

BALANCING BOUNTIFUL

What I Learned about Feminism
from My Polygamist Grandmothers

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CHILDHOOD

1989–2000



THE OLD BARN

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It's 1989 and I am six years old. I squint up into the bright summer sun. A pigeon swoops in big circles and perches in one of the tiny houses framed on top of the big Old Barn. Miriam and I have apples, picked from the Big Tree out in the cow pasture, weighing down the hidden pockets of our dresses. Mir's blue eyes and freckles are framed with straw-coloured hair hanging in a thick braid to her waist. My own brown hair is parted down the middle with top and bottom braids. Our mothers keep our hair this way so it never gets too messy and we don't look like orphan children. Last year's school dresses are our summer play clothes as they collect dandelion stains and fade from washing and sunshine. Our brown feet and arms are a contrast to the faded ruffles of our skirts.

This day, we are planning which animals we will need to add to our growing little farm. My brother Pete is helping me buy one of Uncle Kev's bummer lambs, and Mir has chickens over at Uncle Guy's place. When we grow up, we will go into business together, like our dads, we say. Our houses will be right next to each other or we will marry the same guy and be sister-wives. We will raise good sons and daughters who will help us on the farm before they get to go play in the Old Barn. Mir and I talk about being ready to take our kids and be pioneers to go help rebuild the New Jerusalem on the American continent. We will be farmers and mothers in God's kingdom after the Great Destruction and Jesus comes again.

We pick up a rock and each bust a hunk off the block of blue cow salt out in the cow pen. The cows have licked deep crevices that I trace with my tongue, as smooth as rocks in the creek bed. I take a bite of apple, lick the salt, then rub it back and forth across the bitten part until the white flesh of the apple is lathered and shiny smooth with the salty juice and take another bite.

The Old Barn is cool after the hot afternoon sun. To the right, the old milk room is at the front with three stalls built along the side wall. This dark, dusty room smells of musty hay and isn't used for much anymore except as a little stall where the boys put a new calf or pony on cold winter nights. We climb the wall ladder to the second layer of the barn. Old dairy equipment lies forgotten and half buried under musty hay and years of dust, reminders of the old days when Grandpa Ray and his kids

hand milked the cows before they built the new dairy on the hill.

Nearly a hundred acres of rocky hills and pine trees interrupted with green meadows and scattered with about two dozen dwellings nestle against the towering Skimmerhorn mountains standing guardian over my childhood paradise. A thick marshy forest lines the back of the property against the mountain. Two abundant mountain springs feed a creek that laughs through green meadows. Contented dairy cows chew their cuds in the afternoon shade of a big apple tree. And there stands the big Old Barn.

Daddy talks about when he and his brothers in their bare feet would be fetching the cows for milking. When frost covered the ground, he jumped from one steaming cow-pie to the next to keep his toes warm. He told us he liked to poke holes through horse buns, light one end on fire, suck the smoke through in long draws and try to make smoke rings. Mormons don't smoke and Dad tells us, "If you're gonna suck smoke from something, it might as well be a horse bun; a cigarette doesn't look any cooler than that either."

This middle level of the barn has a low ceiling and extends for only half of the building. When Dad was a kid, the big ranch house burned down. Grandpa and Grandma Aloha converted the chicken coop into a small cabin and put up some bunk beds on this level of the barn for the older boys' bunkhouse.

A big window with sagging shutters looks out over the barnyard. A few old boards are nailed between the narrow strip of wall and the twenty-foot drop to the barn floor. I push up through the square hole and pull myself up, belly sliding on the satin-smooth wood of the hayloft. I keep one hand on the rough, weathered door frame for support as I inch my toes to the edge of the window, far above the dusty barnyard. I lean forward just enough to feel the flutter in my stomach; shivers run up my spine. The chickens look like little bugs bobbing around. The back of the loft is half full of second-cut hay, which has already been stacked to feed the cows during the winter.

Summer is a busy time for us farmers. My brothers and cousins drive tractors, cutting and turning the sweet-smelling hay to dry. Watching them unload a semi-truck of hay is almost like watching a line of ants carrying food back to their anthill. Two of them pull the bales off the trailer and bump them end to end on the complaining chain teeth that take them up and up to the big third-storey window. At the top, two of the big boys or girls wait, stand facing each other and alternate grabbing

the bales from the elevator and packing them across the polished floor to stack in the back of the barn for winter.

I can drag a hay bale if I really put my mind to it and with a couple of us girls on a bale we can feed the critters in the stalls or build shacks, but a farmer our size is better at filling water jugs or helping the mothers bring lunch.

A big knotted-together rope is tied to the third beam that spans the width of the open side of the barn. In winter, the barn is full of hay and usually full of kids as well. The big boys drag bales around to make levels to swing from. “Just don’t break the bales” is the only rule in the Old Barn, but sometimes it happens by accident and then we can make a big fluffy pile to jump into and then fluff it up again for the next kid. The big kids make tunnels and mazes through the stacks of hay bales that lead into secret hidden rooms. Sometimes they are terrifyingly dark and elaborate.

John Wayne and Louis L’Amour are the great narrators of our childhood games in the Old Barn, which can go on for days. The boys are the brave riders of the Pony Express or cowboys in the Old West. We girls are the daughters and wives who get kidnapped, die tragically in childbirth or are abandoned to raise their children while the men go on some great mission. I prefer to be Sacagawea, who got to take her baby with her and didn’t have to miss out on all the fun.

Occasionally, we split into a full-on feud and cousin rivalry. All the kids join one group or the other for some standoff for territory. Sticks become guns and horses; a few of the older boys have their own hand-carved wooden weapons. There is yelling, wrestling, shrieking and prisoners being taken by one group or the other. There is lots of “Bam, you’re dead” with no clear rules.

If the games start getting out of hand, the older girls Nancy and Donna usually start yelling at everyone to go home or someone runs to call one of the mothers from Uncle Karl’s telephone in the little white two-storey farmhouse across the barnyard.

It’s during these wild and reckless gatherings in the Old Barn that our best family history lessons are debated among a pack of us cousins, each with our own authority and God-given right to claim our history.

“Great-Grandpa William Morrish Blackmore was kidnapped by pirates when he was twelve years old and he grew up a cabin boy on a ship,” Walter asserts. He grins widely. Two years older than me, he and Dan are the ringleaders of the boys. He whoops and jumps from a beam, swinging through the air to balance successfully on the hay bales.

“He was not kidnapped. His family were so poor that they had to have him go work on the ships because they couldn’t afford to feed all their kids,” Aunt Margy’s girl Michelle argues with him.

“Nah-uh,” our older cousin Nancy chimes in with authority. “He actually ran away because he knew his parents couldn’t afford to take care of him, so he became a servant on the ship as a cabin boy. The captain taught him all about being a sailor and even taught him how to read and write, and he had to stay on the ship for seven years to serve his contract.” Nancy is one of the oldest of our age group of cousins. She’s good at bossing the boys around and organizing games and clubs for us kids.

“He was so tough, he could climb overhand up the masts and could carry two five-gallon buckets of water straight out to the side. That’s how he escaped from the pirates: he dove overboard and swam three or four miles to shore.” Walt swings to a perch on top of the haystack and then jumps with a whoop into the pile of hay.

“Yeah, but if he hadn’t he wouldn’t have become a Mormon and then we wouldn’t be here,” Donna continues. “He met the Mormon missionaries on a ship he was working on. They were travelling from America to teach the gospel. They gave him a Book of Mormon, which he read cover to cover. Then they taught him about Joseph Smith and the work the Mormons were doing in Utah. Great-Grandpa decided to be baptized and went back to England to marry a girl he was promised to. Her father was a drinker and he told Great-Grandpa, ‘No daughter of mine will marry a man who can’t sit down and have a drink with me.’ So Grandpa William went to Idaho and that’s where he married Great-Grandmother, Mary Christina Ada Horn Blackmore.”

No one is keen to polish up the details of our favourite legends of Great-Grandfather William Morrish Blackmore, a descendant of the wild clansmen of the nomadic tribes from the “black moors” of England. He lives on in the boundless imaginations of his burgeoning posterity.

“Great-Grandpa was on the boat that killed the great whale Moby Dick,” Dan joins in. “It’s true,” he continues. “In England, there is a big sign talking about Moby Dick and listing all the sailors; his name is on it.” For a bunch of kids who could barely find England on a map, somehow our British Loyalist heritage still held strong.

Beyond the legends, and for three generations, the Blackmore name has stood for a stubborn strong will, a righteous conviction to strictly follow God’s word no matter the hardship, the bond and kinship of family and the brotherhood of working together.

In the Old Barn, my daredevil cousins walk the beams, which span the open side of the barn and are only about five inches wide, maybe twenty-five feet above the hay-strewn concrete below. When the barn is almost full of hay, Mir and I also walk the beams. It's easy but I pretend it's dangerous and my muscles tighten with the thrill.

Dust particles dance in the sun slanting through the big open doorway and making a square of light on the wood floor polished from decades of bales stacked there by our grandpa, our dads and brothers and the scurry of feet enraptured in the games of pure childhood imagination.

On this hot summer day, the barn is quiet except for the shuffle of the old sow and her fat piglets in the lean-to at the back of the barn. The ponies stand content in the shade of the farthest corner of the meadow, sending a clear message to any potential riders that a ride will be earned only by lots of chasing and a bucket full of grain.

THE FIRE

A few weeks ago I was eating birthday cake with my family and playing up at the Three-Layered Shack in the trees on the hill above the Old Barn. Today is one of the days when all the kids show up at the same time. Jolene, her brother Johnny and I make a horse corral with sticks tied to the trees with orange baling twine. Each of us has a really good stick horse notched with a string tied around it. Nancy and Donna get all the kids organized so we are all a part of the Pony Express riders, or sometimes we play Wild West games with all of the capturing and shooting and running away, hunting and stealing one another's stick horses. All Mormons learn the Articles of Faith by heart before getting baptized. I've been working to learn them all before Don does.

At bedtime I ask Mother Mary Ann if I can sleep in her bed with her. We get all snuggled in and I'm feeling cozy and safe when someone comes running down the hill, hollering, "Uncle Marvin's house is on fire!" Mother Mary Ann jumps out of bed. I hear her talking to Daddy and then they both leave. I'm scared. Only grey light is visible outside. I bury down in the covers waiting but I can already tell something really bad is happening.

After a bit Mother Mary Ann comes back in carrying my little cousin Tammy and puts her in bed with me. Aunt Marlene stays in my daddy's bedroom with her baby, and the boys sleep on the couch. People are coming and going. Trucks pull up to the house and leave again. I can hear sirens in the distance and can see the red lights go flashing up the road past our house. There is a bright red glow above the trees. Tammy and I stand on the bed together looking out the window, then we huddle together, barely whispering in the dark.



In the morning they say Daddy is in the hospital. Mother says I can go with her to see him. He has oxygen in a tube going into his nose and he keeps coughing. He talks really rough and quietly. He says the doctors said it was like he smoked a thousand cigarettes at one time and burned his lungs. I stand beside his bed and hold on to his hand, looking at all the tubes and listening to the hissing sound of the breathing machine. Big tears fall on my cheeks. The doctors say he is lucky and he could

have even died. He lies back on his bed, his body racked with coughing, wincing with pain.

“I’m going to be okay, love. I’ll be home soon,” he says. I believe him but I’m still scared.

Daddy says he rushed up when Aunt Debbie called him about the fire. She had her children loaded in the station wagon but she said one of them was missing. Daddy told us his terror imagining her little Tim—who is the same age as my brother Pete—sleeping in his bed while the flames engulfed the house. Daddy went running into the blackness and billowing smoke. He went from room to room feeling in the beds and under the beds, finding nothing, and finally was forced out of the house in agony that he was leaving the boy behind.

Miraculously the boy was somehow in the back of the station wagon the whole time and had been missed.

It will be a long time before Daddy doesn’t have to hold on to something when he coughs. In the meantime there are other things to think about: after the fire that night, Aunt Debbie leaves. Some say she flew off the handle. To me it feels as if she just vanishes, taking my cousins away forever. One day I am making shacks in the forest with my cousin Jolene and the next they are gone. Just like that, in one night, the fire burned up the house that had been always bursting over with kids.

I can’t think of anything scarier than the fire. I know that the fire was a bad thing but I don’t understand why Aunt Debbie had to leave. I remember the way my stomach twisted inside me when I heard the sirens outside the window. Maybe Aunt Debbie did fly off the handle. I hope my cousins like their new house.