

BODE AND IRIS

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It may seem odd that an experienced fornicator like Bode Carpenter would get the girl pregnant in the first place—particularly because he carried a condom in the watch pocket of his jeans on that fateful evening. Be it said here, Bode had knock-out good looks—five eleven, neatly trimmed blond hair, a just-right nose, a square jaw, muscular arms, and a taut belly. He lived in Richfield, a town in central Utah. He was a Mormon, and he had an eight-hour-a-day job at the AgriCo-op, a feed and farm supply store, with a half day's work on Saturdays at overtime rate. As for room and board, his parents let him live at home for free because they hoped to nudge him back into the paths of righteousness.

The girl was Iris Denning. She worked in a café in Salina, a town about twenty miles north of Richfield. Another waitress at the café, Sibyl Holinshed, dated a backsliding buddy of Bode's, Abe Larkin. On a Saturday evening in June, Abe brought Bode along and, after the two girls had come out of the café at quitting time, he introduced Bode to Iris.

She wasn't pretty. She had a hawk nose and a prominent overbite—a true Plain Jane, according to Bode's judgment. That didn't matter, of course, Bode being chiefly interested in her nether parts. Abe drove his old Cadillac up to a reservoir, and while he and Sibyl got busy doing unwholesome things in the front seat, Bode and Iris got out of the back seat and walked up a nearby hill.

For an eighteen-year-old just out of high school, Iris had a lot of savvy about religion. Also, she was aggressive about putting down Mormonism. Maybe it was just the natural result of belonging to a religious minority in a predominantly Mormon town. She was a Baptist, as she let Bode know immediately, and she wanted to know why Mormons believed in three heavens.

"We don't believe in three heavens," he said. "We just think heaven is divided into three degrees of glory."

“That sounds like three heavens to me,” she said. “But this is a free country. If you like believing in three heavens, nobody is going to stop you.”

Bode was thinking this Plain Jane was somehow running circles around him. Time to fight back.

“So what do Baptists believe?”

“They believe in salvation by faith, not by works. They believe in the Bible. It’s all you need to find out how to be saved. They believe in baptism by immersion—after you are old enough to make decisions for yourself. They believe in just one heaven. They don’t think you need three of them.”

She said this crisply—no sign of hesitation. Nonetheless, Bode decided to take another swing.

“Baptists believe in fire and brimstone,” he said. “They believe the devil tortures people in hell.”

“Fire and brimstone! That’s just silly. The torment of hell comes just from knowing you’ll never be with God or Jesus forever and ever.”

Bode could see he wasn’t going to be running any circles around this chick. Time to back off and leave well enough alone.

They stopped walking and faced each other. Moonlight didn’t help her features much. She edged toward Bode and on an impulse, he kissed her. It was kind of a duty, he was thinking. Homely girls needed to make out once in a while just like anybody else. The important question was, would she be interested in something a little more substantial than mere making out? She put her arms around him, and they went on kissing. “You’re so good looking,” she murmured. Shortly, the sensuous flexing of her lips got to him, and he tried to slide his hand down through the open collar of her blouse. She grasped his hand and placed it on her waist. They continued to kiss, but the spirit had gone out of it for Bode.

Later, after Abe and Bode had dropped off the girls at their homes and were heading back to Richfield, Abe said, “Well, how was it, ol’ buddy?”

“Not so good,” Bode said. “She isn’t exactly a Marilyn Monroe, and she doesn’t want anybody messing around below the neckline.”

“That’s tough,” Abe said apologetically. “You run into girls like that once in a while.”

For various reasons, Bode kept dating Iris. For one thing, a couple of his former steadies—girls he could count on for a quick session in the back seat of his car after a movie or a dance—became unavailable, one of them getting married and the other moving to Oregon. For another thing, he had become obsessed by the abruptness with which Iris had pulled his hand from her blouse and placed it on her waist. He couldn't quit thinking about her. On a Saturday night when he had nothing else to do, he drove up to Salina and went into the café at quitting time.

There were no customers present. Iris tidied up behind the counter. Through a serving window Bode could see Sibyl and Larry Forbes, the fellow who owned the café, working in the kitchen.

Iris didn't seem surprised to see Bode. When he said he had come up just to take her home, she said okay, but he needed to understand some things.

"First of all, just remember, I'm a Baptist and you're a Mormon."

He understood they weren't to form an attachment. There was no danger of that, of course, at least not on his part. He was actually feeling pretty good—somewhat generous and benevolent. Plain Janes have feelings just like anybody else, and it didn't hurt a fellow to accommodate those feelings once in a while.

"Also, I don't drink," she added, "and I don't like to go with guys who do."

"No problem," Bode said. "I'm not into booze. Also I don't use tobacco or pot." He meant of course that he wasn't into them as a matter of habit. No need for her to know he wouldn't turn liquor or pot down if they were offered at a party.

They left the café a half-hour later. Bode asked whether they should drive back up to the reservoir. She said she knew a place closer to town. She had him pull onto a dead-end road scarcely a quarter mile from the café. It led to an abandoned prisoner of war camp from World War II—more than sixty years in the past. It was an eerie, unhallowed place, and people rarely went there, especially at night. One night shortly after the war, a guard, an angry American soldier, had sprayed the tents of the sleeping German prisoners with a machine gun, killing ten and wounding twice that many.

"If you want to be undisturbed, this is the place to come," Iris said.

After they had kissed a couple of times across the consol that separated their seats, she said, “I like to snuggle. Shall we get in the back seat?”

For a few moments, Bode got his hopes up. Back seats were meant for more serious business than just making out. However, making out was all Iris intended by snuggling. They sat hugging each other while they alternately kissed and fell into snatches of conversation. Eventually their conversation died, and their kissing became intense and prolonged, Iris putting a surprising energy into the process. Quite abruptly, about forty-five minutes after they had arrived, she said, “Please take me home.”

That’s the way weekend nights went for a couple of months. It was an unsatisfactory arrangement for Bode. About five minutes of kissing—with Iris’s lips working on his with an uncanny sensuousness—roused him to the point of wanting to finish the job in the way Nature intended, leaving him in a state of frustration. Of course, he’d lope his mule when he got home, but that was tame stuff compared to having carnal knowledge of a girl when he and she were both heated up and wanting it.

Moreover, Iris teased him about Mormonism enough to keep him on the defensive. She had read parts of the Book of Mormon when her family first moved to Salina—her pastor having said they had just as well deal with it up front since the vast majority of their neighbors were Mormon. She said there were good things in the Book of Mormon, but according to her pastor it was like the Apocrypha in the Catholic Bible. It was a book-length sermon. It explained scripture, but it wasn’t scripture. The Protestant Bible—that’s all the scripture anybody needed, she said.

Bode didn’t know how to respond to that, so he phoned his brother Avery, who had been on a mission and was currently a senior at BYU. Bode doctored the truth a little, telling Avery he had met a nice Baptist girl who looked like she might be open to the truths of Mormonism if he could correct some false notions somebody had fed her. Avery latched onto the project in a flash. As a first step, he advised Bode to emphasize the fact that whereas Mormons had the bona-fide, genuine trade-mark church of God, Baptists were a generic brand of Christianity. Like most other Christian denominations, the Baptists had bought into the Nicene Creed, which held that God is one in substance

but three in person. Only the Mormons, Avery explained, had the straight dope on the doctrine of the Trinity. God the Father had a resurrected body of flesh and bone, as did God the Son, whereas the Holy Ghost had a spirit body, which was why the Holy Ghost could inspire righteous people at any time and place.

However, the long and the short of it was that Iris was unimpressed. She just scoffed at the mention of God the Father having a resurrected body of flesh and bone. She finally did agree to back off on talking about religion altogether since it obviously tainted their moments together with acrimony. Naturally, Bode brooded on his dissatisfactions, and he made up his mind multiple times to stop seeing Iris. But he kept going back. He was hooked, he was an addict. As far as his sex life was concerned, he knew he would have to write the summer off as a loss. He just hoped when it was over and Iris had gone off to the University of Utah, he could build himself up a fresh inventory of local girls willing to go all the way.

Then one night near the first of August, disaster struck. Bode carried a condom in his watch pocket, but by the time he realized he needed it, he and Iris had already got beyond being influenced by a sense of the consequences. He of course had relied on her. It was she, after all, who had set the boundaries on their intimate behavior that summer. He could at least console himself on that fateful evening with the fact that she took the first step by whispering, "Shall we do it?" Taking that as permission, Bode proceeded as an experienced practitioner of backseat intercourse.

Within seconds of their having completed the act, Iris whispered hoarsely, "Bode, what have we done?" During the brief duration of the act, Bode had congratulated himself on his good fortune. Now he realized how stupid he had been to proceed without a condom. Moreover, he realized he shouldn't have gone all the way for a reason beyond the danger of getting her pregnant. Even though she had given him permission, he shouldn't have taken advantage of her in a moment of weakness. She was too good a girl for that.

Neither of them spoke after that until they arrived at her house. As she opened the car door, she said, "We're not good for each other, Bode, so don't come back."

“I’ll behave,” Bode said. “I’ll keep my hands to myself. I promise.”

“Don’t come back, Bode. Just don’t come back—ever.”

For a while on his drive home, Bode grieved. That was the only word for it. Iris had dug into him deeper than he had realized. But pretty soon he began to fret over the chances of her becoming pregnant. He wasn’t ready to be a daddy, especially not with a girl as homely as Iris. So she was absolutely right to put her foot down. They weren’t good for each other.

Arriving at home, he immediately got onto the Internet and researched the likelihood of a single instance of unprotected intercourse resulting in pregnancy—a two-and-a-half percent chance, one site claimed. That meant a ninety-seven-and-a-half percent chance that he had got away free.

With that reassurance, he decided to forget his little episode with Iris Denning and get back to his former habits. He could start taking in dances in little towns like Venice or Glenwood or Monroe and scout out some willing girls. Then there was a bar in Marysvale, where he had had luck with an older woman. Maybe she was a regular there. And he sure as hell wouldn’t get carried away and have sex without putting on a condom.

The next day was a Sunday. As usual, Bode slept in. He was having a belated bowl of cereal and milk when his parents and his younger siblings, Alan and Janet, returned from church in the early afternoon. Listening to their chatter, he realized he was anxious. For a long time he had believed it unnecessary to be in a hurry to repent. He had figured on changing his ways at the age of twenty-five at the earliest and maybe as late as thirty. But now he was feeling strangely vulnerable, as if something drastic would happen to him soon. By evening, Bode had it figured out. His increased anxiety was a result of hanging out with Iris. By poking fun at Mormonism, she had put him on the defensive. Forced to assert his Mormonism, he had begun to realize the Commandments were for real and they were for right now. A guy couldn’t choose to validate them just any old time.

Bode’s life changed drastically. He stopped going out at night, even on weekends. He went on with his back-breaking work at the AgriCo-op, ate meals with his family, and otherwise hung out in his basement room reading the Book of Mormon for the first time in his life. The more he read, the

worse he felt about himself. He was in a special stew on Sundays. He started going to church with his family, which pleased his parents greatly. The bishop welcomed him back, as did family friends. Naturally, Bode didn't have the guts to forego partaking of the sacrament because everybody would know he had serious sins on his conscience. So he went along partaking of the sacred bread and water unworthily even though he knew he was digging himself deeper and deeper into the pit of damnation. Any way he looked at it, his life had become downright hellish. It was the life of a spiritual galley slave.

Bode was grateful when Avery and their sister Anna came home from their summer term at BYU. Their good cheer diverted his parents' attention from his silent, moody presence. They were there for three weeks, filling the house with banter and chatter. By the time they went back to Provo for fall semester, Bode had started to cheer up a little. His improved mood lasted through September, when the weather turned cool, and the storage sheds where he worked weren't nearly as hot as in the summer. Sometimes he felt like maybe the Lord had decided to forgive him for fornicating with Iris and all the others and it was time for him to figure out how to make something of himself. However, he was shortly disabused of the notion things were starting to go well for him. On a sunny Saturday morning in early October, Abe Larkin showed up at the loading dock where Bode was taking in a new shipment of chicken mash.

"Got something to impart to you, ol' buddy," Abe said. "Iris is pregnant. Last night I was at the café up in Salina and Sibyl and Larry told me I've got to let you know."

Bode chewed on his words for a long moment before their meaning sank in. Then it hit him hard. He could feel a blush coming up his neck onto his cheeks. "Well, damn," he said, seating himself on the edge of the dock.

"You know you could just up and marry her."

"Marry her!"

"That's Sibyl's idea, not mine."

"I don't see her and me getting married," Bode said. "She's a Baptist and I'm a Mormon even if I haven't been a very good one up till now." Also, he

hadn't planned on marrying a homely girl. That counted against her more than being a Baptist although he didn't mention that to Abe.

"Maybe I better tell you something else," Abe said. "According to Larry, you'll have to pay child support till the baby turns eighteen even if you don't marry her. The law makes you do it."

Bode was stunned. Ten seconds of ecstasy in the back seat of a car cost eighteen years of child support!

"Larry says you and Iris will have to fill out a legal document that spells out what you're going to do with the kid."

Bode pulled off his gloves and scratched his neck.

"He and Sibyl think you ought to come on up to the café and start thrashing things out with Iris."

"Does she want to see me?"

"I can't say she's real enthusiastic about the idea. But Sibyl says for you just to show up at quitting time tomorrow night. She will make sure Iris doesn't take off early."

"All right, I'll be there," Bode said grimly.

"Don't take it too hard, ol' buddy," Abe said as he prepared to leave. "You ain't the only feller in the county that has got a kid he didn't plan on."

When Bode walked into the café the next evening, the dining area was empty except for Iris, who sat on a stool at the counter. Larry and Sibyl were in the kitchen, as Bode could see through the serving window. A document composed of maybe two dozen sheets of paper lay on the counter before Iris.

Bode slid onto the stool next to hers. He could see his face and hers, side by side, in a round mirror that hung above the coffee urn.

"You've heard the bad news," Iris said.

"Yes. Abe brought me word yesterday."

They watched each other in the mirror. Funny thing—in Bode's judgment, she was pretty in the mirror

"I'm not blaming you any more than I'm blaming myself," she said. "We weren't smart, Bode, neither one of us."

"That's true."

“My mother told me, don’t be dumb, Iris. Don’t get pregnant. Then I went and did it.”

“I’m sorry,” Bode said. “I really am.”

Her gaze dropped from the mirror to the document on the counter. She patted it with a hand. “Larry gave me this. It comes from the website of the Utah court system. It tells us how to make a parenting plan. We’ve got to work out custody and visitation rights—other things, too. It isn’t going to be easy. You’ll want our baby to grow up a Mormon. I’ll want it to grow up a Baptist.”

She uttered a short, bitter laugh. “So what do we do—flip a coin?”

He picked up the document and scanned through it. He could see she was right. They were in for some long talks.

Shortly, she asked him to drive her home. As they passed the road into the abandoned prisoner of war camp, she asked him to stop for a moment. “There’s something else I just as well tell you. When I first knew for sure I was pregnant, I decided to have an abortion. It’s legal in Utah if you do it early. But the doctor has to explain the procedure and show you a movie about it, and then you have to wait three days to have the abortion. All the clinics are in Salt Lake City. Sibyl said she’d drive up with me both times if that’s what I really wanted. But I couldn’t make up my mind—neither one way nor the other. I knew if I was going to have an abortion, I should do it soon. One night I drove out here. It’s a murderous place, and I hoped it would help me harden my heart. It didn’t, Bode. It did just the opposite. I gave up on getting an abortion.”

Disappointment rippled through Bode. Too bad she hadn’t gone through with it. An abortion would have saved them both a lot of trouble. Then guilt took over. He knew he shouldn’t feel so disappointed about her not having the abortion. He had an inclination toward wickedness. That’s all there was to it.

When they arrived at her house, she asked him to come inside while she confronted her parents with the fact she was pregnant. He was too startled to say no. A lamp was lit in the Denning living room when they went in. “Wait here,” she said to Bode, then disappeared down a hall.

He heard a door opening, then a woman’s voice. “Is that you, Iris?”

“Yes, Mom.”

"I'm glad you are home. Have a good sleep, dear."

"Mama, Daddy, I need to talk to you," Iris said. "I'm pregnant."

"What's that?" a deep masculine voice said.

"I let a Mormon guy make love to me and I'm pregnant."

"For God's sake," the deep masculine voice bellowed, "don't make jokes about something like that!"

"It's not a joke," Iris said. "He's out in the living room. His name is Bode Carpenter. We've got to work out a parenting plan for our baby."

"I'll kill the son of a bitch!" the deep voice said.

"Woodrow!" Iris's mother cried.

"Well, let's go out and take a look at him."

Iris's parents were Woodrow and Merle Denning. As Bode already knew, Woodrow was a petroleum engineer, transferred from an oil field near Greeley, Colorado, to a drilling site in Salina Canyon.

Hearing the tread of his slippers in the hall, the quaking Bode prepared for the worst.

Woodrow paused in the doorway from the hall. A muscular, heavy-set man, he wore a belted robe over his pajamas. A moment later, Merle pushed past him. She wore a robe over her nightgown, which hung nearly to her ankles.

"Let's take a little time to talk things over," she said. "Iris, you and your young man sit on the sofa. Woodrow, let's take the easy chairs."

When they were all seated, she turned to Iris. "First of all, are you sure you are pregnant?"

"I missed my period. It should have happened over a month ago. So I bought a kit and I tested positive."

"Well, then, you probably are pregnant."

Sighing, she turned to Bode. "Tell us about yourself. And, please, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Bode Carpenter," he said. "I'm from Richfield. My folks are Martin and Esther Carpenter."

"Presumably, you have a job."

"Yes, ma'am. I work for the AgriCo-op feed and farm supply store out on the south side of Richfield."

“What’s your pay there?” Iris’s father asked in a gruff voice.

“Ten dollars an hour, eight hours every week day, and time-and-a-half for another four hours on Saturday.”

“Let’s see—that’s going to be a little over twenty thousand a year. How much do you spend on car payments?”

“Nothing. My dad gave me an old car. I have to maintain it, of course.”

“How much do you spend on room and board?”

“Nothing. I live at home with my parents.”

“How long are you going to go on living with them?” Woodrow’s voice had turned sarcastic.

“I’m not sure. Not forever, of course.” Bode could see he didn’t count heavier than a piss-ant with Iris’s father.

At this point, Merle intervened. “I hope you two aren’t planning on getting married.”

“No way,” Iris said. “We are going to work out a parenting plan on how we are going to raise the baby. Larry Forbes says the law requires us to do that.”

“Have you considered putting it up for adoption? You could stay with Aunt Dorothy in Denver till it’s born.”

“I’m keeping the baby,” Iris said stubbornly.

“At our cost,” Woodrow grumbled.

“We can handle it,” Merle said. “By all means, you two, go ahead with your parenting plan. If you want a place to hang out while you work up the agreement, you can use our den. Nights are too cold for sitting in your car.”

“Is that all right, then?” Iris said to Bode.

Bode nodded. He wasn’t the negotiator here and his mind was a scramble.

“Hold on just a minute,” Woodrow said. “Let me take a look at that document.”

He strode to Iris and took it, glancing through its pages as he returned to his seat. “Mr. Carpenter,” he said, “what if Mrs. Denning and I make you a deal? We’ll get my lawyer to make up a contract that relieves you of all financial obligations toward this child in return for just clearing out of the picture altogether. Merle and I will guarantee the finances of the situation.”

Bode's jaw dropped with astonishment. He glanced at Iris. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Is it a deal?" Woodrow said insistently.

"Okay," Bode replied.

"Is this okay with you?" Merle asked her daughter.

"It makes things less complicated," Iris said.

"We'll try hard to keep things uncomplicated," Merle went on. "With me as a backup nanny, maybe you can get on with your education."

Bode could see it was time to leave. He stood and looked around. Abruptly walking out like this left a raw edge. He sighed, scratched behind an ear, and headed for the door.

Woodrow followed him onto the porch. Having closed the door, he said, "I'll make sure that contract is ready as soon as possible. I'll have my lawyer bring it by where you work. Now, there's a little something else I want to mention. If you stick with this deal and sign that contract, there'll be ten thousand dollars cash for you under the table. That's close to half a year's income for you. That'll be yours free and clear."

Bode was thunderstruck. Ten thousand dollars cash! What a guy couldn't do with that kind of money!

"No need to mention this little cash deal to anybody," Woodrow added. "That's strictly between you and me, just a little something to sweeten the pot."

Bode drove home on cloud nine. When it looked certain that the entire population of Sevier County would know what he and Iris had done, the nightmare had suddenly evaporated—with a promise of eighteen years of salvaged income and some instant big bucks on the side! He hoped he could smarten up now. He should get on with making something of himself. He would put the ten thousand toward college. He'd pursue a degree in wildlife resource management. That's what he really wanted, a life in the outdoors—and marriage to a beautiful Latter-day Saint woman with whom he'd raise a righteous family.

Bode had a troubled sleep that night. Somewhere toward morning, he awoke from a strange dream. In the dream, he saw a kangaroo grazing on the strip of grass next to the parking lot at the AgriCo-op store. The kangaroo

paused, balanced on its tail, and chewed a while. Then a beautiful human child, maybe six months old, pushed its head and upper torso out of the kangaroo's pouch. Bode knew it was his baby though he didn't know how it had got into the pouch.

He mulled the dream for a few minutes before getting out of his bunk. The baby in the kangaroo pouch reminded him of his sister Janet, whom his mother had briefly placed in his arms on the day of her birth. He realized suddenly he had come down off cloud nine. He was grieving. He had agreed to walk out on his child before it was born.

He swung out of his bunk and sat with his feet on the cold concrete floor. A stark idea came to him. He wouldn't sign a contract. He wouldn't walk out on the kid. Anxiety stirred in his belly. He knew he was in for eighteen years of child support payments, to say nothing of losing an under-the-table instant bonus of ten thousand dollars. Likely he would bring shame to himself and his family. Maybe he would be excommunicated from the Church. Well, that was the way it had to be.

Just before breakfast, he took his cell phone outside to call Woodrow so that his parents wouldn't overhear the conversation. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, "to put you and Mrs. Denning to a lot of trouble, but I've changed my mind. I'm not going to sign any contract. I respect you and Mrs. Denning a whole lot and I hope we can get along okay."

Woodrow began to splutter something about giving Bode twenty thousand dollars under the table. Shutting off his phone, Bode went back into the house to have breakfast. What with his anxiety ratcheted up, he didn't have a good day at work. That night around bedtime, the house phone rang and Bode's mother told him that a girl wanted to talk to him. It was Iris. "Daddy threw a fit this morning. He says you backed out on signing a contract."

Bode didn't know what to say. His anxiety went up another notch.

"From what I could gather, he offered you some money on the side."

Bode remained silent.

"Are you still there?" she said.

“I’m sorry to upset your daddy,” Bode blurted, “but I’m like you. You can’t go through with an abortion. Well, I can’t go through with signing away my right to spend some time with our kid.”

“I can respect that—although,” Iris added wearily, “it does make things more complicated for both of us.”

“I’m ready to tackle the parenting plan. How do you want to work it out?”

Iris suggested they accept her mother’s offer to let them meet in the den of the Denning house. She told him she had arranged to work a mid-day shift at the café Monday through Friday. Accordingly, she proposed now that he and she meet in the den on Saturday and Sunday evenings. The den had both an inside and outside door. Bode was to use the outside door, which would allow him to avoid meeting her father

Bode felt hollow after he had hung up. It was time now to come clean with his parents. He knew a rancher who had chopped off a gangrenous finger with a hatchet. He was wishing he could trade places with the rancher. Chopping off a finger would be nothing compared to telling his parents he was a fornicator.

Bode’s parents, Martin and Esther, were preparing for bed as he entered their room. A single lamp burned on the night stand beside his mother. She was already in bed, wearing glasses and sitting up propped against a pillow with the Book of Mormon in her hands. His father sat on the opposite side of the bed, bare footed but still clad in his suit pants and his unbuttoned white shirt.

“I’ve got some bad news,” Bode said. “A while back when I was still helling around, I broke the law of chastity with a Baptist girl and now she’s pregnant.”

“Oh, my word!” Esther gasped.

A long silence followed. Then, from Martin: “We knew you were dating a Baptist girl. Avery gave us to understand she was interested in the Church.”

“As it turns out, she isn’t interested. She has read parts of the Book of Mormon and doesn’t believe it. She’s a dyed-in-the-wool Baptist. She just believes in the Bible.”

“And you say she’s pregnant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, Bodie,” Esther wailed, using his childhood nickname, “where did we go wrong? How did we fail you?”

“You never did anything wrong. I just turned rebellious on my own.”

“What’s the girl’s name?” Martin said.

“Her name is Iris Denning and she lives in Salina.”

“Are you thinking of getting married?”

“No, sir, we aren’t. Do you think we ought to?”

“If she’s not interested in the Church, you are likely just as well off not getting married.”

“This is just terrible,” Esther said. “An illegitimate child in our family! Who would have thought it?”

“We might have expected it, given how things are nowadays,” Martin said. “But what counts now, I guess, is making the best of it. For starters, you’ve got some tall repenting to do, Bode. You’d better go talk this over with the bishop.”

“Yes, sir, I guess I’d better.”

A little later, lying in his bunk, Bode pondered the fact that he hadn’t told his parents about the six other girls and the middle-aged woman at the bar in Marysvale with whom he had also fornicated. Shortly he decided it was okay not to have told them. But the bishop—that was another matter. He’d rather chop off two fingers than tell him. But it couldn’t be avoided. Bode would have to come completely clean with him.

On his way home from work the next day, Bode called by the bishop’s house. The bishop was having supper when Bode rang the doorbell. The bishop stood in the doorway chewing food while Bode came straight to his point. “Bishop,” he said, “I am in a real pickle. I did what I shouldn’t have done with a Baptist girl and now she’s pregnant.”

“You better come inside,” the bishop said, peering out into the street as if there might be eavesdroppers. He had Bode sit in an easy chair while he closed the door between the living room and the dining room where his wife was still at supper. He listened gravely, shaking his head from time to time, while Bode explained his situation in further detail.

“I’m sorry to hear all that,” the bishop said when Bode had finished. “Lately, it has looked like you had cleaned up your act, and I’ve been thinking

about suggesting to the stake president that it was time to advance you to the Melchizedek priesthood. But now you tell me all your hell-raising has got you in big trouble with an outside girl.”

The bishop’s fingers drummed on the wooden arm of his chair. He was a large, bald man—a farmer whose kids had grown up and moved away from home.

“Do you think I ought to marry her?” Bode said.

“Do you want to marry her?”

“No, sir.”

“Does she want you to marry her?”

“No, sir. But I guess I could try to talk her into it if you think I ought to.”

“Has she shown any interest in the Church?”

“No, sir. She makes fun of it.”

“Well, I will say I’ve known some very righteous Latter-day Saints who were married to outsiders. The important thing is to keep the Commandments. But if she makes fun of Mormonism, I wouldn’t waste time trying to talk her into getting married if I were you.”

“There’s something else I’d better tell you. Before I met this girl, I broke the law of chastity with some other girls, plus a lady down in Piute County. None of them got pregnant. I made sure of that.”

“How many girls?”

“Six.”

The bishop shook his head. “Any thing else I ought to know?”

“I did some drinking. I tampered with tobacco. I smoked a little pot. But not lately. I quit all that.”

The bishop scrutinized one of his knuckles. “You are a tough case. I’m not sure what ought to be done here. I maybe ought to cut you off the Church. Might serve you right.”

He paused to rub the knuckle. “On the other hand, you’ve done the right thing to come talk to me. I respect you for that.”

He began to drum his fingers again on the arm of his chair. “Guess I won’t cut you off. You’d never come back. So where do we go from here? I want you to keep on going to church but hold off on partaking of the

sacrament. Do that for a year. In case people ask questions, just tell them you'd rather not talk about it. No need to advertise your predicament any more than we have to. Hold steady and come next summer, you can start partaking of the sacrament again and I'll recommend your advancement to the Melchizedek priesthood."

The sun was setting over the western mountains when Bode emerged from the bishop's house. He could see that getting on the right side of the Lord was going to be tough. The fact he couldn't participate in the sacrament would hit his family hard. Other people would know he'd somehow got in trouble with a girl. Likely as not, word of who the girl happened to be would leak out.

On his drive to Salina to see Iris on the following Saturday evening, Bode considered the dubious prospects of taking care of their child if he had custody of it. He obviously couldn't turn the child over to his mother during his working hours—at least not until she had got over being horrified by the scandal. The long and the short of it was that Bode was in no position during his negotiation with Iris to insist on anything close to equal custodial time for the foreseeable future. Maybe he would never want equal custodial time—just regular weekends and some holidays and, every other year, the kid's birthday. Maybe that would be contact enough.

He arrived in Salina a little after seven. Iris welcomed him into the den and disappeared for a plate of cookies. At that point, her little brother and sister entered the den. The brother was maybe eight, the sister maybe four.

"We're Rodney and Ellen," the boy said.

"Glad to meet you," Bode said.

Rodney stationed himself near an arm of the sofa on which Bode was seated. "Are you Iris's boyfriend?"

"In a way you could say I am."

"Dad says you are poor white trash," Rodney went on.

"I expect he's right. I don't have a whole lot going for me."

"You don't look like trash to me," Ellen said.

"Thank you," Bode said.

Shortly, Iris returned. "You've had a chat with the kids, I take it."

"Yes. They have more or less welcomed me into the family."

After the children left, Iris sat beside Bode on the sofa and handed him a copy of the parenting plan, keeping another for herself.

The template for the plan was over twenty pages long. She and Bode were each required to complete a plan, being named respectively petitioner in one and respondent in the other. There were boxes to tick off and blanks to fill in by the dozens, presenting them at this juncture, long before the birth of their child, with issues loaded with imponderables. They were to provide the name, sex, date of birth, and social security number of the child. They could opt for joint custody, in which case they would have to agree on important decisions about the child's education, health and dental care, and religious training, or they could opt for one of them having custody—with sole responsibility for making important decisions—and the other having the right to periods of visitation.

"Custody is the big question, isn't it?" Iris said. "When does our child stay with me, when does it stay with you?"

"For sure it has to stay with you till it's weaned," Bode responded. "Later on—well, I don't know. I likely won't have anybody to take care of the kid on long term. So maybe the arrangement ought to be all along that you have custody and I have visitation rights."

Iris looked relieved. In a moment, a worried look returned to her face. "You'll likely want to take our child to church with you."

"Well, yes, I suppose I will want to do that."

"I don't fault you for it. But it does pose a problem, doesn't it—a Mormon service one Sunday, a Baptist service the next? What's more, according to these instructions, we can't badmouth each other's religion. No matter what, our child is going to grow up in a two-church environment."

She turned to look him in the eyes. "Who knows? Maybe someday I'll have Mormon grandkids. So I wish you'd explain Mormonism to me. I promise not to say anything sarcastic."

That began a series of respectful discussions about the doctrines and practices of their two faiths—discussions that went on for more than a month. For the time being, they put the parenting plan on hold and concentrated on their religious differences. However, without truly taking it into account,

they often managed to squander a good portion of an evening together by chatting about personal matters or even, on several occasions, by watching a movie from the ample Denning collection of DVDs.

On an impulse one evening, Bode confessed to having had carnal relations with seven women before meeting Iris. At first he wasn't sure why he told her. He could see his confession shocked and disappointed her, just as if he had owed her the fidelity of being, like herself, a virgin on the occasion of their passionate misdeed at the prisoner of war camp. Eventually, Bode realized he had, in fact, told her because he did owe her that sort of fidelity. Their relationship was turning strange and unpredictable.

"I'm through with that sort of thing," Bode explained. "I've told my bishop. He more or less disfellowshipped me. It's a sort of probation. He told me if I live righteously for a year he'll put me back in good standing. In the meantime, I have to go to church on Sunday but I can't partake of the sacrament."

"The sacrament?"

"The bread and the water for the Lord's Last Supper."

"We call that communion," Iris said. "We don't use water. We use grape juice."

"Did you talk to your pastor about what we did?"

"No, but he knows. Mother told him I'm pregnant."

"Do you partake of the communion?"

"Yes, I accept it. I accept it to show I accept Jesus."

"Do you feel forgiven?"

"Jesus knows what I've done. He knows I'm not going to do it again. My pastor isn't like your bishop. He doesn't get between me and the Lord."

"I hope I feel forgiven when my year is up. But even if I do, I've pretty well messed up my life. I can't hide what I've done. What decent Mormon girl is going to want me now?"

Iris stared at him. "You're dumb to think that way. You're good looking, Bode. There'll be a lot of Mormon girls eager to catch you. I just hope you get one who'll treat our child right when it's at your house."

That's when once again things went south, so to speak. Bode grasped that her words implicitly acknowledged her own attraction to him—and

forced him to acknowledge the strength of his attraction to her. He warmed to the idea of coming home to her every evening for a lifetime, then, worried, struggled to put it out of his mind.

A couple of weeks later Iris made her attraction to him even more explicit. It was a Sunday evening in early November. They were on the sofa in the den. “I keep wishing we could get married,” she said. “It would be so much better for our baby. Besides, I’ve got used to you, Bode. I like to be with you. You are very kind, very gentle.”

Immediately afterward, she frowned, obviously annoyed with herself. She stood and moved toward the outside door, her customary signal that it was time for Bode to go home. He followed her to the door. She opened it and stood with her hand on the knob. “I’ve said more than I should have said. Don’t attach any importance to it. Let’s just get the parenting plan finished and be done with it. We’ve been neglecting it for weeks.”

Driving home, Bode’s mind was a swirl. Iris had intentionally put marriage on the table as a topic of discussion, then pulled it off. Did he want to put it back on?

He granted he looked forward to their evenings in the den. He granted that he lusted on her. But marriage? His bishop had said it was okay to marry an outsider. But if he married Iris, there would probably be other children, who like the child who was presently on its way would be intimately exposed to Iris’s erroneous faith. Then there was the Plain Jane factor. Wouldn’t the first question to come to mind among his friends and relatives be something like this—*Couldn’t you do better than that? How did you get tangled up with a girl that homely in the first place? Don’t you have any pride?*

Finally, there was the question of finances—a question that made the following week a period of uncomfortable self-interrogation while Bode heaved sacks in the storage sheds or, inside the store, inventoried new shipments. At twenty-one, he was still living the life of a sixteen-year-old, engaged in brute grunt labor for a subsistence wage and mooching off his parents for room and board. If he and Iris married—he could see the handwriting on the wall. They’d be dirt poor and dependent on hand-outs from relatives and the Richfield food bank.

While returning to Salina on the following Saturday evening, Bode decided to leave the topic of marriage off the table. He planned to agree that they get on with the parenting plan without further delay. However, his resolve evaporated when Iris met him at the door of the den. She looked so good to him—so desirable. He was wondering if he hadn't been half in love with her all along. He didn't really care, did he, if she was a Plain Jane? Who had invented that demeaning term in the first place?

"Shall we sit?" she said, leading him to the sofa. Stapled copies of the parenting plan template lay on the side table. Next to them was a pitcher of lemonade. She poured him a glass.

Handing him a document, she said, "Are you are still okay with letting me have custody with visitation rights for you?"

Ignoring the question, he set down his glass. "When you thought about us getting married, how did you think it could work?"

She seemed surprised, then thoughtful—then maybe even eager. "I had in mind taking turns at doing things your way for a while and then doing things my way for a while. We could go to the Mormon service one Sunday and to the Baptist service the next. Or maybe we could go to both services every Sunday. We would *have* to be a real two-church family. That would be a way of showing our respect for each other's faith."

He lifted his glass and took sip. He was dubious. Her idea seemed too simple.

"There are a lot of different ways we could work it out," she went on. "But however we arrange it, it will only work if we really want it to."

His resistance softened. Say their family, he and Iris and three or four kids, did things full tilt the Mormon way for a couple of weeks and then did things full tilt the Baptist way for couple of weeks—the idea was appealing. Maybe they'd end up with a bunch of screwed-up kids, but maybe they wouldn't.

"For starters," Iris said, "we could attend each other's church. Maybe you could come with me to my Baptist service tomorrow."

He pondered a moment. "I'm afraid of your dad."

"Then take me to your sacrament meeting. I'll drive down and meet you there."

“Not in my ward,” he said hastily.

“Well, then, somewhere else.”

A tremor went up his backbone. They were behaving as if a two-church family was a cut-and-dried matter. “Okay,” he said, “but it’s just an experiment.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “it’s just an experiment. So where shall we go?”

“Get your laptop and let’s see what we can find in San Pete County.”

Returning with the laptop, she said, “Maybe we can squeeze in a Baptist service somewhere too.”

The most promising venues were churches in a couple of small towns in upper San Pete County—an LDS ward in the village of Bristol and, scarcely five miles from Bristol, a Baptist congregation in the even smaller village of St. Albans. As it turned out, the schedules and proximity of the churches were such that Bode and Iris could take in both meetings on a single day.

He picked Iris up at eight-thirty the next morning. They were both in their Sunday best, he in a dark blue suit with a white shirt and tie, she in a tan skirt suit with high-heeled pumps.

The November sun was bright, and the fields along the highway glistened with frost. Passing through Manti, they saw the Mormon temple, capped at either end by a cupola-fitted tower. Its walls, built of a cream-colored limestone from a local quarry, gleamed in the sun.

“I hear Mormons don’t use a temple on Sunday,” Iris said.

“That’s right. They go to a church for Sunday services.”

“So what’s a temple for?”

“So people can get married for time and eternity,” Bode said. “Also, so they can get baptized for their dead ancestors who died without the Gospel.”

“I guess I can’t enter a temple.”

“That’s right,” Bode said. “I can’t either. Not right now. Maybe next year after the bishop takes me off probation.”

“Say some of my grandchildren turn out to be Mormon. Could they get baptized for me after I’m dead?”

“Likely so.”

He decided not to tell her it might not do her any good even if somebody was baptized in her behalf after her death. From what he understood,

people who had a chance to become a Mormon in mortality but didn't take advantage of it, didn't get another chance in the Hereafter.

"So remind me which of the three glories will I be in while I wait for my grandkids to get around to being baptized for me?"

"You'll be in the middle one, the Terrestrial Kingdom. That one is for good, decent people who have been blinded by the craftiness of men."

"So I have been blinded by the craftiness of men?"

"Well, yes, more or less, that's the way it is." He paused. "Sorry to have to put it that way. Things are even worse for me, of course—at least right now. If I have the bad luck to get killed before my year of probation is over, I'll end up in the Telestial Kingdom, which is the bottom one. That's where wicked people go. It's like the Baptist hell. People aren't tortured and tormented there. They are just separated from God and Christ for all eternity."

"I think you are already forgiven, Bode," she said. "You just don't know it. I think there's just one degree of glory in heaven and its glory can't be measured. You and me, we'll both be there—and our child too, no matter whether it turns out to be a Mormon or a Baptist."

They attended the Mormon meeting in Bristol first. They took a seat near the rear entrance so that they could depart quickly at the end of the service. On the platform at the front, a woman played prelude music on an organ. A bishop and two counselors sat to the left of a lectern while a teen-aged girl and an elderly couple sat to the right. One of the counselors conducted the meeting. There was an opening hymn, accompanied by the organist and led by a female chorister, and then an invocation. A second hymn followed, during which older teen boys broke bread into bits on trays and blessed the bread.

"Those are priests," Bode whispered. "About seventeen years old, I'd judge. Priest is the office I'm stuck in right now, being a backslider."

Younger teen boys distributed the trays. "Those are deacons—twelve or thirteen years old," Bode whispered.

When a tray filled with small pieces of broken bread reached Iris, she looked at Bode a moment, then took a piece and put it in her mouth. She offered the tray to Bode. He attempted to grasp the handle in order to pass it on without partaking—this from respect for his probation. Frowning, Iris

refused to release the tray until Bode, to keep from creating a scene, took a piece. She was, he saw, insistent that they act out the charade of a conventional Mormon couple one hundred percent. As he expected, the procedure repeated itself when a tray of water cups, duly blessed, reached them. Bode judged this to be a violation of his probation. He wondered whether another aspect of the charade was also blameworthy—his satisfaction at the possibility of being taken for the husband of the slender, dark-haired young woman at his side.

Following the distribution of the sacrament, the teen-aged girl who sat on the stand spoke briefly on a theme drawn from a general conference sermon. She was followed by the elderly couple, who reported on a mission to Montana from which they had just returned. Both emphasized the joys of service in their talks, citing passages from the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Among several anecdotes, the husband mentioned having recently given a name and a blessing to the new baby of a young woman whose soldier husband was on active duty elsewhere.

This anecdote figured in Bode's and Iris's conversation while they drove on to St. Albans after the sacrament meeting had ended.

"Do Mormon men get to choose a baby's name off the cuff just like that?" Iris said.

"Not off the cuff," Bode replied. "They give the name the parents have chosen. They also give a blessing so the baby will grow up healthy and righteous. It's usually the baby's father that's giving the blessing."

"So could you do that for our baby?"

"Yes. That is, after I have cleaned up my act and have been made an elder. If we were willing to wait for a few months after our baby is born, I could likely do it."

"I would like that," she said.

As they pulled into the parking lot at the Baptist church, Bode brought up another matter. "I expect you'll want me to take part in the communion, as you call it."

"Would you rather not?"

“When the time comes around and our kid is old enough to see how things are, won’t it be harder to teach it which church is yours and which is mine if we partake of each other’s sacrament—or communion, as you call it?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But yes, I agree, we shouldn’t participate in each other’s communion.”

Again for Bode, that tremor along the spine—he could see they were behaving more and more as if marriage were indeed a cut-and-dried proposition.

The service had already begun when they entered. The pastor—a short, robust man attired in a rumpled double-breasted suit—was leading a hymn a cappella, there being no piano or organ present. The small hall featured a double row of benches, scarcely enough for fifty persons. Close to thirty persons were currently present, mostly men and women accompanied by a few children.

Bode and Iris seated themselves on the last row of benches. At the front was a low stand with a tall lectern, behind which the pastor stood. Two other equally robust men sat in chairs on either side of the pastor. In front of the men, just off the stand, stood a low table covered with a satiny cloth. Trays with handles and shiny stainless-steel plates rested on the table.

At the conclusion of the hymn, the pastor broke directly into a sermon. Stepping off the low stage, he began to pace back and forth like a lion in a cage, his voice assuming a rhythm coordinated with his stride, dropping and rising in force as he strode back and forth. He said he wished to emphasize that it was faith rather than works that took a person to heaven. However, as he went on to make clear, good works inevitably followed a genuine faith in Jesus. They were the necessary product of real faith. Soon he shifted to a new topic. He said Jesus was his best friend. Sweeping an arm toward his listeners, he told them he knew Jesus as well in his inward life as he knew these, the cherished members of this congregation, in his outward life. He said he spoke personally with Jesus many times every day. He said he hoped his listeners had such a relationship.

Despite himself, Bode was transfixed. He listened intently, his mouth slightly agape. The pastor, for all his rumpled, dowdy appearance, could

preach. There was no doubting his intense sincerity. If he misled his followers, it wasn't because of craftiness. He honored Jesus to the core.

Eventually, the pastor declared it time to celebrate the Lord's Last Supper. He said if there was anything amiss in the hearts of his listeners, they should repent of it now. With that, he closed his eyes and called upon Jesus to sanctify the unleavened bread on the plates. He then handed the plates to the two men beside him. Each of them went down an outside aisle, handing a plate to the first person on each bench and waiting until the plate had been handed back before moving on.

When a plate came along the bench on which Bode and Iris sat, he saw it contained small wafers. Iris took a wafer and offered the plate to Bode, who—with unexpected regret—passed it on without taking one. A few minutes later a tray of tiny cups of grape juice came along their row. Again, Bode abstained.

Shortly, the deacons returned to the front and the pastor said, “That’s all for now, folks. Don’t forget Bible study tomorrow night at six o’clock. Sister Hoskins will be running a nursery, so bring the little fellows along. God bless you. Drive careful.”

Bode and Iris retreated quickly from the church and started for home. Passing through Ephraim, they stopped at a sandwich shop. He ordered a ham sandwich, she a chicken salad. They seated themselves across from each other in a booth by a window looking out onto Main Street and for a period ate in silence, casting fleeting glances into each other’s eyes and turning their heads frequently to gaze out the window.

Bode ruminated on the pastor’s theme of establishing a personal relationship with Jesus. Bode had never felt that Jesus was close at hand. He wasn’t sure he wanted to. Wouldn’t that put enormous demands on a fellow? He’d have to take his sandals off, so to speak, like Moses in the presence of the burning bush.

He spoke of the sermon to Iris. “What about you? Have you felt the presence of Jesus?”

“I have. The night I drove into the massacre site to help me make up my mind to have an abortion—the moment I turned off the car lights, I had a

panic attack, and I said, 'Sweet Jesus, help me,' and you know, the calmest feeling came over me and I knew he was close, just as if I was in a room and he was in the hallway just outside, and I knew I must keep the baby but my sin was forgiven and I could bear whatever disgrace and humiliation came my way." Bode's scalp prickled. For a moment he supposed an uncanny energy surrounded Iris. And then it dissipated, and things were ordinary again.

Inertia bound them to the booth. Bode acknowledged the pleasure of simply being there with Iris, gazing out the window at passing automobiles and college students strolling on the sidewalks.

By and by, a boy and a girl passed along the street on a bicycle, the boy pedaling, the girl seated on a rack behind, arms around him and legs spread to keep her feet from interfering with the pedals.

"College students?" Bode queried with a nod toward the scene on the street.

"Probably," Iris said. After a pause, she added, "Do you wish it was us, starting over with enough sense not to get pregnant?"

"Do you?" he said evasively.

"Of course I do. That is, at least a part of me wishes it was us. It would be nice if we were just a Mormon guy and a Baptist girl who knew each other at Snow College once upon a time. As it is—well, our mistake was to hang out in the back seat of a car, wasn't it? But I'm not going to hold our sin against our baby. I'm glad the baby is alive, and I'm glad you are its father."

She picked up the plastic fork with which she had eaten her salad and looked at it abstractly, as if it focused a thought for her.

"I didn't want to fall in love with you, Bode, but I have. Like I said before, I've got used to you. You are kind and gentle, and I like to be with you. So I'm okay with marrying a Mormon. I'm okay with our child becoming a Mormon if it chooses to. So I'd be glad to be part of a two-church family. But if you aren't in love with me, I don't think we should do it."

She was still making it easy for him to back out. He considered doing so for only a moment. Under the terms of any parenting plan they were likely to make, he would see Iris only momentarily at the beginning and end of periods of visitation—with a high possibility that some other caretaker than

Iris would supervise the exchange of their child. She would essentially disappear from his existence.

Across the table, she watched intently. The irrelevance of her plainness sank in on him with finality. Her overbite, her nose, they were part and parcel of a cherished being. A lifetime with Iris Denning—the prospect filled him with a luminous joy. As for the Hereafter with its consequences, it was abstract and remote.

“You’ve got used to being with me,” he said. “Well, I’ve got used to being with you.”

She reached a hand across the table. His hand met hers at the half-way point.

They went on talking for a while, scoping the prospects and problems of a two-church family. Iris accepted that, if Bode blessed and baptized their child, it would be entered upon the records of his church as a member. Bode accepted that Iris would make sure it was also entered on the records of whatever Baptist congregation she attended.

Before they left the sandwich shop, they decided to inform both sets of parents of their intentions that evening. Accordingly, Bode phoned his parents and alerted them that he and Iris would arrive within an hour.

“Will they think I’m a Delilah?” Iris asked while they drove.

“They’ll just be glad we’ve decided to get married,” Bode said.

It was after dark when they arrived in Richfield. Bode’s parents met them at the front door. They were both in their usual Sunday attire. Taking Iris by both hands, Bode’s mother said, “You are welcome in this home.” After she had introduced Iris to Alan and Janet, they all took seats in the spacious living room, Bode and Iris on the sofa, the others in chairs. “We’ve decided to attend one another’s church,” Bode said.

Alarm showed in his mother’s eyes. His father’s brow furrowed deeply.

“We’ve also decided to wait to bless our baby till the bishop has taken me off probation and I’ve been made an elder, and then I’ll bless it in our Mormon ward. Also, later on, when it’s eight, I’ll baptize it.”

Bode saw his parents relax, and he relaxed a little as well. No need to tell them their child would also be on the Baptist records, also no need to bring

up the vexing probability that all these arrangements would repeat themselves when they had other children.

Shortly Bode's mother and Iris began a discussion of family connections. Was there a possibility that Iris could be related to a Denning family Esther knew over at Capitol Reef? Not likely, Iris informed her. As far as she knew, her father's family derived from roots in Missouri, where an ancestor had moved immediately after the Civil War.

"Your family is nice," Iris said to Bode as they drove on toward Salina.

"They like you," Bode said, neglecting to add that they would never surrender a hope that Iris would convert. That would remain a given till their dying day.

Bode and Iris found her parents watching television in their living room. "Sorry to interrupt," Iris said, "but we've made up our minds. We want to get married."

Turning off the TV set with a remote control, Merle motioned the young couple toward the sofa. Once they were seated, Merle turned a querying look toward Bode.

"I'll try hard to earn a decent living," Bode said. "I'll do my best."

"We'll have my wages from the café for a while," Iris said. "After that, we'll make do on whatever he earns. We'll live in a shack if we have to."

"We can't have you living in a shack," Merle said. "If you are determined to get married, we'll help."

Woodrow scowled, needing no words to express his disgust with this new turn of events.

"We *will* help," Merle repeated insistently.

The next morning, Merle drove to the Carpenter home and introduced herself to Esther. Over the next two weeks, the two mothers helped their engaged offspring lay out a plausible future. The wedding would take place on the Saturday of the Thanksgiving weekend in a reception room of a new Richfield motel. The officiator would be neither a Mormon bishop nor a Baptist pastor but the Sevier County clerk. Other arrangements included a small one-bedroom apartment for the newlyweds near the truck-stop on the I-70. Bode would continue to work at the AgriCo-op. He planned to

enroll in night school when winter semester began at the Richfield branch of Snow College and pursue a major in natural resources management. As for Iris, she planned on filling her time after she had quit working at the café by pursuing a degree in elementary education through the online Western Governors University. Woodrow, having accepted the inevitability of the marriage, made the couple the gift of a car with a lot of miles left in it, giving the young couple the mobility of a second serviceable, if aging, automobile.

On the evening before Thanksgiving Day, Avery and Anna arrived from BYU. They were extraordinarily positive and cheerful, as if they were determined to ignore the Carpenter family's shipwrecked honor. Bode was doubly grateful for their presence, which distracted their parents from the ignominious necessity of the pending marriage.

The wedding party gathered as scheduled at three o'clock on the Saturday afternoon following Thanksgiving. Folding chairs were arranged in rows in a meeting room of the motel. At the front stood a small table, laden with a bouquet of white, pink, and yellow flowers. The county clerk, standing in front of the table, called the gathering to order. Bode and Iris stood before him, Iris wearing a light blue suit and half-high heels and Bode wearing his dark suit with a new blue-grey tie—a gift from Iris.

Referring to a few scribbled notes in his hand, the county clerk spoke briefly on the weighty implications of marriage, urging Bode and Iris to regard their civil wedding as a solemn contract with Heaven to love and cherish one another. He then proceeded with the official ceremony, securing from each the required assent to taking the other as a life-long spouse. Bode found himself saying yes with a cracking voice, seized suddenly by the finality of it all.

The wedding party then migrated to a private dining room for a catered supper. After the meal, the party broke up slowly, the goodbyes generating brief sallies into new topics of conversation. At a private moment, Avery asked Bode about the prospects of Iris becoming a Mormon.

Bode shook his head dolefully. "It'll never happen."

"You are sure of that, are you?"

Bode nodded grimly.

“Well, by golly,” Avery said, “at least you would call her a good person—a *righteous* person—wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“It’s certainly not a sin to be married to a righteous non-Mormon,” Avery reminded him. “The thing is, don’t let her drag you off course. You can still qualify for the Celestial Kingdom. You can still qualify for spending eternity in the presence of Heavenly Father and Jesus. Just be a good Mormon, Bode, and you’ll be okay.”

Just be a good Mormon—Bode was glad that Avery had backed up the bishop’s assurance that a two-church marriage wasn’t inherently sinful. Maybe he would see the interior of the Manti temple again after all. He needed to keep his sights locked on the Celestial Kingdom.

The newlyweds spent the night in the Richfield motel, intending to depart in the morning for Bryce National Monument on a brief honeymoon. After they had checked into their room, Iris raised a question. Were they to lounge on the king-size bed for a while and watch wide-screen cable TV, or were they to get down immediately to the business of giving a legitimate consummation to their union?

“I wouldn’t mind if we made love first,” Bode said, having had the legitimate consummation of their marriage on his mind all day long.

He showered first and put on new pajamas. Iris undressed and put on a robe while he was in the shower. Bode emerged from the shower and sat on the side of the bed. Iris stood beside him, displaying the delicate lingerie she intended to wear when she returned from the bathroom. He untied her robe and pulled it open. She was nude beneath the robe—small breasts, trim thighs, a slim waist showing a slight bulge.

“You are beautiful,” he said.

He stood and they embraced. Shortly, one thing having led to another, they got onto the bed and made love.

“Well,” she said, “we’ve taken care of that little business.”

“I wouldn’t mind if we did it again after you’ve had your shower,” Bode said. She looked at him askance. “If you’ve got the energy. . .,” she said.

As it turned out, he did.

Much later, after they had gone to bed for the night, he failed to fall asleep quickly. He couldn't get his mind off Avery's earnest reminder that, despite being married to Iris for a mortal lifetime, he could still qualify for spending eternity in the presence of Heavenly Father and Jesus in the Celestial Kingdom. He had heard that righteous persons who were not married for time and eternity but who dwelled in the presence of the Father and the Son were considered ministering angels. He had heard that these ministering angels from the Celestial Kingdom could visit the lesser kingdoms. A ministering angel—that was exactly what Bode would be. As such he would request leave of absence to visit Iris in the Terrestrial Kingdom. He would request that it be an extended leave of absence. He would be there to comfort and sustain Iris and also to comfort and sustain any of their children who had chosen to go the Baptist way. It was a happy thought.

After about half an hour, Bode began to relax, soothed by the soft sounds of Iris's sleep. He slowly slid a hand toward her till it barely touched her arm. He left it there, comforted by her tactile presence.