



Angel's Landing

Eugene M. Gagliano



Ricky Atwell will tour the southwestern United States with West Wind Summer Traveling Camp. During the journey, he will experience a boy's dream of adventure while visiting famous national parks. He will encounter severe storms, flash floods, bears, tarantulas, desert heat, and summer snow. Ricky must also deal with his fears and a bully while trying to fit in with the other campers. In the end, he must confront his fears in order to save lives.

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First Edition

Dedication

For my grandchildren: Kyla, Dakota, Connor, Bella, Ethan, and Lexi. May you experience the joy, beauty and adventure that I have found in our national parks.

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Chapter 1

The Adventure Begins

The tram began its ascent to the top of the arch. Nobody spoke. Body odor hung heavily in the stuffy compartment. Ricky tapped his fingers nervously on his thighs. He hoped the other guys wouldn't notice his fear of heights. Wiping his brow with the back of his hand, he licked the salty sweat from above his lip. Ricky forced himself to look down at the floor to avoid John's stare.

"Hey, Icky, you look paper white," John said. He sat directly across from him as the tram climbed to the top of the steel arch.

Stanley laughed. "Did you see a ghost or something?"

"You'd better not puke, Icky." John picked at a pimple on his chin.

"I'm not gonna puke," Ricky said.

"You sure you're not getting sick," Ray, the head counselor said. "That wouldn't make me very happy."

None of the guys made him feel like he belonged on this traveling camp, not even the counselors. The summer of 1969 was supposed to be his best; but ever since the trip started from Corning, New York, John had taunted him. If he did throw up, Ricky thought, it would be on John. So far the camp had only traveled as far as Missouri. How could he survive eight weeks on the road feeling like a stray dog?

Unlike an elevator, the tram inside the St. Louis Arch, moved sideways as well as up, like a staircase. The tram gave a little jerk each time it moved up, making a clicking sound. With each click his stomach tightened a little more. Ricky knew he was going higher and higher. Crammed into the compartment, he felt like he couldn't breathe. His lips dried as he swallowed hard.

"Now you're looking more like grass," John said. "Green, green, green."

“That’s enough, John,” Ray said. “You’re gonna make him sick for sure.”

“He makes me sick,” John mumbled under his breath. He pushed his long black hair away from his face.

Ricky felt trapped. He wished he’d never received the pity scholarship, as the other guys called it, to travel the southwestern United States with the West Wind Summer Traveling Camp. What if he ended up like his dad because of this trip?

The tram made a final jerk and Ricky was at the top of the St. Louis Arch. He bolted out of the compartment like a spring, tripping over Ray’s foot.

“Be careful, man,” Ray said. “What’s the rush?”

“Sorry,” Ricky said. He took a deep breath and walked over to the window, which was projected out so he could look straight down. Sweat trickled down his face. Six hundred thirty feet below him, the Mississippi River spread out like a wide brown road. People looked like insects skittering around. His stomach rolled with a queasy feeling and dizziness threatened to make him fall.

Ricky closed his eyes for a moment. He felt himself falling, like in the nightmares that haunted him. Before he left for the trip, his grandmother said the nightmares were a bad omen. Grandma warned him, “Be extra careful on the trip. I’ll pray for you.” Then she kissed him and made the sign of the cross on his forehead.

“Boo!” John said pushing him from behind.

Ricky let out a girlish scream and everyone around him laughed. He could feel the blood gushing to his face.

“That’s not funny, John!”

John grabbed his stomach and laughed.

“Cut that out,” Bob, the camp owner said. “I expect everyone to behave themselves on this trip. We’re camping across the country so you guys can learn more about it and experience the

great outdoors.” Bob cleared his throat and his dark eyebrows collided together. “We’re going to get along together on this trip and have fun.”

Bob’s wife, Alice, shook her head in dismay. “Kids these days can be so rude.”

Ricky stepped back from the window. The arch swayed slightly and his eyes opened wide. He grabbed on to the railing. Now the blood rushed away from his face and his knuckles turned white.

“Hang on, Icky,” John teased. “We’re going over.”

“It’s okay, Ricky,” Bob said. “The arch was built to bend with the wind, much like a tree.”

Ricky’s thoughts flashed back to the time he let himself be talked into climbing a tall elm tree last summer. He climbed out onto a large limb that reached out over a horse pasture. Looking down, he’d frozen in place for a long time until his friends finally coaxed him back down.

Ricky faked a smile that showed his crooked teeth, but by now, everyone knew he was afraid of heights. How long would it be before everyone figured out his other fears?

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Ricky tried to think about all the great places that West Winds Summer Traveling Camp was going to take him for the first time. He’d be in New Mexico in a couple of days. Leaning his head against the car window, the miles whizzed by, taking him farther away from his home in western New York. Hot air blew in from the Texas prairie tousling his brown wavy hair.

Mom had told him to have a great time, but how could he when most of the other campers made him feel like an outcast. Dad told him to be careful, but Ray was driving, and Bob Stockman told him where to go. He had no control, just like the

day he and his dad had the accident. He knew Grandma meant well, but her words frightened him even more.

The late afternoon sky hung hot, dark and full of foreboding. Sweat dripped off Ricky's forehead. The back of his tee shirt stuck to the vinyl seat.

"Looks like we're going to get dumped on," Ray told his fellow counselor Elliott.

Elliott shrugged his small shoulders. "What's a little rain?"

Ricky saw the first bolt of lightning like a crack in the windshield. As the station wagon drove into the ominous cloud cover, the sky fractured with lightning. Ricky couldn't believe how far he could see across the wide-open spaces. The lightning intensified and large drops of rain splashed on the windshield and spit into his open window. Ricky rolled the window up. Roaring rain attacked the vehicle, turning into pelting pea-sized hail.

"Cool," John said. "It's like being inside a drum."

"Hang on," Ray said in his usual military tone. He brushed his hand across his blond, brush cut hair.

"Holy cow," Ricky said. "It's really coming down."

"No kidding," John said. "You're so..."

"KRP 3358, Unit 1 to Unit 2. Do you copy?" Bob's deep voice interrupted over the CB radio from his car directly ahead. The cars' CB radios had microphones that allowed the drivers to talk to each other while driving.

"We copy," Ray said.

"We'd better pull over. It's getting dangerous."

"Yes, sir. Unit 2, over and out."

Ray hung up the microphone, just as the car and trailer fishtailed. The car swerved toward the opposite side of the highway. "Hold on guys."

Ricky watched Ray's strong hands tighten on the steering wheel as he tried to gain control of the car. Dad had done the

same thing. Fear echoed inside Ricky. He said a quick silent prayer. *Please God, not again.*

“Look out for the truck!” Elliott braced his hands against the dashboard.

Ricky could barely see the oncoming truck through the shower of hail. He grabbed the seat and held tight. His heart pumped like a humming bird’s wings.

“Oh, man,” Stanley said grabbing his armrest.

“Whoa,” John said. “This is some ride.”

The car swerved like a snake on the road, trying to decide which way to go. Seconds seemed like hours as the car veered violently out of control. Ricky flopped from side to side like a fish landed on shore.

Ricky wanted the nightmare to end. “No!” he screamed, as if this would stop the car.

The car slid off to the right side of the road, skidded for at least another hundred yards and jerked to a stop.

“Whew,” Ray released his grip on the wheel.

Elliott sighed.

“KRP 3358 Unit 1 to Unit 2. You guys all right?” Bob said.

Ray looked back at the boys. “You guys okay?”

Everyone nodded yes.

“We’re fine, sir. Stanley looks a little green. Ricky’s lost all his color, but I think he’ll make it.”

Ricky took a shallow breath. Today his guardian angel must have been with him again. He wished he were safe at home, but then he hadn’t been safe in the car at home either.

On the day of the car accident, it had also been raining. Dad had been driving him to get pizza, when a car in the opposite lane lost control and swerved into them. It shoved Dad’s car off the edge of the highway. There was nothing anyone could do.

An hour later the camp caravan arrived at the KOA Campground in Amarillo. Small drifts of hail etched the road.

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The sky shone blue to the west as the dark storm clouds raced east. The cool air smelled fresh. How could such a terrible storm produce such an amazing double rainbow?

Tomorrow he'd be on the road again, riding alone with his shadow of fears.



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