

## CENTURY

The overpriced Sierra Vista Assisted Living Center wasn't what Connor would've chosen for himself, but of the five centers they'd checked out together this was the one Roy liked best, albeit reluctantly, having long resisted "assisted living" as a service for old people. Roy had opted for Sierra Vista because it was outside the Phoenix sprawl, not too dandified, and offered an unobstructed view of the mountains. He'd also heard through the geezer grapevine that the kitchen was run by a Mexican cook legendary for her top-shelf chile rellenos.

Having motored most of the way from Taos the day before and spent the night in a motel—his monthly ritual—it was a little past noon when Connor drove up the curving asphalt lane and entered the sprawling grounds through a stone archway. Silhouetted on a rise in the desert against a cobalt blue sky, the imposing structure of brown stucco topped by a red tiled roof resembled a country club, with its abundance of green lawn, colorful flowers and well-trimmed shrubbery.

Connor parked in the visitors' lot, grabbed a small blue cooler from beneath the pickup cap, and hurried up the concrete walkway. Entering the reception area he heard sounds of lunch being served in the dining room: chattering voices, laughter, clattering dishes. Something smelled good. He was halfway across the tiled floor, homing in on the men's room, when Helga Young stepped out of the main office, holding a brown paper bag.

"He's not in his apartment," she said. "You'll find him in the courtyard."

Connor could tell Helga wasn't pleased by this. She was a tall, rawboned woman in her mid-fifties, with short graying hair, winsome gray eyes, a wide, oddly crooked mouth and posture so erect that Connor suspected she wore a back brace. When he asked if Roy was behaving himself, she complained that he refused to attend the rollicking party they'd planned for his birthday, contending their diabolical intent was to capitalize on his age for the purpose of cheap publicity.

"And might he be right about that?" Connor asked with a grin.

Helga pushed out her lips in a feigned pout. "It's not every day that one of our residents turns one hundred. We did invite a newspaper reporter and photographer—an invitation we've now rescinded. Angela baked Roy a lovely chocolate cake—"

"Surely she knows by now he hates sweets."

"Among other things." Helga frowned. "Oh, someone called to wish him a happy birthday. A woman, but Roy refused to speak to her."

Connor hesitated. "A woman?"

"Claimed she was his daughter? Said her name was Marsha?"

“Okay,” he said. “I do have a younger sister named Marsha.”

“And yet he swears he doesn’t have a daughter. I was afraid maybe dementia . . . but his recent wellness check looked okay.”

“They don’t like each other,” Connor said. “I’m surprised Marsha even bothered to call.”

“He *can* be abrasive, can’t he.”

“You should know.”

Helga was one of the few staff members who could tolerate Roy, and in return he seemed to abuse her more than he did the others. It was Roy who’d hung the nickname “Nazi” on Helga, after she made the mistake of telling him about her father, a low-level Nazi who’d surrendered to the British at the end of World War II and later worked for them as a military interpreter. Eventually he and his wife emigrated to England, where Helga was born. While still in her teens, Helga married an American soldier stationed in England and accompanied him to the states. When her husband was killed in a training accident, she’d never remarried.

Helga handed Connor the bag. “This is for our birthday boy. Tell him we’ll just have to party on without him.” Entwining her fingers at her waist, one thumb fiddling with the other, she added, “By the way . . . care to join me for dinner this evening? At my place? Nothing fancy—just meatloaf and mashed potatoes.”

Connor was seized by a moment of panic. He liked Helga and had detected during his visits that she might like him, but he wasn’t attracted to her. It had been a while since he’d been attracted to any woman, an issue he was content with. He tried not to sound brusque as he

alibied, “Appreciate the invite, but I plan on starting back before dinner. Have to be home by tomorrow evening . . . an important appointment.”

Helga nodded with a faint smile of regret and turned away.

In the men’s room, standing before the urinal at last, Connor sighed with relief. Every time this urgency struck—and due to an enlarged prostate it happened with increasing frequency—he was reminded of a childhood incident on a night long ago when his parents left him outside a bar. “Stay in the car,” his dad instructed, “we won’t be gone long.”

Connor loved cars. On his knees in the driver’s seat, both hands gripping the steering wheel, he pretended to be speeding down a highway. The front of the car faced the bar’s door and every time it opened Connor heard the jukebox playing. He was steering madly when two angry men shoved a drunk man out the door. Sprawled on the sidewalk, the man lay motionless for a minute, partly shielded by the car’s hood, only the backs of his splayed legs, clad in jeans and cowboy boots, visible. After several minutes Connor saw one leathery hand reach up and grasp the chrome hood ornament. Bit by bit the man hauled himself up, until his head appeared above his hand. He must’ve hit the lamp post when he fell: bright red blood seeped through his long black hair and streamed down his ruddy face.

The man had trouble focusing, until at last he focused on Connor. Without averting his gaze, he pulled himself up to full height. To Connor he looked like an Indian. His shirt was torn at the shoulder, the buttons ripped off down to the navel. Groping clumsily, he felt his way along the side of the car and each step he took drove Connor to slide lower in the seat. By the time the man reached the driver’s window, Connor had sunk to his knees on the floorboard.

The man flattened his broad nose against the glass and peered down past the steering wheel into Connor's face. The car door was unlocked, Connor realized, but he was too terrified to reach up and lock it. At any moment he expected the man to open the door and grab him. His heart drumming inside his chest seemed to actually make his shirt pulsate. That wide brown oval face, covered with blood, was the scariest thing he'd ever seen.

Then the man did something that instantly broke the tension—he crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at Connor.

After the drunk moved on, Connor was left with an urgent need to pee. He was afraid to leave the car—he knew better than to disobey his dad. Peeing in his pants was unthinkable—big boys didn't do that. He considered opening the door just enough to pee in the street, but somebody might see him. In desperation he looked all around. The car was a big, black four-door sedan with large chrome ashtrays everywhere: in the dash, behind the front seat, in the arm rests. Rather than let his bladder burst, Connor filled the ashtrays one by one with steaming piss.

By the time his mom and dad emerged from the bar, his stomach was cramped with anxiety. During the drive home he worried that his dad would light a cigarette and open an ashtray. He agonized much of that night and throughout the next day that his dad would come home from work and take off his belt, promising, "I'm gonna wear your britches out, boy."

For days Connor made himself sick with worry, until it finally dawned on him that nothing was going to happen, that the desecration had apparently gone unnoticed. But how could that be? Now, seventy years later, he still wondered about the incident. Had it even happened, or had he just dreamed it?

Connor washed his hands, picked up the cooler and brown bag, and went looking for Roy.

Sierra Vista's large rectangular inner courtyard had been tastefully landscaped with native flora: a tall saguaro, Joshua trees, alligator juniper, agave, ocotillo, yucca, holly-leaf buckthorn. In place of grass, the courtyard's main surface was covered with three different colors of gravel, intersected by curving flagstone paths. Near the center of the courtyard was a fish pond with a fountain; beyond this a gazebo. Connor spotted Roy inside the gazebo, slumped on a cushioned wooden bench that ringed the interior.

"Happy birthday!" Connor sang out.

Squinting behind thick glasses, Roy looked up at his son. He wore navy blue trousers, a tan, short-sleeved shirt, red suspenders. His knotty hands lay motionless in his lap. Once he'd been a handsome, muscular man with a full head of black hair combed straight back from his forehead. His thinning hair had now turned pearl gray, his swarthy complexion had faded. He was smaller, both in height and weight. He still worked out some—walking, stretching, light weight lifting—and his muscle tone and flat stomach, as well as a dearth of wrinkles, made him appear younger than his age.

Connor set the cooler on the Gazebo's redwood floor. "How does it feel knowing you've lived for a hundred years?"

"You don't wanta know," Roy said. "What's in there? Beer I hope."

"And a Subway foot-long. Peppers and onions, black olives."

"No cake," Roy said with satisfaction.

“I know better than that. They were just trying to be nice, Roy.” Connor sat down on the curving bench and faced his dad. He opened the brown bag and pulled out a brightly wrapped present with a big blue bow. “From Helga,” he said, passing the gift to Roy. “Open it first, then we’ll eat.”

“Little Miss Nazi? No thanks.”

“Looks like a book. And she’s not a Nazi, Roy. Shouldn’t call her that. Helga wasn’t even born till after the war. Her father was the Nazi.”

“Blood’s thicker than water.”

“Yeah. Some people say you’re an asshole but that doesn’t make me one.”

Roy chuckled. “I been called worse. Bet you have too.”

Connor took a deep breath. “Why’d you tell Helga you don’t have a daughter? Why wouldn’t you talk to Marsha? Why do you treat your own daughter like crap?”

“She’s not my daughter.”

“Of course she’s your daughter.”

Roy sniffed. “A real daughter would come visit.”

“After you told her to stay away?”

“She should come anyhow, same as you do.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Does to me.”

Connor snatched the gift back and tore off the wrapping. “Looky there,” he said. “*The Spell of the Yukon*. Boy oh boy. How’d Helga know you love Robert Service?”

“You told her, that’s how. How big’s the print?”

Connor opened the book. “Not big enough. I can read it to you, though. How about *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*? You used to read me that one.”

“First give me a beer, some of that sub.”

Connor laid the book aside and used the bottle-opener on his pocket knife to pop the cap on a Corona. He handed the bottle to Roy and wiped the largest blade on his pants leg, before slicing the sub across the middle. He placed each half on a paper plate, along with a napkin, and passed one plate to Roy. He tore open a jumbo bag of Fritos and propped it on the bench between them.”

“Forget the lime?” Roy asked.

“No way.” Connor fished a lime out of the cooler. He cut two angular slices and handed one to Roy. He opened a second Corona and held it up. “Here’s to a century of hard living,” he said, tapping Roy’s bottle.

Roy took a long swig and gasped, teary-eyed. “Good golly Miss Molly, that is good.”

“Make it last, Roy. One’s your limit.”

“Bullshit. Couple more down there—one for you, one for me. Seeing it’s my birthday, maybe both for me.”

“Want Helga to skin my ass?”

“That kraut’ll do more to your ass than skin it.”

Connor laughed. “Too young for me. Is she making sure you take your medication and drops?”



“Those eye drops aren’t worth a hill of beans.” Roy bit into his sub and Connor marveled at the whiteness of his teeth. He still had nearly all of them, including his wisdom teeth.

For a time they ate in silence, before Roy said, “Tell me something.” Connor waited for him to swallow. “How come you haven’t remarried?”

Connor shrugged his shoulders. “Too much trouble, I guess.”

“Hard to find women like we had, huh? Sheila was a lot like your mom.”

“I’d have to agree.”

“But Marsha, that damned girl—she as much as accused me of killing your mom.”

Connor cocked his head. “I don’t think she went that far, Roy. She’s told me how she feels. She thinks the life we lived was unnecessarily hard. She thinks it shortened Mom’s life.”

“And she hates me for that?”

“Marcia doesn’t hate you, Roy. She’s afraid of you.”

“Was it really that hard?”

Connor knew his sister was a wuss, pampered to a fault by their mom. Marsha was as much to blame as Roy for the estrangement. For Connor, their nomadic life had been exciting: always moving somewhere different, never knowing what the next place, the next school would be like. Hardscrabble oilfield towns in Louisiana, Texas, Colorado, California, New Mexico—whenever and wherever Roy’s itchy feet took him. Living in tarpaper shacks, duplexes, one-bedroom trailers, drafty old farmhouses. One shabby little town in Wyoming—if you could even call it a town—where they’d lived for several years had been so far out in the

middle of nowhere, surrounded by miles and miles of sagebrush, it lacked even electricity. The general store, gas station, bar and café had to be hooked to generators. All the rental houses—shacks really—received free natural gas from the oil company to fuel space heaters and mantles for light. Behind every house stood an outhouse.

But Connor had been adaptable. Only when he reached his teens, in California, and had to leave his girlfriend behind, did he come to view their lifestyle as problematic.

But what about his mom? He remembered her having more than one miscarriage. And once a blocked intestine that resulted in gangrene nearly killed her. A couple of years later adhesions from the first operation nearly killed her again. He remembered her straining to hand pump water into buckets and pans to heat on a gas cookstove, bending over a galvanized tub—the same tub he bathed in every Sunday night—to scrub their clothes on a rub-board. Bundling up to venture outside in freezing wind to hang the clothes on a line, where they immediately froze. Standing over an ironing board ironing starched khakis and blue jeans. She'd had few conveniences to ease her workload. Why hadn't he helped her more? Why hadn't he been more thoughtful, instead of being just like his dad? Because his mom let him get away with it, that's why.

"It was hard on her," he said. "Raising two kids, moving all the time. How much of her intestine did they cut out that time?"

"Too much," Roy said. "She was tough enough, all right, except for that gut. She always had spirit, but her gut was weak. She waited too long to complain."

Connor flushed with sudden resentment. "She didn't like to complain. She knew you'd

see it as weakness. God only knows why she put up with you, Roy. You'd come home from work and sit down to a good supper every evening, then like as not you'd mosey down to the nearest bar and blow most of your paycheck playing poker or shooting craps. You never worried, not about anything. But Mom did. Mom worried. Your irresponsibility, your recklessness, your philandering. The life she lived was harsh, Roy. It wore her out, that's a fact. Wore her heart out, not her gut. Forty-seven. That's too young to die."

Roy kept staring straight ahead. "She put up with me because she loved me," he said finally. "And what was I doing besides all that other stuff? Making a living, that's what."

"Yeah, I will give you that."

"Had to go where the construction was, boy, or where they were drilling for oil. Where somebody would pay me a living wage to roughneck, skin a Cat, fit a pipe, drive a hot oil truck, weld something." He grinned at Connor. "I even won at poker now and then."

Connor tried to keep from grinning back. "Guess I wasn't aware of it."

"Life was hard, sure, but not *that* hard. Not really. Not compared to the Great Depression. Read *The Grapes of Wrath*. You don't remember any of that. Your mom and I experienced it firsthand. We were more afraid of fear itself than we were a hard life. She never complained—not to me she didn't. Saw it all as some romantic adventure. We were incurable romantics. Marsha doesn't know what hard is. I thought we had a pretty good life."

"God, Mom should've complained," Connor said. "Should've given you an earful. But she was too scared to speak up. We all were. You could be scary, Roy. You terrified Marsha. Still do. I can understand why she blames you for Mom's death. It came too soon."

“You were a handful, yourself,” Roy said. “From the get-go—you know that? When you started driving, your mom and I worried you wouldn’t make it through your teens. Drag racing, speeding tickets, that time you rolled my Ford. Your mom couldn’t handle you, she gave up trying. Somebody had to make you toe the line.”

It was hot in the gazebo, but not unbearably so. An intermittent breeze wafted through. Roy kept staring at the fountain until it drew Connor’s attention. It looked antique: intertwined cupids supporting a top basin, surmounted by another winged cupid in bronze. The cascading water made Connor think of the Rio Grande Gorge, not far from Taos. He’d driven out there more than once this past year, to stand on the long bridge that spanned the gorge, lean over the railing and stare down at the rapid-splotched river over five-hundred feet below. Trying to get up his nerve to jump, like many others had before him.

Then he’d remember Roy and back away.

The glass door leading into the courtyard opened and a stooped, white-haired woman toddled out. Tapping her cane on the flagstone, she shielded her eyes with the other hand to gaze at the gazebo and in a croaking tremolo sang a few lines of “Happy Birthday,” before ducking back inside.

“Mildred Bell,” Roy said. “Babe’s got the hots for me.”

“I can see that,” Connor said.

“Well, I’m done now. You can tell Marsha. She’ll be glad to hear it.”

“Done?”

“Hit my mark.”

Connor set his beer down on the bench. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Wanted to live to a hundred. Time to hang her up now.”

“You’re gonna live a lot longer, Roy.”

“What’s the point?” Roy asked. “Realistically? You think it’s fun being this old?”

“Better than the alternative,” Connor said.

“Hell it is. I’m going blind, boy.”

Connor took time to open Roy another Corona. He’d never heard his dad talk this way.

He reached for his beer and tried to change the subject. “What do you miss most?”

“Miss most?” Roy repeated.

“In your life.”

Roy squeezed his eyes shut. “Driving, I guess. I miss being out on the road like that Willie Nelson song. Getting up before dawn and heading out to someplace different, the sun coming up on a new day, my woman there beside me. You in the backseat, gawking at everything over my shoulder, asking all those questions. That and tobacco. I dearly miss my smokes.”

“And Mom? Do you miss Mom?”

“You know damn well I do.”

Connor studied his profile. He’d often done this as a boy, lying on his belly on top of blankets spread over their worldly possessions piled high in the backseat of whatever car they owned at the time, the smoke from his dad’s Camel endowing the narrow mottled highway, stretching all the way to the horizon, with a mystical haze. Once he even felt compelled to reach

out and touch his dad's cheek, before quickly withdrawing his hand, so quickly that his dad didn't appear to notice, and Connor went back to looking for Burma Shave signs.

Early on his love for his dad had blossomed into hero worship. This despite his paradoxical fear of Roy's volcanic anger. He dreaded the sting of his dad's double-tongued embossed leather belt; feared the disappointment that could cloud those emerald eyes whenever Connor made some misstep, usually in emulation of his dad's transgressions, transgressions that Connor had, in boyish dreaminess, endowed with quixotic radiance. Once grown, he'd come to see those same transgressions for the character flaws they were and swap them for faults truer to his own nature, while recognizing he was no better off for this exchange.

If Roy said he was ready to die, Connor realized, he likely would die, a fact that riled him. Had Roy even considered his feelings? Had he ever? Suicide was such a self-centered act. Not that Roy would consider killing himself—Connor was certain of this—he'd simply will himself to die. And then he *would* die.

"Hard to believe now," Connor said, "how we used to pile everything we owned in the trunk and backseat of some car."

"We did travel light," Roy said. "After Marsha came along, we needed a U-Haul. She had all this stuff that made things more complicated. Girls need more stuff. Girls are more complicated than boys. A lot more."

"She's asked me more than once," Connor said, "how come you made us all start calling you Roy. I wasn't really sure."

Roy tossed a piece of bread into the pond and watched a big fish rise up to grab it.

“Because,” he said, “you weren’t kids anymore. Somehow it didn’t sound natural hearing grown people call me ‘Daddy.’”

Connor rolled his eyes. “You don’t think people think it’s strange hearing me call my dad by his first name? Helga thinks it’s weird.”

Roy poked what remained of his sub into his mouth and didn’t bother to reply.

“What should we do now?” Connor asked. “Go for a ride?”

Roy shook his head.

“Play checkers? Cards? Dominoes?”

Again Roy shook his head.

“It’s your birthday. We can do whatever you like.”

“This is fine.”

“I wish you hadn’t told me that.”

Roy turned to him. “Told you what?”

“You’d decided to die.”

“Hell, you ought to be expecting it . . . after a hundred years.”

Connor chewed his lower lip. “If it happens, it happens. But you’re gonna *make* it happen, you said.”

“When I die, I die. ”

“Are you bailing out on me, Roy?”

Roy kept staring at him. “How much does it cost you, helping with my rent?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I’m a liability.”

“You’ve never heard me complain.”

“You should.”

“I can afford it.”

Roy winked. “Yeah, you’ve done all right for yourself.”

“You were my model.”

“Me?”

Connor smiled. “I learned to manage my money from watching you piss yours away.”

Roy drank some beer and squinted down at the bottle like it tasted flat.

“About ready to go inside and join the party?” Connor asked.

“You’re an old man yourself,” Roy said. “What do *you* miss most?”

Connor pretended to ponder this question, though he knew the answer. “Sheila,” he said at last. “I miss my wife. I regret taking her for granted. You took Mom for granted, I did the same with Sheila.”

In the early seventies, after selling their home in Houston and quitting good jobs, he and Sheila had moved to Taos and invested their savings in a bed and breakfast. They were childless, though not from lack of trying. Running a business was challenging, but twenty-five years later they sold the much-improved bed and breakfast for a sizable profit and moved into a chalet nearer the ski area. Living the good life, until some out-of-control yahoo, skiing above Sheila on a black diamond, went airborne off a mogul just as she was bending down to adjust her bindings. The yahoo’s skis scissored her neck, nearly decapitating her. Connor, skiing



farther down the slope, didn't know about the accident until the ski patrol came looking for him. The gaudy insurance settlement he received only left him feeling worse.

"Everybody does that," Roy said. "Sheila took you for granted, take my word for it. That's how marriage works." He reached into the bag for another handful of Fritos. "You think Marsha will miss me?"

Connor cocked his head. "To be honest . . . I'm not sure."

"I'm real proud of how you both turned out. You may want to tell her so."

"Mom had something to do with that."

"Your mom was a saint."

Connor looked over at him. "Not exactly. Hard to believe she'd leave her kid out in the car while you and her went in a bar. Not these days at least." When Roy broke into laughter, Connor asked, "Why is that funny?"

"I can't believe you remember it. You were only . . . four, maybe five. We didn't mean to stay in that bar long."

"Why did you then?"

"This drunk Indian got rowdy when the bartender stopped serving him. This was in Lander, Wyoming. He was likely from the Wind River Reservation. He grabbed a bottle and was halfway across the bar before me and two other guys dragged him back. After they tossed the Indian out, the bartender insisted on setting us all up. Your mom and I couldn't just leave. When we did come out, you'd pissed in all the ashtrays. Every damned ashtray in the car."

Connor made a show of laughing. "I'm sure you wore my britches out."

Roy shook his head. “Your mom nearly divorced me, that’s what happened. She’d pleaded with me to let her go check on you, but I didn’t like her babying you. I felt like a bastard, though, when I saw how desperate you must’ve been. Your mom raked me over the coals, said things I wouldn’t’ve normally stood for. Shamed me. I deserved it.”

Connor remained silent, until Roy added, “Wish it was still like that.”

“Like what?”

“You could leave your kid out in the car, not worry about some weirdo grabbing him. That sort of thing didn’t happen back then. Hardly ever anyhow.”

“It’s a different world now,” Connor said.

“That’s the problem with being a hundred. You see so much change. You see how things are better in some ways, worse in others. Mostly worse and that’s depressing. Somehow we’ve lost more than we’ve gained.”

“Nothing stays the same.”

“I felt kinda sorry for that Indian.”

“I’m glad you told me about it,” Connor said. “It helps.”

Roy used his thumb to push his glasses higher on his nose. “Helps with what?”

“Helps me understand you better.”

“Christ, good luck with that.” Roy chuckled. “I have trouble understanding myself.”

“Even after a hundred years?”

Roy appeared to weigh this question, until with a flutter of eyelids he lost focus. At last he blinked and nodded at the book. “I’m ready now. Read me that Dan McGrew poem. Then

the one about Sam McGee.”

Connor opened the book to *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*, cleared his throat, and began to read. Occasionally he looked up to steal a peek at Roy, leaning back with arms crossed, eyes closed, head nodding slightly, settled deep in some rapturous trance, intoxicated by the rhythm of those sparse tough sentences. When Connor read the poem’s last line, about the lady that’s known as Lou, he raised his eyes and saw Roy sitting motionless, slumped in a peculiar way, his eyes half closed. He didn’t appear to be breathing. Connor stopped breathing as well.

He reached over and placed the knuckles of his right hand against Roy’s jaw, letting the backs of his fingers trail lightly across the warm emery-cloth skin. When Roy shuddered and drew a long breath, Connor released his own breath. Then Roy smiled. Connor smiled too. He was about to say something, but the words caught in his throat. It wasn’t easy, speaking words of love to Roy, just as it wasn’t easy for Roy to tolerate them. Connor decided not to risk it.

Instead, he turned to the next poem and began to read, “There are strange things done in the midnight sun . . .”

END