One

“What’s this all about?” I whispered. Standing in front of EZ Storage garage door #105, I inserted the key and heard the mechanism click. My fingers shook as I took off the lock. The wheels of the door screeched, as if a car were skidding through an intersection just before impact.

What the hell? Inside was a candy apple red Pontiac GTO convertible, just like my brothers 66’ classic muscle car. What’s it doing here?

The last time I saw Rich’s GTO was in the driveway where he abandoned it in favor of his thumb. When he came back from Vietnam he hitchhiked everywhere he needed to go or bummed a ride from me or one of my friends.

In disbelief, I walked around the dust-covered car. All four tires were flat. Cragar alloy wheels supported it. I bumped my head on the door frame as I hunched over to sit in the driver’s seat. To my surprise I saw a key ring with one in the ignition and two dangling below. I turned the ignition—silence.

I pulled down the visor and a Polaroid snapshot fell in my lap of Rich and Diane on their wedding day in ‘65. I picked it up with my left hand and my right floated above tracing, but not touching the image. Rich was in his Marine Corps dress blues and Diane wore a simple white wedding gown with a pillbox veil. They were so young and happy, standing on the threshold of their dreams, totally unaware of how fate would transform them over the next few years.

There was no question that their blissful image matched the one I’ve cloistered in my mind for decades. You both wrecked it, though. Didn’t you? Whose fault was it? Rich’s because he went to war or Diane’s because she wouldn’t wait for him? I shook my head and sighed before tucking the photo in my shirt pocket.

I reached to open the glove box. After inserting two different keys, I found the one that fit. Inside was a ‘66 GTO Owner's Manual along with registration and insurance cards. I raised them to the windshield to get more light. My brother’s name was on both documents. They had expired in May 1970, one month before he left for Corrales, New Mexico. Beads of sweat began to form on my forehead and my hands felt clammy when a voice came out of nowhere.

“It took you long enough to get here, Danny. Whadidya expect? Mom’s ‘51 Merc?”

I was supercharged as if I had just chugged a can of Red Bull. I grabbed the handle and shoved the door wide open, banging it with my shoulder. I was halfway out when I heard, “Where you going bro? It’s only me.”

“Only you? What the fuck.”

“I’m serious man.”

My heart was pounding. Where the hell was his voice coming from? I fell back into the driver’s seat as if I had plunged into salt water, ten feet below the surface and sinking fast. “Just breathe,” I said.

Just breathe? Underwater? I took a deep breath uncertain if it would be my last. But, it wasn’t. Just keep breathing, I told myself. I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes and rubbed. Could that really be my brother’s voice? After all these years, do I really want to dredge up “wreckage” from the depths of a sea called “Rich’s life.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and covered them with my hands hoping to insulate myself from any further infiltration from the past. I reminded myself to focus on the present, the here and now.

“I know you’re here, Danny. So, you can open your eyes.”

I spread my fingers apart and peered between them hoping that I’d wake up from this freaky dream.

“It’s not a dream, man. It’s for real.”

I turned and saw a silhouette in the passenger seat. His profile came into focus as I looked closer. He wore a red and blue Indian bead headband. His unruly long brown hair and beard framed his face and exploded into curls, some kissing his shoulders. When he turned and gave me his gap-toothed smile I knew it was Rich. He looked just like he had the last time I saw him in the summer of ’70.

What’s going on? This can’t be happening. I’ve gone insane. So many years have passed. “It can’t be you.”

“Yeah, it’s me. Glad to see you, too. You know I’ve been stuck here for a long, long time.”

“You’ve been stuck?” I banged my fist against the steering wheel scraping my knuckles. “You don’t know what stuck is because I’ve been knee deep in mud, or more like horse shit, for years trying to figure out what happened to you.”

“Just chill, little bro’. It’s cool. It’s OK to just be.”

“Chill? When it comes to you, I can’t chill. You left Mom and me and everyone else wondering what we did wrong to have you run away and never return. There are too many loose ends, too many questions.”

Question after question flooded my mind all demanding answers. Where’ve you been for forty-five years? Why haven’t you kept in touch? Why’d you leave without saying goodbye?

“We’ll have an eternity to discuss ‘em.”

My legs felt like rubber as I stood, almost losing my balance. I shuffled to the back of the car and leaned against the trunk. It was a beautiful spring day with bright sunshine against a brilliant blue backdrop. Looking at the sky helped me to momentarily gain my composure. Since I opened the door nothing had changed outside, yet, everything inside me was now in a state of disequilibrium. Is it possible I had just spoken with Rich?

“Why dontya open the trunk?”

I fumbled with the key ring, found one that fit and exposed a jam packed mess. It looked like everything he owned had been stuffed inside. Several large cardboard boxes were pushed together along the back and two smaller ones were wedged side-by-side in front. One was overflowing with 8-track tapes of sixties rock and roll bands. There was outdoor equipment strewn all over; a tent, sleeping bag, lantern, hiking boots, an aluminum frame backpack, a road atlas, and national park guide book. Next to the spare tire were about a half dozen paperbacks, squeezed together like soldiers marching in formation.

“Wow. It looks like I’ve uncovered a lost tomb.”

“Far out, Danny. Maybe you have. Now whatya gonna do?”

“I really don’t know. I stopped to see what Mom had in storage. I didn’t count on finding your car or dealing with you after all this time. I just don't know how to handle it.”

It was getting late. There was not enough time for me to search through all of Rich’s belongings and I wasn’t sure I really wanted to anyway. I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. With my arms outstretched, I regained my grip on the bottom lip of the trunk and began closing it…

“Wait! Hold on. You’re not gonna leave me here by myself. Are you, little bro’?”

“Hell, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I guess I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Do you pinky swear?”

“Yeah, yeah, I pinky swear.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be here. I’ve got nowhere to go.”

I closed the trunk, returning my brother’s possessions to darkness.

**Want to provide me with your feedback and/or read my whole story? Please take a few minutes to:**

1. Send me your feedback about how I’ve introduced my story and Rich in this segment: danduffyauthor@gmail.com and/or

2. Submit your email address on my website [www.danduffyauthor.com](http://www.danduffyauthor.com) to receive an announcement of a prepublication offer for a FREE digital copy of my memoir.

Thanks so much. Dan