

# A Rock, a Fir, and a Magpie

*Craig Witham*

**F**ern left Relief Society early. She had never done that before, but she had a headache. Or something. It wasn't really a headache, but it was in her head. Or her neck, or back. It wasn't pain, but it was ache. Then it was in her abdomen and thighs; an uncomfortable giddy feeling, like something tickling her insides. But not *her* insides, rather the inside of a thick hollow vessel, centered somewhere vaguely within her. Or to the right of her. She didn't know; she knew only that it made her nervous; and it made the cultural refinement teacher's voice unbearable — grating and relentless as a washing-machine's uneven-load buzzer. She had to turn it off.

When she got out into the hallway, she didn't know why she was there, or where to go. She looked back in at the door; Doris Anderson looked up and smiled at her, then let the smile sag back into her usual look of slightly anxious complacency. Fern didn't know Doris's face. Her smile was just a meaningless warp in a field of patternless shapes. Fern didn't return the smile. She looked up at the window; the sun banked off the chrome of a car and filtered through the loosely woven beige curtains. The weave crumbled the light into fairy dust that sprinkled onto the cultural refinement teacher's arms as she stretched them upwards.

"And when they pray, they raise their arms heavenward, throw their heads back like this . . . and chant a prayer. It's like a song. And they sway back and forth with their arms in the air until they're through."

"What am I doing standing here in the hallway?" Fern said to herself, then started down the corridor. She tried to contrive a coughing fit.

Bishop Grendal was in the foyer talking to some deacons. He looked up and smiled warmly. "Sister Tanner, how are you?"

Fern smiled and nodded but kept going. She felt sick to her stomach and unable to speak.

The heat outside made the air thick and slow. She felt as if she had walked from something liquid and cool inside into something semi-solid on the outside. She made her way through it the half block to her house.

---

*CRAIG WITHAM is a psychiatric technician and mental health crisis worker, eternal English undergraduate (senior), father of three, and second counselor in the bishopric of a BYU ward. This story received the DIALOGUE-Silver Foundation's third place fiction award in 1983.*

The front door was unlocked. Jim always used to leave the door unlocked when they went to church. It drove her crazy while he was alive; but now she left it unlocked, despite her natural compulsion to lock it. He used to say, "If anyone comes in our house and steals anything while we're at church, they probably need it a lot worse than we do, and we'll be blessed for giving it to them." She thought at the time that he said it just to aggravate her, but now she knew he meant it; so she left the door unlocked in his memory. This time, she was glad it was unlocked. She walked in, went straight for the couch, and took off her shoes. Everything was hot everywhere. She was too tired to turn on the air conditioning. She would have gone into the den in the basement where it was cool, but then she would think about Jim, because he used to spend so much time in there reading. She didn't want to think about Jim. She didn't want to think. She shut her eyes and let her head fall back onto the couch. She stretched her arms out onto the back of the couch and put her feet up on the coffee table. There was a massive red leather-bound family Bible in the middle of the table with an oval-shaped picture of a short-haired Jesus on the cover with a closely trimmed beard and a smile.

Fern sat very still and for a few minutes succeeded in not thinking anything. Then unwanted images started leaking in: Jim and her son Donald fishing; Donald with a fish hook in his eye. Something that never happened, but that she always feared would happen. Or did it really happen? Then the image she saw every night before she could fall asleep came. It was a picture of Jim's face, made up to look peaceful, surrounded by beige satin ripples, almost the same beige as the satin sheets Fern bought one anniversary when they were very young. They were a surprise; they were supposed to be sexy. Jim could never sleep in them — said they made him sweat. Thirty years later Fern gave them to Linda and Richard when they got married. They loved them. Richard loved things with class; that's why he married Linda, or at least one of the reasons, Fern always told herself. How such a father had such a daughter, Fern could never understand. How could a man whose corpse was uncomfortable in satin sire a child so . . . his corpse *was* uncomfortable, but it wasn't him. Fern didn't like to think of how he looked in the coffin. She wasn't afraid of the image; she just resented it. She resented it being the last look she had of Jim, because it wasn't him. She resented them calling that thing in the coffin her husband. She thought that she would much rather have seen Jim covered with blood and his head lopsided and smashed, than bloodless, caked — literally caked with makeup and paraffin. She would much rather have seen teeth and bits of bone in an urn than that clownish artless piece of sculpture. At night, when she was trying to sleep, she saw it and counted how many people told her, "He looks so peaceful." To her, he only looked dead.

Jim had been dead almost two years, but she saw his face every night. Every night she stayed up late. She worked on her genealogy or watched TV until she could barely keep her lids up so she could fall asleep quicker and shorten the time she had to stare at his face. She hoped each night that she would stop seeing it; but every night it rolled down onto her eyes as if it were printed on the backs of her lids.

Fern fell asleep with her feet up on the coffee table and her head and arms stretched onto the back of the couch.

When she awoke, dusk was sifting in through her living-room window. Her arms and feet were asleep, her neck stiff from lying so long in the same unaccustomed position. It took all the strength in her arms just to roll them off the back of the couch and let them fall with her hands in her lap. She lifted her legs from the coffee table and placed her feet on the floor. She carefully lifted her head to keep from throwing a kink into her neck.

The house was built on the hill, on the corner lot of a wedge-shaped block so that the living-room window in the back of the house presented a perfect view of the lake and the temple and the lower part of the city. In the front of the house, the family room and dining room were situated to take in the view of the mountain rising behind. The temple looked in the window, glowing gold and white, translucent and aglow, floating against the dusky landscape. Beyond the almost-orange gold of the temple spire, a thin line of bright yellow traced the silhouette of West Mountain. Yellow ascended into gold, then pink, violet, deep purple, indigo, then nothing. There was no moon.

The temple lights suddenly flickered and died. The temple receded, gray into black, a two-dimensional facade. Without those streams of light tying the steeple to the building and the building to the earth, and tying the night together, everything was loose. Everything was muddy. An angular section of the town was black.

Fern heard young voices yelling and laughing wildly. She stood up and went to the back door. Someone shot a bottle rocket into the air. It chugged straight up, slowly at first, then exploded into a spark-squirting spiral just above the temple, where it popped anti-climatically.

Fern started down the sidewalk. I'm going to find those boys. Somebody has got to tell them; they've got to be told; they must be told. She walked towards the dark section of the town. She had walked three blocks when another rocket and then another whizzed up above the temple; they popped in rapid succession.

Fern began to run. The rockets were going up across the street from the temple, about a block and a half down the hill from her. Three more rockets pelleted the same pocket of sky and then a fourth veered and sizzled through the fence, lodged in a clump of grass and fizzed like a sparkler, then exploded. The lights in the dark section — temple, house, and street lights exploded silently on as if ignited by the firecracker.

Fern loomed into the light of a street lamp three houses up the hill from where four silhouetted boys were jumping, laughing, and striking matches. Her hair smoked forward in two frizzed wings; the hair on the back of her head had been squashed flat sleeping on it. The feet of her pantyhose had disintegrated from running on the pavement without shoes, and were now fluttering at her ankles like wings.

"You boys! Hey!" Fern slowed to a brisk walk with a slight limp; she had scraped her right big toe on a curbing, but didn't notice it until now. She breathed rapidly; her heart pummeled her ribs. "You boys! What's going on!"

She came to the driveway and walked right up to the tallest of them, a lanky thirteen-year-old with an orange afro. "Terry Schuler, where are your parents?" She grabbed a lungful of air, then grabbed Terry by the arm. "Who taught you to treat the temple that way?" She shook his arm.

"I'm sorry, Sister Tanner."

"What's the idea of shooting rockets at the temple! Who ever taught you to disrespect God's house like that? . . . Answer me! Where's your father?"

"He's gone . . ."

She released him. "This is God's house. It's not to be taken lightly! Do you understand me? It's not to be taken lightly!"

Terry nodded vigorously and rubbed his arm. The smaller boys were huddled together against a faded juniper in front of the porch.

"Hand me those matches."

Terry thrust his hand into his right hip pocket and produced a disorganized jumble of wooden matches.

"Is that all?"

Terry dug out three more.

"Now give me the rest of your rockets."

"I don't have any more."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes. I sw — . . . I promise."

"Now you get back into that house and take care of your brothers like you're supposed to."

"C'mon, you guys."

Fern stood in the driveway and watched until they all filed into the house and the living room light went on. She wanted to go, but she couldn't move her legs. Her stomach and her heart had dropped to her feet.

Fern didn't see the car until the headlights sliced across the hedge and into the driveway. Carl slid to a stop. The car was going very slowly by the time it hit Fern, so it shoved rather than knocked her down. She landed on her right hip and elbow. The matches scattered out in a fan from her hand.

Carl jumped out of the car. "Are you all right? Fern? What were you doing standing there?"

Fern's hip was bruised, her elbow scraped. "Your boys were shooting fireworks . . ." She sat up and tried to rise, but her hip gave way and she fell back onto her forearm. Her elbow landed in the grease and slid. Carl grabbed her other arm and lifted her to a sitting position. ". . . at the temple. I was probably too hard on them. Yes, I was too hard on them. These are their matches." Fern started picking the matches up one by one. Her hands were shaking.

"Here, take it easy. I'm going to help you stand up. Tell me if it hurts too much."

The boys had gathered on the front porch and one of the small ones giggled.

Carl looked up. "You boys get back in that house right now and stay there! I'm going to have a talk with you when I come in."

The boys slammed shut the door before Carl finished what he was saying.

Fern's hip hurt, but once she was standing, it was strong enough to support her weight. She said, "Thank you," then pulled her arm away.

Carl took her elbow again. Come on, I'm going to take you to emergency to get some x-rays."

"No, you're not. I'm just fine. Nothing's broken; I'm sure of it."

"Just to be sure, I'm going to take . . ."

"No, you're not. I'm fine."

"At least let me drive you home, Fern."

"I'm fine. I need to walk. Thank you anyway." Fern limped out of the driveway and started up the hill.

"Are you sure you're okay? Won't you just let me drive you?"

"Yes, I'm sure I'm okay. No, I don't need a ride. Thank you," she said without turning.

Fern limped through the orange light of a halogen street lamp, then across the street. She could tell Carl was still watching her.

As she passed the glass doors of the temple, she tried hard to walk without a limp; she wondered why. A fountain in front of the temple was turned off, the usually shallow, animated water now black and infinitely deep. She stopped and looked through the wrought-iron bars of the fence, holding on with both hands. Her right forearm shot little pulses of pain into her elbow when she tightened her grasp. She looked into the entry to the temple. A night watchman dressed in clean white all the way down to a white belt and white tennis shoes blazed in and out of the cones of light from three ceiling-mounted floods. He carried a large chrome flashlight.

Fern remembered sitting on a small couch in the celestial room with Jim after every session. They held hands and looked at the chandelier. The crystals broke the plain white light into deep unearthly colors. On their thirtieth anniversary, Jim gave Fern a two-carat marquise diamond ring to add to her wedding set. He told her that when she looked at the diamond after he was gone, she should think of the celestial room chandelier and their celestial marriage. She had asked him where he was going, and he said: After I die. She said: You aren't doing any dying. Then he looked into her eyes as if he wanted to grab hold of her insides with his eyes and hang on. She turned away and repeated: You're not doing any dying. He chuckled and said: Gotta do it sometime . . . so do you.

He knew all along. He knew all along that he would be going soon. How did he know? He planned it . . . "No!" she said aloud and hit an iron bar with her palm. It vibrated emphatically, almost echoed. "He knew; but he didn't plan it," she whispered.

Several weeks before Jim died, the president of his high priests quorum told him that Joseph Smith had secret plural wives without Emma's knowledge, before he announced the doctrine of plural marriage. He was trying to illustrate the idea that prophets sometimes receive a revelation before the world is ready. Jim wouldn't believe it. In all his years in the Church, he'd never heard anything about it. He did some research of his own. He learned that it was probably true. He learned also that Brigham Young drank beer and that B. H. Roberts was an alcoholic. Jim and Fern discussed it every night. Fern tried to reassure him that the gospel wasn't the members and that God would



never take away anyone's free will, even if it meant that there would be problems in the Church. He said: They should have leveled with me that there were problems in the early church; that, I could have dealt with somehow. But this way, I'm always wondering what other things the Church has kept from me.

Jim spent most of his free time in Salt Lake at the university library. Each night when he came home, he seemed a little older and a little less alive. Finally, he decided that he had to find some things out for himself. He started fasting on a Friday morning. He left for the mountains the next day. Fern tried to tell him he was too old to do that kind of climbing.

*I tried to tell you! Why didn't you listen to me?*

Then she tried persuading him to take someone along. He said: I need to be alone, honey; don't worry, I'm fine; I'll be okay. Just don't worry. When I get back in the morning, I'll have a few things worked out, I'm sure. Please don't worry.

You had to go up there to be with God? "What's the matter with you?" she said aloud. The *you* sang in the wrought iron. She dropped her hand and took a deep breath. She shut her eyes and whispered, "You didn't tell me you were going to commune *that* closely with Him."

She remembered another time she went through the temple. It was shortly after Jim's death. She was alone. She went and sat in the celestial room on the same couch where she and Jim always used to sit. She knew he was there with her and knew that if he wanted to, he could reach out and touch her and make himself heard and seen. Jim didn't linger long. Fern thought he was probably very busy doing missionary work among the passed-on spirits for whom the temple endowments were being done. She knew when he left. The space on the couch was empty and cold. Right afterward a very young couple came and sat next to Fern. Jim must have seen them coming and left to make room for them. The girl was pink, the boy skinny and almost beardless. They sat, held hands, and looked into each other's eyes. They were children's eyes, totally open and vulnerable.

Fern stood up and walked over to a large arrangement of yellow and blue gladiolas on a table underneath the chandelier. She said under her breath, "Jim, if that was you . . . please let me know for sure. Why didn't you show yourself to me?"

And the answer came as clearly as if it had been a voice: You know it was me; why do you ask for a sign when you know?

She thought she knew then, but now she wasn't sure. One thing she did know for sure, though, was that having him here, right now, to look at and to touch and hold would beat any spiritual feeling by a mile. She knew also that it was a damn fool thing for him to do. He was a damn fool. Fern opened her eyes and whispered aloud, "You're a darn fool!"

The temple seemed lighter. The orange of the spire was almost white, the white stones almost blue. The windows threw a hundred reflections of street lamps in every direction.

Fern drew in a deep breath, held it a moment, then let it out slowly between her teeth. She started walking up the hill. The pain in her hip and

elbow and an almost overwhelming fatigue hit her all at once. She kept walking very slowly. When she got to the rise directly behind the temple, she thought she heard a voice: This religion is for the birds; feed it to the dogs . . . let swine trample it underfoot, they will not turn and rend thee. . . . Mustard? Or mayonnaise only? Hey, Charlotte! Fern! Fern, honey, Charlotte can swim! Oh, my baby is swimming . . . I told you not to stick the camshaft in yet, now you're going to have to take the whole engine out again. . . . Twenty-eight-fifty for what? . . . The jello salad was nice . . . nice . . . nice.

Fern shook her head. Her spine vibrated and her abdomen felt weak and unsupported. She whispered, "Jim?" There was nothing. Nothing but nothing.

Fern shut her eyes and saw Jim's face — his real face, as it looked when he was alive. He was looking into her eyes; smiling. His full head of gray hair was combed perfectly in place. His eyes were the deepest green. She felt him holding her — so warm. She pulled her arms tight up against her sides and tried to make the feeling stay. Jim disappeared. She opened her eyes and Squaw Peak was staring at her with its triangular, white, vacant eye.

Fern tightened her arms down into her abdomen and clenched her teeth. "You're a damn fool, Jim! Dammit! A damn, damn, damn fool! You had to climb into some God-forsaken rubble to look for him. Who did you think you were, Moses? Who in *hell* did you think you were, Moses, for God's sake?" Fern looked up at Squaw Peak and yelled. "What did you think was up there, the burning bush? Answer me if you're so smart! If you're so smart, and so brave, why couldn't you have found him down here? Answer me! WHAT DID YOU FIND THERE!" ". . . ind there!" Echoed off Squaw Peak.

Fern's feet were cold. A light breeze came up the hill from below the temple. The grass brushed her ankles, then was still again. Fern felt suddenly light, so light she could float up above Squaw Peak if she wanted. Another breeze rolled up the hill and vibrated in her hair. Then there was silence. Silence and Fern's breathing.

Then, as clearly as if it had been a voice, she heard: A Rock. A rock and a fir. Emptiness and a magpie.

Fern listened to the silence again. There was nothing. For a moment, nothing. Then a car's engine and a rude set of headlights invading the grass, reflecting off Fern's legs, washing them white as salt licks.

"Let me give you a ride home, Fern. Please." Carl Shuler was standing in the street on the driver's side of the car. Fern could see only the outline of his hair. "You must be tired. . . . Please?"

Fern walked over to the car and got in. Inside, Carl said, "About the fireworks, Fern, I'm really sorry. I'm going to be sure it never happens again . . . I guess Terry is too young to take responsibility for the kids."

"Oh well, they're just boys." Fern saw out of the corner of her eye, in the corner of the rear-view mirror, the temple blazing bright — the only light in a rectangular field of black. It bounced and jogged out of view. They drove the rest of the way in silence up the hill and behind a bluff that covered their view of Squaw Peak.