

2005 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest Third Place Winner

# WINTER LIGHT

By Stephen Carter



*Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?  
The watchman said: the morning cometh and also the night.*

—ISAIAH 21:11–12

1939. MY AUNT MAY GRADUATED FROM UTAH STATE University and got on a train to New York. She wanted to be a writer, so really, where else could she go? She stayed near that huge city the rest of her life, returning home only every now and then when she had the money.

1994. MIDNIGHT. MY PLANE LEFT SALT LAKE International Airport for Atlanta en route to Toronto. *Rudy* was the in-flight movie. But since I'd sworn off television and movies for two years, I was staring out the window.

I love to fly, especially at night. Sometimes the dark below stretches out so far that I feel completely alone. But then a trickle of lights floats across the black; a lone EKG reading, growing and expanding until the finger of light multiplies and becomes lost in the burn of civilization.

Kind of like what I was doing, I thought then: a lone figure bringing light to those who live in darkness. Admittedly, I wasn't going to convert cannibals in the jungle, but I didn't have to go so far in order to find people who didn't have the truth. In fact, in all likelihood, the stewardess who had just offered me some forbidden coffee was one of them. I felt a pang of guilt for not offering her a pamphlet or something. The truth. The light. The right track.

That's what it was like being a Mormon. At least, it was to me. There was an almost tangible difference between those who had the truth and those who didn't. Those who had it were on the train. Their tickets were punched, and the train was moving. On their way. Those who didn't were in the waiting room back at the station, coats on their laps. They used the drinking fountain now and then and read paper-

backs. Sometimes they did unspeakable things in the bathrooms. But only because they didn't know any better—the very reason why people who got off the train and went back to the waiting room were in such a pickle. After all, they had eaten in the dining car, received their complimentary engineer's hat and contemplated their glorious destination, but now they were sullyng themselves. They could do exactly the same things the unenlightened could do, but they were losing something they could never get back. Their original purity. Maybe that's why the official term for someone who isn't coming to church is "inactive." They've relegated themselves to a room with obsolete magazines, the must of old cigarettes, and dusty tile. What else can one do there but be inactive?

MAY WAS A LOST SHEEP. ONE WHO HAD STRAYED. Poetry was more important than church. She always wrote fond poems about her family after her visits yet May couldn't communicate with them. They spoke across a chasm. You can see that separation in a picture of May and her parents when her first book was published. May, taller than her parents, stands in the center, her usual deadpan understating the glee any poet must feel at being bound between two boards. Her mother and father stand on either side, with identical expressions. They still wear their coats, a fedora perched on dad's head, as if they're just about to leave. None of them is touching an other. Three pillars. Three cardboard cutouts.

May's brothers and sisters never stopped trying to bring her back—if not to Utah, to the Church. Knowing that May had a scientific turn of mind, my grandfather once sent her *Faith of a Scientist*, by Henry B. Eyring, and *Evidences and Reconciliations*, by John A. Widstoe, hoping that a rational approach to religion would change her direction. Widstoe, she wrote back, was interesting, a mind worth encountering. Eyring was a bore.

I SPENT ABOUT SIX MONTHS PREACHING THE GOSPEL in Belleville, Ontario. I missed the mountains of Utah Valley; they had always given me a sense of direction, literally. The mountains always ran north and south. A corridor, a demarcated track. In Belleville, Lake Ontario gave me the same sense



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of direction (lake is south), a place to look for if I was ever lost.

Belleville had that whiff of the pastoral town that saturates Norman Rockwell paintings, as if Winesburg, Ohio, had been moved north to Ontario for historic preservation. I loved the fact that the Via Train could zip through miles of cornfields, that mist covered the ground during autumn evenings, that Church Street, by gum, had *churches* on it! Really swell ones, too, with high-collar Victorian architecture. And I loved to drive across the bridge arcing over the lagoon to the island of Prince Edward County.

But one of my very favorite places was Bob Cottrell's home. It was a brown-and-red brick house that sat comfortably on a street lined with two-story maples, leaves almost buzzing with red energy. Bob was about half finished remodeling the house. The main floor was complete with a white fireplace, wood-paneled floors, and track lighting. Upstairs was still in progress.

To us, Bob was like his house—almost converted. He had been on the teaching list for about six months when I arrived. He had attended a baptism; he had heard most of the lessons; he even came to church sometimes. We were always saying to ourselves, "This week Bob's going to get wet." I wanted Bob baptized for two reasons. First, I hadn't baptized anyone yet and I wanted to see what it was like. Second, I really liked Bob. He was a theater guy, and having just finished high school where I had played Polonius, so was I. He was also uncommonly classy. From his perfectly disarranged coffee table books to his casual, yet thoughtful demeanor as he sat in his overstuffed leather chair, to his up-to-the-minute modern art wall hangings and taste for classical music, Bob had it all. Except one thing—the Spirit.

Thus, my mission: to help Bob feel the Spirit. Because once you feel the Spirit, everything becomes clear. The mountains become visible; the lake appears, the sun rises, the train pulls in. Next stop, the baptismal font.

Actually, helping Bob feel the Spirit wasn't my real job because we knew Bob was already experienced. The first time my missionary companion and I visited him, he had told us that whenever he prayed, he felt a sense of peace. He also enjoyed our company for the same reason. What he was describing was the Spirit working on his soul, no two ways about it. We had pointed that fact out to him, but he just didn't seem to grasp it. It was strange that he hadn't—Bob seemed to be the prime baptism type: he was spiritual and thoughtful, he was generous, and he kept letting us in the door.

But Bob had an unpredictable turn of mind, and it always

seemed to keep him an unknown variable in our spiritual equations. For example, during his early days of investigating the Church, the missionaries had challenged him to be baptized. Bob had thought about it for a moment and then took them out onto his front porch. He showed them his newly planted ivy, just starting to reach its tendrils to the first rung of the latticework. "That plant is a lot like me," he said. "It's just starting to grow. And I'm not sure where it's going yet. In fact, let's make that my spiritual plant. Let's see how it grows."

The missionaries bought a bag of fertilizer that night.

By the time I arrived, the ivy, just taking on its fall hue, was making its way up the lattice, but Bob still wasn't baptized.

Finally, one evening while we were teaching Bob one of the missionary lessons, I entered the zone. I could feel the Spirit rolling through the room like a tidal wave as I testified of the truthfulness of the gospel. I was almost getting a headache from it. While I testified, I watched Bob, sitting with one leg folded beneath him, the other over the arm of his chair, his fingers poised at the side of his face—the thoughtful posture. He was listening: surely he was feeling this. I stopped. "Bob, you feel that? That sense of peace and goodness? It's the Spirit telling you that what I'm saying



Crystal—preparing to be purified.  
Ticket about to be punched.

is true."

Bob thought for a moment and then nodded, mostly to himself.

So I took the next step, the one you take while the momentum is fresh and strong. "Bob, will you be baptized?"

I went home disappointed. But in the car Elder Mecham said, "I felt the Spirit in there, Elder Carter. There's no way Bob could have missed it."

I had to agree.

Finally I received a transfer out of Belleville. I hadn't seen Bob for a few weeks, but before I left I called him to say goodbye. He invited us over for dinner, which surprised me—all we were ever doing was trying to baptize him.

The dinner was great. Bob had made it himself. He lit candles, turned off most of the lights in the house, and cranked up the Chopin. When we finished eating, Bob went out of the room and came back with a gift for each of us. They were wrapped in tissue paper with oval pieces of paper each bearing quotations from a Romantic poet. Mine was from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It said, "If there were no God, we would have all this beauty and no one to thank for it." I opened my gift. It was a tape recording of Glenn Gould's rendition of the Goldberg Variations.



ANNA VASCHKE



For that tiny moment, I hear her. No translation required. I wish I could talk back. But she wants me to talk about the sun; the aurora's voice fills me instead.

"He's an odd musician," Bob said, "because he hums along with the music—and not always on key. You can actually hear it in the recording. That's one of the reasons I like him so much."

CRYSTAL WAS ONE OF THOSE MIRACULOUS FINDS. THE kind that come after a hot day of knocking doors—the kind of door you have given up on until, of course, a kid in a diaper comes tearing around the side of the house.

Crystal and her four children lived in an old, two-story saltbox-style house. It was a dark place. Despite the windows, the wood paneling and gray walls drank the light insatiably. The furniture looked as though it were an organic part of the house, sinking into the 1960s wallpaper, melting into the sagging floors. In a small room just off the living room, an inexplicable white man lay in a hospital bed, his beard flaring like the sun, his eyes like awl points. Crystal never introduced us to him. And he never spoke.

I think the old man was a relative of Crystal's, because she had the same sharp eyes. The kind you find on a girl you had ignored through school until you one day see past her self-consciously feathered hair and cheap clothes to a soul that startles you.

The road to baptism was a rough one for Crystal. The poor girl had to give up smoking, alcohol, coffee, and tea—part and parcel of the whole Mormon gig. Her husband threw us out of

the house once, convinced that we were changing her for the worse: she wouldn't let him smoke in the house anymore and had avoided a certain marital act because, well, it's a cigarette trigger. I couldn't really blame the guy. Then a well-meaning but overbearing cousin threw the whole anti-Mormon spiel at her one afternoon, causing Crystal to break a few bright red press-on nails as she clenched the counter edge, waiting for the onslaught to end. The principal at the Catholic school her girls attended threatened to kick them out if Crystal became a Mormon. Crystal also owned up to the real reason she'd let us in the door that first day. "You was cute," she said—referring to Elder Mecham.

But it all came, and passed. Crystal somehow managed to get her children to church every Sunday. She had even convinced her husband to come listen to us a time or two. Her blood ran free of nicotine for the first time in years. And then, one brisk au-

tumn Sunday, all her sins were washed away.

Naturally, to remember the moment, we took a picture of the three of us together in front of the font: Crystal dressed in white, twiggy elbows poking through her dress, preparing to be purified. Ticket about to be punched.

A LITTLE WHILE BEFORE HER MOTHER DIED, MAY WROTE to her about her own life on the east coast, so far away from home. May told her mother how much she admired her. She could do what May could not, raise children, place herself on a strait and narrow path and follow it. "I do not know whether I am making a big circle with my life (I hope it is not a zero!) simply in order to arrive, in the end, where I started."

2001. SALT LAKE CITY. I GOT ON A BOEING 747 WITH my wife and two children. Nonstop 2600 miles to Anchorage, Alaska, and from there, another 362 miles northeast to Fairbanks. As we flew north, the sun hung on the horizon, never quite moving, even though we travelled until midnight. It was almost as if we were following the sun. Tracking it to its home.

As I've found out, light is an important element to factor into the average Alaskan's life. Living in Fairbanks, 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle, I don't get the full brunt of northern darkness. The folks who live on the north coast go a few weeks completely without the sun, and many more with it merely

peeking over the horizon, a smoky red eye. Nevertheless, we in Fairbanks can claim our share of Sunlight Affective Disorder sufferers. At the deepest of winter's dark the sun visits only between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. It just sort of lolls over the Alaskan range, and as Fairbanks is covered with tall spruce and birch, we're lucky to see the sun at all most days. It refuses us any heat.

However, I feel sorry for anyone who dies without seeing the aurora. LSD has nothing over it. But most of the time the northern lights are no relief from the Alaskan night. Witnessing them is like watching a dress rehearsal for the apocalypse. Great and terrible. Writhing coils of light. The contrails of avenging angels. Especially because the lights are so large, so untouchable, a towering inferno, but speak only in whispers. It would be a relief to hear the voice of the aurora; it would give one's mind something to distract itself with, something that would lessen the abstract impact of the spectacle. The explosion of a firework or the thunderclap following a lightning strike can convulse our bodies with a primal fright. A guttural instinct wakes for an instant to engage the mind in thoughts of escaping bodily harm. But the aurora does not approach with force, it seduces. It flirts with its veils, moving like the helix of the surf or the muscles of a horse, promising a revelation. And you watch as if you were in the presence of gods. But when the veil is removed, all you see is vast, starred emptiness. The joke is on you. The veil was removed not to reveal its source, but to reveal you.

That's what heaven's like. Revelation in one hand, a knife in the other.

Getting lost is becoming easy for me. Coming from a valley walled off by mountains 11,000 feet high, I feel as if I am at sea in the midst of the undulations of the Fairbanks land and sky-scape. The hills run in no discernible pattern. The Alaskan Range is too far away to steer by. The sky transforms second by second. I can't tell which direction I would walk if one day I decided to go home.

MAY: ONE ARM AKIMBO, DEADPAN, A VIEW OF SOME anonymous bit of New York City behind her. She had just finished her life. I was only fourteen years into mine. The grainy obituary photo seemed appropriate, as did the backdrop. May was famous, sure. But I imagined her in the next life, blinking with confusion at the familiarity of the scene around her. It was just as her family had always believed. And she, without a ticket.

TOWARD THE END OF MY SERVICE IN TORONTO, I MET a missionary who had just come out of Belleville. Excited, I asked him if he had known Crystal. He thought for a moment and said, "Oh yeah, the crazy lady who ran out on her family."

As I look back now at the picture of Crystal's baptism, study her dark eyes, she looks as if she's standing in front of a firing squad, or perhaps the edge of a cliff. Her hands clamped behind her back, head cocked to one side. Squinting as if into a hard wind.

2003. SUNDAY. A VISIT TO UTAH. THE CHAPEL IS FULL, the loudspeakers in the lobby aren't working. It's testimony meeting. People from the congregation go to the pulpit and tell the gathered saints what they know to be true. Sometimes they relate miracles. Sometimes just gratitude. Sometimes they try to sell real estate. But since my wife and I can't hear anything in the lobby, we leave. We don't realize my mom has reserved some pew space for us. She waits the whole meeting.

Mom sits across the table from me, her son from Alaska. "How are you keeping your testimony strong?" she asks. It's such a simple question in Mom's language. I used to be able to answer it easily, such as on the day she and my dad picked me up from my mission and I answered over the space of four hours. Now I need another four, most of it to spend on translation. There are too many words that don't have a single meaning. Too many mountains have been moved. Too many constellations veiled.

Testimony meeting isn't over for that Sunday. Mom has saved hers for me. I can tell that she loves me because she talks for a half hour straight. I don't doubt anything she says. I know her story. I know her certitude. It's palpable; an actual presence. The old language. The rising of the sun. But she weeps because she thinks she's doing a bad job. "I can't explain things these days. I can't put them in order," she says.

For that tiny moment, I hear her. No translation required. I wish I could talk back.

But she wants me to talk about the sun; the aurora's voice fills me instead.

A YEAR AFTER MAY'S DEATH, HER SISTER MARGARET DID May's temple work for her. Mormonism has a very merciful side to it. If you don't accept the gospel in this life, you can in the next. So Mormons do baptisms for their dead relatives (and often for people they don't even know). They also do the other, higher, ordinances: sealings, washings and anointings. But there's an addendum to this loophole. If you had been the type of person who would have received the gospel, had you heard it in this life, the ordinances can be valid. Otherwise—you had your chance. And, as I figured it at the time, May had a lot of chances. She got off track. She became kind of famous in the waiting room, circling around in there. Falling in love with the vending machine. Ignoring the ticket office. Monochrome, anonymous, concrete.

BACK TO ALASKA; 2900 MILES FROM SPANISH FORK, Utah. My family and I sit in Dad's Jeep, ready to go. Mom comes out to say goodbye. She kisses her grandchildren and daughter-in-law. Then she comes to my door. She hugs me and looks at me for a moment.

"It's enough to make a mother cry." 



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