.

When they got to Showlow, Diff stopped at an auto parts store. "Won't be but a second," he said. "I'm going to overhaul the wife's car. Gotta pick up a couple of gaskets. This place won't be open when I come back through here tonight."

The cigar-smoking proprietor of a curio store was unloading Navajo rugs from a panel truck next to the auto parts store. He paused and stepped closer to the truck. "You boys are Braunhil kids, aren't you?" he said. "I know your daddy." He blew a cloud of

cigar smoke through the open window in an absent-minded way, almost as if he hadn't done it on purpose.

"We're not brothers," Badge said. "We're cousins."

"Hitching a ride with Diff Greenfleck I see," the fellow said. "You're riding with a hypocrite, boys. Diff was on the high council that excommunicated me. They ought to excommunicate him, too. More than one night I've seen his truck parked in back of that cathouse in Globe. Though I don't suppose he'll stop there if you're coming home with him tonight." He pulled the cigar from his mouth and stared at the saliva-slickened butt bitterly, as if it were the taste of the tobacco that bothered him rather than the unjust treatment of a Church court. Then he turned his back to the truck and went on unloading rugs.

Bryant wasn't sure what a cathouse was. It didn't seem likely that Diff would be picking up cats in Globe. There were more than enough of those around Linroth. Badge, however, knew it was a place where whores lived. That is, given the man's leering intonation, he supposed he meant a whorehouse. "Whore" was a word Badge had looked up in a dictionary in the grade school library, having heard it in the schoolyard at recess. Finding the word hadn't been easy because he assumed that it began with an "h." The librarian asked whether she could help. When he told her the word, she flushed and said, "You shouldn't be interested in words like that." Then she said, just before turning away, "Go ahead and look it up. Find out for yourself. But it begins with a 'w,' like 'where.'"

The cigar-smoking man came back to the truck window and said, "I suppose you're wondering what I was doing driving past the back side of that cathouse in Globe. Well, I'll tell you. Ever since I got unchurched, I've made it my business to do that whenever I come through Globe, which is twice a week in the summer. I want to see whose automobile I might find parked there. It would surprise you who." With that, he blew another cloud of smoke into the truck and went inside his store. A second or two later, Diff came out of the auto parts store and they were on their way.

"Somebody's been smoking a cigar," Diff said, after sniffing two or three times.

"It was that old guy who owns that curio store," Badge said. "He blew it in here on purpose."

"Oh, yeah," Diff said. "That's just like him. He's an old reprobate. Claims the good brethren who go to church try to get downwind from his cigar so they can enjoy it second hand."

Beyond Showlow they entered a forest of ponderosa pines. About ten miles down the road they came to a tiny hamlet named Forest Dale, which was nothing more than a small mercantile and a grouping of small, unpainted frame houses. On the porch of the mercantile stood a couple of Apache women wearing billowy ankle-length skirts and long-sleeved over-blouses of brightly colored calico. This was the reservation, Diff explained, and white people couldn't own land or live here—except for one fellow who had married an Indian and could therefore not only live here but also hunt deer and elk and run his bear- and cougar-hounds.

"I wouldn't mind being able to take elk on the reservation," Diff said. "Elk are smart. They know where the reservation boundary is, and they stay inside it. Of course, you would have to feel okay about your wife not bathing very often. These folks don't have bathrooms and a lot of them cook over outdoor fires."

Badge and Bryant knew about their smell. Every summer Apache families camped in the cottonwoods along the creek and picked cucumbers for the Linroth farmers, and on more than one summer Badge and Bryant had struck up a friendship with Apache boys. When they had time, they haunted the willow patches up and down the creek with these boys, who could talk better English than their parents. The Apaches slept in blankets wrapped in tarps, and as far as Badge and Bryant could tell, they didn't take off their work clothes when they went to bed. There was a spring near their camp that flowed with clear water for drinking and cooking and for hand-washing clothes on a Sunday afternoon. A lot of white people in Linroth looked down on these Indians, but Badge's and Bryant's parents weren't among them. Their mothers took turns bringing ice-cold sodas out for the pickers in their husbands' fields every afternoon except Sunday. The pickers never said thanks, that not being their custom, but their brown faces beamed with pleasure when they saw the white women approaching.

A couple of miles past Forest Dale, Diff and the boys went by a

grassy, treeless flat. At the far end stood the ruin of a sawmill—a caved-in incinerator and a long, wood, deck-like structure that Diff said had supported a conveyer chain. "Me and an Apache fellow named Horace Clayly pulled green chain at that mill one summer before the war," Diff said. "He was a nice guy. Talked good English, except of course all of them use verbs only in the present tense. Horace went on binges a couple times that summer. His wife asked me to drive over to Whiteriver and get him out of jail. Which I did."

By now it was only Bryant who was paying close attention to these details, being the kind of fellow who had to listen to what adults were saying and utter brief exclamations of an affirmative sort that would show his respect for their station, such as "Wow!" and "Gosh!" and "Boy howdy!" For his part, Badge was trying hard to ignore all the interruptions and settle into an important phase of his current episode of having to get married to LillieDale. Ever since school had adjourned in June, Badge had been creating elaborate daydreams about getting her pregnant to occupy his attention while working at vacant, mindless chores such as hoeing corn or tramping hay. He had generously sought to share his pleasant escape with Bryant, even going so far as to remind him of their mutual commitment to the vows of the Dogfrey Club, but Bryant had seemed at best indifferent. Badge's fantasies were essentially a saga, a series of episodes or, as it were, a serial daydream. The problem with a serial daydream such as this, of course, was that over and over Badge had to invent new particulars for what was fundamentally the same story, a task that had become increasingly difficult as the summer progressed.

Nonetheless, on this August day, traveling in Diff's truck through a pine forest on the highway between Showlow and Globe, Badge succeeded at last in screening out all distractions and settled into one of his favorite scenes. In it, a distraught, sobbing LillieDale informed her parents of her pregnancy. She could bring herself to do this only when her belly began to swell and concealment was no longer possible. Her parents were, of course, thunder-struck, her mother bursting into tears, her father into a torrent of rage. That scene quickly melted into another, in which Mr. and Mrs. Mortensen knocked at Badge's door and, upon be-

ing invited in by his parents, announced the condition of their daughter, who stood between them with tears of shame gilding her flushed cheeks. On hearing their accusation against his son, Badge's slack-jawed father strode to the backdoor and called his errant son to come forth from the barnyard and make his account, only to be informed by another son that an hour earlier Badge had tied his .22 rifle and a sack of provisions to his saddle and galloped away down a lane. In the meantime, Badge's mother sat on the sofa sobbing with her face buried in her hands. She knew only too well that news of the disgrace that had fallen upon her family would ricochet about town within a few hours, and it wouldn't stop at the town limits but would broadcast itself hither and yon, taking a prominent place in the repertoire of the county's infamous scandals.

The public nature of his disgrace was an indispensable aspect of the fantasy with which Badge entertained himself. He was pleased to imagine furtive conversations held at dinner tables in towns as far away as Holbrook to the north or McNary to the south. Women shook their heads indignantly, and men pursed their lips with incredulity upon hearing that over in Linroth a Mortensen girl had got herself pregnant and the Braunhil boy who had done it to her was hiding out in the mountains. Men were saying things like, "They ought to lynch him," and "Tar and feathering's too good for a skunk like him." It was a delicious notoriety.

Fifteen or twenty miles beyond Forest Dale, the truck bore the three travelers past a little valley spread with corn and squash fields and, alongside a cottonwood-lined creek, a cluster of frame houses. Just off the highway was a gas station with a sign that said this was Carrizo. A yellow cat sat on its haunches by one of the gas pumps. That set Bryant to wondering again what a cathouse might be and why Diff might be interested in stopping at one of them and, if he wasn't, then why the owner of the curio store would make up a preposterous story by claiming that he was. Bryant was almost to the point of wishing he hadn't come on this trip in the first place.

"I'll tell you a story about Carrizo, boys," Diff said. "A couple of years ago, I had a phone call in the middle of the night. I was home in bed. Chief of the police force over at Whiteriver said his officers were in a standoff with a drunk guy in Carrizo whose wife

was being held hostage. These Apache cops were playing it cool and trying to talk the guy into surrendering. The chief of police said on the phone the guy insisted he wouldn't surrender to anyone but his old buddy Diff Greenfleck, so would I drive out to Carrizo and get him to come out peaceful? I said, 'Who the heck is he?' Chief of police said, 'Horace Clayly.' So I did it, boys. Took me an hour and a half to get there. It was close to dawn. He came out, handed me the rifle, then broke down and started to sob. He had been through the war since I had seen him last, got shot up on Guadalcanal. All filled out now, a little on the heavy side."

Even Badge had to perk up and pay attention to that story, so much so, in fact, that when Diff stopped talking, he asked, "What happened after that?"

"They kept him in jail in Whiteriver for a while. Talked about a stint in the penitentiary. But it never happened. These folks are pretty lax on carrying out white man's justice. Four or five months later, they let him loose. Him and his wife still live in Carrizo. I stop by once in a while, drop off something out of our garden or maybe a five-pound cheese. That's the kind of gift they like."

"That's awful nice of you to take them some vegetables or a block of cheese," Bryant said thoughtfully.

Diff whistled a little and tapped a finger on a spoke of the steering wheel as if his mind had wandered on to some other topic. A few minutes later, with the truck grinding up a steep dugway, he went on where he had left off. "A sack of potatoes, five pounds of cheese—that ain't much of a gift, is it, boys? I'm just trying to make up for the fact he had to go to war and I didn't. I tried to enlist, I really did. But I had a hernia."

Shortly thereafter, Badge succeeded in slipping away into his fantasy again, being somewhere in these very mountains evading capture by Mr. Mortensen and his elder sons. These earnest individuals, assisted by a shifting variety of townsmen, combed the forested terrain relentlessly, forcing Badge into constant movement. He was, of course, the craftiest of fugitives, having achieved a cunning found only in coyotes or foxes that have survived to old age—grizzled and hatch-marked by scars from traps, bullets, and the slashing fangs of hounds. For example, Badge made sure the thickets and ravines in which he hid had more than one exit. He

hid by day and moved by night. He built small, smokeless fires and took small game by snares rather than by rifle. So expert was he in the art of concealment that he sometimes overheard the angry, frustrated speech of his pursuers only yards from where they had dismounted. Such details were enhanced when Badge shifted the scene of his narrative to such places as the Linroth post office where those reporting on the futile search in the mountains were beginning to express a begrudging admiration for the fugitive. "Who would have figured on it?" exclaimed old Wilbur Linroth, current patriarch of the town's founding family, as he fingered through his mail. "That Braunhil boy is one smart cookie!"

Eventually, of course, the plot called for his capture. Overcome by fatigue one morning at daybreak, he fell asleep and failed to muffle the nickering of his horse. By the sheerest accident, his pursuers also heard the sound and raised a mighty clamor. Although he awoke and, with a single leap, mounted his unsaddled steed, they had him surrounded. Pulling him roughly from his horse, LillieDale's eldest brother pummeled him with savage fists while a younger brother lashed him with the knotted end of a lariat.

"Let's hang him, Dad!" exclaimed this zealous punisher.

"No, sir!" said his father. "This boy is going to marry your sister whether he wants to or not. Now, listen to me, boy. Are you going to come peaceable, or do we tie you to your saddle?"

The unquenchable spirit of a mountain man of the Olden Days surged in Badge, and he leaped to his feet and sprinted for freedom, only to be knocked to the ground again.

The truck had come to a terrain chopped and broken by arroyos and canyons. Stunted piñons, gnarled junipers, and thickets of rust-brown manzanita dotted the landscape. They passed the junction to Cibecue, an Apache town of some size, as Diff informed the boys, where there had been a battle between the U.S. cavalry and some Apaches in 1881. It had had to do with a medicine man who claimed he had the power to resurrect dead Indians who would drive white people out of Arizona. Six or seven of the troopers and the medicine man were killed in the fight.

"You gotta admire the Apaches," Diff said. "There wasn't all

that many of them. But they still tied up most of the U.S. cavalry for five or six years."

About twenty miles past the Cibecue turnoff, they came to Salt River Canyon, a dramatic gorge into which the road dropped nearly two thousand feet via short, steep hairpin curves, only to cross the silvery river by means of an iron truss bridge, and quickly regain its lost altitude by equally steep hairpin curves. On the descent, the odor of burnt brake linings filled the cab; and on the climb out, the truck slowed to a crawl—all of which seemed to trouble Diff not at all. As cool and collected as if he were instructing them in their priesthood class on a Sunday morning, Diff lectured the boys on the vegetation of the canyon, particularly pointing out the bayonet-spiked agave plant, from which long, graceful, white-gray stems reached skyward, culminating in a halo of yellowish blossoms.

At the point where the road emerged from the canyon stood a café with a couple of gas pumps out front and, to the side, a large cottonwood tree whose overarching boughs shaded the café. A sign at the side of the road declared this to be Seneca. Diff steered the truck to a halt beneath the tree and got out. He said he was going to have some lunch and offered to bring the boys a soda to go with the lunches their mothers had prepared. They said no thanks because it seemed on the one hand that, since they had money, they couldn't accept his charity, yet on the other hand, having hoarded the money for weeks so they could spend it in Phoenix, they didn't feel good about spending it before they even got there.

While they ate their lunch, Bryant noticed a black and white dog sleeping in the shade of an awning. The dog reminded him of the yellow cat at Carizzo, which reminded him to ask Badge what he thought a cathouse might be.

"It's a place where ladies let you screw them for money. It's where whores live," Badge asserted.

Bryant was flabbergasted, having never thought of whores being people who might live in a clean, decent state like Arizona, whose history and constitution he had studied in the eighth grade.

"It's the same as a brothel," Badge said. "That's another word for a whorehouse."

Bryant naturally wanted to ask another question or two, but

Diff came out, putting a momentary end to his education in sexual matters. Diff handed them each a grape soda as he climbed into the truck. "Treat's on me," he said.

"You boys are in the teachers' quorum now, aren't you?" he asked as he looked up and down the highway before pulling the truck back onto the road. "We gottta get you assigned to an adult partner for ward teaching. Maybe your dads." After he had the truck on the road, he added, "But you likely would rather go with somebody else, wouldn't you? I went ward teaching with my dad when I was about your age. He wouldn't quit talking. I remember a place or two where our visit lasted more than an hour. Two hours, once in a while. He wouldn't have been rude enough to keep somebody else's boy pinned down so long."

Bryant was feeling doubly grateful to Diff just now, who had not only given him a grape soda but had also reminded him of what a faithful Mormon he was. Even if there was a whorehouse in Globe, the cigar-smoking owner of the curio store had it all wrong. A man as nice and decent and generous as Diff wouldn't visit a place like that. Not in a thousand years.

Badge was also grateful for the soda. However, unlike Bryant, he wasn't preoccupied just now with Diff and the insinuations of the proprietor of the curio store, being eager to get on with his current episode of having to marry LillieDale. He had left off the narrative at the point where the Mortensen cavalcade entered Linroth following its successful venture in the mountains. Now, with Badge's horse in tow, Mr. Mortensen lifted a hand in triumphant salute to this friend or that along Main Street. Behind him, the slumping Badge—bruised, battered, and securely tied to his saddle—stared indifferently at the ground. As the cavalcade arrived at the Mortensen house, LillieDale shrieked a despairing protest and dashed from the door.

"Back off, girl!" said her father sternly. "You'll have him soon enough."

Ordering one of his sons to fetch the bishop and another to alert the Braunhils to the imminent wedding of their son to his daughter, he ordered yet another son to help him tie Badge to a chair in the living room. "That rascal's a slippery one," he muttered. "Tie him tight. We can't risk his escape. Not after all this trouble."

A considerable crowd of Mortensen and Braunhil relatives assembled in the Mortensen living room for the wedding. Their talk was sober and subdued, nothing like the usual Mormon social gathering. Badge's parents brought his dark blue Sunday suit and a white shirt and tie, which Badge, released from the chair, put on in the bathroom.

LillieDale wore a loose-fitting lavender Sunday dress and held a modest nosegay of white daisies and blue bachelor's buttons gathered from her mother's garden. When asked to say "I do," LillieDale's voice broke, and she wiped away tears with the back of a hand, while Badge uttered the same affirmation with a sullen, downcast grunt. When the bishop had declared them man and wife, Badge brushed LillieDale's puckered lips with the merest touch of a kiss.

Badge emerged from his daydream when Diff pointed out, some miles beyond Seneca, a dead coyote on the shoulder of the highway. "That's rare," Diff said. "Coyotes are usually too smart to get hit by a car." They had by now passed beyond the lower-montane forests of juniper and piñon and were upon a wide plain covered by mesquite, chaparral, and patches of dry yellow grass. They saw some cattle sheltering themselves in the shade of a scrubby tamarisk grove near a windmill. "Tough country for animals in the summer," Diff said. "But there are more wild animals here than you'd think. Some mule deer, antelope, bobcats, coyotes, wild pigs—peccaries, that is, a distant cousin to the domestic pig, I understand. Folks around here call them javelinas."

Bryant listened with satisfaction to all these facts. He hoped he'd know about such a wide range of things when he was an adult. Badge, however, was once again feeling out of sorts with Diff for interrupting his daydream about LillieDale with talk about facts he already knew.

Diff hummed a bit of song, slapping a hand on the steering wheel in keeping with its rhythm. Then, as if there was a connection between peccaries and the song he was humming, he said, "When I was in high school, I drove to Mesa; and a friend and I drove on down to Tucson and went javelina hunting in the desert. Never saw any. My friend decided to relieve himself on a big overhanging rock. So he took down his pants and squatted and did his

business. A bobcat jumped out from under the rock. My friend stood up with his pants down around his knees and shot it. Back in Mesa we drove by his girlfriend's house to show off his trophy. She came out in pin curlers. She wasn't interested in the bobcat, but she did seem interested in me. So next time I was in Mesa, I went by her house and asked for a date. Now she's my wife. My buddy was sore for a while. But he got over it."

The truck rumbled on, hot air rushing in both windows. Bryant mulled this latest story, wondering what Sister Greenfleck had looked like in pin curlers when she was high school age. Badge, for his part, had finally managed to shut off the listening machine in his head and turned on his imagination, which had automatically begun to play the finale of his latest episode.

Following the perfunctory wedding ceremony, LillieDale's mother invited the guests to partake of cookies and punch which she and her sister had set out on card tables in the flower garden. The nuptial pair stood at formal attention, glass cups in hand, accepting the solemn salutations of their families, friends, and neighbors. Underneath a veneer of polite cordiality, these good, decent people could scarcely contain their seething indignation against Badge for deflowering such a delicate, defenseless blossom as LillieDale, who wiped tears from her downcast eyes every few moments.

Reveling in the ignominy into which the citizens of Linroth had cast him, Badge lingered on this lachrymose scene at length. Eventually, however, he had to disperse the crowd and imagine himself and LilliDale standing alone in the room where they had been wed.

Glancing piteously up at him, she obviously expected at best a callous indifference on his part. Happily, the narrative now called for Badge to yield to his throbbing love and allow a warm, reassuring smile to replace his hitherto stolid, apathetic countenance—a transmutation which the long-neglected girl at first did not dare accept as sincere. It was not until he took her in his arms and pressed a long, fervent kiss upon her lips that she began to feel the first inklings of a hope that had eluded her for weeks. Suddenly, relief and gratitude swept her wan, fine-featured face, and her eyes welled with happy tears. With that, this version of the saga ended.

About a half hour later, the truck pulled into a gas station at the outskirts of Globe. "Better get out and come inside, boys," Diff said. "You can cool off a bit before we hit the desert."

Bryant crawled out of the truck through the driver's door and followed Diff into the station. Badge didn't move. Although he was tired of imagining things just now, he felt compelled to at least outline a new plot before turning his attention elsewhere. He needed something shiny, something innovative, something that made LillieDale's suffering even more poignant and his own reasons for failing to reassure her of his eternal love more tragic. There was, he recognized, an illogic to his weeks-long evasion of capture which could justifiably be interpreted as a lack of pity for the despairing girl. He needed some dark compulsion, a sinister force, which left him no alternative to evasion. But who could call upon his best, most creative, most concentrated energy in such heat? With a surge of disgust, he climbed from the truck and stalked into the station.

Inside, Bryant was extracting a strawberry soda from an insulated container. "Want one?" he asked Badge, who grunted his assent and dug into a pocket for change. Diff stood at a counter feeding a few nickels into a slot machine. Sodas in hand, the boys watched while the slot machine's three little wheels, each bearing the image of a lemon, a banana, or an apple, circled frantically, always failing to halt with a winning lineup of a single fruit. "Well, damn!" Diff said at last, turning on his heel and striding from the station. "I won a buck last week," he added as they climbed into the truck. "But it's a fool's game. They adjust those slots to pay off about once every five hundred tries. They're illegal, you know. But, heck, Globe is a mining town. What do you expect?"

Moments later they topped over a hill, and a squalid, heat-blistered town stretched before them. It filled a narrow valley, its streets extending up a slope on either hand. Above the houses on the northern slope loomed a crushing mill, conveyer belt, and smelter serving an open-pit copper mine. Despite such evidence of a flourishing economy, the residential area presented the decayed, half-ruined aspect of a ghost town, as if none of its present inhabitants expected to remain for long and had no incentive to repair, clean, or paint. There was no hint of trees or lawn around

the houses, which floated like small, soiled islands in a sea of dust. At the center of town, the highway showed some sign of citification—a commercial district six or seven blocks long with curbs and concrete sidewalks. There were stores, a bank, a hotel, a couple of restaurants, and an insurance agency—with an occasional house standing between.

While the truck made its slow progress through town, both Badge and Bryant were entranced by the possibility that one of the tarnished, decayed buildings they were passing served as a brothel.

For Bryant, simply granting the possibility was a disillusionment, an unhappy schooling in the nature of mortality, something like the disillusioning—though also enfranchising—perception that his father and mother had had to couple in the same astonishing fashion as the bucks and does in his rabbit cages to bring him and his siblings into the world. Nonetheless, he remained at peace. He had made up his mind on the key issue, which was whether Diff would frequent such a place. He had already decided at Seneca that Diff was too likeable, too regular in attendance at church, too generous and considerate, to have secret associations with evil women. Furthermore, a hitherto tenuous thought had by now coalesced into a firm conviction for Bryant. The cigar-smoking owner of the curio store in Showlow was an arrant mischief maker, a man so given to evil that he could find delight only in tainting genuinely good men with accusations of it. It was such as he who—as the scriptures ordain—are to be cast into outer darkness on the day of judgment, a determination that had released Bryant from further agitation over this matter and allowed his mind to wander on to matters entirely unrelated to evil-doing in Globe, Arizona.

It was otherwise with Badge, who again struggled to lock his thoughts on the task of sketching out a new episode about having to marry LillieDale that would infuse his fantasy with a distinctly new energy. The present obstacle to concentration on this task was the disturbing question whether, late in the night, Diff Greenfleck's truck, loaded with empty cucumber crates, might be found parked behind one of the tarnished, decayed buildings lining this road.

Within moments of Badge's turning his thoughts to that topic, Diff stopped the truck at a traffic light. Waiting for the green sig-

nal, he whistled a joyless tune through puckered lips and again tapped a senseless rhythm upon the steering wheel with his fingers. A woman wearing a light blue sundress and white sandals crossed from the opposite side of the street in the crosswalk immediately in front of the truck. The thin straps of her dress made no pretense at covering her bare, tanned shoulders. Below the hem, which came a little under her knees, her legs were similarly tanned. Diff and the boys watched till she reached the curb near the truck. When the light changed, Diff revved the engine and engaged the clutch, and the truck passed through the intersection. For a few seconds, Badge could see the receding figure of the woman in the rear-view mirror outside his window. Just before they passed beyond her range, he saw that she had turned and started up the steps of a house.

Badge considered whether she was a prostitute. It wasn't her appearance that put that possibility into his mind. He had no preconceptions about what a prostitute might look like—except that she would surely have distinguishing marks of some sort. As far as he could tell, this woman had none. She hadn't a particularly pretty face, nor a nicely contoured body, nor a coiffure of any note. However, even plain and ordinary women were charged with an aura of sexuality that required attention. This one had to be considered, had to be assessed and ranked, if only for a few seconds.

Among the changes Badge had undergone during the past year was the perception that women no longer mingled indistinctly with men in the general population. Within a few short months, they had become, more or less all of them, objects of sexual interest. That this woman—that almost any woman—was sexually attractive to Badge was a discomfiting fact for both practical and moral reasons. Lust was not an emotion that any Mormon male, old or young, could easily admit to, it being generally supposed in the Mormon world that there is no similarity between the sinful emotion of lust and the ardor which drives a husband to beget legitimate babies upon his duly-wed wife. Badge had fed on lust for LillieDale without thinking of it as lust. It was love—tender, grand, unique in the annals of history, light-years beyond mere lust. But a sexual interest in a grown woman had something of the unsavory, even something of the incestuous, about it. It was like lusting after

his own mother. Although he had lately fancied himself a man—swaggering and swearing and teaching Bryant to do the same—he refused to imagine what went on in his parents' bedroom or at least, since from time to time he *did* imagine it, he made certain to expel it from his consciousness as quickly as possible.

Even worse, admitting a sexual interest in the woman wearing the light blue dress implied that Diff shared that interest—for among the changes Badge had undergone during the past year was the recognition that his sexual interest in almost any woman was shared by almost any man. This recognition would not have been an issue just now, or in almost any other circumstance, had it not been for the accusation that the cigar-smoking proprietor of the curio shop had made against Diff. Diff had said nothing about the woman at the intersection, nor, to be truthful, could Badge testify that he had watched Diff's eyes follow the woman. But it had to be assumed. The naive, innocent Bryant may have paid her no more attention than he would have paid a man. But if Badge had viewed her with a sexual interest, then so had Diff. The unsettling conviction now grew upon Badge that it was not merely possible, but certain, that Diff would visit a whorehouse on his way home from Phoenix tonight.

That certitude was something Badge didn't wish to linger on. For a few seconds, he reviewed the exonerating evidence—Diff went to church with his wife and kids every Sunday, he played softball in the county league, and he was generous and thoughtful to a couple of kids who happened to have hitched a ride with him. For a few seconds more, Badge noted that the evidence against Diff was dubious—the bitter testimony of an angry, rumor-mongering, cigar-smoking reprobate whose very appearance, starkly alien to the model of decency to which Badge adhered, undermined his credibility. Compulsively, Badge resumed his effort to jump-start a new fantasy about having to marry LillieDale. There was, in fact, a touch of desperation to the gesture.

Try as he might to fix his mind on LillieDale, he could not help envisioning—from the perspective of one who peers through a keyhole or some other tiny aperture—the woman in the light blue dress sitting on the edge of a bed in a room whose perimeter was lost in shadow. He had, he recognized, cast her in the character of a prostitute and from that followed the further recognition

that it was not, after all, so much a matter of being certain that Diff would visit a brothel on his way home tonight as of *hoping* that he would. Therein lay the shame. Someday not so far into the future, Badge would have to settle with himself—since no one else could do it for him—whether he himself would or would not stop to visit ladies of the night in Globe, Arizona.

The truck soon carried them through Globe's sister town of Miami. Although it too boasted a smelter and an open-pit mine, it was even smaller and graced by even less of a commercial district. Beyond Miami, the highway began a tortuous descent, passing through a tunnel and giving views of a handsome, arched bridge long before passing over it. Emerging from a canyon, the road passed through the town of Superior, set picturesquely amid barren, turreted sandstone mountains. Beyond Superior, at a point where the road began another descent, Diff said, "It's plenty hot, boys. But it's about to get hotter."

Shortly, the road leveled out on the wide, undulating expanse of the Sonoran Desert, which stretched distantly into a horizon hazy with heat and dust. The desert was thick with a gray, dusty, thorny vegetation: saguaro cactus with upthrust arms, giant prickly pear, domed barrel cactus, wicked-looking cholla whose branching joints bristled with sinister spines, and delicately arched ocotillo, which, according to Diff, was often used for fences in Mexico.

Diff wiped his neck with a bandana, muttering as he did so, "A little heat won't kill you." After a moment he added, "Actually, it *will* kill you if you don't have water. Lots of it. You sweat out a gallon a day in this heat. More if you have to work in it. Roofers in Mesa and Phoenix start work at four and quit at noon in this weather. Some of them take salt tablets."

In time they came to Apache Junction, which was nothing more than a handful of houses and a gas station where a road to Florence and Tucson split off from the highway to Mesa and Phoenix. A couple of miles past Apache Junction, Diff said, "When I get old, I'm going to move to the Northwest and build a house in a rain forest. It will have a corrugated tin roof and a bunk bed just inches from the roof, and night and day I'm going to listen to the patter of rain on the tin roof."

The air continued to rush through the open windows of the

cab like a blast from an oven, drying off perspiration before it had a chance to form. Bryant bore his misery stoically, his thoughts having pretty much gone into estivation, like a desert salamander or turtle that digs into the soil to escape the baking heat of the surface. For his part, Badge writhed with a poorly suppressed impatience. Almost anything that came to mind irritated him.

First and foremost among the irritants was his inability to find composure enough to generate a new daydream about having to get married to LillieDale. But a list of lesser irritants also presented themselves. He resented Diff anew for drawling when he spoke, a particularly acute irritant, given Diff's propensity for lecturing. He resented Bryant for playing the constant sycophant to any adult and also, as Badge reminded himself, for failing to pay his cousin the same kind of respect, considering that Badge constantly went out his way to think up clever activities, an example of which was the Dogfrey Club, toward which Bryant displayed an almost supercilious indifference. It wasn't easy to think of ways to pass the time of day pleasantly; and if Badge was kind enough to include Bryant in his special projects, then Bryant ought to demonstrate a little more gratitude.

After a while, they passed some pecan and citrus orchards; and shortly after that, houses began to line the highway. Pretty soon they came to the Mesa city limits, and their misery was compounded by the necessity of stopping often at red lights. They passed the Mormon temple, a handsome, flat-roofed, one-story structure with tall recessed windows and date palms and decorative orange trees all around. They toiled on through Tempe and on into the outskirts of Phoenix, where Diff pulled into a service station and made a phone call to the boys' Uncle Trevor, who would come pick them up and save Diff the trouble of crossing the city in heavy traffic with his loaded truck.

Trevor showed up after a while in a fancy new ice-blue Buick with a V-8 engine and air conditioning. He didn't look anything like his brothers, Badge's and Bryant's fathers, who were short, bald, and ruddy-faced and who, like their sons, could have passed for fraternal twins. Endowed with a full head of dark hair, duly oiled, and a carefully clipped pencil-line mustache, Trevor wore office attire—light poplin pants and a white shirt with sleeves rolled up to mid-arm and a tie with a half-loosened knot.

Trevor and Diff made arrangements for Diff to pick up the boys on Friday afternoon for their return to Linroth and then stood chatting in the shade of the store awning for a few minutes. Trevor seemed interested in the cucumber crop this year; also, he wondered whether the rainy season had started yet up north and, if so, whether the folks around Linroth and Saller's Cove were getting hit by some good thunderstorms. Eventually, he got around to asking whether Diff had ridden any broncs at the Pioneer Day rodeo in Linroth this year.

"You know better than that!" Diff protested. "It's been years since I was dumb enough to get on a bronc."

"Diff wasn't any older than you fellows when he started riding broncs and bulls," Trevor said to the boys.

"These boys are too smart to get into that game," Diff said, shaking his head ruefully. He turned and walked toward his truck, saying, "Gotta go get this bolt heap unloaded before the cukes wilt in the heat."

"Good old guy, that Diff!" Trevor said.

Trevor drove the boys across town to the brick and cement block yard where he was the superintendent. He bought them ice cream sandwiches from a machine and took them into his air-conditioned office, which wasn't much of a place—a couple of utility desks with swivel chairs, some filing cabinets, and half a dozen metal chairs set against the walls. He said a secretary normally sat at the desk that had a phone on it, but she had left early to make a deposit before the bank closed. After he had phoned his wife to let her know the boys had made it and could be counted on for supper, he said he had to get back out in the yard. He told the boys they could stay in the office where it was cool; or if they wanted to look over the operation, they were welcome to watch from a little roofed balcony where they'd be out of the way of men and machines.

The boys sat for a while cooling off, more or less slumped in a torpor of silence. Bryant was thinking about things at Uncle Trevor's and Aunt Sybil's house. They had five kids, all of them younger than Bryant and Badge. On summer visits to Linroth, the kids had acquired an expectation of wit and mimicry on the part of their cousins, which Bryant hoped he and Badge could live up to during the coming few days. He had in fact sanitized a couple of dirty lim-

ericks he had heard at school which he thought his younger cousins would enjoy. He was counting on Badge to lead the way as usual with some farcical ideas to keep the kids in stitches.

Badge sat abstracted, his head cocked a little and his eyes fixed on a plaque on the wall that said Trevor Braunhil had been certified by an institute in Milwaukee as a service master of some kind of a concrete mixing machine. A concrete mixing machine was what Badge felt like just now, his mind being full of inarticulate thoughts and feelings that refused to arrange themselves in an orderly sequence, being just bubbles of awareness that burst almost as quickly as they surfaced.

After a while, Bryant said, "Want to go watch them make blocks?"

"Might just as well," Badge said. However, he didn't move, so Bryant went out and closed the door.

Sitting there, still looking at the certification plaque, Badge realized he had never felt so depressed in his life. He hadn't known a person could feel so depressed.

He was wishing he hadn't been so certain that Diff would visit a brothel on his way home tonight. He was wishing he hadn't recognized that he *hoped* Diff would. He was especially wishing he hadn't realized, that sometime soon, he would have to decide whether he himself would stop there, too. Then it came to him that he had to make that decision now; and with that recognition, as ordained by a simple line of logic, his depression evaporated. If he could resolve, truly resolve, never to visit a whorehouse, then very likely, Diff had long ago made a similar resolution.

Then he began to feel depressed again for being irritated with Diff and Bryant out on the highway with the hot wind rushing through the windows of the truck. Also, he recognized it didn't demonstrate much gumption to make up his mind never to visit a cathouse in the future when he wasn't willing to give up his present vices, foremost among which was a non-stop daydream about fornicating with LillieDale. So he decided to abandon his fantasy of having to marry LillieDale, which made him feel depressed in a different sort of way because he could see there wasn't any end to this business of moral reformation, it now being his clear duty to learn how to get through the tedium of the day without fantasies

of any sort. With something of an inward groan, he made up his mind to get by with nothing but facts all day long.

But it didn't seem like there was much to live for on a steady diet of only facts all day long. Maybe things would change when he became an adult. But he wasn't sure, having observed good, decent adults for fourteen years. He never saw adults really enjoying themselves. They were mostly dedicated to work and worry and wondering if the price of pinto beans would hold up long enough to allow for a profit on the twenty acres of dryland planted to them. If adults tried to catch a moment of relaxation with a book in the evening, they promptly went to sleep in their chair. If they went to a movie, they went to sleep. At least, Badge's parents did. Also they went to sleep when they went to church—though as far as church was concerned, going to sleep could be considered a mercy. Nonetheless, facts were facts, and sooner or later Badge had to accept them.

Pretty soon, Bryant came back inside the office. "Making concrete blocks with a big machine isn't much different than mixing cement in a trough and pouring it into molds with a shovel," he said.

He sat down in a chair facing Badge and said, "A guy just came into the yard and reported one of the delivery trucks was broken down, and Uncle Trevor just said, 'Dang!'"

"My dad would've said 'Dadgost it!'" Badge observed.

"Where did he get that word?"

"Just made it up, I think."

"Braunhils don't ever swear, I guess," Bryant said.

They sat staring at each other for a while. "I've been thinking," Badge said. "What if we give up on that Dogfrey Club business? I have in mind when we get home I'm going to take my knife and dig that little sign off that pillar on the porch."

Bryant tilted his head and rolled his eyes upward to show he was weighing the matter carefully.

"It was a dumb idea," Badge said.

Bryant nodded. "Yeah," he said, "it kind of was."