The Charity of Silence

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THIS IS THE STORY of my father's demise. It wanders when I tell it, and I never know when to bring in the polygamy, so I just do and let matters take care of themselves. People don't understand it was not supposed to be that way. The sickness of living like that turned my father rotten. We were surrounded by shame. My fiancée noticed right away that I mention only my grandparents when I speak of my youth. I have yet to tell her about my childhood, how absurdly it ended. When I back away from those years, from the moment my father fell into what we initially thought was prayer, I can see how hilarious and stupid it could seem to someone who didn't live through it.

We were all in the main house. My father was hollering about money, shaking his fists and slamming them down on the kitchen table, which was covered in unpaid bills. As I remember, it was late in the day and his face was bathed in a golden light that made his anger seem like a scene on a book jacket.

"By God," he hollered, "you women need to get jobs or we're going under." Aunt Jackie had just come home; she didn't even have her jacket off. "I can't claim the kids you keep begging for," my father barked to everyone and no one in particular. "I can't claim the ones we've already got. The IRS would throw me in jail so fast you wouldn't have time to say good-bye, and then where would you be?"

Aunt Jackie said something to my father as she set her briefcase on the countertop, but I didn't hear it. She smiled afterwards, though, and Aunt Colleen laughed to herself, so he wouldn't hear it, but he did anyway, and he rose from his chair. His chest was heaving, his eyes ratcheting from me to Aunt Jackie to Aunt Alice to Aunt Colleen to Aunt Deirdre. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared down at their shoes, except Aunt Jackie who untucked her blouse from her skirt and went to the sink for a glass of water. My father lunged at her and then froze, shouting like someone speaking in tongues. His hands flailed, then he fell to the floor.

Everyone stood and watched him lie there. The kitchen cabinets looked like they'd been shellacked with honey, and the shadows of leaves from the cottonwood outside rustled against the wood grain and the plastic knobs. I

have always thought it strange that a crisis should have been so beautiful. Perhaps this beauty is why we were so willing to believe he had fallen under the spirit.

Aunt Colleen said, "Dear God in heaven, what's happened?" Aunt Alice knelt down at his side and took his pulse at the wrist. Aunt Deirdre said he must be caught up in a vision. I saw his eyes twitch a couple of times right after, so I thought he was faking. Aunt Deirdre didn't believe me when I told her. She said I had to show more faith. "The Lord doesn't give miracles to the troubled," she said.

"Then who does he give them to?" I asked. "Doesn't everybody have troubles?"

"Only the sinners do, sweetie," she said.

"Aren't we all sinners?" I pressed.

"Oh, heavens no," she said, looking to Aunt Colleen for help she didn't get. "We're living in the covenant, Freddie," she explained. "It's a higher law. Sinners can't live the higher law. Everyone knows that." I looked up at Aunt Deirdre, and she nodded; Aunt Alice did too. For a while, at least, I put my trust in them. I mean, they really wanted to believe. Aunt Colleen cleared the bills and set the table. Even though our father had "fallen into discourse with the Lord," we sat down to dinner without moving him. Aunt Alice thought it would rouse him, and nobody wanted that.

After we were seated, I looked out on the table full of my brothers and sisters. I was the oldest by five years. There was Amy, who was seven, then Carrie, who was four, Colby, who was three, Dahlia, who was almost three, Corey, who was eighteen months, David, who was a year, and Jared, who was only six months old. Aunt Alice was pregnant again, but it didn't show, and Aunt Colleen and Aunt Deirdre were both about to give birth. Aunt Jackie was so busy with her job as a lawyer in Ogden and traveling the seventy-five miles each way from our farm to the city that she had let six months go by without letting herself get in the family way. I think my father was upset about that too, even though he wasn't letting on. I'm sure he was caught between having the extra money and dealing with an uppity wife. The other ones were obedient enough that I'm sure Father didn't feel like he had to throw Aunt Jackie out of the house as an object lesson.

We had separate houses, single-wides laid out across the property. We called them "The Village." Everyone pretty much lived in their own houses, but we came together for meals. My father said he was not going to skulk around from house to house like a cat burglar. His wives would come to him, by God, in the house with a foundation. "The scriptures give no counsel on skirting," he would say. But that didn't stop the complaining or the jockeying to move out of The Village.

We had a blessing on the food and on Father, who lay at our feet, then we ate in silence. Half way through the meal, Colby started throwing his corn at Father, which bounced off his face and shirt and rolled onto the

floor. Amy and Carrie and I were scolded for laughing, and Aunt Deirdre sent Colby away from the table with Aunt Colleen. We were told not to interrupt Father's commune with the Holy Spirit.

"What's a commune?" Amy asked.

"It's like praying," I said, but I knew the word had other meanings.

"That's right," Aunt Alice said, cutting Carrie's meat.

"How come he's not kneeling?" Carrie asked.

"Because it's holy praying. Not everyone gets to have the Spirit as strong as Daddy does," Aunt Deirdre said, making it clear that we were done talking about our father's relationship with the other side of the veil. Had I been older, I never would have sat still for it. All I knew was that it seemed rotten to me. Spit was already starting to dry on the corners of his mouth, and by morning he smelled of piss.

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The next afternoon when the kids in the main house were all having naps and I was done with my lessons, Aunt Alice came to my room and started telling me that Father was a prophet. "God is showing your daddy the beginning and the end all at once," she explained, "and knowing that people are worse than dust motes has knocked him out with the spirit." She looked around suspiciously, like she didn't believe it herself. "When he comes back into his strength, he'll expound his time with the Lord to us, and we'll all be edified. That's all your daddy ever wanted."

"How do you know what he wanted?" I asked.

She put her hand to her mouth and shut her eyes for a moment. "What he wanted was to edify his family," she said, sitting primly on the edge of my bed. I wanted to tell her to get out, but I didn't have the courage then, and whatever courage I might have had, my father had whipped out of me in the barn, something that had begun when the other women started trickling in. "When your mamma was dying," Aunt Alice said, "your father set with her and read the scriptures aloud. She's the one who told him to take other wives once she passed. She said the women of the church weren't with the kind of men who could get them to heaven. She said God would direct him in this, the Lord had spoken to her through her fevers, and she knew it was right. Then she told him to unplug the life support machines and leave the hospital."

I stood up and left.

Alice called after me: "Better that one woman should die before her time than a whole family should dwindle in unbelief and wickedness!"

I stormed downstairs and found Colleen bent over my father with a damp dishcloth. She wiped the corners of his mouth where his saliva had dried, and she snatched a kernel of corn from inside his shirt collar. I watched his eyes; they were motionless. His breathing was still shallow

and slow, slower than yesterday—slower than when someone's sleeping—but there was no snoring.

"You understand what he did for your mamma, don't you, Freddie?" Colleen said. Before I could answer that I did not, she took my father hands up one at a time and folded them over his heart like a dead man's.

"Don't you dare set him like that, Colleen," Aunt Alice said, following me into the kitchen.

"I've got to sweep," she said.

"A man is receiving revelation from the Lord, and you want to put him up like a corpse, so you can get your chores done? Sweep *around* him for heaven's sake. Better yet, don't sweep at all. You want to be responsible for taking him out of the spirit?"

"I thought the Lord delighted in cleanliness," I said.

Aunt Alice charged toward me and slapped my face, saying, "The Lord also said to honor thy mother and father—and not with a smart mouth."

"You're not my mother," I sneered, walking past. Aunt Colleen let her hands rest against father's forearms. Aunt Deirdre stepped back against the refrigerator, so I wouldn't crash into her. I thought Aunt Alice was going to tell me to wait until my father returned, then I'd regret my disrespectful ways, but she didn't, and I walked out of the kitchen and into the side yard.

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That was the break for me. I knew my father was most likely dead, not in communion with the spirit. I say I knew, but that's probably not how it went. I'm sure I wished he weren't dead, that he might come back to life, repentant. As much as I hated him, I still thought he would set things right. I remember that my anger was exhilarating. Understanding it helped me stand apart from the rest of my father's families.

I was the oldest, the first-born. I had rights they had been keeping from me. I stormed out of the house. The air that afternoon was crisp, not yet autumn, but the change was on its way. The wind seemed to blow straighter and with more intent, which was probably just a change in me. The wind had been two thousand years out of the canyons like that and would go on like that until the millennium. Fuming, I bore across the yard and into the barn. Though it was the site of those whippings, I still took refuge there. It was a place that lay beyond my father's reach. My mother used to shear her sheep there, card the wool, and get it ready to spin into yarn and thread for her looms. After she died, Father sold the sheep and the looms and gave the wheel back to his mother. He told her it needed to stay in the family and change hands in a proper way. My grandmother's eyes grew narrow, and she turned her head slightly to one side as if she were listening for a sound in the wind.

What my grandmother could not have known was the perversion he

had planned. Eventually they found out, but then it was too late. Had they known earlier, I imagine they'd have taken me away right there. My grandfather might even have trained his shotgun on my father and told him to drive away and never come back. The quiet in their voices tells me they'd have been fierce in rescuing me.

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Before they were married, Father had brought Aunt Alice to stay with us. He'd changed over a room for her in the main house when it was the only house on the property. She had moved her things in, hanging that long blue painting of heaven above her bed and placing a jar of dried flowers in the center of the windowsill. Father was still farming most of the land and said he needed someone to look after me.

Women from church came by, bringing us our meals. That's when the gossip started. As I remember, the neighbors started treating us differently a month or so before I first heard Father and Alice together. I woke thirsty in the middle of the night and heard Alice screaming my father's name. I was six and didn't know that love could sound violent. Moonlight bleached my room white and threw a cage of mullions on my covers. The wind howled across the eaves and made the air seem to shimmer, though I knew it was only the tree branches.

When Alice's cries became more rhythmic, I crawled out of bed and squeezed through my door into the hallway. The nightlight my mother had placed in the outlet just outside the bathroom door cast a sheer yellow light against the wallpaper and wainscoting. My father's door was closed, and the gap between the door and the pine floorboards was dark. I tiptoed down the hall and heard a clacking in my father's room, like shutters banging against the window frames in a storm. I bent down and put my ear to the threshold and could hear my father breathing through his nose the way he did when he was carrying feed bags or setting fence posts. The silence that followed was deep and unbroken.

I don't remember my father picking me up and carrying me back to my bed, but he must have because I woke in my room with the covers pulled up around my ears. It had snowed during the course of the night, and the shine of it blasted into my room like music. I had to squint when I sat up. I went to the window and saw my father walking out to his truck. He threw a flour sack into the bed and drove off, leaving twin rails of blue in the morning snow.

Alice had called to me and said breakfast was ready. As I went downstairs I could smell sweet rolls and bacon. "Your father's gone to Ogden to talk to some people," she said. "He'll be back later on this afternoon. Did you wash up?"

I lied and told her I had. She was very sweet and pretty in a plain way.

I don't remember missing my mother at that point except in the most basic way. Alice was kind, her hands soft. She became horrible when the others moved in and when the houses started arriving.

When I sat down, she pushed my chair right up to the table and set a plate of bacon, fried eggs, and sticky cinnamon rolls in front of me. "Do you want some juice?" she asked. I nodded, and she got me a tall glass instead of a short one. When I asked if my father had been angry at her last night, she leaned over the sink and burst into tears.

Even then, I knew enough to leave it alone. They were married in secret a week later, and Amy was born before spring. It happened like that with the rest of them, except Aunt Jackie. She was a friend of Aunt Colleen's. They all say Aunt Jackie just wanted the baby and someone to take care of it, so she could run off and have it both ways. Father didn't seem to care. She was prettier than Alice, and she brought in the money my father couldn't.

Once Aunt Jackie got pregnant with Jared, everything soured. I don't know why; it just crumbled all at once. Even though the main house was full of kids, the rooms became silent. Father sat up late in the kitchen with his index finger in the scriptures, his head bowed forward and nested in the palm of his hand. I would sneak down and find him alone with the lights off. I could hear him praying faintly to himself, asking the Lord to bless my mother and keep her safe and blind to the goings-on in this house. What Alice had told me about my mother was lies. My father kept them all in the dark. He must have thought he could fill up the void with children, but I think it killed him to sit there in the kitchen all night, knowing who he was and what he had done.

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From the barn I could see the main house surrounded by dirt and sky. I wondered how long it would be before my father started stinking. Maybe they really believed he was caught up in prayer, that he would wake and pontificate from the kitchen floor, casting down the corrupt church of Salt Lake, shouting of rebirth in the old ways of Solomon. But it was over and they knew it. They knew I could not lead the pack. That's what they would have said, but I knew it was me they wanted to be rid of. With mother's husband gone, her son would have to go as well—that's how twisted the logic became, or rather, how the twists of logic became clear to me as I grew older and hurt broke down into granules and blew away. I turned and threw my arms over the gate at the front of the barn, promising myself I would never set foot in that house again.

At least that's what I tell myself now. My bravery is something I concocted somewhere along the line. My memories are much the same, and I am thankful. Without the haze that covers most of those years in polygamy,

I doubt even now that I would hold together. My father dragged us all into his temple and then pulled it down on himself. I pity him now, but I was furious then. Spurned. Betrayed. I tried to lash out. Fuming, I got up and took a half-empty bushel basket and went through the back toward my father's orchard, the only thing he seemed to take any pride in once my mother had left and the other women came.

The orchard spread across a small rise to the east of the main house. It was not very big, but the trees were old—older than the house, he'd said. Once he had grafted new starts into the old trees. Hybridizing, he'd called it. He was trying to make a new variety, a pale delicate apple. He'd joked and said he wanted to call them Adam's Apples, thought that was hilarious. But the whiteness never came; they had been custard yellow and small, mealy and bland. Worse than crabapples. Eventually he gave up on them and said he'd just burn the whole thing down and start over. I told him not to. I said it was just like in that dream of the vineyard from the scriptures. It killed him when I said that. He'd just folded up and said, "Let them go, then. I wash my hands of it. They're yours."

When I got to the orchard, I set the basket down and started right up the closest tree, shaking it until all the loose apples thumped onto the thin grass. I moved through the dozen or so trees one by one until the ground was littered with my father's horrid apples. Then I took the bushel basket, filled it, and hauled it down to the stock pond where I chose an apple, tossing it in my hand like it was a baseball, finding its best heft. I split my fingers the way I had been shown and drew back. The apple flew a third of the way toward the middle and plunked into the water, disappearing into its rings briefly before it popped back up. I threw another and another, each one flying farther and farther.

I kept throwing until the basket was empty and my shoulder ached, then I sat down and whistled to the cows who were poking their heads over the rise. When they came lumbering down to the water, I rose and brushed myself off. Without pausing, I went back to the first of the orchard trees and climbed into the lower branches again and shook, moving from tree to tree, until a dozen or so apples clopped to the ground. I carried them back down. The cows were eating some of the apples that had floated to the other side, and they looked up when I began to pitch the apples again. I didn't know whether fruit like that would kill cows that old, and I didn't care. They were his apples, his cows. He deserved it.

I walked around the stock pond and up the rise, weaving through my father's cattle, then stopped and looked back at the main house. Aunt Colleen and Aunt Alice had come outside and were setting suitcases in the back of the van, then they climbed in and drove off toward town. The kids were packed inside, pressing their faces on the glass. I watched them disappear and the dust settle behind them. The house stood still and naked like it had been pasted there. The sky behind it was clear—blue, hollow,

noiseless. Rising behind the roof, the sandy-gray foothills of the Wasatch Range, the tops of the mountains, faded in and out of a haze. I pushed my way through the cows and followed the backside of the rise to a cluster of cottonwoods and knelt in prayer the way Joseph had. I figured if God spoke to anyone, it was to little kids.

I asked if my father was dead or if he was praying like they said. No answer. I tried again. Still no answer. I fought hard against opening my eyes. I thought if I peeked, God wouldn't answer me, so I waited. The cows were lowing, and the wind shook the aspens. Some birds flew from branch to branch, and way off in the distance there was the sonic boom of a fighter jet. I prayed again, told God I wasn't mad, I just wanted to know what to do. I guess I was waiting for figures to appear, for the voice to be words, but nothing like that happened. I'd never heard anyone say that figures had actually come to them, but I knew God answered prayers. I knew that figures had come in the past. But I also figured that I'd know the answer in my body, the way you know which direction to lean when you're running or the way your hand moves to catch a ball. If God didn't answer prayers, I thought, then the world was a lie, but that couldn't be true because I was kneeling on it. I could smell it and hear it; my body knew it.

If it was true, if my father was dead, I would go. That's the promise I made to myself. When I did, the world became suddenly silent: no jets or birds or leaves or cows. I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat or breathing. I started to sway like a willow branch. God stilled the universe and left me in motion at the center of it. Even though there were no words in my head, I knew that the women had been lying. Early that morning, my father had passed over to the other side.

I said "amen" and stood. When I opened my eyes, the world was in chaos. Clouds swelled in the distance above the roof of the main house, and when I walked back to the top of the rise, I saw that the cows had gathered themselves together on the barn side of the stock pond a hundred yards from where they were when I first knelt. I looked across the pond at the house, and Aunt Alice was standing outside in the driveway, staring toward the county road as if she expected someone. In the distance I heard a vague siren. Alice turned her head. I knew then why Colleen and Deirdre had gone and taken the children with them.

Soon an ambulance pulled up to the house. The paramedics got out and followed Alice inside. After a minute, one of the men came out and went to the back of the ambulance. He pulled out a stretcher and took it inside. The clouds swelled. I sat on the rise and watched the cattle grazing in the pasture where my mother used to run her sheep. Even then I could barely remember.

After a while, the paramedics came out with my father on the stretcher and Alice following. Once they had him in the ambulance, one of the dri-

vers touched Alice briefly on the shoulder. As he did, the sheriff's car pulled up. I got down on my belly so they wouldn't see me. They all stood together and spoke for a time. Alice's arms were folded. The sheriff and the paramedics stood together, closer to their cars than to Alice. When they left, she went back into the house. I watched them drive away, and once they were gone, I watched the dust settle behind them.

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That night Alice and I were alone in the main house for the first time since the other women had come. It was strange, more so than the morning after I'd first heard her and my father having sex. I remember that breakfast the next morning was no big production: some toast, cider, a handful of raisins. The sky was gray, featureless, infinitely neutral. By mid-morning we were at the morgue and some man from the funeral home came, put my father in a heavy rubber body bag, and took him away. The fat sound of the zipper as it closed over his face seemed like the closing of the veil between earth and the other side.

I'm sure I didn't think of it that way then, but I remember the finality of the sound. Fateful. Maybe it even gave me a first sense of what life is about. In a strange way, and for reasons I do not fully understand, I do not consider myself an orphan. Had things gone differently, Alice might have become a parent to me, but the day after the funeral, she sent me to my room to pack a suitcase.

While I was emptying my drawers, I heard her telephone my grandparents. She explained that my father had passed and the house would be sold. I could not hear the rest, but I knew what was coming and didn't care. An hour later we were driving to the house in which my mother had spent her childhood. She had spoken of it as a kind of heaven. I had only vague memories of it then. My grandparents were waiting on the porch. I climbed out with a comic book under my arm, and Alice came around with my suitcase. We walked up together. Nobody spoke. I stood there on the porch, pretending to stare at my shoes. Alice handed my grandmother a folded handkerchief and then said she was sorry. My grandfather nodded. I turned and watched her get into the van and drive away. As I was watching the empty space in the road, I heard my grandmother say, "It's Francie's ring, Herb. It's the wedding ring."

That day began a silence I felt grafted into. My grandparents spoke very little in general, and we said nothing of the past except to comment on changes in the weather, how it seemed to be getting warmer and maybe those scientists on TV knew something they weren't telling. At first, I thought this was cruel of them, that they somehow hated me for having lived in a perversion. I was furious that my grandparents would not ex-

plain or attack, would not even mention my parents. I wanted explanations, but was far too angry to have listened to anyone's accounting. I have since learned that I misunderstood my grandparents. They loved me from a careful distance. There is not often, I hope, the need for such strange love, but I have come to understand that for some there is a certain charity in silence. It chafes at first and chokes but then relaxes its hold to spool out mercifully into the past.