

**Excerpt from *Iron River*, a novel in search of a publisher**

**By Daniel Acosta**

I saw the red light on Betty's face that bounced off her rear-view mirror. I heard her mumble, "Damn it. Now what?" Then I heard the siren, and now the light was bright white and I saw her squint her eyes. I felt the car slow down as she pulled over and I turned around to look out the back window. The white light was shining in so bright that all I could see was the light. When I looked back at Betty, she had her purse open and was looking for something.

A uniform came up next to her side window. I could only see from the belt to the shoulders. It was a policeman. Betty rolled down the window.

"Where are you headed?"

"We're on our way home, officer." She said that in a voice that was weird to me. She was talking English like a white person. I never heard her sound like that before.

"Home from where?" I knew that voice. It was the same voice I heard on the rightaway.

I heard Betty's white voice ask, "Did I do something wrong, officer?"

"Why don't you let me ask the questions?" the Turk said. The words were supposed to sound polite, but they didn't. "Do you know how fast you were going?" Betty answered him. "Yes, Officer. I was going twenty-five in a thirty zone. I always drive five miles lower than the speed limit." She was starting to sound mad.

"Oh you do, do you? Let me see your license and registration." He leaned down and looked into the window. He stared straight at me. He wasn't wearing those sunglasses now, and I could see his eyes squinting in the spotlight. They were blue like mine. "Is this your kid?"

"No, Officer, he's my nephew." She handed him her license and he shined his flashlight on it to read it I guess. While he was doing that, Betty took the registration out of the holder behind the steering wheel. The Turk kept the license and took the registration. I saw his hands. He was wearing leather gloves.

I sat sideways looking at Betty who was looking straight out the front window. We sat like that for a long time. Finally the Turk said, "Step out of the car."

I started to reach for the door handle. "Why did you stop us, Officer?" Betty's white voice.

"Step out of the car and go over to the curb, Ma'am." The Turk's voice was flat, and I couldn't tell if he was mad. The Turk opened the door and Betty nodded to me to get out. I got out my side and stood at the curb behind the car. The headlights and the spotlight of the police car were so

bright I couldn't see anything around us, and I couldn't tell where we were. Betty came over and stood next to me.

"Have a seat." the Turk told us. I looked around but I didn't find anything to sit on.

"I am not sitting on that dirty curb." Betty told The Turk.

He said, "Sit down." and his voice was hard this time. Betty looked around, then she smoothed down the back of her dress like girls do and sat down on the curb with her legs kind of slanted to one side. The sides of her white shoes were going to get scraped on the street. I sat down next to her on the curb. The cement was cold.

The Turk walked to his car. He reached in and spoke into the microphone of his police radio like he did on the rightaway when we killed the hobo. I heard that same fuzzy voice come over the speaker like at the train tracks.

The Turk put back the microphone and walked over to us. He shined his flashlight into my face. It hurt and I looked away.

"I know you." I didn't say anything.

"I know you."

I turned back toward him, but I kept my eyes closed and the light was bright red inside my eyelids. The light went off at the same time I heard the snap of the flashlight switch. "You're one of those kids with the dead tramp. I remember that thing on your face." I still didn't answer him. Betty talked in her white voice again. "Officer, you still haven't told us why you stopped us."

I heard his boots crunch the ground when he walked closer to us.

"Give me your car keys."

"They're still in the switch." Betty sounded mad, like she got at Grandma's house the day after the earthquake.

The Turk got the keys and opened the trunk. He moved things around then pulled out the handle of the bumper jack and held it up like showing it to Betty. I looked at her, and she rolled her eyes and shook her head. He put it back and slammed the trunk shut then went over and looked around the inside of the car. He came around to my side and opened the glove box and shined his light inside.

The police car radio called him, and he went over to answer. He said something into the microphone, but I couldn't tell what. Then he came and stood in front of Betty. His boots were as shiny as Cruz's fake Florsheims.

"What were you doing on Broadway?"

Broadway's an east west street on the other side of the train tracks.

Betty answered him in a mad white voice.

"Coming home from El Monte."

"Why didn't you use Mission Drive or Valley?" Both of these streets were on our side of the tracks.

"It's a free country." Betty said. The Turk didn't say anything back so I couldn't tell if he was mad, but he stood right in front of her so his belt was at her eye level.

He stood there so long I could have counted the lace holes on his boots. Then he threw the car keys on top of the trunk.

"Next time take Valley." After he said that, he went to his police car and got in, then drove away past Betty's car. I watched the tail lights until the police car disappeared in the dark.

"Let's get home." Betty told me, and I helped her stand up. My butt was cold and itchy, and I couldn't wait to get home.

When we got to Grandma's house, the front porch and front room light were on. Betty didn't turn off the motor.

"What did the Turk mean about taking Valley?" I asked her.

She smiled at me, but I could tell it wasn't a happy smile. "He means Broadway is for white people and Valley is for Mexicans. I want to ask you what he meant about the dead tramp, but it'll have to wait for another time. I promised your dad I'd get you home early." She shook her head and smiled again sad-like. "And don't say anything to him about the policeman. It'll only make him mad. Thanks for going with me to the show. I'm glad you were with me when I got stopped." She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead, and I smelled her perfume again.

I dragged my fingers across my lips to zip them shut. Hush-hush. "Thanks for taking me, Betty. I had fun." I opened the car door and walked up to the front porch. When I turned around to wave goodnight she was already gone.

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In the dream I was lying next to that tea-cat in the parking lot, and my legs were bleeding but they didn't hurt. I woke up and I was on the couch in the front room, and my underwear was soaked. My pee smelled bad and I wanted to cry. I was sick of being a pee baby. I got up, and without thinking stripped the couch of the wet sheets and blanket. When I went into the kitchen my dad was on the phone. I took the bed stuff outside, and when I came back in my dad was waiting for me.

"Ted told me what happened last night. Are you all right?" I wondered what he was talking about.

I asked my dad, "Can I go to the bathroom first?" I went in, but I couldn't pee. I didn't have any left after last night. I got in the shower and stood under the spray trying to think how to answer my dad. I gave up and finished my shower. I put on my clean *chones* and went back into the kitchen.

Dad was sitting at the table. He looked at me and pointed his chin to tell me where to sit. I sat down facing him.

"What happened?"

I started to tell him about the show and Cruz's singing group, but he waved his hand. I guess he wanted to hear about The Turk, so even though I promised Betty, I figured she told Ted who told my dad, so I told him what happened.

That's when I learned about prejudice.

That's not really true. I already knew what prejudice is. White kids at school call us wetbacks and *tacos* and other names to remind us we're not white. At the San Gabriel show, the witch lets us pay to get in to see the first movie before she kicks us out for causing trouble we didn't do.

And people say things to me about my port-wine stain, too. Kids call me "matchhead" and "scarface" and stare at me and move away from me when they see my birthmark. But I didn't know it was called prejudice.

I went back to the front room to get clothes to wear. Rudy's door was closed. I didn't remember hearing him come in last night. I looked back to see if Dad was still in the kitchen. He wasn't. I knocked soft on the door. I waited for a time then I knocked again and opened it real slow. Light was coming in through the open curtains, and I could see everything in the room. The bed was made and there was an empty suitcase on top of it. I went out and closed the door behind me.

I went into the kitchen and made myself a minced ham sandwich with mayonnaise and I poured some milk in my school thermos. I put the sandwich and the thermos in my school lunchbox and went up to the club. It was Sunday, and I knew I should go to Mass with Grandma and Mom, but I didn't have to serve Mass and I wasn't in the mood to talk to God. I chewed on the sandwich, but it didn't feel good in my mouth. I swallowed without tasting the food. And the milk tasted sour like it always does when you drink it from a thermos.

"Was I all right?" I thought about my dad's question, and I felt like what Rudy must feel like. Wherever he was, he must feel like he knows he did something wrong and the Turk is just waiting for the right time to arrest him and send him back to prison. I seen pictures of the War in Italy in *Life* magazine at the school library and I seen war movies, and I thought about Rudy fighting in the war. In the movies you don't see people really die. They just fall down when they get shot. And the good guys never get hurt. They don't even get dirty. I thought about Ted and his Purple Heart.

I felt like throwing up, and I didn't know if it was because the minced ham was bad or the milk was old, but I wanted to lean over the edge of the roof and throw up. The club house didn't feel good and I wanted to get down and find Danny and Marco and Little so we could be together when we died or the cops came for us.

I put the rest of my sandwich back in the lunch box and poured out the milk and watched it hit the ground. Then I put the thermos in the lunchbox and climbed down from the club. When I got to the kitchen, Rudy was at the sink.

"Hi, Rudy." He turned around. He was holding a glass of water.

"Ey, Little Man." He smiled, but he looked tired and sick. He said "Little" like Lino did. Liddo.

"Where you been? I haven't seen you around." I asked him.

He shook his shoulders and leaned back on the sink. "Oh, here and there. When do you start eighth grade, kid?"

I put my lunchbox on the counter next to him. "I already started eighth grade." I said, "We went back right after Labor Day." I wanted to wash my hands, but he was standing in the way. When he figured that out, he moved to the side so I could use the sink.

"Right, right," he said like he knew that, only he forgot. I washed my hands and wiped them on a dishrag.

"Rudy, can you do me a favor? Can you call me Manuel or Manny? Call me Man if you want. But don't call me Little Man."

I watched Rudy take a drink of water.

"My friends call me Man, like in Man-on-Fire, because of the birthmark. Call me Man, okay?"

"Ey, that's pretty good: 'Man-on-Fire.' That's a righteous *placa*."

"What's a *placa*?" I asked him. He finished his water then he rinsed his glass and put it inside the sink." His knuckles were red.

"That's another habit I have to kick." he said. "A *placa*'s a nickname. We use a lot of nicknames for people and things in the *pinta*."

I stood there looking at his hands. When he saw I was looking at them, he put them in his pockets. The he looked like he remembered something.

"Ey, Man-on-Fire. Do you have time to talk? We got to get to know each other, you know? We got to catch up." Rudy had a funny way of talking kind of like sing-songy.

"Okay." I said. I didn't know what to do. He came over to me and put his arm around my shoulders and kind of steered me to the front room. We went out the screen door and out to the porch. I sat down on the hobo chair but then I got up so Rudy could sit there, but he put his hand on my shoulder to stay there. He leaned on the little porch wall.

"So, you got a *ruca*, or what?"

"Nah." I said.

"I had a girlfriend in seventh grade." he said. "Her name was Inga. She was like a white girl, you know? She had like blond hair and green eyes." He got quiet and looked past me at the screen door. I turned around to see who he was talking to but there wasn't nobody there.

"Well, she wasn't actually my girlfriend." He said actually like *ack-chully*. "We didn't go out on dates or anything, you know? We just kind of hung around together at school. She couldn't be like my real girlfriend, you know? Because she was *gabacha* and I was *Chicano*. But we used to hold hands in the cafeteria and out in the yard—the schoolyard, you know? And once in a while we would kiss. That's all we did was kiss."

He stopped talking. I didn't know what to say. I waited to see if he would say some more. He did and I was glad.

"That was a long time ago. And the last time I saw you, you was what? Two years old?"

He said "you was" which isn't good English but I didn't tell him.

"I think I was four." I said. "But I don't remember much."

I wanted to know so much about him. I wanted to hear his side of the story my dad told me, but I was scared he would get mad or something. I sat there and didn't say anything.

"You play baseball?" Rudy asked me. His voice made me jump a little.

"Little League." I was on the Preston Panthers team two summers ago. Preston Hardware was our team sponsor. But I'm too old for that league now and I didn't play last summer, so I don't think I'm good enough to play pony league next summer.

"Oh, yeah?" Rudy smiled. "I love baseball. When I was a kid I played whenever there was a game. Pretty good infielder. What do you play?"

"Second base."

"You any good?" He smiled again.

"Well, I'm pretty good with the glove, but I don't hit very good--very well. I strike out a lot."

"Your dad was a good ball player. He could have been in the big leagues, you know? Like Raul

Valdez." After he said that about my dad, he stopped talking a bit and looked down.

I decided to take a chance. I wanted to know so bad.

"What happened, Uncle Rudy? Rudy? Why did you go to prison?"

He looked up at me then he turned and looked at the mountains. All I could see was the back of him. Then he pointed at the mountain.

"Do you see that heart with a arrow through it?" he said.

I was shocked. I thought I was the only one who knew about the heart. Nobody else ever said anything about it till Rudy did.

"You see it, too?" I asked him. I got up and stood next to him.

"Oh, yeah. It looks just like a heart with a arrow going through it. Can I tell you something?"

"Sure." I said like those guys in the movies. He didn't say anything right away. Just looked at the mountain for a long time.

"Whenever I look at that mountain, it reminds me how many times I broke my mother's heart. That's the worst part of things. That's what I hate the most about my life." He was talking to the mountain. I looked up at him and just listened.

"All my life. Everything bad that I ever did. Like that arrow going right through her heart."

He had his hands in his pockets. Then he took them out and put them in front of himself so he could look at the back of his hands. The knuckles were puffy and red. He went over and sat down in the hobo chair. He looked tired now.

"Sometimes I wished I was never born. For your Grandma, you know? Like if I wasn't born, her life would be happy." He waited a second to think about something. "I don't want you to do this or anything, okay? Don't even think about doing it. Just because I told you. It's not no way to solve your problems, so don't try it, *me entiendes?*"

I didn't know what he was talking about so I just said okay.

He started talking real slow like you do when you're not sure if you should say what you're going to say.

"One time when things were going real bad I went out to the tracks and stood there between the rails. I wanted the train to just hit me and take away all the trouble I made. I thought about it, what it would feel like, you know? When the train hit me. I thought it would hurt like hell for like a split second, then no more pain, you know? Maybe it would be like drowning. I wanted to drown myself on those tracks just to stop giving pain to the people I love.

"But I didn't have the guts." He stopped talking again. By this time I was sitting on the arm of the

hobo chair. I wasn't looking at him. We were both looking at the brokenhearted mountain.

"I hated the way my mother would have to go to court to beg one judge after another to give me another chance. Then when I would get the chance, I would jack it up and go back to juvvie. I thought when the judge made me choose between the service or the joint, I could finally make my family proud of me. Your dad was in the army, but I picked the Marines."

I was surprised about the Marines. I thought he was in the army like Dad. Then he stopped talking.

I waited and waited but he didn't keep talking. I turned to him. "You were in the Marines?"

"First Marine Provisionals. *Semper Fi*." He smiled but it didn't last long. "Even that went wrong."

Maybe if I waited he would say more. It worked.

"Our outfit got sent to Algeria in North Africa. That place is like the Mojave Desert. Your dad ever take you to the Mojave?"

It was quiet for a long time. Then I saw that he was asking me. I shook my head.

"Ask him to take you there sometimes. It's different than the Arizona desert when we were kids."

I always thought Africa was pure jungle like the Tarzan movies. I never thought Africa had desert. I guess I forgot about the Sahara Desert.

"So we seen some pretty righteous action along the north coast of Africa. This is the bad part. I don't know if I should tell you, you know? Because you're a little kid and all. But then your dad probably already told you about all the bad things I did. But before I tell you, I want you to think of something first.

"See that wounded heart up there on the mountain? The funny thing is, if you go to Alhambra or El Monte and look at the mountain from there, you don't see the heart. What you do see is a small mountain in front of a bigger mountain. There is no wounded heart if you look at it from a different angle. They're just mountains. It just from here that they look like they do, you know?"

I looked hard at the mountain, then I promised myself I would try to remember to look at it again from Alhambra the next time Betty took me shopping with her.

"Okay well, I'm going to tell you something not even your dad knows. You don't have to keep it a secret, but you don't have to go telling the whole world either, *me entiendes*?" I nodded my head and waited.

"There's this little town on the Algeria coast called Arzeu. It's even smaller than San Gabriel. About the size of our neighborhood. Just a little port town on the sea. Well, we have to take it to get to a bigger city called Oran. We take Arzeu pretty easy, you know? So we're on our way out



of town towards Oran, eight of us in the back of a deuce-and-a-half. I'm sitting with my back against the headboard next to Jimmy Beane. I'll never forget his name. He was this cracker kid from Georgia. A farm kid a year younger than me. He lied about his age to get in the Marines. He hated the farm and the Corp was his way off. Just a farm boy from Georgia who didn't know enough about Mexicans to be prejudice. He though I was Italian. He would say it like 'Eye-talian'. He called me 'Guido' and I called him '*Frijol*,' you know? I tried to teach him about Mexicans, but I couldn't get it through to him that I wasn't Italian. He said when we get to Italy I should tell him which ones was my kin so he wouldn't shoot them. I'm tired and sleepy, so I don't really know what happened, you know? But sudden-like, I feel the truck bump up and down sudden-like and real hard, and at the same time I hear a boom, and then the deuce-and-a-half starts tipping over. I'm sliding off and everything is happening in slow motion. I can feel my ass sliding along the floor boards, and then I guess I black out because the next thing I remember I'm on my hands and knees in the middle of some dry weeds and hot sand. My helmet is off and my ears are ringing.

"I look around and see the truck all upside down in a ditch next to the road. The front tires are spinning slow and black smoke is coming from underneath. Then I see my squad. There are bodies scattered everywhere. I check to see if I'm bleeding. I'm not, but my ears are ringing and my head's pounding, and it hurts bad.

"I get up and try to run to the closest man, who's face down on the dirt road, but my legs don't work good. I do the best I can to get to him. It's this guy named Gentry. All I know about him is he's a white guy—a lance corporal—and he's from Fresno. He's lying on his back choking and his face is all bloody. I put my fingers in his mouth and pull out his tongue and a bunch of broken teeth. He's moaning real bad, but I don't know what I can do for him. I go to another guy who's face down in the ditch. He isn't moving. When I get to him and turn him over, it's Jimmy. When I see him I throw up all over him. I guess the deuce-and-a-half must've rolled over him, because his head is crushed and he's covered in blood. All I could think to do was hold his hand."

Rudy stopped talking for a long time. He made a sound in his throat like he was choking. I didn't know if I should go get Grandma. Then he started talking again. When he did his voice was different. Like somebody was squeezing his neck. He took out a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his nose.

"I been in fights and I seen guys get beat up pretty bad, and I even seen guys die and I did my share of killing in a couple of fire-fights, but I never lost a buddy or seen anything like what happened to Jimmy Beane. I sat there in the ditch holding his hand for I don't know how long. Then he says something. I don't see how he could talk with his head smashed up so bad, but he says something to me. I can't understand him so I lean down and put my ear right next to his mouth. I could hear the blood gurgle when he breathes in.

"'Hurts.' he says. 'Shoot me.' he says. I could feel his hand try to squeeze mine. The blood gurgles. 'Hurts.'"

Rudy stopped again and put the handkerchief over his eyes.

"I didn't want to do what he was asking me, but I could see he was hurt so bad. And he's crying. I sit up and I could hear him hiss the words 'hurt' and 'shoot' over and over. I stand up and put the

muzzle of my M-1 against his head. I hear him hiss something and I close my eyes and pull the trigger."

I heard Rudy give a deep, croaky cough into the handkerchief. I watched his shoulders jump up and down a few times. Then they settled down like earthquakes do.

He took the handkerchief down from his eyes and they were red. They didn't look at me but past me at the mountain.

"I sit down next to Jimmy Beane for a long time. Then I turn the rifle around and put the muzzle in my mouth. I want to pull the trigger again. I want to be with him. To pay for everything, you know? For all the bad things I did my whole life. But I don't have the guts. Why did he had to be the one to die, you know? After all, he was a innocent kid. I should've died, not him. I deserve it way more than he did, you know?"

"Then another unit comes by and finds us. They put us in the bed of another deuce and I sit next to Jimmy Beane all the way to the field hospital. They split us up and check me out, and I guess I'm okay because a few days later I get orders assigning me to another outfit headed for Italy. But I'm no good to fight no more. I wait for them to charge me with murdering Jimmy but they never do. All the way until the Marines let me go I wait for them to throw me in the brig and bring me up on court martial. But they never do. All they do is send me home and let me go with a general discharge, which isn't much better than a dishonorable."

Rudy kept sniffing because his nose was running. He used the handkerchief and looked down at the floor and he kept shaking his head like saying no.

I wanted to do something to make him feel better, but then I remembered what happened to Little. We were playing at his house one time when we saw a dog get hit by a car. We went over to it. The dog looked hurt bad and kept trying to get up. When Little tried to pick the dog up the dog bit him.

I didn't know how to help Rudy, so I just sat on the floor next to the hobo chair with my back against the porch wall and waited for him to come back.

I wanted to tell Rudy about the hobo I killed to make him feel better. At least the people he killed were enemies or a friend who was hurting so bad. But I killed somebody that I didn't know and that never did nothing bad to me. And I knew about waiting to be arrested for murder. But something told me to keep quiet. The best thing I could do for Rudy was sit there and keep my mouth shut.

"I done a lot of bad things in my life. I know I hurt my *'ama* and my *'apa* and Manuel— your dad—and Pete real bad. I guess I'm what they call bad seed. I just wish I knew why God even put me on this earth, you know?"

He looked at me. "No you don't know. I only been here a little while, but I already know you're good seed like your daddy. He doesn't want you near me because he's afraid you might catch what I have like they catch polio or something. But you're not like me. You won't catch nothing

bad from me."

I didn't tell him about the hobo.

He wiped his eyes and blew his nose in the handkerchief. "I guess your uncle Rudy is just a big cry baby, huh?" he said. He looked around and looked surprised that he was on the front porch. He stood up and put the handkerchief back in his back pocket. He leaned over and mussed up my hair.

"Don't tell nobody about the crying, okay, Man?" I nodded and watched him go in through the screen door. I watched the door till the front door closed behind it.

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I had a hard time thinking about my schoolwork for days after, because all I could think about was the story Rudy told me. I feel real bad about killing the hobo, but I don't ever want to know how it feels to have to kill your friend. I had trouble going to sleep at night because all I could do was think about what it would be like to see Danny or Marco or Little dying and me not able to keep them alive. I didn't think about being the one dying at all. It seems like it would hurt more to see a friend suffering like that than to be the one dying, but I don't know and I don't want to know.

I thought about Rudy and how hard it must be for him to live outside of prison. The only thing like that for me is Lent. During Lent we're supposed to give up good things to suffer like Jesus. Every Lent I try to give up sweets, but it seems like wherever I go, somebody's offering me a piece of cake or a candy bar or a cupcake like they don't do when it's not Lent. It seems like there are more good things to eat during Lent. One time Cruz's dad, Lalo, told me he gave up eating watermelon for Lent. I thought that was pretty good until my aunt Cuca told me watermelons aren't in season during Lent.

Anyway, I think that everywhere Rudy looked, he found trouble. And now that he was on parole, trouble came looking for him like that guy Lino. He was trouble. I wish Rudy would've stayed away from him.