

Chapter One

On the Road

Papa died last week. It was unexpected. His car engine gave out when he was crossing the intracontinental railroad tracks west of Gallup and he refused to exit his old 47 Cadillac when the Southwest Chief was churning down on him. They say he flooded the car engine with too much gas, and she died. They say he was working the ignition switch with his fingers, and his foot had the pedal to the metal, trying to clear out the carburetor, and then he died.

My thoughts hurl the Bad F-Word out the side window of our speeding car. Immediately it is thrown back past me by the rushing wind, pushing it along the vehicle's interior, where it silently echoes into oblivion. Papa is not oblivious to our sojourn. He is with us in spirit and ash.

He was one with that car. He was born in it forty-two years earlier when our Grandpa was barreling down Route 66 south of Santa Fe with his wife laying stretched out in the back seat holding onto her bed blanket. She was subdued. She was ready. It was a cold winter morning with the gray New Mexico light climbing in the eastern sky. The Caddy hit a bump in the highway, jumped a foot in the air, and when it settled awkwardly back onto the pavement Papa stuck his hand outside of her, as if to gauge the reception. It must have seemed hospitable, as he immediately started his passage to the outside world. He was out and taking Grandma's milk before the hospital shown in the headlamps of that old Cadillac.

His daddy bought the car new one year past the end of World War 2. It was a present to himself for surviving the Pacific Campaign. It was a lotus cream colored convertible that father and then son, would drive all over New Mexico. It stood out like its owners, and people would ask to have their picture taken in it when the rag top was down. The car was named after Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, a French explorer who dealt in alcohol and furs and inevitably, politics, at the turn of the 1700s around the Great Lakes. Our lineage passes through his Canadian ventures.

When Papa was seventeen, Grandpa gave him the car and he drove it for the rest of his life, which ended Tuesday morning last week. Now he is with Grandpa and Grandma in what I hope is that place called Heaven. They named him Daniel and he always said it was because they knew he could tame Lions. Maybe so, but Mama is a *Lioness*. We are on the road to find her in Los Angeles. We were at the house in Lamy with Aunt Flo, our Mama's sister, when it went down. We look more like mother than we do Papa. She has those deep blue eyes and brown hair cut short the last time we saw her. Her name is Rachel.

Louis and me. Twelve-year-old twin boys, little over five feet four inches tall and pushing close to one hundred ten pounds. My name is Alex from the Russian throne of Mama's ancestors. Louis is from Dad's French connection coming through the previously mentioned Canadian border.

We've been living with Flo since two years past. That's when Mama went to California for a visit with her other sister, Jeanie. She never came back. Something about Hollywood. Papa had to sell our house and send her some money, so Papa, Louis and me moved in with Flo. I'm not sure exactly what happened to her, but whatever it was, it sure has a great big hold on her. Jeanie moved north to San Francisco, but Mama remained south in a place called Pacific Palisades. In our Facebook conversations and text messages she never lets on what happened, but maybe now we'll find out. We got Papa's ashes in an Urn so Mama can get one last look at him before we scatter his dust into the sea below her California house.

We are on Route 66 in New Mexico, running parallel with Interstate 40, just east of Gallup. Our driver is Aunt Flo's ex-husband's brother, Don, another vagabond. He loves to drive the old highway when he can, says it brings back memories. Memories? The new interstate was built before he learned how to drive. Maybe past lives is what he is talking about. He spends most of his life around Silver City looking into the closed down mines and stealing weed from the cartel's herb fields on the flanks of the mountains. When Flo divorced the brother, Don began spending more time at her house. His car of choice is this early-model Mustang and he thinks it will help him score some ladies in California. I don't know. I think he has a better chance with his weed. He used to sell it up in Santa Fe. Now he says he's going to move to Colorado and grow it legal and change his coveralls for a suit and tie and

join the country club with his future wealth.

His inebriant of choice is Jack Daniel's Whiskey and he thinks it helps him relax with the ladies. Says it worked for Frank Sinatra and so why shouldn't it work for him? I don't know, sometimes he gets so relaxed that he just nods off to sleep wherever he might be. He is on probation for five years for driving while under the influence. Fell asleep at the wheel and ran off the road and into a chain-link fence that borders the local golf course. Local Sheriff was in a foursome with the local Judge on that course at that time, and they helped him out of the Mustang. Sheriff wrote the Mustang up for malicious mischief, damaged headlights and littering parts of itself on the links. Sheriff had a sense of humor and he knew Don's war record. But the Judge was there, so he had to write Don up for driving drunk and drinking while driving. Judge was an east coast import that graduated one of those Ivy League schools and he didn't know the history of our people, or if he did, he didn't let it interfere with his job. Don had no choice but to plead guilty. I think he wants to move on to some new territory where he can start a new reputation.

He was a driver in the Army during one of those Gulf Wars and when he came back Flo says he was never the same. I seen pictures of him in his khaki gear, all muscled out like a roid ball player with tattoos popping out on his biceps. Butch-cut black hair and big white teeth sticking out in bliss. Nowadays he is kind of skinny and shriveled up with gaps in his mouth beside yellow enamel.

I overheard him once talking about killing in the mountains of Afghanistan. I was beside the porch with Bara, Mama's Russian Wolfhound, and Don was sitting on the porch with one of his sidekicks, smoking some of their recently harvested herb. They were talking about the war and then Don suddenly said,

I killed some Afghan soldiers that were supposed to be on my side. They pulled out the rifles that I was training them how to use and they were trying to kill me. It was crazy over there. I even killed my dealer.

Dealer? I pondered on that one. At first I thought it was probably a time he chose to kill some Las Vegas soldier cheating at a card game, a time when no

one would suspect the true circumstances of the kill. A time out in the bush when friendly fire is just as likely to get you killed as enemy fire. Friendly fire? Aunt Flo referred to that phrase as an oxymoron. One of her university words. She always asked how being shot by your side could be friendly, especially when you were shot dead. Give Aunt Flo a little of that *Jack* and she would deepen her voice with her best Texas accent and drawl,

Excuse me, my friend, but that was just some friendly fire that I killed you with. Sorry about that. It won't happen again. At least not to you, since you're dead. I really don't like to kill my friends. I was just careless, I guess.

Then I learned that a dealer is also a person that sells drugs to people, a person that cannot be trusted. I learned that kind of dealer usually carries a gun and likes to shoot people and people like to shoot him. I learned that at some point they always do people wrong and then the weapons are brandished. That's a university word courtesy of Aunt Flo. I can not remember ever living without weapons at our house. Papa was a crack shot and he and Don grew up in the bush hunting game for meals, not sport. Rifles, pistols, bow and arrow, sling shots. Anything and everything that a country boy could use to feed and defend himself. I don't think Don has guns in the Mustang. Something about the laws being different in California.

Don said he learned to drive fast when he was driving his Bird Colonel amongst the poppy fields and they had to move quickly to keep the locals from shooting them up. Said they were always watching out for ambushes. Said the Bird Colonel had a habit he needed to feed. Now he drives this souped-up Mustang that he tricked out himself. He loves that car. Papa and Don were fast friends with each other and their cars.

Don loves to drive fast. See how the car leans to the outside from that curve we just went around? It feels like it wants to jump off the road and roll in the grass fields adjacent to the highway. Roll like those wild mustangs that run with each other for pure joy. I guess Flo gets scared riding shotgun with him when he does that. Me? Pay no mind to it. He is happy and vocal and the Jack Daniels in his lap makes him think that his singing is better than it actually is. Doesn't seem to affect his driving though, except for that one run in with the Judge. Probably because he carries that bottle wherever he goes, sucking on it like a baby on a pacifier. I heard Don tell his friend once,

They think I'm walking around with a .18 in my system because of my buddy Jack. They think we're too close to one another. They think we should get divorced!

They both laughed and slapped their thighs and then took more drink.

His happiness is infectious and I don't mind the cracking voice because it is underscored with his effervescence. That's another word I learned playing scrabble with Aunt Flo, and that's the last time I am going to credit her with supplementing my shallow stock of word that I am using to document our trip west. I don't know. I may give her further credit. Maybe. She went to the university down in Texas and read a lot of books to get her degree. She was a librarian in Santa Fe before she was married. She doesn't look like one. She is too pretty. Then again I haven't seen all the librarians of the world.

White hair tied up with a blue ribbon behind her head. Nice white skin with our blue eyes to match her ribbon. She has the same long neck as our mother and the same lithe frame, boobs excepted. Mama has the boobs. Flo has the brains. Flo says her degree was in English, but she speaks Mexican as well as the neighbors and sometimes she speaks it so fast I can't keep up with her. And I am quick. Of mind, of body.

I was a fast runner at our Junior High School. White boy sprinter. Oxymoron, Aunt Flo? Not if you watch some of those *Russky* men and women in the Olympics. Second place at the finals behind Trace Whittmore. His father ran track at Texas and went into the Air Force and ended up at Holloman Air Force Base where he flies jets. Trace says he got his speed through him and running through the White Sands of New Mexico west of the base. Trace says the White Sands are pure white and he showed me a picture of himself in his red track apparel adorning his dark chocolate skin. He says he puts the color to the White Sands. He said if I ran with him in the Sands and I got lost that nobody would be able to discover me because of my translucent skin. We laughed at that. I like him. He is fast. But he leaned into the tape at the 100 meters to beat me in the 7th grade Junior High School Final.

I sit behind Don cuz his relief bottle of Jack Daniels is riding shotgun. Louis sits beside me. Sometimes Don likes to put the car in cruise control and

stretch his right leg out on the seat and rub his foot up against that bottle like it was a pet dog. He is a very laid back individual wearing his country jeans and white linen shirt. He says when we drive into Hollywood he is going to drape his white silk scarf around his neck and put on his red fedora and create quite a scene. I don't know. We will see.

I've been around Don a lot, but I don't remember ever hearing him sing this song before:

*Those were the happiest days of my life,
Drinking, dancing, dating my future wife.
Queen of the triple D's, that was our deal.
Grow'd our hogs fat, slaughtered them for meal.*

He writes this stuff himself. He thinks *the Jack* makes him sound more like *the Frank*. He thinks the rhyming makes the lyrics sound more sophisticated. I don't think so. He says free verse is all right on occasion, says even Shakespeare did that, but rhyming? Don calls that the cat's meow. Says a rhyme and a dime will get the lady every time. I don't know. But it's his car and he's driving. Besides, if I roll this back seat window down a little more, the rushing wind muffles the song and starts up its own cadence.

Not too much traffic this part of 66. This black sedan heading our way is the first car in about fifteen minutes. In accordance with everything Papa and Don taught us about speed cars, it looks like a Chevrolet. 1955. Nobody behind us and that black sedan is going fast. Now it seems like it's slowing down. Wonder why? The hood has a funny looking small gold ornament attached to the grill. Odd shape. Peculiar fellow driving. He's past us now, and as I look back, I see the dust kicking up from the dirt shoulder right of the pavement as he moves off the road to his right, and now he drives to his left, back across the highway. His car turns into our lane and starts in our direction, but behind us a few hundred meters. Meters, yards, whatever. You run track, you run the words into one another. The times just change with the distance. May the best boy win.

That driver is a remarkable looking fellow. I saw him briefly as I looked over the window edge when he was going past the other way. He has sunglasses, silvery blue skin more reflective than mine, coal-black hair, strawberry lips

and he looked like he was sucking on a lolly-pop. Maybe he forgot something in the town up ahead. The one he just left. The one we're approaching. Those red lips of his remind me of that reindeer Rudolph, except Rudolph had the nose and this man has the lips. Maybe that's his name: Rudolph. Maybe that lolly-pop has red color in it and it comes off on his lips. Maybe he heard Don singing and he wants to join him in a duet. The highway pushes through my open window and it carries the voices of Rudolph and Don, singing collectively, pooling their verse:

*Sowed the wheat deeply, ready for fall reap,
Baked bread, sans leaven to sandwich the meat.
Autumn festival draws the farmer to town,
Eating, drinking dancing at the hoe down.
And then that big old bad wolf comes down from the mountain,
To participate in that courting with the girls at the wine fountain.*

Wait a minute! Those last two lines lost their meter; he's singing, not Don. There is a break in the words and then Don's singular voice floats on the roadway,

Well, the well ran dry in that summer heat . . .

BOOM!

The exterior sound reverberates within the Mustang and everything is shaking and jumping in discord. Don breaks out of his verse.

Bad-F word!

I smile at his exultation, for 'Bad F-word' is the highest form of profanity that Aunt Flo permits at the house, and I know that Don loves to have the monotony of a long road trip fractured by some mechanical breakdown. Then calmly, like one of those astronaut movies,

Houston, we got ourselves a problem. I think we blow'd ourselves a rivet and we're coming back to Earth. We got about five miles to the next town, but I don't think we're gonna make it.

I don't sense any concern in Don's voice, just an acceptance of an uninvited onus. Like the story he told about him and his Bird Colonel speeding through the poppy fields toward the Hindu Kush mountains in northeast Afghanistan. They were monitoring the opium burning by the Afghan police and local militia. Suddenly they were cognizant of flies swirling inside their Humvee. When the flies began to bury themselves in the metal of the door stand they realized they were taking sniper bullets from some high mountain sentinel. Don did a U-turn and they left the valley to the locals. They found something less significant to do while they whiled away their time before returning to the States.

I look over at Louis and check his fastened seat belt and he just smiles back at me. Just another adventure in his life. He's the quiet one and he speaks when he feels like it. I do most of our talking. My belt is fastened tight and we're going to find out if these things really work as we run along the right dirt shoulder. The dust kicks through the open windows, filling the interior of the car, smothering our faces. Coughing a bit, I roll the window up to keep any branches from tearing at me. I feel the lightness of the Flashback ride at Six Flags in Texas. I love that ride. For a brief moment we are above the dust, tall gray-colored autumn grass rushing past our windows, a deep ravine bounding toward the front windscreen and I whisper,

God be with us, Louis, God be with us.

Louis has that smile on his face.

I think God can sometimes be a trickster as through the windshield I see a large shrub run toward the right fender and collide with the car, sending us into a counter-clockwise twirl onto the dry-grass, shrub-filled down slope. Now we are sliding with our car roof on the ground. The engine dies and I think maybe Don turned it off so the wheels won't dangerously spin in the air. We crash down about fifty meters, hanging by our seat belts, just like Flashback. The ravine flattens out and the wild mustang comes to a stop in an arid creek bed flush with brown-red grass. There was no deployment of air bags. Maybe this car was designed before them or maybe Don took them out. Probably figured their weight slowed him down. Maybe he has the space filled with supplemental Jack Daniels. I don't know. I never looked. I do know the *Jack* that was riding shotgun and purring besides Don's foot was

dashed out of the Caddy when we did our first roll. I do know that I don't smell any whiskey inside the car, a tribute to the firmness of the bottle or lack of any cache.

I undo the buckle and ease myself down to the ceiling with my free hand and tumble to the cloth and roll off my neck and onto my butt. I see that Louis has done the same. I sit on the underbelly of the roof and I reach my hands over to Don and slide up beside him. I grasp his shoulders. His driver side window is shattered and a slight breeze blows through it with the singing of birds. I cry out as I lightly shake him,

Don! Don! We have to get out of here! There might be a fire in here, like you see in those movies all the time!

His neck is loose as I turn him toward me and look into his upside down face and feel the warm blood slipping from his mouth and nostrils onto my forearms. I move a hand to his face and our eyes meet and I see a dim flicker of light which swiftly extinguishes. He makes no sound except for the drops of blood dripping through and past my fingers onto the cloth underroof of the injured mustang. It seems our family prefers to die in their cars.

Bad F-word,

I mutter and this time scream,

Bad F-word!

I feel some slight energy move away from his body and through the car and off into the distance. Louis is beside me and I speak quietly to him,

We need to get out of here. This is not right.

He shakes his head slightly and the tears in his eyes mirror mine. I roll down the backside window, spilling some of the ravine grass inside the car. I reach around for Papa's Urn and see that Louis already has it and then we grab our small knapsacks and slide out.

I move past the crushed windshield and I glance at Don, secured by his seat belt, his puffy face hanging between his dangling biceps, his forehead and widow's peak beginning to crust with coagulated blood. His life begins to flash in my mind's eye: the war stories, him and Flo, him and Papa and their love of cars and . . . and I am pulled out of my trance as Louis pushes me hard and I see a bald eagle fly closely past us and I follow it and Louis with quick steps off to the side of the ravine. We traverse up the hillside in the direction we were driving: west.

We are a hundred meters or so from the crash, the car visible down the hillside, still with no fire. Suddenly Rudolph is there, next to the car. We cease movement and are quiet, observant. He is dressed from neck to toe in black, the absence of color. Rudolph moves briskly around the car, like a man with a purpose. What purpose? Has he stopped to help us? He moves down beside Don and reaches into the window and I see him touch Don. Louis and I glance at one another, wondering what this man is doing here. Rudolph stands up and looks about the ravine, first at a low level, then with a higher glance. The birds stop their singing. I see the head of the mountain lion that we saw with Papa in the western mountains, two years since. The eyes search the hillside to the left of us. A slow steady turn of his head in our direction and I can feel the heat as they move precisely across the terrain toward our position. I want to run out of my skin but something intangible steadies me and the quietness of Louis assures me that we are fine. The eyes search beside us and then through us as I return the gaze and smell the odor of singed grass behind me. Then they are past, continuing to track further from us. The birds return to their singing while I watch his head turn further across and down the hillside, searching.

Searching for what? Why is he here?

Rudolph turns his body away and continues to scour the bush with his eyes. Finally he stops, and again kneels down to Don. He touches Don. Discretely. Rudolph's body blocks the movements of his hands within the car so I cannot see what he is doing. I do not want to see what he is doing. Then Rudolph slips down onto all fours and moves into the vehicle and disappears and I see the mountain lion hiding in the tree and Louis nudges me and we move into the tall grass: Louis, me and Papa in the Urn.

The sun is above us in the sky and the tall grass merges into myriad Manzanita and scrub oak that pepper a small gulch twenty meters north of the road. A dry creek bed serves as our path. The autumnal sun has dried the rocks that fill its bed. It's not a difficult walk for twelve-year-old boys through this vegetation and the omnipresent mesquite and we move at an easy pace.

Has the snow started to fall around the Great Lakes?

I reply,

I was wondering the same thing. Kind of early for eagles to be here for the winter.

We move slowly the next three hundred or so yards, parallel the road above us. We move out of the creek bed and closer to the highway. A small cliff of fifteen feet separates our plane from below the roadside. We do not speak, but when the birds stop their tune, we stop our gait. I hear the faint noise of a motor moving along the highway adjacent and above. Louder now. Still louder and then there is no engine sound and I want to start up, but my legs are unresponsive. The birds sing not and Louis holds me secure with his hand.

Quietly the darkening of the Manzanita bush above us adumbrates the presence of Rudolph, and quickly he is there. The periphery of his coal-black hair halos in the hot New Mexico sun. The shaded silvery blue skin accents his black wrap around sunglasses. The shadowed lips more the color of pomegranate. Droplets of sweat slide slowly down the side of his nostrils, across his lips and astride his all-day sucker and down his prominent chin, where they pool and drop languidly onto his black shirt. The perspiration has a slight odor of fish that adds to his mystery.

A singularly striking figure.

I feel the urge to reach up and touch him and find out what this man is all about, for I feel no fear, just an overwhelming curiosity to understand what is happening. His nostrils flare slightly as his head turns down toward the creek bed. He must be looking through those sunglasses that make it impossible to apprehend his gaze. I just stare at them and see our reflection

in each lens as his head turns onto and then past our external tranquility. I see my white hair and skin that enclose my blue eyes moving across his lenses as he turns his face. Then he is gazing off to the side and the sunglasses wrap around his temple and I cannot see the white border of his eye. He stops and looks straight out into the distance and the pomegranate opens and his tongue comes out of his mouth. He sticks it into the air. He has teeth in his tongue! Did he suffer an injury? Was he born this way?

Now I feel fear. The urge to reach up and touch him and find out what he is all about has vanished. He holds his stare into the distance for several beats. His words fall on us,

So close. So close.

Then he is gone. Why can't this man see us? At the car and here, his eyes touched over us without appreciation. He has to sense our existence because he seems to be looking for us. If not us, what is he looking for? And his tongue? It can not be for smell otherwise he would have noted us. Did Rudolph have something to do with the car accident and Don's demise? My head teems with thoughts and speculations as to what has just transpired. I wish I could go back three weeks and be sleeping in my bed with my Papa checking our room to see that we are OK, but that is never again to be. The friction in the air ameliorates, the last accreditation of Aunt Flo's words. The birds start singing and Louis whispers to me,

That was a burst of hot desert wind there.

Now it's cooling off for the late afternoon and I hear a train whistle to the north. Louis whispers,

Good to hear that something else is on the move.

But there is something more in the breeze that moves over us, carrying a slight vibration of radiation within it. I look to Louis.

Bara. He is with us.

Louis nods and says,

Like Papa.