



A Story  
From Space

## Introduction:

After the second world war, two ways of being were stomped out and the prevailing system raised from the ashes of war. Capitalism stood as the designer of the next generation and beyond. Economic booms followed, and a period of domination, ingenuity, and wealth flourished. This made way for new voices in the counterculture movement: civil rights for minorities, antiwar protests, women's liberation, and the rise of environmentalism. Individual voices were as strong as they had ever been. This was good of course, but bad for those in charge, or those who liked the status quo. But as the years went on, the rich became richer, and lack of oversight created unethical and inhumane working conditions. The cost of goods rose beyond control while wages stagnated. Corporations were bloated with cash while the working class participated in the revolving door of underpaid and unsafe jobs. It kept going this way until their lives were reduced to nothing more than dollars per hour. Once the people were squeezed of all their spending power, the corporations did not stop there, but created, coined, and championed the new source of value, one that would never run out or dry up. Data became king. Seemingly harmless at first, it began with collecting email addresses for sweepstakes and quickly spiraled into total surveillance.

When the last global pandemic hit, the trust of society began to unravel. The silent promises we kept, the golden rules of how to treat one another, the idea of being a part of something bigger, and the respect for our neighbors vanished. Rather than making positive changes in legislation, programming, and community, the solutions offered were through corporate tax breaks and isolating technologies. Inaction from politicians on life's most desperate areas, healthcare, education, climate, and equality fall to the wayside. Homelessness and unemployment is on the rise despite the record breaking profits celebrated by the corporate executives. Rapidly, the number of people living in poverty returns to pre-World War 2 levels. In a world running out of time, the gap continues to grow.

The year is 2050.

## Part 1

A drummer is sitting on a stool in front of his kit, like a chef before a stove. Raising his drumsticks, he begins to tap, sending an echo around the amphitheater.

“1...2...3...4...” he calls out before smashing the snares and pounding the kick in rhythm.

His left hand is in complete control, tapping the hi-hats, his head bobs, all while keeping time for the rest of the mates playing in front of him. He looks up to see the droves of screaming fans. The shrill shrieks are welcomed with wry smiles from the band. Sweat drips and bounces off the toms, the rest of the band comes in. Tsk tsk tsk tsk ts tsk tsk tsk tsk. Tap tap tap tap tap.

“Excuse me,” a voice floods the moment. “Excuse me, could you stop tapping my chair?”

Sunny snaps out of his daydream and back to reality.

“Sorry, miss,” he responds, the bus coming to a sudden halt. Hustling off, Sunny turns up the volume on his headset, and nods to the beat as makes his way briskly.

The streets are filled with those who use it as their home. Makeshift tents and enclosures are strewn about keeping them from the harsh conditions, whether it be the brutal sun or frigid winters. What was once a tent or two, morphed into its own small village. With the rise of artificial intelligence, many sectors of work became totally automated, forcing many many people out of work and onto the streets. With corporate profits being the measuring stick of a good economy, there were no social programs designed or any consideration as to what thousands and thousands of workers ought to do to feed themselves and their families.

Conditions were rough, but let's not forget who these people were. Mr. Drury, was an engineer for 25 years before he was laid off, his tent was nearly 12 feet tall and had multiple floors laid out, constructed with nothing more than bits of cardboard he salvaged. And then there was Mr. Yola. He was an electrician before his job was given to an acute robot's company that managed to work twice as fast. That didn't stop him from layering lights throughout the courtyard that use solar energy to provide light for everyone at night. Mrs. Daily, who was an arts teacher before the program's funds were cut to supply military weapons to foreign interests. She can knit a full blanket in one day, and is always ensuring no one ever has to shiver while they sleep.

Sunny stops in his tracks as he hears a tune from a radio sitting on a stool on the street. He takes his own headphones off, “I don't think I have heard this one before.” The jazz quartet is in

full swing, the men on the street tap their feet while sipping coffee they manage to brew inside their humble quarters.

Mr. Toriq wrote a lot of the code for the factory Sunny works in. Once the project was complete Mr. Toriq was handed his dismissal, after helping companies for years, little by little, the contracts stopped and the knowledge he once pioneered made him obsolete. But you wouldn't know it as he picked up the hobby of singing and hasn't stopped smiling since.

A woman hands Sunny a cup of coffee and a paper flower.

He goes into his backpack and gives some protein bars and fruit in return. They are all gracious. It's more of a barter system than panhandling.

"Hey Sunny, come check this out." Sunny is invited into the makeshift living space. It was sewn from two recycled camping tents. Sunny ducks his head into the entrance, but is surprised at how spacious the tent is. Looking up, he sees the glimmer of light draped across the ceiling.

"I got the lights up and working yesterday, found them thrown outside for pick up. They looked barely used. Got them running through solar panels from the roof of this building, installed them last night."

"No way, I can barely figure out how to change the light in my apartment."

"Oh, yes, you could! If you youngsters would put your phones down and take off your headphones, you might read a thing or two and learn something," he laughs at his own joke.

Sunny laughs, too, "Hey, I have to get to work, you know how they are if I'm late."

"That is because you're always late, boy, talking to us!"

Picking up the pace, Sunny hustles the rest of the way to work, trying to make up time from his morning tent exploration. Another six blocks to go. When Sunny arrives at the factory, he pulls out his ID. Everyday, like clockwork he waits the 2.3 seconds it takes for the scanner to read the ID. It's something Sunny knows only after scanning into the building countless times, pulling the steel doors, only to feel the jam of the lock. This results in him having to walk back to the scanner and repeat the process. To this day, he walks into the building wondering who designed this and why.

Pulling the heavy doors open, he enters the tower foyer. As it swings closed behind him, all the light of day is sucked out. The thud hits like a backhand from your older brother. He shakes it off and heads past the receptionist.

"Hi Ms. Key, how are you this morning?"

“Hello Sunny, I am good. I was told to make sure you’re not late. You’re cutting it awfully close!”

The factory is dimly lit with LED beams that sit high above. The darkness wasn't a problem for Sunny. Clocking in, he scans his retina and heads to his station. It was everything else that he wished he could change.

“Morning, boss!” Sunny says, still bobbing his head to the music in his ears.

“Good morning, Sunny,” his boss responds less than enthusiastically. “Report to your station, your shift started 3 minutes ago.”

“Noted, boss,” Sunny keeps moving without missing a beat.

Arriving at his station he sits down in the company- issued-ergonomically-designed chair that was fitted at all the stages, a product of BIGCORP, which everyone is reminded of with the giant nameplate on the back of the chair. Sunny turns on a computer, the combination of flashing lights and sounds more fitting for a rocketship. Alas, the technology investments are into the machines, not the products used by the people.

Sunny stares at the large button on the screen. He presses the button and watches as automated mechanical arms begin to sort through the manufacturing line identifying shoes that were incorrectly sewn, or glue that was not quite set right. Hundreds, thousands, of shoes passing by every shift, with the arms seemingly never missing a deformed piece of rubber and cotton. Sunny meticulously tracks each shoe that passes by, making sure his calculations are accurate. He transfers those numbers onto a spreadsheet that he sends to the quality assurance center each day. From there, they calculate the percentage of errors found. Once calculated, real time feedback is provided to improve your performance (objectively, of course).

It is an effort in upholding the mission of the factory: to cover every barefoot. With this sole focus in mind, nothing else matters. With such a saintly and just cause, who could ever question it. And, why would you? Don't you think that every child deserves a pair of shoes? Don't ask how the shoe is made. Question how we can make more shoes. That calculation is boiled down to one number. Profits. Profits mean more shoes can be made, and more feet covered.

Sunny looks over to see his co-worker who is already wearing his VR workstation headset. Most people assumed that the headsets of the future would be sleek. But, with every edition they became more cumbersome, until the appearance returned to that of the first scuba divers. Conversely, marines can use scuba gear that barely cover the nose and mouth, the size of a compact surgical mask at best.

Looking down, he inspects his own worn out shoes (his socks notably peeking out) before glancing up at the machines sorting the newly sewn shoes with fresh stencils and paint. One pair would be a good fraction of Sunny's check.

Sunny has watched the line hour by hour, day by day, year by year, and has seen the gradual takeover of automation at his job. He knew it was only a matter of time before he would be down the street. Only, he wasn't as smart as an electrician, artistic, handy, highly trained, or skilled. As he watched the robots sort shoes, he often wondered that if he couldn't do this, what would he do?

The shoe factory announced record profits last year, all the workers had to clap and cheer as the bosses cashed bonus checks, while the rest of them got a coupon for holiday ham.

"Am I already obsolete?" he thinks to himself.

Bored to tears, he could hardly keep his eyes open. Then, suddenly, the lively factory comes to a halt.

"Power's out again," a voice yells from the void.

"Nice, so we can go home?" a hopeful new employee shouts.

A door pops open from above in the supervisor's bird nest.

"To the wheel," the voice hollers. The workers pivot from their stations, leaving their desks and all gathering into individual circular metal wheels. All the men start to walk, one foot in front of the other, some even jogging. After a few moments, the lights flicker on and the sonic buzz of the machines start once again. Within a minute or two, the robotic arms are back in action, sifting and sorting through shoes.

"Keep it up now, that is how it is done," the supervisor yells. The power went out often enough in the city that the factory calculated these wheels with generators were a cheaper, more eligible solution than the programs the government had flaunted.

Sunny continued to move in synchronized rhythm with the others within their circular metal wheel, each step a part of the mechanized dance orchestrated by the demands of the factory. Dozens of men march in place powering the production of the line. The ambient hum of machinery picks back up and the rhythmic thuds of workers' steps reverberate through the space, creating a hollow atmosphere of dredging activity, step by step.

He looked up to see the various clocks on the wall. Rather than show the actual time, it read "6:45:46, 6:45:45". Counting backward. These unconventional timepieces held a unique

significance within the factory's walls. While they might seem meaningless to an outsider, for Sunny and his coworkers, they marked the countdown to freedom from the monotonous grind.

As he walked, immersed in the mundane, Sunny actually found the task strangely meditative. Still, it was not lost on him how clear they made it known they were nothing more than cogs in the colossal machine. His thoughts turned to the simplicity of walking. Even the most simple, natural movement had been commodified into a repetitive task within the interworks of the charade that was an effective process. This of course was all in the name of a “ healthy economy”. Sunny thought of leaving more than once, but he had a feeling the setting and the product might look different, but the bigger systems at play remain the same. Day after day, the workers' hands and feet move mechanically, until minds disengage, automation occurs, and the routine unfolds like a worn-out script. Seemingly trivial tasks are treated as essential components to a happy life. Snapping out of his ruminating thoughts, Sunny overhears a conversation between two workers in adjacent wheels.

“I watched a movie last night.“

“Oh yeah? Wha-“

“I don't remember, but did you see the trailer for that other movie coming out...”

“...that blockbuster... what's it called...”

“Oh, with the actor from that advertisement.”

“Yeah, yeah, what's his name? He's been in like...”

“Oh, what's the jingle again?”

The two men clumsily hum out a tune trying to remember the words. Suddenly a horn sounds, quickly gaining the attention of all the workers. The welcomed whistle signals lunch. The wheels came sputtering to a screeching stop. Getting out, Sunny notices a rat bouncing around the rafters.

“You and me, both,” he says.

Grabbing some coffee in the break room, Sunny comes across a friendly face already smiling at him. Howard had been working at the company for a long time. His first day on the line, he was in charge of making sure the soles were glued and secured by hand. He is sure to remind you he was here before the merger of ShoeCorp; when it was still owned by the Zapetti's before all the technology. It happened faster than a lot of people suspected, or wanted.



It was back in 2040 when SHOECORP bought out the old family shoe factory from Stefan Zappeti. History remembers Stefan as a kind man, and an immigrant who came from Italy before the first world war. His family started to make shoes for soldiers during World War 2, and Stefan began working in the shop when he was just a child. Working every position there was from janitor to top decision maker. It had been in the family for nearly 100 years. Unfortunately, medical debts forced them to sell. There were promises to keep staff and keep the changes minimal. But since then, only two years later, the bosses decided to go all in with the use of artificial intelligence and robotic technology. There were those who persevered and made the most of it. For better or worse, or, lack of options. Howard was one of them. A skilled worker, with experience and wisdom to fill pools, but now? Who can keep up with the work rate of a robot, much less someone hoping their pension will still exist, when he can finally cash in. Only 18 months away for Howard now.

“Hey there, Sunshine, don’t mind me, I am just getting some rest, that was a lot of wheel time,” Howard says, in greeting.

“No, no, don't get up, I am having a coffee if you want one,” Sunny replies.

“No, I shouldn't at this hour. But, I will take DietBigFizz, if you don't tell my wife.”

Sunny grabs the drinks from the vending machine, and upon returning asks, “How’s home life, your wife?”

“Oh, she is good, she has been so busy lately I barely see her. Between her friends, work, and volunteering. I am more her housekeeper than husband at this point.”

“Volunteering, yeah? What has she been doing?” Sunny asks.

Surprised, Howard replies, “Boy, do you live under a rock? There is a major election coming up! Eleanor has been canvassing, trying to get people registered, and informing people of Joan’s policy. She’s been doing it for months now, and I must say I can’t wait for this election to be over. I just want to have dinner with my wife like we used to!”

“The rock I live under does a better job than any of these politicians, Howard,” Sunny jokes.

“Oh, yeah, how?”

“Free BigFizzdrink,” Sunny deadpans, handing over the drink and heading from the break room into the cafeteria. It’s a lighthearted exchange, but a sign of Sunny’s willful ignorance.

He meets up with another co-worker.

“Another day in paradise, whaddya say, Sunny?” Sty says.

Sty had been at the factory almost as long as Sunny. The two grew up on opposite sides of town. Sty went to a private school with a focus on business and entrepreneurship. If you ask him, he has ambitious plans for himself at the factory.

“You sound way too happy after two and a half hours on the wheel,” Sunny replies.

“Well. I've seen worse.”

“Is that really something to celebrate?”

“Surely.”

“How?” Sunny asks.

“Oh, there is Sunny with his little thermos. Soup again, boy?” One of the veterans at the factory interjects, garnering a laugh from a few others around him.

“Uhh, yeah, soup again,” Sunny responds, less disarmed and more bored of having heard the joke repeatedly.

“Leftovers. Shame. See my woman gets up and makes me a fresh breakfast and lunch each morning. Before her shift at the hospital. Gotta get you a woman like that, Sunny,” the rude worker replies.

Sty cuts in, “Seems like you should be the one cooking for her. You'd better be careful if she learns that Sunny makes his own food. She might leave your ass for him.”

They all laugh.

“Appreciate it now, we only have 15 more minutes,” Stu adds before taking a large bite of his sandwich and letting out a satisfied sigh.

Catching up, Howard sits down next to Sty, “How is the day treating you? I heard you lot talking bout the election on the wheel, gonna be a big one, huh?”

“Yeah, it seems that way, let's see who can get out there and vote. Create some good change in this place, I hope. I don't know how much more I can take. Every day is just another day. Another day at the wheel,” Sty answers.

Sunny tries to drown it all out and have a bit of lunch. When his spoon gets halfway to his mouth, he hears a voice calling out for him, and replies, “Yes, boss?”

Mr. Jentgun arrived at the company six months ago. He was brought in and touted as the savior of shoe factories. Each morning he liked to start the day with a sermon. He invited employees to join an exclusive employee benefit club in which everyone who signed up had to arrive an hour early to their shift, where they could volunteer their time in service to higher powers. These services, typically, were very similar to their job duties. Sunny found it funny how what the higher powers wanted always wound up being shortcuts for the boss and the factory to make more money.

“Sunny, come here, I don’t have much time at the end of the week, so we will do your performance evaluation now.”

“Uh.. sure.. But I only have a minute before I have to get back to...”

“This will only take a minute, if you’d stop talking and sit down, we don’t have to keep wasting time.”

Getting the message, Sunny slinks into the office and sits down on the chair. It almost breaks, it's so old and shoddy.

Never making eye contact, Mr. Jentgun begins, “Hmm, let’s see here.” The supervisor pores through a few papers, scanning back and forth the way you look at two lottery tickets that haven’t added up to winning. “Attendance isn’t bad, but could be better. Accuracy on the line isn’t bad- could be better. Company Values and Morals aren't bad, yet could be better. Oh, I see here that you forgot to write incident reports for 3 infractions cited. That isn’t good. But... but your wheel numbers look good.”

“Thanks, boss!” Sunny says with a smile, trying to take advantage of the sole compliment, or semi-positive comment. “I like the wheel, it's good exercise.”

Looking down from his square-framed spectacles, “Sunny, let me remind you, that here at ShoeCorp you are here to serve the company’s mission and value. Wheel time is strictly for productivity purposes only. In which those products, gains, etc., are included company property. We are not here to help your fitness. You are here to meet the numbers set for you.”

“Noted.”

“And, lastly, you were supposed to be at your station 6 and a half minutes ago... Be sure to make that up today... between now and this morning that is 9.5 minutes total today, we wouldn’t want you accidentally stealing company time, now would we?”

“Of course not, sir! On my way!” Sunny hustles back for the second half of his shift.

Soon after the workers get back to work, the boss leaves for the day, and the atmosphere immediately becomes more relaxed. A coworker lingers by chatting with his mates station by station, with the boss gone he takes advantage of the opportunity to roam without the constant watching. Sunny is engaged and focused on his computer, working on task.

“How about it, Sunny, another day?”

“Just glad it’s almost over, my review wasn’t exactly great.”

“Oh, don’t get caught up in those numbers, that’s what they want. For you to spend time at work, then spend time thinking about work, then thinking about your thoughts about work...futile practice really.”

“Yeah, futile until I’m jobless.”

The two share a laugh.

“I heard you all talking about the election earlier...” The coworker starts.

“I would say I did more listening than talking.”

“It’s an important election coming up,” the coworker tells Sunny.

“Is it? Because it seems like we are just picking our poison.” Sunny responds.

“Surely you see the difference between the two choices?”

“Thanks, but you know I don’t get caught up in all that stuff. That’s for the big heads to worry about.”

“Oh yeah, and what does your little head worry about?”

“All I care about right now is this beat.... Here check it out.”

Sunny sends over a file to his friend, the seamless transfer takes just seconds before his coworker’s head starts to bob.

“You make this?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I can see why your work review didn’t go so hot, but that beat is something,” the man then looks at the clock and it reads “-0:59:50”. “Last hour, let me go get some work done.”

Sunny spends the rest of the work day buried in his own work. Navigating past the internet firewall, he leaves his work software interface and opens up a series of restricted softwares. Putting on his headphones, music fills his environment. The music helps the time fly by. Before he knows it, the working day comes to a close. He watched the clock hit 0 only to reset with a new time displaying how many hours until they must return.

Waiting for the tram back to his flat, Sunny notices fliers pinned to a bulletin board. It was for a rally in support of the upcoming election his coworker spoke about earlier.

“Rally in Makers Squares, 1:00pm-Sunset. This Saturday.” Continuing on another line, “Fight for your rights today.”

The roaring storm of sound from the tram gains Sunny’s attention. Turning around he waits for the sliding doors to open. The stutter of the engine jolted Sunny and a few back before catching their balance.

Sunny notices another rally flier pinned over an advertisement for Burger Blitz, the hunger pangs that follow remind Sunny that he was hungry.

Opening the front door, Sunny is greeted with purrs, and a friendly critter weaving between his legs. Flicking the light switch, a dim glow fills the small cookie cutter apartment. The buildings in the city were once vast diverse artistic architectures, but over time as the quality of materials suffered and prices skyrocketed, the emergence of the same standard and frankly ugly living spaces began to pop up all over. Boasting speedy building times and affordable pricing, the homes lacked individuality, charm, or any warmth.

It took Sunny all his creative might for him to make it his own, covering the walls with art, slapping a few coats of blue paint on the walls, the blandness prior would

Sunny pulls off his shirt, sending it flying, landing on his furry four legged friend. He presses a button on the wall, turning on his surround screen, Music begins to play. Walking only the few short steps to the otherside of the apartment, he opens a window. The music pours out into the courtyard. Pressing another button, a voice begins to blare -

“Tonight on LionVision - we take a look at the destruction of the city,” Jaxson Hayes begins.

Intro music cues and the evening news begins to play. Sunny sits down to watch.

“Have you walked on the streets lately?”

“Yes, uh, and let me tell you, it’s despicable. The economy is in the ground, crime is rampant, prices have never been higher, and all we have are a bunch of freeloaders asking for a government handout. This is Joan’s crisis. She made it but the people, the people will fix it,” Heather Helms responds.

Chiming in, Savannah Blake adds, “What we need is more law and order. Less art and hand holding that the left cling on to.”

In the kitchen, Sunny turns on the burners to the stove and places the nonstick pan on top. With the sound of the TV still on, he hits another button on his walls and music begins to play, drowning out the news in the background. Splashing just a touch of oil into the ceramic sauce pan, he frisbees a tortilla onto the pan, a slow sizzle rises. Opening his fridge, he takes out the cheese labeled “Government Cheese”. He pulls the two rations apart from the pasteurized brick. He opens the cabinet above the fridge, the smallest of the three small cabinets in the kitchen. Taking out the metal grater, he grates the cheese over the flour tortilla and folds it over, placing the prongs of the fork to create a sear. A simple, easy, cheap staple for dinner. He pairs it with a bowl of soup he prepared on the weekend (and had had at lunch).

He sits down on the couch he found from the secondhand store. His mother always told him to never buy fabrics from secondhand stores, that you can’t easily wash. He thought it was just another one of her rules of life, but Sunny learned the hard way when he traded a mattress for some records. It took weeks to get rid of the bed bugs, but at least he had good music to listen to as he scrubbed down every wall in the house. It helped drown out his yelling mother, who, despite swearing she would not help, was there helping, dressed in a hazmat suit, the store drone had dropped off to her. She loves the store, especially when they drone drop her items. Sunny’s mother liked to avoid germs much like you would a former scorned lover or schoolyard bully. It was proactive, it was high-alert, but mostly, it was effective.

Flipping through the channels, Sunny quickly eats his dinner.

After eating, he flips through channels- a black and white movie plays. He seems to remember the film. The one his great-grandmother had shown him. The last silent black and white film before the new wave was introduced. Sunny watched the movie and laughed at the outdated effects and sets, or lack thereof.

In the shadows of the setting sun, two lovers stand atop a hill that overlooks a breathtaking landscape. As they hold each other, the world seems to pause, granting them a moment of respite from the challenges that once sought to tear them apart, he says to her gently, “When you find a cause to love for... or to fight for...you never give up.” They kiss and embrace one another. The scene ends. The credits begin to roll. “You loved that boring movie, granrita, miss you,” Sunny says looking up to the sky. He sets the channels to surf moving from his couch to his kitchen sink.

Drying the last porcelain plate, he wipes his hands. Looking at the clock, with a yawn, it was time for the end of another day.

The weekend finally came, Sunny walks down the city streets, headed east, four blocks away is his favorite park, one of the first, one of the last remaining as the over sprawl of the crowded city seemed to evaporate most of the green that was once, still it was a beautiful park and an important park. It reminded Sunny of when he was a child. His father would bring him there often. Sunny thought it was because his father really enjoyed pushing him on swings, chasing him through jungle gyms, or mending bruises and wounds, but it wasn't until too late when Sunny realized that all those park trips were for him. He made sure to make use of his time and not take the parks left for granted.

An elderly man wearing a long worn peacoat and tethered gloves is playing chess at the stone tables. The tables were from the original construction of the park and had been built over 120 years ago. Now the tables are used for everything you can imagine, from a place to rest someone's head to a platform for young kids to set their video recorders and make an impromptu dance party. And, sometimes, even still, they were used for chess.

"Sunny, good to see you, have time for a game?" Charles says, in greeting.

Sunny was planning for a quiet day at the park, but sees his friend and his smile, so he sits for a game.

"E4, your turn." he says, moving his pawn forward a square, slowly lifting his finger off the piece.

Charles responds quickly, "D4, your turn." The two quickly open the game at a fast pace sending the turn back and forth to one another.

They start to slow down as they leave the opening and into the middle game. The slowed down pace brings time to think and have some light conversation, "What brings you out here today, boy?"

"Same thing as you, old man, a day out of the factory."

"Ha! I heard that, in the freshest of air. no less."

"Well, the freshest we will find anyway, don't mean it's fresh."

"You're telling me!"

Sunny moves a piece only to grimace and watch his friend capture it immediately. He looks around to see the park growing crowded.

“When’s the last time you seen this many folks at the park?”

“They lining up to see me kick your ass, or what?”

They both laugh.

“No, no, Mildred said it was gonna be busy today, something about a rally for the upcoming election. Should be a good showing.”

“Does that stuff ever really matter? Aren’t these decisions already made by secret teams who plan the future of the country hundreds of years in advance?”

“What on earth are you talking about, boy?”

“I just mean isn’t it all the same? Taxes, laws, loss of freedom. And, taxes, laws, loss of freedom.”

“Well sure, especially if everyone had your attitude like it didn’t matter. Voting is how you participate in a democracy, kid.”

“You sound just like my grandpa.”

“Sounds like a smart man to me, then, ha! I can’t make you vote, I can’t make you care, but I can tell you that if you don’t vote, you do not get to complain about the outcome.”

Sunny laughs, moving his next piece.

“Checkmate,” he hears abruptly. Charles extends his hand, “Good game! You get going, Sunny! Don’t spend your whole day off talking to an antique like me. Go, go enjoy the day.”

“Sure, you don’t want another game? What about you, what’s the rest of the day looking like?”

“Oh, it’s nearly 4pm, hit the early bird special with Mildred and take me meds by 6, sleep by 9. You know, I would tell you ‘not to get old’, but no one ever listens to me anyway.”

The two share a laugh before Sunny moves along.

“Enjoy, and tell Mrs. I said hello.”



Later in the day, Sunny was sitting in the park with his notebook. The usually quiet space was bustling today. He began to see the signs and political outfittings. Filling up the park and as the day grew, so did the crowds, a large group began to gather near the amphitheater. Curious, Sunny walked over to see what the commotion was about. As he got closer, a voice from a megaphone echoed out into the crowd.

“No justice, no peace!”

“Save our books, save our trees!”, a chorus rose from the crowd calling back the phrase to the stage.

Sunny removed his headphones to hear more clearly. The chants continue. “No justice, no peace!” With each repetition a newfound energy and voice added to the group. Sunny must look in awe of it as a woman approaches him.

“Hey! You look new here. Welcome to the cause!”, a young woman extends her hand to Sunny. Looking down to see the scribbled on the flier. “Down with fascism,” it reads.

“No, not new here. But new to all this... this politics stuff, yeah.”

”It’s nice to meet you, I am Desi! So what brought you here?”

“You too. I’m Sunny. And I come here every weekend, to read mostly, or be outside.”

“Ha! I meant here, to the rally.”

“Oh, well, yeah, I mostly stumbled upon it really. There were a few guys at work talking about it this week. Kinda completely forgot about it until right now, actually, and you?”

“I moved into the neighborhood, about a month ago..” Desi says.

“Oh, from far away?” Sunny asks.

“Miles and miles, but not so much physical, more ideology wise, so it’s been a good move- a fresh start. But I am in town and have some shows lined up. What do you know about the Lava Lamp? What about you?”

“Oh great venue... I can appreciate that. Me? Yeah, I have been going to the park since I was a kid, my grandpa would bring us,” he says pointing behind himself. “There used to be the coolest slide ever right there, rumor was you’d get up to 20 mph head down there. Was taken down after... I don’t know... a couple dozen reported concussions?”

“Ha, were you included in this count?”

“Oh yeah, this brain is definitely bruised.”

Sunny is intrigued by her presence. He noticed the headphones on her neck were quality, her mismatched outfit looked straight from the bins of the thrift store, but came together like a cozy quilt. Her presence was friendly and Sunny enjoyed the new company. For someone so new in town she was teaching Sunny a lot. They continued talking about the best breakfast sandwiches at the local stops and swapped stories about a recent gallery opening. Before long they are interrupted by a guest speaker. He takes the stage and quiets the crowd.

“My brothers and sisters, we thank you for coming here today, for voicing your opinions and fighting for what matters most. Our voices, our right to express oneself, and how we safely choose to.” The speaker's presence pulls others in and the huddled group grows. A shift occurs from people hearing the speaker to really listening, “No longer can we sit back and let those in charge chisel away at the structures we the people have created, built, and maintained together! No longer with the corporations to drown out our voices and try to repaint the history of the past. Today, we begin to paint the city in our own way.” Despite the more radical approach taken the crowd continued to grow. Sunny felt like he was being directly spoken to. Suddenly, giving a signal, a wave of people came from high and low pouring into the streets. Each is equipped with paint canisters, brushes, colored pigments, and more. Rushing, they begin to cover the signage and advertisements of the nearby corporate entities with spray painted messages that echo from the crowd.

“No justice, no peace!”

“Freedom for one. Freedom for all.”

“The world is watching.”

“My body, my choice.”

In mere moments, businesses, cars, and people are devoured in a rainbow of paint. It reminded Sunny of a festival his neighbors had shared with him, Holi. It celebrates the eternal and divine love of the deities Radha and Krishna. Sunny grew up with people from Mumbai who used to celebrate back home. Holi was an occasion of joy and togetherness. It was hard not to smile at that moment. If only it could have lasted longer. As the chaos and commotion settled, the paint drifted to the floor, people took in the art, the beauty, the communication and community, but laughter and joy was swiftly met with resistance, police on horseback rushed in, attempting to break up the crowd. Startled, the people flee in all directions. The horses become unruly and just as confused as everyone else. Horns blast from police squad cars, drowning out the music that was playing, and piercing the ears of the gatherers. In distress, they plug their ears with their fingers and flee from the sound. The defense teams pour out of vans, heavily armored and equipped with lethal weapons.

Lining up shoulder to shoulder for as far as can be seen, once in position they began marching toward the crowd. The faces of the patrolmen could not even be seen with the amount of gear they were wearing. They looked more like soldiers than a city patrol.

Using a megaphone, the leader shouts his orders to move forward.

Protesters began to lock arms in solidarity. Within moments, they were face to face with the patrol. Pushing and shoving began while the protestors tried to maintain their ground.

They were quickly met with the swift swings of the patrol's batons. Sending protestors to the floor with broken bones and bleeding heads. Others watched as they pushed back into the crowd sending several people to the ground. All the while, they continued to berate them with orders and demands that contradicted each other.

People with their hands up in the air were met with body slams to the pavement. People complying with instructions to get on the ground were met with head locks and knees to the neck. What was once a peaceful gathering quickly descended into dangerous chaos.

The cheers and chants turned to shrieks and screams. The rush of people trying to reach safety causes a stampede, which creates a domino effect in the crowd until Sunny is shoved. He is stomped on repeatedly before he can get his strength to pop up, frantically he turns to look around. He sees a woman bloodied on the ground next to him. He shoves his way through to her and pulls her to her feet.

The shouts of police over speakerphone drown out people right next to one another trying to speak or look for safety through all the confusion. Police begin to make arrests, people begin to fight back. They look up to hear new chants filling the sky, counter-protestors. The scene quickly escalates as the people see their neighbors shoved and beaten by cops. Others begin to break into the businesses, looting items and destroying property.

The calls to halt were ignored, until one officer removed his gun from the holster and fired. Contrastingly to all the commotion going on, the blow of the bullet was heard by everyone. A man drops to his knees. A woman stands over him shouting and sobbing, "No, no. God, no! Why, god?!" Over and over again she pleads until the sounds of ambulance sirens ring out over them.

"Hi, I am Jackson Hayes, with LION NEWS at 11. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to another edition of the Lion's Den, where we cut through the noise to bring you the unfiltered truth. Tonight, we address the so-called 'peaceful rally' that unfolded in our city this afternoon."

The newscaster continues, “Now, in case you’re just getting home and caught up, there was a rally in Makers Square today. You may have been led to believe that this ‘protest’ was all rainbows, unity, and DEI, but let me set the record straight! What they won’t tell you is that this protest, this supposed display of harmony, was nothing short of a breeding ground for anarchy. Here I am, ringing the alarm bells, and it is up to you to listen. I’ve received exclusive reports that these so-called peaceful demonstrators weren’t simply exercising their rights: they were agitators. Spreading misinformation, and worse, targeting children to conform to their sick agenda. Sources confirm that they were armed with dangerous weapons, hellbent on turning our streets into a war zone. Reports of flesh-eating paint sending innocent folk to the hospital. How far will these freaks go?”

Heather chimes in, “Well said, Jackson, so brave of you. And, thank you for having me on the show!”

“Heather Wall is with us. Heather, thanks, as always, for joining us, we love to have you on. Now, let’s jump right into it - tell us more from your exclusive report,” Jackson prompts.

“Thank you, Jackson! Yes, let’s! While we are still gathering all the details, at this time we can confirm that today’s coordinated attack on our town ended with multiple arrests and injuries. Artists, armed with graffiti cans, looted stores and wreaked havoc on our home.”

Jackson cuts in, “Oh my, looting! That... that is unbelievable, crime has gotten just out of control in this city!” Using his hands to gesture the quotations, “‘Leader’ Joan Jackson is too busy taking lavish trips to do anything about it. It’s absolutely terrible.”

“And, what about the so-called ‘community leaders’ who claim to advocate for justice? Well, turns out, they were secretly orchestrating a campaign to dismantle law and order. Yes, you heard me right. It’s not about justice! It’s about undermining the very foundations of our society,” Heather adds.

“Hold on, Heather, I am getting word from our producers. Police have identified organizer, and artist, Justin Heard, as the person responsible for today’s heinous attack on our town. Here we show you a photo of Justin in police custody. Additionally, there are reports of severe injury, and even one person deceased. I am sure we will find much, much more to come of this story. Please stay tuned as the story continues to unfold, and we will be right back after a word from our sponsors.”

The TV cuts to a commercial. A commercial that Sunny has seen and heard countless times.

(Upbeat music playing)

Verse 1:

♪ Hungry for a tasty treat,  
♪ Head on over, take a seat,  
♪ Juicy burgers, fries so neat,

♪ Come on down, let's grab a bite to eat!

Chorus:

♪ Burger Blitz, oh what a delight,  
♪ Every bite is dynamite!  
♪ Come and taste the flavor blast,  
♪ Burger Blitz, you'll love it fast!

(Upbeat music playing)

(Ending with a catchy jingle)

♪ Burger Blitz, where taste takes flight,  
♪ Burger Blitz, come join the delight!

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Desensitized to the point of no reaction, Sunny watches as advertisement after advertisement plays. Ads for medicine, loan support, eating carbohydrates, and not eating carbohydrates. Not to mention the ads for mental and physical health. It was a game to the corporations: to grab the attention of the viewer. It was not a new end goal by any means, but so desperately sought out by the many folks scavenging for money now. Everyone in business was competing against the corporations in power. Who knew its effectiveness anyway. Did the constant onslaught of Burger Blitz ads make Sunny crave it and seek it out more? Or, was it simply the cheapest, most convenient place to buy food? Was it success by the consumer's choice or success by the corporation's innerworkings?

The series of commercials ends and the news returns.

“And, we are back, that was an ad from our sponsor Burger Blitz, I had myself a Blitz Burger earlier today, boy, what a tasty burger, you know. CEO and founding owner of Burger Blitz (continue..),” Savannah Blake welcomes the viewers back.

Heather chimes in, “Aren’t they just a delight, Savannah?!”

Savannah redirects the audience, “We are back folks, and you won’t believe it. During the break, I received unverified reports suggesting that these protestors were actively recruiting impressionable minds into radical ideologies. They want you to think it's about freedom of speech, but in reality, it's a sinister plot to manipulate our youth and turn them against the values that built this great nation.”

“Folks, we can't let this deceit go unchallenged,” Jackson chimes in. “It's time to see through the veil of lies and stand firm against those who seek to tear down everything we hold dear. Stay tuned as we unravel the web of deception surrounding this so-called ‘peaceful protest’. And, let's not forget the supposed artists participating in this spectacle. Instead of celebrating our culture, they were defacing public property with propaganda that undermines our way of life. Art? More like a calculated assault on our traditions -“

Tired of their voices, Sunny flips through the channels, looking for something else to watch but each one the same. Plastered with wall to wall coverage and hot takes of what happened.

He notices how everyone speaking on the event had long been in their comfortable green rooms at the time. No witnesses on air, no actual reporting, only fear stoking. Channel 5, Channel 7, Channel 2, Maxnews, Bignewsdaily, everywhere. All seemingly with the same script.

Suddenly, a special announcement takes over the airwaves. It’s Joan Johnston. The new stations cut to her message, “Hi, tonight I speak into the homes of each and every one of you. I speak because I care. Because the safety of our city is paramount to any one person's ideals. After reviewing the details made known to us, due to the events that took place in the square tonight and an increased amount of tips received of potentially dangerous behavior, I have no choice but to place a curfew starting tomorrow through next Tuesday’s election. As a reminder this is not to be seen as a punitive measure, but one that is required to protect the safety of our citizens...”

Bored of it, Sunny shuts off the TV and lies in bed. His body was exhausted but his mind stayed racing. He thinks about his day, waking up and having his coffee, playing chess, who knew where it all would have ended. Sunny saw it all with his own eyes- the intentions and the actions of the people. The police that beat that woman. He saw who was trying to bring peace and who brought fear. He begins to think of the fallout and eventually falls asleep.

## Part 2

The alarm comes fast for Sunny. Another Monday- back to the same old routine. He rolls out of bed and into the shower. Stumbling out of the shower, he dries himself off before stepping into his pants that were left behind the night before, he grabs the t-shirt next to it and throws it on. He quickly makes his way out the door and to the corner store for some coffee and a bagel.

“Town in Terror!” was the headline in the morning papers. More details of the curfew were released.

“Can you believe this bullshit, kid?” A patron (and one of Sunny’s neighbors) shows him the paper, “8pm? I work till goddamn 7:30. Not even enough time for a proper after work drink.”

“I wish I had more time to listen to this, I do, but I am already running late,” Sunny says, taking a bite of the bagel. He was already halfway out the door.

That morning on the train to work, Sunny gets a link from a friend. He reads it.

“These people will say anything these days!”

Sunny opens the link: “Hey Folks, Axel here with another great show...”

A podcaster, Rafael “Axel” Reed, a political commentator. He gained a following after the XXX. He grew his platform pandering to religious zealots, and specifically, divorced men. Axel often states his failed relationship with his wife and children were the results of an orchestrated attack on not only himself but all males. He proclaims that this was his motivation to start a fight against the "system".

Energetically and passionately, Axel continues his introduction, “Welcome back to ‘The Axel and Rod Pod’, where we cut through the bullshit and get to the heart of what’s really happening out there. The stuff the “mainies” won’t tell you. I’m your host, Axel Reed, with my co-host Rod, and today we’ve got a doozy to talk about! This past weekend, a so-called ‘peaceful rally’ turned into yet another display of hypocrisy and manipulation by the establishment and their puppet artists. Roll the clip, Rod.”

[Sound effect: Thunder cracks, transitioning into a news clip]

A news anchor’s voiceover plays, "This weekend, thousands gathered at Makers Square downtown to protest against the current political climate, advocating for change and unity through art and performance.”

“‘Thousands?!’ Rod can we check those numbers? A large, maybe medium sized group went to Makers Square to ‘rally’. Change and unity, huh? Yeah, right. What they don't tell you is that

this rally was nothing more than a thinly veiled attack on our fundamental freedoms, orchestrated by a bunch of elitist artists who are more interested in pushing their own agenda than actually listening to the voices of the people,” Axel sarcastically cries. “Let me break it down for you. These so-called artists were out there with their paintbrushes and guitars, pretending to stand for peace and justice. But what-“

Sunny’s stop for the train arrives and not a second too soon, he couldn’t be happier to turn off the dog whistles and sirens. Hoping to drown out the noise he turns his music up and walks to the shoe factory. But as Sunny arrives it’s the only thing people at work are talking about. He overhears a conversation while preparing himself a coffee.

“She is so screwed, who does she think she is? Imprisoning us all over a few pansy artists,” one co-worker complains.

“Can you believe it? Unconstitutional! I will tell you what, Victor Stone would never allow such lawlessness,” a second voice adds.

“It’s far overdue. I ain’t following no effing curfew. If Joan wants to send me home that early she better be making my dinner for me too.”

A third co-worker joins the discourse, “And a little dessert if you know what I mean...”

Stirring his coffee, for better or worse, Sunny chimes in, “The curfew is just for a few days until they can sort out what went wrong at the rally. If it’s just for like a week or so, I think you’ll be just fine.”

“Who are you to tell me? That is just what they want you to think. The next thing you know, you’re eating alongside military martials.”

“I’m pretty sure I would know if-“ Sunny bites back.

“What do you know? Joan has had nearly a decade to secure some support and achieve her goals. To make this a better place. What has she actually accomplished? Photo-ops and holiday parties? Overseas vacations? We here are struggling on the line, pensions are soaking up, social security is falling apart, look at the rise of medical prices, etc. How much time do you give a person to fulfill their promises?”

Sunny falters in response, “Well, isn’t Victor just kind of... an asshole”

“Ha, kid, if you think that should stop someone from preventing this country’s self-destruction, you’re dumber than you look,” One of the coworkers retorts.



Another one adds, "Look at Burger Blitz alone, everybody loves Burger Blitz, Victor has already proved he can win and win in big ways! Joan hasn't done shit for us workers. Victor gets us. He knows what we need."

Surprised by their reaction, Sunny sheepishly sips his coffee and heads to his station. Sunny isn't well versed enough to speak up. He was just a kid with headphones compared to those who had been living through these past 30-50 years. "Maybe they are right," he thought to himself. Joan had been in office for as long as he could remember. He asks himself, "Am I better off now than all those years ago?" Sunny leaves work that day with more questions than answers.

The 8:00pm curfew begins. It works to shut down bars, nightclubs, concerts, and other forums where people are socially connected. The curfew even targets the honored symphony, which conservatives cling to and blame the poor for taking away a once class affair.

After work Sunny doesn't take the train immediately, but walks a bit, watching the city empty. He sits in the park and watches as all the workers skip their usual evening social gathering, No yoga in the park, or various co-ed spot leagues, trivia, karaoke, painting class or whatever spontaneous adventure could await. As the sun sets, Sunny starts to walk home, when he notices the bar light still on. Curious, he peeks in through the window to see plenty of patrons. He pops in.

"What'll it be, Sunny boy?" The bartender says in greeting.

"Surprised to see you open, just a pint works."

"Unless ol' Joan gonna come tell me to shut down, I will be open. She is just buying some time until the election. She is securing her next term, trying to keep calm. If they wanted, the patrol would come and shut us down."

"If you say so, you're the boss!" Sunny laughs.

"Got that right. I'm the 'elected leader' of this establishment," the bartender says, raising a glass gathering cheers and remarks from the other patrons.

One of the patrons chimes in, "Crazy. A curfew like I am 16. She must be batty."

"We have fought wars for this country and she wants to put us to bed. Not happening here! It's about time we had somebody else looking after this city," another patron adds.

"Think of the businesses that will suffer."

"Isn't it just for another week though?" Sunny questions the patrons.

A new voice agrees with Sunny, "Exactly, after the week Victor will come fix this mess she has created."

"Oh, quit whining. One week of a curfew for your safety and you're crying about it. Didn't you say you fought wars?" A fourth patron complains.

"Fought wars and bigger men than you, careful there."

The patron who started the conversation speaks again, "It's more than the curfew. The city has gone to shit, look at the streets filled with foreigners. The jobs are going to robots and we can barely afford the rent. Joan the Joke has got to go."

The banter is playful even though it takes Sunny by surprise. After a few pints, Sunny pays his check and heads out the door, not even thinking twice about the curfew, it was only until he looks out to see the desolate streets is he reminded that now, this walk home was illegal.

Sunny isn't too far from home but he is sure to be careful on his walk home staying off the main lit roads, opting for the alleys and shadows keeping him out of the eyes of the cameras above and the patrol on the streets.

After work the next day, Sunny decides to walk past the bar in search of a quieter spot. With the curfew in place a divide of sorts had begun as each individual dug deeper into their own opinion. The tension in town was palpable. The usual welcoming and warm neighborhood was quiet and isolated.

The paper spoke of the unconstitutional curfew, and Sunny walked by the glow of TV screens playing on the streets with similar headlines debating about the rally and the so-called attack on the city. Sunny walked by signs protesting Joan, promising to send her to jail, or worse. He passed a desecrated doll, wearing a shirt with "Joan" scribbled on it. He kept walking until it was all behind him. Staying in the shadows, his head was on a swivel making sure he was regularly checking and occasionally dodging patrol cars. While waiting for one to pass he looked around, noticing a camera overhead. A new deterrent to dodge. Before long, he noticed them on almost every street corner. He walked past the square, still covered in tarps and fencing, as crews worked day and night to clean up and repair any shops that still had shattered glass spilled at its store fronts.

Eventually, Sunny makes his way onto a parking structure in the south of the city. The tower would typically be filled to the top with people coming into the city for a ball game, the theater, a rock concert, or nightclub, but tonight? Not a single car was on it. Step by step Sunny

reached each floor until the 15th. When he got to the top, looking north, he could see over the whole city. He watched as the glow of the light spilled from the windows.

Sunny saw the changing of the city right before his eyes. He thought to himself, that maybe this curfew would be positive for everyone. A chance to reset and identify what is important and then go after and accomplish it. A few quiet days would do everyone some good. A time to reflect and contemplate.

Looking around, he remembered the city was built on art as its foundation. The concert in the park when he was a kid, where he had played the marimba in his school's band. The Chinese New Year parade that was held every year and the time he got to talk in it. His first school dance in the sixth grade with Erica Belgan. The various restaurants of so many cultures you couldn't keep track. These pillars couldn't possibly go away.

Leaving with a sense of solace, Sunny was happy to clear his head and find some space for the night. In his bed that evening, he felt reenergized, hopeful for what was to come.

Morning came and Sunny's alarm sounded. He's startled from his deep sleep and rolls over to turn off the alarm switching to the radio.

"Good Morning Everyone. It is election day in our great city. By tomorrow we will know who will be the new Party Leader. It's 6:00am, currently 75 degrees with some cloud coverage and winds. The polls are now open. Today is the election day we have all eagerly awaited! This date has been on our calendars for years now."

Feeling the temperature of the water first, Sunny hops into the shower, letting the warm water cascade over him still hearing the blurred voices from the radio. He had voted through his phone weeks ago. Early registered voters could be sent a secured link and vote from seemingly anywhere. A surprising privilege people have, and one that is always contested. Since the technology existed conservative voters scoffed at it. Opting to vote on the day of the election, no matter how many times variables like long lines or weather, led to lower voter turn out. Mistrust was always high. It took a long time (and billions of dollars in campaign advertising) to reshape the image of a system that they themselves had once tainted.

Running late, Sunny rushes out of the house leaving the TV behind him. Walking into the corner store, the owner greets him with a big smile, "The usual, Sunny?"

"If it can be quick, I am already late!"

"I can see that, gimme a few... I will be quick about it!"

There was a stillness in the sky as Sunny made his way to the train in the morning. The usual chatter and buzz of the city was quieted. People's heads were glued to the papers or the screens, looking for the latest news or gossip going on.

"Thanks." Looking down, Sunny sees a newspaper advertising think pieces on either candidate, "I'll take this too." He throws some cash onto the counter and rushes out to catch his train. The train stop today wasn't as crowded as usual. A lot of people either took off, or were given off, for the election. Maybe the quiet made it more eerie, but there was a tension in the air that you could feel. A certain reservation before engaging in the typical pleasantries one would. The lack of small talk filled the space with an almost blaring silence. On the tram, he sees the various stops filled with people lined up ready to cast their votes at different stations across the city. Sunny opens up the paper and starts to read.

"It was the turn of the 20th century when Huxley Stone, a hardworking farmer, purchased a sizable piece in the suburbs of the city's limits. Huxley's life revolved around his family and his farm, and for a time, his efforts reaped constant reward. But in 1941, after years of financial strain caused by the aftermath of the Great Depression, Huxley tragically took his own life. His son, Forest Stone, was just a baby when his father died.

Forest Stone grew up under the care of his mother, who struggled with the loss of her husband. Often finding himself caring for his mother through abusive relationships and abuse of substances. Time went on and before he knew it, Forest found himself drafted in the 60's, and sent to Vietnam to fight the war where he found himself on the front lines as a young medic. His experience during the war shaped him, exposing him to the harsh realities of human suffering and the power of medicine. Driven by a desire to alleviate pain, Forest's unorthodox medical experiments earned him a reputation as a risk-taker, and after the war, he leveraged his knowledge to build a successful pharmaceutical company.

Forest's success in pharmaceuticals paved the way for his family's wealth and influence, but it came at a cost. The boundaries of ethics were blurred, as some of the drugs Forest developed in secret during the war had questionable approval processes. Most of which was swept under the rug and have only recently come to light after the launch of the Victor Stone campaign. Still, his company thrived, and by the time his youngest son, Victor Stone, was born in 1990, the family was well-established in the upper echelons of society.

Victor was raised in privilege, growing up in a wealthy neighborhood, attending the best private schools, and surrounded by some of the city's most prominent business figures. From a young age, Victor displayed ambition, learning the inner workings of the family business and absorbing the values of wealth, power, and control. He pursued an Ivy League education, studying business management and internal policy, all with the goal of expanding his family's influence.

Upon finishing his education, Victor joined the family pharmaceutical company, but his ambitions extended beyond business. Victor's passion for politics, fueled by his family's vast network of connections, led to a career in lobbying. Over the past decade, he has advocated for reduced corporate taxes, fewer government regulations, and policies that favor business owners.

Today, Victor Stone is a man of influence and controversy. He has built a political platform championing small businesses and cutting government interference, while advocating for increased defense spending. His populist rhetoric and aggressive pushback against the political establishment has earned him a significant following, particularly among those disillusioned by mainstream politics. While his rise has been meteoric, Victor has also drawn criticism for employing questionable tactics and using inflammatory language to rally support.

Victor now stands at a crossroads in his career. Promising to 'sew back the fabric of the nation', he has positioned himself as a candidate who can restore order and prosperity. His supporters praise his direct approach and bold promises, but critics question whether his methods and ideals will truly lead to the unity he promises."

Now at work, Sunny gets back into his chair, checking to see if he's missed any notifications or emails. He is surprised to see nothing, but he won't complain. Relaxed days like these don't come around too often. He picks up the paper and reads the title of the article, "The Incumbent".

"Born into a legacy of service and sacrifice, Joan Johnston's life has been shaped by the loss of her father, Michael Johnston. Determined to honor his own father's memory, Michael chose to serve his country in the military, but his life was tragically cut short when Joan was just a child. His death left the family reeling, struggling to make ends meet. Joan's mother, Emily, stepped up to raise her children. Emily Johnston worked tirelessly to provide for Joan and her siblings, instilling in them the values of perseverance, hard work, and compassion. From a young age, Joan learned what it meant to overcome hardship with dignity and determination.

Growing up in a middle-class family in a small town, Joan was raised with empathy and an unwavering commitment to community. She excelled academically, driven not only by her own ambition but by a deep desire to honor her parents' sacrifices. After earning her law degree, Joan channeled her skills into mediation and conflict resolution, working to bring people together in a world increasingly divided. Her public service career began locally, where she gained respect as a city councilor, and later, as mayor. Joan's pragmatic approach and ability to listen to all sides made her a trusted leader.

Throughout her life, Joan has carried the legacies of her father and grandfather with her. Their courage and dedication have become the foundation of her own commitment to serving her country and her community. As she steps into the national political arena as a presidential candidate, Joan brings with her a leadership style shaped by personal experience—one rooted in empathy and a deep understanding of the struggles faced by everyday Americans.

Joan identifies as a centrist, committed to moderation and consensus-building. She believes in the importance of finding common ground and developing solutions that benefit the greater good. Her policies prioritize economic opportunity, social justice, and the strengthening of democratic institutions to protect against the rise of authoritarianism.

Joan's pragmatic and inclusive leadership has earned her respect across party lines. However, witnessing the rise of extremist ideologies and the increasing polarization of national politics compelled her to seek higher office. Initially hesitant, Joan eventually realized that her voice and leadership were needed more than ever.

In her first term, Joan won the presidency on a platform of economic opportunity for all, promising to lift up those at the bottom. While her policies faced significant hurdles, often met with backlash and frustration, she remained committed to her goals. Now, as she campaigns for re-election, Joan highlights her successes: building foreign relationships, advancing

women's and immigrant rights, and maintaining a tough fiscal budget. As she strives to become only the second woman to retain her title as party leader, Joan continues to fight for the values she has carried with her since childhood: empathy, resilience, and service.”

Sunny turns the page to see the end of the exposes from both candidates. Overwhelmed with information, he goes to close the paper when a headline catches his eye, “Protester’s Death Potentially Homicide by State Officer”. Sunny nearly spit out his coffee as the buried lede received no attention with the election on all the news channels. He starts to feel nauseous, looking up, luckily, it is time to leave for the day. Watching the clock reset again, he exits the factory floor. One of the easier days Sunny has had at the factory, but it will be one he considers to be more productive than usual. Sunny leaves work feeling uneasy. He spent the day learning about who would be leading the way after tonight and what he learned didn’t make him necessarily confident in either candidate. Headphones in, he skips the train and opts to take the long way home. He wasn’t ready to rush home to watch the screen like everyone else quite yet.

Other than the glow from the full moon, it was pitch dark by the time Sunny made it home. Turning on the lights, he puts down his things and opens the fridge to pull out some leftovers. The cat that he had adopted from the shelter was right there waiting for his dinner as well. After prepping both of them some food, Sunny sits down with a sigh before turning on the news. The numbers begin to trickle in starting the tug of war back and forth for who had accumulated and secured more votes. Somehow, what should be the equivalent of watching paint dry had everyone glued to their screens. The pundits on-screen making their big predictions followed with discourse in online chat forms and social media sites about how it was, in fact, the exact opposite that would occur. It felt like sending a ping-pong ball back and forth over the net.

As it grew later, Sunny was shocked to see that it was even still a contest. Were there truly that many supporters for Victor Stone? Did that rhetoric really appeal to a mass amount of people?

Sunny watched as the back and forth match continued. Around 11pm, all of that changed. A huge batch of votes are recorded and Stone takes a staggering lead. The news pours in and Sunny flips through the channels to screen for some accuracy, and they all report the same. Quickly going downhill, Joan’s path to victory dissipates. Just before midnight, Victor Stone claims victory. Most people are already fast asleep, but not all. Sunny barely can keep his eyes open when he hears the streets ringing with pots and pans, and fireworks blasting and coloring the night sky. Victor Stone’s supporters waste no time in celebrating.

The alarm came fast that morning. Sunny felt groggy. His head hurts, and he looks over to see some empty cans on the ground that the cat must have knocked over. It wasn’t until after his shower that the thought popped into his head, “Did that really happen last night?” That day at

work Sunny enters the front doors of the factory raising his hand to wave to the frontdesk lady good morning, but is surprised to find an empty chair. Sunny tried to recall a time where he saw her miss two days in a row. Unlike the day before, the factory was full of buzz this morning. Sunny enters the breakroom to make himself a coffee. Sty is sitting on a table with his feet on a chair, with some other workers gathered in conversation.

“Crap, that was close, huh? Almost had to suffer another term with a woman at the helm,” Sty quips, pulling laughter and smirks from the others.

One of their co-workers quickly agrees, “Yeah, I don’t think that we would have made it.”

“No more of the monthly emotional rollercoaster! We finally can get this country back to a proper place. Whatdya say, Sunny, that bitch was finally defeated!” Another co-worker adds.

Sunny thinks about how wrong they were to say things like this, as if it made them correct or tough. Instead of speaking up, he walks out of the room.

“At least Victor will end the curfew now,” one of them remarks.

As the day went on, reality started to sink in more and more. A week or two ago Sunny wouldn’t have been able to tell you about either candidate, or politics in general. Now, this distress overcame him. His forehead was iced in a cold sweat. His heart felt like the pounding of a gavel. He saw who was celebrating- the older men, the bosses, the ones cracking the rude remarks. Overwhelmed, Sunny abruptly leaves the factory.

After work, Sunny walks through the park and sees his friend sitting by the chess tables.

“Fancy a game, boy? Shouldn’t you be at work?” Sunny’s friend greets him.

“I don’t know if my head’s really there for a match right now.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Surely, you have seen Victor has the election,” Sunny laments.

“Yeah, and? You didn’t seem to care much about him last time we met.”

“That’s ‘cause I didn’t know how terrible of a person he was!” Looking around the park, Sunny sees workers washing murals and crews removing sculptures. Trucks deliver flower



arrangements and banners touting the success. "I can't believe so many people believe in him. So many of.. of our neighbors. The world may never be the same."

"Well you're right about one thing... right now.. Many believe in what he is saying. Many were tired of the way things were," his friend says kindly.

"And Victor will change that for them?"

"No, of course not. But this isn't the first time evil knocks on the door. Fascism is always at the heels of the vulnerable."

"And now it's too late."

"Is it? Only if you let it be."

"What can be done now? Victor will be appointed to office in just a few days, there is nothing left."

"If that's the case, then you're accepting how bad it is about to get. You see me, I am an old man. And though I don't see well any more. I have seen plenty of folks just like Victor Stone. Hell, he is not so much different than his father in a lot of ways. Yeah, I am that old. And every time a bully comes around they say the same old thing. It sounds scary. And it just gets scarier every time. But you can't give them an inch of your spirit. They can have the drapes and the dressings. You'll have to fight this bully with your core."

"How am I supposed to fight this bully?" Sunny asks him.

"Remember, you're not fighting alone."

Sunny leaves the park that day grateful to leave with some wisdom, but that wisdom did not necessarily bring any hope or peace for Sunny.

Over the course of the next few weeks, turnover in leadership began. It was a law passed by the conservative party in 2035 to expedite the shift in parties after the previous conservative leader successfully led a resistance in this transition of power. It was the first time in the city's history that a peaceful transfer of power did not occur. The delay and protest ended after 17 days and dozens of arrests. It was Joan's final day in office. Though she had already left the country weeks ago and planned to release a press conference later in the week. At the square, the press interviewed Stone's new press secretary, who released the following message:

“Good morning to everyone. We cannot be more excited and ready to help the people of this great city. Today marks a new day, a day in which Party Leader Victor Stone puts an end to the wasteless spending, the blind eye to crime, the perversion of the christian faith and the takeover of our jobs by foreigners. Today the disrespect to our law ends. What is to come in the months ahead is a clearly outlined and executed plan to bring our country back to greatness. In an effort to keep this brief, to end, I am happy to announce that Leader Stone will be addressing his constituents this evening in a prerecorded message that will air at 8pm local time.

Go now, hug your loved ones, rejoice at your office and with your co-workers. Joan and her band of crooks have been defeated. Together we will make sure she never comes back.”

The press conference ends and a commercial for Burger Blitz pops on.

Later that evening, Sunny was home watching the local basketball team playing when a special announcement disrupted the broadcast to bring Party Leader Stone's speech. The network shifted their coverage to cameras fixed on a podium. Sunny noticed it was the same spot that he heard Justin Heard give his speech. Splashes of paint can still be seen in the background with tape marking off sections still needed to be cleaned. Victor walks into view from the right side of the screen and approaches the podium, tapping on the mic.

“Fellow citizens of this great city- thank you for your vote. I could not be more excited to be your new Party Leader. Thank you for listening to this message tonight. And, thank YOU, for this is your moment! This is the moment that will define our future. A future you and I will carve out together, standing shoulder to shoulder, unafraid, unshaken, and ready to reclaim what has been taken from us.

Last week, this very square was overrun by those who claimed to speak for the people, for justice, and for peace. But let me be clear: what happened here was not a peaceful protest. It was a sham. It was a performance by a weak-willed group, propped up by a broken system that has done nothing but make a mockery of our country and our values. They painted banners, strummed their guitars, and spoke pretty words about freedom while trampling on the very foundation of what makes this country great: tradition, hard work, discipline, and pride in who we are and where we came from. I can remember when this was a country who stood by defenders of freedom. A memory we will live again.

Joan Johnston's people talk about unity, but all they've done is sow division. They claim to care about your families, but where was Joan when our schools started teaching garbage instead of grit? Where was Joan when your jobs were shipped overseas, the arts got more funding than your local fire department, and the culture became obsessed with tearing down everything we hold dear? She wasn't there, folks. Joan Johnston doesn't know you. She doesn't know the struggle of working Americans. She's been too busy cozying up to the elites, too busy throwing taxpayer dollars into 'artistic expression' and so-called 'diversity initiatives' instead of focusing on what really matters: jobs, safety, and strength.

Now let me tell you what we will do, what our platform stands for- what my winning this election will mean for you, your children, and your future. First and foremost, we will eliminate the wasteful spending on Joan's vanity projects that have poisoned our culture and weakened our resolve. No more funneling your hard-earned money into art galleries, museums, or cultural festivals that spit in the face of tradition. No more glorifying degeneracy under the guise of 'freedom of expression'. The attacks on our children's way of life will be no more. Our money will go where it's needed- into rebuilding our infrastructure, our military, and our industries. We will bring back the spirit of innovation, not by catering to the whims of the 'creative class', but by empowering engineers, builders, and workers- the real Americans.

And lastly, we will stop this assault on our history. Joan and her cronies want you to feel ashamed of our past. They want to rewrite your favorite character and erase the funny jokes. They want us to accept their satanic beliefs until we no longer recognize ourselves. But we will not allow them to destroy our heritage. We will honor our ancestors- the people who fought and died for our freedom, and we will protect their legacy. We will rewrite the story the way it should be written: with pride, strength, and honor.

As of today, I will be commissioning a board to assess and ban any literature that attempts to brainwash an individual child with notions of illegal activity and debauchery. This is the platform that will make us proud again. We're not just going to fix the problems that Joan and her ilk created- we are going to build a future so bright and powerful, that no one will ever question the might of this city's spirit again.

As I leave you, let me add that due to the overwhelming success in reducing crime and vandalism in record time, I want to confirm the indefinite extension of city-wide curfew. Let this be a warning to all criminals that break the law. You will be detained, arrested, and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

So I ask you, will you stand with me? Will you fight for what you deserve? What you believe in? Will you take back your streets, your jobs, and your future?"

The message ends and the network returns to the originally scheduled programming, which upon immediately goes to commercial. Sunny looks down at his phone and sees a message, “Indefinite curfew?!”

It shocked Sunny, too. With the election behind them, he was hoping that things may return to “normal”, whatever that was. Sunny started to lose faith in that idea. So far, he hadn’t seen or heard anything to change his mind otherwise. Another message buzzes, “That sounded more like a scolding than a celebration speech.”

A few weeks pass, the commotion from the election has died down. Folks were back to work and the emotional reactions had settled down until the citizens returned to the same routine once again. Some found it hard to get back into the swing of things, including Sunny. With Stone doubling down on the consequences, Sunny had been observing the curfew nightly, which meant most days were waking up, going to work, and coming straight home. Monotonous, the days bled into one another.

One evening, after work one night, a nice breeze rushed through the city sky. The cool air felt good on the skin. Getting to his place after his walk home, he opens a window, hoping to enjoy some more of the fresh air. He grabs his radio, turning the switch on, but only hearing dead air. Fiddling with the knobs, the volume, the tuning, until he finally gives it a good smack. Still, nothing. Confused and annoyed, Sunny goes back outside. Down on the corner, to his surprise, Sunny saw the pub open. He stops in.

“Hey, longtime stranger, what's up?” The bartender calls.

“I'm surprised you are still open. The radio is out? You notice?” Sunny responds.

“Yeah, we noticed, I plugged in locally.”

“What’s going on?”

The bartender quickly fills Sunny in, “I heard Victor started a committee to screen all the radio shows, every station on air has to go through an appeal’s process. Rod on the Radio, you know him, right? He was fuming just last night. What’ll you have?”

“Just a club soda tonight. Why would Victor give a crap about Rod’s idiot radio show? He has told jokes and played oldies music for like the last 30 years...”

Entering the bar are a few local policemen. The bartender shouts, “Hey boys, what can we get for you?”

“This bar is breaking the law. Everyone here is breaking the law. You have until the count of five to get out of here. Otherwise, you will be arrested and prosecuted to the extent of the law.”

“Oh piss off,” a patron responds.

The officer removes a baton from his belt striking the elderly patron in the chest. The man’s glass falls to the floor sending shards of glass across the ground.

“Mike, what gives?” the bartender asks.

“Shut the fuck up or you’re next... 1... 2... 3...”

The shocked and frightened patrons ran off. Sunny looks at his friend behind the bar who gestures at him to leave. Putting his head down, he scurries out with the rest of them. He heads straight home that night, not once looking behind him.

After a busy week, Sunny ached for the weekend to arrive. Despite the on-going atmosphere, it was still a Friday, and Sunny was prepared to have a good one. He gets his usual breakfast at the corner store and leaves a few extra dollars on the counter before heading out.

Exiting the train for his stop, Sunny is excited to share some extra donuts with the locals. He is shocked to see that the pop-up tent city had been taken down. In fact, there was almost no trace that any people had even made their home there. Overnight, a small village worth of people and homes uprooted and washed away.

Irritated and worried, Sunny continued his walk along to the factory. It wasn’t just the tent-city, as he walked he saw cleaning crews washing away murals, removing shading structures, and installing cameras on almost every block.

The headlines that day tout Stone’s successes out of the gates. Stories praising his positive crime record and celebrations of stocks reaching new highs paint the pages. The talking heads on TV did their best to gain his favor. While some shun the idea, others’ embrace the fabricated positivity. Some in the neighborhood even raise Victor Stone flags in support.

The next weekend, the weather turns and a cold wind whips through the city. At the park Sunny sits down with a blanket under him and the old radio that his grandfather had gifted him, to spend the afternoon. Like a few nights earlier, Sunny tunes through the frequencies, only to hear white noise. He comes across a channel with a recorded message thanking their loyal listeners for tuning in over the years playing on a loop. He sees a group of people having more success, playing music through a speaker, about 20-30 yards from him. The music is loud enough to hear but not clear enough to know what is being played. Desperate for some good music he thought about joining them. That was, of course, until he watched the next few moments play out.

Two patrolmen in the park walk right up to the group. From a distance, Sunny hears one of officers say, “This is an order from the offices of PM Stone. The music you’re playing and the

party you're hosting is illegal and punishable by prosecution. Turn this off now and disperse or we will arrest you."

The group, not bothering anyone, is taken back by this.

"Excuse me, sir, but what do you mean illegal, we are in a park listening to music," one of them questions.

"Newly passed regulation A.S.C 4.50 states any music with lyrics must be in praise of the city. All other music is deemed to be detrimental to the health of the city."

"Man,-the hell is that? Get out of here."

"You have 3 seconds to turn the music off. 1...2..." Unbelting their batons preparing to strike the group of young men.

"Relax, relax, you do not have to do all of that. We are leaving."

Unsettled, Sunny collects his things to move on. It was only a matter of time before the patrol bothered him. He barely recognizes the park anymore. Walking, he sees kids jumping rope and singing the Burger Blitz jingle while a familiar face rolls up to Sunny. He hasn't seen her since the rally. He had been thinking of her. She looks like she is in a hurry.

"Hey! Don't I know?" She says in greeting.

"Uh, yeah.. I..."

"That's right... the rally! What a mess that turned into. Cops, amiright? What are you up to?"

"Was hoping to relax and listen to some music, but..."

"I know! How shit is that? Least you can listen to the Burger Blitz jingle on loop, right?!"

Sunny laughs.

She continues, "I got to run, but, here! If you want to listen to some real music tonight?"

"Yeah sure! What time?"

"11."

"What about the curfew?"

“What about it?” She laughs and walks off slipping a note into Sunny's book.

Opening the book, Sunny sees an address scribbled down on a torn piece of newspaper. The address feels familiar to Sunny though he can't pinpoint it exactly. He knew that if it was at 11, it was probably illegal. He recited the address in his head several times before taking his lighter to it. That night Sunny stood in his kitchen, watching tv while washing the dishes from his dinner. The faucet drowned out most of the volume from the program playing, which appeared to be praising Victor Stone. He flipped the channel to watch some of the late night comics that would be on. Channel 2 at 8:30, canceled. Channel 9 at 9, canceled. Channel 4 at 10, canceled. You would think that all the comics would have plenty to say about the leaders in charge. That was always the low hanging fruit for them. He found an old comedy movie instead. Sunny first saw this one with some friends right after they graduated from high school. Technically sneaking into the R-rated film, all he remembers is his cheeks hurting from laughter. Drying his hand with a towel, he turns off the faucet and turns up the volume. He notices something different while watching, but can't put a finger on what it is. He turns off the music playing from his stereo behind him.

“What the hell?” Sunny says aloud, listening to the audio of the movie.

“Allan, are you kidding me? Get the fucking clown out of my office, before I—” The tv speaker plays.

“They scrubbed the best movie of all time?!? Ah, what the fuck man?” Turning off the tv, he looks at the clock. 10:30. He grabs his sweatshirt and puts the hood up. Carefully he moves out on the fire escape and quietly shuts the window behind him. He slinks down the fire escape cautious not to alert anyone. Climbing down the ladder, he lets go and his heels crash to the floor, bending his knees to support the fall. Gingerly, he walks to the corner of the building and peeks his head around. Since taking office, Victor's enforcement of the curfew grew stricter, with more arrests each day. Sunny looked down the block with an unobstructed view, the city has never been so quiet.

He walks down the street mindfully moving from shadow to shadow. He recites the address in his head over and over as the cold winter air howls through the alleyways. Peeking his head around a corner, Sunny sees a patrol car just passed him by. He remains still, watching as the car makes a right-hand turn and drives out of sight. When Sunny got to the corner he made sure to go the opposite way.

He looks up across the street. Confused, he sees the old laundromat. Surprised it was still open, he guessed that the run-down laundromat stayed under the radar of the curfew. But, did he get the address wrong? Impossible. Sunny had been reciting it in his head almost all day.

He stops outside a door. There are no lights or signs. He looks around. "Is this a trap," he thinks to himself, pausing almost expecting the foot patrol to come arrest him.

Suddenly, a door swings open, and Sunny is pulled in so fast that his shoes are nearly left behind.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Uhh.. I...." Sunny falters.

"He's with me," a familiar voice calls out, as the blue-haired girl from the rally jumps to his aid.

"Yeah? And how do we know he's not a cop or some narc?"

Sunny looks around to see a quiet room filled with people. There is a kitchen and a couple are cooking together. Sunny is confused, "Oh, I am sorry, I didn't bring anything, I must have misunderstood. I thought you said..."

"Follow me," cutting him off she takes his hand and leads him down a flight of stairs that leads into a freezer.

"Oh, you're definitely trying to kill me, huh?"

"You watch too much news! Here, feel inside, its condenser is busted."

He reluctantly enters the freezer and she closes the door behind him. Walking to the back of the freezer, she pulls a jar hidden as a handle. Sunny is hit with a wall of sound and lights, a DJ is in the booth spinning records, colored lights fill the room, showering down and changing with the beat of the music. People are dancing. The intensity, passion, and heat is palpable.

"Whoa."

"See, told you. No one is going to murder you here. Now come this way."

The two weave through the crowd navigating to another door, the noise fades as they find a much quieter room. There is an old wooden bar, with a bartender pouring drinks to a few patrons seated at the cushioned stools in front of him. Sunny's head is spinning, the place felt like a fever dream.

"What can I get you?" The bartender asks.

"Just some water works?"

"Whatever suits ya, here's a bottle."



“Thanks.”

“What about you, miss?”

“Tequila soda.”

“Coming right up.

“What do you call this place?” “Sunny asks Desi.

“It’s just a hideaway,” she responds.

Desi grabs her drink from the bartender, “Here let me introduce you to a few folks.”

Sunny looks around to see a few familiar faces. He doesn’t know anyone by name, but he recognizes the coat of a man he passes by each day on his commute and a woman wearing dark glasses inside. Whenever Sunny would see her, whether it was 8am or 8pm, she always hid her eyes. But mostly, it was a crowd of unknown people that made Sunny feel shy. Like sitting at the lunch table at a new school for the first time.

Desi yells, “Hey all, this is Sunny, he is cool.”

They all take turns introducing themselves to Sunny.

“Nice to meet you mate, from around here?”

“Oh yeah, my whole life. I was born at Saint Mary’s down the road.”

“Yeah, I know the one, my sister is a nurse there still. She helped deliver three of my five,” the man pulls out his wallet and unfolds a worn family photo. “Took this myself in 2020. Got into a lot of hobbies that year. Photography was one of ‘em!” he says with a laugh.

“That’s a nice photo,” Sunny responds.

“Thanks, they’re all about your age now. How did you two meet then?”

Desi fields the question, “Sunny was at the rally in Makers Square.”

The mood of the conversation shifts, and the tone becomes more serious.

“Terrible what happened there. Were you alright?”

“Yeah, yeah...”

“Damn shame that rally, and now look at us all! Forced to be cooped up here underground, blasted into history past with this curfew shit.”

“You’re not cooped up though, you’re out here sitting next to me,” another patron says with a laugh.

Another chimes in, “I knew that rally was a bad idea, and now look! Justin is locked up on bogus crimes. I heard they are even going to pin the death of that girl on him.”

“It wasn’t the rally that was the problem- it was those statesmen that ruined it for everyone.”

“Alright, enough of the downer talk, I am up.” Desi leaves the area and heads up into the DJ booth. Putting on her headphones she melts into the moment. Sunny saw the passion she looked at each vinyl record with, the wry smile she would pull when finding exactly what she was looking for. The music played loud. Sunny watched as others dancers and sang with each track spun. Sunny sat and admired it all- the sound of the kick drum coming through, and the people dancing and laughing. The music played deep into the night, and he felt good for the first time in a long time.

He slinks back into work the next day exhausted from the night before. Sunny remembers the clock reading 2:30am when he got home and after all the buzz he could hardly fall asleep. At his workstation, with his eyes barely open, he turns to caffeine. Chasing cup after cup of coffee to get him through the day. With each cup came a spike in energy that had his mind racing. He was eager to go back to the hideaway. Grabbing another cup of coffee he makes the decision to return that night.

Later, he stood outside across the street in the dark of the night, staying in the shadows. He watched as a few people stopped in front of the laundromat before entering through the door beside it. Approaching, he knocks gingerly. He is swiftly swept inside with the door closing behind him. Sunny notices it is not as crowded as the night before. It created a more intimate and intimidating setting. Feeling a bit seen in an empty place, he found a seat at the end of the bar and got a drink. Behind him there was a group of people painting on canvas. In another room, he could hear music playing. Sunny sips his drink, mostly keeping to himself, when he sees some books behind the bar, “What are those?”

“Books. Specifically books that have been banned. We got a whole room full of them.”

“Banned books?”

“Yeah, you know, the ones the zealots and the fascists are afraid of.”

“I have never heard of a banned book, I just thought books were more obsolete than anything these days, can't they just be found online?”

“You know how useless the internet has been the last 15 years. It's littered with disinformation. Plus, when the book is banned, it's likely to be banned online as well. The downloadable files are corrupted or tagged so the police can track who attempted to download them.”

“All that for some books about wizards or men kissing?”

“For the fascists, yeah. It's not just dungeons and dragons they ban. They ban anything that falls outside their narrow idea of what's 'pure or godly'. Countless encyclopedias, history books and scientific research never sees the light of day.”

Sunny looks up and sees the photo of the student that was killed during the rally. It's a face he has thought of often over the past few months. He is reminded of that day and what the patrol did to her and how the news blamed it on the crowd. Surprised, he asks, “You knew her?”

“Yeah, we all did.”

“That's Meilani! It was her third year at uni. She came from the South Pacific to get an education. She was helping take care of a lot of folks back home. Shame what the policemen did to her- even worse how the media has completely dropped the ball and is blaming not only the rally, but specifically Justin. It's fucked up.”

Sunny makes sure to get more detail, “Justin was the one speaking that day, right?”

“Correct, and now they keep him at the upstate pen. Been there for weeks. They are definitely going to try and pin her death on him.”

“You know him, too. then.”

“Of course. Justin is a good man. He organized that whole rally, and if you were there, you saw it was a safe place for us to all gather and express ourselves. And now he sits alone, shouldering the responsibility of it all. What more could you do as a man?”

Finishing his drink, Sunny isn't in the mood to explore the hideaway further. He turns to head out.

“Wait, take this before you go, read it and bring it back!”

Sunny takes the book gently, mindful of the tattered and worn cover, “I will, thanks.”

The next morning, Sunny gets up for work and walks to the tram station. Even though he was physically present, his mind wandered to the hideaway the night before. He just couldn't get Meilani out of his head, or Justin for that matter. A bus pulls up before the train. Impulsively, Sunny gets on. He pays the fare and finds a seat. While waiting for the bus to load the tram for work pulls up and away. He rides the bus for a few miles before getting off at a stop and transferring to another one. “Next Stop Upstate” the panel reads.

Rushing, he barely catches the last bus heading north that day. Out the window, Sunny reads the big green sign: “Upstate 75 miles”. He sits back into his seat and begins to read the book that was lent to him last night. “The Autobiography of Malcolm X”.

Once upstate, Sunny steps off the bus onto the side of the dirt road. Looking around, he saw open farmland as far as he could see. There was a sign reading “State Pen 2 Miles This Way” with a black painted arrow pointing east. Looking at his watch, it was about 45 minutes before visiting hours ended and close to 90 minutes before the last bus south for the day would leave. It was a tight window, but he committed, continuing the journey on foot. Eventually, approaching a tall barbed wire fence, he finally gets to the entrance. Walking in, the bright sterilized lights are blinding, and the muted gray concrete walls remind him of the factory. He knew this was much much worse. Sunny's palms sweat and his heart rate picks up.

“Can I help you?” A man says without looking up from the computer screen he was working on.

“Uh, yes, hopefully. I'm here to see someone.”

“Who?”

“Justin... Justin Heard,”

“Are they expecting you? Are you a family member?”

“No, no.”

“You do realize that visiting hours are over in 25 minutes.”

“Yes, I do, I was just hoping to-“

“And the nature of your visit is?”

“Just to see him.”

“ID, please.”

Sunny hands over his ID.

“Okay, follow this officer. He is going to pat you down to make sure you’re not attempting to smuggle any items to the inmate. Please note the sign above stating any attempts to smuggle items to the inmates will result in prosecution to the fullest extent of the law. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

Sunny walks with the guard. He removes his shoes, socks, and sweatshirt. He is patted down from head to toe. The process felt humiliating and Sunny hadn’t even committed a crime. He imagined what the treatment was like for others. Whether you did it or not, the assumption of innocence melts away. Sunny is escorted to the visitors’ phonebank. He takes a seat and stares through the glass across the empty room.

“The inmate will be here in a minute *if* they want to see you.”

A few minutes pass and Sunny is starting to think this may not have been the best idea. Maybe it was wise to leave. As he goes to get up from his chair, Justin enters the room and sits down in front of him. He is confused and unimpressed. He stares at Sunny for a second before grabbing the phone. Sunny does the same on the other side of the booth.

“Who are you?” Justin asks directly.

“Hey, hey, I’m... I’m, uh, Sunny. I was at the rally the other day.”

“Yeah, man, talk to my lawyers. The hell?” Justin gets up to walk away.

“No, no! I was just here to see how you were doing.”

Justin pauses and returns, “How do you think I’m doing?”

“Yeah, sorry I get it. Look I’m not trying to blame you for anything. I just meant that I was there, and that I know what happened and how it happened. I’m here to say thanks, I guess. For sticking your neck out for what is right. I see now, the risk you took.”

“You have no idea of the risk. They didn’t beat you, they didn’t arrest you, and they’ll try to pin that death on me. Not you,” he collects himself. “Sunny, why are you really here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I thought I could help? A lot of people listening to you believe in what you were saying. I believe in what you’re saying. Plus, what evidence do they really have to pin-”

“When you look like me, they don’t need evidence. Thanks, anyway, for coming.”

“I’ll be back,” Sunny says.

When Sunny arrived at the hideaway that evening, Desi was already in the DJ booth. Sunny watched as the DJ before her packed up his vinyl records and shuffled offstage. It was the first time Sunny has seen a wax vinyl record. He heard of them coming in and out of style, but they had been dead for nearly 20-25 years. His grandfather had a collection but eventually had to part ways with them. Come to think of it, Sunny had never physically held music. Music was always streamed through an app, website, or played over the radio. A new song mixed in catching Sunny’s attention. The DJ booth was Desi’s stage; her court, her throne. If you didn’t like a song before Desi played it, by the night’s end it would be stuck in your head the whole way home. The room quickly filled with more and more people wanting to dance and party.

Overcrowded, Sunny opts to find a quieter area. He explores a few rooms filled with art and sees the previous DJ at a table in the corner with a strange contraption. Feeling a bit out of his shell already and Sunny curiously approaches him, “What’s that?”

“Don’t tell me you young people forgot what a guitar is?”

“Of course not,” Sunny laughs.

“You know I played with a fella who played on this record. A couple of these actually!” The DJ says.

“Really? No way.”

“Oh yeah, Duke was a killer on the keys. You know musicians. They would tour around the country back in the day. There was no virtual garden entertainment or streamers. Just a couple guys who would start in a garage with nothing and rent a van. Remember that.”

“And do what?” Sunny inquires.

“Play music, kid.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere, man. Parks like Makers Square. Beaches. Outside and inside of venues. Anywhere!”

“Why’d all that stop?”

“Well, that’s a whole different conversation, and the answer will depend on who you ask. It was the greedy corporations skyrocketing costs for artists and consumers and taking larger cuts. The conservative movement restricting gatherings, limiting hours, and impeding on self expression.

There was an influx of AI and the ‘total immersive life’ that was a form of social media in which you were the conductor of your entire world. When you were feeling sad you could simply tell your interface and it would spit out a brand new and unique song for your situation. Matched with art in a virtual gallery to boot. There were positives to the application, too. However, the drastic reductions of social relationships tends to make art less meaningful in its own sense. You’re blinded by your own echochamber of pleasure and no one stops to look at anyone else’s perspective.”

Instruments are a dead art more or less with the world moving toward digital everything. Instruments very quickly became a skill and hobby of history. Those learning instruments were mostly learning from their families. School programs were cut years ago. Classes and small businesses were driven out by competition in other industries. Similar digital music production and AI took over. There were, in fact, many instruments Sunny had never even heard of.

His new friend shows him the library filled with thousands of books, wax records, comics books and more, stacked in no particular order. The DJ grabs one and spins it on an old turntable.

“Wow, I’ve heard about these.”

The music plays, and it's an experience for Sunny, who generally just uses his headphones. The live music he used to see before everything was shut down was mostly overly processed shows, “How do you keep track of all of this?”

“Mostly my brain, but I have a little note pad I jot things down in”, the DJ nods to a notebook.

Sunny opens it and sees scribbled messes all over. It was an unorganized and unintelligible system, at best, “You know I wouldn’t mind helping get this a bit more organized”

His new friend laughs, “Not sure what you have in mind, but go crazy!”

The next day, Sunny was back in the library. He sorted and alphabetized all the vinyl records sprawled across the room. Piled high on top shelves, stacks all over the floor. Enough to fill his apartment top to bottom. It was like walking through a history book. He explored each record; the liner notes, album art, and the serial numbers. It was the first time in his life Sunny had ever held music.

Most of the records he had never heard of, and was eager to spin on the old player in the room. Others he recognized from the radio or the streamers. He sees a bunch his grandmother would have loved. There was one of an old jam band she followed back in the day.

Taking a break, Sunny goes to grab a drink and sees Desi there. She seems to spend most of her nights there; possibly for lack of other options. No judgment from Sunny. He would offer her a place at his, but there was nothing to offer. Sunny barely fit in his space. Still she persevered and managed with what she had. It is the simple things that tide you over. A comfortable bed. Your feet on a familiar shower floor. Your towels. The things we all take for granted.

Sunny grabs a book off the shelf and read in a nearby chair.

The next day, after waking up, Sunny flips through his notebook. Written were the names and tags of everyone he had met over the last few encounters at the hideaway. There’s a knock on his door. Startled, he quickly hides the paper and pad under his bedsheets. Gathering himself, like a cat, he slowly makes his way to the door, trying to be silent so as not to alert anyone who



may be looking for him. He grips the wooden bat beside the door. "It was the Secret Police, they must have followed him home last night," he thought to himself.

Another knock sends him jumping backward. Sneakily, he looks through the peephole. It was Rose, his landlord.

"Open up, Sunny, You're 6 days late with rent... again!"

He opens the door just enough to send out an apology note, and then an envelope filled with cash.

"Next time, it will be \$200 bucks more, kid, don't try me."

Sunny starts to develop a new routine. In the hideaway most nights. Some nights he stays 'til it's almost daybreak. He stumbles in and gets through his shifts at the factory like a walking zombie. Head home, eat, shower, nap. Back to the hideaway. Repeat. It took a few weeks, but the vinyl records were all organized and alphabetically displayed on the shelves. Sunny also carved out areas for rare records, and specific genres. The room size doubled with extra space to move around. Sunny starts working on the books. He opens a fresh notepad and begins to catalog.

During a shift at the factory. Sunny is listening to some music he had discovered through organizing. Sneaking behind the company's internet safeguards, he downloads the album for his personal library, when an idea hits him. How could he bring the magic of the hideaway with him everywhere? Slowly, he starts to download digitized versions of the physical media in the hideaway.

Half asleep and still with half a day to go, Sunny slumps into the break room for an afternoon pick-me-up.

A few coworkers are having lunch in the breakroom.

"Did you see the news this morning?" Sunny overhears.

"Yeah, Victor is working on a tax break for the working class. How great is that? No politician has ever done more for this city in 6 months!"

Halfway through his sandwich, another one grumbles, "Exactly what's he done then? I ain't seen any changes. I'm still in this factory everyday, stuck seeing you a lot!"

Another co-worker chimes in, “Finally some law and order around here. None of those delinquents running around spreading ‘culture’. And do you see who is in his cabinet? These are distinguished men. I was on the fence about him, but he has convinced me. He is the only one who will save us now.”

They notice Sunny, who is desperately waiting for the caffeine to kick in.

“Awfully quiet over there, boy.”

“Quiet?! He is practically a ghost. Have you seen him on the line lately? Useless,” only half joking the men send the jab waiting for a quick witted response.

Instead, Sunny takes another large gulp of the warm drink. “Better get back to work, then,” he says with no further acknowledgement.

That night at the hideaway, Desi is DJing and some others are gathered around a table playing poker.

“Never played before.”

“Well, you should have.”

“Why's that?”

“Poker is one of life’s best teachers. From simple math skills to pattern recognition to odds and percentages. And, that’s just from the cards! From the people playing, you can learn body language, and how to bluff or when to call bullshit. You can learn to manage what you have, and when to walk away from a...”

“Okay, okay I get it... deal me in,” Sunny takes a seat and throws his money onto the table. A big fellow divvies out his chips. As the first round of betting unfolds, he hesitates for a moment, sizing up the competition. He throws in a few chips, feeling adrenaline surge as he commits to the game.

Throughout the game, laughter and conversations weave in and out of the beats Desi spins, creating a tapestry of shared experiences. The stakes rise, but so do the camaraderie and tension. Sunny finds himself captivated, not just by the game, but by the sense of community it fosters. As the night wears on, Sunny better understands the dynamics at play- both in poker and life. Each hand is a chance to learn, to adapt and grow.

After they finished, instead of going home, a few of them stuck around talking about the changes rapidly happening around them. An older member speaks up, "You look down Sunny! It was only a few bucks. You actually played pretty well."

"Ha, quit it! It's not about the money, I let you have that last hand anyway."

"Then what's on your mind?"

"I guess I just wish that there were more people like the ones here, out there, in the real world."

"Where do you think we are from, kid?"

"It's just the others at the factory... they seem to be happy to embrace this new way of life. Shattered, isolated, and dictated by others. If it's what everyone wants but me, what does that make me?"

"No, no, this isn't new, kid. Some say history repeats itself. I like to say history rhymes. It won't be the same place but it'll be the same sound."

The lively conversation peters out as one by one sleep finds each of them. Laying back on a couch, Sunny looks at the ceiling, fighting to stay awake, trying to preserve the moment until his eyes are too heavy to hold open. In what feels like a blink, Sunny's eyes open. Tired and disoriented, he grabs a nearby water bottle and takes a long swig. The cold water brings another wave of waking up. He glances at his watch and sees the time.

"Oh shit," Sunny pops up and quickly gathers his things, careful not to wake anyone sprawled asleep, but not so successful in doing so. He stomps down on another's legs causing a groan, "Sorry, sorry, I gotta go. I am going to be in so much trouble."

Sunny rushes to work. He sees Jessica.

"I tried Sunny, I tried."

He zooms past her and into his station hoping that know one would notice his tardiness. It was only a few moments into his shift when he heard his name come over the loudspeaker.

"Sunny, please report to the office of discipline, at once. I repeat, please report to the office of discipline immediately."

Sunny gets ripped a new one. After the ear full, Sunny gets up from the chair and with his shoulders dropped and exits the office. He heads back to his station, walking, half asleep. All he can think about is getting back into his own bed later this evening. He sits down at his station just in time to watch the programs on his computer screen turn to black. The power is out. To the wheel they go. Any other day Sunny would cope pretty well, but he is running on fumes. Looking at the clock on the wall it would be another 3 hours before the day ended. He knows it's his own doing so he bites his tongue and gets to treadwalking.

Sunny nods off on the commute home. A neighbor kindly and gently wakes him at his stop, "Hey, hey boy, this is you, right?"

Startled out of his sleep, Sunny quickly orients himself and thanks his neighbor. Getting home, Sunny climbs right into bed and goes to sleep.

Sunny opens his front door on a late Sunday afternoon. He had spent the day traveling to see Justin Heard again. Sunny brought some letters from folks at the hideaway along with a few bucks for his commissary. It was a quick trip, but Sunny was happy to see Justin was doing well. The public defenders were feeling confident. But he didn't want to get too ahead of himself. Sunny only just met him, but he could tell Justin had changed. Maybe it was a change that he saw within himself as well. The social contract, the invisible one that says if you work hard and go good to others then you will receive the same, each day the fabricate of that contract worn. His trust in systems that were meant to protect eroded a little more each day that Justin sat in cell for a crime he didn't commit. Justin told Sunny if he gets out that he will likely leave town, and now Sunny could see why.

He's shaken from his thoughts when he gets an email reminder for a ticket stub he had purchased months ago before the curfew was in place. A reminder of just one of the many events canceled in the last few months. Reading into it further, Sunny learns that the tickets won't be refunded, citing this as not the company's fault but the government's for enacting the curfew in the first place. It's a lose-lose for Sunny.

He turns on the TV, he sees it is the news and grabs the remote to put the game on when the segment catches his attention.

“Happening now, local university students have begun demonstrating on campus today and are encouraging others to join them. Here we are with local student, Noah Hodgins, who identifies as the organizer of the protest. We tune in with our field correspondent for an exclusive interview.”

“Hi, I am Spencer George here with a college student from City University. Tell us, who you are, and what you are doing here today?”

“My name is Noah Hodgins. We are here today to protest the curfew placed by Joan Johnston and the radicalization and abuse of the policy.”

Sunny didn't go to college. He came from a family of workers, most who did not have the money to go to college themselves. His parents grew up in a time where you were promised that a college degree was more than enough to provide for you and for your family. But as the years wore on, his family saw friends and neighbors putting in the efforts only to find themselves deep in debt with predatory loans, and working roles they were underpaid and overqualified for. So, Sunny's father took a different route: he was an electrician working for the city for years. Day and night he worked 14 hour shifts to provide for Sunny and his mother. When they were finally able to retire, his parents left the city in favor of some peace and quiet, but Sunny wasn't quite ready to leave.

Sunny watches the footage of the many students sprawled on the campus lawns. He thinks about what could have been if it were the path he took. Would he be as brave to risk it all?

The student continues, “Since Stone has taken office, we have been met with a barrage of policies that aim to not only restrict the way we live our lives, but dehumanize us all together. These policies not only divide us as a community, but they also impact the ability to care for ourselves and our families by stripping economic opportunities that do not fit in Victor Stone's cookie cutter worldview.”

Spencer George cuts in, “I can tell this is very emotionally charged. While we can see there are a handful of people supporting your cause, there have been many that have come out against this protest. What would you say to those students?”

“While I would call the many hundreds here today more than a handful? My message to all is that only your actions will determine how history remembers you in this moment,” Noah responds.

“How long do you plan to protest?”

“Until the curfew has been lifted and Victor Stone and his cronies repay lost wages to the young, the artists, and the people most impacted by these new policies.”

“Thank you for your time, I am Spencer George sending it back to the studio.”

Later on, at the hideaway, Sunny asks the small group surrounding him, “Did you see the students are protesting?”

“No, what's going on?” Desi asks, interest piqued.

“Looked like at least a few hundred of students were protesting against Stone and his policies.”

Excited, Desi exclaims, “Finally, some action!”

“Looks like it could mean the end of the curfew!”

An older member of the group speaks up, “I wouldn't get ahead of yourself with that...”

“Why?” Sunny questions.

Another man responds, “It is a good sign that the college students are banding together. Segregation, Vietnam, Women's rights, and occupy wall street all benefited from colleges coming together to express themselves in unity. It's a sign of a movement, yes. But nothing comes for free. There is a cost to all of this.”

“What's the cost?”

“Life.”

The headlines in the paper the next day spout claims that Victor Stone wants to meet with the students, but they have refused. A claim that can't be verified. When attempting to do his own research, Sunny is inundated with misinformation or artificial, alternative “truths”. The media battle had begun and the goal of the talking heads was clear: the students were the enemy.

On campus, Victor deploys a special police detail just as he said he would. Deployed first thing in the morning, the patrol used tactics of bullying, violence, and coercion. By the end of the

afternoon, the media releases footage of hundreds of college students in zip tie cuffs. Victor Stone pulls up in his motorcade, stepping out of the secured SUV to address the students directly. He proudly lets them know they have all been expelled effective immediately, and that anyone who protests again will have a similar fate. Stone also announces more restrictions to the public; he introduces a law banning the gathering of more than 10 people. The list includes gatherings on campuses, in restaurants, and even at the weekly farmers market. Despite this, the next day the protests continued.

Sunny is at home that evening when a special news announcement breaks, the headline reads "One Dead from Campus Protests". The announcer says a policeman allegedly hit a woman, Jane Lee, in the head with his baton, and that the student died on her way to the hospital as a result of her injuries. Stunned but numb, Sunny thinks back to his conversation at the hideaway just a few days ago. Life was the cost.

Just hours after the event, a vigil is held honoring Jane Lee's death. It is an emotional gathering. Students are crying out in the night, mourning the loss of the friends and family they have chosen. Despite the ban on groups, hundreds of students come together in the deep darkness of the night. Candles are passed around forming little drops of light glow. The students are arm in arm creating a chain, they begin to sing.

Rolling off the bed, Sunny hits the floor and is abruptly awoken, he sees the time blinking back at him reading 3:14. That can't be right, he thinks, a power outage in the night must have reset the clocks. He looks at his phone. He is late, very late. He forgets his headphones and rushes to catch the bus, finding the last seat open right behind the bus driver. Taking a deep breath, and wiping the sweat from his forehead, Sunny settles into his seat when he overhears the drivers' radio playing a live local podcast.

"Can you believe, a drug house was discovered last night? The contraband they found included alcohol, and bootleg/illegal media, such as smut films and other deranged pornography."

It catches Sunny's attention, he tells the driver to turn it up so that he can hear.

“In this shithole of a city? I sure can! Joan let this plan turn into her own personal stripclub, it will take time for Victor to pick out all the weeds.”

“That’s right, you heard it first, folks. Victor Stone is set to make an announcement tonight on the prohibition-style speakeasy that was discovered last night.”

Sunny realizes that it is probably the hideaway. He wipes sweat from his forehead again, this time icy cold. Thinking quickly, Sunny figures he is already way too late for work. It would be better to skip and take the sick day than face his boss this late with no real excuse as to why. He hops off the bus at the next station and heads in the direction of the hideaway. He posts up across the street at a park bench, trying to not be too suspicious or look too interested.

The hideaway is shuttered with police signage all over it. Evangelists have started a prayer group outside and are reciting scripture. No one is yet aware that Justin is already being blamed for the crimes of possessing the illicit materials.

The crowd murmurs with nervous anticipation as the heat from the high noon sun beats down. Media teams angle their cameras. Reporters and civilians jostle for a better view. After a brief wait, Victor Stone strides onto the stage, his expression as unyielding as the steel-blue suit he wears. He stands tall and firm, gazing out at the crowd before he grips the podium.

Stone clears his throat, and his voice slices through the air, cold and commanding.

“My fellow citizens,” he begins, pausing as the crowd hushes, “I’m here to set things right. To restore order, peace, and the values that this country and this city was founded on. The uncovering of this dangerous establishment goes to show how deep and underlying the crime has grown in this city. Establishments like this are nothing more than reckless and dangerous displays of chaos and defiance. Illicit and illegal materials will not be tolerated in this city. The thousands of records, books, and images confiscated are only a small example of the weapons these freaks plan to use to infiltrate your mind and lead you into evil actions. These disruptors have shown us what they truly are, and it’s time to hold them accountable.”

He leans forward, voice dropping to a low rumble and laced with an almost personal contempt, “So, let me be perfectly clear: we will not tolerate lawlessness. I am ordering the immediate arrest of every individual involved in last week’s disgrace. Not just the organizers, but every single person who supported this violation of our public spaces, values, and very way of life.

Let this serve as a warning to anyone else considering similar actions. Any group, movement, or gathering that undermines our peace and stability will be met by the full force of the law. We are taking swift and decisive action to restrict unauthorized assemblies. The days of unchecked protests are over.”

The crowd is silent, a few murmurs of confusion rippling through the gathered citizens.



“Understand,” Stone continues, “that this isn’t about limiting freedom. This is about protecting our communities from those who seek to tear them apart. We must restore the values that make this country strong— discipline, unity, and respect for the law.”

Victor Stone steps back from the podium, raising a hand in finality. “To those who stand with us, thank you. To those who stand against us—you’ve been warned.” He marches off the stage, and Sunny notices a few of the hideaway regulars in handcuffs following behind him.

Sunny keeps his distance from the crowd, memorizing the scene before putting his hood up and going right home. He gets there, closes his windows and shuts the doors— locking up immediately. His mind starts to wonder of the consequences, the ramifications, and if anyone has seen him there. What about the bosses at the factory? If they found out, surely he would lose his job. He spends the rest of the day at home worrying if he would be associated in any way, when it hits him. The USB. If found it would link him to the hideaway.

Sunny shows up to work for his next shift, equipped with a fake cough to help sell his excuse for missing the day before. Entering through the doors you’d think he was going to cough up a lung. Jessica didn’t even turn her head from her screen. Preparing for a scolding he walks past Mr. Jentgun ready to relinquish another cough to really sell it, but he isn’t there. Sunny gets to his station quickly, skipping his usual morning coffee and socializing with coworkers. Fumbling around his desk drawers, he removes extraneous papers and old receipts. Scrambling, he finds it, holding on tightly as if coming across a once in a lifetime gem. The USB port holds a digital catalog of the hideaways contents. The project he had been working on, was safe in his hands. He lets out a sigh of relief.

Sty comes by Sunny’s station, “Hey Sunny boy, how are ya?”

Distracted, Sunny only half pays attention to his friend, “I’m good.”

“What happened? You went out the other night and were in too rough of shape to come to work yesterday?”

After sending a cough into his arm, Sunny responds, “No, just sick I think.”

“Oh, okay, okay. Right, well what about the news? Can you believe it? Illegal underground clubs?! Can only imagine the degenerates occupying that space, eh?”

“No... not sure what you’re talking about?” Sunny avoids making eye contact with Sty and is trying to play it cool, pretending to focus on his work.

“Nothing? Seriously? You live under a rock or something! You were home sick all day and you didn’t watch any news?!”

Suddenly, the factory’s light shut off. A call from the factory foremen rings out, “To the wheel!”

Saved by the bell. “Got to go, Sty see you later!” Sunny scurries over to the wheel and starts walking. One by one the workers get to their wheel. The lights flicker back on as they manually provide power for the machines.

First Sunny is relieved that no one had found the memory stick as it would surely be the end of him at the factory. But quickly, his mind turns to the others. Hell, what was the point of the memory stick if they were all jailed? And how did they find it, anyway? Did someone confess? Maybe Sunny wasn’t in the clear yet, anyone that was caught could easily give his name up. Was it him? Did he make a mistake and ruin it for the rest of them? The thoughts race through his head, when suddenly, he wonders why Sty would ask those questions, was it him who got the hideaway shut down. But if so, why wasn’t Sunny fired already? He grows overwhelmed and rushes off the wheel, and runs into the bathroom washing his face with cold water. A manager rushes in.

“Sunny, what are you doing in here?!”

“Sorry, sir, I will be fine. I just need a minute, but thanks for the concern.”

“Need I remind you that unauthorized breaks are against company policy.”

“No, sir, my apologies”.

“Ensure you return to the wheel in the next 60 seconds to avoid further disciplinary actions.”

Sunny shuts off the faucets and heads back to the wheel.

Right after work, exhausted from the day, Sunny heads to a local library to meet up with some folk to learn more about what was found in the hideaway. They’re seated by the stacks, pretending to browse through newspapers and reference books, keeping their voices low. Sunny learns that everything was confiscated. Whole collections of music, rare vinyl, hand-painted canvases, poetry, textbooks on art history and philosophy, banned literature, recordings, decades worth of art; seized. Several regulars were arrested, including the

bartender. Sunny is eager to learn about Desi, from what was said, she wasn't arrested, but no one knows where she is right now. This news worried Sunny.

"Now what do we do?" One of the group asks.

"I think it's best if.. if we all laid low for a while. At least until the dust settles on this," another person responds.

"What?! We can't hide now, we will lose everything!" Another chimes in.

"It's too dangerous. What about our families? I have children to worry about."

The group's tenseness is palpable.

Another member finally says, "And what about those of us who thought we were a family, what about us?"

"Look, I am sorry and I can't force you all to do anything, but I have to think of my wife, and my kids."

"We all have something we can lose, but we cannot give in to tyranny."

They sit in silence for a moment as they consider the weight of their next steps.

"Look, let's meet back here in 60 days. We can make a more informed decision at that point."

Reluctantly, the group comes to an agreement. Without saying goodbye, one by one they left the library so as to not draw too much attention leaving all at once.

The next day Sunny had just arrived at his work station when he heard his name over the intercom, "Sunny to the supervisor's office. Sunny to the supervisors' office."

Rolling his eyes, he skips dropping off his items and heads down the hall. He sits in the chair across from Mr. Jentgun, who is on the phone with someone. Sunny can't make out who he is chatting with.

"Please, please, let me call you back in 5. A subordinate just entered my office... yess... Yes, thank you," he hangs up the phone. "Sunny," he begins without looking from his computer screen. "It has come to our attention that—"

Sunny feels his body heat like a kettle on the stove. Sweat forms onto his forehead. This is it. He is going to be arrested. Half listening, Sunny tunes back in.

“... and this is just simply not within our values here as a company. Your performance has been lacking, the others around you are more present, making less mistakes. You’re just not meeting the KPIs, Sunny, and, therefore—“

It’s only then that it dawns on Sunny. He is being fired. No security detail, no officers waiting in the hall. Just an empty dismissal. Without waiting for him to finish his sentence, Sunny stands up, grabs his things, and walks out. Mr. Jentgun’s voice still droning on behind him.

“Where are you going, Sunny? You just got here?!” Jessica asks.

Her words fade as he makes his way down the hall, past the indifferent glances of his colleagues. Walking out into the light, Sunny is ready for the beginning of something uncomfortably new. Sunny heads home and thinks about the newfound freedom he has and the stresses that come with it. How would he pay his bills? Problems for tomorrow he thought to himself.

Now, slouched on his couch, he watches the news, his eyes glazed over as the talking heads shred into the hideaway, the protests, the artists who were only trying to preserve a sliver of life. Their words sting, loaded with accusations and manufactured disgust, the images flashing on the screen show a warped version of the reality that took place. Sunny grits his teeth, reaching for the remote, unable to bear one more second of it. But just as he’s about to turn it off, his eye catches the ticker running along the bottom of the screen. The headline scrolls by slowly, buried under the talking heads’ feigned outrage and blaring sirens: “In other news, a whistleblower who spoke against Burger Blitz, claiming the company used addictive additives, found dead less than 3 days after speaking to media...”

Sunny’s eyes suddenly widened.

### Part 3

With the hideaway shut down, Sunny's days settle into a quiet, stifling routine. No job, no friends wanting to risk contact, and the city fraying at the edges of his view. It all presses in on him as the weeks drag by. Each day feels like a loop of sitting, thinking, waiting for something to change. But between the silence, Sunny remembers one thing they hadn't managed to take: The memory stick. The project he started on a whim became more important than ever. What was meant to be a small gesture of gratitude has turned into a battle for preserving an invaluable archive of art, music, and writing and more. The art they'd collected together was now labeled "evidence," twisted into supposed proof of whatever laws they'd claim it violates. He works on duplicating the stick, a small act of defiance, a reminder that *not everything* was lost.

Sunny arrives at the park, the chessboard already set up on the weathered bench where his old friend sits waiting, watching the pigeons scatter across the grass. They exchange nods, settling into their old rhythm, moving pieces across the board as Sunny speaks up.

"It's like everyone's just... watching it happen all around them," Sunny says, moving his bishop out in front of a pawn. "Pretending everything's fine. It was so easy for everyone to accept this new way."

His friend glances up, almost resigned. "People have been doing that for years. You think this is the first time folks let things get bad? It's easier to ignore what's happening around them. If they don't look too close, maybe they can blame someone else when it finally falls apart."

Sunny frowns, searching for a counter argument but finding none. It feels hollow, a truth he doesn't want to accept. They play a few more moves, the words hanging heavy between them.

The older man leans back, his eyes on the trees, voice low and calm. "Doesn't mean you can't care. Doesn't mean you can't try something different. Just... be the change you want to see. Another game my friend?"

"I don't have time for another ass kicking," Sunny says with a smile. Sunny stands to leave, he carries his friend's words with him. He walks home, feeling a little more certain of the distance between himself and the world around him, but not any closer to knowing what to do about it.

With extra time on his hands, Sunny coordinates to meet Justin update on the day he gets released from prison. The two had been exchanging letters since Sunny's first visit. Opening the letter from Justin and learning that they didn't have enough to move forward with his prosecution, was the happiest Sunny had felt in a long time. When he finally leaves, Sunny seems more enthused about it than Justin, who is quiet, as they walk to the bus stop south. Once on the bus they catch up a little.

“How you feeling, man?”

“Fine.”

“We are so glad you’re safe and coming home”

“Thanks,” Justin’s tone turns frank, his eyes distant. “But I won’t be sticking around here long,” he says, a weary edge to his voice. “I’ve had it with this city. Tired of playing by their rules, tired of trying to toe the line. You give them an inch, they take a mile—and what are we left with? Nothing.”

Sunny feels the sting of Justin’s words and a pang of frustration at the idea of him leaving. “So that’s it, then? You’re just...gone?”

“I tried, I tried to change this city for the better,” Justin gives a half-hearted shrug, hands in his pockets, gaze fixed on the cracked sidewalk. “Maybe I’m just not made for this fight. Some people are, but me? I’ve spent too many years watching it all crumble. Sometimes leaving is the only answer.”

Almost a year into Victor Stone’s term, the city feels hollowed out and colorless. The places that used to pulse with life, were as dried up as the brittle leaves laid on the city sidewalk crunching beneath peoples feet. Parks that used to be filled with friends playing pickup games or people walking dogs now stand empty. Anyone who ventures out for some fresh air to sit on the benches or walk the trails does so quietly, eyes darting around, wary of drawing too much attention.

For Sunny, each day feels like an endless drift. His savings are dwindling and his search for new work hasn’t gained any momentum. Each day Sunny applies for a new job, and each day he receives the same silent response. His once resilient spirit was cracking at the seams.

Sunny sits quietly in a worn diner booth, cradling a cup of coffee as he half-listens to the hum of the radio. The speakers blare a rotating cycle of bland jingles, product plugs, and endless government-approved ads. The warmth of the coffee is a comfort in the otherwise sterile space. Without headphones on—an easy excuse for a cop to stop and search you—he has little choice but to let his mind drift along with the low drone of the commercials.

Suddenly, a bump on his shoulder pulls him back to the moment. He looks up, surprised to see Mary, an old friend from the farmers market days. Her face lights up in a smile as she slides into the booth across from him.

"Wow, I haven't seen you since they shut down the makeshift village there," Sunny says, a trace of disbelief in his voice. "How've you been?"

Mary sighs, a blend of resilience and fatigue in her expression. "Ehh, better and worse," she says, shrugging. "This is life now, right?"

They exchange small talk over coffee, discussing what little there is to keep them busy now. Business is slower than ever, Mary tells him, without word of mouth or a place to gather. "I don't know how we're all expected to survive when they're shutting down everything that kept us connected."

Mary takes out an old record from a bookshelf. The cover was withered away and the paper tore when she removed it from its protective case.

"Listen to this, this is what was hip back in the day."

She starts the record, she closes her eyes as if she was hearing the music in a sweet dream. They talk for a long while, each story blending with the other. Sunny was enjoying the conversation and company.

"Actually, I could use a hand, if you're around." Mary stops mid story to shift her thoughts. "Got some furniture I need moved out tomorrow. "

Sunny nods, glad to have a purpose, however small. The next day, he's at her place, moving old wooden shelves and chairs up and down narrow staircases, breathing in dust and memories of a different time. It reminded Sunny of his own grandmother, he hoped that someone would help her given the same circumstances. On his way out Mary packs a bag with whatever food she can spare—homemade bread, a jar of preserves, and a few hard-to-find treats—

"Take this, I insist."

"No, no Mary, it is really okay."

"I said that I insist, do not argue with me and before you go," she says, handing him an envelope with a serious look, "could you deliver this to your neighbor, Norah, on your way home? It's... a message. It's important that she gets it."

Sunny agrees, tucking the envelope in his coat pocket, intrigued but not wanting to pry. Mary hesitates, then says with a small smile, "If we all want a revolution, then we will be alright." She laughs, soft and a little sad, pulling in Sunny wrapping her arms around him tightly. They stand there for a moment, as the music plays in the background with a comforting tone.

The city papers all had the same headline this morning “Johnston to Leave Politics”. Many were hoping that she would challenge Victor Stone after how the changes have unfolded over the course of the last year. The article shares that the news of her exit is due to the “demeanor and tone of the current political landscape”. An empty message for her followers. It goes on to explain how she would be leaving the city to go overseas for a short while until “all regain their senses”. Her exit hits the resistance hard. It’s another fracture in an already struggling movement. But in the silence left by her departure, Sunny finds something stirring within himself—a purpose he hadn’t expected.

After helping Mary out by moving furniture, he offered to help deliver some of her homemade goods to neighbors since the farmers markets had shut down. The deliveries he does for Mary are simple: some produce, household items, and a few homemade goods. The neighbors, many of whom were elderly, were appreciative of Sunny for taking the time, even going so far as leaving him a few bucks tip. The tips were small, but they’re enough to cover his meals through the week. Gradually, though, people start to talk to him. They thank him for his help, tip him in little extras, or ask for help with another task, trusting him to pass around certain... messages. Sunny doesn’t know if he’s fearless or just numb, but he agrees.

With bans on gatherings and protests, he realizes face-to-face meetings are too dangerous at the moment. But moving alone, Sunny becomes a sort of invisible messenger, connecting people without their needing to risk being seen together. Just like that first message from Mary, each small conversation, each request, quietly seeds the idea of organizing, of staying connected even in the hardest of times.

Quickly, his deliveries expand. He’s carrying not just food and goods, but words, ideas, and small fragments of hope passed from one to another. Occasionally, he even slips someone a flash drive. It feels risky, but he tells himself he’s just another delivery guy, blending into the city’s everyday monotony. As the days pass, his role within the neighborhood grows, and people start to look at him differently—not just as a courier, but as a link in a quiet, stubborn chain stretching across the city.

As weeks go by, the city’s usual spark fades further. Holidays come and go, the streets barren of the usual lights and decorations, stripped of the colors that once made the city what it was. The only flags permitted to fly are the stark national ones, uniform and unyielding. Stores that used to blare pop songs or neighborhood favorites now only play patriotic or religious hymns. Preachers are broadcast far and wide to fill the airwaves with scriptures and prepared sermons, while familiar radio stations fade into static or, worse, become channels for strange sects and cults chanting their visions of order and submission.



Sunny walks to the park on a brisk morning, he sits on a bench with a warm cup of coffee, the steam dissipates into the frigid blue sky, with another cup next to him. A friendly face approaches, Sunny hadn't seen him since that night they played guitar in the hideaway. He sits down as Sunny hands him the spare cup of coffee.

"Morning."

"To you, too"

"I haven't seen you since—"

"So how have you been?"

"Oh, we are alright my way, the wife and I might be stepping on each other's toes these days, but we have been dancing that way for years. I had a choice," he continues. "Could've slipped out the back that night, just vanished like some did. But I stayed. Figured... someone had to hold the line, take the heat, so the others had a shot at keeping the spirit of it going. They took me in, threw the book at me— 'possession of contraband media,' 'conspiracy to undermine national morale,' and some garbage about 'promoting dissent.'"

"Did they... hurt you?" Sunny asks, voice tight with concern.

The mentor nods, touching his chest as though recalling the ache. "They tried to scare us into submission. But it didn't work, not on all of us. I took the fall, did my time, and when I got out... the city felt different. Empty. They'd driven most people underground."

Sunny is quiet for a moment, processing the gravity of what he's just heard. "I can't believe they would go that far. Just for... for people sharing music, art, stories. For people trying to live."

"That's what they're most afraid of," the mentor says, looking Sunny directly in the eyes. "People living freely. Creating freely. They can't control that, and it scares the hell out of them. "How about you, son, what's on your mind?"

Sunny shifts his gaze downward at the flash drive in his hand, "I wanted to give this to you?"

Tinkering with his glasses to get a better look, the man leans in, "What's this?"

"It's a small hard drive—"

“I can see that, but what does it do for an old man like me?”

“That’s the archive, from the hideaway.”

Holding the tiny drive in his hand, “In here you say?”

Sunny laughs, “Yeah, all in there. Files for all the music, books, and even started scanning the art before it all got confiscated.”

The friend looked shocked and honored, “Sunny, how on earth did you do that so fast?”

“It was nothing, time flies when you’re having fun right? Now, all you need to do is plug this into a computer and you’ll have access to it all. From there I can help you transfer it where you want.”

“Sunny, this is so great and thoughtful... I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I should be the one thanking you. You introduced me to all of this. I am happy it’s preserved in some way. Maybe not everything was lost.”

“No, everything’s not lost thanks to you, son.”

The two embrace each other in a hug. Sunny was already isolated before Victor’s laws made it even hard to connect with people, and Sunny didn’t take any connection or physical contact for granted. A high-five, a strong hug, and even a meaningful wave goodbye all meant more these days.

“One more thing,” Sunny says.

An address is scribbled on a torn piece of paper, “I know it’s risky for you to be sneaking around at all hours of the night, but you should know, some of us will be, and we will be better this time. If you are ever so inclined to stop by, you know we miss you, and you’re always welcomed”.

They give each one last great big hug before parting ways. Sunny leaves the park that day with some of the weight off his shoulders.

The new hideaway isn't like the old one. Gone are the DJ booths and walls adorned with art; this place served a different purpose. Rows of folding tables, scattered clipboards, and maps pinned to the walls—it's not just about escaping anymore. It's about strategy, about resisting with purpose. The people gathering here aren't just the artists, musicians, and dreamers: they're the ones who know how to work within systems, who understand codes and signals, and who feel, for once, that something real can and needs to be done. Trading late night raves for more informative presentations and education the group gather almost nightly.

In a quiet but determined tone, they discuss ways to keep this knowledge alive. Some take turns reading aloud from old texts, explaining the struggles and triumphs that brought them here. Others share the details of past elections, civil rights movements, and even basic rights they hadn't thought much of until they started to slip away. It's a reminder of the power they hold, even when everything seems stacked against them.

Voter registration becomes a quiet, yet pivotal, mission within the hideaway. Each week, someone new volunteers to learn the ins and outs— understanding the paperwork and how to help people register under the radar. They set up small stations in the corners of libraries and corner stores, disguised as study groups or book discussions, but the materials are clear: voter registration forms, guidelines, and a rundown of each step, are woven earnestly in every conversation.

They hold mock workshops, practicing how to answer questions without raising suspicion from the patrol. Each person who registers is a step toward reclaiming power, a small rebellion in a system that increasingly discourages them. The simple act of registering becomes a symbol of resistance. It's a reminder that even in this restricted city, they have a say, and they plan to use it.

Just when Sunny felt the momentum shift, the members gathered for a meeting in the stillness of the night. Eventually one of them, Mark, stands up, shrugging awkwardly. "I can't stay," he says, his voice hesitant. "Not with two kids at home. If anything happens..." He trails off, looking to the floor.

"I get it, Mark, I do," Sunny says, his voice calm. "No one's asking you to take a risk you can't bear."

"I don't want to run, you know? But I can't sit here wondering if this is the night the cops bust in."

A few others shift uncomfortably. Maya, speaks up, quieter than usual. "My family's starting to notice I'm gone late. They are starting to ask questions. My brother's been warning me to stop 'messing around with politics,'" she says, making air quotes with her fingers. She gives a faint, sad smile. "He's not wrong. I'm terrified of what could happen."

Sunny nods, understanding the toll this is taking. “Look, if you feel like you have to go, there’s no shame in it. This place isn’t about forcing anyone to stay,” he says, scanning their faces. “But remember, you’re not alone in this. Even if you leave the meetings, the work matters.”

“Does it, though?” someone mumbles from the back. Tom. He’s older, a bit rough around the edges, but he’s been reliable. He looks up, weary. “Every time someone walks away, it feels like they’re winning.”

“I know,” Sunny replies, struggling to keep his own doubt from slipping into his voice. “But we can’t let fear control us. That’s exactly what they want.”

Another pause, heavy. Maya finally speaks up again. “Sometimes it feels like we’re the only ones who care about any of this,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

“But that’s why we can’t stop,” Sunny replies, more firmly now. “They’ve already taken so much. They’ve taken our art, our voices... if we let them take this too, then they’ve won.”

When the meeting breaks, there’s no spirited chatter or plans being laid out—just a resigned silence. After months of planning and long nights spent piecing together the logistics, Sunny manages to gather a core group of committed people. They’re passionate, but hesitant. Something’s missing—a spark, a voice to inspire. They know they’re stronger in numbers, but without a true leader, it all feels fragile. All the group can do now is dedicate themselves to the cause, do what they can with what they have. Despite being fewer than before, the group felt the fire within.

Then, one night at the hideaway, the door creaks open, and Justin Heard walks in. Heads turn as he enters the room, a mix of surprise and awe rippling through the group. Justin’s time away has left him sharper, more determined than ever, and his presence immediately fills in the space of the missing puzzle piece.

He strides to the front of the room with a steady, intense look in his eyes as he surveys the gathering. Then he speaks, his voice calm but laced with conviction. “I’ve watched from the inside and now I’ve been watching from the outside, seeing what’s been happening to our city and to our world. And, I’m telling you now, that we can either sit back, letting them tear everything down, or we can stand up and build something they can’t break.”

People nod, a renewed sense of purpose flickers in their eyes. Justin lets the silence hang for a beat before he leans in, his gaze sweeping across the room. “Remember this: *Those who don’t build, burn. Those who can’t create, destroy.* We’re here to create—to build something real, something they can’t erase.”

A murmur of agreement fills the room, a pulse of energy returning to the faces around him. People who were on the fence, uncertain about the risks, find their resolve. One voice in the back speaks up, tentative, but louder than before. "So... what's next?"

Justin smiles, nodding. "Next, we make sure they see us. And that our message is loud and clear. We will reclaim our city, we will not return to the past but forge a new future. And I will help do my part.

A wave of excitement washes over the group, and the tension that had lingered for weeks begins to dissipate.

"Yeah!" Someone shouts from the back, pumping a fist in the air. "Let's show them what we're made of!"

Sunny wakes up feeling energized the next day. With Justin back in town he feels more confident with the additional support. Making some breakfast, he flips on the TV, watching the news. A special announcement interrupts the regularly scheduled program.

"Hello, my fellow citizens. I come to you this afternoon with pride and admiration. Over the last 18 months we have worked together to transform this once dying city, into one of law, order, and respect. Crime rates are down, homelessness is no longer overtaking the city streets like green vines on a wall, and your patrol are treated with respect and are adorned for their efforts in keeping criminals at bay.

In short, we will celebrate these and future accomplishments. One week from today, we will host a City Parade to commemorate this party's success. Expect a lavish event with no expenses spared."

The message ends and returns to the programs and the talking heads amplify the message out to airways.

The first meeting after Stone's announcement Sunny feels the adrenaline surge as he glances around at the faces of his friends and allies, seeing the fire ignited in their eyes. He steps forward, raising his hands to quiet the crowd, though his heart races with anticipation. "Alright, everyone! This is the opportunity we have been planning for. We've talked about the rally for months now, and it's time to put our plans into motion. We have a chance to make our voices heard!"

As dawn broke over the city, workers hustled to hang banners in Victor Stone's signature colors— bold red and stark white. The streets glimmered under the early sunlight, but beneath the surface, a sense of unease rippled through the air. What was meant to be a celebration felt more like a display of loyalty to a leader whose policies had stifled creativity and freedom. Instead of vibrant decorations that celebrated culture, the streets were draped in propaganda, reminders of a regime that sought to control the narrative. Military flybys occurred throughout the day, whizzing past crowds of people at such a pace that by the time you look up, the plane was already almost out of view.

Amidst the flurry of activity, citizens cheered and waved flags with Victor's face, genuinely excited to participate in the spectacle. Families gathered, children laughing as they were swept up in the festive atmosphere, blissfully unaware of the underlying tension that had taken root in the community. The anthems that were hand-chosen by Stone blared from speakers. But there were those who couldn't ignore the message behind the festivities. Sunny was walking through the crowds as they grew in anticipation for the fireworks display later that evening. Trying to remain calm and indifferent on the surface, while emotions were boiling inside him. He found a quieter space between an alley off the main avenue. He stood and people watched while he recited his plans in his head, when he was suddenly confronted.

"You know how the winds are changing. There's a lot of chatter about what's happening tonight." Sunny looks up to see Sty in front of him. Sunny felt a knot form in his stomach.

"Hey Sty, yeah, supposed to be some fireworks show," he shot back, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Really, the fireworks?" Sty leaned in closer, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret. "Because I heard about your little counter-protest. A real noble cause, huh? Just be careful. You wouldn't want to get caught up in something you can't handle."

"Is that a threat?" Sunny asked, his voice firm now, despite the unease coiling within him.

"Not at all," Sty chuckled, but there was no warmth in it. "Just a friendly reminder to know your surroundings. People are watching, and you know how quickly things can turn ugly. I'm just looking out for you, buddy. You know, I could have just had you arrested."

"It was you, wasn't it? You got the laundromat shut down because you were following me," Sunny says, as he pieces it all together.

"It wasn't a laundromat, it was a drug den."

Unwilling to give Sty anymore of his time, he steps towards him.

“Stop right there!” Sty yells, pulling a small pistol from his jacket pocket. “Don’t move another muscle. I will kill you if I have to.”

“It wouldn’t stop us now, if you did,” Sunny says, unbothered and unwavering as he walks past Sty.

The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of purple and orange, Sunny felt the anticipation building in the air. The moment was finally here. He could see the crowd swelling, a vibrant mix of colors and voices, all ready to make their stand. Tonight was about more than just protest; it was about reclaiming their voices and uniting against the oppressive silence that had gripped their city for too long.

As darkness enveloped the scene, Sunny and his team sprang into action. They deployed their street team, fanning out among the crowd to register voters and disseminate information about positive policies that had been lost in the noise of Victor Stone’s rhetoric. They detailed the actual costs of the curfews imposed, reminding everyone why they were here.

With every moment, the energy grew, and soon, hundreds of counter-protesters raised their signs high in the air, a sea of determination. “No more silence!” “Reclaim our rights!” Their voices rang out, a chorus of defiance that drowned out the oppressive atmosphere of the parade.

As Party Leader Stone stepped up to the microphone, preparing to deliver his carefully curated speech, the anticipation reached a boiling point. Before he could begin, a massive speaker rolled into place, and the music blasted through the air, drowning out his words. The upbeat tempo was infectious, and the crowd erupted into cheers and dances, their spirits unyielding.

Furious, Stone gestured for the patrol to take action, hoping to stifle the counter-protest before it could gain momentum. But it was too late; there were too many people. A human barrier formed between him and the leaders of the counter-protest. The patrol advanced, but the united front of the protesters held strong, unwavering in their resolve. Pushing the line back and forth, using all their strength they maintain, and with all the eyes of the city on Makers Square, the patrol were wise to show more restraint than the previous rally, opting to withhold the physical violence used before.

Stone’s face flush with rage, storms off the stage, unable to suppress the fury boiling within him. Just as he exits, a burst of fireworks light up the night sky, showering brilliant colors that mirrored the vibrancy of the crowd below. There was officially something to actually celebrate.

Sunny, arm in arm with Justin and Desi, felt the thrill of the moment wash over them. They exchanged smiles before embracing one another in a tight hug. “This is just the start,” Justin said, his voice filled with determination and hope. “But tonight? Let’s just enjoy tonight.”

As the music pulsed through the air and people danced, the atmosphere transformed into one of pure joy and resilience. They laughed, shared stories, and celebrated their small victory together, a sense of community and purpose blossoming anew. This was their night to reclaim joy, a night that marked the beginning of their fight for change.

That night became a symbol of hope and resilience, igniting a spark within the community that had long been dormant. News of the counter-protest spread like wildfire, reenergizing citizens who had felt powerless under Victor Stone's regime. In the days that followed, whispers of a general strike began circulating among the city’s residents. The strike gained traction quickly. Workers from various sectors, including factories, service industries, and even educators, united in a collective effort to halt productivity. As the strike grew, the city’s pulse slowed; shops closed their doors, assembly lines came to a halt, and classrooms emptied out, leaving only echoes of what had once been. Within a week or so, the effects were palpable.

Citizens flooded social media with messages of support, organizing spontaneous rallies and sharing information on how to resist Stone’s oppressive policies. They creatively repurposed Victor’s propaganda—turning his campaign slogans into symbols of resistance, turning the narrative on its head.

Everywhere Sunny went, he felt the energy of the strike. The chatter in cafes shifted from mundane topics to discussions of strategy and next steps. People who had been hesitant or fearful now found courage in numbers. They formed committees, coordinated supplies for those on the picket lines, and shared resources on how to vote and advocate for their rights.

The pressure mounted on Victor Stone’s administration. Within days, city officials found themselves scrambling to contain the unrest, their strategies ineffective against the wave of unity that had swept through the city. As complaints and demands from citizens flooded in, the administration could no longer ignore the deep discontent brewing beneath the surface.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of tension and anticipation, the announcement came: the curfew would be lifted. Sunny watched the talking heads that night with a different attitude, he turns the volume up when he sees the next segment start.

Savannah's voice is missing her typical upbeat twang as she delivers news, “This just in: Justin Heard, the artist and activist recently released from prison, has announced his candidacy for the upcoming election to challenge incumbent Victor Stone. This announcement comes over



18 months after Heard was arrested during protests against Stone's administration. Early polls show some support for his campaign, but as we know, Heard's radical views and history with the opposition could present significant challenges.

## **Epilogue**

The lifting of the curfews marked a shift in the atmosphere, but Victor Stone remained firmly in power, struggling to regain the confidence he once held. With mounting pressure from citizens eager for change, Justin Heard's announcement to run against him resonated like a rallying cry through the streets. Though the election was still months away, the momentum was palpable—a small step that could potentially pave the way for a larger movement.

Sunny watched the events unfold with a mixture of hope and trepidation. He understood that while the recent victories felt monumental, they were just skirmishes in a much larger conflict. The fight against Stone's administration would require more than just passion; it demanded a deep commitment to the principles of justice and freedom. It meant to remember that fascism is always only just around the corner.

**END**

