

## Day 7

### New Mexico



After an unusually long visit to the bathroom earlier, Orlan seems entirely back to normal as they drive through a continuation of the desolation of northwest Texas.

“It’s like G-God ran out of ideas out here,” he jokes.

He looks again at their latest photo. The rectangular building is made less bland by the white stucco teepee plastered on the front entrance, and blue and red zigzag stripes and dancing Kokopelli painted on the facade. Next, he looks at the Route 66 pins for Texas and New Mexico which she bought there.

When he unbuckles his seat belt, Frankie suspiciously watches him from the corner of her eye. She leans toward her door when he pulls down her visor and then adds the new pins to the others. Then he returns to his seat.

“You’ve b-b-been to a lot of places.”

“Twenty-three states. I’m hoping to visit them all before...” She hesitates.

“Before what?”

She tilts her head. “Before I grow up, I guess. You know, get a job, a husband, two kids, and a cozy cottage with a white picket fence.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know what I want. I was hoping spending time on the open road might help me figure that out.”

“But I m-m-messed that up.”

“You didn’t mess it up. The truth is before you came along, I felt more like a bus driver just making stops. You brought true memories to a trip that was otherwise pins and Polaroids, and embellished adventures about them.”

Orlan’s attention returns to the visor. “Was that g-g-guitar pick your dad’s?”

“Yes.”

“*Red, White and Blues*,” he recalls.

She smiles.

“Was that guitar in the back his too?”

“Yes. He taught me how to play on it.”

“Maybe you could write a song about our adventure on Route 66?”

“You don’t let things go, do you?”

“If someone can make a song from dumping tr-tr-trash from Alice’s Restaurant that’s not even a restaurant, then exploring Jesse James’ underground hideout, climbing giant rocking chairs, swimming with a blue whale, and eating an enormous steak should be easy to wr-write about.”

“Well, the jokes on you. Because there’s already a song about Route 66.” She sings, “If you ever plan to motor west. Travel my way, take the highway that is best. Get your kicks on Route 66.”

“I like it when you sing.”

“The guy that hid in the attic of an orphanage likes my singing,” she cynically replies.

As they speed along in silence, a tumbleweed blows across the highway in front of them. Then they pass a forbidding black lava field.

“I’m sorry about what I said. It was rude and cruel.”

“You d-d-didn’t mean it to be.”

“Yes, I did, Orlan. Yes, I did. I was an outcast too. I ate lunch behind the theater stage at school alone. And every day as my self-loathing simmered, my bitterness sharpened. Though I should know better, the moment I find anyone unable or unwilling to defend themselves, I attack. All while being so personally passive that life is mostly passing me by. I wish I was even remotely like the person you see me as. But I’m not.”

“I c-c-couldn’t see it if they weren’t th-there.”

“Are you kidding me? You live in a world of comic-book characters and coloring books. You watch someone else’s tv and make up the words. The world repeatedly shits all over you, yet somehow you see nothing but rainbows and pots of gold. You have every reason to be angry, and yet you’re the most optimistic person I’ve ever been around.”

She roughly wipes away the tears that have started down her red cheeks. “Grrrrr,” she exasperatingly growls.

He reaches in his pocket for a napkin with the Old Riverton Store logo on it and hands it to her.

After she uses it to wipe her face, “I have a confession. I broke rule number 5. But in my defense, it was before I made it a rule. Still, I could have corrected it, and I didn’t.” She dabs the corner of her eyes. “My father. He isn’t dead. He does have cancer — skin cancer. He gets lesions frozen off every few years but it isn’t life threatening.” She hands the balled up wet napkin back to Orlan. “He tried to kill himself. Got drunk and took a bunch of pills. Turns out self-loathing runs in the family. And now, I’m the executor of his affairs.”

She looks at her reflection in the rearview mirror. “He’s been in a care facility in California for over six months.”

He opens his mouth to speak but she interrupts. “I know what you’re going to say. We could visit him when we get there. He could apologize for being so distant and I could tell him that, despite everything, he scared the crap out of me. And I don’t want him to ever do that again. We could reminisce about the actual good times. Finish his song together. Become a real father and daughter.”

“Sounds n-n-nice.”

She sighs. “Sounds improbable. Risky.”

He opens his mouth again and she interrupts again. “I know. Sometimes the biggest risk a person can take is to do nothing.”

“Actually, I was g-g-going to tell you that the exit for the Acoma Pueblo is right there.” He points at the offramp rapidly approaching.

She lays on the brakes and the van leans uncomfortably to the side as they barely make the turn.