

ZINA'S VERSION

LEWIS B. HORNE

Zina thought: Ha, what now? She peered through her front door window at the old man crossing Lizzy's backyard. He was skinny as a bunch of sticks, splotchy, and wrinkled as a raisin. His hair was white as alkali flats. He was her brother, and when he pushed aside the oleander branches to get to her door, her energy bugled at the prospect of a new quarrel. What else would she expect when he entered fresh from Lizzy's back door?

"Come in."

She didn't add his name: "Frank." She didn't hold the door open for him, but turned and let it shut behind her. By the time he reopened it and stood inside, she was back at her typewriter. Let him think she'd been there the whole time he talked to Lizzy. Let him think she hadn't gotten up as soon as she heard his car and watched from her window the whole time he sat in Lizzy's house. She straightened her papers, noticing her hands, as wrinkled and splotched as his. When he failed to speak, she turned.

"Sit down."

Even then he was quiet, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his large bony hands locked together. An old scar crawled out of his shirt collar and across his neck. Finally he said, "Where do you want to move to now?"

"Move to?" She concealed her surprise. How could she quarrel with that? "What do you mean move to?"

"Lizzy says you got to leave."

"What does Loren say?"

"The same thing." When she snorted, Frank said, "What do you expect him to say, Zina? He's Lizzy's only son, and you've been a strain on his mother. Both of them tried to be nice to you."

Foothold at last. "I've been a strain on her? On Lizzy? And do you think she treats me, her husband's sister, well?"

Frank took from his pocket a piece of paper and held it toward her. For a moment she wanted someone to speak to, but drew back from the wish in the same way she might jerk herself out of sleep. Since when had she ever needed anyone to lean on? She had looked after herself all her life—managed her own money, traveled once to Hawaii alone, once to the World's Fair in New York, recognized and countered the ploys of those out to trick her. She needed no one to rise up for her now. But she wouldn't touch the paper. It was a testing she refused to face.

"That," she said, "is a private document. Where did you get it?"

"I got it from Loren. He got it from his mother—"

"And where did she get it?"

"Lizzy found it on her front porch. You must have dropped it by the mailbox."

"It's like her to read a person's private mail. I told her before that I want my own mailbox."

He read aloud: "*I'm so sorry, Zina, that you have to live with such a terrible woman. One needs privacy. To have her snooping about your house when you're gone, to have her charging so much rent for the wretched little shack you live in—I don't know how you tolerate it.*" He stopped. She lifted her chin. "You going to tell me that what you wrote your friend is the truth?"

How did he know it wasn't true? Saying it was so or wasn't so—it depended on how you saw it.

"You can't come back to my place," he went on, frowning at her silence. "You got Glenna so upset she won't have you around. Doesn't make sense. You even got Billy's and Roger's wives to pulling hair with your stories. When Lizzy offered to let you take this little place of hers—"

"Everybody likes Lizzy."

"I'll look around for something else. Lizzy says you can stay here till we find something, but the sooner you go the better, she says. Loren, too."

"And me," said Zina. "I say the same."

"I don't know why you despise anyone who does you a good turn. The same monkeyshines all over again. . . . What sense does it make—acting spiteful?"

From behind the curtain she watched him cross to Lizzy's door, spine stiff as a broomhandle. She had a good straight back herself, as though she'd been raised in the Czar's court. She never let her back touch a chair. The Corliss girls had marvelled at that when they were small.

For a moment she felt homesick for California, for the Corliss girls and their families, for their compliments. But the fiber in her body, reflecting the tension of battle, stiffened and knotted. She was among equals here and could think of conquered cities. She had her own story to tell. She put a clean sheet of paper in her typewriter. Tek, tek, tek, went her fingers, slowed by arthritis. *Dear Jean and family*, she typed. She hardly ever hit the wrong key. *Would you like to guess what she's done now?*

The Corliss girls wouldn't question what she'd said. She'd stood in the Corliss house years ago—the house looking like a Spanish hacienda with its inside courtyard and pool, balconies with wrought-iron railings, tall palm trees rising above its second story—she'd stood there when their mother brought each one of the two, red and wizened, home from the hospital. Sometimes she had let herself think of them as her children—almost. Even over the years after she left the Corlisses, she kept in touch. The girls remembered her on her birthday and at Christmas time, whether she was working at the Meekins', the Days', or with whatever family. The girls liked her. And she? She had sat in the second row of the Baptist church when each one was married, and seen their children in the hospital nursery almost as soon as Mr. and Mrs. Corliss did.

Now, all the way to California Zina had sat stiffly against the rocking of the train, staring out at the desert, open and flat under the sun, herself stony with the sense of injustice. The yammering wheels, the sage growing out of sandy earth, the mountains pale and emaciated in the distance scarcely impinged on her own cut-out memories. Paper-doll number one: her father. Number two: Frank, sick in bed, badly burned, long convalescence before him. Number three: Zina herself. And then with features scarcely definite enough to be recognized: John Young. Her fiancé.

"It will be necessary," said her father with awkward formality, "to delay your marriage to John. It will be necessary to help nurse Frank. I have explained the need to John."

"And?"

"He agrees, of course."

Of course. "And me?"

"You are Frank's sister. What else would you do?"

He was surprised that she argued with him. What else would she do? he asked. She would marry John Young today and relieve herself of her 27-year-old spinsterhood. That's what she'd do. Six years her brother Roy had been married to Lizzy. Children came like rabbits out of fat Lizzy, but all dead—all dead but for Loren. When would she stop having children? Why shouldn't Zina marry? She continued the argument. Her father resisted.

"Either I marry now," she said, "or I don't marry at all."

Too long her father resisted, for "not at all" was an easy defense against other demands. Her father said at last, "Have it your own way," and that's what she did, leaving behind her young Frank with his bandages and potato poultices and pain, sitting in the thudding passenger car on her way across the southwestern desert. Sitting there with intense anger and the exquisite pleasure of knowing her father's anguish, his punishment for destroying her prospects. It was like a victory. It was like an escape, too—that unyielding pressure on her, the fact of her Mormon maidenhood. Who would marry Zina and propagate his line through her? No man now, she thought, and tossed her head as though at God himself because she'd escaped the impossible pain of childbirth. What she'd seen Lizzy go through, time and again. Something she'd never have to face now, multiplying and replenishing. She would have done it, she thought, if—. They were to blame. Even John Young for being so spineless, pleading with her at the train depot: "Please, Zina." Such big feet and hands. It wasn't her fault. It was theirs for what they'd done to her.

She found her job with the Corlisses through Mr. Corliss' law partner, a member of the Church—housekeeper, a good one. When the girls were little she let them comb her hair, listened to them marvel that, like Rapunzel's, it was so long she could sit on it. She was frugal. By the time Mr. Corliss became a state senator in the Thirties, she had saved money enough to buy desert properties on his advice. It was only right that he should advise her. Didn't he and Mrs. Corliss owe it to her as compensation for their distrust? "Zina, you just can't say those kinds of things to the girls. Don't look that way. You know what I'm talking about. You've even got them questioning us. . . ." And when she left for the Orstad's, the couple with nearly-grown children that the Corlisses recommended her to, . . . "The girls will miss you." But not a word, she thought, about being sorry. If only they'd say they were sorry to see her go . . . "You'll come back and visit, won't you? Now and then? Come and see us and the girls?" She wouldn't promise, but of course—however indignant she felt—she did go back. What would she do without the affection of the Corliss girls?

When she started work, one of the first things she bought for herself in her room off the kitchen was a typewriter. She used it for letters, memos, copied out page after page of her genealogy on it. When after a year her father wanted her to return home, she answered on the typewriter: *When you wouldn't let me marry John Young. . . .* That was how she put it. She knew she could say: *When you made me postpone . . .*, but the ache and anger were more firmly supported by her version. An oldest daughter deserved some consideration after all. If her mother

had made demands, that would have been one thing. She would have expected that. But her father . . . everyone said she resembled her father. Oughtn't he to have understood? She bore, and bore proudly, the abuse described in her versions, and though she would never admit it—thinking of her father—the more she hurt herself in them, the prouder, the stronger, the happier she became. She wrote home not frequently but regularly, for she wanted to keep channels open, memories alive.

As Zina grew older, all that dark Rapunzel hair grayed. Her skin wrinkled like a deflated balloon. Her voice shriveled. John Young married a girl half Zina's age. When she heard about it, she shuddered at the thought of his big hands, big feet and then thought no more about him. Her father died in the flu epidemic after World War I, and she cried at his funeral, angry at the tears channeling over the wrinkles dug in so early. Roy collapsed in the field one day and spent six hours under the summer sun before Lizzy, boiling fig jam, had sense enough to send Loren for supper-call. He spent the next two years paralyzed and speechless, then died. She felt sorry for fat Lizzy, and spent her vacation that year with her. Lizzy had tried and lost as wife and mother.

Her fingers punched the keys slowly, evenly. . . . *running me out*, she wrote. *I pay good rent, but of course that makes no difference.* No difference that she could afford better. When she retired from her work with the Corlisses, Mr. Corliss had invested her money from her properties for her, "We want you to have a good income, Zina," he said. Mr. Corliss was good to her. It was his wife, she thought, who was the troublemaker. Other women always were. When she sat in Lizzy's house with Frank and heard Frank tell Lizzy, "It's crowded out at our place, and it would be nice if Zina had a house of her own," she thought—all those silly women.

Lizzy said she would enjoy Zina's company.

"She'd pay you rent of course," said Frank, as though she were an object in another room.

"That's not necessary," said Lizzy. "The house is just sitting. If she could take care of her utilities. . . ."

"I shall pay," said Zina, "I shall pay—" and she quoted a sum perversely beyond the little house's worth.

"That's too much," said Lizzy.

"—or I don't stay at all."

She then had something immediate to write about. She always had something to write about. She wrote now after Frank's visit: *It's just as well she wants me to leave. For the money I pay, this house is anything but satisfactory. And do you know what else? Do you remember your letter—*

Struck by a new idea, she stopped. Why not? she thought. She changed her dress, tidied her hair resting on her head like a great gray cushion. After talking with Frank, she needed a walk.

He was just stepping off Lizzy's porch when she came up the driveway from the oleanders.

"Going to town?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Hop in. I'll give you a ride."

Chin high, she walked on. It was hot, but she was accustomed to heat. "Zina," she heard Frank say, "I can't make any sense out of you."

Her shadow was dark and sharp behind her on the sidewalk. The sun burned in her eyes. She stayed as near the buildings as she could to avoid the sun. Ordinarily it didn't bother her. What bothered today was the way it glared in her eyes. She

held her back straighter, imagining Frank following in the car, his burn scar pale, making her think of his old pain, waiting for her to falter.

She was relieved to get inside the hardware store, safe from Frank, safe from the sun. With the air-conditioning, the air made little icicles on her arms. After the glare, she stood in the doorway, uncertain which way to move, unable to see clearly her way.

"Is anything the matter, ma'am?"

She couldn't make out the man's features. She squinted. He wasn't much taller than she was, but his face was all shadow.

"Of course, nothing's the matter."

He took her arm anyway. "Sit down over here," he said. "It's a real hot one today."

She wanted to protest, but she was beside the chair and then in it before she could muster denial. Tired, she felt her limbs relax, until she made herself sit forward, back straight. The man came clear—piggy face, red hands. She tightened her muscles, withdrawing. Fat red hands.

"I want a mailbox," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "If you sit there, I'll find someone to wait on you."

She looked about the store at lawn mowers, bags of lawn fertilizer, lawn chairs. . . . She sat in a lawn chair. It reminded her of the way Mrs. Corliss used to sit beside their pool in her chair. Relaxed. Or Lizzy on her daybed . . . she lay on her daybed listening to soap operas, silly things, but she relaxed, too, until Zina came. Although starch packed her bones as she thought of the snit she'd thrown Lizzy into, the idea of relaxing couldn't help but appeal to her. For the first time the prospect of moving into another place discomfited her.

Here was the mailbox. She bought also a hammer and nails. With the sun behind her, the walk back on McPherson was less trying. She was eager to get back, and the eagerness made the pavement less warm under her feet, the still air less hot as she moved through it, stepping—tap, tap, tap—on her own shadow.

At home, her face showed no strain. In the mirror, it looked as impassive as ever—wrinkled, Roman-nosed, slope-chinned. Hard to tell what Zina was thinking. Just like her father. She changed back into her housedress, glanced at the uncompleted letter in the typewriter. She already knew what she would write. She scarcely needed to go through with the action, for it couldn't change what she wanted to write. Lizzy in a snit. She took up mailbox, hammer, and nails, and went forth to perform what had—to her mind—already been written.

The oleanders had overgrown her doorway so that in her rush she brushed her hair, snagging a strand loose. She'd told Lizzy to have them trimmed. But that was after the quarrel started, and Lizzy had ignored her. She let her hair go, saying to herself, "Drat!" and moved on up the driveway, wishing she could sweep down the whole row. She couldn't see Lizzy watching. In a spell with her soap operas, no doubt. She'd failed these last years, Lizzy had, after Loren's oldest boy was killed in Korea. Feeble old woman, Zina felt sorry. She'd liked Loren's children, what she saw of them, but Lizzy had taken those risks and had to live with them.

Nailed to the house beneath the front porch roof was the mailbox Lizzy insisted they both use. The hammer trembling in her hand, Zina spotted a place for her box just where Lizzy would see it each time she pulled out her own mail. She drew a scratch with a nail. She would have placed it higher, but she grew short of breath if she raised her arms too high. That's what getting old did to you, she thought

grimly. It wasn't easy to hold the box up, the nail through the hole, levy the hammer. But she would do it. Bang, bang, bang. She almost hit her own hand. The nail split into two nails as her sight blurred. Determined, she waited for them to draw back together. Bang, bang, bang. With that nail in far enough to hold the box, she was free to get another for the other side.

And here came Lizzy.

Zina ignored her, stared at the sun-brightened wall in front of her. She put the nail through the other hole, straightening the box. It was warm under her fingers.

"What are you doing?"

She missed the nail and it fell.

"Zina, get out of my flowers."

She wouldn't look at Lizzy. She stood there in her patterned housedress supporting herself with an arm on the corner of her house, there in the fulness of her side vision. Not fat Lizzy anymore, Lizzy with the firm white arms, the bright rose petal cheeks. Now Lizzy's skin had failed her, shriveling on her arms. Her eyes, very pale and washed very blue, had cataracts. Her hair was white and thin. She couldn't hobble to town anymore. Fat bouncy Lizzy had nothing on her.

Bang, bang, bang. The other nail held.

Lizzy reached over and pulled on her arm, but she batted her away. She struck at the nail but missed. Lizzy stepped off the porch.

"Out of my flowers now—"

Zina aimed at the nail. And, then—! Lizzy reached up to pull on the box and the hammer struck Lizzy's hand. Lizzy cried out, a low pale cry, and clutched her hand against her stomach, a hand as old as Zina's and a body as unsupple. She released her hand to glance at it, then pulled it and its pain into her dress again. The mailbox clattered to the ground.

"You knocked it down," said Zina. Only now—without wanting to—did she look directly at Lizzy. She looked at Lizzy and in her mind, the memory nudging the roots of her hair so that her scalp tingled, she saw Lizzy again—fat dimpled Lizzy—saw her in a kind of double vision when the first dead baby was born and then Loren, saw the round face as it was then squeezed and sucked with pain. She had looked grimly on at Lizzy's taut body, held bitterly the sweating hand, when the pains took hold. Lizzy had gambled and this was what she got. This pain. And for what? Dead children. Zina could not tolerate physical pain. She saw this, remembered it, as she looked at Lizzy, all the lines of her face drawn above to the shut eyes and below to the O of her mouth. Shriveled Lizzy in pain. "Keep your hands to yourself and you don't get hurt," she said.

Lizzy stepped back up on her porch. "Cantankerous old woman," she said, half-mutter, half-moan, holding her hand to her mouth.

Zina let the mailbox lie. The oleanders loosened more of her hair. In the house she laid the hammer on the bed. Then she sat at her typewriter. She felt too shaken to type. Her assault and what should have been her victory, what should have buoyed her in the stress she'd stirred up, had failed, had mustered her feelings and turned them back on her. Much in her mind seemed to be in pieces. She closed her eyes and saw Lizzy's hand slip in underneath. She knew she couldn't change the hammer's direction. It was too late.

With her lids shut over her dry eyes, she saw Lizzy's house, too, dusty and hot in the sun. Yellow frame house with untrimmed honeysuckle climbing over the porch. Floors sagging. Doorways uneven. She thought of the Corliss' house with longing, its large Spanish lines, the long circular drive through manicured lawns,

immense palm trees. Lizzy's house was drab. She'd lived in it ever since Roy died. Sold the farm and moved into town. In the Corliss house there was little pain, and that little easily soothed.

Zina noticed that she had slumped in the chair. Straightening, she thought: Just like Lizzy to put her hand in. . . . She took a fresh sheet of paper. *Do you know what she did when I tried to put up my own mailbox?* She stopped, uncertain what to add. Just like Lizzy, she muttered.

Frank arrived before long. First at Lizzy's. Then entering her own house without knocking, he stood in the doorway, heaving a big sigh as though he were the one so sorely put upon. Twice in one day.

"Get some stuff together," he said. "Lizzy wants you out now. I'll have to come back later and pack up for you."

"Because of her hand—"

"Why can't you use the same mailbox?"

"And how is her hand?" she said stiffly, resenting her own worry.

"Oh, her hand is all right. Be a bruise on it. It's a good thing you're so poor with a hammer. Where you going to go? That's the problem. I suppose we can get you a motel room for a couple of days till we find something."

She lifted her chin. "A motel, you say?"

"I'm afraid so," he said. "I told you Glenna doesn't want you at our place—"

"I see."

The indignity of it braced her like a fresh wind. A motel . . . Her fingers flexed, anxious for the typewriter. Frank wanted to leave it behind until later, but she insisted on taking it. He carried it to the car while she was packing.

A motel, she thought.

As they drove out the driveway past Lizzy's house, Zina looked straight at Lizzy's window. The curtain, sure enough, was lifted back. That same hurt hand. She thought of Lizzy's angry mutter: "Cantankerous old woman!"—and held her head a bit higher.

A Note on Lewis B. Horne

Since 1968, if my information is correct, Lewis B. Horne has been publishing stories in various literary quarterlies, stories that draw mostly on his Mormon background in Mesa, Arizona. His literary skill won him the Hopwood Award in Fiction at the University of Michigan in 1960 and, more recently, a place in *Best American Short Stories 1974*. Yet I doubt many of *Dialogue's* readers have heard of him or his work—at least not of his fiction (his modified sestina, "Vision of an Older Faith," appeared in Vol. IX, No. 4). I came upon his work quite by accident when I saw his story "Dream Visions" cited in *Best American Stories 1973* and recognized his name as that of a writer who had submitted some poems to *Dialogue*. From there (though it would have been simpler, if less fun, just to write to Lewis Horne himself), it was a matter of backtracking through contributor's notes to come up with the following list of Horne's stories, a list which may not be complete and may well be out of date by now. But for any of *Dialogue's* readers who may wish to see more of Lewis Horne's work, it is something to start with.

"Peggy and the Olivers: A Memoir of McKenrow Road." *Descant*, 13, 1 (Fall 1968), 2-15.

"When Dry Summers End." *Discourse*, 12, 1 (Winter 1969), 42-53.

"A Summer to Sing, A Summer to Cry." *Prairie Schooner*, 44, 2 (Summer 1970), 95-120.

"Thor Thorsen's Book of Days." *Cimarron Review*, 12 (July 1970), 67-79.

"Dream Visions." *Ohio Review*, 13, 2 (Winter 1972), 86-93.

"Mansion, Magic, and Miracle." *Colorado Quarterly*, 22, 2 (Autumn 1973), 189-202; reprinted in Martha Foley, ed., *Best American Short Stories 1974* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

"The People Who Were Not There." *Kansas Quarterly*, 5, 3 (Summer 1973), 27-37.

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