

La Linda

David Kaczynski

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"La Linda" is set in south Brewster County near the Rio Grande and focuses on the narrator's fascination with the town of La Linda, Coahuila, Mexico, and an experience he has near there.

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I've become increasingly fascinated with the town of La Linda, though I'd be hard put to explain to you exactly why. For one thing, I've never been there, only studied it (if that's the right word) from a distance. It lies at the end of a dead-end road that I've driven down many times. I could have visited it back in the 1980's before the border was shut off. I'd always planned to, but then the bridge spanning the Rio Grande was closed when the mine in La Linda, Coahuila, Mexico was shut down and the town, consisting of hastily constructed pre-fab cabins and a few offices and warehouses, was abandoned. Then after 9/11, the border with Mexico was sealed with a vengeance, you might say, so now I'm only able to view what is basically a ghost town from a distance of two hundred yards, more or less.

My closest contact with people from La Linda came about when a group of miners challenged the residents of our small town to a softball game. The closest shabby ball field on our side of the river was situated on the grounds of the public school in Marathon. Since we are such a small community, it took some effort to recruit an ad-hoc team from around the county. Not surprisingly, we lost the game pretty badly. Still, the game was a lot of fun for me since I loved baseball and hadn't enjoyed many opportunities to play the game since high school.

Afterwards, I chatted with one of the Mexican guys who told me that there was basically nothing to do in the town of La Linda except work, so they plotted out a ball field to amuse themselves and ended up playing a couple hours every day after the evening whistle blew. I guess you can get pretty good at anything if you practice every day. From our conversation, I gathered that there were very few families, if any, living in La Linda. Learning about the athletic pastime of the miners also nudged me to reflect on the many things I do myself to "kill" time in my own life, when time is perhaps the most precious gift we have.

Although the subject of religion never came up in my chat with the Mexican ballplayer, I discovered after the town was abandoned the existence of a beautiful church standing all alone about a half mile west of La Linda. Roman Catholic, I presumed. If, as I inferred, the church was established for the spiritual benefit of the miners, then why was it situated so far from town? Had the idea been to mark a clear boundary between the gritty daily practical routines of the mine and the spiritual aspirations of the church? Or perhaps to insulate the church from any taint of world-

liness? Or was the “church” rather a cloistered monastery, a place of abnegation and devotional prayer entirely separate from the town and its industry?

Many times I’ve been sorely tempted to wade across the shallow river and investigate on my own. The town, yes; but the church even more so. In more relaxed times I could have done so, but nowadays the boundary between the US and Mexico has a very different feel. The laws pertaining to the border are more strict, or at least people interpret them more strictly. And I have to admit to myself that I seem to have internalized this change, almost to the point of feeling it would be close to sinful to step across that arbitrary line into another country.

Then, of course, there’s always the possibility of being intercepted by the Border Patrol when crossing back to the U.S. side. Even with a valid passport in hand I’d be guilty of unauthorized entry, which is a federal crime. So I could get arrested, possibly even imprisoned if the authorities suspected me of being involved in something nefarious, or if they simply wanted to broadcast a message about the sanctity of the border.

While it’s true that I very seldom saw Border Patrol agents nosing about in the area, still it was widely rumored that the familiar green trucks and flesh-and-blood personnel of the Border Patrol had mostly been replaced by drones and electronic trip-wires in remote areas like this one.

So I had to resign myself to a kind of pseudo-nostalgic banishment from La Linda, which is just as well since by all appearances the actual town was destitute of significance beyond it’s one-time industrial purpose, as if meanings had been sucked out of it just as the mineral ore (Fluorspar, I believe) had been ripped from Mother Earth. Maybe it was better, after all, to flesh out what remained with my imagination.

Ah, but the church, I thought, was another matter.

Then, too, I wondered what ever happened to those young men I spent an afternoon playing ball with many years ago, those economic nomads scattered across parts of Mexico and probably the US as well, blown away by desultory winds of need and opportunity, utter strangers to the corporate offices and boardrooms where their fates were ultimately decided. They had played with such energy and focus, I remembered – yet of real, practical autonomy in their daily lives they had next to none.

Every once in a while, my wife –coincidentally named Linda - accompanies me on these day jaunts to the end of the road. Although she enjoys the ride and appreciates as a quaint piece of scenery the view of the abandoned town with its ghostly church, she seems puzzled by my preoccupation with the place. I’ve tried to explain that my experience of La Linda has a metaphorical structure.

“Just think about boundaries: the one’s we can’t cross, or imagine that we can’t cross, or that we’re unwilling to cross, or that we haven’t crossed yet....

“Take for example, the boundary between the present and the past, or between life and death. But even more so, I think about the boundary inside myself between my conscious awareness - which by definition I have access to - and my subconscious mind, which is present to me in one sense but not in another. So when I sit here gazing across

the river, I'm really exploring the meaning boundaries – looking at my own mind, in a sense.”

My wife is a trained psychologist, so I was taking a slight though familiar risk by encroaching on her territory.

“So can you explain to me why driving 60 miles to gaze at a town across the river helps you examine your own mind?” she asked skeptically. “I would think you could do that far more easily while sitting in your chair or on a meditation cushion.”

“Ah, see!” I smiled. “You’ve just hit on another boundary! – the one between the outer world surrounding us, and the inner world of the mind. I can’t examine that boundary just by going inside myself....”

“That’s exactly why when you’re meditating - wherever you happen to be at the time - you should meditate with your eyes open!” she reposted.

And so we went back and forth.

Since retirement, we’d spent nearly all our time in each other’s company, day and night. So I’m pretty sure she appreciated the hours she was able to spend by herself during my periodic jaunts to La Linda. I, for one, appreciated having some time to myself, though I didn’t particularly want to press that argument. Physical distance doesn’t necessarily mean emotional distance, but still I didn’t want Linda to confuse the two if I insisted on my need for time to be alone.

There was another aspect of my preoccupation that I decided not to discuss with her. Typically, as I was about to drive off on one of my pilgrimages, Linda would ask, “Where are you going?” and I would reply, “Well, I’m going to see Linda!” It became a joke between us. But in another sense, my teasing remark was something more than a play on words.

I’ll explain it like this: no matter how close we are to someone, or how much we love them, there’s always some undiscovered territory - a bridge that’s visible but barricaded, not necessarily and certainly not willfully be the one who “owns” the territory; a long, vaguely-remembered history of influences and experiences that shaped this other person resulting in a presence - some call it an aura - that defies description, perhaps akin to the inner meaning of a work of art (say, a modern work of the most challenging variety) though typically obscured by the formulas of functional understanding. I imagine this mysterious territory as one divided between spiritual aspirations and struggles to cope psychologically, mirrored in my mind by the twin poles of La Linda: the church vis-à-vis the company town.

In this sense, La Linda reminded me of Linda.

Meanwhile, it would be a mistake, I realize, to swallow up the entire town in a metaphor. It’s a real place, after all. Sometimes I even wondered if someone might still be living there. Once, for example, I heard the sound of clanging metal and quickly raised my binoculars in hopes of glimpsing a human figure. But a minute later I noticed a dust-devil swirling along one of the unpaved streets, which led me to the more likely explanation that a sudden breeze had agitated a piece of tin roofing material on one of the decayed buildings - just the sort of thing you would expect to hear in a ghost town:

echoes of past activity rendering absence as a kind of presence. Indeed, most of the buildings in La Linda had lost their roofs, either to fierce winds that occasionally blew out of the desert's silence, or perhaps, I theorized, to scavengers from poor villages to the south who know far more than we pampered gringos about recycling as a way of life.

Behind the village lay a tall, broad mountain range that was almost bare of vegetation to my eyes, though it was rumored to host tall trees in the higher reaches. It lay there on the plain as much to set La Linda apart from the rest of northern Coahuila state, but also as a quiet realm hovering above our crowded human stage. I'd asked my Mexican friend, "Have you ever climbed the sierra?" "No," he replied. "But why?" I wondered. "Es muy alto (It's very high)," he explained. Back then, I just knew I'd someday climb that mountain. But now it's too late. The bridge is shut down, the border is sealed, and I've grown too old for such an adventure anyway.

When I turned my binoculars on the church, it appeared to be in good repair. The whitewashed adobe structure shone pristine under the midday sun. The roof, supporting two parallel, cross-bearing steeples toward the front, appeared to be in fine shape, which made me wonder if some lonely priest might not still be living there in the role of a caretaker. The somewhat grand building actually seemed worthy of the name "cathedral," yet as far as I could tell from a distance it appeared to be missing all its doors and windows. While at first glance it looked as if the doors might have been thrown open in a gesture of welcome, on closer inspection I could see that the window frames held no glass, stained or otherwise. In certain lights, I was pretty sure I could look through one side of the building and out the other through those empty portals, vaguely conjuring to my mind the image of a skull. Indeed, all life had gone out of the building. Perhaps the doors and windows of the church had been "recycled" as well.

Nowadays, I seldom use my binoculars, which add precious little detail and nothing essential to my wistful contemplations of La Linda. Instead, I stroll up a small knoll next to a turn-off at the end of the road, sit myself down on a convenient boulder, sip tea from my thermos, and simply let the weather and the view embrace me. After a while, I'll munch on a sandwich I've packed for the trip. By now, you've probably guessed what I'm really contemplating: the reality of impermanence in the aspect of a place that hardly ever changes; or, to put it more succinctly, human mortality, my own first of all since it lies "nearest."

Then something occurred that utterly transformed my experience and memories of the town.

It was one of those hot summer days in the desert when the sun hits you like a hammer. Though it was cool when I left home, my perch on the boulder overlooking La Linda began to feel unbearable soon after I arrived. I saw heat waves shimmering above what was left of the tin roofs of the town of La Linda. Figuring I'd better find some shade to eat my lunch in, I headed toward a cottonwood tree down near a bend in the river, fifty yards or so to the east. The tree was surrounded in a tall stand of

Johnson grass, so my only concern was to watch carefully for rattlesnakes as I parted the grass making my way toward what I assumed would be a sheltered clearing under the tree.

When I emerged into the snug clearing, I was confronted by a surprise: four human beings hunkered down against the bare caliche clay, a man and a woman, a girl and a boy, apparently a family, evidently immigrants judging from their dark skins and ragged clothing. They'd heard someone or something approaching no doubt from their expressions of fear, amounting to terror on the face of the mother.

"Disculpe!" I said. (Excuse me!)

My initial shock turned quickly to sympathy, especially as I noticed how woefully thin they were, almost skeleton-like, not the body type I had come to associate with Mexicans. It was like they'd come from another world. Instinctively, I wanted to back away out of politeness, as if I'd accidentally violated someone's privacy. But another part of me understood that this was a different kind of situation.

"No soy la migra!" I announced, anticipating their concern. (I'm not the Border Patrol.)

"Quien es?" the man asked. (Who are you?)

"Una persona," (a person), and then, "De donde vienen?" (Where do you come from?)

In the interests of economy, I'll spare you the translated Spanish. Suffice to say that while I don't consider myself fluent, I can speak enough Spanish to communicate, at least at the practical, public level.

"From the south," he answered warily. "We look for work."

"Whereabouts in the south?"

"Saltillo....things are very bad there."

Pausing, I took another look at the family. They might have been poster children for a refugee/immigrants rights group. The little girl was snuggled against her mother's waist while the boy peeped out warily from behind his father's left arm. The two kids couldn't have more than fifteen years of age between them. It pained me to imagine what they must have been through to have walked or been intermittently carried, or perhaps bounced around in the back of an old pickup truck over those hundreds of miles of unbelievably rough roads. And food? They'd probably eaten next to nothing.

"Why did you cross here?" I inquired. "It's so isolated. The nearest town is days away" (I meant by foot travel).

"My brother used to work in the mine across the river."

Impulsively, I asked, "Was his name Miguel?" (Miguel was the name of the Mexican miner/ballplayer I'd chatted with years back.) It was a shot in the dark. Besides, there were probably a dozen or so of the miners named Miguel.

The man looked stunned. Or maybe it took him a second or two to arrive at the "right" answer. "Yes, Miguel," he said.

"How is he?" I genuinely wanted to know.

"He's fine...." Then after a pause, "Could you give us a ride?"

As an aside, I remember a conversation I'd once had with a devoutly Christian woman who worked at a local café. At that time, the border was fairly open and it wasn't unusual to encounter what we called "wetbacks" roaming northward. I remember asking her, "If a hungry wetback came to your door begging for food, would you give him some?"

"No," she said.

"But why?" I wondered.

"If I gave him food once, he might come back again."

I remember scratching my head at the time, thinking this very nice Christian woman had somehow missed a key element in Jesus' message of love. Now here I was faced with a conflict of my own between my compassion and my common sense. I knew for sure that if I was caught transporting "illegal" immigrants northward then I'd be arrested, charged, and almost certainly sent to prison. Instead of asking, "Where do you need to go?" (assuming they even had a clear idea) I had to decline quickly and decisively.

I shook my head, saying, "It's not possible." I wondered if they knew about the INS family separation policy, meaning that undocumented parents and their children could be sent to separate detention centers. Thus, if I gave them a ride things could turn out very badly - and not just for me. With this thought in mind, I was able to partially reconcile my compassion with my common sense.

But glancing at those two emaciated children, I sensed that doing nothing was not a tenable option. "Do you need food? I could bring you something to eat," I offered.

The man nodded, though he seemed disappointed that I'd refused his request. The woman, however, spoke for the first time, and with great urgency. "Yes! Yes! Please!"

I explained to them that the nearest store was thirty miles away, and a small one at that; that it would take an hour and a half before I could return with some provisions. Certainly, the store would carry milk, cheese, bread, peanut butter, tortillas, beef jerky, candy bars, bottled water, etc. I planned to be generous and would bring them enough food to last for several days, apologizing that I could do no more to help them. In short, they agreed to wait in place. I promised to move as quickly as possible, and so I left.

The grocery was attached to a modest, under-used RV park with an old-fashioned gas pump sitting out front, next to a flag pole sporting an NRA banner - a picture of a gun with the slyly threatening motto, "Come Take It." The clerk behind the counter in the small, crammed store was a dark-haired young woman with tattoos running down one arm. I felt a bit relieved that the clerk wasn't an older person who might be more likely to initiate small talk and ply curiosity. Though I had no qualms about helping a family of "illegals" I knew others might feel differently, so the need for secrecy instilled in me a feeling akin to guilt. I'd visited the store a few times over the years, but not enough make myself known, which seemed like a good thing under the circumstances.

"How y'all doin' today?" the clerk said cheerily.

"Just fine. And yourself?" Routine formulas of greeting, intended to connect people but also to avoid connection. I got busy shopping in a hurry to hold it at that, and

also because I thought my mission an urgent one. The pickings were pretty slim. Still, I was able to get milk, cheese, bread, canned beans, several large bags of corn chips and popcorn, two boxes of cookies, a whole case of soda pop, about thirty candy bars, some packets of jerked beef, and a case of bottled water. Piled together, my purchase barely fit on the counter. I doubt the clerk had checked out such a mass of stuff often, which did seem to pique her curiosity.

“Havin’ a party?”

“Oh, yeah,” I extemporized, “My brother-in-law is coming with his wife and kids all the way from New York. It’s my wife’s birthday, so, yeah, we are havin’ a party. It’ll be a real good time.” I don’t like lying unless I have to, though sometimes I’ve resorted to lying just to protect my privacy.

“Oh, there’s cakes in the cooler. Would you like to have a look?”

“Oh, no, I already got one.” At this she looked puzzled, probably wondering why I hadn’t bought snacks when I purchased the birthday cake. “I baked it myself,” I added hastily.

“Your wife’s gotta be a lucky woman,” she smiled.

On my return to La Linda, I passed a border patrol vehicle heading north on the otherwise empty road. It was an SUV that appeared to be empty of passengers, though I couldn’t be entirely sure in the split second I had to look. Who could have imagined that my day of quietude and relaxation would turn out like this? My hands tense on the steering wheel. My breathing quickened to a jogger’s pace. Well beyond cell phone range, I had no opportunity to confer with Linda. So I was left to wonder what she, with all her heart and good common sense, would think of my decision-making. I could almost hear her voice on either side of the dilemma.

When I arrived at my usual parking spot, I felt more exposed than ever. It would take me at least three trips to lug all the stuff I’d purchased to the family hiding under the tree. Three trips of at least fifty yards each way, back and forth, delivering groceries into a thick growth of weeds. What if someone was watching me from afar? I’d look suspicious no matter who was spying on me - some hiker, a rancher, or an INS agent. What kind of a world was this, I wondered, where one felt the need to sneak around when doing good?

I decided to take over the case of water bottles first. It was the heaviest item and probably the most needed. I stuffed my pockets with candy bars for good measure, thinking of the pleasure it would give those two little kids. I found it a little harder to make my way through the tall grass with such a bulky load. As I slowly advanced, I wondered how I’d be received – whether my gifts would earn me instant trust and affection, or whether the family would maintain its attitude of wariness. If they greeted me warmly, well, what then? What was I to do with that? Would I be feeding their expectations as well as their bellies? It wasn’t like we could ever become friends.

But it was all for naught, because when I entered the close clearing under the cottonwood tree I found it empty. At first I thought, well maybe they took a bathroom break a little ways away. I decided to go back for another load, yet when I returned

to the clearing it was the same – no sign of the immigrant family. I waited an hour or so, periodically calling out, “Hola! Hola!,” but to no avail. Did they not trust me? I wondered. Had they been nabbed by the border patrol? Were they joined by another group of nomads resolved to keep moving? Feeling futile, I nevertheless delivered my third load, telling myself the family could conceivably return later in the day. Then I drove back home along the vacant road, rehearsing how I would share my day’s experience with Linda.

Linda, as it turned out, had less interest in discussing my instincts and actions than she did in the welfare of the immigrant family. “Maybe one or more of them was deathly sick,” she agonized, and proceeded to inquire about the appearance of each, but especially the children. I had to confess that apart from their emaciated appearance, I’d focused more on their body language and facial expressions, as well as the effort it took to communicate as best I could in Spanish. She mentioned the possibility of trying to locate them and bring them to a clinic, although the nearest would be in Alpine more than a hundred miles away. I pointed out that in order to bring them to a clinic we’d have to pass through a border patrol checkpoint, in which case there was always the possibility of the children being separated from their parents. Next, she wondered about their need for adequate clothing. We could go to a local church’s resale store and buy some nice second-hand clothing, she strategized...if only I could give her some idea as to sizes. Though she’d never laid eyes on them the family seemed to be as real to her as it was to me, as if she could look into my heart. But the bottom line was that we didn’t even know if we could find them again.

Linda and I returned to La Linda the next day, hoping we’d find the family under the tree, or at least discover that the food had been taken or used. Making our way carefully through the weeds raised for Linda another concern: the possibility of snakebite – yet another dimension of the family’s vulnerability. But the family was not there. When I broke a Coke out of a six-pack to quench my own thirst, Linda scolded me, feeling that we should leave everything for the family as a matter of principle. In her way of thinking, it was their stuff now and I had no right to take it. To me, her attitude was a slight hedge against the helplessness we were both feeling, a futile and mostly symbolic gesture aimed at maintaining responsibility. On the drive home, Linda scoured the countryside for many miles in the vain hope of glimpsing human forms.

We returned to the clearing the next day, and the day after that, but to no avail. Like the miners who once animated the town of La Linda, the immigrant family had vanished. We decided to leave the food and water as a kind of offering in case some other immigrants happened to shelter in the same spot.

It seems my experience of La Linda was changed by my brief encounter with the immigrant family. So much so that I don’t visit there nearly as often as I used to – only three or four times a year now. Despite my best efforts to restore the old direction, my mind is drawn more to the vacancy of the glade than to the vacancy of the town. I’ve returned to the narrow spot under the tree only a couple of times. There I discovered a residue of candy wrappers and other packaging torn to shreds, certainly by mice,

perhaps by javelinas as well. The bottled and canned goods remained untouched, only gathering dust.

Now with my gaze cast vaguely across the river, I meditate on what occurred on this side. Everyone knows that the world is full of desperate people. Why, then, do I find myself so deeply affected by an accidental encounter with just four of them? Thinking rationally, there was no reason to blame myself for their plight. The broader circumstances lay far beyond my control. I had no reason to fault my efforts to aid them. The failure of those efforts was simply woven into the structure of things – history, politics, bureaucracy and the like. I guess the answer lies in how they appeared to me: not as mere ideas or abstractions, but as people.

Then again, maybe I never really did see them as people, but only as vaguely human presences defined by need. Present, yes, but only one-dimensionally so, their inner lives and extended social lives distantly assumed but never truly felt. Absorbed in the past, I should have been more aware in the present moment, now so quickly passed. Perhaps they sensed this about me. And perhaps that's why we ended up disconnected.

In our small town, it's hard to avoid conversations, even if one would very much like to at times. At the little grocery store, the cafe, the gas station, people like to talk. Sometimes the topic of undocumented immigrants comes up, though I never bring it up myself. Some folks express a degree of sympathy, but offer no solutions, aware of their helplessness without exactly dwelling on it. Helplessness is pretty much assumed. Other folks spout the kind of derogatory trash about drugs, and gangs, and human trafficking that you hear from right-wing radio jocks. I don't contradict them. Maybe I feel I don't have the right, but in any event I can't change their minds. I know that. Opinions are like hollow, empty rooms with doors locked. I listen – make myself an empty room without doors (like most of the buildings in La Linda) – but I don't validate, unless listening itself could be a form of validation.

When I last visited La Linda it was mid-spring. In the wake of a mild shower, some of the cacti and wildflowers and nearly all of the ocotillos were in bloom, tinting the desert floor with their yellow, blue, and small but intensely red blossoms. Inside, I carried with me the glow of Linda's parting embrace. An immense blue sky held nary a cloud, allowing the late morning sun free reign to light up the far mountain range, touching me, in turn, with a familiar, wistful yearning.

Gazing across the river at the abandoned church, I thought I glimpsed movement. With my naked eye I couldn't tell what it was, so I made the short walk back to my truck to retrieve my binoculars. On a wishful impulse, I imagined I'd discover the Mexican family making a home in the church, looking healthy and content. It took a minute to orient myself to the close-up view. Before long, I saw a vulture alight on one of the window ledges. All symbolism aside, the vulture is a friendly creature. Though a meat-eater, it never kills anything. Sometimes a few of them would fly over to check me out on my overlook perch. I soon realized the vulture was paired up with a mate, the two big birds flying in and out through the church window as if conducting business of some kind. Were they making a nest? It was a cheerful thought to accompany my

mood of spring renewal. Panning across to the front of the church, I was surprised to discover yet another creature – a coyote sitting quietly on the top step, resembling to my mind a domestic dog patiently waiting for its master to emerge. But no, sometimes I think we focus too much on the functionality of animal behavior while discounting their capacity for aesthetic enjoyment. Like me, the coyote seemed to be enjoying a day full of sunshine, openness and calm. Smiling to myself, I mused, “Hmm, must be a Franciscan church.”

The Ted K Archive

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An exploration of borders and boundaries, their psychological and moral implications.

David's two poetry books and one fictional book can be found here:

[<shoptbmbooks.com/Refugees_in_Samsara.html>](http://shoptbmbooks.com/Refugees_in_Samsara.html)

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