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Immortal For Quite Some Time: Princeton

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Immortal for Quite Some Time
(memoir excerpt)

Scott Abbott

Those who want to approach their own buried pasts must . . . not be afraid to return again and again to the same facts; to stew them about as one stews earth, to root around in them as one roots around in earth. For facts are only layers, strata, which only after the most careful research deliver the true values hidden in the earth’s interior: the images which broken loose from all earlier associations stand as precious objects in . . . our later insight like rubble or toros in the gallery of the collector. (Walter Benjamin)

His feet are livid, I wrote. Now his things are in bags in my garage, stinking of cigarette smoke, limp with heavy use. I keep them because they mean something. I catalogue them as manifestations of my brother, a portrait of sorts. I worry vaguely about contagion. I want to know John in ways I never did. I am uneasy about what I will learn. What I’ll learn about myself. We are brothers, after all.

I turn to our notebooks, John’s and mine, gather photographs and documents. Specific words and recalled gestures may help cut through the simplifying patterns memory and forgetfulness impose. What experiences, what ways of thinking, what biological imperatives shaped us? Which did we embrace? Which embraced us?

I’ll piece my way back, or rather forward to that catalytic scene in the Boise mortuary. John will have no choice in this matter.

His feet were livid.
14 August 1972, Wickenburg, Arizona

While we drill an exploratory well a few miles north of town, I've taken a room in a ramshackle motel crammed into the elbow of a highway-railroad intersection. My next-door neighbor is a wizened ex-contortionist who looked deeply into my eyes the first time I said hello and said she would read my palm if I would come into her room. I claimed to have a vague palm. Her name is Maria, and in the relative cool of the evenings she maneuvers a hose to sprinkle a tiny plot of grass and flowers in front of our rooms. She wears a sleeveless blouse, a pair of loose shorts, and sneakers with no socks. She ties white rags around her deeply tanned left calf and her equally brown left bicep, white semaphores that accentuate the contrast between the almost theoretical lines of her emaciated limbs and their pronounced joints. Galls. Burls. She saw me staring at her bulbous elbows and went into a practiced explanation of how her mother tied her in knots when she was a baby so she could be an acrobat. She has never regretted it, she said, for it led to her eventual greatness and the chance to mingle with the truly great people of this century. She is resigned to living out her days in Wickenburg, where the desert heat eases her arthritic joints.

June 1979, Princeton, New Jersey

Last week, after a disappointing job search, the Chair of Princeton's German department surprised me with a one-year lecturership. That was good news; but the change in status made us ineligible for subsidized graduate-student housing. Susan found an ad in the Town Topics: "Companion needed for older gentleman. Free rent in exchange for cooking, gardening, and personal care."


Susan thought it wouldn't hurt to check it out.

In a large house on a quiet, tree-lined street, we found a man of ninety-three years and his sixty-four-year-old son drinking bourbon in a sunny room.

Could I get you a drink? the son asked.

No thank you.

Don't you drink? the old man asked gruffly.

No, we replied.

Why not? the son asked.

We are Mormon and as part of our religion we . . .

You're Mormons! the old man burst in. I have an aunt who is Mormon. She spends her free time tracing our family lines. Marvelous stories. Do you do that sort of thing?

Not as much as we should.

I used to live in Vermont near Brigham Young's birthplace, the old man said. I've always admired his virility.

Susan asked what would be expected of us if we moved in.

The son answered: minimal yard work, light housecleaning, simply being in the house at night in case help is needed, cooking dinner at night. A homemaker will come in each morning to get Father up, bathed, dressed, to get him breakfast and to clean his rooms. A woman will come from New York to take over your duties when you go on vacation.

Would our small children be a bother?

Certainly not, the old man broke in warmly. I like children. I have always liked children.

I studied him skeptically.

And if they get too loud I can just take out my hearing aid. He demonstrated with a shaky flourish.

Do you get around well? I asked, pointing to the aluminum walker standing next to him. His right leg was encased in a complicated brace.

Pretty well, he answered. Thirteen years ago, I was eighty then, I fell down the last step into the garage. Broke my leg in two places. When it didn't set right the doctor decided not to try to reset it. I was so old it wouldn't matter for long anyway. He winked at Susan.

And, he continued, just so you know exactly what you are getting into, let me tell you about my ulcer.

He sipped from his bourbon glass.

My ulcer began in 1912 when my business failed. I was married, with a small son. He gestured in the direction of his son, and then paused for effect. 1912. That makes my ulcer the oldest living ulcer.

We laughed.

My doctor told me he could trace every ulcer to a Greek Restaurant. Do you eat in Greek Restaurants?

Not often enough. Sir, we'll take the job if you want us.

The old man conferred with his son. Could you move in on Friday? he asked. His name is Walter Furman.
14 November 1979, Princeton

Working in the reference section of the Firestone Library today, I observed a slightly disheveled man of forty or fifty scratching feverishly at a pile of worn papers. Later I saw him smoking a cigarette out front. Something about him reminded me of John; or, better said, something about my reaction to a man I took to be troubled reminded me of my feelings for a brother who seems unusually distant.

7 February 1980, Princeton

Peter Brown, an historian specializing in the early Christian period, lectured here today. I found a seat in the packed auditorium just as he rose to speak about active and contemplative lives, the philosopher and the monk.

I am overjoyed to be a guest at Princeton University for a third time, the historian began, and once again to have the great pleasure, the great pleasure of renewing old acquaintances. Unfortunately, he continued, you have had two . . . two years to think about what I said the last time I was here. In private conversations with several of you today, I have been forced . . . have been forced . . . forced slowly and painfully to eat my own words.

The fourth century A.D. is a dark age in my mind; but from the moment the first stutter broke from Peter Brown’s lips, I hung on the laborious birth of every utterance. He spoke of fourth-century politicians and their steady withdrawal from active life and I listened, dumbstruck, to the words that caused this eloquent speaker such trouble: in a wonderful redundancy, inexplicable became inexp-p-p-p-p-plicable; a Latin term was untransla-transla-la-la-table; St. Elmo’s fire fli-fli-fli-fli-flickered; in ali-li-li-litigation the word performed itself.

With faltering lips and faultless style Peter Brown spoke of careful gesture, perfectly formed sentences, subtle restraints, meticulous grooming. He told of the man so perfectly schooled that he wanted to commit suicide because he had farted in a public lecture. He described the pure mind and its cultivation of the unsullied hand, correct deportment and its effect on the exercise of power.

A holy man, he said in a memorable phrase, was thought to have arrived at the most enviable prerogative to which an inhabitant of the later empire could aspire: he had gained parthe-he-he-he-partho-he-partho, freedom to speak before the awesome majesty of God.

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He delineated the relationship between body and soul and I pictured stuttering as the extraordinary and inadequate articulation between the two. Plotinus, he said, was so ashamed of his body that he would not tell of his parentage or of the date or place of his birth. Anthony blushed when he had to eat.

Peter Brown’s concluding remarks included something about infectious serenity; the macabre sound of d-d-d-d-dearth; a question as to how the philosopher gains his superior qua-qu-a-qu-a (then softly) qualities; and finally, an heroic struggle to say the Greek word m-m-m-m-m-machene, the humiliated ones.

I tried out a stutter of my own while walking back to the library. To speak or write eloquently and to manifest the body. Displayed disability as guarantor of honest discourse.

The disheveled man was smoking by the entrance again.

1 March 1980, Princeton

Two dreams last night. In the first I stood on stage, in costume, ready to say my lines. The audience waited but I couldn’t remember a word. In the other dream I also stood on stage, this time wearing a long beard. I spoke fluently, extemporaneously, glibly. The words flowed from my mouth and the beard began to dissolve, leaving me naked.

A brother and sister in my accelerated German class remind me of the semester John and Carol were in my class at BYU. Carol earned a “B” through diligence inspired largely by a desire not to disappoint her brother. Learning his third language, John coasted to a perfect “A” at midterm. He never appeared in class again. I gave him a “C–.”

Pouring Walter’s afternoon bourbon, I tell him about the man at the library and how he reminds me of John.

What does he wear? Walter asks.

A rumpled suit, I answer, and a white shirt without a tie.

Is he a bit thin?

Yes.

Sounds like John Nash. He used to be a promising economist. Had some sort of breakdown.
I try to clarify my point: I don’t think my brother has had a breakdown, just that he’s had a hard life. He has always been different somehow.

2 April 1980, Princeton

Still no job. Second year in a row. Trips to Chapel Hill and Pittsburgh came up empty. I have papers to grade and Thomas has been crying for two hours. Susan comes home with another story of someone with a Ph.D. who was forced out of the profession. I silently tell her to go to hell, escape to my office, drink a Coke marked Kosher for Passover, and work like a madman.

He would be thirty-one in November. Would he ever get a good job? Would he ever have a home of his own? He thought how pleasant it would be to have a warm fire to sit by and a good dinner to sit down to. (James Joyce, Dubliners)

1 May, 1980, Princeton

John called this morning from Houston. He’s cooking at a place called Steak and Eggs and says he is doing well.

Late this afternoon, a colleague on leave to learn Greek so he could finish a book about Hölderlin called from a bar in Laredo to announce he wouldn’t be returning to Princeton. The department Chair came into my office and offered to extend my job for a second year.

Gratefully, I cancel my enrollment in the Wharton Business School’s summer Ph.D. retraining course.

13 May, 1980, Princeton

John called again yesterday. He made $20,000 last year, he said. He was going to enter a writing contest. And he has heard that the Russians are planning to let the Iranian hostages loose just before the November election so “Carter can take credit, win the election, and continue to be a pushover.”

The Russians?

23 October 1980, Princeton

After the woman from Princeton Homemakers left this morning, I took in Walter’s paper and breakfast.

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You look good, I said.

I like optimistic people, he replied. This morning I was a little wobbly and Mrs. Miller said I’d never make it. After that I would have got up if I’d have had to crawl like a snake.

Picking up his paper, Walter asked me if any of the hostages had been released in Iran.

I don’t think so, I answered.

I’ll be an old man before they are released, he said without a hint of a smile.

We began talking about stories in Dubliners. I mentioned Joyce’s attempt to portray Dublin with “scrupulous meanness,” a phrase Walter liked immediately.

I have always been fascinated by stories about death and woe, he said. Even as a boy Edgar Allan Poe was my favorite. My father thought that was deplorable. He wanted to see me reading Emerson or Shakespeare. To please him I used to lie on the floor with a huge volume of Shakespeare open in front of me, pretending to read. My father was overjoyed; but naturally I couldn’t understand a word.

Would you like to be portrayed with scrupulous meanness? I asked.

Flattery is demeaning, he answered. Meanness is unfair. But scrupulous meanness would be an honor.

22 November 1980, Princeton

Walter was weak this morning, almost falling in the bathroom where I was helping him get ready for his Saturday bath. Then he got stuck over the toilet. I pulled one way while he pulled the other, the leather soles of his L.L. Bean slippers slipping on the carpet. Later we talked about Ivy-League football, letting the history behind today’s games banish the knowledge that he is getting weaker every day. Walter began to reminisce about his upbringing: When I was eight or nine my father thought I wasn’t getting up early enough, and devised a scheme to help. At seven A.M. he would play Verdi’s “Anvil Chorus” vigorously on the piano downstairs. It was a sufficiently loud piece to awaken my admiration, and down I would come. We would spend the next half-hour going through a German lesson, the Rosenthal method, if I remember correctly. I learned long passages by rote, having only the slightest understanding of what I was learning.
Walter began quoting in German from Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*. Ten or twelve lines later he was still going strong.

Mr. Rosenthal would be proud of you, I said. My father woke us by singing the BYU Cougar fight song: Rise and shout, the cougars are out! So damn cheerful!

5 January 1981, Princeton

Four days in Houston. Job interviews for the third year in a row. Then the flight home.

I sit by the fire. I leaf through the pages of *The Honorable Schoolboy*. I watch football on TV. I play games with the children. I sleep. And sleep.

I stayed with John in Houston. He has changed his name to Jay. With his guaup, fifty-year-old friend Lee, in Lee's old Buick, he picked me up at the airport. All smiles, smelling of beer and nerves. I asked about Houston. He told me about the giant margaritas in his favorite Mexican restaurant. Lee joined the awkward conversation to point to the sprawling, fire-damaged brick house (ca 1908) he was restoring in Houston's Montrose district. The house's tile roof glowed red-orange against the dusty green of an overgrown park. Jay cooked some ham and eggs and we sat around the kitchen table without much to say. Soon after nine I said I needed to get a good night's sleep to be ready for my interviews. I slept fitfully on a narrow cot in a stuffy closet half filled with boxes.

The next morning I donned my interviewing suit and in ten minutes had exchanged the tenderloin for the inner city's polished, right-angled, high-rise monuments to economic virtues.

That evening Jay and Lee and I drove across town to a pot-luck dinner in the basement of a Unitarian church. A muscular man sporting cropped blond hair and dressed in a Levi jacket, T-shirt, jeans, a steel chain, and engineers boots seemed to be in charge, although a softer looking Unitarian pastor had organized the dinner. Jay was drunk. Between bites of fried chicken he blurted out his secret, putting into words what the kiss I heard the night before had already confirmed.

Uncomfortable with the attention I was attracting from the all-male crowd, I tried to focus on my brother. A handsome man. Others were focusing on him as well.

Back at Lee's house Jay offered me things: a set of knives, a cookbook, a fountain pen. I asked if he were still drawing. He told me about his new business venture: Shaklee B vitamins that would make him (and me, if I wanted) healthy and rich. I tried to describe what I knew about pyramid schemes. I asked him about old bruises around his eyes and nose. He boasted of winning a drinking game called "pass-out." He pointed out the black-velvet copies of Rembrandt and Constable hanging on the walls and claimed that Lee had an original da Vinci drawing somewhere in a box. We spent the evening playing cards. And we reminisced—trivial shared memories that finally made us feel our kinship. Do you remember when Mom broke her toe trying to kick Carol? Remember driving Grandma's riding mower in Colorado? And the squirrel your arrow skewered on her tree trunk? Remember the neighbor kids who dismembered the lizards we sold them? Remember when you fell off the top bunk and smashed your nose? And when I got my nose broken in Little League?

For seventeen years John and I lived together, shared a room, hung our shirts in the same closet, did homework elbow-to-elbow, fought incessantly. Since then we have been virtual strangers.

6 January 1981, Princeton

I called Mom tonight to tell her about my job search in Houston. I skipped any mention of my depression and emphasized that this year I had more experience, new publications, and more interviews.

I prayed earnestly for you to do well, Mom said.

I hope it works, I replied uneasily.

It will only work if your faith is strong enough.

I couldn't help myself and asked her about the three thousand job candidates at the convention. Who helps them?

You'll never get a job if you don't have faith in yourself, she said confidently.

Are you talking about faith or the power of positive thinking?

You know what I am talking about, she said.

22 January 1981, Princeton

Scott! Scott!

I rose from my dream and stumbled down the stairs.

Did I wake you?

Yes, but it doesn't matter.
I thought it would be all right at six. I've been lying here since two.

What's the matter?

Same trouble the doctor's supposed to be working on. I found that if I
turn over to this side I can urinate a little. But now the urinal is full. Would
you empty this for me? And the TV. Does this one work in here? In case I
have to stay in bed.

Walter never stays in bed. After emptying the urinal and testing the TV,
I sat down on the end of the bed.

What did the hearing-aid man say yesterday?

He said my hearing was worse than last year. I need a new $500 hearing
aid. I told him I would think about it. If I knew I was going to live a few
more years I would buy it. But I've been feeling poorly lately.

I think you've been doing fine.

No, I've been getting weaker. I've been having trouble in the bathroom. I
dread it when I have to go in there. So I don't know about the hearing aid.
I hate to burden my estate with a bunch of hearing aids. Do you have a
thermometer?

Yes, should I get it?

Would you please? I seem to have lost both of mine. You'll have to sterilize
it afterward, so the children won't get something dreadful. Gertrude used to
have an obsession with getting things sterile. She boiled thermometer after
thermometer. Never understood why they kept breaking.

21 February 1981, Princeton

An embarrassment of job offers. How will I decide between Bucknell,
Columbia, and Vanderbilt? I won't even make the invited campus visit to
Washington University.

Columbia's is a six-year offer, but not tenure track. Susan likes the small-
town environment of Bucknell. I lean toward Vanderbilt with its graduate
program.

1 March 1981, Princeton

Walter has a dozen prohibition anecdotes, stories that have a strange fas-
cination for a teetotaler like me, although I don't even like the smell of the
bourbon I serve him in the late afternoons.

When did John begin to drink, flaunting a dietary prohibition with as
much force as the Church's proscription against homosexuality?

I got the materials for my gin through an intermediary from Fleishmann's
Yeast Company, Walter recounts. After testing the grain alcohol in my
company's lab, I mixed the gallon of alcohol with a gallon of distilled water
to prepare a supply of gin.

One day at the office I got a call from Gertrude. She was very mysterious
about whatever had happened, telling me only that I should be prepared for
an unpleasant surprise when I got home, and that I should not act rashly.
That evening she sat me down and said that on returning from shopping
she had been met at the door by David and a school friend. David proudly
announced they had destroyed the whole store of gin. Poured it down the
sink. They were headed over to the friend's house to do the same for his
father. Gertrude let them go, but quickly called and warned the other mother
that prohibitionists were on the way and that she should hide her goods.
After hearing the story, I called David in. He must have known he was in
trouble, but he looked rather sure of himself.

Why did you destroy my gin, David? I asked him.

His answer was bold: For God and my country.

David, what in God's name are you talking about?

Our teacher in school told us that liquor rots a man's stomach, David
said.

Well, nothing has happened to my stomach, I replied slowly although not
altogether truthfully, and I have been drinking for some time.

Just wait, David said. It will happen sooner or later. And besides, in school
they said that men who drink beat their wives.

Now I was on firmer ground.

That may be partly true, I agreed. Some men who drink beat their wives;
but there are lots of men who drink who don't beat their wives. You have
never seen me beat your mother, have you?

No, I guess not, David admitted. But it's against the law to have liquor in
the house.

Now I had him. You are wrong, my boy, I said. The law says you can't buy
or sell the stuff. Once it is in the house it is your property. I may not have
been right in buying the ingredients, but what you have done is to destroy
private property.
That was an argument that appealed to the legal-minded boy. Together with his accomplice, David earned enough money to pay me back. And the next weekend I took them both to New York, fed them dinner at the Dartmouth Club, and treated them to a movie. Some time later David confided to me that the other boy, a wild little red-head, had tasted the gin to see what it was like.

I figure that was the beginning of David's interest in law, Walter added. As you know, he's now a New Jersey Supreme Court judge.

It was prohibition, I told Walter, that hardened the Mormons' stance on alcohol. Brigham Young established a wine-growing mission in southern Utah. He also supported the transcontinental railroad because his favorite Bass Ale was stale by the time it reached him by wagon.

Would you like a glass of bourbon? Walter asks.
That's kind of you, I respond, but no thanks.

29 March 1981, Princeton Medical Center

Nathan Taylor Abbott was born today at 11 a.m. What remarkable prospects a child of this age has. What has Nathan inherited, I wonder, and what will he learn from us that will enhance or limit those prospects?

4 June 1981, New York City, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital

Yesterday morning we sent two-year-old Thomas alone into open-heart surgery. He looked back past the attendant, reached his hands out to us, and cried for help. Several hours later we were allowed to see him in intensive care: cadaver white, bandaged, his bodily openings filled with tubes. He was breathing only with the help of a respirator. Every heart beat was monitored, every cc. of urine measured. After a long hour he opened his eyes for the first time. Later he grasped my finger. The night passed silently. Soon after dawn, heartened by Thomas's progress, we talked about the future, about the family we are creating. Around midday the battered little boy nodded yes to my question: Are we still friends? From his window on another day he watched airplanes drop out of the sky to land at La Guardia and counted busses as they passed the abandoned dance hall below.

17 July 1981, Princeton

Scott, Oh Scott. Could you help me?
I heard the thump of Walter's brace on the floor an hour ago. I find him in bed.

Scott, he says, thank you for coming. I'm wondering if you could help me get my...my...you know, my...it's in the sitting room. I've had trouble with this word before but I have a way to remember it. I think of the Civil War, of Sherman's march through Georgia. Only it wasn't a march it was a raid. Radio! Would you get my radio?
I'm going to miss this man.

27 May 1983, Nashville, Tennessee, Centennial Park

The park across the street from Vanderbilt boasts a full-scale replica of the Parthenon and has become a popular meeting place for gay men. I counter the unease I feel while eating lunch here by thinking maybe I'll see John, who has left Houston for some unannounced destination. I sit on a slanting stone bench halfway between a mortuary and a noisy playground. Even when the park is full the bench facing the mortuary is usually empty.

A white blob hangs about eight feet above the ground on a tall hackberry tree. I walk over and find a flourishing lump of fungus where I had thought to find an impaled cow's lung.

How can we trust perceptions so colored by conscious and subconscious experience? I answer my own question: Without experience, perceptions would be measurements devoid of meaning.

29 May 1983, Tübingen, Germany

I cower on the floor under a blanket. In the dark above me a huge cat climbs and hisses and rips at couch fabric. I hug my legs to form a smaller target. The cat screams its outrage. Time crawls on and my anxiety eases into frustration. I'd like to sleep! Then the cat springs like God through the dark and slams onto my head. Wildly I strike out, but he is too quick for me.

From the bedroom comes Libby's voice: Anything wrong? The cat continues to voice his outrage. I have to contain mine.
At breakfast, Kitty rubs affectionately against my legs.
You're good with animals, Bruce says.
10 June 1983, Tübingen

All day in the university library working on literary uses of Freemasonry in eighteenth-century Germany (Lessing, Schiller, Goethe), and now I need fresh air and exercise. I put an apple, cheese, sausage, bread and a book of Hölderlin’s poetry into a bag and start up the hill. At the top, clustered together along a winding dirt road, lie dozens of small garden estates surrounded by wrought-iron fences. Signs warn of vicious dogs. I sit on a bench and read Hölderlin on impossible love.

Done with lunch and not yet ready to join Hölderlin’s Empeocles in his fiery leap into Aetna, I pack my things and step off the road onto what seems an unused strip of land bordering on a garden. A faint trail of bent grass leads to a place overlooking orange-tiled roofs and the green and brown and yellow fields of the Ammer Valley. The garden next to me is a model of industry. Tall poles stand ready to bear the weight of beans already inching upward. There are healthy rows of strawberries. Dark green rhubarb. Apple and cherry trees. Two stacks of white beehives.

I stand near a square of flattened grass, left perhaps by the blanket of a pair of lovers. I think about who they might have been. I am happy for them. Envious.

Stone sounds on metal—a whetstone on the blade of a scythe. The gardener has come to mow the grass I and a young couple have trampled. I walk up the path to find an old man swinging a gleaming blade. Bent low, he rips into the grass with long, efficient strokes.

He is startled to see me in his garden. In broad Swabian dialect he says something I don’t quite understand.

I’m sorry to be in your garden, I say. Trespasser. Stranger. Foreigner.

He mumbles and frowns and swings his razor-sharp blade.

The forest darkens as I leave the Steinenberg. Night falls. I sit in the window of my room. I pick up my pen and write about desire.

3 July 1983, Tübingen

My mother and grandmother arrived yesterday after two weeks in “the Holy Land.” As an antidote to their frenzied professional group tour of hot desert lands, our quiet walks through woods and vineyards have refreshed them. Tomorrow we’ll drive to Munich, and then to Zurich, where my brother Paul is being released from his mission.
The hogback marking the reservation's eastern boundary came into sight. Just east of the ridge squatted the Turquoise Bar. It dispensed, even Sunday morning, what could not be bought or sold on Indian land. McMasters drove more carefully.

An occasional hogan appeared and receded beside the highway. Long-haired horses and scruffy dogs warmed themselves in the late November sun.

Dogs are easier to raise than chickens, McMasters said with a laugh.

Shacks covered with black tarpaper or cardboard huddled along the highway. Away from the river's cottonwoods the landscape was lunar, sand and sandstone dominant, vegetation sparse. The volcanic sails of Shiprock rose in the west.

Bill, do you know why the Indians call it Shiprock? McMasters asked.

No, I don't.

They have a legend about a big ship that brought their ancestors across the ocean.

Just like the story in the Book of Mormon, Bill thought.

The highway drew them south from the volcano's massive core to Tochito, where busy pump jacks sucked oil from the ground. McMasters slowed the car and turned onto a gravel road. The dark, conifer-covered slopes of the Lukachukai Mountains rose above them.

The station wagon pitched and scraped over a bumpy road until McMasters pointed ahead to a cinder block house perched at the foot of the mountains. He turned into the hard-packed yard. A short-haired dog snarled at them from the top of an overflowing garbage drum. Empty soup cans, stew cans, bean cans, canned chicken cans, hominy cans, Spam cans. And bottles. It surprised Bill to see flat whiskey bottles here. Under the direction of the Southwest Indian Mission President, the McMasterses had come to hold a sacrament meeting with Brother and Sister Begay.

McMasters left the car and edged past the snarling dog. He knocked on the door. The cold wind blowing off the mountain ruffled his thin hair. The door finally opened and he half entered the house. There seemed to be some discussion, then he leaned out and motioned for his family to follow. Bill's mother and sister picked their way across the yard.

Bill stretched and looked around. This place contrasted sharply with the well-kept yard of President Tsosi. The head of the Toadlena branch of the Church lived comfortably in a big house trailer surrounded by grass and a garden.

As Bill turned toward the door, a confusing creature rounded the corner of the house and advanced on gnarled, all-but-toeless feet. Feathers scattered sparsely on its wings and body did little to hide scabrous folds of skin. From the bird's bare chest, as loathsome to Bill as grimy feathers on the chest of a man, hung five or six long hairs. Black hairs, thick black hairs, their ends dragging filthy on the ground.

Bill stared stupidly at the bird.

A hairy turkey.

Bill stumbled into the overheated house. Before his eyes had adjusted to the semidarkness, his father was introducing him to Sister Begay: This is my son William, recently returned from a mission to Germany.

The emaciated woman, sixty, seventy, eighty years old, Bill couldn't tell, bobbed her head and smiled.

McMasters led his son over to a long-haired man in a rusted wheelchair. Flaps of empty skin hung from his face and neck.

This is Brother Begay. Brother Begay, this is my son William, just returned from a mission to Germany.

The old man disclosed two lone teeth through a weak smile. Scattered white hairs dangled from his chin and cheeks. He stared straight ahead. Ya-átéeh, he said. Bill said Yaw-ta-hay and shook the man's bony hand.

The McMasterses stood awkwardly in the middle of the room. Sister Begay continued to nod. Brother Begay stared straight ahead.

McMasters motioned his family over to the double bed in one corner. Allie sat on the bed next to the wall, her mother beside her. Bill pulled his hand from the old man's grasping fingers and sat down, leaving a place for his father.

Shall we begin? McMasters asked. Sister Begay nodded from her chair near the stove.

At a signal from her husband, Bill's mother stood up with her hymn book. Let's sing "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet," she suggested brightly.

Sister Begay sang along quietly. When they finished, McMasters began to pray. He stopped short, however, when Sister Begay interrupted.

We know Spencer Kimball a prophet of God. He tell us to join God's church. We see our son when we die.

She lifted herself from her chair and limped over to a shelf holding photographs. Lifting a photo of a young man in full dress uniform of the United States Marines, Sister Begay tearfully described the death of her only son, far from the reservation, fighting in Korea.

McMasters cut the narrative short by announcing that they would now bless and pass the sacrament. Bill broke small pieces of bread onto a plate and filled six tiny paper cups with water from a thermos. McMasters read the prayer on the bread and Bill offered each person the symbols of the body of Christ. He watched Brother Begay's yellow fingernails grope blindly across the plate in search of a piece of bread.
He noticed the crucifix too, thought Bill. And the feathers. He looked over to see how Brother and Sister Begay were taking this call to repentance. Sister Begay was smiling, nodding her head. Brother Begay's sightless eyes were closed.

Slowly the scene changed from the crucifixion to the resurrection. And on that grand millennial day, McMasters was saying, Christ will come again. The just will rise from their graves to meet him, their bodies made whole; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost; but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame.

Closing his Book of Mormon with a flourish, Bill's father spoke in an almost gentile voice: I know that we will be resurrected on that great and glorious morning, You, Brother Begay, will see again and walk again. You, Sister Begay, will be reunited with your son and the three of you can dwell together throughout all eternity.

She nodded her head and smiled.

But behold, McMasters concluded, reopening his Book of Mormon, but behold, an awful death cometh upon the wicked... they are cast out... and they drink the dregs of a bitter cup.

The whiskey bottles outside, Bill thought.

Gathering his books together, McMasters asked his wife to lead them in a closing hymn, called on Allie to offer a closing prayer, and sat down heavily on the corner of the bed. The frame gave way and McMasters found himself sprawled on the floor with his family.

While his father knelt and tried to prop up the bed, Bill stood to the side with his mother and sister. The phrase “proper and perfect frame” flirted crazily through his mind.

The closing song and prayer were forgotten in the confusion and the family got ready to leave. Bill picked up Brother Begay's hand from the arm of the wheelchair and said good-by. He waved apologetically to Sister Begay. She smiled and nodded.

Outside, the cold air felt good. Bill looked around the yard for the turkey, ready to warn the rest of the family. Not until they were safe in their car, however, did it totter around the corner of the house. The old bird's hairs dragged thickly through the dirt. Its glazed eyes burst into flame. It began to run at them, squawking desperately, as if it hadn't squawked for centuries.

McMasters jerked the wheel around and stomped on the accelerator.

The turkey attacked the chrome monster, weaving and feinting with its snake-like neck.

The big car shuddered twice, then careened out of the yard.

Damned turkey, McMasters muttered.
8 July 1983, Zurich

Driving across the German-Swiss border, I had to ask twice before Mom would comment on the story.

That's not the way it was, she declared.

I know it's not, I answered. I used the events and the feelings I remembered to write a story. It's not supposed to be history.

Dad wasn't like that, Mom asserted. Why are you so critical of the Church? So bitter and cynical?

Mom, the story is about a family whose good intentions backfire because of extraordinary cultural differences. It's about our own inadequacies. Missionaries face situations like this daily. We ought to think about them with some humility.

That's not the way it was, she repeated.