

The devil behind glass

This particular event in my adventure of life is a sad one; sad because it touches on the emotional havoc reaped by the institutional church. I know that much has changed since those early immigrant years, but much remains to be done. The true church offers its members unconditional love, complete freedom, and unwavering assurance. When I venture along the road of faith, I reflect sometimes on the fact that I have been set free from institutional religion and I rejoice in the fact that I have experienced true faith. But sometimes, I am also reminded of the pain so many have suffered at the hands of men who thought themselves to be executioners for God. This story is set in 1959, in Wallaceburg, but to keep this sad story in context, I must go back to the Netherlands, about a year before the end of World War II.

Like most seasons, Autumn of 1959, appeared to be no different than previous seasons. A timely Indian Summer had granted a postponement of winter, and everything seemed to glow in yellow, orange, and sienna. It was a favourite time of the year. Gone were the sweltering summer nights and days, when the air was crowded with pesky mosquitos. Thoughts would turn to baking, sweaters, and piles of smouldering leaves, whose smoke filled the air with a fragrance that can only be described as an *Ontario Fall*. Autumn was also a time when church elders resumed their devoted task of visiting all the parishioners in town.

My parents had never been particularly religious, except for the outward appearances of pious duty associated with orthodox Calvinism, that religion of works which permeated Dutch soil during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. To explain how Calvinism had affected my father and mother, I must go back to 1944.

Their church membership in the Netherlands was in the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk* known elsewhere as the Christian Reformed Church. My mother was a member of the *Herformde Kerk* known as the Reformed Church. Both denominations had their roots in the stifling doctrines of orthodox Calvinism, a protestant faith associated with the Reformation that swept Europe in the early fifteen hundreds spearheaded by Martin Luther. The Netherlands had become a bastion of male-dominated, reformed theology, which in turn birthed many churches. Now, one would think that with a few minor doctrinal differences, all these different churches of the Reformation would get along? Never! The Dutch churches were notoriously divisive, a cancer that grew over centuries, birthing bitter rivalries over stupid man-made doctrines. My mother in 1944, a day and age when women had no voice in the church, had to commit herself therefore to my father's religion. It was all part of a complex religious duty that meant my mother had to "change churches," and leave the Reformed Church to join the Christian Reformed Church. The climate of faith in those days was high in doctrinal correctness and very low in grace and mercy. My father and mother came face to face with the ugly side of religion during an episode in their lives that left bitter scars for decades. My father and mother were married when my mother was pregnant with Beert, my older brother, their first child. In the vernacular of common speech, they "had to get married," which for the *uninformed* meant they had sex before marriage. Whether they loved each other was never asked. They had violated church order. But for Chris and Cornelia their love for one another was never in question.

It happened one year before World War II ended.

God only knows what emotions ran rampant in the lives of people whose daily existence was plagued with fear, doubt, and terrifying Nazi oppression. My mother suffered from repeated nightmares about allied and German bombers flying low over her house. She had a crushing fear

of bombs that threatened to fall before they reached their target. The news was frequently filled with accounts of allied fighters and bombers that didn't make it because of enemy anti-aircraft fire, mechanical failures, and inexperienced crews. My mother's fear was very real. So were the fears of my father, my grandparents, and everyone else who lived in western Europe.

Without doubt, the love and affection my father and mother had for each other, provided a moment's escape from terror. In their wartime anxieties many people turned to each other for comfort and hope. My father and mother were married in 1944, and they remained deeply and devotedly in love with each other until my mother died in 1987.

Nevertheless, the church, rather than showing some grace and mercy, or any compassion and forgiveness, insisted the entire world must know about my father and mother's indiscretion, their "sin" as the elders called it. First, they were required to confess their adulterous affair before the elders of the church, who amidst the smoke of their suffocating Dutch cigars, no doubt made the couple recall every juicy detail of their amorous encounters somewhere along the dike between Zwolle and S'Herenbroek, a small rural village where my mother was employed as a grade school teacher. But forgiveness behind closed doors was not enough for the church. In addition to private confessions, my parents were publically humiliated when forced to confess their "sin" before the entire congregation. And it was a very large congregation too. My father never forgot the humiliation and he always bore the scars of their "brotherly love" in the form of bitterness and sarcasm. Whenever he told me the story, his voice would grow cold like steel. Yet, miraculously, he did not abandon his religious upbringing. Mom and dad faithfully attended church, paid their dues to meet church budget requirements, and said the *Lord's Prayer* at meal times. But, it was all religion. Not until some thirty-five years later would they discover the difference between the Christian "religion" and true followers of Jesus Christ. The discovery set them free.

Now I'm back again in the late fifties.

And so, on a dark autumn evening in 1959, the elders of the Wallaceburg Christian Reformed Church arrived at the Verstraete residence on Forhan Street. The meeting was usually a formal one. The family sat around the diningroom table. A brief prayer was said followed by what can best be described as an interrogation. Looking back, it seemed those elders really enjoyed their self-proclaimed position of authority, and they loved to use that authority to pry into family matters that were none of their business. But, how did they know so much? More sons spying at local dances and movie theatres?

And so the interrogation began that evening.

"Gerrit, you were seen in the movie theatre last Friday evening. Is that correct?"

They had "caught me" going to a Brigitte Bardot movie. Keep in mind that in those days, when any part of a movie appeared to be somewhat risky, such as a brief nude scene, of which there were very few and never full nudity, the projector lens automatically went out of focus. All you could see was a blurred image with no detail. Such was the case of nudity in this particular Brigitte Bardot movie. She was the reigning sex idol in Europe during the nineteen fifties. No preacher ever spoke about white-collar crime, corporate crime, spousal abuse, or substance abuse, but sex, my God, it bordered on the unforgiveable sin. So, I was caught seeing a movie which in its approximate hour-and-a-half length had only one nude scene that lasted no more than ten seconds. In fact, I remember the scene as a quick peek of the camera through a keyhole to watch a woman stand up in a bathtub. The whole image was a big fuzzy blur.

I managed a daring reply as the elders waited for my "confession," while they anticipated the usual denial during times when their questions seemed so invasively probing and personal.

"Yes," I replied, "but, it was *your son* who was there also. He watched the entire movie as well, including the fuzzy nude scene, and it was he who no doubt saw me and reported me."

My reply fell on deaf ears and they quickly changed the subject.

"Have you been reading the Bible regularly?" they asked everyone

We all nodded an obligatory yes.

My father replied, as he always did, with a monotonous, "yes!"

My father was very familiar with these *home visitations*, having served as elder himself in the church. That evening he chose not to be controversial. This would be a peaceful evening. There would be other times to deal with the bitterness in his heart towards religious duty. To tow the party line and get it over with, was his attitude. Serve the customary coffee and pound cake and be gone. However, such would not be the case that autumn evening in 1959.

A few months before their visit, my sister bought the family's first television, a small black and white unit. Colour had not yet been developed. I can even remember when television was first invented. A neighbour on our street in Zwolle had bought a television. As children we would hide in the hedge behind their house and carefully peer through the window to catch a glimpse of this incredible wonder. I found it hard to believe. "What's this, moving pictures right in your own home?"

But here we were in Canada, years later, in new country, a land of milk and honey and a land of television. When the Verstraete family sat down in front of their new set, it was an escape from the rigours of early immigrant life. Somehow, life on Forhan Street in Wallaceburg had a silver lining. We were so enamored by our new television, I do not recall ever fighting over programs. My mother watched *General Hospital* in the afternoons. My father watched boxing and nature programs, and in between we filled our time with *Hockey Night in Canada*, *The Jack Benny Show*, *The Honeymooners*, *The Three Stooges*, and other more serious fare.

That fateful night, however, was the only time I ever saw my dad turn on our visitors.

The two elders of the church were still seated around our diningroom table, their interrogation almost over. As if inspired by the Spanish Inquisition, a historic event that still brings painful memories to the Dutch national conscience, one elder stretched his bony arm and pointed a jabbing-stiff finger at the new television set in our livingroom. His lips quivered and with a voice as authoritatively religious as he could muster he hissed.

"The devil is in that box!"

We were stunned.

His condemnation stung like the bite of an angry hornet. Suddenly we felt as if we had been accused of the grossest of sins, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Would we go to hell because we owned a TV? My sister had worked hard and long honest hours at the Wallaceburg Dominion Glass Factory. The set was fully paid for. Fearful thoughts raced through my head. Would my father fall on his knees and beg for forgiveness? Would our brand-new television be confiscated and thrown on Calvin's trash heap of man's utter depravity along with the thousands of art treasures that they judged as ungodly? But my father stood up to speak.

His words were simple, powerful and non-negotiable.

I will never forget what he said. He turned to the elder and spoke in an icy voice.

"Don't worry, in our home 'the devil is behind glass'!"

Somehow the answer lost impact when translated from Dutch, because in its original use, "behind glass," meant it was harmless.

Then my father abruptly dismissed the elders, assuring them that the devil was not about to escape from behind the glass of our television set to be set free to torment the Verstraete

family. In the 1950's, television picture tubes were still safely mounted behind a thick piece of plate glass. It was double protection. Even if the devil escaped from the picture tube, he'd still be stuck behind a formidable plate-glass barrier.

The following year we had different elders for home visitation.

Not all home visitations were bad. Many were friendly and hospitable.

I continued to see the elder's son at the movies until I moved out of town to the big city.

"Nothing is new under the sun," said Solomon. So, enough of this sad tale.