

HOW TO AVOID EXTINCTION

A detailed black and white illustration of a dinosaur, likely a T-Rex, standing on its hind legs and facing right. It is positioned behind the word 'AVOID' in the title.

PAUL ACAMPORA



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Allosaur art by Glendon Mellow

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Chapter One

In Which We Learn That Dinosaurs Are Not Extinct

IT'S EARLY SATURDAY evening when I step inside the Good Eats 24/7 Donut Shop. The owner, Mr. Kruller, sits alone at the empty counter. He's a tall, gray-haired man who says that donuts have always been his destiny. Because Kruller.

Right now, Mr. K.'s got a white paper hat balanced on his head and a pine-green apron wrapped around his waist. He's staring at a fat paperback propped open with a half-full glass of water. "Leo Henderson," Mr. Kruller says to me without looking up from his book. "I hope you want a jelly donut."

"I—"

“Because that’s all I’ve got. If you’re looking for something different, I can’t help you.”

As a matter of fact, I am looking for something different. “I want—”

I’m interrupted by a familiar voice that comes from a high-backed booth in the corner. “I recommend the jelly-filledes, Leo. They’re the best thing on the menu.”

I peek over the top of the booth. It’s my grandmother.

“They’re also the only thing on the menu,” she adds.

“I’ve heard.”

Gram grins and shrugs.

I turn to Mr. Kruller. “I found what I was looking for.”

He lifts the water glass, his book snaps shut, and he heads to a rack behind the counter. “I’ll send your donuts over.”

I move to the corner booth and slide into the seat across from Gram. She’s got an old notebook, a couple *National Geographic* magazines, plus a big, unfolded road map spread in front of her. She pulls a pair of black-rimmed reading glasses off her nose and lets them

dangle from a silver chain. “It took you long enough to find me.”

“I wasn’t looking that hard.”

Gram raises an eyebrow.

“Because I knew you were here.”

“What if I wasn’t?” she asks.

“Then I would have looked harder.”

Gram likes to wander. Finding her—at least according to my mother—is my number one chore. Generally, it’s not that hard a task. My grandmother is usually walking at the park or by the river. Sometimes I find her tasting free samples at the grocery store or browsing around the Allentown Public Library. Oftentimes she just hangs out in the Good Eats 24/7 Donut Shop, where she reads or jots down her thoughts.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

Gram glances toward the front door. Nighttime in downtown Allentown is cool and quiet and dark, but the sidewalk still holds the day’s late summer heat. “It was light out when I got here.”

Just then, Abbey Jones appears at our table with two fat jelly donuts on a white paper plate. She’s also

got a cup filled with steaming black coffee. “Hi, Leo,” she says.

“Hey,” I say.

When people ask, I say that Abbey is my cousin, though technically that’s not true. She’s actually my mother’s third cousin twice removed or something like that. To me, Abbey’s like a cross between a big sister, an after-school tutor, an occasional houseguest, and a slightly wacky babysitter. In any case, she works part-time for Mr. Kruller. She’s seventeen, which is a few years older than me, and she’s got a wide, round face and dark brown eyes. She’s also got a quick temper, and wild, wavy hair that’s usually twisted into a thick brown braid. Abbey’s parents are divorced, so she bounces back and forth between her mom and dad. Sometimes, just because she and Mom get along more like sisters than anything else, Abbey stays at our house for a few days too. Like I said, it’s easier to just say she’s my cousin.

Gram accepts the coffee and cradles the cup in her hands. When she leans forward to take a sip, a few wisps of gray hair fall around her face. For a moment, Gram

looks like a tiny old elf warrior, which assumes that tiny elf warriors wear drawstring pants, black high-tops, and giant fabric purses big enough to hold a potbellied pig. If all those things are true—and I hope they are—then my grandmother is the spitting image.

“This is not good coffee,” Gram announces.

“It can’t be that bad,” says Abbey. “It’s about your hundredth cup.”

“No wonder you don’t sleep,” I say.

Gram takes another sip. “It’s not the coffee that keeps me up. It’s the crazy people in my house.”

Abbey laughs because she knows the crazy people that Gram is talking about. It’s me and my mother and, as I mentioned before, sometimes Abbey. My own parents split up right after I was born. I’ve never even met my dad, so Mom and I have lived in my grandparents’ house for my entire life. During that time, the craziest person in the house was always my grandfather. He died about a year ago. Since then, I think we’re more nuts than ever.

“Are you ready to come home?” I ask my grandmother.

“Not till I get a chocolate-sprinkled,” she tells me.

“You’ll have to come back tomorrow!” hollers Mr. Kruller.

Gram laughs. “Be careful what you wish for, old man!”

I point at the papers spread across the table. “What’s all this?”

“Your grandmother is planning a trip,” says Abbey.

Gram shakes her head. “I am not planning a trip.”

“Your grandmother *should* be planning a trip,” says Abbey, who turns and heads back to the kitchen.

My grandparents used to travel a lot. Mostly they took long drives to places around the U.S.A., but there haven’t been any trips lately. Since Pop died, Gram hasn’t gone anywhere beyond her around-town walkabouts and wanderings. “You haven’t traveled in a while,” I say now.

“I’ve been busy,” says Gram.

“Doing what?”

“Missing your grandfather. Being depressed. It takes a lot of time if you want to do it right.”

My grandfather was a retired high school chemistry teacher, a crossword-puzzle master, an amazing

gardener, and the ultimate math and science geek. Really, there wasn't much he didn't study or fix or figure out. Pop was constantly tinkering with everything from toaster ovens and washing machines to electrical outlets and old cars. He showed me how to build model volcanoes that actually erupt (use hydrogen peroxide, dish soap, and potassium iodide). He taught me to pick out planets from the stars (stars twinkle while planets give off a steady glow). He shared his secret for helping hot peppers grow hotter (bury a pack of matches below the seedlings, then fertilize monthly with Epsom salt), and he made me memorize multiplication tables past thirty. (There's no trick. You just have to practice.)

"I miss him too," I tell my grandmother.

Gram pushes a worn *National Geographic* my way. The magazine's cover features a small, swift-looking dinosaur racing away from an open-jawed T. rex that's just burst out of the woods. "He and I were going to drive to Utah this summer."

"What's in Utah?"

"Dinosaurs," Gram says, as if this is obvious.

"I thought they were extinct."

Gram ignores my joke. “Your grandfather wanted to visit the Cleveland-Lloyd Dinosaur Quarry. It’s near a town called Price. They’ve found over fifteen thousand bones there, and over half of them come from allosaurs. Do you know what the word *allosaur* means, Leo?”

I shake my head.

“It means ‘different lizard.’ It was your grandfather’s favorite dinosaur. He loved to be different.”

Just then, Abbey returns with the coffeepot. “Abbey,” I ask, “do you know what *allosaur* means?”

“It means ‘different lizard.’ It was your grandfather’s favorite dinosaur.” Abbey turns to Gram, then points at my grandmother’s maps and magazines. “You really should go, Francine.”

Abbey and Gram have been on a first-name basis since forever.

“I don’t know,” says Gram.

“I know,” says Abbey.

“To Utah?” I say.

Abbey rolls her eyes. “That’s where the allosaurs are, Leo.”

“There are plenty of dinosaurs closer than that.”

“But wouldn’t it be awesome to see an allosaur on its home turf?” my cousin asks.

I shake my head. “You can’t really see a dinosaur. They’re extinct.”

Abbey gives a little laugh. “Dinosaurs are all around us, Leo. Now we call them birds.”

“That’s just a theory.”

“Gravity’s just a theory, but I don’t see you floating off into space.” Abbey lifts the pot toward Gram. “More coffee?”

Gram puts a hand over her cup. “I think I’ve had enough.”

“We should go home,” I say.

“We should go to Utah,” says Abbey.

“Home,” I say again.

“Utah,” Abbey repeats.

Gram holds up a hand. She looks at Abbey for a moment, turns to me, and then points at the jelly donuts on the plate between us. The glow from a green and red neon sign in the shop window makes them look like fat Christmas ornaments. “Are you going to eat those?”

I shake my head and slide the plate toward my grandmother. She devours them both. When she's done, there's a dab of white on the end of her nose. "Leo," Gram says to me, "this might be the powdered sugar talking, but I think I'd like to go to Utah."

"Seriously?" says Abbey.

"No way," I say.

"I'm in," says my cousin.

"You're not going to Utah," I tell my grandmother.

"Why not?" she asks.

"Because Mom is waiting for us at home. Because Utah is really far away. Because how would you get there anyway?"

Gram picks a set of keys off the table and dangles them in front of my face. "I have a 1973 Buick Electra parked right outside."

The old Buick is one of the projects Pop and I worked on together. That car is in better shape now than when it was new.

"You're not driving to Utah," I say a little louder than I mean to. "We have to go home."

"Leo," Gram says sweetly, "you are not the boss of me."

“She’s right about that,” says Abbey.

“Nobody asked you,” I tell my cousin.

Gram puts a finger on the road atlas that’s spread out between us. She points at a long, thin highway that’s highlighted in yellow marker. “Look,” she says. “Your grandfather already marked the route. From Allentown we’d head to Chicago and then cross Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, the Rocky Mountains . . .” She looks up from her map. “We’d follow almost the exact same route as the first transcontinental railroad. Of course, they weren’t concerned about dinosaurs.”

I turn back and forth between my cousin and my grandmother. “This is all very interesting,” I say, “but we’re going home.”

“I’m going to Utah,” says Abbey. “Look out, allosaurs, here we come!”

Gram reaches across the table and covers my hand with her own. “Leo,” she says, “you should come too.”

“I can’t. Neither can you. Mom would lose her mind.”

Gram sighs. “Your mother enjoys losing her mind. No matter what we do or say, she is not going to let anybody take that pleasure away from her.”

Gram is right about that. My mother is a preschool

teacher in Allentown's Tiny Tots Downtown Preschool. In her free time, she worries about all the ways her students are turning their brains to mush by eating glue, skipping naps, and playing video games.

"What about school?" I ask.

"School is two weeks away," says Abbey. "We're still on summer vacation. Speaking of which, have you done anything besides mope around this summer, Leo?"

"I haven't moped around."

"Have you spent any time with your friends? Have you worked on any of the projects that Pop left behind? Have you read a single book? I bet you've done nothing but hang around inside the house and miss your grandfather all summer."

"Sounds like moping to me," says Gram, "and I know moping."

"I've been doing stuff!" I protest.

"What stuff?" Abbey asks.

"I don't know. Stuff."

"I bet there's stuff in Utah," she tells me. "And it will be Utah stuff, which is much better than Pennsylvania stuff."

“I like Pennsylvania stuff.” I turn to my grandmother. “You can’t just hop in a car and drive to dinosaur land.”

Gram stands. “I’m old, I’m able, and I’ve got an extremely high credit limit. Dinosaur land is definitely within my reach.” She gathers up her books and magazines and maps, she slides out of the booth, and then she heads for the door.

“No,” I say. “No. No. No.” I sound like that annoying goldfish in *The Cat in the Hat*, but I really don’t care.

“It will be an adventure!” Abbey tells me.

I ignore my cousin and follow Gram outside, where she stomps toward the big yellow Buick at the curb. Fumbling for the car keys, she drops her maps and papers. I gather everything off the ground, then jog around to the passenger side. When I get there, Gram power-locks the doors, starts the engine, and lowers the electric window a crack. “Are you coming with me?” she asks.

“I don’t want an adventure,” I say.

“The best adventures are always the ones you don’t want.”

“I want to go home.”

“Say you’ll come with me.”

“Home, yes. Dinosaurs, no.”

Gram grabs the big shift lever below the steering wheel and puts the car into gear.

“You are not leaving me here!” I try the door again. It’s still locked.

“I hope not!” With that, Gram stomps on the gas. The engine roars, her tires scream, I release the door handle, and Gram tears away. I am left alone on the curb with nothing but a cloud of dust, an armful of papers, and the red-and-green glow of a blinking neon donut sign.