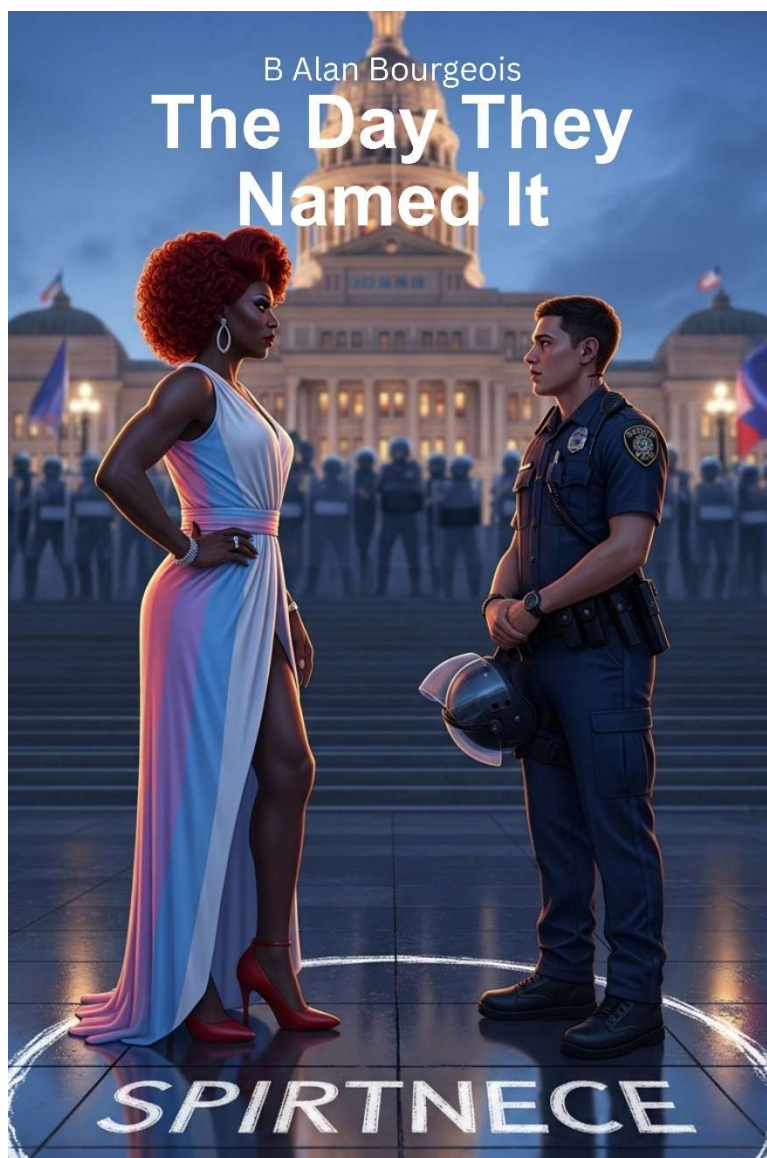


B Alan Bourgeois

The Day They Named It



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by B Alan Bourgeois © 2025

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Authors Note

You never know when a story idea will hit. As a creative person, it can happen anywhere—talking with a friend, overhearing a conversation, or even bending down to tie your shoe. Suddenly there it is: a thought that begs to be heard, to be understood, and, if it's lucky, to be given life.

SPIRTNECE was one of those ideas. I overheard two men talking, and they used a word that made no sense to me. I asked them to explain it. It wasn't this word, and it meant something completely different—but the sound of what I heard settled into me like it belonged. It wanted space to grow. So I let it. It started defining itself, declaring its own value, and from that, this story emerged—along with a way to honor two giants of our history, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera of the Stonewall riots.

As a gay man who has worked within the community for over fifty years, I know how many of us never get recognized for what we do. We come in every size, color, and gender, and while we work to improve the lives of those who follow, we also carry the memory of those who've fallen. My hope is that this word gets the use it deserves, and that its core—living a life of love and kindness—takes root more and more in our world each day. From this perspective, we can keep growing ourselves and lifting the lives around us. Living a life of SPIRTNECE, not preaching it, is how we show others what a life of love and happiness can look like.

The Day They Named It

By the time the riot police arrived, the chalk circle was already on the pavement.

It was about three meters wide, drawn in a shaky white line on the gray steps of the capitol building. In the middle, someone had written a single word in block letters, slightly crooked, like the hand that wrote it was shaking:

SPIRTNECE

No one knew who drew it. Later, people would scrub through drone footage frame by frame, hunting for the moment it appeared. The camera caught a blur of signs and umbrellas, flashes of pink and trans pride flags, a cardboard “Protect Trans Kids” bobbing like a buoy in a storm. Then suddenly the word was just... there.

What everyone remembered, though, was the queen who stepped into the circle.

His name, on the payroll of Jefferson Middle School, was **Marcus Ibarra**.

His name under the lights at Club Solstice, with lashes like butterfly wings and cheekbones carved by a patient god, was **Marsha La Rivera**—a Black drag queen paying tribute every time she stepped onstage to Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, the women who threw bricks and refused to apologize for existing.

By day, Marcus taught eighth-grade civics. He wore muted button-downs and sensible shoes and used his “teacher voice” to explain amendments and voting rights, careful not to cross the invisible line the school board had drawn around “politics.” He’d learned early that, in this district, queer was political no matter how gently you spoke it, and Black was political even when you were just trying to get kids through a unit on checks and balances.

On weekends, he became Marsha.

The first time he walked out in a yellow gown and six-inch heels, wig towering, lips lined in fire-engine red, the club crowd had screamed so loudly he’d had to fight back tears. It wasn’t the cheers, not really; it was the way his whole body exhaled at once, as if some inner rib cage he hadn’t known existed finally unclenched.

Marsha said what Marcus could not. She made jokes Marcus would be fired for. She looked out at the sea of faces—trans girls in thrift-store dresses, nonbinary kids in handmade shirts, older queens in sequins holding hands with nervous young lovers—and thought: *This is what civics class should feel like.* A room full of people learning how to be themselves in public.

When the legislature announced the new bill, Marcus read it twice, then printed it and read it a third time in the harsh fluorescent light of his classroom.

Under the pretense of “protecting children,” it would make it easier to fire teachers for discussing “controversial lifestyle topics” and would criminalize certain drag performances if minors were present. The language was vague by design, sharp everywhere it counted, dull everywhere it could give plausible deniability.

At home, he sat in front of his mirror without turning the ring light on. Half his face was done—foundation, contour, one eyebrow arched and ready. The other half was just Marcus: brown skin, dark circles under his eyes, the faint lines of a man who'd been grinding for years.

He stared at the split face and said out loud, "They're trying to erase me twice."

He thought of his students: Jamal, who doodled gowns in the margins of his notes and pretended they were "video game armor" when the other boys asked; Elena, who'd flinched a little too hard when someone said "he" instead of "she"; Darius, whose mother had sent an email asking if the "gender-neutral bathrooms" were "safe" for her son.

He thought of the kids who hadn't said anything yet, because they were still trying to find words for what they were.

The protest was called for the following Saturday on the capitol steps: a march for trans rights, queer rights, the right to exist in public without being legislated out of visibility.

Marcus didn't debate whether to go. The real question was *how*.

Plain clothes would be safer. Less likely to get his face plastered all over the local station. Less likely to end up on some lawmaker's slideshow about "degeneracy in the classroom."

But when he started to imagine it—the signs, the speeches, the wild, stubborn hope of trans teens chanting their own right to exist—he didn't see Marcus in a button-down. He saw Marsha.

He saw bright orange lipstick and a glittered face. He saw a dress the color of bruised sky, with a hem made of hand-pinned trans flags. He saw himself standing visible enough that any kid scrolling through

their feed later would know: *We were there. We didn't hide for you. We showed up as ourselves.*

That night, at Club Solstice, Marsha La Rivera closed her set with a ballad. Instead of a death drop, she did something more radical: she sat on the edge of the stage, legs dangling, and told the crowd about the protest.

"Y'all know they coming for the babies, right?" she said, voice coated in sugar and steel. "They coming for their books, their bathrooms, their pronouns, and their possibility. So we're gonna show up tomorrow as a wall of glitter and love and stubborn, stubborn joy. Because they can write all the bills they want, but they can't legislate our spirt—"

She stopped.

The word she wanted, *spirit*, landed wrong in her mouth. It felt too churchy, too floaty. What she meant was something messier and denser: the way drag queens held sobbing kids in the alley behind the club; the way trans men worked double shifts to pay for top surgery; the way queer elders sat quietly in the front row, hands folded, bearing witness.

"—our... spirtnece," she finished, letting the invented syllables tumble out, trusting them on instinct.

The crowd laughed, then clapped, then started chanting it, half as a joke, half because it felt good on the tongue:

"SPIRT-NECE! SPIRT-NECE!"

Marsha laughed with them, did a little shrug like, *yeah, I said what I said*, and blew kisses.

By the next morning, the word had slipped from her mind. There were lashes to glue, a wig to tease, a dress to wrestle into. There was the drive downtown with the AC sputtering, NPR murmuring about "heated

public debate,” the host’s neutral tone barely covering her weariness.

Marcus parked three blocks from the capitol and transformed fully in the driver’s seat, slipping from Marcus to Marsha like a key turning in a lock.

He checked himself in the rearview: dark skin glowing under a thin veil of powder, eye shadow shimmering in blues and pinks, lips outlined in orange so bright it defied the overcast morning. The dress was a homemade masterpiece: deep purple velvet up top, fading into a layered skirt of trans flag fabric—blue, pink, white—he’d bought from three different craft stores.

“Marsha La Rivera, queen of public civics,” he whispered. “Let’s go teach.”

The closer he got to the capitol, the thicker the crowd. There were teens with rainbow hair and homemade signs. Parents holding the hands of kids in “Protect Trans Youth” t-shirts. Clergy in rainbow stoles. There were also men with red hats at the edge of the crowd, faces set like stone.

Marsha’s heels clacked against the sidewalk with each step, a metronome of defiance.

He found his people easily. The queens clustered together like exotic birds—sequins, feathers, wigs higher than some of the protest placards. A trans girl in a binder and a too-big blazer nervously adjusted her pronoun pin; an older butch held an umbrella over her and handed her a bottle of water.

Marsha hugged everyone, sweeping in glitter and perfume and a lingering sense of home.

“You look incredible,” said Xavier, a nonbinary performer in a glitter suit. “Teach ‘em something, Ms. La Rivera.”

“That’s the plan,” Marsha said, smoothing down the front of her dress. “We’re here to protect the babies and confuse the hell out of the bigots.”

The speeches started. Organizers rotated through, mics squealing, sound system straining. A trans man in a denim vest spoke about losing his job. A nonbinary teen read a poem about bathroom anxiety. A mother told the crowd, voice breaking, “My child deserves to grow up, not disappear.”

From the fringes came jeers. A counterprotester held up a sign that read “STOP GROOMING.” Someone shouted, “Think of the children!” as if they weren’t all literally there thinking of the children.

The tension climbed, stair-step by stair-step.

Marsha felt it first in her stomach: that clutching, familiar dread, the one she used to get when police cars rolled past the club slowly with their lights off.

On the steps, security shifted.

Then the riot police appeared.

They shuffled into place like a black tide—helmets, shields, batons, boots thudding in unison. They formed a line at the base of the capitol steps, facing the crowd. The sound system crackled and died mid-sentence. The crowd’s noise rose to fill the vacuum—shouts, whistles, chants, the high-pitched keen of someone already crying.

Marsha’s heart pounded so hard she could feel it in the tips of her false lashes.

He’d taught his kids about the right to assemble, about peaceful protest. He’d shown them grainy photos of marches from the ‘60s, color footage from Pride parades. He’d never shown them what it felt like to stand in a place where history might be about to repeat itself.

He held his sign tighter: **WE’RE NOT YOUR ENEMIES. WE’RE YOUR MIRROR.**