

Home Again

BENITA BROWN

THE BUS TRIP FROM UTAH had taken twenty-four hours and now, as the day darkened to evening, it was almost over. I had struggled the night before to sleep, but woke at each little village's bus stop. My muscles had the stiff soreness that comes only after hours in a "greyhound mold." But I had needed the time of the long ride and the solitude that comes from traveling alone. It was my first trip to Washington in a year. With school and a summer job I had not returned to my parents' house since last Christmas. Now, as the highway followed the river, I knew we would be in Pasco soon.

Leaning back in the seat I could watch the water roll past. It had been more than two years since Mom and Dad first saw me off to college. Dad had been unruffled, but I think Mom was worried. It wasn't the same kind of fear that had haunted her when my brothers had left, but the fear of a mother sending her only daughter to a place peopled with strangers. She knew the questions that lingered in my mind, even though it had been more than eighteen months since the missionaries had last stopped by our house; we had not discussed the subject since. The fear had been in her eyes since the day I announced my choice of a college. Two Christmases and the intervening summer had quieted those fears. I had returned from school each time with no signs of affection for any religion. Now I was coming back again, four months a Mormon.

The bus was pulling away from the river now, making yet another stop. These roads were so familiar that I could follow the course mentally. Shifting in the seat, I tried to find a comfortable position; after almost twenty-four hours the attempt was useless. I remembered the exchange of letters with Mom and Dad that fall. I had dropped the bomb-

shell in the first line. The memory of that abrupt statement still made me wince, but it was too late to recall it. Their letters arrived just prior to my baptism. I had wondered since if my timing hadn't been deliberate—ducking their possible dissent on grounds that I was over eighteen. They gave hesitant acquiescence, but though I read and reread every page, there was no approval. I wanted that approval; not fear, not just tolerance, but approval—love. Maybe that was why it had taken me so long to join the Church and why two years before, I had seen fear in my mother. Perhaps it had been my own fear reflected. I had been frightened, not only of Eternity (that gold-plated word) but also of acting for the first time without my parents' approval. It was still hard now at twenty-one, no wonder I had been afraid then.

The bus had returned to the river again, I could see the park to the left as we crossed the bridge. It was empty now, a change from the crowds that filled it every summer. We used to launch our boat there for an island downstream. "Our island," we called it. Sometimes the family would even camp overnight there on the beach, waking when the sun reflected off the water. But the camping trips were rare; with Dad so busy there was usually time for boating only on Sunday afternoons. That was one thing I didn't need to worry about, coming back in December. Nobody would want to go boating in this weather, so there would be no need to explain why I wouldn't go. But there were so many other things—talking with Dad over a cup of coffee early in the morning, the marathon card games that lasted late into the night, drinking a toast to one another before dinner on special holidays—always with Uncle John's homemade wine, always at a table set with Grandma's

china and linen. Perhaps those things were not so important, but they were a part of each of us and a part of our being a family. They made us feel we were at home when we were together. I had not thought about it before, but now I was worried. All of that could no longer be a part of me. It sounded so petty—a cup of coffee, a glass of wine—but everything we had shared had seemed to make us a family, including the cup of coffee, the glass of wine. Hadn't I heard just last Sunday, that there was nothing more important than families?

But there was no time to think of that now, the bus was pulling into town. I rummaged through my purse to find a comb, then gave up, knowing there was no way I could disguise the effects of the long ride. So I struggled into my coat, and gathered up my purse, book, and suitcase as the bus pulled into the station. Mom was there, waiting on the edge of the landing. Slowed by my bundles and the impatient passengers, I worked my way to the door and climbed down the steps. Mom came to hug me and take my suitcase, and an exchange of idle talk and greetings carried us through the station to the car.

"Don't you have any other suitcases?"

"No, I'm traveling light this time. Where are you parked?"

"Over there. How was your trip?"

"I think we stopped at every town between here and Logan. Where's Dad?"

"He offered to stay home and finish dinner so that I could run some errands before the bus arrived. When's the last time you ate?"

"I had lunch somewhere in Oregon, so I'm starved."

"Good, dinner should be ready when we get there."

We fell silent, pretending absorption in the familiar scene of downtown. I tried to think of something to tell her about—my new job in the Sunday School (no, she wouldn't want to hear), sledding with my family home evening group (I didn't want to explain what that meant)—and silently watched the people on the sidewalks until we pulled into the driveway.

"The poplar tree is gone!"

"Oh, didn't I write you about that? It was dying, so we had it taken out."

"Oh, I remember now. I guess I just never had pictured the house without it."

We got out of the car, Mom carrying the grocery sack, me struggling with my suitcase. Dad took it from me as I reached the door. He bent down to kiss me.

"Well, I'd wondered what had happened to you, your Mom was gone so long."

"I think my bus was late." I turned to Mom, "Did you have to wait long?"

"Only a couple of minutes." She was already on her way into the kitchen. "It looks like dinner's all ready, you probably should wash up after your trip."

"O.K., I'll be down in a second." As I ran upstairs I could see the table in the dining room, set with china and crystal. How like my father to treat his daughter's homecoming as a family holiday. He'd even gotten out Grandma's old damask tablecloth. Not until I was halfway back down the stairs did I stop—holiday, crystal stemware, drinking a toast with Uncle John's wine. Why this, so soon? I was not yet ready for explanations. I started down again, sliding my fingers along the smooth wood of the bannister.

Mom was pouring the wine into her glass as I entered the room. I slid into my chair and placed the napkin across my lap. Before I could say anything Dad spoke up.

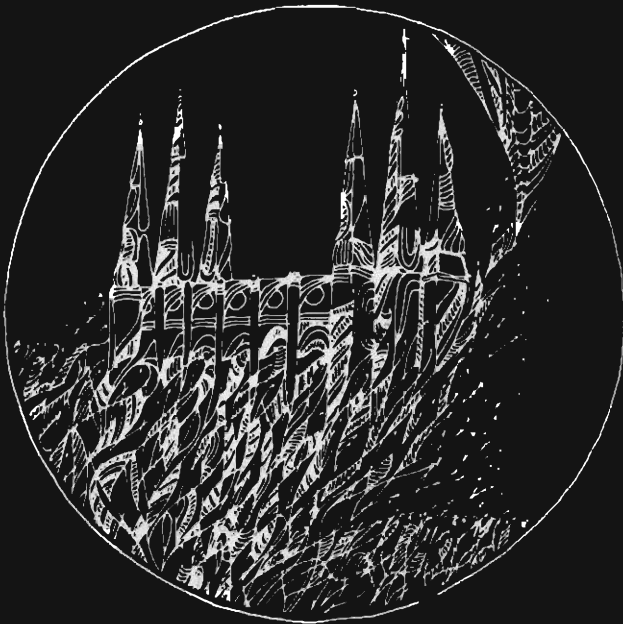
"Uncle John sent us a special bottle with his annual batch of wine this year. It's just grape juice."

Mom held out the glass. My hand was steady as I reached for it. Mom and Dad raised their glasses. I followed suit.

"To your homecoming."

My voice was as steady as my hand, "To coming home."

MORMONISM'S
NEGRO DOCTRINE:
AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW



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