

SIN
AGAINST
The RACE

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ONE

*Early Monday Morning,
Fall Semester 2015, First Week
Huckleberry Park District, The City*

SIRENS BROKE ALFONSO'S SLEEP, BUT WHEN HE AWOKE they'd gone. His mind switched on, he again found himself in the desert of another sleepless night. Disasters stirred in the dimly lit alleys of his mind. Sweat sopped his forehead. Closed eyes longed for sleep. Weariness eventually drifted him into what his cousin Carlton described as a halfway to dawn state, neither dark nor light, neither asleep nor awake. He wanted to linger in that state for as long as possible and cocoon himself in its ambiguities.

Halfway to dawn is a Billy Strayhorn expression, Carlton explained.

Alfonso wasn't familiar with the jazz legend. Who is Billy Strayhorn? he asked. His cousin scowled and said, You better get an education, young man! That night, they listened to "Lush Life," "Chelsea Bridge," and other wonders.

Carlton often visited him halfway to dawn. All of their moments—tender, sweet, sublime, catty, silly, confounding, fierce—coalesced into one. None overpowered the other. A blues requiem whose stanzas were a work in progress.

When dawn proper began announcing its presence through his bedroom window, Alfonso denied it by placing his pillow over his head. Then his iPhone vibrated on the nightstand. He fought the urge to reach for it. Halfway to dawn needed to last just a little bit longer.

Moments later, a different sound jostled him. He recognized the heavy footsteps as either his father's or his sister Belinda's. Before he could decipher which, he heard his father's voice outside his bedroom door, at the top of the stairs.

"No, no, that's alright. What's going on? ... No! Really? ... Seriously? ... It's burning all the way down? ... Oh, man! ... No, you did not call me too early ... You made my day, my friend! You made my day!"

His father descended the stairs. The words became fainter.

His iPhone buzzed again. He couldn't ignore it a second time, not with his father also up and excited about something. He grabbed it off the nightstand. The time flashed 6 a.m.

Two text messages from the local news station jerked him upright.

"Holy shit!" his dry voice croaked.



Alfonso hurriedly dressed and stuffed what he needed for the day into his backpack, though the first day of classes was the last thing on his mind. He made a point of rushing past his father's study on his way out the front door so that his passage would go unnoticed.

Did my dad really say, "You made my day"?

He descended the hill on Beacon Street where his family lived and wound his way from Peele to 44th to Stevens, until he reached the northeast corner of Huckleberry Park at Stevens and 45th. A brisk walk west down 45th brought him to the park's stone gateway at Carver Street. He paused, then entered. Trees lined the path as the grade descended. It eventually leveled out, emptying into a large, grassy field.

In the not too long ago, he and his father rushed furtively out of the house together and came to this grassy field to play baseball. The early hours of a steamy summer morning required that they do nothing less. They snuck out to avoid his mother's disapproving stare. She hated that they played with a hardball, even if Alfonso wore protective gear. Take the softball, she'd say if she caught them leaving. They did, but only for show. During game time, they always kept the ball small, round, tightly wound, regulation down to the last stitch.

Walking through the middle of the field, he could picture his father's tall, imposing frame clad in black shorts and a gray tank top striking a familiar pose: body in profile, head turned toward his objective, the ball clasped close to his chest. Alfonso, in deep concentration, held his bat at the ready. When his father played in college, they called him the Wizard, because he made balls disappear. No one saw them as they whizzed by. The years had changed nothing. His father still had a mean fastball. Whenever Alfonso connected, they set their eyes skyward, following the ball like Charlie Brown followed his kite, with hope that they'd be able to track and retrieve it so that they could send it soaring again.

What if someone got hurt? Would he say "You made my day" then?

He veered right, trudged across the damp grass toward his destination.

Over the summer, the Huckleberry Community Clinic had become a living memorial, a place of homage. He went by it nightly after it had closed for the day to glimpse at what his cousin had helped to bring into the world. During each visit, he stared at the founders' photo that hung just inside the door, taken on opening day. They stood in front of their new space, faces beaming brighter than the sunlight that struck them. And at the far end of the group, sitting down with a reserved smile on his gaunt face, was Carlton. Alfonso didn't attend the opening ceremony, but his cousin didn't give him grief about it. *I'm still taking your ass down there to get your HIV test!* He told Carlton that he was looking forward to it. Two months later, Carlton was dead.

He went up an embankment and through a thicket of trees, reaching the park's western border at Lincoln Avenue. He hid in the bushes. From there, he witnessed chaos.

Across the street, smoke billowed from the smashed-up front of the clinic. Broken furniture spilled onto the sidewalk. Water sprayed hard into what had been the tastefully appointed reception area. Firefighters rushed everywhere. Broken glass crunched under boots. Flames shot out an apartment window above the clinic. Barely dressed refugees from the building stood on the sidewalk, dazed. Paramedics triaged in the street. A baby howled. Fire engine lights cast the area in red.

Alfonso choked on tears and soot.

Through his teary eyes, he recognized faces from his cousin's world also dealing with the fire. Mrs. Parker, wearing a long black dress, sat in the middle of the street next to an ambulance, helping a young boy with an oxygen tank. She was Carlton's favorite nurse and his cousin hated when they forced her to retire. But retirement clearly had not diminished her sense of duty.

"Fierce!" Alfonso muttered.

Then he saw a familiar bald white dude run up, wearing his trademark jeans, white T, and leather biker jacket. His heart sank. Bingo Cincinnati, sweet bear-hugging Bingo, a cofounder of the clinic. The leatherman hung out frequently at Carlton's apartment. Alfonso loved his handlebar mustache, which Carlton often quipped came mail order from the old *Drummer* leather magazine. *No, dear, this is a Tom of Finland exclusive*, Bingo always retorted. His laugh and smile were infectious.

That morning Alfonso saw neither. "I have to protect our patients' records!" he heard Bingo scream as police restrained him from entering the charred inferno. Then Bingo just stood with his hands over his face.

How he wanted to rush to Bingo so that they could support each other. But thoughts of his father kept him in check. Showing his face now, in this crowd, was impossible.

"*You made my day.*" *About this, he fucking said, "You made my day."*

His father *never* approved of the Huckleberry Community Clinic's presence in his district and often disparaged it as "that damn needle exchange clinic." Small wonder Councilman Alfonso Rutherford "Ford" Berry, II danced an early morning jig—and he'd expect others, particularly members of his family, particularly his namesake and heir apparent, to dance along with him.

In frustration, Alfonso turned himself away and walked back toward the center field of the park.



Carver Street, 8 a.m.

Sammy Turner's Corner Grocery

Sammy bent over to pick up the Monday papers as he entered his store at 44th and Carver. He threw the stacks on their racks still bound by their tight plastic straps. He resolved to get back to them after a while. Before doing a damned thing, though, he needed his morning cup of blues coffee. He walked to the back room to set himself upon this ritual task.

Making blues coffee was more like invoking an incantation than following a recipe. And that morning he needed his blues old school, so he put on the disc featuring Alberta Hunter, Lucille Hegamin, and Victoria Spivey. Miss Spivey soon rang out with "Black Snake Blues." For authentic blues coffee, he used his old tin drip pot on an electric burner in the storeroom at the back of the store. As soon as he got it going, he returned to his store-opening chores.

Charlotte Hunter arrived right on cue, the usual bag of croissants in hand. She often shared Monday blues coffee with him. He figured she would arrive in short order, given the day's events. She walked straight to the storeroom without pause. Sammy was sitting at the low end of the counter when she returned. He waited for her verdict, since she took it straight.

"It's a keeper," she said.

Sammy nodded and took a sip. She always added just the right amount of cream to his.

"I can't believe this shit, Charlotte. I just can't believe it."

She sat silently.

"Have you been there?"

"Didn't have the heart. Liz and I both couldn't stop crying."

Sammy handed her a tissue. She dabbed her eyes and blew her nose. "I hate to think what that man is going to say on the news about it."

Sammy scowled at the Councilman Berry reference.

"I won'," he said.

Charlotte shook her head and dunked a croissant into her mug.

Alberta Hunter began singing about reaping and sowing when her doppelgänger walked through the door. Mrs. Parker not only shared Alberta's deep seasoned voice, but also had worked as a nurse well past normal retirement age. Ash discolored her coil of straight white hair and her long black dress, but she otherwise looked her usual stately self.

"Got any more of that coffee back there, Sammy?"

"Mrs. Parker!" Charlotte said.

"Great Dizzy!" Sammy said. "What happened to you?"

"You weren't at that fire, were you?"

"Yes, I was there, and what a heartbreaking sight it was. Just heartbreaking. That beautiful, beautiful center destroyed just like that. It's a low-down, dirty shame."

"That it is, Mrs. Parker," Sammy said.

"It makes me so angry I could spit. All that hard work. Poor Bingo was there. He looked like a train hit him."

"But what happened to you?" Charlotte asked.

"Oh, nothing. I guess I look a mess. I was just helping them out some." She sat on the crate next to Sammy behind the counter and told them about the little boy she saw crying and wheezing so loud she could hear it over all the commotion. "Asthma attack. I got some albuterol and an oxygen tank from the paramedics. I cradled him in the middle of the road until he started breathing normal again."

"Let me get you a mug, Mrs. Parker," Charlotte said. "You take cream and sugar, don't you?"

“Yes, Charlotte, just a little of both, please. I told the paramedics that I was a nurse and that the boy was my godson. Heh! At least I was half telling the truth.”



Alfonso wandered aimlessly, then Carver Street beckoned. Going to *that street* was a huge taboo growing up. No one had to explain why—the programming was hardwired into the DNA. Carlton, of course, advised him otherwise.

You need an education. Go and meet Sammy, young man! He's the den mother for all the neighborhood children coming out into the life.

Jazz and coffee greeted Alfonso at the door. He recognized the soothing pulse of Duke Ellington's "Happy Reunion" and lingered a moment to soak in Paul Gonsalves as he began his sax solo. Scanning the little store for the first time, he found it quite ordinary looking. Narrow aisles. Produce bins. Freezers in the back. To his right, he saw Charlotte on a stool behind the register at the high end of the counter. She looked the same, her intense brown eyes softened by her button nose, her face framed by her contoured Afro. He saw Mrs. Parker again, sitting at the low end of the counter. And he saw Sammy sitting in between them. Alfonso had never seen Sammy before, but he looked just like he had pictured based on all that Carlton had told him: large build, round face, slightly graying hair, an old school, hepcat goatee under his lower lip. He looked at them looking at him, a skinny black kid with a dull Afro and sullen face.

Sammy called out his name, which startled him. The storekeeper squeezed his girth behind Mrs. Parker and walked out in front of the counter. He gave Alfonso a warm hug. Neither wanted to let go. The embrace had been a long time coming.

"It's so good to see you, baby," Sammy said.

"It feels like I lost him all over again!" Alfonso began sobbing.

Sammy held him tight, rubbing his head and back. Charlotte came around and joined them.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie," she said.

He switched his embrace to Charlotte somewhat self-consciously—mindful of a history not his, yet a part of him—but felt only sympathy from her. Carlton always told him that Charlotte was the real deal, always straight, always fair.

“You want some coffee, baby?” Sammy asked. “We finished the first pot but the next one should be ready now.”

“It sure smells good.”

Sammy went to the storeroom. Alfonso turned toward Charlotte again.

“I can’t wrap my brain around this. It was there, last night. I walked past it. I just can’t believe it.”

“None of us can, Alfonso. We’re all in grief.”

Sammy brought up a mug. “Oh, I forgot to ask if you take anything in it.”

“Naw, just black.”

“Yep, just like Carlton!” Mrs. Parker said. “He always said keep it hot and keep it black!”

“Ooo, this is good,” Alfonso said. “This is from a tin drip pot, isn’t it?”

“You know it,” Sammy replied.

“My aunt has one. I like the way it chars the coffee.”

“That’s the blues effect. It ain’t blues coffee unless it’s been bruised a bit, to get some attitude. The trick, though, is not to bruise it too much or it will get bitter.”

“Well,” Mrs. Parker said, standing, “I think I better get home and wash up. Otherwise I’ll smell like soot all day, and I certainly don’t want that. Charlotte, do you think you can walk me home?”

“Of course.”

“You sure you don’t want us to call a cab?” Sammy asked.

“Naw. Better to walk. Need the exercise. Sammy, thank you so much for the coffee. It’s still the best in the Huck.”

“Anytime, Mrs. Parker.”

As she passed Alfonso, she stopped to give him a hug. “Take care, sugar. Come by and see me whenever you want. You know where to find me.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Parker.”

They exited the store, leaving Sammy and Alfonso alone. It remained an eerie, still morning, as if the fire had sucked the oxygen out of the whole neighborhood.

“Come join me behind the counter, baby,” Sammy said. Alfonso obliged, sitting where Mrs. Parker had, dropping his backpack on the ground. He stared forward at nothing in particular while taking slow sips. Even in silence, Sammy provided comfort. Alfonso found him an easy presence to be in, someone who did not force himself on you, but took you at your own pace.

“This summer’s been hell,” Alfonso finally uttered.

“Yes,” Sammy agreed.

“I’m crying for real. But part of me is just so angry. What the hell is going on? First Carlton. Then Eddie.”

Carlton lit up brightest when Eddie was in the room. He snapped and clapped loudest when Eddie threw it down, reading this person and that person. The music funk'd hardest with Eddie in the house dancing his tail off. Alfonso loved it when Eddie dropped by.

Iron bars and alcoholic rage silenced Eddie, barely two months after Carlton died. Four weeks in a coma, still no response. It happened at the cruisy northeast corner of Huckleberry Park.

“Now this fire destroys all that he lived for! His final act on this world, gone! It’s like he’s being fucking erased!”

He squeezed shut his eyes, not wanting to lose it again. Sammy gave him a tissue, with which he blew his nose.

“In my family, Carlton was invisible,” Alfonso continued. “Even at his own funeral. The reverend said his name twice. I counted. Then at the reception, at my aunt and uncle’s, no one mentioned him. It was just like any other family get-together, like Thanksgiving or something. Food, drinks, kids playing on the grass. It wasn’t a funeral.”

Sammy shook his head.

“Aunt Emmy, Carlton’s mother, wouldn’t even acknowledge me. That was harsh. She’s like a grandmother to me, you know, since she’s so much older than my mother. And I never knew my grandmothers. But she looked straight through me when I stood in front of her, wouldn’t say a word. No one saw how upset I was.

Finally, I was like, fuck this shit. I stormed home, went to my room, slammed the door, and pumped Billie Holiday as loud as I felt like and cried my fucking eyes out.”

“Gloomy Sunday” had filled Alfonso’s head during the service while the organist played anonymous dirges, dreck that failed to capture the complexities of Carlton’s life. His cousin often sought salvation from Billie’s bruised singing, “Gloomy Sunday,” “Some Other Spring,” “Good Morning Heartache,” others.

“We played lots of Lady Day at the remembrance we held for Carlton,” Sammy said.

“I so wanted to go to that,” Alfonso sighed. “When my family got home, my mom came up to the room. You know what she said? She told me it was disrespectful to leave like I did. I screamed at her, ‘Disrespectful?’ and slammed the door in her face. I had never done that to my mother.” He took another sip, looked into his emptying mug. “And then later on, after they all had dinner, my father came. He said I made such a scene, that I made my mother upset, that I was being too emotional, that none of this was gonna bring Carlton back, so that I’d better get over it. By this point, I was like, yeah, whatever. I spent the whole summer locked in my room.”

“Mmm, mmm, mmm,” Sammy intoned.

“I’ve become as invisible as Carlton. Maybe I’ve always been and I’m just now realizing it. You know what I’m saying?”

Sammy patted the young man’s hand as it clutched his mug. “Have you ever read *The Souls of Black Folk*, by Du Bois?”

“Yeah. It’s like a bible in my family.”

“Uh-huh. I read it while hitchhiking to the March on Washington.”

Alfonso turned to face Sammy. “Hitchhike? For real?”

“I was young, alright?”

Alfonso giggled.

“It was a different time. The whole atmosphere was charged. You could smell it and taste it. Anyway, as I read it I got more and more excited. I kept saying, ‘Yeah, this is my life. It’s my life!’ And I really wanted to talk to someone about it, but I couldn’t. ‘Cause I wasn’t talking about being black—I was talking about being gay. Everything he said about the masks, the veil, the dual identity, all

that, that was how I felt! I'm sitting around a bunch of black folks, reading Du Bois..."

"And you couldn't talk to no one about it."

"And I couldn't talk to no one about it."

They stared at each other.

"And, you know," Sammy continued, "Du Bois died the night before the march. So folks liked that I was reading it. But I couldn't tell them what was really going on for me."

"That's amazing, Sammy."

"It was amazing."

"You should have written about it."

"I did."

"Really? Was it published anywhere?"

"Oh, no, honey, I didn't write no essay. No one wanted to hear stuff like that from some know-nothing sweet pea. If you wanna know how we were treated back then, read Eldridge Cleaver. Naw, I wrote a tune called 'The Lavender Veil Blues.'"

"Now wait," Alfonso said, shifting on his seat. "Carlton never told me that you wrote music."

Sammy smiled. "Didn't he?" He stood up. "You want some more coffee?" He took both of their mugs and walked to the back room.

Alfonso absorbed the music playing. How comforting he found it, a piece of his cousin's soul immune to erasure, beyond invisibility, living, vibrant.

Carlton gave him jazz. *Take all the music before the vultures come*. He had resisted previous offers. But the "vultures" comment got to him, as Carlton no doubt calculated it would. More than anything, his cousin wanted his immediate family to enter an empty apartment after he died, so that they would receive exactly what they had given. Nothing. *Defy the vultures* became his last rallying cry, one Alfonso in the end could not resist, even as he resisted the end.

"Is that Johnny Hodges?" he called out.

"Nope," Sammy said, walking back with the mugs refilled. "It's called 'Checkered Hat.' It's a eulogy for Hodges after he passed."

“Carlton told me he learned jazz from you, but he never said you’re a musician. What do you play?”

“I don’t play no more. Honey, that was a long-ass time ago.” He took a sip of coffee. Alfonso wouldn’t stop staring. “Drums,” he finally said.

“Bet you still can.”

Sammy said nothing, downed more coffee.

The sax sounded eerily like Hodges’s distinctive embouchure, as if he were being channeled, obliging his lifelong colleagues with one last performance. Alfonso found himself shifting side to side with the easy swing of the piece.

“I hear you’re quite the dancer, like Carlton.”

“He tell you that?” Alfonso smirked. His sashaying stilled.

“He said you studied it seriously once.”

“Yeah. Once.”

He felt Sammy’s stare, but would not return it.

“I had my reasons why I stopped drumming. I wonder now, all these years later, if they were good ones.”

In their safe space on the field, Alfonso once asked his father if he had ever thought about going pro. A silent smile appeared. After a few more tosses back and forth with the ball, he mentioned that major league scouts once saw him pitch a no-hitter. No, really? Seriously? What happened? The silent smile reappeared, followed by mumbled words about it being a long time ago.

Someone entered.

“Hello, Miss Vera,” Sammy said.

“Hi, Sammy.” Her clipped diction matched her pace to the refrigerators in the back.

She wore black jeans and boots, a pale-white top, and a light-blue windbreaker jacket. A golden headscarf, matching her light-brown complexion, covered her hair. When she returned with orange juice, her camera came into view, dangling around her neck.

Vera’s camera keeps it real, Carlton explained. She’s recording our history, our essence.

Sammy stood at the register to ring her out. She reached into her pocket for bills. Their motions were robotic. Neither said anything. Alfonso wondered if they would have spoken more freely

if he hadn't been there. As she pocketed some loose change, she looked down at him, an intense stare, like a search beam.

"You're Alfonso, aren't you?" Her voice sounded bourbon-soaked, just as Carlton described.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you two knew each other," Sammy said.

She moved her camera gently to the side, then reached down over the counter to embrace Alfonso. He did not expect it, but reached up and hugged her as well. When she stood up, a small smile softened her face.

"You going to or coming from?" Alfonso asked.

"Going to. Take care, Alfonso."

He nodded.

"Bye, Miss Vera," Sammy said.

"Miss Vera!" Alfonso called out as she opened the door. "I was just wondering if you could maybe make me a copy of that photo, you know, the one that you took of them at the clinic when it opened?"

"Of course, sweetie. Sammy, I'll leave it with you, alright?" He nodded. She flashed another smile before going outside, her clipped pace taking her southbound.

"Sammy, why did Miss Vera give up modeling?"

"She didn't give it up. She just got tired of it. I think ultimately she always wanted to do photography."

Sammy walked behind Alfonso to get to the stereo. Alfonso looked up at the wall behind him and saw photos he hadn't noticed earlier. One was of Charlotte and Carlton, sitting where he sat now, laughing their asses off. Next to that was a photo of a younger, skinnier Sammy standing in front of his store, leaning against the glass, his arms folded, a beret on his head. Above that hung various awards, a business license, other official notices.

Strayhorn's "Day Dream" came on, the composer himself at the piano. Alfonso closed his eyes.

"This is one of my favorites," he said. He loved how blue chords kept the ethereal piece earthbound, a sacred dance performed by fallen angels.

"Carlton lived," he said. "I want to live, too, Sammy."



Mrs. Parker kept her eyes forward, silently noting, as she always did, the further deterioration of the park—the graffiti, the broken pavement, the crumbling band shell surrounded by a dilapidated chain-link fence. She normally eulogized its yesteryears whenever she walked through it with someone, but uttered none of her familiar verses during their long walk. When the 48th Street brownstones came into view, she stopped suddenly and turned to face Charlotte.

“You’ve got to get rid of that man,” she said, referring to Councilman Berry. “This area can’t survive four more years of his neglect. It’s been eight years since you last ran against him and I know that ain’t a whole lotta time, but a lot has changed since then. The demographics have changed. People moving in want to see a real, thriving neighborhood. Not the mess it is now. Besides destroying a beautiful health center, you know what else that fire did? It gave us another boarded-up storefront and that’s the last thing this neighborhood needs.

“Anyway, he can’t pull the same stunts he pulled eight years ago and get away with it. Attitudes have changed. Folks won’t take kindly to that sort of bigotry no more. People respect you. They respect the work you’ve done. He can’t take that away from you.”

She paused long enough to catch a breath and register the reaction on Charlotte’s face.

“You’re worried about Alfonso, aren’t you, sugar?”

“He looks so fragile.”

“Sugar, we all knew this day would come sooner or later. Alfonso is slowly coming into his own. And that’s a fragile time for anyone. But he’ll be alright in the end, I know he will. How his father will react, that’s for him to decide. There ain’t nothing any of us can do about it. Now, I’ve said my piece. And I’m not gonna talk about it no more, alright? I promise. But I’m asking you, I’m asking with all my heart to at least think about it. Please do that, Charlotte. Talk to Liz and think about it. OK?”

“Alright, Mrs. Parker. I promise. I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Good. Thank you for walking me through the park, Charlotte. I’ll be alright from here.”

Charlotte waved as Mrs. Parker crossed 48th Street to her brownstone. Whenever Sammy gave her crap about running again, which he did repeatedly, she usually dismissed him with *Don’t start with me, Samuel Turner*. But somehow she didn’t mind hearing it from Mrs. Parker. In fact, she was flattered by her breathless appeal.

She slowly turned around, weighted by the events of the day, and headed back to the north side of the park.