


The Black Door

Patricia Hart

yrum Black had three wives. All of the people up and down Tudor Avenue knew that. In fact, I suppose all of the people in Salt Lake City knew that there were polygamists among us, some secret, and some, like Hyrum Black, open. Anyway we all knew he had three wives when he moved in and that he had at least those three until the day he was murdered.

We had all seen the construction of the three identical houses on what had been a corner vacant lot where I played baseball with the Crandall twins and Steve and Jerry Clark and all of the Jensens up until the time I was twelve. We had seen Hyrum himself, dressed in old-fashioned pants made of brown, rough-woven cloth that had buttons on one side instead of a zipper in the front, a shirt with big round buttons, suspenders, and work boots, out supervising the construction with his beard and his cane in one hand, raising his arms and belaboring commands in Biblical language. We thought he looked like Brigham Young himself gazing down on our valley and declaring "this is the place!"

The day the house was finished, the workers started building the wall, a high, gray stone wall that looked like the side of the Salt Lake Temple, stern, foreboding, and with strange carvings of the sun, moon and stars at cryptic intervals near the top. When the wall was finished, he planted all the way around the outside of it a row of seedling poplars. After that, the only way you could see into Hyrum Black's yard was by climbing a tall tree, with the ones at Jensen's being the best because they were the closest. That's where we stationed ourselves the day Hyrum Black arrived with his three wives and who knew how many kids? You couldn't count them because they moved around

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too much, but there had to have been at least seven, because two of the women were carrying babies and there was one tall boy my age or so who looked retarded, and then the twins, boys who looked old enough to be in school, and then there were a bunch of stragglers. The mothers were dark and didn't talk much, moving silently in their long, dark skirts, except to call out an order now and then in a low voice with words we couldn't understand.

"Do you think they're space people?" Jimmy Jensen asked, and we would have hooted him down out of the tree, except that we were trying to be quiet and not noticed.

"That's Spanish, pea brain," I informed him. "Mom told me they came up from the Colonies in Mexico." At the time, of course, I had no idea of what the Colonies in Mexico were; I was just parroting my mother. And actually, even this information was inaccurate, if the tales I heard years later could be believed. According to them, Black had been brought up in Mexico City, the child of a mainstream Mormon banker and his Utah wife. The move to polygamy was something, rumor had it, that his parents never understood, and no one was quite sure whether his costume and ways were something he stumbled on in a forgotten sect south of the border, or something he had invented himself.

"You think you're so smart, Greg Nelson," Jimmy told me, his eight-year-old ire rising.

"That's right," and I gave him a quick Indian burn with both hands on his forearm. He yelped like a coyote and that's when Hyrum Black noticed us up in the tree and came over to the wall banging his cane and yelling at us to get down. "Way to go, retardo," I told Jimmy as we scooted down out of the tree.

A few weeks later on Sunday my father woke me up at seven as usual to go with him to priesthood meeting. Sitting beside him on a folding chair in my white shirt and the black suit I was busy outgrowing I heard that my father and I had been assigned as home teaching companions to a number of families in the ward. That meant that we were supposed to visit them at least once a month, make sure they didn't need anything, give them a message from the First Presidency or a lesson or a scripture, and pray with them, all of us standing around in a circle, before leaving.

"And why don't you stop in and welcome the Black family — er families — to the neighborhood while you're out," Brother Jones ended with a smile. I tried to imagine what a circle it would be if we prayed with my father and me, Hyrum, the three wives, and all the kids, and giggled a little nervously. My father laid a hand on my arm because they were getting ready for the closing prayer.

The next night after dinner my father and I put on our suits again and walked down the block to the corner, where the opening in the wall around Hyrum Black's place could be found. My father knocked. No answer. He knocked again on the dark wooden slats of the door. After a minute or so we heard heavy footsteps heading our way. At last the door swung open, and Hyrum Black, dressed in a brown shirt with a round collar and big buttons, stuck his head out. I mention only that he was wearing a shirt because that

was all I could see. For all I knew, behind that heavy black door, his lower half could have been diapered or half-goat or *al fresco*.

"What do you want?" There was something unused about this way of saying the words.

"Brother Black," my father said in a friendly voice, holding out his hand, "I'm Brother Nelson, and this is my son, Greg. We stopped by to see if you or any members of your family have needs that we could help with."

"We do not need anything," Hyrum Black answered gruffly. "And I would thank you not to call me Brother. We are not brothers in the same faith. Yours is a corrupt and dying perversion of the faith Joseph Smith revealed as a boy of thirteen in 1820." That caught my father by surprise, I could tell. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again, apparently undecided as to what to say.

Just then a head, small and blue-black like some strange and beautiful summer insect, darted out from under Hyrum Black's arm and looked at us with unblinking eyes. I had just time to notice the long hair parted in the middle and done in two long, black braids, and the small face with a delicate mouth that smiled faintly on seeing me, before her father plucked her away by the shoulders the way you might hold a butterfly for a moment by the wings, and said loudly into her face, "*¡Angélica! ¡Vete pa' dentro ahorita!*" And before my father could say anything else, Black turned to us and bellowed, "I will thank you not to come around to my door any more, and I will also thank you to keep your son from spying down on us from the trees!" He slammed the heavy black door shut, and for the next ten years, that door never opened to me again.

From the time I was twelve until I turned nineteen I saw Angélica only rarely, and only from a distance: being bundled into the jeep, or running up the street with a sister or two in tow. None of the children went to our school. Did the mother and aunts teach them at home, or did they just work? Were there nine of them now? Or perhaps an even dozen? Nobody knew. Raw milk was delivered to the family in huge containers from a nearby dairy farm, and so were big bags of wheat and bushels of produce, supplementing the carefully planted and weeded garden we imagined out back. During the deer hunt, Black could be seen going out with the tall, retarded son, and they invariably came back with a buck strapped across the hood of the jeep.

"Venison stew again for the Blacks this winter," Mother said, watching them carry it inside. "And I'll bet they use everything! I don't know how they get by!" The truth was, nobody knew. Word was, Black had paid for the construction of the houses in cash and paid cash for everything he bought around town. But nobody knew where any of the money came from, or how he got it, or how much of it there was.

The children came out only rarely; and after the frightening day of the shaken cane, as far as I knew none of us ever climbed the Jensens' tree again to spy down into the yard. Once when I was fifteen I saw Angélica in a long black dress and a white pinafore that buttoned up the back, her long braids

looped under and fastened to her head, on the sidewalk in front of the house with a piece of chalk drawing something that looked sort of like a hopscotch. I watched from my living room window as another, smaller version of her peeped out the gate, then scurried toward her and began pulling on her arm. Angélica shook her head, but her little sister, or cousin, or whatever, kept pulling and gesturing. Then the gate opened again and the tall, retarded-looking boy came out and stood on the little strip of grass between the street and the sidewalk. Slowly he lifted one elbow into the other hand and rested it on his belt buckle, and slowly he put his raised thumb into his mouth. The little girl pointed to him and made gestures of despair, all the time looking up the road—for their father’s jeep? Angélica hesitated, hoppy taw, or whatever it was, in one hand, standing on one foot and then reluctantly lowering the raised foot to the ground again. She slipped the taw or whatever it was into the pocket of her white pinafore, then reached for the arm of the tall, retarded boy and guided him to the black wooden door in the wall without ever jostling his thumb from his mouth. The door swung open and the three of them disappeared.

The life on Tudor Avenue that I remember during those years was a stream of afternoons devoid of mysteries because inside our house, everything was known. It was a stream of afternoons of coming home from school to eat bread and peanut butter and watch “Highway Patrol” or “Sea Hunt” before going out to ride bikes or play touch football over at the church. Those afternoons melted into evenings later of MIA dances where I mostly just stood on the sidelines of the Church gymnasium (only we called it the cultural hall), which was festooned with green and gold crepe paper. It was a time of school plays and Scouting trips and debate meets and then reluctant appearances at any number of girls’ choice dances given by the sororities (only we called them cultural units). As I look back, I have the impression of months bumping each other out of the way in innocent haste as they rushed into years, leaving me scarcely time to breathe, let alone to look at the odd complex on the corner of Tudor Avenue surrounded by the weird gray wall with carvings of the sun, moon, and stars near the top. But it was always there, as I hurried by on my way to the seminary parties or the senior class bonfire or a wrestling match or a music lesson. It was always there, and Angélica was always still inside it—in some part of my mind I knew that.

The poplars Hyrum Black had planted around the outside of the wall grew over the years, and he pruned and shaped them into spearlike perfection around the fortress with the help of the tall, retarded boy. The trees were like a warning, and I believe we heeded it. I don’t remember ever talking much about the Blacks with my friends, or that it ever occurred to us to make fun of the children when we glimpsed them in their clothing from yesteryear and their unsmiling faces. Theirs was a corner of another time and place, of words and ways we couldn’t understand, so we dismissed them from our consciousness—that strange, dark family who openly broke the law of monogamy, but thought of *us* as the gentiles.

One night in November of the year I was a senior in high school I was walking home just before midnight from Eric Jones's house, where we'd been working on our debate boxes together. I turned the corner onto Tudor just in time to be hit by a flying rush of skirts that sent me sprawling backwards into a snowbank.

"What!" I called out in surprise. Then I realized that the bundle sliding top over tin cup across the icy sidewalk, something flying from her hand, was Angélica. I scrambled to my feet, dusting the snow from my levis and reached down to help her up. Her black braids were wound around her head now, and the dark eyes looked piercingly into mine for a moment as I lifted her to her feet and brushed at her black woolen shawl and heavy dark skirts. Then she broke the gaze and began looking around.

"Are you looking for what you were carrying?" I asked softly. She didn't pay any attention to my words, so I went to the ditchside and recovered at last a small, dark object, an odd, pharmaceutical-type bottle, I found as I knocked off the snow, and the dim light from the streetlamp in the next block helped me to make out in funny, old-fashioned letters, "Ipecacuanha," on a label that had the worn feeling of old suede.

"Here," I said, turning around and holding the bottle out to Angélica, and she snatched it away from me quick as a night insect darting toward a light, looked into my eyes again for just a second, and then turned and ran across the street in the direction of the black door in the wall, which swung open a second or two before she reached it, then swallowed her up. I stood rooted to the spot for a moment or two, shaken by what I had seen in that last glance from the beautiful young girl who didn't seem to understand any of my words and whose pure, dark features were so unlike those of the Nelsons and Jensens and Clarks and Smiths I knew. But even her uncommon beauty and my uncommon innocence could not keep me from recognizing that look immediately and wordlessly for what it was: a glance of pure terror.

I stood there that frozen midnight for more than a minute, debating. Where had she been coming from? And why had she been out alone at that time of night? She hadn't been to the drugstore, not at that hour. Had she been to the home of another fundamentalist family not far away? And what was in the strange bottle? Was someone inside the high, gray wall sick? Did they need help?

In a moment of courage I now find difficult to believe I crossed the icy street, walked through the cery shadows between the poplars to the black wooden gate and knocked politely. Then I pounded and shook the handle. Nothing. No one. Angélica! I thought in despair. If only I could speak your language! If only I had known the words to make you stop and tell me what you were afraid of! Outside the wall everything was dark and silent, and eventually there was nothing to do but to go home.

Six months later, two days after my high school graduation, I was called on a mission for the Mormon Church to Guatemala. I left more than three thousand miles behind me Salt Lake City, Tudor Avenue, my family and

friends and, of course, Angélica, inside her high gray walls with the carvings of the sun, moon and stars near the top.

It was springtime a year and a half later when my father came into my room and told me the police wanted me. That, for once, aroused a spark of interest in me, and the green and gold afghan slid off my knees onto the floor.

“They want me?” I asked suspiciously. “Why?”

“I told them you speak Spanish,” my father answered. “There’s something happened down the street at Hyrum Black’s. I think somebody’s dead.”

I got to my feet and ran a hand through my hair, longish over my collar because I’d discarded the idea of cutting it the way I’d discarded most other ideas involving action since I got out of the clinic in Chichicastenango.

“Come on,” my father said, buttoning his sweater. I could tell that only part of his excitement was at seeing me standing up and about to do something useful. The other part was the same thing that moved me: curiosity.

Outside it was early afternoon — something I’d barely realized from the darkness of the room where I’d drawn the blinds and neglected to turn on the lights. It was the same room where I’d been sitting for nearly four months, making excuses to my parents about when I thought I might be ready to start classes at the University of Utah. The earth was just beginning to smell alive again after the frozen months of winter, and Jimmy Jensen’s dad was actually tinkering with his lawnmower in front of the garage. It had been weeks since I’d been outside, and I was warm, too warm even, in the long-sleeved shirt of the kind I always wore now.

At the corner of Hyrum Black’s lot even the fiercely trimmed poplars were beginning to put out leaves. A uniformed policeman was standing at the gate and a couple of plainclothes detectives were standing just inside. I recognized them without being told.

“You speak Spanish?” the uniform wanted to know.

“Yes,” I said.

“How well?” he asked, unblinking.

“Well enough,” I said, not blinking either.

“Come inside,” he said after a moment, and then to my father, “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to wait out here. The family’ll only have what strangers they have to inside.”

As I stepped through the black door in the corner of the wall, I found I was in front of the third of the identical houses, three stone and wooden buildings that looked much smaller than I remembered them from the time before the wall went up. High pyracantha bushes covered with thorns and orange berries separated the three houses, and a neat lawn ran to the edge of the garden on the side of the lot nearest Jensens’ and their fateful climbing tree. On the walk in front of the middle house, two bodies lay side by side, a man and a woman, feet together and arms folded neatly across chests. The man was Hyrum Black, beard grayer than I remembered it, but wearing the same sort of suspenders and homespun trousers and shirt with the rounded collar and big buttons. But it took me a second to realize that the body at his side was one of his wives. In