

The Postum Table

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The family had been in the dream house about three months. It was October, and they were gathered for Family Night. A box of See's chocolates, wrapped in glossy white paper, sat like the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil on what everyone else in America called the coffee table, but they called the Postum table, because of the injunction against coffee, among other things.

The chocolates, several boxes of which were shipped to them periodically from California by one of Gush's fans, were saved for Family Night refreshments. These morsels, individually fitted into dark brown accordion papers, were distributed at the end of Family Night by reverse seniority, starting with Jessica, the penultimate child at the time who was nearly three, and ending with Gush, who complained every week that someone had eaten the dark square one with caramel, but no one seemed to care. So much for being the family patriarch.

Riley looked across the living room at his sister Muriel, the oldest. Even with the chocolates planted in front of them, she did not want to be at Family Night, and she was making sure the rest of them knew it. Muriel was a junior in high school, Riley's model for Snob Hill living—by default. She sat back in the corner of the flowered couch with the pink cushions, her arms crossed on her chest, her pallid eyelids closed. They were all waiting for JoDee, number two, who was still moping somewhere downstairs. Joan sat looking at her husband. Gush sat looking at his wife. Finally, she sighed. Gush stood, then walked over to

the black, wrought-iron railing that guarded the stairwell and leaned over it so far that the arch of his left foot lifted out of his house flip flops, exposing the pink underside.

“JoDee!” he hollered down the stairs. It was one of his angry, staccato hollers that guaranteed no more moping in the kids. At the sound of Gush, Muriel started, her eyes flashing in annoyance. Instantly, Mom told Jessica to stop coloring in her book. Mom was annoyed too. The kids took their cues from her. When JoDee entered the living room, she muttered something about being on the phone. The rest of the kids looked at her like she was delaying the second coming of Christ, which in a sense, she was.

“Honey,” said Gush, “your friend Debbie knows that it’s Monday night.”

“Not everyone has Family Night,” said JoDee. She pushed her new octagonal wire-rims, which Muriel referred to as JoDee’s honeycombs, up the bridge of her nose. Family Night had always been forced affairs for them, like family vacations, a time when the kids could channel contempt toward each other. For Gush and Joan it seemed to be an endurance test.

“Now listen, kids,” Gush said. Muriel opened her eyes. “I don’t want you planning anything on Monday night, understand?” He looked about the living room at the “older set,” the four of them on the top end of a porous line that would shift down from time to time as they all grew up and moved on. In 1972 the line was somewhere between Riley and his only brother Cade, number five, who was two years younger. Riley was eleven. Number four. Cade was sitting on the couch next to Muriel and chewing his lower lip. Next to him sat Winnie and Chums, numbers six and seven. The four of them sitting there looked like they were waiting to see a doctor.

Candace, number three and two years Riley’s senior, was sitting on the floor next to him. She was casually flipping through her health text which had the most explicit description of the sex act Riley had ever read, a delicious candy unto itself because Mom and Gush were not privy to it. Perched next to Candace, on a bar stool, was late arrival JoDee who was named after the children’s Uncle Dee and a cousin who their mother explained had

died at age four choking on a wad of gum the size of a walnut. That was the reason why chewing gum was never allowed in the house even though Candace had a stash of Juicy Fruit hidden in a shoe box in her closet.

Joan was seated in the rocking chair. The baby, her dark hair matted against a sweaty head, was sleeping in her moist arms. Gush shook his head with disgust at the effort he was having to put out.

“Jeepers,” he said to her with an embarrassed half-smile. Joan smiled back, batting her eyes like she always did when she was humoring him.

“Let’s get started, I need to put you-know-who to bed,” she said. You-Know-Who, also known as Jessica, looked up from her crayons and said threateningly, “No bed!”

They were a family totaling eleven. Two parents, nine kids. When you said all of the kids’ names together, in order, really fast, with the right stresses like JoDec liked to do—“MurIELJoDecCandaceRileyCADEWinnieCHUMSJessieBabyAgnesHoneyToo”—it sounded almost musical, like that hamburger ad they would all be singing a few years later, “TwoALLbeefpattiespecialSAUCElettuce CHEESEpicklesonionsonasesameseedBUN.” There were enough of them to start a country, it seemed. In a way, they were their own country.

With JoDec there, Family Night could finally start. The chocolates seemed a millennium away from being devoured. The chalk board already had stick figures representing Adam and Eve drawn on it, but Riley could sense Gush’s irritation at the possibility he was not being taken seriously. They sang one verse of *O How Lovely Was the Morning*, and Cade started snickering when they got to the part that goes, “Oh what rapture filled his bosom.” Riley snickered too, but not so much that Gush would notice. He shot Cade a reproving look during the closing phrases of the hymn and then made him say the opening prayer afterwards to sober him up.

Cade stood. Funny, since it wasn’t like he was giving the invocation in church or anything. He folded his arms and bowed his head. He didn’t look anything like Gush or his older brother.

Cade was very fair, like Muriel, and had a galaxy of freckles on his head and neck.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” he mumbled into his chest. “We thank you for our many blessings . . .”

“ . . . We thank *Thee*,” corrected Gush. Cade, his arms wrapped tightly around himself and squinting hard, continued.

“We thank Thee for our many blessings, for our family. We pray for the prophet and for our family. We ask You . . . Thee” Cade open one eye and looked at Gush. “ . . . To help us to get our year’s supply of food, and we ask Thee for . . . that we can get out of debt. InthenameofJesusChrist,Amen.” Simultaneously with the rushed and coded ending, Cade sat back down on the couch with a bounce. Everyone else said “amen,” too. Gush said it loudest.

Family business was always first on the agenda every week, and Gush, as if he were the bishop conducting sacrament meeting, would turn the time over to Mom, who would talk about family problems.

“I don’t know what happened Saturday,” their mother said to them. She still had that precision in her diction that she’d practiced as Miss Utah for her poise interviews at the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City. “When my visiting teachers came by, not a single thing had been done in the kitchen or living room. And it was three o’clock!”

“I couldn’t vacuum in here until Candace dusted,” complained JoDee, her white toes curled around the cross bar of the stool she sat on. Candace smacked her sister’s leg.

“I did dust, you stupid idiot.”

“Girls!” thundered Gush.

“Well, I did, Dad!” cried Candace.

JoDee started back in. “Muriel says that you dust like you’re a cheerleader with pompons.”

“JoDee,” said Muriel with a guilty smile, “I did *not* say that!”

“All right, all right,” said Mom. “I don’t know what the problem was in here—or in the kitchen, either. But when Sister Walker and Sister Slaughter walked in here and saw . . . there were two bowls of cereal still in here from breakfast! . . . when they saw that and Riley’s dirty socks under the piano bench”—she looked at him when she said that—“I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed to tears.”

Riley always knew when his mom was angry or at the end of her tether because she used the phrase “embarrassed to tears.” The first time he remembered her saying it was when he was eight, and they all still lived in the river bottoms. She was talking on the phone to someone about his father’s family, and Riley was finishing her sentences for her while he jumped up and down on the couch. She was talking about someone’s first daughter, “a lovely girl who lives in Ogden and has six children. And then they had a second daughter . . .”

“. . . who was the ugly sister,” Riley said, laughing gaily as he continued jumping. She glared at him over the receiver, her lips tightening to a white line. He knew he was in trouble. When she got off the phone she informed him that she’d been talking to the bishop’s wife and that the woman Riley had referred to as “the ugly sister” was his cousin Sally who had been confined to a wheelchair with a muscle disease ever since she was six. “I was embarrassed to tears,” she said through her taut face. And then she left the room, went to the bathroom, shut the door and didn’t come out for a long time. Riley never knew if his mother actually shed tears from embarrassment, but he always admired the inventiveness of the phrase.

Riley only saw his cousin Sally, who was easily twenty years older than he, when they went to family reunions in Arizona, and she was the most curious thing he’d ever seen, a lump of white flesh behind a house dress with a sagging, elasticized collar and terry cloth socks on her tiny, deformed feet. Nevertheless, he felt so guilty about ridiculing a cripple that he went to his room and lay on the bed, trying to feel emotion he imagined appropriate to the occasion. Eventually he gave up and went looking for bra ads in the Sears catalogue.

During this Family Night the vacuum-dusting controversy between JoDec and Candace only got partially settled. Mom detailed, as she did every week, what the Saturday chores were, and she went on and on telling them how to wash the windows so that they wouldn’t streak and that if she ever, ever found out

who was just dumping the utensil strainer into the utensil drawer without sorting them in their plastic-molded compartments that she was going to wring his neck. She could just as easily have said “*her* neck,” considering the gender distribution of all of them—seven girls and two boys.

“You heard your mother,” said Gush with finality. “Now let’s do it! And I have something to add as well.” It seemed to Riley that Gush had a spring in his jaw that he could wind up by just lifting one of his eyebrows, because whenever he wanted to be stern he’d get a tightly wound jaw that looked like Colonel Klink’s on *Hogan’s Heroes*. “When I came home from work today *every single light* was on downstairs. And so was the curling iron!” Everyone looked at Muriel, who not only used the curling iron but had a relationship with it.

Muriel shrugged and sighed, “Okay, okay. I know.”

They’d been at Family Night for forty minutes, and they hadn’t gotten to the lesson yet. Family Nights in most families often amounted to playing a board game and eating refreshments. Sometimes, these families would all just go bowling, or watch re-runs of *Flipper* and count that. But Gush was different.

By the time Gush had pulled the chalkboard out front and center, Winnie and Chums were at each others’ throats.

“Stop touching me!” screamed Winnie, the older one.

“Chums, keep your hands to yourself,” said Mom to the younger, a mere wisp of a child whose real name was Chelsea and whose feet barely hung over the edge of the couch. “There’s plenty of room there for both of you.” Stone-still, Chums looked at Riley, her wounded eyes shading into defiance. Once Gush started talking again, she placed the pinkie of her right hand ever-so-lightly against Winnie’s pant leg.

“Stop *touching* me!” Winnie screamed again, louder and pushing the hand away.

“She’s taking all the room!” said Chums, a defensive sob rising in her five-year-old throat. Her sister slugged her. Suddenly Chums grabbed Winnie’s hair in her fists, no larger than apricots, but with a power surge rivaling that of a vacuum cleaner. With one

sweep of Gush's powerful arm, the hair-puller was transported screaming to her room.

"I can't believe this," Muriel said with disgust. "I've got so much homework tonight."

"Which boyfriend are you studying tonight, Muriel?" said JoDec with a smirk. She was taking advantage of the fact that Gush was out of earshot.

"Shut up, JoDec." Muriel glanced at her mother.

"Mommy, Muriel said a bathroom word," reported a scandalized Winnie, still rubbing her scalp.

"Muriel," said Mom, "I don't care what kind of language they use at that Provo High, but at home you have little brothers and sisters who are watching everything you say." Riley thought what a strange expression that was, "watch what you say," as if the words became incarnate as they hit the air like blue blood turns to red the moment it hits oxygen. Suddenly Gush was back, his brow furrowed, his chest heaving. In the other room they could hear Chums screaming through the nursery door, which she was periodically kicking with mighty thuds. One had to hand it to her, she fought like Samson.

"This has been a real disappointment," Gush said, referring to the family powwow. He seemed to be trying hard to form an appropriate expression of gravity in his flushed face. "This is like a circus around here. Now, kids, sit up . . ." (They did.) ". . . and let's study the Gospel."

The Gospel was the saving knowledge revealed in this, the last dispensation of the fullness of times by the first latter-day prophet, Joseph Smith, and others. And it was linked indelibly to the true Church of Jesus Christ which had been restored to the earth in 1830 and was headed by the current prophet—a short octogenarian with a funny voice named Spencer Kimball—and his twelve apostles, all of whom wore suits like Gush and lived fifty miles north of them in Salt Lake City. Gush had a reputation in the ward for teaching the Gospel with an electrifying, at times crushing, fervor, and as his children they were not spared. On this particular Monday evening, even Muriel seemed to have

finally realized that when it came to Family Night, the only way out of it was through it.

Gush held the chalkboard in one meaty hand, and in the other sketched with surprising dexterity the entire Plan of Salvation. The Plan started with the creation of the world, moved to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve fell from grace. At this point Gush re-drew upside down the stick figures of our first parents to show how they were falling to the lone and dreary world. Even the younger girls laughed at that, which was okay with Gush since he was going for a little levity.

Chums was suddenly back. Drawn by laughter at Eve's stick hair flapping in the wind, she had sneaked down the hall and was standing shyly in the doorway of the living room, a finger in her mouth, her eyes red with tears. She had a bad case of the post-cry hiccups.

"Are you ready to come back in, Chums?" Gush asked with a reproving look. She nodded soggily, and returned to her rightful place in the family order, this time next to where Gush was kneeling on one knee, her small, dimpled hand on the back of his calf. He briefly rubbed her back. She hiccupped.

From the fall of Adam and Eve, Gush took them through Noah and the flood, the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues, and into the time of Abraham.

"Now, brothers and sisters," began Gush, then stopped abruptly and smiled. He looked at Joan who, still pinned by the baby to the chair, smiled back wearily. Gush was always forgetting who his family was when he got wound up with the Spirit. "Sorry, kids," he blushed, and the kids moaned with an irritation that was only mild considering their new absorption in the illustrated Plan of Salvation. He continued. "The story of Abraham and Isaac is a type and shadow of the sacrifice that Heavenly Father would make later of his own son, the Christ." Gush always talked about Jesus as "the Christ." Maybe he did it to invoke awe. Gush looked at Riley with a fresh idea in his face. "Let's say that I'm Abraham, and Riley here is Isaac, my ONLY SON. Riley, stand up here for a minute."

"What?" Riley asked.

“Just stand up here for a minute will you?” said Gush, moving the box of chocolates off the Postum table and handing it to Cade who, holding the glistening package in flat hands, seemed galvanized into one of the magi, bearing frankincense in the annual Christmas pageant. “I need your help.”

Being one of only two boys in a family of what was then nine kids certainly had its advantages—not as many hand-me-downs to wear—but being singled out by his father as an object lesson in Family Night was certainly not one of them. It meant, of course, that Riley couldn’t just sit on the sidelines and comment, *sotto voce*, about all the ridiculous things his sisters and brother did, and he knew that if he didn’t cooperate, Gush would be “disappointed” yet again.

Riley stood up, and Gush helped lay him down on his back on the Postum table. Winnie and Chums giggled. Gush cleared his throat like he did when he lectured. “Just for illustrative purposes,” he said, “let’s say that I’ve taken Riley into the mountains.”

“Like ‘Y’ mountain?” said Chums, her eyes now wide with interest. She was referring to the mountain directly across the street, a pile of flinty rock topped with pine and sporting a huge blocked and whitewashed letter “Y” which could be seen for miles and tagged the nearby presence of Brigham Young University, a.k.a. the Lord’s University.

“Yes. Let’s say ‘Y’ mountain. And I’ve taken him up there because the Lord has told me that it’s necessary to sacrifice Riley to show my obedience.” From where he lay, legs and feet cantilevered off the end of the table, Riley could see his father’s torso and head above, intent eyes behind black-rimmed glasses. He could feel the heat from off Gush’s body and smell the warm, beach-like odor of his skin. Gush cleared his throat again, and Riley saw that Gush was wearing his Moses face—a face flushed with righteous indignation—that from this angle frightened him. When Gush gave talks in church or as a guest speaker at firesides he would gush, emphatic with a Gospel principle. He’d spread his stocky legs apart, thoughtfully and ever-so-slightly caress his chest with the fingers of one hand, gaze intently into space and lift one eyebrow as if he were in pain. Then he’d talk through his

teeth with such a high-pitched voice the blood would drain out of your face just from watching. This sort of thing made Riley uncomfortable. Wouldn't people think his dad was angry about something? Or strange? But the effect on everyone in the audience was always a certain kind of teary-eyed awe.

Gush had Joan's hairbrush in his hand, the bristles pointed at Riley's heart. His other hand was pressed securely on his son's chest while he continued to tell the story. "Now, children, try to visualize Abraham explaining to his ONLY SON that the offering of the day was not going to be a ram or a sheep," he paused here for purposes of the drama, ". . . but that it was going to be his ONLY SON Isaac." The baby started to fuss and the rocking chair creaked as Joan shifted in it. In the ceiling Riley saw for the first time a thin crack in the plaster that ran to the wall behind the couch like a river on a map.

"I like to think," continued Gush, "that Isaac was a young man, older than Riley here, maybe eighteen or so, and that he had as much faith as Abraham." Riley thought about what it would be like to be eighteen. That if he wasn't so afraid to play team sports, he would choose number eighteen for his jersey. "And that when Isaac learned what the Lord had asked of his father he had so much faith he freely laid down on the stone altar without his father having to bind his hands." Cade, holding the chocolates, asked what "bind his hands" meant, and while Gush explained it, Riley's back started to throb. He tried to shift his weight a little but Gush, lost in his narrative, was pressing down on him so that he couldn't move. Riley could see Gush rolling the handle of the brush through his fingers while he talked about the Lord's commandments, explaining how, sometimes, though the commandments might seem questionable, that the faithful must obey.

"Can you imagine the anguish of Abraham," said Gush, "as he looked into the heavens to offer the sacrificial prayer, and raising the knife above his ONLY SON . . ." Gush raised the hairbrush above his head with a dramatic jerk. Three of his mother's hairs floated blurrily above Riley. ". . . was determined to keep the Lord's commandment?" There was a long pause in

his father's voice. Everyone was quiet, and Riley wondered how much longer he was going to have to lie there. He thought briefly about a homework assignment that was due the following day. Finally, he looked up at Gush, the brush still raised above his head, his face turned upward. Tears were streaming down his face. No one said anything.

"Dad?" Riley finally said. "Can I get up now? This is hurting my back. Dad?"

As he sat up, and straightened his T-shirt, Joan handed Gush a tissue with which he wiped his eyes. Riley looked at Muriel and then at his brother, the box of chocolates finally forgotten in his lap, his own eyes wide with some kind of new appreciation for something. Even though Cade had narked on Riley the week before when he ate half the bag of chocolate chips that Mom was saving for cookies, Riley suddenly felt sorry for his brother. That he hadn't been the one sacrificed. That he hadn't been chosen as he, Riley, had.

After Gush blew his nose, he mentioned how God had stopped Abraham from killing his son and that he provided a ram, trapped in nearby bushes, for them to sacrifice instead. Then Gush bore his testimony about how the Christ died for their sins, that God the Father actually did sacrifice his Son, and that he did so because he loved them, and that all of the faithful were likely to have a test like Abraham's at some point in their lives. They probably wouldn't be asked to sacrifice a child, but it would be very serious and trying, and that was God's plan for his children's purification and perfection.

They knelt in family prayer. Afterwards, JoDee opened the box of See's candies, carefully removing the quilted paper that covered the eats inside. She placed the box into the upside down cover, like they did every week at the end of Family Night, and then held the box carefully in front of Jessica who, as always, seemed arrested by all the choices and took forever to decide, attempting to touch each one with a sticky finger while everyone agonized for their turn.

The box was passed from Jessica, who ended up with a candy wrapped in gold foil, on up the line, like the sacrament of bread and water passed at church on silver trays. They were all silent, savoring the creams, the liquid cherries and the nuts, nibbling at the corners of their angular confections to make the reward last, eating half and then, finally, breaking the spell of their pleasure by bargaining for the better half of another sweet, held aloft by a munching sibling.

On the Postum table, forgotten, lay Joan's hairbrush—the weapon—still smoking.