

# UNDER THE COTTONWOODS

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Paul kept both sweaty hands on the steering wheel and breathed through his mouth. Her diaper dirty, Lisa lay just behind him in the back of the station-wagon on the mattress. Valerie was asleep farther back and Richard lay over behind Beth. Richard had stopped crying for Lisa's bottle, but he still whimpered. They had just passed the Lehi turnoff, and from the elevation of the freeway Utah Lake glared to the west like a huge aluminum roof in the afternoon August sun. The air conditioning on the new Buick had gone out just after they left Reno, but now Beth was afraid that if they rolled down the windows another hornet might get in and sting one of the children. He had had to stop and kill a hornet just before they came to Lehi, and since then the only circulation had been the air vents.

Paul glanced over at Beth. Five months pregnant, she sat sweaty and flushed, silent, one of her church books open on her lap. Counting miscarriages, it was her seventh pregnancy in the nine years they had been married. He had wanted to fly out from San Francisco and rent a car in Salt Lake City, but Beth said that they would need the big new Buick for all of the running around the wedding would involve. His brother Mark, a year home from his mission, was getting married, and Beth's sister Stephanie was the maid of honor. If they had flown out he might have had an extra day on Strawberry Reservoir fishing. It would be nice to fish two days instead of just the usual one. As a boy he had always fished the lower Provo River, until the army engineers gutted it on flood control.

Even while he was in dental school and then later in his orthodontics residency, they had tried to get home on vacation each summer, but it wasn't always a rest. One year they stayed with his parents, the next with Beth's, and it seemed as if they had a family dinner or a canyon picnic every evening, with both families invited, including his and Beth's married brothers and sisters and their children. One night his mother always had the neighbors and family

friends over for a buffet on the back lawn, and the mothers of the boys he had known told him about their sons, who were doctors, lawyers, professors and engineers, told what positions they held in the Church, how many children they had, if they had bought new houses. But the mothers whose sons had not achieved were silent, told him what a fine example he was. One night three mothers told him that.

All his life he had been an example. At first he had to be an example for his younger brothers and sisters, then for the neighborhood boys, for his classmates. In the army he had to be the example of a Mormon for his whole company, never do or say anything that would discredit the Church. His example was supposed to help other servicemen to become interested in the Church, investigate it, join. And before they would do that they had to find that he was clean, wholesome, spiritual, happy, different than they were, had something they didn't have, which they would ask him about. On his mission he had to be an example for his junior companion, for the elders in his zone when he became a zone leader, and finally for all of the elders in the mission when he became assistant to the mission president. When he went to Washington to dental school, he had to be an example too, both he and Beth, for all the dental students and their wives. Now in the Palo Alto Ward he had to be an example for all of the Stanford students; he and Beth were what they wanted to become. It was as if being an example were more important than being a person.

He even felt guilty when he took a day of their vacation to go fishing, was away from the family when the vacation was so short. He liked Strawberry best in the late evening when most of the other fishermen had gone home, the boat motors silent, lights on in the fishing camps. Then he fly fished for the big rainbow trout, waded out in the dark cool water with hip-boots, used a weighted bubble on his spinning outfit to cast his fly seventy or eighty feet out, trolled it back slowly, waited there in the darkness for a big fish to strike, watched the circles where they fed in the moonlight or jumped silver into the air. The Provo-River German browns were gold and the Strawberry rainbows rose-silver.

"Richard, be quiet. You're too big for Lisa's bottle."

"He'll be all right, dear," Beth said, "as soon as we get home. He's just tired."

From the freeway Paul watched the whole valley pass. New homes lined the edges of the Orem bench on the left, many of the orchards gone now where he picked fruit as a boy, and new homes lined the roads below the freeway. From Lehi on he had watched for a flock of pigeons but had seen only gulls flying toward the lake. Because the gulls had rescued Brigham Young and the pioneers from the crickets, they were the state bird, protected by state law. As a boy he rode his bike down the county roads trying to spot flocks of pigeons by the flash of their wings in the sun when they wheeled. His flock had all been white. He had traded all over Provo for white pigeons because he liked to see them flying over the neighborhood against the blue sky. At night, his bedroom window open, he lay and listened to the pigeons cooing in their coop on the side of the garage.

But after he was thirteen or fourteen, he couldn't remember being a boy. He had graduated from Provo High School, filled a mission for the Church, been in the army, gotten married, graduated from B.Y.U. and then dental school, finished an orthodontics residency and been in practice one year. He

would build a house, a clinic of his own, he and Beth would have three or four more children, and he would probably move up from second counselor to bishop of the Palo Alto Ward, be in the high council, maybe be stake president in ten years. He had done and would do all of those things he was expected to, but his whole life seemed so ordered, predetermined, rushed, tense. At times he felt like a robot, had little sense of controlling his own life, being individual.

He needed memories of his boyhood for balance now, a knowledge that at one time in his life he had been spontaneous, free, full of emotion without obligation, unaware of time, purely physical. But he didn't have that horde of memories he could bring out and look at. In his yearbooks he was a serious-looking, almost fierce boy in a tie and long-sleeved shirt who was a member of the chemistry and mathematics clubs and vice-president of his seminary class. Because he had an after-school job, he hadn't played any varsity sports or been in any school plays. He was never the most preferred boy, a student-body officer or member of the junior-prom committee. He was the student with the third highest grade-point average to graduate his year. When he looked at the pictures of all the pretty girls who had been his classmates he couldn't remember kissing any of them. And among the pictures of the boys he found few that were the faces of friends.

"Paul, hadn't we better stop at the rest area and clean up a little before we get home?" Beth turned to look at him. "I need to change the baby, and I don't want your mother to see us looking like this."

"Okay." They always stopped to clean up before they drove into Provo.

They passed Geneva Steel Plant, two miles of railroad tracks, tanks, towers, smokestacks, blast furnaces and metal buildings all shimmering in the heat and the thin grey smoke. His mother would come running out to take the children to bathe them and get them ready for supper and then to go to sleep in the clean fresh beds in Bob's room, his youngest brother who was on a mission in Brazil. Beth's parents would come over as soon as she called them. The house would be gleaming, everything scrubbed, polished and washed, the refrigerator and freezer full of food, and the lawns and yard like carpet. Every summer his mother spent two or three weeks preparing for their visit, and the order and cleanliness, he knew, were a physical expression of her love. He had spent his life trying to achieve the happiness and perfection his mother wanted for him, and now he was doing it for Beth, he felt.

Ahead on the left, running at right angles to the freeway, a line of cottonwood trees marked the Provo River, the biggest clump marking the spot where their swimming hole had been by the railroad bridges. The water had been fifteen feet deep off the big flat boulders they called the ledge. The cottonwoods were like a great green tent, the river making everything cool in spite of the hot Utah desert sun. And they swam, dived, swung out on their rope swing, had water fights, played tag, their brown naked wet bodies flashing in the sun like metal when they left the shade. Each group of boys had a favorite hole, the river a series of holes for six or seven miles from the mouth of the canyon to the lake. No one bothered them except the older boys, who, after they were finished in the fruit orchards, swam in the late afternoons. Tired, he liked to float, close his eyes against the sun, or to lie on the warm ledge and drop pellets of bread to the minnows, watch for trout. But when Provo grew after the War and people started building houses along the river, the army engineers

walked their big Caterpillars down the riverbed to pile up rock flood-control dikes, tear out all the holes, make a canal out of the river. That had ended the swimming and the fishing.

The "Rest Area Ahead" sign came up. Paul flipped on the blinker, lifted his foot off the gas and turned in, stopping in a patch of shade under three cottonwoods that the state road commission had managed to leave standing. The cement walk led to the fountain, three canopied green picnic tables and the squat new restrooms.

"Come on, miserable," he said, and reached back over the seat to pull Richard out by the arm, took one of the blankets and spread it in the shade. Valerie was still asleep by the back window. When he gave Richard Lisa's bottle he was quiet.

"Oh, honey," Beth said, "he's too old. You'll ruin his training." She knelt on the seat to reach in the back for the diaper bag.

"Anything to keep him quiet for five minutes." Two big Diesels pounded by trailing black exhaust. Across the freeway and along the river the big cottonwoods around the hole, some of them six or seven feet thick and eighty feet high, were still left. The hundred-yard-wide band of willows and trees along both sides of the river was gone except for the big trees. He had been back to stand there on the ledge, which still remained, and look at the channel lined with white glaring rocks. He had been alive there under the trees, full of a kind of freedom, sensation and pure careless joy he had never known afterward, a sense of being.

He turned. "I'll be back in ten or fifteen minutes, Beth. I'm going to walk over to the river."

"Oh, Paul honey, we haven't got time now for you to go over to that swimming hole of yours. Your mother expects us for supper and we all have to bathe first."

They had stopped to call from Salt Lake City. He looked at his watch. It was four-thirty. "We've got time," and he was already walking. He would hurry. He had told Beth about the swimming hole, and last year driving in on the new freeway he slowed down to point out the trees. He talked about it to friends and even to patients. Paul slid down through the space between the bridge abutment and the chain-link fence and climbed down the high rock dike to where the hornets lit along the trickle of water in the bottom, the only water that came down the channel except during the spring runoff. When he got under the freeway bridges and up on the cut hay field, Beth honked at him. She stood pointing at her watch. He waved, walked across the field and into the trees, where it was cooler. He stopped to look up into the high limbs, breathe the cottonwood smell, then walked through the trees out onto the shaded ledge. With the water gone the real coolness was gone too, along with all the frogs, minnows and trout.

The hole had been about half the size of a tennis court, and smooth, just enough water flowing in and out to keep it fresh and cool. The first thing that he always did once he got his clothes pulled off was to run and dive as far out as he could off the ledge, cut down, down, down, into the cool clear water, then shoot up out of it again, the water giving him sensation all over. He ran and dived many times, then finally stayed under, glided smooth and clean, pushing with his arms, following minnows. When he swung out on the rope swing, the

air cooled his wet naked body, and when he let go, dropped, the sensation went up through to his skull. Later, spread-eagled on the ledge with the other boys, he felt his body full of the sensation of heat.

He liked to fish alone. He pulled on his Levis, the copper rivets burning his skin, put on his gym shoes, took his pole and walked up through the trees. He waded in the river, rolled his worm through the shaded holes and pockets, caught chubs, suckers. Tap, tap, tap, the trout bit, then hooked, fought, went deep, made sudden rushes, the pole an extension of his arm, bringing the feeling into his body, connecting him and the trout. Tired, the trout rose out of the deep water, flashed gold, the rushes shorter, and he pulled it up onto the rocks, held it in both hands to smash its head, cleaned it, threw the entrails to the gulls. Fresh from the water the German browns were beautiful, gold with red, black and orange dots like jewels, but the beauty faded. When he took fish home his father told him about the big ones he had caught on the river as a boy.

Reaching down, Paul picked up one of the warm water-smooth rocks, held it for a moment then lobbed it out into the channel. A gull flew past him low going upstream, turning its head from side to side looking for something to eat. He was eight when he first saw the gold monument to the gulls on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. In the Church, gulls were a sacred bird.

His father convinced his mother that it was safe for him to swim in the river, but before he could go he had to practice the piano and finish his work. He weeded, hoed and irrigated the garden, mowed, trimmed, raked and watered the lawn, weeded the front flower beds, washed the house windows on the outside, washed the car for Sunday. The checks on his mother's daily list showed that he had worked hard, been a good example for his younger brothers and sisters. And when he began to do jobs for his grandmother's friends, who paid him, his mother helped him keep an account of his money so that he could pay his tithing. Most of his money he saved for his mission and college, although he could spend some.

His mother said, "Everything you do is a reflection of yourself, Paul. People know you by what you do." He believed this, saw that it was true, and out of pride, love for his mother and father, he wanted to do everything right, fulfill their high opinion of him, reward their hard work and struggle, be an example. The polished windows, trimmed neat lawns, weedless garden became a mirror of himself, like his clothes, speech, and Sunday-school attendance, his Boy Scout badges. When he pulled weeds it was as if he pulled them out of his own flesh, and he was impatient for them to dry so that he could burn them. Work was moral. Thus he became fierce about right and wrong younger than most boys, sought the perfection he was taught was possible, believed he too would become a God.

Work took him away from the river the summer before the army engineers destroyed it. He didn't have time anymore for play, or if he did it was only in the evenings or when the Orem farmers didn't have cheerries, apricots, peaches, pears or apples to be picked, because at fourteen he was old enough to work in the orchards, fill the baskets with fruit. Sweaty, his mouth dry with dust from the trees, he broke off stems until the ends of his fingers became numb. He worked both hands at a time, kept a steady stream of fruit going into the canvas bag, felt the growing weight against his stomach and loins, tried to pick more than the other boys. In his mind he added up how much money he was

making at 5¢ a bushel, knew how much it was possible to make in an hour. He stopped only to eat lunch or, standing on a high ladder, to watch the farmer's flock of pigeons wheeling over the orchard. When he quit work each afternoon, he looked down the row of trees to see the sixty or seventy baskets of peaches, pears or apples he had picked. He didn't like the farmer to haul any of his baskets off before the end of the day. He was always anxious to get home to tell his mother how much he had picked.

"You'll make a fine dentist, son," she often said, encouraged him. She wanted him to have a better life than his father had working for the Union Pacific Railroad in the shops. All the mothers in the neighborhood were ambitious for their sons, talked of them going on to college, graduating, going to medical school, dental school, law school, graduate school, set them to work early to earn their way if their fathers couldn't afford the educations their mothers wanted for them. And in this way they were already in competition with each other at fourteen and fifteen, although they didn't know that then.

He became frantic about time. He had a calendar in his room, a clock, wore a watch, became aware of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months. The work had to be done well, but it had also to be accomplished in a given time. There was so much to do, so little time to do it in, practice the piano, go to school, work, study, be active in the Church. He had to be able to look back on a day and see what he had done with his twenty-four hours, how he had used them. Money earned and things accomplished, Boy Scout and priesthood awards and badges won became a way of measuring time. And he had a time chart on his wall, put little checks in the squares, made a new chart each month, saved the old charts in a pile because they showed what he had done, were another way to measure time. Two years on a mission, six months in the army, four years in college, four in dental school, two in his residency, one in practice — his life had become too much an exercise in the proper use of time.

Paul listened. Behind him a steady pattern of honking came through the trees from the freeway. It was Beth. He looked at his watch. He should go. Another gull flew up the channel. Gulls worked. They searched the lake shore and the river banks for dead fish, fed on insects in the freshly plowed ground, dropped onto the streets of Provo to pick up fallen ice cream cones, parts of sandwiches, fruit, patrolled Strawberry Reservoir to consume the red entrails of cleaned fish. Gulls were heavy slow birds, never seemed to be flying, but walking, not like his pigeons. Evenings he climbed up the telephone pole at the back of their yard so that he could watch his white pigeons flying over the houses and trees. When he fed them from his hand, they circled the backyard, fluttered down to him, their white wings flashing in the twilight.

Something else had happened to him here that summer he was fourteen which helped to stop his boyhood. He became aware of his body and through it his inner-self. His body had always been for sensing water, sun and air, and all of his responses were spontaneous, not observed. But lying on the ledge in the sun the days he wasn't picking fruit, he began to watch his body. He touched his arms, legs, chest, ran the flat of his hand over his new muscles, became aware finally that he was male. And at times his whole being seemed focused in his loins. Arms wrapped around his legs, he pulled tight, chin resting on his knees, watched the water, waited for a voice to explain to him the chemistry of his pounding blood.

The boy's folklore of sex didn't help him understand puberty because for

him the body was sacred, an instrument for the purposes of God and not his own, to provide temples for the spirits waiting to come to earth to be reared in Mormon homes. He had to be clean, pure; sexual sin was next in evil to the shedding of innocent blood. Sex wasn't freedom, delight or interest, but already obligation, a topic he couldn't talk about with other boys because he had to be an example, be perfect. He turned inward on himself to watch his every emotion, which led him to discover hate, lust, vanity, jealousy and rage, that goodness was inside, not outside. He became preoccupied with his own guilt. The Sunday-school lessons, priesthood lessons, Boy Scout oath and law, all the things his mother taught him, all the commandments that hung over him like a net, fell, and he grew silent, stabbed his sins alone.

"What's the matter, Paul," his father asked him one Sunday that summer after dinner, "something wrong?"

"Yes, don't you feel well, Paul?" his mother said and reached over to put her hand on his forehead.

His father took him swimming one evening after that. "I thought that we might go down to that swimming hole of yours, Paul. You've been working hard out in the peaches." His father's naked body was pale in the darkness, his stomach soft, his shoulders round and stooped. After his father was in the water, Paul took off his shorts and dove in from the ledge. "This is great, son. We should do it more often." His father laughed, shouted, splashed, got up on the ledge once to run and dive in, all the time telling him how much fun he had had on the river as a boy. Once in the darkness their bodies touched. "Sorry, son." But then under the cottonwoods in the dark water shaded from the moon his father became silent, the only sounds the crickets and frogs, the splash of a heavy fish in the next hole. His father was silent when they got out to dry themselves with towels. They stopped at Cook's Ice Cream for malts on the way home. "Well, son, would you like another one?"

"No thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome to it."

He shook his head. They sat silent in the booth for a moment, then his father paid and they left, and his father put his hand on his shoulder as they walked to the car.

He wanted to talk to his father, ask him many questions, hear answers, but he couldn't. He couldn't admit to what he felt, to his emotions, drives, new appetites, thought that he might hurt his father's high opinion of him, sadden his father. He wanted to do and be all of those things his parents wanted of him, wanted the perfection, Godhood, his mother talked about, would sacrifice anything for her belief in that, even himself. So he couldn't talk to his father, use his father's understanding instead of his own. He couldn't let his father protect his boyhood for him, shield him for another three or four years, help him avoid the developing fierceness about his own life.

Reaching down, Paul picked up a dry branch, began to break off small pieces and flip them into the channel. He became lonely. It was easier not to have too many friends, easier to believe in his own perfection that way. He didn't really talk to his classmates, fellows in the army, missionary companions, let them be part of him, touch him. Even with Beth now, as much as he loved her, it was hard to talk, to tell her what was inside, what he really felt, and for the same reasons. He didn't want to hurt her or lessen her opinion of

him, suggest that perhaps he had not been or was not all that she had thought, hoped, imagined. He tried very hard to be the kind of person she wanted him to be, or the kind he thought she wanted him to be. At times he had the feeling that he was an actor performing a role in a play.

After that one night his father never swam with him again, but he rode his bicycle down alone in the evenings that summer to fish. He fished in the darkness, had learned to fly fish, cast the big wet fly where the German brown trout came up in the shallows to feed on minnows. He bought a dip net so that he could hold the trout in the water, shine his flashlight down to see them gold and jeweled before he killed and cleaned them to take home. His mother wrapped them in wax paper and they faded white before she fried them. When he swam at night he swam quietly, head up, or floated, listened, watched the stars through the openings in the cottonwoods. He held onto the swing, the arches slowly growing shorter until the swing stopped, his feet touching the water, then let go, slipped down into the water, stayed under as long as he could. He didn't take a towel, stood to let the night breeze dry his body.

Out of his desire for purity, he became preoccupied with being physically clean. He showered twice a day, polished his shoes every time he left the house, combed his hair at every mirror and window, carried a toothbrush in his briefcase, changed his shirts twice a day, liked to wear fresh ironed shirts. So in this way he lost all delight in his body. He distrusted it, became uneasy because of what he now felt, and so after fourteen he had no memory of his body being wonderful. If he hadn't had to work after school, had time for football, basketball, wrestling, sensing his body hot, sweaty, breathless, knew that he was like other boys, it would have been better. He didn't follow professional or college sports now, but when he had a chance he went to the Palo Alto High School games and meets, tried to imagine himself passing, catching the ball, shooting baskets, running, swimming, see himself, live it all vicariously. He wanted to find his body, take back the responsibility for his own life so that he could begin to love out of himself.

Beth was honking again. Paul flipped the last piece of the branch into the channel, turned, and walked back through the trees and out into the sun, stopping in the hay stubble to pull the cheat grass from his socks. Beth sat in the Buick with the front doors open when he got back to the rest area. Lisa had her bottle, Richard played with a string of plastic blocks on the mattress, and Valerie lay on her stomach coloring. Beth put her book down, got out and walked to the fountain and dampened a clean diaper. "You look hot, darling," she said and handed it to him. He wiped off his sweaty face, neck and hands. Beth had emptied the litter bag, wiped the fingerprints off the inside of the windows, straightened up the back of the stationwagon, put on new makeup and combed her hair. "Your shoes are dusty." He wiped them off and she took the diaper back. He put on the clean shirt she had gotten out for him, tipping the sideview mirror back to comb his hair.

"Your mother will be wondering where we are. She will think that we had an accident."

"Yes, I guess she will. I'm sorry that I took so long, dear."

He tightened his seat belt, pulled out to the freeway, then nosed into the heavy late-afternoon traffic. They crossed the river, and the "Provo Next Exit" sign came up. Going up on the off ramp he saw the tops of trees and houses,



felt the old surge of joy he always felt at coming home, remembered how he had felt when he returned from his mission and the army, how fiercely he loved home. They came off the loop and drove up Center Street past all of the new service stations built for the freeway traffic and then past Pioneer Park, stopping at the semaphore on Fifth West. Richard climbed over into the front seat. "Grandmaw," he said, "Grandmaw."

Paul turned right on Third West, then left on Second South. Except that the old Provo High School building had been torn down, the neighborhood hadn't changed; all of the new houses and construction were in the northeast part of town. The corner telephone pole had always been the goal for their games of grey wolf and kick the can. "There's Mark sitting on the porch with your mother and father. I wonder where Darlene is?" Beth started to wave.

"She's probably got plenty to do if they're getting married Wednesday, honey," he said.

His mother, father and Mark started down the steps waving as he turned into the driveway.

After the welcome was over and his mother and Beth had taken the children into the house to bathe them and get them ready for supper and bed, he, Mark and his father unloaded the Buick. Later, standing on the front porch alone with Mark, he asked him if he wanted to go fishing up on Strawberry one evening before he got married. "Sure," Mark said, "I've been planning on it just like every summer and so has Dad."

"Good." He still had his old spinning outfit, although he had bought new hip-boots. In the darkness he would stand in the thigh-deep cool water, cast out into the lake, slowly troll the fly in, every second expecting a strike, see the beautiful silver rainbow trout leap shining in the moonlight. Mark and his father would kill the trout they caught, clean them, leave the entrails on the shore for the patrolling gulls the next morning. But he wouldn't. After he had fought a trout, felt the movement and pull, the heavy pulse coming up through the line and rod into his hand and arm, seen it in front of him in the water, he would free it. He would hold the rainbow in the net to see it shining rose-silver, pull the hook from the lip, then release it, see the trout hover then flash back into the deep water, vanish.

