

The Cost of Living

“People pay for what they do, and, still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become.

And they pay for it very simply: by the lives they lead.”

—James Baldwin, from *No Name in the Street*

“Absurdity is very much needed in this world of ours. The world rests on absurdity,

and without it perhaps nothing would be accomplished.”

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, from *The Karamazov Brothers*

Prologue

“What are you doing here? Are you stalking me or something,” Syd asked as Richard Goodman entered the bathroom. He carried a backpack with him, hands clutched around each one of the straps.

“No. I’m not,” he said and set his bag down gently upon the tiled floor, mindful of the glass jar, mindful of the loaded gun. “I swear. It’s all random.”

“I thought you were dead. Like, I heard you were dead.”

“I tried to die. I mean, I’ve been wanting to die, but my body won’t allow it,” Richard said and stared at Syd’s feet and legs, intent to work his way up to their face and, maybe, their eyes. “There were other times when I felt like I was already dead.” He rubbed his face with his hands and let out a sigh, one he wished would collapse the building, implode it upon itself.

“Same.”

Richard stepped to the sink turned the faucet on, allowing the water to warm. He pumped soap from the dispenser into his left hand and rubbed both hands vigorously together before splashing water on his face and rubbing it. Syd handed him a towel and watched him, like some unknown, unnatural force that could not be trusted.

“What happened to you? You just disappeared. The news said they searched for your body and everything,” Syd said, looking down. He was still wearing his shoes. Syd hoped their Air Jordan 11s were still by the front door, that nobody had stolen them.

“I couldn’t handle it, couldn’t take what happened,” Richard said. He could not bring himself to look in Syd’s eyes.

“I know.”

“There hasn’t been a day I haven’t thought about you,” Richard said.

“Me? Why me?” Syd asked, right hand spread out and clutched at their breast, as if to check that their heart still pumped, that their body still pulsed.

“Because part of me has always blamed you for what happened to Dom.”

Part I

Chapter 1

Richard Goodman walked across the footbridge over I-25 as the mayhem of the superhighway raged below. While he searched and hoped for a place to relieve himself, he tried to decide whether he was a coward, a fool, or both. He read somewhere once that everyone fell into one of these categories, whether they wanted to or not, regardless of how they viewed themselves. That's how it was with him whenever he took his long walks through ever-growing Denver—fighting himself, his feelings, either trying to remember differently, or trying to forget.

He walked up to a blue Port-o-potty next to a park and baseball diamond just as the glorious mid-September afternoon shifted from warm sunshine to clouds and the possibility of snowstorms. Richard pulled on the plastic door and was shocked to find it unlocked, even more shocked to find the insides of the portable toilet to be somewhat hospitable. He rushed inside and locked the door, amazed the door had a lock. He quickly laid toilet paper around the toilet seat, unzipped, sat, and tried to relax, to avoid the thoughts his mind desperately tried avoid, but ultimately always failed: his addictions, his sexlessness, the loaded gun in his backpack, his son lying dead in a carpeted hallway lined with lockers.

No sooner had Richard started to go when the Port-o-potty shook and a man's enraged roar pierced through the plastic.

"Hey man! Get the hell out of there!"

"I'm trying to," Richard shouted through the door.

"This is my john, motherfucker! *Mine!*"

"Knock it off, will you! I'm trying to pee!"

"I'm gonna *fuck* you up, *bitch!* You had no right to piss in my toilet," the voice continued.

The Port-o-potty jostled and banged with the abuse and Richard tried to maintain his footing. How could he make this stop? Richard knew he had no choice and hated it. He wished he had time to unload the gun first, but shoved his hand down into his backpack and pulled out the gun. Urine and feces sloshed around beneath him and the smell worsened as it splashed up

through the open seat. He slid the door latch sideways and kicked the door open and pointed the gun at the head of a wretched and withered mendicant, who immediately put his hands up and backed off. Richard deeply breathed in the fresh air and stared somberly at his unhoused peer, lowered his gun, returned it to his backpack and, anguished and piteous, bound up the street.

Richard got his 9mm. handgun in the second-to-last year of his high school teaching career. It was a chaotic, panicked time of mass shootings and, in particular, school shootings. More and more school districts were requiring teachers to carry guns in school, but Richard refused. Rather than fire him, the school district forced the Department of Education to cancel his public service loan forgiveness on his massive student loan debt, unless he agreed to carry. He only had one year of payments left before his \$100,000 in student loans would be wiped clean. So, he acquiesced to carry the gun at school and then kept it after the shooting. No one, for some reason, probably incompetence, or the insane love for the 2nd Amendment of the conservative school district he worked in, had asked for it back. Though Richard didn't give them an opportunity, as he had given up his previous life and was living on the streets before the investigation into the shooting was complete.

To live, unhoused and emasculated, Richard believed he had to try and purge himself of the toxic masculinity embedded within him from birth and a life lived within a white, heteronormative patriarchy. These same toxins his own son had been born into, a murderous son, and his emasculation, the total penectomy and the removal of his testicles, given back to him by the doctors in a jar, seemed a tighter *denouement* to the story than him killing himself, or perhaps a fitter penance for what he had wrought into this world. Once, Richard had tried to slit his wrists. When he obviously didn't cut deep enough, he tried to hang himself. Who really knew, besides racists, or boy scouts, how to tie a noose? In his most recent attempt, he tried to shoot himself with his gun, but could not bring himself to pull the trigger. Now, he wasn't sure what the word "saved" meant. *Save money and time? The more you buy, the more you save? Save the planet?* He knew what *these* meant. But what did it really mean to save a person? Or

oneself? Whatever others meant by it, he knew his window for salvation had likely closed. He would continue to suffer and wait for something else to happen, as times grew darker still.

Through the streets of the Lower Highlands, by the sleek and modern looking apartment complexes and the mid-modern homes, toward Tennyson and Cesar Chavez Park, Richard walked, remembered, and tried to forget. The streets were deserted and the city was oddly quiet, save for random shouts of agony and elation emanating from the insides of homes. The Broncos were playing at the immense metal and concrete stadium just to the south, its powerful lights blared in the mid-afternoon across the city as the sun eased towards the mountains.

An old Black man sat motionless on a green metal bench in the park, staring off into nothingness, dressed in a brown tweed suit and a white dress shirt with no tie. A tan felt Kangol rested next to him on the bench and in his hands, gnarled and knotted with arthritis, he held a white paper bag. Richard approached him cautiously, like a reverent supplicant approaching an altar.

“Mr. Breedlove? It’s me. Richard.”

“Hey! How you doing, Richard? Here youngster, have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir. How’ve you been?”

“Fine, just fine. How’s life on the streets? You sure *smell* good for being homeless!”

“Oh, you know how it is. I just haven’t given up yet, is all,” Richard said.

“Yes, yes I do. Was homeless for a time, after “Nam, as you know. But ‘given up’ on what, though? Life? What is there to give up? Life gonna go on, regardless. Don’t really matter whether or not you, or me, keep going. But anyway...” he said and they sat in silence for a few moments before Mr. Breedlove continued. “Gorgeous day, ain’t it?”

“Yes, sir. It is. For now. Can’t believe it’s going to snow later.”

“Damn shame, really. What a waste! Snow in summertime just ain’t right, you know? Where in the hell the seasons done gone? Ain’t it supposed to drop sixty-degrees, or some shit?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Well. We could use the moisture, I suppose. Don’t know why it just can’t rain, though.”

“True. Sure has been dry. But this is *absurd*.”

“They say whole damn state’s in extreme drought. The whole damn West, for that matter. Ah well, they been saying that shit for years. What we all gonna do when the Colorado River dries and dies? Hell if I know. But, anyhow...how come you ain’t somewhere watching the football game, like everybody else?”

“I hate football. It’s the same damn thing every time.”

“You know, that’s true. I ain’t even thought of it that way. Every year they all practically *kill* themselves, bash they heads in, and for what? The Super Bowl?” Mr. Breedlove said and shook his head. “You ever think of all those pigs, chickens, and cows that die every year for that goddamned game? Most of it just thrown away. It’s the same thing with the players. All a waste.”

“I haven’t thought of all that, but you’ve got me thinking about it now.”

“This town is too damned obsessed with the Broncos. Live and die with those meaningless games. It’s an addiction, really. Like war. But it sure is nice to have the park to myself on a Sunday afternoon.”

“So true, Mr. Breedlove. Oh, before I forget. I brought you something.” Richard dug in his backpack, instinctively touched his gun first, the jar with what was left of his genitals, then the library copy of *The Karamazov Brothers*, and then removed a plastic bag filled with large, juicy peaches. “Palisade peaches for you.”

“Oh my word! I haven’t had a peach in I-can’t-even-remember when,” Mr. Breedlove said and licked his lips. He held the bag in his hands and weighed it, then slowly and gently removed a peach from the bag and held it reverently in his fingertips. He pressed it up to his lips, under his nose, and inhaled deeply.

“My goodness. Where’d you get these? I thought the crop got wiped out by the wildfires? And how’d *you* afford them?” he said and snapped his head in Richard’s direction. “These ain’t stolen peaches, is they? Did my son steal these? I know that boy is a master food thief.”

“No. These are on me. I’ve got my sources. Don’t you worry about that,” Richard said before asking “Mr. Breedlove? How did you you lose your eyesight? You know, in Vietnam?”

“I was gonna eat my donut, but I can’t resist this peach,” Mr. Breedlove said, ignoring the question and bit into the flesh. He chewed slowly and happily as peach juice dripped down his chin and onto his shirt. Richard watched him and smiled tenderly. Mr. Breedlove wiped his chin with the back of his hand and took another bite, then reached into the plastic bag. “Here, take a peach, Richard. You deserve it.”

“No, thank you, sir. Those are for you. I just enjoy watching you eat them.”

“Don’t you be watching me. What are you, some kind of pervert?” Mr. Breedlove said with a chuckle. “So you wanna know about Vietnam, huh? I’ll tell you if you tell me how you killed your son, and what’s it like to have your dick blown off.”

Richard tensed in paralysis as his memories enveloped him. Rifle fire. The ping and crunch of bullets whizzing through and burying into drywall. The zip and twang of bullets ricocheting and zooming to who-knows-where. The feel of the gun in his hand, the trigger against his index finger. The unendurable pain in his groin, as he watched his son bleed out on the floor.

These traumas were replaced by a new horror, the realization that Mr. Breedlove knew Richard’s secret, seemed to know about his past. But how? Who else knew? Sonny never brought it up, didn’t seem to know. But none of this was he willing to share. Not now, not ever. They sat in silence until Richard broke it.

“How do you know about me and my situation, you know, down there?”

“I think I read ‘bout you in the paper, or maybe I dreamt about it. Who knows? Could be I heard it from someone. Lots of people say lots of things about everybody else. Some’s true. Some’s not. Is it true about *you*?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Mr. Breedlove. No offense.”

“Just as well. I don’t want to talk about being blind and ‘Nam and all that shit, either,” Mr. Breedlove said and took a deep breath, then another bite of the peach. “Our stories are all

the same, really. Just as equally shitty from one story to the next, in some way or form. I lost my sight, you lost your dick and balls. Humans lost they connection to the world, to each other. How or why don't really matter, in the end," he said and sighed deeply. He took another bite of peach and chewed slowly. "How is Sonny, anyway?"

"Sonny's doing alright, I think. I haven't seen him in a day or two. I think he's got a new girlfriend. I don't know how he does it," Richard said, smiled, and shook his head. "I'm supposed to see him later up the street at The Book Bar, for this open mic poetry thing. For people who don't give a shit about football, they say. He says he's gonna read something. But he always says that and never does."

"That boy..." Mr. Breedlove said and stopped and shook his head. "That boy. I don't know why he doesn't get off these streets and make something of hisself. That damn Army *messed* him all up. FUBAR. Like it did me," he said and sighed heavily. "If only he could stop drinkin'. He's still off that *shit*, though, right?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure he's off the junk." Richard said and looked into Mr. Breedlove's foggy eyes, searching for the innumerable answers to his unspeakable questions. He couldn't help but see Mr. Breedlove as the Greek prophet, Tiresias, and each time they met he hoped he would give Richard a prophecy, a message for what he should do next to try and fix his fucked up life.

"You should come on over to The Book Bar later. I'm sure Sonny would love to see you."

"Now you know that ain't true," Mr. Breedlove snapped. "And it ain't your business, white boy, what happens between a Black man and his son. You wouldn't understand if you tried," Mr. Breedlove said, leaned back against the bench and ran a weathered hand down his face. "Besides, I ain't got patience to listen to all that hippie-dippy gobbledygook," he said with a chuckle. "No offense." He finished the peach and threw the pit into the ether in front of him. A few geese had landed while they spoke and rushed toward it, as did a squirrel from a tree. They converged on the pit and fought over it, viscosly and briefly, before giving up their fight. Mr. Breedlove removed a chocolate covered donut with rainbow sprinkles from the white paper bag

and broke off a small piece and threw it in the direction of the honking geese. They fought over the piece and came waddling toward them on the bench, wanting more.

“I don’t know why you waste good donuts on those geese, Mr. Breedlove,” Richard said.

“We all gotta eat, right? And if you gonna eat, why not eat donuts?” he said with that same vivacious laugh of Sonny’s that made Richard smile. “Well, I best be getting on. Before the storm comes. You tell Sonny that you seen me, and that I’m alive. That’s all he’s really got to know. You hear?”

“Yessir, Mr. Breedlove,” Richard said and smiled. “I’ll tell him. You enjoy those peaches yourself, okay? Don’t be giving them away to all your lady friends, and certainly don’t be feeding them to any geese.”

“Alright, Richard...Patron saint of the Denver streets! You take care now, and find someplace warm tonight. A drop in temps like this is liable to kill a man!” he said, the briefest of chuckles in the back of his throat, and rose up gingerly and grasped for his hat. He placed it delicately on his head and hobbled off, his walking stick tapping in front of him. A stiff, cool wind shifted from the west and blew into their faces. Richard nodded to Mr. Breedlove and watched him walk away, and wondered what people thought of him when he walked away. He hoped they loved him as much as he loved Mr. Breedlove, as much as he loved Mr. Breedlove’s son, Sonny. But that didn’t seem to matter now, if it ever did, whether other people loved Richard or not. Or maybe love, in general. It was time to move on, up Tennyson to The Book Bar to meet his best and only friend.

Chapter 2

Syd looked out the front door of the comic bookstore at the gathering crowd of protesters and wondered when, if ever, human beings would come to their senses.

“Don’t even worry about those fools,” Rory said with his customary chuckle as he hung rainbow flags on the walls. “They don’t mean shit.”

“How can you say that? Doesn’t the ‘God Hates Fags’ sign make you want to kill somebody?” Syd said.

“You’re not used to it by now? I would figure from all you’ve been through you’d be numb to that shit,” Rory said.

Syd had come to love helping Rory at this all-ages drag show, to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere where kids could express their identities, where proud and supportive parents beamed with joy when their children strutted on the stage. Things Syd never had growing up. From the Jesus and abstinence-only sex education in school to the feelings of confusion, shame, and guilt, the feelings of disgust and vileness toward their own existence, all had made Syd feel disconnected and distant from themselves, from their own mind and body. Traumas from which recovery would still take many years. The protesters brought it all back in the most visceral ways.

Syd thought about this and realized there should be an element of truth to what Rory said. Being mixed race, Black and White, *and* non-binary gender fluid, meant Syd was *the* marginalized of the marginalized. There were no categories for people like them. Plus, Syd knew the statistics—the high murder rates of gender non-conforming/transgender People of Color.

They were lucky even to be alive.

“We’d better hurry and get these tables and chairs set up. The little darlings will be here soon,” Rory said.

The thought of seeing the kids in their wigs, outfits, and makeup, smiling, their parents guiding them up the ramp, arms wrapped around their shoulders, past the screaming and

fanatical Christian fundamentalist, lifted Syd's heart out of the chasm of abject dread they constantly battled. The children gave them hope, if only for a couple of hours, and that was enough for Syd.

"What are you doing afterward?" Rory asked. "Wait...isn't it your birthday today? Let's celebrate!"

"I think Betty has something planned. But yeah, I'm down for us to go out together," Syd said and thought of Betty, their on-and-off-again Significant Other. Her beautiful eyes, her incandescent brown sugar skin, her voluptuous lips, and her shapely body. Syd thought of Betty's lips and remembered the first time they kissed and had sex with a woman. It was back in college and Syd's earth had been shaken from within, an awakening and a reckoning all at once. A revolution: mind, body, and soul—that's what it was. But the revolution had led to other revolutions, other uprisings within Syd, and Betty would not be happy with not having them all to herself tonight.

"Oh, goodie!" Rory said and smiled and clapped his hands, then pulled his phone out of his back pocket. "I'll text Lerón. He's been bored out of his mind lately." The thought of Lerón, his bronzed, muscular and fit body, made Syd thirsty. He was a stunningly gorgeous, very bi-curious, but ultimately super-gay man. If only Betty would be okay with sharing. After all, there was abundance for everyone. Lack and scarcity were perceptual flaws—unless a person was dying from drought or famine, both which, Syd then remembered, were occurring somewhere in the world at that exact moment. Syd sighed heavily and moved a chair across the floor.

"I can't stay out too late, though. I gotta be at work in the morning."

"Are you queens ready?" a voice from the stage called out. It was the MC for the drag show, "The Virgin Mary" as they called themselves, wearing a black and green sequined dress that sparkled in the lights. Their makeup was impeccable, their wig large, platinum blonde, and curly.

"I need to pee," Syd said, feeling the typical nerves that came before these shows: nervousness for the kids, nervous to hear the screams and yells of the protesters, anxious about

any future, unknown traumas that may beset them all. Syd hated conflict, but it was unceasing and unavoidable in their lives. But why? What did dressing in drag have to do with burning in hell? Why did it matter to these people who showed up, just to scream and curse at parents with their children, these so-called Christians, if kids wanted to dress up in drag? Why did those people outside care if kids lip-synced, danced, strutted around and felt good about themselves in their own bodies and skin? Why couldn't they just let these kids *be*, celebrated by a community where they were accepted, where they actually *belonged*? Syd didn't understand, like as a kid when their mother would warn about the devil impregnating them, through some unholy immaculate conception. And Syd was just as confused now. What the *fuck* was everyone's problem? Why were so many people so quick to condemn others to eternal damnation? And how? How could so many people claim to know the mind of God, to know what God carried in their heart?

“Better hurry,” The Virgin Mary said. “The crazies are getting restless. We need everybody outside before the kids arrive. Don't forget your rainbow parasols! You'll want it for when they start throwing stones and those little orange Bibles, at your heads!”

Chapter 3

Sonny was born in Denver, Five Points before gentrification, and possessed the admirable quality most people held that Richard had met who were born in Denver: complete self-awareness and confidence that comes from knowing, precisely, “from whence thy came.” Another of Sonny’s important qualities was his adeptness at stealing food. His picture was posted in every grocery and convenience store all over the city, but they couldn’t stop him. But food was the only thing he stole. Even the police looked upon him in wonderment, but that wouldn’t have stopped them from putting their knee on his neck, if they had the chance. Sonny would steal a smorgasbord for him and Richard, all in his coat pockets and pants, and they’d sit and feast in Cheeseman or City Park, when the weather was good.

Sonny’s ultimate power over Richard was how he often saved him from reverting back to alcoholism, and the gloom of desperation and grief that only alcohol could momentarily and simultaneously alleviate, then infinitely worsen. The only time he knew Sonny not to be drunk was when they played basketball together at the local recreation centers, or Wash Park in the summertime. On the same team, they were unbeatable, mostly because Sonny became an irrepressible beast on the court, out-rebounding and out-hustling everyone, and Richard rarely missed a shot. After games, Sonny would cough and dry heave from the exertion and pass out for the entire next day before getting drunk again. Sonny was the only person Richard had ever met that could make him *feel* drunk, by getting drunk enough for both of them, and Richard needing merely to be in Sonny’s inebriated presence to feel the effects. It was a contact drunk that Richard loved; the smell on Sonny’s breathe, the fiery carelessness and vulnerability in his eyes that whirled Richard into intoxication.

Ultimately, despite arguments and disagreements that would have ended most fragile relationships on the precarious streets, it was how Richard saved Sonny from a fentanyl overdose that forged their friendship, It was an abusively cold winter day, the type most

homeless people sheltered, from open to close, in the downtown public library. Richard went to the bathroom after a long reading session and found Sonny dying, a needle hanging from a vein in his left arm. Richard quickly informed a library worker, the antidote was administered, and Sonny was hauled off to Denver Health in an ambulance—an unfortunate regular occurrence at the downtown branch that required the library staff to be trained in the application of Naloxone, and as ad hoc social workers. Sonny recovered, and with Richard's reciprocated help from Sonny having stayed his addiction to alcohol, overcame his opioid addiction.

Richard loved to listen to Sonny talk, tell stories, recite poems, his own or other poets, and entire verses and passages from Sonny's favorites: Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, August Wilson, Toni Morrison. Richard would expound on the deeper meanings from his favorites, like Dante, Hamlet, Joyce, Kerouac, Cormac McCarthy and David Foster Wallace. Sonny was the only person Richard ever knew, besides himself, that read *Ulysses and Infinite Jest*. The author, though, besides Baldwin, that they shared the most in common was Richard's own personal Jesus—Dostoevsky. The only prophet Richard needed. He carried a copy of *The Karamazov Brothers* (kept perpetual on loan from the Denver Public Library), and a copy of *Notes from Underground* he had taken from the school's book room. They talked literature for hours, often until the sun rose over the ever-hardening and darkening downtown Denver streets.

In between readers at The Book Bar, Sonny was in rare form.

“I don't know how y'all fuck with those white writers, man. Shit is whack!” Sonny said loudly, holding court. Sonny was already pretty drunk, and enjoying the attention of the young-white-hipster crowd nodding and laughing while he spoke, looking around at each other, slightly uncomfortable, unsure if they should be laughing or not. “There ain't a white writer who ever wrote better than a Black person. And don't come at me with Ernest Hemingway. Motherfucker was racist as hell. *The Sun Also Rises*? Cancel that shit! And don't come at me with no James

Joyce bullshit. Fuck *Finnegan's Wake*! That shit *ain't* literature! Give me Ishmael Reed over all those fools any-damn-day!"

Richard laughed. He couldn't help it, even though it was all things he'd heard many times before.

"Well, why don't you go up there and show us something, if you're such an expert? Such a critic!" Richard needled, playing his role in a long held ritual between the two of them.

"Critic? Damn, Richard! That shit hurts, man! Alright, you just watch now. I'm gonna show you white folks how it's done! But I gotta sign up first," Sonny said and smiled, the tip of his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth as he scribbled his name on the open-mic list.

A few readers recited some original poems, mostly about sex, or orgasms, or the lack thereof, to polite and awkward applause. Sonny's name was called. Sonny, older but attractive in that ageless manner of the Black Man, unwrapped and unwound his tall, slender frame, puffed out the curls atop his small Afro with his finger tips, smoothed out his mustache and goatee, stretched his long arms along with his enormous black hands, still ashy with dirt and labor from the grind of the streets, and recited from memory, "Let America Be America Again," by Langston Hughes. By the time he got to the last stanza, "Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death/ The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies/We, the people, must redeem..." the gathered crowd clapped and cheered loudly. Sonny bowed and smiled and strutted back to the bar, high-fiving and fist-bumping people as he passed.

"You done good, man. Real good," Richard said and slapped Sonny on his ass.

"Hey, now, Richie! Only on the ball court, brotha! And if I done so good, why don't you buy me a beer? I drank up all money."

"Wish I could, Sonny. I spent my last dime on peaches. For your Pops."

"*Shit*, Richard. Why you gotta do that, man? Why you always gotta go and kill my vibe with some serious shit?"

"I just kind of run into him. I don't know how to explain it. But, all he wanted me to tell you is he is alive. He thinks about you. He asked how you're doing."

“That’s enough, Rich. I don't want to hear all that. Let’s just leave it alone.”

“Well, I’ve got to run. Got somewhere to be,” Richard said and grabbed his backpack off the floor.

“Where the hell you got to go on a Sunday evening? Oh, that's right. You go to that *freak show*, to see the *freaks*. I forgot.”

“Don’t say that, Sonny. I thought you were more open-minded than that. Those kids aren’t freaks. Plus, it’s wrong what those assholes shout at the kids. No child deserves that treatment.”

“But, that can’t be the only reason you go over there. Is there a woman, or something? I mean at least *that* I could *maybe* understand. Or a dude? I don’t know even know, Richie. Are you gay or straight, or what? I mean, what do you do, you know, at night, when you lonely?”

“Don’t worry about it, Sonny. Yes, there is someone I’m trying to find, I think. Maybe. I haven’t decided what I’ll do if I ever find them, though.”

“Them? Who you talking about, Richard?”

“Forget it. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Wouldn't? You mean I *don't* understand! Come on, Rich, I thought we were homies! You can tell me.”

“Sorry, Sonny. I can’t. I gotta go. Where you going to be later?”

“Man, you know I’ll be down at Sonny Lawson Park. That’s *my* park. You know that, Richie. Your ass is going up to read next Sunday! Don't forget...and quit meeting up with my Pops, man! Get your own father, by God!”

They laughed, clasped their right hands and hugged in the manner of brotherly love, and Richard headed out the door and turned north on Tennyson towards the comic bookstore, mad at himself for drinking so much water, wishing he had peed before he left the bar and changed the incontinence pad he wore to soak up any excess leakage. He just couldn't walk around with piss stains on his pants, smelling of urine, like so many of the other homeless. A level of cleanliness was important in order to hold on to one's humanity, Richard believed, which was

the only dangling tendon from the shredded wounds of his past life that kept him alive, kept him waking up and moving through each day.

On the third Sunday evening of each month, Richard often went to an all-ages drag show at a comic book shop in the Sunnyside neighborhood. He wouldn't go in and watch the show, but just stayed outside, to bear witness to the absurd scene. The drama eased his addictions for a bit and alleviated his curiosity, his boredom. But the real reason, Richard knew deep down, was that he was hoping to see Syd there. He wasn't sure why they *would* be there, but thought if he would find them anywhere, that's where it would be. What he would do if he saw them, he had no idea, didn't know what he hoped for in such a reunion. Would he kill Syd? Would he try and talk to them? To forgive them, or ask for a forgiveness he could never accept?

As he walked, Richard thought of those words Sonny had said back at The Book Bar—*freak show*. He, Richard knew, was a freak. He didn't belong in this world. What was he, even? A wraith? The tears of some crying shadow? A decrepit breath from a decomposing spirit? Was any of this even real, was he, or anyone, even alive? He had read on one of his internet sessions at the library about some billionaire tech genius who claimed we were all living in a simulation. He often thought he was already dead, and this, whatever it was, was hell. But those thoughts did him no good, for, in the end, the absurdity of reality was impossible to deny.

Groups of young, white men, who called themselves the "Proud Boys," gathered as usual outside the comic bookstore to protest the event. Richard had read, after first stumbling upon the group during his library binge sessions on the local news, about the "alt-right" and the re-emergence of white supremacy and neo-Nazi groups, of which these "Proud Boys" seemed to be a part. Men, young and old, far from boyhood, dressed in black and stood with signs that read "God hates fags," and "Child Drag is Child Abuse." Some held up posters of Jesus, or waved The Bible over their heads. They shouted, or spoke in tongues, strange and unnatural bodily

writings, while the young drag queens and their families shuffled passed and in front of barricades of wood with rainbow and American flags painted on them, the children's heads bowed in fear and hurt from the screaming protestors. Another group of counter-protestors stood together in a line opposite these Proud Boys. The cops stood in between the two groups and watched, their arms crossed in curious bemusement.

Richard escorted a family to the front door holding a rainbow umbrella to shield them. A rock smashed into the umbrella, nearly jarred it from his grip. They reached the door and the father slipped Richard a five dollar-bill.

"God bless you, man," the father said, trauma and hurt soaked into his face. Grey and darkening clouds blocked out the last rays of the day and a cold gust blew across the parking lot. The umbrella Richard held tipped against the wind. Another rock hit Richard in the shoulder. Richard looked at the man's child, a massive pair of noise-blocking headphones straddled the skull and over the ears and framed a brave, yet terrified face. The door opened and he saw them.