The 19th Wife

David Ebershoff

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Extract

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Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.

—SAINT AUGUSTINE

Like all the other arts, the Science of Deduction and Analysis is one which can only be acquired by long and patient study, nor is life long enough to allow any mortal to attain the highest possible perfection in it.

—ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men.

—THE BOOK OF MORMON,
TRANSLATED BY JOSEPH SMITH, JR.

I

TWO WIVES

THE 19TH WIFE

FEATURING,

ONE LADY'S ACCOUNT OF

Plural Marriage and Its Woes

BEING

THE CHRONICLE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

OF

ANN ELIZA YOUNG—

19TH AND REBEL WIFE OF THE

LEADER OF THE UTAH SAINTS AND

PROPHET OF THE MORMON CHURCH,

BRIGHAM YOUNG

WRITTEN BY HERSELF

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

MRS. HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

AND INCLUDING STEEL-PLATE ILLUSTRATIONS

EASTON & CO.

NEW YORK

1875

THE 19TH WIFE

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In the one year since I renounced my Mormon faith, and set out to tell the nation the truth about American polygamy, many people have wondered why I ever agreed to become a plural wife. Everyone I meet, whether farmer, miner, railman, professor, cleric, or the long-faced Senator, and most especially the wives of these—everyone wants to know why I would submit to a marital practice so filled with subjugation and sorrow. When I tell them my father has five wives, and I was raised to believe plural marriage is the will of God, these sincere people often ask, *But Mrs. Young—how could you believe such a claim?*

Faith, I tell them, is a mystery, elusive to many, and never easy to explain.

Now, with the publication of this autobiography, my enemies will no doubt suspect my motives. Having survived attempts on both my life and character, however, I stand unconcerned by their assaults. I have chosen to commit my memories to the page neither for fame, the trough from which I have drunk and would be happy never to return to, nor fortune, although it is true I am without home and have two small boys to care for. Simply, I wish to expose the tragic state of polygamy's women, who must live in a bondage not seen in this country since the abolishment of slavery a decade ago; and to reveal the lamentable situation of its children, lonely as they are.

I promise my Dear Reader I shall recount my story

truthfully, even when it distresses me to do so. In these pages you will come to know my mother, who by religious duty welcomed four wives into her husband's bed. You will encounter the old woman forced to share her husband with a girl one-fifth her age. And you shall meet the gentleman with so many wives that when one approaches him on the street, he answers, "Madame, do I know you?"

I can, and will, go on.

Under what circumstances does such outrage thrive? The Territory of Utah, glorious as it may be, spiked by granite peaks and red jasper rocks, cut by echoing canyons and ravines, spread upon a wide basin of gamma grass and wandering streams, this land of blowing snow and sand, of iron, copper, and the great salten sea—Utah, whose scarlet-golden beauty marks the best of God's handiwork—the Territory of Utah stands defiant as a Theocracy within the borders of our beloved Democracy, *imperium in imperio*.

I write not for sensation, but for Truth. I leave judgment to the hearts of my good Readers everywhere. I am but one, yet to this day countless others lead lives even more destitute and enslaved than mine ever was. Perhaps my story is the exception because I escaped, at great risk, polygamy's conjugal chains; and that my husband is the Mormon Church's Prophet and Leader, Brigham Young, and I am his 19th, and final, wife.

Sincerely Yours,
ANN ELIZA YOUNG
Summer 1874

WIFE #19:

A DESERT MYSTERY

By Jordan Scott

PROLOGUE
Her Big Boy

According to the *St. George Register*, on a clear night last June, at some time between eleven and half-past, my mom—who isn't anything like this—tiptoed down to the basement of the house I grew up in with a Big Boy .44 Magnum in her hands. At the foot of the stairs she knocked on the door to my dad's den. From inside he called, "Who is it?" She answered, "Me, BeckyLyn." He said—or must've said—"Come in." What happened next? Nearly everyone in southwest Utah can tell you. She nailed an ace shot and blew his heart clean from his chest. The paper says he was in his computer chair, and from the way the blood splattered the drywall they're pretty sure the blast spun him three times around.

At the time of his death my dad was online playing Texas hold em and chatting with three people, including someone named DesertMissy. He spent the final seconds of his life in this exchange:

Manofthehouse2004: hang on
DesertMissy: phone?
Manofthehouse2004: no my wife
DesertMissy: which one?
Manofthehouse2004: #19

Sometime later—a few seconds? minutes?—DesertMissy wrote: u there??

Later she tried again: u there???? Eventually she gave up. They always do.

When my mom pulled the trigger my dad had a full house, three fives and a pair of ducks. He was all in. The paper says although dead, he ended up winning seven grand.

I once heard someone on tv say we die as we lived. That sounds about right. After my dad was shot the blood seeped across his gunsandammo.com t-shirt in a heavy stain. He was sixty-seven, his face pre-cancerously red. Everything about him was thick and worn from a life boiled by the sun. When I was a kid I used to dream he was a cowboy. I would imagine him out in the barn saddling his roan with the white socks, readying himself for a ride of justice. But my dad never rode anywhere for justice. He was a religious con man, a higher-up in a church of lies, the kind of schemer who goes around saying God meant for man to have many women and children and they shall be judged on how they obey. I know people don't really talk like that, but he did and so do a lot of the men where I come from, which is—let's just say—way the fuck out in the desert. You might've heard of us. The First Latter-day Saints, but everyone knows us as the Firsts. I should tell you right off we weren't Mormons. We were something else—a cult, a cowboy theocracy, a little slice of Saudi America. We've been called everything. I know all that because I left six years ago. That was the last time I saw my dad. My mom too. I know you know this but just in case: she was wife #19.

His first wife was more than willing to put the rap on my mom. For someone who wasn't supposed to talk to non-believers, Sister Rita had no trouble telling the *Register* everything. "I was up in the keeping room with the girls' hose," she blabbed to the paper. "That's when I saw her come upstairs. She had one of those faces—it looked funny, all squished up and *red*, like she'd seen something. I thought

about asking but I didn't, I don't know why. I found him about twenty minutes after that when I went down myself. I should've gone down the minute I saw that face of hers, but how was I supposed to know? When I saw him in his chair like that, with his head, you know, just hanging in his chest like that, and all that blood—it was everywhere, I mean all over him, everything so, so *wet*, and *red*—well I started calling, just calling out to anyone for help. That's when they came running down, all of them, the women I mean, one after the next, the kids too, they kept coming. The house shook, there were so many running down the stairs. The first to get there was Sister Sherry, I think. When I told her what happened, and then she saw for herself, she started crying, screaming really, and the next one, she started crying too, and then the next after her, and so on. I never heard anything like it. The shrieks spread up the line, like fire, catching and spreading, one after the next and pretty soon it seemed the whole house was on fire with screams, if you know what I mean. You see, we all loved him just the same."

The next morning the Lincoln County sheriff handcuffed my mom: "You'll have to come with me, Sister." I don't know who called him in, he usually didn't get out to Mesadale. There's a picture of her being guided into the backseat of the cruiser—the rope of her braid flat against her back as she ducks in. The paper says she didn't resist. Tell me about it. She didn't resist when her husband married her fifteen-year-old niece. She didn't resist when the Prophet told her to throw me out. "No point in making a fuss"—she used to say that all the time. For years she was obedient, believing it part of her salvation. Then one day I guess she went *pop!* That's how these things go, you hear about it all the time. Except because of the suppressor it was probably more like a *phump!* than a *pop!*

Did Sister Rita do her in? Actually, it was the chat session. The *Register* loved the irony: VICTIM NAMES HIS MURDERER BEFORE SHE PULLS THE TRIGGER. Technically he didn't name her, he numbered her. But really, Rita's statement didn't help either.

It gave the sheriff enough. The next day my mom was booked and that picture was up on the *Register*'s home page, my mom sliding into the cruiser, her hair a heavy chain.

That's how I found out. I was at the library with my friend Roland. We were tooling around the web, checking out nothing in particular, then all of a sudden there it was, the story about my mom:

WIFE #19 KILLS HUSBAND

SIGN OF STRIFE IN RENEGADE SECT?

In the picture she's shackled at the wrists. Her forehead is white and glossy, reflecting a camera's flash in the dawn, and she has a look in her eyes. How to describe it? Should I say her eyes were dark and damp, the eyes of a small snouted animal? Or will you know what I mean if I say she had the scared-shitless look of a woman busted for murder and about to spend the rest of her life in the can?