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# COME AS YOU ARE

and Other Stories

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STEVEN RAMIREZ



Glass Highway  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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Come As You Are / A Short Novel and Nine Stories / Steven Ramirez.  
— 1st ed.  
ISBN: 978-0-9990791-1-9

Edited by Shannon A. Thompson  
Cover design by Adrijus Guscia

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## Come As You Are

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OLLIE WAS THE FIRST. HE WAS MY BEST FRIEND.

My parents don't know—can't know—the whole story, but when it comes right down to it, none of this is even my fault. All I did was read off a bunch of words from a list I found, and the next thing I know, people are dying. Okay, there might have been some supernatural shit involved, but... It's not like I meant for it to happen. I just wanted to keep Kirk Wardell and his loser friends from hurting me again. This was about those assholes, not me. Why did Ollie have to get mixed up in it? It was that damned freakin' list.

This is not my fault.

You always wish you could control who gets what's coming to them, like God. Sort of. But I guess it doesn't work that way. People you never meant to harm—guys like Ollie who were cool to you and bought you a Klondike bar or a Choco Taco because you never had any money in your pocket because your dad's been out of work since forever and your mom's doing all she can to “stretch a

dollar”—why did those people have to suffer? It makes no sense.

So I'm sitting in my living room, waiting for the cops to be done talking to Mom and Dad. I should've never said anything. Then my parents wouldn't have called them. Whatever. The detectives will want to ask me what happened at the skate park, and I will lie. Because I may be only twelve, but there's one thing I know: you never tell the truth to the cops. Ever.

I guess I should start at the beginning when things weren't so bad. When Kirk and those doofs he likes to hang out with were making fun of my clothes and my shoes and my hair, and I would just take it like the poor dog next door who keeps getting beaten by Luckman, the mean old neighbor with the missing leg. All the animal does is whimper, lower his head and...take it some more. Yeah, that was pretty much the start of another bitch of a day for me.

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ME AND OLLIE had planned to go to Gasher's Park right after school to ride our skateboards. We had to hurry, though, because later the high schoolers would show, and it would be over for us. We'd have to run away before those loudmouthed douches could steal our boards or fling beer bottles at our heads. It could turn into a real mess, let me tell you.

But it was great whenever we got there early. We'd ride and ride for like, maybe half an hour. But then the shit would start. Those dickheads would storm in through the heavy chain link gate, hollering about some little pussies trying to take over their turf. It would always turn into a game of cat and mouse. I guess you know who the mice

were. We'd have to try and get past them, through the gate, down the sidewalk, and onto Pear Street.

Usually, we'd make it, but sometimes, they would catch us and throw us up against the fence. One time, Ollie hit his head on a steel post. The blow knocked him out cold, and when he went down, those idiots got scared and took off. Maybe they thought they'd killed him.

"Ollie, jeez!" I said, running up to him and shaking him by the shoulders.

"Are they gone?"

"What? Yeah, they're gone. You mean—"

"I was faking."

Then he sat up, grinning as he wiped the blood off his forehead. I wanted to kill the little turd, but instead, I hugged him.

"Come on, Ollie," I said, giving him my hand.

Anyways, today was pretty much like all the other days, except we left before the shitlickers even arrived. We cut through the park like we always did. Then we decided to sit on a bench next to some old lady who was kissing her pug or whatever.

All of a sudden, Ollie says, "Aww, man! I forgot my math homework."

"You'll get it tomorrow."

"No, Ivan. It's *due* tomorrow. I already got a D in the class, and my dad said if I fail math, he's going to kill me."

"He's not going to kill you, Ollie. It's an exaggeration. Look, you can copy mine."

"You don't understand. Mr. Ryan wrote down special instructions to help me. I need that paper."

Now I'm worried because Ollie is crying like a baby. I mean, big ol' tears that magnify the freckles on his cheeks. I don't know what to say, so I try doing a funny handstand. But I fall on my ass. I'm hoping I can make Ollie laugh.

He isn't even looking at me, though. Now I have a sore ass, and he's still crying.

"Tell you what, Ollie. Let's go back to school and get your math. Come on. I'll walk with you."

"Yeah?" he says. He's smiling, green snot leaking out of his nose, and I know he'll be okay.

We go back the way we came, past the enclosed skate park. The high schoolers we hate are in there, swearing at each other and holding onto beers as they do tricks—back-sides, Caballerials, Nollies—stuff me and Ollie are just starting to learn. One of them looks like he's going too fast. He falls and does a wicked face-plant, his beer shattering all over the place.

"Whoa!" someone says. "Dude..."

As we sneak up to the gate, I recognize the kid on the ground. I'm pretty sure his name is Franklin. He's screaming and trying to grab his face, but his friends are holding down his arms. We can see the broken neck of the beer bottle sticking out where his eye should be. I've never seen anything like it in real life—only in horror movies. It looks like the broken bottle gouged out the 'tard's eye. I don't think he even realizes how bad it is. He keeps saying over and over, "I can't see!"

"He's the kid who slammed me into the pole," Ollie says. "Remember?"

When I turn to my friend, he's smiling in a way that is seriously messed up.

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IT TAKES us only a couple minutes to make it to school. Me and Ollie, we live real close, so it's nice in the morning when we're late and we need to run like hell to be in our

seats for English before the tardy bell rings, which only happens, like, five days a week.

As I suspect, the place is pretty much deserted. Janitors are already inside the classrooms, mopping and straightening up and whatnot. We head straight for our lockers. I figure this won't take long. Ollie will find his stupid homework; then we'll go to his house, because there's never any food at my house, and Ollie says there's always too much at his. He'll fix me a burrito, which he likes to call a "bean and cheeser." Later, I'll head home alone, which is no biggie.

Ollie is digging through his locker, looking for the "special" math paper from Mr. Ryan. I'm not doing anything, just chillin'. I look over again. Now, my friend has his stupid head stuck inside his locker. Since he's wasting all my time, I decide to go exploring.

There's this old section of the school that's closed off. Some say it's haunted. As I stare through the chain link fence, I can see the rows and rows of old tan lockers, all of which are closed—except for one. I'd seen this locker before whenever I would pass by in the morning on my way to history. And the only reason I even noticed it at all was because it has this ugly red stain across the door—rust, I think. If you stare at that stain long enough, you begin to see stuff. Not like Jesus or aliens or anything—just weird shapes that kind of move around all swirly.

But, like I said, today the locker is open.

Though no one is supposed to go back there, they never keep the gate locked. I guess it's because most of the other kids are too scared. I'll bet it was the principal who started the "haunted" rumor. But I decide to check it out for shits and giggles, which is what my dad always used to say, back when he had a job. I open the latch and go inside. I can't explain it, but as I move closer to the open locker, a

powerful feeling comes over me. Not like fear or anything—more like anticipation. I don't expect to find anything, but as I said, I have nothing else to do, so why the hell not?

The door is swinging back and forth, which is nuts because there isn't even a breeze. To prove to myself I'm not scared, I walk up and shut the door. The stain seems darker—deeper. I look at it all different ways, turning my head this way and that, squinting at it first with my right eye, then with my left. And each time, the shapes look different. If I stare at the door just right, I can almost see...

"What the hell are you doing back here?" someone says.

My heart almost explodes like a water balloon hitting the sidewalk. One of the janitors—this old dude named Hershey—is standing next to me with one hand holding onto his favorite cart with the squeaky wheel from hell. Hershey always smells bad—like sweat and bean farts—and he's missing a lot of teeth. I think he was here when they built the freakin' school. And he's always mad. Maybe his back hurts, which is what my mom always says when some grown-up is being mean to me. *Maybe their back hurts, Ivan. You should feel sorry for them.*

"I'm not doing anything."

He grunts, reaches over, and slams the locker shut. Then he spins the combination lock several times.

"Stay away from here, asswipe. I won't tell you twice."

Hershey turns his cart around and walks toward the gate. As I follow him, I ignore his attitude because I want to find out more about the locker. What's the worst he can do to me anyways? He's a *janitor*.

"Hey, Hershey?"

"Yeah?" he says, a little bit calmer now that he got to yell at a seventh grader.

"Who did that locker belong to?"



“No one.”

We’re outside the fence now, and he’s on his knees, checking the supplies on the cart.

“Well, someone must’ve used it.”

He gets up with a groan and stares at me, his toothless pie-hole hanging open like he can’t believe someone has the balls to hit him with all these dumb questions.

“Craig,” he says.

“So, is he still a student here?”

“No.”

“Oh, he promoted then.”

“Sure. He promoted.”

The old man shakes his head like some sad, evil clown, which creeps me out the way Ollie did when Franklin lost his eye. I see my friend approaching, grinning and waving his math homework. The two of us are standing next to the gate, staring at the sketchy old man to see what he’ll do next. He doesn’t disappoint. Rolling his cart straight ahead, one wheel squeaking like a mouse on Spice, he walks like half a mile down, then stops and turns around.

“Be seein’ you boys,” he says, his raspy voice making this weird echo. “Don’t forget what I said. I’ll be watching.”

After Hershey is gone, I take another look at the locker. Amazingly, it’s open again.

“Hey, want to see what’s inside that locker over there?”

“I dunno, Ivan,” Ollie says. “Let’s go.”

“Come on, you pussy. Can’t you see? Hershey was just messing with us.”

“We’re not supposed to go back there. Anyway, I needa go home and start on this math.”

“Sure you don’t want to see what’s in Craig’s locker?”

“I gotta go. See you tomorrow.”

I have no idea what’s gotten into my friend, but he

takes off like Sonic, hopping on his skateboard and pushing off down the sidewalk.

“Loser!”

I take a look around to make sure Hershey is gone; then I slip back inside. Taking one more look at the locker door, I decide to open it all the way. It’s not even late, but for some reason, the interior of the locker is dark. I can barely make out anything in there. I wait for my eyes to adjust, then reach in toward the back, and I feel the familiar thin, wiry binding of a spiral notebook. Excited, I bring it out into the light. It doesn’t look all that weird. It’s old and dusty and dog-eared. The cover is flat black, with the words COLLEGE RULED embossed in silver in the lower right-hand corner.

“What’s the big deal? Just some stupid notebook.”

Bored and a little disappointed, I take a step back and fling it at the locker, trying to make it go inside. But it hits the corner of the opening and lands on the ground, open to the first page. I look down to see what’s written there.

Whoever this Craig kid was, he was a pretty good artist. He’d used colored pens to create a title page, which reads, CRAIG’S LIST. The writing reminds me of something I’d seen one time at the public library. There was this traveling exhibit of famous manuscripts and crap, and I remember this style of writing is called calligraphy. That’s what the page looks like, only it isn’t real calligraphy because Craig hadn’t done it with special pens and brushes. Maybe he was like me, and all he could afford were cheap ballpoint pens.

As I pick it up, I notice he had decorated the page with these funny little creatures—kind of like monsters. It looks to me like they’re dancing in a big perfect ring surrounding the title. I’m about to turn to the next page when I hear Hershey’s squeaky wheel. Before he can round the corner,

I race through the gate, set down my skateboard, tuck the notebook under my arm, and beat it out of there. Easy peasy.

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MY SISTER BETH, who's older than me by four years, is home from cheerleading practice. I could never understand it. Beth is as poor as me, but for some reason, she's popular. I guess part of the reason is because Mom taught her how to sew when she was nine. She makes herself all these nice outfits, which are always on fleek. Also, she babysits, which gives her enough money for a cell phone and makeup and stuff.

I don't hate my sister, though it's true she suffers from resting bitch face. And yeah, she always gives me and Ollie a ride to school when it rains. I don't know. It's just that I wish she was more like me, so I could have somebody to talk to besides Ollie. Beth doesn't understand anything about me. Maybe that's the way she likes it. She is so basic.

After a dinner of beans and franks, which my father says is the whole reason air freshener was invented, I head back to my room to do homework. I'm actually a pretty good student, and I don't have to try all that hard. I can usually finish English, math, history, and science in about an hour, give or take. Also, I like to read. I have a strong B average, which is why the principal Mr. Charbonneau put me on the stupid honor roll without my permission.

Mom is always telling me I could be a straight-A student if I wanted to. It wouldn't be difficult. But then they'd stick me in Honors, and I wouldn't be able to see Ollie during the day, except at lunch and PE. And Ollie doesn't have any other friends, even though his parents are well off.

After finishing my history essay, I put everything away in my backpack and bring out the notebook. I make sure my door is locked—which is a joke, really. I mean, it's not like anyone in this family is interested in talking to me. Usually, Dad is out in the garage, working on the car or fixing the lawnmower for, like, the millionth time. And Mom is in the kitchen cleaning up while watching some lame-ass reality show. And Beth. After her homework is done, she spends the rest of the night talking to her dumb friends on her cell phone. So, I'm pretty much alone to do whatever I want.

I'm not sure why, but I keep Craig's notebook hidden under my bed. It's like it's this secret thing I'm not supposed to share with anyone—not even Ollie. I'm lying on my bed now, looking at the first page. Holy crap! I could swear the little monsters Craig had drawn are different. It's like they've all moved clockwise on the page—*together*. I look at my hand, and it's shaking. I tell myself I'm imagining the whole thing and turn to the next page.

It's a list.

There on the page, printed neatly in large block letters, are five things the reader, I guess, is supposed to do, according to this Craig kid.

1. NEED THE POWER
2. ABSORB THE POWER
3. TEST THE POWER
4. AFFIRM THE POWER
5. SURRENDER TO THE POWER

Staring at that page, I am struggling to understand what the list is even good for. Was this something Craig was telling himself when he wrote it down? I don't know anything about him. Had he been bullied like me? He

could've just as well been talking about tae kwon do or karate or some shiz. Or maybe he'd been practicing some kind of New Age mental exercise to make himself feel stronger, so he could make it all the way through middle school without killing himself like Dexter Rodine, who in sixth grade decided to slice his wrists with a box cutter. But this seems like more than a mental exercise. I feel like this Craig kid was trying to take charge of his life. Like me.

As I turn the page again, I hear a noise. I look over at my desk, and the lamp is flickering. But there's something else. I set the notebook down and go over there. A #2 pencil half the size of a new one—I am constantly sharpening my pencils—is, well, it's vibrating. I go to touch it, and, I kid you not, it flies across the desk and lands in the trash can. I reach down and pick it up. Nothing. Just a normal pencil.

Lying on the bed again, I turn the page and find a picture of a creature with red eyes and sharp teeth. Another monster, I guess. All around him are those same tiny monsters, which are floating. I can't believe Craig had drawn these things. Seriously, they are really good. Maybe he was a gifted artist who the other kids liked to pick on.

There was this eighth-grader, Shawna Davis, who was a really good artist. She moved away. I remember she used to make all these cool drawings for the school paper. Apparently, the other eighth-grade girls hated her, and they would spread rumors about her being a big ol' slut. They still talk about her like that sometimes, even though she's long gone. "Slutty Shawna." I think one of them even made up a song. That's what kids do when they find out you're good at something—they make up songs.

Below the hideous monster's picture are words that are hard to pronounce. The page's title reads, **NEED THE POWER**. I try sounding out the words, but they're difficult.

I've seen Latin before, and these words don't look familiar. One time, our English teacher Mr. Korn brought in a copy of *The Iliad* in the original Greek, so we could see the language Homer wrote in. But this writing doesn't look like Greek. I don't know what it is. Maybe Craig invented his own monster language? I spend the next half-hour trying to sound out the words, but it's no good.

In the end, I'm a little disappointed, but not very. Truth be told, it's not like I really care about any of this. What I mean to say is, I'm not *desperate*. Not like this Craig kid. Who gives a crap about Kirk Wardell, anyways? I'll survive him. Shit, but then I start thinking about the rest of middle school and how I'm going to have to put up with his stupid bullshit, day after day after day. And what about Ollie? He has it worse because he's smaller than me. It would be nice to have an edge for once.

Who am I kidding? It's not worth it. Besides, it's late. I shove the notebook under my bed, brush my teeth, and turn out the light. I can hear Beth on the phone, laughing in this unnatural cartoon voice. That usually means she's talking to a guy. Maybe he's her boyfriend. I wouldn't know because she never tells me anything. I ignore her and go to sleep.

I don't usually remember my dreams, and tonight is no exception. But when I wake up the next morning, I feel funny. Like something has changed.

End of this sample—*Come As You Are*