

## What It Means

*Reed Richards*

I was looking at the morning through the window in the front room like a bear in a cage remembering somewhere there are meadows, and I noticed how much water was running down the gutter from the spot where the sprinkler was sprinkling. It made me sigh. At six o'clock Dad had set the sprinkler there and turned it on and instructed Odell and Charles to move it at intervals. He opened both bedroom doors and stood back so they both could see him. He said, "If you start now you'll be done by eight." But they had gotten up at eight-thirty, eaten cold cereal and run off in different directions knowing, I'm sure, what they were running away from. Now it was ten.

When I asked Mother whether my afternoon would be free she said we would have to see how things went, and I asked if she would like me to take crying Klayne outside for some fresh air. "It might do him some good," I said. Mother said he was too sick just then, and maybe in a day or two. I made up a poem that I liked to tell him for times when we I took him outside:

*Peonies are pretty as ponies,  
And roses, the redder the better.  
The marigolds can make you sneeze.  
But the snapdragons, oh! watch out for the bees!*

He couldn't hear it, but he could see it. When you put a lively look on your face it often made him smile.

I heard Mother singing "Danny Boy" to poor young Klayne. She said as long as he was crying and fussy to stay in and do some household chores, make the beds and were there any dirty dishes in the sink? "If there's anything else I need I'll tell you," she said. "When Klayne settles down you can go play with your friends." I said, "What if he never settles down?" and she said, "Your friends

will be around all day and every day. It won't be hard to find them."

The lawn must have been ready to float away. I decided I would have to move the sprinkler and had barely come out on the porch when I saw Mrs. Caldwell, dressed in brown, just turning the corner of State Street a block away and starting down our direction, drunk and all out of adjustment, making her way toward home. I decided to wait until she had passed.

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People could talk the worst scandal about Mrs. Caldwell, but at the end they would add, "Well, she is quite different" like they were excusing themselves for talking about her by excusing her for giving them things to talk about. Before she went downhill, before the façade began to crumble like Uncle Leo said, she had been as flashy as a movie actress—not the star of the movie but the brazen woman who gets in her way, like Joan Crawford got in Norma Shearer's way in *The Women*. Some of the details in that gossipy movie were lost to me, but I knew Norma Shearer's husband liked Joan Crawford, who sold perfume, better than he liked Norma Shearer, who stayed home all day and had servants. Mrs. Caldwell, dulled looks and heavier figure, didn't match that image anymore, but she still seemed to have that sense of herself in the evenings, walking downtown with her nose in the air somewhere between the horizon and midnight. I imagined Miss Crawford would have been the same, putting on airs and acting like she was the pageant everybody wanted to see.

I was weeding the rose garden in front late one afternoon and saw Mrs. C. walking smartly up the sidewalk dressed in a silky blue outfit with a little white tam on her head cocked forward and to the side and keeping the sun out of her right eye but not her left. She wore crimson lipstick and more mascara than I'd ever seen outside of the movies and had on heels. Some ladies wore heels to the movies and some wore them to church, but she was going to the pool hall, I think, though if she was trying to catch someone's attention she could have caught it anywhere dressed and made up like that. She spied two of the neighbor ladies, Mrs. Moser and Hilda Fellows, talking in the garden of the yard of the corner

house next door to ours, Mrs. Moser's house. In the late sunlight they were examining a hydrangea bush whose leaves had spots on them. Mrs. Caldwell approached them, smiling aggressively and confidently and with a look in her eye that suggested she was about to privilege them with the gift of her experience and expertise. The ladies weren't arguing or trying to figure out any problem, they were only tisk-tisking about what they saw. When they saw Mrs. C. they stopped their conversation and greeted her politely. She looked at a leaf. "Bugs," she stated. "Oh no, not bugs," Hilda Fellows said. Mrs. Caldwell, who probably knew nothing but rumors about gardening, suggested it was over-fertilized, and they said, "No, it's . . ." Mrs. C. interrupted and said it must not be getting enough water, and they said, "No, no, it's just sun scald." Well, anyone who doesn't know what sun scald is should probably not be giving advice about gardening. Hilda Fellows started to remind Mrs. Caldwell how two days previous, a very hot day, it had rained while the sun was shining, a donkey's wedding, but Mrs. Caldwell interrupted her and said, "Then if there's nothing that can be done you will have to pull it out and burn it so it doesn't spread." Mrs. Moser feigned surprise and gratitude. "Mrs. Caldwell, it is so kind of you to give your attention to my little garden!" she said. "But sun scald, you know, doesn't spread." The two ladies looked at each other and couldn't help grinning. In a huff, Mrs. Caldwell said, "Never mind, it's not my garden, so why should I bother?" When she passed me, walking more quickly than before, with a blush and a frown on her face and her chin a little higher, she glanced at me and whispered, "Biddies!" I could see she felt insulted and thought that Mrs. Moser had half-intended to insult her for being intrusive and knowing nothing. I smiled a sympathetic smile.

Mrs. C. deserved no more of my sympathy after the day I was out in front with Mother and she came along holding Till by the hand. Till was my and Charles's age, and a pleasant though not a close friend. His mother was dressed up in a pale yellow suit with the top two buttons of her blouse undone. Her lips and fingernails were scarlet. And again high heels.

"Hello, Bertha," she said, "isn't this a nice day for a trip to the dentist?"

"Is that where you're going?" Mother said.

“It’s Till,” she said, “with an abscess that needs to be lanced.” (At “lanced” my stomach fell a little.) “A nice way to spend a morning, isn’t it? With a good long hot pointy needle.” (Her eyes narrowed at Till.) “I could do it myself and save myself some money!” She laughed.

“Poor Tillery!” Mother said. “Let me see, Till.” She took his chin and turned his head to the left. She knew where the abscess was—he’d had it already at least three days. His jaw was swollen and red and he looked miserable. She felt his forehead for fever. She had told Dad the day before that if Till’s mother didn’t take him to the dentist she would take him and pay for it herself. (“You won’t pay for it,” Dad said. “You’ll give her the bill.”)

Mother was saying, “You look very nice for the dentist,” and Mrs. C. was saying, “He’s a good-looking man. I always dress for good-looking men.” Till took a small polished stone out of his pocket and held it out to show me. It was spotted black and white and gray like granite with a black vein through the middle.

“Pretty,” I said. “Can I see it?”

He handed it to me. “Where did you get it?” I said. “What kind of rock is it?” Just then Mrs. Caldwell put her hand like a big spider over Till’s face. It was awkward and cruel—I’ve never seen anything like it. “Tillery,” she said, “what are children supposed to be when grownups are talking? Quiet? What grownups have to say is more important than what children have to say. Mrs. Hobbs must think I am raising a little animal! I don’t know where Till gets his manners, Bertha. Where do you get your manners, Till? Probably your father.” She had touched his swollen jaw and made him cry out loud, and one of her fingernails actually left a small scratch in front of Till’s right ear. She let go of his face and patted his head. She looked at Till, who was whimpering. “Shut up, Till,” she said, “or you’re going to get it when we get home.” Till rubbed his face. His mother bent over him. “Come on. You know I wuv you,” she said in a sarcastic baby-talk voice. “You’re lucky your own kids are so well-behaved,” she said to Mother, who had gone a little pale with anger and an effort not to say anything.

As Till and his mother went on up the street, Mother looked at me and rolled her eyes heavenward. I felt guilty. I had spoken and

Till had caught heck. *Were* kids only supposed to be quiet around grownups? Till's mother was just showing off.

But Till never complained about his mother and he loved to brag about his dad. His dad had been in the Army and could do twenty-five one-arm pushups with either arm. He had done wrestling. His dad knew lots of jokes, and were they funny! His dad, Till said, never met a man he couldn't make his friend. It may have been true. Mr. Caldwell was tall and broad-shouldered, with a very short haircut. He seemed to laugh a lot. He could have been a high school coach or a boxer but was actually an accountant. In his way he was no better a parent than his wife was, but he didn't make a spectacle of it the way his wife did. Other kids complained about their parents because their parents made them do things they didn't want to do. But their parents didn't put themselves in front of their kids, didn't aggrandize themselves at their children's expense, didn't leave damage when they touched them. Other parents didn't lock their kids out of their house and throw parties with lots of drinking. Not until the last guest had gone could Till get back in, and that was only if the last guest hadn't locked the door going out, because Till didn't have a key and by then Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell would usually have been in no state to get up and open it. If you had set fire to their house they'd have died in their sleep and not known they were dead until the devil snuck up behind and said, "Gotcha!"

They might have thought that making Till stay outside was the best thing to do as parents, not exposing him to the raucous and profane chaos of their social life, but it was really rotten, pretty sad and outrageous. As soon as Mother found out Till was being locked out she told Till to come to our house and sleep on the couch, just ring our doorbell any time, even the middle of the night. Dad eventually bought a second-hand roll-away bed for him to sleep on. We gave him dinner if he hadn't eaten or hadn't eaten well, and Mother got him a toothbrush and taught him to say his prayers before he went to bed. Charles especially became his friend and took Till everywhere with him. I liked him too. He had the same sandy bruiser haircut as his dad, a crew cut, and it made him stand out. I thought Till was handsome with his brown eyes. I thought maybe after a few years I should fall in love with him and

marry him. Odell wasn't enthusiastic about him. The one time he tried to play a mean trick on Till like he always did on Charles and me he got into big trouble with Dad. As far as Odell was concerned Till wasn't family unless he could be mean to him. But Till *was* a member of the family, a special one, but more ours than his parents'. All the same, I had to admit that he was never happier than on mornings when his parents had gone to bed early, without any drinking, and woke up early and his mom made breakfast. He always told us all about it, and we were always glad for him. It was fair enough. I wanted to keep Till with us, but it was right to hope his parents would straighten up and be good parents all the time.

Late one night, when Till had been locked out and we were fast asleep in our beds, we were woken up by pounding on our back door and hysterical shouting, like a bat had got tangled in someone's hair. It was Mrs. Caldwell demanding that Till be given back so she could take him home. We weren't hiding him from her. We assumed he had told her where he stayed. But she wasn't entirely oriented to the sober world and she had pounded on several doors, knowing she was looking for us, but the wrong people kept answering.

This time it was Dad, and she shrieked, "Is my blankety-blank boy in here?" (The blankety-blank was profane.) "Give him the blankety-blank back!" (The blankety-blank was vulgar.)

"Yes," Dad said. "He's not going home with you."

"He's mine!" she shouted. "He's my property! I'll call the . . ."  
"Cops," Dad said. "I'll call them for you."

She quieted down. Dad had a talk with her. He told her that she was never to do this again, never to come shouting through the neighborhood in the middle of the night. For Till's safety he was staying with us that night and any other night we thought it was necessary. I was standing on the basement landing in my pj's and slippers and heard this. Dad made very sure Mrs. C. understood him. Till was still asleep. Dad told Mrs. C. to straighten out.

She didn't do it, though. What happened instead was that for a time the parties just got more frequent and louder. At night on the Caldwell's block their house was like the one jumping bean in the box still jumping and laughing and shouting and breaking bot-

ties. There were lots of complaints from neighbors and visits from the police. But then quite suddenly there were no more parties. Instead, on most evenings Mr. Caldwell would be seen getting in his car and driving southward out of town and staying away all night. After no more than a week or two of this Mrs. C. started coming out shortly after he left. She would be dolled up and would walk past our house to town. It was said Mr. C. was seeing another woman, spending time with her in other words, like Norma Shearer's husband spent time with Joan Crawford—some said in Lewiston and some said in Smithfield or even Logan—and that he had started doing this after he had found Mrs. Caldwell in a drunken situation with another man at one of his own parties. He was so mad he gave them both a black eye, one by one, and was still so mad at her and ashamed of himself that he couldn't stay at home with her any more. But it was only a big guess that he was seeing another woman—I mean, I don't think anyone followed him, though I suppose someone might have come across him in one of those towns. Then after a while it was rumored that it wasn't just one other woman, that if the Caldwells weren't faithful to each other, neither were they faithful more than once in a row to anybody else. They changed company as often as you might change radio stations. But Preston was just a small place—all the towns were except Logan. Very occasionally, news would break over the back fences of violent jealousies and scandals, always prompting Uncle Leo, when he heard of them, to say, "Not enough ponies on the merry-go-round."

I didn't really know what any of this meant. Soon enough Till was staying at our house every night, and even though he seemed happy, and I was very pleased to be able to do good for him as Jesus taught, I was curious to know the truth—what brought all this about? I asked Till: "Where does your dad go every night? Does he have some friends somewhere? Where does your mother go? Why don't they ever take you with them?" He said he didn't know. I said, "Poor Till! We are very kind to you." I told Mother that Till didn't know where his parents went at night, so should we try to find out for him? Mother said, "Oh, Charlene, you didn't ask him that! It's not nice! It's a heartbreaking situation!" I felt very bad, and when I saw him later on I said I was sorry. "Sorry about what?" he said. "For breaking your heart," I said. He looked at me

like I had him mixed up with someone else. "I didn't mean to," I said.

When I was around six I had a notion, showing what elaborate lengths children can go to to explain the world, that when people got married they had to sleep in the same house unless one of them was away on business or visiting relatives, and when they slept in the same house they slept in the same room and the same bed or in beds next to each other, as in the movies. When they did that and because they were married, God made them dream the same dreams, which showed that they were one, like the Bible said they were supposed to be, so if they do all this according to that commandment and hold hands and kiss, God makes them have babies. A natural law of creation that only applied to married people, which I knew because with the one baby doll I ever had (I never really cared for dolls) I told everybody I was its mother and Charles was the father, and Mother explained to me that brothers and sisters can't have babies together. But with married people, when a married person slept in the same bed or in the next bed with someone they weren't married to, that was when they were being unfaithful because it showed they didn't have faith in God.

By the time I was nine, I looked back at those notions as fanciful and childish. I had found out that people who are not married can and do have babies, though it was not something often spoken about. Knowing this raised more questions and made me feel frustrated and ignorant. One momentous thing I knew, because I was told by Odell, who was three years older than Charles and me and already a scientist, was that what husbands and wives did in their beds at night was make babies. "All night long?" I asked him. He said, "Of course." "Every night?" I asked. "Absolutely," he said. "Then why don't they have babies all the time?" "I can't tell you," he said. "You're too young." It was something to think about.

So the older I got the more mysterious it seemed. I knew Mrs. C. did things wrong that were somehow involved with this, things that sent her home still drunk and with tousled hair, her lipstick smeared and misapplied, her blouse buttoned wrong—a funhouse mirror version of herself—and not just from drinking but from drunken situations like the one Mr. Caldwell found her



in, whatever it may have been. But she didn't ever come home with any new babies or a rise in her belly.

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I had a cousin by marriage and an uncle, both, who drank. By the end the cousin could actually be seen to drink, which explained a lot of strange and obnoxious behavior, and the uncle, who never drank in front of us, never tried to keep it secret in the first place. Why people do it I have never yet solved, and I wouldn't be in the least tempted to do it myself just to see. You drink something—beer, wine, spirits—and it makes you dizzy and goofy. People giving talks in church have said that even just a thimbleful could make you an alcoholic, and, while that sounds farfetched, I would never be the one to try to prove them wrong. We might play games in the yard and twirl around and get dizzy and shout, “Look! I'm drunk! Carry me home!” but can someone sober really wish to make herself so dizzy that she stumbles around and falls down and then wakes up feeling sick? I knew that some people it made exuberant and hilarious until they went too far, some it made cruel, and some it made sleepy. In the summertime you could walk past the city park on any Saturday afternoon or evening, and see migrant farm workers around the picnic tables and in the shade of the elms and cottonwoods, marking the end of a work week and getting their Friday night cash pay, much of which they had already drunk off the night before. From the middle of the afternoon on, men with sun-browned arms and ropey muscles would be slumbering under the tables and the trees, even the bumpy shade of the big oak. On Sunday morning you couldn't walk through the park, if you were out for a stroll, without having to go around a dozen or more empty and mostly empty bottles of something usually called Tokay or Muscatel, some only partially exposed from the tops of brown paper bags, and if you accidentally kicked a bottle it might send a pink spray of what remained in it on your shoes. The odor was, as I would have put it, pointy, and made a sharp little pain in your sinuses that could bring tears. It was not altogether bad. It smelled like rotting fruit, which is what Odell said it pretty much was. “Rotgut,” he called it, “bum wine.” It attracted yellowjackets.

It seemed like my grownup cousin Audra's husband, Kenneth Howard, who would never have been found lying down in the city park, was born to give offense. Before he came to be known as a drunk he was known as a teller of off-color jokes, none of which I ever understood, and before that he was known as a boaster. He gained reputations for being obnoxious and doing bad as he went, like a boulder gathers rocks in a rockslide. He was someone who was bound eventually to lose control of himself. Kenneth Howard was a dentist and a good-looking man, very tall and broad-shouldered. He reminded me of Mr. Caldwell, only a little bit taller and more broad-shouldered and a little better looking. He liked to brag about how excellent he was at everything. He bragged about how being the Sunday School Superintendent made him a bigwig in his ward. He bragged about how he helped teachers who weren't cutting the mustard by taking over their class in the middle and teaching the gospel principles with more force and vividness. "The gospel is really true when I teach it," he said, as if he'd invented the Church. "They'll never forget it," he said. He bragged about how he dealt with rowdy teenage boys, including the ones who were giving a "sly eye" to girls, by taking them out of class by the collar or by their ear and reading them the riot act in the hall or, better, outside where every class could look out the window and see him and know how seriously he took his calling and how much business he meant. "They'll never forget it," he said. He used Odell to demonstrate his stern lectures once, and when his face got close to Odell's Odell held his nose not to smell Kenneth Howard's breath, which made Kenneth Howard furious—you could see it in his eyes—but everyone was laughing, so he had to laugh too. "Kenneth," said Uncle Leo, putting his arm around Kenneth Howard and squeezing his shoulder, "we'll never forget it!" And we all laughed even harder.

At about the time that Kenneth Howard added teller of dirty jokes to his reputation as a glad hander and a bragger and a bully, and before all this turned into outright abominable behavior, it began to be noted at these family birthday and holiday festivities that he paid frequent visits to the bathroom or to his car. Every time, he came back acting a little bit sillier—braggier, jokier, and louder, more demanding of everyone's attention. Eyebrows were

raised. He grew more unsteady, gave offense, told his off-color jokes and claimed they didn't mean a thing because, you see, they were only jokes. I remember the beginning of one, or possibly several, of them having to do with a farmer's wife and a traveling salesman. Since several there, including Uncle Leo and Aunt Peggy, were farmers and their wives, those jokes were the ones that caused the most frowning and grumbling and were most frequently interrupted by protests and refusals to let him finish, so I think I only ever heard the first halves of any of them. He began telling one joke concerning a farmer's wife and a gypsy, and Uncle Leo turned bright red. If he'd been in a comic strip three lines would have been coming out of each ear and his head would have spouted a tornado-shaped spiral. Every August Uncle Leo let a caravan of gypsies camp on his farm down in the bottoms by the Bear River for a couple of weeks. Everybody knew this, Kenneth Howard as well as anyone, since he and Audra once or twice a summer brought Alice, their little girl, to see the chickens and cows and ride the mare (who happened to be gray) with her daddy. The gypsies helped Uncle Leo where he needed it and he shared vegetables from his garden with them. They tried to teach him how to listen to the wind, but he said all he ever heard the wind say was "Whoosh!" The gypsies were pretty much nice people, not thieves as people would say, and they once gave Uncle Leo a puppy, which ended up our dog, the famous Louie. Before Kenneth Howard got further than mentioning the gypsy and the farmer's plump wife, Uncle Leo stepped in front of him, and loudly said, "Kenneth, that is the last joke you will ever tell us. And if you ever think of sneaking in another one I hope you can see that I am big enough to toss you through the door without opening it." Kenneth Howard laughed and said he hadn't meant anything by it, it was only a joke and no reason for getting all hackled up about it. But he didn't try to finish it.

Later in the year, when, in a moment of high spirits, he tried to kiss my cousin, his sister-in-law Alberta, who was nineteen and very pretty, and she shouted and struggled and gave him a slap, and a couple of uncles got up and moved forward like they would have to separate them, Kenneth Howard turned himself into the insulted one: a harmless joke! Why, wasn't it obvious he hadn't meant anything by it? If she didn't want attention, she shouldn't

be so damned pretty. But as time passed there were more and more things he didn't mean anything by. The aspersions and disparagements began to be spoken out loud by the other adults and not hidden from the kids. Someone had told Kenneth Howard a lie—that gin could not be smelled on the breath. Kenneth Howard the dentist.

At the bottom of this downhill path was a crisis that was strange and frightening, but even then funny. It was at our house, Dad's birthday, and the party had moved into our crowded front room after croquet and games in the backyard because evening and a wet summer had brought out unbearable throngs of midges and mosquitos and after them the bats. And it was Alberta again, still blossoming and more than ever trying to stay on the opposite side of the room from Kenneth Howard. Unfortunately, when she wasn't looking he caught her up from behind and clasped his hands in front of her stomach and put his lips and tongue on her neck, and she was so surprised and upset she screamed and jumped as if a mouse had run across her shoes, in the process giving Kenneth Howard a bloody lip and making him bite his tongue. Literally, I mean. Mother lost her temper, one of the only times I saw her do that, and gave Kenneth Howard a piece of her mind, shouting, "Kenneth! For shame! You are drunk! Don't you think we all know that? You are always drunk at every party, and it's not a secret! Shame, shame, shame on you! You go home right now!" It *was* a shame, the shame of having exposed yourself to shame and the shame of discovering that the cloud of shame had been over you for some time without your thinking so. The person most ashamed was his wife, my poor cousin Audra, who was less pretty than her sister Alberta. Her face went red and she covered it with her hands. And her parents, Aunt Delphia and Uncle Ed, were angrier than anyone else. They looked daggers at Kenneth Howard, which between them made a pair of scissors that would have liked to cut off their son-in-law's head and hands. As to Kenneth Howard, he cried and roared, with blood and saliva sliding from his mouth: "Hypocrites! Mormon hypocrites! You can't judge me! How can you judge me?! Thou shalt not judge!" He took a small flat metal bottle out of his blazer pocket and opened it and drank what was left and wiped his bloody mouth with his

sleeve. He roared again. People got out of his way as he lurched about and struck out with his fists, which, because he was so tall and so drunk, were slow and high up and easy for anyone but the wall and a painting by Grandpa Skidmore, which got knocked down, to avoid. He was like a big bear in a little chicken coop, Uncle Leo said afterward. You couldn't tell if he wanted to eat chickens or get out of there. Suddenly the roaring stopped and Kenneth Howard, the entire length of him, fell down on the floor with a big *thump!* and just lay there on his back stretched full out. I thought he must be dead until he started to snore. And cry. He snored very loudly with tears running from his eyes into his ears. Uncle Leo said, "Dolt!"

After Kenneth Howard was gone, carried out, and after Aunt Delphia and Uncle Ed and Audra and Alice and Alberta had also left, which was soon, with their heads down in spite of the hugs and words of comfort everyone tried to give them, one of the aunts said there was the story around that Kenneth Howard had fallen in with a female patient, who was leading him down the garden path. Whatever or whoever it was that made him drink, it was surely his overbearing self-confidence that made him think he could get away with it. With us maybe for a while, but with God too? The King of England wouldn't get into Heaven drunk, so "I'm Superintendent of the Sunday School" was no password to Paradise, even if it *was* a Mormon Sunday School.

I thought about the story later that night. I knew the garden path was an idea and not a real garden path, but I pictured a real one, like one of the four we had in our back garden that went straight back and separated the peonies and dahlias from the gladioli and those from the vegetables. They were bordered with moss roses and alyssum and pansies, and I saw Kenneth Howard being led down one of those paths by a patient, and the patient was Mrs. Caldwell in heels and her pale yellow suit with the top two buttons of the blouse unbuttoned. They held each other and kissed each other and shared liquor from a flat metal bottle and stumbled around drunk, like they were dancing and had lost the beat. Maybe the patient in question wasn't Mrs. C., but it fit with the things I had seen and heard.

Uncle Hugh, in contrast with Kenneth Howard, really was, without trying, the life of a party, and he always came sober, even

when the party was at night, and straight up as a pin and not even smoking. He would never have tried to claim that he wasn't a drunk, but he knew how to behave at family parties, and it was never an issue whether he cared who judged him. He had gone to the Great War never having tasted a drop, and he came back, Uncle Leo said, as horizontal as the killed, a breathing stiff. So he drank, they said, from shell shock, and to feel calm and at peace, to still his fears, he drank because of going through the War. I never heard anyone say he drank because it felt good and he liked it. But who but he would know? I never saw him acting calm and at peace when he was more than half drunk. His wife, Aunt Thelma, and his children suffered the shame of his reputation and the hardship of his irresponsibility and often enough the impact of his hands. They lived in a house that Uncle Hugh was hardly ever able to pay the rent on. The rent was mostly paid by relatives, those being Dad, his brothers, and the husbands of their sisters. Uncle Hugh accepted this charity with good grace and without bearing them any ill will. He even paid his own tithing whenever he had some money of his own left over from what he spent on destroying himself and those he loved. I think Aunt Thelma made him pay it.

Uncle Hugh, I said, always sober at a party, was often the life of it, but not by trying. He was a little man and almost everything he did or said when he was sober was cute. He was fun to play practical jokes on. A loud handclap at the back of his head would raise him straight up out of his seat and send him running into the yard, laughing uproariously by the time he stopped. Place a whoopee cushion under him and he would shout with laughter, re-inflate it and sit on it again and again, and it got funnier every time because of his delight.

Dad was the baby of his family, but Uncle Hugh was the smallest—and baldest too, I should add, without even the fringe allowed the other brothers. He also had the biggest and, as you might expect, the reddest nose. On his own he would drink himself senseless if he had the money, and it became a family responsibility for Dad or Uncle Leo or Uncle Sam or Uncle John or Uncle Will Shumway to hunt him down when Aunt Thelma called or fetch him home from the saloon when the bartender called, and do it

before he got knocked out cold in a fight or reached the point where he was legless and had to be carried.

When he was drunk and still on his feet he could be ugly and cruel and violent. One time he came to our house at night when he was only three-quarters drunk according to him and still standing and very angry about it, and he shouted and shouted like Mrs. Caldwell did the one time but even louder, for all the neighborhood to hear. For some reason he had decided to go door to door starting on our street (we weren't more than three blocks from the closest pool hall), but everyone knew him for the town drunk and no one would give him a single dime for drink. When he got to our house Dad went to the door and wouldn't let him in. "I'm not giving you money to shut you up," he said to Uncle Hugh. "Yell all you want, and when you're done think if tonight isn't a good time for you to start to reform." Uncle Hugh set up a caterwaul about sending his own brother out on the street with nothing but the clothes on his back and would have taken those away if they'd've fit him. I think it amused and embarrassed Dad about equally. "All right, come back," he called to Uncle Hugh. "Stay on the porch," he said, and he went back to his office while Uncle Hugh stood on the porch and smirked. Dad came back with a handful of change. "This is the only time I'm doing this," he said. "Next time I'm tying you up, putting you in a trunk and sending you off to Boise to dry out." He put two dollars in coins in Uncle Hugh's outstretched hands. Uncle Hugh turned away without thanking him, and Dad said, "Hold on a second. Are you going to tithe this?" Uncle Hugh turned around but before he could reply, Dad said, "Never mind, I'll tithe it for you," and he took back two dimes, which made Uncle Hugh laugh. And Dad tithed it too. He put the dimes in an envelope with a note stating it was from Uncle Hugh for tithing and mailed it to Uncle Hugh's bishop.

Another time, Uncle Hugh showed up at the back, and since he was quiet and polite at the door, he was allowed into the kitchen. Mother was washing dishes and I was drying, and before I knew anything, Uncle Hugh grabbed on to me and held me to him and I smelled the unwashable odor of burnt tobacco on his hands and the terrible, stale smell of cigarettes and, I guess, whiskey on his breath and up from his crotch a strong hint of old urine. He held me to him so long and so tight and it hurt so bad



that I screamed, and he still wouldn't let go, singing a loud song that was supposed to be in French but sounded more like cannibal talk in a cartoon, and I cried and Mother yelled and tried to pry me loose, and Dad finally took a big steel pot and banged loudly on it behind Uncle Hugh's head with a big spoon, which made Uncle Hugh jump and let go of me, and I felt a trickle on my temple where it had been jammed up to the middle button of Uncle Hugh's shirt. I touched the little trickle and the sight of the blood on my fingers made me cry even harder, more from the cruelty than from the pain, because I had no doubt Uncle Hugh had done it to be cruel. Uncle Hugh laughed at Dad's trick, but also at my tears. There is still a little scar.

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I never stole, and I lied only under threat, usually from Odell. I never killed anyone and always made my bed when Mother nagged, was kind to animals, kept the Sabbath Day holy according to my lights and did not worship any graven images. I didn't smoke or drink and had never slept in the same bed with anyone since Charles and I had gotten too old to. I only disobeyed the unpunishable part of "Do as your mother says, and be happy about it." Once in Sunday School the teacher asked me to name one of the Ten Commandments and I said, "Early to bed, early to rise." She said it was good advice but not one of the Ten Commandments, and I said, "Are you sure?" It was one at our house, and I hated it but kept it because no one in our house was allowed to sleep past six on school days and seven at the latest during the summer, though when Dad wasn't there to enforce it that commandment often got broken, and when he was there sometimes Dad got us up much earlier to work in the gardens. Of course, sin crept into our world, and none of us was without it. We kids fought and complained and were lazy and didn't do all our chores. We could be mean to each other, and, truth be told, the gossip some of the grownups did and that we learned from them was a sin too, and every gossip agreed about that and was happy to name at least three terrible gossips who should repent. I would have to say that in the balance I was good, but for a while, as I tried to understand what I wouldn't be told and was told not to ask



about, I had my eyes turned, from a distance, to the blurry side in hopes of finding my own explanations. What grownups disapproved of that they wouldn't talk about to children. What, for instance, Mrs. Caldwell did besides getting stinking drunk, I wanted to know. I'd already heard how dreadful it was, so I was sure to deplore it, but when it finally came to the big discovery, how mortifying my curiosity turned out to be! I wanted the illustrated version of capital B Bad and not just the word. In Sunday School Cain killed Abel and that was bad, and Saul was jealous of David and tried to kill him, and that was also very bad. They didn't tell that Noah got drunk and had his clothes off and they didn't tell us the terrible thing Lot's daughters did. They would never have told us that. They told us in a most general way about virtue. They told us that to be unvirtuous was to fall into Satan's temptations. And in the neighborhood Mrs. Caldwell, besides being called "quite different," was sometimes called "unvirtuous," so now that word "unvirtuous" was the veil that hid the truth. I knew a clue though—I knew Mrs. Caldwell went to bars, which were for getting drunk, but also for something else, whatever it may have been. One day my nosiness took me to a bar too, and got what I deserved. I only looked in from the street side of the doorway, but the angels watching over me had decided it was time for me to learn a lesson.

My cousin Marlee and I were walking arm in arm down the west side of State Street at noon. When we came to the Night Owl I saw the door was propped open—probably to air it out—and I saw a chance to satisfy some of my curiosity from the bright side of the entrance. Marlee pulled my arm and said, "Charlene! Charlene! Come on!" and I said, "Wait just a minute." Marlee let go of me and kept walking while I was wondering how people inside could find their way through those dark mazes with very little light and no Jesus. In the darkness, what was exact did stand out: the bar immediately to the right, which I'd seen passing; a few shaded wall fixtures that sent a dull yellow light oozing a few inches up the wall; a dim three-headed globe lamp on the far end of the bar that gave barely enough light to count your change or find your glass when you reached for it, definitely not so much light that the red tips of the cigarettes didn't glow brighter than the light when

the two men sitting halfway down the bar sucked in on them. They were in their shirtsleeves, talking and drinking glasses of amber beer that did happen to catch the daylight from the doorway. They didn't look like terrible people. They may easily have been men who came to Dad's store on Saturday morning with their wives to buy groceries. What was left to see was the icy glitter of reflected light on the glasses and in the mirror behind the bar and the glow of reflected light running down the curved surface of the bar and outlining the shapes of the backs of wooden chairs at scattered tables. The odors that came toward me were almost exactly the smells of Uncle Hugh, his beery breath and his sweaty, smoky shirt. It was also the smell times ten but minus the popcorn, the cotton candy, and the manure of some of the breezes of the July rodeo, where farmhands and farm boys came every year already drunk and making nuisances of themselves to girls. I couldn't see all the way to the back of the room, but I knew it was a pool hall, so there must have been some pool tables.

Besides the two men with their cigarettes and beers sitting at the bar in quiet conversation and the man in an apron behind the bar not paying attention to anyone, I heard some chatter and a sudden raucous laugh from a group I hadn't seen. I had to peer to find them, which I did, on the other side of the room, closer to the front. That laugh coming up from behind me in the tall weeds of an empty lot would have terrified me home. But here, if I was aware of myself at all I was aware of the border between light and darkness that stood between us like a fence, and that I was on the safe side of, the noon side, while they were on the midnight side. Why the boisterous magpie laugh? What was there to be amused about in this place? But then my curiosity all at once disappeared along with my safety when a big male voice boomed out: "Ya comin' in or goin' out? Make up ya mind!" Then the first raucous screech repeated itself and invented at the end of it a woman to have screeched it, who then screeched: "Come on in a pull up a chair, Charlene, and we'll get you a beer! Come on, Charlene, don't be scared! I'll teach ya how to smoke!" How she laughed the laugh of a demon, and all the people in the place laughed a laugh that was neither gay nor kind! My feet dissolved and my knees trembled. I was at the end of the block where Marlee was waiting,

and I was sitting at the curb with my arms wrapped around my knees before I could even consider where I was or how I had got there or where I had been and what I had seen. I was gasping and nearly in tears. It was like a terrible destiny had called to me from inside the bar. “They knew who I was!” I said. “How did they know?” Marlee laughed at me—it was my day to get laughed at, and to deserve it. “I said your name when you stopped at the door,” she said. “Remember?” I still felt upset and all the more foolish. Their voices, before the big insult, had helped me locate them. There were two men and one woman, and she had been on the lap of one of the men, and he had his hand somewhere hidden under her skirt, where it definitely hadn’t ought to have been. What a dreary, blind place to look for pleasure! What a wicked place to be unfaithful to your husband and your child!

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I had postponed my plan to move the sprinkler until Mrs. Caldwell passed, which I knew she must do, but after a minute or two of being lost in my thoughts, I realized that she still hadn’t reached our house, let alone her own, which was across the next street and a half a block farther down. So I went through the foyer again and opened the door, staying behind the screen door, and peeked, to check her progress, toward where I had seen her coming. She was still some ways up the street, and had stopped in the shade of an ash tree and was hiking up her satiny brown dress to straighten her stockings. But she kept stumbling backwards when she did this and having to start over. She was wearing heels, but they were wide and not very tall and couldn’t be blamed for her unsteadiness. A flicker with its polka-dotted belly and funny red moustache landed just above her on a limb of the tree she was under and started drumming rat-a-tat-tat, and she looked up, startled, and stumbled backwards again. Directly across from us on our wide First North, shaded by tall cottonwoods, was the little white house with blue trim and blue door where Hilda Fellows lived. Hilda was a widow who always did good and had good done to, like the widows in storybooks, the ones that weren’t witches. She was standing on her blue porch. She was watching Mrs. Caldwell too. We saw each other at the same time and she waved

to me and smiled. Hilda put her finger to her lips and turned and tiptoed back into her house. I saw her front window curtain part slightly and her nose touch the pane and a tiny bit of light glint from the wire rims of her glasses as she peered out. I went inside again too and stood at the front window with the curtains wide open and waited for the wandering Mrs. Caldwell finally to make her way slowly forward as through a dim corridor, past the cut and carefully edged lawns, to a place waiting for her, her home, which may have seemed many weary miles ahead. How many more dangers would there be? What challenges and how would they be overcome? The chaos in her way, of which no sense could be made, would have felt like doom to me. But she needed home. She needed a place to lie down alone and sleep it off.

This was not the Mrs. Caldwell who went to the dentist in heels and lipstick and an unbuttoned blouse, not the sturdy but buoyant, keen-featured but attractive woman from not so long ago. Not the Mrs. Caldwell who reminded me of a woman in a detective movie I'd seen, described by a man in the movie as "bullet-proof and built for high-speed cruising." She'd smoked cigarettes brazenly and said things that made people blush but were, some admitted, often funny and true. By now her brown hair had dulled some. Strands of it had fallen out of the carefully dressed wave that must have held them at the start. She is at a mid-point in the transition to who-knows-what?—something not so buoyant, not so bulletproof.

Watching her on the sidewalk, I remembered the woman in the Night Owl who laughed at me. I remembered the man's hand and where it was placed. It's more than alcohol that has kept Mrs. Caldwell away from her own house. If alcohol makes ladies sit in men's laps, especially, as the gossip suggests, men who aren't their husbands, then this is something I imagine having happened to Mrs. C. There is something men do to women that women assist them with. The maddening Sunday School word "virtue" is in danger from the gossip word "unvirtuous." I was taken away for a moment by all these thoughts, and I closed my eyes and saw, quite involuntarily, Mrs. Caldwell, her hair gone wild, sitting on Kenneth Howard's lap and wiggling and laughing and planting big red kisses all over his face, and Kenneth Howard laughing too,

with one arm around her waist and the other hand somewhere unvirtuous—on her belly where the baby would be. I opened my eyes to get rid of all this and was resolved to stay virtuous always—until I knew what it meant and forever beyond.

I opened the door again, wide this time, and saw Mrs. Caldwell, still one house up, come to a stop and pull her dress around from the high waist that no longer flattered her figure as it might have done last year. She let the waist fall, having adjusted her underwear, something other grown-up ladies would only do in private. She started to walk, pulling at her waist again, causing herself to list to the side, almost spilling off the sidewalk. She appeared to regard the edge of it with alarm, as if it were a high cliff she were teetering on the end of. Mrs. Caldwell, who was rather tall, bent dangerously forward and threw out her arms and rowed them backwards to regain her balance, which she did sideways with her arms still extended, like a duck landing in a pond. She then navigated back to the center of the sidewalk before moving forward again, though not exactly in a beeline. I've never seen someone make such a winding path out of such a straight one.

Her progress fascinated me, and, unless I were to be called to some task, once she had passed our yard I would probably step off the porch and not move the sprinkler until I saw her turn up the walk to her own house. Was this the same blatant, insensible nosiness that made me stop in front of the pool hall? Was there a kernel of scorn in my interest, an ounce of disgust? If any other person was observing this perilous journey, she (or he) would probably discreetly stay inside like Hilda Fellows was doing, and not act, as I did, as if it were a county fair sideshow, like the three-legged horse. She (or he) may have talked about it later in whispers but would be watching now mainly to ensure that Mrs. Caldwell stayed safe.

I'm coming to the great, epic event—the crossing of the garden hose—at about the same rate at which she came to it. That was where the fun took place. The sprinkler, as I said, had been in one place watering the strip of lawn between the sidewalk and the curb for hours when Mrs. Caldwell came wandering homeward at mid-morning after a mystery night of what the ladies called catting and carousing, when, crossing in front of our house, she discovered an impediment: a green garden hose across her way as

imposing as a serpent and more insurmountable than a castle rampart in the scale she perceived. Her effort was heroic, and more so for having to struggle with her own unsteady limbs and unruly balance. Her long march brought her finally to this important test, and she stopped short to review the circumstances, scouting the obstacle with her eye from one edge of the sidewalk to the other. She turned facing the street and swayed a little, like a ship, blowsy Mrs. Caldwell, and, either thinking she'd solved the problem or that she could meet it head on, lifted her right leg way up with her back to my view, as if she were about to straddle a fence. Either she couldn't lift her leg as high as she thought she had to, or once she had it lifted she couldn't launch herself forward, so she had to lower it in order not to fall down backwards.

Facing the garden hose again, foiled by it, she looked surprised and crestfallen. Disappointed, perplexed, determined, Mrs. Caldwell raised her hand and drew back a strand of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes and walked the length of the part of the hose that lay across the sidewalk, about four feet, looking, I imagine, for a passage, a gap she might go through. Finding none, she devised another tactic, and craftily decided to turn the other way and go over left foot first. She was facing the house this time, and I was able to observe her concentration, her knit brow, and, yes, her tongue, like that of a performer in a farce, thrust between her teeth to the right, like some kind of ballast. I noticed her brown shoes had peep toes, which I liked, and her toenails, like her chipped fingernails, were blood red. She raised her left leg higher and higher, as high as her right knee, giving a long glimpse of her white undergarments, but again not high enough to clear the two inch garden hose, and she was forced to retreat again.

Watching all this, I was as astonished as I was amused. I was pushing back worries, but there would always be plenty of time for those—about Mrs. Caldwell, about Till, and about—I should be honest—myself, the worry that had started with my peering into the bar. But the story was a merry one, and the retelling was even merrier, though I had to be careful who I told it to, not wanting to embarrass Till, and I suppose not even wanting to embarrass his mother. I told Charles in secret. The only friend I told was Marlee because she didn't live in the neighborhood. I told Mother while

she tended Klayne. I told Dad in his office after he came home from the store.

“Know how she finally got across it?” I said.

“No. How?” he said.

“She didn’t. She decided to go around it. She went across the squishy lawn to the curb and back up. She didn’t pay any attention to the sprinkler, and her skirt got all wet. It was clinging to her legs the rest of the way home.”

How he laughed!

It was and still is a funny story, worth laughing about.

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The rest of it was that when she got to the corner, all wet, and had to cross First East, which was very wide, she stopped and leaned forward, holding on to the signpost, and looked up and down, up and down the street. There were no stop signs on any of the corners, so certainly it was a risk for anyone to cross drunk, especially at Mrs. Caldwell’s distracted rate of progress. She waited and waited, turned this way and that, peering as far as she could in every direction. No cars came, but she could not go. I had stepped out on the porch to see if she would make it home and thought of offering to help her across, but was afraid that if any car did come she would end up getting us both knocked over and killed. So I watched her spend nearly five minutes ensuring her safety while no cars came until finally, finally a car passed going north. It was the green Packard of Uncle Will Shumway, a famously bad driver, who did not even slow down or look to see if any other cars were crossing east and west. I understood immediately it was what Mrs. Caldwell had been waiting for. There had to be a car, any car, coming eventually, and once it had passed it could not run her down, and she felt safe to cross. All that was left on the other side was just a little uneventful ways more to her house. No more garden hoses.

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By November, when the bare trees were drifting in the gray, windy sky, that midsummer caper had changed to think about it. For the Caldwells the situation made its onward and downward



progress. Mr. Caldwell had said he didn't love Mrs. Caldwell anymore and had moved out and was living in a basement apartment on the west side of town. People said Mrs. Caldwell was about to be evicted. The time most recently I had seen her in the street again and in the same state as on that summer day, her confused march had declined to an unconscious shuffle. If she'd encountered another garden hose she would have stumbled across it without seeing it and probably have fallen down and hurt herself. No one else I knew of had come down so low, not even Uncle Hugh. Mrs. Caldwell, I was told, had gone to Sunday School when she was a little girl. Then maybe we need bad examples as much as good examples, maybe we need examples of what not to become, and she had never had one and how she had ended up was just a bad accident, like being hit by a car. I decided I would never grow drab and numb like that. I imagined Jesus pitied her and thought then I should too. For Mrs. Caldwell, slovenly and disgraceful, repelled by everything that should have attracted her and held her, maybe there was some kind of virtue in her efforts, at least the virtue of coming home in the morning, but also some kind of love for her to exert herself as she did in the evening and then to suffer as she did afterwards, some kind of desire for something beyond herself and her hideous misery that she failed, always, to reach.

I don't know what became of her, whether she reformed and went back to her vain but generally sober ways or whether she kept drinking until it destroyed her. Uncle Hugh went to Boise for a year and when he came back he was dried up and a non-smoker and stayed that way and lived to be very old going to church and staying home weeknights and not, as would always be part of our memory of him, drinking himself to the floor at every opportunity. A couple of years after the garden hose incident, Mrs. Caldwell moved to Salt Lake and took Till with her. It was a great sadness to our family to lose him. He wrote to us for a while, as we did to him. And then years later, after I was married and living in Salt Lake, I ran across him at Albertson's and we had a nice talk and stayed in touch after that by Christmas card. I was curious about his mother but didn't want to embarrass him, so I kept mum about it.