

RIDING BARRANCA

Finding freedom
and forgiveness
on the midlife trail



Laura Chester

RIDING BARRANCA

Rancho Weirdo, 2008
Marvel the Marvelous, 2008
Hiding Glory, 2007
Heartbeat for Horses, 2007
Eros & Equus, 2006
Sparks, 2000
Kingdom Come, 2000
Holy Personal, 2000
The Story of the Lake, 1995
The Unmade Bed, 1992
Bitches Ride Alone, 1991
The Stone Baby, 1989
Cradle & All, 1989
Deep Down, 1988
Free Rein, 1988
In the Zone, 1988
Lupus Novice, 1987, 1999
My Pleasure, 1980
Watermark, 1978
Proud & Ashamed, 1978
Chunk Off & Float, 1978
Primagravida, 1975
Nightlatch, 1974
Rising Tides, 1973

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Laura Chester

With photographs by Donna DeMari & Mason Rose



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*to the memory
of my mother, Margaret Sheftall Chester
at long last*



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FOREWORD

by **Thomas Moore**

I don't know why I am so enchanted by this book by Laura Chester. I'm not a horse person, though after reading the book, I wish I were. If it were a simple book about horses or about various rides taken during the course of a year, I could treat it lightly and let it go. But it is much more than a chronicle or diary. Laura punctuates the rides with unsettling stories of her family, especially her father and mother, and the stories are not all nice. She doesn't tell us how or why her father was a renegade husband. But she's clear that her mother was a difficult person. The counterpoint of horses and family makes this book unusually satisfying. This intrigue, the unanswered questions, the mysterious juxtapositions, are what make this book, to me, a work of art.

I've known Laura for over twenty-five years. Though we haven't seen each other much in a long while, I feel that we've never lost a sense of being colleagues, not only as writers but as pilgrims on the odd path of life. Maybe this connection with her accounts in part for the pleasure I felt in reading her words. It helps that she's a very good writer.

I've often wondered what an animal is. We assume all kinds of things, but I've never felt satisfied with any philosophy of animals. They are like us in many ways. They have some talents that place them above us, especially the power of their senses, and some that seem to place them below us, especially their lack of speech. But when you live with animals, as I have done for fourteen years now with our dog, you know that they have emotions and some kind of thoughts. They can relate and inspire love. You can argue with them and also worry about their safety. I appreciate the places in this book where Laura tells us what a horse is experiencing. I trust her on this.

Recently I read from one of my favorite Zen masters, Shunryu Suzuki, that he'd like to be a frog, able to sit perfectly still for a long time, and when a fly zips by, gulp it down. He doesn't want to eat flies, but he'd like the capacity for sitting and the quick alertness. I think I might like to be a horse, at least the kind that Laura describes, and especially if I had a rider like her.

There's something mysterious about the joining of human and horse. Old stories tell of horsemen arriving at a community where people had never seen horses before. At first, rider and horse looked like one being, a centaur. That's an intimate bond. To me, a psychotherapist, it means a lot to know that for the Greeks one of the prime educators, especially in the field of medicine, was the Centaur Chiron.

Maybe today when a person rides a horse, she becomes a centaur. There were female centaurs in myth. Maybe it's the blend of human and horse that unleashes the healing power. I get that sense in this book, especially toward the end, when there is an unexpected and beautiful passage of forgiveness. I wonder if this was the purpose of the book, conscious or unconscious, to find family healing through companionship with horses. As in myth, the centaur heals—woman and horse.

Thomas Moore
Author of *Care of the Soul*
Soul Mates; A Religion of One's Own



PREFACE

Unconfined space and a feeling of freedom are what I love most about riding. Sinking into the rhythm of the horse, I am more in touch with my instinctive self—more alert to my surroundings, much like the forgiving animal beneath me. I enjoy exploring new territory, not sure of what challenge might face me next. Even getting lost in the wilderness has its own rewards—reminding me that I am never completely in charge—that the earth is a huge, magnificent place full of surprises. More often than not, I have found that my horse has a better sense of direction than I do. A horse's memory is profound.

I feel extremely lucky to have found four great geldings in the past seven years. As with children, I could say that I don't have any favorites, but Barranca will always be my best boy. He is a big chocolate-colored Missouri Fox Trotter, with the kindest eye, a smooth moving, comfortable-gaited horse with a four-beat walk. His forelock ripples over his face and his tail almost sweeps the ground.

While visiting my mother in Scottsdale, Arizona, soon after my father's death, I encountered Barranca in a barn nearby. It was love at first sight. When he saw me coming, he started to prance around his pen and I was instantly taken. He was recovering from a barbed-wire injury, and I feared that I might be falling for a lame horse with insurmountable problems. But with proper care and chiropractic work, he became the most relaxed and lovely ride. I often feel there is a genuine telepathic communication going on between us.

I had the joy of riding Barranca out West during the winter of this account. During this season I was struggling with my mother's descent into Alzheimer's disease. Mysteriously, during the course of the illness, her once angry, jealous personality was transformed into a sweet and loving presence, making reconciliation possible between us.

But forgiveness is a slow process, and many difficult memories surfaced in the course of writing this book, a process that allowed me to release old hurts and anger. Many of the accounts I share in the

italicized portions of this book are part of my struggle to put family problems behind. After sifting through so many scenarios, riding Barranca put me in the moment, which is where I want to live.

In the spring of the year, Barranca came back to the Berkshires of Massachusetts, our primary residence. Rocket, a palomino Tennessee Walker from the Box-Hanging-Three Ranch in Dubois, Wyoming, became his steady companion. This palomino is never more glorious than when I shampoo his massive mane, which falls equally on either side of his neck. Like most horses, Rocket hates to be left alone. I hope to give him the attention he deserves, so that he doesn't feel compelled to jump out of his stall from a standstill, or leap out of his pasture—quite the escape artist!

Tonka Waken, my Missouri Fox Trotter in Arizona, looks like a strong, solid, Indian pony with a compact body and stud-proud neck. His white-blond forelock falls low on his forehead and he is always eager to get going. I often think of him as my four-wheel-drive vehicle, as he is able to climb almost any incline and actually likes a challenge. An easy keeper, he has the energy and power of a much younger horse. He was born on Valentine's Day.

Peanut, my fourth horse, is everybody's favorite baby. He is the same age as Rocket, but he will always seem like the darling youngster of this equine family. Because of his thin coat, which never seems to grow thick and warm, I chose to leave him in Arizona. With calm amber eyes, he is sweet and gentle. I have had Peanut since he was six months old, and it is a relief to know that he has never been mishandled. I know his history, and there has been nothing traumatic to warp his sense of trust.

On occasion, I rode other horses—in Mexico, Australia, and India. Though these adventures were exciting and new experiences for me, I was always happy to return to Barranca and his gliding gait. Understanding a horse's soul is more important than mere novelty.

While I love the silence of riding by myself, I also enjoy showing family and friends my favorite spots—exploring new places I wouldn't dare go to alone, riding at dawn or under a full moon, meandering beside the Sonoita Creek where one can wander in and out of the water beneath the carved out bluffs, lying down in a field of wildflowers and dozing off in the sun, or finding a surprising, fresh trail. But the familiar can also be comforting. My familiar horses are my greatest solace, along with my old broken-saddle and well-worked reins. I hope in the course of this account, you too can take part in the mishaps and delights I have had the privilege to encounter this past year on horseback, lifting us into another realm, purging the daily grumble and allowing our spirits to soar.

ARIZONA



Tonka, Twilight

Blue Moon on the San Rafael

The sun is still high at four o'clock when I drive my horse trailer over the rim of the San Rafael Valley and look out over this glorious prairie grassland. Tightening Tonka's girth, I mount up and head toward Saddle Mountain, bending east along the dirt road toward the headwaters of the Santa Cruz. As the sun begins its descent, light streaks over the rolling valley floor, lighting up the mountains in the distance.

Alone on this great expanse, I worry for a moment about drug runners and illegal transients, but the land seems so gloriously peaceful, I don't want to waste my time picturing dangerous scenarios.

Knowing it will get cold as soon as the sun disappears, I wear a burnt orange parka and gloves. Tonka's thick winter coat is already warming up even though I am not pushing him. I keep stroking his withers, telling him that he is a good boy, and he seems to understand this.

There is something so soothing about riding alone, without the distraction of conversation—just listening to the horse's hooves on the hard-packed road, hearing the swish of water in my plastic bottle strapped to the back of my saddle. Everything is still and subdued. Tonka is a bit wary of his own elongated shadow at first, but then he moves right along with a nice fast walk, standing patiently when I have to dismount to open a cattle gate.

Once I make it to Bog Hole, the headwaters of the Santa Cruz, I check my watch. It is now 5:15 P.M. I believe I should see the moon rise in less than half an hour. This will be a "blue moon," the second full moon this month. I can see my trailer in the distance, a mile or so away.

My neighbors, Al and Judy Blackwell, pass by me in their truck. I have invited their granddaughter to come over on the following morning, New Year's Day, to give them a ride on Peanut, my caramel-and-cream-colored Tennessee Walker. Children love this horse.

Peanut is still recovering from a night out on the range. One night, all three of my boys escaped the corral through a feeble Mexican gate with a flimsy wooden bolt. (I have since added metal closures on either side.)

The next morning, I knew something was wrong as soon as I left the house and didn't see any waiting horses staring over the fence. The open gate confirmed my fears. I only hoped that they had remained inside the federal land that my neighbor, Sonny McQuiston, leases for his cattle, but they knew the terrain well enough, and had found the open passage out to the road. Telltale droppings lay right before the closest cattle guard, where they had stopped and turned, ending up miles away on the Mowry Road near McQuiston's paddock and his one lone horse.

Luckily, none of the three had been seriously injured, but Peanut had cut his fetlock on some barbed

wire. I spent the past week doctoring his three-stitch wound, pasting on a pad soaked in antiseptic, and wrapping him with Christmas-colored, red-and-green wrap, then duct tape. The little pad inevitably fell out during the night, so I was now simply spraying his sore with antiseptic. *There is always something happening with horses.*

A month ago, when I trailered Barranca up to the San Rafael alone, he rode out nicely as always, but when I loaded him back into the trailer and retreated to shut the door, he broke free, jumped out and ran off with his tether flying. I felt stupid—not having tied a proper cowboy knot, and helpless, for on this wide open range I had no hope of catching him on foot. All I could think of was more barbed wire and dangerous cattle guards.

Panicked, I immediately called my husband Mason on my cell phone. He drove out, and we passed each other on the road as I pulled the empty trailer back home to pick up Tonka, thinking I might be able to catch Barranca on horseback before he got into trouble. By the time I returned with Tonka in tow, Mason was standing by the side of the road with Barranca tied to an oak tree. Two helpful men had caught my renegade and secured him. People take care of each other out here, and I was extremely grateful. Shaken, Barranca was quick to join his equine companion, and I had escaped a close disaster.

This past year streams through my mind as I ride back up the darkening valley. I think of my mother descending into Alzheimer's and wonder where this disease will take her. Her days are now only barely lit, as if she too is waiting in semi-darkness.

I still detect no moon glow, and wonder if my calculations have been wrong. But just before I reach the dirt road that crosses the valley floor, I look to my left and catch the enormous upper lip of the golden saucer ascending above the mountains. Quickly, it rises, magnified in size, and a thrill goes through me—just seeing it makes me let out a *whoop* as I canter up the incline. Suddenly the moon is there in full form, balanced on the mountain line and rising surely, revealing its golden appearance as it continues to ascend, shedding its light on the last of the old year and the beginning of the next.



Laura and Lucy

Rough Riders in the Making

As planned, my neighbors bring their two little girls over to the house at 10:30 A.M. The horses have already been fed, and I've haltered Peanut. Both girls are wearing colorful bike helmets, and my four

year-old goddaughter, Lucy, comes out to watch, somewhat in awe of these older children.

Ashley, aged nine, has close-cropped hair. She has just undergone a non-malignant brain tumor operation. What an ordeal for a small child. She is calm and reserved, while her six-year-old sister is wild and enthusiastic. Well, she was named “Haley” after all. She is eager to help brush Peanut, watching me pick his hooves, dashing here and there.

Ashley stands on the mounting block and manages to hoist herself into the saddle. We walk down the dirt drive all the way out to the road. I am happy to give these girls a chance to ride. Lucy is all eyes, and though she just rode Peanut yesterday with a parent on either side, today she declines. So Haley and comet gets a turn in her purple helmet. The girls discuss their favorite colors, and Lucy pipes up, “I like maroon!”

Haley would like to trot or even canter, but I am leading, and Peanut is taking his time. I tell her that I think she has “the horse bug,” and that she will become a real rider. “You can even ride with me in a few years,” I say.

Sharing my riding life with these girls, I am reminded of all I received in my childhood. I was passionate about horses from an early age, strapped into the saddle by the time I was two. As a child, I found the greatest times of togetherness riding alone with my father. Off through the open fields of Wisconsin—into the dairy wind.

Out on the trail we were free, part of nature, at one with our horses and each other, embraced by the deep green foliage of the Prime Woods or the Nashotah Mission forest, alert to holes when we galloped the trolley track, whisking the heads and rumps of our mounts, so they knew we were not so unlike them.

After putting Peanut away, the three little girls explore the courtyard and all the secret hiding places—the gate that leads to the back garden and the pathway up to the mesa. Haley’s mother has to keep telling her younger daughter to slow down, be careful, *stop*, to not grab everything, but it falls on deaf ears. She is dealing with a comet, after all, a rough rider in the making.



Bringing the Horses In

Snow on the Road

This morning looks like it will warm up quickly, and I decide to trailer Barranca up to Flux Canyon. There are still remnants of snow here from the big storm ten days ago. We climb the hill from Mower Road, and begin the descent on the other side of the ridge. My Standard Poodles, Bali and Cello, are with me today, padding along in tandem. There is nothing nicer than riding out on a good, steady horse with attentive dogs by your side.

Maybe this isn't snow, but a strange white powder— calcium, gypsum, alum? There has been a lot of exploratory mining going on in these hills recently. It seems tragic to disturb the peaceful grandeur of these mountains just to collect copper, silver, or manganese for fiscal gain. But today it is amazingly quiet. I feel like I am the only one enjoying this great expanse. Nobody else is out here, *just me and the drug runners.*

Continuing on down the slope, I can see Mount Wrightson poking up in the distance behind Red Mountain's muscular yet feminine form. Up ahead there's a huge grey outcropping I like to think of as "Rhino Rock"—so different from the rest of the iron-rich, red-colored mountains. I wonder about the landscape, its geologic history—what it is made of, when it was formed.

A deer bounds away up the slope, and I am aware that mountain lions are becoming more of a presence. Recently a friend saw three grown lions crossing Harshaw Creek Road just a hundred feet from our driveway. Surely there are enough deer around to satisfy these carnivores, but still it worries me. I imagine seeing a big cat, and wonder what I would do to scare it away. Would it be interested in my dogs, trotting along so faithfully?

I have forgotten my water bottle and am now very thirsty. Barranca stops to sample various puddles, some of which are probably filled with iron or sulphur or worse. Who knows what elements the mining has disturbed? The proposed Wildcat Mine is planning a massive 150-acre open pit with trucks running down Harshaw Road every eight minutes. I wonder how the Forest Service, which is supposedly the steward of our public land, can let this happen. Who knows what this operation will do to our already compromised water, not to mention the rest of the local ecology?



Barranca on the Move

Sisters in the Saddle

My sister Cia arrives today with Mom and Wanda, our mother's caregiver. Mom's Alzheimer's has clearly progressed. After greeting me, she asks, "Whose house is this? Have I been here before?" though she has visited me three times since November. Her mind is like a Teflon pan—everything sliding right off. Mysteriously, this disease—so terrible in many ways—has allowed her to forget many of the conflicts of our past and has made her a much nicer person.

The beds are all made, and supper composed, so I urge my sister to come out and ride with me. I am willing to give her my best boy, Barranca, though she is somewhat wary due to her last ride here a couple of years ago, when a friend's horse dumped her in the wash.

As we head out, I suggest that we try to focus on riding, and not talk too much, for I have noticed

when riding with groups of women—and surely I am as much to blame as my companions—there is an almost compulsive need to communicate. Often a ride of three or four can be a cacophony, close and distracting.

It is nice to be comfortable enough with a riding partner (like I am with my cousin Helen) to not have to talk constantly. But Cia and I have a lot of catching up to do. We are both concerned about our mother—her medications, her bruising, her balance, and of course, her mental state.

We proceed up a very steep hill where Cia can get a full view of the mountains. It pleases me to hear her awed response to this expansive desert landscape.



La Roca

Cia would often visit me here in Arizona, bringing our ailing father down from Scottsdale. Since I was not always welcome at my mother's house for the past few years, this was the easiest way for me to see them, and I always looked forward to their company.

On his last visit to Patagonia, we took Popi across the border to La Roca, in Nogales, Mexico. But don't push him too far, ordering chicken mole, letting him drink margaritas, forbidden in terms of his therapy? We hired mariachis to play "Rancho Grande" and had our photo taken together, one adoring daughter on either side. At the time, we didn't realize that this would be our last meal together.

Popi's story is a big part of this narrative, for he played a major role in the conflict between my mother and me. I cannot really understand my mother or the dynamic between us, without looking at our family as a whole.

As children, we would wait for our father to come home, anticipating his return. Mom would dress up every night like a good fifties wife, meeting him at the door with a hug and a kiss. They would have cocktails, usually a glass of sherry in the library, and I would fiddle with the combination on his caramel brown briefcase, 3-9-5, until it popped open, exposing his gargantuan legal files.

He was a big important man, not only to me, but to that other world of business. Yet I could see how he often drifted in a daze. I was like him, both in temperament and looks, big-boned, hazel-eyed, with a naughty sense of humor. Popi liked to have a good time and his circle of friends embraced him. He liked to include anyone and everyone, while my mother wanted to keep everybody out. She wanted him all for herself.

On those nights when we ate together around the formal dining room table, it was a chance to teach me manners, but with milk spilling down the mahogany cracks, my jumping up and down, David's antics, Cia's diabetes, George's baiting, and Popi's amusement by it all, how could our mother maintain a civilized dinner? She often ended up in tears.

I didn't realize that what was bothering her was something more important than manners. I remember her sometimes sitting there in silence, barely picking at her food. Even if we asked her a question, she

would not speak. One cannot say the unthinkable.

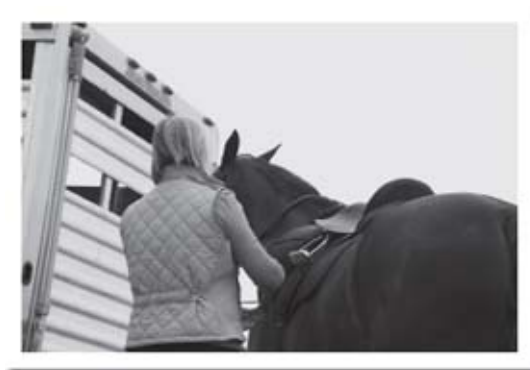
*But when they went out in the evening, it was a different mood. Popi would be all dressed up in sea-
like-sleekness, with flat pearl studs running up his crisp looking shirt. His gloves were immense and lined
with real cashmere. His ring was a garnet signet ring. The emblem on that impressed me. Now I wonder—
where did that ring go? Did he give it to one of his “friends”? And how glamorous she looked on the way
to the opera or symphony, her hair done to perfection, her jewelry and dress so elegant. She would walk away
on his arm with such grace.*

*But I felt a pang of abandonment when they left me at home with my siblings, all of us together in the
breakfast nook, inspecting eggs for that dreaded clot of blood, or eating creamed tuna fish in fried potato
baskets as our elegant parents slid past us, wishing us all a most fragrant goodnight.*

*I liked the roughness of my father’s cheek on the weekends, his long yellow legal pads, and his peculiar
print-script, the cardboard embedded in his freshly cleaned shirts—which I collected for my writing and
artwork—his impressive china dog collection, which I emulated with my own assortment of horses. He had
a compulsion to see things clean and neat—Saturday morning room inspection, mad polisher of shoes. He
would lead wild dashes in the airport, hollering for attention, “Run! RUN!!!” Just-making-it-without-one
minute-to-spare was his favored method for takeoff. To him, creating anxiety was part of the program,
though he thought it all a big joke.*

*I can’t quite picture our mother running in her narrow skirt and two-toned heels. Once Popi got to the
gate, huffing and puffing, perhaps he managed to convince the stewardess to hold the plane until our
mother sauntered up, southern style. I think he really liked her complaints, which he pretended not to
hear, making her even madder. He liked playing the part of “bad boy,” doing exactly as he wanted, riling
her up.*

*It was only after a hard week’s work that he finally seemed utterly spent. Then he was ready to get down
on the dark red carpet and let me ride his back, bouncing before the fire, giving me a good buck.*



Ready to Load

Back Wash

Cynthia Carlisi is coming over to give Mom a massage today, but my horse trailer blocks Cynthia’s
arrival, and Barranca is balking again, not wanting to load. I’m getting really tired of this. Cynthia gives
her free advice—*Don’t use food or treats to entice a horse into a trailer.* I agree, but often opt for the easier
way out—a handful of grain or a carrot, though neither is helping today.

Barranca keeps veering off to the side, and I try backing him up, as Les Spath did when he came

train Barranca in Massachusetts. Les took his time and was clearly the boss. If Barranca wouldn't load, he had to back up. Most horses soon learn that it is easier to go forward.

But now there is way too much nervous energy all around and perhaps Barranca is picking up on that. Finally, with Cynthia clucking from behind, Barranca makes his move and loads. I close the divider and Tonka hops in, then Cia and I drive up the washboard-rough road and disembark in front of the Hale Ranch, with its graceful meadow slopes. It reminds me of some turn-of-the-century homestead with its old wood-and-tin outbuildings and mesquite stick corral.

After warming the horses up, I suggest that we canter to the top of an incline. I go first, loping gently, but I hear a rustle in the bushes behind me and then a *yelp* from my sister. Barranca has shied, unusual for him. I can see that she has lost her stirrup and is unbalanced, but at least she stays in the saddle. "Did something spook him?" She doesn't know, but I don't want to see my sister take another fall, so I suggest that we take it easy.

Tonka feels like quite a handful today. He keeps throwing his head up and down, acting competitively—he hates to have Barranca ahead of him, especially when we canter. Barranca, always the equine gentleman, allows the unruly Tonka to go before him. Sometimes when Tonka acts out like this, I am reminded of a misbehaving child, and how that reflects poorly on the parents. Most likely I only have myself to blame for Tonka's faults.

That night we set up a fire in the living room and turn the lights low. Our mother is in an excellent mood—so happy to be visiting, to be here with us both. The glowing hearth makes her feel at home, for she always had a passion for building a fire.

Every night before dinner Mom would crush newspaper and stuff it beneath the logs in the living room. The fire flared up beneath a painted sea scene that hung above the mantel where waves were caught in a perpetual eternal crash—far from our Midwestern landscape.

On occasion, we would set up those flimsy TV-dinner trays and watch the fire for entertainment. My older brother, George, and I would take turns throwing a special chemical powder onto the blaze, creating tongues of blue and green, while Cia and David, sprawled on the floor in their footsie pajamas. Chipper and our Boxer, lay asleep on the floor. I rubbed his floppy ears.

Once in a while after dinner, if our father was in the mood, he would clap his hands together and ask if we'd like a story. In silent agreement we would huddle together on the dark red carpet and watch the fire as it transformed his kind, attractive face into something almost scary, grotesque. We didn't have to ask what he was going to read. It was always the same story: "Bluebeard."

Our mother didn't stay to listen to Popi's favorite fairytale. She retreated to the kitchen to clean up the Formica-countered kitchen with its checkered floor, everything nice and orderly, the stay-a-bed stew pot away in its Pyrex container, the budgie-bird tray swept clean. Our mother had a firm idea of what the perfect fifties family was supposed to be like and it included bedtimes, table manners, and nightly prayer.

"Open them all; go into each and every one of them," our father read, "except that little closet which I forbid you...."

As the four of us children heeded this warning, delivered by our father's scariest voice, we would shudder in anticipation. I'd put a hand on Chipper's dignified head, hoping he would protect me. My other hand would slip through the opening in the mahogany coffee table, needing something to hang onto. Or I'd play with the empty, silver humidifier, which retained the delicious scent of tobacco—open-shut, open-shut.

“She then took the little key, and opened it, trembling,” our father continued, excited by the terrible tension of the story. “At first she could not see anything plainly, but after some moments, she began to perceive that the floor was all covered with clotted blood, on which lay the bodies of several dead women ranged against the walls.”

In the story the key fell from her hands into a pool of blood. We all knew that the stain would betray her. Bluebeard would know that she knew!

The waves above the fireplace should have sprung into life at that point in the story, crashing against the shore, washing the key with its magical waters. But my father read on in a tone of great warning, as if we too must always obey and never violate the sanctity of the closet.

Luckily, Bluebeard’s wife had a younger sister, who ran to the top of the tower to look out for the brothers. LO! There in the distance came the rescuers riding—two brothers racing across the desert, approaching in a cloud of dust! I liked this part of the story—riders coming to the rescue. I wondered if my own two brothers would be as valiant.

In the story, the brothers arrived just in time, as Bluebeard took hold of the young wife’s hair and prepared to strike off her head. Before he had a chance, the brothers sprang up the steps and ran their swords through the old man’s body, and all four happy siblings were united.

After that cheery ending, it was time to kiss our parents goodnight, then trot upstairs, where we could say the Lord’s Prayer and have “Sweet Dreams.” No wonder I had recurring nightmares.

Now Mom rests in the corner of our big French-blue sofa, propped up by pillows, sipping her favorite Bellini—bubbly water and pomegranate juice—served in an elegant champagne flute. I call her, “Mommy Baby Mama,” and she smiles back, saying sweetly, “My two little girls.” Not so little, I think.

It is hard to imagine our mother dying. She has always had such a strong constitution and an almost manic energy. I could see her dwindling life going on and on, slowly rolling downhill into that murky region of Alzheimer’s land, the mind giving up, but the body resisting.

Six years ago my relationship with her was so different. Even now, I am still finding my way back to the mother who’d rejected me out of misplaced jealousy and anger.

On the morning of my father’s death, my mother called our house eight times telling me NOT to come to Scottsdale—I was not wanted, my father was fine, I was not allowed in intensive care, he could not be disturbed, he was stable, no problem, he needed to rest, I would only be in the way.

My husband Mason thought that I should wait and respect my mother’s wishes. But I had respected those wishes for the past several months, staying away, even though we were living only three hours south in the little town of Patagonia. When I wanted to visit my father in his failing state, I was told, “Why don’t you wait until you’re asked, Laura?”

But my older brother, George, sensed the pressure of time. “Dad might not make it through the weekend.” This shocked me. I didn’t believe it, but I called the Mayo Clinic to check on my father’s condition. “Is it true that he can’t be disturbed?”

The nurse said, “He’s expecting you.”

Luckily I had my cell phone and was able to get directions as I entered Phoenix. When I spotted the clinic across the barren field, it looked like an enormous jack-in-the-box, a monument to illness.

I dashed up to intensive care where a doctor greeted me at the security door, escorting me to windowless anteroom. ~~“About twenty minutes ago,” the kindly doctor began, very tentative, not knowing how I would take this, “your father seemed stable. We thought he was doing well.”~~

Just minutes before my arrival, Popi had been talking and joking with his doctors, and then suddenly something changed. Part of him had slipped away. I took this news in blankly.

The doctor led me to a nearby room where Popi was laid out on a table, tipped at a disconcerting angle so that his head was lower than his feet. He was hooked up to various machines with flashing, changing numbers. Numerous doctors stood in a semicircle by his bed—one Indian doctor wore a turban and held a fist to his mouth. It was as if representatives of healing from all over the globe had flown in to be in attendance. They were silent, respectful, observing their patient.

I went down on my knees, taking his hand. “Dad,” I said, “I’m here. It’s Laura.” His face looked so handsome, peaceful.

No response.

Mom was at home in bed. She had just received a phone call, telling her to come.

Later she told us that just moments before her phone rang, a bobcat slowly sauntered past her bedroom window, right next to the huge plate glass, peering in. I couldn’t help but think that my father, the prankster, had chosen the body of a bobcat to tease her, to make his last farewell, all the while enjoying the fun of startling my mother out of bed.

But now it was as if I was talking by cell phone, not knowing if we were still connected. The circle of doctors slipped away. Only one remained. “What do those numbers mean?” I asked. They were steadily falling from 113, to 110, 98, 97...

“His heart is slowing down.”

“Shouldn’t we try to keep him alive until my mother gets here?”

The doctor responded, “Just this morning, your father requested no heroic measures.”

I nodded.

Popi’s hand was still warm, still alive, so I whispered the Lord’s Prayer and told him how much we all loved him, how he had been the very best father, that we would take care of Mom and his horses. “Goodbye, Dad, go. Don’t hold on. It’s okay. You know that we love you very, very much.”

And then just as easily as a fountain clicks off from its steadily rising and falling motion, the water of his life became still. Peacefully silent, without any pain or even a gasp, as simple as that, it was over. The numbers rested at zero.

Then my mother walked in. The first words out of her mouth were, “What are you doing here? I told you not to come!” followed by a weeping intake of breath, as she went to him, her husband.

As I left the room, Wanda, my parents’ housekeeper for over twenty years, was backing away. “What are we going to do now?” She didn’t know how she would function without his kindly protection.

She went on to tell me how close my parents had been during those final weeks. But he had been tending to her, and no one had been looking out for him, as he didn’t like having anyone hovering over him. After all, he had spent most of his life trying to escape “The Mother,” and he had done a fine job—he had escaped us all, for good.

When I went back into the room a few minutes later, Mom was still whimpering. I sat down on the edge of the bed beside his body and said to her, “Our relationship is going to be different now.”

She answered simply, “Yes.”

And then, it was as if some dark tattered veil fell from her shoulders, the shroud she had worn for him like a protective cloth that deflected attention away from his secret life. It was an instant of transformation that I could barely trust, though the change itself was visceral. She no longer seemed to hate me. She had become like a child, needing me, wanting me to stay with her, but was the rivalry really over? Were we allies now in death?

Sitting together now in our living room, the fire settles down into embers, and my sister and I start getting silly, laughing over the blog I tried to create for this book last fall.

“The day I wrote my first entry, I was going down this flat dirt road—there were no holes or ruts or anything— and Rocket just fell down, on TOP of me!” We all find this hilarious. “And then the next day when I searched the Internet, I couldn’t even find my own blog!”

At last we can laugh together.



Tonka's Eye

You Don't See Them, but They See You

Riding Barranca beneath the big-boned sycamores that line Harshaw Creek, a few leaves left clattering little golden balls dangle like leftover Christmas decorations. Picking our way around thorny mesquite break branches where necessary, so that each time I come this way there will be less chance of getting clawed.

In Massachusetts, falling off is not such a threat. The earth is sodden, and the trails often soft with mud. But here in the desert the ground is like cement, the climate harsh, trees rough and ready to grab you. Old mesquite breaks brittle in my hands. Riding out onto the sand of the wash feels safer, and I let Barranca canter. He has a lovely fast walk and a graceful, smooth lope, but he is still somewhat wary of cattle.

Climbing up an extremely rocky hillside, he keeps trying to turn toward home, but I insist, firmly, and he goes on. Not far away, there is a little turn out, and I see that many transients have come through here. There is a scattering of plastic bottles, black-washed for camouflage, discarded clothing, toilet paper stuck in crannies, a little cave with a sleeping ledge, opened tins of food, the remnants of a fire for cooking or warmth.

One border patrol friend, Danny Cantou, said, “You don't see them, but they see you.” Danny informed

me that they recently captured five men with semiautomatics in a cave right above one of the gates open to go toward the Hale homestead. Last year I found six, fifty-pound bales of marijuana less than a mile from our house, and more recently a truck with 1,850 pounds of grass was apprehended on our small road. In response, the border patrol began setting up sensors along various footpaths—one of which is a favorite riding trail.

When I get home, I give Barranca a bath with warm hose water, then work some Cowboy Magic conditioner into his tail and proceed to comb out the snarls. I've heard that horses are quite proud of their tails, and his is exceptionally long and thick, almost sweeping the ground. The dark brown strands are streaked with gold, just like his fetlocks. I think he likes the feel of his dust-free hide, the sensation of my hands separating the strands of his magnificent banner.



Washing Tonka

Blackwell Canyon

I decide to take Barranca out today, and put my friend, Phil Caputo, on Tonka. For the most part I am the only one who has ridden Barranca these past three years, and he has responded well to my consistency, but now, too often, I am tempted to let others ride him because he is the easiest horse with the best gaits. I know Tonka is a bit of a challenge, but Phil is a trooper.

I call my neighbor, Al Blackwell, and tell him that we are going to ride through his ranch on our way up the canyon. The Blackwells are unusually good neighbors, and let me keep my horses in their stone corral before we had our own barn. Twice a day I made the one-mile drive down Harshaw Creek to feed, and the Blackwells never made me feel like I was violating their privacy. Judy would go out and sit in her chair and watch the horses, getting so much pleasure from just seeing them there. I prefer having my boys at home now, but still miss the old, stone corral and adobe outbuildings nestled in at the foot of Indianhead Mountain.

Dismounting, we walk the horses under the Blackwell's open-air barn and let ourselves out through the back gate. I tighten Phil's girth and adjust his stirrups. He wears a Smith & Wesson pistol at his waist, and somehow that gives me some assurance as we head up this well-known drug-runners' trail. I have ridden this way numerous times and am now more familiar with the route, though it's always a bit tricky starting out until we find the well-trodden path that runs in and out of the wash. Along the way, through this intimate, wind-protected canyon, we note the scattered water bottles, abandoned backpacks, and other transient debris.

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