

Sacrifice

by Hugh Barlow

It was the winter vacation that my boys had always dreamed of. We had finally been able to visit my mother in upstate New York for Christmas. While my oldest was born in Nebraska, he does not remember snow, having moved from there when he was only a year and a half old. My youngest was born in deep south Texas and had never seen snow. Over the years, I had traveled to New York for weddings and funerals but since we could not afford plane tickets for the entire family to go, my wife decided to stay home and watch the boys while I was sent to represent the family. My boys would express their jealousy upon my return each time. They were especially jealous when I came back from a Saint Patrick's Day wedding on Long Island, New York. The city had experienced one of the freak "Nor' Easters" that the East Coast is famous for, and they had eight inches while I was there.

My wife needed several weeks to study for certification at work, so she gave us permission to take a trip to visit my mother. It was actually cheaper to drive than to buy three tickets on an airplane, so the boys and I rented a car and drove across country. The trip up to New York was uneventful but educational, and the visit with my mother was everything that the boys had hoped for. While we were there, nature co-operated by dumping several feet of snow on us. My boys were ecstatic. When it came time to leave, the boys begged me to stay. We had to go.

The winter storm that had seemed so peaceful and bucolic at my mother's country home followed us, and the farther south we drove, the more violent it became. The violence of the storm reached a crescendo as my boys and I were nearing a small unincorporated town in the middle of nowhere. We had somehow gotten lost in near white-out conditions, and the only way I could drive and stay on the road was to steer by the shrubs and weeds that were sticking up on

the unkempt ditches on either side of the road. Of the road itself, nothing could be seen. After several harrowing near accidents and after having driven off the road due to icing under the snow, I was looking forward to stopping at the nearest town to wait out the storm.

Crossing the tracks and the little steel trestled bridge over a small river brought us into sight of the first structures of the un-named town. I saw no sign welcoming us and giving the population as I had for countless of other small towns my boys and I had driven through on our adventure. With the snow, it was possible that we missed the sign, but we were right at the edge of town where such things were traditionally posted, and yet none was in evidence. The first buildings we saw were on the side of a little hill, and looked like old-fashioned rooming houses. There were no signs to welcome guests, nor were there any windows in the structures that greeted us. Each building was a uniform gray that seems to transmute itself from whitewashed structures after years of neglect. Surrounding the windows and doors of each structure was the tell-tale charring that comes from a fire that does not fully consume. It seemed that a limited form of arson had struck the structures on this edge of town. At the foot of these structures, and at the bottom of the hill, was a small service station. It too, saw years of neglect, with the pumps rusting and the windows boarded up. I pinned my hopes on the interior of the town, and drove on using the only street that seemed to go anywhere. Over the hill we traveled until we saw the small steeple of the town's only church. The only activity in the town seemed to be centered on this one edifice. There were fresh tire tracks in the snow and there were several cars parked at the curb. One was obviously a police car, so my boys and I decided to stop and visit with the local congregation and ask directions to the nearest hotel. We figured that at the worst, we would be stuck at the church until the weather let up. It was not the worst place we could imagine being stranded.

The church building was a rustic structure made of rough-cut lumber that over-lapped in the clap-board fashion. The building itself was unpainted, but the boards were a weathered gray that only came from years of exposure to weather. The steeple towered over the entrance which was, oddly, to the side of the building and not the front. At the top of the steeple stood a crooked, broken, and weathered cross that seemed to remain attached to the roof mainly through faith. The cross arms of the cross were broken where they met the upright, and the two arms hung limply as if in defeat. The cross looked like one of those old "Peace Signs" I remembered seeing as a child that the hippies at the commune down the road used to adorn themselves with. The stained glass windows were out of place being the only elaborate parts of the edifice. The windows were exquisitely done, but were eerily dark considering that the building was currently occupied. My boys and I walked down the sidewalk to the entrance of the worship hall and let ourselves into the sanctuary. As we entered the building, we noticed that there was no heat. It looked like the building had been abandoned for quite some time as there were cobwebs that clung to the corners and across most of the pews. The pews themselves were rather odd in that the varnish had the cracked and charred look of finished wood that had been close enough to a fire that the finish had charred, but the wood itself had not. Each of the pews had this look uniformly along it's length and throughout the sanctuary. The interior walls of the church were made of unpainted four by eight sheets of plywood that were screwed into place. It was as if the original walls had been torn out and replaced with the temporary plywood sheets years before, and no-one had bothered to finish the renovation. The air was filled with the smell of old smoke, dust, and mildew.

I was surprised to find that the alter at the front of the sanctuary was covered with what looked like strawberry cool-aid that had been frozen in cascades of icicles. There was a spreading pool of red ice at the base of the alter that would flow across the floor as soon as the weather warmed enough to allow it. It was disgraceful to allow a

sanctuary to come to such a condition, and my boys and I were preparing to leave when a young boy entered the sanctuary from the back and approached the alter. My boys and I were in a dark corner when the lad entered, and we were temporarily stunned by his appearance. We watched quietly as the boy neared the alter and took off his jacket. It was a flimsy thing for the weather, and he tossed it loosely on the back of the first row of pews. As he stood near the alter shivering, a short, fat man with greasy hair and a sheriff's uniform came in through the same entrance that the youth had used.

"Emily! Get in here with that chicken!" the fat man bellowed. A small skinny girl came in struggling with a chicken. Pin feathers were flying everywhere, and the dust motes swirled in the wan light that the colored glass stingily allowed to enter in streaks. The chicken's protests went unheeded as the sheriff grabbed the protesting bird by it's legs, laid it on it's side on the alter, and produced a wickedly large blade. In a flash, the blade severed the chicken's head from it's neck and it's protests stopped. The bird jerked spasmodically and sprayed blood on the alter, the sheriff and the children as the fat man looked beatifically up to the ceiling and said, "May our lord accept this blood sacrifice as an atonement for our sins!" At this point the boy began to roll up his sleeves, and the greasy man gave the chicken to the girl.

"Give this bird to your mama, girl. Have her cook it up for dinner. Hurry up now, hear?" The girl scurried off as the man turned his attention to the young boy. Our attention also turned to the boy, and we spied old scars and as yet unhealed cuts up and down his arms starting from his wrists to his elbows. All of the cuts were covered by the long sleeves of his shirt, but when exposed, it was obvious that the cutting had been going on for quite some time. The boy had a sickly look to him that hinted that he suffered from ill health for a long time. The greasy man looked at both arms before choosing one. He held the chosen limb above the frozen alter and said, "May our lord accept this blood sacrifice for our health." Once again, the blade flashed, and the blood flowed freely from the new gash on the

boy's arm. At this time, my youngest yelped, and the sheriff looked up, peered darkly into our hiding place, and made as if to come and check the corner out closely. My boys and I turned to the door in the corner nearest us and fled into the bowels of the building. Like most churches I have seen, there was a series of small offices behind the podium, and at the far back of the building was an exit. We fled toward this as we heard the pounding of the fat man pursuing us.

As we burst out through the back door, we discovered the rest of the family gathered around an outdoor grill. There was a woman sitting near the fire plucking the feathers off of the first sacrificial victim while surrounded by several children. The skinny girl named Emily was clinging to her mother's dress and stared at us with curiosity. We fled in the opposite direction and skirted the front of the church, slipping in the snow and on the ice. As we hit the front corner of the edifice, the fat man burst out and yelled, "Get 'em!" We scrambled faster. We got to the car as the fat man reached the sidewalk. I jammed the key into the ignition as the boys scrambled into the back seat. I did not wait to strap on the seat belt, but started the car and yanked it into drive as the sheriff lurched toward the driver's side front fender. He was struggling to take his gun from his belt as I struck him a glancing blow with the car. The fat man fell on his back as I raced down the street. I watched in the mirror as he flopped about like a turtle until he found purchase and got up on his feet. He staggered toward his police car as we topped the rise and I lost sight of him. I tossed my phone to my oldest boy and told him to call 911. I could hear him as he tried to contact the authorities. He kept trying, but the reception in the area was poor, and he was unable to maintain contact as we raced along. As I topped a rise, I noticed the flash of blue and red in the mirror and decided to accelerate. My only hope was to outrun the sheriff until I reached civilization. Blowing snow obscured my view as I raced down the frozen highway. I prayed for God's assistance as I tried to outrun what I was sure was one of Satan's minions.

