

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

T. J. Mathews

PSALM 137: 9

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

On a Tuesday evening in October, Sister Farnsworth was sharp with her children, when usually she was overindulgent. She spoke in short, crisp sentences that were sometimes not even responsive, when usually she facilitated pleasant conversation; she would normally ask her husband and children what they had done all day and then comment with her approval or with generous advice. But on this evening in October she had almost nothing to say. When she did speak, she sniped. She was angry and couldn't hide it. The motive for her mood came out over desert.

Elder Carter and Elder Hill had been invited to the Farnsworth's that Tuesday to eat dinner. Carter loved eating with member families, and like most of the missionaries in Ogden, they did this four or five nights a week. The Farnsworth family generally had missionaries over two or three times a month -- Brother Farnsworth put his name on a sign up sheet outside of the Bishop's office -- so all of the missionaries in the district had eaten there on several occasions at least. Elder Carter, the senior companion, enjoyed eating with the Farnsworth's as much as with anyone.

Brother and Sister Farnsworth were a celestial couple. They were both in their forties. He was a custodian for the Weber County School District, although he had recently had to go on a medical disability, hopefully temporary, after being diagnosed with a degenerative problem with his sciatic nerve. Sister Farnsworth taught third grade at Dee Elementary. They had seven children -- four boys and three girls. The oldest was fourteen. The family was always pleasant and the meals always boisterous and fun. The Farnsworths were not pretentious and

didn't try to show off with fancy gourmet meals like some of the members did. They understood that the elders had an hour to eat their dinner and then get back to work. Carter particularly liked the animals. He was one of six children himself and had grown up in house with a similar menagerie. It reminded him of home – his mother had grown up on a farm and the hiss and cackle of animals and the squirming and chirping of children were simply the sounds of contented family life. The Farnsworths had an ageing black lab named Sherlock and a younger shepherd mix named Suzie, five cats, a green parrot that often made a lot of noise, two hamsters (Manny and Moe), a lizard with bulging eyes that moved independently of one another and a white rat named Ratty. Even when the children were all well behaved, and this was not usually the case, the animals made for a loud and unpredictable family life.

Elder Hill, unlike his companion, loathed having to eat with the Farnsworths. He despised it. When there he ached for peace and quiet. His parents responsibly had only two children and a small beagle named Buster. Buster was five. He had replaced a similar small white and brown beagle named Belinda. Both Buster and Belinda had been fixed. The Hill family did not believe in overpopulation – not among people and certainly not among pets.

So, on that Tuesday evening, Elders Carter and Hill had been invited to the Farnsworth's and Sister Farnsworth was in a crusty mood. Halfway through strawberry jello the reason became clear. Kristen, the middle girl who was six years old, set down her spoon with a clank and asked in a voice loud enough to be heard by the rest of the family, "Mom, can I go play with the puppies?"

Sister Farnsworth sighed.

Elder Carter eyes widened with excitement and he asked, "You've got puppies?" It wasn't obvious whether or not he was directing his question to Kristen or to Sister Farnsworth, but the mother answered.

"Yes. Twelve of them!" She set down her spoon as well, placed her napkin beside her plate, got up from the table and headed off to the kitchen. "Damn it," she said as she went through the door.

The youngest child, a tow headed three year old giggled at his mother's swear. Carter was taken aback.

"What? I'm sorry. What's wrong?"

Kristen answered, "She's mad 'cause she don't think we need any more pets."

Brother Farnsworth spoke softly to his daughter, "well, twelve is a lot."

"But they're so cute!" said Kristen.

Suddenly Sister Farnsworth was standing in the doorway. "Of course they're cute. All of your damned animals are cute. But none of you take care of them. I do. And now we can't even afford to. . ." she swallowed hard, "feed them." Her temper had been building for some time, that was obvious. She was now red in the face.

"But Mom, they won't eat much."

"Fine. Maybe you can go without food so we can feed that bitch's brood." The room was now absolutely silent. She looked at her husband and then at the elders and then back at her husband. "We have no money," she said to him, but almost as a theatrical aside so that all could hear. She retreated to the kitchen. Carter and Hall both understood her meaning--that feeding the elders was as much a burden as a dozen extra dogs.

Drawers were slammed as water ran in the sink.

The family finished their Jello, rather quietly, although the parrot had begun shouting the word "hello" over and over.

They could hear Sister Farnsworth muttering as she banged pots and dishes. "the animal shelter charges per dog. . . stupid dog. . . place is a nightmare. . . needs to get a job. . . worthless parrot. . . think I'm made of money. . ." She was clearly putting on a show for all to hear.

Elder Hill was heretically considering the benefits of birth control, both for humans and for dogs, when Elder Carter spoke up, presumably talking to Brother Farnsworth, but loud enough for his voice to carry into the kitchen.

"We could take the puppies, if you guys really don't want 'em."

Kristen immediately shouted out an elongated "No!" as if the suggestion were unthinkable.

Brother Farnsworth looked up immediately.

"No Elder. I know how missionaries live. You couldn't possibly have room, let alone time, to care for a dozen puppies."

Sister Farnsworth had appeared in the doorway. She had been paying more attention than it had sounded like.

"Oh," said Elder Carter. "No, I don't mean we would keep them. It just that. . ." here he paused to make sure he said this the right way, "well, I grew up in a large family with lots of animals and, well, I could like, we could help you get rid of them."

Kristen whined again. "Dad, no! They're ours. They're babies."

But Sister Farnsworth spoke now, sternly. "You mean find them good homes?" She didn't intone it at all as a question.

"Uh, yeah. Something like that," said Carter.

Sister Farnsworth moved the four feet from the door to her place at the table and she sat down calmly. "Thank you elder. That would be very helpful."

"But Mom!" Kristen drew this phrase out the longest yet and her brother, old enough to sense that something was strange with this situation, and old enough to know something about little puppies, said, "They were just born yesterday. They can't leave their mother yet."

Brother and Sister Farnsworth both looked hopefully to Elder Carter.

"Well, uh, . . . it really doesn't matter. . . when. . ."

Brother Farnsworth said, "They are small. Maybe we should give them a few days."

But Sister Farnsworth clipped the end of his sentence, "Can you take them tonight? We have a good strong box from Albertson's. You can carry them in that."

Dinner was over. All of the children, beginning with Kristin, left the messy table and ran out to the garage to protest, to protect the puppies, but they understood also, to say goodbye. Their mother always won.

Elder Hill was holding his spoon; he had not set it down through this entire episode, though he hadn't had a bite to eat in almost ten minutes.

"Finish your dessert," said Sister Farnsworth. "Let them all calm down a bit."

In just a few minutes Sister Farnsworth had gathered all the dishes and silverware into several neat stacks. "Honey," she said to her husband, "take them out through the garage. The kids have had long enough now to calm down."

She swiftly walked around the table to where the elders were and took Elder Hill's right hand in hers. "Thank you Elder Hill. This is. . . so. . ." but she didn't finish. She turned to Elder Carter and shook his hand too. "Thank you." Then, rather unexpectedly she pulled him into a hug. It didn't last long. "We'll see you at Church on Sunday," she said, and she turned walking around the end of the table and into the kitchen, leaving the dirty dishes on the table.

The Elders followed Brother Farnsworth out into the garage. They gathered up the puppies into two boxes, six in each, both lined with newspapers. The puppies were very small and could curl up easily into the palm of a hand. Their eyes were, as is typical in all baby animals, extremely large, but their lids were closed over them. Most of them were solid black or maybe very dark brown. A few had spots or streaks of dirty brown or gray. They didn't look like little German shepherds.

Elder Hill noticed that they made very little noise; nothing more than an occasional meowing. But their mother, Suzie, certainly not a pure German shepherd herself, was quite upset that her brood was being taken away. She lay on her side, with her pallid teats flopping onto a soiled blanket, and whimpered. But still she did no more than raise her head as her litter was taken away.

Twenty minutes later, the elders were home. It was now dark. They had left the boxes, sounding now more like they contained mice than dogs, near a sliding glass door on a concrete patio at the back of the home where they rented a room. Elder Carter told Elder Hill that they would need to change into their grubbies.

After changing their clothes, Elder Carter asked Elder Hill to have a seat. They both sat on their respective beds.

"When I was a kid I often visited my grandparent's home near Fresno. During the summer my brothers and sisters and I took turns spending weeks there at a time. Wasn't really a farm, but Grandma had lots of animals; she always had a couple of lambs she was raising (culls she called them and she bought them very cheap), and rabbits and chickens, a few hens for eggs but always a bunch of young chickens running around. She had couple of geese too: Romeo and Juliet. They're the only animals, besides the hens and the rooster, Wellington, that survived for more than six or eight months."

Elder Hill was restless. "What's the point?" he asked rather rudely.

"Grandma taught us how to kill the animals before preparing them for the freezer. So I'm going to tell how we'll take care of the puppies."

Elder Hill wasn't horrified, not exactly. He had assumed that Elder Carter had something like this in mind, however, he had assumed it would be something like tossing the puppies unceremoniously in a dumpster somewhere. He was a bit impressed that Carter had thought it through this well.

Carter was already talking again. "Chickens are a bit easier than the puppies will be, but the principle is the same. You pick up a chicken and cradle it in the crook of your left arm. They calm right down. You want their head facing you and you can pet them a few times with your right hand to calm them down even more. Then, you grab the head firmly in your right hand and sort of flop the chicken over with your left arm. If you hold the head right, you can feel the neck break. It's so fast there's no time for the chicken to panic. Then we quickly tied them up by their feet using shortish pieces of nylon rope and a tight clothes line. Then grandma, or sometimes grandpa, would take a big knife like a Bowie knife and slice off their heads. This way it all the blood ran out."

Elder Hill sighed. He realized that Carter was enjoying recounting this memory of his youth. "I don't think that's going to work with these puppies."

"No. Of course not!" Carter looked at Hill as if he'd said something very foolish. "The puppies are more like rabbits." He waited, thinking Hill was going to say something more, but when he didn't, Carter continued.

"Grandma let the rabbits get to about three or four months old. Pretty good sized by then. We picked them up too and cradled them gently in the crook of our left arms, just like the chickens, but with the head facing away and resting in your elbow. Once the rabbit has calmed down, then you take its back feet with your right hand. They'll let you do this if you're sort of quick about it. Then you swing the rabbit in a big arc, up in the air and then off to your right until its head hits the ground, or a wall or something. We'll be done with the puppies then, but with the rabbits we tied 'em up by their feet and Grandma cut off their heads with her knife."

Now he was done and Hill spoke up again.

"Elder, I don't think I can do that."

"Sure you can. We'll each do six. The patio will work great. They'll never know what hit 'em."

"It seems cruel."

"Bull! Do you know what they do at the Ogden 'Shelter'?" he made quote marks in the air. They give them a shot of poison and it takes minutes for them to die, usually in convulsions. And some places they just put a whole bunch of animals in a sealed room and let in carbon monoxide from the tailpipe of some pickup truck. They say that's painless, but when it accidentally happens to people, they complain of horrible headaches and muscle aches and nausea."

Hill just sighed.

"Come on," said Carter. "This is instantaneous. Let's get it done."

So out they went. As it turned out, Elder Hill only dispatched three of the puppies. They all seemed to die quickly and painlessly. Elder Carter killed the other nine. Just as he said, he tenderly held each little creature in his left hand, head away from him. He took hold of its hind legs and swung it in a high curving arc. The centrifugal force stretched the animal to its full extension, its head moving very fast, and then it impacted with a nearly soundless thud into the concrete pavement of the patio. There was no blood. There was no sound, not a whimper, not a sob.

When it was done, Carter went into the apartment and grabbed two black garbage bags, the ones with the red ties and "double bagged" the remains. Hill just watched. Then Carter packed the bags comfortably into

one of the cardboard boxes, folded the flaps shut and announced that now Hill was right. It was off to a local dumpster.