

Adrian Stumpp

The Bishop's Celestial Wife

To all those who judge without even knowing me, I say hold it, hear me out, I got a side too, and Bishop Hearthway is prejudiced against me for obvious reasons I don't blame him for, but, anyway, I deserve to speak up. What my relations are with Sister Hearthway is complicated, and you'll see once you know facts from hearsay. Unfortunate for me no one wants to listen, so my final recourse is just to tell it like it happened and hope someone down the line cares enough to learn. Alls I can do is keep faith in that.

Mom and Dad divorced two years ago, and it's understandable it messed with my mind. So I got in trouble, drugs and girls a little bit; it wasn't too bad, but Mom got paranoid and fearful and determined the best thing for me would be a dose of decent folks and religion and so forth. Beings she was in no straights to provide, she sent me up to Ogden to live with her sister Aunt Davina, Uncle Boss, and my cousin Sharlee who I hate.

I was baptized Latter-Day Saint, but Mom and Dad weren't regular with it, and I strayed. But I got to say, with Aunt Davina and Uncle Boss I went to Sunday school and learned about Jesus and Brother Joseph, Nephites and Lamanites, and the early Saints making their pilgrimage to the desert, and I really felt the Holy Ghost there for a while. Then I got to pondering so much paradox and the nature of the still small spirit of the Lord. I determined it wasn't anything but my taste for dramatic emotions taking advantage, the same as with a tragical play or movie, and it was a mistake to prescribe the feeling to the Lord; it was just sympathy for human suffering. I thought this a long while but played the devotee in public. I reasoned like how some places there were Catholics and others Baptists, or Methodists, or Jews, or Buddhists, here the people were Mormons, and it would be disrespectful of our culture for me to blow the whistle.

Some people been calling me an apostate, Sharlee chief among them, but the truth is I'm as Mormon as the rest of them, allowing for different reasons. I collect fast offerings and bless sacrament and attend Priests Quorum regular, same as them. When I came to be with Aunt Davina and Uncle Boss I even confessed in Bishop Hearthway's office my carnal sins, including nocturnal emissions and my habit of personal interference, an embarrassment, especially since the Bishop gave me all kinds of advice for avoiding temptation, like playing yo-yo when I got the urge, or always going to the bathroom with the door open so I couldn't have privacy to defile my stuff.

Well, me and Sharlee were adversaries from starts, and she came off righteous calling me shameless for voiding bowels with an open door, and then when I pulled it closed, she said I was a pervert. Uncle Boss made a speech in my defense about how it was only natural for a teenaged boy to touch his stuff, and that's what made it sinful, the natural man being an enemy to God, but all the same there was nothing suspicious about it. He was only trying to help but embarrassed me more, and then Sharlee started spreading vicious lies about me at the high school. Her scheme to get all the decent kids to shun me succeeded, but what she didn't anticipate was all the scarlet girls took interest. This made me miserable with a devil's potency I was barely penitent enough to withstand. I had to rub hot peppers on my hands before going to bed for discouragement and sometimes I forgot to wash it off before urinating in the morning. Those times were awful for me and my only comfort was that Sharlee was too ugly not to be chaste.

I spent all my leisure pondering books. Some were spiritual like the scriptures and *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, but some were secular, too, like *Of Mice and Men* and *A House Made of Dawn* assigned from school. Alls I did was mind my own business but Sharlee couldn't be satisfied; she caught me pondering and called me a dork. I told her that made no sense, since *dork* means *a whale's penis*, in case she didn't know. She got all offended and tattled to Aunt Davina that I was vulgar and talking dirty to her. I pointed out it was Sharlee who said it; I only told her what it meant. I called her a strifemonger, self-righteous, spiteful, a bearer of false witness, and accused her sly-like with Shakespeare, saying, "*Thou be as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shan't not escape calumny!*"

Sharlee ran red with shock probably because until now I'd always spoken to her with the utmost respect, as if she deserved to be addressed like a lady. Sharlee was unfathomably ignernt and had no idea the truths I'd stacked against her, but even an idiot like her could tell she'd been assaulted, and she slapped me.

I said, "But if one smites thee on the right cheek, turn him the other also."

Sharlee, my nemesis, was smart enough to see I'd beaten her at her own game, and crumbled on the floor bawling like a girl. Uncle Boss took her away to be comforted, and Aunt Davina gave me a good talking to.

She said she understood it must be hard for me to come away from everything I knew about the world to Utah where the way of life was so different and I didn't have any friends, but I would have to learn to love Sharlee like cousins. Aunt Davina said she knew I'd have a rough go of it ever since she and my mom were sisters together in Texas, and Mom took an uncouth trucker for a husband, and lit out for Truth and Consequence, and shunned the straight and narrow path. She said I mustn't blame Mom, though, cause she sent me to Aunt Davina out of love; Mom knew a boy like me, born into the Lord's covenant, shouldn't come of age in a gentile land. Aunt Davina asked me please apologize to Sharlee, but I refused. Later Sharlee came to me so pious the holy spirit must have been rancid inside her, and forgave me insulting her.

The next day Aunt Davina told me she'd prayed up a sweat over me and found me a way to spend afternoons out-of-doors in the service of the Lord's host. Bishop Hearthway, she said, wanted to hire me for a groundskeeper. So that's how I came to spend so much time with the bishop's celestial wife, Sister Hearthway.

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First thing I noticed about the Bishop's wife was her ivory blonde hair cut short like a helmet framing a pretty face. She was five-and-a-half feet tall with a natural suntan, soft spoken, matronly in demeanor but debutante in carriage, and unfortunately prone to cellulite. But all that's superficial and ends; I have never met another person remotely like Noelle Hearthway. She is unique for grace and warmth throughout the world.

Bishop Hearthway's house sat on a half-acre with high fences. The back yard, landscaped in inclining tiers that grew steeper the farther away from the house you went, had the appearance of an outdoor stadium. At the bottom was a lap pool with a concrete sun porch and a small grass lawn. Flower beds scaled the upper tiers studded with big rocks and tall trees. I'd taken hand at some landscaping back home and knew well what to do. It wasn't too hard work taking care of the bishop's yard so long as you stayed on top of it, and some things, like planting flowers, I enjoyed. The grass had to be mowed, mulched, and fertilized, the flowerbeds weeded and checked for pests, and sometimes the trees needed pruning. The Bishop said not to bother watering—he'd do that himself—but there was wood chips to throw and a pool to clean and so forth, and by the time it was all on accounts I was fairly smote.

"Toward summer's end you'll mind the young fruit trees. If the fruit gets too heavy it'll break the branches," The Bishop told me. "Only don't eat them. They're not ripe yet, and you'll get sick if you do."

Come summertime Sister Hearthway laid on a lawn chair next to the pool sun tanning the whole while I did the job. She brought lotions and oils and sunglasses, sometimes the Top 40 station on a small radio, sometimes homemaker magazines. She wore a classy one-piece swimsuit striped red and white like a peppermint, and smiled at me politely but

never said a word. She'd just bake to a nice color on the front, flip over and bake the back, and when she heard me gathering the equipment to clean the pool she'd take her things in the house. Most times I forgot she was there.

Of an afternoon she called to me where I crouched weeding high up the terrace. She'd brought out sun-tea with sugar and asked for company. She asked me about Mom and Dad, how I got in trouble, how I liked it with Aunt Davina and Uncle Boss, did I enjoy what I learnt at school, how was summer vacation, did I like the ward, and so forth. She said she admired the courage it took to make like the prodigal son, humble and ready to be cleansed in the gospel's love.

We had something in common since she'd gone through the same thing when she was a few years older than I. She'd had a sweetheart, and it'd gone farther than it ought. She'd been a hellion then, she said, of the variety that thought she knew the world better than did her parents or even the Prophet's word. She used to have dreams about doing something bad to the ward house, nothing particular, just something horrible, like spray painting naughty words in the chapel, or setting it on fire. "You must think I'm a monster!" she kept saying through her fingers, but I couldn't see reason for embarrassment. I knew from experience bad thoughts to be common for a troubled youth, and told her so. She'd believed in her sweetheart, and he'd let her down, something the church had never done. Seeing now her world crumbled for love of a false hero she returned post-haste to the Lord's plan for eternal salvation, never to doubt again, and never to look back. The talk against her had been so horrid she'd begged her father not to make her go to church, but he'd insisted, and so she understood what I must've gone through.

Honestly, I hadn't paid attention to what was being said against me, since I didn't know these people or care to. It hadn't been awful as she might've feared. Sister Hearthway was glad for me. She asked if I'd ever been in love, which I hadn't. She sighed and told me it was the most beautiful feeling in the world, and she knew someday I would understand. I felt real warm to Sister Hearthway, like we shared something special and rare, and she felt the same for me, too, cause she told me if ever I needed anything to call her first.

My sleep was fettered entire after that. I couldn't rest for worry of Noelle Hearthway. She hadn't said anything negative against her daddy, but I inferred detective-style from what she'd said that he wasn't a very nice man. After her sweetheart had run off she was a broken girl, impressionable, and easy to take advantage. Her daddy lorded it over her and pressed her into being righteous out of fear and humiliation. He introduced her to Samuel Hearthway, seven years older than her, established, respectable, and so forth. She was melancholy talking about it, not that she didn't love the Bishop now, but she'd had to learn it after she was already his wife for time and all eternity.

We were warm friends after that, and the more I studied Sister Hearthway the more obvious I saw she wasn't satisfied in life. Next time I tended the Bishop's yard, she asked right off would I smear suntan lotion on her back. I felt immodest but did it anyways, though later I needed double hot peppers on my hands and prayed up a storm for forgiveness. She called me Levi and I called her Noelle like how friends do. She had me for sun-tea while her babies napped, and asked about my thoughts and so forth, and I asked hers, too.

One day the middle of June we were extrapolating scripture when she got solemn and sat the books away and said she wasn't feeling the spirit. She said she didn't feel the spirit much these days and asked if I thought bad of her. I'd suspected as much for a while but couldn't think bad of her for all the world. She put her hands over her eyes and said, "Oh, but you don't know what I've done!" And she was up running to the house. Came back all nervous giggles with a black gallon garbage bag. She dumped it out on the sun porch and stood over it like a triumph. "This is all stuff I've stolen!" she gasped.

It was good as Christmas. Dolls, clothes, movies, CDs, tools, furniture polish, a fancy cigarette lighter, high heeled shoes, cheap jewelry, some nice cuff-links, a set of oven mitts, my Uncle Boss' personally engraved pen set, and all manner of things—even a Bible.

I said, "You stole all this?"

"This isn't even all of it! I've got more! Bags and bags of it in the garage," she pointed, "Some from people's houses, some from department stores, hardware stores, gas stations, all kinds of places. It's trickier if the store has theft detection devices, but I discovered ways around that, and mostly it's the easiest thing in the world. They never even suspect me! Nice young woman with two kids and dressed like I am—why steal anything if I can buy it? And that's what you do, you always buy something!"

"This is a problem you got. I read about this kind of thing."

"No, I'm not a kleptomaniac. They're compelled to steal, even though they don't want to, they feel bad about it. It makes me feel good!"

I couldn't fathom how that could be. We trolled through the stuff—scarves and golf balls and neck ties—me in a world of puzzle and she pure ecstatic.

"Not so crystal clear now, am I," she bragged. "If there's anything you like, you can have it. I've never shown any of this to anyone before, and I've got tons of it. Help yourself, really!"

I said I better not, but it upset her severe so I took a silk neck tie to put her at ease. She worried I wouldn't like her now I knew how bad she could sometimes be. I said the Bishop was the luckiest man living, and she blushed.

"Sometimes I don't think the Bishop feels so lucky," she said. She had this diminutive way of talking about herself, and it made me mad.

"Then he's stupid as he is lucky."

She was visible shocked, but I was so hot with feeling I didn't care.

"Oh, don't listen to me," she said, "I know he loves me, he's just busy so much, I wish he'd take time to kiss me once in a while."

Well, I was lit. I said, "If I was your husband I'd kiss you thousand times a day. I don't mean nothing by it, I'm just saying.

I already decided some day I want my wife to be same as you, and I can't see any sense in the Bishop being so negligent.

He's a fine man, I won't say he ain't, but what I learnt is even the best got things they oughta do better."

Sister Hearthway flushed a good crimson, said, "It's nice of you to say so." After that things got all awkward between us,

and I said I better get back to those gardenias before it's time to clean the pool. At the time I gave it no thought, but after everything went how it did I know it was important. What went on between me and Sister Hearthway happened that day.

All gossips want to hear is the later stuff, but I'm telling you everything had been decided by then.

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Bishop Hearthway it seems made a good salary air traffic controlling at the international airport. He was formerly a charter pilot, before that a military man, and before raised respectful of good old fashioned family values, which is why he worked so heavy all week and Sister Hearthway stayed home minding the babies. I know cause Sister Hearthway told me. She told me she could work or not work, it didn't matter to her, but it was important to the Bishop. That's how she was with most things: she couldn't care one way or the other, and if the Bishop had a preference she'd just as soon please him.

She didn't want me to do anything but listen to her chatter after she saw I didn't condemn her thievery. It was hard pulling weeds with her telling me all about babies and snoring bishops, and fetching me to smear suntan lotion, and reach high pans in the kitchen, and which blouse did I prefer, purple or white. She had questions about male pattern baldness and the geography of Alaska and all variety of non-interest. I'd make to go home, and she'd stall any way she could, all anxiety, like she expected me to say something I couldn't guess. She called me to the porch for sun-tea and said, "I heard you have a girlfriend now."

It wasn't so, and I gathered she heard from Sharlee whose heart all vinegar and antichrist took no pleasure in the world sweeter than spreading rumors. It was harmless enough saying I had a girlfriend, but Sharlee meant to further blacken my name through innuendo, and I told Sister Hearthway as much. She said, "Wouldn't you like a girlfriend?"

"Sometimes, but not much. I had enough visits to the Bishop's office for a lifetime, and my experience is all girls get me is trouble," which unfortunately persists to the present hour.

She smiled at my admission, "So you must be a very good kisser, then?"

"Probably not. I'm pretty out of practice with it. I guess not bad, though. All my favorite movies have kissing so I must've learned from the best."

She laughed. "You can't learn kissing from movies. You have to practice. I'd let you practice on me if you promised not to take it seriously."

I felt a panic coming on. My throat swelled up, and I heard a ringing like I just been socked. I knew what she said didn't mean what I heard, and I felt guilty for perverted thoughts. I didn't know how to respond for fear she'd know how I took it and find out my adulterous proclivity which was constant around Sister Hearthway. She must've known from the look on my face cause she made real concerned and said, "It's not *real* kissing. We can't do that. I would never think of that and you shouldn't either. But there's no harm in teaching you how to kiss so long as it's just practice. Even the Bishop would say so."

She closed her eyes and I kissed her. She said that wasn't too bad but softer this time and a little longer. After that she said open your mouth a little and press. Then she said keep your eyes open til the last moment so you get a good seal on it. Fifteen minutes I bet we kissed and she critiqued each one. Then she said that was enough for today, you're already getting better, and went in the house so I could trim shrubs in peace.

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I worked a fiery pace after that cause Sister Hearthway insisted all my work be done before she'd instruct me in the smooching arts. I got a decent amount of practice that month and next. At that point if anyone would've asked who's my best friend, I'd said Noelle Hearthway. Sad, since I don't think she esteemed me the same. Once her babies were out like lights and all my chores complete she'd sit me on the livingroom sofa and straddle over me for the next lesson. Sometimes if I got too hot for her she'd have to put her knees on my wrists or hold my hands in hers since it was so indecent for me to touch her. We'd lie on the floor so nothing of us touched but for our mouths, the most delicious torture I ever knew.

She taught me all the flavor and craft of fine necking. How not to put my tongue too far back in the mouth, but not to be feeble; confident, like dancing, a gentleman's got to take the lead but be sensitive, too. Linger, Sister Hearthway taught, caress the teeth with the tongue, and so forth. She was a diamond kisser, and I suppose I cleaned up nice enough.

Sometimes we sat in her pristine car that smelled of fresh laundry and listened to raunchy rap music she'd stole, which she admitted to not liking but for the cuss words. Them were some of the best memories I got.

But on occasions Sister Hearthway got so blue and mournful, my heart felt sick for her. One August Tuesday we were laughing and carrying on with stories of my troubles in Truth and Consequence and her stealing all kinds of fantastic goods. Her giggle dried up. She was a long time very quiet and ignored all my attempts to jolly her.

"I'm a bad person," she said. "I'm a bad wife and a bad Latter-Day Saint."

"No," I told her, but she couldn't be convinced. Her testimony of the Lord's plan of eternal salvation was in sorry states again, just like when she was a girl. She told me she knew full well the Church was true and she had no desire to dispute it, but just the same she didn't care no more. Being born to the truth had robbed her of the illusion of natural life, which made her sad since the illusion seemed so much more beautiful than the truth. She couldn't understand why God would make it so. "I wish I could say swear words without feeling so guilty," she admitted. "I've only had two boyfriends in my whole life. I've never been to a rock concert. I've never been drunk. Just one time I wish I could get drunk and be more worried about my liver than my salvation."

"That's a predicament," I admitted but insisted she had to do what the spirit told her, and if the spirit told her to go to a rock concert and drink like a wino who'm I to judge? I wouldn't think low of her, just like she didn't think low of me even though Sharlee had made it common knowledge I had a problem with keeping my hands off myself.

She stared at me a good instant shocked. She started giggling and that turned to outright laughter. "You promise?"

"Cross my heart," I said, and I was glad cause she was back in fine spirits. But being a bishop's wife is a mean job and soon the sorrow was back in her, and there were babies to wake and feed, and laundry to starch, press, and hang, and floors to scrub. And after that dinner had to be started and snacks given and Sister Hearthway would have to freshen up and get lipsticked so she'd be at her ravishing best and gorgeous when the Bishop came home. I had mulch to bag and woodchips to scatter, anyways, and was behind schedule enough that the Bishop arrived before I'd gone home. He shook my hand and reminded me again to watch the fruit trees but don't eat the fruit.

But for days I could think of nothing but Sister Hearthway. She was in great pain, and all my bones hurt for her sake. I got the romantic teenaged glands the Bishop had warned against, and I was determined when next we met to heft up all the skill she'd taught me and kiss Sister Hearthway in such a way as to heal her wounds.

"That's very good," she said after only the first few kisses, and she looked pleased. "Congratulations, Levi. You're an expert kisser. The best I know, so there's no reason we should continue risking temptation like this. Unless you can think of one?"

I felt nauseous. "Does that mean you can't teach me to kiss no more?"

"That's right. I've taught you all I know." She ignored how tremblesome that made me, and asked, "Are you in love yet?"

"No," I managed. I felt dizzy and wanted to cry.

"But you want to fall in love, right? Someday? After you've served a mission, maybe?"

"Sure."

"And then you'll want to get married? In the Temple?"

"Yeah."

"And if you want her to have a nice time, there're things you'll need to know. She won't have a clue since she'll be a worthy Temple bride, right?"

"I guess."

"You do want her to have a nice time, right?"

"I guess," I said again, though I was all colors of confused since I knew for sure she couldn't mean what I thought.

"I could teach you. If you want." She had her pants down on her hips, and pressed my hand to the silky temple garments on her rump. The softness of her underneath nearly gave me a seizure. I cursed myself for being such a good kisser and too charming for my own good.

"Stop it," I pled. "I know we can't do *that!* The scriptures say, *'Thou shan't not cleave unto another man's wife!'*"

"Well, of course we can't do *that!* I wouldn't even think about it, and you shouldn't either. But in the other place it's alright. Just not the sacred place."

"That's cleaving," I said, *"It's still cleaving!"*

She smiled patiently. "You haven't been raised in the covenant all your life," she said, "so I understand it's confusing. You can do it in the other place and still be Temple worthy. People do it all the time. I wouldn't expect you to know that."

I shook my head. "Still, that's adultery."

But she assured me if it was in the other place it would not be considered adultery or even fornication. But I wouldn't be swayed. Even I knew the vice of sodomy was expressly forbidden.

"Well, then," she said, "I'll just show you with your fingers."

But I beat it out of there fast as a canyon wind, I swear to God. That night I renounced my romantic ways and my teenager glands all in one fit of prayer. I went to bed with the hot peppers still clasped tight and begged my redeemer forgive me for coming so near seducing poor Sister Hearthway. I could only be thankful I changed course right at the end before both of us were barred Celestial glory come the end of days. I promised the Lord to go back to kissing Sister Hearthway and counting myself elect, since any time she spent kissing me was time not spent doing with someone else what she'd suggested.

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Our ward house was a nice one. It sat next door to an elementary school a ways from any main roads. The gymnasium had wood floors—not the carpet ones you find in some churches—and new electrical scoreboards. The gym was located behind the chapel so when lots of people came to sacrament meeting they could open the partition and set up folding chairs on the basketball court. In the lobby hung a huge oil painting of Our Lord and Savior comforting the lambs. The chapel all high ceilings and plaster walls. The pews fashioned of real cherrywood as well as the pulpit. The organ was a beauty, too, and the wall behind where the Bishopric sat was carved wood made to look like the tabernacle organ pipes in Salt Lake City, which anyone with any kind of culture to them knows to be a world renowned spectacle.

Off the side of the Bishopric was a little kitchenette where young men prepared sacrament. I was technically too old for preparing sacrament, but there was a famine on teenagers in our ward, most members being either too old or too young to have them, so it oftentimes fell to me. The room wasn't much bigger than a closet, and that's where I was, filling thimble cups with tap water, when I heard soft steps coming from back of the chapel. Sister Hearthway looked in on me, and I could tell from starts she's mad. Her arms were crossed on her pretty Sunday dress and hard lines roughed her brow.

Earlier the Bishop had asked me for a private conference in his office. I told Sister Hearthway I didn't want to kiss no more cause I was so scared what the Bishop wanted to see me for. She had said there was nothing to be ashamed for since we hadn't done anything sinful. "That is," she'd added, "unless you've been kissing me for real. Have you? I told you it was only okay if we didn't mean it, Levi, but you mean it, don't you."

She caught me there, and it was no use hiding so I didn't bother, but one look at her now and I could tell Sister Hearthway had worried herself half stupid over it. "What did the Bishop want to talk about?"

“Just what a good job I’ve done with the yard,” I said. She didn’t seem satisfied so I added, “He gave me a raise. That’s all.”

“What did he say about me?” she flared.

“He didn’t say nothing about you. You weren’t even mentioned.”

“Liar!” and straightaway her manicured fingers and their sweet lingering of coconut cream lotion were at my collar.

“Just a raise!” I choked, “The trees! A good job, I swear it! That’s all!”

“You’ll sell me out to him first chance you get, I know it!” she said in my ear. She got a crazy look and her tone was sharp as ice-water. I could feel her blinking against my cheek. Her purse was slung over one shoulder and she took something small from it and pressed a square cellophane disc I knew for a condom, without seeing, into my hand. She loosened her grip on my tie, the very one she’d given me, and I stood up straight trying to recompose the suit Uncle Boss handed down to me. It was my only suit and I didn’t want it getting ruined. I said, “I know what we been doing is sinful and if the Bishop knew, he’d be lit. It’s not okay even if it is only pretend. I knew but went along anyway, not cause I’s weak or tempted, but cause I wanted to. It makes me feel good kissing you. And I know it’s not okay for me to cleave to you even if it is in the other place. I searched a bunch through the scriptures and I can’t find it nowhere. I’m not ignernt as you think!”

Sister Hearthway studied what I’d said and for a moment I thought she’d been reintroduced to good sense. “Even the sun-tea you like so much is forbidden according to the Bishop,” she said. “He knows through personal revelation. I have to hide the tea from him. But I won’t anymore. I’ll drink sun-tea when I like, and he’ll have to judge me for it. And he’ll be right to do it, but I don’t care. Righteous or damned, I’m miserable. I want to be free of eternal glory but I can’t do it myself. I need your help. I have to do something irrevocable, something to cut me off. You have to,” she said. “If you love me you’ll have to do this for me.”

She hitched her dress up on her back, pulled her garments to her knees, got from her purse a small jar of lotion, put it to her backside, and leaned against the counter. There was barely room enough in the kitchenette for the two of us doubled over like that. Sister Hearthway said to use the condom, but I knew from Aunt Davina contraceptives were forbidden. Sister Hearthway told me not to be silly, the Bishop used them all the time, news I know would upset poor Uncle Boss who lost an argument on this very theme and suffered a vasectomy that caught infection and convinced him of a wrath worse than Aunt Davina’s.

I tried to stop when she made uncomfortable sounds, but Sister Hearthway said it wouldn't count unless I spilt seed. She closed her eyes and bit her fist while I did my best to get the job done. "Are you close?" she wanted to know, but I was beside myself. This was one problem I'd never had but I guess it was from fear and nerves I couldn't go. Sister Hearthway was real sore and I was scared halfwitted, so she told me hold still and got it mostly done with her hand. But she stopped just before my time, she said, cause she wasn't for sure it would be major enough of a sin if I didn't spend inside her. It was the most horrible time but by and by it was done. And then she was off me smoothing her floral-patterned dress and fixing her hair in the mirror above the sink. I rationalized this way: the Bishop would get her for time and all eternity as his consort and partner in the conjuration of universes in the Celestial Kingdom of Heaven; I could at least have her once on earth.

I had under my bed a microscope Mom sent for my birthday and right after sacrament meeting I rushed home quick as I could to see the magnified contents of the smelly condom. Under the lens the salty waste an iodine tinted graveyard. Scores of the microscopic tadpoles like whale carcasses floated belly up, still as ghosts that would never be. They glided past one another, but I could not detect amongst them the least intimation of divine spark.

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Tuesday the Bishop told me come see him in his office next Sunday, there was something he'd have my ear about. I was an awful wreck that whole week, and Aunt Davina only made it worse with all her questions. I hardly thought, considering all the making out I'd done with Bishop Hearthway's wife, it could be a good thing. But Aunt Davina was convinced otherwise. She had it decided the Bishop wanted me to be the new First Councilor in the Priests Quorum. Sharlee, though, started with spreading it through the community I was getting disfellowshipped at best and excommunicated most likely, though for what she wouldn't say. She just threw about a lascivious glance and expected you'd already figured it out.

Next time I came to the Bishop's house I found Sister Hearthway on all fours in the back grass. She'd taken her babies to her sister's for the afternoon and got sloppy with orange juice and vodka she'd stole from the state liquor store. She was in a miserable condition half wild with drink. I fetched water and nursed her to a sitting position. She'd been moaning into the grass, adamant we hadn't committed the sins of fornication or adultery since it'd been in the other place.

A changed heart had her in such a state. She'd tossed through the night with serious prayer and could not be dissuaded of fear. She begged me to pray with her, which I done, especially since she kept slurring the Lord's name, mostly

in vain, and laughed at her own petitions. She told me what we'd done was a mistake and now it was on us both to put the grievous thing to rights.

The Bishop had found her loot in the garage. He finds out everything, it's the Lord's power in him, she was convinced. That's what he wanted to talk about on Sunday; whether or not I'd known about it. Sister Hearthway had got drunk, seeing this would be her last chance since she was determined to repent once and for all. She'd already decided to tell the Bishop everything we'd done soon as he got home. There was no fighting the power of the Lord in him. I thought that was absurd but didn't want to expose myself as a non-believer by saying so. If she'd wanted to lose her faith she'd have lost it by now, and I discerned it must somehow be doing her more good than harm.

"The Bishop loves the Lord more than me. He's a good Saint and loves nothing more than his God. But you love me more than anything,"

And there was nothing I could say to that neither, because after all it was true and she knew it.

"I thought I didn't need the Lord to be happy, but I was wrong," Sister Hearthway moaned. "Still, it's better to know for sure and pay the price," and then she bent in half and paid a pile of it on the lawn.

I wanted to help Sister Hearthway but knew the only help I could give was not to stop her from telling the Bishop what we'd done. I knew the Bishop would fire me and even bar me from his yard the rest of my life. When Aunt Davina heard what hand I'd played in the whole business, she'd probably send me back to Truth and Consequence, and that shamed me. I felt a powerless disappointment in the face of so much justice. I felt like doing something reckless just to spite the forces stacked against me. I cast about the yard and it occurred to me what to do: I would eat the Bishop's fruit. I climbed the terrace to its highest point near the knotty wood fence that cut the yard off from the surrounding earth. There stood the three young fruit trees, cherries, plums, and apples, little more than saplings tied to wooden stakes to support the weight and guide their straight growth. But I was too late. The ground all around the trees fermented with a carpet of fallen fruit, bird-pecked and withered and rotten in a spray of white crud like confectioner's sugar.

I searched the trees but they were naked. I picked up a spoilt plum and considered what had happened, this once delicious fruit dry as jerky and gone to seed all for want of eating. I was angry at the Bishop for all the beautiful things in the yard, even Sister Hearthway, even myself. A few weeks ago we could have harvested these trees and all of us had more than we could eat. But the Bishop wouldn't let anyone eat the fruit, and now it was ruined, which I thought the first righteous thing to happen all summer.

