

Sunstone Award Winner
1996 Brookie and D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest

MORMON LEVIS

By Phyllis Barber

TIGHT, LIKE TWO LONG CIGARETTES ROLLED IN denim. We call them white Levis, Mormon Levis, but they're actually albino beige. I suck in my stomach, zip up my pants on the way to the window in my bedroom, split the venetian blinds to check the night and see if Shelley's pulling into my driveway. Not yet. I walk down the stairs and see my long legs reflected in the mirror at the bottom. Daddy Long Legs. Leggy legs. Legs made for walking and dancing the whole night through.

Where did you say you were going, Mattie? my mother asks as she pretends to dust the piano with the dishtowel in her hands.

To the movie.

What's playing?

A western.

I hear Shelley's horn. Thank heavens. I'm out of here. Out the door. Bye, Mom.

Remember your curfew, Mattie. And don't be chasing after those boys you think are so neat. You know better.

My eyes brush past my mother's eyes and the picture of Jesus on the wall behind her. Sunrays coming out of his head. Light like the sun on his forehead. Jesus is always looking over someone's shoulder, it seems. Sure, Mom. Bye.

The door sounds final as I slam it, sealing me off from my house. I'm released into Friday night.

Hey, Wondah Woman, Shelley says after I slam the door of her brown Plymouth that looks like a tank. She backs into the street that separates me from the desert: the rim of Las Vegas, the edge of the plate. My house is in the last subdivision in

PHYLLIS BARBER has published five books and has a new, forthcoming collection, Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination (Signature Books). Her e-mail address is <barbonz@infonet.is1.net>.

town. The desert is my front yard.

Hey, Wondah Woman yourself, I say. Tonight's the night. Shelley turns the radio up until the sound is bigger than the car and the street. *Stairway to Heaven*. I settle back against the seat and drape my arm over the open window. We're off to hunt for Rod and The King, our non-Mormon, forbidden boyfriends. Forget the movie. Find somebody who knows the plot. We're off to the Bright Spot to wait for the boys.

They're at the Tracks right now, the place where the manly men of Las Vegas High drink on Friday nights, throwing Teddy Beer cans off the trestle while the Ch-Ch-Chiquitas of LVHS cruise the Spot, in and out of the driveway, circling, trolling.

As me and Shelley turn into the magic driveway under the blinking, rotating sign where the BRIGHT shines brighter than the SPOT, we're looking for the heart of something that probably won't be here until the boys are. We check out who's with who, who's not with who, who's in their own car, who borrowed from M and D. We cruise some more, floating on shock absorbers, big tires, the night pouring into the windows, waiting.

It's 8:45. They're usually back from the Tracks about 9:30. So after we bump over the drive-in's speed traps for the sixth time, we dip into the gutter and out onto Charleston. We head for Fremont Street, past Anderson's Dairy, past the Little Chapel of the West, then turn left onto Fremont, toward the big vortex of light near the Union Pacific depot, the razzle dazzle that never fails to take the words out of my mouth. The Golden Nugget. The Horseshoe. Those zillion bulbs of light.

Shelley switches the station to an oldies show. *Chances Are*, some sixties guy croons as we stop for a red light on Third and Fremont. My composure sort of. . . .

How does somebody's composure sort of slip? I ask Shelley before the singer can finish the sentence. It either does or it doesn't.



I can taste their words, it doesn't matter what they call us, because they need us—our arms, our lips, our necks, our breasts, though we don't plan to give them anything past the neck.

True, Shelley says. But Johnny Mathis says so. It must be believed.

Funny, Shelley. . . .

Hey, don't look now, Mattie, but some slime just pulled up next to us on your side of the car.

Some wanna-be Elvis with a souped up Ford idles at the stop light. Come along and be my party doll, he sings like we're his audience. I look at Shelley and roll my eyes. Then I stare straight ahead. He doesn't exist.

Shelley turns up the volume to drown out his, and Johnny's velvet amps my blood and the yearning for the One and Only. I've been waiting for a long time. My hand outside the window can feel the velvet. It tickles the tips of my fingers, the nerve endings. All I can think of is The Man Who Just Might Be Mine, The King. We cruise past the marquee at the El Portal. *Way Out West*, Shelley says. That's the name of the movie, Mattie. Don't forget it when your mother asks you in the morning. Say it after me. *Way Out West*. She exaggerates her lips.

Way Out West, I mimic her, laughing. Shelley's the best, even if my mother thinks she's a bad influence on her rare gem of a daughter. It's good Shelley isn't afraid of my mother—the Lioness of Righteousness, the Defender of Virtuous Reality. God bless Shelley. The Primo Chiquita.

A car full of shaveheads from Nellis pulls up next to us and pins us with their Air Force eyes, like we're ground targets in

the desert. One whistles a two-finger whistle. Another sticks out his tongue and wiggles it. Yuk, Shelley says. She tries to speed up when the light changes, but the traffic is packed like sardines. She's bumper to bumper with a Dodge wearing Iowa plates.

I've seen enough rubberneckers from Iowa, she says as she tap dances her foot on the brake.

We're stuck in the intersection, and I feel squirmy like an amoeba under a microscope. Horns honking. Everyone stalled. The Nellis boys next to us, a bunch of prying eyes. I keep my head forward but notice with my side eyes that one of them is opening the back door of their dull black car and is lunging toward our Plymouth, making like a primate for the entertainment of his friends. I roll up my window and lock my door just before the primate lands on the side of the car and plants a blowfish kiss on the glass. I can hear the rest of the guys in the car laughing.

Hey girls, he's yelling in between planting slobbery circles across the window. Pussy for me, girls? He puts his hand over his crotch, jiggles his family jewels, sucks in his breath with his teeth tight together.

Don't pay him any attention, I whisper as I turn away from the window, maintaining my cool, hardly breathing.

The blowfish moves over to the windshield and mashes one side of his face against the glass. I act as if I'm talking to Shelley with a permanent left-hand angle to my head. He mounts the

hood of the car. He's crawling on his hands and knees, panting like a dog in 120-degree heat.

Go find another fireplug, I shout as loud as I can which isn't too loud, then cover my face with the side of my hand. I'm laughing. I shouldn't be.

This isn't all that funny, Shelley says to me. Get off the car, she yells to him. You stupid jerk.

I'm trying to fold up in my elbows and arms, trying to be serious and angry like Shelley, but the flyboy's eyes. There's something about his hollow eyes. . . .

Luckily, the traffic starts to move, and, as Shelley creeps forward, she hits the brake, hard. He slides back, almost loses his balance, then leaps into the street. He gives us the finger before he becomes a reflection of the flashing lights.

My heart is beating in my throat. There's not enough air in Shelley's car. Shelley, let's get out of here.

Mattie, I'm doing the best I can. One more block.

In one block, we'll hit Main Street, the end of Fremont Street, the place where we can turn left and get back to the Bright Spot, where we can hold our breath for something important, like Rod and The King, even though they'll be drunk. Drunk enough to give the finger to all worldly inhabitants plus the moon and the stars as they speed down the highway. Drunk enough to call us Bitch One and Bitch Two.

I love it when they talk like that, words from the Forbidden City. Their words are like bold fingers on my neck, brushing over my breasts, down to my belly button. I can taste their words, and it doesn't matter what they call us, because they need us—our arms, our lips, our necks, our breasts, though we don't plan to give them anything past the neck. We are, after all, Mormon girls in Mormon Levis, saving our sacred bodies for The Big Event called temple marriage.

But just when we turn left onto Main, I notice a patch of blood on my Levis. Oh no, I say to Shelley. My period, right now, right this minute. White Cross Drug, Shelley. Can you believe this happened on Friday night?

Shelley steers the big boaty Plymouth into the parking lot of White Cross Drug. She pulls up next to a long, long stretched-out Cadillac sparkling in the street lights. I crane my head and peer into the car. Some Big Sugar Daddy maybe. I see something sparkling in the back seat, and when the door opens, a showgirl steps out with a cardigan draped over her shoulders. The little sweater doesn't really cover her costume. White satin. A vee down to her navel, big breasts like cantaloupes pushed together. Rhinestones glued over the tops of her eyebrows, eyes smothered with aqua shadow and pencil and mascara, more rhinestones glued to her neck, making two arrows that point to her breasts. Her headdress looks like an albino macaw sprinkled with diamonds.

Wow, I say to Shelley. I'm speechless. I wish I could trade places right this minute, have breasts as big as hers, wrap my head in silken turbans, tie gauzy scarves around my torso.

Stop gawking, and go get what you need, Shelley says. We don't have all night, remember. Your Mother said twelve sharp, sharp, sharp. She asked me last week to start bringing you home on time. She blames me, your best friend and protector

and buddy.

Yes, sir, I salute her. I feel the crossroads of the seams against my crotch as I push open the door with my shoulder, unfold into the darkening night, step on the asphalt that still holds the heat of the day.

Mother, I think as I look for the right aisle. Ever vigilant Mama mia. Mama owl. I start humming *Stouthearted Men*, her favorite song about men who fight for the right they adore.

The showgirl is standing under the feminine hygiene sign. She has rhinestones down the seams of her white net hose. She must be in between shows. She's picking up a box of Tampax. Wow. Both of us on the same day. The same time. This must be portentous. The Ides of Something. I try not to look at her as she turns back toward the front of the store, but I can't help myself. There's too much to look at.

Up close, I can see the lines of things. The outliner on her lips, the eyeliner, the pencilled mole on her cheek. And I'm not sure why, but when she looks at me, I wish she wouldn't have. When she does, I can see two human eyes behind the blinking aqua eyelids. I can see two-in-one people walking down Aisle 5 of the White Cross Drugstore: one underneath a graceful feathered headdress and pushed into surprising places by the limits of the white satin costume, the other looking out at me and wow, do her eyes remind me of my Dad talking about the windows of the soul. She's real. Wow. Her eyes briefly graze my face as she passes, leaving me with feelings I don't understand.

After I pay for the Kotex pads and push through the glass door, I can't stop thinking about those eyes. Standing alone on the sidewalk, I watch the back end of the long Cadillac flashing its right blinker, halos around the taillights, the body of the Caddy wrapping around the corner and turning right toward The Strip. I think her eyes remind me of the picture of the sad Jesus nailed to the wall of my Sunday School class. Maybe that's blasphemy, Jesus in drag, but he seems to be everywhere, staring out of the strangest places.

Suddenly, I feel laced and larded with thoughts of redemption, salvation and eternal life. Maybe Shelley and I should try to get Rod and The King to change their ways: go easy on the beer, be more responsible. She and I are, after all, instruments of God. We don't drink. We don't smoke. We go to church twice on Sunday and once during the week.

But, Shelley is honking her horn. Hurry up, she yells out the open window. Let's move. And my ears tune back into Friday night and the strains of *Yellow Submarine* on Shelley's radio. There might be true love waiting for me at the Bright Spot. Remember? What took you so long? Shelley asks as she turns left onto Las Vegas Boulevard and back toward the Bright Spot.

Slow check-out line, I say. I don't want to talk about the showgirl's eyes. Pull around to the back, someplace where it's dark, I say to Shelley. After she does, I unzip my levis, pull down my pants, undo the safety pins and pin the Kotex to my panties. There's that spot of blood on my Levis, but it's in a place that shouldn't be noticeable.

What is this yucky stuff anyway that shows up every month? I say to Shelley. And then, without wanting to, even



BRUCE READE

I know this Church is the only true Church yet here I am, the velour air rubbing across my face and arms and making me want to unbutton my shirt. Open up to the night air. Save me, somebody.

while Shelley's answering me, I'm thinking of Jesus again. Him on the cross. The crown of thorns and pearls of blood on his forehead. And I think of the soldiers staring up at him. And other soldiers carrying shields that aren't big enough to cover their bodies. Arrows. Cannons. War and blood and innocents being massacred. But it's time to hurry up and get back to Friday night. My pants are even tighter when I zip them up again.

I'm ready. Let's hit the Bright Spot, I say, beamingly beamish girl that I am.

You going to buy me some gas for a change? she says, smiling her cheesy smile, her teeth lighting up the car like a neon cheshire cat.

Sure, I say, money being a sore spot between us, me never having anything extra. There's six of us kids, and my mother cans every living thing except lizards so we can eat right. How about two dollars?

Wow, you're loaded, Mattie. Shelley rolls her eyes back and sucks in her cheeks. Her famous fish face.

Don't knock it. It's something.

The jumping neon on the Bright Spot's sign is still going round and round the circular sign. The lights keep traveling the same old same old, and I wonder if there will ever be a moment when something will interfere with this geometrical pattern—six bulbs to a row, each row marching one by one into the light? Could these bulbs ever try another route? Is this

world made of uninterrupted patterns? Unleavable sockets? Can anything or anybody dare to be different?

Shelley parks in stall #16. The carhop slides a cardboard ticket under the windshield wiper. Cherry Lime Rickey, we both say in unison. We'd both like to add french-fried onion rings, but we don't have enough money for both. We don't care about food, anyway. We're still waiting, listening to all the radios as cars cruise the Bright Spot. *You Are So Beautiful. Lady of the Blue Rose. Imagine.*

When do you think they'll get here? Shelley asks as she guzzles the last of her Cherry Lime Rickey through her straw. Her red hair reflects the lights on the Bright Spot sign; speckles of light dance across her bangs.

I tap the bottom of my glass to coax the last of the shaved ice to fall in my mouth. They better hurry, I say, getting tough, like I'll leave if they don't show. Fat chance.

And suddenly they're back, leaning into the windows of Shelley's Plymouth. Rod and The King. Their faces are red. They look like they're feelin' good. Park your car, they say. Come with us, you women, you broads.

I gotta take a whiz first, the King says. Too many Teddy Beers. He laughs. He makes a move with his hand like he's gonna whip his jewels out from behind his zipper right then and there and do it in the bright lights. But he winks at me and walks off for the bathroom. He's so lanky and tall and knows how to move those thin little hips of his. I'm holding my

breath again. Hurry back, I whisper, then think about the science of pelvises.

Too much hard work at the Tracks, Rod says as we walk toward The King's car. Lifting those cans takes a lot of muscle. Like Olympic weight lifters, you better believe.

As soon as The King returns, we all slip into the magic car, the silver streak, Shelley and I in the back seat, Rod at shotgun, The King driving. I wish I was up there with him. I'd slide so close to him, I'd barely leave him room. I want body contact. But instead I watch the back of his head as he drives, the steady rhythm of the street lights lighting up his olive neck, his dark hair like a Bedouin's, the perfect desert boyfriend, someone who might ride a camel and wrap scarves around his head if he had some.

Why don't you get your ten-pound weakling body to the gym? The King is shouting to Rod as we pass Health World, the new gym in town, punching him in the shoulder.

Muscles, Rod says as he puts a beer can next to his bicep. The only kind of muscle I need, he says.

The King is slapping the seat with his hand. He's laughing as if Rod just told the last joke on earth. He's punching his buddy in the arm, and the car is running on auto-pilot.

Watch where you're going, I want to say, but don't. I bite my tongue. I want to fit this time and this moment. Usually, Mormon girls are out of place. Our Mutual Improvement Association teachers gave us cards that said "Dare to Be Different." They thought this would encourage us to be daring enough not to fall into the morasse of the world and the pit of the hell-bound, daring enough to live by The Truth. But I took the cards to mean I should be different from the way anybody told me I had to live life. Dare to be different from everything.

So I don't care if our car is weaving slightly as the King drives from street light to street light. Life is to be lived now, so why spend it preparing for the next one, hoping I'll be God's Little Darlin'? He holds the steering wheel with two thumbs, and I wish again I could be by his shoulder and see into the night better than I can from the back seat. The stars are shining more brightly the further we pull away from the center of Las Vegas. Where are we going? I ask as I lean on my elbows against the front seat.

The Lake, The King says. Something new.

What would really be new, I say, is to drive to the stars.

Well, aren't you something? The King says to me.

Did my voice sound sexy when I said "stars?" I wonder. Is that what he means? Or does he think it's a cool idea to drive to the stars? When we get to the lake, maybe he'll want to change places with Shelley. Sit in the back seat with me.

Today's the day, Rod sings, the Teddy Beers have their picnic.

Tonight's the night, I say.

The radio blasts as we whip down Boulder Highway toward the man-made lake called Mead which buries skeletons of Moapa Indians and Mormon pioneers and the bones of their houses. I've heard about this in Sunday School. The King accelerates. I close my eyes and imagine we could leave the ground any minute and take an aerial highway and blast

through the stringy night clouds highlighted by the moon. I feel the power of speed, the moan of the tires spinning faster than light traveling.

I look over at my best friend Shelley, whose jaw is tight. We both laugh, and yet, steel-nerve Shelley's gripping the seat with claw-like hands. Her face looks white in this light. The desert hills whip by like ghosts, the marker posts by the sides of the road, white dominoes falling behind the path of the car. *Chances Are*, I hum.

I like the idea of leaving the ground, leaving my father's Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale speeches. He won't allow me to say anything unkind about someone unless I say three nice things. We live The Golden Rule at home. We believe in all good things, and we seek after them. Life is one big bud of goodness, I've been told, and yet, sometimes it's a maximum security prison to have to smile and be loving all the time. To be inside those invisible bars of goodness that catch sunlight and keep me true to my word, true to the covenants with God. A cage of golden sunlight, golden plates, and golden birds who can't sing because their feathers are solid. Golden angels who can't fly because their wings are too heavy.

I think of myself giving my testimony in sacrament meeting. "I know this Church is the only true Church on the face of the earth and that Joseph Smith is the Only True Prophet." Believing, believing, and yet here I am, the velour air rubbing across my face and arms and making me want to unbutton my shirt. Open up to the night air. Save me, somebody.

Maybe tonight we'll bust free to the new religion of time and space. We're going fast enough. Fly, King, I whisper so he can't hear me. Step on the accelerator. My veins are drunk with you. Have a swig, Rod says, reaching across the seat and handing his Teddy Beer to The King. He takes a long swig and heads into the night.

Shelley and I are leaning against the back seat, our legs spread wide. I'm looking at two large white Vs. Our legs in the shadow of the car. Our legs that look like bones in this moonlight. I love the wind that's whipping my hair and tangling it and blinding me with its thickness. Hair in my mouth, whipping around my ears. Hair is the only thing I can feel right now. Sometimes it slaps my cheek and stings, but I like the almost feel of cutting into my skin, my skin that's so innocent, my face that tells lies to my mother and says righteous prayers in church on Sunday. I'm a Pharisee. A whitened sepulchre in white Levis. Me. I touch my mouth. It can't wait until we stop somewhere so it can kiss The King. French kiss him. Feel his tongue in my mouth. It can't wait to be bruised from kissing too hard, and I feel throbbing against the tight seam between my legs. Our bodies will wrangle with each other, roll on some sand at the lake, though I know it's only a rocky beach. I can't wait for him to get hard and push against me and my pelvis bone and the cloth of the Mormon Levis.

But I know I'm still a good girl. I want to live with Jesus someday. Shelley, too. We're saving ourselves like precious stamps or coins, even though we're crashing through the night, headlights cutting the dark into ribbons. I have a hunch we're both thinking that someday soon we'll be more careful.

Do what our parents ask us. But this Nevada night. It sucks us in like a Hoover, and we're on the edge of something big.

The King takes another sip of the beer, tossing his head back for one second too long. The car swerves onto the gravelly shoulder of the road and fishtails from side to side. Careening, lurching, jerking, tipping, swaying, righting itself. The King finally gets control and pulls the silver Pontiac back into the southbound lane of the two-lane highway. We're still headed south. Both Shelley and I have one hand flat against our chests. With the other hand, we're holding each other's arms tighter than a fistful of cash.

Damn, that was beautiful, Rod says. Damn, damn. He's slapping his knees and pulling the ring top of another beer. Sweet little Teddy Beer, he says. Good little Teddy. Take care of me. Make me happy. He's stroking the side of the can as if it were a stuffed animal he had when he was a kid.

Give me another sip, The King says. Rod reaches across the front seat, his arm silhouetted against the windshield and the passing rocks and hills that look like grotesque shapes of elephants and desert camels we're passing on the lake road. Beer, beer, wonderful beer, he chants while The King takes more time with this swig. The King accelerates even more. We're heading for a rise in the road, the mound of the railroad track looming large ahead of us, and suddenly the sharp definition of double yellow stripes seem to be rising straight up to the sky.

Jesus and Mary, Rod says. Holy shit! Will you look at that Monster Rise in the Road? Holy holy shit. Rod's eyes are big as he holds his beer can mid-air and looks at the King with a mouth caught by the hook of surprise.

Hey you women back there, The King is yelling. You want love, do you? You want excitement? Well, hold onto your seats. We're gonna take air. A little foreplay, girls and boys.

Floor it, Rod says, leaning into the windshield to watch the ground rise. Go for it.

Maybe we'll sail when we hit the top of the mound because our car isn't a car anymore. I look at Shelley who looks back at me. Our faces are blanks. We're here. On the ride. We accept our fate as The King steps on the pedal, pushes it to the floor, and we head for the high point in the road, the place with a railroad cross shining back at us. The radio is blasting.

I grab Shelley's hand and hold it tight, and together we lay our heads back and surrender, just like we used to do on the Roll-O-Plane at the carnival. Maybe we'll land like a jet on the other side. Maybe we'll keep flying. If that's the case, maybe Jesus will be waiting for us with open arms.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I squeeze Shelley's hand and brace my feet against the floor. I love you, Shelley, I whisper. You're my best friend ever. If I don't have anything else that matters, I have you.

You're the best, Shelley says, wrinkling her nose as she squeezes her eyes tightly. I peek at the black mountain of road soaring in front of the headlights then slam my eyes shut again.

Jesus, we just might be coming to you. Hold those arms wide open. We're leaving the desert, and maybe we'll get to look into your eyes and see if they really are sad, and if they are, we can ask you why. ☐



ODE TO THE SIMPLEST DREAD

Beside myself as beside no other
I move as casually as a cloud,
not so much from place to place
as noticed for not being there
but here.

My doctor and I debated Prozac
today: he was for, I against,
but negotiation always comes down
to dosage and longevity,
you see—

at least you will as age gnaws off
that knob of wooden leg
one lamely calls his confidence,
old confidence man, assurance,
you beast.

After Grapenuts and banana
ten milligrams will do, small fry
me, my shrimp depression
dwarfed within the shadows
I cast,

only I, and whistle, half-balloon
man, half disciple of the shaman,
while the whispers in the shop
suggest the piper's followers
reject

even his music when the sunny sun
collapses with the weight
of its own red optimistic
burden like, let's say,
a guest

at dinner who would tell us once
more, just once more before dessert
of love and Second Comings soon,
while we, enough tomorrows in
our craws,
remind him of Mithridates,
or maybe that court tasters
spent their brief lives
smiling, full of abstract love,
and dread.

—ROBERT PARHAM