

DREAM CATCHER

By Avi

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MY dad woke me at six, and by six thirty, he was gripping the leather-covered wheel of his black BMW, with me barely awake, sitting shotgun. He drove as fast as a getaway car trying to get away from something. I had no idea what. But then, our conversations consisted mostly of slapping silences at each other, like phantom Ping-Pong players.

Which was why, though he was my father, I knew as much about him as I did about one of those lions sitting outside the city's main library. He was there and in charge, but when he talked, it was mostly about rules and expectations, as predictable as a self-winding watch, with smiles as rare as snowballs in August. I could sum up his view on life in five words: *Be ready for the worst.*

Anyway, by seven thirty, we were sitting at Gate 44 at LaGuardia Airport in NYC, with pale lemon sunlight seeping through the plate-glass windows. Most travelers were slumped in hard leather chairs, eyes lidded, occasionally checking cell phones, probably wishing someone cared about their leaving. A few others, bags at their feet, stood by the closed gate door as if nervous that they might be left behind. Overhead television monitors showed the world's latest disasters in gory color. No one seemed to care.

I had my eyes on a brown sparrow, which had gotten inside the terminal. He kept banging against the big windows, trying to fly free. He couldn't. The whole airport was for flying, and here was the one creature that *could* fly, and he was trapped. Then again, by flying, I was trapped. I think my eighth-grade English teacher would have called this *irony*.

So there I was, new travel bag at my feet, stiff new jeans, a collared shirt, a new jacket, and a haircut that was too short. All this so I would look the way my father wanted me to look.

My father, the chief financial officer for a window-making company, was in his work uniform: dark suit, pale-blue shirt, striped blue tie with a Windsor knot, and a matching pale-blue handkerchief poking out of his jacket breast pocket like a mouse

too timid to come out of his hole. Dad's trimmed hair, flecked with gray, was combed back with care. The creases in his trousers were snap-sharp, his face was baby-belly smooth, and he smelled of cologne—his way, I think, of informing people he was alive.

After sitting silently for ten minutes, he said, "I expect your visit to your grandfather will go well."

"What makes you expect that?"

"Paul," he said, "if I have learned anything, it's that people get on better when they do what they have to do. There's an old saying," he went on. "Learn the rules. Play the rules. Win and you get to change the rules." I should also say, If rules are not followed, things fall apart.

"That's why," he added as he always did, "you need to be ready for the worst."

I said, "Guess what? I'd rather not play."

When he made no reply, I said, "When was the last time you spoke to your father?"

"Two days ago, when I set this up."

"No, before. Like, what, two, three years ago? You guys aren't exactly chatty, are you? And I've never met him, right? Most of all, you don't like him. How come?"

He just sat there.

I said, "I know nothing about him. Oh, yeah—he lives in Denver. But we don't have any pictures of him, so I don't even know what he looks like. He's a complete stranger, but I'm visiting him. If you don't like him, why should I?"

My dad did his library lion likeness, and then said, "I'll go over it again. There's a big company audit this week, and I'm in charge. Endless hours. Late hours. By bad luck, your mother is having unexpected surgery, which, while not a big thing, means she'll need to take it easy and will stay with your aunt. As it happens, you have spring break. I don't want you to be home alone."

Knowing where he was going, it was my turn to say nothing.

So he said, "Three weeks ago, when your mother and I were late getting back because of a canceled flight, meaning you were alone on Saturday night, what happened?"

I said, "I had a few friends over."

"Fifteen friends are not a few. Paul, when you can't trust your family, you wind up not trusting anyone."

“We couldn’t call your mom’s parents,” he went on. “They’re away. We called some of your friends’ parents. They couldn’t help. Too short a notice. But my father was willing for you to come and stay with him.”

I said, “In other words, there was no one else to babysit me, so you called your father. Bottom of the barrel, totally. We see Mom’s dad and mom every other weekend. You call him Dad; her, Mom. I’ve never even heard you mention *your* mother. We *never* see or talk to *your* father. Now, all of sudden I’m flying across the country to spend a week with him. I’m closer to the moon than to him.”

No response.

I said, “What is it? Did he have bad breath, wear socks that didn’t match, make you eat gluten-free food? I just want to know why you dislike him so much.”

“Maybe it’s time you found out.”

“Find out *what*?”

“When you get off the plane,” he said, “your grandfather promised he’ll be waiting. Soon as you meet him, use your cell phone to call your mom. She’ll be wanting to hear from you. Otherwise, she’ll worry.”

“What if he breaks his promise and he’s *not* there?”

He actually took my question seriously. “Call my secretary.”

“If you’d just tell me *why* you don’t like your dad, you could save the price of a ticket to Denver.”

“You’ll be back next Sunday.”

A new thought popped into my head. “Wait a minute!” I said. “Is it that he doesn’t like *you*?”

“I’ll give you a tip: keep your smart mouth shut.”

A loudspeaker voice said, “Attention please! We are ready to start boarding Flight 633 with service to Denver.”

Dad led me to the check-in counter, where he laid down my ticket and some papers. “I’m Michael Gunderson,” he announced. “This is my son. Paul Gunderson. Unaccompanied minor.” He showed his driver’s license. “His grandfather will be at the Denver gate. If the boy gives you any difficulties, let me know. My number is on the papers.”

He didn’t even say *my* boy—just *the* boy.

The woman smiled at me. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

I gave my father a snappy military salute, but it was wasted on him because he was already moving away, keeping to his schedule and, I’m sure, ready for the worst.

A gatekeeper led me onto the plane. None of the seats were occupied. “You’re 24F—window seat,” the guy said, and shoved my bag into the bin over my head. “Enjoy your flight.”

I buckled up and watched the ground crew fling suitcases around as if they were garbage bags. I was thinking, *My father doesn’t like his father, but he won’t say why. Or maybe his father doesn’t like him. So keep your mouth shut and be ready for the worst. You’re about to spend a week with a stranger.*

My plane touched down at Denver International Airport something like four and a half hours later. Because I was required to stay with a flight attendant, I was one of the last people to get off. When we reached the end of the exit lane, I studied the people standing, in search of someone who looked like my dad.

“Do you see your grandfather?” asked the attendant.

“Don’t know what he looks like.”

Even as I spoke, a man came forward. He was tall and skinny with a pale, gaunt face. The shadowy bags under his eyes were big enough to pack for a month’s vacation. He was wearing khaki trousers, khaki shirt, and a blue cap, which proclaimed *Viet Vet* in embroidered gold. The resemblance to my father was creepy: it was as if my father had become an old guy.

“Paul?” he said to me. It came as a question, as if he couldn’t—or wouldn’t—believe it was me. “Paul Gunderson?”

I held up my hand, like a kid asking a teacher if I could leave the room. Which, right then, I would have liked to do, though the room was a gigantic airport terminal.

The flight attendant asked, “Are you Mr. Gunderson?”

“It’s what people call me,” the guy said. He seemed reluctant to admit it.

While papers were exchanged, and a driver’s license checked, I stared at my grandfather—for that’s who I assumed he was—trying to make some sense of him. Right off, he didn’t seem friendly. Not a trace of a smile.

Next moment, I realized the flight attendant had abandoned me. That left my grandfather and me to confront each other like two aliens meeting in space; the only thing in common was that we lived in the same universe.

“Hello,” he said, as if it were the last thing he wanted to say. He even hesitated before holding out a hand. It was obvious: he was as reluctant to meet me as I was to meet him.

All the same, we shook, his hand being hard and stiff.

“Need to stop for food?” he asked. “It’s twenty minutes to my truck. Thirty minutes to my home.”

“I probably won’t starve.”

He gave me a quizzical look, as if not sure if I was trying to be funny. I pretended not to notice.

“Check any bags?”

“Nope.”

“Good,” he said, and led the way along what felt like an endless concourse. Our silence felt equally endless. Now and again, he stole a glance at me, as if trying to decide who I was. I was trying to decide if I should tell him I really was his grandson.

After a while, he said, “You like to be called Paul? Pauly? Something else?”

“Paul works.”

“Fine. Paul. People call me Road. Real name Joad, but your father, when he started talking, called me Road. It stuck. How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“You look a lot like your father when he was that age.”

“That good or bad?”

He stared straight ahead. “Not sure.”

We continued on without talking until he said, “Your mother okay?”

“I was supposed to call her when I arrived.”

“Then do it.” The tone and command were the way my father talked, an order.

I put down my bags, took out my cell phone. A message popped up telling me the battery was very low. I called quickly. “Hi, Mom. It’s me. In Denver. He’s right here. Did you want to talk to him? Okay, I will. Bye.”

I looked at Road. “She said to say hello, so, hello.”

“You’re a comedian.”

I said, “If people laugh.”

“I don’t,” he said, as if I hadn’t noticed.

We started walking again. After five minutes, he said, “I never met your mother. Mickey didn’t—doesn’t—want me to.”

It took me a moment to get that “Mickey” was my father. Back home he was always called Michael.

Road said, “You have brothers or sisters?”

I shook my head, realizing only then that he really knew as little about me as I did about him.

We went on, not talking. His conversational skills made my father seem like one of those shouting sports announcers on ESPN.

In the parking section, he led me to an old Ford pickup truck. “Looks old but it runs new,” he said. “Like me. Throw your stuff in the back.”

As I dropped my bags in, I noticed the license plate: A red fringe of mountains was depicted along the top. To one side of the number, there was a picture of people in a wagon. Under the number was the word *pioneer*.

“What’s *pioneer* mean?” I asked.

“I get that because my ancestor came out here before 1876, when Colorado became a state. He was looking for gold.”

“Did he find any?”

“Fool’s gold.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing but glitter. All labor. No loot.”

I hauled myself into the truck cab on a seat that had a rip. Dangling from the rearview mirror post was what looked like a spiderweb made of red string, held together by a circle of twigs.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Dream catcher,” said Road, putting on sunglasses. “Ojibwe Indian culture. They say it will catch dreams. You dream much?” he asked.

“Not really. You?”

“Yeah. Lots. Nightmares. Seat belts are the law out here.”

“What kind of nightmares?” I asked.

“The kind that happen if you don’t wear a seat belt”

I buckled up.

As we drove out of the airport and onto the highway, Road pointed toward the west. “That’s Denver,” he said.

The distant tall buildings looked like a row of stubby birthday candles that had fizzled out. Beyond them were high mountains. It was late April but the summits were still snowcapped. “Does that snow stay all year?” I asked.

“Some of it never melts.”

Wondering if he ever melted, I studied the sky, endless blue without a cloud. I said, “How come my father doesn’t want my mother to meet you?”

“Probably thought I’d scare her away.”

“Would you?”

Road kept his eyes on the highway. Then he said, “You’re not here long enough to hear the all of it.”

I was thinking, *It’s already too long.*

We drove on. Road said, “You worried about your mother?”

“My dad says I shouldn’t.”

He said, “You always do what your dad says?”

“He’s the boss.”

“Really?”

“He thinks so.”

Road said, “How is he?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Just guess?”

I said, “He makes windows, but he’s not exactly transparent.”

“That sounds like an old joke.”

“It is.”

Road didn’t crack a smile, and it took a few more moments before he said, “Your dad and I don’t get along.”

“How come?”

He thought some more and then said, “My son—your dad—lives like the guy who drives by mostly checking the rearview mirror. See who might be catching up.”

“Who’s catching up?” I asked.

“Me,” he said. It was a small word, but he managed to stuff a whole lot of anger into it. Eyeing him, I decided that he—thin, wiry, and with a bite—was like a snake ready to strike. I leaned away.

“Anyway,” he went on, “as things now stand, you might say you’re my only living relative.”

“What about my dad?”

Road grunted. “I said *living*.” After a moment, he added, “I say what I think.”

I said, “What about thinking about what you’re saying?”

“You’ve got a smart mouth.”

“Beats a dumb one,” I said, edging even farther away.

When I saw the muscle lines of his jaw clench, I remembered my father’s suggestion: to keep my mouth shut. As it was, Road was silent for quite a while until he said, “What kind of things you like to do?”

“Hanging out with friends. TV. Video games. Music.”

“Guess what? I hate cell phones, and I have no TV. Despise it. Nothing but bad news and ads, telling you what to do. What about sports?”

“I like football.”

“If you want to hurt people, join the army.”

We drove on. I said, “Do you work?”

He snorted. “Live on my Social Security. Veteran’s pension. Used to be a carpenter. Catch an odd job now and then in the neighborhood. I have one this week. Nothing big. Enough to buy you some food.”

Deciding I seriously didn’t like him, I put my eyes on the mountains to the west. They looked like gigantic jagged walls, and I was trapped behind them for a week.

Half an hour later, he said, “Here we are.”

Ogden Street was lined with trees, a fair number of daffodils, and brick houses. Road’s house was the smallest—a one-story brick, with a steeply pitched roof and a tall chimney. Looked like a goblin’s house.

“Built in the 1920s,” he said. “Back when there was a trolley line on this street.”

“What’s a trolley?”

“Huh! Visiting me must be like time travel for you. Trolley is a street railway.”

We walked into the front room, which took up most of the house. One wall was entirely covered with bookcases, stuffed with books. I had never seen so many in a house. A big easy chair. A reading lamp. A fireplace. No logs. Two windows. Over both windows hung more dream catchers. No pictures on the walls. At the far end of the main room was a small kitchen with a counter and stools. Landline phone on the wall.

There was a side hall, with a small room that led off from it; a bathroom; and up front, a bedroom. On the ceiling of the hallway a recessed square. Hanging down from it was a loop of rope that looked like a noose.

“What’s that for?” I asked, pointing up.

“Pulls down a folding staircase which leads to a storage attic. Full of junk. This is your room,” said Road, indicating the extra room in the back.

It was a small room with pale-green walls. One window—with another dream catcher—a narrow bed, a dresser, and a chair. Another wall of books. I might as well have checked in to a library.

“Was this my dad’s room?”

“It was meant to be, but he took off when I got this place.”

“Took off?”

“Left. Never came back. You a reader?”

“Not really.”

“Your loss. Put your things away while I make lunch.” He walked off.

Knowing I had to juice up my cell phone, I looked for my charger plug. I couldn’t find it, which meant I had left it at home. In other words, I was cut off from all my friends and games.

I sat on the bed and stared at the books. They were mostly histories of the West, cowboys, gold mines, and ranching. I had no idea how I would live through the next seven days. I thought about the noose hanging from the ceiling. Maybe I’d need it.

Road called, “Eats!”

We sat on the stools at the kitchen counter. He still had his Viet cap on. There was a pathetic ham-and-cheese sandwich with white bread on a plate for me. Nothing for him.

“What do you drink? Milk? Coke? Water?”

“Coke.”

“I’ll get some.”

As I ate, he sat opposite, not talking. He was staring at me.

“You look just like Mickey,” he told me for the second time. Then he said, “Sounds like you two don’t get along.”

“It’s okay.”

Head bent, he studied his hands. With his cap down, I couldn’t see his face. Without looking up, he said, “Does he ever talk about me?”

“No.”

He looked up. “His mother?”

I shook my head.

I thought he might say more, but he didn’t. Instead, he sat there until abruptly, he jumped off his seat, walked toward the front door, wheeled around, yanked off his cap, and in an angry voice, cried out, “I don’t hear from Mickey for years. Then, out of the blue, he calls and tells me his wife is in the hospital and his kid—you—is coming. What kind of crap is that?”

Stunned by his anger, I said, “Do—do you want me to leave?”

“Your ticket is for next Sunday.”

“I—I could change it.”

“Trust me, I checked. It costs too much. I don’t have the money. You’re here until Sunday. I have a patio. I’ll be out there.”

As if trying to escape, he shot by. Momentarily, a back door banged.

Dazed, I remained at the kitchen counter, my appetite lost, not sure what to do. All I could think was: *He’s crazy. I have to get out of here.* I went to my room, got out my cell phone, only to remember it was dead. There was that phone in the kitchen, but I was afraid he might come back and listen. I didn’t use it.

Sitting there, I thought, *No wonder my father doesn't like this guy*. For the first time in my life, I felt sympathy for my dad. *Is that why he sent me here? To see what a jerk his father was?*

I don't know how long it took me to get up my nerve to edge out the back door. Road was sitting on a faded and torn couch, apparently just staring at the small grass yard, in the middle of which stood a concrete birdbath. No water in it. No birds, either.

I stood there for a while, but Road didn't seem to notice me. I said, "I want to go home."

"You can't," he said. "Suck it up." Then he said, "I get angry." It was a statement, not an apology. "Just leave me alone. I do stupid things."

That sounded like a threat.

I retreated into the house, trying to decide what to do. I didn't see how I could get home. Deciding it would be best to keep out of his way, I started for my room, but curious, I snuck into his room.

His bedroom had a narrow bed, a small table next to it, and a bureau. Nothing else. There was one window, with another dream catcher hanging from the frame. All I could think was, *He really must have lots of nightmares*.

I was about to leave the room when I noticed a small framed picture on one wall, the only picture on the walls in the whole house. It was a black and white photo of a kid, someone about my age. When I looked at it, it took me a while to realize it was my dad.

Next to Road's bed was a small table with a drawer. Listening to make sure he hadn't come back into the house, I slid it open. A pistol lay there.

Really scared, I sat in my room trying to decide what to do. The image of that pistol and Road's words—*I do stupid things*—wouldn't leave my head. I considered finding a police station. *Get out of here*, I kept thinking.

When Road didn't appear, I went out back. He hadn't moved.

"Going for a walk," I said.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, sweet as a rusty nail.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk but had no idea where to go. I started walking. At the corner, I looked down the street. In the distance, I could see the mountains. I walked toward them. Not because I thought I'd get there, but because I needed a direction.

Seven blocks later, I reached a big park. There were joggers, people playing volleyball, and others doing exercises, as well as kids shooting baskets. I went over to the court and stood there, watching. After a while one of the kids shot me a bounce pass. I took it as an invitation, and played.

An hour later, the kids took off. I had half a mind to ask if I could go with them. I didn't. Not knowing what else to do, I headed back down the same street I'd come—mountains at my back—until I found Road's house. I stood outside for a while, until, reluctantly, I walked in. He was sitting in his large chair, reading a book. His cap was still on. It was as if he was branded with the words *Viet Vet*.

He looked up with those tired eyes of his and for a moment, just stared at me. I could almost see what he was thinking, that I looked like my father. Maybe that was his problem. All he said, however, was, "Where were you?"

"At the park, playing basketball with some kids."

"Good," he said, and went back to his reading.

He made a dinner: some packaged frozen meat loaf, with potatoes and peas. He had gotten some Coke. Doughnuts for dessert.

We didn't really talk. The click of forks and knives on plates, and sounds of chewing, seemed loud. He asked me what grade I was in, and what were my favorite subjects; the questions adults ask kids when they can't think of anything to say. He knew kids like cats know computers.

"The food okay?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What do you eat for breakfast?"

"Oatmeal."

"You have a lot of friends?"

"Sure."

But no questions about my father—his son—or my mother. No mention of his outburst. Didn't really ask anything about me. And I was afraid to ask him about that pistol.

All the same, I'd catch him staring at me, as if he were trying to make sense of me. Or was he looking at Mickey? When I returned his gaze, he'd avert his eyes.

Dinner done, he said, “Get yourself a book. That’s the entertainment here. Tomorrow, we’re going up into the mountains. Camp out.”

“I’m—I’m not sure I want to.”

“You don’t have a choice,” he said.

Upset, I went to my room. *Why are we going camping? What’s going to happen? Should I run away? How am I going to get out of this?*

I found a book called *The Outlaw Trail: Butch Cassidy and His Wild Bunch*, which I tried to read—but couldn’t—too much killing. Instead, I lay in bed trying to make sense of Road. The best I could come up with was that he was a time bomb, like those suicide bombers you see in the news.

Wondering how and when he would explode, I fell into fitful sleep.

By eight o’clock the next morning, we were in Road’s truck, moving fast, with two duffel bags in the back. Road gripped the steering wheel like my father did, tightly with two hands, his eyes locked on the road. He had his cap on, like it was a crown.

I was strapped in a seat belt, feeling as if I were being kidnapped. The dream catcher hanging from the rearview mirror post swung back and forth like a pendulum in an old clock. Or a time bomb. Though I wished I knew where we were going and why, I didn’t say anything, but wondered if Road could hear my heart pounding.

We got on a freeway, drove through suburbs, then swung west on three-lane Interstate 70. As the highway slanted sharply up, snowcapped mountains loomed before us. In moments, we were among them, as if being swallowed.

After twenty minutes of silent driving, Road said, “Denver is another word for dull. But the mountains, they’re something special.”

Still going higher, we sped by some small towns, but didn’t stop. A few times Road pointed and said, “That’s a played-out mine. Probably a hundred years old. Or older. They dug deep, took what they could, and left. Colorado history is boom and bust. Mostly bust. Like me.”

For the most part, all I could see were tall green trees, and mountains capped with snow. Here and there were cascading waterfalls. “Spring snowmelt,” said Road.

Ahead of us, the sky was full of dark clouds trailing what looked to be thin curtains of mist.

Road said, “Storms coming.”

“We going to be okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You camp a lot?” I asked.

“I like to get away.”

“From what?”

“Myself.”

After almost an hour’s drive, cutting through high mountains, Road took an exit marked “Bakersville. No Services.” We traveled along a two-lane road, not passing or being passed by anyone. The sky was gray. The trees around us were gigantic, the rocks high and close to the road. If there was a place called Bakersville, I never saw it.

After a few miles, Road slowed the truck and cut onto a narrow, bumpy dirt road. We bucked along for about half an hour, going deeper into dark forest. Hanging branches sometimes slapped us. As the truck jounced, the dream catcher flung about wildly, as if full of nightmares. I held on, wondering where we were headed. The dirt road came to an end. We stopped. Road turned off the motor. The deepest silence I ever heard took over.

I peered around. The world was mostly green, dark green. High above, treetops were swaying. Beyond the trees, I could see churning clouds. I said, “Where are we?”

“The best place. Nowhere. Roll up your windows.”

Road got out, slamming the door behind him. He seemed to like the sound of leaving.

Having no idea what was happening, I reluctantly got out. The dirt lane had ended, but in front of us was a clearing maybe fifteen yards across. It was carpeted with grass, like a tiny park, or cemetery. In the middle was what appeared to be a circle of stones, surrounded by old logs. It reminded me of some ancient shrine we had studied in school, where they did human sacrifices. Wondering if Road had his pistol, I wished I wasn’t alone with him.

As we got out of the truck, a thud of thunder came.

Road looked up. “It’s a-coming.” He pulled up one of the duffel bags, flung it over his shoulder, took up the other one by a cloth handle, and hurried into the clearing. “Come on!” he called.

I followed.

Once in the clearing he knelt down and began to pull sticks and cloth from one of the bags. Next he flung out a ground cover, then worked to set up a tent. Overhead, thunder banged. It grew darker. 'Trees' tops began to snap back and forth, like angry whips.

Not knowing what to do I sat on a log and watched Road work. When I saw the butt of Road's pistol sticking out of a side pocket, I knew I didn't want to share a tent with an angry man with a gun.

The sky got even darker. Thunder rocked and rolled. Rain started falling.

The tent was up. Road heaved the duffel bags into it and said, "Unless you want to get wet, you might as well get in." He held back a flap and crawled inside.

I hesitated, not wanting to go there with him. But when the rain began to pelt, I did. Surrounded by dim blue cloth, it was as if I had crawled into some kind of cocoon. I wiggled in only to have lightning crackle overhead like a series of pistol shots, enough to make me start. The tent fabric flickered with the light. Crashing thunder boomed. Rain beat down so hard I felt I was inside a drum.

Road tied the front flaps together. Then he sat back, clutching his knees. "We'll be dry," he said.

"Will it last long?" I asked.

"Never know," he said.

I sat there listening to the storm. Getting up my nerve, I said, "Why are we here?"

Road didn't answer. He just sat there, holding on to his knees, his Viet Vet cap pulled low, staring straight ahead. Of course, he knew I was there, and had heard my question. He didn't react.

I eyed the tent flaps, wondering if I should run away, bolt for the truck, and lock myself in.

Then, speaking softly, Road said, "You asked me how come your father and I don't get along. Well, as I see it, a man can't tell the truth until he gets to a safe place."

Overhead, lightning cracked and thunder burst. I flinched. "Is this safe?" I whispered.

"Just us against a God-made storm. Can't get safer than that."

I waited, feeling as if I was on the edge of something bad.

He took a deep breath. “How come your father and I don’t get along? Long story short: Soon as I got out of high school—eighteen—not wanting to wait and be drafted, I joined the army. Get it over with. Before I did, I married my girlfriend, Nancy. She was seventeen. I was sent to ‘Nam. Call it hell. Two tours.

“When I got out of the army, Nancy didn’t know me. I didn’t know Nancy. I didn’t know myself. And when I got out, I didn’t know my new kid, Mickey. Your father.

“By then, Nancy had had enough. She wanted a life. I didn’t blame her. Divorce. I got full custody of your dad. Off she went. I didn’t know where. Never saw her again. I doubt your father ever saw her, either. A few years back, I heard she died.

“I thought I could be a father. I couldn’t. Only real thing were the nightmares, day and night. Let me tell you, the worst thing about having been to hell is you don’t have words to describe it. Worse, it’s trapped inside” —he touched his head—“like a car with its motor running, but you’ve locked yourself out, so it keeps going. Way I figure it, *words* are the keys that open the door. That’s why I keep reading. Searching for the right words, the keys. Maybe I’ll find them. If I do, I’ll get inside my head and turn that motor off.

“Point is, I was a lousy father. The worst. Too much anger. Drink. Other bad stuff. For your father’s eighteenth birthday, he gave himself the best present ever. He took off. Left no word. I didn’t know where he went. I don’t blame him. I was—am—full of bad thoughts, bad actions, ghastly memories, and nightmares... always nightmares. What do they call it? Shell shock. These days, PTSD.

“Every few years your father and I pull the thin strings that still seem to connect us. Never completely cut. We hold on, but don’t ask me what we’re holding.

“You wanted to know *how come*. That’s how come. I’m what you might call a casualty of war. And Mickey—your dad—he’s one, too. Do you get on with him?”

“Not really.”

“Then you’re a casualty of war, too.”

He became silent. Just sat there, holding his knees, rocking back and forth a bit. Outside, the storm went on, but it didn’t seem as bad as the storm inside him.

I said, “Was the war *that* bad?”

“That’s why I have so many dream catchers. Trying to keep the nightmares from coming at me.”

“Do they work?”

“Still looking for one that will.”

“What happened in the war?”

He was silent, and then said, without looking at me: “You really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

Then he said what he had said before. “You look like Mickey when he was your age. He tried to get me to love him. Oh, yeah, he tried.”

We sat there without talking. I had the sensation that the tent was its own world. We could have been in a cave deep in the earth. Or in a capsule shooting through space surrounded by nothingness.

Then Road began to talk. And he didn’t stop. What he told me *was* astonishing. The fighting. The boredom. Friends he saved. Friends who saved him. Friends he lost. People he killed. Men, women, children. A lot was awful. A lot was brave. But all ghastly.

He went on and on. Sometimes I stopped listening. That didn’t stop him from talking. Or looking at me. Sometimes I thought he was not talking to me, but to my father, telling him things he had never told him before. A few times, he even called me Mickey.

I never heard anyone talk so much. It was as if he hadn’t talked for years and was making up for lost words. It was as if something inside of him was *making* words, and they came pouring out of him, like one of those snowmelt waterfalls.

The storm went. The sun came. We sat on the logs. I could see blue skies above the trees. He still talked. He built a fire. We had hot dogs, beans, packaged cookies. He kept talking. I had stopped listening a long time ago. It didn’t matter. He kept talking. All day. That motor inside him never stopped.

It grew dark. I went into the woods to pee. When I looked back, the electric lamp Road had turned on in the tent made it look like a lump of gold in the night.

I nodded off. Road led me into the tent, let me lie down, threw a blanket over me. As I fell asleep, I saw him through the open tent flaps, sitting by the fire, looking into the dwindling embers. For all I knew he was talking to the flames.

I slept.

When Road woke me in the morning, it was cold but bright. The grass had a coating of thin, white frost. When I breathed in, it was like drinking cold, clear water. He had a fire going. I sat down on one of the logs, and he handed me a cup of hot cocoa. He sat on a log opposite.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Stiff. You?”

“Good.” Then he said, “I talk too much?”

“No.”

“Pretty awful.”

“I guess.”

“You guess right.”

I said, “Why do you have a pistol?”

“It’s fake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Walmart plastic. I figure it might scare someone off. I wouldn’t trust myself with a real one.”

“Who would you shoot?”

“Myself, probably. Come on, let’s head back.”

The next five days went fast. Something had changed in him. He was easier to be with. As if he really wanted to know, he asked lots of questions about me, my father, my mother.

We did things, too. The Colorado History Museum. A Rockies game at Coors Field, where the view of the mountains was better than the game. We rented bikes and went along what he called Cherry Creek, down to the Platte River where they once found gold, the gold that brought his ancestor to Colorado. He took me to a town called Marshall, and we rode horses. Mostly he talked. I tried to listen, but I’m not sure it mattered to him that I heard. What mattered to him was that he talked.

On Friday—two days before I was going to leave—he told me he had that carpenter’s job, replacing some steps for a guy he knew. He said he would be back in about six hours.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do. Soon as I was sure he was gone, I pulled a stool from the kitchen, climbed up, pulled down on that overhead noose in the hallway. The wooden steps came down silently.

I climbed up and found myself in a low storage attic. There were cardboard boxes piled up in complete disorder. The boxes seemed filled with junk, books, clothing, and papers. One box had been pulled forward, and was open. I had the impression someone had gone into it recently.

I looked inside. It was full of old photographs. I picked one up, and it showed Road, a young Road, standing next to a teenage-looking girl. He was in army uniform. She held a baby in her arms. My father, I was sure. Held by his mother, Nancy. RIP.

There were more pictures. Not many of the girl—Nancy, my grandmother—but plenty of my father. All ages of being a kid. One thing—in all those pictures, I never saw a smile on his face.

I pushed the box back to where it had been. I went down, and shoved the steps up. They closed up as slowly and silently as they had opened, steps to the past.

On Sunday morning, Road took me to the airport, and like my father had done, went to the gate with me. We sat there, waiting for the gate to open.

He said, “Thanks for all that listening.”

“Yeah, sure.” Then I said, “Can I come again?”

He looked at me, and actually smiled. “Any time.” But it took him a moment to say, “Bring Mickey.”

They called my flight. I stood up. So did Road. At the last moment, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a dream catcher.

“Hey, Paul, you know what? You’re my dream catcher, and guess what—you work.” When I took it, he gave me an awkward hug, as if he hadn’t practiced much. I hugged him back, just as awkwardly.

“Glad you came,” he whispered. And then he said, “Tell Mickey I love him. And you, too. Really.”