

RIDE,
SALLY,
RIDE

(SEX RULES)

DOUGLAS
WILSON

A novel about true love, the sexually demented,
and the crack-up of the United States.

A comedy of manners in a world without any manners,
that world being a sexual dystopia in the very near future,
a time in which Asahel found his way
into and out of the vortex.
And Stephanie did, too.

Let me say it one more time y'all
All you want to do is ride around Sally, ride, Sally, ride
All you want to do is ride around Sally, ride, Sally, ride
~ Wilson Pickett, "Mustang Sally"

*This book is dedicated to Darren Doane,
who had the great idea for the central book.*

This is as good a place as any to insist that all the characters in *Ride, Sally, Ride* are fictional, and I made them all up out of my own head. Any resemblance to any real people, living or dead, is their own darn fault. If they quit acting like that, the resemblance would cease immediately, and we wouldn't have to worry about it.

EXPLANATION

AS ONE IS CLEARLY NEEDED

First, a note about the subtitle: The unassuming phrase *sex rules* admits of two basic meanings. One has to do with the customs or mores of a particular society, including even the decadent ones. As in, “What are the sex rules in Toronto?” This is a matter of mere etiquette and custom, and not morality. Expecting sex by the second date can be a custom, and in certain places, it is, but there is nothing moral about it. It would nevertheless be one of the “sex rules” for that place.

So the second and more foundational sense of the phrase refers to the binary realities that were embedded in the world at the dawn of creation. Sex, the way God established it at the very beginning, rules.

This is a story about both senses, and what happens when they collide. The ancient poet Horace put it with some force when he said *Naturam expelles furca, tamen usque recurret*, which puts the whole thing into a shoebox: “You can drive nature out with a pitchfork, but she will keep coming back again.”

AN OVERTURE

TO THE WHOLE AFFAIR

Asahel Hartwick did not really intend to be the reason for the crack-up of the United States. When that finally happened, the country fragmented into two, and then after that, into four pieces, and then back into two. But the fact that Asahel (known as “Ace” to his family and friends) did not intend this outcome was largely irrelevant. Intentions were, by the last stage, largely beside the point.

Whenever something like this happens, as it has from time to time in the annals of geopolitics, any competent historian can, after the fact, show how the subsequent events that proved so momentous, and which crept up on everybody from behind, and which virtually no one predicted, were in actual fact some kind of inevitable. The whole thing was going to happen, somehow, someday. This kind of inevitability is a

strange creature of time, being only visible from the rear and never from the front. Historians can see it clearly, but prognosticators, for some reason, cannot.

So I have gathered my notes all together, and am about to regale you with a number of events in Colorado, events that eventually and inexorably led to a national crack-up. Asahel was the spark in a room full of fumes, and that is why there was an explosion. But whenever any room is full of fumes, and an Asahel fails to materialize, any competent historian will always tell you that some other guy would be along shortly, and he would be the guy flicking the lighter. Had Martin Luther decided not to post his theses on that church door in Wittenberg because it was raining out, and he was just getting over a cold, then perhaps a fellow down the road named Johannes Becker would have done it. And we would today be casually referring to Missouri Synod Beckerians.

I point this out because while Ace Hartwick provided the occasion, he had nothing to do with the fumes. The fumes were there and well in evidence long before he was born.

CHAPTER 1

A PHINEHAS MOMENT

SETTING THE STAGE

The Cherry Creek neighborhood of the Denver area had been one of the swankiest for many decades, and the troubles of 2024 had only accelerated the coagulation of the swank. After the legalization of pot in the years before that, the downtown area of Denver had gone rapidly to the dogs—and by “the dogs,” the reference is not to show poodles owned by rich ladies or anything refined and decadent like that. Rather, the dogs that everything had “gone to” would be more like the mangier packs that roam in and around the landfills outside Manila, the kind that would eat dead vultures and call it a treat.

And yet the swells of Cherry Creek had reacted to all of that deterioration with characteristic aplomb.

These were largely the kind of people who were directly responsible for the insane policy decisions that had led to downtown sidewalks being covered with feces and needles, but because they would rather be dead in a ditch than live in a place like that *themselves*, they quite naturally arranged for other people to have to live there. Such an arrangement seemed more fitting somehow.

These elites were really good at a few things. Their long-practiced art form, made up of a mysterious heap of closely guarded secrets of never having to deal with any of the consequences of any of their decisions, had really had an astonishing run. If success can be defined as retaining influence and power despite a long string of unbridled disasters and failures, the ruling Colorado elites were a success story for the ages.

In the Troubles of '24, when the whole country had shuffled the cultural and political deck, there had also been a drastic reshuffling with regard to all the ministries that had previously been congregated in Colorado Springs, just to the south of Denver. At least half of those ministries had relocated to states where their ministries would be able to remain legal, and where their newsletters would not be immediately prosecuted for hate speech. The remaining ministries had made the necessary accommodations with what they called "the new realities," and had tripled their budgets for "legal staff" in order keep up with the never-ending directives from the Colorado Human Rights Commission. These directives were, in the words of the legal counsel of at least half the remaining ministries, "demented," but these sentiments were only expressed in executive session, and even then pretty rarely.

Benson Hartwick was a senior staff member of one of these remaining ministries. He served as an elder in a Presbyterian church (ECPPA), one that still had the remains of a sort of evangelicalism about it. One could still detect, from time to time, something that resembled orthodoxy coming from the pulpit.

And, as it also happened, Benson was a most notable resident of Cherry Creek, having served three times as the secretary for that neighborhood's association. So while he did not feel directly responsible for the sunlight that was bouncing off his very green front lawn at this particular moment, he did feel a sense of proprietorship, and a modest but not unseemly glow of pride. The lawn was so green that if green had a word in its semantic family like red does—that word being *vermilion*—only that word and no other would have sufficed. Well, maybe the green equivalent of *incarnadine* might have sufficed, if the light was good.

The day was quite fine, and the sun had been working diligently away at it. In the warmth of that sunlight, there were some bees and other assorted insects fooling around in the flower bed that ran around the house, and a couple of birds were off in the trees yelling about something, while their feathered neighbors chucked and chattered in the language of their normal business. But the relative disquiet of the suburban fauna did nothing to molest the peace—a peace that passeth understanding—that enveloped Benson Hartwick.

He was masculine in all the stereotypical ways—he was tall, and he had a jaw that jutted out, but not by *too* much. He also

had a long-suffering wife named Roberta, who allowed him to make unilateral decisions while telling himself (and any others who would listen) that “we” had come to the decision after a season of extended prayer. Most of the time Benson more than half believed it himself.

When it came to the jargon of servant leadership, no one could even get near him. And he was also fearsome on the racquetball court—at will he could place a ball no more than four inches above the floor from any given position. He had come to believe that his ability to place the ball in just that way was just as good as taking responsibility for the state of his marriage and family, which, he assumed quite wrongly, was in a decent state.

As Benson was looking out over his emerald and practically perfect lawn, a beat-up 2020 pick-up truck shuddered to a stop on the far side of their capacious driveway. The side mirror didn’t actually fall off, but it was obviously thinking about it. Benson’s son, Asahel, jumped out and came around the front of the truck, sticking his ball cap in his back pocket as he came. Ace was grinning like something wonderful had just happened, but he always looked like that. Despite everything, he was a cheerful sort, and a very happy twenty-year-old. And despite the superficial perfections of his suburban life, he had a quick mind and a quicker grin.

He also had a temper that had nearly gotten him expelled from his private Christian high school a few years back. This, given the lax discipline policies of that particular school, would have been quite a feat had he managed to accomplish it. He knew that his picture-perfect family was “really messed up,” as

he quietly put it to himself, and the one thing that was keeping him at home—as he was heading into his third year of college—was the intellectual ballast he was taking on from a dark website that specialized in getting nineteenth century theology into the heavily censored blue states.

He called it ballast, although—truth be told—if anyone in authority knew about what he was reading, if Ace had been silly enough to tell anybody about it, they would say he was in the process of being “radicalized.” What it actually consisted of was pretty tame, sane, and mildly orthodox stuff written in another era, long before the continent-wide opium dream had started.

Ace had sandy blond hair, and was two ticks on the good side of having a medium build. But he was muscular and athletic, and had actually beaten his father in racquetball exactly one time. That had not been a cause of friction between them as they both agreed that it was a matter of uncommon luck, coupled with the fact that Benson had been playing left-handed. Ace’s hair was always tousled, although close cut on the sides, and he had a hard, industrious, diligent look about him. He was nearly always cheerful, but people who knew him well thought of him as taut and coiled.

He walked briskly toward the house.

Meanwhile, a couple of gated communities over, this one not nearly so posh as Cherry Creek, but every bit as gated, Jon Hunt stood on his front porch looking out on the same sunny day that was apparently blessing Benson so much.

Jon had at one time been an attorney with a high-flying Denver firm, but he was now semi-retired. He filled his time up

reading theology and doing *pro bono* work for the now exiled Christian Legal Defense. He had been a courtroom barracuda professionally, but had retired from that particular line when he became a Christian about five years before this particular sunny day. His conversion was almost the direct result of his wife leaving him for another woman. In the years since, he had come to believe that it was a treatment he had richly deserved, and was surprised only by the fact that it had taken his ex-wife Victoria so long to get up enough nerve to do it.

He was waiting on the porch for Stephanie, his daughter, who had gone out for coffee with a young man named Lionel. Stephanie attended the same university that Ace did, although they shared no classes. She had decided to live with her father after the divorce for various practical reasons, but she had come to see such a change in him after his subsequent conversion that she was now hanging around to see what might happen next. She was not a Christian, but she was thinking seriously about it. Up to that point in time, all her intellectual energies were occupied with libertarianism. This was, in the eyes of the state of Colorado, as unwelcome as all get out, occupying a spot right between *Calvinism* and *cannibalism*.

Jon's thoughts turned to Lionel, who was bringing Stephanie back from their third and—unbeknownst to Lionel—last coffee date. Stephanie had accepted the invitations initially because Lionel was the head of the college and career group of his church, the same Presbyterian church that Benson Hartwick attended. Stephanie's father was a Presbyterian also, but as his church met in the basement of the pastor's house, and because he had

affectionately called it Taliban Reformed, she thought she should begin her inquiries into Presbyterianism by talking with someone who was a bit closer to her in age, and perhaps a *tad* more mainstream. From her discussions with Lionel she had come to believe that being mainstream was perhaps a bit overrated.

She was getting out of the car now, and Lionel waved as she walked up the drive. He did not see if she waved back—she did not—because he had seemed to be distracted by his own hand. The sunlight had glinted off his ring.

Stephanie had jet black hair, cut in a page boy style, and a spray of freckles across her nose. She was willowy without being skinny, and she managed to be well-proportioned without being in any way a hazard or public nuisance. She was a pretty girl, but there are different kinds of pretty girls in this world of ours. Some women are just plain gorgeous, and they don't really know how to turn it off, but Stephanie was not like that. She was entirely secure without any make-up, and was routinely described as "that pretty girl," but whenever she decided to put on the Ritz, the effect was to summon up an oceanic goddess of beauty *de profundis*. And if she smiled at anything male while done up like that, he would probably be in the ICU for at least a couple of days.

She ran up the front steps, and kissed her father on the cheek. "Hello, crazy legs," he said. "How was it?"

"Ugh," she said. "I'll tell you over dinner. Let me just say that his idea of a church that is culturally engaged runs along the lines of *monkey see monkey do*. And what he knows about the Old Testament wouldn't fill a shoe box. I asked him about

something in Deuteronomy, and he said, ‘Ah, yes, the Pentatooch.’ And he wasn’t kidding either.”

With that, she went into the house.

* * *

When it came to the United States of America, the lines on the map were all still in the same places. Whenever the weatherman was describing the Arctic Express blowing down out of Canada, the long-familiar shape of America was still right there on the flickering screen, welcoming all that snow, and the spring to follow.

That facade had been diligently maintained by all the authorities for just over a decade now. There were still technically fifty-one states—Puerto Rico being admitted in the barfight that some called the year 2022—but knowledgeable observers knew what a facade all of it was.

At the same time, most everyone else—whether a knowledgeable observer or not—knew that the unity of the “United” States was *something* of a facade. But they didn’t think about it much because they had just gotten used to it, and since there had been no active shooting war, it was somewhat easy to adjust to the new normal.

The rock that had been dislodged at the top of that particular geopolitical avalanche was the repeal—although there had been considerable debate over whether it actually *was* a repeal—of the infamous Roe v. Wade decision. That had happened in 2023, and while it had been accompanied by a great montage of jesuitical reasoning that claimed in the footnotes that it was

not a repeal, the net effect was that an Alabama abortion ban had been upheld. Numerous states followed immediately, with nearly identical language, and immediately there had been in effect two Americas.

There was the northeast Atlantic coast America together with the left coast America. The farthest inland that this America got was Ohio on the one side and Colorado on the other. The quickest identifiers for a particular state were how strict their laws on abortion were, and how loose their laws on the use of recreational marijuana were. And homosexual marriages could also be a marker—most of the heartland states had used the language of the Roe-reversal case, adjusted the language to fit, and dispensed with that travesty as well. About three red states were still embroiled in this process, while the blue states were opening themselves to more and more novel configurations of marriage.

And so it was that 2024 had been a banner year for U-Haul—three times the annual business they had ever had before or since. A *lot* of Americans had gotten an eyeful of what all the pundits were still formally denying, and they had decided to reshuffle to areas more conducive to their values. This accelerated the political processes that had been underway in all those various regions anyway. The red states got a lot redder, and blue states got a lot poorer. The blue states also lost twelve votes in the Electoral College, and counting.

The result was that in between the America of the coasts was heartland America. Oil and agriculture were huge, and pipelines, trucks, and river traffic all flowed down to Louisiana and Texas, and out to the world through the Gulf of Mexico.

The remaining threads tying the Union together were fraying, and many of them had already snapped. California had taken the first formal steps, as required by their constitutional amendment, to secede from the Union. Leaving the Union slowly was thought to be a decent approximation of due process. But a number of the heartland states were only technically still in. More than a few citizens of the more inflamed states—that is to say, the border states—believed that in the years following the Trump presidency, there had been more than one political assassination conducted in one state as ordered by the governor of another state, some of them by drones. This conviction was held by the nutcases who were conspiratorially-minded, by the relatively few people involved in the assassinations, and by a handful of others.

The heartland states were held together by an odd alliance involving three groups. The first was the free market guys, wanting to sell oil to the world and anything else the world might want to buy. The second group was the social conservatives—marked well by hostility to abortion, pot, and porn. The third group was actually a smaller sector created by an overlap between the first two, specifically the social conservatives who were selling a lot of oil. This group was a mere handful of men who served as an informal liaison between the other two groups.

And such was the disarrayed state of things all around the nation while Ace, momentarily unaware of most of it, said hello to his father, went into the house, and got a glass of water from the fridge.

THE MEETING

The moving van had been parked in the driveway across the street from the Hartwicks' all morning, and the usual objects that attend such disheveled circumstances were scattered all over the lawn. The piles of boxes were making their presence felt, drawing the attention of passing motorists. New neighbors were moving in, but it looked like they were making heavy weather of it.

Benson Hartwick, as the soon-to-be neighbor across the street and the ever-eager evangelist, had called his wife from the office—he had noticed the van when he was first headed off to work that morning—and asked her to make a platter of cookies to take over. He had already rearranged the schedule with his team so he could go home at noon. Then he and Ace could go across the street and volunteer to help with the unloading.

In addition to his college hours, Ace worked at the recycling plant, and Benson had asked him to arrange for a few hours off that afternoon. As the final stage of the plan, Roberta could come across with the fresh-baked cookies, and the Hartwicks could make their “welcome to the neighborhood” official.

The new neighbor was named Steven Sasani. When the two Hartwicks arrived, he welcomed the help with a great deal of enthusiasm. “*What* a nice gesture! This is *so* thoughtful. We are really eager to get to know *all* of you better. Sally will be out shortly—she’s still getting herself ready.”

Sasani was a slight little man, just on the healthy side of scrawny, the kind of man who filled all his moments with quick twitches and sudden movements. He had a small cookie duster

mustache, was bald on top, and was wearing a blue polo shirt and the kind of slacks that had gone out of style twenty years before. He seemed affable enough, and continued to be *very* grateful for the help.

With a great deal of back and forth, toing and froing, multiple boxes were carried in. After about forty-five minutes of that, Benson and Ace came in through the front door with the last of the boxes. Their presence and involvement had caused enthusiasm for unloading the truck to pick up considerably.

And there, when Benson and Ace came in with the last load, sitting on the couch—the couch that the two had carried in just a short time before—sat a life-sized doll thing. It was a newer model sex android, from the looks of it, although she was completely dressed. She was decked out like a suburban housewife, a blue bandanna on her head just like it was moving day, and she was staring vacantly, straight ahead. Her lips had that come-hither pout, that sexy look, like she had just been hit in the mouth with a brick.

Steven was sitting next to her, holding her hand and stroking it. “Everyone, this is Sally. We were just chatting in the back room about how thoughtful you all are being. This is not *at all* like Arkansas. People there were *so* judgmental. It got so bad that we finally had to get out—at least if we wanted to stay sane. But it looks like we landed on our feet, right, Sally?”

With that he reached back and touched something on the back of her neck. And Sally said, still looking straight ahead, and with her mouth moving *almost* naturally, “I can talk dirty in Spanish.” Steven laughed easily, readily, with no trace of

self-consciousness. “Such a kidder. Always a laugh riot. I can’t wait for you all to get to know her better.”

The macabre juxtaposition of Steven and Sally there on the couch was hard for Ace to take in. Sally was a knock-out, or at least she was a sex android manufacturer’s idea of a knock-out. There was something creepy about her, but still you got the drift. If she had not been a sex doll, and had been a living person, she *would* have been a knock-out. And further, taking it another step forward in logic, she would not have been the kind of woman who would have been sleeping with the likes of Steven Sasani. And yet there *he* was, sitting with a facsimile of the unattainable.

And so that was how it came about that Benson and Ace just stood there staring, and Roberta was also staring, having just arrived, standing right behind them, plate of fresh-baked cookies in hand.

THEY OR HE?

Benson Hartwick closed their front door behind them. “Well, this is an interesting situation, and no mistake,” he said. Roberta nodded in agreement.

“*Interesting* is not the word I would pick,” Ace said. “Perverted is more like it. Or maybe demented.”

“Now of *course* we differ with the choices they are making,” his father said. “But we really need to have them over.”

“Dad,” Ace said.

“Yes?”

“What do you mean choices *they* are making? What do you mean by having *them* over?”

“Well, you know what I mean. This is just the usual muddle about pronouns. Things were certainly simpler when I was a kid. I still haven’t gotten used to the pronouns. But one thing hasn’t changed over all those years—and that is the fact that they need Jesus.”

“*They* need Jesus?”

“Well, right. Isn’t that obvious?”

Ace snorted. “They don’t need anything because *they* aren’t over there. *He* needs Jesus, I will give you that.”

Roberta had followed her husband dutifully for many years, and in most instances it looked pretty good to the general observer. But she really wasn’t so sure about this one. She looked at her son like he was starting to make sense to her. Perhaps Benson saw that, or perhaps he just felt it in the air, so he turned to Ace with that decisive look he sometimes got at random times, and said this:

“Son, I appreciate the fact that you have been reading and studying a good deal. And your mother and I do fully support your desire to go into the ministry. We love your zeal and we can read the passion of your heart. We love and *affirm* the passion of your heart. But—and I have cautioned you about this before—knowledge of theology is *no* substitute for a passion for the lost.”

“Dad, this is not really a theology issue . . . well, okay it is. Everything is. But not *theology* theology. This is more like ‘how-not-to-lose-your-sanity theology.’ This is ‘how water isn’t dry’ theology.”

Benson's decisive glint looked as though it had hardened as he looked at his son again.

"We need to have them over. And that's it."

REALLY LISTENING

So it was the mother of all awkward dinners.

Steven and Sally Sasani sat on one side of the table, and Ace was sitting straight across from . . . their company. Benson and Roberta Hartwick were at each end of the table, and Steven Sasani was happily carrying most of the conversation. He seemed, and Ace couldn't comprehend how he *could* seem, totally at ease.

There had been some discussion in the kitchen, conducted in hot whispers, about how they were supposed to serve up the plates, but Steven had stuck his head in. Apparently he had needed to deal with this sort of thing before. "Not very much for me, thanks. I am sure it is delicious, but I am such a light eater . . . great, thanks. That looks *perfect*." As it turned out, he didn't need a lot on his plate because he helped himself liberally to Sally's plate, which contained ordinary portions. He packed all of it away.

All through the dinner, in between regaling them with stories about backwoods Arkansas, and how the rubes and cornpones there would behave in unseemly ways, Steven would say things like "Try some of your broccoli? You took too much?" And he would reach over to his partner's plate and help himself, and then say, "You are so right, dear. This is the freshest broccoli we have had in some time!" Thankfully he didn't try to put any

food in her mouth. But he did comment loudly how delicious the food was, and how much she *had* to have eaten.

Ace kept looking at his father, hoping for some sign that he was going to crack. An acceptable indication, in Ace's book, would be something like standing up and throwing dishes and platters. Anything like that would be a sign that sanity had returned. But nothing—Benson was serenely listening to Steven, nodding at all the appropriate times, and making sure he made periodic eye contact, such as it was, with Sally. But Ace was on a slow boil, and wasn't sure when he was going to foam all over the stove—but he was pretty sure that he was going to.

Suddenly that moment appeared to him to be imminent, and he knew he had to get out of there. He had had more than sufficient amounts of lunacy for one modest suburban dinner. "I have a lot of homework," he said, which was true enough. He got up and excused himself, cleared his place, and headed off to his bedroom. But he had to spend some time reading his Bible before he could even calm down enough to think about his textbooks. For some reason, his Bible had flopped open at the account of Phinehas and his spear. Ace read through it listlessly, and then shut his Bible abruptly.

An hour later, his father tapped on the door. "Come in," Ace said, standing up. He threw his pencil down on the desk.

"Son, your mother and I have been talking . . ."

"So *they've* been gone a while?"

"Yes. They left about half an hour ago."

Ace ran his hands through his hair. "Did he carry her under his arm? Fireman's carry? What?"

“Son, I know you’re upset . . . but we all have to remember that each one of us has a Sally inside of us. Whenever we point a finger, the other fingers are pointing back at us. The answer is always Jesus.”

“Dad, I agree the answer is Jesus. But what I object to is turning Jesus into part of the problem. Especially *this* kind of problem. My difficulty is not with the answer, which is Jesus, but rather with the question.”

“Ace, after you left, we had a glorious opportunity to present the gospel. And I got a sense that they were really *listening*. How can you have a problem with that? Do you see why I am worried that your interests in theology are getting in the way of a practical love and concern?”

Ace buried his face in his hands for a moment, and then looked up. “Dad, what if he goes home and prays the prayer? And suppose he then comes over to tell us that *she* did too, and that he wants Pastor Rodriguez to baptize her? About the only thing that could make things worse at that point would be if Pastor Rodriguez said that he *would*. And given that stinker of a sermon three weeks ago, he might just do it, too.”

THE CROSSROADS

Two days later, Benson and Roberta were off to their senior couples’ Bible study, and Ace was spread out at the dining room table, doing his homework as was his custom. There was a knock at the door, and when Ace opened it, Mr. Sasani was standing on the porch, mildly agitated. Maybe even rattled.

“Asahel! I am so glad you are home.”

“Mr. Sasani . . . what is wrong? Anything wrong?”

“I just got a message . . . I mean . . . I have to drive downtown to pick up a package at FedEx Freight, and I think I will be gone about forty-five minutes. There was some problem with the shipment. Would you mind looking in on Sally while I am gone . . . new city, no friends yet, she is kind of frightened . . . I left the door unlocked.”

“Gosh, I don’t know, Mr. Sasani . . .”

“Asahel, I know I can depend on you. What would be the *right* thing to do?”

Ace’s resistance collapsed, but it was not because of the pressure coming from Mr. Sasani. The pressure was coming from another quarter entirely. “You sure you want me to do the right thing?” he asked.

“Absolutely. Thank you,” Mr. Sasani said. “Thank you. *Thank* you. I knew I could count on you, Asahel.” And as he turned away, Ace was pretty sure he saw him leer.

After Mr. Sasani’s Volvo disappeared around the corner, Ace walked slowly across the street, just like he said he would, hands in his pockets. *Might as well get this over with.*

He walked into their house, and noticed that no lights were on, except in the back of the house. He followed the light down the hallway, and looked in on what had to be the master bedroom. Sally was propped up against the headboard, blindfolded and topless.

About ten minutes later, Ace was driving through the evening to the recycling center. It was closed now, but he had a key. A couple times he looked over at Sally, who just sat there,

decked out in one of Ace's old tee-shirts, one that said *Christian Youth Jubilee* on it.

"So this is the way that sanity can come to seem like madness," Ace said to himself. "And I need to do something crazy just so that I *don't* go crazy." He hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand.

Five minutes later, he pulled into the center. He walked around to the passenger side, and picked Sally up. She was lighter than a bio-woman would have been, but still not all that light. The place was deserted, and he walked slowly through the bins toward the giant compactor in the back. He trudged slowly up the concrete steps that emptied out on a landing over the big container. Standing on the lip of the landing, he stood Sally up, holding her up by the neck. Pausing for just a moment, he took a couple of deep breaths and pushed her in. He felt his hand brush against something on her neck as she went over. She went end over end, and landed flat on her back.

Ace stood there for just a moment, and then he heard a voice, wafting up from below. "Uhhh. Do it again. Uhhh. Harder, harder."

As Ace walked over to the switch that would activate the compactor, he was nodding his head slowly, and very deliberately. Her voice was fading, but against the dead quiet of the late evening recycling plant, he could still hear it plainly. "Ride me, ride me," the plaintive voice was saying.

"Okay," Ace said, "ride, Sally, ride," and he flipped the switch. When that cycle was done, he dumped a massive load of tin cans on top that he had not gotten to earlier that day, and crushed

them also. The doll was now buried at the center of an enormous crushed rectangular block of metal.

THE RIGHT THING

Ace got home about five minutes before his parents did and seated himself at the dining room table again, working on his homework, right where he had been when they had left. A few minutes after that, there was a furious pounding on the door. Mr. Sasani was standing there, angry and distraught.

“Where’s Sally?” he spit out.

Ace just stood there, and said nothing.

Mr. Sasani yelled at him again. “Asahel! What did you *do* with her?”

“You asked me to look in on Sally and to do the right thing. So I did. I think that’s all I need to say.”

Mr. Sasani turned on his heel, and scurried across the yard, punching at his cell phone. Ace heard him say, “Police?”

Fifteen minutes later, the kind of quarter hour that seemed like five minutes, a couple of cops showed up at the Hartwicks’ door. Roberta was the one who answered it, and she invited both of them to step in. One of them, a short, burly man, asked for Asahel.

“Excuse us, young man, but your neighbor across the way says that he believes you kidnapped his wife. Do you know anything about this?”

Roberta had figured out pretty quickly the rough outlines of what must have happened, but out of long habit she had said nothing. Benson was standing in the background trying to

calculate what he thought, and wasn't doing too well. He had no categories. He was a decent and well-meaning man in the main, but he was a good man without categories. And a good man without categories is sometimes not a very good man.

Ace stepped back out of the doorway. "You are free to look through the house to see for yourself. But you shouldn't actually be looking for a *wife*—I believe he is referring to his sex doll."

The cops were startled a bit by that little fact, but walked briskly through the house, checking every room. "Is there a basement here?" one asked. Ace shook his head. The other one leaned in a bit and whispered. "Would you mind walking across the way with us and having a little visit with Mr. Sasani?"

"Sure thing."

"Before you go," Roberta said, "just one thing. You gentlemen need to ask Mr. Sasani why Sally couldn't call herself, if she were in some kind of trouble."

Benson started to shake his head as though he did not want Roberta saying anything, but then he suddenly stopped. He had the demeanor of someone who had just dropped something, and had a hundred little pieces of something to pick up, and who didn't know where to start.

As the cops started to move toward the door, Benson suddenly asked them, "Can I speak to my son for a minute?" They nodded and Benson pulled Ace into the hallway that ran alongside the living room.

"Ace," he whispered, "If you had a sister, which your mother and I prayed for often, would you have been the kind of older brother who destroyed his sister's dolls? Would you have been

that person?” He spoke with the finality of someone who had just discovered a slam-dunk argument.

Ace shook his head. “That’s not the set-up, Dad. It would have to be a brother, not a sister. And if he had been having sex with his doll, I would not have needed to smash it. *You* would have.”

Benson pulled back as if he had been slapped in the face, and he stood silent for a moment. “You’re right,” he said after a minute. “I *would* have.” His eyes started to clear for a moment, but then they fogged again, almost immediately. Life in Colorado was far more difficult than it had been for his great-grandfather, who had arrived in that beautiful state when things were closer to normal.

Ace rejoined the policemen, and they headed out the front door. As they walked over to the front porch across the street, Ace saw that Mr. Sasani was seated on a large cardboard box, the one he had apparently picked up at FedEx Freight, and he was weeping as though his heart would never be the same. He seemed to be the kind of man who would never love again, but the end of the box was opened, and there was a second box inside it. That box was labeled “Veronica the Nurse.”