

## TIMO'S BLESSING

Peter de Schweinitz

I remember that the sun shone warm but the air felt cool. A robin would have chirped in the branches that shaded my father, who was immersed in the savory smoke rising from the built-in grill. My four younger siblings spread about the enclosed patio, munching on snacks because the hamburgers were still pink inside. Across from me at the plastic table sat Maudi, a wiry woman with a deep tan, and a cigarette in her mouth, and Rod, a portly man with a slightly raspy voice, greying mustache, topsiders, and Vuarnet sunglasses tucked away in a front pocket. Maudi was Dad's mom. Rod was Maudi's third husband, the one that she kept.

It seemed strange that they had flown out to see us. In less than a month we would be making our annual spring-break trip to visit them in Tucson. As usual, we would spend a night or two at their middle-class ranch house across from a corral of horses before driving south across the border to Puerto Peñasco, known in Arizona as "Rocky Point," to spend a few days in their immobilized trailer home. We'd eat enchiladas to the sound of mariachi bands, sail the catamaran, and bake our skin while lying on our bellies in the sand. I looked forward to that trip.

I don't remember any deep conversations with Rod, or Maudi. It wasn't that they were shallow people; it was mostly that we were strangers. My maternal grandmother, the one we called "Grandmother," lived in a small home in Mountain View, just fifteen-minutes south on 101. She kept a playhouse in the backyard and poured us orange juice in small Archie cartoon glasses her own kids had used. Every spring, she took one or two of us down the coast to Carlsbad to boogie board at the beach with our aunts. I suppose I didn't have any deep conversations with Grandmother, either. But neither did I feel uncomfortable, as I did with Maudi, who wore a red bikini even after her breasts went south.

“How’s school, Peter?” Rod asked.

“Pretty good,” I said.

“You playing any sports right now?”

“No, the basketball season’s over. I decided not to play anything this spring. I’m working at the YMCA, teaching little kids sports. I’m trying to save up for college.” When I spoke to Maudi and Rod, I used complete sentences. This wasn’t because they were formal, but rather because I felt just a bit nervous.

“Oh, that’s good,” Rod said.

“I’m going to try out for the BYU soccer team in August.”

Maudi turned away and blew out a stream of smoke.

“I hope you make it,” Rod said.

I heard the sliding glass door to the family room open and close and then felt my mother’s breath in my ear and saw her square face at my side. From a distance, I looked more like Mom than Dad. Mom and I had blond, curly hair and blue eyes. Dad’s hair was black, like his two brothers, who would also be coming for lunch. “We just found out that Timo and Dave are homosexual,” Mom said. “They’ll be arriving soon.”



I’d seen a pair of homosexuals before.

One day, Dad had piled us into the car and drove north through San Francisco and across the Golden Gate Bridge before turning west through the eucalyptus trees of Marin County. We didn’t stop at Stinson Beach. We jogged north and then west around a cove to Bolinas, a sleepy village in the fog. Dad hadn’t been there in almost forty years, so it took a bit of searching before he found the right place.

“How long did you live here?” we asked him when he’d stopped the car.

“Oh, maybe six months, maybe a year. I went to kindergarten here.”

The cottage must not have been more than six or seven hundred square feet, a lonely structure on the round of a steep hill overlooking the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean. We saw no one on the streets. There were no other houses nearby.

We watched as Dad cautiously approached the cottage. He stopped. “Maybe someone lives here,” he called back. He took a few more steps, never

looked inside, and headed back to the car. Dad had been only five-years old when Maudi had fled my grandfather Lewis, a ski instructor who owned a lodge in southern Vermont. Dave had been three. Timo would not be born until they'd settled into Nevada with Maudi's second husband.

"Might as well see the beach," he said. "We've come all this way."

We hadn't brought our bathing suits, but I took my shoes off and walked at the edge of the tide. The shore bubbled with sand crabs as the water ebbed and flowed.

"You can catch clams here," Dad said. "My grandfather came out from Vermont and taught me how to eat them raw, right here on the beach."

Santa Cruz had wooden-railed roller coasters and girls in bikinis smoking cloves. Here, there were no roller coasters, no girls in bikinis, no cloves. There was nothing to distract from the dreary immensity of the sea and the misty sky.

The two men appeared twenty yards inland, on the dry, flat sand the water didn't touch. One man stood and another lay on a towel on his back. Both were fit.

The man standing up had his shorts on.

The one lying on the ground had a massive boner.

"How come that man is naked?" one of the younger kids asked.

The one on his back must have known that we could see him, but he didn't even blink. He didn't turn pale or change his expression, although we passed by at no less than thirty yards.

Dad didn't say anything.

Mom giggled—"They're homosexuals."

It was big, the mast of a ship, maybe a telephone pole for a seagull to perch. We saw a lot of seagulls that day, hovering, and rising over the sea. We saw pelicans too.



Although both Timo and Dave lived off and on in San Francisco, "The City," I had never visited Dad's brothers. In fact, we rarely drove further north than Menlo Park. San Francisco was a world away, a cluster of row houses and skyscrapers hidden in the clouds. We drove through occasionally. There

were the touristed areas like Pier 39 and Golden Gate Park, but there were other places too. Ugly places like the Tenderloin, with ragged men carrying paper bags and women with hips and high heels.

Mostly, I knew San Francisco from TV. There were things I would never see in person—bathhouses, where men did things I didn't want to think about, skin heads who bashed them on the head in places called the Haight or the Castro District. A gay man had gotten himself elected to the City Council and then ended up dead by gunshot. Wherever gays went, calamity followed.

Having been raised in the Palo Alto School District, son of Stanford graduates, I wasn't dense enough to tell myself that AIDS was a curse, and I quickly gave up using the word "fag" as slang for "idiot." Still, I knew there was something unnatural about the activities of such men. When I judged the world from inside myself, homosexuality seemed fraudulent. Men didn't want other men; they wanted women. They knew they did. In Palo Alto, we had regular people. Professors, engineers, lawyers, and businessmen.



Timo and Dave entered through the black gate beneath the magnolia tree and paused by the small, fenced off, Japanese-style garden, as if allowing me to size them up, or, possibly, to size us up. Biology had shaped both similarities and differences in the three brothers. Each had a full head of black hair and a thick mustache. But Dave and Dad had lithe bodies like their father, Lewis, and enjoyed finely chiseled cheek-bones and prominent, German noses. Timo, on the other hand, was built like his father, Warren, a ranch hand and miner with fleshy cheeks and a barrel chest. But although Timo was built like his father who could do a pull-up with one arm, Granddad Warren would never have worn a hoop in his right earlobe.

Not on your life.

What would the ranchers of the Independence Valley have said?

How hadn't I seen it before?

Probably, this was the first time he'd worn it, at least in our presence.

Dad's full-brother, Dave, had worn an earring for years. I'd figured it had meant he was tough—he wore it in his left earlobe, not his right.

Now, he wore a hoop in each ear. What did that mean? Unlike Timo, who kept his hair short, Dave let his hair grow long and wavy to his shoulders, much longer than Dad's, which was short enough for a business meeting.

Their clothing choices set them apart as well. The dutiful firstborn, Dad wore hush puppies and polyester slacks. The youngest, Timo, also dressed conservatively, but with the style of a younger generation. He wore jeans with an Oxford shirt and shoes I can't remember. Dave also wore jeans but with light brown work boots. This seemed to set him apart, to be, almost, some kind of statement against the professional world of which he had no part.

The work boots and earrings might have made Dave a kind of macho man but for the fact that he kept his shirt open nearly to his belly, far deeper than Burt Reynolds or Julio Iglesias. I had never noticed this before, either. One more button up the shirt, and he might have appeared to be a typical, heterosexual stud at a night club. With as many buttons open as closed, he suddenly appeared to me less like Burt Reynolds, and more like one of the men who sang about macho men on stage, maybe one of the Village People. A tarnished metal medallion on a thin leather cord nestled into his tan, hairy chest. (Mom later told me that he had previously worked as a model in Italy.) Images of bathhouses and man-sandwiches flooded my mind.

*Act natural.*

For a moment, everything was quiet. My uncles stood by the Japanese-style garden. My father remained behind me at the grill. Then, out of the corner of my right eye, I saw Dad pass by my shoulder. If Mom knew they were gay, Dad must have known it too. Emerging from the shadow of the awning of our middle-class Eichler home, he crossed the patio and extended his hand. Timo took a step forward and shook it.

"Nice to see you," Dad said.

"Nice to see you, too, Alan."

Dave looked a bit more circumspect. He stood back on his hind foot and kind of smiled. "Good to see you, Alan," he said, looking slightly upward at his older brother. Dave was only a year or two younger than Dad, but he too seemed almost of a separate generation. Dad was a father of five children, an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood, and a Vice President of Engineering, albeit at a small company. Dave was a single man.

Dad smiled, although he didn't show his teeth.

“There’s salad,” Mom offered, “and Alan’s got hamburgers on the barbecue.”

Maudi and Rod gave my uncles hugs.

Timo sat down across from me at the small, plastic table.

The hamburgers smelled ready.

“Hi Peter,” he said.

“Hi,” I said, holding up my palm. Dad had always insisted that I look a man in the eyes, and so I did. Shows respect. Confidence, too.

“Good to see you,” Timo said.

“Yeah, nice to see you too,” I said, smiling.

I grabbed a carrot stick and dipped it in ranch.

I took a bite and chewed on it, just like I didn’t know a thing.



Our family generally didn’t fly commercial. Usually, Mom and Dad drove us to Tucson, or Dad flew us out in a single engine plane he rented down at the Palo Alto Airport. I suppose those options were cheaper. Dad could rent a plane for eight dollars per hour, gas included, with his membership in the Mach Tenths Flying Club.

I’m not sure why we didn’t rent that year. Probably, it had something to do with the composite weight of our growing family. It may also have been the lightning storm that we’d weathered over the Mojave on a previous trip. As we had been thrown about, Dad had assured us that even a direct strike wouldn’t take us down. Maybe Mom wasn’t so sure.

Tucson doesn’t have lawns. It is a city of taco stands, stray saguaros, wide roads, flash flood canals, and dust. There is an inhospitable authenticity to Tucson. If Phoenix has golf courses and retirement homes, Tucson has hardware stores and funky shops selling Panama hats, psychedelic scarves, and horned-rim sunglasses. There is a certain parched severity found in Tucson, something that keeps a cheerful Mormon at bay—to the north a couple hours, in places called “Mesa” and “Tempe,” the eastern suburbs of Phoenix, where the lawns grow green and square and a white temple stands in the hills. In Tucson, there was no Mormon temple. I’m sure that Maudi preferred it that way.

I was surprised, over the next few days, when relatives from the East Coast showed up. Uncle Joe, Maudi's older and only sibling, was a lawyer in Brooklyn but kept a house on the coast of southern Maine. A man who wore bowties. His children were like him—preppy and accomplished. One of his sons had been the editor of the *New York University Law Review*. I have little idea what the others had accomplished, but they smelled like the Ivy League. Although they were a bit more formal and dressed differently than Palo Altans, they didn't fall far outside my norm for human beings. I didn't imagine any of them as gay.

I was standing alone in the middle of Maudi and Rod's living room, when Mom approached me from the side. "There are going to be a lot of people this year. You and Marc are going to have to camp outside." I thought about the desert.

"Is that OK?" she asked.

"Are there a lot of scorpions around here?"

"You'll have a tent."

"OK."

"Timo has AIDS," she said.

I felt almost as if I'd left my body. "He does?"

"He's looking everywhere for a cure."

I nodded my head.

"He's willing to try anything," Mom said.

"What's he trying?"

"Oh, alternative medicine—herbs and vitamins. . . ."

Some people said AIDS was a curse, but that wasn't scientific. The scientists knew how it was transmitted. Only superstitious people like Televangelists and Baptists believed it was a curse. Still, it seemed to make sense that they were the ones who were afflicted. After all, God was just. Even Darwin didn't agree with gays, and it wasn't often you found God and Darwin on the same side of the table. How could a man make a baby with a man? The species would fail

"Dave plays the role of the man," Mom said.

I pictured that.

"Timo plays the woman." I pictured that too.

She didn't mean that they were together. But everyone knew in those days that gay men were one or the other, man or woman, and what she said made sense. Despite keeping his shirt open too low, Dave looked tough. Timo seemed gentle, like Mom. Deep down even homosexuals understood the reality of the cosmos. I understood the attraction of playing at being something I was not. Once, in the third grade, I had worn my sister's green dress to school. I loved the tiny printed flowers from my shoulders to my knee. I loved feeling open to the elements, even after a kid tried to take a peak from below, But that was on Halloween, the one day of the year free to experience something you were not. Male and female, God had created them. Only male plus female could fulfill the purposes of creation.

"Dad is ashamed of him," Mom said, "but I think he's really nice." I didn't know if it was right to want it, but I still wanted it. I wanted God to cure my uncle, even in sin. Mom must have wanted that too.



That night, after I'd checked the tent for black widows and scorpions, Marc and I slipped into our sleeping bags. We didn't have pads, if I recall, but the pebbles beneath the canvas of the tent molded to our bodies.

"I feel sick," Marc said.

"What's the matter?"

"My stomach hurts."

When I had been a little boy, my father had done everything with me. We'd shot tin cans at Mt. Diablo, repelled into Matadero Creek to collect pollywogs, and flown kites in the coastal hills among the oak trees. But he hadn't spared so much time for my siblings. With five children, there wasn't enough of him to go around. Plus, he'd risen in the hierarchy, from a junior engineer working on circuit boards to a manager of people. He spent several days at a time on business trips, in Washington, DC and, later, New York City. Dad had taught me what he knew—how to fish, how to do math, how to burn leaves with a microscope, how do more math, how a plane elevates, and how electricity works. I taught Marc what I knew best—how to pitch and bat a baseball, how to drop-kick a soccer ball, and how to attend a party without drinking alcohol.



Dad had baptized me. I had baptized Marc.

"You want to say a prayer?" I asked.

"OK." Marc had Dad's long nose and Mom's light blue eyes.

"Do you want me to say it?"

"OK."

Our sleeping bags slipped down our backs as we knelt up in prayer. "Dear Heavenly Father," I prayed, "Thank you for all that you've given to us. Thank you for our tent and sleeping bags, and thank you for getting us here to Tucson safely. Please forgive us for our sins. Marc is feeling sick to his stomach. Please bless him to feel better. Help us to get a good sleep tonight. In the Name of Jesus Christ, Amen."

When I opened my eyes, Marc stuck his head outside the tent and puked.

"God answered our prayer." I said.

"He did?"

"Yeah."

Marc looked at me blankly.

"I said a prayer and then you threw up."

"Uh huh."

"You feel better, right?"

"Yeah. . . ."

It bothered me that Marc didn't get it. What good is a miracle if it doesn't build faith?



Usually, we visited Old Tucson, the western movie set where they taught you how to fake a punch; Tombstone; or the Desert Museum, where we walked a trail among the cacti, before heading south. This year was different. Because of the East Coast relatives, I guess, we didn't have any fun plans. Instead, we hung out at the house and ate cheese and crackers.

Although Maudi had raised her four children in a ghost town, she had grown up as the daughter of San Francisco socialites, and she liked cheese. This disgusted me. It was the way she liked cheese, saying things like "Mm, this is good," and, "This one's delicious." Stuff like that. It wasn't just the narration of experience; it was the nature of the commentary.

People who liked food kind of grossed me out. Food was supposed to be fuel and nutrition. Remember that fat kid in Willie Wonka who went up the chocolate tube? I had wanted to erase the image of the fat kid almost as much as I had wanted to erase Brooke Shields in *The Blue Lagoon* from my mind when I passed the sacrament.

There weren't any balls or Frisbees at Maudi's house, so there weren't any distractions from the cheese and crackers and the standing around the house except the pain in my back. Maybe sleeping in the tent had done it. I don't know if I complained about it, or if the problem in my back was obvious, but each of the three brothers had some piece of wisdom.

Dad's wisdom was not unexpected. Having served in the Army three years, a hiatus from college, he knew about posture. "We de Schweinitz's have long backs," he said. "You have to put your chest out and pull your shoulders back." He demonstrated, and I copied.

Dave had another explanation: "Have you ever heard of chakras?" he started. He and I were sitting alone outside on the low, garden wall by the hot tub. I remember that our knees were almost touching. Which didn't bother me.

"Chakras?" I said. I hated to admit ignorance, but I also hated to lie.

"We have seven, from the base of the spine, to the crown of the head."

I nodded.

"Each chakra is connected to an emotional or spiritual aspect of your life. Each has a spin. You want them to flow openly. The chakra at your base is related to survival." I cocked my head. "Things like security. Safety. Having your basic needs met."

"Oh, OK."

"The next chakra is your sexual center." He didn't touch my belly, but he pointed a loose finger at it. I wondered what it would mean to have an open sexual chakra. How could that be good?

Up he went: My solar plexus was about my power and authority in the world. That didn't seem so good either. Knowledge was good, but Jesus said the first would be last, and the last, first. The upper chakras seemed better than the lower ones.

The one in the center of my chest related to love. That was good.

The one in my throat related to expression. OK.

The one between my eyes had a strange name—the “third eye.” The third eye was the center of intuition.

The final chakra made perfect sense. Dave said it was a kind of gateway. I had never thought of the crown of the head as a vortex of energy, but I'd often received spiritual power at church through this chakra. When I was eight, Dad and some other men in the ward had laid their hands on my head and given me the Gift of the Holy Ghost, by which I would know the truth of all things. Whenever I rose to a new office in the Priesthood, a man laid his hands on my head and ordained me. Just three months before, I'd gone to the Stake Patriarch's house. He'd laid his trembling hands on my first chakra and told my future. I would marry a lovely sister in the temple and attend the Lord's University. I would need to watch out, because I was prone to mediocrity. On the plus side, I had a gift to nurture—that of redemptive love.

I wondered if our prophet, Ezra Taft Benson, knew about chakras. On the one hand, if he didn't know about them, wouldn't that make him ignorant? I'd learned that the Lord would not do anything without first informing the Prophet. Sure, there was more to be revealed, but further revelation would come through President Benson, not through some Indian swami. Either chakras weren't real, or they weren't from God. If they were real but not from God, what might be the source? The devil? I liked them, though. Chakra. It was kind of a cool name. I guess what Dave was trying to say was that my back pain had spiritual origins, and that those origins had something to do with either sex or survival.

Back inside the house, Timo's approach was a little more like Dad's:

“I teach actors in New York,” he said.

“You do?” I remembered Mom once saying he worked on sets.

“Imagine a string attach to your head, right here.”

“Right here?” I said.

“Yeah, that part of your head is called the ‘vertex.’”

He touched my head lightly.

“The string is connected to the ceiling.”

“OK.”

“It's called the Alexander technique.”

After he'd taught me his version of posture, he told me to lie down on my back.

When I pulled my knee up to my chest, he put a hand on my knee.

"You feel the stretch in your hamstring?" He said.

I did.

"Now, without letting go of your knee, extend your foot toward the ceiling."

"Ok."

"Now point your toe toward the ceiling as well."

My leg began to shake uncontrollably.

"That's weird," I said. "Why does it do that?"

"It's a reflex," he said.

I liked it. I liked lying on my back, my leg out of control. I liked it when Timo touched my knee too. I knew I couldn't get HIV that way. There was something very relaxing about feeling my body move without my intention.

Timo exuded an easy confidence that morning, passing down his wisdom, but later that day, when he approached my dad, he seemed different. A little nervous. In the afternoon, Dad and I were playing chess at a tiny table in the dining room when he pulled up a chair.

"I have something to ask you, Alan."

Dad looked up from the board, but hardly adjusted his posture.

"OK."

"I've heard that Mormons have a special kind of healing blessing." Timo didn't whisper these words, but neither did he broadcast them. "Is that true?"

"Yeah," Dad said. "That's true."

When you're a boy, even an eighteen-year old, you can look at adults having conversations and sometimes they don't mind at all. You're just there, watching from two feet away, and they hardly notice. I looked at my father looking at his little brother. It struck me how much younger Timo was. Dad was old, like forty-three or something. Timo was just past thirty.

"Are you able to give blessings?"

"Yeah," Dad said. "I can."

"Are people who aren't part of your church allowed to get one?"

I didn't know the answer to that one.

Dad looked down at his bishop and leaned back a bit. He stroked his mustache. Dad has a really good poker face, even though he can't play poker, because Mormons don't gamble. Could Dad use the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood to bless a non-member?

That had to be possible. I'd heard of it before. But could Dad bless a homosexual? I wouldn't have faulted Dad for blessing his mother, if she'd been dying then of lung cancer, even though she smoked. But sex and cigarettes are different, even though both sins could stop you from getting a Temple Recommend. Sex could stain a man's soul.

"I don't see how there's a problem with that," Dad said.



In the photographs taken right after Timo's blessing, Dave is wearing the thin leather cord around his neck, and another cord, a black one, with a rustic metal shape dangling in his chest hair. He turns away from the camera, looking back over his shoulder, as if he's a female model, showing off his butt. So much for Dave playing the role of a man.

Timo is wearing a pink shirt and tie. His top button is loose, his smile warm.

My great-grandmother, Dougan, a woman who grew up on yachts and clapped for the waiter, is wearing a green and orange blouse and a necklace of thick beads.

Aunt Lisl, dad's born-again sister, is wearing a floral skirt and blouse. Maudi has on thin white linen pants and matching blouse.

Dad is wearing a plain, blue oxford shirt with grey, polyester pants. Same as work. Same as church.

The East Coast relatives wear their more thickly woven oxfords, maybe a bowtie.

Everyone looks happy, even a conservatively dressed man and baby that I've never seen nor heard of again. Perhaps he is the husband of one of the East Coast relatives. I've not seen any of those relatives in more than three decades. When the matriarchs of the family died, not many years after the photo, the connections were lost.

Timo must have made an announcement, because an hour or so after Dad accepted his request, everyone gathered in the front room. The sofas had been cleared from the center of the floor, leaving a solitary, wooden chair that Dad set near the head of the room, away from the front door. For some reason, everyone stood about in a circle. Maybe Timo had requested that. Probably it was the natural thing to do.

“You can just sit down right here,” Dad said, putting his hand on the back of the chair.

I’d never seen Dad say a prayer in Tucson, let alone lay his hands on someone’s head. At least with Mom’s side we sang the Thanksgiving Song, “We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing.” Maudi not only didn’t believe in Mormonism, she didn’t believe in God, as far as I could tell.

I wouldn’t know how much Maudi disliked Mormons until I arrived home from my mission and Mom told me that she thought I was corrupting Japanese culture and until Maudi herself asked me how I could waste one seventh of my life on church. But even at the time, I recognized that the Restored Gospel wasn’t her thing.

I suppose for Dad, the blessing was a kind of coming out.

“So, I just go ahead and give the blessing,” Dad said.

Dave interrupted. “Can the rest of us join in?”

“Well . . .” Dad said.

I knew the answer to that one. I had the Aaronic Priesthood, and even I wasn’t allowed. Dave wasn’t even a member. My grandmother Maudi wasn’t even a man. Lisl didn’t even consider Mormons Christian.

“That’s not what we usually do,” Dad said.

I felt relief. That would have been going too far.

But Dave didn’t let up. He asked whether it would do harm.

Here’s where my memory fails. I can’t remember if Dad gave in or not. I have two memories. In one, we’re standing back, and Dad and Timo are alone in the middle of the room. In the other, we’re all there, laying on hands. That’s the way my littlest sister, Julie, remembers it. She was eleven at the time. What I remember clearly is my discomfort with the idea of breaking the rules. When blessing the sacrament, even a single word like “it” or “the” added or subtracted invalidates the whole thing. You say, “that they may eat in remembrance of the body of Thy Son,” and the bishop smiles with

approval. You say, “that they may eat *it* in remembrance of the body of Thy Son” and you’re back to square one. You have to start the whole thing over from “Oh God, the Eternal Father.” I never had to say the sacrament prayer more than once. Adam did, because he tried to recite it from memory. Never that bold, I read the sacrament prayer from the laminated card.

I don’t remember that Dad had any oil on hand. Our household mostly relied on Doctors Zlotnik and Zamvil.

“Timothy Butters, By the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood which I hold, I lay my hands on your head and give you a blessing.” I don’t recall what Dad blessed Timo with. Probably, my mind was too riled up to listen. I don’t even remember if he blessed Timo to heal.

What I remember are my thoughts: Could God really heal a man from a fatal disease, just like in New Testament times? In 1987 there was no chance for Timo without God. But would God be willing to heal a man who had not only sinned, but shaped his very identity around sin? Wouldn’t it be confusing if God blessed the sinner as easily as he blessed the righteous? What were miracles for, if not to draw a man back to the path?

“I would like to offer something,” Dave said, when Dad was done.

Dave placed his hands on Timo’s crown, not unlike Dad.

“I’m going to channel energy,” he said.

When he finished, Dave looked at me. I took it that each of us were supposed to contribute something. Given the fact that I only held the “lesser” Priesthood, I didn’t see what I could add to Dad’s blessing, but I bowed my head and prayed.

Mom deferred, if I recall, as did Maudi and Rod.

I don’t remember my siblings there at all, although they must have been, but maybe not in the circle. They are in the photographs, and Julie has her memories.

Aunt Lisl stepped forward and spoke in what she called the “Adamic language.” The Doctrine and Covenants speaks of the Gift of Tongues, but I took that to mean something like French or German. Lisl’s words didn’t sound like any languages I’d ever heard. I remember a lot of bubbling “B” sounds. Nothing glottal or stopped. As she spoke, her arms and torso swayed, as if moved by the rhythm of her own song.

At the close of the circle stood Uncle Joe, Maudi's older brother, the New York City lawyer who would, after Maudi and Dougan died, rework the inheritance to channel the bulk of the wealth in the direction of his children. Joe, in yellow shirt and bowtie, said a good, Protestant prayer, hardly different than my own. He even addressed it to "Heavenly Father" and closed "in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."



Later that afternoon, Dave drove Anne and me to his apartment. It was a small, tidy place. He showed us a painting on his kitchen wall. I hadn't known he was an artist. Mom told me he painted houses for a living. The painting portrayed him standing on a ladder, painting the inside of a room.

I noticed a strange drawing taped to another wall. While Dave was otherwise occupied, I examined it more closely. I noted that it was an advertisement for a party, depicting a naked man chained to a pole, and giving a date and time. When Dave looked over, I looked away.



By the next day, the East Coast relatives were gone and we headed south, the Sonora Desert stretching out dry and abundant as far as the eye could see. We had been going to Puerto Peñasco as long as I could remember. Even thinking of the place opened something in me.

Sitting in the back of the SUV with Dave, I tried to name the plants, but got no further than saguaro. Dave gave me a few of the names; there were agave, barrel cactus, lyceum, desert marigolds, and buckhorn cholla.

"What do you call those ones again?" I asked.

"Which ones?" Dave asked.

"Those ones with the yellow flowers."

"Ocotillo," he said.

Dave and I sat close together. I noted that Dave and Dad had the same smiles around the edges of the eyes and the same refined cheeks. Dad's skin was milky white, like Grandfather Lewis. Dave had inherited Maudi's bronze skin, courtesy of a Portuguese ancestor who had tried to pass as Anglo.



As the desert rolled by, we drew with a pencil on a sketch pad.

It had been a long time since I'd thought I was any good at art—since kindergarten, when Mom had set up an easel out back by the lemon bush and I'd painted apple trees with watercolors. At Gunn High, I had taken art as a freshman, but never put much stock either in it or my abilities to do it. I worried about every line I drew. Frozen, almost, I wanted everything to be perfect. "Don't worry," Dave said, as I erased the bad lines.

Dave held out his hands to receive the sketch pad.

"You don't have to worry about mistakes," he said, scratching his pencil across the paper in what seemed a haphazard fashion. "If you don't like the line, just keep scribbling until what you want appears. See? Darken the lines that you like."

From the several dozen lines he'd lightly laid down, a man began to appear, and as the man appeared, Dave pressed harder with his pencil.



Mexico was to the United States as Tucson was to Phoenix. I felt freedom just knowing that we were approaching the border. Sometimes we visited Nogales to haggle over the price of a sombrero or eat turtle soup, but this year, if I have it right, we didn't. At a border stop well west of Nogales, we pulled off the road under a roof with a Mexican official in a baseball cap. Dad and Rod, the drivers of the two cars, entered a tarnished, cement building. When they returned, we continued southwest toward the Sea of Cortez.

There was much to love in Mexico: There were the animal crackers (so cheap!) and the wooden carvings in the blankets laid out for sale on the beach. There were the patches of housing, seemingly placed willy-nilly, and the pedestrians crossing the roads wherever they liked. I had a sense, almost, that life in Mexico mimicked my uncle's style of drawing. A line here, a line there: darker lines must have emerged over time, as make-shift housing grew into *de facto* communities. In Palo Alto and in Phoenix, everything had its place. Planned out. To my young eyes, Mexico was organic.

Hubcaps.

Food wrappers.

Orange peels.

Kids without shoes.

I don't think my sense of freedom came only from the fact that I was on vacation, or that I wasn't learned in the cultural mores of another society, although that's also true. On the beach, there were often blue-clad soldiers with black guns strapped to their shoulders, but this didn't seem restrictive. It was exciting. The locals waded right into the sea wearing t-shirts and shorts. What I saw was spontaneity. Not only spontaneity: nonconformity. Mexicans didn't need to have the proper attire. As a teen, I scoffed at people who wore matching ski suits in Tahoe, or fancy tennis outfits on the courts. Mexicans seemed to think like me.

In Half Moon Bay, I didn't meet kids at the beach. In Puerto Peñasco, I made friends with local boys, who seemed to be there without parents. We taught each other through pantomime.

I made a fin with my hands.

"Tiburón," they said.

"Shark," I said back.

I put my palms together and moved them around.

"Pescado," they said.

"Fish," I replied.

One boy handed me his sunglasses and they rowed me out to sea. That was part of it, I must admit. As a gringo, I was almost royalty. Mostly, though, it was the freedom I felt. Even the weather was unpredictable.

One day, while Dad was sailing the catamaran with Anne and me, the wind suddenly increased and one of our pontoons lifted off the water. Anne cried as we sped back toward shore. I felt as if I were a hero, braving great adversity.

Puerto Peñasco seemed to change the rules, too. In the fifth grade, I was walking past the card table in Maudi and Rod's trailer when I came across Mom, sitting an arm's length from a can of beer.

"What's beer taste like?" I asked.

"You can try it," she replied. "It's Maudi's."

I took a sip and put the can down.

"What do you think?"

"Beer tastes bad," I said.

In high school, Anne drank on occasion. I didn't see the appeal. Why drink something bitter that makes you lose control?



Mom and Dad got a room in a cheap motel. I don't know where Timo and Dave spent the night. We five kids stayed with Maudi and Rod in their trailer in bunk beds and on the floor. There was a trailer park with Gringos north of the beach, but that's not where we stayed. Maudi and Rod's trailer was permanently parked in a lot just off the fairgrounds among old shacks and fishing equipment. I say permanently because it had a room added on, and I never saw the trailer move. I rarely saw anyone except a vendor or two pass through. They'd come to the solitary domicile, open a blanket of wooden figurines for our review, and then depart, back to the beach, I suppose.

After we'd dropped off our bags, Rod hitched up the Hobie Cat and drove off toward the beach. The rest of us put on our bathing suits and walked along the chest-high, cinder-block wall that separated the lot from the fairgrounds. My little sisters, all gymnasts, took turns balancing on the wall. As we walked, the occasional Mexican man in white t-shirt or tank top, wearing polyester pants and cheap dress shoes, whistled at them. Like all of the men in my family, Mexican men had mustaches.

"Eh, Muchacha!"

"Chica bonita!"

Back at home, when I saw a cute girl, I might look again, maybe even try eye contact. If a girl looked interested, I might smile. If she smiled back, I might say, "hello." In Mexico, a boy didn't need to hide his desire. There was nothing ironic about the attention they administered to my sisters. They didn't smirk.

That afternoon, Rod stepped on a crab and then kicked the pontoon. He didn't kick it on purpose. His foot just flew off the crab and smashed his big toe on the boat. He sailed anyway. I liked watching him, with his pot belly and tan skin. I liked his Vuarnets and sailor's cap, his throaty voice. I liked the authority in his hands, as he cinched up the sail or let it out.

I rode Maudi's windsurfer and then dried off. Lying in the sand, the water evaporating from my body, I imagined what I must look like from the

outside. The blond hair. The athletic body. Not too shabby. After a while, I felt itchy, so I dove back in to rinse the salt off my baking skin.

Maudi didn't have any sports equipment. No balls. No bats. Growing up in a ghost town in rural Nevada, Dad and his brothers hadn't learned to play football or baseball. When the population is twenty-seven, it's hard to form an athletic league. They knew how to fish, hunt, and milk cows.



In previous years, we often went to the old part of Puerto Peñasco to dine in a dim restaurant with a mariachi band. This year, however, we drove in the other direction—north past the beach and several, large white houses such as I'd never before seen in Mexico. Apparently, there were upper middle-class people here too. I must have been impressed that such houses existed in Mexico, because I remember asking who owned them. I don't remember the answer.

We pulled into a large, rectangular building.

We entered to find several long tables set end to end. No one else was there.

We ate enchiladas.

After dinner, we danced solo, but all together, a disco ball scattering light across our bodies. I don't remember Mom, Dad, or Rod dancing. Maybe Maudi did. I have a vague, possibly invented memory of Dougan, eighty-nine years old, stepping to the music. Dave had rhythm in his step. His hips moved side to side, as if sliding on a finely greased rail.

Dad was light on his feet and had excellent rhythm, just like Dave, but he wasn't comfortable with rock. Having graduated from Elko High in 1960, the Rolling Stones and Doors had not yet formed, and the Beatles had not yet crossed the Atlantic to do work on the sixth chakra. But at their formation in 1960, the Beatles' sound wasn't yet potent enough to split a generation. Timo had rhythm; he looked comfortable dancing to rock and roll. But he wasn't as light on his feet as his older brothers. It was the late 1980s, so we danced to the likes of Madonna. I seem to remember the Doobie Brothers too.

Over the next few years, Dad watched as his family fell like dominoes—Timo died during the fall semester of my freshman year at BYU, Dave, while I was on my mission; Maudi, the one who'd rejected aristocracy to make a home with a ranch hand in Nevada, went a couple years after that of lung cancer; the next year was her mother, Dougan, who forbade Maudi to mingle with the help. For some reason, despite her cigarettes, Dougan survived ninety-four years. The four deaths were upside down, the youngest going first, the oldest, coming last. By then, Dad had abandoned his old life. He had found a new church and new wife. I wouldn't understand the connection between Timo's death and my father's departure for over a decade.

Rod married one of Maudi's friends, Francesca, who hung crystals from the ceiling and kept a Buddha and a prayer rug in the corner of her living room. Rod lived with Francesca almost twenty-years. He wintered in Tucson and summered in the mountains of northern Arizona. I don't know what he did with the trailer and Hobie Cat.



Our last night in Mexico, Timo showed up at the door. My younger siblings were probably all in their pajamas. Maybe they were still up, playing “war” in their beds. Mom was there, but he directed his question at me. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

Even though I didn't have a curfew, I hesitated. “Can I go?”

“Whatever you want to do,” Mom said, as if I didn't need to ask.

We hopped the low, cinder block wall to the fairgrounds and walked west toward the port. I don't remember our conversation. It's hard even for me to recall Timo's syntax and vocabulary. It's not hard to remember the smell of oil, burnt sugar, dust, and fish guts; the way we walked—easy, as if our bodies had substance; the quality of Timo's voice—soft and resonant, like the glassy flow of water spilling over the edge of a tub.

I remember most how I felt: As if suddenly, we were no longer uncle and nephew, or perhaps that we finally were. Friends, maybe. I felt it not only in the tenor of his voice, but in his neglect to pause and consider how his words might impact me, a young man. I don't remember any man ever

having treated me that way before—as if they didn’t need to consider my age. This, despite the fact that I didn’t yet have a mustache. I felt as if I were walking with an old friend from Gunn High, even though I’d spent less than four or five hours total, I’ll bet, talking to Timo in my entire life. Much less than that, talking one on one.

We didn’t seem to be headed anywhere in particular, but he slowed to a stop not far from a lonely churro stand on the outskirts of the carnival and pointed across empty space toward a ride. Usually, the fairgrounds were empty, but this year our spring break coincided with Easter.

“That’s Dave’s boyfriend.”

I’d stood beneath that ride the night prior, but I hadn’t bought a ticket. It was one of those great axels with metal arms. From the arms, twenty or thirty seats hung from chains. It reminds me now of a spider spinning on a stake. When you board, the seats are barely above the ground. As the axel turns, they rise.

“He’s the one who operates the ride,” Timo said.

Beneath the orbiting children was a lanky man with a white tank top, dark skin, and a thin mustache. Although I wasn’t close enough to see the details, I imagined his dress shoes were scuffed, like the men at the wall.

As I thought about Dave and this Mexican man, a trace of anxiety rose like a reflex in my shoulders. Dave wasn’t just gay in principle. Here was the evidence. But as I stood there, observing him, an ordinary looking, Mexican man with children flying over his head, something let go. I wondered about them—the Mexican with scuffed shoes who operated a carnival ride; and Dave, who had fled Nevada at his first opportunity, enrolling in a prep school in New England.

“How do they communicate?” I said.

“Dave speaks some Spanish,” Timo said.

I wondered what they talked about, but I didn’t ask.

Timo didn’t seem to expect me to say anything.

I nodded and we continued on, the smell of churros fading as we continued in the direction of trumpets and violins. For a few minutes we stood at the edge of a giant tarp, watching men and women in traditional

red, green, and white costumes stomp on a wooden stage. Then, we headed back to the trailer.

Whether we shook hands or hugged, I don't recall. Probably neither. I imagine we said goodbye, just like any other pair of male friends do, after hanging out for a bit. *Goodnight. Thanks.* That kind of thing. Timo looked well when we parted. His cheeks were pink and his chest was thick.