

The End of Innocence

As I walked through the heavy wooden door into the baptismal building, most of the light disappeared. Outside, it was a warm June day. But inside the stone building, everything was cold and wet: the walls, the floor, the tiny dressing room, barely lit by a single lightbulb. I stared at the ceremonial clothes hanging on the damp wall and felt a deep chill. I was eight years old and scared to death.

I traded my long cotton skirt for one of the thin, white polyester dresses and walked reluctantly to the edge of the large pool in the center of the building—the baptismal font. I stared into the dingy water and cringed. One step at a time, I walked down into the four feet of cold water. My white dress started to rise up in the water like a parachute, but I did as I was told: I held my right wrist with my left hand and my nose with my right index finger and thumb.

An FLDS priest stood in the pool with me. He put his hand on my head. In a loud, deep voice, he said, “Flora Mae Jessop, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” Then he dunked me under the water completely for a few seconds, and yanked me up, triumphant. I struggled to catch my breath and saw that the wet dress was clinging to my body. You could see right through it. Shamed and embarrassed, I walked out of the pool and took my place on the side, shivering, as I waited for the other eight-year-olds to be baptized. I felt like a human sacrifice.

Finally, we had all been baptized. The priest pronounced a special blessing on us. We were all saints now, he said, no longer

children. We were full members of the community in the eyes of God, accountable to the priesthood for everything we did. Then he handed each of us our first “sacred garment”—a one-piece, white union suit that would cover us from wrists to ankles. It was designed to keep us modest and pure.

“Flora,” said the priest, “you must wear your Garment of the Holy Priesthood throughout your life. If you are true and faithful to the covenants, it will be a shield that will protect you against evil.” He looked at me hard. “And if you are ever caught not wearing the garment, you will be damned to hell!”

The garment buttoned up the front and had a flap I could unbutton when I used the bathroom. My dresses and skirts had to cover it completely at all times, from my shoulders to well below my knees, with sleeves that went to my wrists, even in summer. I had to wear up to eight pairs of nylon panty hose at once, making my legs look thick and bulky, like a rag doll’s legs.

The dunking was bad enough, but for me the garment was a death sentence. I knew from watching my mom and my aunts that women usually wore the garment for a week before it was washed. By the end of the week, it generally had stains under the arms and smelled to high heaven. A lot of women were so afraid of letting their body lose contact with the garment that they would actually shower with it on. They’d take off one arm and one leg of the dirty garment, get in the shower, wash and dry that side of their body, put the arm and leg of a clean garment on the clean side of their body, and then start all over again on the other side. I thought my garment was the ugliest thing I’d ever seen, and I hated it on sight.

I looked around at my fellow eight-year-old saints, boys and girls until just a moment ago. The boys, I knew, would be given the priesthood when they turned twelve. After that their mothers would have to be submissive to them. All women must bow to a man of the priesthood, no matter his age. As for the girls, we were marching toward an early marriage to a man we would

have no say in choosing. As I stood there in the cold, newly baptized and wholly miserable, I didn't think things could get much worse. But they did, and fast. For me and many other children in Pligville, baptism marked not only the end of childhood but the end of innocence.

I was born in Colorado City, Arizona, on June 12, 1969. For the rest of America the years following the Summer of Love were a time of freedom and protest against the establishment. Young people were making love, not war, and oppressed groups—African Americans, Hispanics, women—were all marching for liberation. But back home where I lived, we were well protected from these “evils” of the outside world. Way out in the desert, between the northern rim of the Grand Canyon and Zion National Park, the twin towns of Colorado City, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah, stand on two sides of a dry wash called Short Creek. They were built on top of the bones of the Native Americans who had lived there for thousands of years before us.

Nearly 10,000 strong, most of us related to each other in a hopelessly tangled family tree, we were still living in a dark pocket of the nineteenth century. With only one road in and the same road out, we were left pretty much to ourselves. Hundreds of miles and many hours away from Las Vegas, the nearest big city, we had our own society and our own rules. And chief among those rules was that only the men had a direct line to God.

According to FLDS tradition and law, God had instructed the men to take many wives and father many children. In return, the men got everything they needed on earth and the promise of glory everlasting. And the wives? They got to do their husband's bidding all of their lives on earth. It was their privilege to bear children year after year and raise them to be obedient members of church. When they grew too old to have more children, they would move aside to make room for their more fertile—and younger—sister-wives. But that was OK! Because when they died, they'd get their reward: they were going to serve their husbands in the afterlife. For eternity.

When I was a little girl, Prophet Leroy Johnson—we called him Uncle Roy—led our commune. Everyone loved Uncle Roy. Along with some other members of the priesthood—including my father's half brother, Uncle Fred—he ran the place. God told Uncle Roy what to do, and he told the rest of us. And he expected total obedience.

In the same way, women were expected to give total obedience to their husbands, and children to their fathers. Husbands and fathers may not have been as exalted as the Prophet, but we all knew that God spoke through them. At least that's what we were taught to believe, and what I did believe. But a few days after my baptism, something changed all that forever.

That day I felt a little wicked—I'd already started cutting down the arms and legs of my sacred garment, and that day I'd decided I wouldn't wear it at all. Who would even know? I wandered down to the barn to see my favorite pony. My dad raised horses, goats, and pigs, and I loved the horses. Maybe I'd go for a ride in the orchard. I expected to be alone, so I was surprised to see my father in there, repairing a piece of equipment. I stopped short in the doorway, keeping my distance.

Even though he was my father, I'd never felt comfortable around him. His temper would flare for no reason, and I'd seen him beat my brothers—one older, one younger—without mercy. Now as he worked he puckered his lips in and out, over and over, a nervous habit. His loose-fitting dentures clicked in his mouth. For as long as I could remember, Dad had worn a complete set of false teeth. He thought it was fun to terrorize the babies and younger kids by pushing his teeth out of his mouth and wiggling them back and forth.

Physically, life had been hard on my dad. He was a small man, only about five feet six and 150 pounds. His hearing had been damaged in an explosion at a construction site, and you had to talk loud to make him hear you. He'd broken his back in another worksite accident. My dad was only thirty-six when I was eight, but he looked much older.

"Hey, Flora." He looked up at me and stopped working. He leaned against a stall door, smiling. He was dressed as he always was, in a western shirt, polyester pants, and cowboy boots, with a shabby straw cowboy hat covering his short black hair. "Come on over here."

I walked over to him, and stood there, silent. He just looked at me.

"You are special, Flora," he said, "my special girl." What was he talking about? He was never nice to me. When I was in public with him, I always wanted to be someone else, because he was nice to people he wasn't related to. Why was he being so nice to me now?

"Come here, a little closer." He looked down at me. I know now that he was a small man and not all that strong. But I was tiny for an eight-year-old, and I thought he was as big as God and just as powerful. He reached out for me and put his hand underneath my dress. I froze. He'd know I wasn't wearing my undergarment! But he didn't seem to care about that.

Still smiling at me, he pulled down my panties. My heart was beating like crazy. I wanted to run home, to my mother, but I couldn't move. What was he doing?

"Sit down and open your legs," he said. Obediently, I dropped down to the filthy barn floor and opened my legs, the lips of my vagina spread wide open. I could feel the sudden rush of cold air on my warm skin, and bits of straw tickling my legs. I couldn't imagine why he would ask me to do this. But he was my dad—the priest of our home. What he did was commanded by God, so he must have a reason. Anyway, I knew what could happen if I didn't do what he asked.

At first my dad just stared at me where I was naked. I couldn't even breathe. I was terrified that someone would walk in and see us. But I wasn't even sure if we were doing something wrong. Then he put his rough, dirty hand on my vagina, unbuttoning his own pants and yanking them down. This skinny tube thing fell out and

began to rise up. I'd never seen a man's naked body before, not my father's or brother's or anyone else's. My face felt hot and my mind was racing. I didn't know what was happening.

His penis was getting big now, red and hard. He grabbed it with his other hand and started rubbing it up and down while at the same time sticking his fingers deeper inside my vagina. I sat perfectly still, numb with shock, fear, humiliation, and confusion as he jerked harder and harder, grunting. I thought it would never end. Then some white, gooey stuff spurted out of his penis, and he went slack, moaning.

Without a word, he stood up and fastened his pants.

"Button up," he said, no longer interested. "Get out of here. Now." He went back to work.

I left that barn in a hurry. I was still eight years old, but I would never be a child again.

My dad's abuse soon became a regular part of my life whenever he was home. He worked as an electrician for an FLDS business in Salt Lake City, and would sometimes be gone for two weeks at a time. He'd come home for the weekend then leave on Monday. But on that weekend, on every weekend, he made my life hell.

It was amazing how much abuse my dad could fit into two days. He'd call me into his office and close the door, ready to go. Sometimes he told me to suck his penis. Other times he wanted to ejaculate on my chest or have me bring him to climax with my hand. Weekend after weekend, he made me do everything but have intercourse.

Dad took my soul and twisted it. I had been taught at Sunday school and at home that the only two people in the whole wide world who will do you no harm are the Prophet and your father: they would never do anything to prevent you from getting into heaven. So how could what my father was doing be bad? The confusion I felt overwhelmed me.

We children in polygamy were taught at an early age that sex is bad and your body is evil. We were never supposed to touch our own body or even look at it. To look at my sister's body was forbidden, and even to *think* about looking at my brother's body was forbidden. This had been hammered into me for as long as I could remember. So taking my clothes off and getting naked with my father was not only extremely humiliating, it was damning. I assumed now that I'd go straight to hell.

I thought, *He's my dad; it's just our secret. I'm special to him.* But I knew that what we were doing was wrong. Deep down I sensed the evil of it. My unshakable belief that my dad would not harm me together with my deep sense that the opposite was true—and the FLDS mantra that “perfect obedience produces perfect faith”—kept me on the verge of emotional and psychological hysteria for years.

I wanted to tell somebody what was happening, but I couldn't. I loved my mom, but I knew she could never defend me against him. Even at eight years old, I was made sick by her continual submission to his demands.

When I was growing up, it seemed that Mom was always pregnant and struggling to manage babies in diapers. For a while she gave birth to a baby just about every year—seventeen children. I was the fourth. But she only got to keep ten of us. Dad took seven of the girls away from her as soon as they were born and gave them to my Uncle Fred to raise as his own. But I'll get to that later.

Mom was a small woman—she carried a shade over a hundred pounds on her five-foot, three-inch frame. Like Dad, she wore a full set of false teeth that never seemed to fit just right. And like Dad, she had had a hard life that made her look a great deal older than she was.

From a distance she could have been any FLDS woman. She wore her long, dark hair pinned up in a wave in the front, parted

on the side, and woven into a bun in the back. Her traditional, homemade, pioneer-style dresses were frayed and worn. She was always pale—as was typical of polygamous wives, who worked so hard in the house from morning to night that they rarely saw sunshine. Mom's fingers were always so swollen from pregnancy and hard work that she could never remove the only piece of jewelry she owned—her wedding band. Except for her glasses, which she always wore, an outsider would think she looked like she'd stepped right out of the nineteenth century. Her life surely was rooted in another time.

Women's liberation has never come to Colorado City. FLDS women are commanded to be demure and dutiful and to keep a low profile. In this regard, my mom was perfect. Around Dad, Mom was silent and subdued. She spent most of her energy trying to shield us kids from Dad's temper tantrums. When he was out of the house, she was soft-spoken and laughed a lot with us kids. But she couldn't hide her deep, underlying sadness, even from her own children. My mother lived a life devoid of hope.

I would often catch Mom crying silently to herself. She spent much of her time staring into space, a distant, hollow look in her eyes. But she never complained. She never spoke against my dad. She never said a word about the seven daughters who had been taken from her.

Mom had three strikes against her right from the start: she was brought into polygamy as a young girl, she was uneducated, and she just naturally wanted to please people. She played the part of the obedient polygamous wife as well as she could; but even in her thirties, when I was growing up, she was emotionally a child. Polygamous women are not allowed to grow up. How can they, when so often they're married off by the time they're fourteen?

Sometimes I'd come home from school to find my mother sitting on the floor coloring with crayons—and not just with the kids. She often colored by herself or with her sister. They would

color like two first-graders. Once I saw the two of them fighting over a crayon. It was heartbreaking. It would take me many years to understand the depth of her pain and the complexity of her imprisonment.

So I knew I couldn't tell my mom about Dad. What good would it do? Besides, the church's motto—"Keep Sweet, No Matter What"—was enough to keep me in line. "Keep sweet" doesn't mean the same thing in the FLDS as it does in the outside world—be kind, charming, considerate. It means that no matter what happens, keep smiling and keep your mouth shut. We were taught that keeping sweet was for our own protection—because no matter how bad things were at home, the outside world was evil incarnate. Hell, people from the outside world were always out to get us. I knew it for a fact. I'd learned it firsthand, on a hot summer day a couple of years earlier.

That day Dad was working out of town and we kids were playing around the house. We were relaxed, having fun. Then the phone rang.

"Hello?" Mom didn't say another word after that, she just listened, but I could see her jaw trembling. She was breathing hard. I got scared. I couldn't imagine what was wrong.

Mom slammed the phone down and ran to the window in a panic. I looked out the window with her and saw two strangers walking toward our house. I had no idea who they were. All I knew was that my mother was upset, and I started to panic too.

"Get down and don't move!" She threw me to the floor. "Kids! Get down here now!" Mom tore through the house, gathering all of us kids, huddling with us on the living room floor. She closed the curtains, locked the doors, and ordered us to start praying for protection from the wicked, evil people who were coming to kill us. I couldn't imagine what was happening.

"Don't make a sound!" Mom said in an urgent whisper. "Pray hard for God's protection." We hugged each other, terrified, praying frantically.

Then we heard a knock at the door. They were coming to get us! We hunkered down lower to the floor, shaking from fear, Mom too.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” We’d never seen her so upset.

“Quiet, children,” Mom whispered. “They’re going to kill us if they find us!” I was so scared I thought I was going to throw up.

They knocked again. We held our breath. Eventually they moved on. Mom told us the coast was clear, and we tried to get on with our day. But I was shaken to the core. That memory is as vivid today as the day it happened.

Years later I realized the people at the door weren’t vicious killers, just Jehovah’s Witnesses looking for converts. But the consequence of their brief visit was lasting terror. Any time outsiders would find their way into our community, everybody would run inside and lock the doors, hiding from the evil ones and praying for salvation. Parents used this intense fear to control their children, the same way they’d been taught as children.

The brainwashing began in Sunday school. Over and over we were regaled with the gory details of the state government’s 1953 raid on Short Creek, Arizona—Short Creek was the original name of Colorado City, our home. We heard the story over and over, from those who’d been there and those who hadn’t.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the Mormon Church, or LDS—had outlawed the practice of polygamy back in 1890. But that didn’t stop people from “living the Principle”—the so-called holiness of plural marriage. Mormon fundamentalist polygamists had broken from the LDS and had been living in Short Creek for a long time. In 1935, they were excommunicated. They formed their own sect, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or FLDS, and dug in.

The Short Creek community was a thorn in the side of the state and federal governments for more than one reason. The men had multiple wives, which was against the law. They didn’t

pay property taxes, which was also against the law. And welfare payments to their many children—a practice the FLDS calls “bleeding the Beast”—were a drain on the system. Clearly, these practices needed to be stopped. So on July 26, 1953, Arizona governor Howard Pyle ordered a massive police raid on the polygamists of Short Creek. It should have been an easy win for the government, but it wasn’t.

Authorities arrested 122 polygamists, and 263 children were placed in foster care. The newspapers had a field day. Photographs showed sobbing children being taken from their mothers, while their fathers were arrested and hustled off to jail. Much like the raids involving the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, and Randy Weaver and his family at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, years later, the Short Creek raid was a public relations nightmare.

In the end not much happened: twenty-three men each received one year’s probation. But the hoopla surrounding the raid ultimately resulted in public outrage toward the government and a more tolerant attitude toward polygamy that has continued to this present day. Since then mainstream law enforcement has been unwilling to enforce antipolygamy rules and legislation. A raid that should have put an end to polygamy essentially gave the practice a free pass.

In church and Sunday school in Colorado City, the story of the raid was presented as a cautionary tale: the outside world hated us, wanted to destroy us, and would rip us from our parents’ arms. This conspiracy scenario was the basis of our study. We were taught, “If you don’t keep sweet, you’ll be taken over by the evil outsiders.”

“Keep Sweet” is the sacred song of the church, preached with relentless passion. It covers a multitude of sins. It means be modest and pure; obey your parents; obey your husband. But to me and thousands of other abused kids, keep sweet meant keep silent as your father is molesting you. Say nothing as your mom or dad beats you with their fists, a belt, a steel pipe. Do as you’re

told when, as a young teenager, you're ripped away from the boy you love and ordered to marry a man in his seventies. Smile sweetly through your pain because there is nothing you can do about it. Surrender your emotions to the Principle without question. Accept it or go straight to hell.

I remember those mandatory Sunday church services with dread and loathing. The front row chairs, reserved for the priesthood brethren, faced the congregation. The rest of us worshippers sat facing the priesthood men. People would be called on, without notice, to take the stage and give their testimony—usually about the virtues of plural marriage and the importance of keeping sweet. These hollow, rehearsed statements were said to elevate one's good grace with the priesthood and reinforce the Principle with the congregation.

We all sat there in church for three hours every Sunday listening to the priesthood rant, rave, scream, and pound the pulpit, telling us what little demons we were and how we were all going to hell. They would single out individuals—they'd say that they didn't like the color or the style of dress some women were wearing or that someone's hairstyle was unacceptable. Then they would expand the criticism to the rest of us.

"God finds you *all* disgusting," they would say. "Keep sweet no matter what!"

It was hard to escape the teachings. One Sunday night each month, for two hours, we children attended in-depth theology classes. We were assigned pages from printed literature to memorize beforehand, and in class we had to stand up and recite it all. Other Sunday nights were set aside for "family night." The families would get together and read stories and recount parables as told by older people who had been in the raid of '53. Their tales of terror and brutality at the hands of the authorities instilled fear and distrust of the system and the outside world.

The only thing I liked about Sundays was that they gave my father fewer opportunities to molest me. As long as I was around other people, I was safe from his grasp.

But it wasn't just me whom Dad was after. He was an equal opportunity abuser, and my brother Theral, his oldest son, was one of his favorite targets. Ten years my senior, Theral was a very shy, goofy-looking kid who was always getting picked on in school. Worse, as far as Dad was concerned, he used to pee his pants. This made Dad so damn mad. He would hold on to Theral's arm and drag him around the yard, kicking his butt the whole time, just to get him to stop. But his solutions had pretty much the opposite effect on Theral.

One day when I was really little, Dad had finally enough. He grabbed Theral and said, "I am going to teach you not to pee your pants once and for all!" Then he dragged him out of the house. When Dad came back about an hour later, my brother wasn't with him. I sat up all night long waiting for my brother to come home. I was really scared. But my brother was more scared. Dad had taken him up on Canaan Mountain, the mountain that towered over Colorado City, and left him there all night to teach him a lesson.

We kids all knew you *never* went up on the mountain after dark if you valued your life and your soul. We were taught early on that the craggy red mountains surrounding the community were haunted with evil spirits—the Gadianton robbers. According to the Book of Mormon, the Gadiantons were criminals who'd had their souls taken away in ancient times. Now, our parents told us, they rode the mountain at night on their ghostly horses. If they caught you, they would steal your soul. If they got it, you would be doomed to wander the world as a Gadianton robber for eternity—until you could steal somebody else's soul. We were terrified. The one rule we kids obeyed was to never go up in the mountains at night.

My brother didn't come home that night, but the next morning my dad went out early. He came back with Theral, white as a sheet. When we ran to greet him, he cowered away from us. My heart went out to him. I could imagine what he'd been through. Every sound would have terrorized him. But he knew if he got up

to move, he'd be a target. If he ran home, Dad would drag him back. Knowing my brother, he probably just curled himself into a little ball and cried all night.

For about a week after his night on the mountain, Theral shook like he had palsy. He continued to be very jumpy for all the years when I saw him regularly, and as far as I know, has never ever been the same as he was before that night.

Sometimes I thought I'd drown in all the tension and anger and craziness in our house. I just had to get out and be alone. I spent hours just sitting high on the limbs of a cottonwood tree, staring at the sky, or sitting on the rocky red cliffs overlooking Colorado City. I daydreamed about running away and disappearing into the mountains, living in a hole-in-the-wall cave where no one could ever find me. But instead of escaping my problems, I soon learned on those days by myself that the children in my family were not the only ones being abused in our community.

One Saturday afternoon, after my chores were done, I slipped out and headed up Big Rock, our name for the small mountain near our house. From Big Rock, I walked along the mountain ridge. Then I stopped at an overlook and looked down into people's yards.

One house belonged to a man I'll call Mark Bailey.* He had several wives and quite a few young sons. They were very cute boys, and I liked them quite a bit—especially Ricky,* who was my age. From my perch, I could see five or six of the brothers, just hanging around the yard talking. Suddenly, Mr. Bailey threw open the backdoor and stormed into the yard with a leather belt dangling from his fist. He ran straight for Ricky and started beating him with the belt all over his body, screaming at him the entire time. The other boys ran into the house to get away. Mr. Bailey was so out of control, chains could not have restrained him.

* Mark Bailey and Ricky are not their real names.

I couldn't do anything but sit there, tears rolling down my face, as I watched Ricky suffer a beating that could have killed him. Trying to protect himself from his father's relentless blows, Ricky curled up into a fetal position and covered his head with both hands. There was nothing I could do to save him. It made me sick to my stomach watching, knowing the pain Ricky's father was inflicting. The beating went on for what seemed like two or three minutes. Finally, Mr. Bailey stopped, yelling, "Just do it again and see what happens!" Ricky lay on the ground for a long time.

I wish I could say that this was unusual, but it wasn't. Over the years of my childhood, I saw more scenes like this than I want to remember. After a while, it seemed normal that parents would do this to their kids. But looking back, I can see that most of the families I knew lived in terrible violence and chaos. It's no wonder they so often spun out of control.

When I came back to the house from these time-outs, it was the same old thing. I couldn't tell my mom what my dad was doing to me. I was too ashamed, and I figured it was nothing special. A lot of kids were being abused by their parents in one way or another. Anyway, I knew it wouldn't do any good. My mom was an adult, but Dad treated her almost as badly as he treated us kids. I didn't want her to leave us, but I couldn't see why she stayed. When I asked Mom why she took what he dished out without protesting, she just shook her head and shrugged.

"That's just the way it is," she said. "You don't understand. That's just the way it is."

She was right. I didn't understand. And it made even less sense to me the next year, when Dad took a second wife: Mom's little sister Elizabeth.

