

CHAPTER 1

*Speaking is silver,
silence is gold*

Until 1960, all of us in Arroyo Grande were ignorant of electricity and automobiles, were unaware of plastic, steel, or homogenization, hadn't been exposed to vaccines, x-rays, or Freud, weren't acquainted with Shakespeare or Hemingway, had never listened to Gershwin or Mozart, couldn't have imagined *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or *The Starry Night*, didn't know what JFK, DNA, SOS, IBM, CIA, or RBI stood for, were uninformed of the existence of George or Booker T. Washington and assumed that England, France, Spain, and Portugal were still the most powerful nations on earth. We used sassafras roots as toothpaste, made paper from pulp and colored it with plant dyes, played the lute and the lyre, and used percussion instruments made from animal skins. And we never went to sleep without our parents saying, "Then all shall sit under their vines and under their fig trees and none shall make them afraid."

This is what I wrote in 1962, word for word, as the beginning of the essay part of my admission application to the University of Taos

(commonly referred to as UT), close to the Colorado border. It came out of an assignment from a creative writing project in our remote, small school, in which we were asked to reimagine our family's history in the form of an introduction to a novel. The part about the vines and fig trees wasn't fiction. That's what my parents, Aarón and Raquel Toledano, and seven other families who together comprise the entire village of Arroyo Grande—the Ávilas, Córdobas, Pontevedres, Gironas, Alicantes, Lisboas, and Firenzes—say each night as the kids are put to bed.

There was more than a kernel of truth at the heart of this fiction, so to disguise it, I resorted to hyperbole, which found favor with the admissions office. They published the essay along with my photo in the UT newspaper on the day I registered, as an illustration of achievement from a member of the incoming class. It caused a sensation, especially since it included a picture of me wearing a colorful Navajo shawl, with a scruffy red and blond streaked beard, and gray-marble eyes.

Waiting in line, I heard an echo of a muted howl that was picked up by a few others around me. It became a chorus of soft bays that I figured was some sort of musical conversation, one of many things I was going to have to pick up on if I wanted to fit in seamlessly. Within a few minutes, they were interspersed with shorter yelps, the cacophony similar to the sounds of the red wolves I'd hear late at night when I slept outdoors in Arroyo Grande. After a bit, the student closest to me tapped me gently on the shoulder and said, "*Lobo rojo, lobo rojo.*"

Red wolf, red wolf. From then on, I was sometimes addressed as *lobo rojo*—unless someone turned out to be my friend, in which case he or she pronounced Jacobo with the J as H sound, *Hacobo*, the typical way in Spanish, notwithstanding the fact that it should've been said with a 'ja' sound, as in Jake.

Eight families had lived in Arroyo Grande in the west-central part of New Mexico since 1677, having arrived there after a five year sojourn that began in Constantinople and worked its way to Mexico. At

the outset, they put down roots far from others, and only in 1867 when a Navajo Indian group set up camp a few miles away did they begin to assimilate. They thrived in the high altitude and benefitted from the remoteness of their existence; the community had never been breached by plagues of war, disease, or fear. Their seclusion contributed to their self-reliance and was something that was handed down and practiced without a forethought. Food, water, clothing, shelter, entertainment, and medicine were omnipresent. They'd opted to preserve a segregated way of life as a method of community survival. Initially interacting with the Navajos and then later trading with settlers, ranchers, and prospectors who'd traveled down the Rio Grande, they gradually become acculturated into the American way of life by the nineteen thirties.

Not that they were fully integrated.

There were no telephones or electricity or paved roads. None of that was a hardship. Several ancient cars and trucks were used within the village (not that anyone had a driver's license). There were no prohibitions against using modern conveniences such as battery-powered tools and radios, and we'd accumulated so many books that a library was built right off the central plaza. No one had a social security card, registered to vote, or served on juries. The truth is that Arroyo Grande legally didn't exist. You couldn't find it on a map, there were no records in the county archives, and we buried our dead without permits, up on a hill, from which you could see both the mountains to the west and the Rio Grande to the east.

My father ran the general store, which was constructed at the easternmost part of the village. It was nearest the road the WPA had built in 1936 in order to enable trucks and personnel carriers to have unfettered access to a new army base that was being built on the western side of the river. That's where the higher elevation would preclude flooding in the spring when the heavy melt would flow south and cut off communities, sometimes for up to several weeks at a time.

The store was universally called The Trading Post, especially after Joseph Deschene, who was commonly referred to as Navajo Joe, opened an Indian boutique within it, where he sold blankets, other woolen goods, carved figurines, and silver jewelry to tourists, army personnel from the base, and then to new-age seekers who increasingly flocked to remote parts of New Mexico to align with nature and seek out those spirits that welcomed their embrace.

The arms that the founders of our village had brought with them hundreds of years earlier—unused muskets, lead balls, and knives of assorted lengths and shapes—testaments to the great victory of the community's isolation, were prominently displayed in alcoves in the back, perched above the two massive fireplaces on the opposing side walls, and hung down from massive hand-hewed rafters that supported the ceilings.

My father enjoyed greeting customers in an effusive manner, finagling them to tell their stories to a perfect stranger. He was adept at using the anecdotes he'd just heard to then steer someone to an item that hadn't been in consideration when the person had walked into the store.

Aarón Toledano was an imposing figure, the tallest person in Arroyo Grande. He moved with a grace that was uncommon for someone of his height. Although one would say his hair was red, it was more appropriately defined as *reddish*. If you looked at him straight on, you'd notice streaks of different red hues forming a rainbow-like impression that culminated in the bun that knotted it all together, a common style worn by many of the adult men. His beard was long and full, and his moustache hung down over his upper lip, concealing his smile, which had the unintended effect of some not being able to determine his mien—not a disadvantage when he acted as the unofficial leader of Arroyo Grande.

After dinner on Friday nights, my father would tell stories to me, my older sister Débora, and my younger sister Nohemi. We'd sit, legs

crossed, with our backs to the great fire, listening to him raise and lower his voice, watching him standing, walking around the room, hearing the wood crackling, seeing ashes floating in space, noticing shadows flickering in an otherwise darkened room. When the stories got too scary, Nohemi would crawl inside her blanket, roll to where she was touching my legs, and peek out, turtle-like, only when there was a pause for a transition from one scene to another. When she was really petrified, we'd hear a loud uuuuuuuuuuum, uuuuuuuuuuum and would see the blanket move up and down, side to side, which wouldn't annoy anyone except the cat who'd settled in for a snooze in one of our laps.

The stories would all start out the same way: a group of three children, one boy and two girls, all related, would sneak out of their house at night, go into the woods and dig up dirt, clay, and loam, and fashion the materials into a person twice the size of a normal man. The giant creature would spring to life as they poured hot coals over it, then the children would throw water to cool the figure and watch it form hair, eyes, fingernails, and toes. The children would stick twigs into the head and then blow air into the space when they pulled the twigs out, giving life to the creature—or Holyman—as my father called it. Then the children would reveal to the Holyman the terrible situation that they were in and how the Holyman should seek revenge on those who'd harmed them. The stories always took place on a cold, windy night filled with danger in the fields, woods, and alleys. The children would be pursued by pirates and wizards, then would be assaulted with words and attacked with weapons. They'd be forced to admit crimes that they hadn't committed, sins they weren't guilty of, and made to believe that they'd never see their parents again or witness the sun to rise that very day.

Then—the Holyman to the rescue!

The creature, who couldn't talk but who could see and hear, would materialize from the shadows and instantly spring into action, absorb taunts and insults, fend off musket balls, knives, and lances, retrieve

those strapped to the rack, tied to the stake, shackled by chains attached to horses, or hoist up those who had their heads forced under water, in which case he'd breathe life back into the child, knowing that the very air that he blew would empty his own lungs and cause his own death. In the end, he'd always die, without a sigh or trace of any emotion, and simply melt back into the earth to be recalled again on another Friday night. Then we'd go to bed, to dream of the Holyman who'd always be there for us when we'd need him most.

The first time I decided to write and illustrate a story was after one of these Friday nights, when I did my best to recreate the evening in what would now be called the style of a graphic novel, but back then was simply referred to as a comic or funny book. I'd sketch a cell, in which I tried to capture both the imagination of what my father had been describing as well as the scene itself, with my sisters in rapt attention, or huddled under a blanket, or drinking some lemon-flavored water with a *burék*, a pastry filled with cheese and eggplant, a favorite late-night snack. By the time I was sixteen, I had a large notebook filled with these pages, so it was natural that I'd call upon this ability to compose and draw as part of the college application.

On the day I left Arroyo Grande for the UT, Navajo Joe handed me a going away gift. More colorful than anything he'd displayed at The Trading Post, it was an intricately woven shawl with a large opening, through which I poked my head, spread my arms wide, and pirouetted around so that everyone else could see the appreciation I felt and the honor I acknowledged. He motioned for me to accompany him, and we walked down to the water's edge.

In this part of New Mexico, the Rio Grande is magnificent. Sunlight illuminated the striated rainbow-like threads of currents that alternately competed with and calmly nestled alongside each other, giving the impression of a race between elements to find out which could claim dominance. We could see unusually far up and downstream, past a sharp bend in the shoreline, cinched at the tip by a large

rock promontory jutting out into the river like an exclamation point as if to indicate the presence of the Navajo village directly up the hill to the west.

He pointed to a ring of large stones that appeared to be a map of the constellations we'd see in the wintertime. He didn't say anything, just moved his head slowly around the stones, nodding, encouraging me to do the same, silently leading me to take it in, to understand the simplicity of the representation. I can't say I understood what it all meant at the time, but later, on a return trip, it served as a beacon to two bedraggled, wearied young men who were just learning about the circle of life.

At the bottom of the hill, the land leveled out as if in a gesture to enable the Rio Grande to change course without offering resistance, a symbiosis of land and water that reflected the ageless history of time. I stood there, mute, absorbing the sights and smells, a minute that was both singular and intimate. A little later, it was time to say goodbye. I hugged him, making sure I didn't catch either his long black hair, which was twisted into a braid that went half-way down his back, or the pendant that he wore around his neck—a five-pointed metallic object in the shape of a star—that could cause you to blink if it caught the sun just so.

I approached my father and reached for the door of the 1939 blue Plymouth. It never occurred to me to ask what would happen if the police were to pull us over and find out that he didn't have a driver's license.

We drove for almost ten hours until we caught sight of Taos Heights on the east side of the river, on a hill above the old mining breakwater islands, the commercial fishing ship wharves, and the pleasure boat piers that spread like the extended fingers of a hand hopelessly reaching out to bridge the expanse of the bay. At the edge of the eastern shore, a large multi-colored house sat perched over the water with a deck that jutted out over the river. Who knew that this house would be my refuge in a storm unleashed upon the land.

We went directly to a café, this being my father's last stop before saying goodbye and then returning home. He introduced me to the proprietor, an older man named Ben Veniste. I was struck by the faint odor of fertilizer, a dank, musty aroma that reminded me of the still air of the cistern, dug from the softer clays near the farms out on the western part of Arroyo Grande. Ben Veniste's long hair was trapped within a fishnet helmet, over which he placed a chef's hat, giving him the appearance of being much taller than he was. He manipulated his cane with such dexterity that you wouldn't have been surprised to learn it wasn't necessary, that it was just a prop. He had what can only be described as larger-than-life presence, made all the more striking by his hearty laugh and his predilection for thumping the cane in dramatic fashion against the floor to underscore a pronouncement he was making or to gently nudge unruly customers out the door by using it to playfully tap the back of their legs.

He kissed my father on both cheeks before he left, a warm gesture that I didn't expect.

Outside the café, my father put his hands on my shoulders, looked me in the eye, and told me not to forget the *Pequeño*. I gave him my assurance. And I meant it. On Saturday nights, just before I fell asleep, I recited it, sometimes out loud, other times silently.

Then he said, "*La palabra es de plata i la kayades de oro.*" *Speaking is silver, silence is gold*—an admonition to me to not reveal any of our secrets.

We embraced and he gently tugged at my shoulders, a signal that he wanted me to bend over a little so he could kiss the top of my head. It reminded me of my last conversation with my older sister Débora: "It's going to be difficult for our parents, you not being here, especially since you've taken on so much responsibility with chores, helping at the festivals, and with Navajo Joe at The Trading Post," she noted in a way that shifted the hurt to others, an easier sidestep that allowed her to start without outwardly revealing her own fears.

"I'll be back before you know it," I responded.

She was silent. I knew what she was thinking.

This is your home, but you might not return.

"I could barely accept when you soared past me in height," she said playfully, "but my fear is that when I see you again, you'll have grown in stature too. And, well, you know, you could be different, could view us in a strange way. You'll have found new customs, new friends, new ways of looking at the world."

"I'm scared, too. You're almost nineteen, and when I get back there's the chance, actually a strong likelihood, that you'll have found your *amor*, and where will that leave me? No more chances to snuggle up with you on one side and Nohemi on the other under the blanket in front of the fire."

My mind raced through a series of faces recalled from those young men a little older than I who could possibly be satisfactory to this smart, vivacious, beautiful young woman, and I acknowledged silently that none of them could measure up to her talents or expectations. I kissed the top of her head. We both laughed and wiped our tears.

My father leaned his arm on the roof of the car. He said, "*Kuando el padre da al ijo, riye el padre, riye el ijo.*" *When the father gives to the son, the father laughs, the son laughs.*

We both teared up, as neither of us had practiced for this moment despite having had ample time to prepare for this gift he was giving me. I thought about my mother's goodbye back at our house; she held me for a full minute or so without a word, her embrace getting stronger by the second. When Madre let go, she pulled my head down to her level and kissed my cheeks and forehead. We laughed softly as relief washed over us, our anxiety overcome.

"*Kuando el rio de la padre yora el padre yora el ijo,*" my father added. *When the son gives to the father, the father cries, the son cries.* I understood through my blurry vision that I was giving my father a special gift—the knowledge that I was ready to seek out uncharted territory as our forebears had done in 1677.

He pulled a shiny metallic object out of his pocket that, when pulled apart, revealed a mirror. He handed it to me. The surface was dazzling, and the child in me opened and closed the mirror repeatedly, much to his delight. I slipped this precious gift into my pocket.

Then my father said the words he'd say on Friday nights when he gathered the three children together:

“May I bless you and guard you;
May I make my face shed light upon you and be gracious to you;
May I lift up my face to you and give you peace.”
And we'd all say, “Amen.”