

Reflections of a “Polyg Kid”

by Terry Block

“So I hear you guys are polyg kids,” Paul says as he sits down. I’d never heard it abbreviated, and it sounds almost funny. “Pole-Igg-Kids.”

Paul is a work acquaintance of my brother and has a particular last name. We live in a large city, but there are two last names that, for those in the know, indicate a possible link to the two large polygamous families who populated much of the rural areas north of us. These families practice a form of fundamentalist Mormonism that still condones multiple wives (“spiritual wives” if not legal ones). Paul has one of the last names. I have the other.

“A polyg kid.’ Hmm. I’ve never thought of myself that way, really,” I said.

We are enjoying after-dinner coffee with some family and friends at my brother’s new house, and my mother overhears the conversation starting. She makes a face as she leaves the room — it is not a pleasant topic for her, and she doesn’t want anyone knowing her business. It is for her benefit that I am writing this under a false name and not specifying where we live. But Paul seems to know some of our history already.

“I’m a polyg kid too. Did you grow up with multiple moms? The whole sister-wife thing?” he asks.

“No,” I answer. Though I am trying to be polite, the tone of my ‘no’ sounded like how I might answer someone if they asked whether I had bleeding hemorrhoids.

Paul asked, “Ah, then I’m guessing your dad took a lot of ‘business trips’ when you were growing up, right?”

“Well, yes, he sure did,” I smile. My initial surprise wore off quickly. Paul knew what he was talking about.

“And you guys have how many siblings?” he asks.

“Four full ones. Counting half-siblings it’s thirty-four, possibly thirty-five. I’ve heard different numbers,” I answer honestly.

Paul looked impressed.

“Dad was a charismatic guy,” my brother adds.

“Yeah, you’re polyg kids.” Paul chuckles.

I am usually not so open about how many siblings I have, especially not with someone I’ve just met. But circumstances are unique. My brother knows this fellow and has obviously told him some things. There is a queer sort of instant camaraderie between the three of us, like members of a rare subset who have managed to find each other in the wild. We had given the “secret handshake,” so to speak. There was no reason for any of us to disavow the facts.

It turns out that Paul grew up in a “compound” of sorts — not like the enormous fortresses one sees on news reports from time to time, but rather a few mobile homes parked near one another and sharing a common yard. He came from a relatively small Mormon family, only eight kids altogether.

The location sounded remarkably similar to a place I remembered visiting. I had foggy pictures in my head of a run-down group of trailers with a fenced area that housed a few goats and a concrete slab that served as a very tiny, cracked basketball court. I barely remembered the older kids I played with there — kids I only found out years later were my half-siblings.

Our exposure to that kind of compound life was brief and

confusing, as was my parents’ marriage. Paul, on the other hand, had grown up in the thick of a situation like that. He didn’t just visit the compound, he lived there. He said one of his father’s wives eventually had a nervous breakdown, and the other two (including his mother) left soon after. No one had been happy. I listened, rapt, to Paul’s tale of how stressful such a family situation can be for all members involved.

So I suppose I was at a (relative) advantage in my upbringing. I was not raised to think such an arrangement was normal, nor was I surrounded by it 24/7. And when my father did talk of his fundamentalist Mormon views, they stood out as utter bullshit to me even as a young child. I recall how he lectured us on the rare moments we spent time with him. He told me dinosaurs never existed; those bones had been placed in the ground by Satan, to “fool people.”

I remember realizing, at age 7 or 8, “Holy cow, I know more than my dad.” Egotistical thought for a kid, yes, but I LOVED dinosaurs.

I would pore through a bunch of dinosaur books at my school library. And I realized right there that I knew more about them, and could speak with more authority on dinosaurs, than the old man driving the car. Of course, I also knew the old man driving the car had a belt and used it often. Part of being a good skeptic is realizing when it’s not beneficial to argue your point.



The four of us came late in my father’s life, and my mother either wasn’t aware of his vast array of other progeny or she only learned about it in bits and pieces. Either way, she kicked him out once she discovered his old habits weren’t over with. I’ve since discovered there are a couple of half-siblings exactly the age of me and my brother, so my father definitely hadn’t “turned monogamous” even for that brief span of years he was with her. The almighty commanded him to go forth and multiply, and multiply he did. His belief system enabled his predatory side to flourish, a story all too common in religious sects.

I’ve heard many ex-Catholics and ex-Jews complain that their religion burdens people with unnecessary guilt, but my biggest complaint against this brand of Mormonism is that it removes guilt — guilt that should, by rights, be present in any man who fathers a huge number of children he cannot support financially, emotionally, or otherwise. Such guilt was apparently removed from our father’s psyche, replaced with a heavenly mandate and an absolute certainty that some apocalypse was surely around the corner. He was never too involved as a parent, but in my early childhood he got me comfortable with riding horses and signed me and my brothers up for archery lessons at a local recreational center. We would need to be familiar with a bow and arrow, he told us, if we were going to survive the End Times, when civiliza-

tion would stop evolving and return to a primitive state. We nodded our little heads and all had the same thought: “Blah, blah, blah, hellfire, blah. Wait — we get archery lessons? COOL!”

My mother was raised Catholic, which my father brought up on occasion in order to assert that she would be purged in fire as the Earth burned and we might burn with her if we weren’t careful. I remember asking once, “If Catholics are so bad, why did you marry one?” He was quiet for a while then changed the subject. Perhaps it was her temperament, or perhaps it was her experiences with my father, but mom grew out of any sort of religion pretty quickly. She dressed us kids up and hauled us to a few Catholic masses when my grandmother visited. The masses were somber and pretty and had plenty of candles and stained glass and incense, but we saw it as a different flavor of the same bullshit.

Not that my mother ever called it bullshit, not outright. While she had (and still has) definite, outspoken opinions on many things, she always answered her children’s religious questions with a variation of “I don’t know, what do you think?” She would also say, “Why do you think that?” My mother answered me this way when I asked if Santa was real, and she answered the same way when I asked if God was real. I had a harder time letting go of Santa and the Easter Bunny, really, as each year there was real, tangible evidence that they had visited our home.

The idea of God seemed way more far-fetched than those two characters. With that simple act of asking me what I thought and why, my mother shut down a whole world of authority figures and opened up the gates to real, honest inquiry. Not surprisingly, all of us became atheists pretty early. I went on to study about religions, and always asked questions, but we all grew into people who never took “because I said so” as a rationale for anything.

I asked my father questions, too, as I got a little older. We didn’t see him much, but there were times. And, during one of those times, I asked him how many children he had, exactly. He puffed up and rattled off a list of names — it took him a while, and his memory wasn’t perfect. But he clearly took pride in how many there were, like children were a high score on some video game. He was proud, and I was mortified.

With each new name, the 13-year-old me wilted a bit more, embarrassed to be connected to such a long and sordid tale of fecundity. Though I had vague memories of visits when I was four or five, I hadn’t really met these siblings, so they didn’t have any personal meaning to me. I just knew that my father’s sexual history somehow meant we were “different” from other kids. And different is the last thing a 13-year-old girl wants to be. I never told anyone how many half-siblings I had. I didn’t remember the names, and as time went on we had less and less to do with my father. His rambling Mormon rhetoric still bubbled up whenever he was around. We heard about why blacks were inferior, why women should *never* be educated, and why he was special because he could trace his lineage to Joseph Smith.

But my father’s voice became even less influential, if that was possible, as he entered the ranks of “deadbeat dad.” Who are kids likely to trust more? The skeptic ex-Catholic parent who works a ton of odd jobs and makes sure they are fed, educated, and have a place to live even if it’s low-income housing — or the guy who drops by every now and then, only to insult the hard-working parent and tell the kids that they

will soon burn in a cleansing fire when Earth is scorched by a vengeful God? The critical thinking skills our mother had vaccinated us with at an early age prevented us from ever truly fearing his prophecies. Dad talked his crazy talk, we shrugged, tried our best to extract some grocery money out of him, and that was that.

Though the fiery apocalypse my father warned of still hasn’t happened, some of those half siblings have popped up. My mother and I ran into a woman at a restaurant who turned out to be a half-sister.

One day I got an email saying “I’m your long lost brother, we share a father, and I’m guessing this isn’t the first time you’ve heard that?”

A gentleman in his 40s who was browsing at a computer store looked at my brother’s name badge and said, “Young man, is so-and-so your father?”

My brother said yes, and the fellow laughed and said, “Guess what, kiddo, he’s my dad too! Any family discount?”

Another day a phone call came over my business line, from a man almost thirty years my senior, saying he was the oldest of the very first litter. These encounters were always friendly, if awkward. I learned dribs and drabs from these moments of contact. All of my father’s children grew to resent him, and most thought he was mentally unbalanced at best, criminally pathological at worst. While I remember him as being quick to pull out the belt, I found out he had abused some of these earlier kids quite brutally. None of them had any sort of parent-child relationship with the man now. Some had moved far away, others stayed in the metropolitan area and had families of their own.

I found out from a half-brother that a cousin of mine had worked at my store the previous year. She hadn’t been a great employee, however, and had disappeared without either of us ever realizing we were kin. My other brother discovered that one of his interns was in fact his nephew, and they had a good laugh (especially as the nephew shared that he, his mother, and all her full siblings ended up atheists too).

If these moments — so many of them — seem like wild coincidences, think again. Chances of running into a relative rise exponentially when you consider that my father had a slew of brothers who also practiced polygamy and had healthy sperm counts. Most of the people leaving the rural areas and that particular lifestyle settle in this city. You can imagine the pitfalls of having that many people who share your chromosomes. All of us were extra careful to discreetly vet anyone we dated, asking just the right small-talk questions to make sure we could verify lineage beforehand. In fact, my husband bears a slight physical resemblance to my brothers — so when I first introduced him around as my new boyfriend, all three of my siblings pulled me aside, separately, and implored me with some variation of “You are absolutely sure we aren’t related to this guy, right?” And yes, I’d done my homework first, of course.

None of us kept in touch with our father, and so little moments of connection like these were seeming more and more like an anthropological dig, where we learned bits and pieces of a bygone era — a twisted, superstition-filled era that is hopefully dying off as young members of the community reject the dogma under which they are indoctrinated. And now, as I sit drinking coffee with Paul, this work acquaintance of my brother’s, this fellow polyg kid, I am learning more.

As we go through names, I find out Paul's elder half-brother had married one of my elder half-sisters. I'd never met her, but Paul says she's very nice and looks like an older version of me. He asks if I want to meet her, and takes out his phone to look through his numbers. I wave him off, saying it's all right. I feel no need to connect, and I don't wish to complicate her life either. He says both she and her husband renounced polygamy and the "old ways of the church" long ago. None of the children in Paul's immediate family had followed their parents' footsteps either. This gives me hope.

Perhaps in this modern day and age, it just isn't as easy to brainwash children into a backward way of life dictated by religious authoritarianism.

"I'm glad to hear none of your siblings have continued in that lifestyle," I say to Paul. "Lifestyle isn't the word I want. Cult is the word. It's really a cult."

"It is a damn cult, absolutely," Paul states as he nods his head in agreement.

Paul continues, "We saw through it pretty quickly as adults. It was just so plainly wrong. I can't see how any-one would fall for some of that ridiculous garbage. Besides, I've found so much peace with my new way of thinking."

Paul smiles at me with bright, wide eyes and says, in all seriousness, "My wife and I are scientologists now."

To my credit, I managed to keep the coffee from coming out of my nose.

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