HIGH MOON, LOW MOON

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Abstract

of

HIGH MOON, LOW MOON

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Christy Drewry

A remembrance of two sisters growing up and growing apart, and a search for who they are today.
DEDICATION

Given with love,
for all sisters, whether strangers or friends.
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Chapter 1

ISOLATION

The postman brought catalogues to Linda’s door weekly, almost daily, left them there, stacked beside the shaggy potted cactus when the porch-side mailbox could take no more. Coming home from work, she stooped with an exhale, gathered them up and brought them into her house.

In the dim light of her living room, she heaved herself to the floor and relaxed against big cushions with patterns of custom motorcycles on the covers, beneath her collection of Route 66 signs, and dreamt her way through denim and leather, Southwest décor and elegant Edwardian dressers, concrete garden gods and wrought iron patio furniture. Paging through the colors and forms before her, Linda occasionally added to a list with smooth strokes of the pen, and once or twice commented out loud with a pause between each word: “Oh. That is bad.” In the twilight, she moved to the dining-room desk, leaving her latest finds on the floor, and switched on the lamp which flung out a pattern of soft colors, pink and blue and green, onto the wall and across envelopes, paper, and postage stamps. She sat and found the black vinyl checkbook in its cubby, and for a time soft clicks filled the room, punctuated by “No, wait” or “That’s not right” or “There it is.” And when the windows could only reflect the room back in on itself, she set pen and calculator aside, brought the specialty catalogue to her desk and picked up the phone.

A muscle-bound dog dropped a toy at her feet when she stepped onto the back porch with a bowl of kibble. “Aw, I’m hungry, Trans. Go eat your dinner.” He stood
back, tense, alert to her every move. “Trans.” He nosed the filthy ball closer. “Okay, you lonely puppa.” Only after he’d slid through the dirt a half-a-dozen times, stirring up a light, fine dust as he attacked each thrown ball, and after Linda had returned indoors, did he settle in to eat his dinner. Yellow Sunshine and silver Baby prowled the kitchen until their food dishes touched the floor. For Linda, leftovers from the fridge would do, heated up in the toaster-oven, which sat next to the hotplate on the crowded tabletop that served as kitchen counter. Fried chicken, either fast-food or store rotisserie, oozed grease, satisfied more than her hunger, as she bit and chewed. “Oh, yeah. Bad to the bone.” But Trans was out back, and the cats were intent on their own dinner.

Linda Susan, born a Contact, raised as an Ehrgott, married to be a Marquez, and then again to be a Dalton. These last initials please her well—LSD. I first heard of her colorful beginnings from the stories our mother tells of the time before my birth, when Linda, for five years, was the only child, and my father and mother and she had already moved from the East Coast to the West Coast. These are the early legends surrounding my sister, as told by our mother.

Through the kitchen window, I was keeping an eye on Linda while she played in the yard. Chuck and I had just arrived from Buffalo with her, and we had the downstairs of a small house in San Diego – the landlady lived upstairs and was very good to us. Linda must have been about five years old and she was intent on dragging a small stick back and forth over the little patch of dirt where she
was sitting. She jumped up squawking and stomping the ground with her feet. I ran out to rescue her, and saw white bumps all over her legs and arms. The dirt where she had been sitting crawled with ants. Not the little black ones. They were large and red—fire ants.

My older sister by five years, she will become my teacher, my torturer, my protector, a stranger, and maybe a friend.

The news came to us in the early fall, when we learned that L.A. County, Linda's employer for the past 18 years, had fired her—we learned that L.A. County, Linda’s employer for the past 18 years, had fired her—and had been sent in for observation only once, after that incident with scissors and a co-worker’s long hair. We had all hoped, then, that medical science would discover Linda’s need and make the recommendations that a mere family could not—we hoped for lithium.

“They won’t keep her. She knows how to act to get out of there.”

“They’ve got to. When they find out that she’s been waiting for Randy for twenty years— that’s crazy.”

“Just wait til they hear her language. Once she tells them to “f—off, it’s all over.”

“No. Linda’s a first-rate manipulator. She’ll have them wondering why the county sent her. She’ll be sweet and respectful, and they’ll just let her go.”

My mother, my younger sister Anna Lee, my ‘little’ brother Mitchell, and I had traversed this ground before, when we first voiced our fears for her health and safety to
each other. Her explosive phone calls, her alternating moods, her penchant for violence—these behaviors and more had us wondering what we could do to help. Nothing, came the answer. She is an adult and we cannot interfere.

Three days of mandatory observation for assaulting her co-worker’s hair—that had to be something. Together, we imagined the psychiatrist’s surprise at her responses:

“Are you unhappy at—“

“Unhappy? Unhappy?” She would be staring into his face, her words hitting him with precision. “I’ve got no bike, no fat man, no weed—how the fuck am I going to be happy?”

“Fat man?”

“Randy, my fat man—he’s coming back.”

“And he’s been gone how long?”

“Twenty years.”

Raised eyebrows.

“That don’t mean nothing because he’s coming back for me.”

“So, why did you cut the woman’s hair?”

“She plays those games, pretends to be all nice with her ‘Oh, excuse me, this, and Oh, I’m sorry, that’ and that ain’t right.”

“What did she do, exactly, to you?”

“She tossed me a look. Oh, I know that look.”

Our hopes slid away when, after the requisite three days, the doctors released her back to work into the county building.
Now, years later, she had assaulted a co-worker, reacting to a perceived threat, either with anger and loss of control, or with pleasure and planning. Hard to tell. I talked to Linda on the phone.

"I didn’t hit that bitch. They’re messing with me – they want to get me."

Right. There was much eye-rolling amongst the family, but nobody challenged her. Of course not. Mitchell and I decided we best go see her, try to help her work things out. He loaded a few tools in his truck for possible house repairs, and I, remembering past dramas at her house, reserved a hotel in Lancaster. In earlier years, any of us would sleep over in her living room or a guest bedroom, but by now, a hotel room was automatic—the safest place to stay. If she became upset and locked us out, at least our clothes would be in the hotel room and not her house. During the long drive down from Sacramento, Mitch and I discussed the likelihood of an explosion, in which case we would retreat to the hotel, gather our belongings, and head back up the freeway. Her condition now, without a job, would likely be much more unstable than before.

"Okay. If one of us says it’s time to go, we go."

"Agreed."

Fall in Lancaster offers the locals a respite from the furnace of Hell. The city is a checkerboard of businesses and empty lots, houses and empty lots, green lawns and empty lots. For many years, Linda had walked or ridden her bicycle between the county building and home. No one understood why she didn’t have a car, even though she swore she’d get a motorcycle before anything else. We worried about the possibility of another
motorcycle, now decades after she had parted with her Harley. Emotional. Reactive. Linda could run someone off the road in an instant of self-made justice, even on a motorcycle. We all knew that she’d already have a motorcycle if she was going to get one, but we didn’t know what stopped her. Money, she claimed. Her catalogue habit had maxed-out her credit cards. I thought that maybe she knew, as we did, that she would risk too much if she got back on a bike, and that’s why she talked about it, but never actually bought one. She was safer, pedestrians and drivers were safer, without a powered, deadly weapon in her hands – whether car or bike.

But now, months before the county fired her, she had her Jeep. Black. Cool, with a cannabis scarf tied to the rear view mirror, and a place for her dog, Trans, to ride in the back. We tensed a bit, expecting the worst: accidents, hospitals, road rage, and jail, but if there were incidents, we didn’t know of them. The Jeep sparked a new hypothesis about her hiatus between motorized vehicles: she had lost her license, for speeding or reckless driving, probably both, and had recently gotten it back. If that was the case, maybe she’d be a better driver, now, with the regained privilege of mobility. She and Trans could drive to her daughter’s home in Arizona to visit her grandchildren, and come up to visit our mother near Santa Cruz, or us – the siblings – in Sacramento.

Mitch and I checked into a Lancaster inn, and Linda drove over to spend some time with us in the pool. Nine o’ clock at night, but the clerk unlocked the pool and gave us an hour. We did laps in different strokes and jumped into the hot tub in between, and we could talk then. I let her lead, knew better than to question outright, and kept the conversation as organic as possible. At one point, Linda mentioned the surveillance
cameras in the corridor and how they didn’t show anything clearly—‘you can’t see me hitting that girl.’ Mitch and I looked at each other. Great—they’ve got solid evidence, too. That girl had wronged our sister somehow: it could’ve been an offhand comment, a brusque passing in the hall, a glance that appeared conspiratorial. Whatever the personal crime her co-worker had committed against her, Linda let her know that ‘it ain’t right.’

Linda, even in childhood, expressed her thoughts and feelings as they came—seemingly uncensored. Our mother tells the stories of Linda and fighting.

We were at a restaurant, sitting in a booth, just Linda and me. She must’ve been four or five. The next booth over, a young boy her age was making noise and carrying on with his parents. He popped his head over the padded back of the booth and saw Linda sitting there. He asked her a simple question.

‘Do you want to fight?’

She stood up in her seat, walked over to him and hit him right in the face. No preliminaries. No conversation. Just a direct answer to his question.

That wasn’t pride in my mother’s voice, but awe. This incident gave her something to think about – Linda might not be an ordinary little girl. She tells another story.

I was called in to her elementary school one day. She and another girl had been trading punches in earnest and they both wound up in the principal’s office.

When I came in, the two were sitting along the office wall chatting with each
other like they were good friends. On the way home, I asked Linda how it was that they went from fighting to talking.

“She’s a good fighter and we were just sitting there waiting, so I told her so, and then she told me that I fight pretty good too, and then we started talking about the fight.”

I don’t know where she gets it from.

My sister isn’t afraid of physical confrontation—she enjoys it. In her early teens, she would join Ed Parker in his Pasadena studios and become an assistant instructor for him in Kenpo karate. In tournament fighting, Linda learned the rules of etiquette. My family attended one of Parker’s “International Karate Championships” in Long Beach, and saw Linda in action. Following the rules handicapped her—no holds, light contact only.

When at last she lost a bout, she explained it to us later.

“That girl looked at me, and from the start, she saw I could kick her ass. If we were on the street, she’d be hitting the asphalt, and we both knew it.”

I wonder what took her away from something she loved so much, and I wonder if she was untrue to her own self in leaving.

Before her job crisis, we’d drive down to visit her every year or two. On a late night solo trip, one summer, I “crashed” on the living room floor, wrapped in a blanket she brought out for me. In the pre-dawn, I awoke to a low muttering. Grey light filtered into the living room and there was Linda, moving from corner to corner, giving her plants
their early morning water. She commanded the space around her with confident stride and determined gestures, even while half-whispering words of encouragement to the greenery. Her long overalls covered a bulky body, and yet she carried herself straight and with a natural poise, like a self-possessed cat. Neat, contained, present. Tiny feet delicately supported her German frame, and sensitive hands knew precision and detail. She filled the living room with her strength. Yet, as I watched her making the rounds, I sensed an innocent child, just doing what needed to be done. Soon she was at the plants near my head, and the ones hanging in front of the covered window above me. There was no pretending, so I lifted my head.

“You’ve been awake for awhile, huh? I know you have.”

Her light-hearted tone encouraged me to confess, and barely hid the accusation that I had been conspiring to trick her. Her voice in the full, not befitting an early morning arousal, jump-started the actions of the day. She took a few long steps to the kitchen, stashed the watering can underneath the sink, and announced our priority.

“C’mon, I’m hungry. Let’s go get some breakfast.”

Over orange juice and omelets, we laid out our plans for the day, so she could take full advantage of having my truck there. Linda listed some groceries and bigger things, like canned dog food and an eighteen-roll pack of toilet paper, that don’t carry well on a bicycle. She also requested a trip across town to the mall for clothes shopping, books, and maybe a movie. I wondered how she got by between visitors. The Mojave Desert, harsh yet serene, wasn’t the only thing that isolated her from family. Our mindscapes seemed mutually unknowable to each other – hers a jagged Picasso with
unpredictable turns and juxtapositions, and ours a clear Raphael with recognizable faces and forms. I troubled myself wondering if she had been so different in childhood.
Chapter 2

LAS FLORES TO LANCASTER

We grew up together in the Las Flores house in Altadena, just as close to the San Gabriel foothills as you can come, from 1960 until 1967. That first night we spent on the front porch – my father and mother and Linda and I – with a view of our new neighbors’ homes across the street perched atop their steep, short driveways, and the mountains, clear and close, behind. Safe between a low stucco wall and the smooth stucco house, beneath the picture window of the living room, we nestled among the blankets and pillows we had scattered across the concrete – our young family. Linda explained the fumigation process to me.

“They put poison in all the rooms to scare out the spiders.”

I kept watch most of the night, not sure if I was glad that my sister had warned me. Before I fell asleep, I sealed myself off with the blankets, and curled up tight inside. I was two and she seven. In the morning, we woke early, spiders forgotten, and the four of us explored our new house, with red tile roof, pleasing arches, and a big back yard.

Inside, our home pulsed with magic, probably residual from the previous owner, “a spiritual woman,” according to my mother. The back half contained our bedrooms—mine on the east end, my sister’s on the west end, and our parents’ in between. A narrow hallway joined all three, and widened just before Linda’s room to pick up the lavender
bathroom. These rooms all lined up on the south side of the house, along the back yard. The hallway opened up to the north side of the house at the kitchen on the east end, across from my room, and at the living room on the west end near the bathroom. Our father paneled the living room side of the door so that it blended into the wall – a secret door, by which he occasionally alarmed my mother’s guests. Linda and I disagreed about his intentions when he’d come through that door and interrupt the four women at the card table. Of course, I knew my father was innocent.

“He wouldn’t scare them on purpose. Dad just forgot they were having a game.”

But my sister, with a deeper understanding of human nature, voiced her own certainty.

“Oh, Dad knew exactly what he was doing.”

The entryway, with its Spanish-style archway, separated the living and dining rooms. A client of our father’s, a furniture builder, created our dining room set, rich and heavy, out of dark pine. Reddish hues from the round table and curved chairs warmed the room.

Our parents had arrived here as dance instructors for the Arthur Murray studios, and Linda and I learned the basic steps for the waltz, the box-step for salsa dances, and, my favorite, the swing steps – one-two-three, one-two-three, break-step. We could stand on their feet while they danced with us, but I learned best when coached from the side. When our parents danced together in our living room, all was right with the world. Sounds of the big bands swung out from the large black horn of our phonograph. The two
made magic, met and danced, spun away and came back together, all while keeping
themselves poised and independent. My father would snap his fingers to the downbeat.
They were smiling, glowing, bright-eyed – a perfect manifestation of the music.

Album covers studded the three walls of Linda’s cubby-hole bed: The Zombies,
The Turtles, Eric Burdon and the Animals. Not plastered, but affixed with thought and
care for the overall effect. Either our mother or father would have helped her put the
covers up – it even may have been their idea, to grow her sense of her own self, her
individuality. Arthur Murray dance instructors, swing was the thing, and Frank Sinatra
was king. Dance bands, big bands, melody and voice, now giving way to beat-driven
four-piece bands: guitar, keyboards, bass, and drums – the essential rock n roll kit.
Hanging the album covers, acknowledging her uniqueness, celebrating the continuation
of music, a natural progression from swing to blues to rock, successively building and
extending from each other.

I fit into the family exactly between my sisters: five years behind Linda, and five
years ahead of Anna. We added a bunk bed for Anna Lee when she was old enough to
move from her basinet to my room. In compensation, I got my own porthole to view the
world outside from my top bunk. To free up the small hallway, Dad replaced my swing
door with a pocket-door, which slid entirely from view when open. We always kept that
pocket door open. It may have been because, sometime after the installation, someone
nailed a picture up on the hallway wall, and my door mysteriously could not be closed.
At the far end of the hallway, Linda kept her door closed, concealing her young pre-teen
life from family. The white paneled door separated us, and humbled me as little sister
who would not be privileged enough to enter her world. Our parents usually left the door to their master bedroom open, and I found an easy path to their bed when night-snarls crawled across my covers, or the lion roared out of his corner.

Our mother often dressed us alike. Dark corduroy dresses with a broad cream trim. Linda and I sit on a bench for the photographer with our heads turned to look at each other, me smiling, she telling me to smile. She is older and taller and wiser, and—on occasion—my guardian.

My world was expanding from just the house and yard to include the neighborhood. Across the street, Mary and Bobby played games on their front lawn with friends. They had a circle-game going on the day I decided to come over and play too. I walked up their short hill of a driveway to join them, and at the top, I stopped. I could see the circle of friends just in front of me, but in a darker light. They looked over at me. I didn’t understand why they were looking and why I just stood there until warm blood dripped down my face. And then my sister appeared, looking into my face, cursing at Bobby as he dropped a handful of rocks. She put her hand on my forehead and ushered me home. At that moment, sisterly love wrapped all around me, displacing the shock of total rejection and numbing the sting of a rock. My sister, my own hero, who loved me enough to take care of me, had come to my aid when I didn’t even know she was there.

When fall arrived, and with it the Santanas, Linda walked me to school. Thomas Edison Elementary, three residential blocks to the west, across busy Fair Oaks Avenue, two more blocks, and south down the hill. I played on the lower playground with the first
through third graders, while Linda climbed the steps to the upper playground for the higher grades. Those steps divided the school so that we never saw each other during the day, but we’d meet after school and she’d walk me home. When the Santana wind blew hard along the sidewalk, we could lean back, all the way back, and let it hold us up. We spread out our arms and felt the force of dry, warm air push us forward. Invisible wind, but so visceral it held our bodies upright. Linda told me that, on the playground, she turned around and lay into the Santana, face first, and felt like she was flying. Like Superman, I thought.

Once, on our way to school, I had a close call with the traffic. We had stopped half a block from our house to pick up Linda’s friend, Pricilla, and a few other kids joined us along the way. Then they crossed Fair Oaks Avenue. The little crowd was ahead of me, and I followed them across. Linda yelled at me and I heard a loud noise behind me. As I made the curb, she pulled me up and then immediately listened to my heart. She put her ear against my chest and reported a fast heartbeat.

“You were scared, weren’t you? That’s what happens. Your heart speeds up.”

Embarrassment kept me from answering, and I couldn’t decide if my sister was concerned with my life, or more interested in confirming what she had heard. My older sister. Student of human reactions.

After breakfast, we headed out to run errands. I wanted to make conversation.

“When are you going to get a car, Linda?”
"A car? No, Chris." Sometimes her explanations were slow and careful—her
sense of humor, I suspected. "It's my Harley or nothing. I'm not getting anything else til
I get my bike."

And until that time, she would ask to drive my truck whenever I came down, and
I would let her. She had earned no one's trust, but I felt a challenge—she dared me to
trust her, and I wanted to show her I did, that she was okay, an acceptable person. I
would not react to erratic behavior. If she accelerated hard, I leaned back into the seat,
comfortable and unperturbed. When she switched lanes without warning, I yawned and
looked ahead. She wouldn't have an excuse to jump on me for telling her how to drive.

Today, she begged to take the driver seat.

"Pleaz-z-ze, Chris? I need to drive real bad."

I enjoyed a small moment of power, knowing it wouldn't last, and let her
persuade me to give her the wheel of my truck, telling myself it would be okay if she hit
something—I expect a truck to get some creases here and there. I pulled over so we
could switch seats, and as Linda took command of the road, I turned down the radio. Her
smile vanished.

"Are you messin' with me? Turn it up."

"It's too loud, Linda. How're we going to hear to talk?"

She met my surprised gaze with her own accusatory one.

"You don't think I can drive, do you?" She was still accelerating.

Her rapid mood change left me rattled.

"No. I see you can drive."
It had been years since any of our family had relinquished control of a vehicle to her, for just that reason. Anyone except me. Linda veered into the far left lane of the city street, and I reached for the grab-bar above the passenger window.

“Oh, I see that psychology shit you try on me. What are you doing?”

At the green light, she slammed the brake pedal. My seat belt dug into my shoulder.

“You’re messin’ with me, aren’t you?” She put the truck in park and looked at me, pupils narrowed to specks, while horns blasted from behind.

“I don’t need your shit. You and everyone.” She jerked the door open, swung her legs out, and strode across the lanes to the sidewalk.

I watched her in the sideview mirror, almost regal, flipping off the world.

Every one of our family has experienced her accusations, her paranoia, her explosive reactions to nothing. We have faulted her for an apparent lack of empathy – psychotic, we conclude. And we drop our connections, shut down any open channels, to protect ourselves from her emotional maelstroms which can devastate any one of us in an instant.

“She’s the best manipulator.”

On that we all agree. She seems to enjoy shaking us up, hoping to get something out of us that she can react to.
The spaces between people can separate or join us. We choose, and once that space becomes familiar, it is easy to traverse. Easy and, perhaps, uninteresting. It is the unknown space that I am driven to explore, finding my way to the separate person — learning, reaching, connecting for the sake of the other person, for my peace of mind. Linda is complicated and interesting, and yet cut off from the people in her life — isolated, when she should be part of our lives. That unknown territory of her mind draws me closer to learn more, to see and understand.

Not just my sister, but other people I have set out to discover. Making connections brings satisfaction: the pull of curiosity, the search for likeness, the drawing out of another person. When I am in the process of discovery, I am not thinking about life, but I am in the middle of living it. Not pushing, not maneuvering, not judging—just being. Not trying to dance, but dancing. And after learning about someone, there is the hard work of maintaining the relationship, by far the most difficult part for me, maybe for most people. I am not consistent enough to be a maintainer. When the connection becomes stable, my perceptions change, and I am no longer the explorer, but the child who wants to play follow-the-leader. Instead of perpetuating that connection, I fall off into the mode of thinking again. Maybe I get bored, or maybe I don’t want to fulfill expectations. I’ve often viewed with awe those people who have long and lasting friendships, those who still know people from their childhood. Somehow, I can’t stay. Only with family. I wonder how relationships work for Linda, and if perhaps we are the same — unable or unwilling to hold onto friendships. Perhaps she struggles, as I do, with an inability to live up to her own expectations in a relationship. Perceptions change, of
self and others, sometimes revealing a strong and whole person, other times a fading and distant one.

The more I learn about my older sister, the more mysterious she becomes to me. She had to walk beside our car once, when my father wrestled with her will, and then ordered her out. I watched from the back seat, my window rolled down, as she paced her long strides to keep ahead. He drove slowly. After a minute, he passed her and parked a little way up the street. When she caught up, she just opened the door and got in. No words from either one of them. I think he had won that bout, but Linda’s shoulders never sagged.

Mother tells us of her earliest exploits.

One afternoon I heard my landlady upstairs yelling, “Missus, she’s on the roof, she’s up on the roof.” Panicked, I ran outside and looked up, past the landlady’s window, to the top of the house – and there’s my four-year-old, standing upright on the slanted edge. Heights were nothing to Linda.

Another time, I heard some children at my door, yelling, “It’s Linda.” Forewarned, I followed the children to the tallest pine tree on the block, in the front yard of a nearby house. The pine is taller than the house by at least half, and from up there near the top, where she sat among the upper branches, my little girl smiled down at me.
My adventurous older sister – my fearless older sister. Her stories become legends to inspire me.

The most unusual and entertaining piece of furniture in our Las Flores home sits squat between the living room and the front door. Simply a barrel with the top ¼ section removed to make room for a padded seat and back, attached to a ball-bearing swivel which is supported by three solid, short legs. The cloth is parti-colored in squares of green and plum and gold.

“Okay, set Lovey down.”

I place our congenial orange tabby guy on the circular seat and he agreeably stretches out. Linda spins the chair, pushing the edge of the back every time it goes by. Lovey flattens himself on the seat and seems to press into the cushion.

“Okay, okay.”

I reach for my poor kitty.

Linda stops the chair and in laughter says:

“Set him down. Careful now.”

I pick up our limp Lovey and set him on the hardwood floor. He sags and lolls, then decides sitting is his best option. Eyes and head track the still-moving room. We laugh at his swiveling eyes, but I want to take it all back. Linda sets him up on his feet again and soon he is staggering away – straight ahead a step, then stop and a step off to the right by fifteen degrees, then stop and two steps to the left.
Not much later, I am in the chair spinning ‘round – there goes Mom’s orange plaid recliner, the dolly Madison, the dining room archway with straw-bottom wine bottles hanging on the wall, the large wall-mounted musical dwarves brought to life with Mom’s paintbrush, the baby grand, the set of rocking chairs, Dad’s recliner, the fireplace, Mom’s chair again. And again and again and again. Linda sets me on my feet, holds me steady a moment.

“Okay, now walk over to the piano.”

The piano keeps moving and my foot won’t step where I want it to. I hear Linda’s laugh. She wants to know if I’m okay, but I cannot say. I feel her hands ease me to the stable surface of the floor.

I couldn’t always tell if she did something to be mean, or just thought she was playing with me. “I’m gonna get you” meant “I will tackle you, sit on you, hold your hands out on the floor, tickle you until it hurts.” Breathless, can’t breathe. Can’t communicate, can’t say “don’t,” only scream out, voice rasping over laughter. My fault for laughing. If I didn’t laugh, I could scream, make her understand, call for help. She comes for me and I run, but somehow I end up on the ground on my back, she sitting atop me, across my hips, leaning her weight into her arms and hands which pin my wrists on each side of my head. I’m squealing and gasping.

“No - no.”

She drops her head, burying her crown into my belly, and twists her upside-down head side to side. In between my gasps for air, laughter erupts from my near-empty
lungs. All my muscles strain in resistance. She comes up red-faced and laughing.

Now’s my chance. I fight to breathe.

“Linda.”

Down she goes again, putting me into spasms, and I am senseless to everything but the twisting pressure against me. My convulsions tear at my muscles – then she’s off and I burn and ache. Adrenaline drains away and fatigue swamps my body and mind. For her, it’s fun. But I never know if that’s because she thinks I’m having fun, or because she enjoys the power play.

Power. Power over someone else. When I think of Linda, I see both her innocence and her influence, because while she maneuvers people in her own way, she, at the same time, seems to operate from the heart, from what makes sense to her. A perfect example is in another of Mother’s stories.

We were watching tv one night, and I told Linda,

“Go put the baby to bed.”

She escorted you to the crib, and put you inside, but you climbed right back out. She put you in again, settled you down, and then came back out to the living room. Just then, we heard screams and wails coming from the bedroom, and I ran to see what was wrong, sure something bad had happened. There you were, tied to the bars of the crib, so you “wouldn’t get out again.”
My sister, I like to believe, thinks that she’s doing the right thing. Each step of her logic makes sense to her.

Her antics seemed to vary from caring about me and protecting me to pushing me up front to protect her, like on the night we broke Grandma’s mirror. We had been left alone in her house, and Linda chased me through the rooms—probably to tickle me. I ran from living room to bedroom to bathroom, which flowed through to another bedroom. I closed the doors after me, and when Linda came charging through the master bedroom door, the long door mirror cracked. We stopped laughing and looked at each other.

“Look, Chris. You’re the little one. I know I broke the mirror. But you won’t get in as much trouble as I would. So we can tell them that you broke the mirror, and it will be okay.”

My sister sounded so smart and logical, and I agreed to her plan. When our mother and grandmother came home, we led them to the bedroom, and I told them I slammed the door, and I was sorry. I didn’t mean to break her mirror. At that moment, I felt very sad for Grandma’s loss and wanted things to be right. I got a hug, and Linda never mentioned it again.

Late nights at grandma’s with the family, when the adults played cards into the early morning, and Linda and I slept in the guest bedroom. I’d ask my grandmother to keep the door open. I didn’t want to lose contact with everyone, even after I fell asleep. The voices from the living room warmed me, soothed me, let me know the world is alright.
“Hey, Charlie.”

That would be my step-grandpa addressing my father.

“Charlie, what do you think…”

The in and out of words I either couldn’t make out, or just didn’t understand.

“Fine and dandy, Marsh.”

The world worked, and this open door allowed me to hear it, even be a part of it, by touch. Natural tones and rhythms wafted in, hums and laughter flowed in and over me, telling me that it’s okay to go to sleep.

There were times when Linda opened her door to me. Deep into one night, an unfamiliar “pat” sound roused me. My mind caught up with my senses, telling me that a distinct rustling had been repeating itself in the hall as I slept. My skin chilled. I opened my eyes, straining to hear, hoping not to. There it was, another “pat” at my doorway, but sounding more substantial than I had imagined. I breathed, and sat up in my bunk bed to see the doorway, trying to match the sound with something in the real world. I slunk to the foot of my bunk bed to peek into the hall. Crumpled balls of paper had gathered there, right in front of my doorway, and their solid, non-ghostly appearance brought me down to investigate. At the other end of the hall, my sister’s door lay open, and Linda beckoned me to her rose-colored land. I balked, not willing to sneak past the open door of the master bedroom, but she silently insisted, pantomiming the slitting of a throat. I tip-toed to her door and she let me in.

“C’mon, Chris. Spend the night with me.”
Her built-in bed laid nestled back in its own alcove. But that's not where she wanted me. She opened the drop-down door under her bed, to reveal an enclosed space not high enough to sit up in, but at least carpeted and clean. It took some coaxing, but I finally gave in.

“Only if you don’t close that door. Leave it open.”

“Okay. But if Mom or Dad comes, I’ll have to close it, and you’ll have to be real quiet in there.”

I sidled in with a borrowed pillow and a secret smile. She already had a blanket in there.

Later in the night:

“Hey, Chris. Are you awake?”

“Mmfft.”

“Yeah, I can’t sleep either. Do you want to talk?”

And so, as a girl of seven and eight, I listened and learned from my twelve and thirteen year old sister: that an unseen power makes the seed sprout and grow into a tree, or a flower, or a weed. That Mary Jo has spongy bones because she won’t leave “H” alone. That smoking isn’t even cool and love is the purest force in the world. And Linda could kick any girl’s ass at school. And that she left flowers on Mrs. Cook’s doorstep because old people are the coolest. And how Mrs. Kraska, her junior high teacher, likes her and talks to her.

We didn’t discuss the assassination of a President, or first contact with our Moon. Nothing about air so dirty that we couldn’t see the mountains right in front of us. Only
monologues about other people, like Frank who could walk his truck. He'd leave the
engine running and then get out with it still in gear, and walk beside it. And Beezer who
rode a BSA motorcycle and had leather boots. I thought her world exotic, and wondered
where she met these people whom she spoke of with awe and respect. They sounded like
her friends, but they never came over to visit the way my friends did.

Sometimes, she'd make observations about our family.

"Do you know that Aunt Hazel has all her teeth?"

The reverence kept her voice even. Aunt Hazel was actually our great-aunt—not
even that. She was our maternal grandmother's cousin, and she took care of Grandma
when they were kids. When our parents brought their little family all the way from
Buffalo to California, both our grandmother and Aunt Hazel followed.

"Do you see how white they are? She rinses with hydrogen peroxide every day."

Our great-aunt, with her silver curls and clip-on earrings, had earned respect from
all the family for being neat and self-contained. She spoke rationally and never cussed or
raised her voice. I didn't doubt that her teeth were all hers, she took such good care of
everything.

These sleepovers let me discover that Linda sometimes left her room at night. I
opened her door one night, uninvited, and found an empty room. Trembling, I returned
to my own, and only at breakfast learned that the spirit-world had not whisked her away,
after all.
I hold up the mirror for you to see yourself, and in the back of the mirror, I see myself. Tentative, hoping for the best, the better. Knowing the truth—the one no one wants to see or admit, but there it is shining out from the old woman playing solitaire at the kitchen table, from the blue-collar worker in front of the set, from the coffee house, the bar, the racetrack—sold in the drug den, the cookie shop, the catalogue.

What a strange mix we are, adaptable with our ingenuity and ability to learn, and rigid in what the brain or body, or both, must repeatedly perform. Across the population, we have the same traits and instincts and intellect. Our differences are a matter of degree. Skin, but in a range of shades. Reasoning power, but greater in some. Art talent, but lesser in others. Fight or flight—extremes or balance. We shift from instinct to habit to addiction—just like that.

Flirt, cry, run. Run towards safety or away from danger. Then run because you can, whenever you feel like it. Now, run because you must, whether it feels good or not, because your body and mind crave it. Other verbs work as well: dance, hate, write, slay. It’s a pattern that resists change. Habits are part of our human survival package—opposite to learning and flexibility which allow us to adapt, and also survive.

Many habits are beneficial—cooking good food. Some can go either way—gossiping. And many destroy—over-buying. We comfort ourselves with familiarity and when that habit becomes all-important, or just always present, when it commands us rather than serves us, we seem to blame the “defect” on the individual and forget that it is a wired-in species-trait gone wrong. We give it a name. Addiction. People become addicted—to many things—and some more heavily than others, and some things we get
addicted to have more serious consequences than others. A day of whitewater can leave a girl wanting more, so that a simple drive along a river, no matter how tame or wild the flow, has her looking for the path of water to ride down through the rocks, and she wonders how it would feel to run that river. The burn to slide downstream spends more and more time in her body until it is everywhere, and then she is addicted. The habit learned of reading the moving water, the skills that helped her survive, turn on her, and instead of being available upon demand, they override her thoughts.

It's a matter of degree. Linda's response to aggression, whether real or perceived, is to fight. Her response to entering a room full of people is to run away. She must struggle to overcome either one. Sometimes "crazy" doesn't describe a deviation from the norm, but an exaggeration of it. If instinct and habit and addiction are common to all of us, I wonder that we don't understand each other better. It seems we have to realize our own motives if we are to clearly see someone else's.

Linda seemed to be pretty steady when I visited a few years back. The food was good; the prospect of going shopping was good, and I was working hard to keep our conversation in a casual, non-threatening tone. You didn't rest when you were in Linda's company, unless you really wanted to take some abuse.

That afternoon, we took the dog for a walk across the barren blocks of undeveloped town. Trans had only a collar, no leash, and I worried he would run into the streets surrounding the square lots, but Linda used her strong voice to command the dog.
The occasional yelling jarred me and interfered with any reflections or conversations. In between yells, Linda spoke of the trials of living in this desert town.

"Shitty job, no wheels, and I'm already half-dead."

That was her way of saying she was over fifty. I tried a light-hearted response.

"Well, I'm not far behind you." I got a smile out of her, then pushed a bit.

"If you were to sell your house, would you move to Arizona to be close to Candy?"

The smile turned into a snarl.

"Why would I do that? What makes you think I'd go out there?"

I didn't understand her response, like so many other things about Linda, and though her tone gave me warning, I answered anyway.

"Because your daughter's there. Don't you want to be with her?"

Silence. I braced for the worst, but she finally laughed.

"Her dad lives there, and I'd be forced to kill him."

It was hard understanding Linda, just being with her, but that afternoon, I learned a powerful secret by accident:

"Trans. Come back here."

Why must she control so much? The dog is fine. He was sniffing bushes in the middle of the huge lot and paid no attention to his master, who repeated her command and picked up her pace, anger animating her stride. I saw Linda's leg flash out and kick the dog.

"Stop it."
The dog did not yelp or run away; he just stood and took the first kick and the second one, but I was out of my head now, running to get between them, taking up an automatic stance in front of Trans.

“You don’t kick dogs. Don’t kick, Linda.” My voice turned rough and unfamiliar.

“What’s wrong, Chris? You look like you want to fight.”

Somewhere, I recognized the fighting stance I’d taken up. I felt hot tears, and I couldn’t stop, even if it meant a fight.

“You just don’t kick dogs.”

Linda stepped back, outside the strike zone, and I stayed firm in front of Trans, but in the quiet, he ambled off to the next bush. My fire went out, and there I was, facing down Linda and wondering what to do next. Her eyes were large, taking in this unfamiliar sight, and she never shifted into a stance. I talked myself down, relaxing muscle by muscle. After a moment, Linda turned and followed Trans down the little trail. She did yell at Trans a few times more, rather half-heartedly, but I saw no more kicks. It occurred to me that there were times when she actually listened to me, whether she said anything about it or not. I could actually, maybe, have influence over her.

It seemed to me that things were getting better for Linda: she had the enjoyment and freedom of a vehicle, she was fully employed and must have some friends at work, she had paid down her credit cards, she was even taking a motorcycle mechanics course by mail. But everyone still remained on guard all the time, even when it looked like she
was relaxed (especially then). Our mother had said it was like walking on eggshells, being around her—you had to tread carefully. She kept spewing profanities, over the phone or in person. Not just words, but directed anger, an intense beam of hate. For the damage that could be done, I thought “glass shards” was a more apt analogy. And yet, and yet, I hoped that awareness was growing within her these past few seasons, that she’d start to make sense of the hints I’d been dropping.

I don’t want to judge Linda’s behavior. I want to understand it. I’ve come to know her well enough to trust her—I trust her to be herself. For so long with her, I was not able to trust myself to know what to say, to respond responsibly, intelligently, compassionately to her.

“I know that Grandma’s still alive.”

She’s mentioned this secret more than once over the years. I’ve never been able to counter with the truth. I can’t say,

“No, Linda. She’s really dead. We had her body cremated. Remember?”

I won’t correct her, but I will listen. My responses have progressed over the years. At first a laugh—but she’s serious. Later, silence, and we let it pass. And finally, a question.

“Why do you think that?”

“Well, we never saw her body, did we?”

“No. But Mom went down there right away. She saw her.”

“Yeah, well, Mom knows. I bet she never told you she has a sister, has she?”
I take the curveball and remember some mention from Linda years back that I had ignored. I still won’t argue (pointless) for I would learn nothing. So I ask, my voice strong and even,

“Wasn’t there a problem – Grandma couldn’t have any more children after Mom?”

We both knew the story – the nurses in Buffalo had tied her legs together so she wouldn’t deliver before the doctor arrived.

“But before Mom was born. Think about it Chris.”

I had to draw her out more.

“Mom has an older sister?”

That’s as far as it went, though.

“You should ask Mom sometime. Ask her to tell you the truth.”

I figured Linda hadn’t thought past the idea to the details. Maybe next time. Maybe the story developed in her mind in response to learning that her real father was someone only our mother could remember. In an out-of-control world, people create relationships and see patterns that aren’t there, and Linda’s mind might have developed a way to gain control of a world she couldn’t make sense of. I just want to keep our channel from going down.

She sees patterns that others do not, but that’s just another human trait exaggerated. We look for the familiar, a pattern we can identify. I look at the full moon, and cannot miss the human face on it, no matter how off-center and incomplete it may be. I find it without even thinking.
Linda and I lie on our backs in the driveway of our Las Flores home, and watch white cotton figures migrate from west to east across the dark blue sky. The heat of the concrete warms my back, pleases me.

“A dog.” She doesn’t point. “Over by where the boot used to be.”

I spot a sweepy cloud in the west, but I don’t see a dog. None of the other scattered clouds have a nose and a tail either.

“I don’t see it.”

“Look at the long, droopy ear. See it? The bright part of the cloud?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then the face comes out of the side, and the long nose.”

“That’s a dog’s head.”

“Yeah.”

I’m impressed and look for another of my own.

“A lady’s dress.”

“Oh, that one over there? The long gown and little sleeves?”

“Yep.” She saw the same thing I did.

A few moments go by, and the curled tongue of the dog has shifted to enlarge its jaw. My dress has imperceptibly made the transformation into an upside down tree.

Now that we’re not children anymore, I wonder what patterns we could see if we took the time to look. I might work to find a cat or a bird, but I bet today Linda could
find an eagle or a lion just like that. Her imagination has survived adulthood unimpaired by criticism, and that is what keeps her open to art and beauty. She knows the right color or shape for each corner of the canvas. That strong sense isn't inside of me, not for art.

Lying on the living room rug, a large multi-colored oval of concentric cloth rings, Linda and I wax artistic on the coloring books spread around us. Mom in her chair, Dad in his, both reading books, while the phonograph pines "Cool, clear water."

Those coloring books with thick black lines and goofy figures don't interest me. I pick out the book with fair figures and fine lines – turn to a page with a flowy dress, full to the floor. From our box of crayons, I select "Red-Violet," my favorite of the colors, and lay down heavy marks that leave the full color on the page, that pleasing purple.

Although I strain to control the crayon, often my movements jerk it over the line. I stop to rest my hand and take a peek at what Linda is doing in her book. In her hand, the dark "Midnight Blue" leaves a surprisingly delicate shade on a man's shirt. The effect seems more realistic than my work. Back on my very purple dress, I try a lighter hand, but now I have even less control and the color shoots over the line unpredictably.

"Here, watch how I do it."

Linda shows me her motion.

"Make little circles over and over."

Somehow, her overlapping circles form a solid color. There's no hint of the scribbling lines from my effort. I work at it again, only mildly frustrated and sure that I will soon get it.
Her next secret she shares with me days later, again on the living room floor.

“IT’s easier if you outline first.”

She never pushes or commands, just offers her artistic impressions. Her dark lines neatly contain a lighter shade of the same color. I find a majestic tree and trace heavy lines of “Burnt Sienna” just inside the curve of the black outline – well, mostly inside. Now for the little, lighter circles – it takes a lot longer to cover the area of the trunk with this method, but patience ensures that the whole area is covered and I don’t have to go back to fill in gaps. Lots of patience. Looking at her book again, I learn another trick. She also darkens the inside lines that show the folds in a shirt, a few separate blades of grass, the veins of a leaf.

“Think of the shadows they make.”

It’s not near as much work to go back and darken those inner shadow lines. And my sister doesn’t judge my work. No silly, encouraging words of “that’s nice” or “now you’ve got it.” Also, no critical words of “can’t you stay in the lines?” or “what a stupid color for a horse.” She allows me to look and learn as I wish, content in her own work.

When it comes to skin color, Linda never uses the crayon marked “Flesh” like I do. She selects the lightest, palest orange she can find – “Apricot” – and melds it with a faint bit of red – “Carnation Pink” – to make fresh skin tones of her own. I had to resort to her trick of mixing colors for skin when Crayola later did away with “Flesh” (actually renamed it “Peach”).
A few years into our visits, Mitch and Mom and I drove down together, with his son, Mitchy, an older teen. At different times, together or alone, we each had come to Linda’s desert, to fix her house, to take her shopping, even just to say hello while driving to L.A. On this trip, we’d done a little of everything. After making some small repairs, hanging out, going out to dinner, and sitting around chatting, we decided to go to the show. We called the theater for shows and times, then spilled out the front door of the house – Linda in her denim jacket and jeans, Mitchy in a black t-shirt and sweats, Mom in a casual suit, and me in black jeans and a purple t. As I ducked to get into the backseat, I heard a commotion, something had happened – there was a voice and then silence. Looking back, I saw Linda talking to Mitchy.

“You can’t go walking like that with me.”

Mitchy just looked at her, eyebrows arched high.

“I won’t be seen with that shirt.”

He looked down at his clothes. In red letters, all caps, written diagonally across the front of his t-shirt, were the letters DARE, and just below, the rest of the slogan in small white letters, “to keep kids off drugs.” He looked up again with humor lighting his face.

“It’s just a shirt, Aunt Linda.”

“No. You can’t wear that with me.” Clipped, controlled words.

“Aunt Linda, it doesn’t mean anything.” The eye-sparkle faded, deepening his dark brown eyes.
Mitch started the engine to get the air cooling and the rest of us stood together in a loose circle, while she balked some more.

"No. No." Each word a fact, edged with cold steel. "Go get another shirt."

Mitchy shrugged and turned back to the house, but his dad called after him.

"Your clothes are fine."

He paused and started to look back, but instead dismissed the drama with a fling of his arm and went inside.

I closed my eyes and shook my head, then headed for the car.

"What?" Linda wanted to keep going. "What's wrong?"

I could answer her with straight truth and stir her up more or I could placate her and save the evening. The objective was always to defuse Linda before she could explode over everyone.

"Everybody wears clothes that have writing. It doesn't mean we believe the writing. For Mitch, it just means that the t-shirt was the next one in his closet."

"Why'd he pick that one to bring here? He knows better."

Laugh. "Linda, look. He went in to change, didn't he?"

I got in the car. Mom was already in the front seat, not saying anything. Mitch stood at the driver's door and watched his son walk from the house to the car. We heard Linda's voice.

"What? What're you doing, Mitchy?"

Mitchy just made his way to the car, the word DARE still slashed across his chest in red.
I don’t know. I just didn’t want to change it.” He got in the back seat as Linda gulped air.

“No. No. I’m not getting in the same car with that.”

We paused and watched her sputter.

“Fine.” The calm of Mitch’s voice, steady and full, sounded reasonable. He closed his door, and we followed suit, then drove off. Out the back window, I could see her pacing across the driveway.

At the first signal light, Mitch thought of something to say. “You know, she’s right. We should be looking for ways to keep our kids on drugs.” By the time we smelled popcorn, the bad taste of that scene had been laughed away.

A few hours later, we rolled into her driveway and saw her sitting erect in the dark. She rose from her doorstep and stood, feet apart, hands on hips.

“You’re not coming into my house.”

Mitchy opened his door, but was stopped by a loud yell.

“No. You don’t come to my house and treat me like that. No. Unh-uh.” She crossed her arms and stayed put in front of her door. “That ain’t right.”

“Linda, let us get our stuff from in there.” I started to get out.

She took a quick, sharp step forward and pointed to the street.

“Go. Go, now.”

“Linda.” I spoke slowly. “If we leave now, if you have us leave, then you know we won’t be coming back.” I couldn’t make myself say “ever.”

The strangest little half-smile came over her face.
On the way back up the freeway, we agreed on this latest survival rule: keep everything in the car at all times.

One needs a strategy to reduce damage when dealing with Linda, and over the years I had developed a pretty effective one—let her talk, rant, cuss, rage, and yell all she wants, and then find a place to insert a bit of humor, get her to laugh, and all would be well—until next time. It took nearly fifty years to figure out how to actually talk with her, hold a conversation, of sorts. In the old days on Las Flores street, I took her verbal and emotional assaults personally, and felt sorry for myself. Later, I learned that she’d get over any dramatic bout very quickly and I could just pretend it never happened, and still later, I realized she seemed to enjoy a good yell, a rant. I couldn’t take offense anymore, knowing that’s how she communicated with the world, perhaps like those children with Asperger’s Syndrome. As I got better at it, I could ride the storm and actually feel unthreatened, magically safe. Eventually, I could ask her the toughest question:

“Linda, did you ever think that your brain might be chemically imbalanced, and that just getting the right chemicals would make you feel better?”

“Oh, yeah, Chris. My brain needs chemicals so-oo bad.”

On another lone visit, just last year, she drove me in her Jeep to the next town down the Antelope Highway. She cranked up the radio volume, a normal habit, but one
that I had begun to understand. She liked the hard rock music, but she also liked getting reactions from people. That was it, she wanted to be told to turn down the radio, she wanted someone to respond to something she did. I could do that, if it meant establishing some kind of dialogue with her. I let the guitars blast for a bit, then tried to say something to her. Maybe she’d turn it down on her own. No. She just smiled wide with flushed cheeks and bopped her head. She rocked til the song was over, and in that brief silence, I tried to capture her in conversation.

“Hey, Linda. How’s Candy doing? Have you seen her?”

One never knows how Linda will take a question. She might explode with anger because she doesn’t know what Candy is doing, or she could criticize me for asking a stupid, fake question. In this case, I got a good response.

“You should see the bad ol’ afghan I’m making for her.”

Hard to imagine my bad-ass, Harley-riding sister-with-an-attitude knitting or crocheting.

“I’ll show you later.”

She had turned the radio down farther, and we talked awhile about how she’s still going to get a motorcycle, and how Candy, her daughter, would be visiting at Christmas, and how I liked her artistic nature. I mentioned the stained-glass iris she had made and sent to Mom this spring, with real colored glass, edged in real lead, and I didn’t say I knew it was a truce gift. Mom had made room for it in the center of her kitchen window, alongside the glass hummingbirds and porcelain butterflies other children and
grandchildren had given her. I told Linda how the iris would catch the afternoon sun and

glow. We listened to more music.

I rolled down my window and cooled my face in the wind. The black sky, the

intense white stars, the surrounding flat desert, emptied me, vibrated my insides hollow.

What I really wanted to talk about – I had questions for her. Questions she might try to

answer, but which stir deep emotions in her, and ultimately shut down thoughts.

"I don't want to talk about it."

My unvoiced questions:

Do you like it here?

Why do you scare Mom?

Don't you want to be a part of the family?

I couldn't understand why, after Randy left, she stayed out there, away from

family. Logically, I knew that she couldn't come home. "Home" was scattered here and

there throughout the state. I began to wonder if she had to be so far away from us. She

couldn't endure people after years of Randy and drugs.

I wrote my sister a letter once, and asked if she hates Mom. On our next phone

call, I asked her again.

"Why do you yell at Mom, and leave strings of profanities on her phone? Why do

you act so mean to her?"

Her reply was not an answer.
“Mom knows what’s up. We fight and then forget about it. She understands that.”

“I don’t think so, Linda. She doesn’t like it.”

Linda was not one to apologize – not for her actions, which she considered to be true to herself. It seemed there could be no resolution between mother and daughter, not with the harsh phone calls and outright threats. Her language belonged wholly to her, and “Fuckin’-A” expressed her wonder whether with friends, co-workers, or Grandma. If Grandma said, “Linda, watch your mouth,” then she would have replied, “What? That’s just the way I talk, Grandma.” Her simple explanation, politely given. Yet, if pushed – “Don’t you use that kind of language in my house,”—she would slip into battle mode: “That’s me, and I won’t stop talking just to be over here. You can’t tell me what to say.”

In a way, I admired her ability to be just her, not to bend to the expectations of others, to always be Linda. How freeing it must feel, to be unencumbered by the needs of others, to not have to put up a façade for anyone. While she is truthful, I am deceitful because I can and do adjust my language, my mood, my temperament to better reach whomever I’m with. This must be a survival skill, a social skill that Linda had never grasped. Yet, somehow, playing roles to accommodate people sounded wrong. Linda’s way seemed most honest.

In the evening, on our way back from a dinner in Palmdale (a treat for her so far from her house), Linda turned the radio up again, loud, but not as loud as before. She pounded the beat onto the steering wheel, and when vocals came in, she joined them –
full force. I laughed with her and turned my face to the window to breathe the words out to no one. She tapped on the door, just below the window. Now, the back-beat had her, and she played the steering wheel: left-left-right-left. She jabbed my knee and kept on singing. It was a good song, and I could see she wanted me to join in. What the heck. I let go and added voice to my breaths. The carefree moment grew and I danced to the music while Linda danced with the Jeep, and the Jeep rocked down the road. The dark road led us on.

I'd always felt a connection to my sister, but now, with my own ego out of the way, I became aware of my deep caring for her, and her own insecurity. I wasn't afraid of her - I could see past the outbursts and rages. She seemed uncertain of what people thought of her—and what they thought was important to her, even if she denied it. The tables were turned, and now I was in control enough to be able to tell her things. I had little moments where I could show her the mirror and let her see herself as I did: fantastically artistic, true to herself, and uncannily smart. And she kept quiet when she looked.

Occasionally, she'd talk of returning to college. Her earlier stint right after high school lasted only months - raising a child while partying with husband and friends made school impossible. I could hear the soft desire in her voice when she mentioned taking classes – a keening dulled by doubts.

"I could take a course by mail?"
What went unsaid was that she couldn’t trust herself in a crowd of people. In a classroom situation, she would sooner or later react to a word or a look and yell at or punch the offender. I suspected now that she could see her own inability to control herself. She understood that she had to adjust to the world accordingly.

“You’re a lot smarter, Linda, than you give yourself credit for.”

It’s true—her insights could be startling, clear, and deep – often from thinking of things in a different way than “normal” people would.

Her silence revealed a thoughtfulness – I could hear her thinking about the possibility that others might see her as intelligent.

My grandmother teaches me how to wrap Christmas presents so they don’t look clunky. She doesn’t have to teach Linda, who already wraps neatly. We spread the wrapping paper out on one of the beds in her guest bedroom, where Linda and I sleep if the adults play cards into the early morning. She shows me how to cut away the excess and make sharp folds for the corners to make a perfect fit. Christmas means presents and dinner at Grandma’s (Aunt Hazel has Thanksgiving) and driving through neighborhoods looking at lights and scenes and movies playing on garage doors. We’ll drive up Christmas Tree Lane in Altadena and point out the sights to each other. Christmas means family.

Little by little, I came to understand that other members of my family had a faith of some kind. My father and I were the only exceptions. For all my exposure to science, I do believe in something which I’ve called by different names throughout my life.
Magic. Light. Energy. The Force. Gaia. It wasn’t until the dark days at the end of my twenty-year marriage that I gave up on all of it. I’ve never fully recovered my faith in the world of humans – or even in the world itself. I have to tell myself to pretend that it’s true, just as my church-friends believe their stories, I should believe mine – go through the motions. Maybe I’ll get it back.

My sister excelled at the art of put-downs. She always had one handy, and she had a lot of them.

“Hey, skinny legs and all.”

She had named me, and I had to live with it. Technically, she was right: I was skinny. Couldn’t argue there. I tried it back on her.

“Hey, big legs and all.”

It had taken me some days to hit on this comeback, and I felt pretty good about getting her back. But she only laughed and then cut again.

“Least I can see, four eyes.”

I had no defense, no argument, and worse yet, I couldn’t use it against her the next time. Her vision was perfect.

She laughed at my dancing, too. She saw me in the living room swinging arms and legs to the music on the record, and came in.

“Aw, you can’t dance. You don’t know how.”

I thought she was right and tried not to get caught at it again. But moving to music was what I had to do, always, always, and if my dancing was ugly, then I’d just
have to keep it to myself. I let her words, her wisdom, her knowledge rule over me for twenty years, until I made it to a dance floor and learned that she was wrong.

Coloring books were just stocking-stuffers. Linda and I always found big boxes around the Christmas tree – big or small, there were many to open. One turned out to be a working oven that came with mixtures and directions and little pans to bake little cakes in. My short-lived exposure to cooking also included some time with a candy-maker that came with corn syrup and molds and directions and dyes and lollipop sticks. An interesting experiment – it did nothing to encourage my presence in the kitchen.

One family event, though, brought us all into the kitchen: the making of Monsieur Bon-Bon’s Secret Fooj. We owned a little white hardcover book written by Ian Fleming called Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang, which our parents read to us and had us read to them. The first time through, we discovered Mr. Fleming’s surprise for us at the back of the book: a special fudge recipe, which requires enough mixing and testing, and more mixing, to engage our whole family. Mother would melt the ingredients together on the stove, and when she turned the heat up, Linda would set a clear glass of cold water on the counter. Every once in awhile, as the mixture boiled, she’d drop a bit into the glass, and we’d all watch it, hoping and waiting for the time when the drop of batter would take form and become a stable ball as it made its way through the water. Linda changed the water often, until at last, we all agreed that the fudge passed, and we could pour it into a large bowl. Father went first with the heavy wooden spoon, counting out the strokes. He challenged each of us to take fifty strokes, and I did as many as I could before my
burning arms could no longer push the spoon through the fudge. I passed the bowl on to Linda. With each beat, the batter became thicker, less willing to release the spoon, and we went several rounds before our parents decreed the mixture done—beaten to a soft, dull sheen, and ready to flow into the cookie sheet that I got to smear with butter between my turns with the bowl. Fudge-making is a night-time activity, the time of magic, when the family is together. We retired to our living-room, leaving our love’s labor to cool in the kitchen, and soon my parents announced my bed time. The rewards for my hard work would have to wait until tomorrow.

We moved away from Las Flores and into a “better” house on Hermanos street. Even an eight-year-old knows that upscale isn’t always better, especially this square house, void of character, a weakling box that could never hold a family together. Darkness came down while I waited there that first night. I lay daydreaming on the mattress we had thrown on the floor. The subtle transition to dusk took me by surprise, and the walls turned grey before I realized—too late to find a light. I froze on the mattress, felt heat drip from my eyes. The closed door at the back of the room stared at me.

“They’ll be back any time, now—any time.”

My hopes concentrated on the front door, the conduit to the rest of the world. Any time I would be rescued from darkness.
Mitch and I moved Linda, packed up the rooms in her house, the garage, the yards, loaded everything into a rental truck, and caravanned to her dad's home near Las Vegas. Her 'real' dad. Whom our mom had left when Linda was about four. Something about a butcher knife and being chased around the kitchen table. When, as an adult, Linda learned of her other father, she made contact, reached out to build a relationship on obscure family history. And she talked about him using terms like "gnarly" and "bad ol' guy." Described his current life in a wheelchair as vibrant and alive. That addition of another person in her life took some pressure off of me, maybe all the family, for being the one to talk to. Her father could share our burden with us. We were surprised that she could make such a leap outside of herself, to find Earl, even just correspond with him. And now, because of that leap, she had a place to go, No one in our family was prepared to take her in. Her daughter's life was in turmoil with husband and child issues; our mother had earlier reached her limit on the amount of psychological and verbal abuse she could take; our younger sister, Anna Lee, had long ago dispensed with the chaos and violence, hanging up the phone each time Linda started to get unreasonable; and even Mitch was wearing thin, since the DARE shirt incident. As for me, her dog would eat my cats, and neither one of us was willing to part with our pets. To take Linda in would mean having to walk on glass in your own home.

Earl took her in and we filled his neat garage with stuff and more stuff, while he whipped his wheelchair about, checking on everything we did. Halfway through the unloading, Mitch said to Earl: "The other truck is just about an hour behind us – should
be here soon.” Some sparkle left Earl’s eyes until he understood Mitch’s sense of humor.

We wondered if he could handle Linda.
Chapter 3

POLITICS OF FAMILY

Linda backed my truck out of her driveway in a tight arc and slammed the brakes in the street.

“Oh, yeah!”

Her face beamed an intense light I had seen before.

“Put your seatbelt on, Chris.”

Mine tightened and locked against me when she hit the clutch for second gear. I didn’t crack, just pretended it was all okay. She was looking for some response, I thought, trying to get a word or expression to react to. She wanted me to say that she was a bad driver. I wasn’t going to give it to her. She had to believe that I totally trusted her driving. Otherwise, we could have a scene that ends badly – a crashed truck, perhaps. If I said anything, my cool-factor would drop to zero. It took only four city blocks to ease into normal driving. I had passed and she had nothing to go off about. I decided to ask her one of the many questions that bothered me.

“Do you like it here? You’re so far away from everyone.”

Shadows flicked across her face and she stopped hard to turn and face me.

“Oh. Oh. I don’t want to be here. But Randy left me here, and I owe more on the house than I can get for it, and my credit cards are too high, and I still don’t have my motorcycle. No, I can’t go anywhere.”
The force of her words, with her looking right into my eyes, hit me – she really was trapped. I didn’t have a solution for her, much as I wanted to make her world right. All I could do was acknowledge her anguish.

“Linda, what will you do?”

She laughed and turned back to drive.

“There ain’t nothing I can do but work and pay bills.”

Linda’s friends came to our Hermanos house on their motorcycles one night, and our mother and father were happy to meet everyone, but shooed them away. They all congregated down on the corner at a neighborhood playground, where they parked their bikes and talked and smoked and just hung out. My parents allowed me to go with Linda for a short time to see them. Some sat in the swings, hanging on to the long metal chains, and others grouped around the park bench, standing and resting their feet on the seat. I admired her friends, all friendly and warm and happy – happy to be there as one gigantic family. No arguments. No fighting. No expectations. Just be yourself and that was fine. As I walked around between the clusters of people, the tone of their voices touched me, said everything was alright, the way it should be. An orange light seemed to fill the park, radiating not from one person, but from the whole group. I didn’t want to leave, but Linda sent me back home, and I carried some of that orange light with me.
Mom and Anna Lee and Mitch didn’t quite understand how I kept the lines of communication clear and open to Linda. Or even why. The instinct for self-preservation should overrule any compassion—it certainly had for the others. Yes, a phone conversation, she in the Mojave Desert, me in the Pacific Northwest, would drop me into desolation for days. Should Janis roll out her blues on my way to work in the early morning, my vision would blur. It feels like a ball and chain, what holds Linda down, or back, or out—out there by herself.

Anna Lee continues to point out my “weakness” for letting Linda go on without trying to correct her (no, your “fatman” Randy is not coming back to you), and for encouraging, even empowering, her. But, I know that argument will only put her in offensive defense mode, and I would lose her, become unable to communicate with her. My reflex—my basic nature—and a lifetime of practice allowed me to navigate the minefield of her mind without any fatal explosions. I am the one who will listen and ask non-threatening questions, help save face, but I will also drop a seed of my thought, just a tiny seed.

In the Las Flores house, we began hearing Arthur’s voice on the phone. He asked for my sister, and soon Linda brought him home and introduced him to the family. The young man entertained us easily with jokes and riddles and the improbable, his eyes alive with interest and humor.
“I’m sorry I’m late, Mrs. Ehrgott. The visibility dropped and I had to fly under the clouds so I could follow the freeways home.”

His dark eyes, almost always lit by a humor from within, glinted with mischief, and if he ever looked serious, he could not hold that expression very long.

“By the way, Mr. Ehrgott, is that your car I saw them towing down the street?” Even if he tried to maintain the ruse a little longer –

“Yeah, it’s a Ford Falcon, isn’t it? White?” – he couldn’t keep the delight from his eyes, and that honest look of concern would quick-change into the familiar broad smile. He won us with his life and energy and wit. Just a grade ahead of Linda in high school, he epitomized “cool,” – he rode a motorcycle.

Arthur Marquez, first-born of Ruben and Angela Marquez, followed by Sandra, Stella, Sylvia, and Ricky, loved laughter and humor and people. He worked in his father’s photo shop and taught our family to put our film in the refrigerator for best results. Linda, in her early teens, frequented their house, and soon, so did I.

Ruben, family patriarch, had lost his sense of smell when a car accident had smeared his face with bits of glass. Still, his eyes beamed with mischief, and smile-lines seamed his lean face. Their dining room resonated with full voices, questioning, telling, joking, usually with Arthur and his father at the center. Angela’s words, spoken with an assuredness and eloquence, seemed to bear weight, and I wondered what she was telling
her children with such rapidity in a musical language I didn’t know. Her tortillas, warm and soft, always passed ‘round the dinner table.

Back from Griffith Park, one afternoon, we kids held our balloons while Ruben drove, and his wife, Angela, looked at him, or back at us, and spoke beautiful words that I could not understand. Her gold tooth glinted when she laughed. At a signal light, Rueben turned and threatened our balloons with a stick pin, then howled over our big eyes and protective gestures. A very happy man. A happy family.

Stella and I became good friends. She had a play house made of painted wood and we’d actually “play house,” sweeping, shopping, decorating. Her being older made Stella the dad. She had coffee, then walked through the doorway (no door) and down the long gravel and dirt driveway to go to work. I went out searching for groceries, and Stella came back to be the grocer, so I could buy stones and twigs and discarded papers to put on the shelves.

Linda, at twelve and thirteen years old, cleans stables up at the Zorthian’s ranch, a mile or two above us in the San Gabriel Mountains, and in exchange, they let her ride her favorite horse, Charlie Brown. He’s tall and handsome, with a brown and white coat – a horse called a Paint. Once, she rode him all the way down to our house and I got to see him, so very tall in-person.

Charlie Brown ate some loco-weed, the other name for that healthy bush with thin, dark leaves and pink or red or white flowers – Oleander. The sap can kill a human,
but Californians use the highly poisonous bush to divide highways and separate neighbors' lawns and just fill-in wherever greenery is needed. Linda's horse ate the leaves, sweet and deadly, and thrashed himself on the ground. I didn't know about his violent death until after we moved away. Nobody at home spoke of it, but I know it must have disturbed Linda deeply. Her senses could be much more fragile than she let on, and so the tragedy of such a painful death may have affected more than we know.

Shortly after, our family made the big move from southern California up to Monterey County, leaving almost everything behind: grandparents, a great aunt, mother's piano, our bicycles, Christmas with Mitch Miller, the heavy oak furniture, Linda's boyfriend, Father's business. Linda would lose either her boyfriend or her family, but none of that meant anything to me. I was nine and we were on an adventure.

We ventured north, up mountains, through hills, across plains, just to where there seemed a perfect setting. We found a motel to be our homebase while we searched for a new home. Weeks went by at the Wagon Wheel Motel there in Salinas. Mother became a telephone operator and enrolled us in a private religious school within walking distance, where the nuns loved us and never seemed to know how Mom should pay the bill. Linda led us through the city streets from the Wagon Wheel to the stone building of the school, she fourteen, me nine, Annie four, and Mitchell three. On the way back home, she'd lead us into a shop with a huge window, and we'd look out at the people and traffic going by.

"Let's go now, Linda. We better get home."

"In a minute, Chris."
I walked to the door and waited, wondering what kind of adventure she might take us on, and if we’d get into trouble, or, worse, disappoint our parents. I couldn’t say anything more though, because we’d leave on her time, and I knew it.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

She brought us back out onto the sidewalk and led us home to our motel. As the weeks wore on, I considered not stopping with her, but holding onto the kids and walking them the rest of the way myself—if I could just be sure I knew the way. If I could, I’d do it right. I’d do what was expected: walk to school and walk back.

Our father looked for land. I was with him the time he first found “The Property,” ten acres of fields and hills and cliffs and Manzanita and oaks, not too far from power and water. He worked out a deal for payments to the owner, traded carpet work for an old thirty-foot trailer, and moved us to our new home.

We were on a great campout, an exploration. Underneath the Manzanita, trails branched off in every direction. I crawled through the tunnels, sometimes dropping so low under the branches that my belly touched the sandy ground. In some places, I could sit up and wait quietly for a rabbit to come by. They seemed to know I was there, and never did.

A real trail, big enough for people, ran up the hillside behind our trailer, through the bushes, to a plateau above us where the water tank sat. Linda and I would climb the hill, fill up two ten-gallon buckets, and carry them back down, trying not to spill too much. Pretty soon it was just my job to bring the water.
Linda got to take her baths alone.

“She’s older now and needs her own privacy.”

We brought in the large metal tub and set it in the kitchen area of the trailer, then boiled and poured water until the tub was half full. All of us found something to do outside of the trailer until she was done. We kids might walk down to the field and make trails through the weeds and wildflowers that stood face-high. Our father would likely be digging, raking, or leveling the long dirt driveway. Our mother could tend the nasturtiums near the trailer, or sweep oak leaves from the wooden steps, staying near in case Linda needed anything. She got to use a special soap on her face, too. My sister became more mysterious to me, like royalty. I thought it right that she, as my older sister, would have privileges that I did not.

After we lived there a short while, my father needed someone to crawl down through the Manzanita, guiding a white pipe past the branches. It was a very long pipe, covering the height of the hill – one piece from the top to the bottom. Linda, though the oldest and strongest, did not have to do the chore. It would be me, even though I expressed my fear at what might be under the bushes. We worked about an hour, with both parents up on the plateau by the water tank, managing the long pipe, feeding it down under the Manzanita to me. I tussled with the pipe whenever it would jam against a thick red branch, redirecting it underneath or sometimes, when it wouldn’t go, over the top. I felt like a hero when I emerged at the bottom, dirty hands and knees, with my hair full of sticks and leaves. Still, I wondered more at my sister’s special status.
Linda also had special school privileges. At first, she went to the high school in town, but then stayed at home, learning from a tutor who came to the property regularly and worked with her privately. Another change that took her further away from me. I walked alone down the steep hill and bumpy road to the county road, where I waited with other local kids for the bus that would take us the six miles to elementary school. I was starting to make friends.

My times spent with her while living on the property seemed fewer and fewer.

We rode our ponies through the surrounding hills. Mine was a fat little Shetland pony named Swaps because he had never been purchased with money – my father traded some carpet work for him. He never really cared what I wanted, this stubborn gelding. The bit and reins were just there for my false sense of control, though he usually went along with where I wanted to go. Speed was a little harder than direction. I could work him up to a trot with a lot of effort. It was a jarring, short-legged pace that landed me on a different part of his back with each step.

"C'mon, Swaps. A little bit more." If I couldn't coax him into a gallop, my spine would snap in two. Often, I couldn't endure and pulled him back to a walk. But on occasion, he would break into a gallop, and we'd flow together over the fields, until he shifted back to trotting, and I had to work him down to a walk again. Linda rode a tall, fast pony named Pappy, whose black legs, and mane, and tail, and nose accented his finely patterned coat of brown and white. This was an Indian pony, capable of running smooth and fast. Linda rode him with a saddle, though. She was with me when I gave up
saddles. We were on our way back home, coming up the dirt driveway, when Swaps went into a trot – thinking of Omelene, that sweet mixture of grain and molasses, up at the fence, I’m sure.

“Whoa.” I tensed the reins back. He trotted faster and then broke into a run as my saddle started to slip to the side. Linda came up behind us

“Pull back on the reins.”

I pulled hard and long, which didn’t mean a thing to Swaps. In one quick move the saddle slipped the rest of the way around his belly and dumped me on the ground right under him. His rear hooves missed me, but I couldn’t breathe. Linda was there in front of me, peering into my face.

“You’ve got the wind knocked out of you. You’ll be okay.”

In a few moments the fire in my lungs cooled with my breaths of air. I sat up slow in the dust and saw Swaps two yards away looking back at me, the saddle hanging underneath him. Linda righted his saddle and we led the ponies up to the fence and put them in their field. With sand in my clothes and hair and on my face, I limped past the bin of sweet feed, ignoring the soft chuffing sounds of the ponies.

Linda rode with a saddle, but I was riding bareback the day we went into Mrs. Black’s forest. The wide road turned from dirt to a pine-needle carpet, and the hush of the air felt sacred. These pine-trees stood tall and straight and commanded a respect in the dimmed light. Up ahead, we could see a small white house sitting to the side of the road, and the road itself continued on up a hill and out of sight. Linda’s voice sounded loud, though she spoke low.
"That's Mrs. Black's house. She's lived here a long time."

Something stirred by the door of the house before I could ask my sister how she knew. The ponies kept walking forward and we got close enough to see an older woman step down from the porch. Linda immediately fell back.

"Chris. You talk. You're good at it."

She followed me, and we stopped when the woman started walking toward us. I was in a magic forest, facing an old woman named Black who had dwelled in the forest a long time. I smiled and raised my hand.

"Hi there."

She kept approaching and stopped some twenty feet in front of us.

"Hello, girls."

Her voice was smooth and warm, and her hair was a dark red.

"May I come and meet your horses?"

I nodded.

"They're ponies really."

Linda brought Pappy up next to Swaps, and the woman came close talking to them, calling them "handsome" and "good." She reached out and laid her hand upon Swaps' forehead.

"Oh, you're a rascal, aren't you? Know what you want."

She muttered a few more things and then looked from his eyes up to mine. I felt uncomfortable, like I had to say something.

"His name is Swaps."
"He's a strong one, Swaps is. Strong and sure of his world."

She moved to Pappy and placed a hand on his forehead, gazing with her light brown eyes into his dark ones.

"Pure. Pure of heart and true. Nothing but soul."

After a few more words, she looked up at Linda, who didn't say anything – just had a delicate smile on her face. I had to say something.

"His name is Pappy."

"Well, Pappy is a fine animal and has a good heart."

She stepped back, raising her hand to shield her eyes from a ray of sunlight that had found its way through the trees.

"It was good to meet you. You girls are welcome to follow the road."

She turned back to her house, and we started the ponies walking. When we crested the hill we were able to talk again. Linda spoke with mystery in her voice.

"Chris. She never asked us our names."

"No. No names. And she didn’t tell us hers, either."

"Yeah. That was Mrs. Black, though."

One winter day, Mother took Linda to the hospital in town. I didn’t hear about it, and hardly noticed that she wasn’t around, so often was she gone from the property. Then, she was back – with an infant child.
“Her name is Candiladia Josephina Marquez. Isn’t that pretty? You can just call her Candy.”

Candiladia Josephina Marquez. In naming her, Linda remembered our great-grandmother, Josephine Irene Baham, the family matriarch, strong-willed and kind, who meant so much to her, who had raised our mother, who years after Candy was born, moved from Buffalo to spend her final days with us on The Property.

Linda and Candy got the bedroom that we’d added to the trailer, including a little closet area, while we kids slept in the front room, and put our beds away during the day. Our parents slept in a little teardrop trailer, set right next to the blue one. I didn’t see much of Linda or her baby. Once, I heard her and my father arguing in the blue trailer. I cringed and turned away – they could both be very powerful arguers, spewing such anger and yelling and sometimes pushing. Confrontations with either of them were much more emotional than I could stand.

The Marquez family came up to visit us. They pitched a large tent right on the patio above the trailer. It was a huge round leveled area with a fire pit to one side, and their green canvas tent filled most of it. I had fun showing Stella around the property, and helping her ride Swaps. We all sat on the logs around the fire-pit to eat dinner, and talk, and we kids would get up and play.

Our father built us a cabin – a little one just for us kids. He leveled a spot about twenty-five yards above the trailer, nestled against the base of the Manzanita-covered cliff, and created a little wooden structure with a rectangular floor, and side-walls that
veered outward forty-five degrees and then angled back inward on their way up to the peak. Standing before the door, you would see a pentagon-shape, longer at the A-frame of the roof, and shorter at the lower sides.

At bedtime, I'd ask someone to shine the flashlight for me while I climbed the steps from the family trailer to the cabin. It wouldn't do for me to have the flashlight, because then I'd be alone. No one would see if a monster reached out from the bushes. If Linda held the light, she would tease me, clicking it off, or shining it elsewhere. I couldn't be sure if she was just having fun, and didn't know how serious the task, or if she really wanted to torture me. Usually, I could convince my parents to hold the light for me.

"Watch me all the way up, Mom."

She stood at the open door, warm light spilling out around her, contrasting with the faint, cold beam of the flashlight. At the top of the steps, a baby oak tree hung its branches over me, and I held my breath, determined not to run past the darkness. I wanted to speak, just to be sure my mother was there, behind me, at the foot of the stairs, but my voice might attract night-beings that were better left undisturbed. My mother had asked me what I was afraid of, and I tried to explain the near-paralyzing fear that pressed cold sweat from my brow whenever I found myself alone in the dark. She tried to reason me out of that fear of ghosts.

"If someone died and became a ghost, why would he be different than he was in life? He's just a person, not a monster."
Her logic made sense to me, and when I tried to use it on myself, I became a little less terrified.

From the open cabin door, I waved goodnight and my mother would call after me another goodnight, and I’d rush inside and turn on the light before she closed her door and was gone. But, I didn’t close mine. To latch the wooden door would be to sever my ties to home, or at least weaken them. I had to balance exposure to dark with need to be connected. With the cabin door standing open, I climbed the short ladder to the carpeted loft, my bed.

Sometimes, the magic of the night overruled my fears, as when the waxing moon filled the dark air with light:

The brightness of the moon opens my eyes. Three long windows angled above me let in all the light from the sky. I sit up in the cabin loft and my whole being vibrates awake and alive.

“Hello, Diana, goddess of the night.”

Her wide crescent illuminates the world in a blue-white light, and I lean forward to look out at the night and down upon my sleeping family in the blue trailer, oblivious to the magic outside their rooms. I, the sole audience of this scene, feel privileged to witness the power of the moonlight.

No longer willing to be just an awed bystander, I crawl to the trapdoor and lower myself into the darkness of the small room below, hurry through the shadows, and fly out the open door, landing on the hard-packed pathway. Below, our trailer—behind, the
rising hill, all illuminated and clear and covered in magic. Below our home, across the bright field, spires of trees rise in the moonlight. Laughter. My laughter. I dance to the trail that leads from my little hill up to the ridge above.

My pre-dawn exploration leaves me clear, and as I climb back into my cabin loft, I think I'll never sleep. Yet, the moon is gone when I awaken to growling and the vague understanding that my own Fool Cat has come upstairs and nestled beside me. A shadow at the trap door — it is Mou-Mou, the huge stray cat that Linda named in honor of a Black Power group. My hand moves to a pillow for defense, and before it touches, Mou-Mou has leapt from the trap door and sunk his teeth into my wrist. Prying at his big, black jaws with my other hand, I am unable to release his grip. With Mou-Mou thus employed, Fool Cat makes a break for it and flies down the ladder and out the door. His exit causes the black cat to disengage and follow. In the aftermath, I lay still, breathing and focusing through the huge sky-windows on a pattern of stars that blurs. I understand the animal instinct to attack — it allows the feral cat to survive. He leaps and kills a rabbit. He dodges and escapes the dogs. On his own, he can only rely on himself, on his instincts. I forgive Mou-Mou his mistake. For all his wildness, I know he will still come back and share my space with me. He won't let me pet him, but he'll let me just be with him.

Before I was done with sixth grade, Linda and her baby were gone. They moved in with Arthur's family in Pasadena. She went back home, to the place of beginning, and made a new beginning of her own. We got a picture of her wedding, with her in a gold,
crushed-velvet dress, and Arthur in a light-colored tux with frills on the shirt. We learned that she finished high school at John Muir. We heard the pride in her voice as she spoke of her classes at PCC, Pasadena City College. Occasionally, I'd take the bus down to visit her.

Arthur sanded and smoothed the teardrop gas tank of his own motorcycle, and prepared to spray on the base coat of paint. The large swinging doors of his parents' free-standing garage stood open as he crouched before the primed tank and brushed it free of the fine dust. Patience. As I watched from the side door, I noticed how gently he turned the piece in his hands, how intently he examined the surface. His art would be perfect—every step an act of love. Intrigued by the newspapers spread out on the floor and the array of parts and tools scattered on the workbenches, I had stopped a moment to make sense of the scene.

His daughter toddled through the garage door, and made right for him. Candy's weight on his back caught him unaware as he squatted on the concrete brushing the tank.

"Christ." He swayed from the impact, shot a foot out for balance.

"Candy, where's your mother?"

He shot me a pleading look, as I watched from the driveway.

"Chris, would you take her back to Linda? I've got another half-hour out here."

Of course I would, but Candy and I found Linda asleep in a guest bedroom, and we left her that way.
Linda squatted in the sandy soil and cleared the weeds from the knoll at the center of her garden, picking the weeds from around her flowers and tossing them onto the sterile earth outside the border. With a quiet grunt, she stood and swept the droplets from her face with the back of her hand, then stepped back to look at her work. Her backyard, surrounded on three sides by grey cinderblock walls, held an oasis at its center, her own creation. Along the edges, small spare trees brushed their leaves against the wall, but in the back left corner, a leafy tree thrived, filling the space above and below and around with green, fresh and soothing. Away from the walls, the soil was loose and uncovered, except for two places. In the right back section, her straggling garden worked at producing tomatoes and peppers and beans. The oasis at the center, directly out from the back door to her house, reveled in cool beauty of blossom and green and occasional rock. Her prize, her hard-won, hard-worked-for living breathing piece of paradise.

She moved to be underneath the trellis her dad had built for her along the back of the house, covered now in shade-providing vines. Not her blood-dad, but the one who had raised her, who had been head of the family when it was young and newly-arrived in California, the golden state, all the way from the east coast. Though not of the same blood, the similarities were strong: tall, blond, quick to temper, quick to humor, ill-at-ease in the real world, socially inept, yet highly creative. Same sky-blue eyes, a sign of the heavy German ancestry. Same inability to let anyone else have center stage – even for a moment. Victim of emotions, swirls of feelings, suspicions.
In the cool of the sturdy trellis, Linda sipped water from the hose, and then turned the water onto her garden, one plant at a time, and then the oasis overall. Vital water, she gave it with a joy of life, connecting with everyone in the yard. As the sunlight on the east wall dimmed, she turned the water off and went inside.

After Linda had her baby and moved down to the Marquez’s home, I never worried about her, or felt bad, or even missed her, because whatever she was doing, she was doing it her way and she’d be fine. Sometimes, I would take the bus down to see her and Aunt Hazel and Grandma. I wanted to prove Aunt Hazel wrong, that I would always visit her and not forget her just because we moved away.

Linda shows me her patch with the bare soles of two pairs of feet, the outside ones down, the inside ones up. The words “Cure Virginity” arch at the top and at the bottom.

“Do you get what it means?”

I nod my head right away.

“Cool, huh?”

Yes. I was eleven and wouldn’t get it for many years, but she accepts my self-acclaimed maturity.
A few years later, I visit her in Altadena and she sets me up. On one warm night, with a very faint breeze, she called a friend over, a young man probably sixteen to my thirteen.

"Why don't you guys go out for a walk? Let me be awhile."

He politely led me outside and we walked the concrete sidewalk through the cozy residential neighborhood, talking about my sister who could always take care of herself. She would say what needed to be said, and fight if need be, he told me. The people in her neighborhood know her. He spotted a concrete wall with a tree next to it and suggested we take a rest. I wasn't at all tired, but we sat up on the wall underneath the tree and didn't have much to say. The boy touched my hand.

"Your skin sure is soft."

"Really?"

I moved my hand to look at it. Didn't know what else to say because he was clearly mistaken. My hands have always been rough and lined. Some time went by.

"It's getting a little cold. Mind if I move closer."

Again he was wrong, the temperature was wonderful. I didn't stop him from moving over. A little more time went by.

"Boy, that wind is just howling between us."

He made no sense whatsoever, and I tired of such inane conversation. I suggested we start walking again.

"Hold on, hold on. Let me first just show you how to kiss. Do you want to learn?"
I didn’t, but I wouldn’t say “no” to his face. Instead, I held still while he gave me a light kiss on the lips.

“There, was that so bad?”

He drew back a little to look at me and gave a soft laugh. He hung his head a moment and then straightened up.

“Okay. Well, let’s finish our walk.”

We talked about Chinese food on the way back to Linda’s, and then went inside. While I thanked the boy for a nice walk, Linda came into the room. She nodded her head at the boy behind me and the room was silent while I settled into the couch.

“I’ve got to go now. See you later.” He made his exit and Linda turned to shake her head at me.

“Oh, Chris.”

I felt like I had failed a test.

When I stayed at the Marquez house, Stella and I would walk the neighborhood, sharing stories of our different worlds, now that I lived in the country. I told her about riding ponies and climbing up to the treehouse and swinging from a rope into a bed of straw. She talked mainly about her friends and what they did together, like having a party at the roller rink. She was with me when my sister invited me a little deeper into her world.
Colorado Boulevard – on New Year's Day, a river of flower-studded floats, The Tournament of Roses parade to celebrate the Rose Bowl, but on New Year's Eve, the boulevard coursed with life, sub-cultures at play.

Moving down the street, Stella as my guide, past clutches of people, only some turning their faces to watch us pass. Though dusk dimmed the sky, the people glowed in colors rich as an oil painting, and when the air around us turned dark, the people became more colorful. Standing in small circles, half on the sidewalk half on the pavement, feet spread, firelight warming the skin, bearded mouths telling stories, like elders at a powwow, hands raising small cans, arms reaching out to pass a bottle, a nod of the head. Stella forgotten, I'm looking, seeing all these happy people who belong to each other, belong with each other. A stinging on my butt, turning, no one there, turning, grinning, laughing people, teeth showing, turning, Stella there, grabbing my arm, “Keep moving” in my ear. Follow her long straight black hair through crowds, across streets, finally to “our” group – the smiling, laughing, grinning, story-telling, drinking, smoking people that we belong to: Linda's friends. The Harleys backed-up to the curb, gleaming chrome forks shining out on the boulevard, each proclaiming its own special identity with gas tanks painted in flames, or iridescent in pearl, or bad, just bad in black. Fifty-five-gallon-drum garbage can, now the community hearth, placed just where a smaller cross-street opens onto the boulevard, contains a reasonable fire, big enough to warm hands and faces, but not so big as to singe beards and eyebrows. The culture where Linda learned the essence of “cool” – that most highly-valued human trait. Weed, not cigarettes. Harleys, not Yamahas. Denim and leather and bad-ass boots.
“That’s my little sister. Yeah, she’s cool.”

Approving laughter. I’m cool. I stand and belong in this new culture, pass a tall bottle from the person on my right to the person on my left, urge a story-teller on with my eyes, laugh when the others laugh. Yeah, I’m cool.

I heard rumors about the divorce, and being out-of-touch with Linda, that’s all I could get. The Arthur-Linda couple lasted only a short time: meet in high-school, have baby at fourteen, marry, then divorce. The story went that she and Arthur had stopped their car at an intersection while three guys crossed the street. She insulted them, or cussed at them, or laughed at them – something that got their attention – and when they approached, Arthur refused to take her part in the argument. She was shocked, and then furious because her man must always fight for her, no matter the reason.

Over time, I came to believe, to guess, that Arthur himself had ended the marriage, realizing the danger in Linda’s behavior. His practical jokes would be too much for her and her mind would categorize each incident as a plot to embarrass, scare, or demean her. If they were driving through the hills down a country road, and he started stomping on the pedal, yelling, “No brakes,” she’d believe him, until he had to laugh, and then she’d pause and look and realize he had pressed the clutch pedal. Her face, instead of becoming flushed with blood, would go white and smooth, while her mind clicked from betrayal to suspicion, and the breach of trust widened.
We all loved Arthur. He told jokes, laughed a lot—came to console us (with Linda away) when we needed consoling. He kept us company when Aunt Hazel died, more than two decades later. We had gathered in her Altadena house, Mom, Mitch, Anna Lee, and me, to prepare for the funeral, and when we called him with the news, he came. At the dinner table, his stories and memories pulled laughter out of us, stretched our cheeks, squeezed tears from inside. We shouldn’t be laughing, here in her house, while she rests in a memorial wall, right next to Grandma. But we couldn’t stop, didn’t want to stop.

Linda wanted a man who would fight, so she left the laughing story-teller behind, and latched onto a burly Southerner named Randy Dalton, with no humor in his eyes. This new man would stand up for her, protect her from perceived threats, fight over nothing, and, most important, be stronger than her.

That was the family that Candy went back to. We knew very little about those years, and only later, after Randy had gone, did we hear Linda’s stories about the time of her life. When a young Van Halen rocked the crowd in their back yard, and the weight of so many people brought down the garage. When Randy would take her to Hawaii on “business.”

“I think we went out there just so he could come back with some good weed to sell.”

Linda kept her name: Linda Susan Dalton. The initials were too cool to give up. And besides, she knew that Randy wouldn’t just leave her there in the desert. They had moved together out of Pasadena, and then she was alone.
My sister secreted mysteries in her mind, and when she voiced any one of them to me, she privileged me with her sharing.

“Do you ever wonder how a little seed grows toward the sun and unfolds into a green sapling?”

I didn’t know how to answer her, so I just looked at her and let her go on.

“Some power is making it happen.”

She was sounding dangerously religious, and I wasn’t sure where she got it from. She certainly didn’t get it from our dad – if anything, his religion was all about learning, reading, and science. Even at the time, something hinted that these may not be her words, but pieces of conversations or overheard references from the people she hung out with, or maybe from her school teachers.

Like Linda, I fell for a boy on a motorcycle—this time a dirt bike. I saw him across the field in junior high and felt that “click” inside, that certainty I would know him, or, perhaps, already knew him. By the time I caught up to him in high school, he had grown long curly hair that disguised him from me. Even so, I had to ask my friends,

“Who is that? That quiet guy in drama class, with the long hair and corduroy pants?”

For the second time, without knowing him, a familiarity resonated inside—but now, I would meet Ken, and our emotions would tangle together and draw me closer. A few years later, at sixteen, I married him on the property, with family in attendance, and his step-brother ministering.
Linda had some advice for me:

“Christy, don’t put all your eggs in one basket, because if you love something and then lose it, you lose everything.”

Although I saw the logic of her words, there’d be no helping me, I could only follow my heart. Some twenty years later, in light of my divorce, I mentioned that thought to her, the advice she had given me, but she didn’t recognize it.

“Oh, that’s probably just something Clemmie told me.”

Indeed, she herself was heavily invested in her second husband, a big biker named Randy. When I learned that her advice was just something someone else had told her, I thought back to the seed-unfolding-into-tree talk, which had stuck in my mind, perhaps brought on a little fear that I’d lose her to religion, and realized she was pretending, and probably to herself as well as others, at being a deep thinker, at being a participant capable of conversations. She mimicked without understanding, just as children do, just as a child repeats words and exclamations made by an adult, without understanding, but observing the reactions of others and learning from that. Empty.

Not to say Linda isn’t sensitive or emotional: she is. Like the time she visited her junior high when she was in high school, and cried when Mrs. Kraska didn’t remember her. Yes, she feels, despite evidence to the contrary. It’s just that her response is one of aggressive defense, an offense, which makes two-way relationships impossible.
In the spring, I took to the road to see her in her dad’s home. Flickering radio stations came and went, and had faded to static by the time the moon, only a few nights from being full, beamed from directly overhead illuminating the stagnant fields in all their emptiness—with no beat, no magic, they were just vacant fields—and the silence created a space where thought could expand, where doubt could creep in, if I let it. I was storm-chasing, speeding my truck directly into danger of unknown magnitude. Anything could happen, anything bad. Now, in the silence of a dead radio, my mind examined the facts of my situation—the truths I had been drowning with music.

Yes, there had been family resistance:

“You might not get back in time for work.”

“It’s a long drive.” The tone completed the thought: “just to see her.”

“Why would you want to see her at all?”

No job, no income, no cash, no house, no friends—so when she called, I had to go—without thought, without decision.

“I’m coming down. I’ll see you this weekend.”

Like rushing an injured animal to the vet, I don’t ask. I just do it, and trust that money and time and attitudes will all work out. And when mother and sister and friends finally understood, they showered me with cautions.

“Don’t let her drive. She’s too unpredictable.”

“Stay in a hotel and keep your stuff in the truck.”

“You turn around and come right back, if there’s a problem.”

Of course.
With a sense of dread, I had loaded up and headed south to Las Vegas, only because it had to be done and I knew I was the one who could, who would, do it – who might make it home unharmed, and still be successful. The task was simply to keep her company, to hang out and have fun. I’d have to put up with conspiracy accusations.

“You and Mitch took some money from my house sale, didn’t you?”

And quick anger for no apparent reason.

“Trans, you get over here when I call you. Get yourself over here.”

My efforts would be unappreciated. At least I didn’t have to solve any problems. I just had to be a friend.

Three a.m. If I kept the truth out at the edges of my mind, I might endure my drive into the desert. Certitude would keep me, had always kept me, from giving up on my sister. Yet, I had given up on others, people who had latched onto my friendship like a life-vest. People with anti-social inclinations, or ones who used friends overtly. People who weren’t family. I had to let them go because they were locked in a loop, running the same program over and over again. My taps and whispers and nudges were ineffective, not able to break the code, and when I eventually started wearing down, I left them behind. I wonder how many people had to leave me behind.

When I get to Linda’s I will not sleep, but climb into her Jeep and let her drive us to Arizona, to her daughter’s house.

When Linda still had her job and still lived in Lancaster, we met at our mother’s house for some fun, all coming from different directions. Linda from Lancaster. Her
daughter Candy from southern California where she had been visiting her father. She brought her young son Ray, and her first-born, Rosie. I came down from Silicon Valley, just over the Santa Cruz Mountains. We all agreed on a fun place to go. When we entered the pottery “paint-a-piece” studio, my excitement grew, not in anticipation of my own work, but in wondering what Linda would do with her art. I wanted to see what she would paint, and what colors and designs would spring from her mind. Even before we picked our pieces, I was already imagining my pleasure and surprise at Linda’s future finished work.

Rosie, a red-headed version of her grandma at seven years old, handled the pottery on the shelves, searching for the right piece to paint. I sponged-off mine at the table, preparing it for paint, but kept looking up to check for shards on the floor, and once in awhile I glanced at Candy, who was thumbing through a book of stencils. Better just not to look, so I would not be culpable when Rosie dropped one of the pieces. Instead, I studied the colored bottles by the cashier and selected a pleasing combination of pink, purple, and blue. Mother, a natural artist, turned her owl in front of her on the table and started her base coat of paint. Linda and Mother and Candy and I had begun painting by the time Rosie had, without incident, brought a piggy bank to the table and joined our circle. Painting creatively is not a relaxing past time for me, and I struggled with the weighty decisions of what color to put where. The sounds of a fussing baby kept interrupting my thoughts. We had settled Candy’s two-year-old Ray in the enclosed play area with happy movies and bright toys, but soon he complained. Candy let Ray carry on, just as she had let Rosie pick her own piece from the shelves.
“She raises kids the Mexican Mom way,” Linda had explained to me years earlier. “Just let them do what they want and they’ll learn from experience.”

I did believe in experience as a great teacher, but not to the extent that everyone around had to suffer Ray’s cries. I shushed him with a pat on the back and a smile. He smiled back and accepted the new toy I offered. With tensions reduced now, I went out to find something to drink, and Candy came with me. We strolled out onto the Pacific Garden Mall.

We came back just at the end of something, and the air still buzzed with undissipated electricity which stopped me a few steps in. Linda sat at the painting table, leaning back in her chair, hands empty and poised beside the pottery plate with half-finished design. Mom stood erect on the other side of the round table, her face intent on Linda. Neither of them looked at me. My body linked into the current, and electric needles worked their way up my spine with the realization that, first, something was wrong and, second, that Linda was the cause of it. This was “a scene” in public and Mom must be horrified, while Linda could be secretly pleased.

I forgot Candy at my side as we paused a few yards into the room. White figures of clay blended into the people at their white tables who were looking up, all in periphery, while my mother and sister appeared in full, vibrant color at center stage, emotions flashing between them.

A light-hearted comment, a quick laugh, any attempt to make light of this, would fall flat onto the center of the table, captured by the charged air between mother and daughter. With that option ruled out, my brain, my body went into auto-response mode
because the next actions were not ones I would normally or willingly make. From a short distance, I watched my body pounce toward the table, words issuing from my mouth.

"Don’t you fight with Mom."

I faced Linda over the table, physically breaking the circuit of electricity. Linda didn’t look at me, found something on the wall beside me to focus on. Her robot-smooth face seemed to gain a warm, human color, and melted into a soft, quirky smile, that said something – I’m not sure what. Maybe:

"See, Mom, I got you. Caused a scene in public."

or

"I lost control—again."

or

"No big deal. I wasn’t going to hurt anyone."

But I had seen a glimpse of what our mother had just faced down: Linda’s face, but not Linda, deadly serious, empty of humanity and taut with power.
Chapter 4

GET IT WHILE YOU CAN

Living the married life in the Pacific Northwest, I find myself in my early thirties and isolated from my family, which has spread out across the deserts and mountains and cities of California. But I will stay and continue the struggle to make our little family work – Ken, and Nikki, and me. Linda and I seem strangers to each other. Phone calls from the desert leave me crying—for myself, for her, for our family.

I am driving Interstate 5 down to Seattle from Granite Falls, the little mountain town where we live, on a morning of blue sky and warm sun, so uncommon for Washington state. It's an easy drive, with rush-hour over and music on the radio, and thoughts of my career in good shape—stable and safe and lucrative—and my daughter in fourth grade at Mountain Way Elementary and excelling in computers. My greatest task, bringing her to a future overflowing with opportunities, fills me up with strength and purpose. My spare time I dedicate to the school, to assist Mr. Dockery with the portable computers he had the school buy for the classroom. Today, I know where to find an unusual clay ocarina at Pike’s Place Market, where vendors line the street with colorful open tents and display their novel wares. Music, good for the brain, they say – essential for the soul, I know.
“In this world, if you read the papers darling
You know everybody’s fighting with each other.”

The radio rivets my attention. I know my foot is on the accelerator, because that’s where it was just before all feeling drained from my extremities.

“And there’s no one you can count on dear,
Not even your own brother.”

All feeling accretes at the center of my chest and descends, triggering shivers of ice. She is alone. No one understands her. Time passes and she loses more – friends, confidence, youth, hope. The greenery passing by at the side of the road recedes to gray as the sun loses color. I am driving by instinct now, driving numb.

“So if someone comes along,
He’s gonna give you some love and affection,”

Trapped in her desert house, in isolation –
Trapped in her body – aging, triple-X
Trapped in her mind – perceiving threats and conspiracies –
Now it is raining – I can feel it.

“I say get it while you can.”
Damn the rain.

In the shower, she shampoos my hair. It is Las Flores Street, in the lavender bathroom.

“You’re afraid to breathe, aren’t you?”
Standing outside the fall of water, I nod.

“Look.”

She centers herself under the shower.

“You can breathe in the spaces, between the water drops.”

We trade places and I practice breathing under the fountain of water. We trade again and she lathers up my hair and puts me back under the shower.

“Don’t close your eyes so tight. You’ll let the soap in.”

I try: relax the eyelids smooth, so the bubbles slide right on by. She waits while I practice not tensing my face under the water, and then I stand calm and let her rinse away the soap.

I am holding my breath, and when I see the road and exhale, exhaustion sweeps to replace the nothing, the shell of my body, and me. I keep driving.

I make a habit of tuning into National Public Radio. It gets me through traffic back and forth between our home in Granite Falls and Boeing where I work just west of Everett. Tonight, I remember, they’ll air an interesting program, one I have to hear.

When I get home, the house is empty. Ken has taken Nikki into Marysville to play with Judy’s daughters. I turn on the stereo and lay on the floor, thinking of nothing—or everything—while bright turns gray and shadows become dark. Not a light is on in the house, but I do not move to save myself from the dark. Let it come.

The radio program begins, and my mind drifts toward the familiar music and voices of public radio. The topic is bipolar disorder.
I remember, now. This could be about my father – that’s why I wanted to listen. I listen. Before the hour is up, I am rolling on the floor, cheeks wet, in the throes of recognition.

“Yes, yes. That is my father – but isn’t it also Linda? And also me?”

Days pass, and the fear of knowing holds me fast. I catch myself wondering, “Is that me?” and then I jump my mind away from any possible answer, but each time the question lingers longer. The program had described my father and his good mood / bad mood seesaw, grandiose ideas (I thought we all had dreams), workaholic, his father alcoholic, all in the name of self-medication, refusal to believe anything is wrong, absorbed with health and fitness – he had diagrammed the muscular system and created exercise cards referring to each area being worked, he studied the patterns of weight-lifting to achieve large muscles or smooth muscles, how many reps, how many sets. Once, on a family visit up to Washington State to see Ken and me, he bought a weight set and carried it back to our apartment. It took him awhile. That couldn’t be me.

While I am delaying the certainty of diagnosis, Linda calls. We talk once every few months, and I dread her phone calls, just as the rest of my family does.

“Hi, Chris.”

“Hi, Linda. How’re you doing?”

“Don’t be asking me that. How come you always say the same thing?”

And here she mocks my tone.
“How is your life, Linda? Isn’t it wonderful? When’s the last time you had weed? When’s the last time you got laid?” You don’t mean it, because you know my life is jacked-up, but you say it anyway. How do you think I am? What can I tell you? Just don’t be fake and use that on me.”

Her rant drains me of energy, of optimism, of life.

“Oh. Yeah. Okay.”

It’s all I can come up with. The following depression lasts for days. Gray, fog, concrete. Can’t reach her, can’t seem to reach me. Ken notices my lasting lassitude and guesses.

“Talk to your sister lately?”

“I don’t know why it spirals me down. We should be able to talk to each other.”

“Just tell her not to call.”

“No. I don’t want to close doors—I want to open them.”

The truth about doors: it takes energy and strength to hold them open. Existing on the edges of a blown marriage, and an exploded family, I would need to close some doors, for my own protection.

“I call it ‘The River of Sorrow,’ and it runs right through me.”

My doctor gives a full-throated laugh and comes back with his own.

“I call it a ‘Sewer of Sympathy.’”
His cavalier manner fits with my careless attitude. He is the more experienced
cynic.

“So, what do you think is wrong with you?”

For a moment, I’m afraid that nothing is wrong with me – that I’m not messed up
enough to warrant a distinct malady.

“I must be manic depressive. The world is going along okay, and then everything
just falls apart.”

“Well, you’re half-right.”

He starts me on Prozac, working from 20mg up to 100mg per day. I don’t want to
start, afraid I’ll lose myself, sure that my identity and history and memory will be wiped
clean. I’ll miss that ‘River of Sorrow’ and my detached view of the human world. I’d
become one of them – those happy people who flit through the world in ignorance. A
clear voice tells me these are risks I have to take.

While my brain-chemicals adjust to the ever-increasing influx of fluoxetine, my
dreams come to life, bizarre and colorful. I never knew that the moon is actually
comprised of blue cheese, but I fly by and see its lumps of mold, touch it with my hand as
I pass. From above the property, I see there is fire on the hills, red and orange and
complete. The trees are burning, and I can never go back. After a week, my dreams
settle back down to the typical “Where’s my classroom?” scenario that has me searching
different buildings for where I’m supposed to be.

I actually feel good enough, strong enough, to call my sister.
“Hi, Linda.”

No way am I going to ask her how she is.

“What’s going on?”

Her slow, measured reply cuts.

“Nothing’s going on, Chris.”

I have to respond with something more than just “Oh.” I risk her anger.

“You mean you haven’t ordered something in three whole months? Wow, Linda.”

Silence on the line, and then ‘t-huh,’ her laugh, allowing us to ease into a pseudo-conversation.

Her father Earl has brought some awareness to her. Since living there, in Las Vegas with him, she’s said some interesting things to me that I couldn’t imagine her saying out loud.

“I know I have a temper.”

“I don’t like being this way.”

“I feel a panic attack.”

“I wonder why Mom is so distant.”

Her honesty stings, makes me ache for an answer.
From her dad's, she drove us in her Jeep to her daughter's house. On the route from Las Vegas to Arizona, Linda turned up her radio. I over-stepped myself. It was a good song. I noted that at the moment I turned it down a few notches, she looked out her window. Then for the next song, also good, she turned it off.

"Because you want to concentrate on driving?"

The narrow road put us through hairpins and switchbacks.

"Well, maybe that too." She gathered herself, but it was not the onslaught I expected. "But, look, Chris..."

"I think you want to know when you're doing something not right, right?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, you didn't even ask me. Just reached over and turned down the radio—and during that song, too."

Shards of glass, though not as sharp as usual. "Okay. Linda, I wasn't dissing the song – you know I like them. But my ears were physically hurting. It hurt my ears, so I turned it down just a few clicks."

She considered awhile.

"And the song was all distorted."

I rambled on about a night laser show where the audience said "turn it up" and I couldn't enjoy the rest of the music because it no longer sounded clear and good and Led Zeppelinish.
“Wait. Chris. Listen. When I lived in Pasadena, there was this cool dude, Frank, and when we rode in his truck, he wouldn’t let anyone touch his radio. He’d get so mad, cuz it was his and he told everyone ‘don’t touch it, ever’.”

I didn’t know Frank, but I did see how he and others had shaped my sister’s view of the world, of what is right and wrong. Their influences and preferences molded her.

“Let me give you my take on it, then. After all our talking and doing things together, I feel comfortable enough to just do something and you know what I’m about. I mean – I guess I figured you’d feel comfortable enough with me to be okay with that.”

No words. No, “oh, I see” or “okay.” We just started talking about something else. But I felt we were getting somewhere. Maybe something was happening.

Wood-burning, colors, fantasy, rich with detail, vibrant with life, steeped in magic. Always the artist.

“With your natural talents, Linda, you should have gone to art school. Mom and Dad should’ve ensured you an art education.”

“Oh, yeah. They did, Chris. They paid for me to go to an art school.”

Ah, that’s where the still-life oil had been produced. On the wall beside the dining room archway in our Las Flores house, a framed oil in dark shades: browns, grays, blacks. An arrangement of flasks and jugs with rounded bellies, smooth shapes against a fine cross-hatch, light fading away from the center, dark encroaching from the edges.
She’d have been no more than twelve or thirteen at the time, the artist, my sister – Linda Susan Ehrgott.

I didn’t press my questions, even though I wondered how long she was there and why she didn’t stay with it. Maybe that’s when the bankruptcy hit us. Still, she never lost her skill or passion. From the wall-spanning collage of big street motorcycles and their riders, mounted on plywood and varnished, to the afghans she knitted for Anna Lee and me and our brother’s baby, Bobby. A whole set she sent us one Christmas. Fifteen years earlier, she had sent me a latchwork scene of a pony, much like our Swaps in the country, with orange sky and blue pond and the pony’s mane, loose and free.

It thrilled me to think of Linda working on something with the intent of giving it to me. I was cool enough for her attention. She would get it right, the theme and color and content, because she knew something about me – we had history going back to Las Flores Street. So, it wasn’t quite true, and for the moment I’d forgotten the afghan and pony, when one winter I told her I didn’t have any art from her.

“Linda, make something for me.”

After a few days, she got back to me.

“Okay, I know what I’m going to do for your birthday.”

When a package arrived from her a few months later, I hurried it inside and tore at the wrappings. Nestled inside, against tissue paper, a large wood-burned plaque, alive with color and busy with forms and faces. The fairies, the mushrooms, the trees – and she had made it knowing she’d be giving it to me. On the reverse side, a single dusty rose and my name. Over the phone, she quizzed me on what she had hidden in the
artwork. I examined the piece closely and found a heart, a musical note, and a book. A heart. I should’ve asked her.

"Does that mean you love me?"

Too presumptuous, too embarrassing, too uncool.

Of course she does. I hung the magical wood-burning by the front door.

I’d been asking her in different ways where she thought she’d like to live. Her father lived in Las Vegas, and seemed to need her despite their arguments. Her daughter and grandchildren lived in Arizona. All her siblings lived in Sacramento. And her mother lived in Scotts Valley, near Santa Cruz. Linda wouldn’t tell us outright what she wanted to do, probably because she didn’t know herself.

"It’s not like that, Chris. It’s not political about who I’m going to be near."

I should have asked her for clarification, because I’m not sure what else she’d base her decision on. I didn’t though.

"I want to show you something I want." We were driving through Bisbee, Arizona, almost to Candy’s. “There, see that?”

Nestled among hard-edged modular homes, the smooth, brown, adobe-style house looked friendly, inviting, cute.

"That’s the first pre-fab I’ve seen that really makes me want to look on the inside."

She pointed out two others later on during the trip.
“Good idea, Linda. Maybe that’s just what you need. And you can set it up near your grandkids so you can finish spoiling them.”

We both laughed, together.