

Liberation Day

It's high noon as you look out the freshly cleaned windows of the recharge station you're working at. The window-wiper bot is making its way down the side of the building; precisely, quickly, and without the recurrent issue of biweekly payment. Another job gone to the bots. Yours once was occupied by a singular robot, but after businesses saw a drop in customers, cash registers were once again manned by humans. Still no chairs though, but your manager let you sneak one in. You're still staring out the window into the clear blue sky, in the distance, you see the top of the Arch, accompanied by scaffoldings and large yellow cranes to the left and right in a quickly revitalizing downtown St. Louis. Your manager steps up into the register area with you.

“Great day, ain’t it, Damien?”

“Yeah”, you say, still staring outside. A fluffy cloud is drifting by, and there’s a couple chatting outside of their car while it charges. Perfect weather, comfortable in shorts and tees, or a light jacket and pants, whatever. You wouldn’t be sitting inside a too shiny and white today either, but, you know, bills and stuff. A hard drop of a box makes you jump and turn back to look, and a box of decorations is sitting in front of you.

“Well, sorry kid, but I still gotta put you to work for something. It’s slow right now, so go ahead and put these up for me, ok? You know how they go.”

You do, and you pick up the box from the counter, shuffle past Artemis from behind the counter, and get to hanging decorations.

The window decals go first. Two red, black, and green flag is plastered on the front doors. Then, large black fists go up. From the outside, it looks like they’re holding up the clean

white roof. You notice one of the folks outside raises his fist outside while smiling at you through the window. You pretend not to notice the white fist punching the air and carry on. Finally, a text decal that says, “Solidarity!” and another that says, “Stronger Together!” on the outsides of the fists, which are outside of the flags. Flags, fists, words. Same as last year.

The door slides open, street noise and smells rush in behind the new customer and are quickly shut out again by the doors when they close. You’re finishing up the last window decal, and look to the right when he strolls in. His salt and pepper hair is matted, his clothes are only slightly dirtier than his skin, and his pink Hello Kitty backpack has seen much better days. He spots you to the right.

“Excuse me, y’all got a bathroom I can use?” he asks.

“Only for paying customers, sir.” Atticus answers from behind the counter.

The man turns to walk out, but stops when Atticus says, “Good thing you just bought a couple bags of chips, and something to drink!”

The man thanks you both, grabs a couple of bags of Rap Snacks (those weren’t at the front of the store when you walked out last to dump the trash) and grabs a Little Susie Lemonade (which have moved from their typical bottom rung position to very front and center in the field of view in the coolers). Atticus rings it all out, pays with his own credit card, and holds the snacks for the guy while he goes to the restroom.

To the left is a small lounge area. Still takes about ten minutes or so to get a charge from empty to full of the electric cars, so why not try to look accommodating for people who don’t want to wait in their cars? The television, thankfully on silent, was on CNN constantly. The

people sitting outside in their cars got the same thing. Remember those ads at gas pumps?

They're in your car's dashboard now.

Anyway, the news segments go as follows: bout the new lithium mines found deep beneath rural Missouri, something about the first successful asteroid mining operation by the joint SpaceX-Blue, and finally, another school shooting. Closed captions were on (mandatory for ADA updated requirements) and a slightly more wrinkled Don Lemon closed out his segment with, "Thank you, join us back at 6 pm for Anderson Cooper's special on Alt-Right terrorism in the northwestern U.S."

Next up, four hours of Black history and contemporaries. This year it was going to be on Black industrial leaders in the U.S. Some very standard, others new and fresh off the block. The Dr. Rev. Leonard McFarland was in the first segment, talking about how Black leadership in space industries would have untold benefits for Black folks here on Earth. Grand visions of doing God's work of taking care of his creation, all of it; Mars, the Asteroid Belt, and everything beyond. A handsome dark face, fantastic talker dripping in Mississippi drawl, and grand visions that made people feel like they could reach out and touch the Moon? Well, at least he wasn't buying private jets.

The man from before walks past you to sit in the lounge area, and he apologizes for leaving small dirt prints on the all-white flooring. You wave it off, "It's cool, bro." and point at a small compartment next to one of the pleather padded benches. A door slides down and a black Romba slides on out, accompanied by a Braava, the auto-mop. He walks over and slides onto the bench and starts eating his snacks. Meanwhile, you carry on with checking stocks, greeting other customers, and smiling very politely at terrible jokes.

The sun moved lower in the sky, which was turning red and orange in response. The houseless man (you assume) has left, and out of the corner of your eye, you caught him take another small bag of chips and walk calmly out the door. He's not stealing from you, so whatever. Atticus saw too, and again, whatever, but for a different reason. At this rate, the guy would probably get hit with a felony in about two months. Camera catches the shoplifting; company waits until its prosecutable to the highest extent. Not the first, not the last. You're gonna tell him next time he comes in, probably a week from now. He'd been in here before, but he always seems not to really remember.

You're back at the register, and a new customer who has no trouble paying for anything they want is piling on snacks for her, while her kids sneak on some of their own. Cheetos, Kit-Kats, two grape Vess sodas, one Honey Bun, two bags of Rap Snacks, and one bottle of Little Susie Lemonade. You tell her the total amount with a chipper intonation, and her phone is planted on the scanner before you even finish. A gold Patek Philippe sparkles on her pale wrist, and one of the kids has glasses on; a famous double-G with green-red arms visible when they turn to look outside. You continue bagging up the snacks and handing them to the mother.

“Mom, why didn’t Dad come in with us?”

“He just wanted to watch the car, sweetie.”

“But why? It’s not moving.”

“Well, Daddy just wants to make sure no one messes with the car while its charging. That’s all.”

“Like that man we saw standing on the corner?”

“Which one?”

“The one with the pink backpack!” the other child jumped in. “With Hello Kitty on it!”

You interject into the family talk, “Why would he mess with your car? He’s got nowhere to take it.”

“Well, the police were arresting him when we saw him, so he must’ve done something bad...”

You frowned at the child, who was honest to a fault, and he responded with a look of confusion. You looked at the mother, and her face started to turn red as you furrowed your brow. Before you could start, the mother shuffled the children out of the door, already knowing how this conversation ends; embarrassingly abrupt, or embarrassingly dragged out.

“Have a good weekend! And Happy Juneteenth!” she said, walking out to the family Land Rover.

Atticus came out from his back office, running a hand through his beginning-to-thin brown hair.

“Damien, you sure you want to come in tomorrow? I really don’t need you for much.”

You reply with a “Hmm” and a scratch at your scraggly beard that you forgot to comb through this morning. The same beard your nieces and nephews hated when you were first able to grow it out. And what would Granny say about your locs? Probably that she loved them. Grandad would call you over to have a drink and ask if you needed any money. You’d say no, and he’d slip you fifty dollars anyway. And then your cousins would want to go for a walk, since Uncle Quin took his sweet-ass time on the grill. You’d get back from your walk, eat your fill, get

a text from that ex you weren't quite over, get a different text from your plug saying he was taking the day off, and maybe another text from a girl you met a couple weeks ago that went to the school right up the street on Grand.

Atticus cut your daydream off for you, "I mean, it is your choice. Just let me know before we get replaced by the night crew. He started off to put in orders for inventory.

"Yeah, I gotchu."

Was it really a choice? Was re-inflated rent a "choice"? Medications? Food for your too empty fridge? The red numbers in your bank account with a negative sign in front? Job after job automated, but not replaced. And now you're one of millions, the one's who work the holiday's meant for relaxation and reprieve from the grinder. But the machine has gotten it's second wind, and it seems like it's only grinding faster now. You'll be coming in tomorrow.

Before you know it, the sun has faded almost entirely from the sky. The moon is out, but the light from it is worthless in comparison to the LEDs that light the charging lot. College students have been walking on the sidewalks between classes and coffee runs to the Starbucks. The apartments across the street have balconies filled with students partying with a ruckus, dark silhouettes flailing above the parking lot below. Stars don't shine well in the city, and by the time all the new construction is completed, you wonder just how few you'll be able to see. Your phone dings with a text from that ex; they want to talk at a new Southwestern restaurant down on Cherokee. Lots of expats these days, with the Rio Grande drying up. You say sure, mostly because you had nothing better to do, and it's not like you ended on bad terms, just couldn't make it work with him working sixty hours a week, evenly split between two jobs.

Atticus came back out from the back, "Alright, get out. I'll take over till Jax shows up."

“You’re the boss. And by the way, I’m coming in tomorrow afternoon.”

You both start walking to the door, and it slides open, letting some of the warm late spring air in. Now you both can hear the music thumping, and the faintest bottle shattering onto the ground beneath the balconies across the street. You remember when you were on those same balconies a few years back and imagine that it probably has looked the same from this point of view on the ground for a long time now to passersby. Atticus taps you on the back.

“You daydream a lot, you know?” and he stuck his arm out for a handshake.

You reciprocate and feel paper between your palms.

“Alrighty then, I’ll see you on Monday! Do not look at this until you’re back home!”

You smile, “Got it, boss.” and take off into the night.

You walk down to the Metro Station and look around while you stroll. People are weekend ready as they walk, bike, and drive past you down Grand. A car of white folks, windows down, playing Sweet Caroline. A car of Black folks jamming to old Paramore at a red light. The cars turning out of the Starbucks lot completely covering the sound with body shaking bass that makes your chest rumble.

Someone comes up to you as you approach the Metro Station, asking if you want some gas. You don’t. Well, at least not this guy’s. You were able to keep the anxiety internal when he approached you. Still not totally used to being left alone when walking alone, and not bothered when someone just tries to sell you something or compliment your shoes. He takes the rejection of a sale well enough, something else you’re still not exactly used to. The bus pulls up, everyone on, everyone off.

Even with the disembarking of a good number of passengers, all the new ones pack the accordion full. You give up your seat to an older man who looks like he'd have trouble standing up. Auto-driving buses were not nice when taking corners and turns just yet. Thing about all the new blood coming into town, it helps secure funding for better public transportation. The MetroLink finally wrapped around town, same pattern as the highways, with high-speed trains now too. Buses ran more frequently, too. Just needed the Southwest to fall completely apart. The bus chimed, and said, "Please make sure you and your belongings are secured. Departing now." Someone mocked the too cheery voice from the back, which made a few people laugh.

You're still trying to stand upright as the bus rolls over potholes the size of craters. Watching the lights of the city pass by as you get further into South City, going down South Grand. Stores and restaurants have decorations up for tomorrow too, and you're still conflicted. The small local places didn't spark this conflict, but rather the chains. The corporations and chains that would talk about liberation for a couple of days, and simultaneously hire Pinkertons to break up any and all ideas of unionization. Hell, Atticus had gotten demoted from his regional manager position for trying to stick up for workers. You wondered just where all of this was going to go, now that rare Earth metals for robotics were plentiful.

You take yourself out of your internal bemoaning for a second, looking towards the back of the bus. There're two young guys sleeping, leaning up against one another. It reminds you of two people sleeping back-to-back to keep watch, but what were their threats? What were they prepared for?

You make it back to your apartment down in Soulard, change your clothes, and you're back out the door to go get some food and drinks with Tavion. It's a nice night, and it's kind of obvious that you're trying to work through the awkward patch of "Yeah, I think we want

different things. But let's actually still be friends!". Before you know it, you're back at your place, going to sleep, and then it's the morning, and the sun and birds greet you. You smell coffee for some reason, and realize you set the pot to brew last night when you got in. No, wait. Tavion set it. Right, and then you both hugged, and he left. Then you remember the ache in your heart at losing romantic affection, but you smile at the prospect of having a good friend who would set your coffee for you.

Coffee, shit, shower, put on clothes, take the MetroLink out to North County. You walk up to your Uncle and Aunts' house, an old brick two story. The day goes like you imagined it would. Good food, flowing drinks, and liquor. Football, Uno, spades. Music playing. Your phone dings; a news alert. Your job is gone because the charging station burned down. At least five more across the country faced a similar fate. No injuries or deaths. Atticus was arrested quickly, "for his connection to the possible arson done to Circle K, with the group AntiBody." The article goes into detail about AntiBody, a misanthropic group who that humanity is a virus of the Earth that cannot be allowed to continue to thrive or expand into space.

Conversation switches to debates about the nature of humanity, the state of the present, the circular flows of time and all the other big questions as everyone else gets updated with the same story. Bobby Caldwell starts playing on the speakers, until someone skips ahead to Luther Vandross. Granny says, "Nah, 'gone head and let Bobby do his thing!'". What You Would for Love comes back on.

Your Mom asks if you're alright. A cousin asks if you need a job to tide you over. Grandad slides you an extra fifty dollars. Uncle Quin asks if you want to stay in the guest bedroom if you didn't feel good going back home. You assuage their worries with a smile, and a

shrug of the shoulders. Can't do anything about it right now. Might as well just enjoy the day.

Living comes first, survival can wait 'till Monday. Just this once.

You go on your walk with your cousins, Tavion comes by, before he heads back to Detroit. The day is warm, the sun is starting to set again. This is life, and this moment is what deserves your full attention.