

Scenes from the Movie

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I SPENT MY 1970S BOYHOOD in one of those remote subdivisions that had begun sprouting up along the foot of the Oquirrh Mountains in the westernmost part of the Salt Lake Valley. From just about any vantage point, one could look east and clearly see Salt Lake City stretching across the face of the Uintahs, with the spires of the Mormon temple jutting upward in the center. My bedroom was upstairs, and I would lie awake at night gazing across the sea of rooftops and steeples to where the nearby drive-in movie screen stood out against the night sky. Although the images on the screen were blurry with distance, I would still watch them flash by, the city lights twinkling behind them, and my transistor radio jangling away in my ear. To me, the movie screen, the city lights, and the transistor were parts of the same world—distant, mysterious, exciting. I would listen to the music and make up movies in my head about people far beyond my neighborhood who knew secrets of untold happiness.

Because Dad would travel for work and Mom sometimes went with him, whenever they were going to be gone for any extended period, Mom used to drop me off at the Cleggs' house which happened often enough. The Cleggs lived just outside of our subdivision at the end of a long, unpaved driveway. Their house was originally a two-room shotgun house built shortly after the Mormon pioneers entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. A century or so later, Brother and Sister Clegg inherited the home and built an upstairs section, including four new rooms. I always wondered if their old house was haunted. Brother and Sister Clegg had nine kids, and their youngest son, Gavin, was my age.

One thing I remember most clearly about the Cleggs was how they would regularly gather around their television to watch the "old shows." Their television was an enormous wooden box that made a sound like a firecracker going off when you turned the channel dial. Sister Clegg was a plump, squinting, good-humored woman, who wore her horn-rimmed glasses around her neck on a chain. She was particularly crazy about the old shows. She would mark up her *TV Guide* thoroughly and often watched them alone. Anything black and white that featured a recognizable Hollywood movie star qualified as an "old show." It was at the Cleggs' that I first heard of Cary Grant and Doris Day and that songs

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like "Animal Crackers in My Soup" or "Aba Daba Honeymoon" first started knocking around in my head. To this day, when I hear the staccato cadences of old movie dialogue in the distance, I think of Sister Clegg.

Brother Clegg was like a Mormon John Henry—towering, muscular, and pensive. He had single-handedly built all of the upstairs addition of their pioneer house, as well as the stables and chicken coops in their backyard. He rode his bicycle twenty miles daily to and from the power plant where he worked. And every evening, he was ready to lead Family Home Evening. This Mormon tradition of reserving one night a week for family meetings goes back to David O. McKay's years as president of the church in the fifties and sixties, but in the seventies at the Cleggs', every evening was Family Home Evening. Usually, after the old show ended, a sort of family program would begin. Brother Clegg might tell an animated story in Spanish, having served as a missionary in Mexico. Sometimes Victor and Pam would play their guitars, or Brother and Sister Clegg would play a piano duet.

More often than not, though, Brother Clegg would read from the Book of Revelation about how iniquity would sweep the land, how the Earth would one day shudder with natural disasters, how there would be wars and rumors of wars, how the four horses of the apocalypse would gallop across the sky, and how the world was careening toward its end. He would sit in front of the roaring fireplace with the kids all in a circle around him, frozen.

After Brother and Sister Clegg went to bed, Victor would usually tell us ghost stories, stories about the ghosts of old soldiers residing in their cellar, or the strange noises he had sometimes heard in the attic, or the sleeping mummy who'd once surprised him in the tall grass of their backyard. Those nights, I had trouble sleeping. Gavin had an upstairs room like mine, and I would lie awake just as I did at home, staring at the glittering city. Often I thought I could see faces peering in through the window. But eventually I would concentrate on Gavin's radio, which played softly on his corner desk, its tuner dial glowing like a city light or a bright star in the night sky. And the music, along with the movies in my head, usually chased the eerie faces away.

One afternoon my mother dropped me off at the entrance of the Cleggs' long driveway, and I found Gavin at the end of it, playing in a big pile of charred clothes, toys, and books. Behind the pile was their television—gutted, its green glass screen shattered. Gavin was spry and energetic—muscular, like his dad, but hardly so pensive. He climbed into the TV and started hamming it up: First he was Shirley Temple singing "Animal Crackers," her voice taking a sudden dive into a Cookie Monster growl. Then he was a newscaster who began to address his audience by name in the middle of the broadcast. Then he was the "Six Million Dollar Man," whose bionic strength allowed him to carry the TV frame across the yard with him as he ran. Then it was time for the channel switching game: I'd spin the firecracker dial around, and Gavin would contort himself into a new position at every pop. I wished my parents would throw out things for me to play with the way Brother and Sister Clegg did for their kids.

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Several years later Gavin told me about a time when his dad swept the devil out of their house. The devil was burdening their home with material things. He had placed evil in the eyes of their dolls. He had stuffed their shelves and closets to the breaking point with clothes and books. The television was constantly on, and it played only at high volume. In a desperate rage, Brother Clegg yelled commands to the devil and swept him into their furnace. Out onto the driveway went the books, clothes, dolls, and the television, and up went a bonfire. It was the day after this that we'd played with the empty TV frame. Mom later told me that Brother Clegg had a "condition" that ran in his family and sometimes made him do extreme things. Still, I never doubted Gavin's story that Brother Clegg had swept the devil from their house. After all, I'd always known their house was haunted. Soon enough, Brother Clegg bought a new TV for Sister Clegg, so she could continue watching the old shows.

Sister Clegg's addiction to the old shows went beyond television. On the other side of the valley was a tiny theater called the Avalon, which showed nothing but old movies. She would regularly pile the lot of us into their family car, a white Ford station wagon, and drive us to the Avalon. We'd crowd into the cramped entryway where a white-haired man sat at the ticket desk. Peering out from between a sputtering popcorn machine on his right and a big jar of pickles on his left, the man always nodded graciously to Sister Clegg and greeted her by name. After buying pickles and popcorn, both of which the ticket man would wrap in brown paper towels, we'd disappear into the viewing room.

We always sat on the left side of the theater—Gavin told me later that his mom had a theory about this, which had something to do with which side of the brain a person prefers to use in processing information. Since Sister Clegg never expected all of us to be as enamored with the old shows as she was, she didn't mind if Gavin and I crawled back behind the last row and played with the Matchbox cars we'd brought in our pockets. Several times, when we were the only people in the entire theater, Gavin and I went over to the right side of the theater and raced our cars down the aisle. Nobody seemed bothered—not Sister Clegg, not Brother Clegg if he was with us, not Janice, Christa, Victor, Maryann, Valerie, Carmine, Lucy, or Pam; not the ticket man; not Katherine Hepburn, Ronald Colman, Raymond Massie, Joan Crawford, or anyone else who may have been there.

If movies like *The Philadelphia Story* or *His Girl Friday* weren't enough to keep us in our seats, movies like *It's a Wonderful Life* were. Until I learned that this was one of Frank Capra's most famous films, I grew up thinking it was my own (and the Cleggs') little secret. Whenever I heard myself say—even think—"I wish I'd never been born," I'd think of Jimmy Stewart's dark stroll through a version of his own world in which he'd never been born, and I'd change my mind. And then there was *Stairway to Heaven*, which began with David Niven narrating a tour through the same sky I'd gaze at nightly through my bedroom window, and which ended with a dazzling trial in heaven that included every famous being imaginable: Moses, Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, the works.

Two movies I saw as a double feature during the Avalon days stand out in particular: *Trapped by the Mormons* and *Brigham Young—Frontiersman*. These are both curios that occasionally play in Utah theaters for a chuckle. But as far as I knew, those movies indicated that Mormonism was as prevalent in Hollywood as it was in my own little Utah world. Sometimes, as in *Trapped by the Mormons*, the religion was portrayed unsympathetically. But this film was also erroneous enough that even an eight-year-old completely ignorant of the concept of camp value could laugh. A silent movie from the twenties, it features an actress named Evelyn Brent as an English girl who falls under the spell of a lecherous, black robed Mormon missionary. Addressing her as "child," he talks her out of her engagement with some poor chap and into the waters of baptism—a ceremony requiring her to wade into a font all by herself while the missionary stands by, still in black, waving his hands and uttering incantations. The missionary also proposes to the young woman, promising to take her with him to the land of the "river Jordan" and the "crystal temple." Shortly after committing to marriage, she discovers the missionary's resentful "sister" is really his wife, setting off a string of events including the attempted murder of both women by other missionaries and the women's eventual rescue. Foremost in my memory are the main missionary's attempts to steal hugs and plant as many kisses as he can on the struggling Ms. Brent before his inevitable capture.

Brigham Young—Frontiersman was different. It was a Hollywood movie from 1940 and a sympathetic portrayal of Mormonism, as far as I could tell. What I remember most is Tyrone Power in a buckskin jacket looking continually alarmed and Linda Darnell spending the entire movie swooning in his arms. And who was that familiar face playing the Prophet Joseph Smith? It was Vincent Price, whom I recognized chiefly from his countless cameos in 1970s variety shows. Who was playing Brigham Young's sidekick Porter Rockwell? The ubiquitous John Carradine, whom I surely knew by face if not by name. As far as I was concerned, *Brigham Young* was just like any movie that had pioneers or mountain men in it, and I considered all of these to be Mormon movies. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, for example. *Jeremiah Johnson*. And even TV shows, like the consistently gut wrenching *Little House on the Prairie*.

Even though it seemed fine then, I look back with some disbelief on the fact that Sister Clegg would take us to see such genteel treatments of our history. In American Mormon culture, the early persecution of saints by mobs has not been forgotten, and thus, misrepresentation of the religion in any form, even as a joke, tends to sting more than it ought to.

My family and the Cleggs belonged to the same ward. The old building we met in smelled of old leather-bound hymnals. I was in the same Sunday school class as Gavin, whose hair Sister Clegg always combed over with Dippity Do. Our class met in the basement of the building, which had no windows, a low ceiling, and stacks of chairs in every corner. And there, in that dark room, we would listen to the sad stories of persecution, of the arduous journey the pioneers made across the plains to the promised land, of their struggles with the lo-

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custs that devoured all their crops, and of the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith. What a sad, sad movie Mormon history would make, I used to think. And maybe that's why we went to see those two films at the Avalon. Perhaps they were the perfect mergers of Sister Clegg's two religions: movies tempered by the reality of Mormonism, and Mormonism invigorated by the imagination of movies.

By the time I was ten years old, my parents felt they could leave me home alone for extended periods of time, and thus I stopped going to the Avalon with the Cleggs. When I earned my driver's license at sixteen, though, one of my first solo flights took me straight across town to find the Avalon, which had by then taken on a rather hazy, mythical status in my mind. Lacking the reliable sense of direction of a more experienced driver, I followed my nose and ended up at a small, X-rated cinema that I could have sworn had once been the Avalon. I peered self-consciously through the locked front door and saw a similar ticket booth and concessions area. I stood awhile and thought. Was the white-haired man still there, I wondered.

In order to get out of our subdivision, you had to stop at a T intersection. On the other side of the intersection stood the Valley-Vu Drive-In. During the summer, any car that drove down that road was treated to moments of free movies against the backdrop of the night sky.

My parents were not avid moviegoers, so I usually went to movies at the Valley-Vu with the Cleggs. Going to the Valley-Vu, as to the Avalon, was one of the Cleggs' rituals. I never got the feeling that Brother Clegg shared the movie mania his wife had, but he tended to go along for the ride. We would all squeeze into the station wagon along with blankets, popcorn, and lawn chairs, and Brother Clegg would weave through the rows of cars, the gravel grinding under the tires and dust wafting in through our open windows. Once the station wagon settled on a spot, we'd all get adjusted—some of us climbing onto the roof, some of us settling for the hood, some of us in lawn chairs, and others remaining inside the car.

It was here with the Cleggs that I first witnessed the terror of Bambi and friends running for dear life as fire devoured their forest. It was also here that I saw my first "In Search of" film—*In Search of Noah's Ark*. Though this was a fairly dull film about an excavation party's successes and failures in the Himalayas, it somehow seemed terribly significant to me then—a worthy replacement for Brother Clegg's evening sermons.

Every night the drive-in played a double or triple feature, the first one starting when it got dark, around 8:30 p.m. There were an awful lot of unforgivably boring Disney live-action films playing at the Valley-Vu, like *One of Our Dinosaurs Is Missing*, *The Snowball Express*, and *The Boatniks*. I slept through all of these and more.

What I didn't sleep through were the movies Gavin and I would sneak off to see when we were older, when I wasn't being babysat by the Cleggs so much as being invited over to spend the night for fun. Around this time, when we were

twelve or thirteen, new management had taken over the Valley-Vu, and this new management proved to be hell-bent on reaping the big drive-in bucks that the teen market had to offer. Thus, *Bambi* gave way to *Beach Girls*, and *Charley and the Angel* gave way to *Cheech and Chong*. These were awkward times. When my parents' own station wagon pulled up to the T intersection, it was almost always at a moment when a pair of bare breasts filled the screen. "Good heavens," my mom would say. Dad usually leaned forward, ready to gun it at the first opportunity. And I was absolutely riveted, stealing another peek or two as we'd turn and drive away.

I guess because he was the youngest of nine kids, Gavin's parents were much less protective of him than my parents were of me, and so for us to sneak out of his house and walk down the road to the drive-in was all too easy. We'd settle into the long, unruly crabgrass surrounding the drive-in lot, able to hear most everything if the wind was gentle and carried just so. *Enter the Dragon*. *Up in Smoke*. *Saturday Night Fever*. *Malibu Beach*. *Good Guys Wear Black*. Our fear of getting caught never allowed us to watch a film in its entirety, but the scattered R-rated images we were able to see satisfied our curiosity.

I always thought—and still think—about how other families in my predominantly Mormon neighborhood dealt with their moments at the T intersection stop sign. I thought about the Williamsons, who'd recently moved in from Montpelier, Idaho. They were Mormons almost Pentecostal in appearance and were completely oblivious, as far as I could tell, to the modern world. And I thought about the frightful sermons our next-door neighbor Brother Christiansen likely delivered in his booming baritone to the family in his own station wagon.

My questions concerning Brother Clegg's handling of the latest drive-in offerings were answered one night as I was riding home with the Clegg family from a church dinner. As we drove by the movie screen, all twelve sets of eyes in the car, which had turned toward it magnetically, were met by a topless volleyball scene in full swing. My own eyes, all a-wonder, positively glued themselves to the screen. "Gross!" yelled Pam and Vicki, and a pair of hands from the backseat wrapped themselves around my eyes. A shrieking chaos arose and carried on for about a mile. And then, in an instant, Brother Clegg yanked the wheel of that old Ford station wagon, long as a hearse, pulled a U-turn, and drove back toward the drive-in.

We all sat silent, the way we would for those scripture readings by the fire, as Brother Clegg rumbled past the ticket booth and parked the car behind the snack bar, effectively severing us from the offending movie screen. At the ticket booth, Brother Clegg spoke intently with the ticket man. We couldn't hear a thing, but remained silent just in case we might. Then Brother Clegg took two steps back and pointed his index finger at the man as though he were setting a curse. We watched his lips move silently for what seemed like hours, looking not unlike that baptism scene in *Trapped by the Mormons*. I still don't know what he said, but when the drive-in changed management again the following summer, family films were back. I remain convinced that the exchange between

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Brother Clegg and the ticket man had everything to do with it.

"The moving picture together with all the other modern inventions is to help us carry the Mission of Christ to all the world, and to bring humanity home to the true principles of salvation," proclaimed an official church statement in 1913. By 1916, the church commissioned two brothers named "Shirl" and Chester Clawson to film various church events and leaders. This era of film production for the church ended tragically in 1929 when a fire killed Shirl Clawson, destroying the studio and many of the films. Among the Clawson employees who survived the fire: a young runner named Verle Weber, uncle to Jane Weber, otherwise known as Sister Clegg.

Sister Clegg used to say that her Uncle Verle spoke often about motion pictures as a potential tool of righteousness. Movies should depict the kinds of lives that people would want to emulate, he used to say. The Clegg daughters always had records playing, and one of their favorites was by the Osmonds, the Mormon teen brothers group that made a brief run for album rock glory before Donny and Marie Osmond's variety show overshadowed them. At the tail end of their popularity, they released a collection of Mormon doctrine rock songs called *The Plan*—two of which made the American Top 40. But the song I remember most from that record was called "Movie Man": "You're in living color, it's your picture show," sang the Osmonds. "Even what you're thinking, everyone will know." I always wondered how they could sing that without sounding terrified.

I clearly remember a Sunday school lesson in the basement of that old church that had to do with this idea of life being a movie. According to the teacher, everything we did was recorded, and the only way we could cut out the parts we didn't like was through repentance. Through a renewed commitment to be obedient to church teachings, and through resolving to make right any wrongs we may have committed, our lives could get the Frank Capra treatment. The teacher gave each of us a piece of paper and told us to write down how we'd like our movies to be. I couldn't seem to write. I was too overwhelmed at the thought of how many wrongs I'd committed which I couldn't even remember well enough to right. I wanted my movie to be happy, and that's what I wrote down.

One night I walked up the stairs of the Cleggs' pioneer house to get ready for bed. I saw Brother Clegg looking through a window at the same view I'd see from my bed at night. "Look at all the sadness," he said, without looking at me. "Look at all the confusion, all the pain, all the evil—what terrible movies our lives will make if we're not able to rise above it all." I stood quiet for a while, trying to take it all in, trying to conjure up an adequate picture of sadness, confusion, pain, and evil. I continued trying as I lay in bed that night, but I just couldn't find that sad picture. I'd scan the blanket of city lights, moving my eyes across the rooftops and steeples. And inevitably I'd find those blurry, distant images flashing across the screen of the Valley-Vu Drive-In. And with the transistor radio softly playing, I'd begin to make movies in my head, about people far beyond my neighborhood, who knew secrets of untold happiness.