

A Letter From Charles

Dear Lizzie:

I know you hate when I call you that.

And I hate it when you call me Chuckie.

And yet, we continue to throw these names at each other knowing it will rile the other,
knowing we should grow up and treat each other better.

But we're locked into this life-long pattern of insults
with no key.

It's been a while since I've written

or called

or visited

or even really knew I had a sister.

My days are filled with noise.

My nights are long and loud.

I rarely remember you or

Mom

or the boys.

Are they still around?

Did Dad ever stop drinking?

I remember – sometimes, and only in short bursts –

you had a kid. Or several.

Girls? Boys? Some of each?

On a good day, I remember a Christmas

sunny, clear

warm.

I managed to find my way to Pacheco – I lost count of the buses and trains I had to take.

You picked me up in Concord.

Walnut Creek?

Somewhere.

The car was strange – I didn't do

enclosed well anymore.

But your daughters?

sons?

laughed and giggled,

vying to get Uncle Charlie's attention.

We were all there – Mom, Steve, David –

didn't he change his name to Henry or something? –

kids and dogs,

trees, lights, presents.

I opened the big box with my name on it –
just what I wanted –
socks underwear boxed mac & cheese books
water shirts pillow backpack.

I felt bad – all I brought
was little cable car toys for the girls? boys?
I thought they'd be disappointed.

But they squealed with joy – hugs and kisses
“thank you thank you thank you”

I don't know why I can remember that
when everything else is gone.

Not really gone,
just hidden
buried under the music playing
in my head
around my eyes
through my ears

It doesn't stop. Unless I take

the pills my social worker gives me

and then everything stops.

So I just follow the notes wherever they lead

wandering the streets trying to catch them –

they're slippery, and crafty little devils –

leading me on, letting me think

I have them.

Until I don't.

I never told you I loved you

because you always brushed it off.

But I did. And do.

When I can.

I don't know what else to say.

It's dark here where I am.

I miss your laugh

your voice.

You always knew where you were going.

I envied that.

Goodbye, Lizzie. the music calls.

Give hugs and kisses to my nieces? nephews?

Hold them close.

I do when I can.

Love, Charles, your brother