



Bruce W. Jorgensen

BORN OF

His mother may have been right, a long time afterward, that he had not been baptized until he was ten because he was afraid of the water. He had been afraid. He must have been four or five, wading in the shallow end of the pool or standing tentative on the steps. Someone—he could never recall even a face—grabbed him, yanked him into deeper water. A bony arm clamped around his ribs that he twisted against, a hard chin bored into his head, then the sun and the bright noises were gone, and water stung his eyes and roared into his ears, his mouth and throat, warm and heavy and oddly solid, a lump of clay too big to swallow.

The bigger body bore him down, then a hand between his shoulders shoved him deeper till he was loose in the water, floating unsure of bottom or surface, twisting to find a way out. Then he saw the changing sky of light before his eyes torn by a hand that gripped his right arm high near the shoulder and drew him out. His father. He clung with arms and legs to his father's thick body, coughing and crying, and his father loosened him, turned him down across one arm and whacked him between the shoulders so he coughed more water out, then clasped him again against his body. "It's all right, Carlie, I'm here. He's gone. It's all right."

He had been afraid, but there was his father too, not a member because of Grandma Wendell, whose father had been so fanatic, even his mother said, that his children went without shoes and decent clothes so he could give to the Church. Grandma had nothing good to say about Mormons, and his father hardly talked about religion at all, unless his mother might say, "Gray, don't you believe in the hereafter, don't you want to be together, in heaven?" and he'd answer, "When you're dead you're dead. I've seen a lot of things die and go back to the dirt. They can just put me in a pine box or tie me in a gunny sack and it'll be fine."

The summer he turned eight, the Bishop came with his father's friend J.B. to see about him being baptized. He said he didn't want to, not knowing why he said it but sure he didn't, and his mother made one serious nod toward the Bishop. Then J.B. said, "Gray, we could take care of you at the same time. You'd make a better Mormon than half the people in the ward. What do you say?" His father just grinned and said, "No thanks, J.B., not this time." And J.B. said "We'll get you under yet."

He got over being afraid of the water. Bathing, he would sink in the full tub until warm water covered him, every part except his nose, and his skin, the boundaries of his body, seemed to blur so he

wasn't sure where he ended and water began, and his own blood surging in his ears sounded almost like noises of the house, creaking or popping of beams his father had cut from timber and sawn himself, water running in the pipes his father had installed.

And his father and mother had gone on taking him swimming, along with his big brother Jared, who was in high school, and his baby brother Joel. He would watch his father swim, turning into something like a seal or a big fish as if water were another home.

Maybe it was that same summer he was eight, when his father took him into the deep. His father liked to dive, thundering cannonballs or sharp jack-knives slicing into the water straight for the bottom. He'd stand on the springboard, turn to them and say to watch him swim like a rock, then he'd dive, both feet coming down arched on the end of the board, the board bending, straightening, lifting his body into the air to turn in a clean arc, shining, then to fall straight on into the water solid as a brick but cutting so cleanly that when his feet disappeared there was only a little splash like a white wing waving or the quick fin of a fish. He'd watch for his father under water and sometimes lose him, he stayed so deep so long, as if he had turned, hide, hair, meat and bone, to the water's own bluish luminescence, invisible as an angel in air. Other times he followed a pale blur streaming snakelike as if without effort along the bottom. Then his father would surface, blowing a spume like a walrus, snorting or barking, black hair streaming with water down his forehead and nape.

"Let me give you a ride, Carlie. Come on. On my shoulders." So he rode his father's wide bristling shoulders while he waded in water up to his chin, sometimes over his head, so Carl felt scared again of going under, down the steep slope into the eight-foot. But his father would turn back up to shallow. "That was o.k., wasn't it. Now sit on my back, wrap your legs around me, just like around a horse, and hold your hands right here on the sides of my neck, and ride while I swim." So he did that, too, the water streaming around his elbows and waist as he straddled his father's back, watching his arms in long sweeping strokes, the water sleeking his black hair, feeling his father's back pumping when his legs frogkicked.

Another time, his father had him hook the fingers of one hand into the waist string at the back of his swimming trunks while he surface-dived, and scared, Carl let go and thrashed in the water till his father turned and caught him under the chest. "You didn't go down. You were swimming but you didn't know it. Now hang on again and this time go down with me." So Carl did, eyes clamped, nose pinched, lips bitten shut, feeling the water lift him and stream his hair back, finally opening his eyes

THE WATER

to the blur of his father's body gliding, a thread of bubbles twinkling up behind his head. After that, he started to go on his own, started under water with his breath burning behind his breastbone, and finally learned to hold his head out or turn it sideways for air. "Good, Carlie," his father said. "You'll be all right." So the fear was gone without his thinking about it, and the summer he was ten he told his mother he wanted to be baptized, this too without thinking about it, only knowing.

It was Saturday morning. His mother had him combed and dressed in white shirt and borrowed white pants, and again asked his father if he'd go down with them to watch. "No, I've got to get those supplies together for the sheep camp. Too many hypocrites anyway." And his father went out and drove the truck down the street ahead of them, turning toward town while they kept on to the Ward. "Hypocrites," his mother said. "Sometimes I think he's as scared of being baptized as you were of swimming." But Carl doubted his father was scared of anything.

In the basement hall of the chapel, dark double doors had been opened on a little room with a little pool in it, tile steps going down into the water. It must go deeper into the ground, he thought, than the furnace room. A lanky blond man in a white coverall was standing waist-deep in the water. Carl was first, and nudged by Brother Sharp he walked down into the font, the unexpectedly warm water soaking his white clothes to his chest, and stood by the man, who took his left hand and closed it around his right wrist and whispered, "Hold tight there, grab your nose when I say Amen, and sit." Then he held Carl's hand and wrist with his own left hand, clapped him once on the back of the neck with his right, and spoke: "Carl David Wendell, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Carl was pinching his nose when the big hand tightened on his hand and wrist, and he felt an instant's wild panic as the other hand came down heavy on his neck, caving his knees under him and thrusting him down. Then the water folded over his head, he floated free of the tile bottom, light and lost, for a second not feeling the hands that held him, and then he was raised up streaming and guided to the steps, blinking to clear his sight. Brother Sharp helped him out, shaking his hand, and his mother led him to the restroom door and handed him his dry clothes and shoes and a towel. His wet white clothes clung to him, a heavy, slow new skin.

When he came out, his mother hugged him and straightened his hair and told him how glad she was that he belonged to Heavenly Father's Kingdom now. "I just

wish your Dad could have been, too, or done it himself. At least Jared will be down tomorrow to lay hands on you and confirm you." Then they drove home. She offered him lunch, but he said he didn't want any right then, and he walked around the house and yard, wondering if he would feel new, believing and doubting the cool lightness that had still not left his skin entirely. He looked at the green ash tree, leaves on a few branches turning their paler undersides in a shift of noonward air. He walked back of the house and lay down in the shaded arch of the lilac bushes where the grass was sparse. The lavender and white cones of bloom were gone, with their scent that drowned the air in April, but the light under the bushes felt moist, almost tasted of the heartshaped green leaves that he had still not learned to make bleat with the shrill buzzing his father could blow through them. Lying on his back he lifted his arm to look at his birthday watch. The second hand swung in its jerky circle and close to his ear it made a small steady clanging. But deep as he looked, the sky seemed unturning, the light and shade of earth standing in utter arrest. He said the one word Kingdom to himself, then the one word Lord. A brown sparrow darted from behind his head, low across his sight with one beat of wings in the bright air, past the bushes and into shade behind the house. He felt then the solid world turn under him, wheeling on its axis like a giant millstone, himself turning evenly with it, and his hands gripped into the thin-bladed grass.

Then he heard his father coming back, tires grinding into the gravel, the whine of downshifting, and turning his head to the side he saw the light green pickup nose into the garage and then his father walk toward the side door of the house. He got up and went in, past the drying sheets his mother had hung near daylight.

"...hasn't had lunch yet," his mother was saying. And his father: "We can eat at the camp. If Knute's there he'll fry us some mutton." She shrugged and put the loaf back in the bread box. "If you both want to, all right. Do you want to ride up to the sheep camp with Daddy, Carl?"

"Yes," he said, the weight of solemnity on him lightening but still muffling the excitement. His mother knew how much his father liked driving on the twisting roads, eating fresh mutton and potatoes cooked in grease in black iron pans on rusty campstoves, squatting on his heels and talking with herders, and how he, Carl, liked going with and watching all this, his father's pleasure. "Then change your clothes," she said, "and take your hat and jacket. It'll still be cool up there."

"You come too, Leah," his father said.

"Not this time. I've got to get Joel from Maureen's and make his lunch, and there's the wash to finish. You two have a good ride."

His wet white clothes clung to him, a
heavy slow new skin.

The pickup climbed between pale cliffs, the road winding even more than the stretch called Rattlesnake in the main canyon where Grampa Swensen's Model A got coasting too fast and Gramma got ready to throw out the baby Jed but then Grampa rolled the car up the sidehill and got it stopped. Coming down a south branch of the canyon was a deep dry gully where Great Grampa Swensen's wagon rolled over and killed him and one of his sons and they weren't found for two days. Carl tried to imagine that but couldn't.

Often he dreamed of roads almost like these, only through red ferric clay, and more twisting, more roller-coastering and dizzy: he'd be riding with his father, and sometimes his mother and little brother, not too fast but at a speed that would have made his mother put her hands on the dashboard, up over abrupt hills, around sharp curves with steep slopes above and sheer cliffs below, billowing a caterpillar cloud of pink dust behind them, climbing higher and higher and seeming to go ever slightly faster. Sometimes the dream would just fade midway in the journey, in a queer suspense of peril and safety. Other times it would end with the truck's front wheels over the edge of a deep washout, lurching him awake like being thrown forward in a sudden stop. And sometimes, the worst, it would speed to the top of an impossible hill, go over, and float on nothing, shimmer into nothing itself, and he'd be falling, crying out for his father or mother, the dream spinning him awake, dizzy, gripping the edge of the mattress that was still turning over under him to spill him on the floor, panting, his chest tight, heaving and pounding hard.

Even the first times, when he cried aloud before he could stop himself and his mother came, he could not tell the dream, and he'd never told anyone since. Even the shrillest terror carried its strange comfort that he kept to himself.

Out of the canyon and going up the ranch dugway, he could remember riding in the open back of the GMC with its sides that would let down for benches, and how he'd cling to the uphill side, as far from the drop as he could get but not able to stop looking over and down at how the world fell away, huge, bowl-like, widening and deepening and drawing him into its center as if its enlargement made a vacuum that would fill itself with him. He was over that now, could take pleasure like his father's in that opening space, though he still felt the pull of the widening.

When they reached the camp, a canvas-covered wagon that always made Carl think of pioneers, except that it had rubber tires and a tin chimney and was like a little cabin inside, Knute was not there, nor were the usual scruffy dogs, yipping and then cowering back under the camp, wagging tucked-down hindquarters to

beg and avoid being petted. "Probably chasing strays," his father said. "Let's get this stuff unloaded and fire up the stove for lunch."

Carl helped his father pull out the four bales of hay and stack them behind the wagon. The ten-gallon milk cans of water were too heavy for him, but he carried in a box of groceries and set it on the high lumpy bed built across the back of the wagon. His father stepped up the wagon tongue and into the doorway, tilting his hat back off his forehead to wipe the sweat with his cuff. "He's almost out of mutton, and I see he's got a yearling tied up out here he likely means to slaughter. Let's you and me take care of that."

His father killed a sheep about once every summer out behind the garage and cut and wrapped the meat for their freezer, but Carl mostly stayed away, inside the house, until the carcass was ready to hang, blunt-necked, oddly skinny in its braided lean and fat, the legs chopped short at the hocks, ribs whitely arching inside the body cavity. His arms went watery and his chest hollow, but he said "OK, Dad," and got up and walked out and down the iron tongue, a little surprised his knees carried him.

His father reached through the cab window into the glove compartment, got out his knife and stone, and whetted the blade for a few seconds. The steel rasped against the soft chitter of aspen. Then the man pulled a coil of rope and a short piece of shovel handle from the truck and walked toward the sheep tethered at the edge of the trees, looking indifferently at them with its milky blue eyes, its lower jaw jerkily chewing. "What do you want me to do?" Carl asked.

"Just wait. You help after this first part." His father straddled the sheep, gripped it behind the withers with knees and calves, and untied the length of braided baler twine from its neck. The sheep bucked forward once, couldn't get free, and stood still. The man crooked his left forearm under the sheep's jaw, drew it back sharply so the muzzle strained skyward, the throat taut, then he pulled the knife across once, hard and quick, opening the throat clear to the neckbone. For an instant Carl wondered when the blood would start. Then it came pulsing rich and dark, foaming into the grass and the black soil. The sheep stamped and bucked, hooves springing and skittering crazily, then its legs buckled under the man's body bearing it to the ground where he held it, now kneeling astride the fat flank and holding the head still farther back while the blood ran in weaker surges and the breath rasped from the severed windpipe. When the kicking stopped, he stood, wiped his knife on the wool, and tilted his hat back to wipe his forehead, breathing audibly through his teeth.

"Well." He looked at Carl. "That's done. Get me a clean pan out of the drawer."

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strange comfort that he kept to himself.

"Yes sir," Carl said and ran to the wagon. What surprised him was his father's face, that it was without revulsion yet without pleasure too, except the satisfaction of having done the thing neatly, the same as when he oiled some kid's squeaky tricycle or got the water regulated in all the furrows of the garden. What surprised him more was himself, that he too felt this a matter of fact, a kind of work, new, but after the first startling slash of the knife just something to see and do. But it was death and it would feed them.

When he came back with the pan, his father had already slit the hide from neck to vent, spilled out the entrails into a coiled, steaming pile already drawing a few lumbering flies, and had the dark-red, fatty knot of heart and the darker, almost purple flared lobes of liver ready to lay in the pan. "If Knute don't want those, we'll take em home. Set the pan by the stove and see if you can find a clean cloth to lay over it."

When Carl came back from doing that, his father was sliding the chunk of shovel-handle through slits in the sheep's peeled legs just above the chopped-off joints and knotting the rope at its center. He stood, tossed the end of the rope over an aspen branch as high as he could reach, pulled the end down, and handed it to Carl. "Let's hoist im. Easier with a block, but we'll manage." They pulled together, hands alternating on the taut rope as if in a game, and the carcass swung free of the ground and swayed in front of the tree. The leaves on the bobbing branch winked like flung coins.

"Now help me peel the hide," the man said, "like this," and gripping with his left he drew the edge of his right hand like a blade between hide and muscle, stripping the skin back an inch or so. Carl stepped beside him and tried the same on the other side, surprised at the heat of the flesh, at how hard he had to grip and pull with his right hand and cut with the bones of his left. He found himself breathing steady and heavy and falling into his father's rhythm, forgetting to try to keep his shoes from under the slow drip of the neck.

Their hands met at the backbone just as the dogs came up yipping and sniffing at the entrails and the blood-soaked earth, with Knute behind them walking his little roan. The mare spooked when she caught the scent, and the herder dismounted and tethered her to the far side of the camp wagon. "How's Gray?" he hollered coming toward them still a bit stiff-legged.

"Just dandy," his father answered. "Got you some groceries."

"And done my chore too," The herder cracked a snaggly grin across his lean, seamed face. "Who's your help?"

"Ah, you remember Carl."

"Sure. Named for your Dad. But don't see him up

here too much."

"Sometimes he's his mother's. But he's with me today. Just got baptized."

Struck, Carl couldn't look at either of them for a second. He'd forgotten the morning, his lightness, the expectation of his brother's hands on his head tomorrow. He felt now as solid, weighted, as the bone and sinew of the hung lamb, unable to locate within himself that earlier feeling, but sensing no absence either.

"Now that's all right," the herder was saying. "He's a good boy." And Carl grinned up at him, almost extended his stained hand for a shake, then felt the formality unfit.

"He is," his father said, then, "How about cooking us some lunch?"

The herder coughed and said sure, his sourdough was ready and he had taters and onions and some chops if this boy would light the stove. So Carl did that while the herder helped his father finish skinning the sheep and chopping through the neckbone.

When they'd finished eating and put the dishes into the big pan to soak in soapy water, the herder pulled from his pocket by its blue tag dangling on yellow string his Bull Durham pouch. "Roll you a smoke, Gray?"

"No thanks. You know I quit. But you go ahead."

"At's all right." The man grinned again his gapped yellowed teeth.

Carl remembered his father coming home from the doctor's and saying he was quitting, and how the last unopened pack of Luckies still lay at the back of the hall shelves, "probably all wormy by now," his mother said. "Might as well have been smoking horse manure from the corral." His father had kept pipes around the house for a while, but couldn't get to like them. All that was part of why he might as well be baptized, but he wouldn't.

The herder rolled a lumpy cigaret which he lighted by opening the firebox of the stove and holding it to a coal. He puffed blue rings that wavered to the arched canvas roof and broke. Carl could remember his father doing that, once in a while getting one ring to go right through another.

After a while his father stood and said, "Well, thanks, Knute. Think we'll drive on up over Seven-Mile and back down Lions Trail."

"Sure enough, Gray. At's all right." The herder stood and stepped to the door of the camp as they walked out to the truck. "Now you watch that boy," he grinned, and coughed and spat onto the ground.

He knew where his father meant to go: the weathered tent-frame set on the foundation of big logs they called the half-house, Grandpa Wendell's summer camp that for years now they had used mostly for picnics on the Twenty-fourth of July. He had never seen it with the canvas stretched and battened on it, though he wished every

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time they came that they could set it up and stay.

"Let's get a drink," his father said when they'd parked near the frame. He doubted his father was thirsty, but none of them would pass here without stopping for a drink, the water was that good, icy cold out of the bones of the mountain and clear as air. His father had told him how he and an old herder had found the spring high under the summit, and how Grandpa Wendell had bargained with the town of Cumorah for some wooden pipe discarded from the town's old supply line and had laid the pipe with his sons' help a quarter-mile down from the spring to the site for the half-house, then cut the big pine trunks to lay the plank floor on and set up the frame.

Back of the frame on the uphill slope, shaded by two big pines, was the end of the pipe, the water spilling into a shallow gravelled basin, then overflowing to become one head of a creek that ran all the way to the valley and watered farms before it emptied into the river. His father knelt and put his mouth to the bright arc of water and so did he. It froze the lips, bit into the teeth like chomping on an iron railing in winter, and went down like cold molten metal. When they had drunk, his father held under the spill from the pipe a gallon jug sewed with twine into a salt sack, and when it was full, let it stand in the basin so the burlap would soak and keep the water cold. Even so, Carl knew, when you drank it back in town it would be already warm as tapwater, its sweetness flattening.

"I remember Dad, your Grandpa Wendell, taking his shower here when we camped," his father said. "He'd rigged a piece of one-inch pipe to run up over here, with a shower head on the end of it. He'd run out here first thing, bare-naked, while Grandma was starting the bacon, stand under the damn thing and yank on the chain and then stamp and dance around, hootin and hollerin till he couldn't stand it, and then run back in for breakfast. By God. Said it'd help him live to ninety if it didn't give him his death. Never could get me to try it. He didn't last that long."

The sack was well-soaked now, and his father lifted it out, dripping. "We'd better go. Get another sip if you want it." Carl knelt to drink again. He remembered one thing of Grandpa Wendell's funeral: Brother Petersen telling a story about himself, how he'd given a talk in Sacrament Meeting one time all about brotherly love and later in the week had been out riding and been stopped by a big man on a horse. "That was Carl Wendell. He said to me, 'Son, that was a fine talk you gave last Sunday. Now what are you going to do about it.' And the two of us got down off our horses and set and talked an hour or more, and I got to know Carl Wendell." The boy couldn't remember what Brother Petersen got to know, but strangely that was his clearest image of his grandfather, lost and now called up again, the big man on the horse

and then sitting in the dirt talking. (He must have gone to church some, been baptized when a boy, so why not his own father?) And now this new clear sight: the man dancing naked in the water cold as stone.

They drove north over the divide to head down the switchbacks. Near the steep brow of the mountain, his father stopped again. "Let's take a look off here," he said, and they got out and walked to the ledge. He'd been here often before, after every Twenty-fourth picnic and almost every drive; he'd always asked to see the lookout, then hung back from the very edge when they got out to it. He went closer today.

From the lookout the world scooped away east and north and northwest in the widest, deepest bowl, its edge maybe in Colorado. His father liked to get to the very edge, stand and just look, and he too liked the wide domain of colors and ridges behind and behind one another, bluegreens and blues that lightened in the farthest distance: it went almost forever, blueing into sky.

He didn't know he would ask it until he did. It was like his first dive off the board when he knew his fear was gone but hadn't tried this, doing the thing before he knew he'd decided.

"Dad, do you think you go nowhere when you die?" The surprise almost cost him his balance on the edge, and he felt his father's hand jump to his shoulder to steady him, then let go before speaking.

"Don't know." He looked up, but his father still looked out on the spread ranges. "I've dug my living out of the dirt and out of the hides of sheep and don't want you boys to have to do that, but I don't mind going back to the dirt. It's good country. If there's a God he made it the way he liked it."

His father still did not look at him or touch him again and Carl did not need to say or ask anything more. Then his father pointed in front of them, to a small island of pine in a meadow below a curve of the road. "If I had money and the BLM was selling, I'd buy an acre there and build me a cabin. Or I'd level off a place to park a house trailer. There's a good spring there—see where the willows are?"

He saw, and felt again the slow, centered pull of the widening bowl, like what you feel when ready to dive. The world in its lines and colors sloped out and away like a wave gathering to crest, all one: God's Kingdom and his father's good country, and he knew himself in both for life.

BRUCE JORGENSEN earned his Ph.D. from Cornell and is now an assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University. He has published fiction, poetry, and essays.

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