

The Body of the Lord's Fair Night

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FLORENCE GRADON WAS A GOOD-LOOKING GIRL, but her looks were nine out of ten parts spirit. Her skirts swung just so, while she danced, her brown hair liked its ribbons fine, and the great good of her heart swept outward like a hay fire, spreading contagion. Even Tom Dean's fiddle had a fit keeping up.

Clair sipped at her juice punch and swerved internally at Florrie's near collisions on the floorboards which echoed, reeling with couples, under lanterns hung from wagons parked three to a side. Several elders watched Clair's best friend, too, and those elders' wives, and a man whom Clair had never seen before, lean and block-shouldered, in a white linen coat, fresh pomade in his hair.

The air in the poplar trees around the ward house yard had its own substance, a powdery slow drift. Bishop Olsen stood watch at the entry, judging the temper of the crowd to reckon, as was his charge, the thorny distinction between wholesome amusement and wantonness. A sister rushed up with news of their earnings—fifteen yards of muslin, fifty-six pounds of flour, a gallon of molasses, and two bags of potatoes. The bishop, polishing his glasses on his vest, took that as a wholesome sign.

"Man is that he might have joy," the prophet Joseph Smith had said. "The great principle of happiness consists in having a body." Thus, from the earliest days, the Saints had conjoined for theater and singing and dancing. When questioned about its saintliness, the prophet Brigham had guessed there was a lot more singing and dancing in Heaven than down in the hot place. The Mormons chose their model accordingly.

Florrie came to Clair's side, at a break in the music. Joe Dean and his friend Ammon followed.

"Who you going to dance with next?" Florrie asked.

A small crowd of girls had circled in. Joe looked girl to girl, his eyebrow cocked like there might have been a doubt in his mind. He was silly

for Florrie, and they all knew it.

Florrie took Clair's arm. "Since you can't choose, why don't you have a dance with Clair."

"I won't," he said good-naturedly.

"But Clair hasn't danced yet, and you're undecided."

He set his jaw. "I won't."

"Joe Dean, don't be log-headed—"

"You gonna fight with her or dance with her, Joe?" Ammon threw this in, impatient for a dance with Florrie himself.

Joe said with heat, "I ain't fightin', I ain't log-headed, and sure as salvation I ain't gonna dance with no girl who has a face like a brush fire."

The words cut Clair like a felling ax.

"Her ma seen a barn burn down," a girl whispered.

"Her ma stood too near to a fire while encumbered."

"Nah," the big-boned girl cut in, "the way I heard, her ma took fright at Indians on the trail. The fright crawled right on up her own baby's neck."

"My cousin Louisa's mama craved fresh strawberries while she was heavy, and sure enough Louisa has a strawberry patch on her elbow, to this day. I seen it."

Clair managed to stay dry and wooden about the eyes while they spread their talk like she wasn't even there to hear them. Florrie shook a little, Clair felt it, and her voice raised up a pitch, "Our Heavenly Father does not stop at the skin. He sees us inside out."

"Well, if *he* was here," Joe said, grinning, "he could dance with her."

"Joe Dean!" The girls lit up at his blasphemy.

Joe swaggered. "He could. I surely would not stop him."

Clair had sat in school with these girls, gone to church in their class. She had borne their taunts like deer flies, brushed them off though the stinging stayed. With boys, the hurt drove deeper. Cut to the bone, Clair made like a slick rock lizard. She held that still. And she numbered them, her persecutors. If aeons could pass into the arms of eternity, boy number forty-nine would too.

A man stepped in, that lean, white coated, penny-haired man, a half foot taller than Joe Dean. He didn't ask their pardon, just said to Florrie straight, "Miss, would you care to take a turn?"

Florrie's posture stiffened. She looked at her companions, then smiled like she'd found gold amidst the dross. She glanced at Clair, to see was it all right. With a nod, Clair let her go. As the others turned to examine the new couple, Clair took her moment of escape.

Out beyond the wagons she gazed up at a bountiful portion of flat black sky. Florrie had dreamed of dancing, that night, of "sanctioned dancing by the light of the moon." No moon for her, at least not yet, but

circumstances bowed to Florrie, always would, men and music, friends and teachers, even the gospel itself. The closer Florrie pulled Clair in, the greater Clair's suffering, chasms of it for a girl who had not been born into this world, but rather cast down in it . . . cast down, no kin, and half her face played red as briars.

Tears came. Clair tried to calm her breathing. The cut alfalfa smelled like it trailed to Heaven, but Heaven gave no comfort. It rubbed her raw, how the Lord could tolerate boys who crowed with stiff-necked bandy-legged cruelty—it rubbed her to distraction, how they did it and never felt a hitch.

She moved toward the far side of the church, to cry herself out private, but voices from the dark there stopped her.

"I don't know what my father would say." It was a female, young and frightened. "He ain't—"

"He abides the Celestial Law. Would he keep a daughter of his from the reap of such benefits?" A man spoke, blunt-voiced and sour.

"Well, but, Papa needs me to home, to tend the young ones while Ma works the Co-op counter."

"Your daddy needs a twenty-year-old mouth to feed? God in Heaven knows he don't."

The woman pushed down sobs.

"Fussing only proves it. You need a husband to work you, need a child to suck the poison out of your vain heart. I watched, and I ain't seen no other men plighting their troth. You got no other suitors, young nor old. Huh. You'd get a room and strong children, as my fifth, never want for food. Samewise, it'd give your tired daddy one less mouth at his table. I seen his crops. He'll bless your going."

She was silent.

"Don't you seek for eternal glory?" He said it with force. Clair believed he'd grabbed her wrist.

The woman cried softly. "Yes, sir."

"Don't you know, sure as the prophet received the Law of Plurality, you cannot refuse his Everlasting Covenant once it has been opened unto you?" He paused. "You'll be damned, sure as the Lord spake it, damned to Hell and the buffetings of Satan. That what your folks deserve? Their board burdened with your hungry mouth and their souls burdened with your shame?"

Her voice had shrunk to pearl-size. "No."

He yanked her again, this time a step toward the light. Clair nearly called out at the sight of Erastus Pratt, stout bellied, shaven clean, the lines of his mouth drawn, unnaturally, into a smile. "That's right. That's a good girl." Clair didn't know the woman he held by the arm, smiling down into her face. His fingers stroked outward, alongside of her breast.

"I'm one to enjoy my privileges." He gave a laugh. "Like the prophet says." Then he kissed her hard as a hand's slap.

Clair ducked behind the steps as Brother Pratt walked toward the dance. He called back, "Courtship's over, Sofie. I'll tell your pa when I see him in the field."

She waited for Sofie to come out, waited and watched. The music answered back, and the feet upon the boards. Sofie might have been invisible but for a sobbing Clair heard, low and steady, under the noise of the assembled. It brought the taste of bile into Clair's throat. She had always hated Brother Pratt's bullying. As field master, he worked them all like tools, men and women, without the least affection. But to see him bully in love: his chosen one, without defenses, and him sharpening the words of God to blade points. He'd bloodied them, and he'd won. She wished she had not seen it. She wished she had stayed home.

Clair leaned back on the granite steps. Horses approached, dragging a pale comet of dust in behind them from the fields. The riders dismounted, boys or men, Clair could not tell. They blacked together in the trees, and then four figures made for the dance floor. Clair didn't recognize the two men or the young cowboy who climbed between the wagons, but the bishop's son, Inger Olsen, crept in right along behind them. Inger was skinny, his white hair combed back over his ears like a ram's horns. In the light slanting from the Gradon's buckboard, it shone like the full of the moon.

The voices inside grew to a squawking, and the two men came back out, this time by the entry. The penny-haired man stepped out, his hand at his hip, the fingers curled back, menacing for all their ease. Bishop Olsen shouted, the top of his bald head wet as a newborn calf, "Go back on to Corinne and dance with your own kind," and, having a shoulder to shout over, "Ye wicked and accursed!" The men walked soberly enough out toward their horses, but they turned at the ditch to spit and *baa* like penned sheep.

Clair stood a moment, listening, then rejoined the safely gathered. The dance floor was a transport of light, lanterns glowing bright as her window glass burdened with sun-up. The musicians swayed above the dancers. Tom Dean's bow arm wobbled and sawed.

Florrie danced the quadrille, far end of the floor.

Clair stood in, next to Elsa Dean, who said, "Ain't she something? Ain't she pretty?"

Clair smiled, "Yes," and Elsa smiled right back. Clair clapped her hands, gave her heart to the music—take a lift and a blessing wherever it was proffered—till the sight of the cowboy caught her, him and his red neckerchief coming her way.

His hat bobbed to the music as he sweet-walked up. He tipped its

brim at Elsa. "Want to dance, pretty one?"

Clair felt hot shame. How she had thought he might—

Inger Olsen crushed her foot just then, no comment, leaning into Elsa from up behind and whispering in her ear. Elsa Dean was only twelve, too young to dance and Inger knew it.

Elsa's face, caught close between the boys, was a misery.

The music switched to a reel, and the cowboy snatched up Elsa's hands, locked fingers, and pulled her on the dance floor with a shuffle-step unlike any Clair had seen. Inger *yipped* as his friend whirled Elsa in a spiral.

From across the room Tom Dean yelled, "Hell and fire, man. Leave my sister be!" He stopped his fiddling, but the dancers kept right on.

With an arm at her waist, the cowboy snagged Elsa in to him and kissed her mouth, full on, then *whooped* and bounded for the wagons, Inger Olsen gone behind him, step for step. Tom Dean waded the dance floor after them, and Bishop Olsen raised the alarm, "Gentiles! Heathens! I defy you to sport with the handmaidens of our Heavenly Father, and in our very midst!" Two elders pounced on the bishop by mistake, his cry and the sinners' exit had followed one-the-other so quickly. Bishop Olsen's fists pounded the air, his waistcoat rearing up over his belly a notch at every swing—and, oh, it was hard for a crowd to be solemn when that waistcoat had reared up.

"Devils! Demons in red neckerchiefs! Do you think the mighty righteous of Zion will stand idly by?" He had failed to note this redneck demon had left the dance just as he'd come, with his own son, and the mighty righteous, under the hail of his rebuking, stood absolutely still. "Serpents passing as men, lying in wait to tempt the daughters of Zion down to wanton darkness and dread sin. Foul vipers!"

Young and old, the dancers stood apart, eyes on anything but each other. Brother Pratt and the elders looked like they'd drunk pee.

It was Sister Olsen who came and touched her husband lightly on the shoulder, saying in a whisper, "Almon, that'll do, dear. That's just fine."

"They have rent the body of the Lord's fair night," he countered, but the zeal had gone out of him, quick as the merriment had gone from the dance floor. A gunshot split the dark beyond the wagons, then wild laughter and the galloping of horses.

Clair rode home in Lester Madsen's fringe-top buggy. Florrie sat in the middle, shaking her head. "The bishop is not like that, Brother Madsen, he really isn't. He is kind and peaceable."

"Please, call me Lester, Florence."

A slant moon had risen. The usual chorus of frogs gave welcome, but all Clair could hear on the drive home was Sofie's weeping.

Florrie smiled at the penny-haired man.