

by Brian G. Daigle

For better or for worse, I didn't expect what was coming. I may have deserved it, but that would require a different story altogether. That story would involve real blood, though it's not like this one does not. Stories like this are supposed to start with setting some kind of stage, but how does one describe the indescribable? How does one put into words that which personal experience alone is fit to convey? "Once upon a time"? "It was many and many a year ago, In a kingdom by the sea..."? I guess our only reliable course is to use words and hope they do what all words have always sought to do; namely, paint the intelligible, stroke by stroke. This picture begins with a sun, slowly falling like it does every half-rotation behind a crackling cityscape replete with lively oaks and a muddy river. My friend's beat-up Chevy smelled of diesel gas and processed burgers. And by the time we finally reached our parking spot, the exhaust was enough to make any I-10 trucker go mad.

Though this was my first visit, I assumed it was not his. My friend's dizzying ability to weave in and out of the foot sojourners, along with his attire which nearly camouflaged him among the sea of participants, fortified my assumption. By all accounts, he had been here many times before. And he didn't hesitate to let any ole' stranger know this curious fact. We sputtered into a parking space.

"*Our* parking space!" He so kindly reminded me for the ninth time. "Get your jacket and don't forget your bulletin." My friend's voice, like it always did around this time of evening during this particular event, whether he was here or not, turned ravenous.

Soon enough we were out of the truck and onto what seemed to be a never-ending, concrete meadow. If green-thumbed scientists could harness energy by laying concrete over the plains of west Kansas, I would imagine it would look something like this. The ongoing rows of automobiles were not easy on the eyes either. This exhibition would put any Dallas car dealership to shame. And they were all here for the same reason. The people moved about their cars, packing. Rather, unpacking and re-packing for their hike toward what lay at the center. Laughing. Cheering. All hustling to the same, sprawling structure. It was as if the very concrete on which we all stood collided together and reached for the heavens. At the center of the asphalt ocean, as if to inaugurate the advent of an emperor, towered a concrete cathedral. From it were only undulations of roars. The rumors must be true. This is an exciting place. Enthused, to say the least.

Like everyone else, we ascended the hike. The entrances were clearly marked with numbers and letters. I left it up to my friend to navigate the sea of congregates. He was my Virgil. I was his Dante. And as long as we got into this place without going through the seventh circle, which later came to mind again

thanks to the lady who sat behind us, I would be okay. Each gateway was heavily guarded by countless greeters, checking identification and performing any necessary frisks. This is not how it's done at my church. But hey, so goes the times of home land security, right? I followed my friend's lead. We genuflected and were in. Thousands would follow. Tens of thousands were said to have gone before us, and this was affirmed by the deafening reverberation of chants and songs coming from the rows of seats circling the interior walls.

We made our way through the crowds. Folks weren't too concerned with respecting personal space. In fact, after sacrificing my right shoulder as the buffer between a large baby in his dad's bjorn and a brick column, and my right foot as a speed bump to a fiery old man in a motorized cart, any notion of individuality or 'personal' space was quickly assumed to represent mere opposition to the greater movement of the masses. We huffed through the various collections of people.

"Stay close or pay the price." My friend reminded me. "This is the kind of place where you get on board or go home."

Home. That sounded nice right about now.

"Home?" shouted a dilapidated man as he leaned against the railing, staring into the endless rows of celebrants after overhearing my friend's instructions. "This *is* home, son! Shoot. This is *heaven!*" Wheww. If that were true, at least I didn't have to be concerned about Dante's seventh circle.

We found our seats. Finally. Rest, at least for my feet. My eyes spanned the crowd. There was plenty to span. This proved to be a multi-generational church, the only criteria for legitimate discrimination being if one did not support the proclamation and advance of their gospel. To my left was a father and his daughter. To my right, on the other side of my friend, was a married couple with their three kids. In front of us was an older couple. And behind us...there sat Medea. I'm certain that wasn't her name. Everyone called her 'Saint Theresa'. It didn't take long to realize this was not an actual veneration of her holiness, but a sarcasm to highlight her ability to rattle off countless vulgarities in a moment's notice. Every church congregation has its own peculiar language, and this one was no different. 'Saint Theresa' was the model disciple. To praise the alter boys was to curse them. To congratulate the sacrifices was not to give a loud "Amen", but to give a loud "Hell yeah!"

Hoads of congregates filled the seats, all in a similar garb and presenting a similar posture: win. This week was no different than the last. Every week hosts the same objective with the same liturgy. And I was thankful my friend was there to point it all out to me.

"Oh, here's the part where..." his voice would impressively breach the unified thunder of the multitude. I'm certain I would have missed most of it had he not diverted my attention with each procession. The service was elaborate. The liturgy begins each week with the presentation of colors,

reminding us, the congregation, that the liturgical calendar is not in ordinary time. These are extraordinary times. This is a season of festivity and celebration. Like all holidays, this comes once a year. Unlike most holidays, this service each week is preceded and followed by a time of festivities all in themselves. The alter is wiped. It is spread with the green of life.

A large television screen sits off to my left. Yes, this is a mega-church, and the screen is necessary to allow most of the participants to see the alter. Only the lucky few have seats in which their naked eyes are enough to fulfill their lusts. Like military snipers, television cameras pepper small coves, reminding me that this service is never confined within these walls. The broadcast is nationwide. The internet gives a window to the rest of the world. A booming voice comes across the speaker system and leads the first of a number of corporate prayers. There is a call. There is a response. Songs of praise crescendo to their fulfillment. The priests enter. Their robes are set aright. Sacrificial instruments, arranged. The anticipation of worship within the walls of the cathedral is infectious, nay deadening to those who lack the same piety. The crowd quiets. Two doors open. Clouds of incense rise. The High Priest enters with the sacrifice close behind. A legion of young men, all prepped and cleansed for yet another spectacle, rush forth, wave on wave. A roar erupts. Their place on the alter is set; they assume the position. The eucharist is elevated. It is pork skin. And with that the three-hour service begins. The division of the entirety of the sacrifice becomes clear only at the end. Four equal parts, with a shared meal in between the pairs. Did the gods accept it? There is always next week. The service closes with the same benediction as it did the week before. Some call it tradition. It has been like this for generations. It is cacophonous, yet keeps beat with the symphonic few. A golden calf has become a golden tiger. It is Saturday night in Death Valley. Chance of rain, never. Chance of worship, certain.