Writer’s Note

Ghost of the Highway grew out of my own family history. My father died when I was young, several years after my parents divorced. My brother and I were largely raised apart after the divorce, and for a long time we barely knew each other. We grew up connected to the same family and the same loss, but experienced much of it separately and eventually built very different lives.

Decades later, my brother and I got to know each other better. What surprised me was how much less important our differences seemed once we actually spent time talking. The similarities were much stronger than I had expected. We had been shaped by many of the same people and events, even though we had spent years carrying our own versions of what had happened.

That became the starting point for Leo and Sam. They are brothers who haven't seen each other in years and are both convinced they understand what the other one's childhood must have been like. Their estranged father's death puts them in a battered station wagon together, carrying his ashes across the Southwest and following a trail he left behind. Each brother begins the trip believing the other got the better version of their family. The road gradually complicates that story for both of them.

Sam also borrows a little from one of my closest friends in high school. He was the kind of guy who could look intimidating without doing anything at all, but underneath that exterior he was incredibly sweet. I liked that contradiction for Sam. Leo sees someone he thinks he already understands, and part of the trip is discovering how much fear, hurt, loyalty, and tenderness can be hidden behind the person standing in front of you.

I wanted to write about brothers, fathers, memory, and the stories families tell about one another, but I didn't want to make the kind of road movie where everyone finally understands the dead parent, forgives everything, hugs, and goes home healed. That isn't how I understand families. Learning why someone hurt you doesn't make the hurt disappear, and a better understanding of the past doesn't give you back the years you lost.

What it can do is change the story you've been telling yourself. Leo and Sam don't get a new childhood, and their father doesn't get rewritten into a better man. They do get the chance to stop relating to each other as characters in an old family argument and start getting to know the adults they actually became.

Humor was essential to the movie because that's also how I understand families. People can be very funny in terrible circumstances. Leo and Sam fight, drink, get lost, run out of money, scatter ashes in places they probably shouldn't, and spend much of the trip driving each other insane. Sometimes making each other laugh is the closest they can get to saying something they aren't ready to say directly.

I don't think I could have written *Ghost of the Highway* when I was younger. It took getting older, reconnecting with my brother, losing people, and looking back at childhood from a much greater distance to understand that two people can come out of the same family carrying very different truths. The story doesn't ask them to decide which brother remembers everything correctly. It gives them the chance to finally hear what the other one remembers.