I took my first step down into the font and thought. Baptisms are funny things. The brightness of it all is profound. It seems as if there is one brilliant mirror reflecting boisterous cheer everywhere. The idea is to pack as much happiness, either real or faked, into one too-hot room in the hope that it will be absorbed into the absolutely petrified soul of the prospective individual about to be baptized. The joy was so thick that it bounced around the walls and the floor searching for something to absorb it, something to hold it in permanently. The beams certainly had many obstructions to navigate around. There were too many fat women with satiated grins made wider still by the application of inordinate amounts of heavy crimson lipstick. Hair that reached ever upward in a maddeningly vertical gyre, as if they were competing with steeples in an effort to be closer to God. Maybe they thought the preponderance of hair would be a better conduit for God. With all the glistening hair spray, their hair had to be a conductor for something. Maybe there was a lightning rod tucked inside the cocoon of hair. Indeed, the hair imparted a degree of luminosity to the scene. At just the right angle, the artificial light would hit the summit of hairdom and create an angelic halo around their persons. Perhaps it was one big conspiracy. Perhaps some secret Relief Society tome specifies that women should wear eye-dizzying lipstick and hair spray in proportion to their weight. That made it all so bright. The Spirit, this pure being of truth, was being artificially implanted into the baptismal font through the use of cosmetics and cover-up.

The brethren ruined the conspiracy theory, or maybe they just didn’t have a secret manual for this sort of thing. After all, they’re clueless for just about everything else. They seemed to take their dark jackets and conservative ties and throw them over the light. Perhaps embarrassed that their polished bald heads contributed to the gaiety, they took what few strands of hair they had and tugged them unmercifully over to the other side in an attempt to complete an even comb-over. The attempt resembled a pubescent boy covering his eyes during a particularly heated movie scene, only to leave a slit here and there for the brightness of their eyes to filter through and focus on the screen. But the forever-searching light pounced on the exposed slivers of baldness and reflected upward. Ever upward.

“Trevvy, now are you sure I must go all the way?” So it went with my Grandma. Part of my caustic mood was due to her focus on the outward show instead of the inner meaning. She glanced peevishly at me, aware of the intense spotlight focused on her. She was shrinking with its heat.

“Yes Grandma,” I adopted a mocking sing song-voice, “That’s why they call it immersion.” I stretched out the first two syllables so it sounded like, “eeeemmmersion.”

She touched her hair and shot me her puppy dog look. I knew that look so well that it had long since failed to elicit any sympathy. I did a double take at her almost-white hair and groaned in disgust. One more big-haired old Mormon lady. Aware of my stare, she patted her milky mane ever so slightly as if the words, “Fragile! Handle with Care” were stamped in bright red ink on it.

I took my second step, and felt the lukewarm water lap over my toes. The water didn’t beckon me, nor did it seem particularly inviting to my grandmother, although she was probably thinking about the ill effects it would have upon her tightly permed weave. Funny things I tell you. My Grandma was about to have all her sins
washed away and become as pure as a newborn babe. Did she know that? Did I know it? I angrily paused and resolved myself once more to the task, “Don’t think Trevor, just do it.”

“Marcella Grace Murphy. Having been commissioned…” I practiced the oft-repeated words, but they wouldn’t come. I didn’t want to think of the words, of their import. So I skipped to the end, to the ordinance. I reenacted how I would hold her, how I would dunk her under the water, and then how I would with Herculean effort pull her squat body back up against the tension of the water and the force of gravity.

Tension, gravity. I thought it funny to think about physics at a time like this. Mr. Benzinger always said physics was the most useful and most applicable discipline. I nodded in agreement of course, hoping to please and accept his word as truth. Yet I wondered what possible practical purpose knowing the universal gravitational constant served. After all, the experiments we performed were always strictly controlled in idealized and optimal settings. We allowed no possibility for variables or happenings of chance to occur. We knew what we wanted to see and we were going to see it even if we had to cheat to do it. This didn’t exactly translate to the real world. The world isn’t a controlled experiment. We can’t control the variability of our lives, nor can we choose one action and hope there are no consequences attached to it. “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Newton’s 2nd Law. Or was it his 3rd?

A hand brushed against my clothes and I looked back to see my Grandma. Her feet were planted firmly on the cold, biting tile while one hand was white-knuckled upon the polished metal banister. She had a bad hip, and didn’t handle stairs too well. “Hold to the rod,” I thought. Third step down. The water hit the pant legs, and it felt a whole lot tighter. I glanced back again, in time to see a massive chill convulse her whole frame.

“Cold?” I asked softly, offering an olive branch as I could sense her duress. I hoped it was maybe the Spirit bearing angelic witness of the divinity of what she was doing. I grunted at the thought, and looked searchingly at her again.

She merely nodded her head ever so softly in agreement. I watched the old, wrinkled folds of her chin stretch and loosen with each nod. She did look the part. Her baptismal clothes were absolutely spotless, a most exquisite whiteness. My grandma had lived a turbulent life, never knowing what would come her way. I worried that this baptism was her answer to old age. She couldn’t carouse around with the boys like she used to tell me of. “Trevvy, I got all the boys when I was your age. My legs were positively to die for.” I remembered her devilish smirk and her self-assuming nod. But now she was a proper old woman and she felt that religion was the antidote for her otherwise boring life. Once more I looked at the brilliant clothes, and wondered again if they merely covered up something fake and untrue on the inside. Just like makeup and lipstick. A scripture came to mind “…and the blood of the Lamb will make your sins of scarlet as white as snow.” Or something like that. I knew that scripture was in Isaiah, because my Grandma had pointed it out in her scripture study. I prayed that the snow had the power of industrial strength bleach because I felt that my Grandma still had some scarlet sins she had not overcome nor forgotten. How could she? The fun times were the only truth she had ever known.

Suddenly I was horrified. A sick feeling hit my stomach and my intestines turned over to rest on their other side. Maybe that was all my Grandma cared about. She was too Catholic. By being baptized, she thought she was saved and gained an immediate admission to the celestial kingdom. It was like she didn’t want to wait in line at the grocery store, but went straight to the express checkout line even though she had more than nine items. What if she thought that by being baptized she could control the variables? No matter what happened, she was still going to heaven because she was baptized. But I told her! Baptism is the first step, but the truth—

--“Nervous?” Grandma gave me a lopsided grin; triumphant that maybe she was not the only one shaking in her jumpsuit.
I was angry with her, sure that she had ignored everything I said. The truth I told her—of exercising faith, of showing good works, of going beyond the outward ordinance—her ears had chosen not to listen. But maybe it was I. Maybe I was judging her? Maybe my truth was not her truth. What was wrong? Why did I see everything with such negativity? It was as if I held a prism in front of my eyes to distort the rays of truth, to split the single, pure ray into splinters of half-truths and uncertainty. Was Grandma not absorbing the message because I was an imperfect messenger? I watched as the light reflected from the water danced upon her chest, wondered if it squirmed inside the folds of the clothes to creep within the warmth of her body. More likely the light just served to draw attention by its show on the outside.

Mr. Benzinger was an expert showman. He could find a way to mix chalk and baby powder, add some obscure chemical, and blow it up. Invariably it left the class awestruck. But once he started to explain the truths and principles behind the reaction, our thoughts wandered, bouncing off the floor and the poster-laden walls. My grandmother as a nonmember saw a lot of marvelous things that happened to our family. Did she just remember the miracles—the shows—and forget the truths behind those miracles? We marveled at Mr. Benzinger’s brilliantly pressed white lab coat. There were various equations delicately stitched on the back in bright pinks and yellows. Charles’ Law, Boyle’s Law, Hooke’s Law. We are told that laws are the soundest principles in science. They are above hypotheses and theories, they need not be questioned because they are beyond the realm of doubt. They are the ultimate truth in science. The equations seemed to merry-go-round Mr. Benzinger’s barrel chest.

Benzinger was the epitome of the mad scientist. He was always rumpled and eccentric. Everyone swore he slept in the classroom on a cot in his office. Every morning there would be an untamable cowlick sticking perpendicular out of his head. His salt and pepper flecked walrus mustache was never trimmed. The man had chest hair that would not recognize the boundaries of his chest. Instead, it surged upward to invade the territory of his chin. He was a gorilla. We never wanted to have him help us at our desks, because then he would lean over our shoulders and breathe noxious morning breath fumes into our delicate noses.

“You can explain anything that happens on Earth with just a few fundamental concepts,” he used to always say. This saying was his band-aid for all class insecurities about an upcoming test. We were looking for things to study; he gave us a broad generalization that had no practicality.

I could not accept such a statement without more of an explanation. I feebly raised my hand, “Every event on Earth?”

“Every event,” he emphasized. His heavy eyebrows overshadowed his dark eyes. The hairs were like icicles hanging from his brow. If he didn’t trim them he had a hard time seeing things, having to fight to focus on us—like a child peeking through his hands at some unexperienced truth. “Try it and find out,” he continued, “you can prove everything.” I had enough to do already than prove his theories. I was cramming for his tests. They were legendary. The curve was so massive that without it not a single person could possibly pass the class. Besides, I already knew that he was wrong. I thought science couldn’t answer everything. So I didn’t try.

The day before Christmas vacation I asked him how he was going to spend the Holidays. He told me in his excited, needle-teeth smile that he would be staying up at a mountain for most of the break making weather observations.

“What about Christmas?” I asked him jokingly, painting his head in my mind onto the lime green body of the Grinch.

“A fool’s ordinance,” he replied. “Besides I’ve got a theory to prove and if I don’t get up there to gather evidence it’ll be hopeless.” I sat and pondered his simple admission that he did not celebrate Christmas. Perhaps he wasn’t the Grinch, nor was he Scrooge. He was a happy man who simply did not believe in Christmas.
The last step down I was up to my waist in water. The clothes hugged my body oppressively. I motioned for my Grandma, and took her venous hand into mind. I watched her feet slide so child-like through the water. She had great big bunions on both her feet. I just imagined all the puss and diseased bone in there just waiting to be cleansed of its impurity. It probably wasn’t that easy. Nothing is ever as easy as it seems.

Ordinance. He had called Christmas an “ordinance.” The word left a bad aftertaste on my mouth. Was Christmas like my Grandma’s baptism, just another outward show of love, but hollow on the inside? Was there any meaning left in the holiday? Or was its lifeblood sucked out with consumer-driven feeding frenzies.

“….in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.” My Grandma unlocked her knees and arched her back. She slid gracefully back into the open arms of the water. I set my feet on the slimy tile and clenched my teeth to pull her back up again. I hesitated and looked down to make sure she was completely immersed. The tension of her body was absolute. Her eyes were clenched and her thumb and forefinger squeezed her nose, as if fighting against the influx of the water. Yet at the same time she was taking in something else. Something I couldn’t define, something I couldn’t even prove if it was really there. Something powerful. Whatever it was, I simply knew I was wrong about my grandmother. I wrenched her back out of the watery grave. Against tension. Against gravity. She stood majestic before me. Maybe she didn’t think that, but she was. Her hair was swept back on the crown of her head. It didn’t reflect the light, but took it in amongst the compacted fibers. It glowed in the font, giving off light from some deep source within. I hugged her, and pulled her head against my chest, tucked it among the folds of my baptismal clothes, seeking the light she radiated, seeking the unproven power I wish I had. It was a power that even my grandma couldn’t define, though I knew she had it. The power of tension, the power of electrons, even the power of gravity paled in comparison to the power possessed in this embarrassed but strong old woman standing at my side. I wondered why everyone didn’t come to gain this power. But I already knew the answer. The truth behind this power could not be given in equations stitched on the back of a lab coat. It could not even be obtained by simply reading of its source. The power is personal to us all. It is different for everyone. My grandma found her truth and her power, and I found myself clutching frantically for the beams of light that raced joyously out of her still trembling frame.