

## **C.A.R.P.**

(A 13-part story)

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### **Part One – Senior Year (McKinley High School)**

The difference between where I thought I was going in March of '97 and where I ended up after all of it at the end of '01 couldn't have been further apart. Every step along the way was a bit more past the pale than I'd already been, and when I look back, it's only by looking at it in very small doses that I can sort of vaguely see how I got from there to here.

Let's start with me. My name's Joshua Turner, but most folks call me either Josh or JT. When our story begins back in March of 1997, I was a senior at McKinley High School in Canton, Ohio. Don't worry if you haven't heard of Canton. I don't blame you. While it's the eighth largest city in Ohio, it's got a population of around 80,000, and on top of that, it's *shrinking*. According to the census, back in 1970, we had a population of 110,000, which should tell you just how *desperate* people are to get the fuck out of Canton, Ohio. I know I certainly was.

The problem was that it wasn't likely I was going to go *far* from there when I graduated. A thing to tell you about me is that while I like to think of myself as pretty smart, I'm what's called an 'engagement learner' these days, meaning that rote memorization without application is a little like being waterboarded for me. I just don't learn well that way. As such, showing off my intelligence back in the 90s hit more than its fair share of hurdles. My teachers liked to claim I wasn't applying myself well enough, or that I hadn't 'done the work,' but really what it came down was that my brain didn't work the way they were used to, and they didn't know what to do about it. I was well-liked by most of my teachers, but they generally said the same things over and over again at parent-teacher conferences – “He just needs to try harder.”

As such, most of my college applications had been either rejected, or accepted without any sort of offered financial aid, which, for a kid whose parents ran a mom-and-pop shop on Main Street, might as well have been a rejection. Some of the student loan companies were sniffing around me, but even at a very young age, I learned to smell a predator a mile away, and those people were sharks who were only interested in having kids in eternal servitude to the interest rates, something I wasn't going to get caught up in if I could help it. The problem was that if I didn't voluntarily slap the collar around my neck, I was going to end up at Ohio State in Columbus, and that wasn't far enough from Canton in any way, especially since my girlfriend, Miranda, had been accepted to UCLA, and was getting a full-ride scholarship, all expenses covered.

I'll never forget the day my life changed, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1997. It was a Wednesday and Senior Prom was only about three weeks away. Miranda had told me the night before to come by her place and pick her up like an hour earlier than I normally did, as I was her ride to and from school, the one advantage of having a car, even if it was a crappy electric blue Geo Prism. It was still pretty cold outside, so I was a little surprised she came out of her house wearing her black, white and red cheerleader outfit, although she had on leggings beneath the skirt, and it was the long sleeve top not the short sleeve one (or the vest one, which was even hotter).

“Morning, dear,” I said to her as she climbed into the car, slamming the door shut behind her.

“Head over to the school, but turn off before we get there and pull into the nook,” she told me, reaching to crank up the heat in the car even more than I already had it turned up. Miranda was the shortest member of the Bulldogs cheerleading team, so she was always the one they threw up into the air and stacked at the top of the pyramids. She jokingly liked to call herself my little pocket rocket, barely over 5' tall as opposed to me, just barely under 6'. She had hair the color of hot cocoa that I don't think I ever saw her have any way except in a ponytail that hung down to her midsection, and deep green eyes, warm and soft.

We were an odd couple, I knew, what with her basically being one of the school all-stars and me

being the habitual underachiever. She was on the academic team, a cheerleader and in nothing but advanced placement classes, while I was often scrawling stories in my notebook in the courtyard in between classes. And yet, she'd made a point of getting me to ask her out when we were both juniors, and we'd been a couple since then. She was a good Catholic girl, though, and didn't want to lose her virginity until we were married (which meant *I* was still a virgin as well), or at the very least until we were engaged, not that *that* was anything we were talking about. In fact, since I'd gotten the rejection from UCSD, things had grown pretty tense between the two of us, because she kept telling me that while she loved me, she wasn't going to pass up UCLA for me, because the opportunities out there were just too great for her to overlook. The last few weeks had been pretty tense, and I sort of suspected she was calling me to pick her up early to break up with me, although I figured the nook would be one weird ass place to do it.

The nook, as it was known, was a little pull off spot where an alleyway turned behind a building into a loading dock that was never used as far as anyone could tell. It was a space big enough for a couple of cars to park that was always nearby but just out of sight, so it became the makeout point for most of the kids in the high school. Considering we were swinging by early in the morning, I didn't expect anyone to be there, and I was right.

Once the car was behind the curve, she told me to put it into park, which I did, and then to slide my seat back as far as I could get it, which I also did. I asked her what was going on, but she put her fingertip to my lips to shush me, and then began to unbutton my pants. We hadn't talked the whole ride from her place to here, so this certainly wasn't what I had expected.

She fished out my cock and proceeded to give me the best blowjob she'd ever given me. It was slow and deliberate, taking time to let her tongue really explore every inch of my shaft before shoving her face down hard, keeping it there for long moments before drawing back up again. Gone was the sexual shrinking violet that she'd been when we'd first started fooling around and in her place was an aggressive, almost domineering sexual creature, hellbent on trying to swallow my dick whole.

The pace went from paced and tempered to rampaging and rushing in a heartbeat, as if she had sensed some sign of weakness, some vulnerability she could exploit, and suddenly she was thrusting her face into my crotch with a voracity completely unbeknownst to me before that very moment. There was a resolve and dedication to the experience that made me utterly unsure what to do with my hands or where to look, as this girl was basically fucking her own face up and down onto my dick, one hand cradling my balls, the other latched onto my shoulder for leverage and support.

"Shit, Meer, I'm not gonna last long like this..." I told her, but it seemed like for the first time ever, she truly didn't give a shit. I'd never come in her mouth before, because she'd always told me that it was degrading towards women and that she hated the taste and she would've hated herself for how she would've felt afterwards, so being the good boyfriend that I was, I went along with it. "Meer, fuck, you need to pull off," I warned her. "I'm gonna..."

Her hand on my shoulder lifted up and slapped over my mouth to silence me as she hummed eagerly, almost deliriously, on my cock, and those vibrations did more than their number on me and before I knew it, I was drenching the back of her throat with a week's worth of pent up jizz, her tongue almost seeming to savor the taste of me, making sure to scoop it all up, her fingers forming a seal against her lips, to keep all of it in there even as she slowly pulled her head back, lapping up all of it. She didn't sit up straight until she'd licked up every last drop of my cum from my shaft, and until after she'd tucked my cock away and rebuttoned up my jeans.

"Start driving to the school lot, Josh," she finally said to me, as she pulled down the sunguard in my car, flipping open the back of it to expose the mirror so she could check her make up in it while I drove us to school.

Once I pulled into the school parking lot, the penny dropped.

"Look, Josh," Miranda said to me. "This has been fun and all, but at the end of the day, I think we both know it's not going to work out. I'm going to California, down to LA, and you're going to stay

here in Ohio. Long distance relationships never work out, and I kinda feel like we've been drifting apart the last few months anyway. You're always so stressed and you never want to talk about it and I don't know what to do about it.”

I remember thinking in that moment that yeah, she was right, I never wanted to talk about it because when I *had* talked to her about it, she told me it made her sad to listen to and she didn't want me to talk about it any more, so why couldn't she make up her fucking mind about the whole thing.

“I wanted to give you something good to hold onto, one final nice memory for us to part on, but I think this is where we call it quits. I'll swing by your house on Saturday when you're at work and drop off all your stuff. I'll always love you and treasure what we had together, but my mind's made up on this, so let me have some space and don't think you can talk me out of it, okay? It's for the best. You'll see. Anyway, goodbye Josh.”

She hopped out of the car and closed the door behind her, nearly running towards the school while I sat there crying my eyes out for a little bit. It had been my first real major relationship and I'd felt like I fucked it up, but I spent most of the rest of the day with my friends, who immediately dogpiled on how they'd never liked her, how she'd always been too stuck up for our crowd, that she was a spoiled little rich girl, that she had no art or poetry in her soul... you know, all the usual shit your friends try and use to cheer you up.

I mean, I also found out a few weeks later that she started dating Wesley Lovington less than a week after she'd broken it off with me, and reports were that she fucked him on Prom night, whereas I was stuck going stag after my best friend had threatened to drag me to Prom in whatever I was wearing that night if I didn't just go with the bunch of them. I felt like a fifth wheel – me, my best friend and his girl, her best friend and her best friend's boyfriend – but they did their best and I tried to enjoy myself, and besides, by that point, my head was a million miles away from giving a shit about Miranda Purdue.

So, I told you all that so you can understand where my head space was during the other event of that day, which was way more relevant to our story, although Miranda does pop up again way later.

McKinley had a six period day, and my fourth period was spent being a teacher's assistant to the English professor. Mostly that meant I double checked tests, but I also had to keep an eye on the computer lab while students from the school newspaper and student yearbook were working on their projects, making sure nobody broke or stole anything. I was in the English computer lab when Mr. Richards, the Journalism/Creative Writing teacher, came in with an odd look on his face. “Hey Josh, I need you to head down to reception. There's a recruiter who's come quite a ways to talk to you personally, and I think you should take the meeting.”

I remember how odd I thought the phrase 'take the meeting' was at the time, since I was basically so desperate to get out Ohio that I would've been 'taking meetings' behind the dumpster if I thought I could raise the cash to get the fuck out of the state. “Oh?” I said, gathering up my things. “Sure thing, Mr. Richards. Who are they with?”

“Some new startup school out west, but it all sounds quite remarkable, and they are only interested in speaking with you. Nobody else in the entire school. Made the trip out here just to talk to you personally.”

Now I was *very* curious what was going on. “Why me?”

“The woman said she read your short story that made it into state's high school literary competition, and it inspired her to come talk to you.”

“...but I came in *third*.”

“Hey, go talk to her yourself,” Mr. Richards laughed. “Opportunity knocks but once and all that.”

“Yeah yeah, I'm going, I'm going,” I said with a return laugh, tossing my backpack over one shoulder, like I always did. Teachers used to give me shit about it, how I was going to pull my back one day if I didn't wear the backpack on both shoulders like it was intended.

My short story published in the Power of the Pen competition, “At The Root,” was about the

power of an idea, and how an idea could take root and change the world, even when the originator of the idea was completely lost to time. I anthropomorphised the idea into the main character, and made it talk about how it had drifted from host to host like a virus, sparking change, revolution and even just social unrest by sparking the smallest and most minor of things. At the end of the story, the idea tells the audience that who knows where it will strike next, but no one will realize it's struck until years of work has happened, and the idea virus has already gone through two or three other hosts.

It had finished third, which was very good, but not first, because the judges said perhaps I was being a little *too* ambitious, reaching *too* far with some of my suggestions and how they had impacted the world. And hey, third place means I beat out several thousand other entries, so I was just happy with how I'd done.

I remember thinking how strange it was that *that* story would bring someone out just to see me, so I was completely unprepared for the meeting that followed. I went down to reception, only to be told that the visitor was waiting in one of the counseling rooms just off the principal's office. (The only reason I even knew we *had* counseling rooms was that one of my friends, Blake, had been visiting with one of the counselors regularly about his anxiety problems.) They told me to just go and that I should stay in there as long as it took, even if it meant I would be late to my next class, which I *also* remember finding weird at the time. This was a whole lot of deference being given to someone hadn't even scheduled an appointment, or wanted to see any student other than me.

Inside the counselor's room was a very well dressed Asian woman in her 50s or maybe even her 60s, her black hair done up in a meticulous bun and large, heavy framed glasses over her eyes. "Ah, you must be Mr. Turner," she said to me with a matronly smile. "I'm Dr. Karen Igarashi, and I was wondering if I could take a bit of time to talk to you about what I think you should be doing in the fall. Take a seat?"

The little room was barely more than a box, a tiny circular table in the center of it with a couple of seats on either side, not really enough room to pull them back far enough to do more than turn them so you could sit down, but by this point, all the cloak and dagger shit had scratched an itch in me that I didn't know I had, so I sat down and smiled. "Hey, you came here just to see me, so that must mean *something* good, right? Where are you from, anyway?"

"Good! Polite and courteous but also direct and straight to the point. Just as your teachers seemed to indicate you would be," she said, a certain tone of satisfaction to her voice. "I am the dean for a brand new institution of higher learning starting up in California this fall with a very select group of students, and I'd like you to consider being one of them."

"Start with the *name* of the institution and then move on to the pitch."

She chuckled a little, giving a nod. "Yes, exactly. I am the Dean for the California Academy of Radical Potential."

"C.A.R.P.?" I asked, trying not to laugh. "I'd make a fish pun, but I'm absolutely certain you've heard them all by this point with a name like that."

"Carp are one of the hardest fighting fish there are, so yes, the school mascot will be the Fighting Carp, but I think it's Academy itself you should be more interested in. We're inviting a very select handful of students to come and be part of the foundational first class. I am anticipating to have a freshman class of around a hundred students, all gathered personally by me from around the country, people who excel in particular fields, each of whom will be tutored and fostered to become even greater and more effective than they already were."

"You said California," I said to her. "Where in California? Near LA?"

"Much further north," she replied. "A coastal town called Montara, about half an hour south west of San Francisco, and about an hour north west of San Jose, so almost 7 hours drive from Los Angeles. California's quite the long state."

"I'm one hundred percent certain I can't afford it," I told her.

"Forgive me for asking, Mr. Turner, but how can you *not* afford free?" she said with an almost

rakish grin. “The selection process for CARP is so precise that, should you pass this interview, you would be given room and board on campus for all four years, you would pay no tuition, and in fact we would pay *you* a monthly stipend, so you would have money to venture off campus from time to time and enjoy things like museums, concerts, festivals and the like.”

I remember suddenly sitting up and resolving to take the meeting a great deal more seriously, because this had gone from 'yeah right' to 'tell me more' within the span of two sentences. “Monthly stipend?” I asked.

“As I said. You see, the educational program you'd be going through at CARP is rather... intensive, and in some ways a little unorthodox. I and a number of other scientists have built a new structure and form for education, but it's only truly going to work if we bring on exceptional and radical students, those who are unshackled by traditional thinking, and we give them all the tools they need to excel while still keeping them on the rails we need them to be.”

“What kind of rails?”

“So, obviously there would be several conditions to the full-ride scholarship that we would require you to adhere to, but I don't think any of them would feel that oppressive to you.”

“Let *me* make those decisions for myself. What kind of rails?”

“Of course,” she said. “And I'm glad to see you taking an active hand in this. For all four years of your education at CARP, you would live on campus, in student housing, including during the summers. There will be a reduced classload for the summers, but there will still be a handful of required classes. We will have vacations and breaks, but at no point during the four years of your time with CARP should you expect to spend more than a single week away from campus, although considering how beautiful our location is, overlooking the Pacific coast, I think you will find that entirely manageable.”

“I mean, summer breaks are pretty important,” I said. “Students need time to unwind and de-stress, as classes can put a lot of pressure on us.”

“Agreed, which is why classes for the first year are only four days a week, with a three day weekend, which you can spend on campus or heading anywhere within range of us, as long as you're back in classes promptly again on Monday.”

“Fridays off?” I said. “Damn, this all sounds very good. What kinds of things do you intend CARP to be known for?”

“That's just it, Mr. Turner,” she said with a wicked grin. “We're going to specialize in making our students maximize that radical potential they bring with them when they come to our campus. Once a week for the entirety of the summer, I or someone else from the staff is going to call you and we're going to discuss what your class load should look like, things you're interested in learning about and things that you aren't, and between all of us, we're going to devise a syllabus for all our students, with the intention of having about ten students per class, although that may go up or down a little bit for certain classes. We may even have one class in the fall which will have as many as twenty students at a time in it, but simply offer in five different time slots.”

“What class would that be?”

“Now now, Mr. Turner, I've talked all about CARP for a while. I want to hear a bit more about you. Tell me about your hopes, your dreams, what you want to do with your life when you get out into the working world.”

“Well, I guess I just really want to be a writer, although I don't really know what kind of writing I want to focus on yet,” I said. “All I know is that I want to tell stories that have an impact on people, that change the way people think about things, that illuminate things they haven't considered, to put things in a new light for them. Whether that's in books or in television or movies or maybe even videogames, I don't really know. I'm a storyteller in search of an audience, I guess.”

“Audiences know what they expect and that is all they are prepared to believe in,” she quoted at me, which made me laugh.

“I know my Stoppard just as much as you do, but The Player has a point. I want to do what they do.”

“Which is?”

“What was his quote... 'We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen *off*. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit as an entrance somewhere else.' That's what I want to do with my storytelling. I want to show all the bits most writers cut away from, warts and all. Violence, sex, love, death, the whole nine yards. I want to find a way to turn our traditional way of storytelling inside out, to find new truths by refusing to look in the old places.”

She nodded with a sage smile, as if my answer had been what she'd wanted to hear. “Good. Good good. Are you in a relationship right now?”

I puffed up my cheeks and then blew out a harsh sharp jet of depressed air through my pursed lips. “Not as of, oh, like six hours ago? My girlfriend dumped me this morning. She's going to UCLA and didn't think a long distance relationship would work.”

“And this would be...” she said, looking through the papers in front of her. “Miss Miranda Purdue? She's your ex?”

I remember my eyes going a little wide at that. “I'm not entirely sure how you'd know that, but yeah, that's right.” We hadn't gone out of our way to hide that we were dating, but it wasn't exactly the sort of thing you expected a college recruiter to know.

“We very much do our homework, Mr. Turner, and if it makes you feel any better, you're capable of doing so much better than Miss Purdue. While yes, she is quite easy on the eyes, she's also rather ordinary in many ways, especially with her tendency to treat adversity as something to run from instead of something to overcome. If you were still with her, I would've had to tell you that a condition of you coming to CARP would be that you would need to break it off with Miss Purdue, but seeing as that's already done, we don't have a problem.”

“Why would I need to have broken it off with her?”

“Because, Mr. Turner, you *can* and *will* do better, I assure you.”

“That's... a little ominous.”

“You needn't worry. Besides, it doesn't matter anyway. Let's get back to my handful of questions. What would you say the most important piece of art – be that visual, musical, literary or even cinematographic – would be for you personally?”

“Pink Floyd's 'Wish You Were Here' or Hunter S. Thompson's 'Fear & Loathing In Las Vegas,' for wildly different reasons, obviously.”

“What's the most important part of any creative endeavor?” she asked.

“The execution,” I replied immediately. “Anyone can have an idea. Ideas are a dime a dozen. Executing that idea into a way that reaches and evokes a feeling in the audience, that's the *real* hard part, and where all the work lies.”

“There's the sort of insight that we want at CARP,” the woman said to me. “Would you say you work well within restrictions, or are you the type of creative who always goes outside of the lines?”

“Restrictions breed creativity, so I'm all for having unexpected lines to work within, as long as they're reasonable and productive,” I told her, seeing her nod even more.

“Excellent, excellent. Can you be a team player?”

“I've worked on the school newspaper the last two years, always in a supervisory role, but never in charge, so I'm used to both taking orders and giving them, whenever the situation calls for it. But the thing I've learned the most over the years is that you have to be adaptable, be able to improvise and evolve in any given situation, and that being static is the enemy.”

“Good,” she almost purred at me. “There is a greater purpose beyond CARP, but it will take quite some time for it to become obvious and relevant, so the level of commitment we ask may seem a little steep. There will be a non-disclosure agreement you will need to sign, and you will need to spend all four years at the Academy, otherwise you will need to repay the Academy for your time spent with

us.”

“Non-disclosure agreement? That's... unusual.”

“Yes, well, we're going to be doing some... rather unorthodox things at the University, and taken out of context, they might seem somewhat strange,” she told me with an odd smile. “In a decade's time, we'll go public, but doing so any earlier could compromise our initial studies.”

“So we're students, but we're also lab rats.”

“That's a rather harsh way of looking at things,” she said with a laugh. “You're partners in a groundbreaking endeavor that won't just change your life, but change the lives of millions of people. *If* we're right, of course. We always need to allot for the possibility that we aren't. It's a small likelihood of that, but a true scientist always allows the experiment to proceed naturally and not interfere. Do those sound like conditions you can adhere to?”

“What would I tell my family and friends?”

“Oh, just the usual. Make it sound like any other college experience and don't focus on the less typical elements about it,” she said, waving her hand. “You're a storyteller. I'm sure you can convince anyone who asks that it's just a slightly esoteric school start up on the West Coast. Other than your parents, who's going to ask? You want a fresh start, away from all of this, don't you?” she asked, gesturing around her. “That's what I'm offering. A fresh and remarkable start.”

“Okay then... where do I sign?”

And like that, with a stroke of a pen, my life was on a completely different trajectory. At that moment in time, I didn't even realize quite how much. I told my parents that I'd been offered to go and attend a college on the West Coast, and they weren't exactly happy about it, until I told them that it was entirely paid for, at which point all the resistance in the world dropped away, and it felt almost like they were just glad to be rid of me. It would be a great adventure, they told me, and since nobody else was offering, they were glad I'd just accepted.

But there's one other thing I should tell you about what happened between here and my first semester at C.A.R.P. I'm only telling you this because... because, well, you're *you*, and I trust you, so maybe we can figure all this out if we put all the pieces of the puzzle together. Because even though I lived through it all, I can't make it make sense to me.

About a month or so later, when I was hip deep into making my preparations to go out to California, I got called down to the counselor's offices again, this time without much in the way of explanation given. When I entered the room, this time there was a very different looking woman. Short, dark hair cut short, business suit although with pants and no skirt. She was good looking as well, but she also seemed stern and overworked.

“You're Mr. Turner, yes?” she said to me, her voice very much East Coast, maybe Boston or New York or Maine. Somewhere definitely upper northeast. She looked kinda like that actress, Carla Gugino. “I'm Special Agent Karen Costello from the FBI. Have a seat.”

“You didn't bring your partner, Special Agent Abbott, with you?”

“Like I haven't heard that one a few thousand times,” she sighed. “Look, I didn't bring you for you to talk, just for you to listen, so sit down and shut up.”

The woman didn't seem to want me to say anything, so I sat down across from her, as she opened a vanilla folder before me, revealing a picture of Dr. Igarashi staring back at me.

“We're fairly certain this woman, Dr. Igarashi, came to visit you, to invite her to her new California Academy for Radical Potential. She promised a fully paid experience and education, but insisted you sign an NDA. Now, I want to tell you two things. First, that NDA does not apply to the federal government, no matter what they tell you. And second, I'm not here to discourage you from going to C.A.R.P.. In fact, I *want* you to go there. But I want you to be my eyes and ears into the place. Once a semester, I'm going to find you and I want a report on everything you can tell me about the place, and in exchange for that, I'll give you full immunity from whatever illegal and shady shit's going down there. Hell, I'll even sweeten the deal – you and any friends you happen to make over there will

be shielded from any prosecution in regards to anything that's tied to the Academy. We've had our eyes on this Dr. Igarashi and her associates for some time, so I want you to think about it, and sometime around Christmas, we'll meet again, and you can tell me what you think, okay? That's it. You can leave.”

“I wanna see a badge first,” I said to her.

She smirked, reached into her pocket and pulled it out, sliding it across the table to me, as I opened it and considered her credentials. I'd never seen an FBI badge up close before, but it looked pretty realistic.

“Business card,” I said, tossing her badge back to her. She pulled one out of her pocket and tossed it over the table to me, spinning it like a throwing star.

“We'll be in touch, Mr. Turner,” she said, as I headed to the door. “And I expect you're going to have quite the story to tell me when next we meet.”

Good lord, did she not know the half of it...