

# Triptych: Plural

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## I

Nora bears the tray of hors d'oeuvres she spent three hours this afternoon preparing. Mushroom caps stuffed with chopped and sautéed artichoke hearts, onion, garlic, bread crumbs, and three cheeses. She approaches the door; Seth follows several steps behind.

Nora married Seth in the Manti Temple seven years ago—seven years consumed by medical school, residency, and internship. Now Seth is the youngest obstetrician-gynecologist in a group of five doctors. Once a month, the doctors meet at one of their affluent-Philadelphia-suburb homes. To complement the meticulously prepared hors d'oeuvres, they sip (all of them except Nora and Seth) wine from delicate glasses.

This is Nora and Seth's second time; after the first—on their drive home—Seth apologized abundantly to Nora. Not that it was his fault. No one had told him what to expect. And the others were actually charmed by the young doctor's unpretentious offering: a bright yellow box of microwave pizza rolls.

Such blunders, Nora decided, are only charming once. Now cognizant of the ritual, she stands at the door prepared to officiate. She rings the doorbell.

Dr. Libbert opens the door. He takes Nora's tray and ushers the couple to a sofa. Sherry Libbert rushes in.

"Welcome to our humble home!" she cries. "Hello, Nora, darling. How have you been? And the handsome Dr. Westover. Hello, welcome, still handsome I see." Sherry takes the tray from her husband and places it at the center of the table across the sitting room they occupy. "That looks delicious," Sherry moans. "You won't tell if I snitch before the party starts, will you? Oh, how could you?" She partakes and moans again.

Nora is pleased and anxious about presentation. “Just don’t take two,” she silently threatens Sherry.

Others soon arrive, hors d’oeuvres and wine bottles in hand. Trying to detect reactions to her labors, Nora tracks with her eyes each individual who approaches the table to make a deposit.

Dr. Swanson arrives last. Her husband, Garrett, follows her through the door. He stands at least four inches taller than every other man in the room. He approaches the table; his thick right hand unloads a tray of something tan and musty on crackers. He scans the table.

“What, Seth, no pizza rolls?” Garrett booms, turning to smile at the others. “Not even pigs in a blanket? So one month is all it takes to turn a perfectly solid guy all frilly? They have obviously gotten to you, young man.”

“I like to think I’m still solid,” Seth smiles back at him. “It was Nora’s turn this month. She has class for both of us.”

“Sure,” Garrett laughs. “Blame your wife. That’s the man’s way out.”

One hour later. Having cut through children, vacation spots, insurance companies, and even medicine itself, the conversation now reaches taxes.

“When you add them all together,” one of the doctors says, “how many do you think there are? How many little corporations and LLC’s and partnerships does it take to keep our little group from paying more than our share?”

“I think counting them is bad luck,” Dr. Libbert says. “I am a man of science; but when it comes to taxes, superstition seems prudent.”

“We did have little voodoo dolls of the accountant made up didn’t we?” Dr. Swanson quips. “Cute little dark gray suit and tiny little matching wing-tips?”

“Yes, Seth,” Dr. Libbert says. “That raises a question. Have you found an accountant to do your personal taxes? You will need one now that you are going to make enough money to actually pay taxes.”

“I haven’t,” Seth says.

“Since I have known him,” Nora says, “I have been his accountant. Not that I like doing it. I always tell Seth: if you ever decide to take another wife, she’d better be an accountant. You know, not

good looking or anything—I like to think I have that covered—just find some serious bean-counting chops.”

“There you go,” Garrett says. “Get your own. I like it.”

Dr. Swanson discreetly digs the heel of her shoe into her husband’s foot. He goes silent.

“Shall I open another bottle?” Sherry cheers, filling in the silence.

One hour later. Seth and Nora approach the door. They apologize that their babysitter has school in the morning. Nora thanks Sherry once again for hosting them. Seth shakes Dr. Libbert’s hand and waves to the rest of the group. Good night and good to see you, he tells them. Drive safely and good night, they call back. And see you bright and early.

Driving home, Seth glances right to see her profile.

“You are funny,” he says.

“We can’t both be the straight guy,” she says. “What did I do?”

“If Seth ever takes a second wife?” he says.

“What?” she says.

“When you said that, how many people at that party asked themselves whether polygamy is a real option for me?”

“Yes,” Nora says. “How many of those women now want to join your harem? That is an important question. Sherry is kind of interesting.”

“I am serious,” Seth says.

“Well,” she says, “let’s go back.”

“Go back?”

“I’m going to explain! Some of those couples I think will make great friends if I haven’t already scared them off.”

“But—but, honey,” Seth says, “I think they probably didn’t even notice it. They probably thought it was some kind of cynical joke about divorce.”

“Please go back.”

“But I think it will just be calling attention to the whole thing. You don’t want to turn an offhand comment into a whole scene, do you?”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“They’re bright people. They won’t think that’s something we just do!”

Driving in the other direction from Dr. Libbert's home, Garrett briefly glances at his wife. "Did you catch that thing about Seth having two wives?" he says.

"Don't get any ideas, Gary," she says.

"Too late," he grins, eyes on the road.

She glares at the side of his head.

"You don't think it's real, do you?" Garret says. "There's no way Seth and Nora would do that. Is there?"

"I don't know," she says. After a pause, she adds: "I wouldn't be surprised."

## II

It takes three cars—two of them minivans—to transport all thirteen boys. They are both quorum and troop. Some weekends they encircle a fire on Friday night and then make two neat lines before the bread and water on Sunday morning. One after the other, the cars park on a narrow Farmington lane. Liberated from the cars, waiting for a leader to approach the door, the boys trample footprints into a derelict lawn.

"Do we get a merit badge or something for going in there?" one of them says.

"No," the Scoutmaster says. "Not everything worth doing wins you a little patch." His forehead makes two deep furrows, and he shakes his head. Then, less sure of himself, he says: "Maybe. We can look into it."

"Everybody here?" the assistant Scoutmaster says. "Great! Let's go learn about the pioneers!"

"Yippee," drolls a boy in the back.

Undaunted in green knee socks with a red band at the top, the assistant Scoutmaster climbs the wood porch and raps on the screen door. Frightened birds burst from the plum tree behind them.

"Hello," she says, voice raspy, high-pitched. She pulls the door wide, steps back, and makes a trembling, grand gesture. Enter, it says. Welcome. She turns and walks away from them down the hall. They follow.

"I see old people," one of the boys whispers. Muffled laughter ensues.

She stops in the dimly lit hallway, walls thick with old por-

traits. Again trembling, she points at a man behind a convex oval of glass. He wears a black beard and has large deep-set eyes. "This is Grandpa Lewis. He built this house." She pauses for emphasis. "He was a pioneer."

She brisk-limps down the hall, leading them to a kitchen full of early evening sun. She recites the history of Grandpa Lewis: converting in Liverpool, crossing ocean and plain, farming rocky foothills, building a shack and, later, this stone home, presiding as stake patriarch.

She stops. The boys look around, hoping she is done. Where table and chairs have been pulled to one side, she folds back a rug. Halting and struggling, she bends, pokes a claw into a large knot-hole, and lifts a section of the floor. The assistant Scoutmaster helps her lean it against the wall.

"Grandpa Lewis dug out a basement," she points, "and put this trap door in." Short of breath, she pauses. "Many of his friends, even apostles, kept themselves safe here. Federal marshals used to come around looking for them."

"Wow," one boy gasps, leaning over to look in. "It's just dirt!"

"What did they do?" another asks.

"Polygamy," she says. "The new and everlasting covenant."

"Not real apostles," one of them says.

"Yes, real apostles," she says.

"But they're so old!" he protests. "Could they even stand up down there?"

"I don't even think the bishop would go down there," one says.

"I saw a movie about that once," another says.

"Oh, really?" she says, gazing into the hole.

"These guys had a place like that," he says. "And you had to know a secret knock to get in there and they kept their food storage down there."

"But were they pioneers?" she says.

"I think so," he says. "But they had another name for them. Let me think."

"Boys," she says, "Grandpa Lewis was a good man. He followed the prophet. And he raised a righteous posterity unto the Lord. Hundreds of us. We should all be grateful."

“Bootleggers!” the boy shouts.

She glares at the Scoutmaster. Her sharp look silences the boys. She sighs and shrugs, and turns to uncover a tray of cookies. The subdued boys eat, offer shy thanks, and depart.

Pulling into the street, the Scoutmaster glances in his rearview mirror at the boys in the back of his minivan. He recites the first two lines of the Scout Oath. “Sometimes,” he says, “it is not easy to do your duty to God and your country.”

No response. They drive.

“I wish my house had a trap door,” one of them says.

### III

The seatbelt light goes off. Jenna releases her buckle, lifts the armrest, and lays her head on Dave’s shoulder. Jenna married Dave yesterday in the Salt Lake Temple.

“There you are,” Dave says. “I missed you.”

“Me too,” she sighs.

“Four hours to New York,” he says.

She is silent.

“Considering the circumstances,” he whispers in her ear, “four hours is such a long time.” He kisses her ear.

“You need your rest anyway,” she grins and turns to look at him. “You made it twenty-three years. What’s four hours?”

“Let’s not talk about before I married you,” he says. “Twenty-three years of bad dreams. And now I’m awake.”

Jenna feels warm in a pleasant way. She is twenty-four and half-way through a master’s degree in chemical engineering. She closes her eyes and sees her heart pumping to every inch of her body not just blood, but an unfamiliar concoction. An elegant chain of molecules that somehow equals contentment. She is also exhausted and sore, but nothing undoes that warm feeling.

“Did I tell you that you look great in that outfit?” Dave says. “Is it from the shower?” Temple-compliant-yet-cute was the theme of the bridal shower that Jenna’s friends gave her.

“This old thing?” she says. “Yes,” she adds, “the shower. You should see the strappy little shoes I got to go with it. Hot.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“I packed them,” she says, “so I wouldn’t have to take them off going through security.”

She shifts in her seat, turns toward him, closes her eyes again, and drifts into sleep. Two hours later, she wakes. She looks up at Dave. He smiles. She stretches, rubs her eyes, and rises cautiously into the aisle.

“Little girl’s room,” Jenna smiles back at her husband of twenty-two hours. Her soreness grows sharper. She fears the urinary tract infection prophesied by a friend.

She returns. Dave looks up from a route map—countless red arcs frowning from city to city—that he pulled from the pouch in front of him.

“You have to stop leaving me like that,” he says. “Honeymoon rules.”

“I promise,” she says. She sits. She looks out the window.

“Everything all right?” he asks.

“Everything,” she says.

“Are you sure?” he insists.

“Of course, Dave,” she says. “Everything.”

Dave is silent. He stuffs the map back into the pouch.

“There is one thing,” she says, turning to face him. “But it is stupid.”

“I’m sure it isn’t stupid,” he says, returning her gaze.

“I wanted to say I do,” she says.

He looks surprised, but he smiles.

“I know, I know,” she says. “Tell me how dumb that is. Ruined by movies and television. It’s like those statistics of how many murders the average person sees on TV in a year. How many TV weddings do you think I have seen in the past twenty years?”

“Jenna, I think that’s part of the point,” Dave says, reluctant to respond at all. “You know, the temple is different. Special.”

“But it was so foreign and quiet! I didn’t know what to expect! There was no anticipation at all. And all my life I dreamed of saying I do.”

Dave is eager to defend the temple. But he fears saying too much right now will only crystallize her disappointment. He says nothing.

“I love the temple, Dave,” she says. “Don’t misunderstand. It was holy. It, you know, has the power of the Church, sealing and all that. It was just so foreign to me! A wedding in my mind just

means something different. I don't know . . . something more romantic."

"I'm sorry," Dave says.

"Do you think it would offend people," she says, "if we had another ceremony where I just got to stand there and look into your eyes and say I do?"

"Honestly, Jenna, yes," he says. "I do think that would offend people. I think it would offend your parents, for example. And mine. Not to mention," he hesitates, "our ancestors. People who sacrificed like crazy to build that temple."

"I know, Dave," she says. "I know. But that's another problem. The temple makes me think of polygamy. Some men actually still believe they'll get extra wives in heaven or something."

Dave shrugs.

"Are you serious? Do you believe that? Do you believe you will have," she pauses, "you know, more than me after this life?"

Dave realizes too late he is trapped. "I'm not sure," he says.

She just stares at him.

Her look, Dave thinks, demands elaboration. "But I think it's possible," he says. "I can't see how else to read D&C 132."

Jenna's eyes go hard. She turns away from him. Her mind races. What have I married? How did I fail to ask him about polygamy before now? Instant jealousy asserts itself: resurrected single women—worthy of temple marriage, interested in Dave—enter her mind. Jenna wants to somehow eviscerate their incorruptible bodies.

"Jenna?" Dave asks softly, touching her shoulder.

She turns. Slowly and firmly, she says: "I will never agree to that, Dave. Not even in heaven. Never."

For the rest of the flight, Dave and Jenna do not speak. They do not even touch.