

Follow the River Home



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PART ONE



The River Reader



Clouds Over the Flyway



FOR FIFTY YEARS, whenever the pull of the earth threatened to suck him feet first into some quicksand grave, he would imagine himself a sandhill crane flying above the Rio Grande. He could see forever. In early spring, the river below carried an abundant runoff reflecting cottonwoods still bare—the view in autumn a path of gold, just before the leaves went dry and fell from their mighty limbs. And though Daniel Arroyo rarely took the lead in the V-formation, and sometimes strayed from the echelon out of a failure to raise his wings at just the right time, he never completely lost the flock. Some great bird would inevitably circle him, draw him back into the formation with currents of air from below its mighty, flapping wings. And so it was that the yearly migration of the sandhill cranes became forever his escape, forever his compass.

Daniel first learned about the cranes from Helen Sedillo, when he was just eight years old. She looked up from hanging clothes on her line one Saturday morning and saw Daniel peeking over their shared fence.

“Hi, Daniel!”

He waved, smiled back. Mrs. Sedillo’s voice was a song that played across the old North Valley neighborhood, her face the picture of kindness that caused all the kids to gather at her table on hot summer afternoons and drink the Cokes she kept stocked in the icebox on her porch.

Oh, she could holler at her boys for taking one more lap around the street on their bicycles, and not coming in when they were called; she could even scold Mr. Sedillo once in a while. But the anger never lasted beyond the appropriate moment, never escalated beyond the suitable level. And when adults sat in Helen's living room sipping coffee, spilling family secrets, her face revealed no judgement. Her hushed voice murmured words of understanding during late night phone calls from other grownups in the neighborhood. I hear you; I see what you mean. She dispensed advice to a parent only when asked, and wisdom gently to a child only when needed. It was in this way that Helen Sedillo became a welcome guest at all the birthday parties, baptisms, and graduations. It was how she became the neighborhood confidant, the keeper of its secrets.

"Are you going to sit on the ditch bank today? The water's only going to run for another couple weeks, you know." She put two wooden clothespins into the side of her mouth as she pulled another T-shirt out of the laundry basket and quickly glanced at the boy who was, by now, looking away. When he looked up again, Mrs. Sedillo had the same concern on her face as she had right after his baby sister's baptism. Carmen had slept in her mother's arms the entire time, even when Father Baca sprinkled the holy water on her forehead. As the family exited Sacred Heart, Daniel had pulled on his father's suit jacket and said, "We have to do it again. She was asleep!" But by then Miguel Arroyo was shaking hands with the guests. "Tell Father Baca we need to do it again," Daniel repeated. Just then he felt the solid hand of Helen Sedillo on his left shoulder. She leaned close and whispered, "It's okay, Daniel. God doesn't mind one bit when babies sleep during their baptism."

And now here he was at the fence just six months later, with Mrs. Sedillo and her same worried look. Daniel quickly lowered his head again.

"You going to the ditch?"

The ditch. That magic place he discovered as soon as he was old enough to walk around the corner. It ran only during irrigation season, March through October. It was lined with old cottonwoods, just like

the one in his front yard, and you could sit on its banks and dangle your bare feet in the water that went muddy every time a bullfrog broke its surface. Box turtles slept on old wood, while blue dragonflies darted among the cattails. And the wild asparagus that grew there—Daniel’s mother could always tell he had been at the ditch by the sweet smell of the wild asparagus on his jeans.

But he hadn’t been to the ditch since the day Carmen died. And just as Daniel was thinking how to escape the question before it came again from over the fence, the first cranes of fall sounded in the distance. Daniel and Helen both looked to the northern sky, as the mighty trumpet call grew louder. The October sun had moved south, revealing an expanse of the deepest blue, just before the year went dark.

As the flock came into view, the cranes took turns in the lead of the cacophonous V-formation. Helen Sedillo, now standing at the fence and pointing to the sky, said, “They’re heading to their winter home, Daniel. The river is like their road, only it’s called a flyway.”

She glanced at the boy, who still stared upward.

“If you save a place in the sky between April and November, they’ll come back again in springtime.”

Those words would echo across the landscape of Daniel Arroyo’s life. For Daniel, the migration of the sandhills became the promise never broken, the putting to rest of old seasons, the beginning of new. Grandmothers would tell grandchildren, as they held hands during walks along the river, and pointed toward the sky. His own grandmother would soon tell him about the cranes, only in Spanish. And a few years later, when he was trying to coax Jeff Murdock’s little sister out of the crawl space across the street, Daniel started to tell her the story of the sandhills.

“Do you hear that, Emily? It’s the cranes. They’re going home, but they’ll be back. I promise. Come on, Emily, have a look.”

But her gaze remained toward the ground.

“I already know about that. Grandma told me.”

On this day, though, Daniel Arroyo began to see the sweeping New

Mexico sky as a great canvas resting upon an easel of cottonwoods. He could paint what he wished—a blazing sun, thunderheads in the distance, a rainbow after an August storm. Or he could paint nothing at all, and just wait for the thousands of cranes that would fill the empty space above him twice each year.

By the time three more flocks had flown over, Helen had forgotten the question that Daniel didn't want to answer. Was he going to the ditch today. It was the first time the sandhill cranes had saved him.

It had only been two months since Carmen died. For Daniel, though, she would die again and again, as his years gathered like autumn tumbleweeds along an empty road. His hands would never lose the memory of how his baby sister felt that day, as he reached into the crib to stroke her head. His arms would scream at him across the years, forbidding him to erase the memory of her weight as he held her. Daniel's hands and arms were equally unforgiving when he went to Vietnam a decade later. His fingers never forgot the slippery wetness of a buddy's blood pouring from the gaping hole in his neck. His arms never forgot the sudden drop of a comrade's head, as it snapped back the moment the soldier died.

But whenever Carmen's face appeared, or a rolling thunder could be heard in the distance, Daniel could at least remember Helen Sedillo's words from over that fence that day, and imagine himself a sandhill crane soaring just beyond the reach of gravity—a gravity of guilt that would tug at him for fifty years. When the frightened faces of those young soldiers would appear, though, the taste of choking smoke and the smell of wasted blood would pull Daniel Arroyo back to Vietnam, never letting him go home. Not even the sandhill cranes could rescue him from that.

Where Two Rivers Collide



HE IMAGINES THE tail rotor propelling to the ground at a sickening angle, still whirling, the rear gunner falling like a bullet toward the earth from the now bladeless, careening chopper. Though the scene appears in slow motion, he cannot run away fast enough as the tumbling blades cut some medic's legs off at the knees just fifteen yards away, leaving a bloody stump of a man. Daniel Arroyo drops his rifle and feels for the old pocketknife. He imagines plunging it deep into the medic's heart just to put the man out of his misery, or maybe just to stop the screaming before it becomes another unerasable sound track blasting across his sleepless nights.

Daniel is only twenty, but he might as well call himself a man, because boyhood is far behind him, lost to the acrid smoke of mortar explosions that come in the night, to screams so chilling they make you want to kill the grievously wounded buddy you played poker with just yesterday. Gone are the images of his youth—a pick-up basketball game in a backyard filled with neighbor kids, a patch of wild asparagus along a ditch bank. Gone are those who gave him comfort—his baby sister, Carmen, who smiled every time he peeked into her crib, Jeff Murdock from across the street. Every sense has been assaulted in this terrible place. The sweet smell of his grandmother's bread has been replaced

by the stench of dying flesh, the song of the sandhill cranes high above the Rio Grande now drowned out by a surface-to-air missile streaking across the sky in search of its kill. The taste of tamales at Christmas has come under attack by the salt fish and peas of C rations, and too much cheap rum drunk one night in a Bangkok bar. Leeches suck at the skin on the bottom of feet that once ran barefoot on the lawn below an old cottonwood. And the feel of Jeff Murdock's powerful biceps during an impromptu wrestling match has been replaced by the touch of limp arms that now hang by bloody threads to the torso of some other lost boy—a lost boy whose unknowing family wakes to just another day in a crowded Chicago project, or maybe to a waiting harvest behind a solitary farmhouse on some Kansas prairie. Perhaps someday he will write this family, tell them he was with their boy when he died, that he comforted him by stroking his arms, his face—perhaps he will lie and say their boy was not afraid.

Daniel picks up his rifle, never even takes out the pocketknife. He dives for cover in the thick brush, waits for a half hour. The medic's screams have stopped. When he hears the sound of a patrol boat in the distance, he begins crawling toward the river, just fifty yards away. His dog tags scrape along the ground, making deadly and revealing sounds as they clink onto the small, smooth pebbles. He stops and listens. Charlie is everywhere—in the branches of every banyan tree, flat on his stomach in the rice paddy to the east, in the rocks that turn into land mines beneath your feet. Daniel flings the dog tags over his shoulder and tucks them into his shirt, where they rest quietly on his sweaty back. A leech sucks at his right ankle, and he resists the urge to jump up and pull it off.

The elephant grass to his left suddenly moves, and he aims his rifle, readies his grenade. It is only the wind, and he continues toward the river. A helicopter hovers in the distance, the sound of its blades chopping at the air, neither coming closer nor retreating. When someone radios the pilot that it is safe, he'll land in a clearing at the edge of the jungle and wait—the chopper blades still whirling like a tornado

among the branches of towering palm trees, sucking dry peat toward the sky, slapping marsh grass to the ground. Two medics will pour out from the helicopter, laden with the tools of triage—tape and tourniquets, stretchers and stethoscopes. They will run from the chopper with heads ducked until they escape the vortex of the whirling blades, past torn limbs flung far from the bodies to which they once belonged, past empty eyes that now stare at nothingness. They will run in the direction of those who can still moan, those who still have the strength to scream. Those men who might have a chance are carried on stretchers to the waiting chopper, which will take off in a tilting jolt, to be replaced by another, and then another. The dead must wait.

Daniel Arroyo is now just thirty yards from the river's edge—just thirty yards from rescue, though it might as well be thirty years at the pace he is able to crawl. The jungle has gone empty of the sound of human voices, save those few who still cry out—some for their mother, others for the girlfriend they hope still waits. And some just swear through their blubbering. But all about him are the sounds that only men can make. Someone else's dog tags clink on the pebbles below a comrade crawling for the river, followed by a muffled shot that renders them silent. Nearby, fresh ammo is dropped into the magazine of someone's M-16; a bolt catch breaks the silence with a snap. Static from a headset, the sharpening of a bayonet. Was that a baby's cry? He pictures Carmen in her crib.

Daniel has to stop his slow crawl each time he hears a sound not of the jungle. Sometimes he has to wait several sickening minutes until he allows himself to get a few yards closer to the river's bank. The patrol boat is idling downstream, how far he does not know. It, too, will wait for the all clear. He smells a freshly exhaled puff from a cigarette, and stops again. His father chain-smoked Marlboros after Carmen died. No, this is probably just a Winston from some GI's rations, or it could be one of those rancid rolled smokes like the one he took out of the pocket of some dead Charlie the month before and lit up as though he hadn't cared that he had just killed some other mother's boy.

The smell of the cigarette is gone, and silence is all around him now. Daniel crawls to within a tantalizing ten yards from the river, where he will hide like a baby Moses in the reeds and wait for the patrol boat that will shepherd him away from this place. He thinks again of Carmen in her crib, but this time he remembers a spot of mud on her forehead.

Daniel doesn't know how long he waits; he has lost track of time. A helicopter hovers in the distance; the sound of a boat grows near.

As Daniel Arroyo begins to rise for his run to the water, he is startled by a twig snapping beneath his dusty knees. A lone red ant is crawling up his leg, not the leech he felt just minutes ago. He looks around and sees the old cottonwoods of his childhood moving in the breeze; the banyan trees have disappeared into a fog of thirty years. There are no towering palms in this arid place. A city fire department rescue hovercraft passes him going north at full throttle; an Albuquerque police helicopter circles in the distance. They are searching for some adventurous boy lost to the river—this river. He remembers seeing the story on the six o'clock news the night before. He has lost track of time.

Daniel looks at the sun directly overhead, then at his digital watch. It reads 11:48. But what date, what year? As he struggles with memory, the familiar face of his wife, Laura, comes into his mind's eye. She had been his high school friend, then his date at the senior prom, his girlfriend after that. They had taken a wild trip through Texas the month before he left for the army, made promises while sharing a joint, as they sped across the Pecos. ("I'll come back and take care of you," he had said, feeling gallant for the first time in his life. "I'll wait for you," she had cried, as though from a scene in a movie.) Laura Patrick. A familiar fog of confusion washes over Daniel as he tries to recall her age. She had shared his last name and his bed for thirty years, had waited for him to be ready for children, and then borne him a son and a daughter. She had worked nights in her father's liquor store while he went to college. As the fog begins to lift, Daniel slowly recalls the GI bill that led him to this place along this river, and that explains the strange gear he now carries.

“What in the world is a hydro technician?” she had asked.

“It’s hydrogeological technician,” he had corrected her. “I’d get to be outside and along the river, taking different measurements, testing the waters. Not always be stuck behind a desk. I think I’d really like it.”

Yes, he has lost track of time.

Daniel’s headset is wrapped around his neck and crackling with static from where it rests beneath the shirt that sticks to his back. A flow meter lies useless on the dry ground just ten yards from the Rio Grande, waiting to be put in the river to transmit velocity data to the headset. Daniel’s hands are tight around the wader rod, which he aims like a rifle at the salt cedar moving in the summer breeze. A float has been removed from his pocket, its cork cap flung to the far reaches of the sagebrush. Sweat drips from Daniel’s forehead as he looks down at sand, not mud. He smells urine, but doesn’t yet feel the wetness sliding down his legs. Someone has vomited, but he doesn’t yet know who. To his back, the Sandia Mountains rise majestic above the eastern horizon—not a hill lined with rice paddies. Ahead, the Rio Grande—the Mekong far behind now. Daniel Arroyo has been home for three decades, but sometimes he just doesn’t know it.

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