

“Songs From Richmond Avenue” By Michael Reed songsfromrichmond@gmail.com

“Reed has a gift of creating ridiculous characters who are not caricatures. Because his narrator engages his quirky friends with an earnest familiarity, the reader finds their predilections and idiosyncrasies credible. Endowed with this surreal cast of characters, ‘Songs from Richmond Avenue’ hums along on its own perverse, comic logic.”

– Michael P. Hartnett, author of “Generation Dementia”

Print: www.blackrosewriting.com/literary/songsfromrichmondavenue

Kindle: www.amazon.com/Songs-Richmond-Avenue-Michael-Reed-ebook/dp/B01N039ZM7

A Houston Kind of Love Story, with Beer and a Couple Dead Folks Thrown In

Chapter 9

As I entered the Relix to hand over Jonesy’s keys before heading home on foot, I sensed something was terribly wrong. Danny was in his usual place directly in front of the TV, but his smirk was not.

“Some blond guy and a couple of buddies were here about an hour ago lookin’ for his girlfriend,” he said, turning away from a screen full of final scores he’d probably seen at least half-a-dozen times by now. “I don’t know what it’s got to do with you, but that idiot Pete told him damn near to the street number where you live before I could get him to shut the hell up. That blond guy looked about half out of his skull before he left, like he wanted to kill someone, only for once around here that someone wasn’t Pete.”

The evening would have already taken on all the classic earmarks of a bad first date, even without this potentially life-threatening development except, of course, that the date involved Michelle. Michelle, who moments earlier had taken both my hands and kissed me right on her front porch and my lips, under that disturbing yellow bulb. A kiss for the whole world to see. Or at the very least, a few passing motorists if they cared to look. My guess is the ever-watchful crone got an eyeful, too.

“Do you want me to go up with you,” I had gallantly offered, as she turned toward the front door. “There’s, ah, no light, you know.”

“No, I’m used to it being unlit and you’re not,” she had replied. “It’ll be safer if

I go up alone – much, much safer. Besides, I have a big morning ahead of me. One that doesn't seem to worry me anymore."

"Why, because you just know things," I asked.

"No, because of you," she replied, slipping past my arm and through the front door.

I knew then that women like Michelle were pretty much always right and probably about more than sometimes just kissing and calling it a night. Couples don't seem to kiss nice like that anymore, I remembered thinking, at least not couples I'd ever part of. My kind of couples tended more toward groping, followed by arguments about groping – sometimes what was and wasn't groped – and, occasionally, the duration of a particular grope.

I'd watched Michelle ascend the stairs until she disappeared into darkness. I had listened to her footsteps and heard the door swing open and close. The chain from her lock slide into place, and the wood creaked twice beneath what I imagined to be delicate, little feet as she crossed the room upstairs. She never stumbled once. No, not Michelle.

"You know, I could swear I watched Eddie take Pete home once already tonight," was as much of a response as I could offer Danny. Not that Pete's location mattered any more now than it usually did. Everyone knew Pete never completely left anyway.

"He came back in a cab because he forgot that fuckin' phone of his again," Danny said. "And since he was here anyway – you know how that goes."

"What else did Pete tell his new best buddy?" I said, pulling up a stool to sit.

"I didn't just stand there and listen," Danny said, looking a little hurt, like I'd suggested he violated some sort of bartender's code of ethics. "Five minutes earlier you could have asked him yourself. He just left again. He had the fuckin' cabbie waitin' for him."

"Did he say where to?"

"He said home, which probably means some titty bar," Danny answered, grinning and taping a pack of smokes on the bar. "I'm not sticking up for Pete and his big mouth, but the guys seemed fine when they came in. The blond guy said he was meeting his girlfriend, then he bullshitted about the ballgame..."

"Fine. He's a great guy," I interrupted, trying to sound as sarcastic as possible.

"Glad to hear it," Danny said with a snarl as he tore the filter off a cigarette and

lit it. "I guess that crazy look he had on the way out was just part of another Pete moment after all."

"He's not a fine fucking guy," I shouted, finally snapping. "Who the hell meets his girlfriend here of all places with a bunch of greasy thugs in tow?"

My outburst got the attention of the few remaining patrons in the Relix, more specifically, four slightly drunken softball players and a female companion sitting at a corner table, all of whom seemed to take my outburst personally. They eyed me warily. The squat, slab of a man at the far end, whose skull resembled a mustachioed chunk of dirty granite, seemed to take the greatest offense. I figured him for the catcher and the boyfriend of the lone female.

"Lots of people go out in groups, it's called having friends," Danny yelled back just as loud. "Look this wasn't even about you when it started. Pete sat down with the blond guy and his friends – right here," he said, taking a couple quick steps past the bar and pounded his fist on a table. "Three regular guys total – not a bunch of thugs. The blond guy was closest so – guess what – that's who Pete talked to. "

The softball players had begun to whisper among themselves now and laid down what looked to be way too much money before rising to leave. I guessed they'd decided against waiting for their occasional waitress to reappear. I was suddenly glad they were only a little drunk, granite head in particular.

"Kyle Wade's his name," I said, relaxing a little bit.

"The blond guy – bullshit. No way," Danny said, seeming glad either that we were no longer yelling or that the place was practically empty now. "Wade Kyle. No fuckin' way."

"Actually, I think it's Kyle Wade," I replied.

"Still, that name's some kind of fake criminal alias bullshit" Danny said, sliding me a beer. "You know, a good ol' boy alias. Who were the other guys, Billy Bob and Bubba Earl Ray?"

"I don't know the other guys," I said. "I don't even know ol' Kyle Bob except..."

I could tell Danny had pretty much guessed the rest, but I went on just the same.

"Look, this Wade guy just got dumped by the woman I was with earlier – apparently he's some kind of rich kid nut job. I don't know how he knew we were here. You gotta know it wasn't my idea to bring women here."

Then it hit me. "The answering machine; he called her number and got the machine. That's why he came here."

The bartender couldn't have known what I was talking about and didn't seem to care. His night would be over in an hour or so. "How's Strummer," he asked. "He's fine. Loves the yard." It was an assumption on my part, really. The only thing I'd been around to see the dog react to so far were sausage and pepperoni slices.

"Look," Danny said, leaning forward. "The blond guy probably mentioned meeting his girlfriend to see if he could get a rise out of Pete. You can figure it out from there. The only part of that conversation I heard was Pete givin' directions to your house and sayin' what a great guy you are, and how you wouldn't mind havin' old friends over this late."

"How good of directions did he give," I asked.

"Not that great. I mean not as good as I made out when you came in. He got 'em past the museum, maybe to your street," he replied. Anyway, Kyle, or whatever the fuck his name is, had already started looking bonkers before that. That's why I got close enough to hear. I figured it was time to toss Pete and try to make things right with these guys – then I heard."

At that point, I remembered why I was there in the first place and slipped Danny the car keys. Then I went outside to use the phone, hopefully, to warn Michelle. I got what I expected, though – the answering machine, which probably rang downtown anyway. Its message was the same as it had been earlier. Probably, as close to being naughty on the job as Michelle had ever been in her life. I decided if Wade had gone to her place at all, it was probably while she was still out. If he'd shown up since she got home he may even have gotten himself arrested. Of course, there were other possibilities that I tried hard not to think about.

"Did you call your lady friend," Danny asked as I returned. "You should, late or not. I really thought there was gonna be real trouble. I tried to clue Pete in but, you know, I finally had to pretty much say knock it off with all the fuckin' personal stuff and invites to other people's houses. I guess I was rude, but fuck. I mean, do you know if this guy just quit takin' his meds or something? I mean that fuckin' look."

"You know more about him than I do," I answered. "I've never even seen the man."

"Well, there's quite a bit to see," Danny said, forcing his droopy lids wide with

exaggeration as he swung his arm in a way that suggested Kyle Wade was at least as large as the wall cooler. “I was just glad the Buddhist came out of the shitter when he did. That’s enough to send anyone packing, crazy or not.”

“Holy shit, the Buddhist was back around?” I said, suddenly seeing a brutal beating at the hands of someone who resembled a crazed blond bar fixture as the least of my concerns.

“He’s still here,” Danny said, managing a weak grin. “He’s in the shitter – again. Or maybe he’s using the office now. Go say hello, why don’t ya?”

Talk about the prototype for someone who seemed like he’d forgotten to fill a few prescriptions, I thought. The Buddhist, whose real name is largely forgotten and best left unspoken, received the unlikely moniker partly as tribute to his onetime dabblings in Eastern philosophy, but primarily for his ongoing penchant for chanting briefly just before assuming martial arts stances for the unlikeliest of reasons. I’d once seen him snap-kick a ferret-like office worker, briefcase and all, onto a table, then rip his shirt off in almost the same motion, because he thought the outsider was talking into a wire underneath his sports coat. It turned out to be just the latest in a series of such misunderstandings involving the unlikeliest of foes. In this case, once the terrified victim regained enough breath to speak, he gladly confessed to the lesser sin of having lowered his head, he had hoped clandestinely, to check his own armpits for odor before sitting with colleagues.

“My humblest apologies, Hoss. I thought you were five-oh,” the Buddhist had said several times, bowing in what I guessed were all the appropriate directions before recommending stick rather than spray deodorant. The Buddhist called everyone Hoss, especially after he’d nearly killed them a time or two.

“The shitter or the office, huh?” I said. In recent years, the Buddhist had begun to spend so much time alone in the three-stall restroom with the door held shut that the already frazzled customers started complaining – privately, of course – and having accidents involving their bladders or worse. Eventually, the tiny back room was made available to the Buddhist, whose disappearances seemed to have a direct correlation to his concern about strangers who spoke into their garments or wore especially shiny black shoes.

“I think I’ll pass on the visit for now,” I said. “I’m walking back over to Michelle’s, that’s her name. I’m gonna tell her what’s up, and then I’m going home and sleep.” I knew I was lying, at least about the sleep part. I felt sick and for once,

it had nothing to do with alcohol. I could taste the adrenaline or at least what I thought was adrenaline, based on the written accounts of some war correspondent whose name I'd long since forgotten.

"Buddhist'd go with you, I bet," Danny persisted. "In case of trouble. He did you a favor before, but I guess he kind of owed you back then."

Nobody called after me as I bolted through the Relix front door and past the oversized wooden deck out front where no one ever sat. During its construction four years earlier, the deck had been the source of much speculation by patrons.

Unfortunately, at least from a commercial standpoint, this would never evolve into a sunray-soaking or moonlit nights sort of crowd. In truth, most of the ensuing talk about the deck centered on trying to predict which of the chronically ripped-to-the-tits regulars would reduce it to splinters while attempting to park a car – or better yet, a truck – adjacent to it. As the debate grew more heated, odds were established and wagering began in earnest, just like with football – just like with anything the Relix crowd could figure out a way to bet on. When Danny got wind that an oilfield supervisor named Melvin Tibbs, who was partial to Tanqueray and grapefruit juice, had concocted a scheme to have accomplices put money on him prior to his intentionally taking out the deck kamikaze-style, Danny called off all the bets. Mind you, this was not because the bartender had any moral quams about holding wagers on something that was rigged, especially when he knew the outcome. It was just that he feared a little too much enthusiasm or Tanqueray on the part of Melvin, who drove one of those steel-plated oil rig service vehicles not quite classified as a tank, might bring down the rest of the establishment as well. The next day, the regulars reluctantly returned to placing lesser wagers concerning which of them could score highest on the new, quarter-a-pop Breathalyzer test that had been installed on a wall near the office door as part of some "friends don't let friends drive drunk" safety campaign. Scores well into the comatose level were frequently recorded, occasionally by someone about to rush off to the back end of a split shift at the Medical Center. Within a month of its installation the machine, possibly suffering the equivalent of a technological nervous breakdown, quit functioning and was taken away. Oddly enough, the deck remained intact.

It was a strange thing for me to think of under the circumstances, I told myself.

I could have been revisiting worse things, though. As I made my way among the broken cement and random gullies that passed for sidewalks in this part of the city,

I was grateful to be alone with my thoughts, though, scattered or not.

It took less than ten minutes to make it back to Michelle's number four door. I hadn't actually run from the Relix, but I certainly hadn't traveled at a relaxed gate either. Had it been a few hours later, I figured I would have passed up a couple of brave joggers along the way, even if their swinging arms and massive posteriors had forced me all the way out into Richmond in order to pass. Another strange bit of mental imagery to be sure, but it still it beat the alternatives. What if he was already there? What if Michelle decided that wasn't such a bad thing? Several precious seconds were lost crawling up the stairs after a stumble sent me shin first into the edge of a step. I should have taken comfort that, aside from my muffled cursing, all was quiet. I also should have noticed on the way in that there were no cars parked anywhere near the old house. I did neither. When the door opened I was winded, disoriented and, of course, wet again.

"Thank fucking God. That big, blond asshole was at the bar looking for you," I stammered, pushing my sweat-drenched hair away from my eyes. "I tried not to think, but I was afraid you might be ... or that he could've, you know!"

"Come in here, you'll wake everyone in the building," Michelle said, loose-leaf notebook in hand. She had yet to change clothes, let alone go to bed. I moved numbly toward the couch at first, but remembering it was also Honey's bed, ended up at a counter stool instead. Michelle, who was drinking coffee, offered me a cup. Oddly enough, I accepted.

"It's decaf," she said.

"Oh," I replied, rethinking my options and feeling oddly at home. "I'll take a beer then if you've got one."

In the interest of brevity, I called on the tools of my trade to recount my barroom conversation with Danny in inverted-pyramid form with the most important points first. By the time I had edited out most of the profanity and any mention of the Buddhist at all, I realized only a few words were really necessary. Michelle's safety was all that mattered to me anyway – that and the fact she was alone. For some reason, I left that out of what I said as well.

"I guess I overreacted coming here banging on the door," I said, even though I didn't believe a word of it. "Anyway, Jonesy can get his car tomorrow when he's able, and I'll head home just as soon as I finish this beer, which won't take long, believe me."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Michelle said. She hadn't spoken a word since I began my tale, but as I looked closer at her face, I knew it wasn't because she thought I had everything figured out.

"Do I think what's a good idea, finishing my beer?"

"Maybe that, too, but I meant leaving Teddy's car where it is. Kyle's already taken a ball bat to one car in the last twenty-four hours."

"How would he know..."

"He might not know, then again, that talkative friend of yours might have told him all about the car, too," she said, moving closer to my stool and taking my hands in hers. "You don't know what someone that mixed up might say."

"Pete, yeah well..."

"We should get the car back," she said. "Take it to Jonesy's and take a cab back."

Yes, I thought. Had alcohol not rendered me so unapologetically stupid earlier, that's probably what I would have done in the first place. Michelle and I would have dropped off Jonesy and the car and then taken a cab back across town. What muddled thinking, I thought, as I downed the remaining half of my beer and reached for the phone.

"I'll have to call Danny at home to get the keys back. It's late, and he sure doesn't stick around cleaning up," I said. "Could I get another beer?"

Danny wasn't home, but as was pretty much always the case his wife, Angela, was. Angela sounded like she'd been sound asleep, which wouldn't be too surprising at any hour. Her tone suggested she was not interested in chatting on the phone or speculating about the location of her husband, at least not on an unsecured line.

Fearing a potential hang-up, I frantically told her it was a matter of life or death, which I hoped was an exaggeration. She sighed and told me to hold while she got a pen and paper. Angela was used to matters of life and death, both real and exaggerated, and good about writing things down, too. She had wanted to be a writer, she once told me. Writers drink a lot, too, she had said. That's why she liked me more than the rest of the bar crew as she called them – I wrote – that and occasionally changed shirts.

When Angela returned to the phone instead of just telling her what I wanted Danny to do, I tried to recount the evening's events, but by that time my upsidedown pyramid had crumbled to dust. I rambled on about the truckload of inbreds

at Fiesta and the smock and maybe even the vibrator. I think I mentioned the clubwielding psycho-brat who was at the heart of the crisis, too. Maybe I even told her there was a woman involved, which pretty much went without saying. Then I sputtered something about Pete.

"Fuck that worthless son of a bitch Pete in the ass," Angela interrupted loudly from across the line. "I can't write all this down. How's my dog?"

"Dog? Oh, Strummer's fine," I answered. "Really likes pizza."

"Don't just feed him that shit," she cautioned, over the sound of ice cubes clinking in a glass. "He needs dog food or he'll get worms. Now what do you want my old man to do for you?"

I asked her to send her old man back to the bar as soon as he got home and have him call me from there. I gave her my cell number and, after a brief exchange with Michelle, her home number as well. I wrote the latter on the back of my hand, too, for future reference.

"I'll have Danny bring the worm medicine and biscuits, too," Angela said, as she hung up.

"You got a little sidetracked on the phone, didn't you?" Michelle said, shaking her head and looking surprisingly pleased. "You should have written down what you just said. Maybe have someone read in on the air for a little comedic relief."

"Well, I got my point across," I answered. "She'll have him call me from the bar after he gets home and she sends him back, which might be a while."

"But we need to go watch the car now," Michelle said, switching back to as close to a frown as someone incapable of wrinkling could get.

"You need to go to bed," I said, noticing a fresh cigarette lying crumpled in an ashtray on the coffee table. "I'll take care of the Caddie."

"Look, I'm responsible for this," she persisted. "You wouldn't even have this problem except for knowing me."

"You can't..."

"Besides," she said, picking up the notebook from the counter and holding it uncomfortably close to my face. "I have a fully devised plan written down. I need half-an-hour in the morning to fix my work problem and my Kyle Wade problem, and then I will go to bed. I bet you can't do that."

"I can so devise a plan..."

"So I've seen," Michelle said. "No, I bet you can't just leave work after half-anhour."

She was right, of course, at least in theory. Leaving would require an almost plausible lie.

“Well, I bet you have no business standing in a parking lot staring at a car for who knows how long either, even if I am there,” I finally said, as it dawned on me that would be a bad course of action for anyone to take. “Is this car watching really necessary?”

“Yes,” Michelle said. “I feel terrible. I didn’t know he was crazy when I first went out with him. I sure didn’t know he was violent like at the bus stop.”

“So your plan is to stand around in the open waiting for a violent, crazy fucker to show up and be violent and crazy?”

“He’s not that kind of violent, I don’t think,” Michelle said. “I asked around this morning, not very discreetly, I’m afraid. I made some phone call, too. He mostly smashes things and goes on crying jags, I’m told.”

“Crying jags?” I said. “That’s reassuring – I mean from a mental health standpoint.”

“You are not going without me,” Michelle said, slamming her notebook back to its original place.

“Okay, okay,” I relented. “But, if old Kyle Bob shows up and goes near the Caddie, we call 911. I know I’m no hero, but you’re kind of starting to worry me on that count.”

“Agreed,” she said.

With Michelle along this time, I traveled at an easier pace, picking our way along the poorly lit path that led toward the Relix. At the first corner though, I put my arm around her and led her across the street.

“Why are we crossing,” she asked.

“Because we aren’t going to the bar,” I answered. “You’ll see.”

More-or-less catty-corner from the Relix was the far corner of a neglected old park. From Richmond, it was not accessible to traffic and thus written off by most motorists as a vast expanse of weeds and bramble run amok where part of a chainlink fence still stood and made mowing impossible. We made our way down first one side street then another until a baseball backstop was barely visible.

“All this time I thought this must be an empty lot with maybe an old building foundation on it,” Michelle said. “I had no idea it ran this far back.” She knelt to read a ground-level marker of some sort, but it was too worn. I always figured it

once honored the exploits of someone named Cullen, as did most markers and buildings in Houston.

“Back way over this way, toward the street, there’s a picnic table,” I said, pointing off to my left. “It’ll be really dark until we get back by the street lights, but we can watch the car from there.”

We not only made it to our destination without incident, but it provided an excuse to hold hands. Maybe, things were looking up. We seated ourselves on top of the table, and through a hole in the brush, had a direct view of the Cadillac.

“Why do you know you can see the bar from here,” Michelle asked. “It seems like a strange place for someone to ever find themselves – even picnickers back when it was a real park.”

As I peered through the shrubs, looking for an answer as much as anything else, a second equally familiar voice came from over my shoulder. “If you’s waitin’ fer that bar to open up there, ya gotta long wait ahead of ya. I useta wait fer it right here, too, but nowadays they don’t let me in no how, so I just stopped waitin’.”