

## Brotherly Love: a Story

The room was slightly lit. It was not because of some limited light sources or budget cut backs or anything like that. As a classroom it was magnificent. A huge desk sat in the front right corner nestled next to a matrix of cabinets and draws and shelves and closets reserved for supplies and artwork and books and coats. The middle of the room was dominated by the chairs and the desks of the students; the desks and chairs formed a U shape, with the open part of the U facing the front of the classroom. The left side of the classroom contained a number of what could best be described as cubbyholes. The students used the cubbyholes to temporarily store their belongings while in the classroom. Over the cubbyholes were three large windows facing the numerous field hockey and football fields and other athletic facilities located on the school's grounds. The *Day School of Science and el Mundo Seclorem* provided its educators with the best technological advantages possible. *SmartBoards*, *LitePros*, unlimited DSL Internet access with any and all software and hardware capabilities imaginable: these were the amenities that a teacher at the Day School could expect. As a high school teacher, Richard "Rico" Serano could not ask for more. But this was not the place he wanted to be at four fifteen on a Friday afternoon. He did not want risk standing up his good friends Chase and Damien, for drinks, again. And he especially did not want to have Warner Turner, one of the biggest contributors to the Day School, proud alum and parent of Lily Turner, tenth grader and member of Mr. Serano's World History II class, sitting before him. Dressed in a tweed blazer, silk pink button down shirt, and powder blue ascot, Warner Turner exuded the power, wealth, and privilege that went along with having facilities like Turner Field and Turner Chapel and Turner Observatory named after his family. As the reigning patriarch over the Turner brood – many who were students at either the Day School or *The Principia* – teachers at the Day School dreaded having the infamous and

impromptu “one on one” with Mr. Warner. Richard only hoped that the lecture would be short and that he could walk away believing that he had some semblance of autonomy regarding what was taught in his classroom and how the reception of such teaching was evaluated.

“I’m glad I could catch you, Richard, before you got out of here for the weekend,” said Warner Turner.

“Well, you know Day School faculty sir,” replied Richard. “We are never really off of work. How can I be of assistance to you?”

“As you are well aware, my daughter Lily is in one of your history classes.”

“Yes sir, I am aware.”

“And she is not doing too well.”

“Yes sir. I spoke with your wife, Mrs. Turner, about ten days ago to address Lily’s standing in class.”

Now, the version of Mrs. Turner to which Richard was referring had to be latest incarnation of the women to serve in such a position; she and Lily could pass for sisters. Mr. Turner was known for years throughout the posh community of Landon Springs as a man with money, willing to purchase the type of woman that he wished to be associated with at anytime. The version that Richard spoke with almost two weeks ago was, or seemed, younger than he.

“Mrs. Turner does not handle issues of consequence within the family. You are now speaking with me,” said Warner Turner in a tone that signaled to Richard that whatever the issue the two discussed, it issue would turn in Warner’s favor.

“Yes sir, I understand.”

“Do you also understand that I, along with every other member of my family, am a legacy at not only Stanford or Yale, but Michigan, Princeton or Brown as well.”

“Yes sir, I have heard such things.”

“Then you must also understand that it is my intention to see Lily attend one of those fine institutions. As of this moment, she has her heart set on Stanford. She wants to live in California.”

“Yes sir?”

“The point that I am trying to make *Rico* is that the C-/D+ grades that you have been sending home regarding Lily’s performance in your class: that situation does not work for me,” said Turner. The fact that he referred to Richard as Rico and not as Mr. Serano, or at least *Reeshard* as he was called at the Day School, caught Richard off guard. Richard existed in two worlds, the affluent world in which he worked and the working class world in which he lived. His livelihood depended upon the strict segregation of both. He never went by the nickname of Rico at the Day School. The name’s “ethnic” connotation did not quite project the sense of persona that Richard knew employment at the Day School demanded. Turner’s use of the name in a setting that Richard viewed as official Day School business was troubling. For all of his life, Richard had succeeded in keeping his two worlds separated; Warner Turner violated that separation and instantly united the two worlds in the identity of Mr. Richard Rico Serano. Turner Warner’s implication was sinister: he knew *who* Richard was. The question for Richard was how did Warner know and what did it mean?

“Sir, I assure you that Lily’s standing in the class is purely reflective of the work that she has done in the class,” said Richard.

“Let me assure you of something Mr. Serano. My family controls four of the eleven seats on the board of the Day School. My wife’s family controls two. I know that you can do the math. As your contract is renewed on an annual basis... you do not have tenure right?”

“No sir,” said Richard. The purpose of the meeting with Mr. Turner became instantly clear for Richard. As much as it was a meeting to pressure him regarding Lily’s grade, the meeting also served as a presentation of power and control on the part of Warner Turner. He wanted to let Richard know, in a profoundly clear manner, that Richard had self-serving reasons to see Lily “do well” in the history class. Turner knew full well that Richard did not have tenure at the Day School.

He also knew that the teachers that did have tenure were a select few, averaging over fifteen years of service to the school each. The Day School of Science and El Mundo Seclorem had not even been actively seeking out teachers who fit the profile of Richard Serano for fifteen years. The minority internship, out of which Richard’s employment grew, had only existed for seven years. None of the minority teachers who came from the program were eligible for tenure. Richard served the Day School on an annual basis. The decision to renew his contract at the completion of each school year was at the total discretion of the Board of Trustees of the Day School. Through a combination of family membership on the board and clout, Warner Turner dominated the decision-making of the board.

“As I was saying, Lily sure has her sights set on Stanford. And with the competition to get into these schools these days, excellence at every level and grade is taken into consideration more and more. I mean, it’s not even like when you went to university. The scholarships and special cases have been eliminated, especially at school like Michigan,” said Mr. Warner.

“Sir, I assure you that I will do everything in my power to make sure that Lily achieves the level of success that is befitting of the Turner name,” said Rico in a tone indicating that he was willing to serve the desires of Warner Turner. This was not a job that Richard could afford to lose.

“I am sure happy to hear that Richard. Hey, why don’t you and your little brother come to the game this weekend. You all don’t even have to worry about food; you can watch the game from my family’s skybox.”

“That sounds very exciting sir, but I am not sure that Brandon is ready for such an event yet,” said Richard. Brandon, the seven year old brother of Richard, had not exhibited many signs of outward interaction with the world over the past year. His psychiatrist, whose services Richard were able to secure thanks to the benefits package offered as part of his employment at the Day School, said that Brandon displayed signs of improvement over the past few sessions, but Richard was sure that an event such as a profession football game, with all of the pomp and circumstance that came along with it, would be too overwhelming for Brandon. This was one area of Richard’s life that Warner Turner would have no influence over.

“Well, I am in the BuzzBook. Call the estate Saturday night and leave a message with the person who answers when you change your mind,” said Warner Turner confidently.

“Thank you, sir. Brandon and I know that we are lucking to be a part of a school community where concern for the teachers does not end at the classroom’s door.”

“Just as the teacher’s concern for the students’ well-being and future opportunities does not stop at the classroom door.”

Richard would not be able to express in a billion words the disgust that he felt when being squeezed by men like Warner Turner. The time was five ten. He spent all of that time, Richard’s time, to tell Richard in a very polite manner that Richard would not have a job next year if he did not give Lily Turner the requisite grade. Richard knew the outcome of the meeting before it even took place. Every teacher on the campus knew what a meeting with Warner Turner meant. Every teacher knew that, from Warner’s perspective at least, that the outcome of such a

meeting would boil down to the following unspoken statement by Warner: “I will take a moment, or moments of your time, that you will never, ever get back. And during those stolen moments that I have demanded, I will tell you your role as a teacher in the school that my great, great, grand-daddy built.” Richard often wondered just how much of his soul was worth exchanging for the limited membership into the middle-class that had been bestowed upon him. Or did he earn it? Of course he did. But even if he did, wasn’t his real existence simply as a working class smuck. Wasn’t that also the point of Warner Turner’s meeting? That was what made the situation so stinging for Richard. He’d sacrificed so much to be acknowledged as worthy of hire by an institution like the *Day School*, only to be made small by men like Warner. This, this was what he’d earned.

By the time Richard arrived at Ms. Kim’s to pick up Brandon, the parking lot of the juvenile activity center was packed with cars. Located in a strip mall positioned adjacent to a neighborhood baseball diamond, the parking lot shared by Ms. Kim’s Haven of Success and Children’s Activities consistently saw a high volume of car traffic. By late afternoon, early evening, the parking lot was even more congested as parents arrived in their cars to pick up their children. Richard wouldn’t exactly refer to the automobiles as cars, because there were very few cars present. There were multiple, multiple SUVs, station wagons, minivans, and of course the iconic vehicle of the city: the Ford F-150. There were even some extended cabs; Richard drove a 1985 Honda Accord. By the time he got to the sign-in/sign-out sheet, it was six thirty. Although he usually arrived at the center by five thirty, because the center closed at eight o’clock, Ms. Kim would not be alarmed at his tardiness, so long as he arrived before eight.

Ms. Kim Sei-Yung started her life in the neighborhood some twenty-five years ago. She originally came from Vietnam. While Richard knew her as a nice old lady who spoke broken

English and who ran an activity center for kids, Professor Sei-Yung was a scholar of astrophysics back in a world that she had long left. In this new world, in America, she performed the duties of caring for the children of working parents who had nowhere else to safely send their children while at work. She held a special place in her heart for Richard, because, except for the young girls who fell prey to the advances of the young men of the neighborhood, he was one of the youngest clients of the activity center.

“Hey, you finally show up,” said Ms. Kim in her normal version of standard spoken English. Richard had long learned to not mistake her speech for a sign of ignorance.

“Hey, Ms. Kim! How are you today? Brandon say anything?”

“I fine. I fine. Your brother, he no say nothing today. As usual these days. He play with the other kids and he do everything I tell him. But, he no say a word. He even draw me a little picture. I put it with his things,” said Ms. Kim.

“Pssshh. Okay.”

As Brandon came walking out from around a corner, *the* corner that Richard learned to never round without first taking the necessary precautions, he assured Ms. Kim that Brandon’s monthly treats bill would be paid on Monday and that he would also put some more money on his books. He’d once made the mistake of rounding the corner without first slowing and checking for little ones. The result: the fluorescent green handprints of a five year old girl on the front of his favorite linen pants. Since that day, Richard learned that Ms. Kim may have the children participating in any number of activities and that he should be very aware of what the children were doing any time that he was present. He could easily end up with a dart in the rear or waffle ball to the face or glowing green paint on the front of his favorite linen pants. He gathered up his brother, his precious baby brother, and wondered if Brandon would ever be the

person that he used to know before it all happened. When Richard looked at Brandon, Brandon seemed so alive, so there: not one phrase uttered, however. Not one syllable. His laughs were silent.

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In all honesty, Richard had stopped looking at the clock in the car; he'd already given up his original desires of meeting with Chase and Damien and having drinks that night. But, as Richard pulled the car in front of the two-family flat that he and Brandon called home, Richard couldn't help but notice the time on the car's dash: seven fifteen.

If a passerby were facing the two-family flat, then the person would see two doors. The right door led to an upstairs apartment where an Irish plumber, Mr. Moore, and his wife and young daughter lived. The daughter was near Brandon's age; they used to play together before the incident. The left door led to Richard's apartment, the ground level unit. As he and Brandon entered the apartment, Richard noticed a particular piece of mail laying on the floor. Because the mail slot was located in the middle of the apartment's front door, arriving home to mail sprawled all over the living room floor was nothing unusual for Richard. But this particular piece of mail caught his attention immediately. The light, from the lamp that Richard routinely left on, reflected off of the mail's shiny lettering. In big yellow and red letters Richard could make out DSSEMS: the Day School of Science and El Mundo Seclorem. Richard's day of communication with the Day School was not yet over.

He scooped up the mail and went about preparing for the end of the day in the usual fashion. While he and Brandon did not speak to each other much these days, their daily routine had been practiced so much that there was not a lot of talking required. Brandon would take off his school clothes, making sure to drop the dirty clothing down the laundry shoot, before putting

on his robe. He would then use the footstool, one of the few items that used to belong to Richard's grandmother that still existed, to gain the added height needed to reach the bowls located in the cabinets in the kitchen of the apartment. After retrieving a bowl, Brandon usually prepared *Spaghetteos* or Ramen noodles in the microwave before bathing, homework and finally going to sleep for the night. The routine usually went smoothly, unless Brandon forgot to put the footstool back in its correct location.

It was rather unusual for a guy to have a footstool, especially one decorated with lace and satin and flowers. But the footstool not only served as a reminder to Richard of simpler days when his grandmother was alive, but was an actual family heirloom that had survived six generations of Serano women and had come to rest with him. The footstool's original owner was Richard's great, great, great grandmother, the half-breed offspring of an Irish immigrant. His mother should have been the current owner. Life and circumstance deemed Richard the inheritor of the "girlie thing" as his grandmother stressed her desire for him to have it as she fought against cancer during the last days of her life. Many older relatives developed a certain resentment against Richard as a result of his grandmother's actions.

Before Richard could start to settle in comfortably, he would usually wait until Brandon began his bath. This night was no different. When Richard heard the water from the bathtub's faucet begin to run, he grabbed his briefcase and the piece of mail that had arrived from the Day School. While Richard had become accustomed to expect anything when it came to the Day School, what he did not expect was a follow up to the demand made by Warner Turner in the disguise of official school correspondence. As Richard opened the envelope, he noticed a postcard invitation inside. An invitation to the Landon Lions football game. The very football game that Richard had declined any interest in not more than three hours earlier. While the

invitation was printed on one side – the print listed all of the important information, such as time and location of skybox activities – there was a handwritten note on the opposite side. Richard read the note aloud to himself: “Richard, I am sure that you and Brandon will have a great time at the game. Don’t be late. Festivities begin at 10am. W.”

“No church for me,” Richard said to himself.

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It was two in the morning. Saturday. And Richard still could not sleep. The one day of the week that he looked forward to during the fall semester, for he did not supervise any student activities in the fall and could sleep in. But sleep he could not do. Ironically, the voice of his grandmother, which was usually soothing and comforting, haunted him in these early morning hours. Combined with flashes of the faces of Warner Turner and Brandon, the voice of Richard’s “meemaw” dominated his mind. In a piercing, shrill tone the voice said, “Rico, I raised you better than that.” Over and over and over again. When he could no longer take the torment, Richard arose and turned on the light located on the nightstand next to his bed. He looked at the clock. Seven minutes after two.

Richard searched for the remote control to the television located on his bedroom dresser. It was a daily thing to lose the remote in the multitude of bedding. After locating the remote, he turned on the television to some random crime show and began searching the top drawer of the nightstand. There, he found the one vice of his adolescence that he’d never relinquished. The one standby that he knew was a cure for insomnia, the voice of ghosts, irritating students, and the antics of Warner Turner: Mary Jane. Majorie Janice. Dro. Perp. Kush. Good. Green. Bud. LG. Good ol’ fashion American marijuana. Richard decided upon his favorite pipe, gathered some incense, air freshener, a lighter – which in this case was a fireplace lighter that he used to light

the burners on the apartment's stove - and his robe and headed for the basement of the two-family flat.

While the Seranos did share the building with the Moores, the basement was dominated by Richard. Aside from a washing machine and a dryer and an area for storage, the bathroom, second washer and second dryer and studio apartment were the sole domain of Richard. He'd set up a music recording studio in the basement apartment. It was his sanctuary. It was where he found solace.

The studio was drafty, however. That's why Richard always made sure to put on a robe or sweater or something before going down there. Sitting in his favorite chair, one of those comfortable desk chairs from *Office Depot*, he found himself staring at the red and black poster of Che Guevara found on the far left wall of the studio. Transfixed, he followed the details of Che's outline until they led to another poster. This time his eyes landed on the figure of Malcolm X. Iconic, one finger pointed in the air. Sepia in tone. Malcolm stood before a microphone. Above his head in white were the words: *By any means necessary*. Richard placed fire to the pipe that he held suspended in midair as he read the poster. He inhaled. He grabbed a pen and a notebook that was laying around and began to scribble:

I'm like  
 Che Guevara with bling on  
 I'm complex  
 I never claimed to have wings on  
 Playa  
 I gets my  
 By any means on  
 Whenever there's a drought  
 Get your umbrellas out  
 'Cause that's when I brainstorm...

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By the time Brandon awoke, Richard was already in the kitchen eating breakfast. He'd prepared bacon, French toast, scrambled eggs, and orange juice from concentrate. Brandon walked into the kitchen and sat down at the kitchen table across from Richard at the place setting reserved for him. He looked at Richard. Richard looked at him. He looked at Richard. Richard looked at him. Brandon then got up from the table and went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash for the morning.

While he sat at the table and watched the back of Brandon as he walked away, Richard thought about the incident that changed everything for Brandon, and for himself. Brandon used to walk to school with a group of kids from the neighborhood. And, after school, the kids would walk together to Ms. Kim's. Mr. Moore's daughter was one of the kids in the group. One morning, Brandon and the kids were walking to school. They stood dangerously close to a corner intersection that they encountered on their route – as children sometimes were prone to do. As the children stood on the corner, the girls playing patty-cake and the boys oblivious to the world playing with their Game Boys or iPods, a 1987 Chevy Suburban came rumbling down the street. As the truck neared the corner where the children were standing waiting for the traffic light in their direction to change from red to green, Brandon was said to be facing Charlie Jones, who was listening to his iPod, and the traffic coming from the left of the children. While Brandon and the rest of the children were removed enough from the corner to not be too endangered by on-coming traffic, Charlie was not. Brandon saw everything as the Suburban jumped the curb and collided with Charlie. Brandon even tried to warn Charlie, according to the other children, but Charlie could not hear because he was listening to the iPod. Brandon watched as the more than two tons of truck struck little seven year old Charlie Jones and dragged him down the street. Charlie struggled in the wheel well of the vehicle as the truck continued to ripped his body apart.

Brandon saw everything. He has not spoken since that day. He will not go anywhere without being driven there by his brother Richard.

When Brandon returned, with drying toothpaste foam on the cracks of his mouth, Richard was still reflecting on the incident, deep in thought and still feeling the remnants of a high he thought would have past seven hours ago. *Some great stuff he thought.* Richard looked at the toothpaste on Brandon's mouth with increased interest. Brandon must have felt his brother's stare, because before he could get into the kitchen, he turned around and went back to the bathroom. Richard heard running water. He smiled.

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"I don't know what to do, either," Richard said into the receiver of his cell phone as he drove down Westminster Street in the direction of his Aunt Willie Mae's house to pick up Brandon. Aunt Willie Mae, his grandmother's youngest sister, always had all of the young children of the family over to her house, every Saturday, for all long as Richard could remember. He did not stop dropping by routinely until he was sixteen. There, Brandon could be around children his age and loved ones and Richard could have some free time of his own. He'd spent the past twenty minutes of that free time arguing on the phone with one of his best friends, Chase Smithson, about the Warner Turner situation.

"Dawg, fuck that muthafucka. He tryin' to be all funny and shit. Who the hell coordinates to meet with their kid's teacher on the same day that a' invitation – excuse me, extortion letter – arrives?" Chase asked.

"I don't know, man," said Richard.

“A damned extortionist, that’s who! How long you gone let them people keep dragging you around by yo’ nose hairs? What the fuck you go to school fo’?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can get anotha job, you know?”

“Yeah, but will I be able to get the same kind of benefits that I have now. Say what you want about the Day School, but these are the best benefits I have ever had. They cover Brandon at twenty five percent costs to me.”

“Man, fuck all that. You ain’t *had* but one job! If making sure Brandon gets what he needs is your excuse for staying at that damn place and dealin’ wit’ fucks like Warner Turner, then you full of shit. You know if push come to shove, I got you.”

“Great just what I need. To exchange one extortionist for another. I’m pulling up to my aunt’s house now. I’ll talk to you later.”

“For real, dawg. Take me up on that, man. You need to get out of that school. But, if you decide to go to that game, holla at me. They playing the Steelers tomorrow ain’t they?”

“Whaaat? Chase with no tickets? No big time clients to mooch off of? You askin’ me?”

“Keep on talkin’ shit. I’m gone leave yo ass at the Day School of Section Eight and me and Brandon gone be in New York, livin’ in a penthouse or something.”

“Bye Chase.”

“Aight, dawg.”

Richard parked in front of aunt Willie Mae’s house, a modest home of that post-war architecture that was replicated all over suburbs in the Midwest. As he neared the front door of the house, he still didn’t know what he’d do about the Warner Turner situation. He was running out of time. It was eight in the evening. Saturday.

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Richard sat on the almond colored chaise. It was his favorite piece of living room furniture. He felt unusually light. Like a Jainist. Like the material weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. His fingertips were orange from eating *Cheetos*. He leaned backed on the chaise, placed the bowl containing the *Cheetos* onto his stomach, and kicked his shoes off. It was Sunday. Seven fifteen in the pm. The Philadelphia Eagles were preparing to play the Chicago Bears and the game was being televised on *NBC*. Brandon sat in the middle of the living room floor; he was busied by something on the laptop computer. Richard smiled. The telephone rang. Again. Richard allowed the answering machine to pick up. Again. The voice on the machine, probably belonging to a “person” in the employ of Warner Turner, left the same, identical message. Again. *Mr. Richard Serano, could you please call Mr. Warner Turner at 675-436-9865 as soon as possible. This is an important call.* The sound of the answering machine’s concluding beep amused Richard for how it concluded the end of a message. So abruptly. So fitting he thought. As Richard settled in for a night of football, he knew that his future was uncertain. He knew that Brandon’s future was uncertain. What was certain was the fact that he would never return to the Day School of Science and El Mundo Seclorem ever again. He smiled. The only noise that came from Brandon’s direction was the typing of keys.