THE HOME TEACHER

Heidi Naylor

Bishop warned Brock Hartman ahead of time. "They'll ask for a food order."

He opened a desk drawer and took out a binder filled with requisitions for the storehouse.

"But they have a decent income from the state, and their rent is subsidized. Let's help them figure out how to live on the checks they're already getting."

He penned information onto a page in the binder and rubbed the knuckle of one hand with the thumb of the other. The bishop's private office, down a carpeted hallway from the noisy foyer, was too warm; his face was pale and tired. He scribbled a signature, tore a page from the duplicate beneath, pushed it across the desk.

"I can authorize this one order since they're just starting out with you. But they get almost two thousand dollars a month, and we have working families doing fine on that. See if you can help them manage it." He replaced the binder in a drawer.

"Oh, and Brock." The bishop smiled. "Thanks for taking them on." Already his shoulders rose. One burden among the many, lifted. The drawer closed with a satisfying *thock.*

At the close of priesthood meeting, Brock got the new home teaching list, the same except for this addition.

Merton (P) and Sharla (F) Petshot. 62, 64.
504 East 45th Street Trailer K
McAdam, Idaho.
208-555-6732

Brock phoned Brother Petshot, who said to call him Mert. That next Saturday, his wife Terra assembled a loaf of banana bread, a container of jam, and a decorative card with their names and phone numbers. Terra wore her summer uniform: denim skirt, sandals, a thin blouse, and Brock wished she'd put some jeans on, more buffer against the toxic incursion of McAdam air.

McAdam had parts that were okay—neighborhoods flanking the river, the new park near the Shiloh Riverside. But the blocks surrounding 45th Street had an undertow of dissolution.

There were much worse places than this. Skid Row. Pain and Wasting, the dreary district east of downtown Vancouver, BC where Brock served his mission thirty years ago, cross-streets Main and Hastings on a city map. McAdam was Pain and Wasting's little sister; a mini Compton, a wannabe Watts. It couldn't compare really, this was after all Idaho; but it was in the running. Mexican drug trade thrived in McAdam, the newspaper's crime log seemed anchored there. Residents were none too friendly—skeletal and furtive or inked up, overlarge. The only legal businesses were a decaying Laundromatic, a dismal daycare, and a salvage auto field. Ruts and potholes pitted the parking lots. Chain-link fences were tangled with weeds and fast-food wrappers; rusty washer-dryers sat like sculpture at the edges of trailer parks.

And there was Animal House, a fetid and riotous boarding kennel for dogs. The Hartmans had made use of it once for Loki, the lanky shepherd Terra brought to their marriage. Brock and Jonah left Loki there, first day of the new family's spring vacation. Jonah was Terra's son, who at twelve had become Brock's son too. In the few years since, twin daughters had been born. It was a lot of change in a little time.

Brock could easily recall how Jonah had looked that day at Animal House: bereft and bleak as Loki allowed himself to be led, tail and head drooping, and then locked into a stained, disinfected concrete slab kennel. Loki turned and watched, panting with steadfast submission, as Jonah and Brock turned away.

"He'll be alright," Brock said. "It's just a few days."

He guided Jonah with a hand touched to the boy's back, and Jonah did not look back, though he did not hurry either. They'd walked together to the exit, as staticky Chopin wafted from speakers to counter the bark and whine and stench of a dozen dogs.

The price this twelve-year-old could pay, to have a father in his life, seemed an outsized force of feeling. But it was not a shock. Even now Brock could be stalled in his tracks by the memory of waking one morning, not long after his own tenth birthday, as Richard Hartman stood in the kitchen, making waffles. Stirring raisins into oatmeal.

"Brock-paper-scissors!" His father called from the kitchen. "Brock-and-roll, Brock-concert. You want maple syrup?"

Brock had thought he was dreaming, but the sun said different, a fuzzy, dazzling blotch through the window. Leaves behind the glass shimmered like sequins. His stomach bounced into his throat, his hands literally tingled. Mom emerged from the bedroom across the hall, later than usual; fresh and pretty, happy; he could still see her, smiling in the doorway. After breakfast, she kissed them both before she left for work. Her hand brushed Brock's neck; it lingered on Richard's forearm.

That Sunday, tall and tanned Richard waved at the neighbors as the family climbed into his car to go to church. He shut the door gently once Brock's mom was seated, walked around to the driver's seat of a car familiar only in that day's memory: pale vinyl interior, brougham top, slender silver gearshift protruding from the steering column like a magic wand. Richard winked at Brock through the rear-view mirror.

When they reached the meetinghouse, he grinned and shook hands with people throughout the chapel. People clapped him on the shoulder, winked at Brock. "Your dad. Looking good, huh?"

Mormons could be great forgivers. And even better at helping to pick up the pieces when somebody, namely your handsome father, walked out again a few months later. The ward rallied round—with attentive

home teachers, with Boy Scouts, the dignity of callings for Brock and his mom; with expectations and steadfast friendship.

His mother even got past things. "Your dad had a way with people," she said, with a few decades of distance. "Richard Hartman had a way with me. I couldn't fight it, even when I tried." She was speaking his name freely, easily. She shook her head, breathed in deeply. "I so wanted him to change." Her eyes were steady and pale; their blue matched her quilted jacket. She lived comfortably on the pension from a long-running state job plus Social Security. Brock's skills as a tax accountant had helped him help her. She had prudent investments, a tidy nest egg, little to worry about. He'd seen to that.

She touched his hand, her fingers dry as paper leaves.

"We didn't fare too badly, did we? I don't expect I'll see Richard again, even on the other side." Her eyes shone as she turned her face to the window. She shivered, almost imperceptibly. "I don't want to."

Brock was as yet unmarried. Untrammeled. *Not a forgiver,* his Mormon soul couldn't help but whisper.

It's all the style now, for women to support themselves and their children. Brock's sense was that a man, a real man, would never cause that to happen.

~

He parked on the hard-packed mud outside the Petshots' and was happy to see a car beside their trailer. A nice one, given the neighborhood. Next door, at Trailer L, a quartet of skinny mullets sat vaping. Brock walked around the car and took Terra's hand, and she sang out her hello toward the group at Trailer L, but got nothing. They turned back to the Petshots' home and climbed its wooden steps.

Some commotion and barking, some kitchen noise. The door opened, and Mert Petshot stood waiting in the dim light. He stepped aside to let them in.

A fish tank hummed at their left in a greenish flicker. Four metal cages stood on the far side of the room, two over two, blocking light from the window. A shadow moved inside a low, dark cage, and Terra stiffened at the shape and rise of a cleaver; in a moment, they saw it was only the mottled fur of a boxer, the flash of white at its throat. To its right was a larger, shaggy black Rottweiler. Its paws scraped against the cage as it rolled to its side.

"Beautiful dogs," Terra said. "Are they friendly?"

"If you're a friend," said Mert, and he grinned, exposing small fish-glow teeth. He gestured toward an old sofa.

"We have a pup and a grouchy cat," Terra continued, smoothing her skirt as she sat. She held tight to the ribboned loaf and the jam jar; perched at the edge of the cushion and kept her back straight.

"We have our son Jonah, plus twin girls, and with Brock here . . . I have all the wildlife I can handle!" She smiled, and when Mert said nothing, blinked her eyes at Brock.

"Mert," Brock said. "Thanks for inviting us in. We thought we'd get to know you a bit. Have you lived in Idaho long?"

"You the ones I call if I need something?" Mert asked.

"Sure," said Brock.

"Oh!" said Terra, "and we'd like to give you this." She held out her offerings.

"Got a new phone last week," Mert said. "How do I call you?"

"Take this bread my wife made, Mert," Brock said. Mert juggled bread, jar, phone; and the gifts tumbled to the floor, where Brock wondered if they'd be remembered before dogs were let loose to discover them. He tipped forward and picked up the card, showed Mert where to find the phone number.

Seeing Mert ordering his life on the phone, Brock brought up the church schedule—"The Big Three. Sacrament, Sunday school, priesthood meeting"—and they'd be delighted to see him and Sharla there. "You're part of us," he said. "You're part of the ward. Eleven on Sundays, week in week out." Mert didn't look up.

"Three hours tops," Brock kept at it. "And you find you're spiritually nourished, you really do. I'm convinced it helps to keep the Spirit with me. Church makes the whole week better."

Mert continued fingering the phone, and nobody spoke. A woman emerged from the dark hallway beyond the cages. She entered as though awakened from a dream. Her jeans were fastened with a safety pin and hung loose. She blinked in the light, and pushed the hair out of her eyes.

"Hello," she said. She removed a stack of mail from a chair and sat down. "I'm Sharla Petshot."

Terra stepped toward Sharla and introduced them. She took Sharla's offered hand, limp as a petal. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Brock lifted Sharla's hand too, for a few seconds, lank and cold, and greeted her. "I was asking your husband about his service in the military," he said.

"Got a pension from the Army," Mert said. "Plus SSI money, but people always grubbing at it. The all-holy VA's supposed to help me with my medications. But you don't get paid for an act of God."

Sister Petshot remarked on the lack of food in the house. "We heard of the Wicker program," she said. "But you can't get any products or disinfectant."

The kitchen stove could easily be seen, beneath a huge cellophane bag of popcorn and a carton of Pop-Tarts. Plastic 7-Eleven cups had toppled across burners and onto the counter.

"It can be tough," said Terra. "What can we do for you?"

"What're we supposed to eat?" Sharla's words overtook her husband's. "A groceries order from the bishop," he was saying. "I won't get pay until the 2nd." More than two weeks away.

Brock leaned forward, touched his fingertips together. "Okay. But how are you doing with your budget? Can we help you plan expenses? Maybe we can find a way to make the money last."

"I have problems," Mert began. "Didn't bishop say? There's a kind of mental illness I got. Pay rent to stay here, sometimes I can't pay. The church helps people like me."

Across the room, the dog scuffled in its cage.

They talked through the particulars of Mert's income, his rent subsidy. "If the church just gives you food, or extra money for rent, that's not helping you," said Brock. "The church is interested in helping you manage your resources."

Mert fished out his phone again. "I can't work," he said. "I got hurt."

He spoke in declarations and didn't provide details about his injuries. "The pain is impressive," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mert," Brock said, hands on his thighs. "But due to your service, to your injury, the state makes sure you have an income and some help with your house. Those are your resources. Maybe we can help you make them stretch."

Mert's head dropped. He mumbled softly to himself.

Brock started to press again, about planning. Terra laced her hand inside his elbow and pulled gently.

"What if we just did the one food order for them, Brock? That will help Mert and Sharla make it until payday. And in the meantime, we can help them figure out a budget."

When Mert heard the words "food order for them," he perked up some. Sharla watched the floor and chewed at her lip; she balled up her fist and knocked it on her knee.

Brock stood finally. "If I was to call, get the Relief Society involved," he said, "when could you go to the storehouse?"

Mert looked up. His rheumy eyes found Brock's face. "My dance card ain't that full."

~

"Mormon missionaries, no shit!" Clive Monson said. He began a spiky, pot-holed narrative. "My people came across the U.S. great plains. Not a few weeks but what Brother Brigham sent them on with the handcarts. They were sandbagged . . . made to move to Alberta. My great, great . . . whatever-the-hell grandfather from Bristol, England." He shaded his eyes

with his hands; turned left, then right, possibly imitating Columbus. "They read the Books of the Mormons, they helped to settle the Salt Lake Valley. *Then* they came to Cana-dee-I-O." He laughed. "A saying my mama told me. *Jesus left his sandal straps in Salt Lake City.* She learned that when she was a girl, helped her say her *s*."

This happened in Vancouver, decades ago. Young elders Brock Hartman and Scott Clubbersoll—Canadian Club—met Clive in that Pain and Wasting neighborhood, east of downtown. Clive Monson claimed a distant kinship to the apostle, now become the prophet in Salt Lake.

Clive slumped low against a blackened brick building, and his hands shook as he talked. A pigeon—they were everywhere—pecked at his shoelace. When he tried to stand, Brock helped him up, but Clive collapsed, first to his haunches, fingers clutching at the brick. Then a final breakdown onto the pavement.

"Whoa, there," Brock said. "You want to be careful." Canadian Club got on one side of him, Brock on the other, and they helped him stand once more. It didn't take, and he waved them away to crouch again on the ground. Talking had worn him out. His smell followed the elders back to their flat, stayed on Brock's hands and in his clothes.

But Clive showed enough interest to keep those elders coming back to the blackened building where he held court, and back again; as much as anything to wonder how he'd latched onto a couple shiny, clean-cut boys in double-knit Mr. Mac suits. Talking with Clive, who tried to be cheerful but quickly sunk into a silent, pervading doom, felt like slowly peeling the easy, daylight surface away from things, to reveal an abyss for which the young missionaries believed they had a useful, if not the only, ladder.

When Clive wasn't on the street, he squatted in a flat near the gaslight district, and sure they could teach him there, no problem, after his methadone kicked in, next Tuesday. "My day at the clinic, four o'clock."

Clive felt sorry for Americans because they had it backwards—"no on free clinics, yes on the guns."

Canadian Club laughed at that, hands loosely on the belt of his dress slacks. "Unarmed Americans with health care?" he said, with a wink and a grin.

"That's what you call a Canuck," answered Brock.

Clive mentioned that he wanted to work in America someday, "due to the tax structure," and as he looked up to catch their eyes, Brock realized the three were having an actual, back-and-forth conversation. His spirits lifted. Conversation—beyond Club's supervisory directives—had been in short supply.

~

On Brock's next visit to the Petshots', he took a ledger book and a Mason jar filled with Terra's chili. Mert took the jar and looked around.

"You want to heat that up before you eat it," Brock suggested. Mert walked into the kitchen and set the jar against the bag of popcorn on the stove.

"Don't know how I'm going to make it til the 2nd," Mert said, as he turned back. "Four days away."

Brock dismissed thoughts of Mert attempting to heat the glass jar rather than empty the chili into a pan. "Here before you know it. What would you say to making a plan for that money, when it comes?"

He broke the neat cardboard band and opened up the ledger, where orderly lists and columns awaited smart, thoughtful accounting entries. He laid it across the top of a pet cage, elbow high.

"You put the rent money here. Then you decide how much you'll need to spend on food. A car payment might be next."

Mert studied his cuticles. "You bring them groceries orders we talked about?" he asked. "That first one already ran out."

Brock said they'd get to that later. First came the figuring of SSI checks, groceries, penciled dollar amounts. He and Mert would clear some space among the animals, sit down and get to work, line upon

line. Dog food, fish food; heck, they'd get to the blessings of tithing one day. A simple matter: making a plan, executing it.

"Self-reliance," Brock said. "You have to . . . you know, you have to make the choice, work at it every day, and then, you'll see, you get accustomed to the plan. You start to rely on it. You're making a habit."

"The cigarettes," Mert said. "You know, I just gotta habit."

Brock cracked a grin. "Didn't take long, right?" He clapped Mert lightly on the back. "This habit won't take long either."

But Mert couldn't work up any interest in the ledger. "Didn't your wife want to be here, this time?" he asked.

"I figured we had the budget to talk about," Brock said. "She's busy with our girls." He walked to the sofa and sat a few minutes. He watched the dogs and touched his fingertips together, elbows on his knees.

"I get it, with the money book," Mert said, at last. He was still standing at the cage, where he fingered the edge of the ledger's vinyl cover. "Make a deal with you. You give me a order for groceries, and I'll write in the numbers."

Right.

"You'll write in the numbers," Brock said finally. "In the ledger? Or here on the food order?"

Mert stared at him. "Sergeant," he said. "I'll write them numbers wherever you say."

~

The young elders, Club and Brock, kept happening by the curbside on Wasting, first avoiding the alleyway near the junction with Pain, venturing closer and closer, hoping to connect with Clive. Nobody hassled them after a few times. Once a guy named Piefork brought them a bag of oranges, stepped backwards bowing after they finally took the fruit. A bookstore owner on Wasting kept their dusty, everlasting stack of Books of Mormons on her counter, beneath a tented index card labeled *FREE.* The neighborhood barber trimmed them up every three weeks

and refused their Canadian dollars: "My good deed to the preachers. Long as you bring it in washed."

Time and persistence were with them; or, as Club said of Clive, "He's ready. He's golden." And in a few weeks, the two elders were meeting Clive Monson at his flat. For portions of each day, Clive worked through scripture in a weak square of sunlight by the window there; sometimes with the missionaries present, more and more on his own. He liked the story of young Alma, changing his life.

"Brother did a shitload of damage," he said. "Fighting against the church, against God himself." He marked the page with his finger and looked up. "He changed, though. He came through, just like you said. He got to have his words in the book." Clive managed a laugh, mind and body clean for the better part of this new day. "The longest chapters! Dude couldn't shut up."

Club didn't miss a beat. "Compelled to share is why. Like us. We need the gospel as much as Alma did."

Clive looked dubious at this, but he seemed attentive as the elders read aloud. He took a turn, he read verses.

For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored . . . .

Within an hour, the three men had finished with scripture for the day, and Clive gave his first prayer. *Jesus bless for bringing these brothers here.* A clotted cough, an *Amen.* Clive raised his head, turned toward a taped break in the window frame. A flatmate groaned softly in the next room, massaged by the nearness of God or narcotic.

"I'm-a find a road out of this hell," said Clive. "See if I don't."

~

Bishop phoned Brock; kind, but firm: "Brother Mert Petshot's called the house a few times, left a message. He and Sharla, asking for a food order," he said. "Have you been able to work with them?"

They talked it through briefly; and the bishop's message was the same: "I really can't authorize continuing with the orders. There's a way to help them help themselves, surely."

Brock was beginning to doubt there was a way, but he made another visit. It was after dark, and the trailer's lights were dim. A filmy dust cloaked the Petshots' car; a cat scuttled beneath the back end and stared out with glowing eyes. When Brock reached the top of the three wooden steps, Mert opened the door wordlessly and stood aside.

Across the room, the ledger remained, untouched, on the dog cage. Brock mentioned the bishop asked him to stop by, see how things were going.

"Things are just not good," Mert said. "I'm out of money. I don't know. If I had gas in my car, I could stop at the store, if I had money for the store. But I can't even put the gas in my car."

"I've got ten dollars here, you can get some gas with this."

Mert fingered the bill.

"That's one piece," he said, "in a puzzle full a holes."

Below the ledger, the dogs shifted, releasing a smell like old lettuce. Fresh sweat from Brock, cigarettes from Mert. A plug of matted black on the carpet stuck to Brock's shoe.

"You wondering why I sometimes run out, ain't you," Mert said.

"Don't know what I can say to that, Mert."

"You thinking *you* would never run out like me." Mert's eyes held steady. "You and your jar a beans. I seen you with your wife. Your pretty-ass car. You ain't about to help."

Brock wanted to leave. He swallowed and coughed, employed his old and unforgotten tricks of distracting the body. He sucked in his stomach. Touched his tongue to the front of his teeth, opened his throat in a closed-mouth yawn.

He knew Mert had been dealt a tough hand. No family to speak of. His circular talk showed he was a brick or two shy upstairs. Add the Army, which—combat or no—might have been terrible, especially for

someone like him. Factor in illness, the never-explained injury. Add compelling habits, stir in everyday wearing-out.

Still, no tragedy had unraveled him that Brock could see. He'd not lost something precious, like a child; a country. Not faced down cancer, or explosives, or any real danger in the service. Baseless intuition on Brock's part, he clung to it nonetheless.

Focus on what you do have, his mother's words, singing into his thoughts. Mert had a sound mind, sound enough. Clothes on straight, buttoned up. Decent car. Expensive dogs, cigarettes, an expertise at wheedling. Income, from all-of-ours truly and other schmucks paying taxes and fast offerings. The fact was, you were looking at a real American life here—with choices.

And Sharla Petshot loved him. Managed him. There she was, moving in the darkness beyond the front room, waiting for Brock to leave and the day to return to its familiar depressing rhythm, only with more perishables in the fridge.

"Mert," Brock kept at it, trusting in firm but friendly reason. "When I run out, it's a couple factors. One, I quit watching where the money goes. I don't plan, just spend. Easy to do, because on payday, it feels like plenty of money, right?"

Mert was silent. Keep talking he'd have to cave, just to shut his home teacher up.

"Two," Brock said, "something big happens."

"A car repair, a person gets sick. Sharla sometimes doesn't feel so good, right? Happens at my house too."

Mert pulled out his phone, fiddled with it like a shrewd adolescent. Brock's pulse began to rise. He was concentrated on controlling it when Mert looked up. Sister Petshot had appeared. Same languid manner. Same green pilly robe. Lips curled in distaste.

"Tell him, Mert," she said.

"I got problems, and you have to help me," he recited simply. "The reason why I come to your church."

It was the clearest piece of communication that had happened between them.

Brock decided not to remind Mert that he hadn't *been* to church in weeks.

"My last ward? *That* was a good ward. Helped me all the time. They understood. A man like me got problems. I served my country. I belong to your church."

Smart enough. Likely competent. Opinion by me, trained and certified home teacher.

The big dog's toenails scratched at his crate, an underscore.

"I think you can make it 'til Friday," Brock said. He let himself out.

~

After Clive's prayer in the flat, they wiped their eyes like little girls. But Clive had a new worry to surmount. When the elders were with him, he felt he could stop using, quit the chase. But what about when they weren't there? *You globetrotters will be reassigned, get your transfer tickets like you do,* he said. *And what will I—*

This hurdle occupied the elders through a few blurred and corkscrew weeks, during which Clive alternately banished and welcomed them, showed up for meetings and then disappeared. They brought a couple members of the branch by, tried to help Clive make friends. Clive spoke with charm and clarity one day, mumbled and carried the whiff of vomit the next. He tossed his scripture into a dumpster and later fished it out; he succumbed to the needle, and next day withstood his craving another few hours. For an entire day.

"Clive," said Canadian Club, one bleak but opiate-free evening. "We can't be with you every minute. But listen." He opened his book. "'The keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel, and he employeth no servant there . . . whoso knocketh, to him will he open.'"

The young elders prayed, they laid hands on Clive's head and blessed him with strength of body, and then with resolve when the body failed; and for when resolve failed, they blessed him with grace.

As he prayed, his fingers tented and lightly placed, Brock thought he felt the tension leave Clive's jumpy skull. He was sure he could sense beneath his fingertips a curious mixture of softening and firming, as Clive's manic mind and body were becalmed. He thought of it for years afterward, how some sort of bad spirit had truly seemed cast away from Clive as they prayed a blessing on him—and as both he and Clive believed in that blessing—didn't they? On that cloudy, whip-wind night, they did.

They reached a week where Clive had gone three days without using; they'd been with him almost forty hours, trading sleep. Their white shirts became dingy, creased and sour from watchfulness. Clive was pale, clammy, twitchy, huddled in a blanket one moment, jittery and pacing the next. The elders sat with him on a depleted futon; one or the other followed him to the bathroom, since Clive was terrified of being left alone, even for the clunking, misbehaving toilet. He crouched and huddled in a corner of the curtain-less shower, through the water's turn to cold. Steam and mist faded as Clive's body was pummeled by the shower's icy shards.

The elders bent the rule of companionship. They took turns ferrying filthy blankets, towels, sweatpants, a tattered gray robe to and from the laundromat a few blocks away. At Woolworth, Brock bought bleach and detergent, then picked up two plastic-wrapped packages on a whim—twelve straight columns of white socks. Back at the flat, he unwrapped and folded them, glowing artifacts of a tended life. He stacked them on the kitchen counter like neat dinner rolls, rationed them to one pair per hour. Clive scraped socked hands over his ribs, his thighs, behind his knees, over his temples. When a bloody hole was worn in the cotton, Brock put a fresh pair of socks on him and tossed the ruined set onto a pile of trash. Across the room a stack of dirty towels anchored

a corner. Books and pamphlets littered the sofa, across the floor. Food wrappers, soda cans, orange peels. The elders took turns gathering it up and hauling it away.

At the end of the afternoon, Brock stood, in creased, over-worn and outsized dress pants; he paced the room as Elder Clubersoll read aloud in the low murmur Clive could tolerate. Brock turned to the broken window of Clive's flat, to the pocked, concrete-wall view. A wedge of dark shadow there, a sharp stripe of hard, days' end sunlight.

The view was small, limited; but he knew what lay beyond it. Vancouver, the chilly, gleaming city beneath pregnant clouds, cloaked in chrome and granite, bordered with the lace of a lapping shoreline. He moved closer, got a whiff of pure November cold, a glimpse of heavy sky. He felt a little better and put his face closer to that clean, clear air.

"A sharp and wondrous evening," he heard himself say. Words he never used, but sure enough, they'd come through his own voice. "Smells like it might snow."

Clive lifted his head. He stood unsteadily and walked to the window.

Brock whispered to him hoarsely. "We read about snow today. *Sins red as scarlet, and then . . . as white as snow.*" He paused and touched his fingertips to the frame. "As sifted, drifted, gifted snow." The words seemed to be coming from his mouth, but not through his mind.

Club was behind them, at the table. He looked up from his reading.

Here was the ladder, a glimmer in the darkening day. *Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.* In the silence, the glow from the window, he felt that the Lord had joined them. The scent of winter, a sweet ribbon of cold traveled into the room, a clean fragrance Brock would ever after recall and hope for.

"You don't *need* nothing, Clive." Club picked up the thread. "You don't need us. You got something better. You got the Lord Jesus Christ with you, right now. You go knocking, man. He's there."

"He's there." Clive echoed the words, in a whisper, the first words he'd spoken for hours. He stood at Brock's elbow, watching the narrowing strip of sunlight on the shadow of dusky concrete.

"I think my fever might've broke," he said weakly.

A few—very few—snowflakes found their way into the small wedge of space, drifted onto the windowsill like outsized grains of salt, conferring peace. Dignity.

Below them, around a corner was the wonderful ratty bookstore; further on, the grimy, hollow alleyway with its oily rainbows. A pink glow began to suffuse the grayness of the sky, and the tiny dots of snow skittered along, rising and falling, skipping and tumbling like children, as the weak sun behind the building held, and held longer. A slice of light, then a sliver.

They left the flat just before the light dropped for good. It was Clive's idea. "I want that bit of fresh air all around me," he said. Maybe he even felt well enough to eat. He clutched at the elders' elbows, needing some help to walk; he said the snow was piercing, the cold was an anvil inside his bones. At the diner he chewed part of a waffle and sat, motionless, pained if either elder tried to talk. They were near the faint clackety-clack of a railroad. "People going somewhere," Clive said. He picked up a pitcher of syrup, set it down again. He was too tired, almost, to lift his fork. "It's happier than it seems," he said. "Happier than it looks."

His eyes had lost their glossy, pinned weirdness. His fatigue spoke of a scraping, a hollowing and cleansing rather than the old tamped down, corrosive and chemical depletion. Eventually he managed a grin. "I'm here," he said. "I'm here. I don't mind the cold. I can *feel* it. About to shoot somebody for a cup of coffee, if I had the strength." The elders grinned back. Brock ordered him a hot chocolate.

"I'm here, elders," Clive said again when the train rumbled by once more. "I'm going somewhere myself."

~

Friday—Mert's payday—came and went. Sunday, no Petshots at church; but the week after, Mert called a couple more times, and once again talked Brock into a food order.

At bishop's request, Brock brought up the idea of a conservator. The state does this for people it deems incompetent, he'd said. A conservator could manage income, distribute the rent, the utilities, any debt.

Brock may have erred, explaining to Mert the incompetent part.

"Hand off my money to somebody, say, you," Mert said. "Then you parcel it out back to me. That makes as much sense as about . . . about a cocktease in a cathouse." His eyes jumped from Brock to the fish in the clotted aquarium.

"I'm a small fish in a eat-dog world. Always a bigger fish waiting at the next corner. I ain't giving my bishop your mo—" He stopped, and started again. "I won't give your bishop my money. It's my money."

Brock started to speak, and Mert rescued him.

"Save your opinions," he said. "The point is mute."

Lord help him, Brock submerged a smile.

"'S my money."

"I don't want your money," Brock said. "You've earned that money, through your service in the Army. I thank you for that."

Mert's head moved like a bobble toy. Again, Brock told him, if they didn't want a conservator, a *program*, he'd be happy help with their budget for a month or two, checking in every few days. But the food orders were a thing of the past.

"Think about it," he said, over Mert's protests, as he left. "This could work real well. And only if that wasn't successful," he said. "The planning, the care with your spending. Only then would we go the conservator route."

He walked to the car and didn't look back.

~

Not long after Clive was baptized, Brock's time in Vancouver was up. He transferred to Victoria, a place permanently shrouded in mist, where he taught three lessons in as many months. No takers; and not long after

that, his mission was over. As the years went by, he connected two or three times with Clive, who as far as he knew, had stayed clean and kept the faith. Clive had taken a job as a shipping clerk near the Montana border. He married a First Nation woman who had a son. He played church softball. That son would be grown by now. When Brock married Terra, he sent word. He tried not to worry much, at not hearing back. In the manner of men who shared something too large for talk, they'd kept their communications few and far between.

Both had taken their time, come through some trouble. Each had married a woman with a child, a woman who needed them. Brock chose to believe that each had continued on as best they knew, with the best lights they had. Sometimes he revisited his old missionary journals, to make sure those miraculous days and weeks with Clive were real. Faith, belief . . . he'd found these to be essential, but not so durable. Choices that had to be made daily, that had to be bolstered with prayer, language, memory. With action, and thus, always in danger of faltering. You hoped there was mercy. Hope—desire, patience, meeting faith halfway—that was more constant. He hoped Clive was doing well, that he had managed to hold on to the gospel. Club too. But as to the particulars of their continued pathways, he had no information; no answers.

And no answers regarding Mert. He'd stood so many times now on the Petshots' doorstep, paperwork folded beneath a loaf of Terra's bread. He pictured Mert as a kid in junior high, sitting alone at lunch, often with nothing to eat. Slow and befuddled, picked last for everything. Not likely able to read. He saw Mert's teenaged skinny neck and bad teeth, his unwashed hair, his pants too short, his shirt always stained. His mother in bed all day drinking, sleeping. The Army waiting in the future for his warm, twitchy body, another number toward their quota. His father, of course, missing.

Brock's father had been missing too. That was of course different. He had many other advantages, a fact he was not sure he'd truly considered before this moment.

"Life's damn expensive," Mert said, on Brock's last visit, matter-of-fact. It seemed to be Mert's only answer. Sharla Petshot moved about in the shadows behind him. "I have obligations."

Gambling debts? Brock wondered. Lottery tickets? Too many fast-food dinners out?

"Mert, isn't this an obligation?" Brock waggled the food-order papers at him. "Keeping back some money so you can buy some damn food? So other people don't have to buy it for you?"

He, holding his casserole, clutching his dispensary, benevolent paperwork. His gloomy charity. He was speaking to a closed door now.

~

That weekend, Brock worked a full Saturday. He was driving home, going to press some juicy burgers onto the grill, spend the evening on the patio with his three pretty girls, maybe Jonah would even stick around. They'd have a tablecloth, set up on the good part of the concrete. Play games after dinner. He'd read *Are You My Mother?* with the twins. "The snort went up. It went up, up, up . . . . And up went the baby bird." The girls would lift their arms with the words, get tired of it long before Brock would.

Mert called just as Brock made the turn in to his own neighborhood. Surprise, he couldn't make the rent.

"You gotta help me." The dashboard amplified his wheeze. "You're not helping me."

"Are you ready to figure out the conservator?"

"Conservative my butt," Mert growled. "I'm calling your bishop."

"Bishop will tell you the same thing I'm telling you."

"I'm calling him. You won't help me."

Brock eased up on the gas, there were kids around. You could tell the high water bills: Rookers' house, on the left, then the Siddoways', with the chevron pavers. A curve in the road, and his own place up ahead. The lawn needed tending, heat had got to the flowers; but it looked

pretty good. For a minute, he was eight, sweaty and proud, come in after cutting their scrabbled patch of grass his first time. His mom was at the stove. Brock looked into the saucepan. Orange fat in broken triangles over the surface of Bar S franks-n-beans. "I'm going to call the bishop," she was saying. Heat filmed up the sides of the pan. "I bet we can have our new home teacher baptize you."

"Mert," Brock sighed. "You do that. Go ahead, call him."

"Since *you're* not helping me," the dashboard accused. "Worst home teacher, I never had. That's all I'm saying."

"I hear what you're saying. I've tried to help you."

Cursing crackled through the dash. *Don't hang up,* Brock Hartman thought. End the call, but don't hang up on him.

"Mert—I have to say—"

"Don't preach to me. Some home teacher. You're supposed to help—"

Brock sped the car. "Conversation's over," he said, and pressed the hang-up button.

He rattled too hard into the driveway, where pink tricycles were flung in a jumble on the asphalt. Daddy was home. They were cooking out.

Last time Richard Hartman disappeared, Brock had been nearly twelve. So when the time came, Brother Thueson ordained him a deacon. He tagged along with Cleverlys on that year's father-and-son campout, and only once. Brock worked the warehouse three nights a week during high school, some double shifts during summer. Kept the job going an extra year. When he put in his mission papers, he had almost four thousand dollars, not half of what was needed; the church had to help Mom with the rest.

He was at a bad angle, but he cut the ignition and listened to the engine tick. A blonde pixie stood in the picture window, scratching her tummy under her t-shirt. She was holding a six-inch plastic horse, a look on her face like *This My Little Pony has gotten somewhat dingy, Dad.* Brock waved at her, rolled down the window to breathe. His daughter stroked the worn-out silvery mane on her pony. He watched as she looked away,

up toward some tree leaves, and sucked her thumb. Terra had painted some foul-tasting stuff on the nail, but she couldn't seem to stop.

A metallic ring from the dashboard. It rang and rang. Just past the hood, a small bird fluttered up, tracing a crooked path beyond the roofline.