

Waters of Mormon

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WHEN SHE WENT DOWN INTO THOSE MORMON WATERS, she must have been eighty years old. No one exactly knew, but it'd been a lot of years, at least sixty, her daughter thought, from that other baptism in her native land, where she'd brought down the wrath of her father's gods and the sun had gone out.

The daughter was present for this one. The lights were electric and didn't flash. Dona Julita was dressed all in white, but the brightness shone more from her ivory teeth, brilliant eyes, and radiantly black skin. The daughter, for her part, was present only out of respect, because of the undeniable spiritual gifts that'd been present in her mother since the beginning, and that'd helped to raise her and later her own children within a sense of family that endured whole the scathing northern cold. For that reason alone, though privately she couldn't stand it, she'd publicly ignore the fact that a mere decade earlier her mother's new church had still denied full sanctity to black races, and sit with her mother beside those waters.

As Dona Julita descended into the font, resplendent and calm, her daughter recalled the stories that she'd been told as a child, spiritual tales that were always painted for her in vivid colors. The painter of those stories, herself never burdened with the gifts of written literacy that would to her daughter become a mixed blessing, had borne them straight from the heart, which faithfully learned and correctly interpreted whatever she heard. The biblical narrative, shaped on her tongue to the African-based Latin rhythms of her untutored experience, was fused with her own private *mythos*, which became indistinguishable from the other. To the child nourished at her knee, it was as if Dona Julita were in the flesh a new page from that timeless, spiritual saga.

Before she was anyone but simply Julita, skinny daughter of a native priest, given by her father to the worship of strange gods, she'd rebelled against that destiny, wading into the evangelist's muddy water, being lowered under it, rising up again in defiance of the black clouds that out of nowhere came between earth and sun. Her father, who in turn

had been given by an aunt to be "Satan's priest," as Julita would later tell it, had appeared as suddenly, mysteriously, on a hillock overlooking the pool. His arms were folded squarely. A piercing light shot out from the narrow slits of his eyes. His presence seemed to command the storm, which came forth in torrents in the instant before her immersion, subsiding immediately as she emerged from that burial to an even brighter light. In that moment, defeated by an unknown god, her father pronounced the curse that would remain in force long afterwards. For her infidelity she was abandoned to the grinding poverty that, years later upon his death, was only slightly eased when she finally married a man who, for all of his lack of warmth, could afford to keep the last of her children, a strange, moody girl who would take the mother with her to the far-away north.

The outlines of that poverty were visible on her skin, now, as the daughter watched her grasp, with one hand, the white missionary's wrist, leaving her other hand free to stop her nose against the water. The prayer would be pronounced in English, the daughter translating since no one else could. Afterwards, because her daughter couldn't be asked to go farther than her own will took her, Dona Julita would attend the meetings alone, understanding few words but drinking in a spirituality that to the daughter it seemed she already possessed in greater abundance than anyone there.

Those Mormons would continue to flutter around her, anyway, cute and black as she was, so much more like a biblical prophetess than anyone they'd ever imagined to really exist. Eventually, though, the language barrier and strain of small talk became more than most of them could sustain. When she was home ill, for months before her passing, they forgot to visit. Yet it was she, the daughter remembered, who'd asked to go there in the first place. She'd seen the place for the first time in a dream, recognizing it then when her daughter chanced to drive past it. Or had she seen it first and then dreamed it? In any case she'd then made her daughter take her there so she could be taught and re-baptized. Those missionaries had never experienced anything like it. The daughter, who didn't share their proselyting faith, nevertheless served as interpreter to the fulfilling of her mother's will.

One might have expected, then, that knowing her mother as she did, the daughter would've been prepared for the miracle that did happen at that baptism. They never spoke about it to each other, but she knew by what her mother didn't say that together they'd seen what the others couldn't. The heavens had opened to them, in fact, as the water coursed off her face, and the daughter knew that it was Dona Julita's father who, snatched from Satan by his daughter's prayers, and by his own consent, now extended his arms to her.

Then there were the lost children, living and dead, whom the mother's poverty had forced to be given away. Mother and daughter wept, and Dona Julita chattered joyously in her own language, though no one else in that room seemed to notice. Then mother and daughter saw Father and Son, who in their private vision were blacker than the brightest sliver of night, and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and assuming the form of a black madonna. It was then that the heavens rained fire across worlds, reconciling all of those beings who'd been thought to be lost from each other. What had been broken was made whole. Dona Julita smiled as never before. It was that smile, in fact, that after her mother's passing would sustain the daughter through all the months of loneliness.