

"What comes first? A western, or your prayers?"

I glanced quickly at Father. His eyebrows conveyed to me exactly what I had expected. I pressed closer to the screen, noticing every hat, every hang of the holster for clues to each gunfighter's fate. The cool, impatient stillness behind told me that those vague hints would have to suffice.

I silenced the gunfire and the screams of frightened ladies, but left the picture. I sidled to a stuffed chair, my eyes craning in their sockets.

Father sighed again. "Shut it all the way off, Darrell."

I didn't hesitate to do so, although not from fear. There was no alternative.

The hard floor made my knees ache. I rested my elbows on the cushion and leaned forward, just like Father and Shirley. We didn't kneel stiffly upright as in church. We slouched on the sofa or chairs--all much lower than the church pews--until our noses almost touched the seat covers.

"Who's going to lead?" Mother looked each of us in the eyes.

Shirley recited the prayers most rapidly, but she didn't like to lead. Father yawned too much, and since I couldn't withstand his example I lost all my effectiveness.

Father yawned. I yawned. The clock ticked on the piano.

Mother repositioned her leg on the hassock. "I will lead." Crossing herself, she began: "Our Father..."

She pronounced the words precisely but inflected them without apparent regard to their content. She seemed intent upon squelching our nearly continual round of yawns. Her painstaking progress was agonizing. All across the country people sat fastened to their TV screens, pleasantly scared by the shoot-out. A haze began drifting over my consciousness.

The words of the prayers gradually merged in my mind, high-timbre tones preceding, time after time, choppy, yawning responses:

"HailMaryFULLofgracetheLordisWITHthee,blessedartthou amongwomenandblessedisthefruitofthywomb, JESUS!"

"HoMarmoth--mothGodprayfrus--sinnersnowatthourofdeath Amen."

Mother's voice, rising and falling with our nodding heads, eventually ended our session of prayers with an improvised entreaty for graces to be showered upon us. "Lord, we ask You to be understanding...", she prayed, looking at Father, Shirley and me. When she spoke this way, the three of us knew ourselves to be overhearing a private conversation. She talked so freely that we felt almost embarrassed, vaguely uneasy.

Though we stirred slightly after her final "Amen," that personal supplication made us linger. For a moment, the anticipation of resuming our earlier pursuits was quelled.