THE CELESTIAL LAW[1]

Carol Lynn Pearson

> *God will be very cruel if he does not give us poor women adequate compensation for the trials we have endured in polygamy.* —Mary Ann Angell Young, legal wife of Brigham Young[2]

Mary Cooper and James Oakey, my maternal great-grandparents, married in 1840 and settled in Nottingham, England. Victoria was on the throne, and occasionally the citizens of Nottingham came out to pay honor as the queen in her carriage passed through on the way to Belvoir Castle. Mary gave birth to seven living children. James became a designer and maker of lace and also helped to develop new lace-making machinery.

I have brought up from the fireplace mantle to sit beside my computer while I write a framed four-inch square of delicate Nottingham lace, a product of James's work, precious enough to cross the Atlantic and to cross the great plains. The lace is black, a color all citizens wore in 1861 mourning the loss of the beloved Prince Consort Albert.

In 1850, the Oakey family was baptized, joining the more than 33,000 Latter-day Saints in the United Kingdom and Ireland (compared to 12,000 in Utah at that time). Missionaries, enthusiastically preaching on street corners and in homes, had reaped a fruitful harvest since their arrival at Liverpool in 1837 with their optimistic gospel of new revelation from God, a restoration of lost truths, and a vision of a people preparing for the return of the Lord. For some time, James and Mary maintained the

1. This essay is excerpted from the author's recent book, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Pivot Point Books, 2016).

2. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 100.

mission home in Nottingham, the center of the work for all of England. James became branch president, then district president.

Like most wholehearted converts, James and Mary were anxious to gather to the new world and be part of this high endeavor, and by 1862 they had gathered the necessary funds. As they packed the very few things they could take on the voyage, my grandmother, eight-year-old Sarah, was told that none of her large collection of dolls could go. This story was repeated to me often as I grew up:

James said, "We all must make sacrifices, Sarah. And your dolls will be your sacrifice for Zion."

"Father, what is Zion?" Sarah asked.

"Zion, my darling, is the pure in heart."

According to the story, Sarah sadly but bravely dressed and arranged her much-loved dolls around a little table and told them goodbye.

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Mary and the children set out for the six-week voyage on the *John J. Boyd,* numbered with 701 Saints of like disposition and destination. James was to make as much money as he could and follow as soon as he was able. One daughter, determined to stay with her boyfriend, abandoned ship just as it was to sail. Another daughter died of mountain fever as the family crossed the plains in a covered wagon. As little Sarah walked the 1300 miles, and as the wagons creaked their way west, they left behind them a nation playing out the bloodiest battles of the Civil War.

Their company reached the Salt Lake Valley on October 1st, 1862, making their way through Emigration Canyon, where the oak, maple, and aspen trees were aflame with the red and orange of autumn. Fifteen years earlier, in 1847, Brigham Young and the first company of Mormon pioneers had arrived and entered a semi-arid valley whose major attraction was that nobody else wanted it. The Mormons had been evicted from their homes in Illinois by mob violence and were determined to

become a nation unto themselves. Brigham had inherited the mantle of the prophet from Joseph Smith, and he was committed to bringing to fruition Joseph's vision of Zion. By the close of the 1860s, 80,000 converts had made the trek to the Utah territory, and the wasteland was truly blossoming as the rose.

My friend and Church Historian Leonard Arrington wrote in his biography of the man who was the mastermind of it all:

> Brigham Young was a kingdom builder with dreams as grandiose as Sam Houston or John C. Fremont. But unlike them, he was successful. . . . Brigham Young was the supreme American paradox . . . the business genius of a Rockefeller with the spiritual sensitivities of an Emerson. . . . He was not merely an entrepreneur with a shared vision of America as the Promised Land; he was a prophet . . . and he built beyond himself.[3]

By the time my great-grandmother Mary and her children arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, it was far different from when Brigham had first gazed on it and famously said, "This is the place." I wonder if Mary even believed her eyes as she looked down from the rim of the valley into a basin that was thriving. And that large building there—that adobe Grecian Doric building with pillars at its entrance looking as if a tornado may have brought it in from some far-off land—looking like it might be—a theatre! It was true—a theatre in the desert, completed and dedicated in March of the same year that Mary and her children arrived. Along with his keen sense of business and colonizing, Brigham brought across the plains his love of the finer things of life.

In the dramatic company that Joseph had organized in Nauvoo, Brigham had performed in the romantic tragedy, *Pizarro*, playing an Incan High Priest, a part that some said he played for the rest of his life. Even before the temple was completed, Brigham insisted on building what became the Salt Lake Theatre, a showplace that quickly became a national landmark, seating 1500 people in a spacious hall with two

3. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), xiii.

balconies, galleries, boxes, lit by countless candles, elegant chandeliers and suspended coal oil lamps, featuring a deep stage with a wide drop curtain and professionally painted backdrops. Mormonism attracted not only lace makers like James Oakey, but architects, painters, glaziers, artisans, and builders of all kinds. The first play produced was *The Pride of the Market*, one of the eighty in the repertoire of their already developed theatre company. It was said that there was no star of the American stage who did not make an appearance in this remarkable venue. Years later, a non-LDS author went so far as to declare that the Salt Lake Theatre was "one of the Seven Wonders of the theatrical world."[4] Perhaps my great-grandmother managed to bring her children to the theatre, bartering for tickets with eggs, cheese, vegetables, or doilies.

As a drama student in the university named after Brigham Young, I memorized his remarkable statement: "If I were placed on a cannibal island and given the task of civilizing its people, I would straightway build a theatre for the purpose."[5] And now, writing this book, I feel compelled to present the story of the theatre to give more soul to the story of the Mormon people and to underline my intense admiration and appreciation for Brigham Young and all that was accomplished through him. Brigham was far, far more than a man who had fifty-five wives.

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Still, there was *that*. Polygamy. Brigham had sent out a call to the traveling Saints to bring with them "starts" and seeds of every kind—sometimes stuck in potatoes to keep them viable crossing the plains. And prominent among the seeds that Brigham himself brought from Nauvoo to

4. Annie Adams Kiskadden with Verne Hardin Porter, "The Life Story of Maude Adams and her Mother," *Greenbook Magazine* 11 (June 1914): 885.

5. Harold I. Hansen, *A History and Influence of the Mormon Theatre from 1839–1869* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1967), iii.

be planted in the West there was *that one thing*—the thing that Joseph had restored at the insistence of God, who had sent an angel with a flaming sword, the thing that Brigham had first resisted and then came to enthusiastically accept, the thing that was part of what brought down his prophet-friend—Joseph's vision of plural marriage.

Such marriages had continued unabated since Joseph's death but were still protected with secrecy. Here in the territory of Utah, they were finally safe. Brigham could unpack this unusual doctrine of his beloved Joseph and teach it and live it openly under the clear blue western sky where they were accountable only to God.

On August 29, 1852, under the direction of President Brigham Young, the first public acknowledgement of Mormon polygamy was made. Apostle Orson Pratt spoke in the Old Tabernacle to a crowd of perhaps 2500 people on the necessity of the plurality of wives as

> a part of our religion, and necessary for our exaltation to the fullness of the Lord's glory in the eternal world . . . to raise up beings . . . that are destined, in their times and seasons, to become not only sons of God, but Gods themselves. . . .
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> I think there is only about one-fifth of the population of the globe, that believe in the one-wife system; the other four-fifths believe in the doctrine of a plurality of wives. They have had it handed down from time immemorial, and are not half so narrow and contracted in their minds as some of the nations of Europe and America, who have done away with the promises, and deprived themselves of the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
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> [The great and noble ones] are to be sent to that people that are the most righteous of any other people upon the earth; there to be trained up properly. . . . This is the reason why the Lord is sending them here, brethren and sisters. The Lord has not kept them in store for five or six thousand years past, and kept them waiting for their bodies all this time to send them among . . . the fallen nations that dwell upon the face of this earth . . . they will come among the Saints of the living God . . . [and] have the privilege of being born of such noble parentage.

> Now, let us enquire, what will become of those individuals who have this law taught unto them in plainness, if they reject it? I will tell you: they will be damned, saith the Lord God Almighty.[6]

Incidentally, Elder Pratt's first wife Sarah eventually left him, left the faith, and became a strong opponent of the practice of polygamy. She called her husband's venture into plural marriage "sheer fanaticism," particularly when at age fifty-seven he married his tenth wife, a girl of sixteen. Sarah and all of Pratt's wives and children struggled in poverty.

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James and Mary Oakey were still in Nottingham when that historic announcement was made—that polygamy was a true and godly principle—and only two years into their membership in this new church. A few months later in December, Joseph Smith's revelation on plural marriage was read in Britain and was met with shock and, for some, with apostasy. Likely Mary, as she began to hear the rumors validated, would have felt as did Hannah Tapfield King, who wrote to her non-Mormon brother upon hearing the doctrine of plural marriage announced at the semi-annual meeting of the Norwich Conference:

> Oh!—Brother, I shall never forget my feelings!!! It had an extraordinary effect upon me, for though I had known for a year that such a principle existed in the church, when I heard it read, and some things in it which I did *not* know, I confess to you I became skeptical and my heart questioned with tears of agony, "did *this* come from God?"[7]

Later Hannah did come to believe the doctrine was of God, as she became the last and fifty-fifth woman sealed for eternity as a wife to President Brigham Young in 1872, five years before he died. And whatever

6. Orson Pratt, Aug. 29, 1852, *Journal of Discourses,* 1:58.

7. Rebecca Bartholomew, *Audacious Women: Early British Mormon Immigrants* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 126.

James and Mary Oakey felt about the authenticated rumors, it did not stop them from making plans to join the Saints.

By the time Mary Oakey and her children arrived in the Territory of Utah in 1862, the doctrine of polygamy was deeply planted and very well known. Many hundreds of statements by the highest leaders of the Church made clear the essential nature of polygamy as a foundational part of the gospel, such as this one by Heber C. Kimball, first counselor to President Young: "You might as well deny 'Mormonism,' and turn away from it, as to oppose the plurality of wives."[8]

It was also clear by the time my great-grandmother arrived that not all was well in Brigham's Zion regarding this principle. He was having a difficult time getting the Saints on board, especially the women. A daughter of Jedediah M. Grant, right-hand man to Brigham Young, notably said, "Polygamy is alright when properly carried out—on a shovel."[9] The same women that historian Wallace Stegner called "incredible"[10] Brigham now labeled "whiners."

At a general conference in Salt Lake City in 1856, four years after the first announcement, Brigham said:

> It is frequently happening that women say they are unhappy. Men will say, "My wife, though a most excellent woman, has not seen a happy day since I took my second wife;" "No, not a happy day for a year," says one; and another has not seen a happy day for five years . . . many of them are wading through a perfect flood of tears. . . .
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> But the first wife will say, "It is hard, for I have lived with my husband twenty years, or thirty, and have raised a family of children for him, and it is a great trial to me for him to have more women"; then I say it is time that you gave him up to other women who will bear children. If my wife had borne me all the children that she ever would bare, the

8. Heber C. Kimball, Oct. 12, 1856, *Journal of Discourses,* 5:203.

9. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 94.

10. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1964; repr., Lincoln, Nebr.: Bison Books, 1992), 13.

> celestial law would teach me to take young women that would have children. . . .

Brigham told the women he would release them from their husbands, release them to leave the Territory. But if they chose to stay, he continued, "You must bow down to it, and submit yourselves to the celestial law. . . . Remember, that I will not hear any more of this whining."[11]

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It is possible to find occasional stories of polygamous families who lived in some contentment. Making the best of a difficult situation is a Mormon characteristic. A culture of polygamy had become a given, rather like the weather. In Leonard Arrington's diary he gives an assessment of Utah polygamy in general:

> Nearly every important Mormon entered into plural marriage and in nearly every instance the first wife, though formerly giving her approval for the second marriage, privately opposed the second marriage and privately was jealous of the second wife. While she attempted to sublimate her feelings, these were recognized by her children and these were magnified by them so that it was impossible for them to look upon the second wife and second family in an objective way—as the children of a brother or sister would look upon aunts and uncles and cousins.
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> Feelings developed between first, second, and subsequent families. Privately, not publicly, they made snide remarks about their "aunts." Wives would tear pages out of husband's diaries that referred to the other wives and family. They would destroy letters to or from the other wives and families. Bitter complaints would be made which were passed onto children and great-grandchildren.[12]

A wise person once said that "people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you

11. Brigham Young, Sept. 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:55–57.

12. Leonard Arrington, *Diary*, Jun. 29, 1975, author's private collection.

made them feel." That is the indisputable test of all our teachings, our doctrines, our policies. Mormon plural marriage was enacted with the widespread understanding that the Saints were preparing for a heaven in which each man rules his family kingdom, a kingdom that is more potent and more prepared for eternal increase with every wife that is acquired. Such polygamy—whether fact or fear—becomes a sanctified plundering of the position of women and of the feelings of women, robbing us of our power, our dignity and our self-respect. How Mormon women were made to feel under the trial of past polygamy and feel still under the fear of future polygamy is something that we have never looked in the face. It is a sad face. It bears some resemblance to the face of Emma Hale Smith. We must look without flinching if institutionally we are to heal.

The forced dichotomy between public presentation and personal feelings pointed out by Leonard Arrington added a second layer of awfulness to the situation: emotional inauthenticity, which I believe to be something we Mormon women continue to deal with today. In 1882, Phebe Woodruff, first wife among seven to Wilford Woodruff, fourth president of the Church, speaking at a mass meeting of Mormon women held in defense of polygamy, said, "If I am proud of anything in this world, it is that I accepted the principle of plural marriage, and remained among the people called 'Mormons' and am numbered with them to-day." However, a few days later a long-time friend asked, "How is it Sister Woodruff that you have changed your views so suddenly about polygamy? I thought you hated and loathed the institution." Phebe responded:

> I have not changed. I loathe the unclean thing with all the strength of my nature, but Sister, I have suffered all that a woman can endure. I am old and helpless, and would rather stand up anywhere, and say anything commanded of me, than to be turned out of my home in my old age which I should be most assuredly if I refused to obey counsel.[13]

13. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 101.

Interestingly, Phebe's husband, President Wilford Woodruff, is the man who issued the "Manifesto" in 1890, which officially ended the church's support of plural marriage. This document came, not in response to the feelings of Phebe and other women, their decades of bitter unhappiness, but in response to the fact that the church faced disfranchisement and federal confiscation of its property including the temples, which would in essence destroy the church as an organization. And also, of course, so Utah could be considered for statehood.

There is no clearer evidence that plural marriage was firmly held as an essential doctrine of the Mormon Church through the four decades prior to the Manifesto than a particular formal letter that was sent from church headquarters in December of 1891. This letter, issued jointly by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and addressed to U.S. President Benjamin Harrison, was a plea for amnesty for church members who had practiced polygamy prior to the Manifesto, members who had suffered arrests, trials, fines and imprisonment. The fifteen-men leadership wrote:

> To the President of the United States:
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> We, the First Presidency and Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, beg to respectfully represent to Your Excellency the following facts:
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> We formerly taught to our people that polygamy or celestial marriage as commanded by God through Joseph Smith was right, that it was a necessity to man's highest exaltation in the life to come.[14]

Those words leave no doubt that, in the minds of the highest leadership and in the minds of church members, "polygamy" and "celestial

14. "Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of the Protests Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat," Vol. II (Washington: Government Printing Office, January 16, 1904–April 13, 1906), 489, https://archive.org/details/proceedingsbefo01elecgoog.

marriage" were one and the same, and that the practice was essential for the truly faithful. It would be statistically impossible for all men to practice polygamy, but, according to the church's official website, "Probably half of those living in Utah Territory in 1857 experienced life in a polygamous family as a husband, wife, or child at some time during their lives."[15] Polygamous families were considered "elite" and polygamous men were almost always those chosen for advancement in church leadership. This "elite" status influenced even later generations. A friend of mine, writer Andrea Moore-Emmett, who was not a descendent of polygamists, says, "That omission in our pioneer family ancestry always caused my mother great regret, since, according to her, it meant fewer blessings bestowed on all succeeding posterity."[16]

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My great-grandmother Mary Oakey and her children stayed for a year with friends in Salt Lake City and then spent a year living in a dugout in nearby Kaysville. When James rejoined the family, they were called by Apostle Charles C. Rich to settle southeastern Idaho. The little town of Paris was their destination, close to the beautiful and placid Bear Lake in a valley covered with wild game and overrun with meadow grass. James, the lace maker, turned his hands to creating bedsteads and chairs. Mary made a home from whatever was available. They were building Zion, home of the pure in heart, and sacrificing for the glory of God.

Despite evident pressure, the Oakeys appeared not to be interested in participating in polygamy. Between their arrival in Paris in 1865 and a fateful, heart-breaking event of 1873, James and Mary Oakey lived the monogamous life they had signed on for. Although there is

15. "Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah," https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-and-families-in-early-utah?lang=eng.

16. Andrea Moore-Emmett, *God's Brothel* (San Francisco: Pince-Nez Press, 2004), 14.

no written record of such, there must have been conversations between this couple, and James—as an upstanding and capable man—would likely have been invited by the leadership into the order of plurality. A strong influence would have been Charles C. Rich, who presided over the entire Bear Lake region, a man who himself—back in the days of Nauvoo and Winter Quarters—had taken six wives. Rich had stayed with the Oakeys while he was a missionary in Nottingham, and Mary and her children had resided for a time with his first wife Sarah when they arrived in the Salt Lake Valley.

I can easily imagine some conversations between James and his priesthood leader, Elder Rich, based on the general documented discourse of the day. Here is a scene that might have taken place in the sawmill owned by Rich. Perhaps the two men spoke as they were cutting and grinding and sanding benches for the chapel:

"Well, James," says Charles. "President Young is putting it pretty plainly. A man who wants to rise in this church—a man who wants to rise in the celestial kingdom—that man will enter the holy order of plural marriage. I do feel to encourage you in this, James."

James is silent a moment, then speaks. "I just don't know if this teaching is correct, Charles. It doesn't—it doesn't feel right somehow."

Charles stops his work and looks James in the eye. "Do you have a testimony of the gospel, James, of the prophet Joseph, of the restoration?"

"I do. You know I do!"

"Then trust the leaders, James! I'd surely hate to leave you behind. We are creating a *chosen people*! Enlarge your posterity! Your *eternal kingdom*!"

James shakes his head and looks down at the sawdust on the log floor. "But my Mary. How could I hurt her like that?"

"You are her head, James, her head and her God. We are the new patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob, ruling over our families with kindness but with strength! Don't fail your family, James!"

But James said no.

Perhaps the following year another conversation occurred as the two men walked together on a sunny day to priesthood meeting.

"James, last week I had to release a bishop from his position—it would not do to have a monogamist presiding over those who are living the principle."

James does not respond. Charles continues. "You should be a bishop, James. And even higher. Why, in England, you were one of our best leaders."

James slows his gait and frowns. "But I—I love Mary. She is the only one I want to be with."

Charles stops walking, turns to his companion and places a hand gently on his arm. "James. Listen to me. You can love others. As I do. It becomes a maternal love. The brethren say, 'Love your wives. But not too much.'"

James begins to walk again, quickly, as if he might outdistance the pain. "Every time I think of hurting my Mary like that—I just can't, Charles. It would break her. She might even—leave."

"James!" Charles speaks sharply. James turns and looks at him sadly. "James," the voice now is gentle. "If you do not act, your Mary—and you—may lose your eternal crowns and inherit a lesser kingdom!"

But James said no.

One more conversation I fantasize. The two men speak as they work together in the grist mill.

"Charles . . . I've spoken again to Mary. She says no, never. She says she would rather be damned than let another wife into the family."

Charles pauses in his work. "I am so sorry, James. Obedience. Obedience! That's the winnowing. Separating the wheat from the chaff, just like we're doing here in the mill." Charles reaches into a bushel and thrusts a palm full of kernels in front of James. "Are you wheat or are you chaff, James?"

James sits down on a stool and puts his head in his hands.

Charles continues. "I wish Mary could see, as did my first wife. A second wife is not an intruder—she is the key!—the very key to opening the door of salvation in the celestial kingdom not only for herself, but for her husband and for his first wife. If you love Mary, lead her into righteousness."

"She will not be led."

"Then you are released from the law of Sarah, my friend. You have given your Mary the opportunity to approve. She has refused. You are now at liberty to proceed. And if Mary continues in her stubbornness, she is the transgressor." Charles squats beside his friend and places a hand on his knee. "But believe me, James, Mary will become reconciled. I've seen it time and time again."

Still James said no.

And then something happened that turned the world of James and Mary upside down.

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I have known since May 30, 1972, the general story of what happened. I found the account in my diary. Married for six years and the mother of three children, I wanted to learn all I could about the family history, so I spent the day with Aunt Mamie, the older sister of my mother Emeline who had passed away when I was in high school. Aunt Mamie had brought to our home in Provo, Utah, pictures and genealogy sheets.

All she knew of what happened in the Oakey family in 1873 was very sketchy. Later I quizzed other relatives, anyone I thought might shed more light, but all anyone seemed to know were just the bare facts. Again I am going to take dramatic license and construct a scene that might represent those facts.

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It is twilight in the two-room log cabin of the Oakey family in Paris, Idaho. The three children who still live at home—Alfred, 24; Sarah, 19;

and Hyrum, 14—sit at the table reading or sewing by the light of the coal oil lamp. Mary, whose hands are always busy, mends a quilt that covers her lap. There is the sound of horses and a wagon. A muffled voice calls the horses to a stop.

Hyrum closes his book and looks up expectantly. "Father's home!"

Mary places the quilt on the chair and opens the door, letting in the chill of an early October evening. In a moment James enters, slowly. He takes off his hat and looks around as if he's not sure where he is.

Sarah stands and takes a step toward him. "Father?" she asks gently. "Are you ill?"

"No. No, I'm . . . fine."

Mary touches his arm. "Sit down, James."

"In a moment . . . a moment." James glances at the closed door and then back to his family. "I have something to tell you all. I brought someone with me—from Logan." He looks at his wife. "We knew her many years ago in Nottingham."

Mary blanches, reaches for the chair and slowly lowers herself into it.

James continues, anxious now to conclude his news. "Ann. I told you she had come over, Mary. Now a widow . . . she's in the wagon. I was counseled . . . by priesthood authority." He pauses, then speaks evenly and solemnly. "Ann was sealed to me in eternal marriage yesterday in the temple of the Lord."

The children stare at him. No one speaks. With difficulty Mary stands, walks to a coat rack, and takes down a heavy shawl.

"Mary, what are you doing?"

"What I told you for years that I would do. From this moment, James, I am no longer your wife. Tonight I will stay with Sister Olsen."

"But it is the will of the Lord!"

Angrily, Alfred stands, nearly upsetting the table, and steps toward his mother, helping her with the shawl. "Mother, I will take you there."

"Mary!"

James and the other two children watch in disbelief as Alfred pushes past his father, opens the door, and escorts his mother out into the night.

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That's as far as I imagine the scene.

What we know for certain is this: In the year 1873, directly after James came home with a second wife, Mary, his wife of thirty-three years, left him and never lived with him again. Mary took the three children who were still living with them and moved about seven miles away to a place then called Dingle Dell, now called just Dingle. She told James he was not to follow them. This is the town in which my own mother, Emeline Sirrine, was born. A history of Dingle that can be found on the Internet says: "The first permanent family came in 1873. They were Mary Oakey and her sons Alfred and Hyrum and daughter Sarah."[17]

For the first year they lived—as they had in Kaysville—in a dugout, and then in a log cabin with a dirt floor, built by Alfred and Hyrum. Mary, now age fifty-eight, lace maker's wife from a comfortable residence in England, homesteaded 160 acres, and this in a land of dry farming . . . wheat and alfalfa . . . hawks and ground squirrels and sage hens . . . blow snakes and owls . . . winter occasionally reaching 45 degrees below zero . . . snow drifts that covered the fences . . . scarves wrapped around faces leaving an opening only for eyes. To Mary, all of this was a preferable choice to living with a husband that, to her perception, had betrayed her.

In the words of Mr. Stegner, incredible indeed.

Aunt Mamie always wondered why? "Why did Grandfather take this woman as his wife? What did he see in her? Grandmother was so lovely and dainty, always wore a white apron and a black velvet cap. And this other woman—well. . . ." Aunt Mamie would shake her head. "I'll never understand it."

I thought that I would never understand it either, and I thought there was no more information anywhere that would leave some better clues. But then—out of nowhere—the final piece of the puzzle just landed in my lap. I was listening to an episode of Lindsay Hansen Park's

17. "A Short History of Dingle Idaho," Family Search, https://familysearch.org/photos/artifacts/8144061.

very impressive *Year of Polygamy* podcast.[18] In the series' one hundred podcasts, Lindsay had already covered the Kirtland and Nauvoo period, the establishment of plural marriage in Utah, and was now examining the pressure that was brought to bear on the men to enter this principle. Suddenly I heard something that made me stand frozen at the kitchen sink. "In 1873, Brigham Young gave a sermon in Paris, Idaho, in which he said that if a man refused to take a second wife, in the eternities he would lose the wife he had." *Paris, Idaho? 1873?* I rewound the sound and listened again. *Paris, Idaho! 1873!* "*. . . he would lose the wife he had!*"

I was thunderstruck and felt anger rising in my throat. *How could you say that, Brigham Young! How dare you say that!* I called my four siblings and told them this new piece of family history. They too were very upset. My brother Warren in St. George, Utah quickly got on the Internet and found the very sermon.

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As I read the precise words of that sermon today, I imagine another scene. This one takes place just a few weeks prior to the scene in which Mary leaves her husband, and it provides what I am confident is the missing information that explains the mystery. I place myself there in the bowery, a large open structure with a hardened dirt floor with wooden posts holding up a roof of thatched brush and willows. The population of the town is just over 500 and nearly all are present for this event. I stand just behind and to the right of President Brigham Young, and I place Mary and James and their children on the front row so I can see them. They are in their Sunday best, James wearing a dark suit, grey vest, and black bow tie, Mary in her crinoline dress and black velvet cap. Fans occasionally flutter against the heat and the flies. All eyes are on their prophet-president, who has come to give them the word of God. The sermon starts well:

18. Lindsay Hansen Park, *Year of Polygamy*, available at http://www.yearofpolygamy.com.

> The Gospel of life and salvation that we have embraced in our faith, and that we profess to carry out in our lives, incorporates all truth. . . . I am here to give this people, called Latter-day Saints, counsel to direct them in the path of life . . . [and] I have never given counsel that is wrong.

Brigham touches on many principles that I appreciate. And then—

> Joseph received a revelation on celestial marriage . . . a great and noble doctrine. . . . Now, where a man in this Church says, "I don't want but one wife, I will live my religion with one," he will perhaps be saved in the celestial kingdom; but when he gets there he will not find himself in possession of any wife at all.

I look out at the front row. Mary Oakey raises her eyebrows and looks unblinkingly at her prophet. Brigham goes on.

> He has had a talent that he has hid up. He will come forward and say, "Here is that which thou gavest me, I have not wasted it, and here is the one talent," and he will not enjoy it, but it will be taken and given to those who have improved the talents they received, and he will find himself without any wife, and he will remain single forever and ever.

James drops his head onto his chest and presses his fingers into his brow.

> But if the woman is determined not to enter into a plural-marriage, that woman when she comes forth will have the privilege of living in single blessedness through all eternity.[19]

Son Alfred, sitting next to his mother, reaches over and takes her hand. Mary does not flinch. James breathes deeply, looks up at Brigham, whom he now can barely see through his tears. Finally, sadly, James knows what he must do.

President Young finishes his sermon and says amen. The congregation echoes amen. I glance now at the small block of delicate lace here on my desk, the work of the hands of James the lace maker, black lace to mourn the death of the queen's beloved consort. I mourn now, too. I mourn the death of the bond of love and trust my great-grandparents had created together. I used to blame James, but now I mourn for him.

19. Brigham Young, Aug. 31, 1873, *Journal of Discourses,* 16:22.

He acted not from love but from fear: God's wrath is a harsh thing to fight. And I mourn for Sister Ann, the new wife. She also was directed by authority, she went, and perhaps she suffered as well, knowing that her presence broke hearts. I mourn, too, for President Brigham Young. He thought that he was never wrong.

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One last note to this story. A couple of years ago, my brother Warren suggested that he and I take a road trip up to Bear Lake to visit the old family stomping grounds in Idaho. I readily agreed. Our first stop was the lake. You drive around a bend—and suddenly there it is, a beautiful stretch of blue in what appears to be a desert. We then drove into the little town of Paris. The major feature in Paris is a very impressive tabernacle, built by the Mormon settlers and now on the National Register of Historic Places. Skilled artisans had set their hands and hearts to creating something of beauty, stability, and usefulness. The building is a Romanesque structure made of red sandstone that had to be transported by wagon or sled from a quarry eighteen miles away. The designer was prominent architect Don Carlos Young, one of Brigham's sons.

It is not possible to walk unimpressed through this building that can hold two thousand people. And if you have ancestors who likely helped in the construction of it, there is an added layer of appreciation. I walked down an aisle of the main hall toward the choir loft, pipe organ and podium, my hands enjoying the polished pine wood of the benches, each of them an original from the late 1880s. Very likely my great-grandfather James helped to cut and to sand some of these benches. My brother was busy taking pictures. Suddenly I said, "Hey, Warren. Would you take a picture of me up at the podium?"

"Sure."

I climbed the stairs and arranged myself at the heavy, carved wooden podium and looked out at a most amazing view, the intricate woodwork of the ceiling, the stone carvings, the balconies, and the stained glass

window in the far wall. The hall had been designed by a shipbuilder from England and looked and felt like a huge and elegant hull. It was evening, nearly closing time, and the hall was empty except for my brother and me.

This uppity woman suddenly realized—*The hall was empty!*

I later realized that it had been 140 years ago to the very month since Brigham had given his fateful sermon in the bowery very close to this spot. Hundreds of Mormon prophets and General Authorities had spoken right here. I shouldn't . . . But . . . I planted my feet, grasped the edges of the podium, surveyed the empty hall and began.

"Dear brothers and sisters. We are gathered here today in honor of my great-grandmother, Mary Cooper Oakey, who in the year 1873 had the good sense and courage to say no to polygamy. I believe you know her story; it is printed there on the program. Sister Oakey, we honor you. I am also pleased to let you know that new light has come on that troublesome subject of polygamy, new light that makes it clear that there was a lot of misunderstanding and a great deal of unnecessary pain. Hopefully before long we will be able to write 'the end' to the sad story of Mormon plural marriage. There will now be refreshments and celebration in the foyer. Thank you."

I scanned the hall again. It was still empty. But in my mind I saw two figures sitting on the front bench, one in a dark suit with a grey vest and black bow tie, and one in a crinoline dress with a black velvet cap. They were holding hands.