

Uncle Heber Kissed Me

MARIE L. MYER*

Uncle Heber was coming. We were tired of waiting. We had been at Grandma's since ten, sitting fidgety in our new dresses. Sister Tuttle made them for us. I never could remember her name; I thought perhaps it was Tunnel, bringing up a long, dark, cool image with me through the years. Then I knew that tunnel was only the remembering word, and that it really was Tuttle, sharp and crisp, like that. Like a thimble rapping you on the head, maybe, or eating peanut brittle. The dresses were red, and hung in the closet for years after, even when we weren't little girls anymore, they hung there. One had strawberries on the top, "For the baby," Sister Tuttle said. "And the cherries for brown-eyed Marie, and the peaches for Carolyn, the oldest."

Now it was nearly noon, and the hot Dixie sun wheeled higher in the sky, sending its rays slicing across the sky when we squinted our eyes at it, its image black against the inside of our eyelids, as we blinked it on and off again.

We had been waiting since ten then; I had lost my shoes somewhere in the drowsy droning morning; they had shooed us out of the waiting house long ago. Now we played, the three of us, in the red sand by the ditch bank, sifting it through our fingers, wriggling our toes in its delicious warmth, pillaging the pyramid lairs of the doodle bug, surprising him in his hungry waiting. Waiting, waiting . . . the grown-ups had long since forgotten us, in their apple pie furniture

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Drawing by Peter L. Myer, Director of the B. F. Larsen Art Gallery, Brigham Young University, formerly Chairman of the Art Department, University of Nevada at Las Vegas, husband of the author.

polish bustle of preparedness. I could feel Grandma's old house waiting now, cool and dark.

Then in a rush of relatives, hands quickly brushing sand off our dresses, hunting for shoes, he was here, filling the world with his voice and his laughing and his presence.

"Do you remember your Uncle Hebe?" he boomed, and he bent down and shook our hands. Mother thought it was sacrilege for him to call himself "Uncle Hebe," but he did it anyway.

Grandma's front door is of heavy dark wood, and the glass, mitered on the corners and around the edges, gives off a cool green glow. We children never used the front door, but ran around the wide columned porch to the side door, next to the kitchen window. But today we all went in the front door, and stood around in greeting groups. I couldn't see him at all, just the tall backs of grownups. But I stood squeezed by the door in the special occasion somberness of the foyer and looked up at the dark high ceilings. In my mind I could see into the dining room with its heavy round table we always used at Thanksgiving, I could see into the living room. Grandpa Lytle's picture was on that wall in an oval frame, looking forbiddingly grand, covered with greenish curved glass, his big brush mustache carefully trimmed. Grandpa Lytle is dead now, and so is Grandma, and the living room is still filled with the heart-stopping awe of being a child in the presence of the grief of grownups. The somberness will never leave the room, even with the new sofa and lamps. The piano seems so big, and I feel like sitting very still, and not saying anything, hearing back in the years the solemn drone of condolence calls and the solemn scent of flowers.

The foyer was filled with grownups, but he sought us out and shook our hands. His eyes were the world, with the sun reflected in them. I stood in the dark shadow of the door and my hand was in his strong clasp. "Do you remember your Uncle Hebe, children?" This is Carolyn. This is Marie. This is Rachel, the baby.

Rachel. His mother's name was Rachel. "Rachel, Baby Rae, I will kiss you because you are beautiful, your eyes are blue, and your name is the same as hers."

His strong arms lifted and swung her up through the darkness of the foyer into the sun. Bright red strawberries

on her dress, bare legs still a little sticky with the sand. The wheeling sun was on his face, in his eyes, and he was the world, he was the Prophet. I thought my heart would burst with the happiness in the sun. And Uncle Heber kissed me.

I stood by the door in the darkened foyer, my eyes were brown, my hair was brown, there were cherries on my dress, and I never did find my shoes. He set her on her feet again. Baby Rae. Beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed, with strawberries, and with a little strawberry mark on her cheek where his whiskers had brushed. But she was only a baby, the gift was hers, but the memory is mine.

I stood by the door, and looked into the still wheeling sun, and I thought I could feel his kiss on my lips, still feel his beard on my face, thought my heart would surely burst with happiness. The gift was hers, but the memory of wheeling sun, heart tight with joy, the world in the eyes of the Prophet, is mine alone.