

Incident On A Sunday Morning (1956)

The Sunday morning had its usual Sabbath day radio accompaniment of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Strict Baptist though he was, my father loved the sound of those singers. Doctrinally, he would have consigned them to eternal perdition in a heartbeat, but he at least recognized fine music when he heard it. The radio program, "From the Crossroads of the West," was also a favorite of mine. Enamored as I was of good music, I drew real enjoyment from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Sunday always had more than a whiff of chaos about it in the Dyal home. Mom couldn't bear the thought of leaving the house with an unclean kitchen, so after the hubbub of breakfast came the ritualistic cleaning that enabled us to leave for church with a Holy Ghost cleanliness-next-to-godliness anointing upon us. Or, at least, less of a chance of coming home to an army of demonic cockroaches.

We finally arrived and did our usual church thing, the parents heading to the main sanctuary, the kids to Sunday school. After the typical boring lesson that taught nothing (and this week I didn't even have the diversion of watching the teacher's skull squeezed into a bloody pulp by a phantasmagoric hand), I wound up in the main sanctuary with the folks. Whatever was happening was giving the children's lesson a run for its money in terms of dullness, so I amused myself scribbling drawings on a small piece of providentially placed paper, a tithing envelope or some such thing.

Unable to have scared up any less interest in whatever the minister was pontificating about that week, whether some obscure point of theological doctrine voted in as Ultimate Truth by a show of hands in some church council or other, or some thunderous fulmination about the Red Menace, I fully exerted my powers of concentration to block him out.

That attended to I set myself to tracing an image of the light as it played upon and came through the stained glass windows, falling at last on the seats. I also found distraction following the lazily meandering trajectories of the dust particles that played amidst the photons of the rays of sunlight.

It was really quite beautiful to watch, indeed, mesmerizing.

The back of the choir loft was decorated with a painting of an outdoor scene, a river, hung over the baptistry. The painting was the next focus of my attention after the fleeting absorption of the dusty light had run its course. Anything to help pass the time in church, certainly the most boring hours of the week to any normal, well-adjusted child, and also to one who was normal and well-adjusted but also just happened to see and hear people no one else did and who took mental trips through alien worlds. As did many of my parents' Bible heroes, come to think of it.

There are qualities displayed by light as it manifests in a church sanctuary that is not quite the same as other locations, something that makes it interesting to watch, even as it flickered over the face of the minister and downwardly to be reflected off the top of the grand piano where the pianist was preparing to play another hymn. The light struck her glasses and, in an odd bit of reflection, was directed unerringly into my eyes.

I momentarily averted my gaze and when I looked back, the pianist had disappeared and taken the entire front of the sanctuary with her. Rather than there being a huge hole in the building, the familiar churchscape had been replaced by some sort of primitive structure, obviously some sort of temple but of non-Biblical roots. The place was obviously very old and came equipped with a couple of personages. One seemed to be the priest, beside whom was someone arrayed in some sort of elaborate ceremonial dress.

The priest was speaking *sotto voce* in a language I couldn't understand, couldn't even make a guess at trying to identify. I intuited that the quietude of the voice was due to a veil of obscuration between my consciousness and theirs.

The two produced an animal, a pig I believe, obviously terrified judging by its high-pitched squeals. They held the frightened creature down on a rock, the flat surface of which was equipped with a drain. Frantically twisting this way and that, the animal desperately tried to escape, as though it knew what lay ahead for it was to prove terminally unpleasant.

Its worst fears were realized when another of these foreign men of God approached, knife upraised. The blade plunged into the pig's flesh, tearing from its innards one final scream before it expired. The priest rolled the dead carcass over and cut into it, slicing it to pieces, the freely flowing blood escaping through the drain in the rocky surface.

I must say his dissection of the animal was a meticulous affair, almost as though he were performing delicate brain surgery and, indeed, perhaps he did that as a sideline, as did other ancient priesthoods. The precision of the work did nothing to diminish the flow of blood; it was everywhere, covering both priests.

A third priest, this one unbloodied, produced from beneath the rock a bowl filled with the blood, held it up to the heavens and whatever god(s) they believed resided there, then began sprinkling the red liquid on the crowd of people I suddenly noticed standing watching this spectacle and seemingly quite eager to have porcine platelets throw upon them.

The priests poured the blood upon one another and followed this up by drinking the stuff.

What was such a horrifying scene doing in the mind of a twelve-year old boy? I did not know. All I knew was that something felt it necessary for me to witness it. Thinking about it, of course, it was not one whit less bloody or violent than countless stories in the Old Testament, much less the western world's greatest single bloodletting as related in the four Gospels. But somehow the fact that all of that went under the name "Judeo-Christian" made it far more acceptable than anything called *pagan*. What a difference a particular nomenclature can seem to make.

The effect of the scene made me shake so conspicuously my parents thought I was violating the eleventh commandment, thou shalt not fool around in church, and led to a hushed scolding. Horsing around I was not. Having a seizure I most certainly was.

I watched, paralyzed with dread, as a torrent of blood rushed straight out of *The Shining* and down a short stone staircase and flowed over the crowd. Minutes later, I came back to what passes in this world for reality, the vision over, and my thoughts and flesh gripped by dizziness, confusion, and complete uncertainty as to what had just happened.

I was physically nauseous from the preceding spectacle, my head ached, and the dizziness continued unabated. I retained a mental picture of the outlines of the priests superimposed over the staid Baptist minister whose preaching hadn't skipped a beat. Gradually, the remnants of the vision faded and the church was once again whole, its familiarity very comforting after the *Mondo Cane* barbarity I had just witnessed.

I threw a glance in my father's direction and the look of anger in his eyes augured certain punishment when we arrived home, for conduct unbecoming a Good Christian Youth. This in no way hindered him from singing the closing hymn, a moving tribute to the loving grace of a forgiving God.

I had to endure the endless stop-and-shuffle of the outward bound post-service receiving line, knowing that no matter how godly was the after church shop talk that flowed from my father's mouth, I was still in for it when I got home. Although my legs already felt sore from the anticipated punishment, I agreed with myself that under no circumstances would I give him the satisfaction of seeing tears come from my eyes. I had no idea at the moment that this day would be my final encounter with Dad for many a year to come.

Upon returning home I was escorted to my bedroom. With the same meticulous care I noticed in the priest-butcher, Dad removed his belt and the accustomed punishment for odd behaviors began. With each downward stroke of the leather tongue I withdrew deeper into myself. In the distance I could see Charon coming towards me. I was pleased to see him and even more pleased by his succor.

Holding me closely, he spoke soothingly. "Hold on tightly to me, little one. It will soon be over."

With those words I was out of the house, drifting with my spirit protector on the evening air, leaving my father and the belt and all the rest of it over the proverbial hills and far away as Charon and I soared through the inner worlds. However, the tranquility of this pleasant space was swiftly shattered by the far-away sound of my father's voice.

"Have you learned your lesson?" Dyal Senior enquired. What lesson I was supposed to have learned from this or any of his other floggings, was never made clear, nor did I ever feel he really knew what they were supposed to accomplish.

I exercised my constitutional right to remain silent. I felt another blow land, but still I said nothing. Charon was still holding me tightly.

Suddenly, the mental fog lifted and for the first time I felt the actual physical pain of the torment inflicted upon me.

“Have you learned your lesson?” Another question that remained unanswered.

“Answer me!” he shouted.

I finally responded to him, but they were hardly the words he expected to hear.

“Are you finished?”

The next blow struck me with sufficient force to send me to the floor.

“Are you finished now?” I asked.

My cheeks were devoid of tears, my voice filled with undisguised hatred. At that moment he knew he was standing on the banks of the Rubicon. He would either have to cross the line and take this all the way or give it up.

With one last look at me, he turned, and went into the livingroom.

I found myself savoring the all-too delicious feeling of hate that pervaded my thought, possessed my very soul, as I got up off the floor and went to the bathroom. The warm water brought a modicum of relief to my wounds and were joined by the hot tears that burst forth. I sank to the floor and sobbed, propped up by the enamel of the bathtub and the hatred that welled within.

After what seemed like (and may have been) hours, I settled into the refuge of my bed, pulled the covers over my head, and sailed off into welcome oblivion.