

Gramma, What's a Bastard?

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I WAS SCRUNCHED BEHIND THE BIG over-stuffed sofa, reading the forbidden works of Mark Twain. Oh horrors, I was reading the most forbidden book of all, *Roughing It*. I was tittering over what he said about the Mormon women. He said he had to come to Salt Lake to set the Mormons straight about polygamy, but when he saw how homely the women were, his heart went out to any man who would marry even one of them, let alone several.

When I asked my mother why Grandpa wouldn't allow any of Twain's books in his house, she said it was because Twain told so many lies about the Mormons and it outraged my grandparents. Well, I durst not let anyone catch me reading such lies, but while I couldn't keep from tittering, I did manage to keep from guffawing, and luckily too, because Mamma and Aunt Libby came and sat down on the sofa.

I was getting ready to make my presence known, when my Mamma's words stopped me. "Lib," she said, "why do you always lie about your age?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Matty, I never lie about such things."

Now, Mamma was only five feet tall, but she had been a guard on the first women's all-state basketball team and was a real scrapper, especially where Aunt Lib was concerned.

"Oh, yes you do." Although I couldn't see their faces, I knew that Mamma was probably opening her eyes in mock surprise. Mamma's voice was stern. "I happened to hear what you told Liz Smurtz about your age, and it was a lie. I know exactly how old you are!"

Aunt Lib sputtered for a few seconds and then said, "I can't tell my true age because I'm a bastard."

What's a bastard? I puzzled. I could just barely contain myself from asking, "What's a bastard?"

Then Aunt Libby went on, "I was born after the Manifesto, so that makes me a bastard."

Mamma said, "My father never indulged in such a vulgar practice; he believed in quality, not quantity."

Aunt Lib sounded very irritated. She got up and went to the door, and I heard her say, "My mother was only sixteen when. . . ." Then I couldn't hear the rest as she went out the door.

I was twelve then, and my fertile mind asked what horrible thing had happened to Aunt Libby's mother at sixteen. Why, I would be sixteen in three and a half years. What happens to girls at that age?

The next day my short little, potato-shaped, soft-spoken Grandma, who swirled her hair on top of her head like a pancake, dropped in on one of her frequent visits. I greeted her with a cheery "Hi, Grandma," and invited her to sit while I poured her a glass of cold lemonade. As she sipped I waited for just the right moment, then as innocently as I knew how, I asked her, "Gramma, what's a bastard?"

A tinge of pink spread over her face. She gave me a very odd look, glanced out of the window, and said she didn't know. Grandma seemed to be dense about a lot of things because her answers about many things were, "I don't know."

Just about then my mother came in and told me I'd better go clean up the mess in my room. Well, I felt they wanted to talk about something that I shouldn't hear. I headed for my room, then softly tiptoed back and leaned against the wall nearest to the overstuffed set. I heard them mention Mable, which kind of threw me because I didn't know anyone by that name, but then they mentioned Aunt Libby, and from what they were saying I figured Mable was Libby's mother.

Well, I had met Libby's mother a time or two. She had about the most sour face I'd ever seen on an old woman, seemed almost as if she'd been suckled on lemon juice instead of milk. She was a short fat little woman. She wasn't jolly like fat people were supposed to be. In fact, I don't ever remember seeing her smile. Then I remembered that something awful must have happened to her when she was sixteen. I figured it must have been bad enough to make her sorrow for nearly fifty years.

I pressed my ear against the wall, and I could hear my mother telling her mother that Libby had confessed to being a bastard. Now I knew that Grandma didn't know what a bastard was because she had just said so. I waited anxiously to hear my mother tell her.

"Well," Grandma said, "considering what kind of life she's had, I guess you could say she is one."

If you looked close at Mable, you could imagine that she had been a pretty girl at sixteen with golden blonde hair and violet blue eyes like Aunt Libby, and Libby wasn't too bad looking for having such a sour-looking mother.

I heard Grandma telling Mamma what Mable had told her. Mable had been in love with Willy and wanted to marry him when he returned from his mission. Now Willy came from a very humble home. His mother had been a widow for several years. With three children to pro-

vide for, she did washing and made clothes for more fortunate women. She had a few chickens. She called them missionary hens because the money she got for their eggs was put into a missionary fund for her sons. Mable visited her often to buy eggs and ask about Willy.

Well, it seems that a suave, middle-aged stake president had taken a fancy to Mable. He was tall and handsome and had dark wavy hair with a hint of silver in it. His eyes gleamed when he looked at an attractive young woman. Everybody looked up to him. It seemed half of her friends had a crush on him. He called on her parents and asked if he could have her in marriage. Now, who could refuse a good-looking man like this? It appeared he had mountains of money and would be a swell catch for any eligible girl in the valley. He already had three wives, but I guess he could never get enough of a good thing.

Mable's parents felt honored that such a fine, upright man wanted their daughter even though they knew she loved Willy. They promised her that love would ripen for the stake president and insisted on a temple marriage. This marriage brought many children into the church, but Mable never seemed to get much joy from them.

Years later I went to a family gathering. I saw a lone little figure, sitting at the far end of the room. I was puzzled for a moment, wondering who that could be. Could that possibly be Mable? Could she still be alive? I had to look closely to make sure it was her. She was a shriveled little prune by then, watery gray eyes, few teeth, and well into her nineties. I was surprised to see her still alive. It seemed she was loath to die. I said to her, "Mable, you're probably going to live forever."

She replied in a little, thin, cracked voice, "I hope so. I never want to die and meet that old bastard devil again that my parents married me off to—after he already had three wives."

And finally I understood.