

Summer 1957

The tree house was a refuge for my friends and myself. Situated in an oak tree deep in our backyard it was, for me, the capitol building of the Dyal homestead, a place where I could go, alone or with others, to feel as far from the madding crowd as was necessary at the moment without giving up the reassuring closeness of home and hearth and refrigerator and first aid kit.

Knowing fully well that our mothers wouldn't climb the wooden ladder to pry into our private activities (which, quite frankly, were probably a lot less interesting and rebellious than we liked to think at that young age) and equally secure in the knowledge that our fathers were too busy playing golf, indulging ancient cowboy fantasies on the saddles of power mowers, or watching sports to give a flaming hump what their offspring were up to, we could do pretty much whatever we wanted in the physically confining, imaginatively liberating walls of the tree house.

On a hot summer day my buddies and I were in our oaken penthouse admiring what in that day and age would have been called "girlie pictures" carefully shorn from a "forbidden" magazine we had found in a neighborhood alley. Losing little time wondering why anyone would callously discard such a treasure, we papered our wooden walls with pictures of 1950's feminine pulchritude. Absolutely quaint and unquestionably tame by today's anything-goes standards, the tanned, firm flesh of those *Leave It To Beaver* era babes were more than enough to warm the blood and fire the thoughts of we Cold War youth. Besides, T&A is one of those things, like swing dancing and roller skating, which never seem to go out of style.

That morning, as I gazed with admiration on the photographs of distant, unattainable women in their expensive lingerie, appreciatively drinking in the sights of well proportioned breasts and hips and legs and whatever else could be seen in those pre-Flynt pictures, I suddenly had a feeling of guilt, as though what I was doing were somehow wrong. A boy, worshiping ladies who were so far out of his league as to be ludicrous, wrong? How could such a thing, well accepted and widely practiced since time immemorial, possibly produce the slightest tinge of parochialism? Was there something wrong with me?

At least one thing had not changed: I still had not the slightest idea what I would actually do if one of those fold-out goddesses suddenly materialized in front of me, led me to her secret seaside grotto, laid me down on her thick bed of lush, tide pool watered moss, and boldly stated her intention to initiate me into the mysteries of life, although in retrospect I more than likely would have done whatever she suggested.

My brief surge of nascent Christian guilt, which probably had its roots in a preacher's half forgotten reference to some scripture along the lines of Psalm 101:2-3, "I will walk within my house with a perfect heart, I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes" (which David presumably wrote *after* his little encounter with Bathsheba), set me to thinking. Suppose I really was some sort of a sinner, and maybe one day the Big Guy really would require my soul? Perhaps I could interpose others between His righteous wrath and myself? Wasn't that vicarious thing the entire gist of Christianity or, at least, of its probably unholy great-grandchild, Churchianity?

The idea was conceived, gestated, and born in an inspired flash. I would purchase the souls of my friends and, when my sinful spirit was about to be cashed in by the Great Croupier in the Sky, I would have chips with which to bargain and continue spinning the roulette wheel of my own life. A born salesman, methinks to myself. There was a problem, however. Such concepts as souls and spirits and God and judgment and hell and eternity, while having kept philosophers burning the midnight oil for millennia, didn't mean a damn to kids. What prompt could I employ to get them to cough up their souls and turn them over to my good offices? What else? Cash.

Interrupting my friends' revelry of bovine mammaries, I put forward the proposition that they should sell me their souls for what I had decided (without checking the closing Dow Jones) was the going rate for souls, the princely sum of twenty-five cents. And, of course, something in writing to seal the deal. Skeptical but interested (after all, a shiny U.S. quarter dollar would purchase a lot more at the local candy store back then), we briefly discussed the details, then money changed hands, I received the spiritual deeds of trust – written in pencil rather than the customary blood, but neither God nor the Adversary (I was prepared to deal with either) – would mind as long as they got the goods.

Giddy with the success of my initial venture, I began a marketing campaign at school, the effectiveness of which was proven by the fact that I wound up netting some thirty souls from people too short sighted to care whether they spent eternity in a heavenly mansion or a sulphur pit. (Needless to say, this gave me an early taste of the verities of human nature.) I now had a good supply of fresh souls ready to wheel-and-deal and had also created a suitable plot for an Ingmar Bergman movie.

Being a successful but novice salesman, I had no idea that there existed such a thing as buyers' remorse, that strange malady that afflicts purchasers within seventy-two hours of purchasing an automobile or home, or selling their souls. I was, therefore, somewhat surprised when one of my band of satisfied customers called and told me he wanted to buy his soul back. Sensing a wind of profit beginning to blow my way, I upped the resale price to fifty cents and wound up getting seventy-five. A two hundred percent profit! Where has this business been all my life, I wondered. By month's end, just about everyone I had traded with had reclaimed their souls. My pockets were stuffed but my social life emptied as people began to consider me odd. Go figure. Anyway, I learned at an early age that wealth could trail loneliness in its wake.

Actually, my classmates had always considered me different. I had an unusual way of speaking, appeared to be off in another world much of the time, was never selected to play on a sports team when sides were being chosen and, in general, never quite fit in with the rest of the crowd. I discovered early on in life what it means to be an outsider. Still, maybe that was what attracted to me the friends I did have. They knew that if they were in the mood for an offbeat adventure, Myron would never let them down.

One day, when I knew a clutch of pals was heading over to my house, I decided to share with them a taste of the constant fear in which I dwelt. I took an old round metal cover left over from who knows what and threw it on the ground in the depths of our backyard, not far from the tree house. I decided I would tell them, in my usual nonchalant way, that this was an entrance to

Hell, conveniently situated on the Dyal estate. Much more interesting than a plain old wooden fence begging to be whitewashed by Tom Sawyer's group of gullible twerps.

Fortunately, old Mom Nature decided to conspire with me, providing a gloomy, overcast day with the smell and feel of a summer storm on the horizon. When my friends arrived, I concluded that the overall atmosphere was not conducive to a casual approach to the subject of a stairway to hell (sorry, Messers Page and Plant), so pitching my voice to what I hoped was the mysterious tone of a Chaldean oracle – or at least the guy in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* – I solemnly proclaimed that I had discovered a way down into the bowels of Gehenna and had placed over it a specially-anointed cover, charged with magical forces and blessed by someone even more powerful than Oral Roberts, to keep the demonic hordes of darkness trapped in their vile, stinking netherworld. Yes, I always loved *The Twilight Zone*.

For some unfathomable reason, my friends' first reaction to my statement was laughter. Who could understand such an attitude? With a flourish that would have embarrassed the great Houdini, I led them to the portal to the pit and with a dramatic wave of my arm, introduced them to Satan's front door.

"Here it is," I proclaimed. "All we need to do is lift it and the denizens of Hell will be released!" All that was missing was the "Step right up, folks!"

The weather continued to be my unwitting ally in this urban gothic mind game, the sky becoming darker and the first drops of rain beginning to fall. Just as I ceremoniously perched myself next to the crummy old can cover that I had turned into the front door to Brimstone City and pointed the way down into everlasting anguish, a loud clap of thunder sounded directly above our heads.

As a gentle rain began to fall, I challenged my friend Dennis, whom I knew to be the weakest link in the psychological chain, to demonstrate his mastery over the forces of evil by stepping forward and opening the cover of the chasm. My friends were growing restive and I suddenly feared that someone would call my bluff. Thankfully, the rain began to fall harder and retired to the house.

With a certain restraint, my friend Tom asked what would happen if he went outside and opened the portal. I causally told him nothing would happen, as I had sealed it by the mere act of leaving. I patiently explained that the portal was harmless so long as I was not near it, as it required my power for opening. I didn't stop to think that this kind of cast me in the role of the Devil but neither did anyone else consider this, so I dodged a lightning bolt that could have proved highly embarrassing. My friends left, still skeptical but placing enough faith in my power not to fear a neighborhood invasion of hell-spawned locusts.

As day retreated before the onset of night, I began to feel a deep sense of uneasiness, which turned to fear, then to understanding.

I, the entrepreneur of the human spirit, the guardian of the gates of Hell, was the one who lived in a horrific underworld. Fear was my companion and the womb of my own interior demons.