

1988 Brookie and D.K. Brown Contest Second Place Winner

MONA'S FAMILY

By Lewis Horne

I

IT TAKES TIME AND PERSUASION TO SETTLE BIG VON IN THE chair on the sunny lawn. He might be the grandpa, he says, but he isn't so decrepit he needs to sit. Why should he want his picture taken anyway? Both Anson and Travis, his two sons, stand to the side. The grandkids, one of whom carried the arrow-back chair from the kitchen, work on the man. They laugh at his growling.

"I'll get me a lasso if he runs," Anson calls out.

As they wait, Travis slips his arm around Lynette's waist. She tosses back her hair with a quick movement of her head. She's wearing dark glasses, his trim wife. Nothing shows of the crying jag last night, that left him feeling so empty-handed with helplessness.

"C'mon, Grandpa. We've got Travis and Lynette here this time. How soon can we snap the whole family again? Not ever, I bet."

Big Von grumbles something about his funeral. That would be a good time, he says. Shouldn't be long, not the way things go. Be digging his grave, he figures, before he needs a new pair of jeans.

Lynette does not stiffen. But Travis doesn't know whether he should expect her to react to what Von says or not. Was it fear last night? Uncertainty?

"Grandpa! We want the whole family. Now."

He knows Lynette thinks of her weeping. But how much and how far beyond it has she gone since last night? Too often in his life Travis knows little of what he should do about those he feels responsible for. Too often he feels he should know more—as husband, as father, as church leader until a few months back, as a son right now with his mule-headed father. The way Lynette cried in bed. He wants to growl, "C'mon, Von, let's take this goddam picture." Without looking, he can tally the members of the group gathered in the front yard of the old home. His family. Anson's. And Felice—the frail woman who's a stranger to him still. He can count who is not here, too. Mona—who was his mother and Anson's. Shirl—who took her place.

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Big Von squints at the sun. Then he turns to Felice. "You going to stand for this masterpiece, too?"

"If you want me. It's your family, Von."

"My family?" he says. He glances at Travis, then Anson. Travis knows what he's thinking. But Travis never knew Mona. So he doesn't know what his father sees with his blurred vision as he looks toward the kitchen chair on the lawn.

SHORTLY before Travis Kipper was released as president of the Farewell Branch, Lynette underwent a mastectomy. That started it. Brought him to thinking not only of Lynette as he stands waiting but of Mona, too.

The surgery frightened them both. Articulate and open people, he and Lynette discussed with Bill Scriver the emotional problems a person might expect. Bill was head gynecologist at University Hospital and—as a Mormon—a member of the branch Travis presided over. They read articles and books, attended a couple of discussion groups. The Sunday before surgery, Travis administered to Lynette with the assistance of his two counselors and one of their home teachers. He felt better, though not as assured in spirit as he would like, after the laying on of hands. Lynette professed comfort, and they both blinked moist eyes. Following surgery, Bill Scriver told them there were no complications. Lynette wore a padded brassiere. Both she and Travis spoke with frankness about her scar, Travis less concerned about her removed breast than about Lynette's feelings concerning it. If he were expected to feel squeamish, repulsed, or less ardent, he was one of the odd ones. He sometimes felt Lynette pushed her chin-up attitude a bit, and by some quiet show of affection, tried to suggest she needn't do it for him.

"I've never been one of the busty ones," she might say as she performed her recuperative exercises, "not even when I nursed the boys."

As if to suggest the loss wasn't that noticeable anyway.

In passion, he might kiss the scar as though to show that as a part of her it was something he could accept and love. Sometimes on a Sunday after he'd been at church all day, checking the affairs of the branch—financial, social, spiritual, hearing the worries of the members who wanted to talk with him,



DANA JACQUES

amazed at the plight of some, carrying others through to some kind of resolution—he would go home to his tall willowy wife waiting in their dark bed.

When university started, Lynette continued to drive three times a week to the small town fifteen miles away to teach her first year German classes. Sometimes in winter, the road would ice. Seldom did she miss a day. In his office at the chemical plant, Travis would look out at the clear sky signaling bitter sub-zero cold or at the gray clouds heavy with ready snow, or he'd look out on falling snow, gentle or wind-blown, and wonder at the storm sweeping the state highway, thinking of his wife with her long hair pulled back to show her profile, bony as a model's, against the winter landscape. He would think of her in the Honda with Vivaldi or Bach or their Book of Mormon tapes, until she called to let him know she was safely home over the two-lane rolling highway. He tried to get her to join a carpool of others who lived in Farewell and worked at the university. But she wanted to leave campus when she was ready, she said, didn't want to depend on someone else. "I like to be home when the boys get home from school"—though sometimes she had barely time to drop her books and remove her coat in the old frame house before their two sons bounded up the driveway lined with tall spruce.

Still, Travis and Lynette both knew of women who had

undergone mastectomies only to succumb wrenchingly a few years later. Those cases Travis did not mention, though they'd both acknowledged after surgery that they wouldn't feel sure—not feel comfortable—for a few years yet. Nor should they. It would be foolish to wax too sanguine. For that reason, Travis asked to be released as branch president. Since the area was going to be made into a stake and their branch turned into a ward, Travis thought he should speak up before his name was discussed for continuing as bishop. So when the General Authority came through, Travis was released and set apart as the stake clerk, a calling much less greedy of energy and hours.

"Seven years is a hell of a long time to hold a job these days," he told Lynette.

"You were a good branch president," she assured him, ignoring his cussing for she was acquainted with his father and brother and stepmother, his rowdy genial upbringing, and she knew he could be discreet. What Mormon was perfect? he asked her years ago when she chided him, a returned missionary.

But to some extent he felt like a man retired. He spent a session with Clair Morgan, the new bishop, to fill him in on the running of the ward and the circumstances of its members. "Sure a lot of people with problems," Bishop Morgan said, "mighty big problems." Travis smiled and nodded, and when he went home that night sat on the couch beside Lynette, feel-

ing as horny as he ever had when they were courting. But the lifting away of other people's problems, the hours of meetings, the reflection he gave to them—and they did seem to lift away as though, like the spirit, they had been transferred with his authority—left him feeling light and adrift. He certainly remained busy. His job in the lab gobbled more time now that he had it to give. He certainly had enough to do at home. The two boys—Travis Von Jr. and Mike—welcomed his help with their schoolwork. But what bothered was an emptiness—as though with his calling he'd worn a mantle of some kind, blessing him, pumping his spirit as though a meadow had burst into flower. He'd not always been aware of it. He grumbled and cussed, scolded the boys, complained about the work. But now that it had been handed on to Clair Morgan, he felt its loss. An emptiness. The meadow had been cut—perhaps harvested. He felt, sometimes, used up.

Lynette, too.

As the trauma of her surgery settled into the day by day, as she pressed at night against his lanky frame, the sense of what she was—a woman mutilated—seemed to let out from somewhere deep within, like a long expiring sigh, some of the strength she'd been depending on.

The phrase was hers, she looking at herself in the bathroom mirror as he watched from the bed. "I never felt it so much before, how mutilated I look. A woman mutilated."

He protested. But he was tired. Shocked as he was at her statement, anguished as he felt, his sympathy did not focus firmly enough to reflect the fullness of his concern. Nerves, mind—they had loosened in weariness to a kind of transparency.

Nevertheless, he rose to stand behind her, looking at his own long face above hers in the bathroom mirror, his bony fingers on her bare shoulders. He found nothing new to say, nothing with which to register anew his affection. She touched one of his hands with hers and twisted her thin mouth ruefully. She understood his feeling. But still, she said again, looking at his dark eyes and his bushy dark hair beside her blonde hair that fell straight and shining past her shoulders, said again, "A mutilated woman." Both pairs of eyes, his and hers, fell to the scar and the smooth sloping breast, and she lifted her eyebrows, trying to register a kind of irony. What worried Travis was less that effort than what her face might show in the dark when she was supposed to be asleep or he in his weariness slept.

"If I knew!" she said one evening when the boys had left for a ballgame and they sat at the uncleared dinner table.

"Honey, you can't think about it that way. You've got to keep going just like—like always."

"I am 'going,'" she said. "Everyday. I'm not afraid. I just wish I knew. Whether it was worth it to keep going."

"I know it's easy for me to say. But not all that easy."

"I try not to show the boys."

"I want you to show me." He touched the pad of her index finger with his. "We're 'interinanimated,'" he said, going back to the time they met at Brigham Young University and their English class was reading John Donne, he a returned missionary and a veteran of the Korean War, though he'd never been

in Korea, and she a Utah girl from a large Salt Lake City family two years out of high school.

That evening they decided to take a trip west—together. For the past few years, they'd been going separately, she to Salt Lake to see her numerous relatives and many friends, he to Arizona to see his brother Anson and his family and his father, Big Von, who lived with them. He'd not been for the last three years, nervous about leaving his responsibilities for the branch. Nor had they taken the boys since they were little, thinking the distance too great for driving, the expense too costly for flying.

"We'll see Anson and Big Von first," said Travis, "and then come up through Salt Lake so the boys can get acquainted with that flock of cousins. Soon as school's out. I've got vacation time gathered."

"I can hardly wait," she said.

TRYING to elude his grandkids, avoid having his picture snapped, Big Von takes Felice's arm. He's treated her throughout her stay as though a cuss word or any word too loudly spoken might blow her feet from under her. But unaccustomed to quiet talk, he sounds when he speaks to her as though he's grumbling, sharing with her a special irritation.

Big Von tells her, "They should get you a chair, too, Felice. Better yet, you can sit and I'll stand."

"Oh, no." She tries to pull free. "It's not my family."

"You think I'm going to claim these two?" He glances at Anson and Travis. "Couple of no-account drifters—"

Felice laughs.

"They're not just your boys, Von."

He grunts.

She adds, "I think Mona would be proud. I know she would."

"Travis doesn't have a picture of you and Mona together," says Lynette. She speaks out suddenly. Her voice is normally low, but now it's louder than usual, even a bit gravelly with restrained earnestness. She lowers her sunglasses a moment. "Do you realize that, Von? Not the two of you together."

"Now, c'mon, you got pictures of your mother, Travis. I give them to you myself."

"But not you and Mona together." Ever since her surgery, but more sharply after last night, Lynette has somehow brought Mona closer to him than she's ever been, a dark-eyed and thin-faced presence, closer and at the same time farther away, something missed, something left behind that a person can no longer go back and recover. How does Von think of his first wife? How does he feel about his loss after so many years, even with Shirly?

"No picture of you and Mama together," he tells Von.

"Then you got to be in the picture, Felice."

"I'll stand with Travis and Lynette."

II

THEY took five days to drive west, the back of the sta-

tion wagon piled with tent, sleeping bags, clothes. They cut south to the turnpike, passed Cleveland and Toledo, turned down through Indianapolis and across Illinois and Missouri to Oklahoma until some of the magic western names appeared—Amarillo, Tucumcari, Albuquerque, Gallup, Holbrook, Globe. On the car radio, they followed the news of the Falklands. Two nights they camped. Two they slept in a motel with a swimming pool, and on the fifth they arrived.

Anson had written: *Better bring sleeping bags for the boys. Hetty's still living at home and Lannie will be back from the Y by then. I'm trying to get Cass down from Flagstaff with her family for a day and maybe Edie and hers from Las Vegas. Big Von fancies a picnic on the front lawn. Sue's a real gardener and keeps the yard beautiful. She's still Big Von's sweetie, I think, coming at the hind end after five girls and being a straggler at that. Sue knows lots of new piano pieces since you last saw her. She likes her teacher at the university though it's a chore sometimes driving her over.* His brother was not a bookish or writing sort, but he and Travis wrote each other once a month, Travis hammering his letter out on a manual typewriter, Anson writing in a half-printed script of surprising neatness, surprising because Anson—more than he—had inherited Big Von's unbridled voice and gestures.

Both showed themselves, brash as spangles, when he and Lynette drove up the driveway. Travis barely straightened his legs before Anson shoved out the back door and across the new lawn, setting up a squawk among the chickens. "Travis, you son of a gun." They came to a draw on the handshake, each grimacing as the other squeezed, free hand on the opposite shoulder. Anson made a mock gesture of pain as though each of Travis's grinning boys bruised his knuckles. Then Lynette. Some people were discomfited by her calm. Even now, after all the hours of driving, scarcely a hair out of place. But not Anson. He grabbed her around the waist in a bearhug that lifted her off the ground. As he whirled in the driveway, her hair winged free, head tipped back in a laugh of white teeth and sunshine that made Travis's heart lift.

Mia was quieter than her husband, her smile as warm, as she kissed the cheek of each person. She was a bit heavier—this dark-complexioned, dark-haired Mormon girl from Colonia Juarez—than when Travis last saw her, and she was favoring one leg slightly as she walked. Sue, the youngest, was twelve years old, dark and lovely, thin and willowy.

"Where's Big Von?" Travis asked. "He still milk the cow?"

"Sure thing. And Sue still helps him or he'd never find it, don't you, honey? He's got a surprise for you, Travis."

Hearing the spring on the back door squeak, Travis expected his father's holler, "Travis, where the hell are you?"

That was when Travis first saw Felice.

His father rounded the honeysuckle vines, a stocky man just short of six feet with brush-cut gray hair and close-cropped beard. He held the elbow of a small older woman. Von put on the likeness of an escort, though Travis knew that the man, "legally blind," did not move securely anymore.

Travis's first thought was that Big Von was going to marry again—after twice being a widower. First, Travis's mother, who

died giving birth to him. Then Shirl, who lay in the cemetery beside his mother.

But as Felice stood before him, left shoulder a bit higher than the other, he knew from the way the two of them smiled that marriage had nothing to do with the surprise.

Big Von had to explain who she was.

"Your mama's big sister, Travis."

Travis repeated her name with something like reverence as he looked at her dark eyes, the gray hair, touched in a beauty parlor, brushed to either side of her bony face, the thin-edged line softened by the smooth sweep of flesh from cheekbone to chin. All were features he'd noticed in snapshots of his mother. A surprise. Confusion. For staring at the woman whose eyes began to mist, he could not bring the two—mother and sister—together. It was she, Felice, who took each of his hands in hers. He bent forward and brushed her cheek as though fearful of touching. Gesturing Lynette and the boys over, he introduced them.

"What do you think?" asked Big Von. "Does he look like Mona?"

"Not the way Anson did when they were children—the photographs you showed me. Now they both look too much like themselves."

Would his mother have had the same slow and precise—even over-precise—manner of speaking? he wondered. Would the age that didn't show in the face show similarly in the roughened texture of the skin on the neck and at the base of her neck? Would she dress in clothes so highly in fashion as this living sister?

As much as he swam with the dizziness of surprise, pleased that Big Von was so satisfied with himself, Travis wished he'd been warned. He wished he could have prepared himself—so he didn't feel so exposed, so he didn't almost pull back when the woman slipped her arm around his waist as they all moved into the house—she, Travis was surprised to notice, with a stiffness Big Von's awkwardness must have masked, Mia with her slight limp, Lynette with a squeeze of his hand before she stepped back between their own two boys.

"You see," said Von, "I ain't heard from Felice since a bit after Mona—after your mama died. She was here for the funeral, but then you got a job—didn't you, Felice?—and now she's been the vice president of a telephone company."

"It was a small rural company, Von. I'm retired now."

"Well, hell, big or small, it's still vice president, isn't it?"

They sat in the living room. Two lamps were glowing. Sue had played the first movement of the Italian Concerto for them, Big Von proclaiming it one of his favorite pieces.

"I knew Mama had a sister," said Travis, "but I never thought much—"

"I did nothing to remind you," said Felice. "I've been alone quite a while now—and none of our family was what you could call 'well' people. I'm very easily frightened."

"And you a vice president," said Von.

"That's why I'm here. I got frightened. No husband anymore. No children. I was afraid to have children—especially after Mona."

But what frightened. . . It isn't very easy for a person thinking—knowing it's only you left. Without a family. I started to wonder after all these years about Mona's family. I was afraid to have children, you see. My husband wanted them. Me, too. But after Mona—I was afraid."

Von assured her they'd have been happy to see her anytime. When she stopped writing, he didn't know how. . . He'd thought of her, too. "But we had so many worries, me and the boys—"

"Von, you always scared me. I never thought I'd see forty. Maybe I got some gumption from our father. I was a funny woman getting a business degree in those days. Papa was an agent on the reservation for years before he saw Mama. I remember him as a much older man. You can't always trust a child's memory for that sort of thing, but I've pictures to prove it."

"You remember when me and Mona married?" said Von.
"Oh, yes. I went with you."

Felice's smile was slightly drawn as though more than just her memory was a part of it. Anson paused in stroking and massaging Mia's leg as she rested it in his lap, and Travis felt Lynette's weight bear on his shoulder as she sat beside him.

"It was July, wasn't it," she said, affirming the memory, "and one of the hottest days driving across the desert to the courthouse. Your Model-A started steaming, you remember, and I was right at the beginning of an awful summer cold, so I was in no mood to go into the courthouse, not after you found some shade to park under, not unless you were going for sure to do it."

"We went in," said Von, "to find out what we needed to do."

"And when they came out," said Felice with a little laugh, "they were married. Just like that. All the way over and while I sat in the car with my nose red and running, they got married."

The six of them were quiet for a moment. Von let loose a big yawn.

"I'll get one of the pictures," said Felice. Her knitted slippers brushed the carpet as she returned. "It was taken only a couple of days before. Me and Mona. You can tell by my droopy eyes that I'm coming down with something. But doesn't Mona look happy? Depression days. But she's happy."

"Such a tiny thing. . ."

"Yes. She and Von had decided to marry, and Mama was agreeable. Von wouldn't get in the picture."

In the dark bedroom, Travis may or may not have dozed off. He opened his eyes to find Lynette lying on her back. He knew she didn't sleep that way. He watched her breast lifting and falling. Rising on his elbow, he wiped the tears from each cheek, her eyes in the darkness open, her hair swirled about her pillow. She took his hand pulling him against her, and placed it where her breast had been, the line of her scar traceable to his fingertips through her nightgown.

"Don't be frightened," he pleaded. "Let's not be frightened."

Then she sobbed in earnest.

III

THE whole family arrived for the picnic. Big Von rejoicing in the confusion, had to be reminded by Felice of the nap he needed. He counted heads aloud—his own two boys, his eight grandchildren, and then Cass's three and Edie, tummy swelling with another one, holding her youngster in her arms. "Do I look as much the grandpa as I feel?"

Late in the afternoon, after the meal and after Big Von had lain on his bed—"I couldn't sleep though. You didn't expect me to sleep, did you?"—Travis found himself with Anson and Big Von moseying out the driveway for a walk. Lynette stepped out to say something to the boys, and Travis motioned her to join them. She shook her head and waved.

The three of them strolled along the road next to the irrigation ditch, the orange trees dusty behind it. The sun was hot, and Travis squinted in spite of his sunglasses. Neither Von nor Anson wore them. The telephone wires hummed, and Travis didn't know why the three of them happened to be walking. He should have stayed behind with Lynette. But shaking her head, waving him on that way to join his father and brother, she seemed to be gesturing that she had recovered from her crying jag last night. She'd wept hard, pulling the sheet up to stifle the sound. Later, she said she didn't know why she was crying. "I've not even been thinking about my surgery." But she cried for twenty minutes or more in the quiet house, Travis feeling helpless, unable to do anything but get up to close the bedroom door and later go to the kitchen for a glass of water. He was afraid he'd wake Big Von and get pulled into a nighttime chat, but luckily for Travis, the man was asleep.

Lynette drank the water, hiccuped slightly.

"Oh, dear," she said.

They both sat on the rumpled sheets, he crosslegged, she with her long legs tucked to one side.

"I wonder where all that came from?" she said softly, referring to her weeping.

He could only suggest tiredness.

"Probably," she said, "and tension from the worry and thinking about your mother. And then thinking about your Aunt Felice afraid to have children—your poor mother—"

She stared into the glass.

"Thinking about your mother," she repeated. "She died so long ago. Never saw you. The boys."

She hiccuped again and handed him the glass of water. He placed it on the floor beside the bed. When they lay down, side by side, staring at the dark ceiling, she said, "I feel better now. Really."

Her wave across the yard full of chairs and card tables suggested that the calm she'd shown at breakfast, throughout the morning, during the picnic of fried chicken and salad and soda pop and excited children, was a calm deep enough to relieve his own anxiety. Perhaps hers, too. How could he know?

"Funny," Von said, as they walked, the water in the irrigation ditch a soft murmur, "if I'd grown up in another place,

folks would of called me white trash. At first, I didn't think nothing about it when I dated your mama. I was just lucky, I thought, somebody like me—Von Kipper—having a nice girl. Something to crow about to those horny hombres I run around with. And then it come to me—out of nowhere, just looking at the sky—what right did I have to a girl like Mona? A nice girl. I guess that's when I realized I loved her.”

“And married her?” said Anson.

“That's right.”

Through his tinted lenses, Travis saw something on his brother's face that Big Von could not see. When Anson glanced at him across Big Von's gray brushcut, Travis knew what he was going to ask, there by the headgate on the property line.

“Von.” Anson stopped walking, and Von shaded his eyes. “Was I early? Or was I an eight-month baby?”

As youngsters, both Anson and Travis had counted the months and wondered. But to ask Von—and there had scarcely been anything they could not ask—would have violated their mother's memory. Now with Felice visiting, the atmosphere was subtly altered.

Von's response was quick. “You was a seven-and-a-half month baby.” As though daring Anson to complain about it. “That's why we drove to the courthouse the way we did. That smile in Felice's picture—I'd just taken away Mona's worry. She was scared to death, a nice girl like her. I just told her, ‘Don't you worry none. We'll get married before the week is out. Ain't I told you I love you? Don't we both want this family?’ Somebody else, somebody with more brains than me, and you'd of been nine months like Travis. But I'm the father you got. And the last thing I ever in my life wanted to do was hurt somebody—your mother, you boys, any of them.”

Anson squeezed big Von's shoulder under the sunny sky, the dark shadows of the three of them mingled coal-dark on the pavement.

A call from up the road broke the silence. Travis Von Jr. beckoned from the driveway.

“They must be ready to take pictures,” said Anson.

AFTER they're gathered, Cass's husband, Tim, finishes arranging his tripod and camera. Von settles at last, turning the chair out of cussedness so he straddles it, his arms resting on the back. Anson and Travis stand behind, Travis has arm around Lynette's waist and the others arrange according to height and age. Cass's husband sets the camera and then lopes into range to kneel beside his grinning wife, everyone counting to twelve before they smile for the shutter.

Afterward, Travis kisses Lynette on the cheek.

For two of the pictures, Felice stands beside Lynette, who seems to have grown fond of the older woman. Then Felice moves aside, holding up a hand so no one will alert Big Von that she's slipped out of the picture.

When she walks up beside Tim's camera, one shoulder riding higher than the other, Von asks her what she thinks she's doing.

“I want pictures with my own camera. Don't anybody move.”

“But you got to be in them, too!”

“No, no,” she says. “Not these. I want just Mona's family. Are you ready? Such a handsome lot. Everybody smile.”

She snaps two with her polaroid camera after Tim has finished.

It's exciting to stand beside her as the last photograph emerges from white to color, from blank surface to picture. The kids crowd to watch. Even so, Travis peers over his oldest son's towhead, flashing a grin at Lynette, as slowly—like something emerging from a dream, from a smoky distance—the group appears, smiling, Travis, Lynette—their family. The lot of them. Mona's family.

He takes Lynette's hand. Felice hands her one of the pictures. There they are. ☞

FEAR

Beth and Elise left Willene only a half-shelf in the medicine chest and took most of the closet space. They read subway maps, cannot believe she's always lost.

Not even the first unit of her text is done, and she used the last of her sabbatical to interview Mormon women. The interviews aren't edited, poems won't come. Everything comes to her friends: Beth, clerking for a posh law firm, Elise, who's travelled the entire world, ready to begin an M.A. in lighting and set design. Willene, a workhorse, always plodding behind race horses. Always children to teach.

And she'd better get the other two started in family prayer or living close will strain relationships that have lasted years. She does, and that night Beth dreams of trying to understand why everything costs Willene too much.

She sees the base of a tree and thick, twisted roots branching every which way, pearl-white hairs threading from root tips, unlocking water from soil bits. Hairs, thousands and more, feeding the tap root. The roots grow,

a slow rotation, bending around rocks when they can or sapswell into wedges that split hard things. She knows that in some way the tree is Willene, and then she sees a rope braided from tree roots, supple and single and all in a dance. She wakes, tells of the dream, and for a little while, Willene stays unafraid.

—LORETTA RANDALL SHARP