Personal Essay

Gentle Father

George Bennion

One of the earliest recollections about my father has to do with his scent. Not unpleasant, it communicated security and well-being. It was subtle and absolutely person specific. My father was gone a lot and, because of that, was an overwhelming presence when at home. In my memory, he was clearing land with a team of horses about three or four miles from our house and probably for some need of my mother's had me in tow. I have no memory at all of the main part of the day. I am sure it was summer because, although it was dark by the time we started home and we were at about 5,800 feet elevation, we wore no coats. It was chill but not cold. I remember he put me on one horse just back of its collar so that I tried without confidence to keep my position by clinging to the harness. He tied the rope of the other horse to the tail of the first and then swung up behind me, one large, warm arm across my front, and drew me against his stomach. His arm provided all the stability I wanted, and I let go of the harness, but it was his scent, soft and reassuring, that made me secure.

That scent was fixed in me forever. If it came to me now, I would smile inwardly and look around for him. Once when I was six or seven, we had moved from the country to the city, and the house we were living in was not yet home to me. I was having an unpleasant dream. My bed was jostled a little, and a kind of fear took me in my dream. My father had gotten into bed with me. He had been away from home for some reason and, out of any expectation of mine, had returned. Perhaps one or two of the younger children had gotten into bed with our mother, and he had found my bed the simplest and quickest way to sleep. As he settled into bed and put his arm around my waist and that known scent penetrated my

dream, the fear vanished, contentment flowed over me, and the unfamiliar place became home.

Yet I did not always feel entirely safe around my father. This was more than just the fact that he was big and I was little. My juvenile occupations gave me ample reason to expect punishment. But the difference in us, he a grown man and I a child, was a factor. To me, his strength was beyond comprehension. Once in a while, as we children romped around him and clumsily bumped into his back or knee, we bounced off as though he were a rock or a large tree trunk. He was gentle and tender and welcoming, yet still, he had that hardness of body and that towering strength—we had seen him lift the back end of our old Ford and hold it up with his knee while he got blocks under its axle. Although I didn't articulate the ideas, encountering or thinking of him was accompanied by a nebulous sense of risk. He governed us more by look than by word. He never spoke angrily or shouted at us. We knew from his face when something had gotten out of bounds. Signs of approval were equally silent and equally clear. It's hard to say exactly what they consisted of, these countermeasures to the scowl—a softening in his face, a deepening of lines at the corners of his eyes—but we had no uncertainty.

In 1933 he started a homestead and in May 1934 took two of my brothers and me there for the summer. Two unusual and revealing incidents occurred. We planted a cherry tree, a summer apple, currant bushes, and a kitchen garden in the little hollow where he built a one-room cabin of lumber carefully salvaged from a garage dismantled near our home in the city. (It has taken me fifty years to quit saving used nails and bent bolts.) Soon after the cabin was finished and the summer work outlined, our father left for an editing job he had taken in the city. The hollow had enough pitch to it that water ran down the furrows readily, making a mess of the cow trail of a road that ran beneath our garden. To protect the road, we shoveled a catch basin between the garden and the road, maybe twenty-five feet long, ten feet at the widest, and waist deep. It was only a small second step, whenever there was enough water in the "pond," for us to take a dip. On one hot, gusty July weekend, our father came out to spend a few days. We had been working very hard. The catch basin was full. When we came in from the fields,

we boys were stripped off in minutes and paddling and splashing in the cool water. I suddenly looked up at my father standing twenty or thirty feet away, obviously yearning to get in the water. Although I was unfamiliar with the term Victorianism, I knew why he didn't join us and was vaguely saddened by his longing.

The other incident occurred just before school summoned us to town. The weather had turned suddenly cold, a warning to us and all animals. Again our father was there, and while the four of us were standing in the garden, a half-grown coyote entered at the bottom of the garden. In no time, he was eating windfall fruit, and then while we watched, he began digging parsnips. I disliked parsnips and was amazed at the coyote. Our father told of coyotes commonly eating any such sugar-bearing foods in preparation for winter.

The homestead was in the midst of sheep winter range, and the sheep were a great trial to us. Our water came through miles of small ditches from several mountain springs, the ditches hoed out and maintained endlessly. Particularly in the fall and spring, when sheep herds were coming out or going back, the sheep tromped our ditches flat almost daily. The word *sheep* became a curse word. Now, with the young coyote absorbed in his bonanza, one of us was sent quietly up to the cabin for the .22, and our father shot the pup. It dropped like a bag of water no longer held. That's all there was. To my view, the coyote was innocent and beautiful. The simple equanimity with which my father dispatched it startled and confused me. I said so. As though he were explaining why loose teeth must be pulled, he passed it off with a couple of instances of coyote depredations, but then half in humor and half seriously, he said, "I should have left him; no telling how many sheep he would have killed in his lifetime." It was a side of my father I had not noticed before.

But it was also at the time we started that homestead that I discovered one of the choicest manifestations of his gentleness. It was as delightful to work with him as it was to be around him when work was done. From infancy I had no great love affair with hard work, but when he was there, explaining the purposes and the skills and especially any principles of physics that were involved, even the tasks at the bottom of my detesting had charm. In the first year of that undertaking, we scratched and clawed

mile on mile of ditch, bringing pathetic little streams across hard-packed gravel ridges, their rocks cemented together by the gradual accretion of lime. Hoe blades wore down; handles broke; our hands took on the shape of our tools. We never went anywhere without at least a shovel. After the basic job of ditching was finished, we routinely went up each ditch muddying the water to silt up the little interstices through which our precious water seeped away. And in later summer, we were forever scraping out moss and grass. On these tasks, I loaded more ill will than I ever did on the piano or the violin. But my father's presence and conversation so beguiled those times that when he came out I genuinely hoped for such tasks. My perception of the settlement of the Great Basin, my leaning toward humanism, whatever capacity I have for critical thinking—all of this had its beginning in his talk at such times.

In my later teens, I learned to disregard his gentle guidance. It did not always compete well against the flashy and the gaudy. When I was nineteen and my father was still at his editing job, I got a job at a bank. One of the tellers owned a major truck stop at which he employed his brother as manager. This teller fancied himself not only a model of grace and charm, but also of shrewdness and acuity. His manner with elder female customers was something to behold. They would wait in line for his window when some tellers had no line at all. Suave and dapper, he saw himself above the rest of us—and we ourselves probably believed it a little bit, sometimes. Of course we joked about him when he was not present, but his beautiful clothes and his polished and confident ways nevertheless made us easy marks for him.

One day he confided to me that he was about to marry and that a motorcycle he owned would be out of harmony with his new estate; he added confidentially that he would consider selling it for a good deal under its value if he could find someone who would care for it well. In those days, I rode the streetcar whenever my destination was beyond easy walking distance. After thinking over the confidence carefully (all of ten minutes), I told him that if I could reach his price, I should like to have his bike. Somehow we managed to work it out.

That evening I spoke of the matter to my father, expecting him to share my excitement and to congratulate me on my shrewd

deal. We were standing in the lane that circled our home. It was a warm spring evening just after sunset. He stood silent long enough that I thought the temperature had dropped. "I wouldn't bother with it. Motorcycles, especially on gravel, slide too easily from under their riders and let them go, trading flesh for gravel, scraping their way into a ditch or against a tree." Of course, I had been imagining myself sailing smartly along beautiful mountain roads or getting to work quickly, passing the unpleasant streetcar with neither regret nor difficulty. He turned and we walked, without speaking, up the lane toward the house. His point was compelling. Still, I was nineteen—lots of people in those days were saying that was old enough to vote. Plus, confound it, that bike and picture of unrestrained flight were too much for me.

When I got to work the next morning, I was in turmoil, and the teller, for some reason, said he had decided not to sell me his bike. I saw that as a trick to get a better price and made some dark suggestion to that effect. But when the bank closed that afternoon, he took me to his truck stop and showed me the motorcycle. It did not fit my picture of it at all. It was old and scuffed up. When I looked at him in surprise, he merely shrugged and called his brother. We walked around back where there was an old sawhorse. The teller said, "Sit on the end of this so that you're hanging over a little. Ed, here, will throw gravel in your face, and I'll kick your butt. That'll give you a good idea of what riding a motorcycle is really like, and you will get off without any serious injury."

"By some chance," I asked, "do you know my dad?" I went home chagrined. Gentleness cannot always manage foolishness. I was lucky.

Another time when I disregarded my father's gentle reproach I was not so lucky. This time I was not fetched by the flashy, but by something far more grievous—my ego was under stress. I was much older but apparently not much wiser. I was homesteading with my father. I was aware of his disapproval at once, and affected by it, yet I bulled stubbornly ahead, just as with the motorcycle.

We had been homesteading for ten or so years with just enough financial success to keep us hoping and struggling. I was also teaching and had located my family near the university, about a hundred miles from the farm. In the summers, I visited my family

on weekends, and when school was in session, I visited the farm once or twice a month. My father had brought cattle to the venture and a few badly needed, but worn, pieces of equipment. Lately things had taken a bad turn. It was doubtful that we could get fuel to run the irrigation pumps. I had tried to raise operating money from banks, insurance companies, and merchants, but got nowhere. One Saturday in early spring, I took a load of groceries out to my father and the hired man; we talked about the prospects at some length. My father quietly urged me to be satisfied with a career at the university. He said, "It looks hopeless to try any longer. Other years we would be irrigating by this time."

I wanted to avoid such negative thoughts. Success there meant at least as much to him as to me, and though our situation looked bleak, I was unwilling to consider giving up. "Dad, there are fuel dealers everywhere. They have just as much need to sell as we have to buy. There's got to be a way to work this out." On the way home that night, it occurred to me that the fuel dealer himself might extend credit. I called on him the next day after school.

He was a giant of a fellow, about six six, and was on a delivery when I got there. I waited. We exchanged greetings, and, as he always did, he told me how much he loved to go out into the desert, how he admired "our pioneering spirit," and how he loved to see someone "make the desert blossom as a rose." This triteness was standard, a kind of opening exercise not to be hurried. When the ritual was finished, he got down to business: "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I need fuel."

"I've got fuel. How much do you want?"

"Forty-five hundred gallons, to start. Uh, I'm broke, Jerry. I can't pay till summer."

He put me "on hold"; his I-love-the-desert music started again while he seemed to be assessing, imagining the near future. "I'd love to take my son-in-law and my son, the only one still in the roost, and get out for some shooting. How are the rabbits out your way? . . . Why sure, Brother Bennion, what are friends for? We at this plant take it as a pleasure to help someone out. I think I can slip out early next Saturday. You wouldn't mind if I and my boy walked around on your land, would you? You know, since my

bypass surgery, I'm supposed to walk five miles every day. Saturday, for once, I'll do my work first and my walking second."

I had not heard of his heart trouble. We worked through the details of that, and I started to leave. "Uh, Brother Bennion, uh, in order to keep good neighbors good neighbors, uh, I'll have to take a crop mortgage."

"That's fine, Jerry." It struck me as a little false for him to have such difficulty saying it. The instrument was crude:

4500 gal #2 diesel

To be pd out of first crop hay

Neither a due date nor a dollar amount, and I did not care. I was getting fuel.

By Friday the weather turned bad; a persistent rain began to fall, and the temperature to drop. I called Jerry to remind him that the last seven miles to my place was clay and would be like grease under the rain. The weather worsened. It froze every night, but under the bright spring sun, the road was slick again by ten every morning. Two weeks later, I took groceries to the farm. Somehow the fuel dealer had slipped out. His tracks in the clay were eloquent warning to any traveler. I left the pickup where the clay road began and walked in for a tractor to carry the supplies. At supper my father said, "You're paying too much for the fuel." He got the invoice and pointed to the price—"$0.169 per gallon."

"That's a clerical error—most likely. I'll bring it to his attention Monday after class." For a long time the price had been $0.135; I was a little unsettled but quite sure it was a mistake.

"That's no error. That's our price."

"My gosh, Jerry, the price has been thirteen and a half for the last three years. You set it yourself. Don't you think you should have told me? That's a big jump—a 25-percent jump."

He didn't take that well. Possibly if I had not been under such stress, diplomacy might have emerged. His voice gained an assertive edge: "Brother Bennion, we have to make a profit in this business. Besides," he concluded, "you didn't ask, so I assumed you didn't care." With that he slowly uncoiled his great length, standing over me a brief moment and then, turning his back, began filing papers. I waited a short while, moving from surprise to anger. He

said nothing further, and I left, scalped. I hadn't asked. I had been careless, and I had my reward.

The cold, rainy weather continued, keeping the alfalfa dormant and blessing the weeds. Conditions were the same all over the state. I heard it on the news and saw it in fields everywhere. Some farmers cut their hay and just raked it off the fields. Others burned their fields. I left mine, hoping to salvage something.

Eventually summer came, and we cut and baled, the crop maybe worth the price of baling wire. One Sunday in mid-June, the fuel dealer called me at my home, "I know you've baled your hay, and I want my money."

"Jerry, the crop is worthless. It couldn't be called feed by any stretch. You'll have to wait till the second crop."

"There's no waiting. Bring in a load this week. I'll have a buyer."

I tried to make him understand, but he was not to be put off. I agreed to bring three tons as a sample. He gave me the location of a dairyman who he said would be glad to get it.

"No dairy cow will touch that trash; it's good for nothing but bedding," I warned, but I might as well have talked to the wind. Saturday came, and the dairyman, very much against his will, gave me a check for $75.00. Jerry was there, of course, and eased the check from my fingers.

The dairyman, who, like me, owed money to the fuel dealer, finally asserted himself: "That stuff ain't feed. It would cut milk production to nuthin' in no time," he said.

Jerry knew another dairyman who would take the whole crop and "be glad of it"; he himself would come out next Thursday, early, with his own flatbed and the dairyman with a one-ton. They would continue that arrangement until my bill was paid. I felt shame for this second dairyman and no small anger at the fuel dealer. But, as he had promised, they arrived at my fields about nine o'clock Thursday morning with two trucks. The fuel dealer, this heart victim, understandably did not help load the trucks but walked alongside, making jokes and in general having a great time. I was smarting badly. Though I told myself I should be glad my trash was paying the fuel bill, the pretense that it was a marketable product and the fact another struggling farmer was forced to pay money for it were stingingly humiliating. The fuel dealer's exercise

of raw power without human consideration, as I saw it, was especially galling. I could think of little else.

When the loads were secure and the trucks beyond my gate, I headed for the cabin, where smoke signaled the noon meal. I had gone only a few yards when I stopped short. Making some quick calculations, I cried out from excitement and then in a cold tone, "Jerry, you dumb cluck! You've played right into my hand." I hurried to the cabin and, as we started the meal, told my father and the hired man just what I had in mind. I was trembling, my voice unsteady. My father looked at me as at a stranger. He said nothing. The hired man was delighted and congratulatory, which alone was condemnation. By supper nothing had changed. My father remained silent throughout the meal. Without finishing my food, I went out, but even the night air did not relieve my distress. Nevertheless, in spite of the clear warning of my father's quiet hurt, I determined to stick with my plan.

The weeks went by, and then one Sunday the fuel dealer called and said, "We'll be out for the last load next Thursday. I'll be glad to get everything settled, and I suppose you will too, right?"

"Jerry," I said, with no great confidence, "You needn't make the trip. You've already got a little more than you had coming."

There was a pause. I waited.

"What do you mean? The bill was so much. The bales weighed an average of so much, right? We agreed on that. And we hauled this many bales each load for five loads, right? And at $25.00 a ton I have one more load coming, right?"

"Not right, Jerry. You're wrong on the price. It's $31.30."

"No! The price is $25.00. It has been for two or three years."

"Jerry," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady, "The price is $31.30. We have to make a profit in this business. Besides, you didn't ask, so I assumed you didn't care."

The silence was absolute, and long. I feared his heart. Eventually he spoke, fully composed. "The trouble with you is you don't know who your friends are. Gather up your papers, and get down here. I'll have your crop mortgage ready, and we'll be done."

"I'll do that, and it's true that I've had some confusion about who my friends are, but, Jerry, how soon could I get another load of fuel, and what would the price be?"

That last was quite unnecessary. But I had got into the spirit of the thing and couldn't let go. When I did let go, my thoughts, as in the matter of the motorcycle, focused on my father, the hurt I had given him. His notion of what it was to be a human was so clean and so basic that he found it superfluous to speak of it. I had walked on that. My scheme, brought off without a hitch, now unraveled and turned to something nasty in my mouth. Both in the motorcycle affair and the fuel deal, something unwholesome had welled up in me and stolen my wits. My father was not saddened because I took a different course from his but because my different course could not bear scrutiny. Characteristically, he said nothing, but I knew his mind on it, and I think he was aware that I did.

That business with the fuel dealer turned me to wondering about the difference between my father's life and my own. He had once mentioned a birthday party his mother gave him when he was very little. There would not have been another family close enough for any convenience in this matter, no one within miles. Probably, the mothers of the guests made a day of it and planned quilting or other practicalities while they visited. In fact, his account mentioned only two friends at the party, a girl and a boy, each from a different family. They would have been two hours or more in a buggy getting there. There was no lawn, no park, no playground. There was the house, of course, and, naturally, since parks and lawns were outside their experience, the lack was no impediment. At some point, they began a joyous game in the vicinity of the barn. My grandfather had cleaned out the part of the barn where he milked. The result was quite a steep mound of blue-black manure, firm enough to hold its shape but soft enough to be very slippery. The partying children scrambled and clawed their way to the top of this delight and then, squealing their excitement, made precarious descent. In no time, the splendor of their party attire was sullied beyond redemption. Sounds of merriment carried to the hills, and, more importantly, to the mothers, prompting investigation. The party was over, my grandmother responsible. I have been told that she manifested anger, that she said some memorable things. I suspect, however, that there was also silence, sobering and sufficiently ambiguous that the little boy examined many possible consequences, both the speech and the silence sufficiently

impressive to be important in the formation of my father's gentle and largely silent correction of his children.

All I have left of the sudden end of that celebration is that without taking time to heat the water, my grandmother washed my father vigorously and then for some period of time equipped him with a dress outgrown by an older sister. Of course, under the circumstances, he manifested a certain reluctance to see his guests off. It was only because his brothers suggested he might lose even the dress that he appeared, eyes averted, for supper. If, in fact, my grandmother's treatment of him then influenced him toward gentleness, I memorialize her now for it.

Once as we were ditching together, he said that when he and his brothers were just little fellows about the farmyard, they had some amusement at the expense of the roosters that crowed them out of bed. One of these was a small game cock, not half the size of the others, though it was their boss, a strutting little tyrant that routinely bloodied their combs.

A feature of the yard was a pond, where close-kept livestock watered. Once when the bantam's tyranny particularly offended the boys, those small gods of the farmyard, they caught him and threw him in the pond. He survived the water but not all its effects. He came out bedraggled, misbegotten, so unrecognizable and to the other roosters so in need of being pecked that they lit into him and drove him off. I suspect that even in his own view, he was now ridiculous and unfit. When he rejoined the flock, it was at the bottom of the pecking order. Naturally a new leader emerged, also encumbered by an inclination to tyranny. It was not long until the boys found it necessary to throw him into the pond, also. Then followed a succession of hen-yard governors who, as often as their governance became unbearable from the boys' Olympian perspective, were successfully baptized into the brotherhood of the dethroned. Gentle? Compared with what? The boys let no blood. They stood for justice, I would say, like the God of the Old Testament but were scarcely so dangerous.

An incident from his twenties shows a capacity outside my perception of him—way beyond gentle. His partner in this affair was a young man his age from a town some forty miles off. It was he who told the story. Before the days of Taylor Grazing, he and his

partner were running a herd of about fourteen hundred head of cattle on the open range. Cows were disappearing faster than animal predation could explain. There were consultations, the county sheriff was visited, and eventually a man was brought to trial. To the partners' outrage, he was acquitted for lack of evidence. Their losses had been significant, and now it appeared the trial would not only fail to stop the thefts, but might also encourage worse. In the courtroom, the partners held a quick council and then separated. One of them stationed himself menacingly at the main exit of the courtroom to discourage the defendant from leaving by it, and the other got their Model T Ford to the back, where they expected him momentarily. He did come out; they quickly hustled him into their machine and drove to the scene of their losses. In all the drive, perhaps two and a half hours, no one spoke. They found a tree suitable to their purpose, threw a rope over a branch and fixed a noose around the fellow's neck. Before they broke silence, they drew him up until he was breathing only poorly by standing on the tips of his toes: "If we even so much as see you again in these parts, we'll finish this job." They turned him loose, and their losses fell away to normal.

I know of nothing in my father's ways, jovial or sober, that could be companion to that tale, yet his former partner told it like an old love remembered. I tried to imagine my father having a "past" which, with his marriage and our coming, he had jettisoned, but the idea was so preposterous that I jettisoned it. He has been gone now these many years. I will never know.

All these events occurred long after his gentle, Victorian nature was established at the most basic and unexamined level of my assumptions. Yet thinking about it now, I do remember some things that argue for a nature more complex. When I was about ten, my parents and I—perhaps others—were driving on a straight stretch of fine graveled road. Suddenly, altogether without preamble, Mother asked if she might learn to drive, a great surprise to me, possibly even more to my father. There was a wait before he responded. The implication of course was huge. I felt it intensely. I was amazed at my mother and enormously pleased with her, too. But frightened. I wanted success for her but feared it: she was a

short woman and could scarcely see over the dashboard; more than that, something unconscious in me was signaling alarm.

Being able to drive, especially then, was more than just liberating and enabling. Probably at that moment, such ideas were affecting each of my parents in different and powerful ways. I knew nothing of women's suffrage movements, but even a little daydreaming kid cannot be totally unaware of who has privilege and authority and what the symbols are. My father stopped the machine, got out, walked around to the passenger side, and helped Mother out. He did this without uttering a word, which in itself was portentous. He delivered a step-by-step description of the starting of the engine and of the engaging of the clutch, all of which Mother performed nervously but faultlessly. However, words like slowly and carefully are far too vague for the one who must actually let out the clutch pedal. That comes only with practice. It is in the class of things that people even of a low order of intelligence can learn to do well but that few of us do well at first. The feel and the sounds are the real teachers. Mother let out the clutch pedal "slowly" and "carefully" but, even so, faster than the other operating factors could accommodate. The car bucked and stopped, bucked and stopped, a disorienting and confusing experience to all first-timers. She had interrupted a perfectly satisfactory travel down the highway. Or was it the sociopolitical structure that she was interrupting? And she was, in a way, asking to be elevated from an inferior station determined at least partially by skill at driving. This was risk taking at its purest. She had a lot to gain but too much to lose. I regretted her self-imposed vulnerability. I am sure that if they had been home some evening, reading together, talking a little of this and that, my father would have agreed and would have brought it off gracefully and been pleased with her. But now, with the car bucking and clunking and his being caught off guard, he made unusual noises, perhaps muffled expletives. Sixty years later, I remember the sentence that followed and the unaccustomed tone carrying it: "Lucile! Confound it, you might as well hit the transmission with a double jack!"

The car had brought itself to a complete stop. Mother opened the door, got out, and walked around to the passenger side, which by then my father had vacated. She did this without uttering a

word. To the end of her life, she never again asked to drive—and never complained about having to take the streetcar. Gentle? Hardly. But dramatic moments surprise us into dramatic speech and acts.

Even on the rare occasions when my father lectured me—twice on long automobile trips when I was ten or twelve, just he and I in the car, and one other time as we walked in the desert when I was seventeen—he never spoke that way to me. My older brother and I, at seventeen, had been putting up hay all summer. Our father came once or twice a month. We got along well while he was gone, but when he was there, we competed for his attention. On this occasion, early morning, my brother and I were getting the horses ready for the hay wagon. One of them stepped on my brother's foot, and he was certain I had pushed the horse to produce that result. There was a burst of ugliness, and I left, heading west across the desert. Actually there was nowhere to go, and by the time I thought about that and began to wonder how to go back to the cabin without looking a fool, my father, following my tracks, found me seated on a rock, lost between self-justification and shame, not in the least mindful of what fears I may have imposed on my brother nor of the position I may have put him in with our father.

Each of those lectures was about fundamental family and human values, quietly and courteously delivered but in such a way that I had no doubt that I was being taught and what had occasioned each.

When my father and I began homesteading together, he was already sixty, afflicted with some pretty consistent discomfort from old injuries and some new problems that would afflict him to the end. I have since felt sure that they were major causes of what I saw as a loosening of self-control. His reserve was visibly eroding.

We had drilled a well four hundred fifty feet deep and had installed on it a turbine pump capable of a flow of about three-and-a-half second-feet of water. The engine was a new Caterpillar, one hundred horsepower, to be cooled by water in a tank above the front of the engine; two-inch pipes that ran the water from the pump to the tank, then to the engine, and then back to the pump completed the system. It was great to have cold water from the well

cool the engine, but there was this drawback: the engine had to have water before the pump could be started, yet the engine had to be running to get water from the well. As a reservoir, we temporarily used a fifty-five-gallon drum previously used for mixing pesticides. This was the day of DDT and chlordane.

My older brother had come, and we were going to start up the pump and show him the wonder of the water. He had driven forty-five hot, dusty miles. Ignorant of the history of the drum, he got a drink from it. Just as he finished his drink, our father turned and, realizing what had occurred, sure that he had lost a son, offered a great sizzling oath equal to his fear of the moment and to all the pain and frustration besides.

So my father, articulate and instant, knew all the words.

Still, for me, adamantly now because of his aging, my father was gentle. He must have known all the words all the time, may have had a "past," but he governed himself. I had never before heard him unload like that, had never seen him violent, had never witnessed the occasional anger so common in other men. I had never seen him beat or otherwise abuse any animal. Yet he was intense, and there were moments and situations.

One of them came still later in his life. He didn't walk well anymore, and his frame had become quite stooped. When we took beeves to auction, he never got in on the driver's side as he always had before, and often, when our animals were sold and we drove around to get provisions, he sat in the truck and waited.

One time when we had run a few head through the auction, he just went directly to the truck while I collected the proceeds of the sale. Then as I was crossing the parking lot, someone behind me called out, "Mr. Bennion? Mr. Bennion." When I turned to see what was wanted, the speaker said, as though I were something he wanted to avoid stepping in, "Not you! Your father. Mr. Bennion? Mr. Bennion, do you remember me? I'm Corbin Huffaker."

I knew the speaker, not well, but enough. He had inherited substantially when his folks died, and in addition to his being manager of a farm supplies business, he made well-secured loans at usurious rates. He had laughed a good many neighbors out of his home when, in almost anyone else, their need would have inspired sympathy if not help. In these and other ways, he had managed an

unsavory reputation around town. In both lending and collecting, he had shown himself a coward when pressed and a bully when permitted. Everyone called him "Dog."

My father appeared not to have heard. "Mr. Bennion, I was at your cabin on Indian Mountain one fall in '44. It was roundup. Do you remember?"

No response. In spite of the fact he had brushed me aside, seeing Mr. Huffaker trying so hard to be acknowledged embarrassed me.

Without looking at him, my father said, "No. I can't say that I do. What did you say your name was?"

"Corbin. Corbin Huffaker. Don't you remember? That night in your cabin? There was Jake Winters and Ev Rydalch from over in Erickson Pass."

"Anyone else?"

"No. Nobody. Some kids. Four or five, hanging around for the roundup. From down around here."

Even if relations were congenial, calling kids "nobody" would have made him detestable to my father.

"Ev I know, and Jake Winters, and I remember that bunch of young fellers, good hands, all of 'em, but I don't recall anyone by the name of Corbin." My father was manipulating, deliberately not looking at the man. I was at the point of saying something to ease the situation because this man, often so wretched to others, was now so pathetic. But before I did, he spoke again, his need awful and urgent. "That night you told stories about Stansbury and Frémont, when they were mapping and exploring around western Utah. We had venison. One of them kids got a deer. I'm sure you can remember that night."

"I'm remembering some, but I have no recollection of anybody named Corbin. Huffaker? Huffaker I know. Corbin. Corbin. I connect that name to nobody." My father had returned the ugly word Huffaker had put on the boys. Mr. Huffaker moved off a bit and shuffled his feet, his whole demeanor a kind of begging. "Corbin is a name I don't know," my father continued. "Would there have been some other name you went by?" Now my father looked directly at Huffaker. At first he seemed so preoccupied his mounting intensity escaped me. But now there was in his face

judgment and contempt, something that took me back to childhood and the old disapproving looks aimed at my misbehaviors, except that where that had been parental and guiding, this was final and damning.

I was pained—perhaps more than Mr. Huffaker—and amazed. Also, although I had no respect for Mr. Huffaker, I was affected by his agony and wanted to be away from there. He squirmed, cast his eyes down at his feet, and abjectly said, "They call me Dog."

My father faced back to the dashboard. "Yes," he said. "Now I know you."

Mr. Huffaker was standing clear of the truck. I hit the starter button, shoved the transmission into low, and made for the parking-lot exit. After a time, I sneaked a look at my "gentle" father, marveling both at what he had just done and also at the consummate skill with which he had done it. Before we quite reached the homestead, it occurred to me that what he had just done to Dog Huffaker bore a remarkable similarity to what I had done a year or two earlier to Jerry, the fuel dealer. In a rush of shame, I recognized the idea as an attempt to justify myself. That night in my sleep, an image formed in my mind of a small boy-god throwing a banty rooster into a pond.

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