



LAZARUS
MAN

A Novel

RICHARD
PRICE

Author of LUSH LIFE

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For Lorraine Adams, my vivid, my raw-hearted twin
All I want, is what I have.

For the daughters who raised me—Anne Morgan Hudson-Price and
Genevieve Forrist Hudson-Price

For my brand-new granddaughter,
Willa Hudson Price-Polk

For Ben Polk and Stefan Marolachakis

To the memory of Calvin Hart (1948–2020)

And to the memory of Herbert Zucker (1920–2008)

“God is no thing but not nothing.”

—**HERBERT MCCABE**

PART ONE

ANGELS
SPRING 2008

It was one of those nights for Anthony Carter, forty-two, two years unemployed, two years separated from his wife and stepdaughter, six months into cocaine sobriety and recently moved into his late parents' apartment on Frederick Douglass Boulevard, when to be alone with his thoughts, alone with his losses, was not survivable, so he did what he always did—hit the streets, meaning hit the bars on Lenox, one after the other, finding this one too ghetto, that one too Scandinavian-tourist, this one too loud, that one too quiet, on and on, taking just a few sips of his drink in each one, dropping dollars and heading out for the next establishment like an 80-proof Goldilocks, thinking maybe this next place, this next random conversation would be the trigger for some kind of epiphany that would show him a new way to be, but it was all part of a routine that never led him anywhere but back to the apartment, this he knew, this he had learned over and over, but *maybe-this-time* is a drug, *you-never-know* is a drug, so out the door he went.

★ ★ ★

One of the bars he gravitated to now and then was Beso, a small slightly grimy spot on Lenox off 123rd, the clientele a mixed bag of old-timers, younger arrivistes to the area both Black and white, and single straight women who felt at ease in here because of its vaguely gay vibe ...

On this night, the place was quiet; just two model-handsome young men talking to each other at the short end of the bar and a softly plump light-skinned younger woman, straw-sipping something peach-colored, who couldn't stop looking at them.

The men only had eyes for each other, and small-talking to the bartender, as he already knew, was like chatting up a vending machine.

One of the problems he had with living alone was all that talking to himself, talking without speaking and occasionally deluding himself into thinking that he was actually talking to someone else.

He ordered his drink then set himself up three stools away from her.

“I went there too,” he said, chin-tilting to the Fordham Rams logo on her pullover.

“What?”

“Fordham. I went...”

“No, this is my cousin’s sweater,” she said looking past him.

“What year did he graduate?”

“She. Didn’t.”

“Me neither, I thought there were better things to do with my time.” Anthony just saying it to say it.

“Like what.”

“What?” Momentarily unable to recall what he said last.

Then, “I wish I could remember.” Then, “Anthony.”

“Andrea.” Saying her name as if she wasn’t sure of it.

Either because she just didn’t care, or was too naive to clock that they were a couple, she threw a smile to the men in the corner, one of them politely smiling back before returning to his conversation.

With the talk going nowhere, Anthony, as he sometimes wound up doing, concocted a more interesting history for himself.

“After Fordham, I went to a clown college down in Florida.”

“For real?”

“For real. But I had to drop out because I was too claustrophobic to get into that mini-car with all the others.”

“What others?”

“The, you know, clowns?”

Then, looking at him for the first time since he sat down, “Tell me a joke.”

“Clowns don’t tell jokes,” he said, thinking, *I just did*. And gave up.



Columbia, not Fordham. Both the high point and the beginning of the end for him; full boat academic scholarship, freshman track, chess team, then kicked out three months into his second year for dealing in the dorms.

Why.

It wasn't because he needed the money; his Mobile, Alabama, grandparents had made sure of that.

So, *why.*

A therapist suggested that as a Black student he might have subconsciously felt pressure to act out the role expected of him by the white students but that was bullshit. First of all, there were two other guys in his year who were also booted for dealing in the dorms and both of them were white.

Second, there were more Asians than Caucasians.

Third, his parents were both professionals and solidly middle-class.

Fourth, he was raised in as integrated and urbane an environment as could be found in New York, relatively at ease in the private schools he attended, with his racial rainbow of friends and in the social circles of his parents. Columbia was just a seamless continuation of all that went before.

And while he was on the subject, he thought for the multimillionth time in his life—*Why does everything have to come down to race?*

But then, as always, he answered his own question—*Because it does.*

“As a Black student...” When the therapist referred to him as that as opposed to what he was, a half-and-half, it rattled him. It wasn't that he didn't know that an eyedropper of Black meant Black but ...

He was light-skinned and Caucasian-featured enough that, if he wanted to, he could pass back and forth at will.

It seemed to him that nearly every day of life at least one person, intrigued by the mystery of his features, asked him, “What are you?”

Most people preferred to interpret his mixed-race face as Latino, Mediterranean or Arab, a few going so far as to specifically guess Armenian,

Israeli, Turkish but rarely the truth, because for the most part, either out of their own tribal discomfort or embarrassment or straight-up aversion to it they wanted him to be anything but.

Some even resisted that truth when he felt it necessary to share it in order to steer the conversation away from jokes starring Black people, or other shitty racial commentary.

Sometimes he preferred to present as white, other times as Black. Both were true, both were false. And both left him feeling like a spy in the world; a double agent inside a double agent. And both left him feeling psychically exhausted.

When the expulsion from Columbia came down, his mother, whose family owned a chain of funeral homes in Mobile and Birmingham, decided to let it be, but his father, an Italian Irish pugnacious race warrior who taught African American history and literature at various private high schools in Manhattan, tried, after Anthony had pleaded with him to drop it, to kick up dust by accusing Columbia of targeting minority students. But after going through the motions of an internal review, the school basically told the old man to tell his story walking and that was that.

In the end, after a few years of bouncing around from lesser college to lesser college while working here and there mostly as a men's shop retail salesman, he eventually received a BS in education. Over the years since, he had taught junior high school English in a few public schools until his last day three years ago when one of his ninth graders, not liking to be told to stop slow-dragging his chair every five minutes from one end of the room to the other, came up to his desk when he was grading papers and nearly brained him with his arm cast.

The lawsuit he filed against the board of ed was still pending.

But the worst thing that happened that same lousy year was when his stepdaughter had been accepted, minus any offer of financial aid, to the private school where his father taught at the time—there was no way he could have afforded the tuition—and he made the idiotic mistake of

mentioning it to the Great Liberator himself who then promptly got into a war with his own administration, resulting in Grandpa losing his job.

The thing was, oddly or maybe obviously enough, when his mother, a passive and distant parent, died of a heart attack, he was shaken but not destroyed. But when his father, that bullying overlord of his life who gave him shit for choosing to marry a white woman, died in a wee-hours one-car crash some months after losing his own teaching gig, Anthony completely fell apart; back into the powder, loss of family, loss of job after job after job—see powder—and he was still falling apart, on this night, and in this bar.

“What do you want,” he said, unaware that the words had actually come out of his mouth.

Then again, Beso was bar number three.

“What do *I* want?” she shot back, not liking his tone.

“What?” he said, then, “No. Sorry. I was talking to myself,” then, talking to her, “I was in Garvey Park last Sunday with a sketch pad because I heard about a regular open-air outreach church service for homeless people and, yeah...”

Anthony drifting a little again, seeing that Sunday crazy man again in his orange wraparound ski glasses and soiled hoodie, his holey blanket-cape, his ballooning left hand bound to the point of bulging by dozens of rubber bands.

“And I wound up talking to this one guy there, he called himself Chronicles Two, he kept asking me, ‘What do you want.’ Just pressing me, ‘What do you want. What do you want...’

“I asked why he wanted to know, he says, ‘You got that pad and pencil you’re holding so I imagine you came to draw pictures of us but you haven’t made move one with that thing and I been watching you for forty-five minutes, so what do you want.’”

“Ok...” Andrea listening to him for real now.

“Then he said, ‘Let me tell you something, you look at me and see what you want to see but know this ... Yes, I am homeless, yes, I’m on medication

but I didn't *lose* my home, I just walked away from it because I need to be here for the people who *need* for me to be here.

“And I have a real hard time making this scene, sleeping inside my rock and hiding from my enemies, but the fact of the matter is, right now you look more burned out than me so, what do you want.”

“What do you want,” she murmured.

The men in the corner slowed their talk in order to listen in, the standoffish bartender too, busying himself cleaning clean glasses. Without looking up from his nursed drink, he could sense their attention and it made him feel of momentary substance.

“He says, ‘You and me, we are men of responsibilities, you to yours, me to mine, and we can't never rest neither of us. You want to survive all that weight? The trick is to think less but without surrendering your God-given intelligence. Can you manage that? Because it's hard and the thing about time is you got a little less of it than you did yesterday.’ So...” Anthony trailing off, the tale at its end.

A few minutes later, when she got up to leave, Andrea startled him by sliding her fingers over the back of his hand.

He'd relive that touch for years, but it wasn't what he was after.

★ ★ ★

As she walked her fourteen-year-old son Brian across the Crawford Houses courtyard this evening towards the man who had shot him two days earlier, Anne Collins, wearing her USPS blue shirt and maroon-stripe slacks in order to project some kind of half-ass authority, kept the boy directly in front of her so that she could grab some part of his clothes in case he last-minute decided to bolt.

The kid had that angry/embarrassed look he sometimes wore—head lowered, eyes upraised as if he were about to attack—but she knew that that fuming expression was about all the attack he ever had to him.

At six-three, three hundred and twenty pounds, there was nothing junior about Junior White, one week back out on the street and intent on taking back his spots.

She could tell by the way Junior, through his goggle-thick glasses, barely took note of them as they came on, that he had no idea who her son was, even though he had put him in the hospital with a bullet graze that bloodied his calf.

As scared as he was that night, Brian knew enough not to talk to the detectives who eventually showed up in the ER, and when the female of the two turned to her for help—*Mama, can you do your mama thing?*—Anne played dumb too, thinking, *I'll handle this myself.*

“Hey, how are you, my name is Anne Collins and this is my son Brian Passmore,” she said, striving for brisk.

Burning with humiliation, Brian glared at the ShopRite across the street as if he were trying to will it into flames.

“The reason I’m introducing myself to you this afternoon, is because Brian had got shot in his calf the other night right near here. Now, I don’t know who did it, and don’t want to know, but I’ve seen you out here and you might hear things and I would appreciate it if you do hear who was shooting the other night that maybe you could tell them for me that Brian is a good kid. I mean he tends to hang out with the wrong crowd, I can’t control that from up in my apartment, but he himself, he’s more of a go-along-to-get-along hanging in the back type of individual but he’ll catch a bullet faster than the others just like he’ll catch all the water when a bus goes through a rain puddle no matter how many other kids are standing around, he’s just unlucky that way but he don’t mean anyone any harm, and I just want you to know that about him so maybe you could pass it along to whoever was throwing shots the other night, you know, in case you ever run into them.”

She had no idea if Junior, looking down at her with his lips slightly parted and his eyes unreadable behind his thick glasses, had heard a word of it.

And if he knew that she knew she was talking to the shooter himself—of course he knew—he didn't show any sign of it.

Now what.

"You live in building Six, right?" he finally said, his overweight lungs whistling through the words.

"That's right. My name is Anne Collins and my son here is Brian Passmore."

"What floor?"

"The fourteenth. It's really the thirteenth but they don't want to make anybody nervous with that number so they skip it altogether."

"I don't know anybody living on fourteen."

"Well, now you know me," Anne said, pretty much forcing him to shake her hand. "So maybe we can start saying hello to each other when we pass. You have a good night."

★ ★ ★

Finally on his way home, half-smashed, Anthony found himself standing beneath an open second-floor window on Lenox, a microphone-amped voice, deep and female, blasting out into the empty street.

GOD, I HAVE BEEN ...

GOD, I HAVE NEVER BEEN ...

GOD, I AM ...

GOD, I AM NOT ...

Then, after a short microphone silence through which poured a raging aviary of disembodied howls and shouts ...

GOD, WHAT I WANT ...

GOD, WHAT I FEAR ...

At first, he just stood there staring up, then, not ever ready to call it a night, he stepped through the propped open street door, climbed the cooked-diaper-smelling stairs and walked into a hotbox of chaos: a too-bright, too-small, airless room packed with too many people, some upright and

juddering like jammed washing machines, others roaring, keening, yipping or rolling up and down the aisles like tumbleweeds, the mingled scents of body odor and bleach hitting him like a wall.

TELL THE PEOPLE ABOUT THE COMETS, GOD

WAKE 'EM UP IN TALLAHASSEE, GOD

WAKE 'EM UP IN ATLANTA, GOD

THOSE PEOPLE DIDN'T DO NOTHING TO DESERVE THOSE COMETS, GOD

And there she was, Prophetess Irene, as wide as a bus in a blue-and-white box-check pantsuit and matching newsboy cap, standing in the front of the room, mike to mouth, her eyes lightly shut behind great turtleback lids ...

SO GIVE 'EM A HEAD START IN FLORIDA, GOD

GIVE 'EM A HEADS UP IN GEORGIA, GOD

GET THEM ALL OUT OF THERE, GOD

Before he could even begin to process the sight of her booming out her visitations, or to make any sense of all the people running in the aisles, snapping their hands at the wrists as if drying them off, or clutching their temples as if their brains were on fire, or to just square himself up, decide to bolt or to stay and see, the decision was made for him—big mannish hands steering him from behind into one of the folding chairs.

WE PRAY FOR THAT VIRUS COMING DOWN, GOD

ITS GONNA HIT US IN THE INTESTINES, GOD

KEEP AN EYE ON THAT VIRUS, GOD

DIVERT ITS MISSION, GOD

And even though she hadn't looked his way once since he came into the room, was yet to open her eyes as far as he could tell, he intuited that she was aware of his new-face presence, probably wondering whether he was friend or foe, and what to do about it either way.

GO TO CAMILLE THOMPSON IN PATERSON, NEW JERSEY, GOD

SHE'S HAVING A DIFFICULT PREGNANCY, GOD

RELAX HER FEMALE ORGANS, GOD

OPEN HER FEMALE PARTS, GOD

*GO TO GINO LYONS IN YONKERS, GOD
HE DIDN'T MEAN TO HURT HIS WIFE LIKE THAT, GOD
HE WAS FRUSTRATED, GOD
HE WAS BESIDE HIMSELF, GOD
AND NOW HE'S SORRY FOR IT, GOD
SO, TELL HIM TO GO TO THE POLICE ON HIMSELF, GOD
BEFORE SOMEONE ELSE DOES, GOD*

The man next to him began whirling his hands one over the other as if he were rolling up a skein of invisible yarn, whirling higher and higher with each rotation as if he were building a Jacob's Ladder, higher and higher until he had to rise up out of his chair to keep it climbing.

Misted with his neighbor's funk, Anthony sat head down trying to get a grip, wondering how people could just let go like this, come in off the street, hand their brains to the hatcheck girl in the lobby, step inside a room and immediately start whizzing around the walls like unknotted balloons.

He'd seen it before in some churches, understood that for some with hard lives the need to let it all out in a safe place for a few hours on a Sunday morning or a Thursday night was one way of fortifying yourself for the burdens of the coming week, but that ability to willfully vacate yourself, to disassemble your very being in pursuit of a fleeting release ...

Carefully raising his eyes to the room, he saw that the only islands of composure were the dragged-along-by-grandma, seven, eight and nine-year-olds, the shirt and tie boys, the dress and hairbow wearing girls, sullenly flaccid in their folding chairs, their eyes as dull as nickels, one small boy looking back at him with embarrassed anger.

*I PRAY FOR EVERY DOCTOR IN EVERY STATE, GOD
I PRAY FOR EVERY NURSE IN EVERY STATE, GOD
YOU GUIDE THEIR HANDS, GOD, YOU GUIDE THEIR SKILL, GOD
WE NEED THEM DESPERATELY, GOD
WILL NEED THEM DESPERATELY EVEN MORE IN TIMES TO COME,
GOD*

As the celestial teletype continued to stream he began to settle a little, drift a little, and experience a nugget of desire—not to bust loose but to burrow down—where he sensed there was some kind of thoughtless safety waiting for him.

*AND KEEP AN EYE ON THE EIGHTH AVENUE LINE, GOD
DON'T LET THEM TERRORISTS DO WHAT THEY'RE PLANNING,
GOD*

*THERE'S GOOD PEOPLE RIDING THAT A TRAIN, GOD
DON'T LET NOTHING HAPPEN TO THEM, GOD
THEY GOT TO GET TO WORK, GOD
THEY GOT TO TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS, GOD
EVERYBODY GOT TO TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS, GOD
THE BUSINESS OF LOVING YOU, GOD*

He was getting there, feeling both above and beneath it all, floating and buried and slightly unable to form thoughts.

Then still unseeing behind those shuttered lids Prophetess Irene addressed his presence in her temple head-on ...

*THIS YOUNG MAN RIGHT HERE, GOD
HE CAME IN BECAUSE HE HEARD THE NOISE, GOD
WAS CURIOUS, THAT'S ALL, GOD
BUT NOW HE'S HERE, GOD
BECAUSE YOU BROUGHT HIM HERE, GOD
HE'S BEEN LIVING WITH SEVEN, EIGHT, TEN YEARS OF PAIN IN
HIS HEART, GOD
HIS FAMILY HAS LEFT HIM
HIS FRIENDS HAS LEFT HIM
HE'S BEEN CRYING OUT TO YOU ALL THIS TIME, GOD, HE JUST
DIDN'T KNOW IT
BUT NOW THAT HE'S FINALLY IN YOUR PRESENCE, HIS TABLES
WILL BE TURNED,
AND HIS HEART WILL BE HEALED
HE WAS FIRST THEN LAST*

AND HE WILL BE FIRST AGAIN, GOD

She was a hustler, he knew that, but it didn't stop him from viscerally experiencing a rush of hope. A hustler, no doubt about it, but he still felt grateful. To her.

I CALL OUT FOR AIDS, GOD

I CALL OUT FOR HYPERTENSION, GOD

I CALL OUT FOR DIABETES, GOD

I CALL OUT FOR OVEREATERS, GOD

I THANK YOU FOR MY HEART, GOD

I THANK YOU FOR MY LIVER, GOD

I THANK YOU FOR MY LUNGS, GOD

I THANK YOU FOR VITAMIN A

I THANK YOU FOR VITAMIN B COMPLEX

I THANK YOU FOR LEAFY GREENS, GOD

I THANK YOU FOR INSULIN, GOD

He closed his eyes and tried to return to that descending state of release but this time the small euphoria running through him he recognized as identical to the fleeting cut-cord elation he had felt right before deciding to swallow most of a bottle of aspirin a week after his wife and stepdaughter left.

*AND GIVE US THE STRENGTH TO DEAL WITH OUR DAUGHTERS,
GOD*

*WE CAN'T SAY NOTHING TO THEM THAT THEY DON'T GIVE US
BACK TWO FOR ONE, GOD*

*HUMBLE THEM AND GIVE THEM BIGGER EARS TO LISTEN WITH,
GOD.*

NOBODY NEEDS MORE GRANDCHILDREN, GOD

BUT IF THEY'RE GONNA COME ANYHOW, GOD

*GIVE US THE GRACE TO RECEIVE THEM AS THE BLESSINGS THAT
YOU INTENDED THEM TO BE, GOD ...*

Spooked by his own deadly sense-memory, he impulsively raised his eyes to her for help.

And then he wished he hadn't.

*I SEE YOUR ANGELS HOVERING AROUND THAT SPOT ON THAT
YOUNG MAN'S BACK, GOD ...*

THEY SEE SOMETHING THERE, GOD

THEY'RE WORRIED ABOUT SOMETHING THERE, GOD

*THEY KNOW LIKE YOU KNOW THERE'S SOMETHING INSIDE OF
HIM RIGHT THERE, GOD*

THEY KNOW LIKE YOU KNOW, GOD

THAT IF HE DON'T GET IT OUT, IT'S GOING TO KILL HIM, GOD

He had no idea what he'd done to make her flip the switch on him like that but those fretting angels of hers came off to him more like a threat than a divine insight; a menacing metaphor that he couldn't dissect right now, but one thing was clear—it was definitely time to go.

As he stood up to leave, the big hand that steered him into his seat once again came out of nowhere to slap a glob of cheap vanilla-scented lotion on his forehead and into his hair, Anthony knowing right off what the deal was—an effort to startle him into feeling like he had been hit by the spirit—it must have worked on some people in here but all he could think of was the shower he had to take to get that cloying crap out of his hair. It felt unworthy of her, but she still freaked him out.

Heading for the door, he could feel her eyes on his back.

SOME SET FOOT IN YOUR HOUSE, GOD

JUST BECAUSE THEY'RE CURIOUS, GOD

*BUT THEY SHOULD KNOW THAT CURIOUS DON'T CUT IT WITH
YOU, GOD*

DOUBTERS DON'T CUT IT WITH YOU, GOD

SO SHOW THEM THE POWER OF YOUR TRUTH, GOD

LET THEM BE SLEEPLESS FOR YOUR VISITATION, GOD

LET THEIR COUNCIL OF REJECTION BE REJECTED, GOD

LET THEIR COUNSEL OF REJECTION BE SHUNNED, GOD

★ ★ ★