

Ray warned Felix daily that if he did not get in touch with his Cherokee roots, dang it, all of this would end badly. He warned him of the coyotes, and how they'd been spotted running in packs, and not the pairs Felix recently read about in the paper. Ray quoted their escalating numbers in the Sierra Madre foothills, that it didn't make no darned difference if it were three in the morning or noon, they were hunting, not scared and not resigned to staying in the thick brush of the wash. These coyotes were seasoned. They got the taste of seven-year-old Marisol in their mouths, the deaf girl who lived in the largest house on the corner lot. The blue one. They got her playing hopscotch in the driveway one street over, just south of where Felix's family lived on Mira Monte Avenue. They bit at her cheeks. The coyotes took the palms of her hands as she defended herself.

The City of Sierra Madre even issued new trashcans. They were large industrial plastic containers with self-locking lids. Residents had to use them or be fined for breaking a wildlife ordinance that said you couldn't invite coyotes over for dinner. Felix pressed down on the lid to lock it in place, but it would just pop up and bend slightly onto itself, warped from the direct sun that hit the side of the house like a solar flare. Nothing survived on that side of the house. This was the first summer that Ray did not change the direction he parked his 67' Mustang so that the fading of the yellow and black racing lines would even out. According to Ray, buying the Mustang brand new was his last greatest memory. Felix eyed the car since coming home early from Oregon. He offered

to park it in a storage unit for Ray, or maybe put up a tarp during the summer heat to stop the beating, but Ray wouldn't have it.

"Can't go hiding it away." Ray pressed his cane into the long shag strands of the living room carpeting. He looked out the window down on the Mustang. "She's not the worst thing I've ever seen."

Ray had stories. Felix listened to them all, mostly at breakfast on the porch every morning. Ray was Felix's grandfather *and* job until he found a real one. There were some weekends that Felix did janitorial work with his cousin Simon's company. It was the only way Felix's mother would allow him to live at home. He cooked Ray's meals and made sure Ray didn't wander off into the foothills when the dementia sent him chasing ghosts. There was clearheaded Ray and then there was the child inside his head that took over and caused havoc in the house. This was called heading up *la resistance*. Felix had to hide Ray's dementia medication in his breakfast. Citalopram went in his chorizo. Fluvoxamine fit nicely into the tripe flesh in his menudo. And after breakfast, half chewed and wadded up in a napkin, or simply lined up on the table in defiance, Ray's medications like tiny monuments of victory.

Felix set down a bowl of oatmeal. Ray took out his bottom teeth and placed them on the lace runner that webbed out the middle of the table.

"No tricks, mijo?" Ray settled into his wide-armed chair with gates that closed on each side like a highchair. You left a gate open and Ray would missile into the cherry hardwood floor.

"No tricks this morning, Ray." Felix cleaned the corner of Ray's mouth after the first bite.

“You can call me Abuelo if it makes you feel better. I know a boy your age needs that. It means grandfather.”

“I know what it means.”

“Then what’s with the Ray nonsense?”

“So you don’t forget your name.

“Don’t even speak Spanish, do you? Try it. Abuelo.”

“I’m good, Ray.”

Felix wanted to answer his grandfather with some smartass Spanish, but he couldn’t string anything together.

“How come you won’t do nothing with it?” asked Ray.

This is how the *Cherokee talk* always started, always in the morning when Ray’s body snuck out of bed, leaving a note for his mind to sleep in. It took all of the Today Show before Ray’s brain booted up, when he realized Katie Couric wasn’t a dude. Managing Ray everyday was repetitiveness, like shooting a hundred free throws at the end of basketball practice. Felix obliged. “With what?”

“You’re Cherokee. You’re 100% black crow-haired Cherokee. Look at you.”

“Nope. I am a Mexican, Ray.”

“You ain’t no kinda Mexican. Trust me, I’ve known a Mexican or two.”

“Ray, you were born in Santa Rosalia, Mexico. Your father was a Federal from Chihuahua, Mexico. You told me that he shot the round that ripped through the sleeve of Madero. I’d say that makes me Mexican.”

The words were wasted. “Shit. How much do you weigh, Sequoyah?”

Sequoyah was the inventor of the Cherokee alphabet, Ray's favorite Indian. To Ray, the only Indian. Sequoyah created the syllabic construction of Cherokee language so that the Cherokee could pass on speeches, write books, and read the morning paper before starting their Cherokee day. The giant Sequoia trees and Sequoia National Park in Northern California were named after him. The Cherokee seed was likely planted years before Felix was even born, when Ray would take his mustang through Texas and Mexico, camping along the Rio Grande. It was just after the coyotes made the local paper that the seed germinated and Ray started calling Felix, Sequoyah. It was one of the many unpredictable switches in Ray's head that ignited in him a consuming interest in the Cherokee.

Felix sucked in his gut, flipped back his waistband and lifted it above his navel. "One hundred and ninety-five pounds."

Ray tapped the spoon on top of his oatmeal like a skin drum. "Not gonna lie, that's a good weight for a Cherokee. Real impressive amount of pounds." Ray admired Felix's bulk from the breakfast table. "You just have to learn how to throw it around. This wild dog problem ain't gonna fix itself. Coyotes can't be feeding on little girls."

"Ray, it's not our problem."

"You are right, Sequoyah. Not *our* problem. It's *your* problem, so you better figure out who you are."

Ray pressed his weight onto his rhinestone-crusted walking cane and took a long rest halfway into his stance. He had the cane custom-made after being witness to Evel Knievel's famous rocket flight over the Snake River Canyon in '74. And when people asked Felix about what kind of man his grandfather was, he responded—*the kind of man*

*who has seen Evel Knieval in flight. Name one person you know that has seen Evel Knieval. You can't do it.* According to Ray, Evel's cane was diamond encrusted, one karat for every broken bone, and it had more diamonds than the number of bones in the body. Ray took off his black cowboy hat and tapped Felix's straining belly with its brim.

"We'll get you there."

The leading news story on channel 5 was a pack of coyotes negotiating the rough terrain of the San Gabriel Mountains. Felix's mother, Anita, mentioned the irony of coyotes eating Mexicans. That they have been doing it for years, one way or another. The coyotes' bodies were lean. They darted in ninety-degree angles like a school of fish or like you might expect from UFO's over Griffith Park on a stony night. Felix thought they ran proudly. He wanted friends like that, a pack he could run with. Felix couldn't relate to the kids he grew up with in the old Pico Rivera neighborhood anymore, with all their light-speed Spanish chatter, and the spider-web tattooed elbows they used to catch the unsuspecting hueras from the valley.

Anita locked the front door and made her way to the couch. She wrapped her shoulders with a quilt and dug her toes into the seams of the cushions. "Was your grandfather a handful today?"

"Ray was fine. He talked about taking his car out for a ride someday soon."

"Well, he would just as soon skip outta town if we let him. Probably kill ten people before he got a mile away. The man can't even stand in a shower or pee straight, let alone take care of himself behind the wheel. It won't surprise me, Felix, not a bit, if he were gone one morning."

“Mijo, he thinks he’s indestructible.” Felix flipped through the channels to find different news coverage, “I don’t know what to tell you, mom. If you ask him, he’s got nothing to lose.” All the local news coverage had stock footage of coyotes, a constant looping of National Geographic and Discovery splices—coyote heads poking out from underground, carrying small rodents across plains in a gallop. Every one of them alone and paranoid in their movements, unlike the Sierra Madre coyotes that roamed like eastside gangs, chests puffed out—vato dogs.

He watched as Chopper 5 chased down the wild pack of dogs. It might as well have been footage from the Los Angeles County Sheriffs department helicopter, blasting its spotlight on bangers in wife-beaters and khaki, beatin’ feet on a Saturday night off Beverly. These coyotes were Sierra Madre’s first gangs, and no one knew what to do about them. Most families locked themselves away. Felix watched moms walk their children to school in pairs, so they’d have someone to keep company on the return home. Some drove their large SUVs one short block to drop off their children, making sure to tell them *I love you, entiendes?* Spanish in Sierra Madre was pure survival instinct, Mexican muscle memory.

Anita extended her legs across Felix’s lap. “He’s an outlaw.”

“Maybe.” Felix nodded. “His mind is getting worse, though. He doesn’t take his medication.”

“How is it you two are close now, when he wasn’t around like a normal grandfather?”

Felix thought for a moment. “I don’t know how you time these things.”

“He’s just getting to know you, mijito.” Anita turned off the television. “And forgetting you just as quickly.”

Ray walked into the living room right out of the shower. Patches of soap stuck to his side. An archipelago on his mottled skin. His chest wall had a recessed cavity between his nipples that looked as though he had been hit with a mallet. Ray slapped himself across his naked flanks and howled, “Still bleeds when I piss, Sequoyah.”

Anita shook her head, leaned in close to Felix, “Ray still thinks you’re an Indian?”

“No, Ray thinks I am *the* Indian.”

The real Sequoyah died in 1843 while traveling to Mexico to find a group of Cherokee that had migrated south into Mexico after the Trail of Tears. Felix read that his gravesite has never been found and that it is supposed to be on Texas-Mexico border, near the town of Coahuila. He stared at the map as though it might reveal the secret spot. Sequoyah didn’t seem like much of a warrior to Felix, not like the image he had in his head as to how Indians ought to look and behave. For the most part, other Cherokees looked like *Indians*—Felix often thought about his own look, how it did not match with the Mexicans down in the valley, not the immigrants, but the extreme La Razas, Chicanos with their khakis and black corduroy slips, Dodger jerseys written in a graffiti script, buttoned at the top for effect. He remembered his boys from Pico, and his cousins from Montebello, how when they bent back in their stance, their jerseys splayed out to the sides like insect wings. Stingers cocked. They straight up told him, *Homes, you are a minus 10 on the Mexican scale, and we don’t know what to make of you, bro.*

His family had done its best to extract him from the Mexican he'd been hell bent on becoming. Lengua!? What language? Felix felt like the New Coke of the family, a reformulation of Mexican. The problem was that it did not hide his last name, Perez. It didn't cover the graffiti on the gray cinder block in the back alley, or reattach his cousin's thumb after a fight in that same alley with a guy named Poof. It didn't stop the dancing at quinceañeras or turn piñatas into birthday cakes. Tortillas into Wonder Bread. It didn't keep the Los Angeles Dodgers from getting their collective asses kicked by the New York Yankees in the 1978 World Series, the first year in the new house. Mostly, it didn't stop his father from getting his hair cut twice a week by a huera who slipped a Chanel smelling love letter into his pocket that Felix's mother eventually found and dropped to her knees while cleaning stains off his pants. It was the Farah Fawcett—family switcheroo.

No doubt Felix could relate to the full-page Lithograph of Sequoyah in the Encyclopedia Britannica, and how it didn't look anything like an Indian. Sequoyah wore a red cloth wrapped around his head like a turban. Felix showed Ray. "This guy. Right here. This is Sequoyah?"

He read the caption a second time to be sure *this* was the Indian Ray insisted he was deep down. There were no feathers in Sequoyah's hair, no war paint on his face. Talk about minus ten on a scale! When Felix thought he should have a harder look, he read the part in Sequoyah's biography about how his father was European, and to Felix, this was the key to Sequoyah's soft heart. Felix wondered how Sequoyah got to have a European father. No way it was accidental love. He read about how Sequoyah and his Cherokee people were part of the Five Civilized Tribes until their membership expired.



Did Sequoyah really think he was Indian enough? Especially when he looked north to his Choctaw brothers, the Indians who gave the Cherokee their Cherokee name.

Felix had pen pals in Paraguay and Cambodia during his teenage years. It was in response to his mother telling him to get out and meet people his own age. Ray remembering anything at all was a shotgun blast at best, but for some reason, he remembered this about Felix.

“You still writing letters all over the world?”

“No, I stopped that a long time ago,” said Felix.

“Did you stop or did they? Ray’s question felt like a set up.

“I don’t remember.”

“That means you stopped.” Ray slid his hand across the porch railing to take his seat. “If they stopped, you’d have an unfinished feeling in your gut, like you’re still waiting on something.”

“I never thought about it that way, Ray.”

“I never thought about it that way, Ray,” he mimicked. “You know, they called those Talking Leaves.”

“Who’s *they*, Ray? No, no, let me guess...”

Felix organized Ray’s silverware, unfolded his napkin and put it across his lap.

“Cherokee. They called letters Talking Leaves. You wrote so many damn Talking Leaves. Sequoyah, goddamn it! You don’t gotta invent another language, but for Chrissakes.”

Ray slapped the newspaper on the breakfast table and tapped his crooked finger on the front page of the Local section—a picture of four children spinning on a merry-go-round, their bodies moving faster than shadows trailing underneath them. It was a picture taken last December at the Winter Solstice festival. They had on knit caps and smoky breath. The picture seemed surreal in the middle of July. Felix turned the newspaper around to read the headline. Ray used his butter knife, still married to a glob of margarine, to point at the article. Felix winced as he read—*Dogs Will Hunt*.

Ray went back to bed, so Felix decided to go for a run before it got too hot. He felt a quiet toughness running through the neighborhood. No one to call him out. The trailhead that led into the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains was marked by a collection of posters stapled to the visitors sign by State wildlife, warning of coyotes. Felix heard the rumbling of a vehicle coming up the road to the trailhead. A white Parks and Recreation truck hooked around the bend and pulled into the dirt parking lot. It stopped with its tailgate at the trashcans. A woman with a tight bun at the crest of her skull got out and checked the lids and the chain that held them in place. Her shirt looked one size too big, and took away all her curves. Felix nodded to her, and wondered if she might come over and warn him about being alone. Instead, she gave Felix a wave with her gaze, rummaged through some recyclables and climbed into her truck. She rolled up her window so that the dust from the lot wouldn't find its way inside the cab as she drove away. There was something in the clumsy way she rolled it up, though, that stopped Felix and made him rethink his decision to run from the end of the sidewalk and onto the trail.