

THE MYSTERY
OF INIQUITY

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A Jon Mote Mystery

Daniel Taylor

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B O O K S

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For Fleming Rutledge, in gratitude for a lifetime of good work.

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth,
and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil
continually.

—Genesis 6:5

There is a wound in the flesh of human life that scars when it heals
and often enough never seems to heal at all.

—Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

Evil is a vast excrescence, a monstrous contradiction that cannot be
explained but can only be denounced and resisted wherever it appears.

—Fleming Rutledge

Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind . . . , that I may
discern between good and evil

—I Kings 3:9

This little Babe so few days old
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at His presence quake,
Though He Himself for cold doth shake;
For in this weak unarmed wise
The gates of hell He will surprise.

—Robert Southwell, from "New Heaven, New War" (sixteenth century)

Abandon all hope,
ye who enter here.

—Dante, *Inferno*

Darkness. Eyes adjust slowly, but ears hear what no one wants ever to hear—muffled screams, groans, the thudding of metal pipes sounding dully against flesh. The narrow corridor is long, dimming into black. Cold cement walls coated with wet—likely seeping water, but your mind insists it is blood. Someone behind you has a fistful of your hair and is pushing you forward, forcing your chin to your chest. You want to say you are innocent, but no one, by definition, is innocent in this mausoleum of all hope. All are guilty. All will suffer.

You pass doors of small cells off the corridor on both sides. Each one is occupied. In each one a body is being rendered. You try not to imagine what awaits in your own cell, a room set aside for you, just for you, its only guest. Just as well. In this place, imagination is a beggar.

Your guide, a sinister Virgil, pauses in front of a door. You think to break away and run, a sign of your witless desperation. Run where? Deeper into hell?

The escort kicks the door open and shoves you in, letting go of your hair. A single, bare bulb hangs by a wire from the ceiling. Other wires, their metal ends exposed, dangle from the walls. A powerful-looking man, in every way, greets you with a smile.

“Welcome.”

He holds a filleting knife, blade a sliver of silver, spinning it nonchalantly in his hand.

He asks you no questions. He is not interested in a confession. Or information. He is interested only in your fear—and in making you pay. You do not know for what.

An evil place. A place of evil.

But not the only one.

ONE

Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.

—George Burns

I START EACH MORNING with a cup of evil.

Death, disaster, corruption, violence—all four horsemen of the apocalypse, and many others besides. More like a stampede of the apocalypse.

This cup of evil is called the morning newspaper, a daily miscellany of human failure and natural calamities of every kind, curated to highlight what's wrong with the world—and with us. Us as in humanity, human beings, who once were thought to be the pinnacle of creation, then of evolution, but about which we now have grave, grave doubts. We're no longer thought to be as good as the animals. And yet we congratulate and coddle and pamper ourselves incessantly. Never have self-esteem and self-loathing mixed so freely at the same moment. We love ourselves, we hate ourselves, we frighten ourselves.

Okay, maybe we don't individually hate ourselves—that's far too medieval—but we hate our collective selves. We disparage "the system" that we ourselves invented. We vilify the past, throw darts at the present, and handwring over the future. We're quite sure planet earth would be a much better place if we weren't here—or at least if those other people weren't here.

I often wonder why I start each morning this way. I never feel better after reading the paper or more equipped to face my day. It's more likely to irritate than to soothe, to tell me half-truths than whole truths. And yet I

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read it, as they say, religiously. For decades I have had no official religion, but morning coffee and the morning paper in a more or less quiet nook are a daily rite I perform as devotedly as any believer before altar, shrine, or holy mountain.

That the newspaper is being replaced by the internet merely means that it can all be updated minute by minute. This is not progress.

When I say “quiet nook,” I’m speaking a half-truth myself. Zillah and I have kids now, three of them in fact, all arriving in unison just over four years ago. There *are* no quiet nooks in our house. I only have domestic quiet when I’m mowing the lawn, counting the roar of the mower as white noise, much less invasive than the random yelps of the triplets when one of them has lost momentary possession of a toy, or demands attention to a hurt, or simply expresses unfocused dissatisfaction with the universe. Or sometimes just screams excitedly for the hell of it.

For decades the offenses to quiet came mostly from within—voices, the plague of hyperactivity in the mind, the *Sturm und Drang* of turbulent emotions. Those are quieter now—not gone, not exorcised completely, but more like occasional visitors rather than the masters of the house. The voices, in fact, seem to be gone for good. (Knock on engineered, faux-wood linoleum.)

Yes, I feel myself getting increasingly less interesting. And that’s all for the good.

I’m still editing for Luxor House, occasionally hearing a bit of news about the folks on that ill-fated Bible translation project. Only half of the original committee are still with us. We lost Adam and Lilith in the midst. Cate passed away before her trial could take place, and Dr. Jerry wasn’t long in chasing after her. (I heard that he managed somehow to turn her in his own mind into a martyr rather than a murderer. Whatever one needs to believe, I guess.) I exchange an email here and there with Robert Green on company business but haven’t heard from Martin since I shook his hand as we sadly departed Mount Carmel Lodge.

If my work career is more or less in a steady state, my home life is example number one of chaos theory. Having children alters reality. It’s not, “The same life plus one.” It’s, “I don’t recall signing up for this.”

And triplets triple the troubles. No, “troubles” is too negative. Let’s say opportunities verging on challenges. Like naming them, for instance, which commenced when modern science informed us that we were birthing three, two boys and a girl. Named before they even arrived. Most parents labor

over coming up with one name. And for us it's not just three—it's really six at least, plus how to navigate the family name, for some a major ideological and relational issue in our jumpy times.

I wanted to avoid silver spoon names, increasingly chosen these days by plasticware parents. No Lance, Carlton, Blake, Blair, Chance, Sterling, Clarice, Sheldon, Hugh, or Tulip for me. When I said so, Zee smiled.

"Who are you, Jon, the Naming Police? Besides, Lance isn't a silver spoon name."

She pauses, then laughs.

"It's a low-budget, B movie, 1950s Hollywood-leading-man name."

Naming the boys did not prove too troublesome. Dennis and Daryl are straightforward, because we simply extended family names another generation. The names would live on a bit, even if the men did not, a highly limited immortality. But the one girl of the threesome was more difficult.

Zillah wanted a power name. She subscribed to the ancient idea that a name creates a path. It tells the cosmos what to expect from this child, and it tells the child—before her eyes are even focusing—what is expected of her. Giving a kid the wrong name sets them up for a diminished life.

So Zee went to the internet—where else?—and made a list of female names that mean some version of strong. Turns out there's a cornucopia of them—from all times and in all cultures: Audrey, Valerie, Carla, and Adira—which would go well phonetically with Dennis and Daryl. (And Zee has a Jewish ancestor, so the Hebrew would be nice.) Then there is Carla, Ebba, Andrea, and Rainey. (I liked Rainey—unusual but not weird, as opposed to what you get when namers are trying too hard.) Of course, one also had to consider Valencia and Valentina, Philomena, Gesa, Karleen, Millicent, and Gertrude. (No—Gertrudes have rightly been banished from the twenty-first century.) Not to mention—but I will—Keren, Lena, Matilda, and Bernadette.

And then there's Elfrida which apparently means "elf power." I demanded to be allowed at least one veto. Zee didn't disagree. And when Brianna came up, I wondered for a moment where Judy's and my Brianna might be today. She had lived up to her name for sure, but it hadn't saved her from a broken heart.

One day, while we are going through the list, I make an incautious observation.

"With all these strongly named women around, you'd think women would be running the world."

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Zillah answers quicker than a frog zapping a fly.

“We are.”

I risk a “how so?”

“‘The hand that rocks the cradle.’”

I finish the line.

“‘Rules the world.’ Bad poetry but probably true.”

“We’ve moved on from rocking the cradle to rocking the boat, but we still do most of the cradle rocking. And washing. And cooking. Women still create the feast. We just don’t get our fair share of it when it comes time to eat.”

Ah yes, Virginia’s observation that women get the chicken leg and if there’s a draft, sit in it.

“Also true, Zee.”

I am about to point out that Zee herself doesn’t do a hell of a lot of cooking. (She and I mostly graze for meals rather than prepare them. It’s amazing what you can find in the back of the refrigerator—especially if you’re not too picky about leftovers and expiration dates.) But greater parity here and there cannot be allowed to stand in the way of a call for universal justice.

So how did we end up with Zora instead of one of the strength names? Zee just announced it one day.

“She’s going to be Zora.”

I’m happy enough but still curious.

“Why Zora?”

“She was a great writer and a great woman. And I don’t care what the name actually means, she was strong as hell.”

Fine by me. It appeals to my love of words—their meanings, their sounds, their rhythms, their histories—that the two women in the house will alliterate, perhaps on all sorts of levels: Zillah and Zora. It seems destined.

After making the announcement, Zee grows quiet. She speaks as to someone not present.

“Daphne was the one who introduced me to Zora.”

A long pause. Zee’s eyes are watching the past—the past in which Daphne took her own life.

“Said *Eyes* is a book I needed to read.”

I put my hand on her shoulder but say nothing.

Ghosts.

I won't soon forget the first time Judy saw the triplets. She had joined me in the hospital waiting room while Zillah did the work. At first, Zee didn't want me in the delivery room. Maybe thought it was a bit too conventional. Or perhaps that the last thing she needed was a twitchy, hovering husband. But as the pain escalated, she asked for me to be called in. And after they were all swaddled and placed in a line, Zee called for Judy.

It's an emotionally complicated moment for all of us.

Judy studies each of the three in turn. After evaluating Dennis, she nods. After studying Zora, she smiles approvingly. But with Daryl, she lingers. She grows solemn. She reaches out and strokes his still wet hair. Judy looks slowly up at Zillah and me, then touches Daryl's face and speaks.

"He . . . he looks like . . . I should say . . . he looks like me."

Zee and I both have tears in our eyes. Judy continues, gazing back at our child.

"Yes, Daryl looks like me. He has my . . . my eyes."

She half smiles.

"He looks like his . . . his ahntie Judy. Like me."

She turns to us again.

"Is that okay?"

Zee answers, because I can't speak.

"It's not just okay, Judy. It's good. It's very good. We are proud that Daryl looks like you. We wouldn't have it any other way."

Zee nudges me. I nod. The three of us silently hug, holding each other for a long time. Then Judy reaches out and puts a hand on Daryl.

"I . . . I am your ahntie, I am. I will help . . . help take care of you, D . . . D . . . Daryl. And I will . . . I should say . . . help take care of Dennis and Zora, too, I will."

Zee accepts her pledge.

"That will be great, Jude. We're going to need all the help we can get."