

Saved

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The president of the Saint Paul Bible Institute saved my soul, but he sure took a roundabout way to do it. I always thought he could have used up a lot less energy.

His name was Strom. I'm almost sure about that. Strom—the kind of name that should have signaled “Lutheran.” But he knew who he was, all right, not the kind of man willing to be straitened into clerical collars attached to black dickies, a symbol of dedication to the Apostle Paul's orderly mind. Not Mr. Strom, whose taste ran to suits of deep royal blue or brownish maroon and contrasting ties and whose shiny white hair fluffed and cascaded over the back of his collar. His theology bounced a little more than the lucid epistle-writer's did. I could see, even at the age of six, this man could stride into a crowd and people would move out of his way.

Mr. Strom liked to come down to Mountain Lake, Minnesota. Come to think of it, everyone called him “Doctor,” and I'm sure he earned that title, or paid for it some way, so I owe him that. “Doctor” Strom it is from now on. Why he liked traveling to Mountain Lake was a mystery to us. We were always charmed when any outsider, especially one who spoke only English, claimed to like our town, but we were so convinced of our unimportance that we found the praise hard to believe. Unimportance was another form of the virtue of modesty, which we Mennonites proudly upheld. So we were relieved when we figured out that he liked Mountain Lake during pheasant-hunting season. Mennonite farmers in

those days considered it unneighborly to post “No Trespassing” signs, and greedy to charge hunters money for the use of the land. So Dr. Strom could roam around making the surrounding cornfields his free-of-charge happy hunting grounds. And since he was a famous Christian evangelist, plenty of people offered him free meals and lodging. I doubt he could have found such a bargain in Saint James, a Lutheran and Catholic town thirteen miles away. Well, it was the Depression. Everyone had to save money, even the president of the Saint Paul Bible Institute.

The town certainly benefited from the pheasant season tourists, especially the one hotel, three restaurants, and four gas stations. They wore out their cash registers during the season. The one tavern in town—the only place that sold only beer, no food, just beer—probably doubled its annual income during those four or five weekends. The he-men who had descended on Mountain Lake and who, even in those days before Robert Bly had taught us how to dance in circles and beat drums in forests, had spent the days smashing down cornstalks and slaughtering Chinese Ringnecks: these men needed to spend their evenings attacking unslakable thirsts. “Just look at the kinds of people those pheasants bring into town,” some of us locals would grumble.

The farmers complained too. Pasture gates were opened and not closed, tempting the livestock to wander away. Farmers reported finding stray shotgun pellets lodged in their cows’ udders. Horses were spooked by the gunshots. Farmers’ wives were startled when gangs of gun-carrying strangers turned up on the front porch asking for cold water. But the hotel, three restaurants, four gas stations, and of course the tavern had no complaints about collecting their tiny share of Minnesota’s tourist income. Nor did the Farmers State Bank.

I should clarify. Dr. Strom did not spend his Saturday nights hunched over the bar at the tavern. He had to rest and study on Saturday nights for his Sunday morning labors against sin. He even eschewed the appearance of evil and picked up the local habit of walking fast with eyes straight ahead when passing Bill’s Cafe, the morally ambiguous eatery. My father’s cousin Bill served beer along with the food, or even beer without food, if that’s what you wanted, and true Christian passersby took pains not to look into the windows of this dark place tainted with 3.2% alcohol.

Every July Dr. Strom came to Mountain Lake again, bringing with him the Saint Paul Bible Institute’s combined choir and concert band on their summer evangelistic tours, and they’d set up their grand encampment in the school auditorium. Since we lived only a half-block from the school, we really couldn’t ignore such a splendid and loud event. This was July, after all, and nothing in town was air-conditioned. The open windows broadcast every orotund syllable of Dr. Strom’s sermons, every jubilant or plaintive note of the music, throughout the neighborhood. Even so, my parents held back. Excitement seethed in people’s conversations about the services, and my parents nodded politely. One day someone—a woman who had fled from the measured sobriety of the Mennonites into the excitable arms of the Christian and Missionary Alliance—

begged my father, "But, John, you should go. You live so close." That put him into a tight corner. How could he dispute that waterproof logic? So we went, my parents, my sisters, and I.

The dictum, "Presentation is everything," is a cliché by now. Dr. Strom invented it. Every moment of the service was smartly packaged, from our entering the front door, greeted by smiling, well-groomed Bible Institute students, until our final exit, when these same students farewelled us with a handshake—one-handed, two-handed, or fingertips, depending on how we had performed during the altar call. Ushers handed out programs—not homemade mimeographed church bulletins but playbills professionally printed on knobby paper. I stopped breathing when our usherette leaned over and chimed sweetly, "Would you like a program, young man?" I tried to say yes but ended up nodding and gurgling. My sisters disappeared into the crowd where I suppose they found their friends among the folding chairs on the main floor. My father chose the balcony, where there were tiered benches without backrests. "Sit up straight," my father reminded me, bookended between my parents. The pianist down on the main floor, playing the walking-in music, was a grown-up, not a student. But his music wasn't the kind grown-ups usually played in Mountain Lake. I caught some of the tunes—"Rock of Ages" and "This Little Light of Mine"—but under the influence of his fingers roaming from the top to the bottom of the keyboard, the sounds came out as a syncopated foxtrot, the kind of music you'd hear in a night club for good Christians who spoke only English and drank Dr. Pepper.

In those days little boys wore suits and ties to church. But since no one had enough money to buy more than one suit, which a rapidly growing boy would outgrow anyway, my parents had had to decide whether to buy me a winter suit to wear through the summers or a summer suit and make that do for the winter. Wool won out. Heat, they had reasoned, can only make you uncomfortable. You can die from the cold. By the end of the opening prayer I was sweating. When we had to stand for the first hymn, I discovered that the varnish on the benches, under the warmth of all those buttocks, had begun to melt. I looked down and was shocked to see that the wool weave of my pants had already imprinted its pattern onto the varnish, which was turning white. I tried to tell my mother. My father said, "Sh!"

The printed program helped me through the evening, the way a road map helps a driver guess how long the trip will take. Checking my program when the choir and concert band began to perform for the second time, I could see we had sung two congregational hymns in so-and-so much time, and the next item coming up was "Offertory." Relief was in sight. While the collection plates were being passed back and forth across the rows, I knew I could squirm a bit and let some air into my tight collar and pry my pants loose from the melting varnish. After that came only three more items. "Scripture Reading": that couldn't take long. "The Message": that was hard to estimate. The last item, "The Invitation," I didn't recognize. Maybe it was like the Benediction at the end of a Mennonite service, brief and comforting? I hoped so.

My estimates, it turned out, were way off. The second musical program, a mere one line on the playbill, expanded into a twenty-minute concert. Dr. Strom wanted us to know his choir and concert band were the most splendid ensemble we'd ever hear before arriving in Heaven. Number after number washed over us, extolling the joys of loving the Lord, smiling voices, and shiny brasses, not necessarily in that order. Then the drums rolled. Something important was coming. The lights dimmed. A spotlight picked up the face of a soprano. As the choir hummed and the band faintly followed, she began with a moment of discovering faint hope:

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." The whole choir joined in for the second stanza: "I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps."

As a prelude to the fourth stanza, the trumpet players stood up for a fanfare that charged the metal folding chairs with electricity and thundered into the line: "He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat," and climaxed its army recruitment message with: "Our God is marching on!"

After the final stanza the brasses blared forth, "Glory, glory, hallelujah," to let us know the really big stuff was coming. The tympani and bass drum exploded with imitation cannon shots. The whole choir grew taller as the singers roared out the first stanza again. Red and blue lights played over the white robes of the choir and white jackets of the band. Our balcony quivered when the ensemble hit its grandissimo fortissimo.

Well, that made me sit up and take notice, but I didn't know what to think of it. While the crowd downstairs was applauding and cheering, I glanced at my mother. She was looking down at her folded hands. I looked up at my father. His tight jaw told me this militaristic song was going to influence how much he would put into the offering plate.

I no longer remember what the sermon said. Most likely I'd forgotten it by the next morning. But I still remember the sounds: the hush of the audience in the pause before Dr. Strom began speaking, the energy of his first words, his voice stepping up and up and then gracefully skipping lower for a down-home joke, his cadences rolling clause upon clause until he could go no higher, his voice mellowing as he pled for his sin-wracked charges. Tears flowed down his cheeks. The choir began humming under his words. His voice breaking, he begged all wayworn sinners to make one more journey down to the front to unload their heavy burdens. "Oh, boy," I said to myself, realizing that an "Invitation" was nothing at all like a Benediction. "This is gonna take a while."

"Just as I am, without one plea . . ." the choir began singing softly. Dr. Strom's voice rose above the pleading singers, caressing our ears, urging us to arise and hasten to the open arms of his associates—a half-dozen well-groomed youths and maidens lined up at the front with, literally, open arms, singing along as the choir finished the first stanza, "O Lamb of God, I come. . . ." Two teenaged boys just ahead of us suppressed a giggle. ". . . I come!"

No one stood up. No one walked down the aisle. By then, if I had been Dr. Strom, I'd have slunk away discouraged. That's why I'd never have made it in the evangelism business. But he was a veteran. He knew what he was up against: a whole auditorium full of stiff-necked Mennonites not looking for ways to change things. And he also knew he had five more stanzas to go before that hymn would come to its merciful end. And he knew his choir hadn't even begun to show off its heart-rending powers. Each stanza became more mournful and the humming between stanzas more insistent, and Dr. Strom's voice soared above the music as a heartbroken cadenza.

After the third stanza, he lost control of his weeping and begged us all as a congregation to rise. "Do it not for yourselves but for your weaker brothers and sisters who fear to take the first step." Even at the age of six I was on to him. He knew that once we were up, momentum would keep at least some of the feet moving. What he didn't know was that one of us up in the balcony was stuck to the bleachers. My parents got up all right. My mother must have been sitting on her program. But I had to lean forward and then six different directions sideways, gradually pulling my wool pants out of the deeply imprinted varnish before I was loose enough to stand up.

By the time I was up, I noticed several people watching me, and I caught on. Dr. Strom was talking to me. No one but me. I was the sinner he was luring down the aisle to confess. I was the reason all those sinless people had to endure the heat in the room and the anguish in his heart. What should I do? I rummaged through my mind, trying to remember what sin I had committed and he had divined and I was supposed to go tell one of those pretty college girls about. I was paralyzed. How could I possibly walk away from my parents, walk to the back of the balcony, walk down the lobby steps to the main floor, walk all the way to the front past hundreds of people who knew my parents, and confess to a perfect stranger, "I'm six years old and I haven't done any sins yet"? Besides, having been stuck so long to a varnished bleacher, I wondered what the rear end of my pants looked like, and I imagined a big white blotch.

So that was not the time Dr. Strom saved my soul. He still had a big job ahead of him. My parents didn't talk about the service on the way home or the rest of that evening. My father ate his nightly corn flakes. My mother got ready for bed. I kept my back up to the walls as much as I could, slithered up to my room, and took off my pants to inspect them. The varnish had dried, and the seat looked just a little shinier than it had before. So I thought I wouldn't mention it to anyone. No one mentioned Dr. Strom or his evangelistic spectacle the next morning nor on any other mornings, and we'd probably never have discussed him if our dog hadn't reminded us of him three or four months later.

Her name was Peggy. A pudgy, muscular, mid-sized Boston terrier with a broad white stripe in the middle of her face, she loved people—not wisely but too well. Anyone approaching her—friend, stranger, or scarecrow—she'd greet with her wide-mouthed, pop-eyed smile, her screw-tail wagging so hard that the rear third of her body wobbled along with it. If a burglar had broken into our

house—not that we had any thieves in Mountain Lake—Peggy would have greeted him with: “Hey! Wanna play? Want some of my food?” She would have failed as a hunting dog, if anyone had been foolish enough to try her, because her idea of the good life was fawning over people. Everything else escaped her notice. But promiscuous as she was, I was her favorite friend. Our previous dog had claimed my father as the master. When Peggy came into the house, she chose me. She bent her whole life to whatever I was doing. When I went to school, she waited at the porch window for me to come home. When I played with my tricycle, she learned to ride it with me.

Late in October my parents took her to Uncle Pete’s farm a mile from town. Rats had been breeding in his corn crib, and Boston terriers are supposed to be good ratters. Whether Peggy was the right dog for the job we never found out, because one day at noon my father mentioned to my mother, “Pete called this morning.” Before she could reply he added, “I’ll tell you later.” As he was leaving to go back to work, I tried to maneuver into a good place to eavesdrop, but they were too quick for me. From across the room I saw them whispering.

That evening after supper my father said, “Pete says there were two hunters on the farm that day.”

My mother gasped. “Did he look?”

“Yah,” my father said. “Couldn’t find it.”

This was serious. I’d heard about chickens being killed by stray shot. Why not a dog? Just as I was beginning to catch on, my father confused me again by saying, “Pete’s going to call George tonight.”

George? Did they mean Uncle George? He lived in Saint Paul and was married to a woman named Rose who spoke only English, so he did too, and they belonged to a strange church we always politely stayed away from. What did he have to do with Peggy getting shot on Uncle Pete’s farm? I worried all the next day and kept on pumping my mother: “When is Peggy coming home?”

“Pretty soon,” she answered. “Be patient.” But I noticed she didn’t look me in the eye.

Just after supper two evenings later, my father muttered to my mother, “George called. He has the dog.”

“It wasn’t the man we thought,” she said, “was it?”

My father nodded grimly. “I told you so.”

“Oh, my,” she said, giggling. “Oh, my!” My mother, whenever she had to face evidence of wickedness or foolishness among adults, would always giggle—embarrassed for her whole class. Whenever she giggled, I knew there was something she wasn’t going to explain.

But she’d been right predicting Peggy’s return “pretty soon.” The next weekend Uncle George and Aunt Rose came to visit. As they pulled into the driveway, I saw Peggy in the back seat, yipping and clawing at the window. As soon as the door was open, she ran straight for me, jumped on my chest, knocked me down, and covered my face with her wet tongue. As we two ran to the

backyard to romp, I glanced back and saw Uncle George standing at his car, fists on hips, grinning broadly.

Now that Peggy was back home, and nobody was explaining anything, I decided to try circling around. I'd ask my mother, "Peggy's sure glad to be back, isn't she?" and follow up with, "Are we going to that revival service next summer?" My mother caught on and fretted. For her the mildest, tiniest fib cost excruciating agonies of conscience. So she had to blurt out the whole story. One day, she told me, two men had turned up at Uncle Pete's farm to hunt pheasants. One man said he was the president of the Saint Paul Bible Institute and offered to save Uncle Pete's soul on the spot. "Go hunt," Uncle Pete grumbled at them, "but make sure you close the gates."

That evening nobody could find Peggy. Uncle Pete spent the next morning walking up and down the corn rows, expecting to find a dead dog. While searching, having plenty of free time to think, he had the bright idea of calling Uncle George, who had a lot of connections through his strange church, and he in turn dropped in unannounced to visit the president of the Saint Paul Bible Institute. Dr. Strom was delighted to see his old friend George. So was Peggy, who was making herself at home on the living room floor. "I thought I was doing a kindness, poor thing," Dr. Strom explained. "We thought she was a stray dog. She looked awfully hungry."

"But she's fat!" I protested to my mother. "She has a license." I was referring to the brass tags attached to her collar, one for her town registration, the other with my father's name and address: Box 86, Mountain Lake.

"I know," my mother said. "I know." She giggled.

By now, Dr. Strom has long since been forgiven, except for thinking we were such rubes that we'd believe his story. Stray dog indeed! But in the many years since Dr. Strom succumbed to promiscuous Peggy's charms—a time in which I have seen lawyers strive mightily to get their patently guilty clients acquitted, have seen bankers preside over collapsing savings and loans and walk away with fortunes in their pockets, have seen one corporate or political public figure after another who thinks we are all such rubes that we'll believe any story—during these years I've come to honor Dr. Strom as a minor saint with a small flaw. He did, after all, give the dog back. That moment of generosity was enough to save my six-year-old soul from despair. But we never did go back to his revival services, I guess.