

# Requital

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## Chapter 1

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Summer of 2019

Once upon a time I was just like you.

It was September of 2018 and we had moved back to New Mexico from Cape Canaveral, Florida. I remember feeling so secure with my life, when one good day followed another good day, when my twin sister's arrows knocked down the jackrabbits, when the water in the lakes was warm enough for swimming, and when the mountains were full of wild boar ready for Papa to kill and barbecue. At dusk the sun would set red with a backdrop of white cumulus clouds and blue sky and we would fall asleep and have nice dreams and everything seemed pretty swell.

You remember that?

I do.

But of course there were some minor incidents which set us back for a day or two: like when the cat had a grand litter and two of the runts died because they couldn't get enough nipple, and only four of the living got adopted, so Mama, without telling us, placed the other three in a sack and threw them in the river; or when the coyotes traveled north from around Las Cruces, and the chickens quit laying golden eggs, and one morning after a large midnight squabble, we found only red feathers in the hen house.

But then the good days pushed back and started to repeat themselves, and life was happy again, a comedy where everyone was laughing in the expectation of Christmas and the holidays.

But then things turned into a tragedy when just before Christmas Mama picked up and left our family to go off to LA. We'd been through this a few years before when we were living in San Diego, but she came back then. This time she didn't and the phone calls and text messages just dried up somewhere in the wide deserts that separated our home from an LA town called Pacific Palisades.

Papa had to sell the house to give her some money to live and we moved in with Aunt Flo at her Ranch south of Santa Fe. She's Mama's older sister by about ten years in age and forty points in IQ. She graduated University of Texas as a librarian. She's the one that had us reading Dickens at four and Huckleberry Finn at eight. She's the one that taught us how to write a journal, so if our story makes any sense, give her all the credit. If you can't make heads or tails of what I write, then I am only to blame for being a poor student.

Then this past June of 2019, our dog, Bara, got lost on our camping trip with Papa in the New Mexico mountains. We searched high and low for her for several days, but nothing ever came of it. Found no signs of her or any kind of life. Never found her body. Put out posters for her all around the mountains and spoke with everybody, including the Rangers - but nothing.

And now, two weeks ago, late August morning, the County Sheriff came to the house to talk with Aunt Flo. Flo knew something was serious when the County Coroner

showed up in a separate county car. Me and Myrrh had been up since early morning and we stood out-of-sight beyond the front porch screen door when they showed up.

Sheriff said Papa's car engine gave out at dawn when he was crossing the continental railroad tracks west of Gallup. Said he refused to exit his 1977 Cadillac when the Southwest Chief was churning down on him. Sheriff said Papa flooded the car engine with too much gas and then the engine died.

Sheriff said Papa was working the ignition switch and his foot had the pedal to the metal trying to clear out the carburetor and then he died.

County Coroner said Papa had a deep needle mark on the inside of his left elbow and asked if he was an intravenous drug user.

"Of course not!" screamed Aunt Flo at such a suggestion. "Daniel never used drugs." She always used Papa's formal name when talking to people other than family about him.

County Coroner said, "We found upon examination that he was low some pints of blood." Like he was a car low on oil or something. Again Flo screamed at the coroner,

"Do your job. Find out where it went 'cuz his blood count has always been normal."

The Coroner was new to our county. He had a strange way of speaking, like he had no emotional involvement. Maybe he didn't wanna suffer other people's pain in his job. Might get to be too much for him. He couldn't explain where Papa's blood went, except there was none at the scene and not much in his corpse. He did say, "the Army is over there doing their job for which they are eminently trained, surveying the scene, gathering their facts, ascertaining their findings and then they will write a report."

Even Aunt Flo shook her head at that statement and mumbled. “Idiotic nonidiomatic foreigner. Speak the local tongue.”

I did ask them one question though, and that was what time did this happen?

“5:30 AM this morning,” and I knew the sheriff didn’t lie about the time because that’s when I woke up from my dream about Papa and me shooting skeet in the lower twenty acres of Aunt Flo’s ranch. I was all in a hot sweat and agitated that something was not right with my world and I couldn’t go back to sleep. My sister Myrrh came into my room crying, “Luke,” – that’s my name -- “something bad has happened but I don’t know what.” So we got into our street clothes and went out on the porch and just waited, waiting for another shoe to drop. First Mama, then Bara, so only Papa left and I knew it had to be bad.

Myrrh was quiet throughout the spiel. She’s always the quiet one. The patience of Job. But I will speak about that later -- if there is a later.

They said they didn’t find any witnesses and the body was at the morgue for viewing. Soon as the Sheriff and his Idiot Friend left, we had Uncle Don drive us out to the site of the car wreck. There are no houses out there. Not even cell phone towers. County people seemed to have already done all their work at the site so they were gone. They had dragged the burnt-out shell of the 77 Caddy off the track and left it there. But as we drove up, there were three men dressed in army fatigues searching around the wreckage for something, I know not what. I told Don to drive on past and we would come back when they were gone. He drove past several miles and stopped at a liquor store where he picked up a companion bottle for his buddy Jack Daniels, who always rode shotgun wherever he drove.

The Army was gone when we came back. Don stayed in his car with his buddy Jack while we searched around and finally found some homeless man who lives in the bush half mile up from the accident. Had some trouble breaking his silence until I got one of Uncle Don's half empty bottles of Jack and then he opened up like a flower after a spring rain.

Said he woke up at the sound of the crash and before it came to a stop the train took the Caddy up beside his camp. He saw the car collapsed against the front of the Chief, stopped on the tracks. His camp was close, maybe forty yards north of the track. Said he likes to sleep close to the track because the clanging of train wheels lulls him to sleep. Said he saw something like a man, all dressed in black strutting around like a Raven, walk up to the car. He said . . .

He said, to Myrrh, "girl or Tom Boy or whatever you are, get me more Jack before I talk more."

We went back to Don to get some more Jack and about ten minutes later he said this Raven searched for something under the carriage of the car, but found nothing. Then he climbed in the car and began searching all around inside and found nothing. After several minutes of searching inside the car, the Raven fellow went outside and walked all around the car and up and down the tracks, still searching. He didn't find whatever he was looking for. Then this black bird pulled out his cell phone and did something with it. After about a minute, he climbed back in the car and found something which he put in his pocket. Then he leaned real close like to Papa. Like he was going to bring him back to life. Or maybe kiss him. Homeless man couldn't tell which. But he claimed he saw some small bolts of electricity jumping around in the car. After a minute

or so this Raven pulled out a black bag and repeatedly grasped toward something in the air. He said the Raven could never get a hold of anything and finally quit and put away his bag.

Then the homeless man held out the empty bottle and said,

“No more. I ain’t saying no more. As God is my witness I say no more.”

Then he dropped the bottle and cried,

“Now ya git outta here whatever you are and wherever you git you better carry a cross with ya!”

I went over to the track where there was still debris and looked at it real close. No blood anywhere. I found the ivory knob for the Caddy stick shift further up the track where the Army missed it and took it with me. Papa and Don had converted the transmission from automatic to manual around the turn of the century. They loved to go through the gears themselves. They didn’t want the transmission to have all the fun.

Myrrh asked him if the Sheriff or anybody talked to him about this and he shook his head and pushed his arm hard in the direction we were to leave him with his last words, “When it was done, that Raven flew outta here like one of those black birds outta hell.” He threw his arm up into the air with a flying away motion. “Now git out here!”

And that was that.

No witnesses Mr. Sheriff?

“You incompetent piece of horse turd!” I shouted to the all-knowing railroad tracks and I picked up a large rock from the ground and stepped into a baseball pitch, hurling the rock, with a green tracer following behind it, against an aluminum railroad



shed just off the track, causing shovels and track spikes and sledge hammers to jump high in the air before they crashed back to the ground.

I hadn't done that since the incident at Cocoa Beach the year before. Lot of force. Too bad I was aiming at the signal sign fifteen feet past the destructed railroad shed. Myrrh just showed her all-knowing smile.

I told Aunt Flo what had transpired at the railroad tracks with the homeless man and the Army and she nodded and said, "You've done good. This was not an accident. I don't know what it was, but I know this is not an accident. And I don't like the fact that the federal government's got it's people out there. It's just all too strange."

Papa 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 and the Caddy hit a bump in the highway, jumped 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. How do I know all of this? He use to tell the story on his birthday. A birthday we will continue to celebrate, without his physical presence.

His daddy bought the car new. It was a present to himself for surviving some war – I don't know which one. 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 start 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 two weeks past. 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.

Aunt Flo had the Cadillac shell put into a spare garage on her property and after the funeral she had Papa cremated and brought the ashes home. Ten days later we got an invitation in the US Mail that Mama was getting married along the Pacific Ocean in California. The invite must have got lost in the mail because the wedding date was set five days away. And get this, she is marrying PK Murnau, the Billionaire!

“You kids,” said Aunt Flo. “You go and see your mother is being taken care of. Don will drive you. Take some of your father’s ash to scatter in the Sea and take his Cross necklace from his trunk.”

I nodded. The Cross was the one he had made in Kayenta when marrying Mama before shipping out to South America. His Marine buddies all got tattoos on their last leave before shipping out, while he had a Navajo artist fashion him the Cross. He wore it for the duration. He survived intact. Most of the others perished in some cocaine field in Columbia and came back in body bags.

Now he can join them.

## Chapter 2

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2018 – Cocoa Beach

Papa was real smart. High schooled in New Mexico, the University of California offered him a full scholarship. A Berkeley graduate with undergraduate and graduate degrees in electrical engineering. He was a skilled computer programmer and had several job offers in Silicon Valley. But when he graduated University in the mid '90s, in following his father's footsteps, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. When he finished boot camp in San Diego he was offered the opportunity to go to OCS in Quantico. He took the offer. After OCS he took Marine Corps schooling as an electrician. He had been working with electronics and computers since he was twelve years of age and so he figured to get some formal training in these fields. He got the training and they were so impressed with his skills that he revised and updated some of the textbooks.

From growing up in New Mexico he was fluent in Spanish. At the request of the DEA, he brought his skills to participate for three years in drug destruction in Colombia in the late 1990s. He got out of active service just before 911, and moved to San Diego where he got a job working for General Dynamics. He started out as a computer design specialist for missile tracking systems and his brilliance easily moved him up the ladder. In 2005 Uncle Sam needed him back in South America so he went down there for a tour.

He'd been commuting solo between San Diego and White Sands, New Mexico and Florida since 2016. But after they signed a billion-dollar government contract, General Dynamo gave him a raise and told him to move his wife and eleven-year old twins from La Jolla to Cocoa Beach. General Dynamo played a major role in the development of guided missiles for the Military and private companies launching spacecraft for exploration and satellites.

He rented a house just north of Patrick Air Force Base, on a small bluff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. This is where we had our beach parties. Our front yard looked north to the launching pads at the Cape. The sounds of the ocean lulled us to sleep at night; the regular blasts from the missiles woke us mornings.

A lot of foreigners worked at the Cape. Some for the Federal Government, some for the private contractors. Some Brits, French, Italians, and some descendants of the German rocketeers under Werner Von Braun. After World War 2 the Army gave those German scientists a good washing as best they could, spending millions of American dollars trying to remove the Nazi blood from their hands and the Nazi treachery from their hearts. Good press in Life Magazine and the national newspapers glossed over their holocaust history where they killed "Gypsies and Jews and Faggots," and referred to them as "Patriots for the American way of life." – whatever life that is.

Papa worked with all these people at the Cape. Mama hated to leave La Jolla with its easy commute to LA and the film industry. She had always wanted to be a movie star. So she spent her time now starring in the plays put on by the Cocoa Beach Theatre Group and doing small roles in TV shows and movies filmed in the southern

states. But it wasn't enough and she made it known to Papa that she wanted to go back to California.

There was an old German man named Murnau, who still lived in Cocoa Beach – he must have been pushing ninety. He came over to the US in the late forties with some of the German Engineers. Apparently he grew up in Peenemünde in the German rocket industry and he was acquainted with Von Braun. He married a niece of Von Braun and they had several children. He bought up a lot of real estate in Florida in the 1950s and became very wealthy as the space industry took off.

PK Murnau was one of his grandchildren. Aunt Flo said PK borrowed one hundred million dollars from his grandfather and then made his fortune short selling some tech start-ups that had serious financial problems. He covered his short positions, made a couple billion, then purchased a small space satellite company called OSPREY and got the federal government to back it. His competitors cried, 'kick-backs,' but there were no whistleblowers to substantiate the claim. He built a large compound in Cape Canaveral where he launches satellites for governments and private companies. Not to spread himself too thin – there are rumors that he only sleeps four hours a day - he went to Hollywood and made some Vampire films and raked in more dough. He made some enemies, as most public figures do. Aunt Flo says PK has a lawyer named Cohen who does all the transactions through encrypted Internet communications so nobody knows really anything about his private affairs.

Now Aunt Flo says PK's into Artificial Intelligence and he has a large facility outside of Wichita where he's doing all kinds of crazy inventions. That's according to

Aunt Flo, who called him the Edison of AI. She had to explain to us who Edison was. Me and Myrrh were impressed.

I saw him once in Cocoa Beach. I know he had something to do with the theater group that Mama worked with. I know he had a gigantic yacht at the harbor. White skin, gold hair swept back off his forehead. White cotton shirt and pants. He was kinda hunched with a bad back. Didn't look like anything special. But I didn't get to look at his stock portfolio. He was riding in a big Mercedes with his assistant, a tall muscular African man who spoke the Queen's English.

I remember that summer the fish fries with the Canaveral scientists and families under the hot sun as the dark closed in from the east. Stuffed with African Pompano and lemonade and burnt marsh mellows, my parents would usher me and Myrrh up to our bed rooms where the steady electrical hum of the ocean subsumed the laughter of the parties and lulled us to sleep. Weekdays we woke to take the yellow bus to the elementary school where I would stare out the open windows to the ocean sounds and day dream of the after-school sand and sea. Life was good, but . . .

Summer passed into Autumn and on a Tuesday afternoon in late September, to celebrate an afternoon OSPREY missile launch, and just to celebrate anything and everything with food and drink, there was a beach party in front of our house. Papa didn't work for OSPREY, but that didn't stop the local scientist from partying.

Concurrently, there was a Championship Match for soccer bragging rights in Munich between a famous German club and the American team. The scientist and electrical engineers from Cape Canaveral had set up their home-made TV sets on the picnic tables along the beach – the engineers scorned mass produced entertainment

products and made their own. The star-spangled banner was just finishing up, to be followed by the German anthem, and judging by the noise emerging from the television sets, the crowd in Munich was getting ready. Same for us in Florida and except for a few Germans, the scientists and technicians at the beach party stood at attention. About eight miles to the north from our party were the Cape launching pads for the missiles. The OSPREY launch was set for later in the day, so everyone was eating and talking and intoxicating in anticipation of our double-header. The preparation for the launch had been completed that morning, so members of the OSPREY team were able to spectate from the beach party.

School had started again for me and Myrrh. After school was out, I'd spend the afternoons slamming balls on the dirt field or riding my mat in the Atlantic Ocean with the dolphins and hammer head sharks, while above me the gulls screamed like the planes from nearby Patrick Air Force Base.

The soccer tournament had been going on for ten days. Papa loved the American team, while for some unknown reason, Mama supported the Munich squad. It should've been a great time for our household as everybody had backed a winner in the run-up to the championship game, but as the tournament progressed, they began arguing more about the merits of their respective teams, which segued to the boredom of moving to a backwater town away from the motion picture industry. Fortunately for the town of Cocoa Beach, our house was bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Banana River on the west, with bookend empty sand lots on the north and south.

Before the Americans won, my parents were sleeping in separate rooms. Their quiet voices concealed the rancor that had been spilling out doors. I heard the word 'divorce' spliced into every day conversations and I began to wonder about the future of our little family. My father, a devout Catholic, said we would always be together.

The game was finishing up in regulation with no goals scored, and everyone was getting anxious. It was a large beach party with adults barbecuing steaks and pork and fish on the grill and taking digital photos of one another. I remember one of the Germans taking a photograph of Mama and me and Myrrh which he showed us and then she left for her theater group as she apparently had a bad feeling about the match. Between sips of German beer from the kegs and Cuban rum from paper cups, the men kicked balls around and played a pick-up game on the sandy beach, widened by a low tide. The beach game started low-key but as the day wore on and the drinks poured, there were some minor scuffles between some Europeans and Americans. The referee was the tall black tribesman called Bernard who worked with PK, who was not present at the party. He was taller than Papa, probably six foot six and he got a kick out of being the referee. He would blow his loud whistle and shout with his English accent at the players, enjoying the comradery and victuals – if it seems that sometimes I use some big words, remember that Aunt Flo used to play scrabble games with us all the time so as to increase our vocabularies.

The sounds of the television sets were blasting away. There were a lot of transistor radios blaring. Cubans kept parking on the bluff and refilling the liquor and food and everybody was waiting for the volcano to explode.



The televised game moved into penalty kicks. The ocean waves were small and as I sat on my mat out in the sea, I could hear the announcers from the radios carried by the men along the shoreline. A set of waves rolled in from the east and I lay on my mat and kicked my feet hard under the sea level, trying to catch a three-footer. An older boy paddled next to me on a surfboard and then stood up with his right foot forward on the board. A goofy footer. He was a rather goofy acting boy. Liked to laugh a lot. Made jokes all the time. Not afraid to try something difficult and fail at it with great success. His name was Jack and I called him,

“Jack the Ripper.”

He was a very good surfer on a small six-foot board that his father had shaped and glassed from leftover space material. His father was Johann, an Austrian Olympic skier for the 2002 games set in Salt Lake City. I called him “Mr. Ripper.” He was a mechanical engineer and he met a Spanish woman at the games and decided to marry her and move to the United States. He became a US Citizen and moved to the Cape when he was offered a job by General Dynamo as an operations manager. His wife Monica made me and Jack bright yellow polyester shirts to keep us from getting burned in the water by the mid-day sun and to make me visible in case I got washed out to sea!

He taught Jack all his tricks: massive off the lips, three sixties, flips and somersaults. Tricks that were impossible to do on a nine-foot long heavy Old School surfboard. He'd catch the wave and I would ride behind him and watch him carve a sweeping left turn to generate speed and power. Then his legs would thrust his board into the wave while he twisted himself backward, almost parallel to the surface water as his board jumped back at him. Then he would turn hard back to his left and his body

would straighten up and he would stand tall down the face of the wave, maneuvering slightly up and down the forming shoulder of the wave with imperceptible shifts in his weight, his back slightly arched, his arms casually dangling at his sides. I'd ride behind and hoot and we laughed together. In the water, life was always good. Myrrh was wading in the shallows and looking at sand dollars. I saw my father holding a transistor radio, standing along the shore as Ripper kicked out of the wave, his surfboard flying into the air with a little help from the southern wind that ran along the coast. Papa never carried a cell phone unless it was absolutely necessary. He didn't trust the tracking devices. He said if somebody wanted to find him, they had to track him the old fashion way. Drones? He could easily shoot those down. I continued my ride until I stopped against the sand.

When I stood up, a round old man in a long dark coat was searching for something in the sand. He would slowly turn around with his body stooped and his eyes scrutinizing each pebble.

"What are you looking for, Mister?" I asked.

He wasn't startled by my voice. It seemed like he was expecting me. He looked up and raised his ring finger and said, "I seem to have lost my ring." His hands were wrinkled and spotted from age. He had a thick German accent. He was from the beach party and he was holding a half-full wine glass filled with red liquid. He frequently sipped from it as we spoke.

"Ocean nice?" I knew he was one of the old Von Braun people at the Cape, because he looked ancient and still had that heavy accent, but I had never met him. He must have been eating the fresh sausage at the picnic, because he had that pig smell.

He wore a clean panama hat above a chubby red withered-face sitting on a wrinkled neck, dark sun glasses wrapped round his eyes, and a freshly pressed black silk shirt with the red lettered words, Xanadú Mansion Golf Course, stitched over the left breast pocket. That was one of the casinos in Batista's Cuba that the Cape people use to fly down to in American Air Force planes taking off from Patrick. That was last century, before Castro overthrew the island. This German man was old!

I remember his lederhosen revealing white hair on his chubby calves that disappeared into strange black rubber boots wrapped tightly over his feet. He stood just out of the reach of the lapping sea and a muscular German Shepherd dog stood still next to him. I wondered if Bara would like this dog.

"Kinda small, but fun," I replied.

He scrutinized my face for many moments, and I felt like I was being inspected for some purpose, and then he said, "Sie haben sehr blue eyes."

"What?"

He seemed to catch himself and said, "Nichts." I knew that meant nothing and he continued, "I don't see your Vater kicking the ball around? Is he out in the Wasser?" I'd gotten use to the Germans use of "V" for the "F" and I knew the German word for 'water.'

"He's over there." The man's glance followed my pointing to Papa who was now walking with his radio toward us from about a quarter mile to the north.

"Gut. This reminds me so much of Peenemünde. You need him to swim in the Wasser with you," said the man. "Is your sister out there?"

“Who are you?” I asked. Beads of sweat broke out on the man’s wrinkled face and he removed his sun glasses to wipe his brow. His eyes were as blue as mine. He looked away from me and I saw the whites were streaked with crimson and the cheeks and nose of his face were contorted with blue blood vessels.

He replied, “I am from the Overcast Group.” He may have expected a response from me but I gave him none, and then he said, “This beach is so much like Karlschagen.” He spread his arms out and took in the beach and slid a boot in the sand, and looked back at me. “I enjoy the beach parties. Ich liebe the calm Atlantic Ocean.”

“Are you for Munich?”

“Vas?” he said.

Something inside of me sprung up like a cold well of water and I replied, “Never mind.”

He looked from Papa to the sand, and he did a little search with his foot dragging the pebbles for his ring, and then looked up toward something now further away from me, which I now know was the launching area for the OSPREY, and said, “Sie have a nice swim. I need to find my ring now.” He walked away and I moved thirty yards toward my father and looked down at my mat and saw the reflection of gold. I reached down and picked up a gold ring and studied it for several moments and then looked to see the German now at the liquor bottles set out on the table next to several kegs of beer. I put it on my finger and decided I would tell him about it later in the day. I ran down the beach, mat in hand, to coax my father into the water. He demurred, saying,

“You play with Myrrh. I want to listen to the game. OSPREY time coming up and the missile should launch now.”

I ran pell mell into the water past Myrrh, who didn't look up. I watched the missile lift off from the Cape and paddled out next to Jack.

I don't remember most of what happened next and can only relate here from discussions with my father and sister. The missile lifted off, seeming to run from the white tail of smoke trailing it. Jack caught a four-foot high wave which he immediately started ripping. I got the next wave and a dolphin rode beside me, chattering like a proficient gossip. I touched the dolphin as I tried to keep up, but of course I couldn't and I fell out of the wave while the OSPREY turned slowly in the sky, moving lazily in our direction.

Unusual, Papa thought. It should be climbing, not turning. Too soon for that.

Papa remembered the dolphin leaping out of the water behind me and that Ripper was already outside where he caught another wave and started into his usual flip in the air, five-feet above the sea, his hands grabbing both rails of the board. The crowd on the beach erupted in noise that was quickly washed over by the tremendous explosion and a ferocious sizzling sound, like thousands of eggs frying on a colossal griddle.

Papa shouted, "Luke!" – and I think I remember his scream, "Get out of the water!" Myrrh was in the shallows next to the sand and started to run onto the dry beach. I started to back-peddle through the waist high water and I turned to shore and lifted my knees high against the water and stumbled and picked myself up and began again as Papa, about a hundred yards distant, ran toward me.

Papa saw the ocean water evaporating around the sinking OSPREY and smelled the hot waves pushing toward the beach. I do remember horizontal sea drops

thrown from the crash burning my eyes and looking back to the land and seeing my father standing away from the water, throwing away his radio and screaming sounds dwarfed by the missile blast. Ripper finished up his flip before being knocked down by a torrent of ocean water and then he was gone. I remember Myrrh in water just over her toes with her mouth open and no sound.

I do remember this surreal current of electricity and energy and mass that went through me and something alive struck me violently as I closed my eyes and saw black and white rainbows and then I knew no more.

Papa related to me that it all became in slow motion, even the explosion of the missile in the sea. Running on the beach toward me. Me stumbling toward him. The sizzling sounds of missile sinking into water like the Titanic with the following explosion that seemed to blast me with waves of radiating energy from the sea water shooting into me with the concomitant lifting into the air by the flying body of the dolphin.

The dolphin.

### Chapter 3

-----  
Song of Myself

I dreamt the song of myself even before I first read Whitman the next year in New Mexico: spirit floating in blue over my body, whether water or the atmosphere or some other dimension, I could not tell. No difficulty breathing, so maybe it was sky. No one else around as I watched my body below entangled with the dolphin with a wide burn marking its skin. I move and it turns its head toward me and gives me that dolphin smile and then wiggles in the shallow water and swims away, leaving my father to come out to my body. My body has a large laceration on my back and the blood flows freely. The gold ring branded its shape around my finger and then fell off in the water. Papa is crying and picking me up and pressing his palm to stop the blood and carrying me and I float higher up in the blue so that I can see the old German standing and drinking beer and looking toward us. My father's arms encircle me and his hand stanches the flow, like the Dutch boy with the dike. I am at peace in a world of red. Surrounded by love and acceptance and it is a place where I could spend the rest of my life. Eleven years old and my thoughts were oneness with all things and it was love. Love evolved from a sea of turmoil and hate. Myrrh is running beside father, tears streaming down her face and the other party-goers are clearing a path for Papa to go up the hillside. One of them picks up Myrrh and runs beside Papa with her in his arms and her red burned feet glowing.

From above, watching an ambulance from the air force base skid to a halt on the cliff as my father places me on the stretcher and they replace his hand with theirs to stop the blood and I hear an attendant say, "his heart has stopped."

I felt good. I felt in the presence of a Lord. I couldn't identify which one but I knew he was not of an organized religion. He was too relaxed. Too accepting. No demands. No conditions. I wondered if I could become bored here. I wondered if there were things to occupy my time. Would I be able to physically move or would I live the life of my mind, my thoughts, my imagination, my spirit? Did I really need a heart anyway? I felt satiated. That this is the way that it could be.

Forever.

I soar above the ambulance with its lights flashing and horn blaring and it is waved through the guard house at Patrick Air Force Base with nary a decrease in speed. They rush the body, my body, I feel a detachment from it, into the Emergency Rooms and several doctors and nurses start working on me with the words,

"No pulse. No heart beat for the past seven minutes."

Some tend to my torn body and they clean it and rinse it. They hook me up to lines and call for units of blood. They speak calmly, probably for the benefit of my father and there is a powerful man, built like a football player, thumping his hand against my chest. Then a nurse begins to give me mouth to mouth resuscitation, as if I were a drowning victim. Then there are other victims of the OSPREY brought in by ambulance that begin to fill the beds in the small rooms and the doctors and nurses spread out to care for them.



Someone in white rolls in an instrument panel and they pull out some cords and put some liquid on my chest. Everyone stands back while the burly man puts two paddles onto the liquid and presses down and gives an electric shock to my body.

Nothing happens.

“It’s been too long,” whispers a second man.

The nurse quit kissing me and looked at my father and went to help someone else. The burly man, eyes now closed, goes back to his rhythmical thumping of my chest and he seems afraid to look at my father.

I float outside the operating theater and see a Seminole Indian dressed in native garb bring 2 pints of herbal oils that he hands to a nurse who brings it into the room and nods to my father and leaves. I watch the Seminole walk toward the exit of the hospital as he slowly vanishes into a spirit, but not before he looks up at me with twinkling eyes.

“Twenty minutes and thirty-one seconds,” says an orderly with a quiet, detached voice who then walks away and over to another filled bed. The football player looks at my father’s face and says,

“Sorry,” and follows the orderly to another room, pulling the drape behind him so that Papa can mourn me in solace.

I decide to go within my body to see what it feels like to be dead. It feels cold, and a sadness shrouds over me, an awareness of an incomplete life. Like a game of chess stopped after the pawns have been moved and the Queens are ready to work, or the seventh game of the series being cancelled forever and ever and ever. A life stuck in anticipation, unfulfilled. Nothing grand, except maybe a hyperbolic obituary magnifying my prospects because of my genetic constitution.

Son of a rocket engineer and a movie actress. Brains with latent beauty to develop from this boy that loved the sea and all things of Nature . . .

. . . and then Bara bounds over my legs and my mother is there and her and Papa open the Seminole vials and place their hands on me and swab my temples with the essential oils. I feel the warmth of red and black peppers and olive oil and hemp oil mixed in honey-water and dropped into my mouth. In several seconds I feel the harrowing heat burn into my skin and down my esophagus and into my stomach and I see the fire rage through my vessels and into my organs and my heart broaches a beat, then two, then jumps tachycardia from which it slowly diminishes to maybe one hundred twenty beats per minute as oxygen and nutrients pulse to my cells and carbon dioxide and waste is pushed out of those cells.

Nice, I think, always leave it to Mama and I pass out to escape the heat and decide where I should go next.

Twenty-eight people were in the water at that time. Only I lived. Several hundred sea-creatures, including hammer head sharks, kingfish, corbina, pompano, joined the roster of the dead. No dolphins. The Emergency Room pronounced me dead.

Then I heard a small cry from somewhere outside of myself and it got louder and it sounded familiar and I realized it was my father. But he was not crying. He was whispering something. There was urgency in his voice and it was sporadically muffled by the sound of silence. The voice was coming at me from several directions and it cancelled itself out in different parts of the words. I could hear uu and then nothing and then from another direction there was rrr and then I heard nothing and I wondered why he was speaking letters to me.

And then the sound, naa, broke into me.

Then it was silent and it started to repeat itself with the uuu and rolling rrrr's like a Spaniard or a Russian and then the full one-syllable word, done slipped through.

I thought what does this mean but I could think of no answer and then suddenly there was a slamming through the barrier of the word, NOT.

Then the chant came through from a long distance with the volume and proximity closing in, like a bird flying directly at me with the litany, You are not done. I wondered, have I become a turkey that is being cooked for someone or something and not yet finished and what does this all mean and then the word here pushed through the barrier and I knew the chant was,

You are not done here.

I knew the chess board was awaiting the moves of the Queen and my time would come and then I knew no more.

The pain was pervasive. I felt it climb under my skin where I imagined the black and blue colors had replaced my Florida tan. I felt it in the soles of my feet as if I walked on flaming coals. The muscles in my thighs burnt with a fire that I found unbearable and I opened my mouth to scream but heard nothing. Only felt the ache within my body and then liquid being spread along my temples and my feet, and hands across my body and the odor from my sister's name, Myrrh. Myrrh being spread along my body and I knew that Papa and Mama were always there. I had brought them together with my pain. I felt happy and I fell away to Oneness.

I had brain waves, but I was in a coma. My parents said every prayer to God that they ever learned and made up a bunch of new ones for the occasion.

The medical staff wanted to begin treatment but my parents refused and locked the doors on them. Somebody from the Cape made some phone calls and from then on my parents were left alone with me. They slept next to me in old Army cots. They laid their hands on me with massages and concoctions from mixing essential oils. Myrrh came in with bandaged feet and slept beside us. Bara slept on the floor. Six days later I woke up and the doctors did a battery of tests and they couldn't find anything wrong. I went back to our home on the bluff overlooking the shore about a week after the event. After two days in the house, Papa stuffed us with hot dogs smothered in mustard and onions and relish, and allowed me, Myrrh and Bara to revisit the scene. Mama wasn't there, she was with the theater group practicing a play to keep her thoughts away from all things bad about the Cape. It was dusk and the beach was low tide and empty except for us. Myrrh had bandaged feet and walked on crutches. I finished my hotdog and Myrrh gave Bara the remains of hers and Bara greedily took it down in one gulp. Something drew me into the water and Bara walked against my leg and we saw a gray fin break the surface several yards in front. Bara made no sounds so I felt no danger and I saw it had a wide burn mark surrounding its body and I knew this was the dolphin from the day of the OSPREY. We met in two, three feet of water and watched one another for maybe thirty, forty seconds. Myrrh shuffled into the water to be with us and she turned on the flashlight from her cellphone. Bara was completely still as my words finally spilled out,

“Thank you.” Then: “Excuse me while I cry.” The tears rolled down my cheeks and dropped to my shoulders to embed in the white cotton T-shirt I was wearing. The dolphin rolled over onto it's back and flipped its tail out of the water and wagged it at me.

I knelt down and stroked it and Bara licked the dolphin's skin with her tongue. Myrrh knelt down and petted it and whispered, "thank you for my brother." This lasted for several minutes then it rolled on its belly and something gold in the shallow water reflected from the light of Myrrh's cell phone. I picked it up and it was a gold ring and on the inside was the lettering, Murnau. Then the dolphin turned and slowly swam away and Bara began to growl under her breath and I thought she was sad to see the dolphin leave when a sickness swept over me and I turned to the words,

"Vas ist hier?"

to see the old German who spoke to me at the OSPREY killings standing beside us in about a foot deep of water with one of those metal detectors. He was with his same German Shepherd dog. But now I knew his name. He was Murnau, he was the grandfather of the billionaire. He was twisting a ring less finger.

I held out the gold ring to him. "Is this your ring?" I said.

Myrrh had turned off her light so he must not have seen me because he jerked his head around and said, "Wer ist hier." He grabbed the outstretched ring from my hand and greedily put it on his finger. Strange. I did not feel him touch my hand?

Bara snarled with her teeth vibrating and the man pulled out a pistol from his waist. I recognized it as a German Luger and stood up and faced his profile.

"Schweinhund," he growled back at Bara and started to take aim and I quietly said,

"No," as his dog took up his growl.

He swept his pistol around and past my location, doing a 180 degree turn, his eyes wide open and shouted, "Ver sind Sie?"

He stopped his pivot when he was facing our home on the cliff and I repeated, "No."

He whirled around, his eyes passing over me and Myrrh, and said to Bara, "Devil Dog! Sie sprechen nicht."

My head was the height of Murnau's ribs and I slammed my fist into his groin and he screamed and doubled-up and Bara tore the Luger from his hand, taking parts of his fingers in her teeth.

The German did a low groan as he dropped to his knees and watched Bara run off fifty yards along the shoreline where she stopped and dropped the Luger and stood silent, returning his gaze. He covered his mangled hand in his coat pocket and stood up and said to his dog, "Gehst du!" The shepherd dog ran pell-mell at Bara who met it halfway and crashed into it with such force that the shepherd dog broke into medium pieces of rubber and plastic and fur. Springs bounced from its severed paws and there were electrical wires all over its body. A medium-sized battery lay with the debris that was a dog, a robot dog!

Murnau frowned and his body convulsed. I stood five feet away from him and he had no idea I was present or that Myrrh was still standing in the sea. I couldn't figure it out. He began to walk toward Bara, who started running pell-mell at him and then he turned and started running away. I ran with Murnau and then ahead of him where I pushed a five-foot long piece of driftwood in his way and he fell over it onto the sand. He muttered something in German but never saw me stepping on the edge of the driftwood. He got up and Bara was all over him, taking him down to the sand while her teeth shred through his trousers and lacerated the fat on his ass. "Bara!" I cried and she let go and

the man rolled over to leave a dark imprint on the sand. Probably blood. He slowly got up and stared at the dog and backed away for twenty, thirty feet, not sure what to expect. Bara watched him, waiting, waiting for any furtive movement. But he only wobbled as a beaten old man and she allowed him to leave in defeat.

I walked back to the Luger and kneeled down to it. One of the serrated fingers had a beautiful smooth gold ring loose around it. I used an empty seashell to slide it away and then inspected it. It was the one he took from me. I slipped it over my branded finger and it fit perfectly over the scar. I took it off and threw the ring thirty feet up the beach and its alacrity left a small electrical trail behind it. The same electrical trail that I spoke of earlier in my story, the one along the railroad tracks where my father died. Bara looked at me quizzically. Myrrh stood up and crutched back to dry sand, her eyes intent upon me. I ran to the ring and picked it up and repeated the throw with the same trail.

“How is this?”

I picked a small stone from the sand and dusted off the particles. I wound up like a star pitcher and threw it off into the dark and the electrical trail followed and quickly dissipated like lightning from a storm. Lightning without thunder or any noise whatsoever.

I found another stone, this time larger, and did another throw. Same soundless trail. I walked over to the thrown stone and knelt down to the large crater it was buried into. The stone was hot, the crater was hotter.

A weird, weird night.

Myrrh leaned down from her crutches and picked up a sea shell and tossed it underhand. Nothing special. She tried it again overhand and again there was no trail of anything. Didn't dent the sand, didn't do nothing. She shrugged and dug her heel into the sand and scraped a half circle and raised her hand to speak. Her half circle opened up and she nearly fell into the crevice that it left.

"Jeez," she said. "This is what my burnt feet get me?" She moved her hand in the opposite direction and the crevice sealed up as if it had never been there.

We exchanged glances and I said, "let's see you do it again." This time she dug an irregular line with her heel for about fifteen feet and then she walked back to me. We watched as she motioned her hand and the sand broke apart into a cleft.

I began to tremble, violently, and I became cold and wrapped my arms tight across my body and couldn't think. Myrrh walked over and looked in to her creation and said calmly, "this one's about six feet deep." She sealed it up with another hand movement and moved slowly to me with the Luger in hand and said, "this is a strange night. A strange and awful night." I nodded. She kept the Luger in her hand and then Bara ran up and had the ring in her teeth. Myrrh took the ring and stuffed it into a small pocket in the collar that Bara wore around her neck.

We took the magazine out of the Luger chamber and about ten minutes later we walked up the small cliff with Bara to our house and spoke no more. We took our time, as Myrrh was in pain and I wasn't strong enough to carry her. We mentioned the ring to no one.

Jack's father, Johann, was at the house. He was grieving the loss of his son and sharing some stories and beer with Papa. Papa asked how the beach was and we told



about Murnau's father trying to shoot Bara and how Bara attacked him and obliterated the robot dog.

"What the hell is wrong with that man," said Papa. "What is he doing in front of our house trying to shoot our dog?" No one had an answer. "And a robot dog? What are these Germans up to?"

We didn't tell them the man couldn't see us nor about the ring and the powerful throws and deep trenches. Myrrh gave Papa the Luger and magazine and after he studied them he gave them to Mr. Ripper.

"Don't like this," said Mr. Ripper after many moments of turning it over in his hands. "Neo-Nazis from hell. This old Murnau was one of the originals. Your American government should have hung him seventy years ago." He drank some beer before continuing. "From what you tell me, the old man wanted you in the water when the missile went down." Papa drank his beer, nodded and listened, "somebody wanted you dead." Papa sat up straight.

Mr. Ripper continued, "Couple months ago, over at Port Canaveral, where the Germans have their compound, I was trying to locate some liquid rubber, experimenting with wetsuits and new boards."

They drank some more and Papa pointed to the kitchen and said to us, "there's some chips and dip and lemonade in there for you." We knew he didn't want us to hear the conversation, so naturally we walked slow.

"Some of the German scientists were outside. They were bartering with some Cuban fishermen about purchasing some caged sharks that were caught that morning. They had already bought several sharks and they had the Cubans cut them open with

the organs still extant and the Germans were examining the living organs.” We got our lemonade from the frig and hung inside the kitchen door jam. “When I went inside to see if they had the material I was looking for, I walked past a half-open door and saw the billionaire Murnau sketching something on paper.”

“Hitler Youth,” murmured Papa as he drank some beer and looked at bottle.

“Germans do make good beer, though.”

Mr. Ripper continued, “I don’t know. He had that tall African assistant with him. The one they call ‘the Masai.’ They were doing something with costumes and crafts and electrical wiring. They had some dogs in there that didn’t move a bit. Probably robots like your kids said. And some of those mannequins looked alive. I thought they were for that theatre group in town, the one your wife stars in.”

Papa groaned. “They don’t act. B-movie posers with no life. “I went to Russia summer of 1991. My mom’s village in Sakhalin. Chekov Theater Group was there. Put on *The Seagull*. Those were actors.”

Ripper said, “this was more than that. But I don’t understand it.” He paused and then continued, “my wife went back to Spain two days ago.”

“Really?” said Papa.

“Yeah. “When the grandpa showed up and saw me he closed the door and got me some rubber and I left.” Mr. Ripper handed the weapon back to Papa and said, “I really miss Jack.” We went into our bedrooms because we didn’t need a good cry and went to sleep.

The following weekend our family took a trip to Miami Beach and when we came back to the house we could see that it had been searched thoroughly. Most everything

was put back the way it was when we left, but some of my clothes and the clothes of Myrrh were folded in a different way than normal. The Luger was safe in a hiding place in our sandy garage. Papa and Mama thought that it was very strange, the search and all. We never reported it to the authorities, but a couple of days later some Army officers with a lot of brass on their uniforms came to the house and I saw Papa give them the Luger. There was no mention of the ring. I guess they didn't ask Bara about it, and I doubt she would've volunteered that information.

Ten days later a Cocoa Beach police officer found the badly eaten body of old Murnau along the shore. Everybody knew who it was because he was such a fixture and property owner in the town. He was identified by partially amputated fingers as Heinrich Murnau. The Army took over the investigation and ruled it death by shark. Conjectured that he was swimming in the sea at dusk and was attacked. The other Germans concurred, said he used to swim in the Baltic at Peenemunde all the time for exercise and everybody knew he continued that habit here in Florida.

Everyone said it was a tragedy. A real tragedy and they held a large funeral that several hundred people attended at the son's large estate at the Cape. His kids and grandkids and great grandkids were all there to celebrate his life. I was told that the billionaire orchestrated it like a medieval passion play – whatever that is. Mama insisted we attend. Ripper's family declined. The ceremony was rather dull with too much talking, in English and German, so I can understand why Ripper's family didn't show up. There was food after the ceremony and from a distance I saw Mama talking to a man I recognized as being PK Murnau. He wasn't dressed in black, but white linen over a white cotton shirt and sailboat loafers. He had that real blonde hair and though they

were far away, I thought I heard a faint accent in Spanish, for that seemed to be the language he and Mama were speaking. She presented me to him. It was in the afternoon and it was a sunny Florida day and I remember him wearing real dark sunglasses and staring at me for many seconds and searching about me with his head moving around. I don't know what he was actually looking at or even if he was looking at me all the time. Maybe there was somebody behind me that he had some interest in? I don't know. But he said nothing and then walked away. And I don't remember if he had something wrong with his posture, so maybe that was just a one-time accident when I saw him in Cocoa Beach with a kind of hunchback.

I heard that it took several days for the younger Murnau to gather his things and then he left for Hollywood for some film he was producing. I heard that Bernard left with him.

About a week later three German scientists were at a beach party near Patrick Air Force Base. An unseasonably warm October day with Hofbrau beer drunk and beer hall music sung and large breasted Mädchen dancing with the fellows. They went out for a swim. An eye witness described them as suddenly being surrounded by hammer head sharks who ushered them out to sea. Shredded clothes were all that was found by the military police investigators.

The eye witness was Jack Ripper's father. He left for Spain the day after.

One month later our family moved to New Mexico for Papa to continue his work at the White Sands. The westward movement got Mama thinking more about Hollywood and she shortly slipped away from us on a Santa Fe train headed out to LA. Papa

refused her request for a divorce. He talked about the Pope and 'against his religion' and such stuff.

Weird, huh? After such a wonderful summer, it seemed like one bad day followed another bad day and my nice dreams turned into nightmares and I started wondering about the course of my life – that maybe I was meant to live a tragedy.



## Chapter 4

### ----- On the Road with Uncle Don

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

We're on the road to Mama's wedding in Los Angeles. Today's Tuesday and it is to happen this Sunday. No idea she even had a sweetheart until she telephoned several days after Papa's death with condolences and then that tardy wedding invitation.

And Murnau the son, no less!

I love my Mama dearly and miss her, but I don't want no other father in my life. I expect we will meet him, give them best wishes, trip down to La Jolla to see some old friends and then head back to New Mexico or live in La Jolla..

We look more like mother than Papa. She has those deep blue eyes and brown hair cut short the last time I saw her. Her name is Rachel. Now I'm a twelve-year-old half-orphan, little over five feet four inches tall and pushing close to one hundred ten pounds. Myrrh is my Tomboy fraternal twin – neither of us have had those hormones kick into play so nobody, even family, except for Flo and Papa, could tell us apart except with close scrutiny – now only Flo. Myrrh was named by Mama with input from her parents about being a present to the baby Jesus. My full name is Luke. Luke Blank. I don't have a last name anymore. My mother took back her maiden name and I don't want that. I certainly don't want the name of any stepfather. My father had a well-known

last name that I don't need people to tag me with as a result of his strange death. Grandparents on both sides steeped in their Christianity devised Myrrh and Luke presents to the Baby Jesus. Luke means 'healer.'

Grandparents were all religious and now all of them have gone on to the other side to whatever worship they might find. Me? I don't mind going to church with all the singing and eating and very rarely a good sermon, but most of the time those preachers talk too loud and too long and I don't appreciate those people always sticking that plate in your face and asking for money all of the time. Myrrh feels the same.

We'd been living with Flo since less than a year past, 'cuz that's when Mama went to California to follow her dreams and change agents to some German woman. When she left, Papa had to sell our New Mexico spread and send her some money and we all ended up with Flo.

Aunt Flo says Mama moved in with some retired actress who knows an aviator movie producer named Howard Huges and that he has some pictures that she can be in – in addition to PK Murnau's Vampire franchise – Aunt Flo laughed long and heartily at that Vampire Franchise remark that she made up on her own.

In letters and phone calls Mama 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. Then we will join him in the ocean to watch his dust migrate to who knows where. I love the water. Rivers and lakes in New Mexico. Atlantic Ocean at the Cape, and now we get to go back to California and the Pacific.



We've been on the road from Santa Fe for a little over three hours, on Interstate 40, just west of Gallup. We want to intersect with the north 191 and then the western 161 and go through Mexican Hat and Monument Valley - the place my parents met. The driver is Aunt Flo's ex-husband's older brother, the aforementioned Don, another vagabond, whose Jack Daniels loosened up the story about the Raven-haired man. He loves to drive what he calls the 66 when he can, says it brings back memories. Memories? What kind of memories? I don't think he ever left New Mexico after he came back from the Middle East, so what has he to remember about the outliers except Boot Camp in San Diego and a ship trip halfway across the world to Asia. Maybe past lives is what he is talking about. But whose past life? His or someone else? Now he spends most of his life around Silver City looking into the closed down mines and packing out what silver and gold he finds along the flanks of the mountains. When Flo divorced his brother, Don began spending more time at her house. We know hez got some good coin, cuz his car of choice is this '54 Hudson Hornet Hollywood we're riding in. We didn't exist back then, but he says he laid down 20K to get it from a private dealer after the turn of the century. He kept it in storage when he was at the war. He thinks it will help him score some ladies in California. Thinks the name will impress some of them. I don't know. I think he has a better chance with his pieces of gold. He used to sell gold and silver to artists and Indians up in Taos and Santa Fe and now he says he's going to move to California where he reckons there's a lot of money rolling out of the studio lots and he's gonna change his coveralls for a suit and tie and join the country club with his future wealth.

His inebriant of choice is that Jack 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's on probation for three years for driving while under the influence when he fell asleep at the wheel and ran off the road and into a chain-link fence that borders the local golf course. Local Idiot Sheriff was in a foursome with the local Judge on that course at that time, and they helped him out of the Hollywood Hudson. Idiot Sheriff wrote the car up for malicious mischief, little damage to a headlamp and littering parts of itself on the links. Idiot 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 and I think he wants to move on to some new territory where he can start a new reputation.

We are probably the only people that travel anywhere nowadays without cell phones. Papa didn't believe in them and Don was an acolyte of Papa. Papa could not stand people speaking or playing with their cell phones all the time. To him, texting was anathema. He said you gotta have your wits about you in this world because anything can happen at any time. He also said he didn't like the government being able to track you on your cell phone. Knowing where you were at all times and being able to swoop in and grab you.

Don was a driver in Afghanistan 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 the Rock 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 scraggy hair and gaps in his mouth beside yellow enamel. Flo said the war did that to him. She never minced words and always said,

“Damn Wars. Military gets the best people we got, turns ‘em into Hades killers in some foreign land, and when they come back, if they ever do, a lot of them spiral downward into drugs and alcohol and despair.”

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 herb and 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 American 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.”

I thought 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 kilt 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 another university word courtesy of Aunt Flo. I cannot remember ever living without weapons at our house. Papa was a crack shot. He was older than Don. Back in New Mexico in the 90s, on leave from the Colombian cocaine fields, he started to take the boy Don in the bush hunting game for meals, not sport. Same age as with me and Myrrh. 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 Hudson. Something about the laws being different in California.

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

Papa and Don were fast friends with each other and their cars. They could dismantle a car engine and put it back together in a couple of hours and have no leftover parts. They knew every bolt and nut and electrical wiring on all their cars. They taught me and Myrrh how to drive a stick shift when we were seven. At eight we could trouble shoot his Caddy and fix her – not near as well as him – but we were getting there.

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 'cuz he is happy and vocal and the Jack 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 and that's 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 .22 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 words that I am using to document our trip west. Well. 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, but she doesn't look like one 'cuz 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 Spanish as well as the neighbors and sometimes she

speaks it so fast I can't keep up with her and I got high marks in my Spanish class at the school and I am quick, of mind, of body.

I was a fast runner at our Junior High School. Second place at the state finals behind Trace Whittmore. His grandfather ran against the white boy winner of the 440 at the Texas Relays just before one of those wars and beat him. They wouldn't let the Grandpa Whitmore run in the relays, so it was a run through the roped off main street in Austin before two thousand frenzied drinkers and it almost ended in a riot when Mr. Whittmore won. Grandfather had been one of those Tuskegee Airmen flying the P-47 Thunderbolt in combat missions in Europe. Trace's father had the same blood lines and same speed, and Mr. Whittmore joined the Air Force after university and flew jets and ended up at Holloman Air Force Base in a staff position. 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 too similar to the White Sands. We laughed at that, and then he gave me my nickname, "White Sands." I like the name and I like him and he is fast, but he leaned into the tape at the 100 meters to beat me in the 7th grade State Junior High School Final.

I sit behind Don cuz his relief bottle of Jack Daniels is riding shotgun and Myrrh sits beside me. Sometimes Don likes to put the car in the cruise control he and Papa installed in their cars, and stretch his right leg out on the shotgun seat and rub his shoeless 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 and Don 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 Sinatra. 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 and 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, and besides, if I roll this backseat 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 and this black sedan heading our way is the first car in many minutes. In accordance with everything Papa and Don taught us about cars, it looks like a German car. I don't recognize it. Nobody behind us and that black sedan is heading toward us 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. Only hear the tires on pavement. No engine sounds. Maybe its electric? 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 into a U-turn. 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 and 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, ivory blue skin more reflective than mine, coal-black hair, strawberry lips and he looked like he was sucking on a lolli-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 lolli-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 wind 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 beer 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 . . . . .

THUD!

A large black bird crashes into the windscreen in front of Don, shattering the safety glass and making it difficult to see through as simultaneously,

BOOM!

The exterior sound reverberates within the Hudson 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 her house, and I know that Don loves to have the monotony of a long road trip fractured by some mechanical breakdown and here he got two: a cracked windshield and a flat tire. Then calmly, like one of those TV news shows,

"Command Center, we got ourselves a problem. I think we blow'd ourselves a gasket and smacked a Raven 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, where they were monitoring the opium burning by the Afghan police and local militia, when 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, so Don quickly did a U-turn and they left the valley to the locals and they found something less significant to do while they whiled away their time before returning to the States.

I look over at Myrrh and check her fastened seat belt and she just smiles back at me. Just another adventure in her life. She's the quiet one and she speaks when she feels like it. I do most of our talking and that's one of the reasons I'm telling our story. 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 airshow ride at Patrick. 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, Myrrh, God be with us." Myrrh has that smile on her face.

I think God can sometimes be a trickster as through the windshield I see a thick short tree 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 Hudson roof on the ground, like going into home plate with a swift slide, and wondering if you're going to beat the throw or get called out – and I wonder what "out" means in this situation.

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 the ride at Patrick Air Force Base. The ravine flattens out and the Hollywood Hudson comes to a stop for its close-up in an arid creek bed flush with

brown-red grass. I know Don and Papa had designed a pair of airbags for the Hudson and I watched them get tested, but there was no deployment. 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 'cuz I never looked. I do know the Jack that was riding shotgun and purring besides Don's foot was dashed out of the Hudson when we did our 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 Myrrh has done the same and I sit on the underbelly of the roof and I reach my hands over to Don and slide up beside him where 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 Hollywood Hudson. It seems our people prefer to die in their cars.

"Bad F-word," I mutter and next time scream, "Bad F-word!"

I feel some slight energy move away from his body and through the car and off into the distance where it seems to stay. Myrrh is beside me and I speak quietly to her,

“We need to get out of here. This is not right.” She shakes her head slightly and the tears in her 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 Myrrh already has it and then we grab our back packs and gear and slide out.

I move past the crushed windshield with the flattened Raven melded into it 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 pushed out of my trance as Myrrh shoves me hard and I see a bald eagle fly closely past and I follow it with quick steps off to the side of the ravine, past some energy that I know comes from Don.

We traverse up the hillside in the direction we were driving: west. We are fifty 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 deliberately around the perimeter of the car, like a man with a purpose. He looks under the back of the car where the differential is located but finds nothing and then he carefully searches the ground and the plants but makes no motion to pick at something. He looks up and around the terrain surrounding the car. Has he stopped to aid us? After a while, he stoops down beside Don and reaches into the window and I see him touch Don's shirt pockets. Myrrh and I glance at one another, wondering what this man is doing here and if he is going to help. Rudolph looks around the interior of the car for several minutes, then backs out and stands up to again look about the ravine. First at a low level, then

with a higher glance. The birds stop their singing. His 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. This is wrong and I want to run out of my skin but something intangible steadies me and the quietness of Myrrh assures me that we are fine. His 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.

Rudolph calls out in a sugary voice,

“Is anybody here? I’ve come to help you.”

He is silent and then searches back across the hillside.

“If you come to me I’m sure we can help the driver.” He sounds like an ice cream vendor calling out from his truck parked near the playground. Full of sugar. White sugar to induce the children to bad teeth and multiple visits to the dentist.

I look at Myrrh to see if we should respond to Rudolph and after several seconds we shake our heads. We saw Don die. I could feel his spirit and there’s no way this Rudolph could bring him back. He’s fishing for us. He cannot see us in plain sight and he’s trying to lure us in. But why? The grass singes behind us again and then his look is past.

The birds return to their singing while I watch his gaze turn further across and down the hillside, searching.

Searching for what? Why is he here if not to assist us and call the authorities and bring in the help?

Rudolph turns his body away and continues to scour the bush with his eyes and another coaxing,

“I’ve got some food in the car. Hot fried chicken. Donuts. Chocolate Bars. You can eat while we wait for the police and the ambulance to get here.” He has a bit of an accent that I cannot fathom – thank you Aunt Flo. Maybe Canadian or southern or I don’t know very many accents.

“I can’t help you child, unless you come out of your hiding place.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cell phone and punches something into it. Maybe he’s calling the police? Maybe his odd look has prejudiced us against him? I’m not sure. After several moments he walks past the back of the car about thirty feet and leans down and picks up something that he looks at it and then puts into his back pocket. Just like the homeless man described with Papa! What did he find?

He walks back to Don’s car where he stops and is still for many seconds. He sees something and follows it with his gaze as he reaches into a back pocket and pulls out an object which he shakes open to show a black bag. I cannot see anything as he moves toward something very slowly. He reaches slowly towards it and then violently grabs at air and quickly stuffs his hand down into his bag and seals it up. He lifts up his hand and looks at the back of it, like maybe he injured it? Then he licks it. Probably cut it and has some blood seeping from the wound.

Myrrh and I exchange questioning glances. This is like the homeless man describing the events following the death of Papa.

Rudolph again kneels down to Don’s body. 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. Rudolph slips down onto all fours and moves over Don's body in the vehicle and something like a black curtain covers the inside of the car and Myrrh nudges me and we move into the tall grass: Myrrh, me and Papa in the Urn.

“What did he grab?” I ask Myrrh.

She replies “I didn't see anything. Just like he doesn't seem to see us.”

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-olds through this vegetation and the omnipresent mesquite, and we move at an easy pace.

“Has the snow started to fall around the Great Lakes?” asks Myrrh.

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

We move slowly the next mile or so, in the long ravine that parallels the road above us.

## Chapter 5

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### Bara

About four months ago we took a freight out of Lamy, New Mexico with Papa. When I say we, I mean Papa, Myrrh, me and our beloved Bara. That white Russian Wolf hound was as big as us. We weighed about ninety pounds. In 2017 Papa bought her to placate Mama. She loved that dog as much as us and named her Bara, after a Russian actress who allegedly studied under the great Russian director,



Stanislavski. I don't know if the aforementioned Theda Bara was Russian or not. Mama said she was. Papa said she wasn't and he would know, his mother being from Russia and all that. Aunt Flo, the authority on everything, said that Ms. Bara was actually born in Ohio and grew up there. She said that Ms. Bara went to the University of Cincinnati. She then went to New York to star in silent movies for Fox Studios during the time of the Great War. That being World War I.

Ha! Flo said that the Great War is the one that you or your loved one go off to fight. That there are no small wars when people kill or die or get maimed. When a soldier or civilian is left reduced physically, spiritually, mentally, then that was a Great War. Flo said that even victors sustain a reduction. Papa and Don, before their automobile deaths, agreed with her. Anyways, when the film industry moved out to Los Angeles, Ms. Bara relocated there and made a bunch of silent motion pictures. She lived there with her dog, the Russian wolfhound, and later with her husband.

Papa bought Mama the dog for her twenty-sixth birthday, when we were almost ten years old. Bara grew quickly and became big and covered us like a mother dog. She was friendly to our friends and enemy to our enemies. If she didn't know a person, she would size them up with her nose. If she liked them, they could stroke her. If she disliked them, she would slow growl them as they backed away - like she did with that Old Nazi Murnau. Invariably her judgment would show true as the person's actions would validate her nose. Bara had a rhythm about her. It radiated at a quick upbeat pace like energy from the earth. I could feel it in her when she leaned against me. Like the constant purr of a cat, touching her brought tranquility and happiness. Bara refused to go to LA with Mama.

July was hot and irascible, where the wind and the rain and the thunder all of a sudden appeared on a sunny day and tore up the landscape with lightning and Niagara falls of water. Papa never thought that weather was an anomaly – he knew it was the changing climate. It was early morning at our house and Papa just woke us out of bed and said, “Time to ride.” And our family of four, Bara included, got ready. We made several sandwiches with Wisconsin cheese folded between slices of tomato and tucked into a spinach leaf between the special sourdough bread recipe that Mama left behind. Mama always made it with a warm glass of water, couple of spoonful’s of un sulphured molasses, tablespoon of olive oil, a dash of sea salt and then sift in four cups Kansas wheat flour. Mix it with her starter, knead it, add more water and flour as necessary, knead it again, let it rise only one time overnight, bake four hundred degrees for forty minutes and Waalaa! The cat's meow!

She was a good - is a good - cook.

The cat's meow. A phrase that runs in our family. Like blue eyes or curiosity or blonde-white hair when you are a child that changes into dark brown as you reach voting age. We each had a canteen for water and some protein bars for emergency. Warm dark-colored Pendleton over white t-shirts, blue jeans, grey sneakers and knit ski caps. No clothing that would stand us out from a distance. We should know where each of us was, but other creatures should have difficulty locating us. Papa had already packed our sleeping bags onto our army packs which held extra water. We had our bows broken down and arrow quivers on the side of our packs. Our packs weighed about thirty pounds, his must've weighed about sixty, or sixty-five.

Papa brought some playing cards to keep us occupied when we weren't hiking or hunting. He brought his Smith and Wesson Magnum 45 with twenty rounds to keep himself occupied. And he brought Bara.

He drove the Cadillac down west of Lamy and parked along a side street off of the train station. We walked over to the tracks where a line of boxcars were being prepared for transportation and just climbed in one that had doors open on both sides. It was empty except for us. We only waited twenty minutes before the shunting of the cars fueled our excitement. Our boxcar was moved twice and then we were off. Heading west toward the Continental Divide. I asked him how he knew the boxcar was headed west. He just shook his head. "No idea. The plan was to go on an adventure. This time we're going west. If we go east, we still find adventure. Adventure is everywhere you go. You just have to keep your eyes and ears open and use your God-given brain." He paused to let it sink into my God-given brain. "So that you don't do too many stupid things. Cuz one stupid thing too many and your life could be over."

Papa was an adventurer and a thinker. He just did that one stupid thing too many. I hope he was stupid, for to think otherwise causes me to cogitate my designation as prey, and I do not want to think that. Because if Papa got caught up in some plan of Rudolph and his ilk, and they were too strong or tricky or deceptive with him that he died, then what chance do me and Myrrh have to survive?

He liked to say that God loves to test you, that God throws things up in your life that are going to create your character, or show your lack thereof. I have told you quite a lot about him and as long as I'm alive and you want to listen, I will tell you more. I feel myself to be his historian, his biographer. Twelve years I spent with that man. First two

or three come back in glimpses, when something brings their sketch out of the shadows of our memory. Or when relatives and acquaintances spoke a story about him that I wrote down in my brain with invisible ink that passes in and out of obscurity as I think about him. Sometimes they told stories of him about events where I was present, and sometimes I have difficulty melding their observations with my own. You know the story of the six blind men and the elephant and their description of what they touched and how each was different? Well, some relatives told a story of where I was a percipient witness to the events and their facts diverge from my remembrance of that scene. And I wonder whose version is right and whose version is wrong? But I realize that I saw all with the eyes of a small-devoted child and that things they would notice had no import to me, and things which I deemed significant, had little meaning to them. With this understanding, I can draw his history more complete, more complex. And since I am his biographer, I can put down whatever words I chose and write them indelibly into my memory, into my stories of him. And as I am his son, this is his story as much as mine.

The terrain along the railroad track follows closely beside Route 66. It's a mixture of grasslands, mesquite, Mountain Ash, Chokeberry, New Mexico Olive. Pinions and juniper in the higher elevations. About forty minutes into the ride we felt the wind picking up and then the rain pelted the outside of the boxcar. The water was beautiful and the drops began pouring down so large and furious that the landscape became blurred. Heavy drops forced their way through the boxcar doors and washed over us. In the distance we could see erratic strikes of lightning followed several seconds later by the thunder. Then we made a sweeping turn along the tracks and were through it. We looked back and could see the storm pouring water and cutting up the countryside

behind a fierce rainbow resplendent in the now disclosed rays from the sun. I felt then and I still feel now, that if we could have taken a photograph of the three of us plus Bara in the boxcar, with that background of gold beams and band of crescent colors up against the beating sky, that my being could have spent infinity in that picture in complete harmony with the world.

In another two hours the train stopped short of the Continental Divide at the town of Thoreau. Apparently there was another train or two heading over from the west. We hopped off and headed south toward Bluewater Lake. Papa stuck out his thumb and the first pick-up truck that came by stopped for us. We went south on the 612 into the mountains and past the lake when Papa had the driver stop in the middle of the mountains. It was dry there; the rain had stayed in the valley. Papa was a native of this area and with his bits of Chiricahua Apache blood he knew it as well as any man, so we had no worries for this adventure.

We found a trail going north and Papa would have Bara run point for a while, then stop and let us pass her so she could hang back behind us to inspect something, then run back up to point. I could feel her energy as she ran past. She was short haired sheep white with some gold along her flanks and hindquarter. That narrow face with some more gold sewn into her ears was always on the alert for whatever came next.

It was before Cape Canaveral and Mama moving off to Hollywood when I became aware that Bara preferred Papa to her. I think it was a labor day or one of those three-day holidays. We were at a picnic south of Las Cruces with friends and relatives. Mama was dressed in a flowing white dress out of a Gatsby party and I remember her

looking so beautiful. Papa was playing in a baseball game with Don and some other local athletes. Captain Whittmore was playing on the opposing team made up mostly of Air Force people. His son Trace was there. Us boys were watching the grown-ups play and Bara was sitting with us. Mama was sitting with the ladies about twenty feet directly back of third base, sitting below a wide umbrella set on the grassy field. They were sipping drinks and eating from a fruit bowl. How do I remember this so well? Listen to the story and you will understand.

I was standing by Mama watching everybody. The Captain was batting and Papa was playing catcher. Bara was sitting right beside third base. Mama called Bara to come back to her, to sit beside her. Bara hesitated. Mama called her again. Bara gave her that annoyed-dog look and slowly started walking toward Mama, all the time looking back at Papa. The Captain drove a pitch high and far to the outfield and Don had to place his Jack on the outfield grass and run it down. The ball landed before he caught up to it. The Captain, with the speed that runs in his family, was motoring around second base, intent on executing an inside the park home run. Don had a different idea. With one motion, he picked up the ball and threw it to the shortstop who relayed it on a rope directly in the air to Papa. The Captain was running so fast that when he got past third base on his way to home, there was no way he could stop and reverse himself back to third. So the Captain tried to take out Papa. Papa was a good athlete. He played matador to the Captain's bull. The Captain rushed at him in an attempt to dislodge the ball and to dislodge Papa's head from his shoulders - in my opinion. In Bara's opinion too, for she growled under her breath and Mama told her to be still and grabbed her neck. Papa did a full-on matador pass, tagging the ball and glove to the

Captain's head for the out. The Captain grazed Papa's chest and then went hurling to the ground, throwing up grass and dirt and dust all over the place. Bara broke Mama's grip and ran into the dust bowl and joined in the celebration with Papa and his teammates. I didn't know the word then, but I know now that I saw Mama mouth the word, "Bitch."

A little over an hour into the hike, along the side of a steep cliff, we stopped among the pine trees beside a small creek to eat some of the sandwiches. The creek dropped down the cliff to the forest below. Bara was running behind us and when she got up to us she stopped dead still next to Papa. They both saw the big cat at the same time.

"Cougar," he said calmly. We followed his eyes and saw the big cat, sitting low in a pine tree, eying us from about eighty yards. The cougar was larger than me and Myrrh. Beautiful grey coat with a somnolent face and half-closed eyes. His whiskers were moving slightly, but not from the wind that was starting to pick up. It looked like his nose was twitching. Probably smelling its first cheese sandwich and wondering what to do. Ha. I really didn't think that at the time. I let Papa do my thinking for me in that situation.

"Myrrh. Luke. Don't move." – he needn't tell Bara that. He spoke in the tone of voice when there was danger or anger or discipline to be attended to. "Probably just checking us out so not to worry, but stay still." Not to worry, as Papa grasped for the 45. Not to worry, as the cat yawned in our direction. Wisconsin cheese? Why would a cat want Wisconsin cheese? I do remember that thought running through my head but it was so fleeting that only now does it come back to me. Papa pulled Smith and Wesson

out of his pack. With his free hand he put me and Myrrh behind him and Bara. I thought I was fast but that cat could leave me in the starting blocks. It had started its run when Papa's 45 rang out with three quick shots that echoed through the mountain and down the cliff and they must have missed for that cat was in the air toward us when it collided with the rhythm of Bara. Papa slammed me and Myrrh to the ground with his body. The lightning goes right over us and cuts into a tree down the ravine and the concomitant thunder blasts my drums into incomprehensible noise. I look through Papa's fist to see Bara and the cougar entangled and bouncing down the gorge beside the bolt with the radiating song of Bara. I relive this as I tell it and therefore I mix it in the past and present tense. Besides, Aunt Flo isn't here, so I can bring in any word and any tense that I want with no fear of gentle correction.

Then they are gone. The combatants and the bolt, leaving a tuft of cat hair lofting in the breeze, a black tree trunk and my ears full of noise. I look at Papa and I see him say the Bad F-Word and then he quickly stands up and looks down into the abyss of trees and red dirt and volcanic rock. I quickly rise and join him at the edge, looking down into tangled brush and trees. Papa's lips move but I hear nothing. I think that my ears have been blown out by the thunder. I look at Papa and I speak words that only vibrate in my head, "I can't hear anything." Papa motions for me to follow him. Apparently, his hearing was not affected. Papa looks down into the ravine and then turns to me and Myrrh as he speaks. I touch his throat with my right hand and try to read his lips with my eyes.



“I don't hear anything down there. Must be several hundred feet to the bottom. Bring everything cuz that cat might have family around here and we're not coming back up.”

He flipped open the cylinder to his pistol and took out the three empty shells. “I don't know how I missed at that range.” He replaced them with fresh bullets and then closed up the cylinder. I released my hand from his throat and we started moving down the trail and this time he had his weapon in his hand. It was a deep, narrow trail that had been chiseled into the rocky side a long time ago. Probably by the mountain goats and the Indians. There was no gold around here so I don't think the Spaniards would have done it. The creek ran roughly parallel to it until it disappeared into a small waterfall off to our left. I remember it being more than several hundred feet deep. It was difficult to gauge the depth with all the plants and trees and leaves stuck into the side of the cliffs. It probably took us over an hour to descend.

The first sounds to break through my steady noise were waves lapping on the shore, as if I was standing beside a lake. Half way down the trail the muffled voice of Papa came through. It sounded like he was speaking through a comb with paper wrapped around it. I didn't hear any noise from Myrrh – she was her usual quiet, calm self. Toward the bottom my ears began to hurt and I knew my nerves were coming back and that I would not be deaf forever. When we made it to the bottom there was only one body and that was the cat. Papa turned the cougar over as he looked for his bullets holes. There were none. He mumbled, “I can't believe I didn't even touch this cat with three shots at such close range.”

The paper was slipping off the comb. “My hearing is almost back, Papa.”

He stood up and tousled the hair on my head. "Good for all of us. If it hadn't been for Bara, I don't know if we would still be walking around. Bara!" I could hear him but the forest swallowed up his shout and there was no echo. "Bara!" No response and he turned to look over us for a last shout. "Bara!"

His words ran away from us and never came back but the Myrrh screamed at the top of her lungs, "Bara! Barrrrrrrr;" she actually rolled her "r" for a long, loud time before finishing with "raaaa." No response except my echo of her call. Papa looked down to us and then kneeled alongside the dead cat, searching the ground with his eyes and fingers. Then he stood up and moved around the cat, searching for signs of Bara

"No blood. No tracks. No nothing." He spoke quietly, probably to himself. "You see anything around here that might come from Bara? Fur? Tracks."

"No," said I as Myrrh shook her head. Still looking around us, Papa said,

"We are going to stay around here for the night and tomorrow and the next night and following morning. If Bara is alive, she might come back. If she is injured or dead, we might hear animals moving around that want to feast on her. We have to get far enough away from this dead cat so that those scavengers don't hunt us."

"Where's Bara?" asked Myrrh, choking tears. I don't cry too much but her question made me fragile, moist.

Papa replied, "Probably didn't make it down this far. There are no signs of her presence."

"Bara!" again from my quivering mouth. I loved that dog. "Bara! Are you here?"

Myrrh joined in my unanswered plea and Papa said, "It will be difficult down here with all the growth, but let's work our way a hundred yards or so in that direction and

make camp. There's probably some water running over there as this is the base of this small vale and water should come through here.”

Papa was right. It was difficult. It was overgrown. There were large rocks that we had to move over and large trees to slip past. But no signs of Bara. We looked all around as we made the long, slow journey. No fur, no blood, no signs of animal in the rocks and trees. No response to our crying her name into the forest. Papa was right about the water too. We came into a small meadow covered with bunchgrass and wild rye about three hundred yards across and a small creek, about five feet in width and eight or ten inches deep ran in its center. Mountain sand and silt were dried out along its perimeter, held in by banks two or three feet in height. It must have been a longstanding water course, as the thick meadow grass and flora were luxuriant in their colors. This was the July creek, when the snow has all melted and the only water is that from the southwest monsoons in the mountains. In the spring, the dry banks along the perimeters of the creek would easily overflow from the snow pack melt. Myrrh and I bathed in it while Papa watched with his 45. Then he gave me the pistol and he refreshed himself.

“We will set up over by those large pinos. Don't want to be too close to the water in case something is following along its course and happens upon us while we are sleeping.”

We dried off and moved our gear a couple hundred yards to the pine trees. Papa was a survivor. He covered most of the possible danger points. He just became careless when Mama left him. We set our campsite next to a fallen pine tree so that our backs were protected. We weren't really hungry, so only part of our sandwiches were

eaten. We wrapped the uneaten food tightly in plastic and put it in a metal container separate from our camp so they would not attract highly sensitive olfactory animals like bears. The night was uneventful except for an early morning fight between competing red-hatted Gila Woodpeckers. I couldn't see them but Papa said he knew their sound from Mexico and he said they were probably fighting over a female. We ate the rest of our sandwiches and then broke out our bow and arrows. Papa had us walk around and collect deadwood for our fire that night and for archery targets. For the rest of the afternoon we set up targets twenty-five yards, fifty yards, and one-hundred yards away from us. Then we practiced, and practiced, and practiced. We practiced stationary and running shoots for the shorter distances. For the hundred yards we aimed high into the sky and then released the arrow so that the arc would rise high and then drop down vertical at the target. The impact was so swift, so sudden, that it would scare the daylights out of any animal or person at the impact zone. As the day progressed, we got better. All the while we looked around for Bara. All the while we listened for the sounds of Bara. But nothing.

Dusk came late in July and the last hour of the light we looked up into the canopy of trees, walking around and calling out Bara's name. There was no response.

Papa had been gone for several hours and he shook his head when he came back camp to the gathered deadwood that we placed between a circle of rocks. He had Myrrh lite the dried grass under the deadwood and we were ready to cook. He had two jackrabbits that he had already cleaned away from our camp to keep the coyotes and other scavengers at bay.

“How many shots?” asked Myrrh.

“One each. Grip and rip from about twenty yards. Went a mile out to see if any Bara. Nada.”

Myrrh mixed olive oil with peppers and salt. Papa cut up the red meat from the big wild rabbits and gave it over to Myrrh for the sauce. She placed the pieces in the Iron skillet and set it on some rocks in the fire. She put in some already cooked white rice that we brought along with us into a stainless-steel pan and stream water. We boiled the stream water and poured it over black tea bags for our drink. Dessert was fresh sourdough bread lathered in raw butter from a neighbor’s farm and local wild honey from Santa Fe. It was a good meal but the absence of Bara kept us subdued. We washed all the cooking utensils in the stream and then set them about fifty yards from the camp. No need to invite the locals in. That night we didn’t do our usual storytelling or songs. We lay in our respective sleeping bags around the fire and had our watch time set to make sure the fire was always burning. Papa’s 45 was loaded and laying under a tarp next to him.

He said, “Life is like riding a raft down a river. You have your calm waters and you have your turbulent waters. Things will happen that will make you ecstatic about life. Other things will get you really upset and angry and sorrowful. That’s what’s happening with us and Bara. We have experienced so much joy with her and now we have this extreme sorrow. We will never forget her, but at some point our lives go on. Just try not to go over a large water fall and we’ll be OK.”

I fell fast asleep and set my inner clock for an hour before sunrise. I wanted to see the Dog Star rising in the east before the sun. I hoped Bara would appear with Canis Major. I was disappointed, not from the beauty of the dawn sky, but from no Bara.

Breakfast was scrambled eggs and Wisconsin cheese with fresh tomatoes that Papa pulled out of his backpack. We peeled the skin off Florida oranges that dripped with juice for our morning liquid.

We practiced our archery for a couple hours in the morning with Papa helping with our technique. Sourdough for lunch and then we cleaned the utensils and hid our gear in some heavy underbrush and took our bows and quivers and went looking for signs of Bara.

Nothing but Jack Rabbits and a deer we refused to molest. We made it back to camp, voices hoarse from crying the name, "Bara," thighs exhausted from going up and down the rugged terrain. Each of us bathed in the warm stream for about twenty minutes and then changed into clean clothes. Supper was the same as the night before.

This night Papa said, "Sometimes you wish that you could go back to the head waters of the river to start over again, correct your mistakes. But that cat was there and Bara did what she had to do. She made no mistakes and we are here. But when you make a mistake, learn from it so you don't repeat them. That's all you can do. And no matter how many times you go down that river, something has changed. It may be a good change, it may be a bad change. But it has changed and be aware of it."

I tossed the night away in my sleeping bag.

In the morning, before our eggs over easy, Papa said, "We haven't seen any birds flying in the sky to indicate there is another animal down here. Maybe she got disoriented and left this place. I don't know. I'm sad, but we have to leave here and follow the creek to the bottom of the mountain. Let's go after breakfast and some target practice for a couple of hours and then another hour of laying in the stream."

After we dried off in the warm sun, he picked up his gear. We did the same. The creek led us down the mountain. Most of the time we walked next to it. Sometimes we walked in it. Sometimes we had to break new brush to stay with it. We did what we had to do. We looked, we scrutinized, we called out, but we saw no signs of Bara. On the ride back in an east bound freight, Myrrh and I were mostly silent. Papa talked about his father, how Papa told his father after he got out of the military from Columbia, that it seemed there was more evil in the world, more evil people. Grandpa said, "No. There are just more people in the world so naturally there are more evil people. There are also more good people. Try to be with the good people, but if you have to, don't back down from the evil ones."

We never saw Bara again. I think now, though I didn't have the knowledge and experience to think it then, that there was only room for one bitch in the family, and that was Bara. And I think now that Bara sensed that Mama's spirit had left our small family sometime before her body followed. Just thinking about that dog gives me comfort. I like to think that if Bara had been around, she would have pulled Papa from the Cadillac.

I look over to Myrrh and I see she is holding back the tears. She's been listening to my thoughts. Sometimes we like to cry to clean out the system. It'll be getting dark in an hour or so. We've been following these railroad tracks for maybe twenty miles. We need to find a that place we were going to for the crash. We need to find the food store food store and a place to sleep.

## Chapter 6

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The Rancher

We move out of the creek bed and onto some railroad tracks. A small cliff of twenty feet separates the tracks from below the roadside. These railroad tracks we are walking along still have the heat in them. Papa's Southwest Chief should have gone



past a couple of hours ago, and I haven't noticed any freights since that whistle earlier, but it is best walking along the side of the railroad tracks. Sometimes one of those locomotives can sneak up on you really fast, and the next thing people are reading your obituary in the newspaper. This is the second time in a year that I've thought about my obituary. Is this a harbinger? Tell me true, Flo, tell me true. How would my 12-year-old obituary be different from my 11-year-old?

A promising boy cut down before he reached his teenage years.

Future Baseball Hall of Famer. Future Rhodes scholar. A very intelligent boy who excelled in all sports and loved to read books. He would spend endless hours with his twin sister and father in the New Mexico wilderness. His father had recently died, preceded by the family dog and the voluntary leaving of his wife. He was on a trip with his twin sister to see their Mama in California. Young physical specimen, he was projected to be six feet three inches tall and a future University athlete at whatever University he chose. The cream of his generation taken out by a large locomotive looming from the languid shadow of a sharp turn in rural New Mexico. Monument Valley --

Myrrh's sudden stop and me stumbling against her take me out of my reveries. The town Rudolph came past should be pretty close. We can use some water and some food and a chance to call Aunt Flo.

Backpacks, hoodie sweatshirts, belted chinos, skivvies, and socks inside some good hiking boots – this is our appearance. Our wallets have several hundred dollars to

hold us til we see Mama and our packs carry camping gear and Mama's directions to her home. Most important, we have Papa in his Urn. Through the tall grass, I see a gas station and what looks like a garage and a small wooden structure that might pass as a small living quarter and . . . and that's it. Nothing else? It looks like one of those combination gas and food marts, so we are in luck. I don't see any cars. We cross over the railroad tracks just shy of an old brick colored caboose pushed off on a siding next to the main track. We drop our packs to the ground. Myrrh looks around for any nosy animals and then sets down the Urn in the tall grass. She says, "You get us some food and water. I'll wait here for you. I'll be with Dad."

"OK." I move over a small dry creek bed and then up the small cliff and over some dirt and cross the two-lane highway and walk to the canopy that fronts the building and covers the two-island, four pump station. There is a battered sign that has the stenciled black words, Black Top, printed on it. I believe that is the name of this place.

I move past the first island of gasoline pumps and into the car lane and then through the second island of gasoline pumps and I am slightly surprised to see a new large Mercedes car parked there with a stocky, grey-headed woman putting gasoline into the tank. My knowledge of this Kraut car came from Don and according to him, this lady has money. A small white dog sits in the shotgun seat.

I let out a small sigh of relief and the woman quickly turns her head in my direction. The skin on her face is smooth in contrast to her coarse hair. Large people usually have smooth facial skin. I know she is not deaf as her head-turn shows that she

hears me and her glance shows that she sees me and I know she is not related to Rudolph.

I walk past the rear of her car and see that she has New Mexico license plates. A local. The tires are splattered with dry muck, as if she had driven through some recent harvest land. They have the smell of dried dung. She wears a white long-sleeved man's shirt tucked into faded blue jeans and her feet are adorned in clean cowboy boots. She must not walk in the muck, she just drives in it. Hopi silver and Turquoise artistically adorns her garments. Probably from a ranch around here. The gold ring on her wedding finger indicates a successful ranch. Maybe she could give us a ride if she is traveling west? I will think this over with Myrrh once I purchase our food.

I am past her and I feel her glance follow me, and I am aware of a little bit of the heat of Rudolph. Maybe I am too sensitive or maybe the harvest heat is in the air or maybe this road is being driven by strange people. I don't know. I do know that we need some food and liquid and a way to quickly move west.

I pull open the screeching front door to the mart and its sound becomes muffled by the loud air conditioner on the inside ceiling, throwing cool air down upon me, and I am back in the wintertime at Taos with Papa and Mama. I am five years of age, first time on a chair lift, stuffed together like geese in our down jackets and I am so happy to be snuggled with Myrrh between them. We are all snow skiing. No time to think, no time to talk, no time to argue. We just take the chair up the white slopes and race back down. Take the chair up the white slopes and race back down. Repetitive. Exhausting. Instinctive. Satisfying.

I think Mama went to California because she was tired of arguing with Papa. Aunt Flo says people don't argue in California. She says they all swim in the Pacific Ocean and play golf and tennis and work on their tans. She says that Mama is probably doing that type of work. I guess we will find out.

I am through the front door of the small mart, lost in my past, and I barely hear the pretty Native American woman in her forties,

“Well, look at the breath of fresh air! Such a handsome young boy! Bring your items to the counter when you're ready, honey.”

Her face is pleasing to look at.

“Do you have a telephone here, ma'm?”

“No, son. The phone went out about three hours ago and the HAM radio has been out since yesterday. Do you need some help?”

“No, thanks.”

I do not tell her about the accident with our dead Uncle. What happened to us was not right. I feel that in my stomach and I know that if I tell her about it, that something, something not good, something probably evil, might happen to her. Best leave her out of it, so I smile at her and move up the left side of the mart.

I see there is no one else in the store. I love Wisconsin cheese spread onto rye bread with spinach and tomato and thousand island dressing and I immediately see the dark bread sitting on a shelf.

As Aunt Flo says, “Bingo!” I grab a loaf of the dark rye bread packed next to some whole-wheat berry bread. This small country store carries some excellent dark breads. Not unusual that the woman behind the counter is lean and healthy looking with

clear eyes separated by a straight nose over cherry lips enclosing ivory teeth. This is country living. I wonder how the people will look in California. The Wisconsin cheese is in the refrigerator against the back wall. I close the door with my hand and see the Florida orange juice on the next shelf over and open the door and pick up a gallon. Myrrh loves orange juice, especially Florida orange juice. She got this from living in the Cape. The spinach and tomatoes are on the produce stands back toward the counter and I carefully pick the ripe ones. I don't see any thousand island dressing, so I head back to the front with my groceries and put them on the counter in front of the lady. She must have been born happy because it exudes from her skin.

“Do you have any thousand island dressing?”

“No, honey. Not much demand for it. Not enough space in the store to stock things that don't sell.” She counts out the items and rings at the register. “That will be twenty dollars, even.”

While I reach into my front pocket and pull out several bills that Aunt Flo gave to me in the early morning, the lady puts the items in a brown paper bag. I break off two ten spots to pay the nice lady and she smiles,

“Thank you, precious. Have a good day.”

If nothing else, our mother taught us good manners,

“You are welcome ma'm, you have a good day too.”

Her smile follows me as I pick up the bag and back away and move to the front, beneath the cool breeze, and push the screeching front door. Outside, I stop for many seconds to allow my eyes to adjust to the brightness and I see the Mercedes has been moved away from the pumps and is now along the corner of the building. The lady is

standing next to the open rear trunk, fiddling with something. Her silver belt buckle reflects the lowering sun. I look past her and see Myrrh standing on the other side of the road, making a gesture of hunger with her hand to her mouth.

I am not sure about riding with this lady, so I deliberately move in a direction that will take me past her, where I can gather more information about her. I move closer to her and am aware how the Mercedes and the pumps and the narrow roadway are lost in the vastness of New Mexico behind them. As I get closer I watch some black birds gliding on the wind currents and she turns toward me. "Nice day, isn't it?" There is sadness in her voice. An emptiness.

"Yes, ma'am, there is." I stop next to her and look into her trunk. There is clothing in there. Clothing for a young person and she has moved it around so that it is spread evenly like on a display counter at Nordstroms.

"I don't see your parent's car? How'd you get here?" Her voice is nice. Sad, but nice. Melancholy is the word I learned from an unattributed source. I could ignore her if I had a mind to. Just walk away as if the words were swallowed in the wind. Papa always taught me not to talk to strangers. Be polite with them, but don't engage them in a conversation. They may be good people, they may be bad people, but the only reason they are talking to you is because they usually want something from you. But she has a sadness with which I am familiar. We all need comfort.

"We're going to meet them further west."

"I only see you. Who is we?" She glances around but not across the street and she does not see Myrrh.

"I have a mouse in my pocket," I laugh. Depressed people can infrequently be desperate people, so no need to reveal all of our cards. She laughs at my words. She motions into her trunk.

"You need some clothes? Some of them are brand new. I bought them for my son." She lifts a beautiful white linen shirt with the tag, Ascot Chang, and hands it to me. It is fine to my touch. Excellent material.

'It is nice, but I can't take your son's clothes. He should like this for himself.'

She releases her grip on the shirt, draping it over my hands. "He died two weeks ago from pneumonia. I bought these for him before he died. Now he doesn't need them. We buried him last week." That is her sadness and I know it is deep and that it will be long lasting.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable wearing them, ma'am."

She pulls out another linen shirt, this time green. "He was about your size. I want you to have them."

"No thank you, really."

"He was our only child. We have a big ranch out in the country." She must have a husband and now they have no child. I don't want to ask this melancholic lady to drive us west. If she hears our story we will all end up crying ourselves to death in a one car crash into some Yucca tree along the side of the road.

"I am so sorry for your loss."

"Are your parents coming here?"

I think for many seconds and then feel that maybe she will take comfort from our similarities and we don't need to cry. "No ma'am. Dad died last week. Haven't seen

mom in a couple of years.” She looks into my eyes for many seconds and I wonder if our tears are going to fall together and stream into the warm New Mexico dirt where they will steam back up through us, mingling with our perspiration. Then suddenly she grabs me and lifts me up, throwing me into the trunk of the Mercedes and closing the lid down hard. I know this is her desperation. I lie back down in the trunk against the new clothing. Their smells contrast with those that I have picked up in the last hours.

I call out to her, but there is no response. Then I pound the interior of the trunk with my hands and feet. There is no response from outside. I wonder if Myrrh saw this. I wonder how she will extricate me from this situation. I stop pounding and listen. I hear nothing. The car is luxurious, the trunk is virtually sound proof. I listen for the car doors to open, but I hear no sound. I listen for the engine to ignite, but there is no sound. What does this crazed melancholic desperate woman want from me? If she wants me to take her dead son's clothes, I will do it. Just open the trunk so that I can tell you this.

Where is Myrrh? I can feel her presence. She has not left me. I slide my hands up against the underbelly of the trunk and start to push it. I feel an incipient unknown strength stretching through my back and into my shoulders and inside my forearms out to my hands, as the metal of the trunk starts to dent from my force. I stop pushing and lower my arms. What is this new-found strength? Where is it coming from? I reflect back to the lightning strike that I threw in Florida. That scared me and Myrrh and I never tried it again until the railroad tracks last week. But now? A calmness walks through my body and I know that I will escape. I lie in the dark for many seconds and wonder how this trip to California has unfolded into a nightmare. Is this lady sufficiently impaired that she wants to kidnap me? Then I hear the click of a lock and the trunk pops slightly open.



Then I see a hand, clothed in a white shirt, opening the trunk and I see Myrrh and the lady standing behind the car. Her face turns from Myrrh and looks down to me.

“What? You didn't escape?” She speaks in disbelief and looks back to Myrrh, who is on her like a ferocious cat, gouging at the lady's eyes and jumping on her with all her weight. They tumble out of my sight and I sit up and push the trunk lid fully open. I climb out. They are both on the dirt and Myrrh is raining her with blows. The lady covers herself with sobs and speaks through broken breaths, “I only wanted a replacement son. I only wanted a replacement son.” I reach down and stop Myrrh after several more blows and she ceases the fury. Myrrh and I stand up simultaneously.

“Let's go,” she says and she picks up my grocery bag which lies behind the rear tire of the Mercedes. I catch my breath and nod and we move away from the prone woman. We walk briskly toward the highway.

“I saw her put you into the trunk and then she went into the store. Probably to pay for the gas.” We move across the highway. “I ran over to the car but there was no way to open the trunk so I just waited for her.” We are on the other side of the road and look back to see the woman standing up, dusting herself off. “I figured she would think that I was you, and that I had somehow escaped from the trunk and then she would open it again to put me in.” We stop at the edge of the tall dead grass and she is now walking roughly in our direction. This lady has gone over the edge in her grief. I feel anger and compassion for her. I want to comfort her but I think she no longer listens to an external voice. “That is exactly what she thought and I played disoriented and she grabbed me and she was trying to put me in the trunk. You should have seen her eyes when she saw you and then looked back at me. Saucers!”

I smile at the thought of how people, even close acquaintances, have difficulty in telling us apart. Myrrh picks up the Urn and the packs. "She might follow after us the rest of the day," I say, as we watch the lady cross the highway. We stand quiet as she slowly lurches from one foot to another before stopping twenty feet distant from us. She has this dumbfounded look on her face as she mumbles into the air, "we just need another child. That's it. Big bedroom, horses to ride, great food. . . ." Her voice trails off and from her vacant stare past us, it is clear she doesn't see Myrrh or me. "I'm not begging you. I'm just inviting you to live with us." She slowly looks around but her eyes focus on nothing, and her head continues to turn, causing her body to pivot and twist in an awkward position." The only sounds are the small birds and a light wind blowing from the south. She matches our silence. Finally, with no response, she traces her trail back to cross the highway. We head into the edge of the tall grass and stop. I don't tell Myrrh of my sensation of power. There will be time for that. Myrrh reaches into the grocery bag and pulls out the container of Orange Juice. She breaks open the cap, says, "Florida," and begins to drink it the way Papa and Don use to drink their first sips from their ale cans: slow and deep into the container. We stand beside our packs and over the Urn and look through the edge of the grass as she moves across the black top. One-step, two-step, slight stagger. An unchoreographed dance set to the music of a wake band as the living celebrate the dead with a jumbled two-step, knowing their own time will come. She is almost across the road, when the only noise is:

THA-DUNK!

The silent black sedan coming from the west impales her on its golden hood ornament. Her body muffles the collision sound and keeps her against the car when a

small woman would have flown into the air upon impact. The driver window is open and I recognize Rudolph with his wrap-arounds and persimmon lips and white stick from the omnipresent all-day-sucker. Sweet Flo so enhanced my vocabulary that I thank God the luscious librarian is part of our family. Flo always said that those polysyllabic words could make you seem smarter than you were. The trick, she said, is to use them with discretion – too many and you sound like a pompous ass. We stand in silence. Myrrh screws the cap back on the OJ and puts it back in the bag. I hear only the sound of the rolling tires of the car slowing down in the distance. Deliberately, leisurely, it comes to a standstill about three hundred feet after the lifting of her frame from the black top. Without haste, Rudolph opens up the front door and exits the sedan. He closes the door and moves to the back of the vehicle and opens the trunk wide. Then he moves to the front of the vehicle where he runs his hands along the lifeless body of the lady, stopping his hands at her face. Rudolph looks into the woman's face and scrutinizes it for many seconds. Just as he did with Don. What is this Rudolph looking for? Then Rudolph lifts up the large woman from the hood and fireman carries her across his shoulders and to the back of the sedan. He stands at the rear bumper and carelessly drops the large bulk into his trunk. The back of the car drops noticeably from the load and settles at a lower level than before. She has taken my place inside a trunk. I wonder what Rudolph will do with her body. I wonder what kind of grief her husband will have to fill the void of no son and no wife. Rudolph closes the trunk and looks around.

He stops his gaze at the gas station and holds it there for many seconds. He gets into his car and drives to the gas pumps. The mart is closed up. The blinds drawn down on the windows. The lady has vanished. I am glad for her. Then he exits his car and

quickly walks toward the Mercedes with the open trunk. He looks in and pulls out the shirts the lady was presenting to me. He holds them up to his face for several beats and then drops his arms in front of himself, holding the shirts in one hand and closing the car trunk with the other, before looking at the ground. Foot prints. He must be looking for footprints. Myrrh carries the packs and the Urn and I carry the groceries and we move further through the tall grass and scrub oak and down a slope. At the bottom of the slope, we step into the dry creek bed and move between some shrubs in the direction of Rudolph and hide against the dirt cliff which is six feet high and affords us a view of him.

He must have discovered our shoeprints. He moves toward the road, occasionally glancing up and around to discover what might lie in the distance. But he hasn't seen us. He crosses the road at the same point that the lady crossed and then Rudolph is to the other side. Our side. He stops. He looks up and down the highway, studying the dirt along the side of the roadway. Seconds slip past. My breathing has paused but Myrrh's breathing is normal. Rudolph crosses onto the dirt and stops ten feet into it. He starts to move in a small circle that broadens out each time he reaches back to his starting point. He must not see our footprints. After four full circles he stops and looks away from the ground. Holding the shirts, he stands perfectly still and I see him close his eyes and push his nose forward in the air. He cannot see us! He is trying to smell us! What do we smell like to him? The woman smelled of manure. Do we smell like adolescent kids who need a bath? Can he smell the freshness of the Orange Juice on Myrrh's lips?

We watch him for a long time. He slowly opens his mouth and sticks out his tongue. He flicks it out in different directions, trying to grab our scent. The small hairs on

the back of my wrists start to raise until Myrrh's quiet touch flattens them. The afternoon heat glistens off Rudolph's sweaty silvery face and I am reminded of the reflection off a missile when it lifts off from Canaveral. He says in a loud accented voice, "I have some fine woolen shirts to keep you warm!" He waits for a response that never comes.

"Three of them, actually four. I miscounted. My mistake. Made for you, my child." He still has his eyes closed as he does a slow three hundred and sixty degrees. His pivot is smooth and well-coordinated in comparison to the Rancher Woman's. When the pivot is complete he stops and then he must open his eyes as he quickly walks back across the highway and over to his car.

Suddenly another noiseless black car pulls off the road and stops at his car. Rudolph walks back to him. Another white man steps out, a younger man with pale skin and torched red hair. They move apart and Rudolph goes to his car trunk and opens it while the other man, I call him "Red," goes to his car's trunk and opens it. Red takes something out and walks back to join Rudolph. Rudolph puts the shirts into his car trunk and steps back and grabs at the air and pulls out a black bag from his pants and pushes something into it and closes it up.

The second man leans into the trunk and drops his hands in with the object he brought from his car. His head dips toward the trunk and he moves his hands around for a long time.

"Myrrh", I whisper. "What do you think he's doing?"

"I think he is doing what the homeless man refused to speak."

This Red finishes his task and he pulls out what looks like a gallon container of dark red liquid and carries it back to his car where he sets it down and closes the trunk.

Concurrently Rudolph closes his trunk and they meet at the front of Rudolph's car. They speak for maybe a minute and then they both cross the black top road in our direction and we lean against the cliff.

The birds sing not and Myrrh holds me secure with her hand. Quietly the darkening of the Manzanita bush above us introduces the presence of Rudolph, and now he is there and I look up at him. 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 deep 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 over-cooked bacon that adds to his mystery.

He slowly sweeps the area with his right hand and a gold ring reflects the rays of the sun as he looks past his hand sight. I see the wound where he cut his hand hasn't fully coagulated as several drops of cranberry colored blood fall to the sand at my feet and small puffs of steam rise from their landing point. He pays no attention to the drops.

A singularly striking figure. An evil creature.

His nostrils flare slightly as his head turns down toward the dry 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 can just make out a tinge of fiery crimson in the white border of his eye. But his hair beside his ear looks different. It looks like some

gold under the black. Is he wearing a wig or does he dye his hair black? 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 and flutters it about. Is it some kind of radar device? But different from what my father works on, or worked on? He has very white teeth. The color of the elephant tusks that I remember from visiting the San Diego Zoo. Or the great white sharks that we saw hoisted at the docks of Point Loma by the Italian fishermen. He holds his stare into the distance for several beats. His words fall on us,

“So close. So close.” His voice comes from deep in his throat and sounds familiar in tone.

Then he is gone. Why can't this man see us? At the car and here, his eyes touched over us without appreciation. Like Murnau's now-dead father? 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 cannot be for smell otherwise he would have noted us. And the lady. She saw me at first meeting, but after my escape, she didn't see me or Myrrh. What caused that to happen?

My head teems with thoughts and speculations and hurt as to what has just transpired. I wish I could go back two 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.

Then I hear the exchange of muffled words and Rudolph is above us with Red. I only see the reach of their hands across the terrain and the Red says,

“Gurt's down there. He is motivated.” Different voice tone from Rudolph. Almost girlish.

Then they move away and I wonder what this 'Gurt' looks like. Myrrh and I look at one another but we say nothing as they may pick up our sound waves. I see a drone in the air coming from the direction of the cars. It flies directly over us but does not stop. I hear another noise by their cars, a fast whirling noise. Myrrh and I duck down in case something comes flying towards us. The noise lasts for a couple of minutes and then it goes off into the distance and is no more. I hear no tires moving away and I wonder what they are doing by the cars when suddenly a man rambles past us beside the railroad track and he emits a wolf howl and I see that for a split-second even Myrrh is startled. This third man is maybe twenty feet from us and moving in no precise direction. He is dressed in a variegated bush camouflage jacket and trousers. Actual leaves are pinned to the clothing and on a gaiter that he wears around his neck. He looks like a fake turkey and I hold back a smile. He keeps looking at the ground like a tracker and I can't predict his next step, as he seems to react to what his senses absorb. But he doesn't sense us. I believe that if Myrrh and I were to separate he would walk between us without any awareness of our presence. We watch as he sneaks past us, separated by ten feet, his head slowly turning from side to side as he scans the area. I think his appearance and movements probably scared the real turkeys away. I don't see it, but he must be carrying a pistol, because he smells like oil. A well-oiled pistolero.

In the distance, above the rail road tracks that we recently walked along, I see the drone slowly hovering along at a height of about twenty-five feet. Gurt moves onto the tracks and stands twenty feet away from us. He emits a second wolf howl and waves his arms toward Red who is back above us, and who waves back. I look at his Gurt's rubber hunting boots standing atop the steel track and his voice draws me up to



his face, "You can hide for only so long, but after we gather the facts and deduce your movements, we can tarry for you."

It was a whisper almost to himself. He pulls out a dark green flask and puts it to his mouth and drinks. When he drops it away I see the color on his lips is a cranberry red. He walks down the embankment from the tracks and up the slope to Red. They whisper to one another and I see Rudolph slowly walking toward them.

"Tarry?" Aunt Flo would have loved that word. So British or intellectual sounding. They turn and walk away and the drone follows them and I kneel down to gather myself. The sounds of tires driving off free the birds to start singing and Myrrh whispers to me,

"They got a posse out here looking for us."

I reply, "Yeah. What do you think they put into those bags?"

"I'm afraid to even guess."

"Me too. But we gotta figure out what we're up against if we're going to make it through this alive. When Don passed, I felt his energy, his spirit, standing outside of him."

"Me too," says Myrrh. "Do you think. Do you think it's possible Rudolph grabbed Don's spirit and put it into the black sack?"

I stutter, "I th . . . , think. I think I'm going to be sick." Perspiration beads over my body.

"What about Papa?" asks Myrrh.

I kneel down away from Myrrh and place my head beside the cliff and vomit. Several times, with some landing on my shirt.. Myrrh offers the canteen and says, "we

could use one of those new woolen shirts now.” I hope she is joking and I wash out my mouth and lips and dry my face with my sleeve.

I say, “I don’t want to think about that.” I change shirts and put water on the vomit and clean it as best I can.

Now it’s cooling off for the late afternoon and I hear a train whistle to the north.

Myrrh whispers again,

“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 Myrrh and say,

“Bara. She is with us.”

Myrrh responds with a simple nod and a big reassuring smile.

## Chapter 7

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Papa

Size is a relative measurement for small children. Papa had a photograph taken of the three of us the day after we were born. He is sitting on a hospital bed with his legs crossed and Myrrh is swaddled in the striped blue and white maternity hospital blanket that all babies receive at birth. She rests on his right thigh and I, identically clothed, rest on his left thigh. I am told that I was nineteen inches long at birth, so my height gives me some gauge as to how tall he was that day. But I have no idea how to translate that into inches for him. I know from looking at his driver's license after his death, that he was listed as six feet and two inches tall and two hundred pounds. Black hair, blue eyes, no facial hair covering a prominent chin. Pictures of him at thirty years of age show strong arms and torso and I know Mama couldn't help but be attracted to him. Now he sits in his Urn, waiting to see what words Mama will speak over him.

Papa was pure Californian. Some Russian from his mom's settlers that came down from Northern California to south of Sacramento before the existence of these United States. Those ancestors moved freely between Merced and the starting waters of the Rio Grande. Gypsies setting down some roots. They married with Apaches and Mexicans and other whites that happened to take a fancy to our men folk. There is rumor of a beautiful Chinese girl climbing into the family tree. Papa used to call his forefathers a veritable melting pot of the west and that he himself was like a mongrel dog, borrowing a bit of genetic material from this race, a little bit from that race, and some more from several other races. He sometimes referred to himself as the Dominant Gene. Then he would laugh and say,

“But you best watch out when my Recessive Gene shows itself, cuz then all hell can break loose.”

But he wasn't referring to any mescaline buttons or weed or over-the-counter or prescription medications that many people ingest for their reputed powers of releasing the creative self. He never partook of these substances in the States, as far as I know. Of course I didn't know him in Columbia or his first thirty years on this orb or any past lives that he may have incarnated. I do know that he started to drink ale after Mama left.

Daniel. Daniel the lion tamer. Fictitious. His parents said the name was from a French trapper in the family lineage one hundred eighty years earlier who disappeared in Yellowstone. Just went out one winter before George Washington became president of these United States and never came back. My grandparents never worried that giving him the name of a relative that may have met a sorrowful end would afflict his life. They believed that a man created his own destiny and that a man should conduct himself in such a manner that his life built upon his preceding acts, preparing him for the present moment. Besides, the earlier Daniel may have just left civilization, not the living. And here is another besides for you: Papa knew his cars, he knew his cars really good, so in my mind and Myrrh's concurrence, there had to be something extraordinary to keep him in that car while the Southwest Chief was churning down on him. And what was the Raven fellow doing there? Myrrh and I never told anyone other than Flo about that drunkard's story. Is Raven related to Rudolph in some way? Are they the same? Does he really want to kill us; and maybe stuff us in his bag?

My head begins to hurt when I try to fathom all this and how he could die while trapped in his Cadillac on a railroad track that he had crossed several hundred times in his life. I know that unless we can figure it out, I shall be trapped in such speculation for

the rest of my days and that my hurting head will visit me on a frequent basis. I need to take this pain and put it against these people.

They have photographs of him in the local high school in Santa Fe where he ran track. Papa ran like us, like the wind, and in diverse distances: sprints, high and low hurdles, the mile, ten thousand meters. His father once told me that during summer vacations as a boy Daniel would run in Indian moccasins through Yosemite all the way over to Mono Lake. In Lobo country he would carry his bow and quiver and feed himself out in the wilderness by shooting rabbits, at first, and as he grew, the larger animals, like deer. He learned all the berries and leaves and bark to use as food and medicine. Extra food and gathered foliage he would bring back to his family. Even when he mastered the rifle, he would still hunt primitive. "To test myself against the offerings of nature in her purest form," is how he phrased it.

In 2006, when he was twenty-nine, and was given orders to go to Afghanistan, they gave him two weeks leave and he went with some buddies to visit Monument Valley before shipping out. That's where he met Mama, and if we live long enough, I will tell the story later.

Maybe she will speak Spanish words over him, for that was his second language and her mother was from Spain and she was fluent. He enjoyed moving south into the Chiricahua Mountains for long trips to hike the trails and bask in the thunderstorms and speak Spanish with the coyotes, four and two legged. Sometimes he had to lead them to safety when the trails disappeared and the weather turned into abjection.

Actually, as I tell this, now I think I misspoke earlier. Maybe it was expected that Papa would die doing something foolish. He lost the great love of his life and although he tried to mask it, we could all tell that he was depressed. Aunt Flo was always baking him apple pie and lemon meringue pie. Don would talk cars with him endlessly, with both of them gesticulating around their respective vehicles to make their points as Don drank his Jack and listened to his Frank and Papa drained his newly acquired taste for a local ale. Not just any ale, but Po'Pay – some mixture created by the Mexicans and Indians from the Agave plant. And Myrrh and me were always dogging after him, willing to learn everything he had to teach, and loving every time that he tousled our hair.

But we weren't enough. A man needs the love of a woman to make his life complete, and when Mama was not coming back, Papa became more reckless. When she was still there, and we were nine years of age, I vividly remember him limping into the house with blood dried torn Levi's. He got tore up during an overnight hunt with some wild boars along the Texas border. He went down there with a crew from Holloman for two nights. They packed out exactly what they packed in; nothing more like the expected slabs of hog meat. It took him six months to mend. He spent the time around the house building and fixing things. Those tenacious boars gave us a new porch, a new roof and he gave the Cadillac a rebuilt motor. But I know he never mended from Mama going to California. Don tried to help him that way. Papa was a good-looking man and Don used to tell him he could have had countless ladies in New Mexico, but he didn't want any. He was locked into Mama. She had been his life and when we showed up, Myrrh and me, we were all three his life. Then she was gone. And he followed.

What is Flo going to do without Don? Will she go into a depression, like Papa? Probably not, women are stronger than men with that kind of thing. They suffer for a time, but afterwards they always move on. Especially if they are attractive and they allow themselves to acknowledge the eyes of men. Aunt Flo is attractive. Like Mama.

It was a small church on Main Street overflowed with upwards of 400 people for the funeral. I don't count the sheriff and his sidekick undertaker as one of those people. Papa had a lot of friends from different walks of life. Most of the town was there, whether invited or not. Engineers from all over the country, Florida, New York, California and of course the Cape and the White Sands. Didn't see no Germans. They knew better than to show up. Quite a few Indians attended. Navajo, Hopi, Apache and Pueblos. He used to run with them over the mountains and in the hunting fields. They spoke the same language. He got along with all those in their love of nature and living off the land and respecting one another.

Aunt Flo chose the Preacher Man and he was pretty swell. Summed up Papa's life real good and didn't broach too deeply into the problems with Mama – she didn't make it to the funeral, but sent a note saying how much she missed him and she had some of the happiest days of her life with him. Preacher even said a few good things about me and Myrrh, not all of them lies. He didn't even ask for a collection at the end of the ceremony. Don't that beat all?

After words there must have been over a hundred people that came over to the house. A lot of the women brought dishes to eat, like salads: Cesar, tossed, New Mexico hot or otherwise. Vegetable plates filled from their gardens of Idaho or sweet

potatoes and artichokes and spinach and kale and broccoli and tomatoes. Fermented beets, cabbage, pickles and sauerkraut sitting beside more pies than you could count on your fingers: boysenberry, blackberry, raspberry, cherry, apple or pumpkin. Your choice.

Fresh venison from some of dad's hunting buddies all cut up and ready to cook on the grill. Some chickens and wild turkeys prepared and ready to eat, and fresh butter and cream and raw milk from one of the neighbor's dairy farm.

It was a grand feast and we only wished that Papa had been there to enjoy it. He would've stood amongst Uncle Don and all his friends and drunk Mexican beers and Jack and maybe share some beer with the ladies, recounting the high and low times of his life.

There were several kids there our age, friends from the school yards and children of the space workers and we ran with them and laughed with them and they cried with us and as the night settled in we all had our multiple pieces of different pies. Stuffed, we slipped past the long legs of the adults and their storytelling, trying not to upset the liquor in the glass dangling beside their waist, as we pushed through to our rooms and fell asleep.







## Chapter 8

### ----- Hitchhiking

Myrrh and me slept under the stars in the cool New Mexico night. I gathered dried grass and lay my blankets on it and slept between them. My levis served as a pillow with my hoody and extra cushion for my head. Our bellies were filled with my sandwiches, and my body burned their calories to keep me warm. The deaths and strangeness had exhausted us but I still lay awake til the early morning hours. Myrrh was fast asleep, like a hibernating bear.

Early morning was foggy which held the temperature and limited the visibility. Myrrh had been up for less than an hour before me, making some cheese sandwiches and pouring out the OJ for us. I was still exhausted, but we had to be moving.

It's shortly before noon and we've just gone one hundred yards in the red dirt along 66, down from a summit and into a wide desolate valley. We're standing beside

the two-lane blacktop that splits the desert ground beside us and as it trails west, gradually narrows into itself, until only the ruddy earth and small volcanic outcroppings are visible. The valley flattens out at the base and then runs back up the opposite side to distant hills. What appears to be touchable is probably forty miles into the distance.

Not too many cars this western part of New Mexico. What cars I see don't want to stop for two young urchins with their hoodies lain down against their necks. Maybe they think we've escaped from a juvenile detention center and pose a grave danger to them. Those are the people that we need to pick us up. Ones that are hesitant; not ones that are attracted to a young person seeking a ride. So we walk along the edge of the pavement, pushing out thumbs on the infrequent occasion when we hear the motor coming up from behind.

Step after step, wondering what will come down the highway and Myrrh reads my thoughts.

"If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come."

She looks at me and I finish the Prince's lines, "The readiness is all."

Satisfied smiles, more step after step and then it is there, coming toward us from the east: the soundless wide-hipped Raven vessel driven by the man that touched Don, the man that slammed into the sad faced Lady: Rudolph in all his outlaw colors of black and his clown-face features of cranberry lips. The silver blue skin and coal black hair swiftly inclining toward us. We have no time to slip sideways into the iron red siltstone and rabbitbrush set away from the road so we stand still on the reddish sand and wait to see what he will see. Fifty yards from us, the car noticeably decelerates and Rudolph

slowly rotates his face as he scans the landscape. His eyes are coal black. He's alone and I surmise the others are searching different roads or possibly walking through the bush trying to catch our tracks. Now he is almost to us and the speed of his machine is probably fifteen miles an hour. His pivoting head and body scans 360 degrees as he looks past me and Myrrh, then through us, and he rolls to a dead stop thirty yards past. I can't tell if he kills the engine, but he slides across the front seat and opens up the passenger door and steps out and back to the right rear door. He opens it and suddenly two enormous black dogs bound out and start racing around in a fury, as if they needed desperately to pee or defecate. They run pell-mell east up the road and cross over to our side as they race to the summit along the packed siltstone sand that runs beside the road. They stop at the top of the grade, one hundred yards east of me and Myrrh, and look back. Rudolph slowly walks across the blacktop to the yellow center line while the dogs race back along our side of the highway. Behind the dogs, the top of the trailer from a long eighteen-wheeler seems to rise out of the steam from the summit in the highway until the cab emerges from the same black tar. The front of the Mac truck looks like a dinosaur with a gold cross on its forehead. The Mac barrels toward us and the view of the golden Cross turns into a medium shot and I see it to be a hood ornament. The noise of the rolling truck covers all the sounds of the desert and then I realize the only noise from these dogs had been their paws running on the pavement and siltstone and they are quickly up to Myrrh and look back at the looming Big Wheeler. I wonder if the dogs are going to lift their legs to finally take the pee they have been running from, but I see no male appendages nor bitch parts and I now understand they are not real dogs! They are mechanical dogs!

Hannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!

The foghorn from the dinosaur hurts my ears, the full sun reflecting from the now huge cross blinds me, and I turn to watch as the Big Wheeler rolls past and see Rudolph languidly moving himself off the pavement as the trucker switches lanes to blow beside the Raven Machine, the rushing wind slamming shut the open car doors. The noiseless dogs run just short of Rudolph and one crosses to the other side of the tarry pavement. They stand on opposite sides in the dirt along the road, howling at the behemoth diminishing to the west.

The truck is at least a quarter mile down the road and Rudolph puts up an arm and flips out his hand to toss an electrical current which strikes into a tall rod standing firm over the back of the trailer. It looks like a lightning rod.

Rudolph appears disappointed and calls the dogs over to the car where he opens the back door and they climb in. He walks around to the driver door, opens it up, sits down, and begins fiddling with something, probably a cell phone, but there are no towers out here so he would have to be doing it through satellites. Myrrh studies his movements. Seconds pass into a minute and he starts the vehicle and the only sound is rubber on pavement as he floors it down the highway. We stand up and watch the car drop into the shimmering distant blacktop.

## Chapter 9

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Joe

Step after step along the edge of the highway and then I hear more traffic. I can't see anything as we move off the blacktop and then to the red soil. My first sighting is of long black hair blown back by wind and then a multi colored cloth wrapped around the top of a head, the face being hidden behind the windshield of an old green military Jeep. Sitting behind the windscreen with a long crack running along its top, I see the driver, a large man wearing an old green field jacket. The Jeep slows down as it closes in on us and the man's long hair settles down on his shoulders. He is Indian with a sun brown

face and I guess that he's Navajo as we stand in the eastern portion of their reservation. He stops the Jeep beside us. His eyes are hidden behind his aviator sunglasses. New Mexico sun, any season, requires sun glasses for eye protection. New Mexico license plates are in his favor. He looks directly at me.

"Where you two going?"

A good voice. A voice of sincerity that requires the same type of response. I don't like to bring up California. Too much fringe moves in and out of that place so that people are always skeptical of someone heading in that direction. And then they get upset when someone wants to move from California to their wondrous state. Can't win for losing. Whatever that means, Aunt Flo?

"Monument Valley."

"On foot?" A smile crosses his lips.

"No. Well, we'd like a ride if we could get one?"

"How'd you get out here?"

"Got dropped off couple miles back last night and we started walking and hitchin again this morning."

"Any luck?"

We don't respond as he studies our clothes and then my face. I stare him down and he finally says, "you two twins?"

"Yeah," replies Myrrh." Defiant.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"You got parents that let you out of the house? Or are you orphans?"



What is this guy? Mr. Twenty Questions? If he wasn't our only possibility for a ride for probably the next couple hours I would just wave him on. I don't like him prying into our life so much. It's not like he can't look at us and see we don't have any weapons so we're not a threat to him. We don't like to give out too much information to strangers. Especially on this trip after what has happened so far.

"Mister. You're not interviewing us for a job. We get the ride or we don't. Either way you can drive off."

He looks at us kinda funny and then starts to laugh. But at least he can see us. I don't think I've ever seen him before, but maybe the news of Don, or maybe the Rancher Lady, has spread through the countryside. He climbs out of the Jeep. A large turquoise necklace drapes in front of his sun yellow leather shirt. He wears faded blue jeans dropping down to his ankles, held up by a turquoise studded leather belt with a flashy bald Eagle buckle. His legs are stocky and strong and taper into leather boots on his feet. He circles around me, like an inspector general, but when he tries to pat our packs and look into the grocery bag, Myrrh and me back away and he stops.

"My Mama said to 'never let strangers touch you,'" says Myrrh, sliding her feet into a semi-karate stance. Except she's never taken karate lessons.

I pull out the depleted orange juice and the remainder of the food and hold them up. He nods toward us and looks down to my side.

"Your Papa's ashes in there?"

I freeze. I hear Myrrh's breath stop. This man sees us, but is he one of them? One of Rudolph's lackeys or cohorts? I step back several feet and put down the food

into the paper sack and wonder if I can throw my Canaveral energy at the man, and what would it do if it struck him. Myrrh slips back several feet.

“What?” I play dumb. Maybe this fellow is just throwing out words to see what reactions they bring out. He nods his head slightly,

“I was at your father’s funeral. I remember seeing you two and Don pointing you out as his twins.” We say nothing and he looks at us for a long time. “Your father was in the Marines during the cocaine wars. He went to the Mideast at the time I went in. I was Marine. Don was Army. I met Don overseas.”

Myrrh nods and asks, “Which theater?”

I’m thinking of Flo saying the Theatre of the Absurd, but he says, “Afghanistan.” A satisfied look moves across his face, “my name is Joe and one of you is Luke and the other Myrrh.” He looks at Myrrh. “You be the girl twin with the pretty name.” Myrrh actually blushes a little. “Lucky guess,” he says. “I don’t bite and I’m exiting the 66 to go north on the 191 which will get you closer to the valley.” He motions for us to get in and then he walks around the front of the Jeep while I climb in shotgun with Myrrh in the back. “Buckle up. It’s my law for riding in this Jeep. Too easy to get bounced out.” He watches us buckle like him and then he starts the engine. “I can take you close. I’m going to Moab, so I can drop you at the 163. You can pick up a ride from there.” The Jeep rolls onto the blacktop and we drive away.

After several miles of quiet, I say, “you hear about Don?”

He slowly nods, “some police report that he was drunk and rolled his car and got killed yesterday.” He watches me and continues. “Another funeral to attend.”

Mile after mile along Route 66 and then we turn north on the 163.

“They were good men. Used to go hunting together.”

“I don’t remember you, Joe,” I say.

“I never went to the house of your,” he pauses for a long look at me, “father. Never met your mother. She at Goulding’s?”

“You from around here, Joe?”

“Born and raised, and I can see you’re kinda skeptical about me. Is that right?”

About two minutes run along the miles of the road, and then I say, “This is a funny highway Joe. It seems that people here aren’t what they seem to be or what they want people to think they are.” I give him about thirty seconds to digest this and then I continue, “but you got two things that are going for you: one being that you can actually see us and two, you don’t talk sugar or threats.”

He pulls his aviators down to the edge of his nose and looks at me with a grin. “I do see you. Both of you as separate kids though you look almost identical.”

Mile after mile and always his smile. “Maybe three or four times your Papa came with me to hunt and to find herbs and medicines out in the country and mountains. I see Dan’s face a little in you two and you’re pretty articulate for 12 years old.” He looks at me and back at Myrrh so long that I’m afraid we’re going to crash into some roadkill trying to cross the highway and then he turns back in his seat and pushes back his aviators and drives on down the road. “Except for maybe the name, I can’t tell Myrrh is the girl.”

“Thank you, sir, says Myrrh. “I can be the girl when I’m good and ready.” I watch her looking at Joe, searching for some more words, and then she comes out with, “We were with Don when he crashed.”

Joe slowly nods. "Figured as much. But if you didn't want to talk about it, I wasn't going to pry." We say nothing further.

Panorama is the word to describe the terrain on the roads in western New Mexico. Mountains to the east that are topped with early season snow. Red soil with some outcroppings of lava. Purple sage and rabbitbrush along the sides with an occasional yucca rising above the desert land. Joe keeps the speed about fifty miles an hour and the warm wind waltzes around us and then escapes out the back. I don't see Rudolph or the Dinosaur truck that he threw the lightning at, so that Dinosaur must've made it all right. I'm glad for the trucker, but I wonder if Rudolf and his ilk haunt this roadway.

Thirty miles pass and the landscape is a mirror of the past highway, the mountains have switched sides and the high clouds have given way to blue sky as the sun is further into the west.

"I met your father back in 2006 in Afghanistan," Joe says. "I doubt he ever told you about that war."

"No."

"Good for him. All that I can say is he was an honorable soldier and he did his job well".

Myrrh asks, "Are you one of the code talkers?"

His eyes stay on the road and I can see his mouth curving up into a larger smile as he nods, "My gran pas [Navajo] was one back in World War 2. "Group of em from here." He laughs out loud, not taking his eyes off the road. Silence for several miles and then Joe gives a quick glance at me and says, "you see that bow and quiver of arrows

in the sheath next to Myrrh?" Myrrh touches the sheath and fingers the string on the bow.

"Yeah."

"I would take those in the mountains with your papa and practice our skills." After several miles of only the sound of our humming engine and the rushing wind and four tires on asphalt, Joe says, "when I got outta the Corps in 2011 I was 25 years old and a pretty good horse trader. I was down in the West Texas town of El Paso doing some trading. From the War I had some problems in my heart so I went to the doctor and they gave me some medication to help me. Only it didn't. It made my heart beat slow, real slow. Made me real fatigued and my legs real heavy. I had to leave my hotel to see some horses and as I'm walking down the sidewalk, I feel like I'm gonna fall on the ground. My heart rate was so slow I thought it would just stop and quit on me. And every time a ligament clicked in my chest I thought I was going down with a heart attack. I would look at the people walking toward me and wonder that if I collapsed on the ground, would this person think I was a young drunk bum Navajo and just pass me by, or would they understand I was having a heart attack and they would come to my aid. I searched a lot of faces, young and old, and I firmly believed in the innate goodness of people, that someone would have dropped down to help me if I had collapsed onto the ground." I glance at him, his eyes fixed on the undulating road and I follow his gaze to see two cars a long way off coming toward us on the left side of the road. They disappear into a dip and Joe continues, "Unfortunately, I did fall down, but fortunately a nice young quarter-Irish Navajo lady saw me collapse and she tended to

me and she got the ambulance and rode with me to the hospital. She ended up marrying me and we got two kids living on a ranch South of Gallup.”

We climb a crest in the highway which flattens out and then goes into a slight dip and the sun reflects off the large gold ornament of the first car. The car driven by Rudolph, followed by the second car with the Redhead driving. I look over to Joe as the black cars speed behind his head and past us and I think what have we wrought on this friend of my father who survived the War and a heart attack only to pick us up on this desolate stretch of highway and expose himself to our Trackers. I look through the side view mirror, watching, waiting for one or both of the autos to slow down and pull to the shoulder and kick up the dust as they roll into a U-turn. I say, “You might wanna let us out of the Jeep up here.”

“How’s that?” asks Joe, his aviator glasses reflecting my face back to me.

“That driver of the first car, the one with the cranberry lips, I know he killed Don and then he killed some Rancher Woman outside a gas station a couple hundred miles back.”

“So why do you want out?” asks Joe.

“I don’t want you ending up dead like Don. Or Papa.”

Joe looks at me so long that I am relieved to see the road stretches out straight into the distant west and he says, “this is my country. Nothing happens in my country unless I want it to happen. You’re riding with me and you are protected.”

“Joe. These men are real evil. They have some weird electrical powers.” Joe just drives. But it never happens. No brake lights. No dusting. No turn. No Rudolph and I wonder if this might be a dream and we are still in Santa Fe waiting to drive out. I

wonder if Don is drinking some of that Jack, getting fueled up for the ride to California. I wonder what kind of fuel he would use if he had one of those electric cars people drive.

“How was life living in San Diego with your family?” asks Joe.

“Quiet city. Nice beaches,” Myrrh answers for us. I can feel her trust for this man.

Joe says, “Did Boot Camp there. Learned some of the history of that town.

During World War 2 they had gun placements all along the coast. Your town, La Jolla, had artillery batteries in the town and along the northern cliffs few miles past that Pier, right along Highway 101. When the Marine Corps was training us at Camp Pendleton we use to take liberty there.”

“Yes,” I reminiscence, “Papa let us play in some old pillboxes on the side of Mount Soledad.”

“Did you say ‘Mount’ Soledad?”

“Yeah.”

“That pile of dirt is maybe nine hundred feet tall.”

“Yeah.”

“Around here that would be called aa Ant Hill.”

“OK,” says Myrrh.

“But then again, Mt. Surabachi is only about six hundred feet high. But seven thousand Americans died there, including many of my grandfather’s friends.”

We go about five miles with only the tires on the road and the wind running over the Jeep as our accompanying sound and then Joe says, “Looks like a different car coming up fast and going to pass on our left.” I look over my shoulder and see a light green 2011 Ford Escape passing by our left rear tire, real close to us, maybe four feet

of separation as it moves past and the face of a young girl in a red calico neck scarf and yellow brown sun dress is pressed against her shotgun window, staring at Joe and then maybe me. It passes our car and gets in our lane and is maybe two hundred yards ahead of us and Joe says, "Here goes one of your buddies past us." Again I look back and see red-boy's car scoot past us, but he doesn't look in our direction, and then he is ahead and in our lane.

"Where's Rudolph?" I ask.

"Who?"

"We named that other person Rudolph because of those lips he has on him."

Joe smiles without looking at me and says, "Rudolph is maybe a quarter-mile back."

I glance back and see the black car closing on us and then speak as it gets closer. "Don't look at me, Joe." Many seconds later Rudolph is driving our same speed parallel to us and I look past Joe and see Rudolph lift his hand from his steering wheel as he gives a small wave which Joe reciprocates.

"Friendly fellow," says Joe and then there is a loud boom off in the distance ahead of us. Joe points and I look down the straight road a few miles away and see red dust billowing up from the left side of the road. "Probably that Ford," says Joe.

I pull my gaze back and see Rudolph grinning beside us and then there is a small noise from underneath his car he frowns and I see him pull off the road. "Tough luck," says Joe. "Must have got a flat. Can't help him. See what happened ahead."

We go another four miles to reach the Ford accident. Red's car is parked along the left side of the road. He stands outside of it, watching us pull up behind him. The



Ford is parked fifty feet in front of his car, front wheels in a small ditch cracked in the red sandstone. Joe looks at me and motions for me to get out while he stands up in the Jeep and says to Red, "What happened here?" Myrrh gets out of the back seat grasping a bow and quiver and raises a fist full of arrows toward Red who sees nothing.

Big red top-hair standing over his forehead shows a bad hair transplant packed with grease to hold it in place. His wrap-around sunglasses cover his eyes. He has a tooth pick held by his crooked teeth in a crooked grin as he looks about and says, "I am not sure. This Ford Escape was speeding along in front of me and then it lost control and almost rolled over, but the driver saved it, and it ended up in that ditch." I walk directly behind Red and he has no awareness of me. Myrrh goes over to the road and looks up and down and around for signs of a car out of control: like skid marks or roadkill. There are none.

"You see anybody get out?" Joe asks Red.

"I saw the driver crawl out. He is sitting on some blankets that came from the car." Red points to a man about fifty feet away. "I believe there is a girl out there somewhere." I walk over to the man and his eyes are closed and tear stains are down his cheeks. Young man, mid-twenties, narrow furtive face with no scratches or blood on his skin or seeping through his clothing. Clothes are a bit ruffled, but that could be from the long drive. He smells like the oil from the car that has soaked into the sand beneath its carriage. I make no effort to speak with him as he lowers his head onto his chest and puts his hands on his temples. Eyes flicker open for a moment and then close shut, tightly. Probably in shock and Joe needs to deal with him. There is no sign of the

girl. Something seems not right, but I can't grasp it. My ears are drawn to Red when he says, "Say! Did you by any chance see another vehicle coming this way?"

I listen to the nonchalance of Joe. "What'd it look like?"

I look over at Red and Myrrh is standing about ten feet away from him. He doesn't see her. Red twitches his lips. "Big black ragtop." Red looks back up the road. "Silver shekel hood ornament."

"That silent silver shekel ragtop blew out a tire tread three, maybe four miles back." Aunt Flo would love Joe's speech patterns.

"I don't believe that." The tooth pick falls from Red's quivering mouth.

"Then don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't believe it."

Red twitches more and looks like he wants to attack Joe, who inquires, "You have a problem?"

"No." He turns and starts jerking toward his car, when he stops from Joe's shout,

"Hey Red!" As he turns back, Red's eyes burn through his wrap-arounds. "You brought your toothpick in, you pack your toothpick out!"

"What?" cries Red in frustration.

"I don't know where you came from and who potty-trained you. I don't care where you go - down the road or down to Hades - but you're a guest of the Navajo Nation and what you pack in, you pack out. Comprene?" My eyes flick between Joe and Red, and the vicinity around the broken car where the girl might be. Red's hair leaks grease over his neck and ears and slips down his forehead as he jerks over to where he heard about

Rudolph's blow-out. He doesn't see it from standing so he hunches down and angrily searches about in the sand and only finds the toothpick when Joe puts his boot toe over it. Red stands and puts it in his pocket, glaring at Joe, and then scurries away, only to be stopped by another Joe command. "Hey Red!" I see his shirt is soaked with water and his face is streaked with grease and I wonder if he is dehydrated and might collapse in heat stroke as Joe shouts over to his quivering body, "There's a tow truck operator over at Chinle if you need help." I see Red shake his head and start to pull out a heavy knife tucked into his belt. Myrrh kicks his wrist hard and the knife falls to the ground while Red looks to see who struck him. But he doesn't see Myrrh and he turns and glares at Joe, "Hey! Why'd you do that?"

I can hear the surprise in Joe's voice as he says, "Just looking out for you, that's all." Joe makes a quick wondrous glance at Myrrh and then me. Red ignores the words and trembles over to his car and gets in and drives back the way we all came. Myrrh kicks up the knife and lets it rest on the toe of her shoe while Joe picks up a bow and arrow from his Jeep and says, "Didn't look to me that Red saw you or Myrrh, or maybe I scared him so much he just looked at me?"

"Maybe," I reply and he motions for me to check out the car crash.

I walk beside the crashed Ford car and touch a busted-out window and see no girl inside. I look underneath, because she appeared to be pretty small, but the only thing there is a slow drip of the oil from the engine into the sand. Just like Myrrh and me with Don's crash, she escaped, a survivor. How is she related to this driver? And why is she hiding from him and from us?

I catch Joe's attention with, "I'm gonna find the girl," and he acknowledges me with a hand wave. I search the ground beside the car and find some small footprints moving away from the car and toward a small berm sloped with rabbitbrush and Yucca. I walk slowly so as not to startle her and repeat my litany in different directions that she might be hiding, "It's O.K. We're friends. Here to help." No response.

"Friends here," I say to no response and I see a small glimpse of bright red cloth through the dry leaves of a scrub oak. I use the same tone that Mama taught me to use with the skittish colts on our small ranch. She steps out from behind the bush with the same red calico neck scarf and yellow brown sun dress and I stop about six feet from her. The same pretty face from the shotgun window, but now she wears dark glasses to protect her eyes. Probably kept broken glass from cutting them.

"Hi," I say, "I'm Luke. We're here to help you from the accident." I twist back and include Joe with the conversation and see him holding bow and arrow as he stands next to the still seated driver.

"Young man, speak to me," she whispers to me with the voice of an old lady and I turn to see her holding a cocked pistol pointed toward the right side of my stomach and something speeds past my ear and a Navajo arrow crashes into her chest and her pistol fires a shot into the sky as she falls to the ground. Joe races past me clutching a large boulder that he throws into her chest and the sound of crumbling plastic reveals a hard fiberglass body with rubber and wires and transistors sticking out. Her mouth is open and smoke begins to trickle through it and then a small fire licks through her lips. Joe kicks off the sun glasses from her eyes and their color matches Rudolph's.

"Bad F-word," I mumble. "Shoulda known. I smelled that oil from the gun."

“What’d you say?” asks Joe.

“I’m cursing my stupidity.”

“With ‘bad F-word?’”

“That’s the worst word my Aunt Flo allows.”

“Good for Aunt Flo.” Joe smiles and pushes the lifeless robot over with his foot, revealing some animal organs and a little bit of blood. Joe shouts back to the driver, “You get over here!” The boy stands up and starts to run away from us and onto the highway. Joe puts the bow against my hand and says, “They tried to kill you. This is your shot.”

“I’ve never killed a person.”

“Not a man. A robot.” He hands me an arrow and I measure the forty yards getting longer and let fly and it misses the boy by three feet and skids along the blacktop.

Joe quietly takes the bow from me and strings an arrow and shouts, “Myrrh! You want this robot? I think he’s running faster now that he’s past you!”

I watch Myrrh slowly turn her bow and follow with the running man’s stride. She nocks her arrow and slowly adjusts her position.

Sixty yards distant and she aims a bit higher and a little to his right as the road angles that way. She releases the arrow and it flies high and wide, landing twenty feet past the runner and into a scrub oak along the side of the road. Joe shakes his head and pulls an arrow from his quiver and nocks it. He leisurely moves his aim with the stride of the boy and the currents of the wind and the explosion in the man’s back tears asunder a fiber glass body and releases several bundles of rubber and wire and isolate

transistors and what looks like animal organs that trail behind him on the asphalt before he crumbles onto the roadway. Myrrh's expression shows the same amazement that I have with the damage done. As we three run up to the terminated robot Joe says,

"Nitro tip." We stand over the scattered remains. "Not a person. None of them are." Joe pushes the debris with his foot and kneels down to inspect a beating heart, covered in blood. He continues, "I'm gonna call in the forensic people to gather up this evidence."

"You with the police?" He nods and I continue, "you have a special group of people for this kind of thing?"

"Lot of open space out here. We learned a long time ago that there are more than our spirits inhabiting the land. UFOs and all that. Army's got some people to do the detail work." He laughs loud.

"U.S. Army?" I ask.

"Yeah. Government has their foot in every door and we not only got UFOs, but we got carnotite ore – uranium. Mined it around here."

I nod. "That was a clever trap. Pretty young girl looking through the car window."

"Robot," corrects Joe and he walks over to his Willy's. "All staged, like a Hollywood production."

"She called me to speak to her and her pistol was aimed to the side of my stomach."

"I woulda thought she would aim for your heart. Robot and all." Joe pulls out the microphone from his radio set. "Ten-four. This is Joe about twenty miles south of Chinle." [Navajo]

A voice crackles through the speakers fastened in the Jeep. "Roger that, Joe."

[Navajo]

"Got some more deactivated robots along the road here and need you to send Terry out to pick 'em up." [Navajo] [in English] "Notify the Army to get out here too."

"Roger Joe. Will do. What happened this time?" [Navajo]

"Don't have time to talk right now. I'll wait till Terry shows up so the coyotes don't get here first. I'll mark the one on the road with a cone so the tourist don't go running over anything" [English] He hangs up his microphone.

We watch a tow truck with the word on the driver's door "Chinle" go past.

"Damn Tourists," quiet voice of Joe. "At least they got some Yankee dollars to help our economy."

## Chapter 10

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Bow and Quiver

Terry showed up in a half hour and we got back into the Jeep and took off along the 191. After about a half-mile, Joe looks over at me and back to Myrrh and smiles. “Don’t know why, but something tells me we should take this dirt road coming up and drive a couple hundred yards to an archery range.”

Before we can respond we’re on the road and drive the two hundred yards and stop. Joe motions for us to untie the bow and quivers fastened to the outside of the



driver's side of the Jeep, running beneath the driver door rocker and over the rear wheel well.

He draws the string back and steadily moves his bow a little higher as he aims at a weathered leather target attached to a bale of hay maybe one-hundred feet from where we stand. He releases the string and there is no noise until a couple of seconds later when the arrowhead impales the faded red colored deer head drawn on the leather. Joe steps back and hands the bow over to me.

"I think what happened back there on the blacktop was you being out of practice and like you said, never aiming at a person, but in this case, robot, before." He looks at both Myrrh and me and continues, "Your Papa said he taught you two archery." We nod. "Now show me."

Joe holds out the quiver of arrows and I chose one and he pulls it out and holds it up. "This is an excellent arrow. Made it myself." He puts it next to his eye and sights down it. "Shot a lot of game with it. Those are my teeth marks on the wood where I straightened the arrow out in the bush. Impact can make it a bit crooked and I wanted to reuse it." He gives it to me. The bow is about the same weight of my long bow that I left at home, twenty-two pounds. I nock the arrow and draw back the string and a little of the feeling of the bow comes to me. I let the arrow fly right into the dirt that fronts the target.

"I could tell from your sliding the arrow on the blacktop back there that you have some skill," he says. "You may not have hit the target, but your father taught you excellent technique."

"It's been a while, maybe six months ago since I've done this," I say.

I line up my second shot and concentrate on getting it closer. It hits the edge of the target. Myrrh holds the bow she initially fingered and I know she is eager to nock an arrow and let it fly.

“Nice,” says Joe. He gives me another arrow and asks, “Did your father tell you to think of anything when you lined up your shot?”

I search my memory and it comes to me, “I should visualize the arrow hitting the target and then draw back the string and let my mind slip to nothingness.”

“Good advice. Follow it.”

I nock the back of the arrow over the string, place the arrow shaft against the bow held by my left hand, pull back the string, aim with my right eye and picture in my mind’s eye the release of the arrow and its flight into the center of the target. I line up the shot and then think of nothing and the bow and arrow take over and the tip of my arrow splits Joe’s arrow. He nods and smiles at me. “You are Daniel’s son.” He pulls out another arrow and gives it to me. “Do it again.” I easily pull back the bowstring and sight the target and then smoothly turn the bow about ten degrees right and let the arrow fly.

“What just happened?” He asks.

“Big fat Jack Rabbit. Out past the target maybe sixty feet. We can eat that later.” Myrrh races ahead of us to the field and my arrow is through the body of a rabbit twenty yards back and right of the target.

“Through the heart,” says Joe with admiration in his voice. Myrrh picks it up and we walk back to the Jeep area as he asks, “How come I never saw you at any archery meets?”

“We’ve been in Florida the better part of two years and before that we were commuting between San Diego and Las Cruces. Papa just took us out into the bush to shoot for meals.” I take out the arrow and wrap the dead rabbit in cloth and place it in a burlap bag from my backpack.

“You shoot almost as good as my kids,” he laughs with a big smile and looks to Myrrh. “I’m sure Myrrh shoots like you?” Myrrh says nothing and takes an arrow from the quiver and nocks it into the bow and looks quickly around and quickly fires into the sky at a distant black bird which heavily falls to the ground. “Good shot,” exclaims Joe. “I hope you weren’t aiming at the target.” He grins. “You got yourself a Raven, but why now? Too many of ‘em around here. Usually bring trouble.” He scrutinizes us for several moments as we walk to the Raven. “Good to kill, but not to eat. They eat too much dead meat, got too much disease in their mouth and innards.” I nod and then Joe goes serious on us. “So you were with Don when he died.” It’s not a question.

“Yeah.” I speak quietly as Myrrh puts her foot on the dead Raven’s body and violently pulls out the arrow. “One of these crashed into his windshield and he got a flat and his Hudson drove off the road and flipped over. Nothing happened to us and you know what happened to him.”

“Was he drunk like they say?”

“No. Had some Jack and doing some singing, but not drunk.”

“You think the bird caused it?”

I kinda squint my face up toward him and say, “Mr. Joe. You seen that Rudolph fellow and the red-haired man. Robot tried to kill me.” Joe nods. “They killed Don. Maybe Papa.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know why. It’s too strange to think about, much less talk about.”

“You speak to the police about this?”

“Don’t trust the cops nor the Army people that have been showing up on this,” I say.

Joe nods and says, “Like the war. Tell you to kill and then they deny things they told you to do. Then you feel guilty because you survived and your buddies didn’t.” At the jeep he pulls out a thin long leather case and gives it to Myrrh. “Open that up and pull out the bow.” Myrrh does. “That’s a survival bow that breaks down to fit in the case. And those arrows are feather fetched. You can have that. Put it in your backpack. Five of those arrows have explosive tips, so only shoot them on something you want to destroy.”

“Thanks,” says Myrrh.

Joe nods, “I hope you don’t have to use it, but I fear you will. Let’s get back on the road.” We get in the Jeep and drive the dirt road down to the two-lane and continue motoring Northwest.

“I have to be in Moab tonight and for several days, otherwise I’d take you into Monument Valley.”

“We appreciate this ride. No matter,” says Myrrh.

“Chinle is just ahead. You can call your Aunt Flo from there and let her know you’re OK.”

“No,” says Myrrh. “We’ll do that tomorrow.”

“OK. But I have time to take you to Bluff where you can get a room for the night. Or, if you like, get you closer to the Park with a ride to the top of the Valley of the Gods? You’ll need to camp out for the night there, but either way, pick up a ride in the morning to see your Mama.”

Joe doesn’t know everything. We will pick up a ride to Mama’s new home in LA - and the wedding with her new husband.

I remember her beauty. I don't remember her warmth as she began to feel distant from us. She was like me at the Canaveral school - kid looking out the classroom door, wanting to get outside. I think we locked her into a motherly life that she didn't want. I don't think we were a mistake. But we were a burden on her, two of us showing up at once, especially one of them a Tomboy. But I like to think it was the travel with Papa's job. I think she thought she was too young and too pretty to be living away from Los Angeles. Maybe if Myrrh had been a regular girl. I don't know. I think she thought we were going to drain the reddish color from her skin, grey out her hair and wash the azure out of her eyes. I wonder what Hollywood does to a beautiful woman. I know San Diego is lowkey, but LA?

It's dusk when Joe stops the Jeep above the Valley of the Gods and helps us remove our belongings. The events brought us close, and we stand near one another. On the road we drove in on, car lights splash on the bushes as it rounds the corner and lights us up. A green army sedan pulls up next to us and a man rolls down the window and says, “Joe, you the man called in that robot finding down south about three hours ago?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, I made that call. Where you been?”

“Moab. Needed to see somebody and get some beers.” There’s a slight laugh from a man dressed in army fatigues riding shotgun in the vehicle. “Notice anything funny or strange with these ones?”

“No. But did see some man all dressed in black driving a black convertible sedan around there.”

“We already checked him out. He’s good.”

The shotgun man leans toward the steering wheel and says, “Say Joe. Why don’t you come by the office tomorrow around 1 PM. The Kayenta office and we can discuss this thing.”

Joe replies, “I’m going up to Moab myself tonight. Hope you fellas left the town standing.” Joe smiles. “But I can meet you back there tomorrow at four. That OK?”

“Fine,” replies shotgun. “Let’s go.” The army vehicle makes a U-turn and its low beams light up the bushes and disappear, leaving only the hum of a motor dissipating in the distance.

“They must be in a hurry,” says Joe. “Didn’t seem to want to talk with you.”

I just shrug my shoulders and Myrrh stays silent. Joe reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small matchbox and opens it to reveal wooden stick matches. He gives it to Myrrh.

“Here. If you ever need fire, these will do the trick.”

“Thanks,” says Myrrh, and she takes them and puts them into her jacket pocket.

“You may need it for other things. I’m not sure, but I just had to give those to you.” He slips over to me and in the closing light studies my face very carefully. It lasts almost a minute but I don’t feel any discomfort. He breaks the look by putting his hands

onto my shoulders and smiles, "You twins didn't just step off one of those New Mexico UFOs, did you?" I shake my head, Myrrh stays silent. "You didn't use some kind of ray so the Army fellas couldn't see you?" I'm not sure if he's serious, but now we both shake our heads. He holds himself still for several seconds and then he starts laughing and releases me and we join in. "I sense it. You two are like budding flowers." We shift our glances over to him. He opens his closed fists in the twilight, stretching out his fingertips to the sky. "I do not even want to ask what strange and wondrous things have occurred in your short lives." He pulls his hands away from the sky. "But they pale in comparison as to what is to unfold." He moves over to us and we embrace one another for numerous seconds when he says, "as you become aware of your strengths, nourish them, command them. Learn their limitations. Learn how to work around those limitations."

We break and he moves to his Jeep. "I'd love to stay and chat, but I have to get to Moab. Your future is not for the faint hearted and I envy it." He winks his right eye at us, "don't worry about those Army fellas. Not gonna tell anybody about you two. I was in the Army and you learn really quick not to trust anyone with brass on their shoulders." Then he is gone into the black northern sky along the road the Army drove away on. A very good man. A bit loquacious with the ordinary things of life. But we all like to believe that we are unique, that we are one of a kind in this world. Even us fraternal twins.

With our flashlight, we step off the road and work our way along the edge of a large boulder, careful to watch for snakes or other reptiles or animals that might have the same search for a sheltering place that we have. We find only the end of the boulder and circle along its southern side and stop fifteen feet back from a precipice that reveals

the view south over the Valley of the Gods. We lean back against the warmth of the boulder and look into the starry distance. Twins don't have to speak words to communicate. We sense it between us. We have been there and done that so many times that it is part of our environment.

When we were small, still crawling, we only had to bang our heads several times before our sonar included one another's body on its screen as an understood perception. Papa told of the time that we were 2 ½ years old. We were on the old leather couch in our home in La Jolla, bouncing off the opposing arms as we would alternately leap toward each other, head first into the depth of the seating area. We took turns, first Myrrh and then me. Papa watched us in amusement from across the room. Then he was paralyzed in horror as we leapt simultaneously from opposite arms across the width of the couch. We were looking straight across the room at him and we did not see one another. At the moment our heads were set to collide, we each turned our tiny heads and bodies ninety degrees and slid past one another and into the depth of the couch. We were laughing with Papa nearly passed out from fear.

I love that man so much. So does Myrrh. Present tense.

Looking across the Valley, the cloudless sky is sprinkled with thousands of stars, the moon holding its entrance til after midnight.

“Let's unroll the blankets beside the rocks to get their reflected heat before the night cools down,” says Myrrh. We do and I use the flashlight to search for some deadwood for a small fire. Myrrh skins the rabbit. We cook it with some vegetables given to us by Flo: red onions, sweet potatoes and zucchini in a pan greased with butter over a fire enclosed by stones. It's a good meal washed down with some water from our



canteens. We sit on our sleeping gear to keep the blankets warm before we lay down to bed.

"Why are these things after us," I ask.

No answer for a very long time as the stars become brighter and the sky darker.

Then Myrrh replies, "Those Army men. They didn't see us."

"But they're not Rudolph? What's up with that?" I ask.

"No Comprende," Myrrh says and then after several moments, "Why our family?"

I shrug my shoulders and ask, "do you think Mama is in danger?"

"I hope not. Should we find a telephone tomorrow and call her?"

"I don't know." I hesitate. "That might put her in danger. I just don't know." The moon starts to light up the tops of the hills to the east and Myrrh sleeps while I lie awake.

After midnight I still can't sleep. No stars, no moon light, just high clouds and now a light drip of water onto my face and blankets. Sometimes those Mexican hurricanes can sneak over you from the Gulf of California and the rains can be torrential. I stand up and say, "Myrrh, we should get out our tarps and cover our belongings from this rain." But she's already up and wearing her one-piece swimming suit as she basks in the warm rain drops. I see her tarp over her belongings. I see she has pulled out my tarp and partially covered my stuff. I change into my bathing suit and pull the tarp completely over my stuff and stand next to Myrrh. There is no wind, no sound from animals, only the plink of water dropping on canvas tarp and running together into rivulets that drop over the edge of the cliff toward the Valley of the Gods. We do not speak. The night never cools. The sprinkle is brief, as the light rain tapers off,

leaving a dark balmy night where the clouds slide to reveal millions of stars blinking in the galaxies and bathing over our camp. The moon shaded far down in the southern sky behind a large rain cloud. I marvel for maybe ten, fifteen minutes at the splendor and then take a short sleep until dawn.

## Chapter 11

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The Trucker

Myrrh is already awake and she has changed her swimming suit for denims and hoodie. I am still tired, but she has made a Wisconsin cheese sandwich for me and I hungrily eat it.

“Thanks.” Contentment back at me and I hungrily eat my sandwich and listen to the faint voices of some far-off coyotes and suddenly a red-tailed Hawk floats beside us on the small wind rising up the cliff below us. “Whoa,” the word stumbles from my mouth as we could reach out and touch the Hawk. Eye-contact, a high-pitched short call and

then the bird peels off like a fighter jet from formation and plunges into the Valley. Myrrh and I follow the Hawk's flight until it's gone from sight. We smile at one another and speak no words for maybe a minute.

Finally Myrrh says, "Sun is coming up," and my eyes look to the east. There are traces of small cumulus clouds in the eastern sky. To the distant west, an exquisite rainbow is high in the clouds that gave us our rain, a herald of the sunrise. Then the sun streaks up and the earth's muted colors glare and blur with golden rays and the intensity of the rainbow is accented. We watch this scene for maybe twenty seconds and then suddenly the rainbow evolves into a three hundred sixty-degree circle.

"Oh my gosh!" the words escape from Myrrh while I think them.

"Incredible. I thought you could only see such a thing from an airplane at high altitude."

Mysteries of life. Difficult to fathom. Can't tweak one's brain trying to understand everything that happens, otherwise it could drive you crazy and my mind might just fall apart. Gradually the rainbow breaks and dissolves as the sun rises higher and the distant rain clouds move way to the south. We finish our Orange Juice and put all of our trash in the paper sack and begin to retrace our steps back toward the roadway to begin our descent to the Valley and see what motorized vehicle might come along and give us a ride. As we leave the boulders I see what at first glance appears to be a large dinosaur standing along the road. Something out of a Jurassic Park movie has apparently stepped into the strangeness that is following us. At second glance I realize it the magnificent tractor-trailer with a large Apatosaurus painted on the side of the

trailer. The tractor is fire engine red with a gold hood ornament in the shape of a Christian Cross.

“The menagerie roadway,” says Myrrh in a droll voice through smiling lips.

I reply, “We have yet to reach California.”

The truck is quiet. No engine running. No radio blaring. We move around the side and over toward the cab and I see there is a man on his knees before the monster truck. His hands are clasped before him and his eyes are closed and his lips are moving. The words are quiet and I start to make them out as we approach him.

“and all that I need from you Lord is somebody to come along and help guide me through the sharpest turns.”

He must have heard us for he opens his eyes slightly and actually sees me and Myrrh standing before him. His voice is louder now.

“Well, praise Jesus. Has he sent me some of his children?”

I ask, “What? Do you need some help, mister?”

He stands up and moves slowly toward us, a slight smile starting to take over his face. He gathers both of us in with his words.

“Yes, son. My sons. I do need some help and I do believe that the Good Lord has sent you two boys to help me.”

He looks closely at Myrrh and then back again to me. He speaks loud, like a former artillery soldier who spent time around his firing piece sans ear plugs and ear muffs.

“Identical twins? How do people tell you apart from each other?”

“Freckle on the back of the left ear,” I point over to Myrrh. The man walks to the side of Myrrh and looks at her left ear.

“You're right about that. Mr. Freckle-ear, what's your name?”

“Myrrh.”

He looks closer at Myrrh. “I don't mean to offend. But are you a girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Almost fooled me, but your voice sort of gave it away.” He takes pride in his discovery. “Well, my name is Jim. And you Mr. Non-Freckle-ear. What do you call yourself?”

“I am Luke.”

“I salute your biblical names.” He does a half salute with his right hand to temple and then walks over to the side of the dinosaur painting on the panel of his truck. “Glad to meet you two in my hour of need.”

I say, “glad to meet you too.”

Then he just starts talking, “Well you know. I started out in Oklahoma City where I picked up a bunch appliances to be delivered in California. So I was on the forty and I figured I would go up here and drop into God's Valley and then to Monument Valley from here. Never done this route before, so I did it, kinda stormy road, and I ended up stuck here last night and it was too tight on the turns to go on and risk scratching up my truck. She's a beauty, ain't she?” He stops for a second and points to his dinosaur. “Valley must be as old as this fellow. Last night I was driving down into this here Valley of the Gods and I got my Rig stuck on this sharp turn.” He points to the back of his trailer which is less than a foot from the rocks bordering the road. “Nobody came by

here last night except the rain.” He points to the water drops on his windshield. “I need you two to help me get straightened out without scratching her up on the rocks.” He cocks his head toward us, “What are you doing here? Tourists?”

“Uh-ha,” Myrrh gives a small laugh.

I say, “hitchhiking west.”

“You feel the rain last night?” We both nod. “Warm? No?”

“Beautiful,” says Myrrh. He must be all right because Myrrh is talking to him.

More from Myrrh, “Where you going once you go through Monument Valley?”

“LA.” Too soon to break surface talk with Jim. Need to study him. See what side of the sanity line he straddles. Certifiable or dilettante? There you go Flo. Play those words. It’s not like he picked us up along the side of the highway. And Rudolph did throw a bolt of lightning at his truck yesterday. It doesn’t seem like a set up. My intuition doesn’t tell me that and I look over to Myrrh who nods slightly. Jim studies us further. “You two are kinda small, but I only need you to walk along the sides and yell if I’m about to rip up my Rig.” He starts walking along the cab. “I can drive you out of the Valley. I’m headed over toward the Mojave,” and points west, “if you need to go that far. I always like company. Especially new people. That way I can tell my old stories and not bore them.”

I glance at Myrrh and she slightly nods her head and I continue, “We will go west with you, Jim.”

“How far?”

I sense his sincerity. “We are going to meet up with our mom in California.”

“Well. You help me, I help you. Let's do it. Put your gear in my cab.” He opens it up and we pile everything on the passenger side. Then we follow Jim as he moves back from the cab. Jim walks back along the Rig and points to Myrrh. “You walk along the back of the right side and shout out if I'm going to run into the rocks.” He places Myrrh into position and then moves left behind the trailer, “and you, Luke, walk along the left side of the Rig and do the same thing.”

I see a small silver box attached to the top of his license plate holder and point to it. “What is that which-a-ma-call-it?”

“That's a camera lens that I have hooked up to a monitor on my dashboard so I can see behind me when I'm driving.” Jim places me beside the Apatosaurus. In letters dwarfed by the dinosaur, I see that the creature is the face of an animal cracker called Apatos. They are described as the original animal cookie from the Jurassic Period, loved by all for millions of years. I never heard of 'em. But I have lived a sheltered life. I correct myself. I had lived a sheltered life until Cape Canaveral. After he places us into position he walks back to the front of his truck and gets into the Rig and shuts the door and rolls down the window and looks out of it toward me. “Here we go!” He starts up the engine and I recognize the diesel sound that all the big trucks make. Slowly Jim moves his truck down the grade, with Myrrh and me trailing him. We move down the grade and then the truck slides into a one hundred and eighty degree turn as the road switches back left. He is getting too close with the back of his Rig and I shout,

“Whoaaaaa!” and I gesture with my arms for him to halt but it looks like he doesn't hear me or notice me until the back-brake lights burn and the Rig comes to a

jerky stop. Jim allows the truck's engine to idle, emitting purring sounds similar to those I imagine would be made from a large prehistoric cat.

He gets out of the cab and walks in front of it and then back along the passenger side the sixty feet to where I am standing by the right rear of the trailer. He can only get six feet from me, as one foot separates the dinosaur tail from a large boulder at the inside of the curve. He gives it a cursive glance, like he has done this kind of inspection hundreds of times. "Thanks, Luke," he looks back at me, "I'll straighten out the front wheels for several feet and we should clear it." He moves forward between the rocks and the trailer and is again back in the cab. He straightens the wheels and drives forward several feet and the trailer clears the boulder. Then the Rig moves a bit quicker down the straight path before the next turn and Myrrh and I run after the truck. He repeats the switchback turn, this time to the right with Myrrh watching, without any problems. Now he has the hang of it and Myrrh and me skip after him as he slowly manages two more switchbacks without the need for our arm waving. At the bottom, the road flattens out and Jim stops his Rig and waves his arm through his cab window for us to come to the front. When we are beside him, he shouts to us. "We are out of here! Get in!" I climb first into the cab and sit between Jim and Myrrh. Jim puts it into gear and starts gradually along the straight road. We pass a sign that says Valley of the Gods just as Jim shifts into a higher gear. He is a man older than Papa, maybe in his fifties. Long gray hair held back in a Pony Tail by some Hopi turquoise band.

On the dashboard of the cab, there is a small monitor running pictures of a highway on its screen. "Is that behind the truck?" I ask.

"That's it. So I can see what is going on behind me."



Now third gear and we are moving about twenty, twenty-five miles per hour. I see that he has some ink on his right bicep. Similar colors as to what Don wore, but different markings. I point to his tattooed right bicep. "What's that?"

He doesn't look at me, just at the road ahead. With a slim smile he says, "That says praise the Lord."

"Doesn't look like English script."

He glances at me and Myrrh for a second and then eyes back on the road. "как дела?"

From Grandma's teachings I know he asked how are you and I reply, "Довольно хорошо теперь, когда мы едем с тобой."

Jim's eyes widen and he blurts, "Я так и знал! Вы двое похожи на старую страну! Мама миа! Who taught you Russky?" he asks.

"Grandma," I say.

"Where'd you grow up?"

"Нью-Мексико and San Diego."

"Lot of Russkies in New Mexico?"

"Russkies are everywhere."

"Да. Like Phillipinos and Mexicans. All over the world." Jim looks over to us for several seconds, the smile taking over more of his face and then he lifts up his right hand to slap five with me and I can smell the sweat of driving a truck from Oklahoma to God's Valley as he passes his slap across my head and connects with Myrrh's hand. He shouts into the windshield before him. "Praise the Lord, pass the ammunition and we'll all stay free! We have roots together. Where in Russia?"

“Far East.”

He nods his head. “Ever been there?”

“Да. When we were six. Went with Mama and Papa north of Vladivostok and along the coast to Kamchatka.”

“Ain't that the world! You been there and I seen it by talking with my first wife!” He loves to speak loudly. He has a half-crazed look of some of Don's friends. He takes his left hand off the wheel and points to his tattoo. “But back to this, I should be dead now. Not a war. Not a fire in my apartment. Not some crazy woman.” He throws his frenzied grin over to Myrrh. “But that's your future, not your present.” I don't think he is talking about our Mama, but I can't tell. These are strange days and this is a strange trip and some people seem to be tuned into different frequencies. He pauses for several seconds, as if debating whether or not to reveal a not very well-kept secret. He can't help himself and he continues, “But cancer. The Big C!” Neither Myrrh nor I respond. “Bone marrow cancer!” He shouts it at us with exasperation.

“What's that?” Asks Myrrh, probably to calm him down.

Apparently, people in my family don't live long enough to catch this disease. “You boys do lead a sheltered life, don't you?” Jim puts both hands back on the steering wheel and looks at the road ahead. “Two summers ago I started feeling tired all the time. Lethargy. Weakness. Couldn't figure out what the matter was. I thought I was in pretty good shape. On the road I'd always stop for the night at one of those trucker motels that had a pool and I would go in and swim a few laps. I always did my quick twenty laps, then eat my supper and go to sleep. My last twenty lapper was in Norman. Next night I was in Vegas and I did fifteen laps, but they were slow laps and I felt tired

so I went in and got my steak and potatoes and chased it down with an apple pie and went to sleep. Real good sleep. I had to drop some goods off in Reno, so I drove up there. I felt more tired than usual going through the desert. Thought it might be the Proving Grounds, but that shut down, supposedly, years back.” He checks us with a look and then back to the road with his eyes and to the story with his words. “Dropped my goods off. I went to a good motel, checked in my room and went out for my swim. Well, damn, if I couldn’t swim but five, six laps and each one got progressively slower and finally I had to lift myself out of there and change my clothes and get some food. I was hoping that I wasn’t turning into a diabetic.” Jim’s speaking slows, like his laps. “I didn’t go see no doctor. They never tell you anything good and I like to hear good things. I had to go to Kansas City and on the way I did my usual routine and this time at the pool I went in and I didn’t swim any, I just floated there in the deep end for a couple of minutes and I felt like allowing myself to sink to the bottom of the pool and just stay down there and go to sleep. A nice deep sleep with this tiredness that had taken over my body. So I crawls out of the pool and I was having problems breathing in deep. I couldn’t do it.” He pauses slightly, not for breath, for that seems fine, but for his perplexity of what was transpiring in the past. “Maybe a week later, one afternoon heading to Colorado, I drove up to a truck stop and I got out and started walking over to get my lunch and I started to pass out and collapse in the gravel parking lot. Lucky for me there was an ambulance crew in there eating and somebody got em and they came out and got me and whisked me away to the emergency room just outside of Oklahoma City.” Jim halts his slow speech. “You getting all this?”

I nod. Myrrh listens intently, like with Joe, and she says, "Continue, please." If we survive this trip, I think Myrrh is gonna be a medical doctor.

"They checked me in to the hospital, trying to figure out what was the matter, just scratching their heads. I didn't mind being there. The food was good. The nurses were pretty. They told me my blood counts were out of whack. My hemoglobin was down to a 7 and my reds were about 2.4. They asked me how I was walking around. They said I had some problem with my immune system and a thing called an IgM protein. So they gave me some blood transfusions over about two months and then they infused me with this east German drug I can't remember the name of – that's one of the symptoms – memory loss. Anyway I got over it in about nine months and now they just watch me for remission with a blood test every three or four months." He changes topic, "I think we are headed for some more autumn rain. Must be from that Mexican tornado west of Mazatlán heading across Vegas and over to Utah." On cue, the rain starts to pour down on the cab and the windshield wipers run furiously to keep the road visible. I see large drops of water fall through the beams of light thrown from the headlamps onto the road ahead. It looks beautiful. A car goes past us in the other direction and I smile at the raindrops pounding off its hood and windshield.

We are at Bluff and I close my eyes as we turn to the west and we are through the town. Monument Valley, here we come, and Jim shifts into the higher gears as we pick up speed along the two-lane blacktop. Jim says, "God must be angry to throw these beauties at us. The thunder and lightning are going to just tear this sky apart." Myrrh nudges me hard in my right ribs. Why? I'm not falling asleep. She motions with her eyes to look into the camera monitor on the dashboard. There is a car quickly

approaching us from the rear. Although the rain is coming down hard, I do not see its windshield wipers working. Then the car is close behind us and I see that it is Rudolph's car. I look to Jim and see him watching the monitor and then I look at the monitor and the car is not there. Then I look past Jim's steering wheel, through his closed driver window, and see the hood ornament of the black car. It moves slightly ahead of us and I see through his passenger window, Rudolph driving beside us. His black eyes look at Jim for many seconds as the vehicles pace one another. He speeds with us and Jim turns his head and makes eye contact with him. Jim waves to Rudolph and Rudolph reciprocates and then abruptly speeds past us and crosses into our lane, where he speeds into the wet distance. I watched him running parallel to us and he never looked past Jim. Again, we seem to be concealed from his senses. "That fellow just passed us runs from the lightning," says Jim. He speeds up the windscreen wipers as the rain increases in volume. The drops are as large as I remember ever seeing.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I seen him and other like him along the highways broken down in their fancy cars when the thunder and lightning strike."

I ask, "you talk to them?"

"Not really. Strange people. I don't like to use the word 'evil,' but I do with them. Up to no good. He has a strange color for lips and always wear those dark glasses – even in the dark."

"Why strange?" See if I can draw Jim out some more about Rudolph.

"'bout a year ago, south of Death Valley, quick storm dropped down from Canada and lighted up the place and left some flash floods. One of those people, or things, or

whatever you want to call 'em was broke down side of the road. I pulled over to offer help. I was trying to figure out his electric engine and I cut my wrist on something and my blood started to flow out. Before I could stop it, he reached over uninvited and touched my blood." I tense up against Myrrh. "He started having a seizure and I had to grab my igloo and pour water on it and wipe the blood off. Took him ten minutes to recover and he stayed away from me like a dog beaten by a bad master. So I just left."

For all her tact, sometimes Myrrh blurts things out. "He might have killed our uncle."

Not even fazed, Jim replies, "I don't doubt it," and looks us over. "They all got that silvery skin and dressed up in black. Fleshy smell. Some like pigs, others like fish." The rain lets up and in the far distance we can see the monuments. "I don't believe in no vampire bull pockey. But I think the cancer medication may have tainted my blood with some powerful killers and that weird character got more than he could handle when he touched my blood."

"What do you drink?" I ask.

"Just goat milk and water. Eat in moderation. Too much of anything, even good things, is bad for you. A man gets caught up in his own disease and he starts worrying about every creak and belch and gas that he passes, when he should be out there living the life that he was put on God's earth to do."

"I love God," says Myrrh. Myrrh always tells it like it is and Jim reaches over me again with that trucker odor and slaps five with her.

"So do I, but make sure you pass me that ammunition," Jim says and I raise my hand slightly and get the slap of his hand crossing back over my head. "You play the

hand you are dealt and there ain't no point crying about it or making like you're so courageous and strong and all that bullshit hype.”

Myrrh continues, “the man that drove past us, the pig smell, the evil man, he can't see Luke or me.” Jim gives a slow glance at Myrrh and then to me and then back to the road. “He's got some people working for him and none of 'em hear or see us. But they're looking for us.” Myrrh pauses a few seconds and then quietly says, “they want to kill us.”

Jim nods like that wasn't an extraordinary comment by Myrrh and says, “death is a funny thing.” We drive past the rain and into a shaft of light which goes for a couple of miles on the road ahead of us. For a few, maybe twenty seconds, he's silent as he alternates looking at the highway before us and the rear camera monitor on the dashboard, where he seems to view pieces of his past life. “When they told me I had cancer my stomach tightened up just like the Army when I was in the Gulf.” He has seen the things that Don saw. Now his words are quiet, hushed, just above the level of the truck noises as we speed along the highway. “Any man that says he ain't afraid of death is a either a liar or crazy or has accepted his fate. Either way, I stay clear of those people because I might be the one that gets killed instead of him.” A pause and then he continues, “You just live your life and make sure you're doing what you want to do 'cuz you don't have time to waste.” He takes a long breath. “And that is all I've got to say on the subject.” He looks over to Myrrh, “For now.” Jim laughs heartily. Serenity sits in the cab with us and Jim says, “reach into that glove box, Myrrh. But watch those big needles in the glass.” She opens the glove box. It's big like the truck. The interior is freezing with several blocks of frozen ice. I see four large cloth bags of different colors.

“One of those bags, the white one, has large needles set in some glass containers. Stay clear of that one. Take the red bag out, see what’s inside. Should be about ten vials left.” She pulls out the red bag and opens it up to reveal two-ounce black glass vials. “Open one,” he says. Myrrh unscrews it and its filled to the top with red colored liquid. “That’s my blood,” says Jim. “You can have the whole bag. I got more vials and I got the needles to get more blood.” Myrrh screws the top back on. “Keep it cool and should be good for a couple months. If you meet up with those creatures and they can somehow see you or guess where you are and you can’t escape, as a last resort, put it on ‘em. It will maim ‘em pretty good. Probably kill ‘em.”

“Thank you, Jim.” We speak in unison.

“Put it on the walls in your bedroom and all over your house. They smell the blood and they gotta have it. They touch it or get too close to it.” He smiles. “You’ll see.” Myrrh reaches to our belongings and secrets it in the igloo. “God made Monument Valley in his likeness,” says Jim. “Vast and quiet and beautiful. Except sometimes I talk too much.” We never hitchhiked for long distances before this trip. Around our home, we might get a ride for a mile or two, lasting a couple minutes at the most. I wonder if people always talk about their health when they sit with strangers. I wonder if they do it on trains and planes or long bus rides? Papa was more into doing things than talking about them. Hunting, fishing, baseball. He never talked about Mama leaving. Course my family has usually died young and quick. I guess only the survivors have a story to tell about their adventures with medicine.



## Chapter 12

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### On the road to Goulding's

We cross over the San Juan River where the Cathedrals are in view, when suddenly the clouds close up in front and the sky darkens dramatically. I watch the monitor and see the sunlight disappear as we ride the blacktop. I see our rig lights reflecting in the road ahead of us and I remember how truckers always drive with their

headlamps turned on for safety. I want to feel safety on this trip. "Holy shat!" says Jim. I know this word from Don. Past tense verb. Flo never allowed it in a scrabble game. Her board, her rules. "I think we are headed for some real heavy rain in 'bout an hour so I'm gonna tell you a story to pass some time before the excitement." "About a decade ago, before I got Old and Cold, I had me a Navajo Lady for a girlfriend. She was beautiful. I don't know what she saw in me, except that I was young and dumb and full of . . . energy. Yep, I was a very energetic young fellow. We had a place in Flagstaff. When I wasn't driving cross country we would be down in the Grand Canyon or over on Powell. She was smarter than me. Most people are. But my heart is good and she knew it so she stayed with me. We would spend time at Goulding's and tumble in the valley. Don't get my drift. Too early for you. You got your whole life to explore that. She worked at a mental health clinic as a psychologist in Flagstaff, tending to the people on the edge. Those that had gone over, she didn't see them. They had a special place. One of 'em fell in love with her and wanted her, but she had no interest. She tried to dissuade the patient to keep that therapist-client relationship in place. Didn't work out. The lady shot my Navajo. Killed her. Killed me for five, six years. They put my girl in the ground and the lady in the loony bin. I believe in a God, but I don't know rightly what he does. It seems like he doesn't bother himself with our lives. It's like he doesn't want to get involved. Sort of like watch and wait, like when you have a disease that doesn't need immediate attention. And then you're dead from the no attention. You need to watch out for the crazy people that are out here in the world. They don't lock them up anymore. They just let them run free and everyone seems to be packing heat." Jim stops and stares down the highway. I wonder if Rudolph packs heat? He must be one of the

crazies. Or maybe there's a purpose in his madness? Maybe he is pure evil like Jim said. What other explanation is there for him? He doesn't show a gun and he can't see us and he keeps tracking past us and missing us, except for Don. Don just liked his Jack Daniels and his Hudson and his weed. Is that enough to get a man killed? There were parts of his life that he never discussed around us. Were they sufficient to have him killed? I do not know. Sometimes life seems so random. Maybe life just happens, without any motives. No. I don't believe that. I know that Papa wanted Mama and he got her. Then I know she wanted to leave and she did. There were reasons for those events, and if they were fully articulated, I would understand them. So they weren't random. They were thought out. I never thought about God the way Jim talks, but I sure hope He just doesn't watch and wait on our lives.

Now the Old Woman at the gas station. There was a poor thing that was trying to fill a void in her life and she lost her bearing. Trying to kidnap me and take me to her ranch to replace her dead son. Sounds like something out of a bad Hollywood movie. I sure hope that Mama doesn't get a role in one of those types of movies. Does Hollywood stretch all the way to the beaches of the Pacific Ocean? I hope not. Is Hollywood a place in your mind's eye that you can transport yourself to when you seat yourself in a movie theater and let your imagination run with the picture? Do I have free will to choose the pictures for my life that I run in my head? I hope so. I am intrigued and scared at the same time about our future.

"They can never nail it down as to what caused my cancer." Jim starts up again on his favorite subject, himself. "But I got a strong suspicion." He looks past me to Myrrh, "and it wasn't that uranium they got all over this country."

The rain falls slower now. The size remains droplets. “Few years back they did an examination of my heart and they put some radioactive dye inside of me so they could see everything and then they stuck me in a tube for twenty minutes. Everything was fine, but about ten weeks later I got this black dot on my right lower molar. Thought I had a cavity. Went to the dentist and he said, 'Nope,' you just got a black dot in your enamel.”

Do all old people have problems with their hearts? He looks intently at both Myrrh and me for so many seconds that I think he is going to run off the road if it weren't straight and then he says, “It was the radiation that got my tooth. Radiation is the perversion of the world. Change your DNA from bad to good in a matter of weeks or months. It took a year or so before it got into my blood and my bone marrow and I couldn't produce the red blood cells and the white blood cells and the hemoglobin and the platelets like I use to.” Jim stops to emphasize his point. “The fatigue crept up on me and I ended up in Oklahoma and I sit before you today, a cured man.” He is back looking at the road and swerves slightly to miss a large puddle of water in the right lane of the highway. It's a crazy world out here and the water has filled the washes running alongside of 163 and I glance to the south and see Mitchell Mesa and Grey Whiskers and wonder how the Three Sisters are bathing under this intense storm as the rain again tumbles larger drops upon the Rig.

A long sharp bolt breaks from the distant road in front of us and leaps over the Rig. “Sheeet!”

craaaaaaaaaaaaaRAAACK!

The sound of the bolt trails Jim's word by three seconds, starting from the same point of bolt entry, and thundering with a low rumble that increases its intensity as it rolls over us and the sound and the vibration make me want to jump into a ditch, away from this high riding truck. "Sheet!" Jim echoes his previous word. "That thing started from where we are going! If we were there now we would be burning flesh." He doesn't slow down his Rig. "Just have to barrel through it, cuz there is no way to know where it's coming down. Wonder what happened to that strange looking albino that passed us? Hope we see him burning along the side of the road. Burn there as a warm up for Hell."

I hope we don't see Rudolph anywhere again, burning, driving, stopped or floating in the air. I look over at Myrrh and see she is fast asleep, so I know there is nothing to worry about. I say, "that was sure bright, but it didn't faze my sister."

Another mile down the wet blacktop and all is pure white blindness as a lightning bolt flashes over the truck. No sound other than the rain on the cab and the wipers on the windshield and I look over to Jim who is wearing dark glasses on a dreary autumn afternoon on a road lit only with lights of the Rig and lightning in the sky. "Did you know that was coming and just put on those glasses?" I ask.

"Sensed it coming like a dog for an earthquake. Crazy, sure crazy. It lit so close with all its glory that I thought God was coming for us and gonna turn us into a white light, truck and all." He looks over at Myrrh. "She's a deep sleeper, a real deep sleeper. Must not have any worries in her head. Wish I was like that - again."

The Rig accelerates down the wet pavement and coming toward us, lit up by our high beams, is a bright red ragtop convertible drifting toward us, headlamps flared in separate directions, like a drunk trying to walk two separate lines. The top is down and

the riders bask in the luxuriant droplets. Several dark-skinned passengers wave merrily at us.

“Joy riders, playing with the lightning. Like those idiot tornado chasers I seen in Kansas when I was delivering goods out on the prairie. Them idiots like to swirl in the air without wings while these idiots like to get a taste of the fire of brimstone before they cleanse off in a Sweat Lodge. Guess it’s a good gig if you can get it. My dead wife did it a few times. Not for me.”

Craaaaack!

This one is behind us and over the Navajo vehicle as I look in the monitor and watch their car careen over to the left and then to the right, and then it straightens out and continues down the road, arms stretched out of rolled-down windows, rain fueling their splendid time. “Dare-devils. All of em are just damn fools. But I wouldn’t mind joining them. We could be a Car of Fools. The insouciance of youth; and its purely natural – they frown on drinking here – the elders cracked down. I love to drive a desolate road in the rain. It’s a drive into tranquility and often times I discover newly formed waterfalls crumbling down the cliffs along the roadside and I just park my Rig next to ‘em with the windows down and relax. Watch the water cascade and splash in all directions.” He looks into the rear distance on his camera monitor. “I envy them. You should sleep, like your sister.”

He glances off the road to me and then back again to the road. “Ten, eleven years ago, there was this trucker. Trucker Ted. Real big cab. He had some lightning rod set up way over his cab and claimed he had the ground wires that drug along the highway during a lightning storm. Said he had no fear of these storms and would never

stop his drive for one.” Another glance at me. “He burned up on the road a few years back. Guess his invention didn't work so well”.

The windshield wipers run a fifty-yard dash, pumping furiously to keep the road visible and I am happy that for whatever reason Rudolph has gone past our life. “This is holy ground for us. We came here about four years ago with our parents.” I speak so quietly that I think the pounding rain has drown my words, but Jim responds.

“Howz that?”

He wakes me from my developing thoughts, causing me to regroup myself, and after a moment I say, “Our parents met here in 2006.”

“Really? Tell me about it.” Through the downpour I see flashing red lights up ahead and Jim starts to slow down his Rig. “What’s this,” he asks no one in particular, except I am the only other person awake in the cab. At the turnoff to Goulding’s there is a single Army police vehicle blocking the highway. Jim stops the Rig about fifty feet from the flashing light car. A man steps out of it and opens up his umbrella and approaches the cab with an oil lantern in hand. Jim rolls down his window.

“Hi there,” says the man, who is wearing bright yellow rain slickers cut down to his ankles. His yellow umbrella is over his cowboy hat and underneath the slicker are military fatigues with some brass partially exposed.

“Hello there,” answers Jim. “What do we have going on here?”

“Roads out up ahead. Too much rain and some flash floods coming down from Utah. Can’t get through to Kayenta.” Jim looks down the road and starts his words, “well,” finishing them looking at the officer, “I’ve come too far too find some other route.”

“Utah and Arizona got this same rain. Road around Mexican Hat is flooded out and the San Juan River is over its banks. You best stay at the Lodge until the rain clears out. It’s supposed to head east early morning.”

Jim says, “Well, this is going to slow down the trip, but I can get some good food there and the rooms are clean. Chance to clean up after being on the road.” The soldier smiles and Jim asks, “they got any rooms left up there.”

“Maybe five or six cars up there now. Still afternoon and I doubt too many others are coming in.”

“Thanks,” says Jim. The officer motions toward the road to the Lodge and goes back to his car and the Rig makes a slow turn to the right and we drive past the local high school football field on our left and head to the Lodge followed by a high thunderbolt breaking overhead and the belated sound of,

Craaaaack!

“You may have picked up the fact that I spoke in the first person with that military man. I don’t like officers. And from what you told me about your trip so far, I’m going to pretend you’re not with me and let’s see what the other people can do with their eyes.”

This Jim is a pretty smart man. I like him.



## Chapter 13

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Rabbit and Fish

Jim moves his Rig along the upper parking lot and hurries through the rain to the office. "What d'ya think?" I ask Myrrh.

"Fine. This storm makes it almost dark and it'll be good to jump in the pool to clean off and get some restaurant food and sleep."

Jim is back to the Rig and opens the door and says, "Two big beds should take care of us. They said I can stay parked here so gather your stuff and we're in Room 21."

The pool was probably 82 degrees and we swam around for twenty minutes before taking showers and walking through the now light rain and into the eating establishment called the Stage Coach Dining Room. The name is from the movie that Hollywood director John Ford released in 1939. A Navajo woman behind the cash register greets by name, "Jim. Haven't seen you since when? Six months when you were delivering those new TVs to Phoenix?" Jim smiles back at her, "Come on Little Feather. If we meet too often your husband is gonna start looking for me."

Little Feather is medium height with some gray in her black hair. I guess her to be a few years younger than Aunt Flo, probably forty-five. Nice face, carries a little extra weight which looks good on her. She wears a freshly cleaned beige white dress and she has two turquoise necklaces around her neck that hang down beside a small pocket. The pocket holds two lead pencils like we use in school.

“Got any table in here for us,” asks Jim.

“Sit wherever you like,” she motions into the dining area. “Only patrons are those two men over in the far corner in the upper dining area.” Jim glances around the room and takes note of them.

“I thought this place would be packed, what with the road closed to Kayenta.”

Little Feather frowns. “Who told you the road was closed?” Before Jim can respond she adds, “there was a young couple that just finished eating here that drove in from Kayenta.”

Jim replies, “there was a trooper down there at the intersection, said flash floods closed the road, and said we should come up here and stay the night and eat some good food.”

“First I heard about it. But it’s good for business,” says Little Feather. “Who are your friends?”

“This is Myrrh, like the present to Jesus in the Bible. And this is Luke, another biblical character.” She puts out her hand and Myrrh and then I shake it.

“Glad to meet you, happy to meet you,” as me and Myrrh talk over each other’s sentences.

Jim doesn’t look at the men in the far corner as he says to Little Feather, “you know those two?”

“Never seen them before.”

“What have they been doing in here for an hour? Eat everything on the menu?”

“No. Funny thing. They had hardly anything to eat except for Wonder bread that they dip into olive oil – probably Italians. Wash it down with glasses of tomato juice.”

In a quiet voice, "Luke, Myrrh, why don't you walk over towards those two men and see if you recognize them?"

"Come on Jim," says Little Feather. "Don't be rude to the guests. You might scare them away before they give a big tip. Ha ha."

Even quieter now. "They may be friends." Myrrh and I watch Jim as he continues, "I'm gonna go down to the table by the window to watch the storm over the valley. I want a separate table from the kids, but I want you to set their placemats at the same table across from me and bring three glasses of water to my table. Don't look at the kids, don't acknowledge that they are there."

"That's kind of funny isn't it? Why are you doing that?" asks Little Feather.

"I just want to check on a hunch that I have." His voice is lower. "Make sure you don't speak to the kids unless I tell you to and don't look at them. OK?"

Little Feather takes a little breath, like she is used to this kind of behavior from Jim, and then says, "OK."

She gets three menus and three glasses of water and follows Jim down to the lower dining area by a window table that he picks out. She sets the table and leaves. Myrrh veers into the ladies' restroom while I walk over to where the men are. They look past me, clearly watching Jim. I move right up next to their table. I don't remember ever seeing these men before. The older looking man, probably forty, has curly hair the color of buttered popcorn. He wears a warm wool sweater, the same light gray color of the jackrabbit I killed with Joe. He sips a glass of tomato juice and calls to Little Feather, "Oh waitress."

She walks by me and stops at the table. "Yes, sir?"

“I’d like to buy three orange juices for that group that just sat down,” says Rabbit.

“That’s nice of you.”

“We are very friendly people,” says the other man, a youthful scary-looking creature with black wide-open eyes like a fish.

“We are friends of theirs,” says Jack Rabbit.

Little Feather smiles at them and looks toward Jim, her eyes passing seamlessly over me and she says, “your tab?”

Fish-boy pulls out a roll of twenties and drops two on the table next to a half empty cup of olive oil. “Of course, mam. I will take care of it.” Forced smile showing some decayed sharp teeth.

Little Feather picks up the bills and says, “I’ll deliver the OJ and get you change.”

“No mam, no change. The rest is for you and your good service,” says the boy-fish. She smiles and then Rabbit pulls something out of his shirt pocket and says, “excuse me, mam, but this is a picture of the kids at our beach party last year. We are all good friends.” I look at the photograph and it is the Polaroid taken of Myrrh and me and Mama on the day the OSPREY crashed into the ocean! But Mama is not in the photograph! Who are these people? How did they get this photograph? Little Feather stares at the photograph for many seconds and Rabbit says, “See. The orange juice will be a surprise for them and then we will walk over and say hello.”

She walks away to fill the order while Myrrh comes out of the water closet and smiles at her. Rabbit places the polaroid back in his jacket and says, “Big tipper now?”

“When we leave this restaurant, I will get the money back and I will put it back on my roll.”

Rabbit says, “that waitress is a cool customer. I don’t know. We’ll have to watch that man’s eyes to figure out where the kids are.” Rabbit pulls out a flask from inside his jacket and pours some red liquid in his tomato juice. “Do you want some more energy?”

“That from the old lady at the gas station?”

“Yes. You already drink all of yours?”

“Yes and no thanks, I didn’t like the taste.” Fish-eyes reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a small German Luger – it looks like the one from Florida! - which he puts on the table next to his salad and olive oil bowl.

Rabbit reaches in his jacket and pulls out an identical Luger, but this one has a gold “SS” embroidered into the handle on both sides. He has a slight tremble in his hands. Like with Red on the highway with Joe. Rabbit taps the SS and chambers a magazine. “When you prove yourself.” Fishy bites his teeth between his lips and says nothing. They simultaneously reach into their pockets and pull out suppressors and screw them into their respective barrels. Papa and Don had silencers for some of their pistols, so I know how these suppressors muffle the sound of a pistol shot.

They wait. Patiently. They have no rings on their fingers to play with. They are unflinching, and then it dawns on me that at least one of these is a robot. Maybe both? Like with Joe. Myrrh’s eyes meet mine and she nods. Maybe Rabbit has a malfunction in his computer system and that causes him to tremble. Or maybe rain water has something to do with it. He’s been out in the rain. I don’t know about these artificial intelligence creatures. Lotta hype about them, but when push comes to shove, all bets are off – I learned that idiomatic expression from Don and his card playing buddies. The

fisheye looks crazy, like he's half mad. It seems like he copies Rabbit. Maybe he's the only robot and they programmed him to follow the leader.

Little Feather sets down the orange juices and finishes up some small talk with Jim and then goes back up the small stairs to the upstairs dining area where she takes the order ticket to a Mexican cook standing next to the kitchen door. She follows him into the kitchen.

When she disappears, Rabbit and Fish stand up and walk past us. Fish chambers a magazine using the same movements as Rabbit – he has to be the robot - and we trail behind them.

I whisper to Myrrh, "Rabbit has a copy of a photograph of you and me and Mama from that beach party with the Osprey crash. But Mama's not in the photograph." Myrrh looks surprised, and I continue my whisper, "I think these guys put some blood into their tomato juice and drank it. The Rancher Lady." Fisheye looks back and sees nobody and then they push their pistols in their trouser belts and walk down the stairs to the lower floor where they approach Jim.

Jim turns to greet them, "thanks for the OJ. How are you fellas doing?" The sky to the south lights up and thrives directly over Goulding's with a low rumble that sounds like a big tree ripping apart as it comes at us from the distance, until it bombs over our heads with the sound of fireworks exploding inside a hollow door. The men drop to the floor with hands over ears and a small groan in their voices. Jim looks down to them as the fury passes over, "you two alright?" Their faces actually reflect fear. Maybe they aren't robots. They stand up. Jim reaches his arm toward the OJ sitting on the table and says, "the kids thank you."

Fishboy reaches into his belt and touches his hidden Luger. "You are very welcome." A very quick facial and vocal transition from fear to politeness.

If they are like the girl at the Ford car, they can hear us, so I pantomime a pistol for Jim. He understands and says to the standing Rabbit. "I like your hair color, same as my Aunt Bunny."

What?" asks Rabbit.

Jim smiles, "my aunt Bunny has hair same color as yours." Rabbit has no reaction to this comment. Jim motions them closer. "I want to show you two something one of the Shaman's showed me yesterday over near Gallup. The men glance at one another as Jim pulls out a pocket knife with his right hand and lays it on the dining table. He rolls up his left sleeve to the elbow and picks up the knife and lays it against his left inner wrist. "Watch closely. This is incredible."

The characters look at one another, left hand's pulling on their Lugers. Fish leans closer to the table. Jim brushes the knife against his blue artery and slices into his skin and dark red blood jumps out. He splashes his blood over the face of Fish. Rabbit backs away as Fish draws his Luger and lifts his gun hand before it drops to the floor with his body. I think he was blinded by some blood in his eyes and I kick the Luger toward Myrrh. Rabbit pulls out his pistol as Jim moves toward him with his open wound. Before he can fire it, Myrrh picks up her orange juice and breaks it over his gun hand. He holds onto the pistol, but countless sparks of electricity emanate from his hand and wrist and pistol and the trigger appears locked. Jim is almost to him and rabbit turns and hops up the stairs to the upstairs dining area and rushes out the front door into the rain. I look down to fish boy and his face has melted into a ghoulish mask of gray and blue and

white colors. My eyes meet Jim's and he says, "that's what my blood does to robots. Watch this. It's not over." We watch as the creature's body begins to shrink and shrivel within its exterior clothing. It's head contracts into something you might see in the hut of an African headhunter. I can hear the limbs crumbling inside of his clothing and his ankles break apart to reveal wires and hard plastic and computer chips. An acrid cloud seems to float above the heart area and tomato juice is spilled all over the floor and I turn away to look out the windows to prevent myself from vomiting.

A long lean shard of lightning breaks over the high school football field that sits between us and the entrance to Monument Valley. It streaks along the road to Goulding's and I see a silhouette which I know is Rabbit running towards it, and away from us. No time to count the numbers to calculate how far the lightning is from us, as the thunder rides inside the blinding flash that goes through Rabbit and lands just outside of the Stage Restaurant. The windows tremble violently without breaking as the focus of the disintegrating Rabbit blurs in and out through the pelting thunderstorm. Then the lightning evaporates into darkness, leaving only the burning robot to illuminate the progression of its dismantling.

Jim slips the two Lugers and some extra magazines into his carry-on bag. He says, "drink your OJ before it gets warm. Then we can get to another table and get some buttered-up Fry Bread with honey and cinnamon." He does his thumbs up to Myrrh. "She done good. Real good."

Little Feather walks carefully down the stairs and over to us and asks, "I guess you didn't know these people?"



“Robots,” corrects Jim. “Rubber, batteries, transistors, oiled joints, Artificial Intelligence. Somebody spent a lot of time and money making this one.”

“You OK?” she asks all of us. Myrrh and me nod and Jim says, “can you get another glass of OJ for Myrrh while we move over to another table?”

“Yes,” says Little Feather looking at the messy floor.

Jim points to our table where there is the roll of Fish’s bills. “Contraption left the money for you to take care of any damage.” She nods. “Could you butter up some Fry Bread and bring that for our first course.”

“Of, course.” Little Feather heads back up the stairs to the kitchen.

We walk toward another table and Jim continues, “After that, we get some Navajo Tacos with some guacamole.” He smiles at us. “Don’t bother asking ‘cuz there is no legal alcohol here.”

## Chapter 14

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Ear of the Wind

We left the Stage Coach about an hour and a half later. It took me a while for my stomach to settle down, but we all walked away from the table feeling content. The rain had stopped and the sky was dark from the passage of time, not from storm clouds. To be on the safe side, Jim moved his Rig about a mile further into Utah and then met us back at our room. He had the Lugers with him along with the extra magazines. He brought out a fresh vile of his own blood that he took from his wrist after the fracas. He streaked some along the door jam and the windowsills in our room. He set the vial on the bedside table and said, "you now know how to use this." We nodded.

Everyone was changed into their pajamas with the only light from a candle we had lit in the room. Jim says, "give me the short version of your mother and father meeting here in the valley. I'm worn out by the day and that food, that beautiful Indian food cooked by the Mexican cook, makes me want to take a nice long sleep."

Myrrh and I look at one another and she defers to me. I begin. “Our grandfather, Peter, her father, came out here in the summer of 2006 from Los Angeles. He was an assistant director and dialogue writer on a very low budget western. White Stallion was its name. He brought his family with him to live at this here Goulding’s Lodge with the rest of the crew. I don’t know what room number he had, or they had. But I know the food was just as good as it is now, because that’s what her Mama always said.”

I take a quick break from my story to see if everybody is still awake. They are. “His wife was Spanish – he met her on a movie shoot in Spain for one of those spaghetti westerns back in the 1980s. They brought their two daughters with them. Aunt Flo was their oldest child, thirty, working as a librarian in Santa Fe. She came out for a visit. Mama was their other child, sixteen at the time. The location shoot was scheduled for twenty days, with another fifteen set for some soundstage in Hollywood or maybe Burbank. The producer, Sam Spiegelman, had several heart attacks as the cost ran over.”

I get up from my bed and pour myself a glass of water from the sink. Both my listeners are still awake and I continue the story as I walk back to the bed. “We know all of this because Papa use to tell the story of how he got a twelve day leave before shipping out to Afghanistan. He went with some Marine buddies to see Monument Valley and ended up discovering the love of his life. It was the twenty-third day of the shoot and by all rights, Mama should have been back in LA. They never would have met and we never would have picked them as our parents.”

“ And picked each other for a sibling,” interjected Myrrh quietly

“ But I’m sure we would have been reborn at another time and place and probably met each other by “coincidence” somewhere in our lives.”

“Papa grew up on a farm in Merced, California, just west of Yosemite, before moving with his family to Las Cruces in high school. They had chickens, cattle, pigs, and horses. He was an excellent rider. He was twenty-nine that summer and him and his friends rented some horses in the Valley and went riding. They played hide and go seek among the buttes and Papa lost them. Instead he found Mama along the Ear of the Wind walking her horse through a herd of Churro Sheep being tended to by a Navajo shepherd. The Ear is a large opening in one of the siltstones that allows the wind to rush through it. She was beautiful.”

“Still is,” says Myrrh.

“Papa was two or three inches above six feet - maybe someday we’ll be that height. He was good looking. In a manly sort of way, without the accoutrements that come with that burden – thank you Flo. It was love at first sight.”

They had seven days and seven nights together. Her mother fell in love with Papa when he spoke his Mexican Spanish to her. Her father was against the relationship. He knew Papa was going off to war and he feared that he would die, leaving his daughter with a broken heart and a full belly. Her sister Flo didn’t care one way or the other. Flo was busy studying the Navajo language. Flo has always been into words.”

I check my audience and as I suspected, Myrrh is asleep. I get up and walk over toward Jim and hear him lightly snoring. I pull his covers further over him and then go back to my bed. I like my story, so I will whisper to myself and to my Papa and his Urn. I

continue: "Riding their mounts and eating lunch among the monuments; joining cast and crew for dinner in the Stage Coach Restaurant, they were inseparable. One week of feeding off of one another's dreams and desires. But he knew he had to go off to war. She was conflicted. She wanted so much to be an actress, a movie star, in the industry that employed her father and within which she grew up. Yet she was now living the life that she so desired to portray on the screen. She wanted to portray it so well, that other girls, other women, would want that life and she would win an Academy Award for it."

I stop and listen to the light breathing of my companions. "What do they say in show business? Dying is easy, comedy is hard. Well, dreaming is easy but living your dream, now that's real hard."

"On Papa's last day in the valley, a Catholic priest drove up from Kayenta, and the cast and crew and producer Spiegelman celebrated them getting married at the Ear of the Wind."

"Next week Papa was gone to the Middle East and Mama was back in California enrolling at UCLA. About four weeks later we were small little creatures, little embryos, making our appearance on an ultrasound screen. I will take that over the Big Screen anytime."

"I know that Mama was happy and surprised that she had us in her belly. She was living with her parents in Brentwood and Flo took a hiatus from the Santa Fe library to help little sister out."

Another easy drink of water and my glass is empty. "In this easy day and easy state of California abortion, I wonder what might've happened had she been offered a

role in a movie that could jump start her career into fame. Is this what has happened to her now with this PK Murnau?"

I stop speaking out loud and go back into my thoughts. I believe there is a God, but does he believe in me? Myrrh hears me and says, "what?"

I am blown out of my reveries and I say, "I'm going to call Aunt Flo on this room phone and tell her everything is OK with us." Candle light flickers in Myrrh's eyes as I dial out.

Flo picks up on the second ring, "Hello?"

"Aunt Flo."

"Where are you? Is Myrrh with you?"

"We're fine."

"Fine where?"

"Can't speak too long. They might be listening."

"Who might be?"

"You know Don is dead?"

"Yes. But where are you?" There is something not natural in her voice and I pause for another moment and stare at Myrrh's eyes.

"Friendly Fire. You remember that thing about our best school friend, Friendly Fire."

"What about Friendly Fire?"

"Did she come by like she said she would?"

“Yes. She was here. She wondered about you two. But where are you two right . . .” I click off the phone and Myrrh’s eyes squint at me and she quietly shakes her head from side to side.

I continue, “are you looking out for me? Are you looking out for Myrrh? How about Jim? Men and women. Wars, murder, slavery, robbery, theft, rape - all carried out in the name of a God. Yahweh, Buddha, Allah, Jesus, Umvelinqangi, Mohammed. Billy Sunday! Ha! Say the wrong name in the wrong place and you will be killed. Beheaded. Stoned. Buried alive. Crucified.”

Myrrh whispers, “What did Joe see in us? What is so extraordinary about you, Luke?”

I respond, “surely Goodness and Mercy will follow us all the days of our Life. But the only thing following us is Death.”

The clouds have closed up again as rain on the roof gives us sheets of water pouring down on the pavement. I draw a curtain back from the window and see what looks like a shadow quickly disappear. I also see the water pouring so quickly that the rain puddles choke on themselves as I choke on my tears. I say nothing to Myrrh, a slight nod is sufficient. I pick up the vile and smear more blood along the window panes and door jamb and then I set it back on the table with the top off.

I am so, so tired of all of this and I think, praise the Lord and pass the ammunition and we’ll all stay free.

I close my eyes and drop quickly into the sleep of scattered dreams.

## Chapter 15

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### Roy's Cafe

I dream of a farm at night with chickens and cows and sheep and pigs running free with a low discordant noise. I am asleep. Papa is carrying me. Myrrh is walking around with a pan filled with chicken feed, strewing all to the cackling animals that are



moving about her. He sees I am waking and he sets me down and motions me to go inside the house, where my breakfast is ready. I am my present age and Mama is in the kitchen. The dinner table is covered with a red and white checkered plastic cloth. A plate of sourdough cakes sits on it, topped with fresh butter that melts down the sides. A jar of dark sage honey sits beside the plate. A fresh glass of raw cow's milk sits beside the honey. I sit down and pick up a fork and push it into the top pancake and it emits a low sound like a small balloon emptying of air.

I open my eyes to the dim instrument panel light of the cab interior. Where am I? What happened to our bed? What about Goulding's? Did we leave there without me – I mean without me knowing about it? I hear muted noises that were not part of my dream on the farm. I raise my head to see the empty driver seat of the rig and that it is dark outside and I realize I am in the sleeper cab behind the driving seats. I hear voices that are barely audible. I see the driver door open to the pitch dark and no Jim sitting next to no Myrrh riding shotgun. Only Jim's distant voice.

“What the duck do you know about death, huh?”

Who is he talking to? Himself? I don't think he said the word 'duck.' I think the distance and the night scrambled the first consonant. Aunt Flo didn't . . . Aunt Flo? Never part of her scrabble game. I heard it from Papa and Mama when they were arguing in the house and they thought I was asleep. Arguing about living in Florida or New Mexico, and sometimes even San Diego. Arguing about going to some place where there were more people and opportunities and things to do, beside hunting and fishing and hanging out at the beach and just having a regular good time. Mama was

never afraid to speak her mind and tell us what she wanted and what she didn't want. I know that often times a Mama wants something different than her boy child wants.

Jim's voice is getting louder, which means he is either speaking with more volume or he is moving closer.

"Two tours in Iraq. My old man died in Cambodia in the seventies!"

I move to the passenger door of the darkened cab and lower myself onto the road beside Myrrh. The exterior lights of the Rig illuminate the truck and the pavement. The headlamps are on high beam and push out into the darkness. She has our gear on the dry ground next to her. Where are we? I see no moon in the sky. Must be early still. We move away from the Rig, leaving our gear; my legs seem to know where to escape the confrontation that is happening on the other side of the truck. We stop. In the distance I can hear the low humming sounds of a resting train engine.

We are further away from the bad F-word, and its myriad conjugations fade into the night and behind I see a long row of several small white cottages along the road, each lit by a solitary porch light. I see an isolated gas station with an overhead neon light reading, Roy's Café. There is a highway sign with numbers "66." We must be close to LA.

The Rig is about one hundred feet behind us and now I see its headlights shine across a white car parked at an angle to the Rig, as if there was an accident that had been averted. The headlamps from the car light up two figures that are moving in and out of its beams. I recognize Jim, and hear his faint voice in the distance.

"Three white lights in my life, man, so what in tarnation do you know about death? You and that lighted up face! Huh, you squeezed up red top!"

With everything that's happened on our journey, it's gotta be Red that Jim is talking to! Unless they made two of him? And who is 'they?' I see the red hair on the person and then it moves into the dark, so I don't get a good look at him. It is only through Jim's voice that I obtain a description of the other man.

"I am talking to you! You got that silvery face with those funny lips and those tarnation sun glasses on your nose in pitch dark so don't start waving your arms at me like you are some . . ."

And then Jim puts his hands on his own face and seems to be pressing against his own ears. Jim stumbles and his knees start to buckle as he begins to slip toward the ground.

No! This cannot be the third death that visits us on this road. Don, I couldn't help. The Lady, I would not have helped. The robots are nothing. But Jim is like us. A good man traveling his road of life. A helper.

I watch Myrrh's hand reach into her shirt pocket and pull out the box of stick matches from Joe. She lights a match and throws it into the air, where it pauses for a second, glides about four feet to the left - but I note no wind - and then falls to the ground. There is a small ignition of fire and then a sudden flare which reveals the stick has landed on a line of something. The flash diminishes and the flame begins to run away from us and I see it is following a trail of ash!

The red-haired man is back in the vehicle beams and he moves Jim like a stringed puppet, dropping him down and lifting him up in response to the man's raising and lowering his hands. Jim falls to the ground. It seems like he deliberately drags his

hands against the rough pavement. He is going to draw out his blood! The flame slows to a walk toward the white car, burning through the ash and Myrrh screams, "potash!"

Red turns and looks toward her and shouts, "hey kid! You get away from there!" He stops his marioneting and moves toward the white car and I see a second person exit the car and run over to Red. Jim is off the ground now and he rubs his bloody palms together and grabs the second man and they fight.

"Hoooooowwwwwwwwwwwlllllllll," is the anguished sound from this man that spreads through the air. He cannot escape Jim's grip and he quickly falls to the ground into darkness, beneath the headlamps. Red stops half way between the fallen body and the car and begins a low, moaning howl, as he spectates the continuing saga. The flame is to the car and I hear an electric engine turn over and the car starts to speed away with fire burning on its rear tires. For a brief moment Red raises his arms in joy and I think the car is free. But the speed of the car creates a rushing wind that dilates along the under carriage. The car moves faster, as if trying to dislodge the flame through sheer speed. The fire grows larger until the flame-engulfed vehicle explodes into infinite pieces with attendant large sparks of electricity. It looks like an exploding microscopic yellow-red planet cut through with small streaks of lightning.

Jim and Red look at one another and then Jim takes off after him. Red is a slow runner and Jim is even slower. They disappear west down the empty 66 while I run down the highway to the red ball of fire. The car made it about a half mile and it takes me several minutes to reach it. The burnt person or thing is separated by about twenty feet from the frame, its life extinguished. Tires and white fenders and bumpers are scattered about. The under frame for the car lays on the pavement, the intact battery

pack dug into the tarry road. The body of the car is a burnt-out shell, the body of the person is only a skeleton of irregular shapes. Bones, calcium, ivory, man-made? No flesh, but no wires? What was this, this thing? The acrid smoke from the burning tires and upholstery and foam spiral into the sky with their attendant odor which almost cloaks the slight distinctive smell of cooked fish.

Gasping for air, Jim is beside us and joins my stare and says, "I have seen at least a hundred dead people, but this is the first I ever seen where all the flesh is gone. He turns away. "Sheeeeeet."

"That a robot?" asks Myrrh.

Slowly shaking his head, Jim says, "Maybe. I think that Red fella is a person. A robot would've been a faster runner, even though he escaped me. That one I killed had more grease on him than a roast pig. The other one, the runner, the red head. Weird the way he was pressuring my head."

Jim abruptly shuts up.

"You seen too much of this so early in your lives. Let's go."

He motions for us to follow him back to the truck and he walks away. I look at the things tennis shoe that didn't burn. Weird. We study them.

"Come on!" commands Jim. "Too early in your lives!"

We join him.

'Early in our lives?' We heard Don talk about kids in Afghanistan, younger than us, that had witnessed the decimation of their entire families from a missile fired by a US drone. I heard about the four children playing on the beach in Gaza; they were

blown up by the . . . ? Who? Nowadays not too many people want to admit they did anything.

I don't think age has anything to do with witnessing death. As we walk, Jim asks, "How'd that fire get over there?"

"Myrrh put a match into some ash and it burned in a line over to the car." We stop walking half way back to his Dinosaur.

Jim says, "I don't know where the ash line came from, but there is some commercial potash company on the other side of the railroad tracks. But not lined up."

We are too distant from the burning tires and the beams of the Rig to see each other sharply. "I was sleeping in Goulding's and then this. What happened?"

Jim says, "You must have slept six hours straight and we could see you were still tired so we put you in the back part on the sleeping bed. You were exhausted." Myrrh nods. "I was driving on 66 right here, by Roy's, and that white car was coming up real slow from the opposite direction. Then I saw him stopped and facing us in our lane. So I stopped too. This red-haired fellow wearing dark glasses in the pitch dark got out of the car and starts mumbling something about a 'lot of people die on this road.' Well, he made no sense to me and I figured he was crazy, maybe from those two at Goulding's, so I says to him, 'move your car or my Rig will move it for you.' He just stood there for about a minute, staring at me and staring at my Rig. The headlamps reflected off his face and his skin was blue-like, silvery blue. Then he says, 'this road reeks of death. Indians, settlers, Army, tourist, drunks. Death all over this place.' So I started yelling at him, asking what he knew about death and then my head started to hurt, like he was squeezing it with his hands. And he was in the lights moving his hands like some kind of

orchestra conductor. Like he was playing with me. Then the flame ran over to his car and he got distracted and he lost his power and I bloodied my hands and the other one was there. Must have been that third one in the car that tried to drive away and he ended up burnt to bits.”

His retelling the experience calms Jim.

“Yeah. The red one has that crazy hair-do and the lips, like you talked about before. It was all slicked back and he wore these wraparound sun glasses and he was silvery as a ghost and he was sucking on something. Just like that guy I saw near Death Valley and that one yesterday in the rain. Maybe a toothpick. I don't know.”

Myrrh asks, “Were you able to see the color of his lips?”

Jim remembers for a moment. “The beam lights showed him kinda like a red lipped Bat fish I saw about fifteen years back free diving off the Galapagos Islands. Bizarre looking character. They look like the ones you saw?”

“I don't know. The red haired one has got to be related.” I say.

“They gotta be related. Same space ship or creator. Can't be a coincidence,” says Jim. Description is close. Car seemed close, but different colors. But it seems like most of the people that drive on these highways at night are slightly off kilter.

Jim stops and we stop and listen. “This is where the one I bloodied should be.” All three of us look around for about one or two minutes and can find nothing and then Jim shouts, “nothing left but those shoes. Well I'll be. Just like the one with the orange juice.” He shakes his head. “Gotta be from some space ship or something.”

“Is your truck O.K?” asks Myrrh.

“I think so. I'm going to walk around her and make sure.”

Jim starts moving away from us and I look over to Myrrh.

“That was a smart thing to throw that match in the ash. How did you come up with that idea?”

She looks down the highway where there are still some flames burning on the road and in the tires. “I don't know how that ash got there. I just heard Jim's voice and I lit one of those sticks and threw it up into the air. I didn't see no ash.”

“That man or the thing that Jim killed, it saw you and was screaming at you.”

“Yeah,” says Myrrh. “I didn't expect that. I wonder why that happened? I think things are changing with me.”

“I hope you don't lose anything. Maybe there's a time limitation on this. Maybe I should use mine up before I lose them?”

“You'd have to have a good reason to use them,” says Myrrh, “and I hope you never have.”

We move after Jim, trailing him by about fifty feet and Myrrh says, “we gotta get out of here.” We slow our walk. “This all has to do with those Nazis at the Cape. Robots. Technology. Artificial Intelligence. Papa said during the Big War the Nazis did human experiments on the Gypsies and other prisoners.” She looks toward Jim and says, “we need to go west without him. They want us. Not Jim. Maybe not even Don. And now something might've happened to Flo.

She pauses for a long time, looking from the diminished flames and over to the rig before she says, “Maybe we should quit this trip. Mama might get hurt because of us. I don't know what this is all about.”



I reply, "you're just talking to the wind now. You know that's not possible. They are after us. And they're not gonna give up until they kill us."

Myrrh says, "I was just doing some wishful thinking. That cop that sent us up to Goulding's? Who do we trust. And the Army? What's the Army got to do with us?"

I shrug, "Let's get our stuff and say good-bye to Jim. There's some train cars over there that should be going west, if we pick the right one."

"O.K."

We walk toward the Rig. I see Jim moving about it, finishing his inspection. "Everything is good. I've called the Highway Patrol and they told me to put out some flares. They should be here in about twenty minutes and then we can tell them this weird tale." We're all standing in the headlights of the Rig.

"Jim, me and Myrrh want to walk away and go sleep under the stars tonight."

"What? You don't want to stay here and watch the Highway Patrol do a ten-hour investigation that will stretch into mid-morning and they will end up asking you two or three questions which you have no answer for when you could be sleeping?" He still has his humor intact.

I reply, "we plan to walk a long way off and find some quietness and just watch the stars." He nods. "We'd also like it if you didn't tell anybody about us. Especially government people. Highway Patrol. Army. If they know about us, they'll probably track us down and cause a lot of concern."

Jim smiles and the Rig lights reflect off his teeth. He thinks for several moments and then says, "I'm good with that. I don't plan to tell them about space ships and aliens. They'd probably lock me up."

I see his eyes close slightly and he takes a deep breath.

“You alright, Jim?”

He doesn't answer right away. “Tired. I guess. Sometimes I feel the fatigue from that damn cancer. Especially when something upsets me.”

“I thought you beat it?”

“You never beat cancer. It's always inside of you. The best you can do is remit it, like I've done cuz I do not like the chemo that they give. Terrible side effects. That Bendamustine? Whoaa. Now it's good, but I had to use that white Tiger Balm to lessen the pain cuz I wasn't gonna hook on those opiates. They say you won't die from this Walden Pond thing, but that you will die with it in your system.”

“You need us to stay with you?” Myrrh asks.

“Naw, the stress is gone. That red top is gone into the bush. I'll be alright. I don't like the government knowing too much about me either. No good comes from it. Bunch of bureaucrats running around like chickens with their heads cut off, trying to justify their paycheck. Stirring up trouble where there is none. People can take care of it without them. Bunch of Parasites.”

We move over to the passenger side of the Rig and gather our belongings. Jim stands with us. “This is my card with my truck radio transmitter. Call me any time if you need something. I'm all over this country. I owe you.”

“We will.” Myrrh speaks for us. Myrrh hugs Jim first and then I follow suit. Then we walk in front of the headlamps.

“God be with you two fellows.”

“And you.” Myrrh again speaks for us.





## Chapter 16

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John Barleycorn

I carry the Urn in my pack and we are out of the headlamps, down the road toward the burnt-out vehicle.

“Germans. F-Word Krauts are doing this.”

“You think it’s because what happened to them at the beach? Sharks and drowning and all?”

“Gotta be that and maybe more. They killed three people, including Papa. We gotta bunch of the robots. Some German scientists attached to the Cape crowd. Murnau’s old man was one of them,” says Myrrh.

“Murnau is going to marry Mama in three days.”

“Yeah,” whispers Myrrh. “Mr. Ripper was on to something.”

“She left Papa for him,” I add. “Do you think she knows anything about this?”

“I hope not,” says Myrrh. “There is no way our family could deteriorate to this, is there?”

“If she can see me, than she’s innocent,” I say.

Myrrh nods, and we look back to the Rig and then start walking across the unpaved ground toward the humming train engine. Another hundred meters or so and

we reach a long line of train cars. The powerful humming train engine fronts the train cars in the direction that we were traveling on the road with Jim, so I assume this train is going toward Los Angeles. I hope so, but no matter, as we need to exit this place pronto. Roy's Café is way in the distance as we move along the tracks, first flat cars, then closed up box cars with motors running in the refrigerated ones, and finally to an open box car. We lift up our backpacks and put them on the floor. Myrrh gives me a lift up into it and then I grab her arm and then her back and lift her up to join me.

I say into the dark, "Joe was right about those matches."

"I know. It seems there are some people on our side."

The floor of the boxcar is strewn with hay. It must have carried feed for farm animals. We sit down and wish for the train to move. After several uneventful minutes, our wish is granted and the steel wheels begin to creak along the tracks. We turn our heads and look out through the open door toward the Rig as the wheels accelerate. I hear the distant siren of an emergency vehicle and see red lights flashing off the side of a small hill running adjacent to Route 66. I never see the actual vehicle and then we are into the hills and alone. We must be on a long straight stretch of track, for the cars are gliding along without much rolling. The close howl from a high-pitched coyote voice pierces the sky like the thunder over Monument Valley and I feel the hair on my arms standing up. The howl cuts off and is behind us, but the hair on my arms remains standing. We know that Jim almost added another white light to his quiver and I wonder how many lives that cat has left. One of these times he will probably continue the journey into the other world.

"God be with you, Jim. God be with you."

“Amen,” I conclude Myrrh’s prayer and the events surrounding Roy’s Café become lost in the growing distance and the deepening darkness.

“Myrrh.”

“Yes?”

“Pull out one of those vials and open it and set it between the door and our sleeping area.”

Myrrh opens the igloo bag and pulls out a vial. She unscrews the top and places it close to the door. We roll our sleeping bags out and change into our PJs and climb in.

The only sounds are the wheels clickety-clacking against the rails, and I hear it again, the radiating rhythm of Bara far off in the distance and then it fades underneath the surrounding hills. I look through the dark and see the slow blink of Myrrh’s eyes and then she closes them and sits back in the dark. We settle ourselves into the hay and fall back into the dead sleep that had been so morbidly interrupted.

But the sleep of the dead is broken by a big voice shouting down at us, “are you two deaf?! I’ve been shouting at you the past ten minutes. Ever since I woke up and seen you.”

I sit up and realize the man must be ordinary, whatever that is, as he sees me in addition to Myrrh.

“Well?!” A quick flash of light from a car on a road running close to the tracks reveal a small man with a big voice.

Half-awake from a dream that I was hoping for but can’t remember, I say, “Hello there. Sorry we didn’t see you before.” Myrrh leans up and looks at him and pulls out her flashlight.

He squats down before us and says, "I'm John Barleycorn and I'm King of these here Rails."

Myrrh blinks the light on me for a second and says, "this is Luke," blinks it on herself for a second and says, "I'm Myrrh," and then leaves it on him longer, "Mr. John Barleycorn." He looks about sixty, probably forty years of age. Takes care of himself cuz he's clean-shaven with freshly-washed long silver hair. A worn, light blue and gray Pendleton woolen sport shirt with a rip down the top three buttons covers his chest. Myrrh's flashlight doesn't reveal his trousers, so I guess blue jeans.

"Gotta ask; you look too young. Got anything to drink?"

"Got a canteen of Utah water," I say and he erupts in laughter.

"John Barleycorn don't drink no water!" Myrrh turns on her light and scans behind him at the interior of the boxcar. I see an opened sleeping bag in the far corner next to an army pack. She runs the light down on the floor and it shows Jim's vial has moved. John turns back, watching the beam of the light stop on the vial. "That yours? I moved that a bit." He shows us the red blood on the tip of his finger. "Didn't seem like a mosquito repellent. Not sweet enough, but it stuck to my finger good." If it works like we seen with Jim, then we know John Barleycorn isn't one of them. "What in thunder is that thing?"

"Keeps the Martians out," I say.

He says with a laugh, "You must have come out from New Mexico. You'll fit right with California." Mr. Barleycorn seems pretty lucid for a man that's probably traveled by rail for years. He also seems to have a good sense of humor. "Can you git that light off



of me, please. They got lots of bats flying around here and I don't want them to be attracted to the inside with their teeth in me, or you."

"That happen very often?" I ask.

"Bout ten days ago, no, maybe last month, or is it next month? Anyways, I was riding with this guy from back east going through the San Joaquin Valley and we got attacked by big bats." He points. "I'll take some of that water if that's all you got?" He holds his hand out to Myrrh and she pours some water in a paper glass that she gives to him. "Fella told me he was writing the great American novel. About hitchin through the states. Riding the rails. I told him he should've been here after the Gulf War when a lot of those vets were riding the rails looking for America. Had our own towns outside all the big cities. Said he was too young then." He drinks the water in two gulps and hands the cup back to Myrrh and stands up and finishes, "I'm going over there to get my sleep. Glad to meet you." Myrrh shines the light over to his belongings and he says, "no need for that. Night vision is damn good and I don't want no bats to catch my spot." Myrrh turns the light onto the vial and he says, "don't worry about that Martian thing. I ain't gonna fall over it. Cat eyes here." She extinguishes the light and he disappears into the dark. She muffles her light and walks over to the vial. On an imaginary line from one boxcar door to the other, she fluffs up the hay into small tepees, about six inches high. At the top of each tepee she spreads blood. Then she moves to the open door and spreads blood along the opening at about five feet high. She carries the open vial back to us and sets it down at the foot of our bags and turns off the light.

The clickety-clack of the train cars on track take over the night and I fall back asleep thinking the homeless man must have slept well - before he heard the Cadillac crash.

## Chapter 17

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### A Vampire

I wake up to the midnight darkness. Not from the subtle shifting of the boxcar as we speed along the tracks, for that helped me into the beta state. Not from the clickety-clack of wheels on track, as that pushed me further into the state. But from an eerie wave of energy that languidly moved close to me. I focus on the lit green cat eyes of Myrrh who is staring back at me. She blinks twice and turns her eyes toward the open door of the boxcar. The full moon is high and its rays stream into the box car and drop a craggy shadow on its floor. Something stands astride the open sliding door, one foot on

the floor and the other foot dangling slightly outside in the wind that rushes past the boxcar. The outside foot is facing into the wind and it looks like the creature is delicately angling it, so that the currents force the foot up and down, right and left, riding the wind like a stationary kite in a constant breeze. Red shoes, lightly illuminated, cover its feet.

So cocky, I think. It has to be one of them. I look to Myrrh and she nods.

The train moves around a bend and now it is a silhouette within the open boxcar door. A thin figure with what looks like short golden angel hair on the head. Angelic in that it appears to have dull lights underneath the golden hair that barely make it visible when the moon is blocked. The hair slowly turns from left to right and back again, so I know the creature is surveying the interior of our ride. It brings both feet inside and moves away from us, to where the hobo should be. Tense seconds pass into a minute and then the Barleycorn cry, loud enough over the rail clacking, resounds within the Boxcar, "git your teeth off my neck! You bat-out-of-hell! I'm tired of you!" I can only see faint gold colors from the halo jerking around on the other side of the car. "Damn you! I donate my blood for liquor money and I'll be bejeebers if you're going to get it for nothing!" The moving lite-show continues and suddenly Myrrh is up with her light on and as she passes the vial she picks it up and is to the far corner. Her light shines on the creature who turns its head back to her and there is blood, cranberry blood which I assume is from Mr. Barleycorn, dripping from its front teeth which are shaped like scissors.

"Hssssssss," is the sound emanating from its mouth as it jumps toward Myrrh, past her light and into the darkness. She drops her light on the floor and it rolls around beneath the sound of the commotion. The halo lights are standing and I fear Myrrh is

getting the worst of this so I throw my hand at the halo and explode a hole in the top of the boxcar. Damn! They are too close and I am too inept.

I cannot describe the hideous laugh from the Angel that seems to push out the open door and I look out to see the double engines pulling our freight far in the distance, leading the way around a long curve that our boxcar is shortly to follow. Abruptly the laugh ends and the winding rails shift the light of the full moon through the door, revealing Myrrh rolling backward to where I stand.

The halo seems to stagger over to the sliding door, the moonlight rays slipping across its body as we sweep further into the turn. Then it moves toward us with three quick short steps and stops and then golden hair leans down to its red shoes and I look to Myrrh who looks quickly at me and back to angel hair.

Electricity and scream and fear jolt every hair on my body to attention as the creature leaps its golden angel hair into the ceiling of the boxcar, where it hangs like a right side up bat for thirty seconds, before crashing down upon red shoes and crumpled legs and torso. Not down for the count, it staggers up, wrapped in a low moan barely audible over the train noises. The tracks straighten and the creature lurches over to the door and resumes the position where I first saw it, but without the swagger. The light in the golden hair tapers. The volume in the torso shrinks like a balloon that has been pricked. The red shoes are now lightless black.

One hand slides on the door and then recoils in shock. It must've touched some blood. It pushes its butt out the door and leans toward us like a hunchback and hisses,

“Yooooouuuuu.”

I swear the train makes no sounds as he says this and suddenly something from the outside grabs the deflated body, like a mail crane in reverse, picking up this dying package from the train instead of depositing letters onto it, and he is gone.

Myrrh says, "Jim's blood worked." I nod and she says, "why don't you check on John Barleycorn. I think he's OK, but I need to go back to sleep."

The moon hides behind a tall mountain as I say, "I'm afraid from the excitement, if I stand up and the train jerks, I might fall out the open door." I crawl over and pick up her still shining light. I shine the light on the frayed black tennis shoes standing alone on the edge. Several wires stick out of them toward no calves. No flesh. No blood. Some liquid I don't want to touch that kinda smells like rancid fish oil. My peripheral vision glimpses a small sharp needle on the hay beside the shoes and I put the light over it and say, "This looks like one of those needles Jim used to draw blood. What is it doing here?"

Myrrh is beside me. "Can't sleep yet. I found it over near Barleycorn and I stuck it through the tennis shoes."

I say, "those wires running out of the shoes probably went into the legs. Does that thing run on a battery?" I correct myself, "Did."

"Yeah," she says. "it seems like they all do. I'm kickin those shoes and pushing that hay around the needle out of here and let's check John Barleycorn." She pushes the evidence out the door and we walk over to Barleycorn, who says, "don't worry about me. Just a mosquito bite. I'm going back to sleep. Thanks for all that. I won't forget."

We go back to our corner of the box car and Myrrh says, "Make sure the vial is set up."

“Good idea, Myrrh.” My sarcasm finally comes through on this journey. A trait to celebrate a small victory like this for our side.

Myrrh ignores it, “I think we should get off this train next time it stops. Somebody had to know that thing came on here and they’re gonna wonder what happened to it. Probably somebody waiting in LA for freight to arrive.”

“Yeah. We need to stop at a freight yard and get off and stretch and check our powers for LA and get back on in a couple hours.”

## Chapter 18

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Kelso

The freight train slows down and vibrates to a stop in the early morning hours and I wake up to see Myrrh standing along the box car door. She sees me and says, “This looks like a holding area for freight trains, waiting for their turn to run down to LA.”

I stand up and walk to the sliding door beside her and look out. There's another track with box cars sitting on it and I can hear the humming of train engines on idle at the head of that line. She says, "Look through these two box cars on the other track." I look. "There's a train station over there and it says Hesperia on it."

I nod and take a quick look at John Barleycorn, fast asleep. Myrrh signals for me to pick up my backpack and then she lightly jumps out of the box car door and I follow her. We move between the cars of the adjacent train and then down the gravel and across the dirt and about fifty yards east of the train station. The sun is coming out from behind some clouds in the east and we stop under the shade of a large Canary Island Palm tree and look about for whatever our senses might capture. The two freight trains look like they have at least 150 cars in each one. Both of the front engines face West and are halted back from a two-lane blacktop highway that crosses the tracks. The depot looks like it's closed and from the fifty yards we can read the large printed sign in the front door window which reads, CLOSED FOR REPAIR – No Trespassing.

"Must be some government contractors working on this," I say. "Took the money but forgot to do the work."

She nods and says, "Looks like a spigot from a well over there beside that outdoor latrine. Let's fill up our canteens and go out into the desert maybe a mile and see what kind of powers we have left – if any."

We drank our fill and filled up our canteens and they sit beside our packs on top of some dry scrub oak. We both look at my right hand as I alternately make a fist and extend my fingers, like a card dealer getting ready for the hand.

“That dead scrub oak, ‘bout forty yards to our right.” She points in the distance. I unroll my hand and nothing comes forth. “Put some force into it, as Papa use to say, like you mean it.” I bunch my fist and throw my hand and fingers open and a bolt goes into the ground twenty feet in front of us. I try again and this time it awkwardly lands fifty feet to the right of the target.

“You’re getting worse.”

“I know. This is hard. But my hand feels fine.”

I throw it again and it lands fifty feet beyond. We exchange glances and I shrug. “You try. See what happens.” Myrrh throws her hand like a ballplayer and unravels her fingers at the target and nothing happens. We glance to one another and then she looks back to the target and unfurls her hand and again, nothing happens.

“Couldn’t do it in Florida so why should I be able to do it here?”

“Try your foot,” I say.

She walks out fifteen feet and digs her heel into the ground to draw a ten-foot line perpendicular from me. She walks back to me and then motions her hand out and the sand parts. Myrrh smiles as we walk to the crevice and see that it is 4 feet wide and 10 feet deep, “At least my gift is still there.”

“Good for us,” I say and then we back away and she closes it up.

“Visualize it,” she says.

I do for about 30 seconds and then I make a fist and uncurl my hand and my electrical current sends the shrub dancing into the air.

“Yeah”, I say, “visualize it, my mind’s eye, picture it happening and then it happens.”



She moves back several feet and I wind up like a baseball pitcher and picture the bolt striking the scrub oak and I release my hand and instantly the scrub splits in two.

“Yeah!” shouts Myrrh as she looks at me in admiration. “We better stop while you’re ahead, because maybe you only have a limited amount of throws.”

I say, “Pull out that bow from your backpack and let’s put it together and see what we can do. Make sure we still have the skill that we showed with Joe. I think we’re going to need it in Los Angeles.” Myrrh pulls out the case from her backpack and pulls out the bow and has it ready in under a minute.

She pulls out a feathered fletched arrow and says, “there’s a black bird in that bush about fifty yards away. I don’t like it.” She nocks the arrow and pulls the string back and takes aim and releases. The arrow crashes into the bush and the black bird flies out, higher and higher as she nocks another arrow, holds back the string and takes aim and leads the bird on its flight of death a second time.

As we walk to the defunct bird to recover the arrow, Myrrh says, “I don’t like these black birds anymore. They remind me of the crashing into the windshield of Don’s Hudson. I think they’re all evil.” She removes the arrow, wipes the blood and guts off the tip by pushing it into the sand, nocks it, draws the string, aims and quickly shoots high into the sky, where the arrow flies about two hundred yards before dropping straight down into another bush. More black birds scatter. “Your turn,” she says as she gives the bow to me.

First I break apart the bow, saying, “I need to put this together quickly.” Thirty seconds according to my internal clock. She hands me a feathered fletching and says, “put it in the same bush that I just did.” I rapidly nock the arrow, draw the string back,

aim and release. We watch the arrow high arc to the same bush, but a slight breeze blows it fifteen feet to the side. "Give me another arrow please." She does and I nock, draw, aim, take the current into consideration and release. The arrow comes down directly on the bush.

"Very good," she says.

"Give me one of those explosive tips. She does. It looks clean and full of explosiveness. I see a dead tree, about seventy yards in the distance. It is about sixty feet tall. Looks like it dried out during one of those California droughts. "Let's pretend that's a tall robot," I say." I release the arrow giving room for the breeze. It lands forty feet up the tree and explodes everything above it down to the ground.

As we walk over to it to survey the damage, Myrrh says, "I think we are done here."

"I concur. Let's eat some food and then find the next freight train to LA. No rush. Come what, come may."

## Chapter 19

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## Los Angeles Bull

The morning is half-way run out and our train is traveling real-slow into the freight yards in Los Angeles. We rumble by a sign that says 5 mph, but I think we're doing about 3, as we go past a score of train cars along the side tracks. Some with engines running, most with engines off. Ahead of us, becoming louder as we approach, is the voice of a man saying something through a megaphone. Seconds of time pass, stationary freight cars beside us are past and I can decipher the voice of the man saying, "I repeat myself. This is John Bull and welcome to the Los Angeles freight yards. This is my freight yard and I don't remember inviting any of you people here. When this train stops you will exit the train and stand outside and on the ground until I look at you and decide what I want to do with you. Some of you Mexican boys are going to ride with migra to cross back the border in San Diego. Some of you others are going over to the sheriff's department to work on the side of the roads for the county of LA. Lotta trash waiting out there for your picking. The others of you, we'll have a good chat. My dogs would love for you to run. My club would love for you sass me."

Our freight train clangs to a stop and it takes about a minute for all the creaking and groaning of the wheels and the brakes and frames and wood to quiet down. Then I feel it: the presence of Bara. Myrrh does a slight nod to me and I feel ready. Good and ready.

I ask Myrrh, "should we just walk out of here?"

She replies, "maybe you can but he's bound to see me after all the damage I've inflicted."

"I guess we'll see what side of the fence he's on."

We jump to the ground beside the track and see about twenty other freight riders standing before open boxcar doors.

The self-proclaimed John Bull crosses over some tracks toward our group. He's as big as Papa in height, but has a girth about him that pushes out his brown shirt with a belly on him like a southern sheriff in a small Mississippi town. His shirt tucks into a belt that is rolled over by his stomach. One hand dangles by his side with the megaphone, the other hand dangles a four foot long jagged 2x4. A holstered pistol sits on his right hip. He has two Rottweilers walking beside him. We are situated in the far right of the line and John Bull starts with the first man to our right. I look over to see his profile six feet from me. His body is almost perfectly straight from his shoulders down to his ankles. He has no butt. He carries all of his fat in his neck and torso and arms.

"Grasshopper, git your ass over there." Bull points to a spot and the man walks ten feet over there.

Bull moves over to the next man who is beside me. "Roach, what you doing on my train?" No reply. The man is shorter than me, probably under five feet. Probably thirty years old. His brown work shirt is pasted with dirt and his blue work jeans are tattered and worn black. He holds a woolen shirt. He has no shoes. A frayed Yankee baseball cap adorns his head. "Comprende Englais?"

"No," the man says.

"Yankee fan?" No response and Bull yanks off the man's hat. I look over to Myrrh and she nods past Bull and I follow her direction and see Rudolph standing in the shadow of a boxcar two tracks away from us. Bull grabs the man and pushes him toward the first man, saying, "you can clean up the LA streets for a couple of weeks

before you head north to the Valley to pick peaches.” Bull throws the Yankee hat at the man’s back and he squats down and picks it up. Beside Rudolph, a second man emerges from the shadows and it is Red!

Bull walks past me, his two dogs oblivious to my presence. Another evil man with evil dogs. He says to Myrrh, “aren’t you kinda young to be on my train?” Her power of invisibility is gone.

“I just wanted to try it out once.”

“So you picked my train to ride.”

“I didn’t know it was your train, sir.”

“What should I do with you.”

“Let me be on my way.” Myrrh takes a step to leave and Bull puts his mallet against her chest.

“Could send you over to Juvy. You got a family to bail you out?”

“No.”

“Blue eyes?” No response from Myrrh and then Rudolph’s sugary voice rings out.

“Bull!” Bull looks back at him. “Move the rest of ‘em away from that child.” Bull does as he is told and he herds the others, including the two previously segregated, fifty feet up the track. The dogs remain before us. Rudolph and Red move toward us. Rudolph stops thirty feet away next to a flatbed train car filled with firewood that has several axes lodged in pieces of wood. Red walks up to us and stands behind the dogs, separated from us by about eight feet. Red pulls out something from his shirt pocket and I know it is a copy of the polaroid I saw at Goulding’s, me and Myrrh without Mama at Cocoa Beach. He scrutinizes Myrrh and says,

“You riding with someone else?”

“Nope.”

“What have we got Red? Is there a match?”

“Gotta be one of ‘em.” Red nods.

“John Bull!” Rudolph’s voice calls down the tracks. “Pull that white ass Grasshopper over here.” Bull signals to someone I cannot see as they are between box cars, but I hear the sound of footprints on the gravel between the tracks. Then I see John Barleycorn being pushed from behind by a man wearing a cowboy hat and nondescript brown clothing. He places him beside Red and then the escort leaves.

Red asks, “recognize this one?”

Barleycorn makes no movement and says nothing. After several seconds, Red uses his hands and starts moving Barleycorn like he did with Jim. No response. Then Red, separated by two feet from Barleycorn, marionets him into jumping up and down, then backward somersaults and finally groveling on the ground to where his nose is up against one of the dog’s backside. All the while Barleycorn makes no noise. He hasn’t forgotten his promise. His eyes are dulled, as if he were not there. He endures and I feel the pain that traces across Myrrh’s face.

“I can fire him up, Boss. Take his arm or leg.” Red lights a match and brushes it across Barleycorn’s face. No reaction and he puts it out against Barleycorn’s cheek. No response except burnt skin. No cry. No passing out. No closing of the eyes.

Red looks back to Rudolph who shouts, “Bull! Get your Schwenker hier!” Bull signals to somewhere in the distance and a person covered in a grey greatcoat saunters over to Red. The person is a woman with long blonde hair disappearing into

the back of her coat. She has a pretty face, like some actress I've seen on the movie screen. But her mouth is slightly twisted up and she has some blood vessels along the side of her nose. I can't guess her age, and anyway, that is of no importance. She stands up close to John Barleycorn and unbuttons her great coat and opens it up in front of him. His eyes come back to life as he looks at maybe fifteen or twenty unopened bottles of liquor. I recognize Jack Daniels, actually two different Jacks, resting in separate pockets of the inside of her great coat. She purrs like a soft kitten, "you look like a Whiskey drinker." Staring at Barleycorn's lighted eyes, she pulls out two bottles as she says, "you look Irish. I bet you like Bushmills." She raises the bottle in her right hand. "I got the Red Bush," she raises her left hand, "and the Black Bush." His face moves up and down and sideways, following her movement of the bottles. She looks to Red and nods.

Red holds the polaroid in front of Barleycorn and says, "recognize these kids?" Barleycorn's eyes dart from the photograph to Red to the bottles as he shakes his head, no.

The woman unscrews the top of the Black Bush and sniffs the top and smiles at Barleycorn who winces as if he were struck along his face with an empty bottle. She puts the Red Bush back inside her great coat and her hand comes back with a crystal glass. "Dorsett," she purrs as she pours it half-full and lifts it up for the sunlight to pass through the amber liquor. Barleycorn watches her take a sip as he licks his lips. "Like to finish this?" she asks, holding it toward him. He nods. "Then speak with the nice man with the red hair." She raises the glass up and down and Barleycorn nods with it,

transfixed. She has him. I know he is going to reveal the two of us and the ride last night in the boxcar.

“Is this girl here in the photograph?” asks Red.

“Yes,” he mumbles.

“How about the other person. Looks like a boy. Recognize him?”

“Yes,” he mumbles as the lady hold the glass close to Barleycorn’s nose so he can smell the Irish Whiskey.

“See him around here?”

“No,” he mumbles. The dogs watch him closely, their mouths seeming to smirk at him.

Red says, “do a three sixty around this place. Look at the girl and all around her and over toward Mr. Bull and tell me if you see the boy.” John Barleycorn shifts in place and studies Myrrh. His eyes pass over where I am standing but I see no recognition. I make a strange face to see if it stops his panorama, but it doesn’t. He can’t see me! What happened since last night. When he is through with his pivot his eyes stop on the glass in the lady’s hand. “Not here, Boss!” shouts Red. The lady looks at Rudolph who nods and she holds the half-empty glass out to Barleycorn and allows him to take a long sip. His eyes close, his eyelids tremble, as he tastes the whiskey. When he tries to hold the glass she pulls it back and his eye lids flutter open. Red continues, “you seen the boy riding the train?” Barleycorn nods toward the crystal glass.

Myrrh breaks in, “what are those dogs smirking about?”



Red is broken from his cross-examination and says to her, “shut up, Missy.” I feel the angry heat emanating from her person and I whisper, “tell Rudolph his father had a dog the night he lost his ring.”

Myrrh says, “your father had a dog that night he lost his ring, remember?” Murnau jerks his head slightly, as if he is trying to remember. “Didn’t he tell you about his dog?” The two Rottweilers stiffen under the petting of Red and they look around the freight yards.

“Of course,” says Murnau. “Ein Deutsch Hund.”

Myrrh says, “the robot dog with the springs and wires and all that crap.”

Murnau closes his cranberry lips over his teeth and hisses, “You can be just like that dog and lose your life.”

“And you never find what you have been searching for since Canaveral and through New Mexico up to here.”

“And what is that, Missy?” his teeth are back in view again.”

The four eyes of the two Rottweilers focus behind me with fear and I look back to see Bara move beside Myrrh and nuzzle her hand that lays next to her hips. I take a deep breath, the Rottweilers stop breath, and Rudolph holds his. “Whoaa,” stutters Red. “Where’d that dog come from?”

Myrrh says nothing but Rudolph responds, “Red! You may want to step back. Fur might fly.” I look at his face. His smirk mirrors that of the dogs. Myrrh reaches into the pocket in Bara’s collar and pulls out his father’s ring and slips it over her ring finger.

“This what you looking for?”

Murnau freezes in place. “That’s my property.”

“Your father forfeited it at Canaveral.”

“I want it, Missy.” Rudolph sibilants the “s’s.”

Red and the lady move back, John Barleycorn’s hands tremble in empty space toward the retreating crystal glass, and there is a muffled noise and the dogs are gone; except for eight severed paws with wires and rubber protruding from them and a small black cloud hovering ten feet above us, which the breeze carries along. I look at Bara, who is quietly standing in place, but surrounded by bits of rubber, electrical wires, tubes, fur and things with which I am unfamiliar.

Red says, “sheet,” and backs further away while the lady is running between the tracks with John Barleycorn stumbling after her. The smirk is off Rudolph’s face and he unfurls his hand in the direction of Myrrh who slides against Bara before tumbling to the ground with a torn shirt and blood dripping from her shoulder. Bara has an area on her back where her fur has been lacerated off, exposing bleeding skin. Her forelegs are bleeding, and in great pain, she reaches down to Myrrh. I see Red pull out a Luger from his waistband and as he trains it on Myrrh, a weakened Bara leaps on him and he disappears except for his boots on the ground, emulating the dogs, with his own dark cloud floating on the currents above us. While Red did this, Rudolph fisted his hand and I quickly unfurl my fist at him and the band of electricity strikes past him, causing him to fall back against a boxcar.

I see my shadow on the ground so I know I must be visible to him. He ducks under the boxcar and my next throw breaks into the wooden frame but has no effect on the alloy steel wheels. I know there is a limitation on the strength of my power. I run to circle around him and Murnau throws a bolt that breaks up the ground behind me. I look

back to see Myrrh and Bara sitting on the tracks, watching me. I climb onto the coupling of two cars and lift myself off the ground and wait. The wait is short as I watch Myrrh's eyes locate him for me and I hold onto the exterior ladder of the boxcar and lean around the corner and see Murnau crouching up from under the car. He senses me and turns in my direction with his clenched hand and my electrical current knocks him down, red blood spewing from his torso and arms. I go to his body and see he is still alive, but his arms appear torn and useless. I run over to Myrrh and reach into her pack and pull out medical supplies.

John Bull watched all of this and when Bara begins limping toward him, he cries out, "No! I was just a bystander. I had nothing to do with this!" He starts backing away as Bara infirmly closes on him. He trips over a loose railroad tie and Bara halts beside his prone body and looks back to me, where I have used alcohol and cotton pads to clean Myrrh's wounds. I nod and Bara takes Bull's ankle in her mouth and presses down sufficiently to draw pain, which is past the line of drawing blood.

"No! Please no!"

I shout over to him, "Next time I hear you've been harassing the riders, you lose a leg!"

"Please. Never again. I promise. I swear" Bara goes a little deeper with her teeth. "I promise!"

"You don't 'swear,'" I say. "You Honor."

"Yes!" He cries out. Bara releases her teeth and drops his leg. He nurses it and stops up the blood with a handkerchief. He puts pressure on his wounds and slowly the blood coagulates.

Myrrh stands up with her backpack in hand and I help her over to where Murnau lays. He's alive. He focuses his eyes on me as I say, ""You're the AI man in Coca Beach that was going to marry our mother?"

"Ja."

"Why have you been trying to kill us?" Bara has painfully joined us. She has always been a quick healer.

He takes several moments before replying, "I wanted to clean your mother's history. Marry her without the baggage of your family."

Myrrh shudders and says, "you failed."

"Yes," he replies, "and now I see you both and I die."

"Where is our mother," I ask.

"Pacific Palisades. Waiting for our marriage."

I cringe at those words and say, "you smell like dead fish."

"Very healthy food." Is he a jokester on his deathbed? Why did I even make the remark about his fish smell? "You caused my father's death."

Murnau nods.

"You caused Don's death.

Murnau nods and mumbles, "Don.. This man actually knew Don's name. For some unknown reason I sing, "Autumn festival draws the farmer to town," and Murnau joins with, "Eating, drinking dancing at the hoe down." I continue without Murnau, "And then that big old bad wolf . . ." I stop and look at his pomegranate lips, "help me out here. What's the next line?" Perplexity moves across his face. "Isn't there some more?"

“Nichts. Nothing more except for Mr. Bull to take me to the county coroner.” He closes his eyes and breathes no more. But this story is not to begin and end with incompetent coroners.

“What is that about?” asks Myrrh. I raise my fingers to my lips and use my legs to roll his body on his stomach. I lean down and inspect it for blood. Only a little on his side. I pull on his hair next to his ear but it is not a wig. I look closely at his hair roots and they are black as a moonless night.

“He’s dead,” I say in a loud voice.

Myrrh starts to speak but I put my finger to my lips. I stand up and pull an axe from the side of the boxcar filled with fire wood. I look at John Bull and cry, “Bull. Get over here and take this body to the coroner!”

Bull says, “OK, Boss. OK.”

While Bull struggles to move toward us I raise the axe and bring it down on Rudolph’s neck and sever it from his body. White and grey skin break apart and there is the sight and sound of electricity shorting. Wires and cartilage and transistors and oil and blood spill onto the ground.

“What is this?” asks Myrrh with surprise.

“Sharkskin from Canaveral,” I say, “just what Mr. Ripper was talking about.” Myrrh offers her flashlight which I turn on and focus into the depths of the headless body. “There’s organs in there. Probably from hammerheads that the Cubans sell to people like the Germans.”

“He’s a robot,” Myrrh nods as she speaks. “He didn’t wear dark glasses to protect his eyes from the sun. This isn’t Murnau. It’s a Rudolph robot.”

“Take that ring off his finger,” I say. “Compare them.”

Our ring is pure gold with the lettering Murnau. Rudolph’s is fool’s gold, pyrite. No letters inset.

“This Rudolph is an AI robot,” I say. “The one that killed Papa and Don smelled like pig. He was a real German pig eater and this Artificial Intelligence creation smells like fish oil. We know what the real Murnau looks like, because it was him at the crash with Don and the Lady at the gas station. But he was wearing a black wig and his hair is actually golden just like it was at his old man’s funeral at the Cape. This robot, all his antics the past few days, him and his other AIs tracking us and making us destroy them, have made us visible and the real Murnau has probably been watching and listening to everything from this things audio and video receptors. Probably sent him satellite signals and now he’s probably waiting somewhere between here and the ocean to finally see us and kill us.”

Myrrh asks, “what significance does the ring have?”

“I don’t know, but I hope we find out before we lose out on any magic it has.” I lean up and see Bull still playing with his leg as he stopped coming toward us when I decapitated the robot. “Bull,” I shout. “Get me a gallon of gasoline. Pronto!” He sloths and my words follow him, “you want my dog to help you?”

While Bull limps off, I say, “I had to sever the head to stop any audio and video transmission. Hopefully, Murnau thinks that we believe he is dead.”

Ten minutes later I have the gasoline in a metal container. “Now get out of here and if I hear people talking about this.” I say no more to Bull and he nods and hobbles away. “You got any matches left.” Myrrh pulls out some sticks. I soak the robot in the

gasoline and take the match and box from Myrrh. Bara and her back away ten feet and I strike the match and say to Myrrh, "this is a test." I throw the lighted match high in the air, five feet to the side of the terminated robot and we watch as the match glides directly over the body and falls onto it. The fire consumes it and the ash smells of burnt fish.

We gather our things and us three, Myrrh, me and Bara, slowly move toward a distant building that must exit from this hellish destination of the rail riders. On our way, we walk past an unconscious John Barleycorn, laying on his back in the sun, snoring loudly, empty bottles beside his outstretched arms, his body blanketed by the grey great coat.

He has found bliss. Pray that we find ours as our journey is reaching its destination.

## Chapter 20

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Father Miguel

We climb onto a platform where passenger trains are parked. There is an Art Deco sign which reads, "Los Angeles." We descend some stairs that take us into a long tunnel, filled with people going in several directions. It leads under the tracks that sound above us. At the end of the tunnel we emerge into a waiting area with large lounge chairs filled by people. A hundred meters through them are doors backlit by the sun that must lead to the street.

It does, and there are no buses parked there. Now what? A man, in some kind of uniform walks toward us. "Need some help?"

"We need a bus to get us to Pacific Palisades."

"Long ride for you two." I give him a weak smile and he points off in the distance. "Walk right here on Alameda and you walk into Cesar Chavez. Go to the other side of the street and get on the Sunset Boulevard bus. Take you right there in a couple of hours." He looks at the Urn. "What is that?"

Don't know the legality of Papa's ashes in California. "Just some family heirloom."

"Have fun at the beach."

"Thanks."

"You are welcome."



We move across a parking lot with our packs and Urn and follow his directions and end up standing on the sidewalk next to a bus stop. Several people, a mixture of Hispanics and whites, wait with us. Finally, the bus arrives and we get on and pay the driver what he asks and sit down with the people.

“This is Friday,” I say. “The wedding is Sunday.”

“What if it’s a ploy?” asks Myrrh.

“What d’ya mean?”

“I mean maybe there is no wedding set for Sunday. Murnau just set it up to get us out here to kill us.”

“Good point. But we have to find Mama,” I say.

“Visible, we are sitting ducks.”

“Yeah,” I say. “How can we recover our invisibility?”

We think silently about that for several stops as our bus picks up and drops off riders. Four Hispanic ladies, dressed in colorful clothes and head scarves, get on the bus and sit behind us. They speak in Spanish, so we understand them, and they talk of going to midday mass at the local Catholic Church, Saint Peter’s. The most talkative one of them says she has several sins for which she must ask forgiveness and then she will be cleansed and innocent again. They all laugh heartily about that.

“Myrrh,” I whisper. “Maybe we should speak with a priest, do a confession like the ladies, get so clean nobody will see us again?”

Myrrh thinks about this for a couple of bus stops and then says, “I don’t know. I remember maybe the Catholic Church is against cremation. Gotta stay in one body for the second coming to be reincarnated. Or something like that? I don’t remember all that

gobbledygook that Papa was steeped in. His spirit might be upset right now with his ashes in this Urn.”

I have no answer and then the bus slows down and the ladies are standing up and I look at the Myrrh and she says, “why not? If nothing else we can use the toilet, drink some grape juice and have some bread.” She smiles like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland and I wonder that maybe if we could just be able to disappear like that cat. I would like that.

The women wait at the back door of the bus, and when the driver opens the doors they file out, with us trailing in the distance. The powerful sound of the diesel motor propels the bus away from the curb northwest on Sunset. The bus’s absence reveals a tall Bell tower across the street where St. Peter’s is located. We allow the ladies to cross the street and then we follow. The houses around the church are old and well kept. In several of the driveways there are some intricately painted cars that sit low to the paved driveways.

“Lowriders,” I say and Myrrh nods in approval. “Papa and Don would be in heaven here.”

“Exactly,” I say, as we pass an open garage where a man is on a dolly working under a car with a bottle of beer sitting beside him.

A voice calls out to us, “Chollo! Like the wheels?” The voice is from a young man sitting inside of the garage, drinking a beer.

“Si, amigo,” replies Myrrh. We meet him at the back of a 1947 Chevrolet.

“Where are you camping?” He points at our backpacks.

“We just came out to visit our mother.”

“Where you from?”

“New Mexico for the last year. For that Florida, San Diego,” I say.

“Gypsies,” he laughs. “What do you know about these cars?”

“Our Poppa had a 77 Cadillac that he tricked out. Him and my uncle.”

“Never seen a low rider Cadillac,” says the man under the car.

“He didn’t make it a Lowrider,” I say, “but he had that car chromed and smooth.”

“Like to look under the hood?” We move along the side of the car. “V8 with power to spare.”

“Same as the Caddy,” I say.

The recorded sounds of the bell chime from the tower. “I’m Luis,” he says. “That’s Desi under of the car.”

“Myrrh and I’m Luke.”

“You come here to see us or are you going to the chapel?” Luis laughs.

“Yes, the Chapel, got to do some confessing.”

“Kind of young to have sinned in your life.”

Myrrh just nods. “Say hello to father Miguel for us.” He smiles. “He keeps inviting us over. Says the reason the church is in the neighborhood is because it’s for the sinners and rogues like us. They don’t need to build these churches in nice neighborhood like Beverly Hills because nobody sins there.” He laughs some more. “Besides, most of that Hollywood crowd is Jew and they don’t go to Church. Ha.”

We exchange, “Adios,” and we move down the driveway and across the street to the church. Except for the rays of sunlight passing through the beautiful stain glass windows along the side walls, countless lit candles provide the lighting. The interior is

dark and inviting and loving and on the back wall above the tabernacle, Jesus is on the Cross. The Latino ladies are sitting in a pew off to the right and I guess they are finishing up with their confessions so Myrrh and me move over to where they are. They give us shy smiles, but they do not speak. They are our height and I feel like they are school chums, though they are 20 or 30 years older than us. We sit down our backpacks and Urn. When the last lady finishes with her confession she draws open the curtain and walks out and I replace her in the small closet. I pull the drape and kneel on the step below the partition with the latticed opening to converse through.

“Bless me father Miguel for I have sinned and I cannot remember my last confessional.”

“What have you done my child?”

“I killed a robot, father.”

“Excuse me?”

“I killed a robot, father.”

“Was is it a human robot? “

“No. Father. It was just an electrical, rubbery robot. An AI.”

“Artificial Intelligence?”

“Yes.”

“And why did you do this my son?”

“The robot was trying to kill my sister.” There is a silence between us for many seconds. Not an uncomfortable quietness, simply an exchange of energy without the need of the spoken word.

“And where was this?”

“In the freight yards.”

“Los Angeles?”

“Yes.”

“And what happened to the robot?”

“John Bull took its ashes away.”

“Who is John Bull? “

“It’s his yard.”

“How did the robot end in ashes?”

“I cremated it.”

“How do you cremate a robot?”

“With a gallon of gas and a box of matches.” He is silent for a long time and I fear he may have left. “Are you still there, father?”

“Yes. Unusual, because I remember having a dream of you.”

“Was it like this?”

“Somewhat. But not robots – a man with thick blonde hair.” He pauses and continues, “I don’t believe I’ve heard you before. How do you know I am father Miguel?”

“Louis from across the street told me your name.”

“Oh, very good of him. He should also come in for confession.” Several beats pass and then, “your sincere and heartfelt repentance is complete and perfect.”

“Am I forgiven my sins?”

“Yes, my son, you are forgiven. Nothing else is required.” I leave the confession booth and pick up our backpacks. Myrrh replaces me and I stand outside to listen to her confession. Latinas are speaking quietly in Spanish and they ignore me.

“Father forgive me for I have sinned,” says Myrrh.

“When was your last confessional?”

“Too long ago to remember.”

“And what have you done my child for which you seek forgiveness?”

“I killed two robots.” I hear silence as I believe father Miguel is digesting this.

“Are you with the boy that was just in here?”

“Yes, father.”

“Didn’t he kill a robot to save your life?”

“Yes, father, he did.”

“Did you kill two robots to save your brother’s life?”

“No, father. They were trying to kill our friend, Jim.”

“Was it in the freight yards in Los Angeles with John Bull?”

“No, father. This was in the deserts.”

“Are you being facetious?”

“No, father. This is all true and I need to be forgiven for my sins.”

“So you’re telling me they have robots all over the country?”

“Yes.”

“Did these robots have a pleasing shape?”

“No. Roughly made and smelling like fish.”

“Alright. Your sincere and heartfelt repentance is complete and perfect You are forgiven for your sins.”

Myrrh walks out of the confessional and joins me as father Miguel comes out from his side of the closet. He looks at the Latinas and then past us.

“Where did those children go, [spanish] ” he asks the ladies.

“We didn’t see them leave.” [Spanish]

“Did you see them inside the church?”

“Si, I saw the one go into confessional after me, father.”

“Did you see them come out of the cabinet?”

“I don’t remember.” They look at each other and shrug.

Father Miguel runs past us up the aisle between the church pews and throws open the large doors that open west to Sunset. We leisurely walk up the aisle, admiring the hardwood oak pews, until we stop behind the flustered father. We want to thank him and I nod to Myrrh who places her hand easily on his shoulder for several moments, causing him to relax.

“Amen,” I whisper and I know that he heard me as he smiles widely, waves to Luis across the street, and then turns back to enter the church, leaving the doors wide open behind him.

We wait at the bus stop for over twenty minutes, as there was no one with us and the bus did not stop. Finally, a person gets off at our stop and we get on through the back doors and we move west toward the Palisades and Mama.

And Murnau.

## Chapter 21

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### Mama

When she first moved here, Mama wrote us that she rented a room from a woman named Silvia. Wrote that Silvia was a thirty-seven-year-old beauty whose cleavage had been discovered by the noted aerialist and movie producer, Howard Huges, and he put her under contract and bought her a place along the ocean. He would fly his airplanes past her house and do tricks to impress her. That was twenty years ago, about 2002, when Silvia was 17 years old. He put her in some of his movies, but none of the other big producers were impressed by her acting, so they only gave her a bit parts. Despite the promise, she never became a major or even minor star, and as the years went past, she was neglected at the house - with no work, with no Howard, but with plenty of credit on her cards. Mama wrote, 'The home was built on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Coast Highway with a view across the Ocean all the way to Russia.' Mama sometimes exaggerated.

The bus ride to Pacific Palisades was a little over an hour. We walked the last half mile along a narrow street lined with million-dollar homes. Thanks to father Miguel,



we are invisible, but Bara walked 50 yards behind us, in and out of the shrubs of those houses as we anticipated surveillance on the property.

The home was a little difficult to find, as you cannot see it from the street. There are several cameras along the outside speared fence and locked gate. We took off our backpacks and slipped through the thin metal barriers. The narrow driveway drops precipitously from the road, descending into a small grove of red eucalyptus trees and silky oaks. Half-way down, I see a flat-roofed beach bungalow built on the cliff with the vast Pacific spread behind it. I don't see any Russia though. The roof is covered with small white lava rocks that reflect the late afternoon sun. The place looks old, built in fashionable post and beam construction from the middle of last century. Solid, but unkempt, like a fashionable lady letting herself go in her later years. Maybe Huge felt the secluded location kept it out of sight and her out of the conversations of other people, so he didn't need to keep it up. I'm sure the home served its purpose for him and for her. I don't know. I just heard he was a jealous type. Just my speculation because I'm sure when she was young and acting in movies she would want the whole world to know who she was. But now? We shall find out.

I wonder how she has maintained herself, this discoveree of Howard Huge. I see Bara sneaking into the property through and adjoining neighbor's bushes where she stops and lays down on her stomach, looking at us with an alert yawn.

The sun is in the far western sky, hanging over Malibu, and beyond that, the landscape of Point Dune. The marine layer is moving in from the south and the sky is growing dark and the shadows are leaving. As we walk down closer, the house looks more than unkempt; it is slightly battered. Past the normal wear and tear of daily living.

It's like several storms have passed through it, causing damage that has never mended. I can tell it's out of plumb. Aunt Flo wasn't sure who Huge was, that maybe he was mixed up with somebody with a similar name last century, and that man was an inventor, a venturer, and a madman. Whoever the right person is, I bet this house has some tales to tell, this structural witness to private moments.

The foot of the driveway curves to the right and dissolves into dry dirt on the north side of the house where the front door is bookended with cactus and jade plants and spiky aloe Vera. The flora is like a desert beside an ocean. Which is what Papa said Los Angeles really is: a desert with imported water and residents imported from every country throughout the world.

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Papa use to talk about the permanency of the land and the transitory nature of the structures built on it. He said you can blow it up or burn it off, run an earthquake through it or split it with an atomic bomb, but the land would always be there. But the trees, the vegetation, and man-made creations, they would last for a finite period of time and then be gone. Acropolis? It would be gone someday. Great Wall of China? Eventually disappear. People? He said they all had a finite life span and then their bodies would return to the earth.

But the soul, now the soul, my boys, that will continue on.

I hope his soul is with us, me and Myrrh. But I wonder what the homeless man was crying about.

No. I do not wonder about that. I stop myself.

She never said it, but I always knew that Mama liked Myrrh more than me. Fact of life. I'd like to think that Papa liked me more, but he loved us both the same. Praised

us when we did good, beat us when we did bad. No favorites. Same soft love, same tough love. If one did bad whilst the other did good, the former got the hand, the latter got the praise He used to say, to no one in particular, when we were creating a ruckus somewhere, whether at home, a restaurant, a store, or some other appropriate place for a little grab-ass:

You know why there is fat on an ass?

And then he would raise that large hand of his and make like he was closely inspecting it.

To cushion the blow.

As we got older, four or five, and the pain wasn't felt, he would ask if we wanted it hard or soft. I or Myrrh would be down on the bed, actually smiling for the expected blow, and he would come down full force on the side of the bed next to us, his hand folding into the sheets. I or Myrrh would laugh and then ask him to spank us for real. He would oblige, but very lightly.

Most people would look at us and not be able to tell us apart. Even Papa, on a rare occasion, would mix us up. Not her. She could distinguish us in the dark when we were sleeping in our joint bedroom in our identical pajamas with our bodies entangled. Or she could discrete us when we wore identical clothes with our backs to her and she was engaged in conversation with Aunt Flo. She just knew which of us was which. In the same manner I could tell that the itty-bitty larger piece of carrot cake went to Myrrh, not to me. Or that the inflection in her voice when she gave us praise was a little prouder when she was dispensing it to Myrrh, and the disappointment in her tone was more pronounced when she enumerated my failures. Maybe she wasn't even aware of

it. I don't know. I never broached the subject with her. If she was aware of it, she would probably deny it. Or maybe she would admit it and say that is the way it is. I do not know how I would respond to that. I will not ask her.

We use to go to music festivals at the J.W. Eaves Movie Ranch in New Mexico. She would dance with Papa and Myrrh; and sometimes me.

But, there actually were rare moments when we blurred into one another and she would mistake me for Myrrh and I would feel a bit more warmth directed toward me. I wouldn't let on that it was me. I appreciated her warmth. Maybe it was because Myrrh was the quiet one and she would listen to her talk for hours on end when she was still in New Mexico with no Papa or sisters or friends around. She would talk about anything under the sun and Myrrh would just move with her sounds, actually dancing to the rhythm of her speech, seemingly assenting to everything she said, while I would question the reasoning and thought behind her discussion. She didn't always like that. She enjoyed some discord, because it got her to thinking more deeply about her beliefs. But at some point she would shut me up with,

“You're just a child and you don't know any better.”

I was just a child, and I thought I knew better. I am now twelve and I know how ignorant I was back then. Scratch that. I am just a child.

When she left for the West, I missed her the lest. I mean least.

There is an old, wooden speed-boat in the front yard. I look at the steering wheel of the boat and see there is a compass. The reading north on the compass is straight to our right, to the driveway we just walked down. So we have moved west and Myrrh now

turns to her left and looks through the front glass door and I follow her gaze through the small room and the large picture windows inside the house that face south.

We stop at the door and inside I see a wooden dining table with some wooden chairs beside a ficus tree that grows inside the house. The room is less than sixty feet across to three large picture windows that expose the ocean. Straight ahead is an old, large brown leather couch, facing a cast iron stove against the far windows. Papa had a stove like this in his room. He used it to burn wood for heat in the winter. Sometimes he would cook on it. Mama never liked it. I doubt that Mama would use the one in this California house.

Time passes and the sun and the light diminish as we stand at the glass door. We know that we can be heard, so Myrrh and I exchange shrugs of our shoulders with our hands raised out from our sides.

Then I hear the shuffling sound of feet enclosed in worn slippers.

## Chapter 22

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Silvia

“Welcome my children,” is the sound of a woman’s voice, not Mama’s, from inside the house. It freezes me and I look bewildered toward Myrrh. A lady, probably forty, probably Silvia, wearing dark sunglasses, walks over to the glass door and opens

it wide. She scrutinizes around, on, through and past us and I look to Myrrh with relief as she is unaware of us. This frail lady wearing a large floppy butter colored bonnet with a white and grey feather sticking straight up to the ceiling is speaking with the oak trees behind us. Her corded neck has a black scarf around it. Her white face and nose are crossed with incipient blood vessels. Her corded ankles drop into old yellow stained house slippers. I sense she is a housebound alcoholic, and she probably claims to be a teetotaler. For her, that means she never drinks outside the boundaries of her property. She looks all around Myrrh's face, unable to center on her, if in fact she can sense her. I can't see her eyes but her lips are glossed over with zinc oxide. Is this the woman my mother shares a home with. I turn away and my thoughts throw the Bad F-Word past the woman and against the picture windows that afford the southern view to the Pacific Ocean.

She looks around wildly and says, "do not, I repeat, do not use profanity in my home. Howard is forbidden to do that and you do not have any more privileges than is granted to him. Do you understand me?"

I stand admonished and amazed and perfectly still. Did she hear me? She steps back and uses her hands to usher us into the house but Myrrh holds me back with a look. Then this lady follows behind what she imagines to be us and says, "I'm Silvia de Lago. Maybe you've read about me?" We give no response and she continues to walk and talk. "You know how to read?" We quietly trail her. "I'm not talking about reading Geronimo Stilton or Goosebumps. I'm talking about literature." Silence and then she starts again, "Don't smart talk me. This is my house you're at and you will . . ."

The ringing of a cell phone stops her and she walks over to a bookshelf and picks it up. I move close to her to listen in on the conversation of the other side.

“This is Sylvia.”

“Anything unusual going on over there?”

“Nothing on my end.”

“What are you doing right now?”

“I’m running my lines. In case somebody shows up I got to get them to the outside chairs and get them to eat some of my food.” She amends herself, “Our food.”

“I saw you at the front door from the video feed. And I heard you talking, like there was somebody else there?”

“You better look at the camera inside the house because you see I’m the only person in here and I’m just talking to myself, perfecting my lines and I’m getting tired of this and you can tell Howard that.” Silvia de Lago hangs up her phone and walks past the domesticated ficus tree and disappears around a corner. As we follow her we note the kitchen is the size of a closet and there appear to be a master bedroom with two small bedrooms with attendant baths. While Myrrh stays with Sylvia, I walk into the large bedroom to see if Mama has anything in there from home that I might recognize. There is a dark dress sitting on the bed that is not familiar, so it must be where Silvia stays. A small aquarium sits on a five-foot cabinet beside an undraped window to the outside. The aquarium is dark and I see a small reflection in it from the last bit of daylight that spreads in the room. I move up close and see three large fish, motionless. I think they are sleeping until one of them seems to wink its eye at me. I never heard of aquarium fish blinking their eyes and so I stare at it for a long time to confirm my initial sighting.

Nothing. No movement around the eyes. Must be my imagination in the dim light and I turn away and walk to a smaller bedroom and there is a framed photograph of Mama's smiling face on the chest of drawers. She looks different than when she lived in New Mexico. Not better, not worse, just different. Maybe it's one of those head shots that everyone in Los Angeles carries around, ready to give to some stranger who may be of benefit to their career. On a wall there is a second framed colored picture of a man who looks like Murnau. Blonde hair. No sunglasses and I see he has blue eyes. Cranberry lips. His natural colors. The Germanic egoist that patterns an Al after himself.

I exit the room and stop on some colored photographs on the living room wall. The first is of a single lady in her twenties. She is pretty in a midwestern style. Long dark hair held back from her forehead with a pin and falling down along her ears. If this is Silvia, she was indeed a beauty. A Midwestern farm girl with clear rosy complexion, high cheekbones and beautiful dimples in her smile. No need for make-up. The next framed color photograph is of a rakish looking middle-aged man with slicked back hair over an intelligent forehead and a sharp nose that stops above a thin black mustache pasted above his upper lip. Probably Howard Huges. He wears a suit and bow-tie, like some of those congressmen who are so full of themselves. The photograph shows him from the chest up to his widow's peak, mostly blocking a large silver airplane in the background. The final framed photograph is also color. The man and the woman are standing together arm in arm. He is maybe 5 inches taller than her and her head is resting on his right shoulder and her face is filled with the dimpled smile. He is wearing aviator sunglasses and his mouth has a crazy grin on it. A crazy Jim smile. After several minutes of viewing this rakish couple, I move through the house and join Myrrh who sits



on the other side of the picture windows, on the ledge overlooking a dirt lot filled with scrub oak and weeds. The lot's southern perimeter is about one hundred feet from us where it ends at a small cliff about 20 feet higher than the adjacent Pacific Coast Highway. There is a second chair on the ledge, placed about 6 feet from Myrrh's. It is occupied by Sylvia. There is no third chair so I sit on the crumbling cement on the edge of the small precipice. An ocean rusted four-foot high trophy with an airplane propeller mounted as trim sits next to Myrrh. I silently read the engraved, '1951 San Francisco to Santa Monica propeller race, Champion, Howard Huges.' My confusion as to the date is interrupted by the ring on her cell phone.

"Listen. I'll call you if anything comes up. Until then, quit bothering me." She closes up the phone and sets it back on her chair. I sense the fear in this defiant woman. Outward bluster to mask the inner fear. I stretch my hand toward her and she feels my energy and I feel her reciprocating trepidation. If she is lucid, then she must realize that she is in the middle of an extraordinary event. But what powers, if any, does she possess? She picked up on my bad F-word. Anything else? I need to test this woman so I concentrate that I'm going to slap her on the side of the head, so I flinch my right shoulder but she does not respond. She does, however, lower her glasses down to the ridge of her nose and look around from left to right and right to left, and I see the same crimson of Murnau in her sclera. She pushes her glasses back and drops both arms around her chest and hugs herself and shows a small shiver and then goes off into her lines:

"A beautiful wedding at the Getty Villa for a chosen woman." She portrays puzzled and she plays her role. "Chosen lady like your mother. I would have thought

different. Maybe four or five children already? Whoops. Pay no mind to my rantings. Howie says I speak too much, that I should zip my mouth. Ha! Howie you varmint, you!”

I wonder what she means by ‘chosen.’ How well does she know my mother to think she would have more children.

Silvia says, “I don’t like leaving the compound nowadays. Too much trouble out there for an older woman like me to venture into.” I have no idea how old this woman is. Mama said late 30s. But this woman talks about last century as if it were now, and there is age written all over her body and face and hands. And her faded foot slippers testify to her age, splashed with variegated colors of sauces, rosé and bodily fluids.

From her demeanor, I can tell she no longer dreams the impossible.

She slowly stands up and says, “I’m going to bring out the food and drinks. Can you stay here till I come back.” We say nothing and watch the bumper to bumper traffic on Pacific Coast Highway until she comes back with her hands balancing a beautiful rectangular white china tray the color of elephant tusk. She calls out, “There’s a pitcher of lemonade in the kitchen for you to pick up and take out here. My hands are full.” She sets the tray down and sits down and nobody moves. Finally she stands up and mumbles, “damn kids, got no respect for their elders these days.” She goes back inside and I look at the tray holding three matching china glasses, one half-filled with amber liquid, sitting on a clean white linen cloth on the tray. It also holds several small sandwiches that are held together by toothpicks through their centers. At the base of the sandwich is a thin piece of dark bread, above that is a thinly sliced cucumber, and above that is a thick wedge of white cheese. Finally, there are two bunches of grapes, one red and one black, held in separate circular China bowls.

Silvia is back and she glances sideways at the tray. "I made the sandwiches this morning. It's my take on cucumber sandwiches that Noel Coward writes about. In case you're interested, the grapes come from the local farmers market. I do get out and about on rare occasions." She performs a faux laugh.

She picks up a glass and lifts it for many seconds and then replaces it. "I only offer once." No response.

"You probably know that I am called Silvia. This is for you." She tips the pitcher of lemonade to her glass and tops it off. She puts back the pitcher and sticks a finger in her drink and stirs it up and then licks her finger.

We wait expectantly. She does not disappoint as she lifts up her glass. "I propose this toast.

May your aircraft always land in shallow waters,  
May your land craft move easily against the wind,  
When I speak that I will be there at five,  
Then know that I shall arrive, fully alive.

She holds out her glass to an imaginary bouncing with ours and I catch a small whiff of the liquor, something Don would be satisfied with, but which I cannot name out of ignorance.

Three small brown birds land on the cement porch a few feet from where the tray is. The oldest of them moves close to Sylvia.

"Are you really sure you want some of this?" asks Sylvia, picking up two cucumber sandwiches. "You know I don't like aggressive people? You know that don't you? You little bird, you. Yes you, the one standing closest to me. You're too

aggressive.” The bird moves in closer to her. Silvia takes another sip of her liquor and puts her glass down and breaks off a piece of the bread that she throws to the closest bird. The bird picks at the crumb two or three times and then takes it up and hops about ten feet away from us. The bird drops it on the cement and continues to pick at the bread. Silvia then picks off a couple piece of the other sandwich bread, which she throws to the other two birds. They mimic the pecking of their aggressive friend and move a short distance away to continue their meals.

“There, there. You two eat your movable feast.” She empties her glass and then pours a refill.

Sylvia seems to be a harmless person. I don’t want to think of things to come but I hope she is not involved deeply in this, that her fading beauty is a result of neglect and fruit drinks and rubbing elbows with the wrong people for too long.

Headlamps are on for most of the congested traffic going in both directions on the coast highway below us. The marine layer sits over the sea shore like a frozen wall of water. To our right, to the west, a heavy fog has crossed Pacific Coast Highway and fingered up into the canyons and crawled over the houses of the super wealthy.

The lemonade makes Silvia gayer. “Young man. Can you go inside and get my gold box for me?” She answers herself with, “Certainly, where is it?” She stands up and replies, “In that chest of white drawers against the wall, close to those historical photographs. Second drawer from the top!” Her phone rings as she heads toward the door and she changes to a rougher voice tone, “Nobody here but me and the birds and they’re dying and I’m not picking up again.” She closes up her phone and disappears into the house and I see the aggressive bird laying on its side next to the remaining

crumbs from the cucumber sandwich. I remember she doesn't like aggressive people and I guess that applies to birds also. If we had been her guests, would she have served us this cucumber sandwich? I remember Mama acting in a Noel Coward play – but I thought he wrote comedy. Myrrh looks at me and I make a motion with my hands of pushing Sylvia off the ledge and she nods her head. Sometimes my character judgments are too quick and turn out flawed.

Sylvia comes back with her gold box, She takes another drink and stuffs some grapes into her mouth, wiping away some zinc oxide which exposes an unnatural crimson color in her lower lip.

“So lovely,” she says to herself, “I love your view, I really do!” and herself responds with, “Well, I don't own it. But it is lovely, isn't it? Howie picked it out for me. He said that I could watch him fly by when he was testing his aircraft. I would wave to him when he passed by. It was our secret signal that the house was ready for him.” Now she has some cucumber and she takes it in one bite. “Later, when he got delusional, he would buzz the house on random occasions to keep me on the up and up. He had trust issues.”

She frees her hands by putting the lemonade glass on the table and we watch as she opens the box and pulls out a small dark green ball of vegetable matter that has small glistening drops on its outside. Same stuff Don used to smoke

“Pay no mind to me, youngsters. Don't know about where you come from, I may know a little bit about where you are going, but this is legal in California.” She pulls out some rolling papers. “You're from New Mexico, right? Not Old Mexico, right?” She emits a faux hysterical laugh at what she thinks is a joke. Or maybe it's a Pavlov reflex that

comes on just before she knows she's going to get high. She opens up one of the papers and starts placing parts of the green weed on it. "I have a government card which allows me to use this medicine whenever and wherever I like." She places the weed back into the box. She licks the paper and then folds it together with the chosen weed inside. "You know how to use those stick matches?" Silvia closes her eyes and I nod and Myrrh picks up the small carton from which she extracts a match, strikes it against the box and there is fire. Silvia's eyes flutter open as Myrrh throws the lit stick above the ledge, where the onshore breeze from the ocean carries it to the tip of the J attached to her lips. Her body is frozen while her eyes dart about in terror and her lips suck in the air and the joint lights up. The match extinguishes as it falls to the cement ledge. I watch the fire reflect off her crimson eyes. After several seconds of inhalation, she removes the cigarette and breathes out, her hands vibrating as if she had Parkinson's. She takes another hit, her cell phone rings, she picks it up and throws it down the cliff where it can no longer be heard.

It takes several tries to get her shaking hands up to her mouth to take further hits. She says in a whisper, "Maybe you have a chance. They got drones, lasers, ships out in the ocean, security and dogs all over the place. But even if you get through that, I doubt you can get through to your Mama." She stands up and squishes the roach on the cement, and mumbles, "she's gone too far. I'm going to sleep now. Good night." She is into the house, and she locks up the front door but leaves the one next to us open. She walks into the kitchen and comes out with several lit candles that she places inside the doors: front, back, and the one to her bedroom. She has a candle left over that she places next to the photographs of her and Mr. Huge.

“Is she inviting death?” whispers Myrrh.

“I believe she’s inviting protection.” I whisper back.

“From who?”

“Father Miguel.”

The marine layer moves and stops at the ledge we are sitting on. Everything is dark except down below are the eerie vehicle lights captured in the fog and the muted sound of cars. The sirens of an occasional emergency vehicle doing its nightly work puncture the droning sound of the highway. Myrrh whispers, “I want to sleep too.”

I quietly reply, “check the bedroom for cameras or audio or other AI stuff. I’ll spread some of Jim’s blood on the doors and in areas where someone might grab for a hold. In the morning, if Sylvia is still alive, we will know if she is for real.”

I appreciate the vehicles below moving together in the fog at one time without any apparent accidents. They quick=step so no one bumps into another. We need to keep doing that same thing to survive. I walk behind Myrrh and go to my backpack and open it to bring out some bread and cheese and bottled water. I take it back outside. I need to think about tomorrow. I need to try to sort out the gibberish talk that has come out of Sylvia’s intoxicated mouth. How old is this woman. How much is BS, how much is feigned to draw us into death? Why would they let us stay with an ageless woman who would open her mouth up and prophesy our future trouble? Murnau is not a stupid person. He cannot still be cocky after everything that has transpired. Or can he be? Does he think that he has some sort of immortality? Is he a descendent of Dr. Faustus? Goethe or Marlowe? Which one fathered him?

I glance west through the fog bank and my eyes are drawn to the neighboring house. It's lights are doubled and dispersed by the marine layer, but it is colorfully lit with red, green, orange and blue lights blinking on and off. I wonder what the occasion is and then I tense up from a shadow moving along the property until I realize that it's Bara. We exchange glances and then I go back to my thoughts and my water until my attention is drawn to a movement coming from the adjacent house and across the lower part of Sylvia's property line. The figure moves deliberately, cautiously, quietly.

The quietness is broken for less than five seconds as Bara leaps on top of the mover and it flays apart down into the fog bank. I'm not sure, but I believe that the constant odor of fish from the Pacific Ocean strengthens for several moments that are quickly passed. Will it be missed, will there be other incursions?

Over the next hour, one by one, the neighboring lights, the blues the greens the oranges, the violets and the reds slowly turn off in sync with the diminishing sounds emanating from the freeway. The marine layer lifts higher and covers the houses. I go into my backpack and pull out one of Jim's vials of blood. I smear it along the columns that hold the roof up over the porch. I put some along the porch door that leads into the house. I look to Bara and make a quick noise with my lips and she looks at me and blinks at me walking into the house. I streak the door jams and along the front door. I go over to the leather couch and paint an imaginary circle around it with Jim's blood. I set the open vial on the floor and fall asleep with the quick thought how about tomorrow,

Now it will come.



## Chapter 23

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### Getty Villa

The early morning light squeezes through some high-rise condominiums three miles to the east along the Santa Monica coast. The marine layer has been replaced with high gray nimbus clouds and it looks like a chance of rain later in the day. I slept well and I stand up and stretch my arms. I walk over to the bedroom where Myrrh went last night. She is still sleeping. I move over to the open door of Sylvia's bedroom and hear her wheezing. Still alive. I move over to the door to the outside porch and see a pair of blackened tennis shoes standing by themselves. The telltale wires and rubber and transistors stick out of the shoes. I lean down to them and look at the circular patterns from the oil that is splashed on the shoe canvas. I find no traces of blood. Was this a newer AI that didn't need blood? I stand up and look at the inside of the door jamb where Jim's blood was smeared. I see what looks like scratch marks running across a strip of his blood. So it still works. Bara is outside and we exchange knowing glances and then she goes down the hillside and into the bushes, ready for our next move.

Myrrh comes up beside me and we hand signal one another to eat some food and drink some water and gather our necessities for our short journey.

Forty minutes later we are down the hillside and walking along the coast the highway. We move on a bike path adjacent to the busy highway, past a tennis club built right up against the ocean.

“A tsunami would carry this place away,” I say.

Bara walks separate from us, along the edge of the sea.

We pass the club and watch several surf boarders sitting in the ocean water, waiting for the waves to come in. The waves appear small and I think they will have a long wait. We pass a street sign that reads, “Sunset Boulevard.” A couple of early morning bike riders are headed in our direction so we step off the path because we know they cannot see us. When they go by we resume our walk.

There's a sign up ahead, on the side of the road. It reads, “Getty,” I can't read the rest,

“Getty Villa.” Myrrh reads the entire sign. Her eyes are twenty-ten, slightly better than mine for long distance. We go another hundred yards and then wait for the traffic to thin out before we cross to the other side of the highway. I think how a four-lane blacktop road along the beach in California has more cars on it than the Interstate that runs through all of New Mexico. So many people in such a small area. I will not miss this place.

Just ahead, a paved road runs up the hillside for 100 feet where there is an entrance booth with a guard limiting access. We are about forty feet from the booth and several cars move past us and stop for the attendant. One car is shiny with chrome and

Powder Blue paint and it has a distinctive hood ornament. "Did you see that hood ornament?" asks Myrrh.

"Yeah. It's all silver and looks a woman leaning into the wind like one of those Olympic ski jumpers."

Myrrh says, "That woman looks a lot like Mama."

"No way. You're crazy!"

"Just a thought," says Myrrh. "Let's follow behind it. I doubt anybody can see us at this place." Just then a small green Mercedes convertible loaded with several children our age passes by with a young girl making a face at us. "Forget I said that."

Inside, we take the elevators which deposits us at a small Roman amphitheater that is packed with kids. Many of the children have painted faces and costumes from the Roman times. There appear to be an older man and two girls in their twenties that are in charge of the production.

"Expect the unexpected. Let's paint our faces and arms with some of Jim's blood," says Myrrh and she pulls the veil out of her pocket, screws off the cap, and pours some into my hand. I color her forehead, cheeks and chin and draw some on her neck and drop some on the back of her exposed hands. She pours some blood on her hands and does the same for me.

Some young people break away from the production and move off in the distance and we follow them into the Getty museum. The Getty Villa is full of people of all ages, races and nationalities marveling at the architecture and the artifacts and creations contain therein.

"There must be some private area around here for a wedding?" I raise my tone on the word "wedding" to let Myrrh know this is a question. She gives no response and I am surprised by the musical voice of a man behind us.

"Looking for a private party?" He's dark skinned all over including a shaved head. How did he see us? I turn to face him but he walks past me and addresses Myrrh.

"Yes?"

"What?" she says.

"I saw you coming past the amphitheater and I wonder where your parents are?"

"They're walking around," replies Myrrh.

"There's a private party for those children with a medical condition. You look like you're splattered with blood, so I thought you may have adorned yourself for the occasion? Maybe a blood disorder?" No response from Myrrh and he almost sings, "I see you are very white, and you appear very faint. Were you sent here for the party?"

"Maybe. Where is it?"

"Follow me, please. My name is Delphi." He limps out his hand. "What may I call you?"

"Cleo," replies Myrrh. Delphi walks ahead of Myrrh and I follow behind my newly named sister.

"You flagged my interest. His voice seems to float above the noise of the crowds and it carries a strange accent. Not Russian or Spanish, the two foreign languages that I am familiar with. Maybe something out of the southern United States, with some Creole cadence in it? I'm not sure.

“Do you have anyone else with you? I mean beside your parents. Like someone your same age?”

“No.”

“That’s all right. I think you can have some fun here. We can accommodate you.” The man’s lips are too large and too red, but I don’t think he’s one of those Bat Fish that Jim was talking about. “We have some directors and producers and actors there.” He lifts his arms up expansively. “All kinds of fruits and cheeses and breads to satiate your appetite. Whatever you like to drink, we have it.”

“I’m looking for the wedding party,” says Myrrh. Delphi responds with a funny look over his shoulder as he moves into a thick crowd in a narrow hallway and splits it apart with his arms while we follow behind him.

“Is that where your parents are?”

“My mother should be there. She’s getting married today.”

“How lovely! I’ve never seen you before. How lovely is that. Are you new here?”

“First time.” The crowd fills in behind us and the noise swallows him up. “Lovely?” That man spoke of directors and producers and actors. Is this word peculiar to their industry or is this appellation prevalent throughout Los Angeles? I bet Mama could explain this. I hope we find her here. Then again, I hope maybe she isn’t here.

Another man, maybe twenty-five, twenty-six, stops Myrrh and Delphi. “What have we here?” He has smooth, hairless skin, like us. Unlike us, he has a purse draped from his shoulder. “Who is this boy with? Not you Delphi.” He puts his face closer to Myrrh. “I can’t hardly see him?” He says in a high voice, the pitch emitting through swollen lips. They look as if he had been struck in a fist fight. But they have no scrapes or bruises.

“We’re looking for his mother who is supposed to be the bride at a wedding around here?”

“I love weddings! I want to go with you.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Maybe. There’s one at Malibu for some professor. Then Topanga has one tonight. Is it supposed to be at the Villa?”

Myrrh nods.

He bites his swollen lower lip between his teeth and tilts his head off to an angle and turns his eyes to the sky. I think this must be his way of searching his memory. He must have a large memory because it takes many seconds and I worry that he may cause his lip to bleed, before he says, “nothing at the Villa as far as weddings. Just our monthly get together for the boys and girls, but I’m bored with that. We need to find something more exciting.” He reflects a few more moments and continues, “but there’s one down at the Beach House south of the Pier this afternoon. Big Production. Billionaire. Lots of security. Got to know somebody to get in.”

“We know his mother,” says Delphi. They exchange fist bumps and the man’s swollen lips part into a sly smile and reveal his perfectly cut teeth. He moves his right hand down along his jeans and my eyes follow it as he stops it at his belt. I see that his jeans are torn over each knee, revealing bare skin. Maybe his pants got torn when he fell to the ground after getting hit in his mouth.

“Were you in a fight?” I ask him and he looks around to find where the voice came from, but he doesn’t see me. He responds though, with, “no, Sonny, why do you

ask that?" I catch myself and then a short Latino man with blue-dyed short hair, bumps up against him and puts an arm around his waist.

"Telly! I thought that I was . . ." He stops when he sees Myrrh standing there. He has identical torn jeans. Maybe they had the fight together. Friendly battlers. "Who's your child?" he asks.

"Cleo," says Delphi. "This is David and you already know, Telly." They offer and Myrrh returns, fist bumps. I try to keep from bumping the new friends as we make it through the door and out to the pool where several laughing people are frolicking in the water. Villa guards stand along the Roman stone that edges the pool, motioning for the celebrants to come out.

"Cleo," says Delphi. "with now us four, do we need to bring anybody else to the wedding?"

"My dog," says Myrrh.

"Oh wonderful," says David. "Do you have a Jack Russell?" Myrrh shakes her head and says, "Russian wolfhound." She points across the waders to the far end of the pool where Bara stands like a statuary street performer.

"Lovely ! says Telly. "Looks like real life!" The three fellows laugh. "I'm having difficulty focusing on you, Cleo. Maybe somebody spiced up my water?" He giggles and the others join with him.

"Same for me," says David, moving closer. "Do you have some red paint on your face?" Myrrh nods. "I will not even ask you why," says David.

Delphi looks at his watch and says, “we got about two hours to crash into that wedding.” He asks Myrrh, “are you in the wedding party? Do we need to get there now?”

“No. It’s kind of a secret and she doesn’t know we’re going to be there.”

“Lovely. We can all surprise her when she sees us.” Delphi pauses and continues, “is your mother the one that’s marrying the Billionaire?”

“I think so.”

Telly laughs and winks at Delphi. “Oh this is going to be a funny wedding to crash! I just hope we have the right one.” He pulls out his cell phone and is about to dial when Delphi says, “none of that. We don’t want anybody else knowing about this besides those invited. That way will have a great story to tell and photographs to show and everyone will be jealous of us.” Telly puts away his phone with a big smile and nod of his head.

David says, “right one or wrong one, a wedding is always a good party to go to. A celebration of a coupling, with good food, excellent liquor, and great entertainment. Let’s look around here for an hour, then drive over to the Pier and head into the wedding.”

“I think we’re perfectly dressed,” says Telly. “The super-rich like to dress down. Besides, we are trendsetters.” He takes out a small compact from his purse. We must be getting close to Mama, as the cover for his compact is the Van Gogh Irises Flower, the same style that Mama sent to Aunt Flo three or four months ago. Telly opens it up and takes out a small green pill that he puts in his mouth. He holds out the compact to his friends and they each take one and put it in their mouths. He holds it towards Myrrh, who politely declines and he closes the cover and puts it back into his purse.



The three men move adjacent to the pool toward the Bara statuary, Myrrh trailing behind them. I move close and whisper, “you got Bara and the ring if there’s any problems. I’m going back to Silvia’s to get our stuff and find out where this Beach House is.”

She nods and walks away.

Chapter 24

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Silvia Redux

I take a leisurely walk back to Sylvia's and as I enter the front glass door I see her sitting indoors in her couch facing the Pacific Ocean. The ocean breeze flows into the house through the open door to the walkway above the ledge. Silvia is normal, agitated, speaking to herself and anyone or anything that is in earshot. She doesn't see me as I stop behind her.

“Howie! Howie! Howie! You dare devil, you. For you a woman was another crazy ride. Built some planes and boats and trains and crashed them all and screwed up your body so bad that you recused yourself from the world and turned into a spectator at the stage of Life when you should have remained the Attraction!” She lifts up a syringe in one hand and studies it. “Harroved your body and the drugs you had to take to alleviate the pain destroyed your brain and everything you promised me dissipated into this wizened Old Man when you were only in your fifties.” She is alone and drinks from the bottle. I put on my backpack and strap Myrrh's to my torso and grab the Urn. After a deep drink she continues, “when your Brigham's bought me this place and set up my trust account to keep my mouth closed and my legs spread only for you, you ended up killing me too.” She takes another long swig and lays her head back against the faded red leather couch. Her eyes are closed for many seconds and then she opens them and the whites are fully red and her peripheral vision picks out some of my form. “I see we may have a partial Lad in the house. A virgin beauty who should get out of this town before it eats him up. Before they make him an offer he cannot refuse. Before he gets a job working on his tan at some acreage high up in the hills with a one hundred eighty-degree view of this here Pacific Ocean.” How can she see part of me? Nobody saw me

at the Villa. Why her? She motions her bottle to the sea. The only way to find this Beach House is to interject myself into her conversation.

“No wedding at the Getty!”

She shifts on the couch toward me. Her eyes are more crimson than red, the murky whites seeming to pulsate as she changes focus and mumbles. “Good God, boy, no wonder I have trouble seeing you and they cannot find you. I thought you only existed in the silent movies. But you speak?” She dismisses her words with a downward wave of her hand. “I lied about the Getty.” Then she sits up a little, “so you were here yesterday to hear me talking, running my lines for your benefit?”

“Yes,” I affirm her.

She motions to me. “Come to me my pretty one. I can help you. Come close to me.” She can’t help herself much less me, and she takes a drink and then continues, “so that I can touch you and take you to them.” Silvia struggles to her feet, bottle waving slowly and wildly in one hand, the syringe in the other. “How did she have two of you so alike, that even with good eyes and a touch of sin in your presence, I can barely make you out? I know you’re only what, twelve years of age, and you grew up in the country in God-awful New Mexico, but surely in this day and age there must have been some kind of education going on with you two or did you spend your days and nights out in the woods or in a barn with the livestock? Did you people ever get out in the world? No wonder she felt driven out of that place you call 'home.' Jesus H. Christ!”

“I don’t understand,” I say.

Silvia moves toward my side. The spirits, her awareness of me with her glaucoma-vision, and what other infirmities she may have, direct her. “Come here you

little bastard, where ever you are. He promised me a seat next to him if I corralled you and had him pick you up. Come here.” I let her slide past me, now with her back to me. “I saw you two on the video at Bull’s freight yard, clear and beautiful.”

I know I have to insult her to get answers. “Howard Huge? Ha! You were one of dozens that he housed in decrepit quarters with promises of marriage and notoriety and take a look in the mirror to see what a monster you have become!” She turns around, a pulsating wide red-eyed wrinkled up Old Woman with crimson lips to match her sclera. “You’re such an embarrassment they won’t even let you into the Beach House!”

“Wrong, Buster!” She gesticulates toward the Pier and continues, “their sending a limo for me in thirty minutes and I’ll be right down there with your sister and you joining the rest of your family in death while our religion and family flourish!

My derision worked and I move out the door to the southern ledge and give her one more, “You crazed lifeless shadow of a human being!” She follows me to the door jam and I see her finger Jim’s blood and a small bruise on that finger begins to grow. “You might want to pack your bikini because you’re headed for the hot spot. But then again, who would want to look at that?” I point at her. Backpacks on and Urn in hand, I leap down the cliff and only glance back to see Silvia perspiring and evaporating and reaching into the distance, where she loses her balance and begins her fall down the hill.

## Chapter 25

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### Santa Monica Pier

I am gone, across the deserted coast highway with an alacrity that no longer surprises me. There is no one on the beach. No airplanes or helicopters or drones in the sky. Did some studio pay to close down this stretch of the town to shoot a big scene for their movie?

I run toward the Pier which appears to be two miles distant. To my right the ocean is empty of ships or people, to my left, the houses on the cliffs above the vacant Coast Highway seem lifeless. Now there are no gulls to cry at me. No terns to jump out of my way. No California girls to speak my future to me with their easy movements. I am headed to where others are to join Sylvia in imminent death – I hope that my family is not among them.

After several minutes of running, I stop to get my bearings and get my breath. Where is this Beach House? I see two long new black limousines in a parking lot up near the deserted Pacific Coast Highway. Three men dressed in black stand outside the vehicles. It looks like one of them has binoculars and he aims it from the Pier to past me, so I don't believe I am visible to him.

I take deep, slow breaths and slip all thoughts from my brain, clearing it to whatever energy might come into me. It does quickly. First as a quiet sound in my left ear, feet moving lightly over sand and then receding behind the sound of a lapping sea.

I think, "Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me." I reach into my backpack and finger my father's Cross necklace. I feel good.

I am close to the Pier. There is nobody around. Through the pilings I see on the other side myriad people dressed in all black. Hoodies over heads. Trousers down to bare ankles as they lift and drop their feet on the sand in unison.

Where is Myrrh? Where is Bara? I stop under the Pier and note the sharp barnacles covering the pilings from the mean high tide mark down to the sand. I walk further under the Pier and stop, for tied against a piling close to me, I see a pair of hands corded at the wrists so tight that they are bruised with coagulated blood. I glance at the face and it is one of the boys from the Getty Villa. I turn away from the needle marks in his neck and see a second boy in the same condition at an adjacent piling. Two small marks along each of their necks inform me that they have been drained of their blood. The Masai energy booster from the Stagecoach Restaurant. I see no others but hear a whimper and move to find Bara leaning weakly against a piling. She warms to my touch and I kneel down and discover deep lacerations along both sides of her rib cage and a bloody mouth missing some teeth. Her eyes are swollen, half-closed and I say, "you done good, girl, you done real good. I'll take over from here." I open up a sealed package of raw meat from my backpack and give it to her. She eats slowly. A litany from the robots chanting, "Heil Philip, heil Philip, heil Philip," draws my attention two hundred feet away. "Artificial intelligence." Ha. I don't consider them intelligent. These clones are given all their information by Murnau to execute his orders. They cannot think for themselves. They are limited by the data given to them and perform in

accordance with their software. If they are tapped into the Internet information grid, then they must be terribly contradicted. How could they be consistent AIs with the changing landscape of information that is fed into that beast?

Now I see Myrrh in the center of their irregular circle and then I switch focus and I see two figures dressed all in white moving from the sand down to the robots. Probably Murnau, and who else walks in his sphere?

I open a bottle of fresh water and pour it in my cupped hand for Bara to drink and she laps it up. Behind a piling twenty feet away from me, the face of the third boy that was with Myrrh, I remember his name as being Delphi, peers toward me and watches Myrrh lap the fresh water.

“What are you drinking nice dog? Please save some for me.” He sees only Bara, not me nor the AI behind him that jumps through the sea water and snaps his neck with a quick hard twist. The robot takes the lifeless body and holds it straight up against the piling while he wraps a cord around Delphi’s wrist. It pulls the arms around the piling til they almost meet, and then ties the cord to the boy’s other wrist. The barnacles cut into Delphi’s lifeless arm and his blood runs down to his elbows and across the barnacles. The AI let’s go the body and it is held straight up by the arms tight against the piling. The robot cups its hand to catch some blood, and when there is a sufficient amount, it puts it to its mouth and slurps. It repeats itself.

Bara has almost finished drinking all the fresh water and I wonder how do I free Myrrh from the besetting robots without Bara’s support. I take two deep breaths and relax into myself. This is not my first dance. I have the span of the universe in my soul and I stop thinking. Bara finishes the water and I put the empty bottle in my backpack

while I watch the thirsty AI. I pull out a piece of twine and tie it around her collar and secure the Urn to the other end. I let it dangle and it holds. I take out the ring from the pocket of her collar and look at it closely and put it in my pocket. I pull out a blood vial and motion to the AI who steps toward me. Like the priest ringing the bells of mass, I ring the veil onto the AI's face and body. It quickly dissolves into the sea.

I move away from the Pier to circle behind the robots. The water comes up to my belly button, about two and one-half feet deep. I am close to them, about ninety feet from the edge of the circle backing out towards the surf, when I feel the rubber bounce against my thigh and look down at a dolphin who rolls over to reveal a faded scar across her lower body. I know that I exchange a wink with her, though her eyes stay open. Now fifty feet from the circle and I stop to let them come to me. Myrrh is in the center. Her shirt torn red over her lacerated left arm, blood on her forehead, eyes closed. There is no chanting now, just the lapping of the small waves as the circle slowly backs toward me. I feel different rubber on my other thigh and I look down to see a baby white shark. Baby being seven feet in length. I know they frequently hunt in groups.

I pull out two vials of Jim's blood, one in each hand, as three clones back into me and I draw blood lines across their lower backs and throw the vial in my left hand at them. The only sounds of their termination is their collapsing into the sea where their bodies are taken away by the white pointers. The fractured circle moves past me before it closes up the hole and then I am next to Myrrh of the closed eyes and whisper, "take this vial. I have more in my pack." She does and I start to fade in as Murnau shouts,



“Did you cause that?” No response and then he sees a little of me and says, “Welcome to the final wrap party.”

The rain storm is moving in from the south and the preceding clouds slowly roll the shade over our group. Now the sun is on me, and now follows the dimness. Mama follows behind Murnau in ankle deep water, and first they are lit as a couple and then he is in the dusk as the sunrays stay on her. She is so beautiful. She wears a pure white cotton dress that stops below her knees and above the waterline which is now up to her calves. A white woolen-knit sweater keeps her warm in the cool afternoon. Her long hair is pure gold and tied up into a ponytail that hangs down her back. Eventually the sunlight walks past her, and she takes off her dark sunglasses which are identical to the ones that Murnau keeps on. Her blue eyes are dulled and she doesn't look directly at Myrrh. I do not feel that she can see me.

“Beautiful, isn't she?” his smile looks like a smirk to me. “Can you imagine the beautiful offspring we will have?” He waits many seconds, fully believing his crassness will out my anger and stoke my full visibility. It doesn't and he finally continues, “I love a challenge. Always have.” Murnau speaks slowly and I reach my left hand into my backpack and pull out Papa's Urn. Murnau continues, “of course you came. I knew it. I didn't see you two at first. No sense of your presence.” He pauses, “but I see you now. Not like most of the others. They give off sin. Some people glow with it, seemingly proud of their accomplishments. You two didn't even throw shadows. Amazing.” He pauses his monologue and I search his face from the distance, but his shades keep my search superficial. Golden hair, pale skin, large reddish lips, white suit over a white shirt with a red handkerchief tucked into a lapel. Dressed almost identical to our meeting at his

father's funeral at the Cape – now I know he didn't see me there. He's bare foot and the water reaches over his trouser cuffs. He continues, "You slowly started to appear, like the footlights coming up for the play with the players moving on stage, until I had a vague idea of your presence. I couldn't make you out at Canaveral. Like a blind spot in a good eye. I caught a refraction of you, but nothing tangible. Then I decided to bring you out, in a manner of speaking. That's what the manner of death of your father and this fabricated wedding was for. He would've died anyway but I would never have seen you to terminate you." He stops and smiles, "I use 'you' in the plural form. Thought I had you with the Jim Beam man, but you got away. I had to go back to LA for business so I left some minions to finish you or cattle-prod you to the coast. Then it was only a matter of time. I wanted to draw it out, have some fun. Such a boring job that I have. Most are not like you, they wear their greed and coveting on their sleeve for all the world to see. And they have this great fear of death. But not you." Murnau pauses and looks around at the Pier, the Sea, the Clouds, and the Circle of AIs. "And now you are here, my Lovelies." I shake my vial and throw the liquid on some robots. The Whites take them away, the circle closes, and I see my arm blocking my view of the sea. I am completely visible.

Myrrh opens her eyes. Several of her tears wash them, and she focuses past him and says, "Mama?"

A response is slow to come and when it does, it seems to stutter out of her lips. "Byrrh?" mumbles Mama.

She doesn't mention my name, though she botched that of Myrrh. Is she lucid enough to remember that I am the unfavorite?

Murnau smiles at us. "I brought her down here to give you one more look. To see if she has thoughts of either of you. I don't think so." He looks back to Mama and then turns back to me and says, "I didn't find the ring on your sister. That means you must have it? It will be a lot easier for your family if you give it to me now." The smirk is still on his face. His lips are redder than I remember, but I attribute this to the dark clouds that now cover the entire sky.

"You have her on drugs. There's no other way she would ever be with you."

He chuckles to himself, looks around and spreads his arms out from his sides, "Most of them come over to me on their own accord. The only drug necessary is LA, Hollywood, and all the possibilities and fulfillment of the dark dreams that all of these people have." He rubs the Gold ring on his left hand. "I have mine, you have the one designated for your mother. Let's say that you are the ringbearer for our putative marriage, your last act before your death and ignominious funeral. I will celebrate both with the same meal of baked meats and imported wines and your mother will gradually forget you ever existed."

Myrrh looks at me and says, "I saw Papa and I wanted to go with him." She is quiet while Murnau pulls Mama behind him. "Papa said, 'not yet.'"

Murnau says, "You should have gone. It would have been better for you. Less torment." He places his hands before him, like the puppet master at Roy's Café. He moves his hands in an effort to make me his marionette and dance like Jim did. I am surprised that it works. I try to fight it, but my body pays no attention to my mind and I stoop over, my head going closer to the water. I am afraid he's going to drown me and I drop my hands to my side so that Myrrh can slip the backpacks over my Urn hand and

free hand. As I hit the water, I reach my right hand in my pocket and pull out the ring and try to throw a lightning bolt at him, but nothing happens except his ghoulish laugh. I am standing stooped with my head under the water and I feel him grab the ring from my hand and then my whole-body collapses under the surface of the sea.

How long can I hold my breath? Do I really want to hold my breath? Maybe I should go join Papa and Don and all the others that have gone before. I feel the white pointer against me and I have no fear, for this is only a body. I feel my spirit starting to rise above me and I think maybe the second time is a charm. Forever in everlasting love.

No pain. No pain. But why is my left hand burning up? Why is this Urn on fire and going through my wrists and elbows and into my shoulders with excruciating pain? My right hand grabs my neck and I need oxygen and it slides down to Papa's cross and pulls it up above the water with my head following to the air and I again feel that damn dolphin tossing me above the ocean, hands holding out urn and cross.

"Don't do that!" cries Murnau as he harshly unfurls his hand at me and I note a slight current of energy shoot past me where it burns into one of the black hooded clones who falls into the water with a sizzle. Murnau tries again and the energy moves over Myrrh and takes out another clone. Sharks take them both away. The circle closes up and the clones are almost touching us and I shout to Myrrh, "Now throw the blood!" She does and the remaining AIs crumble into the sea. I move in front of Myrrh and hold the cross to block an electric throw by Murnau.

"Damn!" he cries out.

Now the circle only exists in a red blood-oil slick around us. The white pointers have removed everything else. About fifty feet further into the ocean shark tails slash and flash as clothing and electrical wires and other flotsam is tossed into the air. Organ eaters. White pointers always spit out wetsuits and fiberglass when they mistakenly grab surfers. They treat robots no differently.

Murnau grabs Mama and pulls her behind him as he makes it to the dry sand and runs toward the Pier. I discover electricity which I throw way past him. I know my limitations and don't want to harm her. He stops and releases her and fires a charge that I slip like a prize fighter from a heavy right hand, but still stumble to the sand. He fires again and my concurrent throw collides with his second throw causing a wide swath of fire and smoke between us. I crawl backwards and we again fire at one another, causing another explosion, but this time the electricity jolts back from the cloud in both directions, and his hand and my hand burn deeply. Murnau unfurls his left hand toward me but nothing comes forth. I do the same with my left hand to the same result. The powers are gone.

Myrrh helps me stand up. Except for the burn, I am OK. Murnau is under the Pier with Mama where he meets a dozen or so AIs and he sends them toward us. Bara hobbles over to us and Myrrh pats her head and then does a wobbly walk toward Murnau for twenty feet ahead of us. She stops and gauges the line between Murnau and me. In the sand, with the heel of her foot, she draws a perpendicular line across our plane to Murnau. She stops her drawing at thirty feet wide and then slowly walks back to us. As the robots rush toward us, she raises her hand and her line breaks into a deep crevice and the robots fall over one another into it like lemmings over a cliff. Then she

closes the crevice with another movement of her hand. The sand gurgles with steam and then smokes like a foreboding volcano. Murnau stands still, watching this with us for about a minute. Waiting. The eruption eventually comes with the bursting sand throwing up smoke, rubber, wires, shark skin and detritus tinged blood red.

He has seen enough. Murnau leaves Mama and breaks into a run under the other side of the Pier toward the vehicles and drivers that I saw when I first came down here. They are about three-hundred yards from us. A drone suddenly appears high in the sky near where he is running.

I grasp the Cross with my right hand and it miraculously heals. Myrrh has the backpacks and I take them and put them on the dry sand. I kneel and pull out the pieces of Myrrh's bow and secure it in place. Then I loop the bowstring in place and test it. It feels strong and my right hand feels supple. "I need maybe three of those charged arrow tips." Myrrh reaches into her backpack and pulls out a leather pouch and holds up the three requested arrows. She gives me one.

"Showtime," she mumbles.

I notch the arrow and slowly draw the string back and then release it. It flies toward the drone. The drone operator must have thought that was my target, so the drone slides to the side, and the arrow speeds harmlessly past it. Shortly thereafter the sounds of numerous rounds being fired off from automatic weapons fill the venue. Then there is a loud explosion and the gun fire ceases. I can see through the Pier pilings the bonfires of the shattered limousine carriages licking at the sky.

I shift my gaze through the pilings and see Murnau moving away from the flaming cars and now running along the shoreline.

“I’m going after him. Gather our things and Mama and follow me at your own speed.” I take off, initially at a trot as I need to get the kinks out of my legs. I feel loose at the Pier and as I make it to the other side I see Murnau about half a mile ahead. Emergency trucks are to the flaming carriages and their water hoses blanket the fires, leaving white smoke to mark the destructed vehicles. I begin the sprint of a twelve-year-old boy with long legs carrying a baton of an Urn in my quest to win the relays for my team at the State Finals.

Seven hundred yards. Murnau is slow for his age. Six hundred. He glances over his shoulder and almost trips over a berm of sand. Five hundred. I can see the sweat lining his trousers. Four hundred. He flings his jacket off. Three hundred. He falls panting to the sand and quickly gets up and resumes at a half-gait. Two hundred. The back of his dress shirt is soaked. One hundred and he turns and crouches with one hand on a knee and the other hand high in the air as he speaks only on the quick breaths-out, “No mas. You have me.” And I run up to him and plant the Urn on his forehead and he tumbles into the moist sand covered by the incoming tide. I stop five feet away.

He lays on his side in the shallow sea and I see blood dropping into the pooling water.

“OK,” he still pants. “Now what?” I don’t know what the answer is. “You can prove nothing against me. I know this is beyond the experiences of your age, but to use legalistic jingo, ‘you have no evidence of any wrong doing,’ and if any ever did exist, don’t you think my lawyers would deny, and then object to its use and it would

disappear forever?" He unfurls his hand to the air. "Whoosh." He smirks at his sound effect.

"Twenty-seven people died at the Cape," I say.

"But not you. A real tragedy." He eyes as blue as mine and I return the stare. I see an almost imperceptible shake of his head and he says, "Twenty-eight when you count my father." He's exhausted from the run up and the blow to his head and he struggles to sit up from the water. "You have some unusual gifts. A worthy adversary. Robots need adjustments." I don't know what he means. I don't know what anything means anymore. I look down the beach to see Myrrh and Mama and Bara limping toward me, a quarter of a mile distant as rain begins to gently fall. A half mile behind them I see an Army sedan parked next to the emergency vehicles. Then they are no longer visible in the mist and he points to my cross and says, "you are one of the few, the very few, who actually follow the teachings of your reputed Savior. That is what saved you, and that is what will save me. Help me up." He holds his hand up to me and seems surprised when I don't grasp it.

The light rain slowly moves over to us and stops like a thin curtain of water. It doesn't wet us and is immediately swallowed by the sand. After several seconds, it morphs into heavy drops and flanks us so that we are in a small space akin to the eye of a hurricane. It's like a gray sheet of rainwater has been drawn around us, and I look straight up to see a dot of blue sky.

Me and Murnau. Man of Infinite Greed. A Coveter. Nothing else in our little closure except his words of enormous substance. The tide rolls in higher and he sits up to keep his head dry as it swirls past over his thighs and he starts to kneel up. "Don't



worry. She's beautiful, but a dime a dozen in this town and I . . ." The Urn smashes down on the top of his head with a crushing blow.

I cannot fathom whether I did that or the Urn acted from its own volition as I quietly say, "God of the Old Testament." He sprawls on his stomach, his hands by his sides, and they seem to quiver lightly. Then the water recedes back to the sea, his body floating with it. The eye of our rainstorm moves with him and I walk with the body, anticipating what will happen next.

My dolphin appears, and like a tugboat, she nudges the body to deeper water where she is met by a White Pointer. The dolphin turns back and ushers me out of the burgeoning red water and the eye of the rain collapses and I am drenched to the sound of lightning cracking overhead. I walk out of the water onto the soaked sand and wait for visibility of my family. It takes several minutes but we see one another as the curtains on the shoreline slip apart, leaving the heavy rain and restricted visibility over the ocean. Myrrh holds tightly to Mama while Bara brings up the rear with one pack seemingly stuffed with both our belongings. We meet and I look into the eyes of my mother and give her a warm hug. She has no strength, but she does lean into me. Myrrh knows not to ask any questions or even say anything. I say to Mama, "do you have your cell phone with you?" She has to think about it and then she nods. I point toward Pacific Coast Highway, away from the emergency vehicles and Army sedan that are no longer visible to us, and say, "let's walk up to the highway and call a taxi and get out of this town. We need to go south."

Now the traffic is picking up on the highway. Our driver shows up and we promise her some extra money for her Bara riding shotgun. Myrrh gets in first, Mama

second, and just before I step in I slip Mama's cell phone under the rear back wheel and close myself in the backseat. The taxi begins to roll off, I say, "please stop for a second, I think I dropped something outside." I pull a paper bag from the backpack, step out of the idling taxi, go back and pick up the crushed phone and stuff it in the bag. It's destined for the first incinerator that we see in San Diego.

Our ride passes under the California Street bridge and we leave the Pacific Coast Highway and merge onto Interstate 10 where the western sun breaks out and a rainbow appears in the eastern sky.

And so it begins.

Chapter 26

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Moving South