
The Baptism

by Bonnie L. Casey

I got saved the day my brother was baptized, which is more than I could have said for him. He was baptized by my grandfather in a tank of water next to the organ in the church where my grandfather sometimes preached.

I was terrified of my grandfather, a tall, lean man with pure white hair. His warmest gesture toward me up to that time had been to teach me to mix strawberry jam into my cottage cheese so I wouldn't gag on it. He was a retired missionary who preached long, mesmerizing sermons about Africans named Utu and Bunga whom he had personally saved from sin. I was contemplating getting saved myself at some future date, a process which in my world necessitated a plunge in the baptismal tank. But first I wanted to see if it had any noticeable effect on my brother's character.

My brother needed saving more than anyone I knew, yet his attitude toward his impending immersion had been casual in the extreme. He was 12, four years older than I was, but light-years ahead of me in sophistication. He hung around with older boys who wore Brylcreem on their hair and watched "American Bandstand" when their parents weren't home. He took every opportunity to let me know that he "knew the score." I admired this about him, except where it touched on matters of the divine, and there I thought he ventured into

blasphemy. The night before his baptism he informed me that he was going to keep his eyes open underwater to see if my grandfather's robe floated up. I wanted to be there as much to see if he would really do this as to watch for any alterations in his character.

That Sabbath my grandfather departed from his African notes to preach about little children sitting at the feet of Jesus. Every now and then he would mention my brother to illustrate his point, gesturing down toward him and calling him "this precious soul." All the mothers in the congregation cried and made their children put away their coloring books and listen. My brother sat still, his chin on his chest and his eyes fixed downward. He was tearing his bulletin into a thousand pieces and dropping them onto the floor.

At the end of the sermon, my grandfather and brother went to a room behind the platform to put on their robes. The choir sang all the verses of "Just as I Am" to fill in until they returned. When they failed to emerge at the end of the hymn, the choir sang it all over again.

Finally my grandfather appeared in his black robe, walking toward the center of the tank with the slow, dragging steps of everyone's worst dreams. The water came up to his waist, so that when my brother emerged from the shadows behind him, he was submerged up to his armpits. My grandfather placed one hand on top of my brother's head and held his other hand up in the air, two fingers pointing toward heaven. He began to pray and pronounce blessings upon my brother.

And that's when it happened to me. Being pieced together from bits of half-understood sermons and hymns, my understanding of salvation centered around an experience of inner "glory." As I understood it, when you were saved, Jesus came into you and then shone out of you—sort of like you had swallowed

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a light bulb. This experience had never come to me firsthand, but I felt confident that I would recognize it if it ever did. Such was my faith in my own election.

As my grandfather spoke on and on, I felt a deep pit open up beneath me and start to swallow me. A feeling of mixed wonder and terror gripped my throat, and I began to cry—quietly at first, then in big gulping gasps. Finally my grandfather stopped speaking. I saw him cover my brother's mouth with a handkerchief, and then the scene became a blur. Whatever it was that was swallowing me took over completely. I bent over double and hid my face in my hands.

By the time my brother came up out of the water, I was shaking uncontrollably. My mother thought I was going to be sick and took me out to the ladies' room. I didn't tell her I wasn't sick. I just sat in the stall for several minutes, contemplating the mystery of the divine. Then I flushed loudly and came out, making a show of wiping my mouth with a wad of paper.

We were going to have lunch after church at my aunt's house, which for my brother and me always meant being consigned to the

sun porch at the dreaded children's table. Some of my relatives who didn't usually come to church had come for the baptism, and we were going to have something of a celebration afterwards.

I sat with my brother in the back seat of the car as we drove to my aunt's house. I had stopped crying by this time and was feeling much like my old self. I was thinking about what had happened to me in church and whether I ought to try to explain it to my brother. I looked over at him, slouched against the car door in his Sabbath suit. He didn't look like someone who'd had an encounter with the divine. He didn't look any different at all, except that his hair was wet and slicked back. He felt me staring at him, finally, and turned and glared at me.

"What are you lookin' at?" he mumbled.

"Nothin'," I said.

At my aunt's house, my brother was the center of attention, at least for a while. Everyone had kind words and manly advice for him. They shook his hand and told him he had taken a big step—and how proud they were of him. They told him that from here on he must try to live up to this experience. He told them that he would try. My grandfather took my brother by the shoulders and began talking in his preaching voice. He said things I didn't understand about a Damascus road, and then made everyone close their eyes while he said grace.

My brother had assured me that after he was baptized he would be allowed to sit with the adults for Sabbath dinner. But after grace was over, he was sent out with me and my cousins to the sun porch, where he hunched into his usual seat at the children's table. He was deeply wounded by this insult, but I was glad for the chance to observe him at close range. He brooded and sulked all during dinner. My cousins and I tried to make conversation with him, but he told us to be quiet, referring to us as "you children" and telling us to eat our peas.

I could see no evidence that my brother's

character had changed for the better. If anything, he was more moody and flippant than he had been before. Finally I hit on a test. If he passed it, there was some hope that my brother was capable of being saved. I put on my most serious expression and looked right at him. He was sitting across the table from me, stuffing great globs of apple cobbler into his mouth.

“Did you do it?” I asked.

“Did I do what?” he answered, swallowing another mouthful of cobbler.

“Did you keep your eyes open underwater?”

My brother put down his spoon and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He didn't answer my question directly; he just leaned across the table until his leering face was inches from mine, and said, “Longjohns.”

It took a few seconds for the full import of what my brother had said to hit me. When it did, I suddenly had a vision of my sainted grandfather standing in a circle of huts, preaching to a group of Africans in his long underwear. It was an image that shocked and enraged me. Forgetting my table manners, I shouted at my brother, “I don't believe you were saved today at all!”

“Well, how would you know? You've never been baptized,” he shouted back.

“I know because I got saved today without being baptized. While you were in the tank with grandfather I got swallowed up by the shenanigan glory.”

My brother paused and blinked a few times. “The what?” he shrieked.

“The shenanigan glory. You know, like in the hymn. The shenanigan glory that shines forth from within.”

Suddenly my brother's face was contorted into a laugh so overpowering that he was silent for the first few seconds. Then he exploded into howling guffaws, pausing between howls just long enough to bellow, “That's shekinah, you twerp! Shekinah glory!”

I put one foot on the seat of my chair and planted my fist just above my brother's gaping mouth. He reeled straight back off his

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chair in a somersault and landed on his back on the floor. I ran around the corner of the table and stood over him, one foot in each of his armpits, ready to defend my honor and the honor of my grandfather. But it wasn't necessary. My brother lay silently beneath me with his eyes closed, his face washed in blood. He looked as saved as I had ever seen him.