

## ***GODAWFUL FOR 25 CENTS***

By Michael Ventura

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God: a word of unverifiable significance -- can mean everything, nothing, or both; also, used as an expletive. For *awful* my dictionary gives a dissonance of definitions: "inspiring awe; extremely disagreeable." Those meanings are strangely linked, for one doesn't merely feel awe; if it's truly awe, one is possessed by it. Awe cancels out everything else. You can be so overwhelmed by awe that the object of awe becomes almost repulsive and you seek to escape -- for one's sense of self can be a fragile thing, and we can fear that too much awe will leave us with very little of ourselves. Certainly some of the more dire behaviors of people in love can be explained by this, as can the response of many to any serious thought of God. Thus when a divine agent appears in the Bible, folks hide, run, faint -- anything to shield themselves from the often extremely disagreeable sensation of raw awe. Only the most holy Biblical people stand their ground for awe, and even they tremble.

In America, we routinely use "awful" to mean "extremely disagreeable"; its usage as "inspiring awe" is virtually extinct. And we've coined another word, a strange sort of word, not quite an expletive, not quite an exclamation: *godawful*. A usage that increases "awful's" expression of awe and the speaker's sense of repulsion. Our words mirror us. You may never say "godawful" in its literal sense, but it's still your word, for there's no act more communal than speech. We speak not only to each other but for each other. We hold the meanings of words for each other. People who use sexual profanity are holding this society's cursed sense of sexuality. People who use racial epithets keep our damnable history alive in their mouths. Leaders who spew an evasive vocabulary allow their listeners to evade the truth with them. People who use speech with clarity are making a clear space for others as well as themselves. Any word or usage that finds a place in the language has found a place in the community. Every word is a container into which the entire community of that language has put something. Merely by understanding a word we share its meaning, for understanding is never passive. Understanding is an experience, and there's no one-way experience; all experiences are exchanges, however one-sided they may seem. When we understand something, we enter the community of that understanding.

It can be important to remember how we entered the community of certain understandings -- so lately I've been trying to remember how I entered the territory of "godawful."

It happened in New York City, in 1953. The city was godawful if anything was. An immense labyrinth, always moving, always noisy, always threatening, always gray. As a child, I could compare the city to nothing else. To a New York street kid, Nature is a rumor. I'd never seen mountains or deserts or forests except in movies, and I'd seen movies in enormous rooms, rooms as big as churches, *in the city*. So Nature itself seemed smaller than the city. Something that could fit into one of our buildings. (Shirley Clarke captured this in her rarely seen film, *The Cool World*: The dream of a Harlem girl is to see the ocean, but she believes the ocean is impossibly far away, she has seen it only in movies; she does not know -- the knowledge is simply not available to her -- that if she takes the subway on her corner to the last stop, there will be the Atlantic Ocean.) Years later I wrote a poem: "Here in the city/ Our own bodies/ Are all the earth we have."

The city was everything. Always thrilling, always beckoning, always dangerous. Dread-inspiring. Fascinating. Godawful. No adult, no matter how authoritative or charismatic, seemed "big" when compared to New York City, the height of its buildings and the maze of its streets. It seemed an entity upon which a human being could not make an impact. So the city itself had a god-like quality. As in rural communities, Nature is often God, in New York the city is God. It's certainly how God operates on you, no matter what you pray to. What this says to you is that the city is a stronger god than God.

Street kids are impossible to keep track of. When they leave their apartments they can wander off in any direction in a seemingly endless maze. On the day I'm remembering, I'd wandered off alone again, and for the price of a quarter I'd gone (as I often did) into a movie theatre. In that neighborhood it didn't matter how young you were, or whether or not it was a school day. If you had the quarter, they let you in. The picture was *The Robe*.

I didn't know it then, but *The Robe* was the first Hollywood film in CinemaScope. Movies had already seemed unnaturally big. This was even bigger. and it was filmed in a Technicolor much deeper and richer than the flatter tints of today. A child doesn't know that a film is directed and acted; to a child, a film just is. It's another order of existence. Like a dream. Or, to the Catholic child I was, like a church. This film was too much like a church! The godawful images of church were there, in the film, but in motion, in assaulingly bright colors. That incredibly sad, somehow feminine man on the Cross in church -- here he was, on this screen, and you knew his face though they never showed it. You saw the faces of others as they looked at him, heard his name, saw his cut and bloody legs and feet as he stumbled through the streets carrying the cross. Saw, in a brief horrible shot, the nail enter his hand. Saw him in outline, from behind, on the cross. Saw his blood. Saw his blood-stained robe.

Saw how his robe inspired one man (Victor Mature) and tortured another (Richard Burton). I didn't retain their names at the time, but because of this movie I was ludicrously stuck with them for life as numinous figures. I could see the inspiration of one and the torment of the other, though I could make no sense of it -- except what even a child could know, that somehow this Jesus person was having an earth-shattering impact. Godawful.

It was, incredibly enough, a religious experience. You don't find them, they find you, and this one found me as a child alone in a theatre in that city. I remember no thoughts, certainly no revelations; only the most lurid, vivid impressions. For me, it meant that this Christ-person my mother worshipped was real. And "real" meant: He had an existence apart from my mother and the church. A frightening, terrible existence. In a psychologically actual way, I was a child who was present at the Crucifixion. I know that sounds melodramatic and ridiculous, but it's all that explains to me, now, looking back, the reality I've always felt about Jesus. Not as a god. I don't remember ever equating Jesus with God -- probably because I'd seen him, on the screen, as a man. A man to whom awful things happened, and who exerted a strange force upon everyone.

The statues in church had their stern doll-like reality. The crucifixes in our tenement apartment had theirs. The talk of my mother and my aunts had long ago taught me that Jesus was a "someone," he was spoken of, at least by women. (I don't remember any man in our extended Mediterranean family speaking of him, except when they cursed.) All this no doubt softened me up. But in *The Robe*, which frightened me so, I saw his impact, apart from family, apart from church. His blood. His garment. His capacity to torment and inspire. Everything seemed to go crazy around him -- to go crazy

and to stay crazy. It wasn't a "movie." I saw it. I needed no other proofs. In my innermost heart, no matter what later doubts and arguments I would have with Jesus, I didn't need further evidence of his existence, his strange powers. The deed was done. As he said on that cross, "It is accomplished." Godawful.

But Jesus, like Nature, was contained within something far huger and greater and inescapable to me: the city. Thereafter, when I heard of Jesus -- from the priests, the nuns, my mother, my aunts -- I knew something about him. My own terrifying and private knowledge. I'd entered the community of those who've in some way experienced him. But I also knew that as crazy as he could make people -- beautiful-crazy or terrible-crazy or both -- he lived and moved and had his being in one building in my city, and I knew where that building was. Everywhere else he was a statue, but I knew where he hung out. I also knew that the next time I had a quarter he wouldn't be in that building. He'd come and gone. The grownups said he was coming back. I expected him to come back, yes, but I thought he'd come to that building, in that overwhelming city. And the same thing would happen all over again, the way it always did when a movie came back. This was not a good formula for hope. Jesus would get lost in this city just like everyone else.

Somebody had said something in the movie about "Love one another." They were quoting Jesus. In the movie people had been haunted by those words. I was haunted too, I'd caught their haunting like a fever, and those words would remain with me always. But the streets, the god that was New York, said something else, and that godawful contradiction would tear at my little-boy's life, as so many others had been and would continue to be torn. I had joined a community not of understanding but of paradox. Years later I read a line by another Brooklyn kid, Norman Mailer: "New York is the capitol of the Twentieth Century." My image of the crucified Jesus is on Golgotha, but Golgotha is in a building, in Brooklyn, in New York, not 2,000 years ago but in the 20th century, and nothing changes but the intensity of the paradox and the explosion of population in the community of the Godawful.

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