

UCLA

Departmental Honors Theses

Title

The Gospel of John McDaniel

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/505039k3>

Author

Jones, Milagro

Publication Date

2024-03-22

Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN MCDANIEL

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

MILAGRO JONES

ADVISOR: DR. RICHARD YARBOROUGH

LOS ANGELES, CA

MARCH 22, 2024

ABSTRACT

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN MCDANIEL

MILAGRO JONES

In the City of Angels, there was a man with a devil on his shoulder, who looked into his daughter's eyes and saw the face of God. The intersectional identity of a formerly incarcerated single father fleeing from domestic violence is interrogated through the lens of Los Angeles' current homelessness crisis in *The Gospel of John McDaniel*. In three stories that address the welfare motels, homeless shelters, and low-income housing bureaucracy that make up a large portion of the homelessness industrial complex, John McDaniel serves as an eyewitness whose story is a testimony to the resilience of those who successfully navigate the high barrier systems of homeless services. This story is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents, in this thesis are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

4 MOTELS

25 SHELTER

44 AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Motels

Milagro Jones

“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” Malachi 4:6 KJV

A bulbous brown beetle looked up at John from the surface of a tall cup of black coffee. A descendant of a carboniferous kingdom, through eons of adaptation this brave bug had evolved the instinct to survive stubbornly. This resilient coleopteran swam in rippling circles as wafting steam lifted in waves. It transformed John’s cup of joe into a jeopardous jacuzzi. John poured out the baby with the bath water. He pulled his daughter Joana back into one of those generically named gas stations that litter lonely intersections in every segregated American city.

“There was a roach in my coffee. This one is on the house.”

“Fly land in your coffee. That not my fault. One dollar ninety-nine for medium. Two twenty-nine for large.”

“What’re you deaf? How do you know my father-in-law isn’t the health inspector? One phone call and you’d be scratching lotto tickets and holding a cardboard sign by the freeway exit.”

“You break it you buy. You spill it. Same. Nothing free. Pay money or get out of my store.”

Locked in a defiant staredown, John reluctantly pulled Joana through the swinging door which activated a clanging bell. At the same time, the cashier watched him so intently that neither man noticed the pack of Skittles Joana was holding in her little hand.

“I can’t believe that guy. Who does he think he is? The prince of Agrabah or something.”

“Mm-hmm.” Joana was greedily chewing a mouthful of Skittles as a sugary rainbow melted into a sweaty gob in the palm of her hand.

“What was I thinking coming here to L.A.? Leap of faith? More like a walk off the plank.”

“Ell Ayye! Wow.” Joana looked up at the palm trees swaying majestically just like the videos John had shown her on an iPad screen in a downtown loft in Milwaukee, Wisconsin a week earlier.

The green “V” shaped palm leaves reminded John of the discoloration he had discovered on Joana’s body after a court-ordered visit with her mother Sharon. The light hue of the marks darkened throughout that eerie autumn evening as John changed Joana’s soiled diapers. Confused, he bathed her, wondering what kind of dye or food coloring had stained the baby’s soft skin. In the morning when the spots appeared blue, John marveled and rushed Joana to an urgent care office, hoping for a benign explanation. The bruises had blossomed into purple petechiae by the time the pediatrician examined Joana and informed John coldly, that his daughter had been the victim of child abuse. With time, love, and cocoa butter lotion, the scars had healed. The psychic wounds found no apothecary for an isolated father and a motherless child. An expiration date on the child abuse injunction that kept Joana safe from Sharon had spoiled everything like a bowl full of cereal ruined by rotten milk.

John found no justification for his restraining order against Sharon lasting longer than the protection order for Joana. Who did the courts think was more vulnerable? He shook his head at the memory of the jelly-jowl judges, languid lawyers, and randomness of American jurisprudence.

“We’re safe,” John announced, inhaling thick smog like it was the fresh air atop Mount Zion in the promised land. “We’re free at last. Good God almighty. We’re faareee at last.” He

scooped up Joana and lifted her high into the air where she felt she could almost touch the clouds.

A talkative Uber driver named Ricardo had picked John and Joana up from LAX an hour earlier and dropped them off at the Limbo Motel. The front desk clerk had announced that cheapsuites.com hadn't included the deposit with their online booking.

John had walked to the Gulp-N-Guzzle. The ATM withdrawal fee had left him ten dollars short of the fifty needed to pay for the Limbo Motel's deposit.

John carried Joana in one arm, balancing two backpacks and an over-the-shoulder bag that he had been able to fit in the compartment above his head on the plane.

With an Ethiopian cross dangling on a leather cord around his neck, John felt confident that Yeshua would provide a way. A trans goddess in a skin-tight red dress with eyes so hazel and brown that they stopped John in his tracks sauntered from the parking lot to the entrance of the Limbo Motel. Hypnotized for a heartbeat that felt like an eternity, John broke free from his worshipful gaze and approached clutching his last forty dollars. The strikingly beautiful stranger slid the motel clerk her earnings and disappeared down a dim hallway.

"Figure everything out?" The clerk eyed John suspiciously from behind bulletproof glass. The clerk's wife and young son peeked out through a curtain hung in the small room and John realized the clerk must also be the owner of the motel.

"You have a beautiful family." John smiled.

The clerk glanced over his shoulder and appraised his wife with a stern glare. She scooped up the tiny toddler and ducked beneath the cover of the colorful curtain.

"Where is your wife?"

“Wisconsin.” John shook his head. “And she’s my ex-wife if that makes a difference.”

“I don’t want any trouble. You call her. You give back the child or I phone the police.”

“It’s not like that. I didn’t kidnap my daughter. I’m a single dad. I have the divorce order with the custody agreement in my bag.”

The clerk scrunched up his face. “Let me see the paper. You are too young to take care of baby by yourself.”

“I not baby. I big girl.” Joana stuck out her tongue and the clerk couldn’t help but smile.

John set Joana down and placed both of their backpacks on the ground. He could feel the lines etched in his shoulder blades from the straps that had cut into his skin. He unzipped the black over-the-shoulder bag and rifled through legal documents and other important papers.

“Aha. Here it is.” John slid a divorce agreement through the slot where money and keys were exchanged. It had already been turned to the page where John had used a yellow highlighter to mark the custody and placement agreement. He had long since grown used to the random stops by police officers and scrutiny of daycare providers, social workers, case managers, and a whole belligerent bureaucracy of everyday opposition who refused to shift their perception of John’s existence from felon in custody to custodial parent.

“This forgery! You make this on Apple Microsoft!”

“It’s Microsoft Word, and no I didn’t make that. The official seal is on the top of the first page.”

The clerk flipped through the pages curiously and when his son ran through the curtain before his wife's hand could snatch him by the waist, the clerk's gaze was softened as he motioned to shoo her and the child away.

"You have fifty dollars. Yes?"

"I had sixty on my card, but the ATM fee was four bucks. I could only withdraw multiples of twenty. I'm ten dollars short."

"You have baby. If she break something in room, I keep deposit."

John was surprised to discover that the room was bare. There was nothing in it for Joana to break. A lumpy mattress on a worn-out bed frame, a landline phone on a dresser with a drawer that wouldn't open, and a bathroom with a toilet underneath a sink. No mirrors or television set. The place was baby proof alright.

John plugged his charger into an outlet and connected it to his phone. He put on an episode of the PJ Masks for Joana and used the landline to begin calling a list of numbers he had scrawled across a crumpled sheet of printer paper.

Every family shelter was at capacity and the domestic violence shelters only allowed victims of domestic violence to stay if they were women. John called each number on the list he had made until only one was left. John dialed 2-1-1.

"Greetings. My name is Gabriella. I am a community resource specialist. I have a few questions to ask so I can help."

Thirty minutes and what felt like one hundred questions later, John was writing down the address of the nearest Department of Public Social Services. It was a Sunday evening, so

luckily for John and Joana, it would be open in the morning. Gabriella's voice, as warm and sweet as his grandma's famous apple pie, had assured him of that.

John didn't even have a chance to open Joana's backpack and get out her change of clothes or a bedtime story. They were both so tired that they fell asleep with PJ Masks playing in the background.

John dreamed he was three years old again. His burly dad Henry had come to visit the apartment his mom Linda had just moved into from a battered women's shelter. The worn crutches she had used since her failed hip replacement over a decade earlier were leaning on a wall in the living room. Henry was yelling about Linda placing her Precious Moments mug full of creamy sugary coffee down on his beat-up word processor. Linda was crying and demanding Henry stop shouting in front of John when a knock from a police officer brought Henry to the door. John had been given clear instructions to look out for his mother and received a sticker in the shape of a sheriff badge before the officer had left Linda to beg for Henry's mercy. In the middle of the night, Linda had smuggled John out of his bedroom and shushed him as they fled into the darkness. Arriving at a motel with the vacancy sign burning brightly into his exhausted eyes, John had wet his pants as Linda limped into the lobby with his trembling body cradled in her arms.

A pimp outside yelling obscenities at a young girl woke John from a childhood nightmare. Joana was snoring and John could hear moans, laughter, and the scratching of rodents through the walls of the Limbo Motel. John looked at his phone. It was five o'clock in the morning. Gabriella had told him that the Department of Public Social Services would open at nine, but he should be there by seven or eight if he wanted to get inside before the workers

took their lunch break. John assumed it was the room that smelled sickly and sour, but he wished there was a shower just in case.

John paced the room impatiently and then went into the bathroom to wash his face and brush his teeth. He coughed up a dank yellow calcified stone caused by tonsillitis after gargling warm water and wished he could afford a visit to the dentist. His tongue felt the space where his tooth had been pulled out in prison. The dentists behind bars only did extractions. Fillings for cavities and annual cleanings were a privilege John had only been made aware of when he had signed his daughter up for Wisconsin's government-assisted healthcare. He wondered if Los Angeles' Department of Public Social Services would be as bad as the Milwaukee County Health and Human Services. His mother Linda's Greyhound bus trips crisscrossing shelters and motels across the United States and an endless cycle of homelessness had taught John that every city had a unique approach to criminalizing poverty.

John strapped on all three of his bags and picked up Joana in his arms, careful not to wake her. He walked to the front desk hoping to see the woman in the red dress. He exchanged the key for his forty-dollar deposit and marveled at his first morning in Los Angeles.

The July heat made John wish his tee shirt was a tank top. Gang members in cliché colors and shirtless surfer bros passed him as he ogled bikini-clad babes, and joggers in bike shorts and leggings. At a Mercado, John bought a Minnie Mouse stroller for twenty-five dollars and placed Joana inside. The smell of an asada burrito from a food truck woke her up and Joana happily ate her breakfast while John used his phone to navigate to the Florence-Graham Department of Public Social Services.

John saw more Porsches zip past in ten minutes than he'd seen in all the years he'd spent in Milwaukee. Every Rolls Royce and Range Rover caught his attention, but it was the green Lamborghini that made him wonder if Los Angeles was a real-life city of angels. Thugs Mansion must be in Beverly Hills, John thought to himself without realizing that he was in Huntington Park, far from the glitz and glamour portrayed in the Fresh Prince of Bel Air. In John's mind, he might as well have been on the Hollywood Walk of Fame looking down at his own name written on a star.

How much farther could he make it from the family court commissioner who had promised with a grin that John would never see Joana again? How much more distance could he put between himself and the guardian ad litem who had begged the judge to return Joana to Sharon despite her habitual convictions of child abuse?

"He's a thug," was their rationale for recommending John lose custody.

"He's a gangster."

"He's a felon."

What they wanted to call him was legible underneath those code words they used to remain politely racist in a society where open hostility was no longer in vogue the way it had been for their grandfathers. John had sat quietly through the insults without objecting. Working fifty hours every week. Walking and catching the bus to take Joana to her daycare, hospital visits, public libraries, museums, and picnics at the beach. John had subsisted alone for years while old ladies congratulated him for spending a day with his daughter without realizing he never spent a day without her. Women in supermarkets advised him on the obvious trifles of caretaking, thinking he was aloof and unaccustomed to bearing such a burden. Everywhere he

went he was complimented on being a good dad, or such a responsible older brother by people who hadn't spent half as much time with their daughters as he had with Joana. Mothers with nannies, au pairs, and babysitters whose husbands barely glanced in the direction of their daughters offered John proverbs that made him bristle. Single moms who placed their babies with grannies, aunties, and sisters so they could shake it in the club on weekends assured him that they were in a similar situation. Through it all John had never faltered. He picked up his cross and asked Yahweh to help him bear it.

"Take a number," the security guard towered over John's five-foot-seven frame. Joana had unstrapped herself from the stroller and was running around the lobby of the Department of Public Social Services. John felt like he was in a church on Sunday, a place where all the well-behaved children sat obediently in the pews while Joana was the only kid who ran free to yell and play. John knew he was expected to tell Joana to sit down and shut up like his mother had done to him growing up as a Jehovah's Witness attending services in Kingdom Halls. John didn't give a damn about society's expectations. As bad as he wished Joana could be at a playground, this was where they had to be. He wasn't going to tell her she couldn't be a kid. After the mean mugs and eye rolls of the public service panopticon didn't work, a supervisor sent a case worker out to the lobby to warn John that his daughter needed to sit still in one of the chairs or they would have to leave.

"She's three years old. Looking at the number we've pulled, it's going to be a few hours before anyone sees us. How long do you expect her to sit down?"

The worker marched back to the supervisor and a moment later the supervisor came out to escort John and Joana to the back.

“Sorry for the wait. I’m Gladys. I’m a supervisor here at the Department of Public Social Services.”

“It’s cool. I’m John. John McDaniel. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Let’s get straight to the point. How can we help you, Mr. McDaniel?”

“This is my daughter Joana. We just got here last night and we’re homeless. A Community Resource Specialist named Gabriella at 211 told me that there were emergency homeless services available here.”

“211, huh? Aren’t they something special? Well, I hope Graciela also told you that you’ll need an ID for yourself, and social security cards for you and the baby. Birth certificates with official seals only. We don’t accept photocopies and of course, we require proof of legal custody from a judge.” The supervisor crossed her arms and smirked, confident that she had just placed John’s king in a checkmate.

“Sure thing.” John smiled and retrieved everything the supervisor had asked for from his bag. “And her name was Gabriella, not Graciela by the way.”

The Supervisor frowned and took a moment to skim the documents John provided. “All of this paperwork is from Wisconsin. I’ll have to make phone calls to confirm this documentation is reliable. You came here from Milwaukee?”

“Yeah, it was a journey.” Joana spun around and twirled causing the Supervisor to flinch as if something had toppled over and broken.

“You know, we can request a bus ticket to send you both back to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I think that’s the best we’ll be able to do. The homelessness problem here in California is such a crisis already. The last thing we want is to add another family to one of the waitlists.”

“I used to work in City Government in Milwaukee, specifically dealing with homelessness. After that, I worked on federal grants with the Department of Housing and Urban Development. I’m familiar with my right to interstate travel. The airfare to get here was not cheap. You’re not shipping us back on Amtrak or Greyhound bus, Gladys; but nice try.”

“What about the mother? How is she going to see the baby out here?”

“She can see Joana on TV when she’s famous. She should’ve thought about that before she was convicted of child abuse. Twice. The honorable judge granted her unsupervised visitation while she was still on probation. Her punishment the second time? You guessed it. More probation. If I hadn’t filed for a child abuse injunction in juvenile court which is a separate jurisdiction, Joana would’ve been returned to her mom Sharon to experience the same abuse a third time. Joana’s child abuse injunction expired at the end of last month. I came here to Los Angeles because the guardian ad litem threatened me. He said he’d use all his connections to make sure Joana was returned to Sharon.”

“Studies do show children are better off with their mothers, Mr. McDaniel. As much of a know-it-all as you profess to be, I’m quite sure you’re aware of that already. There are all types of classes and counseling available for mothers with post-partum depression. The real trouble is you took a child across state lines. I’m going to have to contact someone at the F.B.I. This sounds like a federal charge of kidnapping.”

John laughed heartily. “I scheduled a court date and made sure Sharon was served with a notice thirty days in advance. She showed up and agreed that Joana could leave Milwaukee. The judge tried to convince her not to sign the agreement and warned her that if Joana left it would be a lot harder for her to overturn the custody agreement.”

“I don’t like this one bit. Not one bit. I don’t believe a word you say.”

“I have summaries of judgment from every court hearing right here. I have all the paperwork and documents you asked for. Gabriella told me there are emergency food stamps, cash assistance, and motel vouchers available.”

“Food stamps. Absolutely. Cash assistance. We’ll see about that. Motel voucher. That is another story entirely. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority is the one with access to motel vouchers. You need a referral from the Homeless Management Information System. And there is no way you’re going to get that. We have a program where we can give you one thousand four hundred dollars for July to use toward motel payments. But you must keep every receipt and bring that documentation to us within seven days, or you will be responsible for returning all the money. Every red cent. These are one-time-use emergency funds, and I must stress they are nonrenewable. If you don’t want to be homeless on the streets in August, you need to take the bus ticket and return to Wisconsin.”

“Should we wait here or in the lobby while you process the paperwork?”

“The lobby, you smart-mouth son of a duck. For Christ’s sake! You’re making me lose my temper, Mr. McDaniel. Let’s be civil, but don’t you dare get your hopes up for any of these benefits. I’m going to go over these documents with a fine-tooth comb and make some very serious phone calls. If there is a single i undotted or t uncrossed, you’ll be explaining to the Los Angeles Police Department what you’re doing here with that little girl.”

“Thanks. You don’t have any lollipops or candies in this office for Joana, do you?”

“Out, Mr. McDaniel, get out. You and your insufferable child need to get out of my office immediately.”

John placed his bags into Joana's stroller, grabbed Joana by the hand, and led her from the office into the overcrowded lobby.

An hour later John was sitting in a burger joint underneath a sign that read Burger Joint dipping a French fry into a messy glob of ketchup and flying it like an airplane toward Joana while she giggled uncontrollably. John's Electronic Benefit Transfer card had three hundred dollars in food stamps and eight hundred dollars in cash. A case worker had told him there would be one thousand four hundred dollars loaded onto the card within forty-eight hours that would cover the cost of motel stays for July. John had done the math and enough searching on Google to know there weren't any motels listed online that he could afford with his benefits, so he started asking around to see if the locals knew a run-down place where a room cost somewhere around fifty dollars a night.

"The Charlie Horse in MacArthur Park." That was the answer John heard repeated over and over again.

MacArthur Park had once been a gilded jewel glittering amongst the diamonds and rubies of Los Angeles. Now it was a cesspool of human waste where society's outcasts were abandoned to their own devices. A woman wandered stark naked covered head to toe in a thick layer of grime, talking to the hallucinations created by the chemical imbalances in her brain. A group of physically disabled men were strewn across the grass passing around a hypodermic needle to take turns shooting up drugs. The children of newly arrived immigrants wandered in every direction, pawing wares, begging for charity, and stealing what they could to survive. John sighed. He was disappointed to realize with some hesitation that he would fit right in.

John placed Joana in her stroller. He crossed through MacArthur Park and looked at a filthy pond full of floating garbage where historic plaques claimed there were once boat shows to entertain the rich and successful. When John made it to the sidewalk, he saw a playground across the street where parents pushed their kids on swings inches away from shirtless men whose bodies were covered in tattoos. The tattooed men were drinking beers, smoking cigarettes, and using hard drugs in broad daylight. Drug dealers, easy to spot in their slick urban gear and covered in ostentatious jewelry, prowled the area making hand-to-hand sales as if they were stuck in the 1980s. Families continued to laugh and play as if the open-air drug market was full of mascots like Disney World.

Joana was pointing at the pigeons that crowded together picking at every imaginable sort of trash. It felt like John had blinked and been transported into the refugee camp of a third-world country.

The Charlie Horse Motel was two blocks from MacArthur Park. John had to carry Joana's stroller up a few steps with her in it and push his way through a large metal gated door to gain entrance. The lobby was full of grizzled old junkies and veterans of prostitution whose sagging skin was like boiled chicken barely hanging on their aching bones.

"We need a room."

"Here?"

"Where else in town? Only the best for my princess." John winked.

"You must be crazier than the usual."

"Crazy about these prices. I was told it was forty for the night, but you might do weekly specials."

“I don’t know where you heard that. It’s still sixty a night or four hundred for the week. Always has been.”

“That’s cool.” John went to the ATM in the lobby and retrieved four hundred dollars nervously while a scrawny man with shifty eyes stood over him breathing down his neck.

The room had a bed, four walls, and friendly cockroaches for roommates. There was no bathroom or window, and the size was like the prison cell John had shared with a convicted murderer who was serving a life sentence with no parole. John whistled and was about to sit on the edge of the bed when he noticed the corner of it was covered in tiny dark splotches that he immediately recognized as evidence of bed bugs. He pulled back the sheet and lifted the mattress and sure enough there were dark stains and shed skins scattered in the seams. John gagged and rushed Joana out of the room quickly. He pulled the stubborn door shut behind himself with difficulty. He locked it with the old-fashioned key he had been given and left the motel despondently.

A young woman with two kids was sitting on the curb next to a tent, sipping from a tall can of beer.

“Hey, excuse me.”

The kids both turned to look at John, but the woman stared straight ahead avoiding his gaze. “Yo. I’m not trying to get your phone number. I have a question. For real.”

“Wassup?” The woman had deep bags underneath her ocean-blue eyes. Her long blonde hair was matted.

“Do you know if there is a homeless shelter around here somewhere that accepts families?”

“Oh. Yeah. You can go down to HOPICS. They have shelter referrals, but you’re better off going to Target and getting a tent and a sleeping bag. Those shelters have tons of rules and if they catch you using in front of your kids, they’ll report you to CPS.”

“Hopicks? Do you know the address?”

“Nah. I would look it up for you, but my boyfriend broke my phone. It’s in South L.A. though. I think it was somewhere near Slauson.”

“Thanks. I’ll find it. Here’s a little something for the little ones. Maybe you can buy them some candy or something.” John passed the woman a ten-dollar bill before pulling out his phone to Google search for “Hopicks.” Nothing relevant appeared on the screen but when he typed in “homeless” and “Los Angeles” as related keywords, he got an address for an organization named the Homeless Outreach Program Integrated Care Services. It was closing at five pm. Google Maps said a bus ride could get him there at four-thirty. John walked to the bus stop.

HOPICS was a small building with a long line of people standing, sitting, and lying outside. When John asked one of them how long the wait would probably be, he found out they were just loitering, and he could enter the building whenever he was ready. Inside there was a desk with a security guard, fifteen to twenty chairs, and four windows with case workers behind them. The room was nearly empty. A few mothers with young children sat on the chairs with blank expressions on their faces. John was handed a number by the security guard and took a seat. Joana was asleep in her stroller. John checked his phone. It was four forty.

“74. Window three.”

John heard his number and approached the window.

“We offer homeless services here, sir. Are you in the right place?”

“Yep. I’m a single parent fleeing domestic violence. Me and my daughter need to find a homeless shelter ASAP.”

“Enter the door along that wall over there that says “intake.” You’re lucky. You’ll be our last new client for today.”

John pushed Joana’s stroller past the windows and chairs to a big brown door that had a piece of paper taped to it that said “intake” handwritten in bold black Sharpie ink. Behind the door were cubicles. John stood still looking around and feeling confused until a woman poked her head out of a cubicle and motioned for him to approach.

John pushed Joana’s stroller over to the cubicle and a flashy young woman with short-cropped hair offered him a seat across from the desk where she was seated in front of a computer.

“Hello. I’m Bethany Martinez. I am a case manager here at HOPICS. How can we help you today, young man?”

John set his bags down and tried his best to sit comfortably and look professional at the same time. Joana was still sleeping, and John was careful not to speak too loudly so he wouldn’t wake her.

“Hi. I’m John. I’m a homeless single father. I’m fleeing from domestic violence and my daughter Joana is a survivor of child abuse. I’m hoping your organization can help us find a homeless shelter that accepts men with kids.”

“You said domestic violence?”

“Yes, that’s right ma’am.”

“You were arrested for domestic violence and that’s why you’re homeless?”

“No. I’m sorry I didn’t explain it correctly. I was abused by my ex-wife Sharon and so was my daughter Joana. Sharon was convicted of abuse against me, and I have a restraining order. She was also convicted of abusing my daughter Joana, but her child abuse injunction expired. So, I came here to Los Angeles to keep my daughter Joana safe from experiencing abuse again.”

Bethany took a deep breath. “You came here to Los Angeles? From somewhere else? Where did you come from?”

“We came here from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.”

“Where is your family? You need to go see if you can stay with your parents or another relative.”

“No, I don’t have any family. I grew up homeless. My mom was a victim of domestic violence. She went missing in 2011 and the last time I saw her was 2009. I didn’t have a relationship with her since the time I was 15 in 2005. I don’t have anywhere we can go. We need a referral to a shelter.”

“What were you doing for your girlfriend to put her hands on you? Women don’t just attack men for no reason. Women are nurturers and healers. The referrals I give are for mothers and young children. The vouchers I sign off on are for women who survived abuse at the hands of men who look just like you. I could ask my supervisor but I’m going to be honest. I like to reserve my vouchers for families from where I grew up. Here in the South-Central area. Women coming from Riverside, Long Beach, or as far away as Nevada are getting turned around every day. What makes you think I would give a voucher to a grown man from Wisconsin?”

“Ma’am. I’m sorry if anything I said offended you. I’ve been up for hours trying to find a motel for me and my daughter. The only place I could find was full of roaches and bedbugs. If you have a voucher that can get us a place to sleep tonight, please ask your supervisor to help. When I find a daycare for my daughter, I will come back here and volunteer. I’ll do anything I need to make it up to you.”

“Your name is John, right? Are you working?”

“I just got here yesterday. I signed up for benefits at DPSS today. I will start looking for a job once I get my daughter Joana into a daycare.”

“Are you aware of how serious the homelessness crisis is in South Central? It’s getting worse because people like you keep coming from all over the country thinking you can enjoy the weather and get a motel voucher for free. Look at yourself. You are an able-bodied grown man. You need to get a job and provide for your daughter. My dad served in the military. Sometimes he worked two or even three jobs to provide for my mother and me. Real men don’t go around asking for handouts.”

“I signed up for selective service. I spoke to a recruiter before and everything. I had no one who could watch my daughter so I could go to basic training. Everyone I’ve left my daughter with has abused her. When I was serving in a national nonprofit, I had to travel to Washington D.C. I left Joana with my brother and his baby mama. As soon as I got back into town to pick her up from her daycare, there were detectives, CPS, and police officers. They ambushed me. Come to find out, while I was out of town, either my brother or his baby mama abused Joana. The daycare didn’t even tell the police that I was in D.C. for work. Then I had to go to a conference in

Baltimore. I left her with my sisters. She is only three and she Facetimed me saying, 'They're hurting me, Daddy. Please come get me.' We have nowhere to go. No one else can help us."

"I've heard all the sob stories you can think of John. Every last one of them. There is nothing you can say to make me feel sorry for you or your daughter. I know you want a free vacation in Los Angeles. Everyone and they momma does too. Your only option is a shelter in Skid Row. The Union Rescue Mission. If you leave here now, you can get there in time to do intake and get a bed for the night."

"Please. Not Skid Row. That's not a place for a child."

"Sir. It is five o'clock. Our office is closed. You can go to the Union Rescue Mission or back to the roach motel."

Joana was audibly crying. John wiped away silent tears. He pushed Joana's Minnie Mouse stroller past the tangled mess of bodies littering Skid Row. Endless tents were festooned reminding John of a Renaissance fair he had attended in middle school. John knew the peasant rags of this common rabble were no costume. Every city that John had visited throughout his transient childhood and unstable adulthood had revealed an area where the poorest of the poor were herded and penned up so as not to offend the sensibilities of the snobs who set the standards for society. Students were dragged from school to be scared straight by the sight of survivors suffering. John gripped the cross around his neck and looked at one of those privileged students who attended a private school. The teenage girl's hair was the same reddish-brown color as Joana's.

John pushed Joana's stroller past the gawking teens on their field trip and stopped at the entrance of the Union Rescue Mission. He pressed a button on the intercom and heard a buzz

and the loud unlocking mechanism of a heavy prison-like door. John gripped the handle and pulled. He pushed Joana inside and a security guard behind a bulletproof screen greeted him. Hunched over with his black bags on his back as big as an exoskeleton, John resembled a beetle. Those obstinate insects inch their way through an unforgiving ecosystem. John, like the scarab of ancient Egypt, was dignified by the deities though his earthly kingdom was a pile of dung.

Shelter

Milagro Jones

“For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy” Psalms 61:3 KJV

All John wanted was a little privacy for himself and his daughter. The shower on the third floor of the Union Rescue Mission in Skid Row reminded him of prison. There was no curtain to separate him and his daughter from the other homeless families shuffling in and out of the black-mold-infested bathroom. It was one thing for a family to share a shower with cockroaches, which the staff called water bugs. It was another thing entirely for fifteen families to share three showers.

The immediate solution to a problem of this magnitude was a sliding wall divider. The flaw in this temporary fix was the wide gaps that allowed John to see everyone in the bathroom and everyone in the bathroom to see John and his daughter showering. Certainly, a private Christian mission with millions of dollars in annual donations could afford to install shower rods and curtains, John thought to himself.

John scrubbed his daughter, careful not to drop the bar of soap, a survival mechanism he'd acquired in prison that proved useless on the outs but unforgotten. A curly-haired child of five or six, brushing their teeth in the shared bathroom, glanced over at John and his daughter, locking on with intense blue eyes. John felt the eerie sensation of being watched as the glance bordered on a fixated gaze and hovered dangerously close to a rude stare.

An ambiance of coughs, burps, and farts pricked John's nerves like needles. He turned the handle of the shower towards the letter H, knowing full well that cold water was the only thing the scummy shower head would produce. He hurried to lather and rinse the tear-free

shampoo through his daughter's formidable locks of reddish-brown hair, thinking of the line downstairs for breakfast. Joana looked up at her father and laughed at how his big puffy afro had been reduced to wet noodle-like strings pasted to his face and the sides of his head.

"Pasghetti!" Joana declared and clapped her hands. John turned off the shower and ignored her joy. He was thinking about the smell resembling burnt plastic that he recognized as his roommate Fernando smoking crack. John was tired of the dirty mattress, filthy sheets, day-old food from Starbucks, and the cool contempt from the case managers. Most of all, though, he was tired of Fernando leaving his three daughters in the room alone to come in the bathroom and smoke crack.

It was an affront to the sense of safety John associated with the word shelter. This was supposed to be a place where Joana could escape from the used needles, glass pipes, contraceptives, and human waste littering the streets of Skid Row three stories below their window. This was supposed to be a space free from drugs.

John was not paying attention to how rough he was handling Joana while pulling her shirt over her head. She was scared at his inexplicable anger and imagined it must be something she had done. She burst into a wailing moan that built into the crescendo of a high-pitched cry.

"Let's go!" John demanded, hearing only the repugnant coughing of Fernando, who had finished his morning dose of crack and was now lazily puffing a cigarette while taking pulls from a fifth of Seagram's gin.

"His daughters haven't even had breakfast!" John shouted to no one in particular. The hopeless families queueing in and out of the bathroom didn't even notice Fernando. He was just another shadow underneath the flickering lights.

John rushed out of the bathroom, rudely brushing past bleary-eyed parents and their yawning children. He pulled Joana down the hallway until they reached the sterile office, where frontline staff barricaded themselves against the clients they were employed to serve.

“May I speak to a case manager?” John was livid. His indignation was building with every heartbeat pounding in his eardrums.

“Dada! Dada! I’m hungwweee.” Joana pleaded patiently with her best puppy dog eyes. John didn’t even glance in her direction.

“I’m busy!” John craned his neck for any sign of a case manager. He knew they liked to come in late and leave early. A new hire named LaTasha poked her head through the doorway of a private office while apologetically holding a phone. John didn’t care if it was the President of the United States on the other line. He brushed past the intern who tried to block his way and dragged Joana helplessly into LaTasha’s corner office.

“Mr. McDaniel, I’m on the phone with a client. Have a seat in the waiting area.”

“I’ve been waiting for a whole week already. There is a man smoking crack in the bathroom every morning when I’m getting my daughter ready, and I’m sick of it.”

LaTasha sighed. “I’ll call you back, girl. This man waltzing up in here like he owns the place.” LaTasha hung up the landline and pulled out her cell phone. She texted her supervisor Latrice that a man was threatening her. She felt unsafe and needed security. John continued to explain himself while Joana looked around the office curiously, touching anything that sparked her interest.

“His daughters are always unsupervised, and he’s constantly getting high and drunk in front of them. What is the point of having a list of rules here when no one is expected to follow them?”

“We’re Christians, Mr. McDaniel. I hope you can understand that we don’t believe in judging others. If you and another client disagree, we recommend you read your bible, pray about it, and talk to that person with an open heart. Jesus will give you the words to make peace with one another.”

John grabbed his head, pressed his fingers against his temples, and yelled out of frustration. Joana rushed over to him. “What’s wong dada? Are you otay?”

John looked at Joana’s wide eyes and felt incensed that his daughter should be forced to deal with such pitiable conditions.

“I want to file a grievance or speak to someone who can do something about-“

“Is everything alright?” Two buxom security guards entered the room and stood over John on either side. “We heard there was a problem.”

“Yes, there is a problem.” John cut off LaTasha, who had opened her mouth to speak.

“Mr. McDaniel!” LaTasha stood and put her hands on her hips. “This man barged into the office without permission, complaining about another client when he need to be minding his own business.”

“You causing problems, McDaniel?” Joana crept into a corner behind a bookshelf to hide.

Fernando peeked through the doorway of the office, beaming. “Everything alright, ladies? Hey Tasha, how’s your morning darling? Blessed and highly favored, I bet.”

LaTasha smiled. "Good morning, brother Fernando. You know God is good as always."

"Ain't that right, sister."

"The devil is a lie, though. John is in here telling us that he thinks you've been smoking in the building." LaTasha laughed as if the idea was ridiculous.

"Come on now. I've never pretended to be a saint, but you know I'm too busy caring for my girls to fall into temptation. I need to have a word with Latrice later. I just wanted to see if you could let her know I stopped by."

"Of course. Give those precious babies kisses for me." LaTasha hunched over her landline phone and punched in seven digits. John could hear a soft voice on the other line as LaTasha went back and forth, cracking jokes and talking about personal issues.

"Time to go, McDaniel." The security guards split up to escort John and Joana out of the office.

"My issue wasn't resolved. I still want to talk to someone."

"You can call LAPD if you think there has been a crime committed here but be careful if you accuse someone of possessing illegal substances; you better have proof. That is a serious accusation."

John stood in the hallway and dialed 911 on his free government flip phone. The security guards walked away towards a staircase entrance with the words "Staff Only" posted. Fernando was waiting at the elevator doors with several other families. All three of his daughters were loaded up in a large stroller, playing on tablets and a smartphone. Fernando was all smiles and laughs, but when the elevator door opened, he turned to face John directly, and the smile

disappeared from his face. He pulled his finger across his neck like a knife before winking and entering the elevator.

John would've loved to have punched Fernando's face in. He thought about the last time he had swung a punch and how quickly that had led to prison. John imagined his absence from society, Joana languishing in a foster home like the one he had been sent to as a child. He wouldn't be able to resort to violence to solve this problem. He had to find another way.

"911 Operator, how may I direct your call? Hello, can you hear me? What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Yes, hello. My name is John. I'm at the Union Rescue Mission in Skid Row."

"You're at what, sir?"

"I'm at the Union Rescue Mission. It's a homeless shelter in Skid Row. I have a roommate here who is smoking crack in the bathroom while me and my daughter are trying to shower, and he just threatened me when I tried to report it to a case manager."

"I'm sorry, sir, this is the emergency line. It's for emergencies. You have to call the nonemergency LAPD hotline. I can give you the number and transfer you over. Do you have a pen and paper to write with?"

"Hold on, I'll grab one now."

Joana took off, running towards the elevator.

"No, get back here!"

"What was that?"

"Joana, get over here, now!"

John grabbed Joana's hand and pulled her away from the elevator. She struggled to run away, so he picked her up and held her in one hand while holding the phone in the other.

"Are you still on the line, sir?"

"Just transfer me. I don't have a pen."

Two hours later, Joana was passed out on the hallway floor, and John was pacing outside the frontline staff office when a petite police officer in uniform walked out of the elevator.

"Officer, I sure am glad to see you."

"Are you the one who called?"

"Yes, I have a roommate who is smoking crack in the bathroom when me and my daughter go in there to shower."

"Is he in there now?"

"No, he left with his daughters."

"What is your name, sir?"

"John McDaniel."

"Do you have any weapons on you? Any guns or knives."

"No, ma'am."

"OK, because I got a report that you might have made threatening statements or gestures to clients and staff. Does that sound accurate?"

"No, I called because my roommate is using drugs in front of my daughter, and he threatened me before he left."

"Here's the problem, Mr. McDaniel. This is one of those he said, she said types of situations. If you're having problems with your roommate, that is something the two of you will

have to handle between yourselves. Now we can run your name, check and see if you have any warrants, and do a search of your property, or we can give you a warning if you agree to stop wasting our time.”

John deflated. He looked at Joana, crumpled on the floor beside the waste bin. They had missed breakfast, and John had skipped an appointment at the Department of Public Social Services that he would have to reschedule. It had all been for nothing.

“I understand, officer,” John mumbled. “Sorry for wasting your time. Have a good afternoon.”

“That’s more like it.” The officer said with a smile. “Look, here’s my card. If you ever need to report a real crime, call me.”

John headed to the room he shared with three other single dads and their children. Two dads were in the room when John entered, carrying Joana. On his messy bed beside his daughter Alicia, Ralph watched a children’s program on his smartphone. Jared was applying creams and scented lotions to his skin while his son Achilles slept soundly in their corner of the room.

John laid Joana on their bed and put dirty clothes in a laundry bag. He placed his shower bag on a dresser and changed from his sandals into comfortable walking shoes. He carefully placed Joana in her Minnie Mouse stroller and looked up to see Fernando entering the room, pushing his daughters Tessa, Theresa, and Tamia in their stroller.

“You know who I am foo? I got Crips and Bloods in Long Beach, Sureños too! I’m not the nigga you wanna narc on.”

John sighed. It wasn't even the fact that a Mexican had just got away with calling him nigga. He knew Fernando was all talk, and it was a principle he had stood on his whole life that a man who disrespected him had to be dealt with. John clenched his fists and unclenched them. He breathed deeply, counted in his mind to ten, and exhaled. All the sacrifices he had made for Joana would have been in vain if he swung a punch like he wanted. John had no choice but to ignore Fernando and be the bigger man.

"You scared, huh? If I were a rat like you, I'd be scared too. Pussy." Fernando spit out the last word, and John felt it like a bullet piercing his ego.

Fernando's daughters were laughing now, and Jared was smirking. Ralph paused the program he was watching and sat up, hoping to see a fight.

John strapped Joana into her stroller and walked past Fernando with a blank expression on his face. He heard Fernando's taunts continue as he marched to the office for the second time that day.

Latrice gossiped with the intern, Jessica, and sipped a latte from Peet's Coffee.

"Ms. Latrice."

"John, how are you? Heading to the bible study?"

"What?" Why in the hell would he be wasting his time doing that? He was in a crisis and needed resources. Scriptures were the last damn thing on his mind.

"The children's choir starts practice at six. You should bring Joana after dinner."

"Ms. Latrice, I need to be placed in a different cell, I mean room. My roommate is harassing me."

Latrice almost spit out her coffee. "This isn't a hotel, John. Beggars can't be choosers."

“Please, Ms. Latrice. I prayed about it, and God put this on my heart to tell you.”

The intern returned to her computer and opened a blank document, trying to look busy.

Latrice walked into her office and motioned for John to follow.

“You can take a seat.” A painting of blue-eyed White Jesus stared down at John.

John remained standing. Latrice set down her cup of coffee and picked up a pen, clicking it repeatedly. “One of our families is leaving today. God blessed them with an apartment in the Valley. We can move you into their room, but I expect to see Joanna at choir practice tonight.”

“Of course.”

Latrice raised her eyebrows and stared at John.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, John. I knew with a name like yours, you would find time to ask for God’s direction.”

“Amen.”

John backed out of the office, pulling Joana’s stroller in reverse.

The elevator carried John and Joana downstairs to a large dining area that resembled a high school cafeteria. Only these students were dropouts or scholars of the school of hard knocks. A table loaded with day-old deli sandwiches and baked goods a week or more past their sell-by date attracted Joana’s attention. She was reaching and making a soft whining sound.

“Oh, you’re up.” John grabbed a few items, tore open their packaging, and handed them to Joana. She chewed on a piece of stale bread.

John walked through the dining area and exited into a long corridor. He pushed the stroller past a worship hall. Metal detectors and a bulletproof glass cage were situated at the

entrance of the building. John showed his ID to a worker at the cage. She scanned it and handed it back to him. The door buzzed open, and John pushed the stroller out onto the streets of Skid Row.

The rancid smell of human misery and the sight of desperation brought tears to John's eyes. He pushed past wheelchairs, open sores, crutches pounding pavement, and endless tents, storing the broken hopes and dreams deferred by a city of fallen angels.

"Here," a gnarled hand reached out to John. "Get that baby something sweet from the corner store."

John politely accepted the one-dollar bill and hurried to buy Joana a can of Arizona iced tea. It was the only thing that defied inflation and still cost .99 cents.

John mixed the tea with Joana's spill-proof cup of water. She slurped her sugary drink happily and smacked her lips. Despite Los Angeles' paltry reputation for public transportation, John managed to work a miracle with only a metro pass as providence. He rode a cramped bus twelve stops, squeezed up against a man in a sharp blue business suit and a woman in a disheveled dress. He hugged Joana in his arms like a running back headed for a touchdown.

"Pico Street! Remember to exit through the back," the bus driver called out as John pushed through the aisle. John hurried past lingering pedestrians on the sidewalk, desperate to reach his destination.

"I'm sorry, sir, there is no way she can start tomorrow." The director of the daycare program was smoothing out Joana's wrinkled application in her pale, manicured hands.

"Please, she needs to get out of Skid Row, at least a few hours a day, and I need to look for a job."

“Mr. McDaniel, are you and your daughter experiencing homelessness?”

“Yes. I can explain.”

“I’m sorry, there is no need for an explanation. We do have a few state subsidy spots available. Here is a list of the things she will need to begin immediately. Let’s head on back. I’ll give you a tour of the room she’ll spend most of the day in. She can meet the teacher, and I will introduce Joana to her new friends.”

When John and Joana returned to the shelter, it was nearly 6 P.M., the curfew for residents. One minute after 6, a guest would have to return the next day and reenroll in the program to request a shelter bed. All their belongings would be in a black plastic garbage bag. If they didn’t return the day after, their social security cards and family heirlooms would disappear.

John walked past a group of drug dealers. It infuriated him to see them in their designer clothes and shoes standing next to a BMW while contributing to and profiting from the abject human condition of addiction.

A washed-up pimp was leaning against a piss-stained wall rapping to a woman whose beauty was unrecognizable underneath her cracked makeup.

“This isn’t a short story. I can’t bring you to climax in 5000 words or less, baby.”

“You find a place with four walls, real walls, and a bed if you want me to break you off some of this, Daddy.”

John showed his card and was scanned into the Union Rescue Mission. The door slammed shut behind him. John felt trapped like an inmate.

Joana was the only kid in the choir practice who didn't want to sing. The old lady at the front of the room ignored her as she ran around adjusting shelves, moving empty chairs, and finding ways to entertain herself that didn't involve participating with the rest of the group. All the other parents had left their kids in the room to fend for themselves, thankful for the moment of freedom choir practice allowed them. John didn't think any room in the Union Rescue Mission was safe enough to leave Joana unattended momentarily. He doubted the choir director was certified in first aid or CPR. What would she do in case of an emergency? Who would she call on? Jesus?

"Good job, children!" The final song had ended, and the parents were pouring into the room to collect their youngsters. John and Joana were the last to leave. Latrice was loitering in the hallway, waiting for them.

"Good news, John. The room is ready for you."

Somehow, John and Joana's world had managed to shrink. From a twin mattress in a corner of a room shared with three other families, they had transitioned to the bottom bunk of a bed in a room where they were the eighth family. Instead of a dresser, they had to store their things in two drawers. Whatever couldn't fit, they shoved under the bed.

After moving all their things into the new room, John brought Joana downstairs to eat dinner. Fernando walked behind them, taunting John the entire time. John sat at a table and picked at his food, poking the Jello and pushing the mashed potatoes around with a plastic spork. Fernando knocked John's tray onto the floor and spilled his milk carton across the table.

“Uh oh,” Joana was fascinated at the stream of milk, watching the droplets descend and splash on the floor from the vantage point of her stroller. She nibbled her cookie and pretended to dip in the milk.

“Let’s go outside.” Fernando was getting loud for no reason, trying to draw attention. John had been taught to talk with a small voice and walk with a big stick. He knew Fernando was selling woof tickets. “We can leave the kids here and walk around the corner.”

John pretended not to hear Fernando. People gathered around to see what was happening. John was the only one ignoring what was going on.

A security guard named Mona approached John. “You’ve gotta clean that up, McDaniel. There’s a mop in the closet by the water fountain.” John pushed Joana’s stroller over to the closet and grabbed the mop. He felt he was at the center of a cosmic joke. He wondered how often he felt this before, thinking about all his miseries and failures over 28 years.

“Clean that up like a good little bitch,” Fernando high-fived a vato in dark locs. Mona watched John push the dry mop around and laughed nervously. A freckle-faced kid giggled, but most of the gathered crowd remained silent. They were expecting John to retaliate. No one could believe that he was taking the abuse from Fernando. Was John scared? He looked like he could fight.

John put the mop away after a half-ass job of cleaning and then picked the tray up off the ground and placed it with the dirty dishes on the other end of the cafeteria. Joana was reciting an epic tale in kid language. John grunted and murmured each time she demanded a reply.

Upstairs, John got Joana and himself a change of clothes and headed for the showers. The line was long, and John stood solemnly while Joana played with the other boys and girls in the hallway. Fernando walked past with his daughters and whistled. John stared at the back of his head, wondering if he was making the right decision. All it would take is two hits, John thought to himself, me hitting Fernando and Fernando's fat ass hitting the floor.

"It's all yours, cabrón." A father and his two sons sauntered past. The line had dwindled slowly. It was John and Joana's turn to claim a shower. John pushed open the door and held it for Joana. She swaggered in and ran over to the sinks, turning on the tap to play with the cold and hot water.

"Come on, Jojo. Let's take a shower."

"Too cold," Joana scrunched up her face.

"I'll give you some yummy toothpaste to brush your teeth afterward."

"Bubbagum."

"That's right, baby girl. It's bubble gum flavored. When we're done with our shower, we can change into some comfy pajamas and read a bedtime story."

"PJ Masks!"

"Greg becomes..."

"Gecko."

Connor becomes..."

"Catboy."

"Amaya becomes..."

"Owlette." Joana loved the call and response of finishing her daddy's sentences.

“Come on, girl, let’s take a freezy cold shower.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Here I come,” Joana giggled as John chased her around.

When John and Joana finished their shower, Fernando entered the bathroom with his head down. His eyes darted and averted John’s mellow gaze. He walked into an empty stall, and the door slammed shut. John tried to take Joana’s toothbrush, but she pulled away.

“Time to go.” John heard the lighter spark and the hissing sound as the crack rock melted. Fernando sucked the pipe greedily, desperately holding in the smoke like a drowning man held oxygen before exhaling.

John picked up Joana and swung her around playfully. He walked out of the bathroom with her in one arm and all their shower supplies, dirty clothes, and toiletries in the other.

Joana sat crisscross apple sauce on the bed. John was lying on his stomach with a PJ Masks book open, slowly sounding out the words on the page. Joana’s stuffed Catboy toy was in her arms. She yawned and closed her eyes.

“Snitch!”

Joana’s head snapped up. Fernando was in the room. He walked over to John’s bunk and stood over him.

“Snitches get stitches! Snitches get stitches! Snitches get stitches!”

The kids on the top bunk started repeating the chant alongside Fernando. Soon, the entire room yelled it in a sing-song voice: toddlers, children, adolescents, and parents.

John kept reading to Joana. “Owlette got inside her Owl Glider, but it was too late. Oh no, Luna Girl got away.”

“Snitches get stitches! Snitches get stitches! Snitches get stitches!”

“The Luna Magnet was too powerful; Catboy didn’t know what to do.”

“Snitches get stitches! Snitches get stitches! Snitches get stitches!”

John’s voice was shaky. “Gecko used his Gecko Grip.” Joana’s eyes were closed. John laid her more comfortably atop the mattress.

“Snitches get stitches... Snitches get stitches.” The chant died down, but the room was full of laughter and an electric buzz of excitement. Everyone wanted to see Fernando and John fight. John rolled over and pulled the blanket over himself and Joana. He watched Joana’s nostrils move slightly with every breath. He didn’t care about Fernando and the other families anymore. All he saw and heard was Joana.

Eventually, Fernando got bored hanging out in the overcrowded room and left to check on his daughters. Theresa, Tessa, and Tamia watched a low-budget slasher flick on Fernando’s phone when he entered the room. The bed where John and Joana used to sleep would remain cold and empty until the next day when a new father would arrive with his son, and his sadness would fill the space.

Joana snored, and John lay awake, thinking about the apartment they had left behind to eke out this strange new existence in Los Angeles. John thought about the master bedroom with the king-size bed in Milwaukee, where he had filled his appetite with the empty promises of casual lovers. He couldn’t even clearly remember their words, the sounds of their voices, or the feel of their bodies. He only had a vague sense, like a nude silhouette shrouded behind steamy glass shower panes. He thought about Joana’s room, stuffed with plush toys, dolls, and games. Her pink bike with the training wheels had gone in the dumpster with everything they couldn’t fit into two

carry-on bags to bring aboard the plane. The judge wasn't to blame for not extending the child abuse injunction. It was my fault, John thought, for choosing to sleep with an abuser.

In the morning, when John and Joana showered, the familiar stench of crack cocaine was unavoidable, like the charred remains of something burnt black, sizzling in a skillet. John ignored it and moved robotically, inching one step closer to a room for Joana that she didn't have to share with twelve other children. On the way back to the shared room, John heard Fernando's familiar voice, but he sounded strange. Security guards were arguing with Fernando, who was slurring his speech and wobbling like a broken chair leg. A social worker was dragging Tessa and Theresa backward. Tamia screamed, and security had to grab her as two police officers got off the elevator and tried to restrain Fernando. John felt sick.

"Stop resisting."

"Fuck you, chota!"

This is all my fault, John thought as the officers wrestled Fernando to the ground. A crack pipe rolled out of Fernando's jacket pocket and shattered underneath the boot of one of the officers. John was numb as the hallway filled with watchful eyes.

"He shouldn't be drinking if he can't control his liquor."

"I told him to slow down and focus on those girls."

John was confused that the only voice blaming him was the one in his head. The other families gossiped about Fernando like yesterday hadn't even happened. There was no mention of snitches or narcs as John moseyed down the hallway and headed to the room to get himself and Joana ready for her big day.

Breakfast was a brown banana and a day-old bagel, but John found himself content to eat even though there wasn't a dollop of cream cheese in the cafeteria. Joana shook a small red box of raisins like a rattle. One of the wheels on the Minnie Mouse stroller felt loose, so John tightened it before heading towards the exit.

The faded green and blue walls of the Union Rescue Mission towered over John and Joana as they meandered through the packed sidewalk. On one side were the shelter beds stacked behind brick and glass, and on the other, the camping tents and blue tarp walls hid the scars of traumatized survivors. As John turned the corner, he looked at a mural of a satirical green and white sign that read "Skid Row City Limit Population Too Many."

Joana's brown eyes were wide with wonder as she walked into her daycare classroom. She stared at the shelves of brightly colored books, tables covered in games, arts and crafts stations, and a corner with a mountain of soft toys. John tried to hold back the tears that brushed against his cheeks like gentle child-size fingers. Joana let go of his hand and ran to hug a giant teddy bear.

"Wait, Jojo."

Joana turned. "Dada?"

"What about a hug for me?"

Affordable Housing

Milagro Jones

“And Jesus said unto him, *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.*” Luke 9:58 KJV

“And Jesus saith unto him, *The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.*” Matthew 8:20 KJV

The Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles was better off constructing fortified castles with alligator moats around their offices, the way their royal President and CEO barred the serfs from entering their regal citadels. Have paperwork to turn in? Sorry, peasant, you’re not allowed in this pristine palazzo. Bow your head and slide it in the drop box. Need to speak to your caseworker? Who do you think you are? The Duke of Windsor? They’re busy vacationing and avoiding clients during work hours. Compose an email. No reply? Send two more. Send a third if you want. It might be a few months before the Vice-regent grants you an audience. Want to wait on hold for three hours just to hear the click tone of a disconnected phone call once you finally reach the first place in the queue? Call the info line. The contact page on the website is as close as you’re getting to the royal court. Do you insist on speaking directly to a staff member and having your question acknowledged? You’re better off waiting with the journalists from TMZ to gain access to a celebrity. John knew all about Housing Authority fiefdoms since he had been dealing with them since boyhood and worked directly with the federal government department that oversaw them as an adult. However, knowing and being able to do something useful with that knowledge were two entirely separate things.

John dropped his daughter Joana off at her daycare in Koreatown down the street from his favorite local coffee shop. He counted the endless change for a latte while calculating the six hours it would take to make it through the labyrinth of Los Angeles and back in time to pick Joana up. In a sprawling city where pedestrians were just as likely to be the victim of a hit-and-run accident than make it to their destination on time, John deeply wished he had a valid driver's license and a car. A Ferrari with the horses. A royal steed, you know?

With little choice except to depend on the medieval public transportation system, John boarded a rundown Metro bus that desperately needed an inspection and a new coat of paint. He flipped leisurely through the pages of a science fiction manga. Riding a Metro Train through L.A., however, is nothing like the high-speed rail a salaryman can enjoy as a passenger in Tokyo. The L.A. Metro is about as efficient as the U.S. Healthcare system. The buses were even slower than the train since traffic is always congested like a clogged artery. John would've ridden a bike if he cared about his health. He slouched and read the pages left to right, the traditional way to enjoy an English translation of Mecha Magical Super Schoolgirl Z.

Two volumes and a short nap later, John was staring at a line so long it snaked around the entire block. Gathering his gumption, he was ready to start humming his favorite Negro spiritual when poof, a little red imp with a clove tail and horns appeared out of nowhere and landed on his left shoulder.

"Is this how you're going to waste your morning and throw away your afternoon J-Dawg? Standing in line with the bums and begging Uncle Sam for reparations? You can paint the orange tip of a cap gun black and get a ski mask from the 99 Cents store. Would you rather live like Robin Hood or Oliver Twist?"

“Speak of the devil. My main man Mephistopheles. You got a lot of nerve unmasking your mug around here. The last time I took your advice I served a 2 to 10 for Felony Assault, which was a slap on the wrist once they dropped the First-Degree Home Invasion charge.”

“You bungled that one. No way you can put the blame on me. I told you to stick him up when he was flashing the money, not come back later and kick his door in. What I suggested was heat of the moment. If he didn’t get airlifted in time you would’ve been facing premeditated murder.”

“Listen you self-righteous Satan, I’ll wring your little neck before I take another shot at a trip to the penitentiary.”

“You’ve done a lot of soul-searching since serving your sentence. I commend you on that. The scars we share are not so shallow. They go more than skin deep. Blood brothers for life boyo.”

John clasped his hands together to flatten the little fiend. When he separated his palms there was only a puff of smoke that melted into thin air. John glanced at his right shoulder expectantly, waiting for a guardian angel that never arrived.

The line to enter the Housing Authority didn’t budge for an hour. John stood around staring at trees, buildings, and parked cars. He tried his best not to make any inadvertent eye contact that could lead to small talk. When the line did begin to shrink, it wasn’t because people standing outside waiting were being allowed to enter. It was simply the fact that a lot of folks had other things to do. Mothers had sons whose schools called to notify them that their babies were running a fever. Grandmothers had sharp pains shooting through their hips and dull aches pounding on their backs that forced them to retire from the paralyzing quest ahead of them.

Housing was a Holy Grail for these adventurers. Homeless moms whose kids hadn't slept in a bedroom of their own for years. Homeless dads whose status was an invisibility cloak to society. Students who had been on the streets since they aged out of foster care. Couch surfers coerced to trade sex for a sofa to sleep on, a shower, and a hot meal. John didn't want to be numbered among the miserable masses whose data was aggregated in Point in Time Counts to calculate the reality of the homelessness crisis. He had grown up watching Rap Music videos on BET's 106 and Park that promised him an adulthood of champagne swimming pools, an irl waifu harem, and a Rolex to match his 24-karat gold smile.

Standing around was for losers. John knew that the only thing worse than being a loser was being a quitter. He decided to stretch his legs and take a stroll to the front of the line. He wasn't going to cut in front of anyone. He just wanted to see if there was an attendant at the front gates who could ask the King about lowering the drawbridge.

John was surprised to realize that everyone ahead of him in line was frozen. They weren't statues like the unfortunate souls who looked upon the snake-haired gorgon Medusa. John reached out his hand and realized they weren't cold to the touch like ice sculptures. They were just petrified like fossilized wood frozen in time.

When John finally made it to the front of the line, he was surprised to find that the drawbridge had already been let down. The only thing standing between the bridge and our somewhat chivalrous hero John was a lanky knight with a black t-shirt stretched over the top half of his suit of armor that had the insignia "security" in bold yellow letters.

“Sorry to bother you,” John mumbled gazing up at the impenetrable visor atop the helmet and wondering if there was anyone inside. “I just need to know when the line is supposed to start moving.”

“Two thousand twenty-nine,” the voice echoed and traveled like it had been processed through a loudspeaker.

“Eleven years from now?”

“Yeah, it’s an eleven-year line to get Section 8 housing in Los Angeles. Didn’t you look at the website?”

“No, I was told there was an eleven-year waiting list. I’m not on the waiting list. I had a Section 8 voucher in Milwaukee. I applied for portability. I’m here to fill out the paperwork for my Los Angeles City voucher.”

“Sorry man, the eleven-year waiting list is for current applicants. The eleven-year line is for current clients. Since you came here through portability, you’re technically a client. If you stay in line, you can go inside the Housing Authority on July twenty-seventh, two thousand twenty-nine. If you leave the line and come back another day, you’re going to have to start your eleven-year countdown all over again.”

“This is crazy. Is there at least a supervisor I can talk to?”

“The supervisor of our security team? He’s in the tower above the parapet right now. I don’t think you want to talk to him though. He only talks to clients in the dungeon. Trust me, you don’t want to find out what goes on in the dungeon.”

“Bro, are you kidding me? I want to talk to a supervisor who works at the Housing Authority.”

"I think they're attending a masquerade right now. King Eric Garcetti invited them to a royal ball. I have a quill and ink if you want to write the royal supervisors a message. Hermes should be here to pick up messages next summer or fall."

"I need to pick my daughter up from her daycare. I can't wait that long. And what do you mean Hermes? That's Egyptian Mythology. Aren't the Lords of the Housing Authority from medieval literature?"

"Nah, you mean Hermes Trismegistus. He's an amalgamation of the Hermes I was talking about and the Egyptian God Thoth. Don't tell anyone I told you this, but Eric Garcetti is thinking about abdicating the throne of Los Angeles. He doesn't care about the homelessness crisis and all that depressing stuff anyway. His dream was to be a D-List celebrity in Hollywood. Behind the scenes, he settled for Ambassador to Mount Olympus. The official announcement is going to be unsealed during the next election cycle."

"Elections for who? I thought Los Angeles was a monarchy."

"So do the Mayor and the County Board of Supervisors. Apparently, all the politicians, city, and county employees think they're royalty here."

"I'm not a king but my princess needs me. I'm a single father with sole custody and we're homeless. I've got a devil on my shoulder, and I don't want to do something stupid. Please can I just go in and talk to my case worker about my voucher?"

"I'm a father too, man. My baby mama hasn't let me see my daughter in a year. That's the only reason I'm doing this. Take this and go inside, quietly. A few case workers are hanging out shooting the breeze. The introverts and recovering alcoholics. You know, the type of people who turn down invitations to King Garcetti's parties."

“Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I never had an angel on my shoulder, but I imagine this is what it would feel like to have one.”

“Chill out with all that sentimental stuff. This is just one dad helping another. Good luck homie.”

John accepted a rusty key and hurried across the drawbridge. He entered the key into the locked gate on the other side and turned it with a satisfying click. Old school ASMR, John thought to himself as he pulled the ornate gate open elegantly.

After passing through the gates, a splendid botanical garden that rivaled the horticultural masterpieces of Babylon, and a yellow brick road that would’ve made the Wizard of Oz jealous, John arrived at a marble-floored room with a crystal chandelier and an emerald couch where the most beautiful young woman ever to grace the pages of a romance was sighing audibly.

“What’s wrong?” John got down on one knee and took the hand of the lady to kiss it. She removed her satin glove and offered it daintily with a whimper. “Don’t you realize you’re the loveliest maiden in the land of Los Angeles?”

“What about the rest of the United States?”

“Forget about the U.S.A. You’re the fairest in the entire continent of North America.”

“What about Canada?”

“Canada too.”

The maiden’s cheeks blushed as red as a freshly arranged bouquet of roses. “What about Greenland?”

“Is that in North America?”

The damsel stopped crying immediately. "What are you the village idiot or my honorable champion? Don't you study maps before leading your armies into the battlefield?"

"Ok, Greenland too. You don't have to be so mean about it."

"And Mexico?"

"Well, you are beautiful, but have you ever seen a Latina? You might have some competition in Mexico."

The teardrops that fell from her delicate cheeks made sounds like keys pressed on a piano. John was awed that something so tragic as her sadness could be so lovely."

"Ok, don't quote me, but off the record, Mexico too."

"Oh, my gallant paladin, you compose such poetic utterances. If you don't stop flattering me with your freely given favor, I will undoubtedly fall hopelessly head over heels in love."

"Damn. Just like that. Should I delete my Tinder or is this going to be more of a friends-with-benefits thing?"

"Take my wimple. Tie it like a scarf around your pole when you go jousting. You will be my Black Knight like Morien. Not since Oroonoko has the world seen a more noble visage sculpted from such terribly dark skin."

"Yo, that's kind of racist. We can hook up, but I'm not cool with roleplaying Othello and Desdemona or anything weird like that. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I'm the damsel of the Section 8 Department."

"Why do they need a damsel? I thought this place was for helping the less fortunate."

“They can’t just give you a rental assistance voucher. That’s not how capitalism works. The voucher is in my bosom next to my undying love for you. If you want me to take off my kirtle so you can reach between my breasts, you must first pay the dowry.”

“I’m broke. What part of rental assistance did you not understand? I don’t have money for that.”

“You must earn it in blood.”

“I can run to the store and get you some maxi pads or some tampons if you want, but I’m not parting the Red Sea like Moses. He ain’t even get to see the promised land.”

“I’m not talking about that kind of blood.”

“You’re a virgin!”

“Sir John McDaniel. The dowry is paid for by slaying a dragon. The blood of the dragon in exchange for my love.”

“So, do we go on some dates afterward or do we drive to Las Vegas and get hitched in a chapel? I don’t even have a car to drive to Las Vegas.”

“You kill the dragon, and the Housing Authority will give you my hand in marriage. When we consummate our eternal vows, you can retrieve the voucher and have affordable housing forever.”

“Forever?”

“As long as your income falls below the federal guidelines for poverty, which is pretty generous since this is a first-world nation.”

“I’m divorced. I’m a single dad. I don’t think it’s a good idea to rush into another marriage. Do you even like kids? Are you ready to be a stepmom?”

“How does submissive trad wife from a medieval fantasy sound to you? I’ll cook, clean, and milk the goats. Whatever the lord of the manor commands me.”

“I’m more of a feminist when it comes to my outlook on intimate partnerships. I think there’s an unfair power dynamic at play here. Not to mention the fact that we just met each other about two pages ago.”

“I thought you were desperate. Isn’t this voucher your whole motivation as a protagonist?”

“Speaking of vouchers, is it still in one piece? It’s probably sweaty in there, mashed up between those massive mommy milkers.”

“Did you get feminist confused with misogynist? Have you taken Women’s Studies 101?”

“You want me to fight a dragon. That sounds kind of risky. Are you at least going to tell me your name?”

“You didn’t ask or offer yours. I knew you were John McDaniel because your ravishing reputation and reputation for ravishing are known far and wide to all the maidens across the land.”

“Yeah right. I haven’t had a match on Tinder in forever. The last time I ravished anything other than my right hand was when I had a two-bedroom loft in downtown Milwaukee.”

“I’m not your therapist, I’m your damsel in distress. My name is Anissa from the house of Locklear.”

“OK, Anissa. I’m running short on time. I need to get back to the daycare to pick up my daughter. Can you tell me where to find the dragon so I can get this over with?”

The dragon is downstairs in the Deep. That's D2 on the elevator. If you accidentally press D1, you'll end up in the dungeon. Trust me, you don't want to find out what happens in the dungeon. Unless you're into that sort of thing, Daddy."

John descended into the cavernous deep. The well-lit elevator played a catchy jingle that he couldn't help snapping his fingers and dancing to. His little jig was interrupted when the elevator stopped on B16. Two elves got onto the elevator. John had never seen an elf before, but he knew they weren't humans because of their pointy ears and breathtaking androgynous beauty. Gods or goddesses maybe, but mere mortals, forget about it.

"Technically we are mortals."

"Yeah, we have a similar life span to humans."

"Are you a dark elf?"

"No, I'm a high elf. My parents are Black."

"I'm a dark elf."

"But you look White."

"My parents are White."

So dark elves and high elves are fantasy races, but within the races of fantasy, the same social construct of race that America adopted is operating?"

"B22 this is our stop."

"Last level of the basement dude. You sure you don't want to get off here with us?"

"We're going to an influencer party tonight. You don't want to miss it."

“Sorry man. I heard L.A. parties were cool. But I’m a single dad, so I’m going to miss out on all that stuff. I just need to kill a dragon with my bare hands so I can get a voucher that will give my daughter her own bedroom.”

“Should’ve just used an elven affordable housing potion.”

“Wait, what was that?”

The elevator dinged and opened to D2 the lowest level of the Housing Authority. John exited apprehensively, feeling a feverish fear that twisted his guts inside out, caused him to clench his well-shaped cheeks, and squeezed a dribble of urine from-

“I didn’t pee my pants.”

His pants were dry, but the crotch of his boxers was definitely wet. It was like he went pee in a public restroom where he felt uncomfortable, and he didn’t give it a good shake before zipping up his pants.

“I did not pee my pants.”

“Have a seat soldier.”

A big pink bespectacled dragon was sitting on a black Boss Wingback Traditional Chair with their legs crossed puffing tobacco from a brown briar pipe.

“Mr. McDaniel. Do you mind if I call you Mickey D? I just wanna gobble you up like a Happy Meal. You are so much cuter in person than I thought you’d be.”

“Soo, you’re the dragon?”

“Capitol D baby. It has been lonely down here since the last champion. He was a squealer. Cute too, ‘til I burnt half his face off. But you know what they say. Can’t stand the heat? Don’t mess around in momma’s kitchen. Is it hot in here or is it just me?”

“You’re the dragon?”

“Guilty as charged, MC Danny Boy. Can you really emcee? I used to do kid’s parties. Kids love dragons and they are so adorable.”

“I’ve got a kid. My daughter Joana. She’s four years old and she’s at daycare waiting for me to pick her up.”

“So, what’s the hold-up? You came here of your own free will. I said I was lonely. I didn’t say I was desperate. Todeloo toots.”

“I was sent here on a mission.”

“By who? That crazy bitch Anissa? She’s still trying to kill me! Gosh, that girl knows how to hold a grudge.”

“You know Anissa?”

“Let me give you a word of advice, Mr. Hitman. Before you come up in here all big and bad like Léon the Professional taking orders from a little girl, just know one thing. Beowulf thought he was a hero too. Until he met my brother. Ending suicidal bloodlines runs in the family.”

“Let’s just say hypothetically I wanted to fight you.”

“You think she’s cute? What’d she offer you? Let me guess. Her hand in marriage? That gworl is a black widow boo boo. How many husbands do you think she’s lost? Two? Three? Try ten. She is a manipulator and a narcissist. You can try me if you want to. You are not Euron Greyjoy, and this is not Game of Thrones.”

John sat down in the chair opposite the dragon. “What’s your name?”

“Slaybella.”

“Seriously? Slaybella, the dragon. In the basement of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles.”

“You can just call it HACLA. If the people don’t know what you’re talking about they can google it. You are stressed. Do you want a martini? I need a drank. GG!”

“Yes, mistress.” A crispy creature in the shape of a man came running from the shadows of the Deep.

“This is Gologamere. I call him GG. Anissa sent him down here two months ago to return with my head. He’s been a loyal servant ever since.”

“A slave? There are modern-day slaves in California?”

“Where do you think the produce in the grocery store comes from? Half of it was harvested by kids as innocent as your daughter. But GG is not my slave. He is free to go whenever he wants to.”

“I would never leave your side, my mistress.”

“Vodka Martini. Stirred not shaken. Sorry MI6. We don’t want none of that James Bond bullshit up in here. What do you want to drink cutie?” Slaybella placed a claw on John’s hand that he shook off aggressively.

“I can’t show up drunk to my daughter’s daycare! Gologamere, get a grip. You came down here to slay the dragon.”

Gologamere gasped. Slaybella set their pipe down. “You are rude. That was uncalled for. GG show our guest to the door please.”

GG crept over to John and placed a charred hand on his arm to escort him. John shrugged him off, disgusted, and swung a wild right following with a left. The combination connected and GG collapsed to the cavernous floor.

“You got blood on my rug!”

John stomped GG’s head in and rushed Slaybella. Flames shot into the air. John tackled Slaybella and sent their glasses flying. Pipe tobacco spilled. What was left of GG moaned in pain. John throttled Slaybella ferociously. He mounted their abdomen and squeezed their throat with wild abandon. Slaybella’s guttural cry was cut off by John’s relentless passion for violence. Coughing sounds and ghastly gurgling aroused his insatiable appetite for blood. He released Slaybella’s neck and began punching their elongated snout. He punched their broad brow until vitreous and aqueous liquids intermingled with blood and covered his fists with a reddish froth that bubbled from his victim. John was provoked by the image of Anissa, the thought of what he imagined to be B-Cup breasts stained with the ink of the Section 8 voucher. He sacrificed Slaybella at the altar of Athena.

When his mission was complete there could be no question of the mortality of Slaybella. John dragged their corpse onto the elevator and pressed A1 to return to the first floor. At B22 the doors opened and the elves from earlier almost entered the elevator car.

“What’s wrong? You’re going up right?”

“We’ll catch the next one.”

“About that potion.” The door closed before John could finish his sentence.

John shuffled a jig to the anodyne Muzak, holding Slaybella’s corpse like a partner on the dance floor of a formal ball. The ding of the elevator brought John to his senses. He snapped out

of his MKUltra-esque hypnotic state. Drenched in blood, with a dragon's dead body balanced in his exhausted arms, John summoned the strength to reach Anissa.

"Ding dong, the witch is dead."

Anissa swooned and revived three times. "My noble champion."

"Cut the crap. I need that voucher. Just like the next bus to Koreatown, it's got my name written all over it."

Anissa grabbed John's head in both of her hands and planted a fiery kiss on his lips.

"You're so big, and strong, and handsome."

"Broke, and tired, and hungry too. Reach inside your dress and give me the voucher."

"Take me with you."

"To my daughter's daycare?"

"To your Section 8 apartment, silly. When you sign the lease will you come back for me?"

"This isn't that kind of story Anissa."

"The threads of fate between us have been cut?"

"Did you consult the Oracle of Delphi to figure that out?"

"Then that's the price you pay for affordable housing." Anissa turned her back modestly for a moment and when she spun around, she was holding a damp sheet of computer paper with John's Section 8 Voucher printed single-sided in portrait orientation.

John wiped the voucher slowly across his cheek, held it to his face, breathed deeply, and kissed it.

"Damn, that was creepy."

“Farwell, Lady Anissa.”

“It’s Lady Locklear. My first name is Anissa.”

“I didn’t forget your name. I just wasn’t sure how Medieval titles worked.”

“You’re one pathetic dude John. I hope you find a damsel to clean your stables and milk your goats.”

“And you’re one manipulative Milkmaid. I hope you find a ruthless murderer on the battlefield, with a sensitive soul, and a skill for writing sixteenth-century sonnets.”

“That was the Middle Ages, honey.” Anissa booped John’s nose with her index finger.

John stuffed his Section 8 voucher into his pocket and jogged out of the marble-floored room. He strode across the yellow brick road and power walked through the lush botanical garden. He struggled to push the ornate gate open and closed it behind himself, locking it shut. John returned the key to the thankful security guard and dapped him on his gauntlet before walking past the line of frozen faces. He reached the bus stop just as the Metro Bus to Koreatown was arriving. He sat on the bus and read his manga. Halfway through the bus ride he finished reading and had no way to entertain himself besides staring out the window. John watched the city pass by like his wasted youth, knowing Los Angeles could never be his home. He was a transient of time drifting through space.

The daycare director Ms. Kim wanted to have a word with John when he arrived to pick up Joana.

“Is everything OK, Mr. McDaniel?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

“Are you sure? Not to pry, but you’re covered head to toe in what appears to be blood.”

"I had to go to the DMV today and forgot to make an appointment."

"Oh. Walk in. That explains everything."

Eva, a beautiful teacher blessed with big brown eyes and shoulder-length black hair poked her head in the office politely. "Excuse me, Ms. Kim."

"Sorry Mr. McDaniel. It'll only be a moment."

"It's fine."

The women closed the door behind themselves, but it didn't shut all the way. They were terrible at whispering. John wasn't eavesdropping. It wasn't his fault the door was slightly ajar.

"It's Joana."

"Is she OK?"

"She had a nightmare."

"She didn't have an accident, did she?"

"No, but she was inconsolable. She said her dad was in the dream and he got eaten by a dragon."

"Oh goodness. These kids and their fairy tales."

"Is everything OK with Mr. McDaniel?"

"Oh yes, I was going to warn him about showing up so late, but he had a rough day, and I don't want to stress him out with my nagging."

"Well, if he needs a girlfriend or a wife to nag him, you let me know."

"Eva, you stop that teasing. Be professional."

"Yes, Ms. Kim. I'll go get Joana's favorite stuffed toy and make sure she doesn't forget it this time."

“OK. Mr. McDaniel will be right over to get Joana. There is just one more thing we need to talk about.”

Ms. Kim opened the door gently and sat down across from John.

“Sorry about that. It was your daughter Joana. She had a bad dream and wants her favorite toy to comfort her.”

“I still remember my favorite stuffed animal. It was a teddy bear like the one from the Snuggle fabric softener commercials.”

“I’m much too old to remember my favorite soft toys. I do remember making paper dolls and decorating them. Working with kids keeps you young. How did your boss feel about you taking the day off?”

“My supervisor Jenna told me a story about the first time she went to the DMV. She understood how important it is for me to get my documentation.”

“We all do Mr. McDaniel. We are immigrants too. You are like a refugee in your own country. Traveling all this way with your daughter for a better life. We all sacrificed something to relocate to Los Angeles.”

“This city is a graveyard of broken dreams. If the director of the Community Center didn’t get Joana a spot in this daycare, it would’ve been a wake-up call.”

“You can rest easy. This is the third daycare she’s been in since you arrived in Los Angeles. Isn’t that what you told me?”

“Yes. The first one was amazing. Joana loved it and everyone loved her. While she was there, I had time to search for a job. Once I got hired, I had to remove her because the hours didn’t match my work schedule.”

“And the second one.”

“It was terrible. The County paid for her to enroll in a home daycare. One day I arrived and the mother who was licensed to care for her was attending mandatory training. She left Joana with her daughter Maria, but she had classes at the local community college. Maria left Joana with her dad. Joana was alone with this strange old man and the County didn’t see anything wrong with it. I was in tears ready to quit my job. When I told Veronica what happened, she said you might be able to help.”

“Life is going to knock you down, but you always get back up. If at first you don’t succeed, try again. If you fail a second time, keep this in mind. Maybe the third time is the charm.”

“My granny said that when God closes a door, he opens a window. With all these churches here in Koreatown, there is no way I could deny the power of Jesus Christ.”

“I know the power of story. Veronica told me yours. I felt so sorry. I thought there was nothing we could do to help. Then we got a phone call that one of the families was leaving. There was only one state subsidy spot open when their child left. That spot is now Joana’s.”

John and Joana rode the bus from Koreatown to Crenshaw in silence. It was dark outside. The moon was full and only a handful of stars could be seen through all the light pollution. The passengers on board were a shady-looking bunch of ruffians. Whenever the meanest looking of the bunch would disembark, an even rougher tougher miscreant would climb aboard. Barely anyone bothered to pay the fare. The driver wasn’t getting paid enough to make an issue of it.

From Crenshaw, John carried Joana to a bus stop that didn't have a bench. He stood frozen like the people in the line outside the Housing Authority, while Joana sucked her thumb contentedly in his arms. The second bus took John and Joana to a train station in active gang territory. Convicted Crips on parole and kids on the way to their first felony eyed John suspiciously, trying to make sense of a man who had more in common with them than they could imagine. John and Joana boarded a train to Norwalk Station. A teenager with a Bluetooth speaker was blasting NWA's Fuck the Police. Joana stirred but the Hip Hop anthem became her lullaby instead of a call to action. John and Joana began their final bus ride of the evening. They caught the 115 Manchester bus to Firestone Boulevard in Downey, California. This is where the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority had placed John and Joana through their motel voucher program, as an apology for a worker at HOPICS sending them to a shelter in Skid Row. John and Joana got off the bus and walked across the street to the Hacienda Hotel, a no-frills motel with a fancy name and a ramshackle exterior. John was surprised to see an archangel with big feathery wings standing on the sidewalk outside the hotel. The angel's halo was a red paisley bandanna tied around his head. He had a hat on the ground for tips. He was blowing away on a trumpet.