1984

Against the Dying of the Light

Harlow Clark

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AGAINST THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

... Yet a little while is the light with you.

JOHN 12:35

HARLOW CLARK
"What idiot ever thought of carpeting the basketball court?"

"Probably some sweet old lady in the Relief Society," came the reply. Then in a high old croak, "The cultural hall will look so much more cultural that way."

Cefyn looked up from the letter he was writing and smiled; if two weeks' running was any indication, this was a ritual: Cefyn's district would meet with the zone leaders each P-day at the church to play basketball and complain about the carpet. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, dearie," he called out in an equally high voice.

"It would to someone who asks, 'Why is this basketball white?'"

This voice Cefyn would have recognized even if he hadn't seen the speaker; it belonged to Elder Poelman, a Canadian from South Africa. That summer, in another city, he'd managed to get Cefyn to play some basketball and football—but had given up the task as hopeless. "It's for playing on orange carpet," Cefyn said. "Just as you use orange soccer balls for playing in the snow." Someone threw the ball halfway down the court, hit the backboard, and the game continued; Cefyn went back to his letter.

He looked at us, stared very sadly. "Don't you understand that by separating God and Christ, by preaching works and neglecting grace, or by saying 'saved by grace after all we can do,' you are placing your souls in danger?"

Cefyn paused. The old man's words, without his voice, didn't quite make sense. How to convey the sense of the old man's words? The noise of the game was too loud. Cefyn took his letter out into the hall.

"You are putting light for darkness and darkness for light. God is not interested in our works. He only wants us to accept His salvation. The works come later, as a necessary part, after you've been saved. But grace is primary. You are leading people away from the light of Christ. Please do not risk your souls."

"Oh, this is where you've been for the last ten minutes," said Cefyn's companion, Elder Roberts, walking to the drinking fountain.
"Don't tell me you've all been looking for me."
"No, but Elder Thomas thinks it would be good if you stayed in the cultural hall with us."

Elder Thomas was district leader. Cefyn had known him in another ward, where he hadn't seemed overly concerned about staying with his companion as long as he was in the same vicinity. But there had been some trouble in the mission—something about an elder and an older single lady—and the elder had been transferred to another mission "right quick." In last week's zone conference, President Peters had repeatedly emphasized the rule about staying with your companion. "The members know the rules. How can we expect them to give us referrals if they see us not obeying the rules?"

"It's noisy in there. I can't think very well," Cefyn said. "Perhaps you should come in anyway," said Elder Roberts. "All right. At least until the current scare blows over."

He carried his letter back into the cultural hall (cultural because of the stage at one end) and began writing again.

His words just floored me. I could feel his love. He looked like he might start crying. I couldn't say anything, not "I know you think you've been saved," or "I'm sure you're sincere and believe that deeply but, ..." because that's the way people always get around Joseph Smith. "I'm sure he thought he had a vision," etc. I wish I could warn people with the kind of love he showed me. It reminded me of what Jesus said to the scribe.

While Cefyn was checking his Bible, the door to the cultural hall burst open and a man about five-and-a-half feet tall came running down the court. Someone threw him a ball and he dribbled a few times and said what he had last week: "You just have to know how to handle the ball, Elders—like playing on the driveway." He turned around, aimed at the basket, three-quarters of the way down the court, and shot. The ball circled the rim and dropped through.

"Hi, Brother Melanos," Cefyn said. Brother Melanos was the ward mission leader. He had black hair, and in the ten years since college had kept his chest well-muscled. Cefyn looked over toward the door. A woman had come in with Brother Melanos. She was taller than her husband, and
thinner—like Cefyn. She had light blond hair and was wearing mirrored sunglasses. I ought to introduce myself, he thought... well, after I finish the letter.

"Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." I didn't say it though—it seemed presumptuous. Instead I said "I thank you for your love." It was too formal. I wanted to leave before Elder Roberts tried to refute him (he was a debater in high school). But all he said was "It is only through God's grace that our works have any meaning, and one day—through His grace—I hope to see you in His kingdom."

Cefyn looked up; Sister Melanos was still standing just inside the door, still wearing her sunglasses. He felt kinship with her. He did things like that sometimes—like forgetting to remove the bands he wore to keep his pant legs out of the bicycle chain. He looked at his letter. Just a few more sentences and he would go and meet her...

"Hey, Elder Hunter, help Sister Melanos get the food out of the car." It was Elder Thomas. Cefyn looked at his companion, who said, "It's all right, just out to the car. No harm in going that far from us." General laughter. Cefyn looked hard at Elder Thomas then walked through the middle of the court, diagonally, to Sister Melanos. They shook hands. "I'm Elder Hunter. I don't believe I've met you yet but then I've only been here..."

"I'm inactive," she said, taking off her sunglasses. "I don't come out very often." Her diction was sharp, her words almost clipped.

"Oh," Cefyn said. "Uh, oh," a little laugh. He opened the door and they stepped out into the hallway. "I'm inactive," he muttered. "I only come out to missionary firesides."

"David wants me to cook tacos for your investigators..."
tonight. They don't have them out here. He's trying to reactivate me.''

She had the knack of leaving Cefyn speechless.

Through the glass in the outside door he looked at the afternoon sun on the snow. A safe topic. "This is the kind of day my sister Janet loves. Let one ray of sunlight hit the snow, and she piles her friends in the car and heads for the slopes," he said, opening the door.

"I don't like the sun," Sister Melanos said, putting on her sunglasses. "It destroys my vision."

If Cefyn said "I'm sorry," she would say "No you're not." So he said nothing all the way to her car. When they got there, she unlocked it and got out a large grocery sack for Cefyn and a smaller one for herself. "How, long . . . ."

Cefyn said.

"I found out when I took my son for an eye test, and took one myself, just for a lark. The doctor did a bunch of tests and found that the ultraviolet rays of the sun are destroying my eyes."

"I'm sorry," Cefyn said.

"Yes. Well, if I had known about it years ago, it would have done me some good to wear these glasses." They had come to the door of the church. Sister Melanos held it for Cefyn. When they got to the kitchen, he helped her with her coat. She was wearing a long, dark-brown skirt and a light cotton blouse. He could see she wasn't wearing garments. (He noticed things like that the way bachelors at a party notice wedding bands. His watching for garments bothered him; it was like looking for signs of orthodoxy.)

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Cefyn asked.

"Basketball is a curious game," she said, taking a brick of cheese out of the grocery sack. "The Aztecs had a version of it. It was worth the players' lives. Funny how little things like basketball assume such importance. Well, I suppose you should get back to your companion."

"It's probably not that important. It's just that you hear so many stories about an elder leaving his companion for a few minutes, and bang! some girl's got his pants down."

Cefyn's face reddened as he realized what he'd said. (Besides, that was supposed to be the kind of remark that
brought on those situations.) “I’m sorry, that was rather
indelicate.”

Sister Melanos started laughing. “O yes, bound to your
companion like Odysseus to the mast.”

“That wouldn’t work in this case. Elder Roberts just went
to the doctor and had the wax taken out of his ears.”

The fireside went well. After dinner (Cefyn hadn’t tasted
tacos in a year), the elders showed The First Vision, and
Brother Melanos talked of his conversion. Cefyn enjoyed it—but twice he felt there was something wrong with the day, twice he remembered what, and twice he put it out of his
mind. It wasn’t his remark about elders being caught with
their pants down; it was Sister Melanos’ laugh after his
remark about Elder Roberts’ ear wax. She looked and laughed
as though it were she who was relieved at being forgiven a
foolish statement.

All but two of the investigators came to stake conference
the following Sunday. Sister Melanos was there, too, but
Cefyn didn’t get to say hello. The Syracuse First Ward had
opened the accordian walls between the chapel and the
cultural hall, and filled the latter with folding chairs. Cefyn
was in the chapel with his investigators, and Sister Melanos
was at the other end of the cultural hall when he noticed her.

He saw her on Thursday, though, when she came to pick
up Brother Melanos (who owned a light appliance business
in downtown Syracuse. Often on Thursdays he would don
his jogging suit and run through rain, snow or whatever to
join the elders’ game.) Cefyn was writing a letter when
Sister Melanos came into the gym with two children. He
looked at her, her children, then at the clock. Four o’clock.
It didn’t seem like they’d been playing three hours. “Good
afternoon,” he said.

“Perhaps,” Sister Melanos said, sitting down in a chair
near him. “Jacob, Alma, this is Elder Hunter. He comes
from Provo, where I met your father.” Cefyn put his letter
on the floor and shook hands with the children. Alma
climbed into his lap, stared at him with jet black eyes, and
said, “Someday, I want to be a missionary just like you.”
Her mother started laughing.

"She's been doing that for about a year, to every new elder she meets."

"Well, Alma, do you want to ride the Missionary Express?" Cefyn asked, hoisting her onto his neck. He trotted around the gym to calls of "arm's length, Elder Hunter." When he had set Alma down, Jacob said, "My turn."

Cefyn looked at him. "You're pretty big. You must be nine already."

"Uh-uh. I won't even be eight for two weeks. I was born on Thanksgiving and I'm going to be baptized the first Saturday in December, so I get to ride the Missionary Express too."

After Jacob's ride, both children begged for another, but their mother sent them off with a "you'll tire poor Elder Hunter out."

"You have charming children," Cefyn said.

"Thank you. When Alma was born, we wanted a good traditional Mormon name—so we chose 'Alma.' Everyone in Utah thinks it's strange to give it to a girl, and everyone out here would think it a strange name for a boy. So I guess we bucked tradition by being traditional. We were always non-traditionally traditional. I met David at BYU, in a Freshman English class. He went on a mission to France; I stayed home, dated, and wrote letters—and when he got back there I was waiting for him. We got married two years later, during which time his companions were having children and ribbing him about not being married yet.

"We graduated in 1970—I with a master's degree, he with a bachelor's—and came east to enjoy the higher earning power of a college diploma. At least David did; I was pregnant, and decided to be a good traditional Mormon housewife..."

"With a master's degree," Cefyn added.

"Yes, well I soon found out that Pope and Dryden aren't much consolation when you're trying to change a screaming baby's diaper. I was going to try for my Ph.D. after the children got into school—but I've got to rest at least until next fall." (Cefyn wondered how often she'd said all this to
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herself.) "I'd have to have a fellowship, but I don't know if I could read my students' papers—it's hard enough for me to read a book. And," she looked at Cefyn, "anything I could do is only temporary.

Always at my back I hear
Time's winged chariot hovering near."

"Hovering?" Cefyn said.
"Like a hawk. You're one of the few members of the Church around here with enough taste that I can quote poetry to you—I mean real poetry, not the stuff you hear in church."

It felt like an insult—like someone deciding that all missionaries are idiots because the elders in your district listen only to Saturday's Warrior, My Turn on Earth, and The Tabernacle Choir's Greatest Hits.

Sister Melanos was looking toward the game, not watching as her husband made a basket before going out of bounds, just looking. She didn't turn to Cefyn when she said, "Ten years ago I knelt across the altar from David in the Manti Temple, my eyes filled with wonder at the murals I had seen, the ceremony we had participated in, the love we shared."

She brushed a hand across her cheek. "And it means nothing now. Those words are like ashes in my mouth."

Then she shook her head and smiled at Cefyn, her eyelashes sticking together in places, and said, "No, I guess it's not that bad. I guess I should see what the children are doing."

Cefyn watched her go out the door, trying to figure her out. Then he thought, write a 500-word essay on the meaning of this passage. He started laughing; even when she wasn't there, she brought him up short.
A few minutes later she came back in. "Do you know what I miss most though, being married? Guess what I studied in college?"

"Classics, earwax and knot-tying," Cefyn said.

She laughed. "I studied the 18th century. All around me the 20th was going to hell. I wept for it, and tucked myself into the 18th. Amazing how little protest there was at BYU. I don't think anyone even thought of occupying President Wilkinson's office. That came later, near the end of 1971. David became aware that many of his fellow chemists were devoting their time to making substances whose sole purpose was to kill... human beings. Not the chemists at Kodak, necessarily, but all over the country. It was odd, because he'd always been aware of the war, and said it was God's blessing he never had to go to Vietnam. I never liked that idea, but I was glad he didn't have to go."

"I'm amazed," Cefyn said.

"Oh?"

"For some reason I think of chemistry and basketball as mutually exclusive."

She laughed. "David is a very brilliant man; he believes, with the Greeks, that a mind is no good inside a flabby body. Anyway, he heard he could get into business down in Syracuse, so he left Kodak, and he's been busy in the Church ever since." She paused while watching her husband block a pass. "I didn't want to get on this subject."

"You were talking about President Wilkinson's 18th-century campus."

"That's right. We used to get together, a bunch of us from our class, and go over to the snack bar in the Wilkinson Center and get a soda and talk about what we were reading. Once, while I was dating David, I went there with a fellow from our class, and we were talking about 'To His Coy Mistress,' and I said how I thought the man in the poem was a pig for trying to frighten his fiancee into his bed. A very witty pig, with his 200 years for each—" she looked at Cefyn, "part—but a pig." She waved a hand in front of her face and laughed hollowly. "I miss that, being able to call up a male friend and say 'let's go get a Coke and talk about that film on television last night, or what you're reading, or
writing, or . . .’’

‘‘ ‘Rithmeticking?’’ Cefyn said.

She smiled at him; then she shook her head and left the
room.

About ten minutes later Cefyn went out the door and
down the hall to the bathroom. When he came out, he
stopped at the drinking fountain. As he straightened up and
started back to the gym, he glanced down the hall. Sister
Melanos stood by the glass door that opened onto the hill
sloping down from the church. She was simply staring out at
the falling snow. Cefyn walked back to the gym, but paused
at the door. Sister Melanos shivered, a long shiver, and
though the light was dim, Cefyn could see her holding
herself and rubbing her arms briskly. He walked down the
hall to her. ‘‘Would you like my coat?’’

‘‘No, thank you. I was just thinking about stake
conference and Bishop Taylor from Utica: ‘This chapel is
truly a city set on a hill.’ Example, example, that’s all we
hear anymore. The Church of the Latter-day Public Relations
Men.’’

Cefyn felt a slight shock. He had said the same thing
many times, but coming from her, the words had claws.

Sister Melanos looked at him. ‘‘Take a good look over
there. Take a good look.’’

On the hill opposite was a very large Jewish cemetery.
Near the road running between the two hills was a tall, old
tree with many graves cluttered around it. Every time he
came to church he had been intrigued by that and wondered
if there were any modern Sadducees, asleep in the roots of
the Tree of Life.

‘‘That is the city set on a hill,’’ said Sister Melanos,
‘‘whose light is darkness, and cannot be hid from the world.’’
And Cefyn understood. ‘‘You saw the doctor today,
didn’t you?’’

‘‘In a couple of years I may not even be able to drive. In
my dreams I see myself on that rocking-horse D. H. Lawrence
wrote about, staring out the window, not even rocking.
Nothing,’’ she said. ‘‘Nothing.’’

‘‘It seems so . . . extreme,’’ Cefyn said. ‘‘Your eyes—
there are ways of getting around that, of adjusting. It’s not
the last . . .''

"Perhaps you wouldn’t be so glib if you were losing your sight."

Silence.

Finally, "I’ve never lost any of my senses, but I know loneliness. Kids used to hit me, tease me, swear at me in the halls and in my yearbook. Andrew Marvell and his 400 years for two breasts was great companionship at times." (There was a half laugh in Cefyn’s voice.) "Wilfred Owen, and ‘The Jabberwock with eyes of flame.’ You know, I’ve never read Alice in Wonderland, but all the elders ask me to recite ‘Jabberwocky.’ I am the mission joke." Silence.

"But the thought of a maimed body," Sister Melanos said, "not whole, so depresses me. Don’t you ever get bitter, or ask, ‘Why so much pain?’"

"I, don’t know. I suppose it has something to do with Christ. With having hope in Christ. . . ."

"I don’t!"

Cefyn looked at the snow, chastised himself.

The door of the chapel opened. Jacob and Alma came out. Jacob turned on the lobby lights and looked down the hall.

"There you are, Elder Hunter. Can we have another ride?"

Cefyn placed Jacob on his back and Alma on his shoulders, putting his arms under Jacob’s legs. He held Alma’s feet with his hands, then headed for the cultural hall. As he entered he said, ‘‘Missionary Express comin’ through. Five o’clock. Time for all good elders to go back to work.’’

It was Thursday again. Basketball again. Cefyn hadn’t been able to finish his letter last week, so he put the date November 17 under what he had written and continued.

They just showed up at church one day and asked to be taught. Then this Jim Jones thing broke out in Guyana, and everyone was talking about cults, and someone told Brother Waverly that Mormons were a cult, and he’s anxious, and his wife doesn’t want to attend without him. Ah, the mysterious workings of ‘‘our father below.’’

Cefyn put down his letter. ‘‘I’ll be in the chapel,’’ he announced loudly.

‘‘Ten-four, good buddy,’’ said Elder Roberts.
It was a beautiful chapel. Cefyn remembered being in the Old North Church in Boston years ago; the tour guide had said something about its being designed like an upside down ship. The arches in this chapel reminded Cefyn of that.

It was funny, Cefyn thought, but Mormons didn’t pray in their chapels—except in meetings. You’d never walk into an LDS chapel and see people kneeling at the benches praying.

He knelt at a bench on the front row, resting his elbows on the seat. He prayed for his investigators, each by name, and felt he should pray for Sister Melanos. He felt presumptuous, as he had in high school when he prayed frequently for some friends and relatives weak in the faith and straying. Who was he to judge that others needed praying for? “Bless Sister Melanos that she will find the light she has lost.” He paused. What else to say? He should ask to help her, but she was under the stewardship of another—her bishop, her husband. Yours, by virtue of friendship, came the words.

He finished his prayer. Four o’clock again. He went out into the lobby. She was there.

“David doesn’t know I’m here. I came to talk to you.” Cefyn drew in his breath. “Oh?”

“It’s all right. I’ll stay at arm’s length. I—I just have to talk to you.”

“Ordinarily,” Cefyn said slowly, “we aren’t supposed to counsel members.”

“I know, it’s policy. That’s what I meant when I said I can’t ask a friend out to talk over lunch. I just want to talk to you as a friend. And legitimately, I can’t, here.”

There were sofas on either side of the lobby. Cefyn sat down on one; Sister Melanos took the opposite end.

She stood up, went to the other sofa, where she had laid
her purse.

"I may leave, for a long time. Go to Utah. Can you imagine going to 'Utah'? Calcutta, maybe."

"Have you thought of asking your husband for a blessing?"

"He offered. And I said, 'You don't just lay your hands on people's heads and the sun undoes its damage.'"

"And if it did," Cefyn said, "it wouldn't be from God anyway, right?"

"Dammit. I know you're a missionary, sworn defender of the faith and all that. But I just want a friend."

"I'm sorry," Cefyn said.

They sat for some minutes looking out the lobby windows, watching the fading light—silent.

Finally Sister Melanos spoke.

Time and bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away.

"It's a nice image," Cefyn said. "Who wrote it?"

"T.S. Eliot. It's from 'Burnt Norton.'"

"I memorized something from that:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the Healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart."

"That's 'East Coker,'" Sister Melanos said, maybe in rebuke.

Uneasy silence. To fill it, Cefyn continued:

"Our only health is the disease
If we obey the dying nurse
Whose constant care is not to please
But to remind of our and Adam's curse,
And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse."

"'The dying nurse,' that's the Church. It goes down to the grave with us. It leads us to death." Another rebuke.

"Why Eliot?" Cefyn asked. "You, you seem to have given up on Christ, I mean, you said you had no hope in him. So why Eliot?"

"'O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark.' He
understood that, that we go into the dark. He understood that our only defense—our only defense—against the shadow is the written word. He understood the vacancies of the human spirit—not Christ.''

Eliot didn't understand Christ, or Christ didn't understand Eliot's vacancies—which had she said? She was wrong either way. No, let her speak. "I love that image of the wounded surgeon," Cefyn said. "It's such a perfect comparison; I don't know why I didn't think of it a hundred years ago.''

"That's the point, he's technically dazzling. He shocks us into belief with his metaphysical imagery. Who could resist the idea of the Holy Ghost as a dive-bomber?''

"I've not read that part."

Sister Melanos walked over to the picture windows.

"Pound," she said. "Have you read 'The Ballad of the Goodly Fere?'" Pound understood Christ and stated it plainly:

'I ha' seen him eat o' the honey-comb
Sin' they nailed him to the tree.'

It was completely dark now. Sister Melanos stood looking out at the snow. Cefyn stood up. He almost turned on the light, but he wanted to hear if she would say more.

"Pound was an anti-semitic fascist, and an atheist at that," Sister Melanos said. "But he understood Christ. It's called 'grace,' something the Church knows little enough of. Work, work, work.''

Cefyn could hear her warming up like the boiler on the dry farm, building speed and steam and pressure—then she stopped. Her words hung disembodied in the air, and faded to silence. Silence and the dark. . . . Cefyn didn't want them to enfold him—them. He turned on the light. Sister Melanos blinked several times rapidly. "I'm sorry, I guess I should have told you I was going to turn it on.''

"Mission rules, I suppose," she said. "The Church has too many rules. Too many rules. Don't! Don't! Don't! 'To remind us of our curse,' to condemn us. To lead us to the grave. That's all you hear in general conference or stake conference or . . . thou shalt not! 'If you would just spend time with your kids, or obey the prophet (not the Lord, the prophet), or just pay your tithing, the world wouldn't be in
such a mess. I'll bet Lehi paid his tithing, and his sons botched it. Damnation. That's all you hear—damnation!"

She paused, then stopped.

Cefyn didn't know what to say. Then—"My feeling from general conference is that God, and the Church, want to forgive us. Don't condemn us. I've always felt they were urging us to repent, to partake of God's grace. We can always repent."

"Not always. You cannot be forgiven of adultery. Cannot."

"Even that. I've always got the feeling from general conference that you can be forgiven for anything. Even murder to some degree, anything but denying the Holy Ghost."

"Not adultery."

Where did people get such ideas? Cefyn had heard that before, and such denial of Christ's mercy made him angry. Anyway, why did she want to start a theological debate . . . oh. "Even that," he said. "Anything but the unpardonable sin, and most of us aren't capable of that."

She looked straight into his eyes. He wanted to avert them but looked back. Her face was somewhere between rage and mourning. Finally she dropped her eyes and her shoulders.

"Now you know everything."

Cefyn didn't know what to say. You can trust me; I won't tell—no. "I, I, don't know anything."

She turned toward the gym. He'd said the wrong thing again. "Even of that," he said.

She turned to him, smiled, then walked to the gym.

The next Thursday was Thanksgiving. President Peters asked his missionaries to take P-day on Wednesday, and spend much of Thursday proselyting. "What better time to teach families? Many elders and sisters who proselyted last
Thanksgiving can testify to its fruitfulness." Wednesday was also transfer day. Cefyn got his notice in the Monday mail. Saugerties. Elder Poelman had been there. Cefyn called him. He thought of his friend’s T-shirt from there, "Wherein the hell is Saugerties?"

"It’s where they use orange footballs for playing in the snow."

On the bus, Cefyn looked out the window a lot. New York was an impressionist painting in the sunset. When they stopped in Utica, Cefyn opened his journal, turned on his overhead light, and began to write:

I’m sure what I said to her was inspired; otherwise I would have started to argue. I don’t like to hear about how foolish or vengeful the church is (except from myself—then it’s like complaining about someone you love). I would have said something stupid. A thousand times I’ve been on the verge of saying something stupid, and been glad later that I didn’t.

A girl who looked about twenty-five sat down next to Cefyn. The bus started to pull out of the station. "Elders and Sisters," President Peters had said, "when you’re transferring from one area to another talk with your fellow passengers." He looked at the girl, then at his journal. The bus was on smooth road now. He began writing again.

I’m sure what I said about being forgiven was inspired too, but it’s not one of those stories you can tell at zone conference. . . .

—"For with some I am not well pleased," President Peters was saying, "because they will not open their mouths. . . ."

He looked at the girl again. Another line or two and he would introduce himself.

"Against the Dying of the Light," a first place entry in the 1983 Vera Hinkley Mayhew Competition, comes from a cycle of stories about Cefyn Hynter—pronounced "Kevin" from the Welsh.