



Sometimes even my bones resonate with the melodies of my childhood. Ebullience and depression; love and warmth; the frightening separations and the joyous, if fragile, reunions. This is how I come to remember, simply because the old rhythms will always reverberate, always remain.

In 1974, when I was twenty-one and a college senior, my mother committed suicide in the closed garage of our family home, after having tried many, many times before. From the point at which I was old enough to understand what so many hospitalizations meant, I had graphed her innumerable attempts to end her life and thus it wasn't long before I understood how violently the self can turn upon itself.

As my sister and I chose which dress she would be buried in, I resolved never to seek the solution she had found to end her pain. Like so many others in the family, I was angry that she had deserted us, angry that after all the years of all four of us struggling with her depression, we had come to this conclusion, at her side. Even as I felt sorrow and relief, I wondered whether I would ever overcome so many intense feelings and forgive her.

But when I turned forty-five—the same age my mother had been when she died—my world fractured in ways I could never, ever, have foreseen. I found myself drawn into my own vortex of depression, desperate for relief from the interior pain that obliterated nearly every waking moment, and I tried once, twice,

three times to kill myself — even though I was a daughter, a sister, a wife and, most importantly, a mother.

While I knew first-hand that depression can leave entire families helpless, it stunned me to learn that in the United States someone kills himself every seventeen minutes, and over a million people commit suicide worldwide annually. Suddenly I realized that I was not alone in the tractor beam of this disease. I thought about all the many others there were, trapped alone under the bell jars of their depression and suicidal thoughts—and their families, prisoners as well.

In 1994, when I was forty, I had published the memoir, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton*, about the complex relationship we had shared. The book dealt with my maturing as a woman and as a mother, as well as the acceptance of my sorrow that my mother had found parenting my sister and me to be so onerous. The book was my attempt to reach out to her and even to forgive her, despite her many problems, twenty years after she was gone. With the arrival of my two sons, I had discovered a fresh understanding of, and compassion for, how difficult being a parent truly is, even when it is not complicated by mental illness.

However, *Searching for Mercy Street* was only a prelude for me. I had focused on coming to terms with my mother's life, while I had yet to learn how to come to terms with her death. I needed to confront and disentangle myself from the strong tentacles her suicide had attached to my life. I needed to confront my own

struggle with depression, bipolar illness, and our family's history of successful suicides.

The struggle reflected the emotional, and perhaps biological, legacy that was passed on from my mother to me. It illustrated how I came to make decisions as a fifty-year old woman, both for myself and my family, away from the magnetism of my mother and her powerful sphere of influence. It was surely significant that she had often told me, "never be a writer, Linda," but not once in her foreshortened life had she ever said, "never be a suicide." What a shock it was to discover myself following the same terrible path she had walked, despite all my determination that this should not and would not happen. Not only for myself, but for the sake of my children as well.

It was in December of 1997 that I learned how resolve provides only limited protection. As if I had fallen off a cliff, I spiraled down into a pit of loneliness and sorrow and couldn't climb out. I couldn't talk with those I loved about my grief or my despair, so afraid was I that by speaking about such things, I would make them even more real.

I worried, unconsciously, that even if I described the pain wrapped around my heart, I would not be heard. I worried, consciously, that others—no matter how close—would perceive me to be preoccupied with myself in unattractive ways. Who could

really understand how I felt and refrain from making negative judgments about it all, just such as the ones I had made about my mother and her illness?

One day simply followed another, and then another—and then the nights came on. The air of the house was tinged sepia. There was no color, not even black and white, to anything. None of the furniture or the objects in a room had any defined edges. It was as if I were trying to live without my glasses. Everything was out of focus.

I spent a lot of time crying by myself, even when it seemed as if there were nothing to cry about, and I was mortified every time the tears started again. I remembered my mother had cried just this way and I closed my eyes against the shame that I hadn't understood her better, that I had blamed her for giving up. I felt like a traitor.

The depression was pushing me harder into the black recesses of my mind. Each day that I survived I hated myself more. Little by little I was squashed into a tiny, wasted ball of self-loathing. Awakening in the mornings, I rolled my face back into the pillow and thought, desperately, about how willing I was—no matter the cost—to trade my life for peace.

I had feared the approach of my forty-fifth birthday for years; my mother had killed herself the month before her own birthday on the forty-fifth year of her life. Now here I was—just six months away from my own—on a slippery road in the rain, a road slick with curves and no guard rail. No longer could I imagine, or believe, that I would outlive my mother by besting the number of years she, and now I, experienced as so achingly turbulent.

I had been hiding my depression fairly well—following each day’s routines—but still it gnawed away in my gut like a wolf in a trap, and at last it gathered itself for the attack. At my younger son’s bar mitzvah in October, I had gotten drunk in public, but no one seemed to notice anything strange, perhaps because I was keeping my drinking private. Alcohol helped keep me quiet, sedated, and isolated.

For the first time in my life, I envied my mother the solution she had found to quell the pain of her depression. For the first time in my life, my emotions pushed aside all concern for the family who would remain if I joined my mother—even though I, too, had once been part of such a family so abandoned. I knew well the agony of that rejection.

My thoughts of suicide did not mean that I didn’t care about these very important people in my life. It was more as if the pain that accompanied my depression had moved onto a new plain, and, in my confusion, it seemed to require a new and different sort of release.

From my own experience as the daughter of a suicide, I knew intimately how many people—especially family and friends—think of this quintessential act of self-destruction as a self-indulgent, self-involved, selfish choice—or even a temper tantrum that takes no one else into consideration. But suddenly I saw the reality of it: interior pain, urgent, could indeed pressure you to take your own life.

What once I had tried so hard to avoid and push away with such determination for over forty years, suddenly seemed natural,

and I ached to surrender to it. Finally I recognized exactly what I had inherited: the lust to sit in the driver's seat of death. It was surely significant that she, the celebrated poet, had often told me "never be a writer, Linda," but not once in her foreshortened life had she ever said, "never be a suicide."

For many years after my first suicide attempt, I did not believe that I would survive. Now, twelve years later, as I turn fifty-seven years old, I can see how much of my strength and determination it took to break the cycle of self-destruction upon which I had been raised. But with the help of a family that strived to forgive and accept, with the benefit of excellent psychotherapy and the best of modern medications, I have stopped my own part in my family's battle with suicide. I now watch my sons surpass the age I was when my mother took her life. I did not abandon my children as I had been abandoned. I am a mother who lived, despite it all.

I hope I have put behind me my mother's legacy, that old dance partnered with a death wish. I hope that my life never again becomes as filled with despair as it did when my husband divorced me. I hope that I will always be able to work hard at my therapy, no matter how difficult, and that I will always discipline myself to take the medications for my bipolar disorder—despite their side effects. I hope that I will never again lose the love, however temporarily, of

my family and friends. I hope that depression will never again eat me alive. And I hope that none of these wishes are only magical thinking.

In September of 2009, after eleven years of divorced life, I remarried. No longer am I alone. I believe that I have succeeded in burying the legacy, for despite it all—despite my own history and my mother’s black magic—I am once again at my desk beneath a wide window, where a scrap of melody from a wind chime somewhere in the distance rides the slipstream of clear air to encourage me. I remember what a friend once said: sometimes you cannot know which is harder—when you feel you can’t possibly go on anymore, or when you start to realize that you will.

Many evenings after dark, my new husband and I sit on the back deck, our hands linked. Our Dalmatian lies down in front of us, and, in a comfortable rhythm, I begin to scruff the fur of his back with the sole of my bare foot. The moon climbs the night sky, and we wait patiently for the nocturnal howling of our resident coyote pack to begin. The first wail and the dog raises his head, ears lifted, alert for the cousins that call him. The second voice joins in and then the third, until there is a chorus of many, and we all listen, transfixed by the clamor of life that rises from the great silver bowl of the canyon.