

2006 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, First Place Winner

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

By Stephen Carter



SOMETIMES REVELATION WORKS THROUGH A void. Like the day I realized that I knew next to nothing about my little brother.

It's been said that early in my life I held baby Ronnie (number four of nine) in the hospital just a few hours after he was born. But I don't remember the incident. In fact, my memories of Ronnie seem more constructed than recalled, dominated by a composite image my mind probably cobbled together out of pictures from my mother's photo albums and thousands of sandy memories buried in my subconscious. Ronnie had dark brown hair and matching eyes, like my father's. Brown in the way your grandfather's overcoat was brown. A pliable, supple leather; warmth. The ancient and the infant. And an oval face with a hint of baby fat. A hint that never left.

But the feature attraction was Ronnie's mouth. We called it a Cheerio mouth. A perpetual O of many interpretations. An O



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of concentration; reciting the sacred Om; or caught by surprise, open for a sharp intake of breath. Or perhaps an awed whistle. But always, always his mouth was a tender shape. A mussel pried from its shell.

You'd think that being in the middle of the family, Ronnie would have been buffered from life by the caring siblings around him. But he wasn't.

One twilit evening, I followed baby Ronnie up the stairs at the back of the house. All of one year old, he was a semi-professional walker, still in early training on stair climbing. My mom called out for me to hold Ronnie's hand as he ascended the steps. Whether overly optimistic at Ronnie's skills, or pre-adolescently under-enthused in the cooperation department, I decided he could do it himself

Have you ever looked back on a particular incident and felt you can discern an intricate web of weights and pulleys wheeling away toward a foreordained outcome? It's the type of incident that makes you wonder if guardian angels have evil twins—the distant cousins of angels of destruction—yea, even the angels of stupid, preventable, lifetime guilt-inducing accidents. Well, this was one of those incidents.

For at just that second, little Ronnie tripped, driving his

round lips and baby teeth right into the ignorant corner of a concrete step. Blood, wailing, I-told-you-so's, and a front tooth that zombified into a dull gray during the course of the night.

I stared at the ruthlessly optimistic headlines on the cover of an old *Readers' Digest* holding down a rowdy batch of *Field and Streams*. Beneath the *Digest's* promises of immortalizing health tips and a daring rescue story lay a picture of a ravenous trout mere milliseconds from clamping its triangular jaws onto a deftly crafted fly, its subtle steel hook glinting inside. Little Ronnie's howls stabbed out of the dentist's office. The poor kid. Only one year old and getting his tooth yanked out. All my fault.

After the sacking of Ronnie's mouth, my dad carried him into the foyer. The dentist had bestowed a complimentary toothbrush upon my little brother, a reward for courage under pliers, and he had put it to immediate use, scrubbing the toothbrush vaguely in and out of his trampled mouth, staining the new, white bristles.

And that wasn't all Ronnie had to suffer. My sister has the distinction of accidentally helping him chop his pinky off with a slam of a door. He wore a cast for months afterward, and when it emerged, his finger had a question bent forever into its neck.

Through all this, Ronnie remained Ronnie. The quiet kid in the corner, hands in pockets, watching everything with his dark eyes, lips poised.

But as I said, somehow I missed him. Perhaps I was too busy fighting with David, or playing with the baby twins, or sinking into a state of New Wave-induced teenage torpor. Or being just plain gone. Any of these things.

WE SIT ON white chairs in a white room. Giant mirrors on the walls blaze at each other, reflecting our images infinitely until, oddly, they're lost in darkness. Each of us is wearing the sacred temple clothing. White robes; green satin aprons with fig leaves embroidered thereupon, reminding us of our mortality. Slippers to keep our feet warm and the white carpet sterile.

My mom and dad are here. My brother David and his wife Veronica. My sister Julie and her fiancé Paco.

We Mormons believe that each person who has lived on the earth needs to be sealed to one another. Linking together a long chain of human beings. To be more specific, Malachi said, "He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Malachi 4:6). We need the entire human race to be sealed together as one gigantic family in order to find ourselves perfected and brought into heaven. We're either saved together, or not at all. A tight spiritual ecosystem, we humans.

One Lord. One Faith. One Family.

Strangely, this ceremony is something we've never done together before. My parents married in the Salt Lake Temple in 1974. Since they married under the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, each of the children born to them was born under that covenant. We came into the world already sealed to our family. But it's only now, thirty years later, that

we're finally kneeling together, clasping each other's hands, performing the covenant that has been with us so long.

My mother and father kneel at the altar in the middle of the room and clasp hands. The mirrors carry their images as far as reflected light can take them. As if they transcend space. Then, as the sealer speaks the words of the ceremony, they transcend time. They are now, respectively, a man and woman who lived somewhere in Wales, 1869. They each take the hand of their spouse in place of the deceased, in the sight of God and angels, who will validate this marriage for eternity.

After a few ordinances, the sealer stops and tells us that in all likelihood, the people we are doing these sealings for are present in the room. That they are most likely rejoicing at becoming a member of the saved, at having become united with their families. And in a way, we're each a part of their family now.

We start sealing children to parents. My brother and sister-in-law become children to these two Welsh parents. Each kneels at the altar and places his or her hand on top of my parents' hands to be grafted into the family.

There are lots of names to do that day. We get them from Brazil, Mexico, France, and Germany. And everyone gets a turn at each post. My wife and I are sealed for a couple from Mexico. Then, strangely, my father kneels next to us and places his hand on top of ours. He's sealed to me as my son. This sudden switch of roles catches me off guard.

I remember that bizarre thing Jesus said. "I am the Father and the Son" (Ether 3:14).

In fact, by the time the sealings have ended, we've all been sealed to each other in a variety of ways. A celestial game of genealogical *Twister*. My sisters and brothers have become my daughters and sons, mothers and fathers. I've sired my own parents. If a string ran between us signifying each relationship we had just contracted, we'd be hopelessly entangled—or tightly bound.

*True to the faith that our parents have cherished;
True to the truth for which martyrs have perished.*

I WAS SO proud of you when you went on your mission," says Ron. Yeah. He's Ron now. Twenty-four years old, father of one, divorced of one, proud leader of his own death metal band. Smoker of cigarettes. Drinker of coffee. In two words: Black Sheep. All non-jailable acts that stop a person from being a temple-worthy Mormon, Ron has committed.

During that twenty-four-year period in which I had misplaced my brother, Ron had managed to move to Spokane under a vaguely gray cloud made up of "inappropriate" music, creative leather neckwear, midnight disappearances, parent-child stresses exacerbated by Ron's idiosyncratic view of financial responsibility, and finally a brush with death. A brush, Ron says, because his thick skull managed to withstand the impact of a swinging chair ala western saloon fight. I can still see the earthworm pink scar like a dripping of wax on his forehead.

"You know, I was running around in a white shirt and tie, too," Ron says, creaming his coffee, a serpent of white coiling

into its bitter black. “When I first got up here, I sold stuff door-to-door. I’d get into this shirt and tie, strap on this huge old duffel bag full of crap, and hit every store on the street.”

A piece of the world suddenly falls into place for me. I had always understood the “No Soliciting” signs on private residences, the ones we missionaries so studiously ignored (“But we’re not soliciting; we’re not *selling* anything!”), but not the ones on businesses. They were to discourage people like my brother.

“I’d sell books, toys, candy, all this stuff that they could buy and then sell at a ‘huge profit.’”



Why is it so hard to look? Perhaps because in the curve of the jaw, the squint of the eye, the hold of the shoulder, are sown pieces of you. There are a million filaments connecting you two, and when either of you change, there's a pull.

“So you’d just go into these stores. . . ”

“And I’d dump my crap on the counter and talk and talk and talk.” He takes a test sip of the coffee. “Man, I was a hard sell.” A glint of bemused pride flashes in his eye.

I try, but I just can’t picture Ron as a hard sell.

“It wasn’t easy,” he says. “It was totally against my personality, but I had to do it. I had to survive.”

Over a plate of sausage and eggs advertising the joys of trans fats, he tells me about the time he drove a supervisor to Montana, not realizing that his supervisor was leaving his wife to hook up with another woman.

“Course, when I got home, I found out my apartment building burned down. Everything I had was gone. My posters. CDs. Guitar.” Ron shrugs his shoulders after the manner of one who has ceased being surprised at the cards life

pulls from its sleeves.

In fact, as they couldn’t account for him for a few days, the police wondered if he had been killed in the fire.

“What did you do?”

Ron shrugs and bites off a piece of glistening sausage. “I lived on the streets.”

“Holy cow!” (I have a wife who keeps me on a *Sesame Street* vocabulary, otherwise that quote would have been rated PG-13.)

This has been a night of revelations. My brother was (1) a hard sell, (2) presumed dead, and (3) homeless. I look at him

a little harder. Though I’ve been staying with him for the past four days, I haven’t really looked at him. I’ve kept my childhood image of him in front of his face all this time.

I start to piece together his new face. A wispy Zen master goatee flows from the chin, eyes the same grandfather brown, but face leaner. Lips, curling next to each other as if for warmth, still occupy only a tiny space above the chin.

Why is it so hard to look? Perhaps because in the curve of the jaw, the squint of the eye, the hold of the shoulder, are sown pieces of you, bearing fruit you had never conceived of. There are a million filaments connecting you two, and when either of you change, there’s a pull.

The whole world is being dragged out from under me. Right here in Shari’s Diner. Maybe I’ll need more than just this strawberry milkshake.

THE GARAGE WHERE *Deaconess Fatality* sets up for the show is different from their home garage only in that the door can open. Our entertainers for the night consist of a lean, muscled drummer, a lead guitarist who resembles Cousin It after a few head-banging tunes, a rhythm guitarist steeped in a more classic rock era (read: the '80s), a screamer (they were once called vocalists) decked out in eyeliner, and of course, Ron on bass guitar. About a dozen people show up, most of them Ron's night stocker friends from Wal-Mart.

Transformation gives birth in small places. Socrates in the streets, Jesus in the stable, Joseph Smith in the grove of trees, the Sex Pistols at St. Martin's College.

As they begin their machinations, the members of the band, previously a stubbly clutch of misfits, slowly merge, flexing into one organism. Bound by the veins of their equipment, soon the 9000 pistons of the beat snap between them, muscle sweat sanctifying the air. We inhale.

There's a reason *Deaconess Fatality* turns down the lights for a concert. They generate their own.

*And as I answer the darkness of the unknown,
I will answer without fear.
I can feel my soul is changing,
I can feel my soul is changing.*

Until now, the beating of my heart has been a tepid thing. The contours of my breath, candy and flaccid. My soul fat upon Fred Meyer. But behold: the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; a vision rages in the desert; a double-pedaled bass drum rips the heavens asunder!

The cup overflows, and the twelve who stand nearby, yea event Wal-Mart associates, car wash attendants, and burger flippers, receive of a fullness: nothing withheld. Sealed in body, spirit, and acceleration, we dance on the threshold of revelation.

THE NIGHT IS clear and quiet. Not a car engine breaks the silence. Not a cricket chirps. Well, I guess I can hear a bit of ringing, somewhere far away in the background. Yeah, there's definitely a ringing.

The band members are dismantling their equipment after inflicting epic sonic damage onto an unsuspecting Spokane suburb. Not being of the death metal crowd, I had not been aware that, lacking a crash helmet, a wad of unused toilet paper in each ear is a proper accessory for these functions—along with a beer in hand, tank top, metal studs, rings, and other hardware variously inserted into your choice of a number of different tender morsels of your body, plus a high tolerance for unintelligible lyrics.

Ron stands in the garage of my transfiguration, smoking and talking with a friend. He tilts his head back and forms his lips into an O. I can see his entire life in that gesture. Then he does something I can't quite catch, and from his lips wings a languid circle of smoke. It flows from his mouth like liquid, like a white serpent, like the slow whip of the northern lights. I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

"You can blow smoke rings?"

He smiles and shrugs.

I set up a work light to point toward the ceiling and mount my video camera on a tripod.

"Blow them into the light," I say. Ron thinks it's funny, but he humors me.

I watch the smoke's fetal ballet, its blind, prophetic paths, as it conjures its way through the viewfinder.

JULIE'S DECISION TO get married is quite a revolution. Her most intimate contact with boys until now has been to bat them away with a behemoth backpack. This guy Paco must be made of strong stuff. But also, this is the first time almost the entire family has been together in a year. We've kind of dispersed, as modern families seem to. Thus we've spent countless hours during the past few days racing in the hotel pool, stumping each other with questions from *Battle of the Sexes*, and generally acting like little kids. Even Ron is here. He took three days off work and drove twelve hours with his girlfriend in a rented car to make the event. No small sacrifice on his part.

Our grandparents are here too. The ones from my dad's side. And this is important. It's important because Grandma has been working nonstop for the past six months to get herself worthy to go to the temple.

"I've just spent too many weddings waiting outside the temple," she says. She wants to be a part of the family. She wants to see that marriage ordinance again. The one that bound her to her husband more than fifty years ago. The one that promises to keep her family together in heaven forever. The one Julie and Paco are just about to enter. This is a time for all of us to be together. To bind ourselves to God, and thus to each other.

THERE HAVE BEEN five weddings in our family. Ron's was the first one out of the temple. It was one of those affairs with protocol plastered everywhere. Brief, blunt, social rituals. Giddy words flying hard and fast—that is, when the air isn't altogether dead. You know, the way a realtor works on a "fixer-upper" for one weekend to improve its curb appeal.

Ron's future parents-in-law lived in a house surrounded by a pasture that had been flooded by a nearby river. The day before the wedding, for the heck of it, Ron and I grabbed a canoe and paddled out into the middle of the pasture.

It was one of those moments that should mark the turning point in Hallmark holiday specials. I, the straight-arrow brother, with a mission, temple marriage and legitimate child under my belt, was supposed to reach out and help Ron see the world through a different pair of glasses. Give him the motivation to turn around and make something better of his life.

But somehow I misplaced the script. My missionary instincts failed me. Turns out we were just two guys sitting out in the middle of an impromptu pond.

The Hallmark camera crew packed up and went home.

For lack of a better plan, we decided to paddle to the river that had overrun its banks. A fine time to discover that Ron had never technically been in a canoe before. I was still knocking the rust off my Boy Scout skills trying to remember how to steer the

darn thing when, sensing two suckers, the current caught us.

It was fun at first, zipping along the river. I felt a certain sense of freedom and adventure. But our lack of experience caught up with a disturbing lack of finesse. We crashed through some overhanging bushes and saw that we were heading straight for a culvert. Maybe high enough to let the canoe through. Maybe. And doubtless spattered with slugs, snails, spiders, and other icky sticky things.

It was worrying.

Ron made a grab for a bush. I paddled frantically for the shore.

Finally getting my chance to be a wise big brother, I cried, "We might have to jump!"

"My new boots!" Ron cried back.

The culvert sucked us closer and closer to its dark mouth.

Two idiots in the same boat.

JULIE AND PACO walk toward the temple door. Hands clasped. The Portland temple is white, an arc light to the world, projecting God upon the sky. Being weird, the couple has forgone the tie and dress. Instead, they have donned long white shirts that looked vaguely Muslim over their slacks. To me, they look like modern Nazarites, children of covenant. They're travelers now. Home will soon be in each other.

I can't quite bring myself to go in with them. Ron and his girlfriend are sitting out in his car sharing a cigarette. I toy with the idea of staying out with him. But I wonder how it would look.

From my family's point of view, it would be suspicious, perhaps even an act of betrayal. To come all this way to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime event and then duck out at the last minute. You don't dis God, His ordinances, the salvation of the human race, or your sister (with or without her backpack).

I don't know how it would look from Ron's point of view. A needless sacrifice? A brotherly gesture?

From God's point of view?

I don't know. I don't know at all.

I stand at Ron's car window, making small talk. Feeling like an idiot. I'm supposed to be in the temple. I dressed for it; I prepared for it. My family is in there.

Most of it.

Ron exhales a stream of white smoke from circled lips. It curls like a fern into the air. A breeze catches it and carries it toward me. It hits my white shirt and settles, sealing itself among the fibers.

"You'll be here when I come out?" I ask.

"If you don't take too long," Ron shrugs. Then he turns and grins at me.

So I walk into the temple. I feel its weight, its buoyancy. An elderly man dressed in a white suit looks at my recommend and sends me through. Straight into the house of God.

A filament of tobacco smoke trails from my body. ☹



FAMILY GATHERING

Aunts and cousins gather at the kitchen table
with stories of extinguished tribes,
repeating the life of Kitty Grasshopper,
grandmother's grandmother on my mother's side.

Before the white men, all Shasta women had the art
of tanning deerskin, scraping hair and chewing
stiffness out of the hides. They buried them in thin
loam beneath the pines, dug them up when the time
was right, and chewed again. Before she'd blunted
her teeth completely, Kitty walked out of the woods
and found Pierre, son of a son of an escaped Acadian.

Details surface, are contradicted across the table,
or conceded as they knit their tales. They lose the thread,
match colors, then carry on as if taking turns at hand work.

Back to great, great, grandpa Milo, burned out of Illinois,
and Mary Ann, his eleventh wife whose mother
went running from the Great Hunger, and her parents
who could clearly recall the heel of Cromwell.
On and on they go, weaving their way back
to longboats, through ancient clan connections,
to speculation on some nameless Roman girl
carted off by Visigoths. The blood may run, they say,
back to Moabites, Sumerians, and citizens of Ur.

They pause when someone puts on a kettle. Chewing the fat
is thirsty work. And in the lull they silently assent to put
away the tales until the time has come to dig them up again.

—KEN RAINES

