

FICTION

# THE ROAD FROM TAHLEQUAH

BY M CID D'ANGELO

*For Leonard Peltier and Russell Means*

She has a mohawk. She isn't Mohawk; she is Cherokee. She has a nose ring linked to an earring with a thin gold chain. Her eyes are dark with mascara and there's a spiked collar around her neck. When she speaks she says fuck a lot. He thinks she talks too much.

His granddaughter reaches over and turns on the radio after a glance. A tortured soul fills the pickup with cries of getting popped in the ass with a cap; the voice slugs it out like a jackhammer. She likes it; she pulls a tight grin across her young face and concentrates on the road.

*My truck, old man, my music.*

Ahead stretches tedium in flat green and amber fields. As the old man watches, he notices a billboard with the smiling, idiotic face of the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz* begging them to pull off a side road for the graveyard remains of the Golden Era of Tinseltown. They are in Kansas.

Flat. Flat like you'd guess it to be. Flat as the sky.

"Fuck. We need gas."

There's no use protesting when she has her mind set, the old man has discovered. He doesn't want to protest anyway. His whole life up until now has been a paradigm for protesting. Some battles are best un-fought if you want to win them, or so a wise fool had once said, that wise fool of a young man he once was; a younger man who'd weighed the consequences of his actions against the age-old idiom of ends justifying their means. Things had been different then.

Tom Long wears a black hat with a feather stuck in it. It's supposed to be an eagle feather, but it's not. It's from a turkey. No one knows that. His drawn, horse-shaped face bears glasses, and although he possesses a large man's frame, his jeans have trouble staying up despite a weak belt. It's been more than thirty years of revisiting what he'd done and now, on the flat road to oblivion, it's coming back. That's the problem with perdition: it doesn't let you rest, whether it's yours or not.

"Smoke?" He asks. His shirt pocket is empty.

She nods at the glove compartment. He takes out a half-empty pack of Marlboros and slides a stick out. She wants one too.

"Mom took my whole carton," the girl says after another grin. "That's okay because I stole twenty bucks from her. If it wasn't for the fact she got that credit card, we'd both be fucked."

He coughs, wipes speckles of blood on his sleeve. Death. It's both savior and damnation from federal prison because they can't do anything for him anymore and no one wants to die behind bars.

"But it's not like I hate her or anything. I mean, she's cool. I just hate it when she gets all up in my shit for nothing." She rubs her nose with the back of a hand. "What a hypocrite, know what I'm saying? She keeps spewing this shit about it being bad for my health and she goes through two packs a day."

"What did they tell you back there?"

She blinks. "Back where? Oh. The prison. Nothing. But I was scared shitless when those fucking protesters tried to stop us after we got out of the gate."

The radio spits venom in the shape of a female DJ's outrage: a rude question about whether to leave the toilet seat up or down for a lesbian.

"Fucking feminists," the girl mutters and switches the station. His granddaughter is very colorful in her point-of-view, the old man thinks. She drums her fingers on the wheel. Thumpety-thump-thump.

Asphalt, heat, and cigarette smoke on the flatlands. A thousand years and it doesn't change here, Tom Long thinks. Another thousand and it'll be the same. The land is always the land. That's okay but it's screwed up too: the land never forgets anything. It holds onto its memories because time changes nothing.

Yes, memories. Shit, like it was 1971 all over again. The cabin near Tahlequah on that day the soldier boys showed up with the FBI and turned the nearby community center into a bloodbath. Maggie, his wife, had been at her sit-in. One of their boys – his granddaughter's father – with a .22 rifle running after a jackrabbit and the old man



remembers calling him up to the porch and taking the gun away. Nobody likes seeing a redskin with a gun. They didn't have much to drink in the cabin, so his friend Walker Clouds got into his truck and went to buy beer at Winnie's Market on the way to Tahlequah and the community center where Maggie was. Tom Long didn't work even though he'd left Vietnam with an honorable discharge, but Maggie had made a good paycheck as a social worker for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They were quick to get the government cheese. Walker Clouds and Maggie Long didn't come back that day, by the way.

"Big sky," his granddaughter mutters.

The old man says nothing.

"Ain't too bad, though. I kinda like it. I can see how some people come out here."

She drives them onto the ramp of a Conoco gas station and hops out. A greasy-looking man in a dirty dress shirt watches her from the street. There's a clunk as the driver slips the spout into the tank. There's an argument between her mother's credit card and the reader. She hits the display with an open palm and stalks to the store to pay in person. When she comes back, she has another cigarette dangling from her mouth.

The old man passes her for the restroom. He urinates for an hour, it seems. The place is clean and smells of antiseptic. A picture on the wall above the urinal offers the incredulous view of Cherokee Raindancers dancing for a miracle. Blue tile and white grout. His eyes run the creases between the squares as if they're roads.

*Another memorial step back to '71. It's appropriate*

*"She has a mohawk. She isn't Mohawk; she is Cherokee."*

"But your mother...is she doing...all right?"

It's an inane question. His granddaughter turns up the music for a few crashing bars. "I love this," she tells him in her furious glee.

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Salina. Coming up Interstate 35 you can't see it until you're almost upon it. Gray clouds – an aluminum sky – stretches out from them, everywhere. There's an oasis of green trees on the flatland, gathered around a huge red and white water tower that proclaims the town's name in ten-foot-high block letters.

"Place is a fucking dump," the girl says.

"There are worse places."

"Coming from you, I believe it."

now, with his dick in his hands, because the whole thing had been pissing in the wind. Even from his cabin they'd seen traffic rocketing down the road from the community center after the BIG SHOOT. A brown-yellow cloud billowed behind it. They hadn't come up just for lunch. The old man could remember a few of the vehicles turning on Hansen Road, before the fork to his cabin. Chief Redd MacGregor asked the wind what the hell was going on, but it hadn't answered. No one could have said there was trouble just by the dust cloud. That would be insane. They knew there was trouble because they'd *sensed* it. The final sum dawned when the men at Uncle Tom's cabin put two and two together: federal and U.S. Army trucks on the dirt

road, and Maggie Long's sit-in at the community center. They ran inside, locked everything up. The lone Indian there with a colorful name – Clouds-In-His-Eyes – had asked, "I hope you've got guns, Tom Long."

Maybe the way the old man remembers it, it wasn't the same. He flushes and suffers a coughing fit. The old man in the bathroom mirror looks too old for his time.

After he's secure inside the truck, he helps himself to one of the water bottles and sips, watching his granddaughter.

She smokes, defying the warning posted on the gas pump and looking feral and militant despite the fact that beyond her mohawk and her tattoos and piercings, she's actually pretty. *She's Maggie all over*, he thinks. The girl folds her arms and leans against the truck, eyeing the gawking pervert across the way. *What the fuck are you looking at?* her eyes storm out in plain English. The digital numbers of the pump switch on and on across from her. Remembering the dirty windshield, she takes the squeegee from the water holder and services the glass. The old man in the passenger seat turns and watches the store.

"I hope we don't get any trouble on the way, Gramps," she tells him as she wipes his side. "That shit in El Reno was fucked up."

There were many people along the way who would like nothing more than to see him dead, and they, like the land, never forget anything. Despite this, the old man has nothing to say.

"If I woulda known I was going to face that shit, I would've taken Robert with me." She stops, flings water from her tool and stares at him. "But I don't think he woulda come. Nobody wanted to come."

The old man has nothing to say to this either. He thinks that everyone has their reasons for not wanting to come.

She replaces the squeegee and gives the pervert across the street the finger. She climbs in the truck and checks her wallet.

"Mom gave me two hundred bucks, but there's no way we're gonna make it all the way back on that. What do you got?"

"I thought you put it on her card."

"I did. But we gotta eat, Gramps."

He pulls out cash – all he has – from a bundle in his back jeans pocket and hands the whole wad to her. She counts it, grimacing.

"Fifty bucks?"

"I was an inmate in a federal prison, Maggie."

"You think they'd give something to you besides a swift kick in the ass on your way out."

"It doesn't work that way."

"But they said you were a model prisoner. That's why you got released, right?"

"That doesn't mean I get a prize."

"Fuck."

Margret drives with a stern look on her face. It's perpetual. The old man thinks she's too thin. She smokes as much as he does and he hopes that his cough will somehow frighten her. She wears a tank top and utility pants that Marines wear. Margret has more metal on her than a '57 Chevy. On her right arm is a litter of tattoos connected to each other. Not many pictures – just words there. FUCK THIS SHIT FUCK YOU along with the anarchist's sign and illegible scribbles. A Pocahontas from the picture books with penis envy, perhaps. The old man is surprised to see that she sports a medicine wheel on her wrist.

On her neck there is another tattoo – but he doesn't recognize it. For a young woman with a lot to show, she doesn't want him looking at her for very long. It's another circle or wheel with a knife or a feather in it.

"Have you been to Tahlequah?" He asks her.

"No. Where's that?"

"In Oklahoma."

"Did we pass it?"

He tells her no. "I lived in a cabin near there once." He doesn't know why he asks her. Maybe he wants to test her, see how much she's learned



about her family history. He’s disappointed when they take the junction to the I-70 and head west. Margret tells him she wants to make Hays before it gets dark.

She flicks her spent cigarette on the road. “I hope you don’t care, Gramps, but I’m putting in a CD. I’m fucking getting tired of battling static and these asshole ministers.” She grabs another cigarette while she’s at it. Another tortured soul begins assailing them out of the little box but Margret turns it down. It’s the least she can do.

“How is your mother?” He tries again.

“Why do you care?”

“She never wrote to me.”

“Because she hated you.”

“Hated?”

“*Hates* too, probably.” She takes smoke in a deep breath, casts a glance at the rushing fields. “It’s fucked up. People back home love you and hate you, Gramps. But you know that. They talk about you as if you’re still the shit.”

He tells her some things die hard.

“I don’t know. Mostly everyone is dead. I mean, just look at my dad.”

Silence.

“They say he got cancer from cleaning out asbestos in reservation schools. I didn’t go to Tulsa to see him. He was dead before I knew he was sick.” She punctuates her syllables with smoke. “He was always going on about working here and working there. Never made any money because the asshole never stopped drinking. You know he was an alcoholic, right?” She doesn’t wait for the old man to say anything. “I hated him. So I didn’t give a fuck he died. But I mean, he beat the shit out of me almost every night.”

He snorts, spits up bloody phlegm, and shoots it out the open window.

The girl glances at the rushing fields. “Mom told me you went to Oklahoma University. Go Sooners.”

“I dropped out.”

“Yeah, I know, but you were the only one in the

family that has done that. I mean, gone to college.”

“You don’t?”

“Fuck no. Who has the money for that?”

“There are grants. Scholarships.”

“Not for me. I have a record. Like you do.”

“For what?”

“I’m just another fucking redskin on drugs.” She’s staring at the rearview mirror. “What the fuck?”

There is another pickup coming up behind them. It has three people sitting in the cab. Their horn is blaring and they’re shouting. Margret scowls and watches them approach. When they have made her blind spot, she swerves and guns the engine. There’s not enough horse, though, and the other vehicle pulls up alongside.

“Fuckheads,” she shouts through the open window.

The other truck pulls close and they are struck with rocks and eggs. Margret hits the brakes and the other vehicle rockets past.

They are gone in moments.

She gives the old man a wild look. “Just how many people did you kill, anyway?”

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She hates driving; she’s told him. Margret says they’ll make Hays before nightfall, but she doesn’t want to go hell-bent for it anymore. They sit on hard plastic chairs in the corner of a Taco Bell nearest the door and eat. She chews with her mouth open and her large round eyes wide. He can see her nipples poking through her tank top and light brown hairs on her upper lip. Her armpits are unshaven.

“Does it hurt you?” She wants to know. He has to ask her what she means. “Are you hurt that I was the only one willing to come pick you up?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because it would hurt me. I’d be fucking pissed.”

“So, yes, it did hurt a little. He was lying.

“I think it’s cool, though. I mean, there’s nothing

back at home anyway but sitting around with Rake and goofing off online.”

“Rake?”

She tells him he’s a black male friend she hangs around. Nothing romantic, but Margret doesn’t phrase it that way. She uses “fuck” again to illustrate her relationship with Rake: *it’s not like we’re fucking or anything*.

“Did you meet him at school?”

“Juvenile Corrections. A work detail. They had boys and girls from all over the state working together cleaning trash from the side of the road. Rake was in for drugs, like me. We were out a couple of months later and started hanging out. We’ve been friends ever since.”

“Kind of stupid to have a record for, Maggie.”

She laughs. “Oh, fuck. Yeah, that’s much worse than what you did.” The girl gives him a serious look. “I don’t do drugs anymore, Gramps. Takes money, and all mom gets is a stupid allotment from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They think it makes up for everything, so don’t get me fucking started on the government.”

He’s sorry he’s asked. He turns his attention to the scenery.

“So what was that place like?” Margret chases him.

“What place?”

“That cabin of yours.”

He thinks. Memories are never like what they’re supposed to be. Shadows. Shouts. Threats. Lots of things. The siege, the gunshots. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, but it wasn’t like the literary one. Not by a long shot. Well, maybe a little bit. It’s a matter of color; the literary one was all black, and this one was red. Red all over.*

“Well?”

They’d been the bad guys, but it’s all just a matter of perspective. One’s cause can be another’s crime, and there’d been a lot of dead bodies there. He tells her he doesn’t remember, though, and that’s a lie. She tells him he was the one who brought it up

in the first place. *Tahlequah, right?*

“Dad never said much about that place,” she goes on.

The old man tells her he understands why.

“And Uncle Albert never does either.”

“Where is Albert?”

“I don’t know.” She thinks a few minutes. “I kinda liked that radio station we were listening to coming out of Oklahoma City. The one where they were singing and talking in Cherokee. I mean, the music sucked, but it was cool to hear the words.”

They hadn’t listened long, he recalls. The introductory music was “Turn the Radio On” sung in Cherokee with a male and female chorus. The DJ had spoken in Cherokee for the first part of the broadcast and English the second.

“No one speaks it at home anymore?”

She shakes her head. “Where the fuck did they come from? Those fuckers in the truck who egged us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bastards. You think somebody called somebody and told them about you?”

“They know who I am.”

“I thought that shit was over when we crossed into Kansas.” Margret gives a long look at the parking lot. “And what you did was so long ago, right? If that happens again, I’m going to shit my pants.”

“We’ll stop. Get a room and call it a day.”

She reminds him she still wants to make Hays before they do that. He tells her there’s no rush.

“Did they cause you a lot of shit in prison? I mean, after 9-11?”

He doesn’t answer her.

“I woulda thought they would’ve. I mean, you had it all over you, didn’t you?”

The old man winces; he tells her he doesn’t know what she means.

“I mean, Gramps, what they labeled you,” she presses him. “Those assholes outside the prison and on the road haven’t forgotten it.”

He tries to explain it was different in prison, but it’s hard to. It’s not like Margret would understand.



She's young and stupid and on fire to kill the world.

"Labels...like the one they gave Timothy McVeigh," she pushes.

He says nothing.

"What could it be, Gramps? Maybe...terr-o-rist?"

"Goddamn it, Maggie."

"Don't call me that." She slurps Coca-Cola from her straw. Her large brown eyes are pretty, despite the regalia. Soft, warm even.

"Why don't you want me to call you Maggie?"

"Because that was *her* name."

Her saying that hurts him more than anything else. "She was a great woman, your grandmother."

Margret shrugs. "I'm Margret. Christ. I even hate *that* name."

"What name do you want?"

"Does it matter? I've changed my name almost every year since school." She sighs, thinking. "I wanted something Indian at first, so I called myself Amadahy. I got sick of that and tried to be white. So, I called myself Kathy."

"What is your name now?"

"I suppose what the white assholes call me: 'Indian Cunt-Bitch.'"

They grow quiet for a time. He's finished eating, and he looks out the window under the Taco Bell sign to watch the traffic. She slurps from her straw, following his lead.

"What was it like in prison?"

"Why? Do you want to go sometime?"

She shrugs. "The way I'm headed, who knows?"

"That's pretty cynical."

"It's realistic."

He takes a deep breath, turning his gray-steel eyes on her dark brown ones. "Who do you think I am?"

"I don't know what to think."

"That's because you don't know, Maggie, or whatever-name-you-want. We weren't a bunch of..." He searches for the word, but can't find it. It lingers somewhere around the neighborhood of anarchists and murderers. "Your grandmother was shot and killed by soldiers because she believed in

something. I was guilty the most, though. Out of all of them, I was the one who was guilty the most."

"Because you hijacked that train?"

He looks back at the window, those steely gray eyes now more like undefined clouds on an overcast day. He whispers, "I was guilty because in some fucked up way, I was an idealist."

Margret is grinning through her pride. "They still talk about you, everyone. All those people with their websites and their blogs. It has to mean something, Gramps. I mean, they were all out for your release."

He shakes his head. She doesn't understand the motives of those who champion doomed causes. Margret does not understand the semantics, the details. He can see in her eyes triumph over getting one on the White Man. She represents the majority of those naïve. That's because no one knows in the new digital world what had happened those years ago; not *really*. His story is left over from the days of barbarism, and Margret doesn't know that Tom Long would have loved to have died there.

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There's a somber light the next day with no sun, stretching on yellow, unknowing fields. Here the gray sky is no blanket, and it smothers you. And what's so frightening is that you don't now how it does it. It stretches on into infinity like it did more than a hundred years ago, more than two hundred years ago, more than a hundred *millennia*. All you can do is gaze up and think, *how small I am*.

A song on the radio blasts something about the singer being a rat in a cage, but it doesn't seem to register with Margret who is blissfully smoking and driving in her rage.

They are north of the I-70 now, on a low-maintained road passing out of Kansas. A sign promises them Idalia and Last Chance. The fields are unchanged for the borderline.

Tom Long whispers, but his words are lost upon the rushing wind. She doesn't know; she doesn't hear them. The words are like the rolling fire that burns across the sky-domed plains, above the

“*All you can do is gaze up and think, how small I am.*”

amber-dancing miracles of corn and barley and wheat, above the infinity of the past. We are who we are, and maybe even that is not enough. *Idealists are the dangerous ones, Maggie*. They are the dangerous ones because they are doing and dying, and then he nods off and Margret talks because she doesn't know that he has. She will tell him of endless days of her mother sitting in front of a television that babbles incoherently about easier living from a can, or how one might stretch their food dollar by gourmet techniques; she speaks of petty squabbling in the schoolyards of her youth, how the nuns or the missionaries or some conservative teacher had berated her for wearing a feather in her hair or that she was caught with a little book in her hands that illuminated the scribbling of Sequoyah – the man who founded their alphabet – or that she was listening to Native American rap music; she'll tell him of those days when she and Rake hid from the Highway Patrol after casting empty shopping carts into busy streets, and how they'd set bonfires in the middle of endless pastures; and in between CD sets, she'll go on in her youthful, belligerent arrogance how soon she was going to piss everything away in that small little fucked town she'd been forced to endure, and that people like Rake and her mother and Robert her brother would be only shades to haunt those years she'll no longer want to

remember; that everything she was and is whether Cherokee or not didn't really matter; and within her voice one might even hear a slight flutter when Margret accidentally mentions how she loves the idea of New York City and that somehow with the Indian poetry she sometimes scribbles in stolen composition notepads, one day she'll be able to go there; and she'll dream about how she'll exceed her own expectations, somehow, regardless of the drugs she's done or the low schooling she's had, or the people she's known; and Goddamn how she loves Rain Dancers – *and don't you remember them, Gramps?* but she will no longer ask her grandfather – *god fucking asshole must be asleep* – about what actually happened at Uncle Tom's cabin all those years ago. The one near Tahlequah. The one he yaks about. The one where Clouds-In-His-Eyes and Chief Redd MacGregor had ended, and what began Tom Long's history of hijacking a train to nowhere but ended up with him here, now, profoundly and utterly silent in his elder years, his spirit free of his cooling flesh. They will come to the clapboard house – her mother's house – somewhere along the way, and Margret will try to rouse her grandfather, but he will be wandering the endless fields for his lost and beloved Maggie, and finding a place where a crowd has already begun to gather. ▢