

Playing God

by Jason Ramstad

He had walked by the same popup stand every day for the past two years, but walking by the stand today would be the death of him.

Richard walked down the steps from the cinema, squinting against the harsh sunlight and breathing in the smoky, dirty smell of summer in the city. He held up a hand over his eyes for shade so he could see, forgetting he had his sunglasses still propped up on top of his head. He stepped off the last step onto the sidewalk.

“Don’t be a stranger, ya shit head,” he said to Jordy, who stood beside him.

“Likewise, asshole.”

“We live in the same city now and I see you less than I did when you were visiting just once a year.”

“Funny how that happens.”

Richard chuckled. “Yep, hilarious. You know my schedule, so let’s plan for drinks one of these upcoming weekends.”

“How about next? I have zero plans.”

“Well next weekend is no good,” he said, and laughed.

“Well then you tell me when you’re free, because I have no life and can basically meet you whenever you tell me to.”

“I’ll text you, then,” said Richard, knowing full well he’d forget about Jordy a few minutes after they parted ways and that he probably wouldn’t see him again until sometime next year. “You should go on Tinder, meet a few people. Get laid, let off some steam.”

“I *have* been seeing someone,” Jordy said defensively.

“Who?”

“My hand,” he said, and he held up his hand, palm facing Richard. Richard laughed and shook his head. “What? He knows exactly what I like most. And we have such a history, we go way back.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Text me then,” said Jordy, and they shook hands awkwardly. Jordy wasn’t a handshaker, and neither was Richard.

“Adios.”

Jordy turned right and walked to the subway station at the intersection. Richard turned left and headed north up the street. It felt good to be out. Most of the time, he holed himself up in his room reading books and watching Netflix. On really wasteful days, he might lose himself in three or four hours of YouTube videos, watching endless minutes of dogs and cats doing the same old stupid shit, or else hours of Fail Army videos where human beings learned the hard way that they’re mortal.

Right now the sun shone down between thick clouds in great columns of sunlight. A man walked by, sucked heavily on his vapor-cigarette, then blew out a great cloud of smoke, which Richard walked through. If anyone might have been there with him to talk to, he would have lied and said he was disgusted. But the truth was that he loved the smell of the smoke, all fruity and pungent as it were. He had smoked for nearly seven years himself, had quit nearly three months ago to the day. Did it get any easier? Fuck no. Did he still crave a cigarette every waking minute? Fuck yes. Had he cheated and snuck a cig or two during his three months of no-smoking? He even lied to himself about that one, but the truth was that he had a few times.

Oh well, he thought as he walked up a small slope in the sidewalk. *A year ago, this small section of sidewalk would have exhausted me, left me seeing little bright stars as my body began to work overtime for oxygen.* Now, though, he walked it with ease. Crazy how the lungs rejuvenated themselves. He walked on, a few beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

And now began a twenty second countdown. *The* twenty second countdown.

Only, it was a silent countdown, a countdown of time that was happening nowhere except in the universe, a countdown that was a part of Richard's life and would forever alter it. Only, time wasn't real, and not even the universe was aware that in twenty seconds Richard's life was about to change forever. In twenty seconds, the beginning of the end would happen, and when the countdown struck zero, the clock would begin counting again upwards until Richard died and time seized all meaning.

Now ten seconds had elapsed.

Richard walked by a street-meat vendor. \$2 HOTDOGS. WORLD FAMOUS! 1\$ SODA! The sizzling of the dogs on the grill reached his ears. From a speaker behind the grill an

old Celine Dion song belted out. A man stood with a hotdog in his hand and dished relish and onions onto the dog. Richard continued by, only vaguely seeing this. He smelled the smell of grilled hotdogs on the air and his stomach grumbled hungrily.

Five seconds.

Four.

Three.

Two.

A gust of wind powered its way across the street in this moment, kicking up a swirl of dust from the condo construction site on the other side of the street. The dust whipped across the sidewalk and slapped Richard on his right cheek. He brought up a hand to shield his eyes, and stopped walking for just a moment.

Just five feet in front of where Richard had stopped walking, there was a small popup stand, consisting of two upright shelves (the kind made of cardboard that could be easily disassembled and carried) on which there were dozens of little pamphlets. There was a little sign above the shelf nearest Richard. It read: *What does GOD really think about you!?* Then in smaller letters underneath: *Stop and talk to us.*

On either side of the popup stand, standing with their hands together in front of them like two security guards, were a man and women. But when that heavy gust of wind swept across the street, the pamphlets had taken flight. One of them flew through the air, its pages opened like wings, and landed at Richard's feet. It slid to a halt up against the toe of his shoe.

Remarkably, the lightweight cardboard shelves didn't budge, as though they had been bolted to the cement.

The sudden gust of wind died as quickly as it had come on. Richard lowered his arm now, opening his eyes. And the first thing he saw was the pamphlet at his feet. The cover had a picture of Jesus Christ with a bright golden halo above his head. Jesus wore white robes and the lower half of his body melted into a bright fluffy white cloud; his arms were held open in Jesus-like fashion. **What does GOD really think about you!?** These words arched at the top of the pamphlet over Jesus's head.

Richard bent over and picked it up. He brushed off the pages with his hands. Later, he would recall that something unusual had happened the moment his fingers touched those pages, a sort of tingling sensation that had started in his fingers and worked its way along his arms before spreading out through his body. In the moment, he equated it to a shiver of sorts, brought on by the cool gust of wind.

He stepped forward. The man and woman who had been standing with their popup stand were scrambling about, grabbing pamphlets off the sidewalk and placing them back on the shelves. On some of them, the pages had been torn. On others, they'd been scratched by the dust and stones on the pavement.

"Oh, shoot. Oh, shoot," said the man, placing a pamphlet back on the top shelf.
"Heaven's sake!"

The man wore a well-tailored black suit jacket, blue jeans, and a black top hat. The woman wore a flowing dress with a flowery print, and she wore a blue jean jacket overtop to match her partner's ensemble.

“Here you go,” Richard said, holding out the pamphlet to the man, who had just turned around.

The man, with his face in shadows under the brim of his top hat, looked at the pamphlet, then up at Richard. He smiled, and his eyes grew slightly larger. Then he held up his hands, palms out, in a gesture that said, “Oh I couldn’t possibly take that from you.”

“This landed at my feet, I believe it’s yours,” Richard said, confused.

The man in the top hat tilted his head, and the smile on his face grew wider. He still had his hands held up; finally, he brought them together as though about to pray. “Darling?” he said, and Richard briefly thought the man was speaking to him. “Look what we have here.”

The woman in the flowery dress and denim jacket approached from behind the man, who Richard now fully presumed was her husband. *Great*, Richard thought. *I shouldn’t have picked this damn thing up, now I’m stuck talking to a bunch of religious crazies who want to preach the word of God to me...*

The woman looked down at the pamphlet in Richard’s hand, then up, and she met his gaze with the same peculiar stare of her husband. Those wide eyes, the forceful and queer grin on her face. The way the two of them now looked at him, as though they were searching for their own reflections in a mirror, made Richard’s stomach tighten. He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“This fell off your-” Richard began, but he was cut off by the woman.

Her hand bolted out from here side to stop him from talking. “Oh my my, what *have* we got here?” she said.

“It’s just – I picked this up for you,” Richard said. And he wanted simply to throw the pamphlet at them and walk around them and up the street. But no, that would be rude. And these people seemed...odd. Something inside him told him not to sidestep them, not to piss them off.

“But, we couldn’t possibly take that from you!” the man said loudly. After a few passersby took brief glances at them before moving on without another thought.

“It’s...I really should get going,” Richard said, trying and failing to put a kind smile on his own face. The way the two of them were searching him with those big eyes, he felt like they were seeing right through him, like their eyes were little x-ray machines.

The woman took one step forward. She was now at arm’s length from Richard, and she reached out, as though to touch him, and Richard flinched away. “Oh!” said the woman, pulling back her hand quickly, as though having been jolted by an electric current. “He’s...alive,” she said to her husband.

Richard’s brows furrowed. Now he felt sick to his stomach. These people were clearly nuts, just the type you might expect to be standing next to a stand trying to push pamphlets about God or Jesus or whatever it was they tried to push.

“What?” Richard muttered.

“*So* alive,” the husband agreed with his wife. “Son, *you* were meant to pick up that pamphlet.”

“Oh yes!” said the woman. “You were *chosen*.”

“I think the wind just blew...here, I actually have to go, I’m late for an appointment.” He forced the pamphlet out at the man. *Take it*, he thought. *Take the fucking thing*.

“Oh honey,” the woman said, and now the smile erased from her face. It was replaced with a look of sadness, a look almost of pity. “You certainly have an *appointment*. Yes, you certainly do. An appointment with our Lord.” And her husband nodded along with this. “Certainly,” he added.

“Here you go,” Richard said, finally at his wits end. He stepped forward and around the man, who didn’t bother to move out of the way. Richard set the pamphlet on the shelf with the others. The second he did, a small breeze swept over him, and that same tingling, electrical feeling coursed through his fingers and down his arm.

He took a few steps up the sidewalk, then turned around to get a last look at the strange man and woman. They stood still with their backs to him, as though they’d frozen in time. Then, sensing Richard’s watchful glare, they turned slowly like they stood on a roundtable, to look back at him. A shiver ran up Richard’s spine. He shook it off, turned, and walked hastily up the street and lost himself among the crowd.

The first strange thing to happen to Richard began no longer than ten minutes after he arrived back at his apartment. Feeling dirty, he went to the bathroom to wash his hands. He turned on the tap and ran his hands under cool water. He went to put a dab of soap in his palm, and that’s when he noticed his fingertips. They were bright red. It looked like he’d burned them badly, yet they didn’t hurt. He rubbed them with his other hand, thinking perhaps he’d touched

red ink and stained them. But the redness would not come off. He ignored it for now, dried off his hands, and went to the living room.

Feeling tired, he decided to take a nap. He chugged back a good gulp of water, then lay on the couch. He knew his roommate was at work so he wouldn't be woken any time soon. When he lay back, he looked up at the popcorn ceiling. Before that heavy feeling of sleep overcame him, he saw a shape in the dots on the ceiling. Had it been a face? Perhaps. Or perhaps he'd just been seeing the remaining image of that nut job he'd met earlier on the street, superimposed on the ceiling.

When he woke up, two hours had passed and he felt groggy. He had dreamed, but what he had dreamed about quickly escaped his memory. All except for one phrase, which rang through his head: "God is real, boy! Repent!"

He closed his eyes, trying to will the heavy groggy feeling out of his head. What a fucked-up thing for him to have dreamed. It was clearly something related to his encounter earlier.

"I don't even believe in God," he said to the open room. His voice drowned in the silence. He brought a hand up to his forehead. The back of his hand touched the skin on his forehead and he had to pull away immediately. He was *boiling*. His temperature was high, yet he didn't *feel* feverish. Sure, he felt groggy, but he always felt that way after an afternoon nap that went too long. But a high temperature?

As he held his hand up over his head, he once again noticed the redness that had been on his fingertips. Only now, the redness had spread.

He sat bolt upright. *What the fuck?*

The redness ran up his hand to a point midway up his forearm. *Spread like wildfire*, Richard thought. It reminded him of a birthmark. But this had come out of nowhere. He looked at his other hand, his left one (the one that hadn't touched the pamphlet earlier) and noticed it was fine, normal, *not red*.

His heart hammered in his chest. Perhaps he was having some sort of allergic reaction? But to what? As long as he lived he'd never knowingly been allergic to anything. Could the pamphlet have had something on the pages, some sort of chemical that might cause a rash to his skin? That was possible. He'd heard of that being done before. Remember the anthrax scare?

He got up and walked to the bathroom. He ran his hands under cold water, using soap to scrub away at the red area. The strange thing was, he couldn't *feel* anything different about his skin. Other than the redness, it felt to him perfectly normal.

He opened a drawer and took out a thermometer. He pushed the button and stuck it under his tongue. After thirty seconds it beeped and produced a number. 103.1 degrees. *Shit*. He had a fever all right; he shouldn't even be functioning at that temperature. He put the thermometer back in the cupboard. He looked at himself in the mirror. *Should I go to my family doctor?* The office would still be open. *Or should I take myself to the emerg?* To get there he would have to take a cab, or ride the subway. What would people think when they saw his reddening arm? He could wear a coat and gloves to cover up his arm and hand, but that might draw stares and attention as well.

Regardless, he knew, wherever he went people were going to stare. They might think he had an angry red birthmark. Was this redness (because *redness* was the only word he could think of to describe it) transferrable, was it contagious?

He went back to the living room and chugged what was left of his water from earlier. He went to the kitchen and popped three Tylenol to try help with the fever. Still, though, he didn't *feel* feverish.

He decided he would go to the pharmacy around the corner. *It's a rash, perhaps some variation of hives*, he thought. He would get a topical cream and apply it and all would go away. His fever was a response to some kind of infection, surely.

The second strange thing happened when he was inside the pharmacy.

It had taken him five long minutes to walk to the pharmacy (or perhaps it had been five long hours, but it seemed that time had lost all meaning), when it should only have taken him thirty seconds. When he stepped out of his apartment building onto the street he was blinded by the sunlight. He had never felt such an excruciating pain in his eyes as he did in that moment. It was as though someone had poured sizzling grease over his eyeballs.

Finally, he staggered into the pharmacy. His eyes were pouring tears and everything was blurry.

"I – I need..."

"Sir?" A concerned voice.

Then, a loud *BANG!*

The fluorescent ceiling lights all blew at the same time, the place turning dark and the glass showering down on the rows upon rows of shelves. There were a few shouts. Then a bit of laughter from the three workers behind the counter.

Then, again: “Sir, are you all right.”

And now that the lights had gone out, Richard could see well again. His cheeks were wet with tears, but he could see. He looked around. The three people – one man and two women – behind the counter were looking at him curiously.

“I need a cream for this rash,” Richard said in a flat tone, and he held up his arm. The redness had now spread to the shoulder. It was now partially covered by his shirt.

“Do you have an allergy to something?” said the man, and he walked out from behind the counter. His small silver tag said that his name was Curtis and that he was the pharmacist.

“That looks very serious, sir.”

Then Richard burst out in a fit of laughter. His head tilted back and he couldn’t control himself. Curtis the pharmacist took two large steps back, frightened. He made a small waving gesture to the two women behind the counter. On cue, one of them picked up the phone and dialed 9-1-1.

This wasn’t the first time Curtis had called emergency services for a client who’d come into his pharmacy. Once, he’d had a woman come in and walk behind the counter, in search of something that could get her good and high. Another time, a man had walked through the doors and begun convulsing, eventually collapsing to the floor. It was the price you paid for harboring addictive narcotics. All things considered, he was just thankful no one had ever pulled a gun out on him before.

“Sir, I think we are going to get some help for you,” said Curtis, holding his hands up assuredly.

Richard stopped laughing. He lowered his head. He looked Curtis in the eyes and said, “No thanks, I’m fine.”

Then he turned and walked out of the pharmacy.

Outside, it was dark. It was as though the sun had been turned off like a light switch. The tears on Richard’s face had now dried completely. He wondered how long he’d been in the pharmacy. It had felt like only a couple of minutes, but now the sun had dipped down and the city was blanketed in darkness. The people walking up and down the street seemed not to think anything odd was going on.

Without looking, Richard stepped off the curb and into the oncoming traffic to cross the street. A car honked loudly as it swerved out of the way. Another car slammed to a halt, its tires squealing loudly. In the distance came the sounds of sirens.

Oblivious to the angry shouts from drivers, Richard made his way to the far side of the street. Then he turned and headed south. He wasn’t consciously thinking it, but he was heading back in the direction of the little popup stand he’d come across earlier. On his way south, a police cruiser, followed by an ambulance, roared north up the street toward the pharmacy. Richard was the only person on the sidewalk not to stop and watch the emergency vehicles bolt by with their sirens blaring and lights pulsing.

But when he came to the spot where the popup stand had been, nothing was there. The married couple who had been standing there handing out pamphlets had packed up and left. *Or*, Richard thought, *perhaps they were never here in the first place*. He shook his head. That was the fever talking.

He lifted his shirt up from the waist. The redness was spreading rapidly. It was making its way to the other side of his body, and down toward his bellybutton.

I should turn around and go to the ambulance, came a thought in his head. Only, the thought was far off and distant, almost not there at all. It was like he had a second little voice in his head. That voice had been the old him, but the new him wasn't thinking rationally. The new him decided to keep walking south along the street. The new voice in his head whispered, *subway...subway*.

So that's where his body took him.

When he got to the stairs that descended into the underground station, the redness had finally reached his other arm. Now that darkness had fallen, nobody could really see just how red his one hand and arm were, which was a good thing, or they might have all gone running.

There was a streetlight above the entrance to the stairs. When Richard walked under it, the light went black. Nobody noticed or cared, because lights went out all the time.

He descended the stairs.

The place was busy enough with evening commuters that he walked right through the gate without paying for a token. In fact, Richard was so delirious by this point that he didn't even notice he'd walked through the gates without paying. Nor did he care.

Down more steps to the platform.

The lights overhead flickered.

Now people looked up curiously at the lights.

Richard stood in the centre of the platform, and a man looked at him. The man observed Richard for a second, then he suddenly looked frightened. Because, here was a man covered in a crimson red rash and with a crazed expression; the eyes wide and bloodshot, the smile with those teeth showing, and now a few strands of blood running down those pearly white teeth. The sweat, running in streams down his face.

“Oh God,” said the man, and he pointed. And then others looked in the direction the man was pointing.

The screaming began when Richard took five long strides and jumped off the platform onto the train tracks. Everything was frantic. Someone tried to get to the emergency speaker system to call for help, to stop the oncoming train.

But then all the ceiling lights blew out and everything was drowned in blackness. For a beat, the screams stopped as people tried to comprehend the sudden darkness. Then people, frightened, began to shuffle dangerously along the platform in the direction of the stairs.

From somewhere there came a source of light. From far down the tunnel came the headlights of the oncoming train. The breaks of the train squealed against the tracks as it slowed for its stop into the station. Richard stood stark still on the tracks, like a zombie, facing the oncoming train. But just as the train reached the opening of the station, still travelling at a good speed, Richard held out both of his hands, palms out, as though pleading for the train to stop.

And *stop* is exactly what the train did. There was a loud sound, like the crack of a whip, and then a deafening crunch as the train came to an immediate halt, as though hitting an impenetrable wall. The train collapsed into itself. Inside the train, hundreds of bodies flew forward. Necks broke. Arms and legs snapped in half. Skulls cracked against the backs of seats

and against the balance polls. The engineer smashed through the front window and flew a hundred feet down the tunnel.

“I...am...God!” Richard shouted manically, and if a few dozen people hadn’t just been killed, it might have even sounded comical. He laughed like a mad man, and people began to run frantically, bumping into each other, toppling over, stepping on one another, trying to get to the stairs. A few people fell down onto the platform and struggled to get themselves back up in the darkness.

Finally, all became quiet.

Inside the train, injured people began to stand again. There were loud cries for help. Those that survived were feeling their way through the darkened vessel of the train, clambering over the dead bodies, stepping on the limbs of the unconscious and crunching their exposed bones underfoot.

Coming up the tracks from the station before this one was the next train, hustling down the tracks at 50 miles per hour and entirely unaware that the next station was still occupied with a mangled, inoperable train car.

When the speeding train collided with the still train, they both thrust forward through the tunnel, and everything exploded. Those who hadn’t been able to climb the stairs to safety were knocked over with the force of the blast, or else killed in some fashion – a metal girder to the head, a shard of metal to the gut, a sharp shard of plexiglass to the throat.

Richard disintegrated among the tons of steels that flew at him with the force of a tsunami.

An hour before the incident in the subway tunnel

The popup stand with the crazy husband and wife had existed all along. True, they had moved on, packed up and set up shop at a new location. But in their wake, they'd left one trace of evidence that they'd been there. A single pamphlet. It was one that had been blown from their little stand earlier, taking flight across the sidewalk. And it had come to a stop against a little chain link fence that had been set up around a construction site. It was there that the pamphlet waited, stuck up against the fence it like it had been glued there.

A small boy walked down the sidewalk in hand with his mother. He let go of his mother's hand when he saw the pamphlet up against the fence. *Neat!* The colours on the front were bright and white, and there was the picture of Jesus. He knew that face anywhere. He had seen that face at church just last Sunday during mass, painted high up on the ceiling of the church.

The little boy crouched down and observed the pamphlet before picking it up.

"Come on, what're you doing?" the mother said impatiently.

"Look momma, it's Jesus!"

"All right, let's go!" she said, hand on her hip.

The little boy picked up the pamphlet, feeling a slight electric pulse in his fingertips. With the pamphlet in hand, he ran back to his mother. "Look what I found!" the boy said, showing the pamphlet to his mother.

By the time the two of them got to the subway station five minutes later, the boys fingertips were a bright red. They hopped on the next train, and the train took them in the direction of downtown, toward the busy and huddled masses of millions of people.

If you wish to collaborate with me on a project, please contact me by direct messaging me on any of my social media accounts.

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