

SHARON,

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sister and a younger sister, Melanie Stauffer, and brother yet to come.

Sharon had a rough-and-tumble relationship with Melanie as a child, but it didn't stop Melanie from idolizing Sharon.

"There were times I would have to go run and hide from her until my mom came home, but I loved her so much," Melanie said. "She was a tomboy and prided herself on being tough."

Sharon balanced episodes of sibling rivalry with other moments in which she did her best to pass along her passions to Melanie.

"She would sit outside with me at night and we would look up at the stars together and she would tell me about nature and the universe," Melanie said. "She would collect lizards in the neighborhood and take care of them."

Even as a youngster, Sharon was "committed" to cycling, but also enjoyed activities such as trap shooting and hiking. Her preferred style was jeans and a T-shirt. She kept her hair cut short. In one picture from the teenage years, she appears to have borrowed the style of every boy in *Tiger Beat* magazines of that era, right down to sunglasses hanging from a beaded necklace. Unfortunately, her boyish interests didn't go over well with peers. Teasing and bullying in school led to becoming more of a loner.

"There was trauma there for her for sure. She had a hard life of people being mean because of her preferences," Melanie said. "I think she really found her peace being in nature."

The Pritchards' father eventually left the family, but Melanie said it bonded Sharon more closely to their mother.

"She would always tell us to do it the right way — raise our children the way our mom had raised us," Melanie said.

Despite the strong relationship with her mom, Sharon overwhelmingly wanted to get away from her home and the peers she had to face on a daily basis.

She joined Job Corps to begin vocation training as a chef and met Rachel at the training site in Reno, Nev.

"Sharon was working on vocational training while I was working on getting my GED," Rachel said.

The two became fast friends, but it proved to be only a pit stop for Sharon. She joined the Army after Job Corps.

On leave between boot camp in Texas and being sent to Saudia Arabia to participate in Operation Desert Storm, Sharon confided in Melanie that she was lesbian. Sharon and Rachel's friendship had developed into more.

Sharon was sent to Saudia Arabia as support personnel to soldiers on the front line. She would prepare meals as a sous chef and deliver rations to the front line.

"What really affected her was driving through the war

zone and seeing bodies in the streets," Rachel said.

The trauma of what she saw in the Middle East damaged her psyche badly and lingered long after an honorable discharge in 1993. Sharon and Rachel picked up where they left and stayed together for the next five years in Reno.

"[What she saw in the Middle East] affected her drinking, she became more paranoid and she had extreme nightmares," Rachel said. "Sometimes we would have to go sit in the closet together for her to get over it."

Sharon returned to other familiar comforts besides the bottle. Between her return from the service and her death, two well-loved iguanas — Godzilla, then Free — got to call her a companion. Sharon preferred communicating by letters because she perceived phones as a danger to her well-being. She often signed the iguanas' names alongside hers.

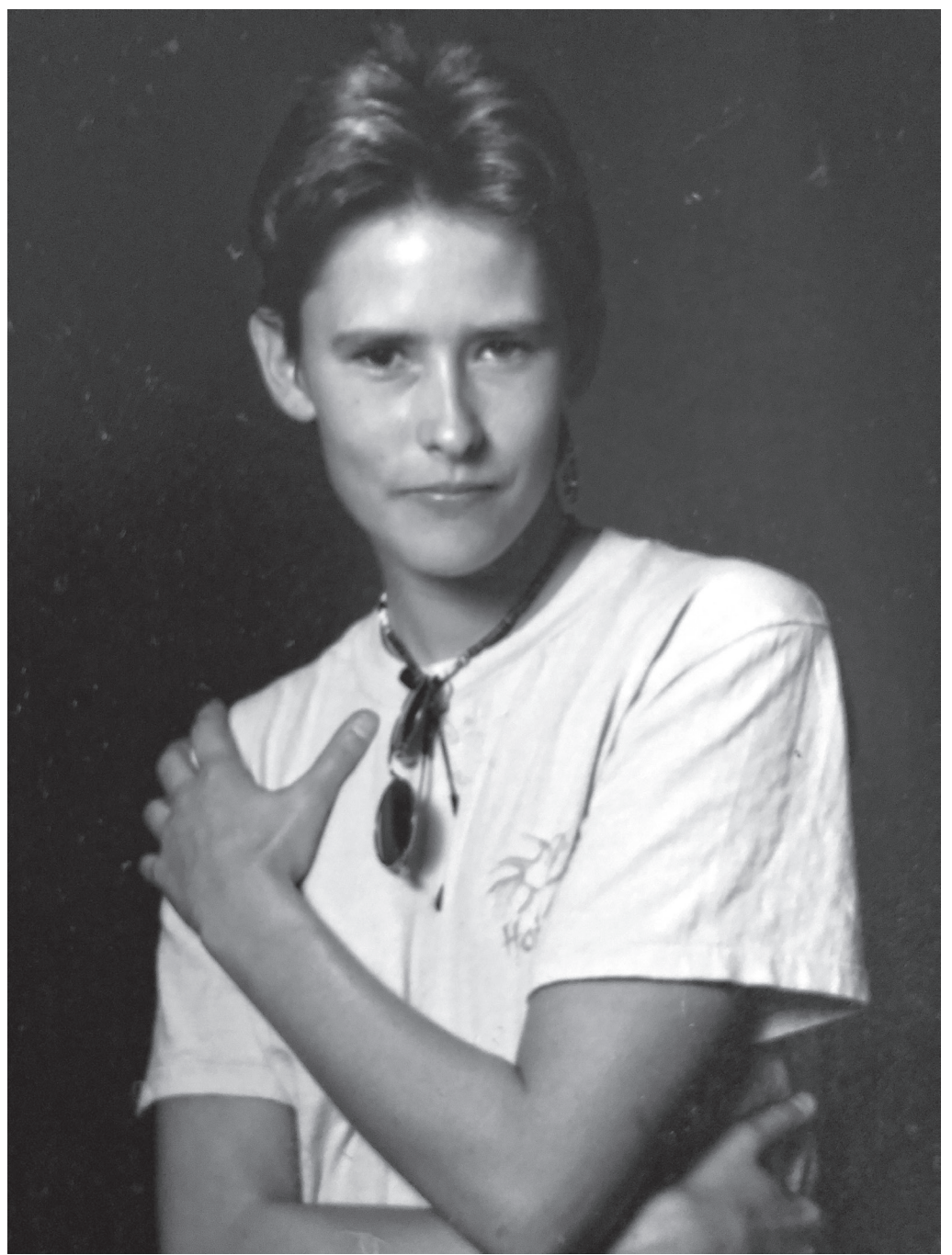
"She would always tell me things like Free's tail could snap the legs of a cat or dog and stuff like that. Like she was always so proud of her lizard and he was her best friend," Melanie said.

Sharon worked in hotels as a sous chef around Reno for a living, and kept her spirits up by competing in triathlons and hiking with her leathery companions along the Truckee River.

Melanie couldn't have imagined a better career match for her sister.

"It was like something that just came very naturally to her and she was very big into nutrition and vitamins. Even as she dealt with alcoholism, she took vitamins and ate healthy," Melanie said.

Rachel and Sharon split up when Rachel left to take care of her ailing mother, but they remained friends and in contact as much as Sharon's paranoia would allow.



Sharon in her teenage years.

Submitted



Sharon with former partner Rachel Chavarria.

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"I always told her that she could come and live with me if the choice was between that and homelessness. I left other relationships to go and be with her when she was struggling," Rachel said. "She was just always my priority."

Sharon stayed in Reno and had some run-ins with homelessness, but the death of her mother in 2011 sent her spiraling.

"The alcoholism had really started to escalate by that time and she just fell apart," Melanie said.

Sharon became chronically homeless soon after. She eventually left Reno for Washington state and both Melanie and Rachel had to live through extended periods of radio silence from that point on.

In one undated letter to Melanie, Sharon doesn't dwell on her own experiences, she offers financial advice: "One of my favorite phrases is 'a penny saved is a penny earned.' It still holds true to this day."

Sharon included a silver coin with the letter, and continued, "It is 90% silver. It is used as a bargaining chip. Say this coin is all you have left, you could go into a convenience store and trade it for a quart of milk, cheap loaf of bread and a can of beans."

The letter is signed, "I love you with all my heart and soul, Sharon & Free."

Melanie lost track of Sharon after their mother's death aside from the occasional letters.

"I tried hard to find her, but I didn't hear from her again until April 2017 when her partner died," Melanie said.

Melanie flew to Seattle to pick Sharon up and take her back to California. Sharon seemed ready to give treatment at the Veteran's Administration clinic in Menlo Park a try, but it didn't stick.

At one point, she was given a prescription for klonopin while trying to kick the bottle. The combination of the two can cause memory loss, loss of coordination and cause irregular breathing and heart rates.

For Melanie, a licensed therapist, it calls into question the types of screening the military does before accepting new recruits.

"We know that trauma compounds on older trauma and Sharon had a lot of that by the time she enlisted. She enlisted to escape that and came out the other end worse than when she started," Melanie said.

Sharon ended up back in Reno, then headed toward Oregon where Melanie thinks she spent some time at a women's shelter in Ashland before settling in the Salem-Keizer area. Court records show Sharon had no run-ins with the law during her time here, but several Keizer police knew who she was and were aware of her

movement around the area. Sharon left behind a stack of pictures she had been carrying around for years when she left Melanie's circle of care.

"One was my mom, one was of Free, there was one of the two of us. She would always carry around pictures and little mementos of people that mattered to her," Melanie said.

Melanie said the world might have learned a lot from her big sister if they could have found a way to listen.

"Humility and kindness and, no matter what she was going through, she always had a positive attitude. She always knew that God loved her," Melanie said. "She amazed me because she would be going through difficult things and she always had so much faith."

I think she would also say not to judge a book by its cover. Because you can look at someone who is homeless and

think they're the worst person. And then if you just take the opportunity to get to know somebody, you can see they are people struggling and they have big hearts."

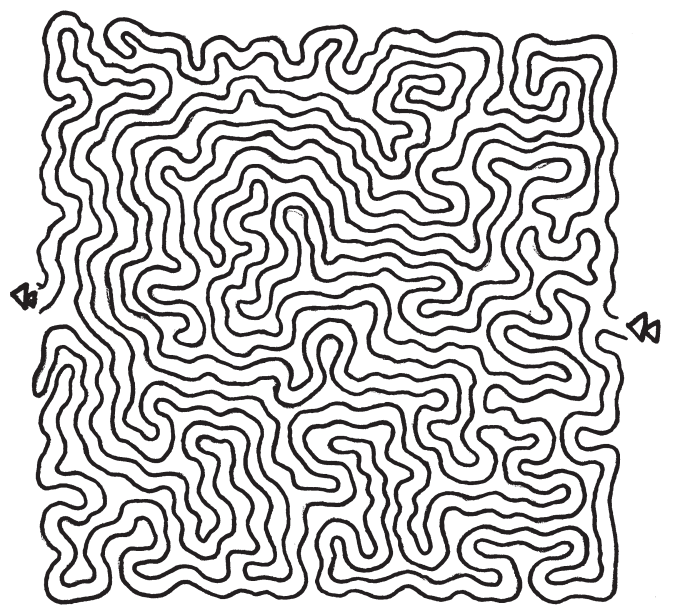
After her death, Virgil T. Golden Funeral Chapel cremated Sharon's body. Melanie received the ashes a few days before being interviewed for this story. She has a plan for what comes next, even if there isn't a date set in stone.

"Sharon would never want to be buried. She would always talk about how, if she died, she just wanted to have her ashes spread in nature," Melanie said. "When we were kids, she had a praying mantis and it passed away. She took me up into the hills behind our house and she buried it and read from the Bible and gave it a little ceremony. I'll do something similar for her in the mountains somewhere."

"We know that trauma compounds on older trauma and Sharon had a lot of that by the time she enlisted."

— Melanie Stauffer

maze



Maze by Jonathan Graf of Keizer

sudoku

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