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p. 79

Make this fairyland house,
or Santa's sleigh, or a dollhouse—all from gingerbread!

THE GREATEST GIFT

Unable to have children of their own, Lorene and Julian Vela opened their hearts and their home to first one unwanted baby, then another, and another, until they had 20. A true story of a remarkable couple who live the Christmas spirit 365 days a year. By Nilah Rodgers and Etta Lynch

When the entire family gathers for Christmas at their home in Lubbock, Texas, Lorene and Julian Vela welcome no less than 20 children—not one of whom was born to them—19 grandchildren and 18 sons-and daughters-in-law.

During these noisy, fun-filled reunions, Lorene and Julian watch their huge family laughing and feasting together around the brightly decorated tree and their eyes meet in mutual pride. Unable to have babies of their own because Lorene suffered childhood beatings that injured her internally, this Mexican-American couple have taken in, over the years, 20 children no one else wanted. They adopted nine and became foster parents to 11.

Sometimes, at those giant Christmas celebrations, when the love flows in almost visible currents from person to person and across the three generations, Lorene allows herself to remember a time when there were no children and no hope of ever having any.

Dark clouds hung low over the small yellow house and mist collected on the

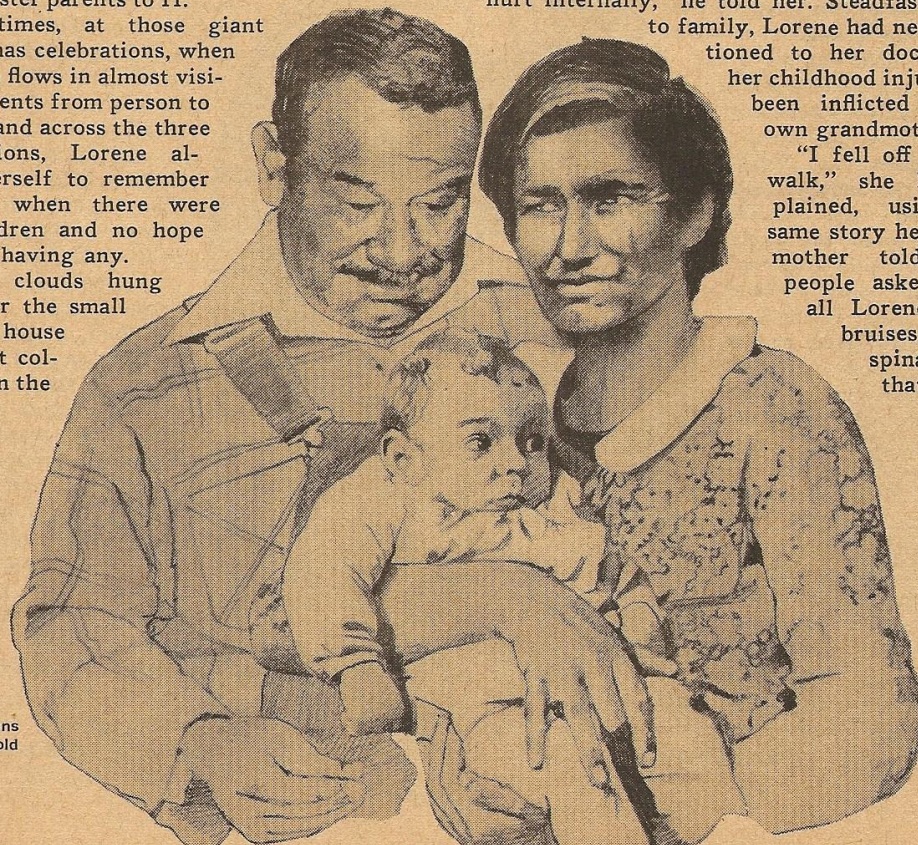
surrounding mesquite trees like tears, it was as if all nature wept with the grieving couple that sad day 30 years ago. Yesterday, Lorene's body had carried Julian's baby and her mind had dreamed of the strong son she would give her husband despite the childhood abuse that doctors said had ruined her own health.

But today, her frail body had refused the added burden. This tiny beginning life, like all the others in their nine years of marriage, had slipped away. She had miscarried many times before. But this time it was different. This time the doctor had ended all her hopes.

"You'll never carry a baby full term, Mrs. Vela. When you injured your back, you were hurt internally," he told her. Steadfastly loyal to family, Lorene had never mentioned to her doctor that

her childhood injuries had been inflicted by her own grandmother.

"I fell off a crosswalk," she had explained, using the same story her grandmother told when people asked about all Lorene's cuts, bruises, and the spinal injury that had ►



Illustrations
by Alan Reingold

twisted her back into a permanent hump. Through the years she had refused to dwell on those bad times. But now that the beatings had robbed her of the joy of children, her tears seemed endless.

They only stopped when a cousin of Julian's who worked in a Lubbock home for orphans called to tell them about an abandoned Mexican-American infant girl. "Would you consider adopting the baby?" the cousin asked.

The next day Lorene and Julian appeared at the orphanage. To their surprise, the baby was blue-eyed and blonde. "I don't believe she's Mexican," Julian said.

"What difference does it make?" Lorene asked, cuddling the baby close and touching her with tearful wonder. They carried the baby home and named her Lillian. As soon as it was legally possible, they adopted her.

Lorene was 40 years old, anemic, stiffened with arthritis, and plagued 24 hours a day by her old back pain. Every move hurt, and little Lillian's care created a thousand tasks a day. At night, when the baby whimpered, Lorene's heart responded instantly, but pain slowed her movements. Julian helped, but he had gone from farm work to a job for the Santa Fe railroad, and he was often called out at night.

Early in 1948, just as Lillian began toddling, a woman appeared at the Vela home, carrying a week-old infant. "Could you keep my baby for just a little while?" she asked.

Lorene held out her arms eagerly, remembering the indescribable sweetness of holding a tiny baby. Weeks later, the Velas learned the mother had abandoned the child. They adopted the little girl with the delicate features and narrow face and called her Rosie. Lillian's new sister had a mop of black hair and huge brown eyes.

A year of happiness followed, marred only by Lorene's physical suffering. Then a man's voice was asking, "Will you take a problem child? She's six, and we don't know what to do with her." The caller was from the juvenile authorities.

With pride, the Vela family walked out of church with their fourth child and first son.

"How can a six-year-old be a problem child?" Lorene asked. "Bring her to us."

Gloria arrived. Lorene and Julian took turns holding her on their laps, talked to her, touched her with open affection. She responded by helping Lorene with the babies. They called her *Mamacita*—Little Mother—a title she carried proudly. Gloria was no longer a problem child.

In the fall of 1957, a pregnant teenager called to tell Lorene she wanted to give up her baby for adoption when it was born. The only stipulation: Julian and Lorene must pay the hospital bill. With many sacrifices, they scraped the money together and carried home a week-old boy, whom they named Elvis.

Lorene was 50 by then, but ignoring the pain in her back, she plunged into night feeding, rocked the little one to soothe his stomach colic, washed his diapers. Julian's walk took on a new pride and on Sunday, when he marched down the church aisle, he triumphantly carried his first son.

One snowy winter night six years later the small house buzzed with the usual after-supper activity. Lillian, nine, and Rosie, ten, were washing the dishes. Teenage Gloria lay on the floor near the stove, drying her hair. At the kitchen table, Julian helped Elvis with his alphabet, eagerly learning with the six-year-old because Julian had never attended school.

Outside, the dog barked. An insistent knock followed, and Julian opened the door. On the steps stood a woman carrying a tiny, undernourished baby. Three small children, ranging in age from about four to nine, held to her skirt. They wore dirty outgrown coats, and their eyes held identical expressions of wounded, animal fear.

"Their mother died," the woman said, her eyes as cold as the zero weather. "They're kin to me, but I don't want 'em."

Lorene, struggling up from her chair by the fire, restrained her indignation. "If you want 'em," the woman continued, "you can have 'em. Or you can give them to the welfare people. Makes no difference at all to me."

She thrust the baby into Lorene's arms, dis-





"I don't want these four children," said the stranger at the door.

engaged the other three from her skirt, pushed them through the doorway and quickly whirled away into the night.

Lorene and Julian stared at each other. With an effort Lorene started toward the three children huddled together. The oldest girl stepped forward,

her small fists clenched. Lorene stopped short. Someone had hurt these children. Her skin prickling, she handed the baby to Julian and turned back to the three.

"Please don't be afraid." She smiled in reassurance, but made no move to approach them. "We love children in this house."

The children exchanged glances of disbelief. For several minutes Lorene talked without taking her eyes from them, then realized they might respond to an offer of food.

"Mamacita . . ." She beckoned Gloria to her side. "Why don't you show them where to wash their hands? I'll fix some *tortillas* and beans." At the mention of food, the children followed Gloria to the kitchen area. There, they ate incredible amounts, but still watched Lorene with obvious uneasiness.

"What are we going to do with them?" Lorene whispered to Julian.

"There are too many," Julian said.

"I know." Lorene took the baby to the kitchen sink and washed the thin, undernourished body. She was too old . . . 56 now. Her children were almost grown, except for Elvis, and Ruth, who had been adopted after him when she was 2½ years old. She couldn't do it.

Their hunger eased, the three girls agreed to a bath but refused to be separated. Lorene ran warm water and turned to lift the four-year-old, Mary Ann, into the tub. The child dodged, fell backward, flung up her tiny hands in an instinctive gesture of self-protection.

Suddenly Lorene was back in her grandmother's house. For a fleeting instant, she became this homeless four-year-old, remembering all too clearly how it was to be beaten, thrashed, flung against the wall by

grown-ups so crazed by their own angers and hurts they vented their fury on a helpless child. No, she couldn't turn these children away.

With the new arrivals in bed, Lorene picked up the baby and sat down in the rocking chair.

"Julian . . ." she began hesitantly. "We have to take them."

His keen eyes searched her face. "How will we feed them?"

"Buy flour and beans in 100-pound sacks."

"I guess it *can* be done," Julian said. "My father fed 16 kids on 50 cents a day. But you're not strong enough."

"I can do it," she insisted.

"You need to get some teeth," Julian reminded her, his eyes teasing but proud. Several of hers had been extracted in the hope of easing her arthritis. "If we take these four, you'll go through life a snaggle-tooth mama."

"With children, we won't ever be able to afford extras like teeth," Lorene agreed. "But we can give these little ones love. That's a lot more important than the extras."

The addition of the four lively sisters filled the Vela home until the walls seemed to bulge outward. The three older girls blossomed, put on weight, and adjusted well. But the baby, Lisa, couldn't keep her formula down. The doctor ordered surgery. For two harrowing weeks Lorene and Julian paced the hospital corridors and took turns consoling Lisa's three sisters who were certain that once again someone they loved would be taken from them.

When the baby recovered, the Velas visited the attorney who had handled all their previous adoptions. "If you're crazy enough to adopt four more," he said, "I'm crazy enough to make it legal. And there'll be no charge."

When word spread through West Texas, "Lorene and Julian Vela never turn down a child," the couple had to give up trying to limit their family. Along with the nine legally ►



How will we feed four more? Lorene wondered as she rocked the baby.

adopted children, they took Henry, two Davids, two Joes, another Ruth, Miguela, Victoria, Rachel, Oscar and Socorro. Some stayed a little while; some until they reached adulthood.

The Velas accepted a steady procession of children from orphanages and off the streets. Some were half-starved, crying out with hunger, small and alone. Some were teenagers, sullen and reckless with impatience to get on with the business of living.

In every one, Lorene saw what others failed to see . . . the loneliness, the agony of being young and unwanted, the eagerness to love and be loved. The welfare department offered the Velas \$40 a month for each child. They took the children but never accepted a penny for their care. Somehow they always scraped up the money. The love, however, flowed in abundance.

Lorene's grandmother had been furious at her daughter for marrying the man who became Lorene's father. Her grandmother had called him a "no-good." Then her father had been arrested and sent to prison, disgracing the family.

While he served his sentence, another man fell in love with her mother. When she refused to marry him, a bitter argument followed. That night Lorene snuggled in bed against her mother, feeling warm and loved, enjoying the cool breeze from the open window. The next moment the rejected suitor stuck a gun through the window, pulled the trigger and killed her mother.

After that, Lorene often wished a bullet had killed her, too.

She went to live with her grandmother in a house overrun with her grandmother's children and the children of her aunts and uncles.

When any child misbehaved, it was Lorene who was punished. Often she was hit until her nose bled, then hit again because the blood was staining the bed.

Just which beating maimed her small body, Lorene could never remember. A small photograph taken with her mother showed a pretty little girl of about three with a smile and a straight back. So she was not born with the

continued on page 252

*Love overflows the
small house when the huge
family gathers
at Christmas.*

