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# Why They Kill

THE DISCOVERIES OF A  
MAVERICK CRIMINOLOGIST

RICHARD RHODES

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**WHY THEY KILL**

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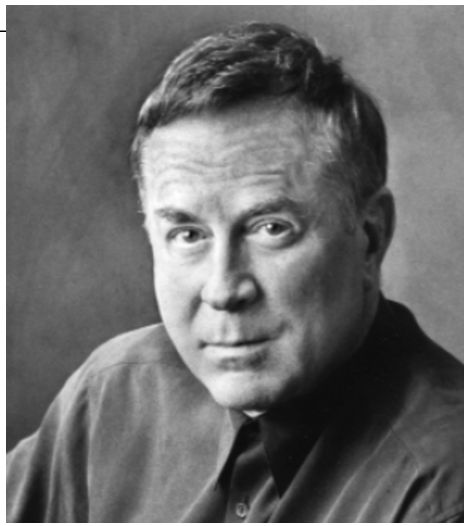
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RICHARD RHODES

**WHY THEY KILL**

Richard Rhodes is the author of nineteen books. His *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and a National Book Critics Circle Award. He has received Guggenheim, Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts and Alfred P. Sloan Foundation fellowships, and lectures frequently to college and professional audiences. Rhodes and his wife live in Northern California.

WHY THEY KILL

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*The Discoveries of a  
Maverick Criminologist*

RICHARD RHODES



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*I and the public know*

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*What all schoolchildren learn,  
Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return.*

—W. H. Auden



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# THE MAN WHO TALKS TO MURDERERS

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prisonpent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

—Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*



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## Prologue

Why do they kill? Why do some men and women and even children assault, batter, rape, mutilate and murder? No question has so stubbornly resisted explanation. Religions, ideologies and even discipline or science that touches on human behavior have offered answers—theories invoking moral, supernatural, behavioral, social, neurological or genetic causes. None of these well-known theories credibly and authoritatively explains the violent crimes you and I follow in the news every day. It strains common sense to imagine that people are born to violence when rates of violence differ from group to group, culture to culture and age to age. It strains common sense to invoke brain damage to explain violent behavior when most people with damaged brains are not violent. Poverty, race, subculture, mental illness, child abuse, gender, are all disqualified, singly and collectively, as explanations for criminal violence by the sheer number of exceptions within every category that even a casual investigation reveals.

I have personal experience of violence, which is why it interests me. For two years, between the ages of ten and twelve, I was subjected to beatings, psychological and physical torture and near starvation at the hands of a stepmother whose amused malevolence substantiated the wicked stepmothers of folklore. When my older brother and I were removed from our abuser's dark precincts by an enlightened juvenile court and sent to a private boys' home to recover, I gained thirty pounds in three months. As a result of my extended personal encounter with evil, most of my books have examined human violence in one form or another, always for the purpose of discovering what causes such violence and how it might be prevented, mitigated or at least survived.

I encountered the work of Dr. Lonnie H. Athens, an American criminologist, almost by accident while scanning a catalog of books published by the University of Illinois Press. The catalog listed Athens's 1992 book *The Creation of Dangerous Violent Criminals* and explained that it was based on in-depth interviews he conducted with more than one hundred violent criminals. Compared to statistical studies of police records or CAT scans of criminals' brains, that approach seemed refreshingly direct, so I ordered a copy of the book. It surprised and fascinated me. Not only did it offer a credible explanation of the process whereby the violent criminals Athens interviewed learned to be violent, it also immediately helped demystify the newspaper accounts of violent crimes I read every day. (Violent criminals often brag about their crimes, for example—a seemingly self-defeating behavior that frequently leads to their arrest. Athens's work revealed that individuals who decide to use violence need the fearful respect of their intimates and seek it even at the risk of being caught.)

After due consideration I located Athens at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, where he teaches, and proposed to write a book about him and his work. As I interviewed him, studied his work and extensively reviewed the criminological, psychological and historical literature on violence, I realized that his findings might have far wider application to understanding violent behavior.

Because Athens's personal experience of violence prepared him to find what previous investigators have missed, this book begins with his own story, moves next to his work and then tests his findings by examining whether they apply to well-known violent criminals whom Athens had not investigated to violent behavior in other cultures and times and to the ordeal of violence in combat. Finally, it explores Athens's most recent work, which looks beyond violence to the construction and

reconstruction of the human personality. It concludes by considering how Athens's discoveries might be applied to interrupt and thereby to prevent the development of violent criminality. Unfortunately neither Athens nor anyone else has found a way to reverse the process once it's complete.

## *Bring It On*

The James River flows through Richmond, Virginia, like human time. Turbulent above, where the fresh Appalachian water breaks white across the rocky shoals of the fall line, it rushes purposeful past the old Confederate stronghold only to stall and forget itself and slacken to tidal meanders below. Life is contention, and violent homicide has troubled the passage of the river since aboriginal days. pushed up from Jamestown in 1607 with English adventurers hunting for gold, darkened the blood ground of civil war, spills through the drug-divided city today and always aggrieves with private murder. If murder is madness, why does its run reach so far? Why has violent death undone so many?

In Jamestown days homicide rates in the West were already declining. Contending human beings had murdered one another in medieval Europe at rates comparable to those in the most murderous American cities today. Urban and rural patterns reversed in that ungoverned age: Medieval cities were safer than the violent peasant countryside. In the seventeenth century new monopolies of state began sequestering violence in police forces and armies. A civilizing process displaced murderous disputes from the street to the courtroom; homicides declined dramatically to historic lows early in the twentieth century before the modern urban rise after the Second World War.

When Lonnie Athens remembers the river running through Richmond, he remembers the Manchester Cafe, his grandfather Lombros Zaharias's diner for mill hands, set on a narrow triangle of land wedged among paper mills and cigarette factories in southside Richmond, at the end of the May Bridge. Athens's mother christened him with his grandfather's name, transliterating Lombros into Lonnie to shield him from the ridicule the rednecks heaped on Greeks in Richmond. More than anyone else Pop Zaharias steadied Athens's turbulent childhood.

The Manchester Cafe was an Edward Hopper scene. The mill hands called it a slop joint: big plate glass windows, separate entrances for whites and colored and divided service inside; marble countertops where burly tattooed men in undershirts leaned on their elbows drinking buttermilk; dark booths stained with sweat; a chalkboard listing the tabs that Pop let regulars run up between paychecks; a menu of hotcakes, hamburgers, salt herring, Pop's legendary bean soup, black coffee, orange Tru-Ade, apple wine and Richbrau beer; cigarettes and chewing tobacco for sale at the register; Hank Williams's "Lovesick Blues" or Woody Guthrie's "Philadelphia Lawyer" on the Wurlitzer jukebox; coal smoke from the mills billowing past like cloud shadows and Pop's flowers and fig tree taking refuge in the garden behind. "There was always plenty of good plain food to eat," Athens remembers, "colorful scenes to watch, humorous stories to hear and no blows to fear." No lack of colorful scenes at home either, but their auras signaled storms of family violence.

Violence might have come from that violence. Instead, partly because Pop knew how to keep the peace at the Manchester Cafe, Athens would eventually earn a doctorate in criminology at the University of California at Berkeley. A compact, handsome man with an explosive laugh, coiled and intensely focused, he would talk his way into prisons past hostile guards to interview convicted rapists

and murderers, alone and unprotected, sometimes at the risk of his life. Searching the heinous narratives for the tracks of the beast, he would find the rude, brutal, informal and probably universal program that creates dangerous violent criminals. He would discover for the first time definitively what generations of his colleagues in psychiatry, psychology, sociology and criminology had glimpsed piecemeal but failed to comprehend: the malevolent logic of violent acts. He would publish two brilliant, original books. And then he would spend twenty years beating his head against the brick wall of professional resistance to his hard truths—truths that might inform strategies of prevention and guide the criminal justice system to identify and sequester violent recidivists.

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Pop's sheltered daughter Irene married wild Petros Athens, who called himself Pete the Greek. Pete strolled into the Manchester Cafe in his army uniform one day near the end of the Second World War, ordered a beer and asked to talk to Mr. Zaharias. When Pop came over, Pete switched to Greek and told him he'd met his daughter at a church picnic. The young soldier was due for discharge soon; Irene thought her father might hire him. Bridling at the impropriety, Pop warned Pete not to speak to Irene again unless her mother was on hand to chaperone. He didn't need help in the café, but he believed in Greek helping Greek, so he agreed to try out Pete at the front counter.

Pete combed his thick, coal-black hair straight back on his large head. He was broad-shouldered and barrel-chested, with hard biceps and powerful forearms, but he was short in the leg. Pop thought Irene looked like Jim Londos, the "Golden Greek," the professional heavyweight wrestling champion of the world. Pete thought so too. Londos was one of Pete's heroes. The other was Rocky Marciano.

Pete married Irene and joined the family, but he didn't last long as Pop's front counterman, slingin' hamburgers under the Dr Pepper clock. The mill hands called Greeks "flat-footed guineas" and ridiculed the sound of their language: *Quack-quack-quack, quack-quack*. "You weren't black," Athens explains, "and you weren't white. You were just some type of strange foreigner caught between two groups and marginalized." Pop shrugged it off as the price of doing business. He had started out in the 1920s with a pushcart selling doughnuts and coffee and expanded to a shack, and now he owned his own restaurant and a nice house on Byrd Park and had money in the bank.

Pete had a different program. Pete had a bold demeanor: *Bring it on if you want, and if you don't, fine*. He had grown up in Pennsylvania, where his father had been a brickyard worker and professional wrestler—a brutal, hard-core, hand-to-mouth peasant from Sparta. Pete's mother had died in her son's arms, decapitated in a car accident. When the mill hands hassled Pete at the Manchester Cafe, he took off his apron, debouched from behind the counter and beat them senseless. "He threw one guy through the plate glass window," Athens says. "Unfortunately another guy he almost killed was the foreman at Standard Paper Company, and they boycotted my grandfather's cafe. So my grandfather told Pete, 'We're not here to beat up people, we're here to make money. I've had enough of this crap about Greek pride. If you have money you have pride. You don't have pride if you don't have any damn money. What the hell are you doing? You want to be a wrestler, become a professional wrestler.' So he let him go." Pete found a job at the Lucky Strike factory.

Lonnie's older brother, Rico, was born in 1945. Lonnie came along in 1949. There were sisters born before and after Lonnie and a baby brother later, but the two older boys and their mother carried the burden of Pete's domination. "Man, woman or child," Athens remembers Pete lecturing them, "it's up to you. I didn't tell you to disrespect me. You told your fucking self to do that. If you're big enough to disrespect your father, you're big enough to get what you get." He knew what he was talking about.



Pete's father's hands had been callused from the brickyard, and when he had hit Pete he'd busted his lips. Pete told Lonnie they had almost starved to death the year his father had smashed another laborer in the head with a two-by-four and the brickyard had laid him off. Pete left home when his father took after him with a hot poker and almost killed him. He shined shoes at a hotel before he joined the army and shipped down to Richmond. He was big on respect.

Pete worked for Reynolds Metal after Lucky Strike let him go. "I'm a hardworking SOB"—Athens transcribes one of his father's monologues—"and I deserve some respect for it. I work a regular job but I make my livelihood by working on the side too. I'm a natural hustler. I know how to talk to people. I was born with the gift of gab. I can sell anybody. I can go out there anytime and make myself some extra money. I don't need any college degrees or union cards to do it, either. I don't need to wait for payday every week to get my money. I can make it on any day of the week. Talk is cheap. Money is what talks in this world, and my mind is always on how to make a buck."

Early in the Eisenhower era, when Lonnie was three or four, Pete bought a diner from an uncle of Irene's in Washington, D.C. The Red Star Lunch became Pete's Snack Bar, thirteen stools and a counter, fish cakes, hot dogs, hash smokes, french fries, pies, icebergs, two big coffee percolators, breakfast all day. The growing Athens family moved to the second floor over the diner. Pete had been a drummer in high school; he made extra money in Washington after hours playing drums at the Friendly Tavern.

He kept an unlicensed gun in a holster nailed up under the counter near the cash register, figuring if a robber would order him to open the register and then Pete would grab the gun and blaze away. The neighborhood was transitional—Athens thinks that's why his uncle sold the place to Pete—and becoming threatening. Two black men came in one day and ordered three dozen hot dogs with everything on them. Lonnie was there helping out. "We had little pieces of paper already cut, and we get the hot dogs from the steamer and put the stuff on and wrap them, wrap them, wrap them." They loaded a box with the hot dogs and put the drinks in: Rock Creek Colas. The order came to twenty-five dollars. Instead of paying, one of the men grabbed the box. Pete demanded his money. "They said 'We ain't payin' you anythin'. This is the cost of doin' business here on H Street,' and they started toward the door. My father pulled out the pistol, shot over their heads and said, 'The first SOB goes through that door, he's going to be eating some lead with his hot dogs.' " Pete held his gun on them while Lonnie called the police. Declining to press charges, Pete had the police collect fifty dollars from the two hustlers.

Pete was no less violent at home. "He'd grab my brother and me by the hair and smash our heads together, bloody our faces," Athens says. "I'd hide under the bed. He'd pick up the bed, and I'd hop onto the springs so he couldn't get me. He was a barbarian, a peasant from a Greek peasant family, an extreme patriarch." Pete believed that the man is always right. He would fight anybody, Athens remembers. "He'd say, 'I don't care who you are or who you think you are, you could be a doctor, you could be a lawyer, you could be anything, but if you mess with Pete the Greek, I'll knock your fuckin' ass on that floor, and you may not be able to get back up again.' " Athens respected his determination. "He didn't go off every day. I don't want to give the wrong impression. But when he went off, he went off."

He went off one evening when Lonnie, four or five years old, was arguing with his mother about taking a bath. She wanted to wash his hair. He resisted, and she complained to his father. Pete came roaring in, grabbed Lonnie, picked him up and shoved his head down the toilet. "Flushed it two or three times. I thought I was going to die. I thought he was going to kill me in that toilet. It was

humiliating. The water kept going over me, and I just felt filthy. I was frightened to death.”

Pete put Rico in the hospital. Rico learned from Pete. When Lonnie was a baby Rico had attacked Lonnie in his crib with a hammer and smashed his baby bottle. More than once he'd tried to smother his little brother with a pillow. This time they were fighting, and Rico pushed Lonnie down the stairs. He wasn't hurt, but it knocked the wind out of him. At supper Pete asked Lonnie how he had fallen down the damn stairs, and Lonnie told him Rico had knocked him down. Irene rushed to Rico's defense, which made Pete all the madder. He picked up a plate and broke it over Rico's head. Rico had to be hospitalized for stitches and a concussion.

The streets of Washington were violent as well. Lonnie did not escape being victimized. F. Scott Fitzgerald describes an early incident in one of his books:

While I was walking home from elementary school, three teenage boys began calling me “short legs” and taunting me relentlessly about my small stature. After I thought they had walked a safe distance away from me, I made the mistake of yelling back at them. They suddenly began running after me. I cut across a vacant lot in a vain attempt to escape them. Once in the lot, they began throwing rocks and bottles at me as I ran. I was able to avoid getting hit until I tripped on an empty tin can. Just as I got back on my feet, one of the boys ran up to me and bashed me in the head with a brick. As I wobbled backward and put my hands to my head, I saw stars, black splotches, and blood pouring all over my hands and down my shirt. Then I got dizzy and collapsed. I woke up in the hospital, thanks to the kind intervention of a woman who had seen me lying on the ground.

Another time in Washington, Irene left Lonnie in Rico's care while she checked into the hospital to deliver a new baby. Rico had trouble at school. He used the occasion of his mother's absence to load his air rifle with BBs and go looking for revenge; he positioned himself outside his school and shot out windows and shot at kids leaving the building. He had dragged Lonnie along with him. The principal threw both of them out of school. They ran away and holed up in a shack in the woods for three or four days, surviving on food they shoplifted from a nearby Safeway. The police were looking for them. Their adventure ended when someone came up behind them at the Safeway and grabbed them by the back of the neck. They thought it was the manager, but it was Pete. He busted their heads together.

Living with violence, a child as bright as Lonnie could hardly avoid studying it. Hypervigilance in any case one price children pay for childhood abuse. Athens traces the beginning of his interest in criminology to the summers he loved when Irene sent him from Washington to vacation with his grandparents in Richmond. The Zahariases lived in the Greek neighborhood on the edge of Byrd Park, an urban forest west of downtown Richmond that descends southward to the James River shoals. The front porch looked across to the fountain in the northern reach of the park and the boat lake beyond. One summer a child molester was working the park, kidnapping children. The FBI, which has jurisdiction in kidnappings, decided it needed a decoy, and the agent in charge chose Lonnie. He sent him to the lake to walk around, cautioning him to stay by himself, away from other people. With men stationed to intercept anyone who tried to drag the boy off, the agent watched with binoculars from the Zahariases' porch. Lonnie, seven or eight years old, enjoyed his decoy work. “I'd go there every day,” he says. “I wasn't scared. After awhile it got boring, and I started hoping that whoever it was would grab me.” The molester never turned up. But Lonnie was intrigued.

Back in Washington after his summer adventure, Lonnie was playing the pinball machine at Pete

Snack Bar one day when mayhem ensued. A man walked in to challenge Pete. Pete had kicked him out before and told him to stay away. They had words. "Pete said, 'I told you not to come back in here. Get out.' The guy said, 'Fuck you, motherfucker, I don't have to get out of here.'" The man brandished an empty bottle, Pete drew his pistol, the man threw the bottle and Pete started shooting. The bottle missed. Bullets flew. "Contrary to popular opinion," Athens observes, "when you're really excited it's hard to shoot straight." But Lonnie was almost in the line of fire. The confined explosion beat against his head: *Bam! Bam! Bam!* "I could hear the bullets hitting the plaster wall beside me. I crouched down and held my ears." He was so terrified he wet his pants. Running toward the door, the man took a bullet under his arm on the right side. The shooting was ruled self-defense, but Pete was convicted of illegal possession of a firearm and had to pay a fine.

Between gun battles and the changing neighborhood, Pete's Snack Bar was failing. Pete had the soul of a carny, florid with wanderlust and get-rich-quick schemes. When Athens saw Federico Fellini's film *La Strada*, years later in college, he couldn't believe how much Anthony Quinn's circus strongman and Giulietta Masina's blond, diminutive, long-suffering mistress reminded him of his father and mother; mentally he retitled the movie *Pete and Irene on the Road in Italy*. In the summer of 1959 Pete sold his snack bar at a loss and prepared to take his family on the road to Florida. "The famous trip south," Athens calls it, laughing now at the lunacy of it. "The big dream, south to Florida for gold and the fountain of youth. We bought this damned station wagon and loaded up everything. Pete buys a big, extra-size cooler, puts ice in it, bologna and cheese, milk in there for my sister Connie and the baby, Billy. We made the trip in July, no air-conditioning in the damned station wagon so we were burning up, going around Florida all summer looking for a new place, looking for a beachhead."

They lived in the station wagon, slept in the station wagon, lined up outside gas station rest rooms to use the toilet and to wash. For driving-around money Pete would organize a tent and a table roadside, and they'd sell trinkets and souvenirs, Lonnie and Rico flagging down cars. They lived like dogs. Pete at least was happy. According to Athens, that was how his father wanted to live. " 'No bills,' he'd crow. 'No fucking bills. No water bill, no heat bill, no electricity, no fucking mortgage.' They ate bologna and peanut butter every day. Pete tried to get a job as a chef in Boca Raton. Then he got a job running a small gas station. It was his big plan: "This is how we can make it. We don't have to pay any rent, we can live out of the car. Park the car in the back. Make Rico the pump boy." Lonnie and his mother set up the table with souvenirs, hung up a sign. They rang a little bell to get people's attention while Rico was pumping gas.

Going unwashed, eating bad food and hustling to survive was exhausting and humiliating, and finally Irene had enough. "I don't know what happened," Athens says. "He smacked her around for complaining, smacked us all. But school was coming, and she put on the pressure. 'We can't keep living like this. We've got to have a home for these kids. They've got to go to school. You're crazy. This isn't working.' So he relented. North to Richmond. So this was the famous idiotic trip to Florida."

Much later Athens would write scornfully of academic criminologists who present themselves as experts on criminal violence without ever having had personal experience of such violence or contact with violent criminals. Their usual rebuttal to his challenge, he noted, was that "one need not actually *have* heart trouble or some other terrible disease to discover a cure for it." That was true, he agreed, "but [one] must at least *see, touch, smell and examine* actual diseased hearts if he ever hopes to know anything about them." Athens had certainly seen, touched, smelled and examined more than enough violence in his tumultuous childhood to know what he was talking about.

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Settled in Richmond once again, Pete found a job at the Standard Paper Company racking up cardboard, and rented a marginal house in the north end. Factory wages didn't put enough food on the table. Pop came around regularly to visit the kids and slip Irene some money. When he saw how bad they were living, he intervened, telling Pete, "You're not going to feed all these kids like that. You should get a restaurant. Find a place and I'll set you up." Pete found a place downtown called King Joe's Restaurant. It seemed to be a sweet deal, but in fact the neighborhood was once again transitional. Lonnie designed the sign, a majestic crown with "King Joe's" spelled out in glowing neon tubing. He worked there after school, rinsing beer glasses in blue water, filling beer boxes.

At King Joe's one day, lounging in a booth and looking out the big front window, Lonnie witnessed stark horror. An empty street. Afternoon light. A woman runs into view, panic on her face. A man appears, chasing her with a knife. She dodges into a doorway, scrambles to open a glass storm door, wedges herself in full view behind it pulling it against her by the handle, screaming for someone to let her in. The man smashes the storm door glass, gashes his arm, the wound spurts bright red into the afternoon light, the man raises the knife high, ignoring the blood gushing from his arm, and stabs and stabs the woman through the shattered door frame as Lonnie watches, petrified. Blood everywhere—the man's blood, the woman's blood. She slumps and collapses. A beat, then the man swivels around, looks across at Lonnie, bolts across the street, bursts into King Joe's bleeding and brandishing his knife, shrieking, demanding that Pete tourniquet his arm. Lonnie's eyes are wide watching as he trembles in the booth by the window.

Pete jumped to it; he'd been a medic in the army. He tied off the man's arm, and the man ran out. The police and an ambulance arrived on the scene while Lonnie frantically explained to his father what the man had done to the woman who was dying in the doorway outside. All these years later, telling me the story, Athens still shudders when he remembers what he saw.

King Joe's was another bust, another big dream that wasn't working. One day when Lonnie was there two black men came in. One of them was agitated. Abruptly he pulled a gun and put it to Pete's head. Pete was midway along the counter and couldn't reach his pistol holstered beside the cash register down at the end. The gunman started reciting all the reasons he hated white people. "You motherfuckers done us wrong. Why shouldn't I kill your goddamn ass? Blow your fucking brains out all over you. You been fucking us over for years. You made us slaves, you bred us like animals, I'll blow your motherfucking brains out." While he ranted he clicked the trigger at Pete. It made Pete's hands tremble and he started to sweat. Lonnie was terrified.

Pete needed his gift of gab that day. He said, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not from around here. I'm Greek, man, we got nothing to do with that. We weren't even in this country back then. My people came over after the First World War. We haven't done anything to you black people. I'm just trying to run a business here and support my family." And then, thankfully, the second man took his side. "Put that gun away, brother. Don't kill this man. He ain't done nothing to us. Let him go. Drop it." Finally the gunman put his weapon away, and they left. Pete closed up for the day to recover.

They moved to a cramped three-bedroom brick house on the other side of Byrd Park from Irene's parents, across from University Stadium on Maplewood Avenue, another transitional neighborhood. A big, muscular redneck named McCahill, with a Ku Klux Klan tattoo, in his late twenties, lived next door on one side; an older redneck named Seal on the other. The Athenses still spoke Greek at home.

Irene called her children to meals in Greek. The neighbors registered the exception and picked at ~~Quack-quack-quack, quack-quack~~. “What’re you talking about,” Seal would taunt Lonnie. “~~Quack-quack-quack~~ quacking over there all the fucking time, talking that *quack-quack* shit? Let these fucking people in and the next thing is, they draw niggers.” McCahill would agree: “These motherfuckers didn’t even fight in the fucking war. We didn’t fight World War Two to have these motherfuckers come live in our fucking neighborhood. They didn’t even fight on our fucking side. I don’t know what the fuck these motherfuckers are. Some kind of Moslems or Muslims? What are you? Are you a fucking Muslim or a fucking Moslem? Don’t tell me you’re a goddamned Christian. I know goddamned well you ain’t no Christian.” Lonnie would say, “Greek Orthodox,” and McCahill would sneer, “They ain’t no fucking Christians. Some fucking type of Jew or Moslem.” One thing led to another. Rico took offense. By then he was sixteen but small for his age, like Lonnie. He told Seal, “Fuck you, I’ll kick your goddamned ass.” Seal pulled a gun and fired a couple of shots at him. He missed Rico, who retreated to the house. Then all-out war started.

Three neighbor women knocked on the door one day. When Irene answered, they grabbed her by the blouse, spit on her, smacked her and tried to drag her outside. Rico happened to be home. He pulled his mother into the hall and chased the women off. “This was an upwardly mobile neighborhood for rednecks,” Athens says. “They’d just crossed the transition zone. They thought they finally had their place in the sun. That’s why they were hostile. They were xenophobic, full of hate. If you get around xenophobic people, it’s dangerous. They want to prove they’re tough, and they try to get you. I feel like we were being lynched there.”

The Athenses’ neighbors—McCahill on one side, Seal on the other—built low cinder-block walls capped with brick at the front of their yards to express their aspirations. Pete couldn’t afford a full scale wall. He laid a row of bricks and hooked them into his neighbors’ creations. When McCahill discovered the encroachment, he knocked off Pete’s bricks. Lonnie knew there would be trouble. He worried him that McCahill was a lot bigger than Pete and had fifteen years on him—Pete was in his forties by then. Pete came home and silently repaired the damage, hooking his wall back into McCahill’s. McCahill saw what he was doing and came out. “I’m not going to put up with this shit,” he told Pete. “I’ll just call the police to settle this.” Pete menaced him. “We don’t need any fucking police to settle this. I’ll settle this with you right now.” McCahill backed down.

Extending the war zone from the family to the neighborhood overwhelmed Lonnie. Pete ridiculed him, calling him a “goddamned runt.” “I used to cry all the time,” Athens recalls. “I was getting it at school, getting it from the rednecks in the neighborhood, getting it at home. And one day I just couldn’t walk. I wasn’t faking it. I guess it was a hysterical reaction. I just froze. I told my family I couldn’t walk, and I crawled to the bathroom. Pete didn’t like to spend money on doctors. I used to go to doctors by myself when I needed medical attention. I’d go down the boulevard and look for the right specialty, go in and give them a false name and address, ‘Lonnie Jones’ and some big address over on Monument Avenue. I never had any trouble. Some of them must have known.” He was brazen enough to ask for samples when the doctors wrote prescriptions.

His hysterical paralysis persisted. Pete tried mustard plasters, to no effect. Lonnie stopped going to school because he couldn’t walk. When Pete had to carry his son around, he conceded the virtue of doctors. Lonnie told a parade of specialists that he had a pain in his back. The doctors told Pete, “We don’t know, he just can’t walk. Something’s wrong with him we can’t detect; his bones seem to be all right; it must be nerve damage.” After about three months of consultations, the doctors recommended placing Lonnie in a state home for crippled children located near Byrd Park. “They took me to look

over,” Athens says. “I was just a kid, and here were all these crippled kids. I’ll be honest with you, I looked like Frankenstein to me. It scared me out of my wits. So they took me back home and decided to try one more doctor.” The doctor examined him and whispered something to Pete. Pete gave Lonnie a look, carried him to the car, threw him into the backseat and drove home. When they got there Pete turned around and said, “You better get up and walk out of this car or I’ll put my foot so far up your ass you’ll wish the fuck you couldn’t walk.” Lonnie was cured. “That was the miracle cure. I got up and walked into the house.”

When not even paralysis could protect him, Lonnie understood that he had to protect himself. Tired of being pushed around, he resolved to try belligerence.

## *Thoughts Filled with Ghosts*

“In nature,” wrote Emerson, “nothing can be given, all things are sold.” Mice, rabbits, deer, even family pets defend themselves when no one else protects them. Why should brutalized children do otherwise?

Lonnie Athens worked a paper route in Richmond in his junior high school years. The route included his own neighborhood, west of Byrd Park. Farther west it extended into Windsor Farms where the rich people lived behind walls in mansions set back among live oaks and magnolias on long, curved roads that led down toward the river. Windsor Farms was a different world, and it spooked Lonnie, riding his bike under the overarching trees in the half-light of early morning, throwing papers as the trees loomed and the houses dark. Nearer home his next-door neighbor menaced him when Lonnie wheeled by on deliveries. “He called me a Greek runt. Sicced his dog on me—‘Get that fucking Greek runt!’ ” McCahill’s German shepherd was vicious. Lonnie prepared a defense. He sawed off a broomstick handle and set a nail in the end. The next time the dog attacked him he smashed it in the head, and it squealed and went down. McCahill ran out screaming, “Whadya do to my dog, you fucking Greek runt? I’ll kick your fucking ass!” Lonnie, half the man’s size, picked up a brick and wonder of wonders, McCahill backed off long enough to let him escape.

Threatening McCahill with a brick had been Pete’s advice. “My father called me Peanuts and Einstein because I had a little microscope set and tried to do some science experiments at home,” Lonnie Athens recalls. “He told me, ‘Look, Einstein, if you ever steal or mess with any girls in the neighborhood, I’ll kick your ass. But if you go out there and bust somebody in the head, even kill somebody, I’ll be behind you all the way. Remember that, Peanuts. You’re my boy. Don’t be like Rico. I’ve seen Rico run. Don’t ever run like Rico. You don’t run, I’ll come and help you. I don’t care if it’s kids or what. You stand up, I’ll come help you, but don’t ever run.’ ”

Lonnie took notice. By eighth grade, things started exploding. Pete grabbed him by the throat one day and choked him. Lonnie clutched a chair and menaced his father. That was a standoff. Another day Lonnie was target-shooting in his backyard with a bow a friend had loaned him when Pete came over and told him to put the bow away. Instead he notched an arrow and took aim at Pete, telling him, “Don’t ever mess with me. Don’t ever put your hands on me. I’ll kill you if you ever touch me.” And strangely enough, although Pete beat Rico and Irene severely, after that he was leery of touching Lonnie. Lonnie had lost his fear. He would call Pete names and then lock himself into his bedroom. Every time Pete got the door unlocked Lonnie would be out the window. He would scream, “I’ll kill you one day! One day I will kill you! You fuck with me, you dirty fucker, and one day I will kill you!” He was imitating Pete, who often told his son that he was going to kill him, even putting a gun to his head.

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Athens respected his grandfather. Pop Zaharias wanted Lonnie to go into medicine—he paid for the microscope set and financed Lonnie’s experiments. “Don’t be like your father,” he told his favorite grandson bluntly. “He doesn’t have any sense.” Pop despised Pete’s violence. He thought it was ignorant. Pop was a peasant off a Greek sheep farm, but he was shrewd and pragmatically antimach. “Fight for what?” he’d ask Pete. “You goin’ to make any money fighting? It’s stupid.” Pop called Pete a “one-stop salesman.” Pete dragged Lonnie along when he made the rounds of small towns in southern Virginia selling knickknacks and sexual aids. “He sold flints, lighters, sunglasses, can openers, cartons of handkerchiefs, breath fresheners, rabbits’ feet,” Athens remembers. “But he had a whole line of other products that he held back selling until he sensed that a customer would be receptive—rubbers, vibrators, nude pictures, penis extensions. He’d make up little bottles of what he called Spanish fly out of Coca-Cola syrup and liquid No Doz and put a ten-dollar price on them. He’d tell them, ‘You know, I got some other stuff here, for adults. How’re you and the old lady doing? You need some help? Let me help you.’ Turn to me: ‘Son, go get me that box, son.’ I’d bring in the box. ‘Son, we have some adult business to talk about here, best go on outside.’ Like I didn’t know. He’d go into redneck bars and sell them pictures of black women and then go into black bars and sell them pictures of white women, work both sides against the middle. He had a lot of guts.” At Christmastime Pete would pull on an old army jacket, pin on a Purple Heart, snap a black patch over one eye, take up a cane and make his rounds claiming to be a disabled veteran. “Palermo,” he would say. “Battle of Palermo, lost a lung and an eye. Help a veteran for Christmas. I got a son right here. You know how many I got just like him?” Down the back roads of rural Virginia Pete would target a service station, note the owner’s name in the window, ask for him by name. If the owner wasn’t around, Pete would claim he had an order, deliver two gross of condoms, refuse to wait, convince the pump boy to pass him out of the cash register and take off before the owner showed up. He would make a week’s wage on one trip, covering his tracks with a false address on the receipts he wrote. A year later he would go back to the same towns and bull his way through his previous customers’ outrage and sell some more, but the one-stop salesman had sense enough to stay away from the service stations he had scammed.

Athens’s grandfather, born in 1882, was an elderly widower by the time Lonnie reached junior high. Although Irene had hauled the kids to church earlier in the Richmond years, she came to be ashamed of Pete’s increasingly poor reputation in the community where she had grown up, and eventually stopped attending. Pop would pick up Lonnie and take him along for company. Through the church another nonviolent mentor entered Lonnie’s life. The dean of Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Richmond was a literate, sophisticated North Carolinian, Father Constantine Dombalis, who had trained at Episcopal Divinity and Columbia and who made it a point to include the Athenses on his visitations. “I would go by the house regularly,” Dombalis recalls today in retirement. “and the children would be there and we would talk. Irene was a very fine person. She really held the family together.”

Lonnie smelled condescension in the way he and his family were treated in church. His grandfather was respected, but Pete the Greek was a black mark on the Greek community, so the Athenses were pariahs. Lonnie challenged Father Dombalis. “I went to him and I said, ‘We’re always in the back of the church. Nobody talks to me. What is this? You treat the doctors and lawyers better than you treat people like us. This isn’t a Christian church, it’s a country club.’ Dombalis was very wise. He said, ‘Listen, Lonnie, I’m Robin Hood. I have to take from the rich to give to the poor. Who do you think pays for all this? You’re right, this is God’s house. You’ve got just as much right to be here as they do. If anybody says you don’t, tell them to come see me.’ So I respected him. He told me the truth.”



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