

Shepherds and Shepherders

By Richard Zane Smith

Roy eventually found her there in the empty church, small and silent, gazing through a rain spattered window. She didn't turn when he quietly shut the door and approached her. "Honey, are you ok?" Her face was as streaked as the aluminum framed window before her. "I'm fine", her voice flat and lifeless. He gently put his arms around her from behind and they watched the endless sage receive the tears from Heaven.

A pick-up was passing, lurching and groaning on the mud slick road that seasonally changed it's course like a river. Before them the rain began its evolution to snow, big wet, feathery masses disappearing into the red earth. A handful of soggy sheep and a few goats wandered without direction just beyond the mission compound fence.

She sighed and limply squeezed his arm. "I don't think anyone will come." He glanced to the front of the church where the shepherds robes lay stacked neatly and next to them two tinfoil covered shepherds crooks, some lacy angel wings and sparkly haloes sat waiting. "We'll see," He squeezed her in return and watched the big flakes settle, melting around the rose bushes they had both planted with such joy and hope that summer. Deborah had been so full of life! smiling those sky blue eyes with such happiness. Even the bushes seemed indecent and exposed, leaning so naked and foreign in this landscape.

He really didn't know what else to say. Her bouts with depression left him fearful and powerless. "I'm sorry Honey; I know you put a lot of work into this." A goat was making a racket with its bell, winding its head back and forth trying to extract its head from a hole in the sagging sheep wire fence. Another goat had somehow managed to get through and was perched on the propane tank. It was intensely studying a yellow elm leaf wagging from the bare branches. He felt her giggle quietly and he was relieved. "Oh, by the way, I did get a couple bales of hay at the trading post. Doug said they were his last". He patted her and moved towards the door. When she turned back to the window without response he couldn't help feeling a little irritated. At the door he looked back. "Deborah, we have to do our part. We are only called to be faithful." She felt it as a barb and returned it with an icy glare. He walked out and closed the door.

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All four tires spun and whined as the whole truck skidded rebelliously settling upon its own desires. The deep slurry filled ruts received it in its destined embrace. "Damn!" Benson stepped on the gas trying not to gun the motor, but the truck only slumped lower, mud flying everywhere. "Shit!" He hit the steering wheel with both palms. "I told him my tires were bald!"

He had been out weatherproofing his trailer, nailing flake board to the flimsy framing when Pastor Roy came over. "Benson, I hate to bother you, Son, but well. Deborah is kinda upset. She's put so much work into preparing for the Christmas play." He was shaking his head. "Well she's worried that the weather might keep the kids home from practice today...."

Benson rolled down the muddy window with force and peered out. His truck suddenly felt like a low rider buried this deep. "Damn! Why do I listen to him?" How was it those missionaries always made him feel like he couldn't say no? "I was hired as maintenance, not some kind of taxi driver!"

He was angry at the new pastor and his fragile wife but he was furious with himself.

He opened the door and climbed out into the mud. Squinting off into the distance, he could make out the Etsitty place against the mesa appearing and disappearing between falling snow flakes. God couldn't expect him to obey every crazy request someone made of him. But inside he wasn't sure. He slammed the door shut, tilted his hat down and climbed off the road. Leaning into the snow he set off towards the Etsitty's, leaving his truck in the middle of the road.

If he could get Custer's help, he could get pulled out and return to the mission with his two boys. She'll have to be satisfied with that. He wove his way through the wet sage breathing it in deeply, filling his senses, giving him it's pleasant and familiar presence, soothing down the inner fury as it always did. He prayed quietly keeping his hat low, moving through the land almost without conscious thought, until the dogs started barking a long way off.

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Before opening the door to the trailer, he stomped his feet on the old PTL! footmat, trying without much success to knock off some of the mud. The sound would also serve to alert her of his presence. He didn't want to surprise her again crying on the sofa or lying silent across the bed.

He was worried. But when he came in she was at the kitchen table wrapping up the doll they'd chosen for baby Jesus. She glanced for a second at his feet and he was instantly thankful he'd decided to take his shoes off at the door.

He dropped the mail on the table and took off his jacket. So this was what it was like to 'walk on egg shells'. It seemed much too hot but he wouldn't dare touch the thermostat. Deborah worked the torn strips of cloth around the hard hollow body. The plastic blue eyes flickered open and closed.

"Well, good news!" He was cheerful and in charge, studying a return address on a large envelope. "Benson's off to gather up the angels, shepherds and wise

men." She managed a quick light glance and a fluttered smile. She rose and put baby Jesus in a crumpled Wal-Mart bag. "It'd be nice to have everything ready when the kids come."

There was a limpness in her movements but she was trying, and it brought back a glimmer of hope. "Great! I'll get those hay bales and we'll fix that old church up fine."

Soon, they were walking in silence through the falling manna in the wilderness, their boots caked in red slush, heavy and clumsy. A figure stood watching them in a long dark overcoat just on the other side of the compound fence. Deborah waved a mittened hand and flashed an easy smile, but he only stood there motionless, watching. Roy was taking the plastic off of the hay bales. "Who's that?" he asked quietly over his shoulder, wadding up the plastic sheet. She opened the door wide for him. "I have no idea, but he gives me the creeps." He stumbled in with the alfalfa bale, an orange string in each hand. He stomped and wiped his feet on the carpet scrap, swaying heavily. Little green flecks fell like confetti. She placed the plastic bag on the back pew and baby Jesus nodded his flat cropped nylon lashes. Shaking her hair free of snow she hung up her jacket on the metal hooks on the back wall.

"Now it smells like a barn in here...Oh!...look at all the hay falling down the isle!" She groaned cheerfully, and he felt a lightness of spirit he hadn't experienced in a long time. As he dropped the bale next to the plywood manger he watched her combing out her hair..."Thank you Jesus."

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Benson caught sight of sparks in the shed just beyond the house and knew Custer was home. He bent down and snatched at an imaginary rock and 'tossed it' at the barking dogs. They slunk away towards an old hogan where they stood guard before an open doorway still barking his arrival. The smell of cedar smoke was all around him.

Custer was bending over a metal table cutting out a perfect circle of steel. The torch popped and hissed, sending sparks cascading with the falling snow. Benson waited till it fell, hissing and sputtering on the ground, before coming up. "Ya-ateeh shi chei," Custer lifted his goggles and smiled his famous smile. "Hey...Ya-ateeh shi bro!" They squeezed hands and stood silently watching the steaming disc in the bubbling mud. "I thought that was your truck in the road." He turned his cap around and hung his goggles over the oxygen tank. "When you gonna get a real truck?" Custer laughed and poked at Benson, "Hey...by the way, I like your new double wide..."

He paused and looked troubled with false confusion, "But... when are you gonna get the other side?" They laughed easily together. Even though Custer was just a

few years older, Benson would always be considered 'little brother'. Benson adjusted his hat and scraped mud from his boot with a piece of scrap metal." I don't know," he shrugged, "I got a good deal on that one. Some John rolled the other half trying to take the back road to Hard Rock."

Custer wiped his forehead, "damn" and started to put on that worried look again. "I don't know, no woman's gonna marry a guy with only half a house!"

Benson nodded and smiled, "What are you making?"

Custer shook his head, turned off the pressure in the tanks, and hung up the torch. "Grandma's mad at me." He tossed an old canvas scrap over the tanks. "Last year I had this whole truck full of cement left over at the job site." He picked up the disc with vice-grips and looked it over. "So I brought it home, stuck that chute right in the door of that old hogan and dumped it. Man I had a nice concrete floor in no time." He was shaking his head, "When she got home she was pissed!"

Benson was confused "Why?"

Custer looked sheepish and started gathering up the tools. "Well, I guess Grandma had a little stash of her jewelry and money buried in there somewhere. Hell, how was I supposed to know?" He closed the tool box and latched it, putting it up on a shelf.

Benson stared at the disc, "So...what's this?"

Custer acted surprised, "Oh that? It's for her cookstove; she dropped the cast iron one and broke it, 'smiling sheepish again,' on that damn concrete floor!" He shook his head and pulled off his gloves. "Come on, let's go get some coffee." Benson followed him to the house. Custer knocked dust from his jeans and reached for the hole in the door where in ages past there might have been a door knob. "Hey, Lou-Anne! Guess who's here? It's that guy from the half-way house!" Knocking mud from his boots he turned back to Benson. "That's what they call you now, did you know that?" Benson smiled and checked his boots.

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Deborah was placing the baby in the hay filled manger, brushing off little flecks of alfalfa. He watched her as he held the neat stack of little robes. "I can't believe that Benson or any of the Indians didn't know what a manger was supposed to look like," He placed them neatly on the front pew. "I thought Navajos were supposed to be shepherds." He cautiously checked his watch and glanced at Deborah who was starting to get that far away look again. "Dear God, not now" he prayed silently. "Well, it won't be long. They should be here anytime." He

studied the door cheerfully as if willing it to burst open with little eager brown faces.

Deborah turned and faced him. "Roy...what are we doing here?" It was a question from someone lost or in a dream that keeps changing. He reached for her and pulled her in close. He had to be strong. He knew she would yield to him eventually if he showed the strength and firm gentle leadership he learned from those huge Promise Keeper rallies. "I know this has been difficult for you, Deborah, but you know as well as I do that God called us here." She stiffened slightly but he stroked her golden hair. He rested his chin lightly on her head and inhaled the scent he loved so deeply.

The old picture of the Good Shepherd looked down from the wall and gave him courage. He whispered lightly, twisting tiny delicate word-threads that he hoped would become a cable...maybe a life line to pull her back. "Remember the rally? Evangelize Earth 2007?" He spoke the words slowly and reverently stroking her gently. "Remember how we both felt the call of God...together?"

Her tears felt warm, even sensual on his arm." I know...I know," She sobbed freely now," I just miss my family and friends at home. Oh Roy, I'm not sure of anything anymore...." She buried her head in his shoulder and he rocked her tenderly. "I think we've been under real spiritual attack, both of us," he began, "Satan has a stronghold here, you know? We have to find our strength in the Lord. Remember our prayer warriors back home who..." The door of the church opened and in the swirling snow stood the old Navajo man in the long overcoat. His old plaid hunters cap was dripping with melting snow. He spoke to them clearly and slowly in the language of the land, words as rooted as the small twisted junipers scattered among the sage, words clear as the wind and totally incomprehensible to them both.

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Lou-Anne's kitchen was comfortably cluttered and warm. She poured coffee into two mugs and returned to the gas stove with the old coffee pot that soon popped and jumped under the low flame. Custer stood up from the table, setting down his cup. "I gotta show you somethun," he smiled mischievously, "You won't believe this," Lou-Anne took a tortilla off the grill with her fingers and put it on the growing stack. She smiled briefly at Benson, rolling her eyes and shook her head smiling as she pinched off another ball of dough from a green plastic bowl.

Custer was soon banging around in the other room and yelling at the boys. "Hey, turn that TV down and come out and say 'hello' to your uncle!"

"Hello Uncle!" Benson heard them both laugh it out.

Custer was dropping something, "These kids have no manners," he was mumbling.

Lou-Anne slapped out another tortilla and called after him, "It's under the bed!" She turned back to the stove and adjusted the flame under the potatoes.

Custer appeared with an old U.S.D.A. commodities box. He set it on the table and sat down, reaching in and pulling out a handful of letters. "Check this out," He set them down on the table and grabbed another handful with a dirty rubber band around them.

Benson watched and sipped his coffee waiting for the story that he knew was coming. Custer looked so serious. "We couldn't find anyone to herd sheep. Grandma's getting too old or too lazy" Lou-Anne turned and glared at him, but Custer ignored her. "The kids won't do it; sheesh... all they want to do is watch TV or play video games, or 'let's go to town! let's go to town!'" He looked disgusted rubbing the Formica on the table with his hand. "Remember Jolene, my sister?" Benson nodded and turned his cup till he could read 'Go Broncs' on the side. "She's been stationed in Germany. She told us those Germans are crazy about Indians over there. They even have powwows and sing those war dances. When they found out she was a real Navajo Indian ...man, they practically worshipped her."

Benson shook his head and scraped at a hardened coffee drip with his thumbnail. "When I was little, I didn't even know I was Indian!"

Custer laughed, "Me too, I thought Indians all wore feathers and stuff and chased cowboys around. So anyway I got this idea," Benson leaned back and Lou-Anne laughed "You always get ideas!" She took the potatoes and the stack of tortillas to the table, "Eat!" she commanded. Custer took a spoon full of potatoes and put it on a tortilla, "So anyway we needed a shepherder," he shook salt over it and rolled it up tightly. "So I had my sister put an ad in the paper over there for the job." He took a bite.

Benson raised his eyebrows, "In Germany?" and fixed his own tortilla carefully.

Custer nodded and pointed at the box dramatically. "Those are all applications for the job!"

Benson smiled, his mouth full, "No way...what are you paying? Maybe I'll take the job."

Custer paused and looked straight at him, waving his burrito, "Nothing!" He took another bite and chewed it slowly. "In fact, they are going to pay me. The one who offers me the most gets the job!"

Benson wiped his mouth with the dishtowel there on the table, "You're crazy!"

Custer's eyes grew wide, "Maybe...but I'm not stupid!" They all laughed out in one single burst. He looked around and then at Benson. "Ready? Let's get that truck pulled out... before one of those Yazzie boys finds it." Lou-Anne called the boys and they both took a rolled tortilla for the road. Benson noticed she was smiling proudly at her man when they walked out the door.

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Deborah's eyes darted in fear to her husband. "Roy" she whispered fiercely, "do something!"

The snow circled in and around the old man where he stood planted, looking beyond them towards the manger on the platform behind them. Roy stiffly greeted him, "Yateeh" and then moved slowly behind him to shut the door against the spinning galaxies. Slowly the man lifted a gnarled hand and pointed straight ahead speaking earnestly and then looked towards Roy for an answer. Roy stared blankly at him and smiled weakly, as he kept gesturing to the front. Suddenly Roy's face changed from confusion to radiant joy. It was as if he'd heard angels from a Christmas card. "Deborah", he began slowly, "This is what we have been praying for." His voice was calm and sweet with assurance. "It's the Babe...in the manger...he wants to know what it's all about...Praise God!" he spoke in a whisper.

Deborah came down the aisle like a bride and took the old mans arm as if it were her own father in a tuxedo. Roy's eyes became moist as he watched her. "Come" she spoke to him and gestured her small white hand forward. The old man hobbled with her, and Roy followed this amazing procession. He prayed his heart out. He prayed that language barriers would be torn asunder as in the book of Acts. He prayed for a miracle as blind eyes had been opened and cripples once walked and leaped. When they reached the front the old man looked at their tearful faces and spoke his desire. He looked at the babe in the manger. Roy spoke as he had never spoken before, and Deborah saw that his face was like an angel. She knelt and wept in pure joy. Roy pointed to the manger and faced the old man whose eyes shone in his beautiful wind carved face. "Would you like to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" The old man looked at him and pointed at the manger and then speaking simple Navajo pointed to himself and to the world outside, he reached a hand in a torn pocket and pulled out a wrinkled and stained wad of dollar bills. Roy shook his head and placed his pink hand over the money. "The gift of eternal life cannot be bought or sold... it is a free gift." The man looked away and laid the money at the foot of the manger and gestured gently. He turned and sat on the front pew and said no more.

Deborah gasped, "Its a gift! A gift to the Christ Child!"

They both held each other with tear streaked cheeks, they gazed into each others eyes, partners once more, united again in sweet victory.

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Custer put a gloved hand on the muddy bumper and leaned down to fasten on the log chain.

"Man, you really sunk this one", Benson stood motionless, looking off into the snowfall, his hands hanging by their own weight. In a few minutes they'd jarred it loose and pulled it up onto the side, spinning and groaning the whole way. Benson pulled it out of gear, and sat staring blankly ahead with the engine idling noisily. Custer appeared at the window and leaned in. "We'd better take mine, you're not going to make it till the mud freezes, bro." Benson nodded, Custer was being big brother again...and it felt good. They walked to Custer's truck where the kids were under the tarp in the back laughing and pulling it off one another as the snow descended. Custer hollered at them and smacked his gloves together to knock mud loose.

"Damn, never thought I'd be working for the missionaries" They got in the cab and slammed the doors shut. Custer guided the truck back onto the road, working the wheel and gears as an expert. "Remember Alfred Begaye?" Benson nodded, silently unbuttoning his jacket. "He finally joined the Mormon Church...said it was the only way you could get a good job in Blanding. That's what he said anyway." The truck obeyed his commands like a good cutting horse.

Benson was getting hot and feeling a little defensive. "These new missionaries aren't so bad; these people at least don't order you around. Not like boarding school when we were kids."

Custer nodded, "Well that's good. Hey remember old Mr. Brown?"

Benson nodded and a silence fell like a big screen before their eyes on which memories flowed in vivid color and emotion. Benson was twelve, spunky and liked to make the girls laugh in class. Mr. Brown was standing there leaning on his huge desk explaining to them the benefits of learning a foreign language. Benson raised his hand. "We already speak a foreign language."

Mr. Brown smiled condescendingly. "I hardly consider Navajo a foreign language, Ben."

"No not Navajo," Benson burst out, "ENGLISH!" The whole class roared and Mr. Brown smiled a thin smile. In an hour he was cleaning Mr. Brown's bathroom with an old toothbrush. It wasn't till he got to the toilet that he noticed the teachers own personal toothbrush in a steel rack over the sink. The next day Mr. Brown glared at him but wouldn't say a word, and well, neither did Benson. It became their own little secret and it kept a tense peace between them the whole year.

It was Custer's laugh that brought him back and the memory faded. Custer was grinning, "One thing I learned at boarding school...never punish a kid by making them cook for you!" he shook his head and they both laughed. Benson looked at him with admiration, "dang, no wonder they were sick all the time".

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The old man sat quietly in the pew. His hands in his lap, his old frayed coat still buttoned around him and his hat still perched on his head. Roy and Deborah held one other and spoke gently, watching the snow fall. It was beginning to stick and cover the land with its brilliance even as evening came on. He felt her breath come and go .With it was new life and contentment. "Roy, remember that speaker at E.E. 2007 who told the story about the sick little girl?" He squeezed her and nodded, loving the sound of her words. "That story really touched me," her voice was dream-like. "Here was this Stone Age tribe in the jungles and they gave up on her. Even the witch doctor walked away, the parents refusing to be comforted. Then came the man of God..." her voice was glorious. "He takes this child and in front of the whole village bows on his knees and prays for a healing." Deborah unwadded a ball of tissue to dab her eyes. "Even when the witch doctor watched from a distance cursing and making evil sounds, this missionary stands against the devil! He takes the antibiotics from his bag and gives her the medicine and prayed," She looked at Roy. "She was healed Roy, and the whole village saw the power of God!" He smiled and closed his eyes. She nestled in deeper to him. "Do you think God could do something like that here?" She was timid and hopeful, like a child.

Roy spoke with certainty, "Not only could he, but I'm convinced he will!" His whole body seemed filled with light. Was it bells he heard so close, or angels rejoicing? A truck was coming up the road slowly towards them and into the compound. Snow fell like the stars at the end of time. Now came the unmistakable sound of bells outside the church. The old man sat waiting.

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Benson was brushing off his jacket and the old man was talking to him earnestly and gesturing while he spoke. The kids were trying on the robes and looking over the cardboard wings. Benson stared at the floor politely and nodded his head occasionally. The pastor and his wife still in each others arms watched with growing interest. "Well?" Roy's curiosity was too much.

Benson hesitated and studied them briefly, then let his eyes drift around. He watched the boys playing with the tinfoil covered shepherds crooks. He realized the couple was staring intently at him and waiting. He shrugged. "He's a shepherd for Fannie Tso, over that way," He nudged out the direction with his lips, "says the sheep were hungry. So, he went to the trading post for a little hay. Doug told him you bought the last two bales"...Benson looked up at the manger scene, Roy and Deborah stared blankly. "He came here... umm...I guess he wondered if you might sell him a bale." Benson fumbled with the buttons on his jacket and wished he'd stayed in the truck with Custer.

One of The Yazzie girls they'd picked up along the way was taking out the Jesus doll. One of the strips had begun to unwind. Custer's boys were calling the shepherd crooks 'light-sabers' and started a little sparring with special sound effects. The pastor and his wife didn't seem to even notice. Roy glanced at Deborah who looked as if she had turned to grey stone. He moved quickly, "Well I suppose we should give him one of these bales."

Benson looked at his boots, "Ummm he said you both looked kinda sad... so he thought maybe you wanted to keep the hay, or something."

Deborah's voice cracked, "No, that's OK... he can have that bale...the one Mary was going to sit on..." The door opened and Custer peeked in and quietly announced "There's some sheep out here eating your rose bushes." Deborah moaned and sat down hard in one of the pews holding her head in her hands.

Roy was alarmed. "Ben! Go chase those sheep away!" He commanded, looking him in the eye, beckoning with his hand towards the door. Benson slowly moved in obedience and then out the door past his friend, avoiding Custer's eyes. The snow swirling across the land.

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Söhahiyöh
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written in 1999

Note: Richard Zane Smith is a member of the Wyandot Tribe and lives near Wyandotte, Oklahoma. A world-renowned traditional potter, he is highly involved in the indigenous cultural restoration of his Wyandot people. Although not a Mid American Indian Fellowships member, Richard Zane Smith is a special friend of MAIF and regularly attends the annual MAIF Gathering.