

FICTION

Ziontales: An Excerpt

Kevin G. Barnhurst

INTRODUCTION

I WROTE THIS STORY UNDER A SPELL. I was living in Salt Lake City, not in the sprawl of the new suburbs, nor even in the politically correct neighborhoods of the East Bench or the Avenues near the university, but in the Marmalade District. Gentrification has since remade the area, but at that time and for much of its history, it was a backwater of decaying pioneer dwellings and odd apartments made from broken Victorian homes, squeezed onto the foothills below Ensign Peak.

I took long walks on the steep, narrow streets, under the aging box-elders, and wondered about the gables of one house, and the provenance of a certain black walnut tree, and the oddity of a straight but narrow Wall Street with no financial futures. I also walked with my father to the place where I was born—just around the corner—to the places where he lived as a newlywed with my mother, now long dead. Even then the district was alive on the margins of upright Mormon life, just around the mountain from the proper neighborhoods where Brigham Young had lived. There the landmarks seemed grander—the temple and the Endowment House, the facade of the first ZCMI department store, the Eagle Gate where North Temple Street entered the prophet's estates, the gazebo around the only tree pioneers found in the valley. But I remember that the tree had been reduced to a stump. Its curious end led me to spin out an explanation.

The voice I found for the yarn was officious and Victorian—an odd choice, I thought at the time, inspired by a flowery edition of the English fairy tales illustrated by Arthur Rackham. But I remember sensing that the choice was right. Now, with ten years' hindsight, I understand this odd phrasing. It is a proper Mormon voice, springing from the mercantile values and bourgeois East Coast civility that overtook the Mormons of the late nineteenth century.

KEVIN BARNHURST lives and writes at Pond Lane in Stoddard, New Hampshire. To pay the bills, he is a visiting scholar in the School of the Arts and research fellow of the Media Studies Center, Columbia University. He was recently named associate professor and head of the graphic arts program in the School of Public Communications, Syracuse University. He wrote Ziontales for his three sons, one of whom is enrolled in the New York Middle School for Writers in Manhattan.

What follows is an excerpt from the introduction to Ziontales, along with one story from the collection.

Like theirs, it is an adopted voice, imitative and self-conscious yet utterly sincere, assured of its correctness and even superiority.

The moralism of this voice, decorative and artificial, slightly arch, is only one way in which Mormonism speaks, at least to me. The acquired genteel cadence only partly obscures another tone, a harsher accent akin to the bluntness of New Englanders. The renegade Mormon, typified by the profanity of the late J. Golden Kimball and by the unregenerate Sam Taylor and my own smoking grandfather, is a powerful voice in Mormon culture. These people are the Mormons I understand and revere. They revolted against the patina of acquired culture. They are coarse and base but essentially good, the hidden metal in the Mormon social ore.

The story is about Mormon culture, but it is also about Mormon truth. One need only pass time among the faithful to sense the web of truth. Mormon miracles happen. God's will is made manifest, right is sustained, truth revealed. Mormon scholars must correlate the demands of scholarly truth with the facticity of revealed word. Politicians must acknowledge the brethren. The Mormon world is made that way. So this story is an artifact of truth, built on evidence and framed by reason. It points to the testimony of witnesses, most of them family members, and to the corroboration of urban archeology: the remains of a golden past only partly assimilated.

The result, I have been told, is not a fairy tale at all. This may be a tale, filled with absurdity and hyperbole, but unlike the tall tale, its authenticity is asserted in the manner of the Mormon testimony, tied invariably to personal experience and witness: *My mother told me so. I beheld with my very eyes*. This concern for truth pushes the story into the territory of legend, the form where truth play-acts a central role. Of course, legend is too grand a term for this trifle. What gets in the way is its obsession with language, words, rhythm, and alliteration. The word play is self-conscious and perhaps cloying. The story contains, not only in the appropriation of the rhetoric of tall tales but also in its literary form, the contradictions to its concern for truth. The explanations ring false because they are truth protested too much. Their mannered form inspires distrust, like a syrupy salesman. The verbiage arouses a suspicion of what lurks beneath their quaint exterior—but that is fodder for some other essay.

What matters here is that the story seems, ten years later, to express my feelings for Mormonism. At one time my Mormon roots were slightly embarrassing, in the way I suppose all boys from any hinterland feel a twinge when reminded of their humble beginnings. But I am no longer embarrassed, either by this precious little legend or by having grown up a Mormon. I see both as fertile with possibilities. I find that my best motives—in those moments when I have courage to stand up for principle despite personal risk, when I do the occasional altruistic service for the sake of my community—those good values spring from the culture of Mormon Utah and the church with a capital C.

It is an odd vocation that requires constant emendations. I've been tempted to use my word processor to erase the sins of this slight literary legend. But on reflection I stand by it, because it is an artifact of my younger self and because I have learned to forgive my own folly.

The Lone and Only Tree

When Grandfather Cedarbloom was still a very young man, he was called Old Cedarbloom even so by the pioneers, since his face was quite wrinkled and his head quite bald at a very early age. But this bothered Old Cedarbloom not a twig, and by his pluck and good fortune he came to be among the first to arrive at the Valley of Zion on the twenty-fourth day of July.

Now, being prematurely aged, Old Cedarbloom suffered from insomnia, having got a blessing from the prophet himself and said innumerable prayers to no avail. So on that first Twenty-fourth of July, it happened that he was abroad at night, and having wandered far from camp, he came upon an ancient tree, gnarled but hearty, growing on the valley floor.

"Now this lone tree," he exclaimed to himself, "is the only thing of dignity to grace the Valley of Zion before the Saints arrived." (Old Cedarbloom had studied elocution in the East.) "And in the prime of its glory, it shall be the pioneers' friend."

When he spoke these words, the tree, as if taking its cue from his flowery speech, burst into bloom with a hundred white blossoms that glowed in the night.

Old Cedarbloom was left speechless at this, so he took out his water jug and poured his last few drops at the foot of the tree. And finding no rocks nearby, he squatted by the tree, admiring it until almost daybreak, when the blossoms slowly closed and hid among the branches, whereupon Old Cedarbloom returned to camp.

Now when he reached the prophet's wagon, for he was a faithful Saint, Old Cedarbloom discovered that he could not speak, nor could he write down what had happened, try as he may. So he knew he must keep his own counsel.

That day the pioneers passed by the lone tree, and a few stopped to rest in its shade, never suspecting what Old Cedarbloom had seen. But that night, and every night thereafter, he made his way to the tree and watered it faithfully so that it flourished, although it didn't blossom.

Now this is not the end of the tale, for the Saints had many hardships before the Valley became the safe and comfortable place it is today. In those times, the trains of pioneers coming into the Valley would stop to rest under the lone tree, and in the winter Old Cedarbloom feared that someone would chop it down to use its bark for food and its wood for fire. But when the Saints had at last begun to prosper in the Valley, Old Cedarbloom no longer feared for the tree but watered it faithfully every night. And in the day, since he was still

a young man, he took up the trade of gardener, his training in elocution being of no use since he lost his speech.

After a time it happened that Old Cedarbloom came to be appointed gardener to the prophet himself, and in the course of his daily chores he often conversed with the young ladies of the estate, the prophet's daughters. One in particular would speak her mind at great length, while Old Cedarbloom smiled or frowned and nodded in reply. After each of their meetings, the girl would exclaim: "You are the finest man I've ever met, the only one who ever listens."

And so despite Old Cedarbloom's ancient appearance, in a short time the two fell in love, and it fell to Old Cedarbloom to escort the young lady to the Twenty-fourth of July dance. This lasted well into the night, and as soon as he had got the young lady safely home, he headed for the lone tree, carrying his water-can. Now the girl, who (being a mischievous prophet's-daughter sort) had observed Old Cedarbloom's nightly excursions, did not announce her arrival but waited until Old Cedarbloom was well away and then followed him secretly to discover what made him carry his water-can out in the night.

When Old Cedarbloom reached the tree, the girl hid out of sight but close enough to see and watched as he poured out the water at the tree's foot. But when the tree burst into blossom, she squealed, and Old Cedarbloom, who though dumb was neither deaf nor blind, heard the noise and spotted her at once behind the greasewood. In his befuddlement at being found out, he tried to speak and was greatly bewildered to hear his own voice.

"What's this!" he cried, but the girl only cowered until, realizing he spoke, she ran and threw her arms around him.

Then Old Cedarbloom told her all that had befallen him and swore her to secrecy, fearing she would be struck dumb if she told. And when he was convinced of her good will and allegiance, he asked for her hand.

For this she needed her father the prophet's consent, so Old Cedarbloom agreed to come the next day and ask for her hand in marriage. But when he came to the prophet, he was again unable to speak, the effect of his startlement having worn off. Nevertheless, he asked for her hand by signs, and the prophet, impressed that this son-in-law would never talk back, gave his assent and married them in the Endowment House.

Now the newlyweds took up residence in the gardener's cottage, and Old Cedarbloom continued his daily work while his wife became a secretary to the prophet. And in her correspondence, she discovered by chance one day that the plat of the city, as it was expanding eastward, would leave the lone tree in the middle of a street. The possi-

bility of losing the tree to a street alarmed her so, that she could hardly sleep at night, and while this was convenient, since she could accompany Old Cedarbloom to the tree, she dared not tell him what she knew.

Instead she hit upon a plan to save the tree. She went to her father the prophet and to the city council, arguing that plants and trees and grass should be allowed to flourish down the center of each street. The council thought it a costly venture, however desirable it may be, and they refused. But the prophet's daughter enlisted the aid of all of her many sisters, and soon all of the prominent and fashionable ladies of the city joined in the petition for trees in the streets. And so at last the council proclaimed the Beautification Plan its own idea and retained Old Cedarbloom to plant and care for the project.

The gardener left his post with the prophet and, taking in pay an acre of land facing the lone tree, built a house where he could grow as old in years as he was in appearance, along with his wife and his newborn son.

The years passed quickly, and about the time Old Cedarbloom retired from his post as tree warden for the city, he became a grandfather to his grandson, Orson.

Orson was a simpleton who was said to be slightly deaf at an early age and, like his grandfather, suffered from incurable insomnia. Now Grandfather Cedarbloom thought this a great blessing, and on the Twenty-fourth of July, he took young Orson, who was prematurely gray, and showed him the tree and how to water it, and on the following day, Old Cedarbloom passed away.

Well, Grandfather Cedarbloom had kept the secret perforce, and his wife because of her oath, but nobody had told young Orson it was a secret at all, and before he knew it, people were coming to watch him water the tree in the dead of the night, especially on the Twenty-fourth of July. Grandmother Cedarbloom was so alarmed at this, that she began ailing and never went out to the tree again, but watched from her kitchen window.

After a while the city council heard of the lone tree and how it was attracting visitors from distant cities far and wide. So they decided to build a gazebo around the tree to make the spot easy to find, and to attract more visitors to the hotels and eateries of the city thereby.

Although he looked quite old and gray, young Orson was very green and inexperienced, and he took his celebrity to heart, sporting a great style of dress and turning the nightly watering into a ceremony with an ungainly polished water-can. But as any gardener would know, a roof overhead and cement underneath, while useful for mankind, are harmful for a tree. And Orson Cedarbloom, being a simpleton,

hardly noticed as the tree became sickly and branch after branch dried up. Quite apart from being alarmed, Orson was glad, since each woody branch could be cut into a hundred small relics and sold at a handsome price. But his prosperity was short lived, for at last the lone tree was only a stump, and the visitors no longer came in any number.

Grandmother Cedarbloom was grieved at the death of the tree, and she no longer had the will to live. Now, on the next Twenty-fourth of July, when Orson watered the stump and it failed to blossom, the few who had gathered scoffed and laughed him to scorn, all but one stranger. So Grandmother Cedarbloom hailed this one and told him the whole of the story, and then and there she passed away. Orson was left to wander the streets, carrying his oversized watering can. But the stranger told the story to my father, who told it to me. And any who doubt the tale can go to Sixth East Street, three or four blocks south, in the City of the Great Salt Lake, and there they will find grass and bushes growing down the center of the street and a stump standing in an old, forgotten gazebo. And that is the proof of the story.

