

## Chapter 1

May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1975

### The Middle of the Night

Light flickered in-and-out and in-and-out in a rhythmic cadence through the dark finger-smudged window. The sound of the road passing underneath the hole in the floor board could have been the beat of a song. But Buddy didn't know which song. He didn't know that many songs.

The car was otherwise quiet, his mother driving with both skin tight, bony hands on the big black steering wheel, street lights whirring by in the night. She made no noise, no movement – even the big dark curls in her hair stayed immobile, paralyzed in space, kind of how he felt in the back seat. He couldn't remember her putting that spray stuff on her hair this morning, and he couldn't remember coughing because of the fumes in the bathroom before he left for school. He was confused as to how she got her curls to stay so still, even with the car moving so fast.

There was no noise around them as she drove along the highway, and he didn't know what time it was. It seemed late. Maybe it was the morning – the dark time of the morning that everyone called “the middle of the night.” That never made much sense to Buddy – how it could be both morning and night at the same time.

A thin white sheet covered him. It was full of Snoopy dogs, so he knew that it was from his bed at home. He spread out his body along the back seat with his spine facing the rear of the car. His hands were under his head, a real hand-made pillow. His new Adidas sneakers, a birthday gift from his parents, were still on his feet, and he was wearing the same blue and green striped shirt that he wore to school this morning. Or yesterday morning now, he guessed.

Buddy moved his legs and saw his mother's eyes quickly glance into the rearview mirror.

“You up?” she asked, her voice quiet, breaking the sound of the silence in the car like a mumble in a dream.

“I got to pee,” he answered, afraid to move, still feeling like he was suspended in time. The weight of the air was heavy in this car, and he felt like he was in some kind of trouble, like his mother would send him to his room the next chance she had with no ice cream or Lady Fingers cookies for dessert.

She pulled the car off to the side of the highway, put it in park and turned her head. “Son, you run out in the bushes right there and go relieve yourself real quick.”

Pushing the Snoopy sheet off, he scooted out the side of the back seat and into the thin grass off the shoulder of the road. There was a light coming up, but not a soul to be found on this road, other than Buddy and his mother. He walked over to the bushes, unzipped his fly and a

long overdue stream began the process of killing anything that was still living on that spot. He breathed in the cool early morning air and felt it fill his lungs with fresh life. There was a sudden pause in his heart beat as he heard some rustling in a nearby bush. Rather than wait to find out what it was, he hopped back into the car again, only this time, he rode shotgun.

“Where we goin’?” Buddy asked his mother, watching her hands again, tighter than ever on the steering wheel, like she was holding on as if her life depended on it.

“Somewhere far away.”

He had heard her say that several times before when she had him locked inside of the car and they had been driving for a long while. But this time – unlike those other times – it seemed true. He had no idea where they were, or where they were going, but he knew it was late. Would Kenny be mad at them for not going back home?

“Was today my last at school?” he asked her, already certain of the answer.

“Yes, son.”

Buddy sank down into the seat, the vinyl hard, slippery and uncomfortable. His mother lit a cigarette and rolled down her window. He rolled down his window, too. The smoke hurt his nose sometimes, and he wanted to be able to stick his head out with the wind in his face like a dog when the smoke got too bad inside.

In the distance, off to the side of the highway, he could see one of those big metal monsters that go up-and-down, supposedly drilling for oil. They were scary looking, and there were times when he thought that they could pull themselves from their spots and start walking over toward them. They were so big – maybe they would be able to stomp on his mother’s car, crushing them both inside. Or maybe his mother would pull him out before it got to them and protect him from their huge metal feet...because that’s what mothers do. They protect their sons from monsters.

Looking out at the headlight-lined empty road, Buddy tried to figure out what was going on with his mother. And, in order to put the big oil drilling monsters out of his head, he started to think about yesterday...or maybe the day before...he wasn’t sure.

He woke up like normal and got dressed for school. He had Rice Krispies for breakfast that did not snap, crackle or pop for very long at all. Not like the commercial says it does. He watched Bugs Bunny on the little black and white TV on the kitchen counter. Kenny, his stepfather, was sleeping on the couch in the living room, and he could hear him snoring that big deep, loud snore – the one he made when his mother said, “Kenny is sleeping it off.”

Kenny was not wearing a shirt or socks, and his jeans hung loose and low on his waist, almost like they were too big for him. His right arm was touching the floor. Buddy’s mother was ironing her light pink skirt in her bedroom, and when she heard Buddy shut off the TV, she came out and kissed him goodbye. Buddy had picked up his lunchbox, a small metal one with comics

on it that was all scratched up but had managed to last him the whole school year anyway. Then he swung open the screen door, heard it bang shut behind him, walked down the two wooden steps that needed fixing for the whole time they lived in this small house, and then down the sidewalk toward James Street.

He saw Mr. Sogg sitting out front of his house on the steps reading the morning paper.

“Hey, Buddy boy,” he grunted at him with a salute.

Buddy waved and replied politely, “Good morning, sir,” as he walked by.

Crossing James Street, he took the usual way to school: a path through a back alleyway in between two houses, then ran through an empty field leading all the way to John Morrow Primary School, where Buddy was finishing up the second grade. And other than seeing his best friend Gary ride up to the school playground on his silver Schwinn, his teacher Miss Clemmons taking the roll in her nasal voice – “Daniel Kaspar Junior” – and some kind of light pink blur in front of his eyes, Buddy couldn’t remember anything else from the whole entire day. Not lunch or recess or art class or even the spelling test that he knew he must’ve taken because of how his mother quizzed him on the words the night before.

The last thing Buddy recalled was waking up in his mother’s car in the dead of night with the Snoopy sheet over his waist, feeling like the life he had was over... forever.

Buddy’s stomach growled. His mother puffed.

“Where are we?” he asked her, breaking the thick fog of quiet. His mother wasn’t a real talkative woman even in the daytime, but he could feel something horrible coming from her, all the way through her pores. Her hair wasn’t messy or anything, and he didn’t remember ever seeing the shirt she was wearing before now. But the light pink skirt she wore while driving was the same one she had been ironing before he went to school.

“Still in Texas,” she said.

“Are we leaving Texas?” Buddy asked, slightly confused. He had never been out of Texas before that he could remember.

“Yes,” she responded and then flicked her cigarette out of the window, the tiny orange light flying solo onto the black road behind them.