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Shot in the Heart

Mikal Gilmore

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This book is dedicated to my brother, Frank Gilmore, Jr.

He endured much to help me tell this story.

PROLOGUE



There's something the dead are keeping back.

—ROBERT FRODO

THE DREAM

I HAVE DREAMED A TERRIBLE DREAM.

In this dream, it is always night. We are in my father's house—an old charred-brown, 1950s-era home. Shingled, two-story, and weather-worn, it is located on the far outskirts of a dead-end American town, pinioned between the night-lights and smoking chimneys of towering industrial factories. In front of the house, forming the border to a forest I am forbidden to trespass, lies a moonlit stretch of railroad track. Throughout the night of the dreams, you can hear a train whistle howling in the distance, heralding the approach of a passenger car from the outside world. For some reason, no train ever follows this signal. There is only the howl.

In the house, people come and go, moving between the darkness outside and the darkness inside. These people are my family, and in the dream, they are all back from the dead. There is my mother, Bessie Gilmore, who lived a life of bitter losses, who died spitting blood, calling the names of her father and her husband—men who had long before brutalized her hopes and her love—crying to them for mercy, for a passage into the darkness that she had so long feared. There is my brother Gaylen, who died young of old wounds, as his new bride sat at his side, holding his hand, watching the life pass from his sunken face. There is my brother Gary, who murdered innocent men in rage against the way life had robbed him of too much time and too much love, and who died when a volley of bullets tore his violent, tortured heart from his chest. There is my brother Frank, who turned increasingly quiet and distant with each new death, who was last seen walking down a road nearby the night-house of this dream, his hands rammed deep into his pockets, a look of uncomprehending pain seizing his face. And there is my father, Frank Sr., who died from the ravages and insults of cancer. Of all the family members, he is in these dreams the least, and when he is there, I end up feeling guilt over his presence: I am always happy to see him, it turns out, but nobody else is. That's because, in the dreams, as in life, there is the fear that my father will spread anger and ruin too far for his family to survive, that he will somehow find a way to kill those who have already been killed, who have already paid dearly for his legacy. When he appears, sometimes the point of the dream is to convince him that the only cure for all the bitterness, for all the bad blood, is for him to return to death. Lie down, Father, we say. Let us bury you again.

Finally, there is me. I watch my family in these dreams and seem always to feel apart from the fraternity—as if there is a struggle here for love and participation that, somehow, I always fail. And so I watch as my brothers come and go. I look out the windows and see them move in the darkness outside, through the bushes, across the yard, toward the driveway. I watch cars cross the railway tracks. I watch them come and take my brothers and deliver them back, and I know they are moving to and from underworlds that I cannot take part in, because for some reason I cannot leave this house.

Then, one night, years into these dreams, Gary tells me why I can never join my family in its comings and goings, why I am left alone sitting in the living room as they leave: It is because I have not yet entered death. I cannot follow them across the tracks, into the forest where their real lives take place, he says, until I die. He pulls a gun from his coat pocket. He lays it on my lap. There is a door across the room, and he moves toward it. Through the door, there is the night. I see the glimmer of the train tracks. Beyond them, my family. "See you in the darkness beyond," he says.

I do not hesitate. I pick the pistol up. I put its barrel in my mouth. I pull the trigger. I feel the back of my head erupt. It is a softer feeling than I expect. I feel my teeth fracture and disintegrate and pass in a gush of blood out of my mouth. I also feel my life pass out of my mouth, and in that instant I feel a collapse into nothingness. There is darkness, but there is no beyond. There is never any beyond, only the sudden, certain rush of extinction. I know that it is death I am feeling—that is,

I know this is how death must truly feel—and I know that this is where beyond ceases to be a possibility.

I have had this dream more than once, in various forms. I always wake at this point, my heart hammering hard, hurting for being torn back from the void that I know is the gateway to the refuge of my ruined family. Or is it the gateway to hell? Either way, I want back into the dream, but in those haunted hours of the night, there is no way back.

I HAVE A STORY TO TELL. IT IS A STORY OF MURDERS: murders of the flesh, and of the spirit; murders born of heartbreak, of hatred, of retribution. It is the story of where those murders begin, of how they take form and enter our actions, how they transform our lives, how their legacies spill into the world and the history around us. And it is a story of how the claims of violence and murder end—if, indeed, they ever end.

I know this story well, because I have been stuck inside it. I have lived with its causes and effects, its details and indelible lessons, my entire life. I know the dead in this story—I know why they made death for others, and why they sought it for themselves. And if I ever hope to leave this place, I must tell what I know.

So let me begin.

I AM THE BROTHER OF A MAN WHO MURDERED INNOCENT MEN. His name was Gary Gilmore, and he would end up as one of modern America's more epochal criminal figures. But it wasn't his crimes—the senseless murders of two young Mormon men on consecutive nights in July 1976—that won him his notoriety. Instead, what made Gary famous was his involvement in his own punishment. His murders took place not long after the United States Supreme Court had cleared the way for the renewal of capital punishment, and Utah—the place where he had murdered—had been among the first states to pass legislation restoring the death penalty. But practicing it was another matter. When Gary received his death sentence in the fall of 1977, nobody had been executed in America in more than a decade, and despite its new laws, the country still didn't have much taste for legal bloodshed. All that changed with Gary Gilmore.

On November 1, 1976, Gary refused his right to appeal his sentence and insisted that the state go ahead and meet the date it had set for his death. Immediately he hit a national nerve, and nearly every day and night for the next few months he made headline news. There were arguments, delays, and intrigues; there was even a love story. But through it all, Gary remained fierce and unswerving in his determination to die—he even tried his own hand at it twice—and he had put the State of Utah and death penalty advocates in a difficult, unexpected spot. He made them not just his allies, but he also transformed them into his servants: men who would kill at his bidding, to suit his own ideals of ruin and redemption. By insisting on his own execution—and in effect directing the legal machinery that would bring that execution about—Gary seemed to be saying: *There's really nothing you can do to punish me, because this is precisely what I want, this is my will. You will help me with my final murder.*

And the nation hated Gary; not for his crimes, but because, in his indomitable arrogance, he seemed to have figured out a method to win, a way to escape.

Many people, of course, already know this part of the story. It was major international news for several months in 1976 and 1977, and it was later the subject of a popular novel and television film, Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*. If you've read that book or seen the film, you know the story of Gary's last few months: the trusts he betrayed, the love he lost, the lives he destroyed, and the self-negation he sought. What is less generally known, and what has never been much documented, is the story of the *origins* of Gary's violence—the true history of my family and how its webwork of dark secrets and failed hopes helped create the legacy that, in part, became my brother's impetus to murder.

These parts of the story were never told because, quite simply, nobody would ever talk about them. During the last few weeks of Gary's life, Larry Schiller—who had secured the rights to Gary's life story and who would later conduct

most of the interviews for *The Executioner's Song*—tried to get Gary to talk openly about the realities of his childhood and family life. Schiller sensed that something horrible had happened in that past, but Gary insisted this was not the case, and he often met these questions with mockery or anger, even until the last hours of his life. Months later, Schiller and Norman Mailer would spend numerous hours interviewing my mother, Bessie Gilmore, trying to explore the same necessary territory: Had something happened in Gary's childhood that later turned him to the course of murder? Schiller and Mailer tried their best but, more often than not, my mother answered their inquiries with maddening riddles and outright avoidance. There were large, dark parts of the family's past that she would not deal with, and that she preferred to cloak in the guise of mystery. Something to do with my father: how he had lived his life and how he had treated his sons. Whatever happened in those long-ago days, neither Gary nor my mother would reveal it, and both of them went to their graves keeping a tight hold on their secrets. It was as if they would rather die than give up the past.

I also would not discuss the details of my family's past. In fact, I would spend the next fifteen years of my life trying my best to distance myself from my family and what I saw as its terrible history and luckless destiny. I used to tell myself that whatever ran in Gary's blood that turned him into a killer did not also run in my blood, and that whatever turned my family's hopes to wreckage would not also devastate my life. I was *different* from them, I knew. I would escape.

I now know better. To believe that Gary had absorbed all the family's dissolution, or that the worst of our rot had died with him that morning in Draper, Utah, was to miss the real nature of the legacy that had placed him before those rifles: what that heritage or patrimony was about, and where it had come from.

PART ONE

MORMON

GHOSTS



“[T]here are transgressors who, if they knew themselves, and the only condition upon which they can obtain forgiveness, would beg of their brethren to shed their blood, that the smoke thereof might ascend to God as an offering to appease the wrath that is kindled against them, and that the law might have its course.”

— BRIGHAM YOUNG,
Journal of Discourses

Even when the Mormons built ghosts, they built for the ages.

—WALLACE STEGNER,
Mormon Country

CHAPTER 1

BROTHERS



ONE BY ONE I HAD WATCHED THEM ALL DIE. First, my father. Then my brothers Gaylen and Gary. Finally my mother, a bitter and ravaged woman. In the end, there was just me, the youngest, and Frank, the oldest. Then one day, when the pain of the family's history had become too much to bear, Frank simply walked into a shadow world and could not be uncovered, no matter how hard I sought him. Or maybe I just didn't seek hard enough.

That was over a decade ago. In the time that followed I believed I was no longer tied to the wreckage that had been my family's spirit, and whatever devastations might come in my life at least now they would be my own. I told myself I was finally alone: free to pursue my own family dream.

One day, though, that dream dissolved into a nightmare. When that happened, I began to understand that I hadn't avoided my family's ruin after all. Indeed, it felt like our ruin might be endless and that the only way to stop it might be to stop the legacy itself—and the only way to do that was to crack open its god-awful secrets, if I could find them.

And so now I want to go back into my family—back into its stories, its myths, its memories, its inheritance. I want to climb back into the family story the same way I've always wanted to climb back into that dream about the house where we all grew up. Climb back in and find out what made the dream go bad, and what made it destroy so many lives.

It's as if the structure of my family's past has taken on the dimensions of a mystery for me. I want to see if, by examining our history, I can discover somewhere within it a key—a single event that might explain what produced so much loss and violence. Maybe if I could discover some answers, I might be able to bargain my way out of any further loss.

So back I go, afraid in part that I might never know the truth, afraid also that I might find out too much. I know this much: We all paid for something that had happened long before we were born, something that we were not allowed to know. In the end, perhaps it will remain a mystery that nobody may touch at the heart.

THE FAMILY I GREW UP IN was not the same family my brothers grew up in. They grew up in a family that was on the road constantly, never in the same place longer than a couple of months at best. They grew up in a family where they watched the father beat the mother regularly, battering her face until it was a mortified, blue knot. They grew up in a family where they were slapped and pummeled and belittled for paltry affronts. They grew up in a family where they had to unite in secret misadventures just to find common pleasures.

In the family I grew up in, my brothers were as much a part of its construction as my parents. They were part of what I had to experience, to learn from. They were part of what I had to overcome and shun. They gave me something to aspire to: the chance to escape their fates. In fact, one of the ways my family best served me was by teaching me that I did not want to stay bound to its values and its debts or to its traditions.

In any event, I grew up in a world so entirely different from that of my brothers, I may as well have grown up under another surname. Obviously, I should be thankful for those differences, but of course things never work quite that smoothly. The misery of my brothers' childhood is so distinct from the misery of my own childhood, it's almost impossible for me to feel delivered from their hell, anymore than I feel saved from World War Two merely because I didn't have to live through it.

You could find much of the truth about these two families—the family of my brothers and the family I grew up in—by flipping through the pages of our main photo albums. Those pages are made up almost entirely of pictures of my brothers, and in most of those photos my brothers appear together in one configuration or another. Pictures of Frankie and Gary as babies, holding each other's hands and smiling delightedly at the camera; pictures of them standing together, in their matching army and navy outfits during the war years, or in their matching slacks, with suspenders, white shirts, and wide ties, when the family lived in the deserts of Arizona. After Gaylen was born, it was pictures of the three of them. Three boys dressed in authentic cowboy gear, standing with gleaming toy guns in their hands, all trying to look ominous, like little brother outlaws. By the time you page through the books to the time of my childhood, you will find only a few photos of me with any of my other brothers—mostly as we were lined up single file on Christmas mornings in front of the tree, looking like heartsick convicts. Just as notably, there are only two or three pictures of me by myself in those main family albums, in contrast to the numerous solo portraits of my brothers.

These pictures make plain a certain truth: My brothers and I did not inhabit the same time and space. We did not know each other. We barely belonged together. I remember playing a bit with Gaylen when I was a child, because he was the one closest in age to me, and I remember Frank Jr. taking care of me, taking me to movies, looking after me, loving me. Contrary to my mother's memories, I don't recall doing much of anything with Gary until many years later, when we were both adults. For all of two or three days.

Mostly, I remember playing by myself, with my own toys. I liked guns and Western scenarios, just like my brothers—though they all forbade me to touch any of their fancy silver-plated pistols that I envied so much. But more than guns, I liked castles. I had a fine model set of King Arthur's castle, complete with a drawbridge and turrets. But I didn't like—in fact threw away—the cheap plastic figurines of knights that came with the package. I had seen a much nicer-looking set of metal knights and horses, in fearsome-looking action positions, made by a ritzy English company called Britains. They were hand-painted, they were gorgeous, and they were expensive, and I more or less made my mother buy them for me. If my brothers could have their pearl-handled six-guns, I could have my ornate knights. I loved placing those knights inside the castle walls, pulling up the drawbridge, keeping them in the fortress where no harm could come to them. I never let my brothers touch my cavaliers in armor—not that they wanted to.

IT'S POSSIBLE MY BROTHERS and I may have played together more than I recall, but only a few incidents involving the four of us stick out in my mind. One time, we were all in the backyard of our home in Portland, Oregon, and my brothers were tossing darts at a board they had hung on a tree. I loved watching them and I wanted to throw the darts too, but they weren't about to have a clumsy little kid cluttering up their sport. Of course, I persisted. Pouted, probably. Finally one of them—Gary, if I remember right—relented. "Okay," he said, "if you want to play darts, we'll play darts. Here's how we do it." He took me over and stood me in front of the target. "We see who can get their darts closest to *you*."

I should have run, but I didn't. I was glad to be included. Gary tossed the first dart, and it landed about six inches from my foot. Frank Jr. lobbed another, and it hit a couple inches closer. Gaylen tossed his, and it ended up maybe less than an inch from one of my feet. I was starting to feel less like I wanted to be included. The next dart—tossed by Gary—did the trick. It hit my right shoe, went through the top, through the toenail of my big toe, and stuck upright. My brothers looked panicked, and I started to cry. My mother came outside, saw the dart sticking out of my foot, the sheepish look on my brothers' faces, and was not pleased.

Later, I took a revenge of sorts. On a beautiful summer afternoon, Gary was sitting on our front porch with a couple of his girlfriends, and my brother Frank was there too, with a girl. Again, I wanted to be included, and again I was told to go away. I went to the side of the house, got one end of the long garden hose, dragged it to the front porch. I handed the nozzle to Gary, who was sweet-talking a honey-blond-haired young woman, and said: "Here, hold this. I'll be right back." He wasn't paying much attention to what I said. He sat there, holding the hose, talking to the girls.

I ran to the back and turned the hose faucet on full blast. As I'd hoped, the spray got Gary right in the face—*hard*—and soaked his clothes. I could hear his howl in the backyard, and I could hear the girls' laughter. I ran and hid in some brier bushes behind our house, and didn't come back for hours. When I did, Gary was still looking dour. "I'll never forgive you," he said.

I STUDY THOSE PICTURES of my brothers. I have more hard feelings about those photos than any other items in our family scrapbook. I look at the three of them, their guns pointed at the camera, and I can feel the world they shared together, the world they belonged in. It isn't the toughness of their stance—their romance as little boy outlaws—that calls out to me. Instead, what strikes me about these photos is how much my brothers smiled when they were together—how happy they seemed in that world of theirs. I don't remember people in my family smiling that much when I was a child, but then, there's a lot about those years I don't remember that well. Those smiles are like a mystery: They tell me there was a whole life my family lived that I still know nothing about—a life that, even to this day, nobody talks about.

For all the hell my brothers may have gone through, they were, at least for a time, real brothers. I look at the faces in those pictures, and I hate them. I don't want to, but I do. I hate them because I wasn't included in their picture. I hate them for not being a part of the family, no matter how horrible its costs.

CHAPTER 2

BLOODLINES



I TRY TO REMEMBER MY MOTHER. I shut my eyes and make myself recall her face from my earliest memories, when my father was gone much of the time, and my brothers had not yet drifted into lives of serial disaster. She smiled a lot in those days; every morning I awoke to a face that seemed to take delight at my awakening. Then I see her face from a few years later. It was different by then, full of hot anger, and sometimes alive with a dangerous insaneness—a face that could not help displaying the costs of a history of endless disappointments. I grew afraid of her face during that time—in part because my father told me I *should* be afraid of her—and that only made matters worse.

The truth is, Bessie Gilmore had plenty to be angry about. My father had taunted and berated and beat her for years, and my brothers had already turned our house into an address of neighborhood notoriety. But the anger began earlier than that. Much earlier.

In the end, my mother is the person I would spend the most time with in my family, and as I grew older I believed I identified with her experience of sorrow and loneliness, her sense of being a maddened outcast. But now, I reach this place where I must begin to reconstruct her story, and I am surprised to learn that perhaps I never really understood the depth of her pain or the sources of her damage at all. The rest of us in the family were men; I know well of our particular meannesses, our fitful and plundering moods. To a certain extent, I even understand the violence that ran through our lives—at least I understand how one can hate the world for its refusals, and how one can want to punish or destroy anything or anybody that might savor a happiness that we will never have. But when I try to imagine the reality of my mother's heart, and its endless hatred and fear and hurt, I grow afraid. I'm afraid that the

deepest parts of our hearts are inherited, and that my mother's was a heart of prophecy. In the end, I am only able to enter her memory when I imagine the damnation she felt in her youth and the bereavement she felt in her later years. It's as if I only understand the painful brackets of her life: the fright she grew up in, the fright she died in.

But I also know this: It was my mother who did her best to instill in me a sense that I might succeed in this world—in other words, that I might escape the tradition of our family—and it was she, perhaps more than any other person, who helped enable me to accomplish that dream. It is probably true, in fact, that she sacrificed some of the health and security of her later years so that I might realize that success. In turn, I learned how to forsake her, just as I learned how to forsake everybody else in my family. She wanted me to survive our family legacy, to be her best work, and yet in order to do that, I felt I had to leave her behind, and of course that hurt her. You cannot move into a new world and still stay bound to the demands of the old world, and I figured I was somebody who was always headed for new worlds.

But I wasn't the only one that my mother had hopes for. I suspect that she saw Gary as her work as well: Perhaps he was the one who might act out her rage for her, and avenge all the years of abuse and exclusion she had suffered during life in Utah. If ever a mother had a son who might pay back the legacies of her past, then that alliance was Bessie and Gary Gilmore. I remember my mother once telling me: "Gary was the criminal. I'd like you to be the lawyer. Your brothers will need a good and caring legal mind."

She said this without demand, but also utterly without humor or irony.

TO EXPLAIN WHY BESSIE GILMORE might have wanted to punish her kin and homeland, I should begin by telling a bit about the people and history she grew up with. My mother was born into the world of early twentieth-century Mormon Utah—a place that, in many respects, was dramatically different from the America that surrounded it. The Mormons had long possessed a strong and spectacular sense of otherness and unity: They saw themselves not only as God's modern chosen people, but also as a people whose faith and identity had been forged by a long and bloody history, and by outright banishment. They were a people apart—a people with its own myths and purposes, and with a history of astonishing violence.

My mother remembered hearing the legends of her people—their miracles and persecutions—throughout her childhood, and she passed these same tales along to me and my brothers during our childhoods. Chief among these stories were accounts of Mormonism's early struggle for survival—in particular the powerful and haunting story of the church's martyred founder Joseph Smith, Jr. Smith was a man with a remarkable imagination and vision—indeed, he was among the most innovative mythmakers in the nation's history—and he was also a man who managed to turn his most personal obsessions into a complex, epic mix of theology and folklore. Smith would build nearly his entire complex theology on what was essentially the dilemma of bloodline: how one might redeem the dreams and debts of one's heritage, or else perish as the result of unfinished curses. By the time this question reached my own family, it had become a matter of fatal consequence.

Smith's most lasting work, of course, was the Book of Mormon. First published in the late

1820s, the Book of Mormon has managed a staying power matched by only a handful of other American texts and novels from the same period, and for over a hundred and sixty years, has been a central factor in helping to establish Mormonism as one of the fastest growing religions in modern history. The origins of the book are as fascinating as they are controversial: Smith claimed that the book had been transcribed from a set of ancient golden plates that had been presented to him by an angel of God named Moroni. Upon these plates was written the history of America's ancient inhabitants and their dealings with the God of Israel—in effect, Smith was claiming to have discovered a long lost, sacred complement to the Bible's Old and New Testaments. The book had—and still has—a tremendous impact on the minds of many Americans, and it is not hard to understand its almost primal appeal. Once you strip away all the Book of Mormon's pretenses of scriptural import, what you have is nothing more nor less than a lusty tale of America's favorite subject: families and murder.

Written—or at least narrated by Smith to his transcribers—in a voice that sought to emulate the King James translation of the Bible, the Book of Mormon tells the one-thousand-year chronicle of a Jewish tribe, the family of a righteous man and prophet named Lehi, who took his kin and friends and fled Jerusalem in the year 600 B.C., during a time of the city's corruption. Under the direction of God, Lehi and his sons built a ship and sailed to a new land, where Lehi taught that the greatest purpose in life—the single path to redemption—was to win God's love by obeying his laws. But there had always been a rivalry in Lehi's tribe, and at the time of the old prophet's death, when he appointed one of his younger sons, Nephi, as the family's rightful patriarch and seer, the development was met with great resentment by the older sons, Laman and Lemuel. Soon, Laman and Lemuel swelled in their anger toward their father's legacy, as well as toward the piety of Nephi and his Old World god. They threatened to overtake their brother and his followers, until Nephi was forced to remove his tribe from his brothers' dynasty. God was enraged by Laman and Lemuel's rebellion, and because of their pride and blood-thirstiness he struck them with the curse of red skin and proclaimed that all their descendants would have to carry this blemish—and the knowledge of God's disfavor—as payment for their fathers' sins. Thus began the schism between the Nephites and the Lamanites, which formed the central historical dynamic for the Book of Mormon.

Over the next millennium, the posterity of these two families warred almost constantly, one side paying the cost for having descended from righteous blood, and the other doomed to living out the disobedient and murderous legacy of their evil forefathers. Later, in the book's most daring moments, Jesus Christ visits these peoples, following his crucifixion and resurrection, and administers to them the doctrines of salvation and the counsel of peace. But peace does not hold for long. Violence returns, and killing grows rampant. At the book's close, there is only the voice of one man, Moroni, the last survivor of the Nephites. He ruminates over the history of his fallen people and their last battles, which began in a city called Desolation. At the end of the battles, the bodies of the Nephites lay in thousands across the bloodied landscape of a dying nation, and the few children who survived were forced to eat the flesh of their fathers. Finally, there is nothing left for Moroni to do except wait for the Lamanites, who are in effect his estranged brothers, to find him and slay him.

Murder and ruin are written across the breadth of Joseph Smith's pre-American panorama, and because violence always demands an explanation or solution, the Book of Mormon

unexamined greatest revelation is a truly startling one: As Moroni looks at the blood-redened land around him, and as he reviews the full reach of the history that led to the mass extinction, it is plain that the force behind all these centuries of destruction is none other than God himself. It is God who brought these wandering people to an empty land, and it is God who established the legacies that could only lead to such awful obliteration. God is the hidden architect of all the killing at the heart of America's greatest mystery novel, the angry father who demands that countless offspring pay for his rules and honor, even at the cost of generations of endless ruin.

The single strongest instance of blasphemy in the Book of Mormon occurs when a charismatic atheist and Antichrist named Korihor stands before one of God's judges and kings and proclaims: "Ye say that this people is a guilty and a fallen people, because of the transgression of a parent. Behold, I say that a child is not guilty because of its parents."

For proclaiming such outrageous words, God strikes Korihor mute, and despite Korihor's full-hearted repentance, God will not allow him forgiveness. Korihor is left to wander among the people of the nation, begging for mercy and support, and the people take him and stamp upon him, until he lies dead under their feet.

THE BOOK OF MORMON'S VISION OF AMERICA as a land that had always known destruction would in effect become his most haunting work of prophecy. Violence and fear would follow Joseph Smith and his people until his own bloody death years later, and even after that, murder would have a way of staying in the Mormons' history.

Despite all this, thousands of men and women flocked to Smith and his beliefs. Joseph would eventually name his new religion the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and its followers, the Saints. But his enemies—drawing on their hatred of the Book of Mormon—called them the Mormons.

My mother's Mormon pedigree stretched back to these early times, along all the paths of her ancestry. Most of these men and women came to the American Mormon community from the poverty of England, on the promise that they were journeying to the new Promised Land. What they found instead was a land full of fear and violence. By the mid 1830s, the Mormons had already been forced from several settlements, including the large communities they had built in Kirtland, Ohio, and Independence, Missouri. Their farms had been burned, their men and children murdered, their women raped—sometimes under the direction of state militiamen. Much of the enmity was ascribed to what many Americans viewed as the Mormons' odd beliefs and troubling mode of community—the Saints were said to be practicing polygamous marriages (which turned out to be true), and believed in a system of plural deities and multiple heavens (which also turned out to be true). But what seemed to disturb—or stir—people most was the character of Joseph Smith himself. He was an alluring man, but also a proud and ambitious one. Speculation was rampant among politicians and newspapermen that Smith had a meticulous plan to conquer America's middle states and build a Mormon Empire, based on a religious government, with Smith at its head. By the 1840s, Smith had been tarred and feathered, shot at, jailed and threatened with military execution, and had been called, by many men, "the most dangerous man on the American frontier." One state governor—Lilburn Boggs, of Missouri—had even decreed that the Mormons had become

an official enemy, and should be driven from the land, or exterminated. The Mormons left and built a new city-state called Nauvoo, across the river in the western part of Illinois. Under Smith's direction, Nauvoo would become one of the largest and most wondrous cities in the Midwest—but ironically, that development only tended to make matters worse for Smith and his followers. The Mormons were already seen as a kingdom within a state—a accomplishment unparalleled in America's growth—and by 1844 the people of Illinois had come to fear Smith and his Mormons as the Missourians had. When it was rumored that Smith's personal bodyguard—a legendary Western gunfighter named Orrin Porter Rockwell—was responsible for shooting Missouri's former governor, Lilburn Boggs, in the back of the head (miraculously, Boggs lived), the dream of Midwestern empire was effectively over.

After a few more troubling incidents, Illinois exploded in rage at Smith, and Governor Thomas Ford insisted that the prophet turn himself over to civic authorities to stand trial. Smith surrendered himself to the authorities, and was held in jail—along with his brother Hyrum and a few other church leaders—in a small town called Carthage. There was no criminal charge at first, but soon one was formed: treason against the state—a crime punishable by death.

Governor Ford had guaranteed the Smiths' safety if they surrendered, but the militia assigned to protect them was the Carthage Greys—a troop that, on Joseph's appearance in the town, had assured him that they would see him dead before they would see him free again. On the late afternoon of June 27, 1844, a small force was guarding the Carthage Jail when a mob of a hundred men approached. The mob and the guardians were friends and part of the same militia, and so there was no real resistance offered the attackers. Several men entered the jail and rushed up the stairs to the room where Joseph and Hyrum were held. The mob members fired musket shots through the door into the room, and a bullet caught Hyrum in the face. Four more shots ripped through him before he fell to his brother's feet, dead. Joseph had a pistol which a friend had slipped him earlier. He fired all six bullets back through the door. Three of the shots wounded some attackers, slowing the assault long enough for him to rush to the window to escape. He swung one leg out, and when he looked down, he saw nothing but bayonets and rifles. According to most accounts, it was there, as Joseph Smith was perched on the moment where he could see the full cost of his vision, that bullets riddled him from the doorway and from the crowd below. He cried, "Oh Lord, my God!" and toppled from the window to the ground. The mob outside gathered around him, some of them kicking and jeering at him, until they were satisfied he would never rise again, and then they fled.

That's the story I have heard all my life about the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. There were other witnesses, though, who told a different story about Smith's death, and for many years after the event, I learned recently, it was their version that was widely accepted as the true one. According to the earlier account—which had been supported by Mormon witnesses and the later confession of a mob member—this is what happened in Joseph Smith's last living moments in Carthage:

He made it to the window, then two shots hit him and he fell outward, to the waiting mob. One of the men in the crowd picked Joseph up and propped him against a well curb, a few feet from the jail. A militia colonel ordered four men to shoot him. They stood about eight feet from Joseph, and at the same moment, they fired their bullets through his heart. Joseph

Smith fell on his face, and his blood poured into the land of the country whose secret history he had once tried to divine. He lay there for a long time alone, dying.

He was no blood relation, but I feel more kinship to Joseph Smith—the damnation he feared, and the long-coming doom that finally swallowed him—than I do any of my true forebears. I feel for him as a brother.

THE KILLING OF JOSEPH SMITH WAS MEANT TO END MORMONISM, but instead, it changed its course. Within a few months of the assassination the surviving church rallied around a new prophet and president, Brigham Young—a less visionary theologian than Smith, but a smarter leader and a more gifted autocrat. The Mormons remained in Nauvoo for two more years—long enough to make it temporarily the largest city in Illinois. But pressures for the Mormons to move continued and so did the mob assaults, and after Young heard a rumor that federal troops were preparing a campaign to destroy the Saints, he decided that the only way for his people to survive America was to leave it. In February 1846, Young and the Mormons began the long pilgrimage to find a new home beyond the nation's borders. Eighteen months later, they settled in the Great Salt Lake Basin, in a land that they called Deseret (taken from the Book of Mormon's term for the honey bee—which is to say, the industrious worker who knew how to work in a like-minded community). This new home was to be, in part, the fulfillment of Joseph Smith's dream of a Kingdom of God on earth—and, in fact, it became the only religious nation ever established within America's borders. In this millennial land called Deseret—later to be called Utah—the Mormons would be free from the fearful vigilante armies that had made them, along with the Cherokees, one of the only populations ever to be driven from the United States under the threat of extinction, and in this promised place, they would defend themselves from any oppressors who might follow them.

Shortly after settling in Salt Lake, Brigham Young sent out word that all Saints in any land who could make the journey should migrate to the Great Basin, and help the church establish and populate colonies for its long-awaited empire. This was the decree that brought my mother's final Mormon forebear, Francis Kerby, into the Utah Valley, where years later, according to one story, he would come face to face with a terrible and disillusioning reality.

Not long ago, I found a microfilmed copy of Francis Kerby's old handwritten journal (like so many Latter-Day Saints' chronicles, it has been preserved in the invaluable archives of the Mormon Family History Library, in Salt Lake City). Of all our ancestors, Joseph Kerby (who was my grandmother's grandfather, on her paternal side) left the most detailed personal record—at least, up to a certain time and place. Kerby was born in 1821, into an aristocratic family of devout, long-standing members of the Church of England, who resided on the Channel Islands, off the coast of France. In 1849, when he was twenty-eight years old, Francis and his wife, Mary LeCornu Kerby, heard the preachings of a Latter-Day Saint missionary, read the Book of Mormon, and converted to the Mormon religion. Kerby's parents were stunned and outraged, and though they never completely severed their ties with their son, they grew distant from his concerns and would later leave him and his children little or none of their wealth. Almost immediately, Kerby went on to a fairly stellar career in the British Mormon world, and within days of his conversion, he had accepted a church leader's suggestion and started keeping a journal of his daily and weekly activities. It is

document that is, at once, both tedious and fascinating to read. Like many Mormon journals, Kerby's diary—which was kept from 1849 to 1893—is brimming with mundane ecclesiastical detail, and not much else. If Francis Kerby ever had an argument with his wife, or ever had a row with a neighbor—or, for that matter, ever got sick, heard a good joke, or noted a passing moment of history—he did not record it in his journal. Instead, he related page after page of church activities, including dinners with distinguished Mormons and accounts of his attendance at various LDS functions.

On January 1, 1857, Francis Kerby and his wife and children sailed to America, and three years later they joined the last of the Mormons' handcart expeditions to Utah (the handcarters literally walked their way across America, pushing and carrying carts that held their possessions). After his arrival in Utah, Kerby was apparently never the same man. Whereas in England he had kept a meticulous and proud list of all his ecclesiastical activities—and, in fact, had held high rank among the church's U.K. clergy—after he got to Utah, he was less interested in keeping track of his life within the church, and seemingly less interested in church activity itself. Indeed, the final thirty-three years of his diary notation consists almost exclusively of remarks about marriages, births, and deaths. There are no longer passages in those last pages about his beliefs and devotions, as there had been during his English career.

My mother had a theory about what happened to Francis Kerby: She thought he had a crisis of faith. "He was never the same man after the Mountain Meadows Massacre happened," she once said. "He couldn't believe that the Mormons would have done such a thing, and after he learned the truth about it he never had the same heart for the church he had once loved."

THE MOUNTAIN MEADOWS MASSACRE HAD TAKEN PLACE IN 1857 —the same year that Francis Kerby had arrived in America—but the roots of the tragedy reach back into Mormonism's earlier years, when Joseph Smith began to conceive a theology that might prove as merciless and bloody as the history he had envisioned for the Book of Mormon. More particularly, the event's proper history probably began during the Nauvoo era, when Smith first promulgated a principle that was to become: known, infamously, as Blood Atonement. Aside from the practice of polygamy, no other Mormon teaching has proven as complex or controversial as Blood Atonement. In its most widely understood sense—and in Joseph Smith's original precept—the tenet runs like this: If you take a life, or commit any comparable ultimate sin, then your blood must be shed. Hanging or imprisonment would not suffice for punishment or restitution. The manner of death had to be one in which your blood spilled onto the ground as an apology to God.

In recent years, mindful of its historical image as a vengeful people, the Mormon Church has gone to pains to disavow this interpretation. The real principle of Blood Atonement, the modern theologians claim, is a matter of redemption, not vengeance. Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of the world by the shedding of his own blood; if you believed in Jesus as the Son of God, and if you followed his teachings and obeyed his laws, then you would be purged of sin through his blood. However, there are some sins that are so grave—and murder is one—that if you commit these deeds, you have placed yourself beyond the power of Christ's atonement.

The only hope for redeeming such sin is to have your own blood shed—and even that may not be enough to earn forgiveness in the next world. But for this form of Blood Atonement to be properly carried out, we must all wait for a better world when the civil and spiritual laws are administered by the same government, and such a time has not yet come.

That's the official account, but the legends of the West told a different story. According to some observers—including former governors and justices of the Utah territory, and a few confessors and witnesses—Blood Atonement was indeed practiced by the Mormons, and it was applied to a wider range of sins than simple murder. Some of the offending crimes that might merit death are not hard to imagine: There were numerous rumors in the mid to late 1800s about men who had strongly offended Brigham Young, or who had violated Mormon oaths of truth and secrecy, and ended up lying along some remote roadside, or buried in nameless graves, with bullets through their heads. But there were also other offenses that might invite death. Among them, according to some writers, were adultery, incest, whoredom, rape, thievery, hopeless mental illness (which in its more dramatic forms was sometimes read as a sign of demonic possession), and flagrant and persistent disobedience of one's parents. At midnight, the stories went, a committee of Mormon elders, dressed in black, would visit the offender at his home and would lead him or her to a freshly dug grave site. Some prayers would be offered as the condemned knelt by the grave, and then someone—perhaps the wronged husband or father, or a righteous church leader—would lean over and cut the offender's throat, holding him or her by the head, so that the dying person's blood would empty onto the ground.

Did any acts of Blood Atonement ever really occur in Mormon Utah? Church historians have denied the rumors for over a century now and, indeed, there are no proven cases of Mormon authorities ever having sanctioned any acts of execution or bloodletting under the church's auspices. But it is also true that many Danites—the Mormons' band of secret protectors, police, and avengers—were guilty of a sizable number of shootings and murders in the Utah area, without being tried or apparently even chastised for their deeds. Obviously, given the unscrutinized and theocratic rule that the Mormons enjoyed in large parts of the Utah territory during the early years of its settlement, it is possible that executions and assassinations may have been conducted with such ironclad and sacred secrecy that historians may never retrieve the truth. As Wallace Stegner wrote in *Mormon Country*: “[I]t would be a bad history to pretend that there were no holy murders in Utah ..., that there was no saving the souls of sinners by the shedding of blood ..., and that there were no mysterious disappearances of apostates and offensive Gentiles.”

The legends of Blood Atonement also served both a mythic and moral purpose. On one level, the spread of these stories illustrated two harsh facts. To the extent that the stories were spread by anti-Mormons, they illustrated how America regarded the Saints as demons who had turned their religion into a system of ritualistic outrages. To the extent that the stories were perpetuated by Mormons themselves, they demonstrated how the bitterness of their history had turned them into a hard people, and how that hardness and meanness had now spilled over into the land that they were settling. In addition, the rumors about Blood Atonement helped the Mormons keep their own people in line. My mother recalled hearing terror tales about old Utah's secret Danites and their midnight deeds for years. She also remembered that these fables were often told to children, in tones that implied that maybe

the Danites and their rites of Blood Atonement weren't altogether banished in early twentieth-century Utah.

But the Mountain Meadows Massacre was not a myth and it was not a rumor. It happened and its horror has been well-documented, even confessed to. Briefly, here is what took place.

In September 1857, a wagon train of Arkansas emigrants, known as the Baker-Fancher party, was making its way through southern Utah, en route to California. Unfortunately, they were journeying through the region shortly after the Mormons had received word that federal troops were marching their way. The intent of these troops, Brigham Young had decided, was hostile—he had long been expecting a showdown between the Saints and the nation that had expelled them—and as a defense strategy, Young had enlisted several of the local Indian tribes to help repel the U.S. invasion.

When the Baker-Fancher party arrived at the southern outpost of Cedar City, the Mormons in the region viewed the group with frightened suspicion: Perhaps the emigrants were, in fact, an advance party for the U.S. troops. It hardly helped matters when a few of the emigrants—later dubbed the “Missouri Wildcatters”—boasted that they had been among the militiamen who had slaughtered Joseph Smith a few years before and that, as soon as they reached California, they would raise forces to come back and help exterminate the surviving Utah Saints. The Mormons that these Missourians chose to infuriate were Mormons who remembered well what it was like to be driven from their homes by violent mobs, and they decided that these people would not leave their land to bring back new armies to kill them. They held a meeting and discussed whether to treat the emigrants—who were resting for a few days at a watering hole known as the Mountain Meadows—as enemies of war. The Mormons dispatched a messenger to Brigham Young in Salt Lake City, asking his counsel. Young replied that these visitors were definitely *not* a part of the federal campaign, and that they should be allowed to pass unharmed. By the time the messenger arrived back in Cedar City a few days later, nearly the entire Baker-Fancher party had been slaughtered. When Brigham Young heard about the massacre, he wept over the realization that his people could commit such an atrocity.

The news of the Mountain Meadows Massacre spread rapidly, and soon became a chief weapon in the U.S. war against the Mormons. Finally, eighteen years after the event, the man who had been reported to have been the commander of the slaughter—a prominent Mormon named John D. Lee, also a famed member of the Danites—was arrested, and in the course of two trials, Utah and the nation began to get a better picture of what had really happened at Mountain Meadows. Lee had been the area's Indian agent at the time, and according to the accounts of local tribesmen, he had approached them with reports that the Baker-Fancher group was poisoning the Indians' stock and planning greater violence. Lee himself testified that it was the Indians who had felt injured by the actions of the emigrants, and that they had threatened Lee that if he did not help deliver the wagon train party to the Indians' justice, then the Mormons would be endangered as a result. In any event, shortly after the messenger had left to consult Brigham Young, a group of Mormons and Indians carried out an attack on the Baker-Fancher party. The battle went on for days, and as a way of ending it, Lee told the tribesmen that if they would allow the women and children to escape unharmed, the Mormons would allow the slaughter of the migrant men. The Indians, Lee said, agreed, and

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