

CRONE
(Tarot Card: Death)
Z. Sharon Glantz

“Are you taking me to the airport and picked me because you weren’t convinced I’d really go?” said Elise.

“Who me?” said Miriam. Elise chuckled. She hadn’t done any traveling for seven years, nor had she had much contact with her family. She was surprised by how much she enjoyed the weekly online chats during the COVID pandemic with extended family, even when her brother’s kids stopped coming after the first few meetings. As the wedding of her niece approached, she was determined to reconnect with her family.

Miriam and Linda were more than dogpark acquaintances, they were friends. Miriam was a retired psychologist and had a way of pointing others to that which they denied. Linda had been a high-powered executive before her health took a turn. She was easy to underestimate and didn’t suffer fools. Unlike Miriam and Linda, Elise found retirement was an opportunity to write full-time. The three women were in their mid-sixties and met almost every day to wander into the woods near the dogpark.

Her dog, Potato, perpetually introduced her to many other dogs and their people. She knew some better than others. Potato had started off as a funny-looking little puppy she adopted from the pound and kept growing until he was the size of a small horse. Linda’s dog, Luna, was an older Corgi mix and Miriam’s dog, Chartreuse, was an Australian Shepard. The three dogs rarely played together but did recognize they were part of a pack and welcomed other dogs when they met them – at least most of the time. Elise, Linda and Miriam clung to the trees when other dogs engaged in happy running and wrestling. Being knocked over hadn’t been a big deal in earlier years, but

the vulnerability of age made for unhappy outcomes. Both Miriam and Linda had broken a knee. Elise had also been swept off her feet but hadn't broken anything – yet.

“Did you hear what he said?” asked Miriam, obviously annoyed. “He muttered as though I wouldn't be able to hear him. He wondered if we were escapees from a nursing home.” Miriam snorted with derision, Linda and Elise laughed.

“Oh to be young, eh?” said Linda. They walked in a comfortable silence.

“You have a funny look on your face, Elise. What were you just thinking?” asked Miriam.

“I was thinking about what he assumed. Sometimes we understand the narratives of our lives – our own and everyone else's – in such different ways. One misplaced assumption can diminish who we are in the eyes of others and sometimes ourselves.”

“You're worried about your trip,” Linda said. Maybe so, thought Elise, frowning to herself.

“Sounds to me like neither you nor your family have enough information to create accurate narratives of one another,” said Miriam. A year ago, she had co-opted Elise's concept of “narrative.” Made Elise proud.

On the drive home, Elise thought about how she and her mother discussed family. Elise mostly complained that they rarely contacted her, not even to thank her for creating gifts for each of them during the holidays. For example, before water bottles had become a thing, she had wrapped bottles with yarn so they could be reused. One year, she made edible environments with cookie crumbs and candy. She'd made candy boxes with personalized pictures and designed a family crest. Later, she focused more

on metaphors. She loved the creative process even though the results weren't anything resembling commercial. She hoped her pieces inspired at least one moment of recognition and joy. Her mother had loved the silliness.

"They don't know you," her mother would say. "I didn't really know you until we started talking every night." Elise lived one thousand miles away from her mother and the rest of the family. Her mother and her husband had lived in his elegant and comfy condo and worked in studios in her mother's building. He assured her that she would be able to live in the condo as long as she wanted after he was gone. However, when he died, his children forced her out. At 80, keeping the loft in her building warm enough was challenging and she could no longer mount the stairs to sleep in the loft. She was lonely. Her husband had withdrawn into himself the months before he died. Elise agreed to call her mother every night. They did so for over a decade. However, her mother's dementia made the last few years of her life in assisted care a challenge.

A few years after her husband's death, her mother sold her building and moved to an adult living complex closer to Elise's brother. An old tenant who remained a close friend of hers had convinced her to move to her new community. Their friendship deepened as her mother went from being independent to needing constant assistance. Meanwhile, her brother dutifully stayed in touch with her and managed her finances and other needs. Sometimes her sister-in-law visited and once in a while, their children and grandchildren dropped in. Her mother's physical deterioration freaked them out, so their visits got rarer. Not that they'd ever had regular contact with her.

As her mother's dementia took hold, Elise was patient with her shifting states of awareness. One day they'd have an esoteric discussion and the next she'd claim she

was pregnant. When unmanageable, her mother's nurse would call and put her mother on the phone. Usually Elise could calm her down, but not always. One night she loudly wailed: I DON'T KNOW. Elise figured out that her mother was thinking about what happens after death and talked her down. However, at this point her memory was so poor she'd calm down one minute and the next, she'd forget and start wailing again.

Towards the end, Elise remembered an online chat with the family who were celebrating the birthday of one of the clan. They'd always made a big deal about each other's birthdays. This time they invited Elise and her mother. They were virtual and the others were present, following COVID protocols. Her mother launched into a weird quiet storytelling that made no sense, although she'd slip in commentary on those she could see through the screen. Her brother's family found this amusing, but for Elise? Not so much.

This particular state made Elise especially sad but was new to the rest of the family. As they listened attentively, Elise could see the vibrant narrative of her mother's life dwindling in the eyes of her own family. She had quietly been one of the backbones to the feminist artists' movement and helped the careers of many successful artists. They knew she and her second husband had created collections of vibrant and poignant scrolls because they hung them in their homes. They didn't know the wild lives they lived during that time. No, they never really knew her either, thought Elise. Then again, I've been so focused on the present, the stories of her life elude me too.

"They don't know that you're a living Charon," said her mother during one of her more lucid moments.

"How do you mean?" asked Elise.

“Your brother brought life into this world, nurturing it to fruition. You’ve been the one who helps people die.” Elise was stunned into silence. “Did I tell you I’m running for senator?”

Elise could see the wisdom of her mother’s words, not having had children. However, Elise hadn’t thought about the many people she had loved who had died way too young. Her mother was right. She’d helped some of those people find peace while dying.

In one case, nine years previously, she had reconnected with a friend she hadn’t seen for 15 years. Maya was with her dog, Fido, at the dogpark. She was dying of liver cancer. She had close friends who helped her but otherwise lived alone. Elise fell into a role she’d played in her caretaking past. She took Maya to a few appointments when her friends were unavailable and walked her dog when she was feeling especially lousy. Mostly, as Elise had always done, she listened to Maya talk about life. “Have you always been like this?” Maya asked.

“Yes,” said Elise. She thought of a mutual friend of theirs who suffered health crisis after crisis for many years. She’d lived with her for most of them until her friend fell in love with a nurse. Her lover didn’t like Elise all that much, but took care of her friend until she died.

When Maya died, in addition to new clothes, Elise inherited Maya’s dog. Fido and Potato were buddies until Fido died of old age. His death was expected but his dying was long and challenging. She may have waited too long to put him down, but he didn’t seem ready until she knew he was.

Elise's mother's death was sad but also a great relief. Elise knew she had died before hearing the news from her brother. She had spent the day moving from her bed to the toilet, depleting any and all food she had ingested from all of her orifices while her head screamed in fierce pain. This was more than a raging migraine. Her mother had been terrified of dying. Her last act felt like she was sharing that fear with her living daughter.

COVID prevented Elise and everyone else from traveling to a memorial. Elise was fine with this. In fact, she'd been fine with the whole world drama of COVID in that it reinforced her tendencies to be reclusive. She hadn't always been like this. She'd had a colorful life. Now she just wanted to live in her head. However, she still had a heart and her niece's wedding would reinforce her sense of family.

"Do you have a dress for the wedding?" asked Linda during a subsequent dog walk. In the previous year, Linda's daughter's wedding had been a small affair and Linda hated the pictures taken of her because of her dress. Elise had to admit, the dress looked better on the hanger than on Linda.

"I do," said Elise. "It's quirky, just like me."

"And you have your dogsitter all lined up?" asked Miriam.

"I do," said Elise. Miriam and Linda knew Potato would likely torture the dogsitter because he was used to being with Elise and suffered severe separation anxiety in the form of howling – even if Elise was gone for short periods. When Fido was alive, they'd both howl before settling down. No more settling down for Potato, much to Elise's dismay. "I told the dogsitter what to expect and even set up dogwalks without me in preparation. I can't think of anything more I can do."

“He’ll be fine,” said Miriam.

“Who else will be at the wedding?” asked Miriam, artfully changing the subject before Elise could start obsessing over leaving her dog.

“My brother and his wife, of course, along with his ex-wife who is the mother of the bride, and her husband. My brother’s kids -- the bride and his son and girlfriend, along with his wife’s kids, their partners and three young children. Oh, and the bride has a daughter.” Elise had spent time with her grandniece when she was too young to remember her but authored an ongoing story of unicorns and griffins. which she’d also wrote for her sister-in-law’s grandkids. The bride said her daughter loved each chapter. She never heard from the others.

“Didn’t you say your brother married his wife and two kids when they were young?” asked Linda. “You talk like they’re two separate families.”

“I’ve asked that question for years,” said Elise.

“But you haven’t asked them,” said Linda.

“No, I guess I haven’t,” said Elise. She and her sister-in-law had gotten along but never really liked or trusted one another. Maybe this was why she didn’t allow either of her kids to come and stay with Elise. Her brother’s kids had each visited one time – not much, but something. This had always saddened Elise. Years later Elise was saddened even further when her brother and his wife were surprised to learn that she’d worked with kids for 12 years. Still another false assumption and narrative that had shaped her relationships with family. How many were there? No, they really didn’t know her.

“Do they at least acknowledge you at your birthday like they do with one another?” asked Miriam.

“Nope,” said Elise. “I take that back. I’ve gotten a few texts over the years and my brother and sister-in-law send me something almost every year. However, I get the impression it’s more of an obligation.”

“That’s disturbing,” said Linda.

“It’s okay,” said Elise. “Spending time with them was always more important to me. For years we’d see one another twice a year. My mother was diligent about family gatherings. At Passover she held a family seder. She’d also invite various sundry enigmatic friends. Over a ten-year period, I wrote and rewrote the Haggadah complete with art I created and family photos..”

Seders had taken place at her mother’s husband’s condo. Her brother and his crew took over her mother’s studio. “Studio” was what they called her mother’s building. The furniture store had been converted into retail spaces, artists’ studios and two lofts. The 20-foot white walls of the lofts contained art mostly created by her students and friends. Only a few were pieces she had created, mostly still in progress. There were two full-sized looms, cupboards of yarn, bolts of fabric, every type of dye and paint imaginable, and numerous little curiosities, mostly for appliques, in the stacks of small drawers. Every visit was a treasure hunt. Anyone who visited saw the quintessential successful artist studio, even though her mother made her living as a university professor of art and landlord.

“At Passover, it made sense the family would take over the studio because there were so many of them and a lot of room. I envied them but stayed with my mother in the condo. Maybe next year.” Linda laughed. She hadn’t been raised Jewish, but her father

had been Jewish, and her daughter had moved to Israel. Elise thought of her as a Jew by proxy, which made her Jewish.

“Our second annual family gathering was at Thanksgiving. Families of people who I knew in high school reconnoitered at a lovely conference center on the California coast. A few of the parents had been close friends of my mother. For four days, we were fed three meals a day, had a beach to comb and a big room in which kids played and adults chatted over jigsaw puzzles. For a few years, I brought scripts I had written to read out loud. I brought my guitar and sang. I performed individual Tarot readings to the group that I thought of more like performance art. One year, I inadvertently accurately predicted a disaster for one of the recipients and that freaked everyone out. I had no idea and only years later find out that was the reason fewer of them participated in this particular activity.”

“I hope they appreciated your creativity,” said Miriam.

“They did,” said Elise. “I can hear my sister-in-law saying, ‘Elise, you’re so creative.’ Her tone of voice still makes me shiver.”

“Didn’t you once say that your nephew saw you differently?” asked Miriam.

Elise told them a story that popped into her mind. Her nephew had been in his early teens. He’d always been hyper-sensitive with the potential to inherit the same major depression yuck that plagued her and her mother. What she didn’t expect was for him to suddenly break out in tears for fear his father would die some day. “My brother was fine, so this came out of nowhere. I listened and use the voice I’d always used when someone was hurting, even for things only imagined. My tone changed when I told him that he needed to find a way to deal with the mindfuck – something my mother

told me about when I was young after one of her wackadoodle incidents. I wasn't unkind to him, but I did reinforce the idea of gaining skills to manage his mental health. He actually stopped crying and got it." Elise had many discussions about this with him over the years.

"Good for you," said Linda.

"Did you tell your brother and his wife about this?" asked Miriam.

"No. They were already frustrated with how fragile he could be."

"What about your niece," asked Linda. "Did she also inherit depression?"

"Not that I know of. But she did have her own challenges." Elise kept those stories to herself. She had promised her niece she wouldn't tell anyone. Nor was this the first time she had been asked by family members to do so. Elise held these secrets but over time, observed this wasn't mutual even after everyone grew up.

"I suspect the narrative my family believed about me was reinforced by me, although I wouldn't know about it until years later."

"Do tell," said Miriam. Elise was on a roll. Why not? she thought to herself.

"Every year at Thanksgiving, the girls wanted me to tell them stories," said Elise. "I may be a writer, but I've never thought of myself as a good storyteller – mostly because I don't think in a linear fashion. My nieces wanted bedtime stories anyway, so I made up fantastical narratives that relied on myths and I made two young girls the protagonists. One year – the last year of bedtime stories – I told them a story about my life in the prior year. I was still overwhelmed and figured, why not?"

"What happened?" asked Linda.

“They were in their mid-teens, aware of sex even if they hadn’t experimented, but obsessed with stories about relationships.” Elise gave them an abbreviated version of the story she’d given her nieces.

Elise was near her baby making expiration date, but still pined for a family. She’d had bad luck finding a partner. Either they were too crazy, they used her as a launching point to engage in a real relationship or they died. Those weren’t the only circumstances but sometimes that’s how it felt to her.

Elise had been working in a big prestigious law firm, barely eking out a living while quietly writing plays, some of which proved successful but most of which never hit the stage. The beginnings of the internet gave her an arena not only for finding love, but a new venue for writing success. “Everyone on the internet is a sociopath,” her co-workers would say. “Only geeky crazy people use it.” That wasn’t Elise’s experience until it was.

Elise discovered polyamory, although she was most comfortable with threeness. She was bisexual, so this wasn’t too far-fetched an idea. Entering a family with kids could be easier than creating one. The story included experiments with two different couples that resulted in disaster both personally and professionally. Elise hadn’t had an ongoing intimate relationship since, and that was 20 years ago. As per usual, telling the story was exhausting.

“I didn’t give my nieces intimate details, but I did tell them all about the people I met and the relationships I had. This was a story of love and betrayal, complete with not one, but two sociopaths. I checked in with my nieces periodically to make sure they

understood the story. I didn't talk about sex but I did talk about the dynamics of three people together in love."

"Wow, that's quite a story," said Linda.

"Why was that the last story you ever told them?" asked Miriam.

"At the time, I didn't know," said Elise. "Fifteen years later, in a passing conversation about Thanksgiving, my brother and his wife said they thought my stories for the girls were wonderful until they got totally inappropriate."

"Parents will always be parents," said Miriam. "How sad it took 15 years to talk about it."

"They mentioned it in passing," said Elise. "We never talked about it."

"Not even with your brother?" asked Linda. Elise shook her head. Either exhaustion or shame was making it difficult to talk. Elise drove home in a daze. Her default was to blame herself for anything that went awry, but she was too tired to go even there.

"Has your family seen your plays or read your books?" asked Miriam on a subsequent walk.

"They've heard drafts of a few plays but never saw them performed. My plays aren't easily visualized by theater professionals let alone regular smart people, but worked well when performed," said Elise. "My nephew suggested he too might want to be a writer and yes, the boy can write. A few years ago, I sent him a first draft of a graphic novel that helps writers hear feedback on their work. My plan was to turn some of it into a video game. He'd always been a gamer and I figured he might even learn

about the arduous process of rewriting. I also assumed he understood the nature of first drafts. Oopsie, I was wrong.”

“Did he read it?”

“He said he did and then laughed as he told me, ‘You know how it is – you write and write and your work doesn’t go anywhere.’ I could see I had overestimated his understanding of how writers do their thing. But he was in his twenties, so that could change in time.” In truth, that exchange had been a big oucher for Elise and a sign of things to come.

True to her word, Miriam took her to the airport and Elise was transported back to her family. She knew they would be consumed by the tasks of producing a wedding and was hoping she could be of help. They had every little thing planned and moving forward and, if anything, they were all shocked that she’d actually shown up. The groom said as much in the kindest way possible – three separate times. Elise worked hard to ignore any emotionally triggering red flags and stay in the present.

Elise shared a place to stay with her stepmother who had married her father long after she left the nest. The two women had little in common, but Elise was glad they could spend some time together. They collected her sister-in-law’s mother before heading out to the wedding venue. Am I just another old woman? Elise thought. It didn’t help that they had missed the obscure turnoff and arrived just as the ceremony began.

The wedding was beautiful. Her nephew officiated and each of the parents made long heartfelt speeches at the reception. While the reception was being set up, she had been wandering around until she noticed the wedding party posing for pictures. If the bride hadn’t noticed her asking the photographer to include her, Elise may not have

appeared in any of them. As it was, neither of the bride's elders had been included. Again, Elise stashed her annoyance to celebrate the day. She even suppressed her shock at her brother's ex-wife's hurtful stoned and drunken comments. Funny how narratives get passed around, she thought.

Elise's stepmother had left to drive the 450 miles home. Her brother wanted to go through old photographs of family – incredibly old photos of people Elise had never met. Since their mother's death, he had taken more of an interest in family. This was ironic since he couldn't remember anything from his childhood. Elise had been both amused and confused by his lack of memory. Not that theirs was a bad childhood. Except for the few surreal incidents of her mother's madness, they'd had a good time of it. Did the dramatic events of his childhood provoke her brother's forgotten past? Elise had often listened to her mother try to explain her madness and she tried to protect her brother from all of it.

Elise's sister-in-law had graduated from intern to full-fledged therapist just before COVID, mostly counseling her patients online. Elise and her mother had been amused by her aspirations. Her mother had undergone 10 years of psychoanalysis and many more years with other therapists. Elise had seen many therapists and interned with a few, while applying for graduate school. She'd even authored a book with one of them on the developmental stages that she'd turned into award-winning plays. However, Elise hadn't followed through with becoming a psychologist. She realized she preferred putting her efforts into creative projects and besides, she wasn't a fan of therapists. They were a special type of entitled, even when well trained and effective, maintaining a veneer of authority that wasn't justified.

It had taken a few years, but she was finally ready to focus on the life of her mother rather than her dying and death. When Elise asked to see the art stored in their storage container, her sister-in-law went into a diatribe about how important the works of art were to their family. Elise was happy to hear that the family had different pieces of her mother's art hanging in their homes. Her sister-in-law seemed to assume Elise had motives other than building a legacy website. Another red flag to stash. Elise was glad when later that day they drove her to the Airporter that would take her to the flight home.

Elise didn't remember a lot about the drive home. Miriam had questions but Elise had a tough time collecting her thoughts. By the time Elise got home, she knew she was getting sick. She'd been vaccinated for COVID and the flu, but she her throat was a familiar kind of sore.

Elise's dog had been as difficult as she'd expected and the dogsitter avoided seeing her face-to-face upon her return. Evidently the howling had been so impossible, Potato stayed with the dogsitter and her husband at their house. However, the reunion between dog and owner was joyful, and Elise was happy to be home.

Elise tested negative for COVID, but her deep coughing made her brain fuzzy for well over a month. The wedding stories she told Miriam and Linda were more positive since she still didn't have it in her to think about all the red flags. She was almost sorry when she could think clearly again. And feel again.

Over the course of a week, she shared her difficult memories of her journey with Miriam and Linda. They were ever so patient as she raged. The three of them were good at taking turns processing some of the difficult circumstances in their lives. However, Elise was surprised at her own anger and hurt.

“I’m sorry I’ve been whining so much,” said Elise. “It was more about the absence of curiosity about me after seven years than anything said. I know, I know, they were focused on the wedding, but seven years with little or no contact is a long time. I’d even written another unicorn story.”

“Time for the woulda-coulda-shoulda game?” asked Miriam. This was something they did periodically, something Miriam had used with her patients.

“My sister-in-law’s daughter never said one word to me,” said Elise. “She didn’t even introduce me to her kids.”

“What woulda-coulda-shoulda have you said,” asked Miriam. “We’ll go first. I would have gone out of my way to play with the kids anyway.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to resist the baby,” said Linda.

“I got nothing. I could see they had no idea who I was. At the wedding, my ex-sister-in-law said: ‘You’re so lucky your mother made sure you’d be taken care of.’ Elise had to admit that yes, her inheritance did assure a comfortable retirement.

“My life in none of your damn business,” said Miriam.

“Still drinking and smoking too much, are we?” said Linda.

“You’re lucky you found a wealthy man who puts up with you,” said Elise. Her ex-sister-in-law still lived drama to drama which is why I didn’t say anything to her. She was exhausting even on a good day.

“A cousin of my sister-in-law sat with his grandson draped over himself, so it looked like the baby was slowly slipping to the floor. His wife and my sister-in-law told him what he was doing was wrong, so I playfully defended him by pretending to be the

baby. My sister-in-law told me how ridiculous it was for me to pretend I could possibly know the mind of a baby.”

“I would have flipped her off,” said Linda. “Well, not really, but I would have thought about it.” said Miriam.

“Are you a judgmental bitch like this with your clients?” said Linda.

“Obviously I can’t know the mind of a baby because I’ve never had children.”

They all snickered.

“That’s actually pretty good,” said Linda.

“That’s what I said, although my timing wasn’t great” Elise said.

“Wait, didn’t you write a book?” asked Miriam.

“I even gave her a copy. As far as I know, she never read it.”

“I read it. I found the format a bit peculiar, but the content was spot on,” said Miriam.

“You haven’t said anything about your niece, the bride,” said Linda.

“She had orchestrated everything in the wedding,” said Elise. “She was constantly surrounded. Someday I’ll tell her about how her wedding candle gifts almost got me arrested.”

“Say, what?” said Linda.

“At the airport, the TSA stopped me. Their machine flagged the candles as suspicious. No big deal except my cannabis gummies were next to them. While waiting for his supervisor, the TSA agent looked at the jar. Fortunately, he decided to ignore them.”

“That was risky, Elise,” said Miriam. “You know better.”

“I do remember something unexpected from the trip,” said Elise to change the subject.

“Do tell,” said Linda.

“My sister-in-law’s son had fallen out of favor with the rest of the family. Evidently during COVID, he turned to Joe Rogan. I found it amusing, but his parents didn’t. However, he’d also had an accident at work and was relatively disabled and unable to walk comfortably. Having always thought of himself as invulnerable, this had humbled him. There was a kindness and curiosity I hadn’t seen before. A start-up he’s been working on with a friend for years just might have legs.”

“Good for him,” said Miriam. “At least you didn’t end up arguing politics with your family.”

“I hate that there are Trumpies in my family,” said Linda.

“No, they’re just your typically politically correct progressives,” said Elise. “I’m not sad I won’t be moving there.” Again, the words fell out of her mouth before she thought about them.

“You were going to move there?” said Miriam.

“I thought old age near family would be a good thing,” said Elise. “Except my brother, I’ve been relegated to relative.”

“Nice turn of phrase,” said Linda.

“You won’t die alone, Elise,” Miriam preemptively said. Elise knew how loving and protective Miriam was when it came to those she cared about.

“We all die alone,” Linda said dramatically, the back of her hand stapled to her forehead. Miriam and Elise laughed.

On her drive home, Elise felt her body relax and tears come to her eyes. All the fear and anger turned into a deep sadness. There were many reasons to shift her perspective of family. Maybe she didn't reach out enough, or maybe she had but it didn't matter anymore. Maybe she had unwarranted expectations, or maybe she always knew better. Maybe the narratives that were understood by her family were wrong or maybe at least partially right. Maybe they really didn't know her. Individually and as a family they had created their own narratives about her and there was nothing she could do to change that.

Elise was intimately familiar with the letting go that grief demanded to assure moving on. Her mother was right in calling her a living Charon. She remembered reading the book her co-writer had written about grief and smiled. Grief was its own altered state of awareness. She also remembered a quote from Charles Feidelson: *Life is a series of little deaths out of which life always returns*. She couldn't remove the little death of her familial false narratives and expectations. So, she'd do what she'd always done. She'd let grief wash over her for as long as needed and return to building the narrative of her own life.