





To those friends who've died
from an overdose. Their names I
can't mention—or I'd be sued for
defamation. But their absence
forever haunts these pages.

LINCOLN

"You think you're running from your home, but you're really running from yourself." Unknown

Lincoln sat on his bed, staring out of the window—a habit reserved for moments of deep contemplation or sadness. A sudden ring shattered the silence, jerking him back to reality: it was his father. 'Your mother has probably spoken to you,' he said. 'I'm calling to ask—how should I deal with Kathy? Swiftly or slowly?' He meant poisoning—a gradual demise over the course of the next few days.

Awakening abruptly, his body was drenched in sweat, with tears flowing freely. In that instant, he grappled with a pain so intense, crying like a child. Strangely, he had neither a dog named Kathy nor a mother nor a father in reality. Yet, within the confines of his dream, those three characters felt as tangible as his tears. Still dark, in that dusky moment, he gleaned a profound

truth—we meet death either at the hand of God or at the whim of another.

Lincoln Sorni was born in a small and sweltering village in Mexico under circumstances of which he was unaware. When Lincoln was conceived, his parents were going through a tough time. His mother found out that her husband had another woman less than a mile away from their marital bed. She, the other woman, was scheming a perfect plan: to get pregnant and take the man away from his wife, who was already burdened with two children and a routine that consumed her. She, the mother, when discovering her husband's audacity in dividing his time between two homes, felt how the fear of losing him pierced her chest. It wasn't the money she feared losing; it was him. She, the mother, was a woman of flesh and blood, eternally in love and ruthlessly obsessed with her husband. She, the other woman, was neither younger nor older than the mother, but she had something that the mother lacked due to her devotion to the church: an audacious boldness and a history of men, men that the mother wouldn't even dare look at with the corner of her eye. She, the mother, used all her physical attributes to attract her husband and take him away from the other woman, even

resorting to black magic. But that man was so enthralled with the other woman, that instead

of drawing him closer, it pushed him further away. Not only did the man start sleeping at the other woman's house during the week, but also on weekends, awakening in the mother an existential bitterness, which she unjustly took out on her two children. But the opportunity for the story of one stick and two homes to change, presented itself one morning at her door, in the form of a milkman.

In desperation, the mother made a decision that would change the course of their lives. After her two sons had gone to school, she began inviting the milkman into her house, a fifteen year old man who abandoned school to sell milk door-to-door. The milkman was so poor that he looked like a *preñador*. The flirting took over two months before she managed to get him inside her—longer than she expected, as he was not accustomed to engaging with married women with children, and she was not accustomed to cheating on her husband. But one deposit of milk was all it took to get her pregnant.

When she told her husband that she was pregnant, he started to spend more time at the house, but during her pregnancy, there were rumors about the milkman and the mother—rumors that, of course, never got to her but to him. He confronted her, but mimicking her favorite mexican actresses, she strongly denied it all.

When Lincoln was born, his father held him in his arms and rejected him, feeling deep inside that he was not his son. The father looked for

the milkman, and when he confronted him, the milkman's father burst into hearty laughter, asserting with a hint of disappointment that his son was far too foolish to seduce such a stunning woman, let alone get her pregnant. He licked his lips in front of his wife—the milkman's mother—while his thoughts wandered to the mother of his unknown grandchild.

Lincoln's father named the baby Pastor just to remind himself, every day, that he was an 'impostor.' That was the first and last time that he held him in his arms.

Pastor grew into a bewildered child, unloved by his father for reasons unknown and visibly neglected by his own mother, whose adoration for her husband was unmistakable. The confusion and absence of affection made him sensitive, often shedding tears without cause and wrestling with a persistent sense of loneliness. To escape reality, Pastor turned to novels and movies. Hollywood films became his refuge, transporting him to idyllic two-story homes with loving families and fully stocked fridges. In those movies, food was always abundant, fathers were friendly, and mothers were caring. Lacking friends and resenting the company of other children who taunted him, Pastor carried with shame a set of delicate mannerisms, constantly facing ridicule wherever his legs took him.

At school, his classmates would drag him to the bathroom, strip him of his clothes, and force him to walk across the courtyard wearing nothing but his underwear. Everyone laughed—

even the teachers, steeped in machismo. Silently holding back his tears, he found himself wishing to be paralyzed, longing to escape the burden of walking.

At home, his father—who was not his father—watched him with disdain, and unable to control his anger, would lock him for hours in a wooden box. There, Pastor not only learned to endure but also discovered the magic of daydreaming until he drifted into a deep sleep. One of those times, he dreamed that God, in His massive presence, appeared atop his father's desk. Confronting him about the mistreatment of his son, God kicked him hard in the face. Inside his box, still asleep, Pastor laughed.

In his darkest and most twisted thoughts, Pastor wished for his father's death. Afterwards, burdened with guilt, he sought forgiveness from God, but the thoughts always returned in a vicious circle of torment. Until one day, he realized that his desire would never be fulfilled, so he began to indulge in imagining how he would kill him himself: perhaps with a kitchen knife. But frightened by his own thoughts, he ran to the church. Kneeling before the village priest, he confessed with a trembling voice. The priest, devout and wise, sternly warned him that if he were to commit such a horrific act, he would be condemned to spend the rest of his days in prison and would never, ever enter the kingdom of heaven. Pastor reflected, and with the cold logic of a child clinging to a dream, he abandoned those diabolical thoughts.

At the age of twelve, driven by his father's irritation, who hated seeing him at home, Pastor found a job at a vegetable shop. Every Friday at two in the morning, he and his colleagues — men three times his age — loaded trucks with vegetables to export to the United States.

Before the truck departed, Pastor would always say goodbye to the vegetables with nostalgia, giving them names he invented himself. As he made his way home, he thought about the benefits of being a vegetable and the disadvantages of being a human.

One Thursday at midnight, at fourteen years old, with his legs bruised from his father's lashes for forgetting to stock the freezer with bags of water to avoid the unnecessary expense of buying ice to cool the sodas of the day, Pastor sat on his bed staring out the window, remembering the sermon from the priest who claimed that God was perfect, that He placed us in the best mommy's and daddy's belly in the world. Pastor, filled with anger and frustration, knew those words were lies.

The next day, he hid among the vegetables in the truck, and as the engine roared, he knew he was finally escaping from a life that, despite being his, did not belong to him.

WELCOME TO NEW YORK

"New York is New York, but Manhattan is more New York than New York." Me.

Lincoln was almost twenty years old. He wasn't as beautiful as a swan nor as ugly as a duck, but he had something special, something still untouchable. Like every winter, the snow fell, and Lincoln ran. It didn't matter where he went, time always seemed to catch up with him.

Manhattan was vast, magnificent, a city of ancient secrets and unrelenting energy. Its skyscrapers loomed with a wisdom and hunger of their own, towering over him like giants. In their shadows, Lincoln was small, brand new, and barely noticeable—a boy with nothing but big dreams and worn-out shoes, running just to keep from being swallowed whole.

Undocumented, he survived with two jobs. By day, he dressed up as Spider-Man, entertaining tourists in Times Square. Each time proving to himself he wasn't enough—too skinny, too small,

too Latino, too poor. When the worn superhero suit was off, he worked his ass off as a busboy at a nightclub in Hell's Kitchen—a place where everyone with no home in the world belongs. Far from the heroics he played out in Times Square and cleaning Americans' shit at the nightclub, he loved New York without knowing why. The truth was, he hadn't even known it existed.

The night was cold and tinted with sparkly pink-blue hues outside, while inside, an unrelenting summer embraced everything. The air grew dense as if the entire space held its breath in unison. And there he was, Derrick Passeri. Among the crowd of gay men, Derrick wasn't one to blend in; he stood out with his stereotypical beauty, worthy of a magazine cover or iconic Hollywood movies. With his blond locks, a sharp diamond-shaped jawline, and a body sculpted by steroids and the gods he didn't believe in, he approached the bar. At the other side of the bar, Lincoln was cutting limes behind the counter, when he caught sight of Derrick Passeri's careful smile in response to a joke no one would ever remember but whose face Lincoln could never forget. Captivated, he found himself memorizing every feature of the beautiful man. Lost in the moment, Lincoln accidentally nicked his finger as he sliced the lime, the fruit slipping from the cutting board. A thin line of red traced his pale skin, but Derrick was the only one who noticed,

offering a soft, knowing, mischievous smile as he rolled his eyes before turning away.

A week later, through coincidences no one would dare to explain, Lincoln found him smoking a cigarette, standing barefoot, clad in slightly damp blue jeans and a white tank top, as he leaned against the handrail outside his door. Lincoln, a shy and insecure creature, stared, but the thing with staring is that it confuses the one being stared at, not Derrick. He knew the effect he had on people, especially individuals like Lincoln. Bungalow was a rescued cat standing by the closed door, staring at Derrick. Lincoln went on to explain that the cat was left in his house by a friend; he lied to get his attention, but Derrick couldn't care less.

"Are you a cat person?" Lincoln grabbed the cat as he asked.

Derrick looked him in the eye. More than annoyed, he wondered what good he could get from engaging in a conversation with him.

"Your mother never taught you not to talk to strangers?" Derrick asked.

Lincoln never felt that he had one, and the pain across his face was enough to know half of his history. An uncomfortable silence followed the inconvenience of the wrong question at the right time.

"Are you a personal trainer?" Lincoln asked, quickly swifed from discomfort to joy, showing off a genuine spark of interest in his eyes.

It's been known across ages that gay men would use this question as a way to get a man's

attention, and Lincoln, at his young age, was not the exception.

Derrick examined his small frame, forgetting the very beginning of his own physical transformation. He concluded that Lincoln was not interested in getting a better physique, but getting his attention.

“Why, are you looking for one?” Derrick asked.

“Yes, been looking around.”

“You can’t afford me,” Derrick said as he put out the cigarette by stepping on it. The words stung more than Derrick could ever know.

Lincoln sensed a deeper meaning behind them, one Derrick likely hadn’t intended—and in that, he was wrong.

Derrick turned and started to walk away from a scene that he wouldn’t benefit from, only to discover that water was running out of the neighboring apartment. He ran into the apartment like a bullet. Lincoln followed him.

Derrick was an enigma to most, a solitary figure navigating the murky waters of life with a heavy heart and a mind clouded by bitterness. His days were painted with shades of darkness, a canvas tainted by the injustices he endured and the drugs he used to numb the pain. He wasn’t one for making friends or keeping up with the latest trends, and you wouldn’t catch him dead on social media, not with the skeletons lurking in his closet. He also harbored a strong aversion towards individuals with excess weight, a sentiment that extended to his grandmother,

Sofia, whose imposing physical presence in her youth mirrored her larger-than-life personality. Despite her declarations of affection, her affectionate gestures often felt suffocating and unsettling to him. At the tender age of eight, Derrick gathered the courage to confront Sofia about his father, a question his mother had evaded. With gentle strokes through his blond locks, Sofia disclosed a harsh truth:

“Even your own mother didn’t know who your father is. All the things you learn in an orgy. That’s how slutty your mother was,” she concluded.

Derrick’s understanding of adult concepts came prematurely, and among them was the meaning of “orgy.” It was a lesson learned far too early, imprinting upon him a knowledge of carnal indulgence before he was equipped to comprehend its complexities or consequences.

As Derrick expected, upon entering the neighboring apartment, he went straight to the bathroom, where the overflowing bathtub cradled an old man’s lifeless body within its porcelain confines. The old man, with his weathered features and tired eyes, bore the marks of a life hard-lived, yet his stillness spoke of a journey nearing its end. At just 80 years old, he might have deemed himself too weary to continue.

Derrick, driven by desperation and adrenaline, pulled Old Clint from the water, his hands trembling as he began the rhythmic compressions of CPR. Despite his frantic efforts,

the old man remained unresponsive. Lincoln, alarmed by the commotion, stepped forward to intervene, only to be met with a sudden blow that left a deep bruise etched upon his face. Fueled by a surge of anger and determination, Derrick unleashed his frustration on the bathroom tiles instead of Lincoln's youthful face, the sound of breaking ceramic mingling with the echoes of his desperation. For a fleeting moment, he glanced at Lincoln, who now stood in silent shock, cradling his cheek. A pang of regret stirred within Derrick—an emotion he wasn't accustomed to letting surface. He clenched his jaw, suppressing the urge to apologize, and redirected his focus back to Old Clint. Kneeling beside the lifeless man, Derrick resumed his efforts, counting each compression under his breath until, miraculously, the old man stirred back to life. Exhausted yet victorious, Derrick slumped back against the flooded bathroom floor, his heart pounding in his chest as he watched Old Clint slowly regain consciousness.

"Who are you?" Old Clint asked, looking at Lincoln's scared face, his voice tinged with confusion. Derrick, unable to resist the temptation to stir the pot, replied with a sly grin, "That's my boyfriend." The words hung in the air, laden with tension and defiance. It was a calculated move intended to unsettle Clint and assert Derrick's control. And while it may have achieved its desired effect at the moment, it would ultimately lead to their swift expulsion from Old Clint's apartment.