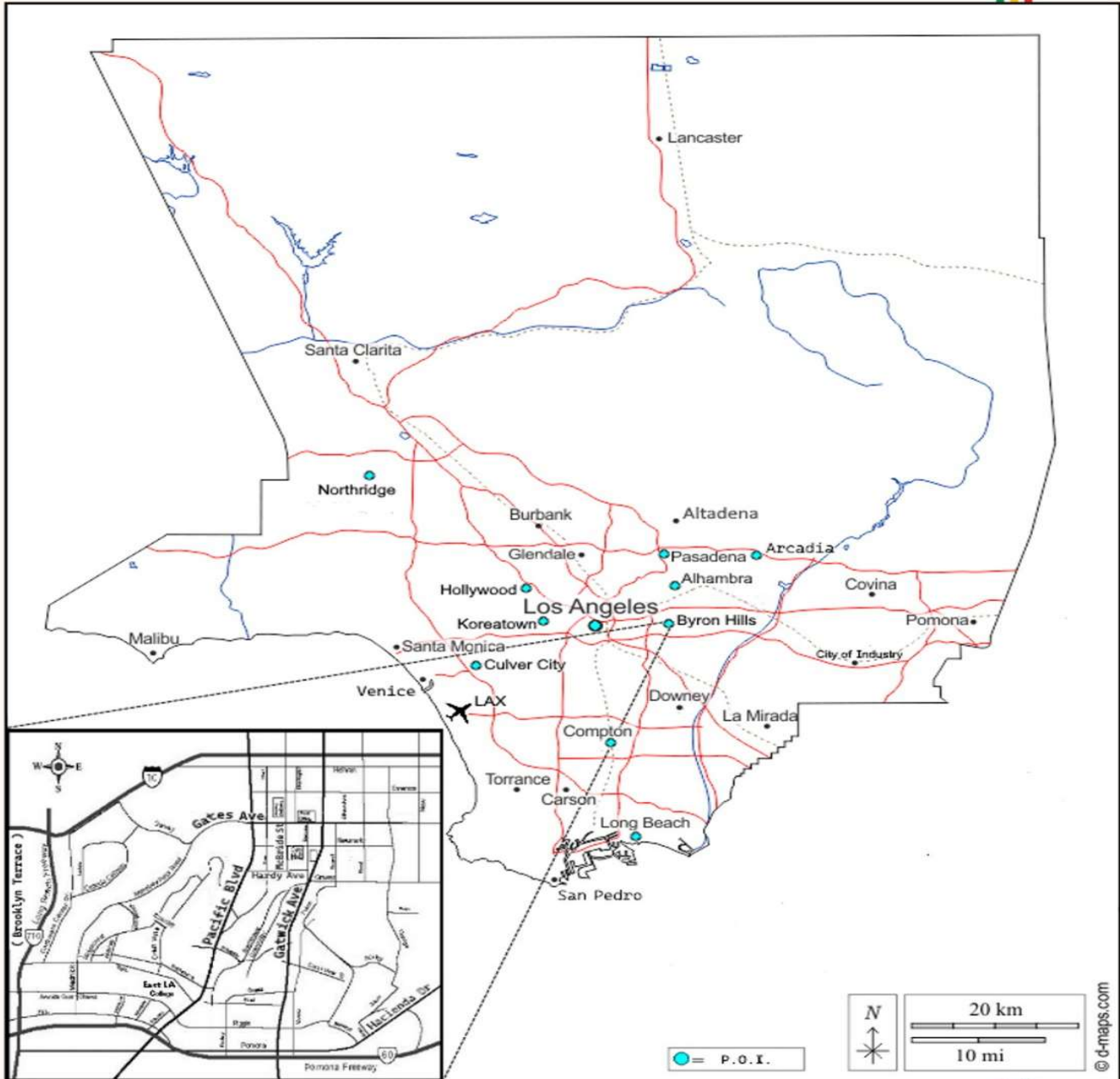


Curb Children



by

Carlos & Javier Avitia-Velazquez

CURB CHILDREN

Carlos & Javier Avitia-Velazquez

Seven Proxy Press



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"Los Angeles is a shitty heaven and New York is a fun hell."

-U/[REDDITOR]

"And nothing of value was lost."

-ANONYMOUS

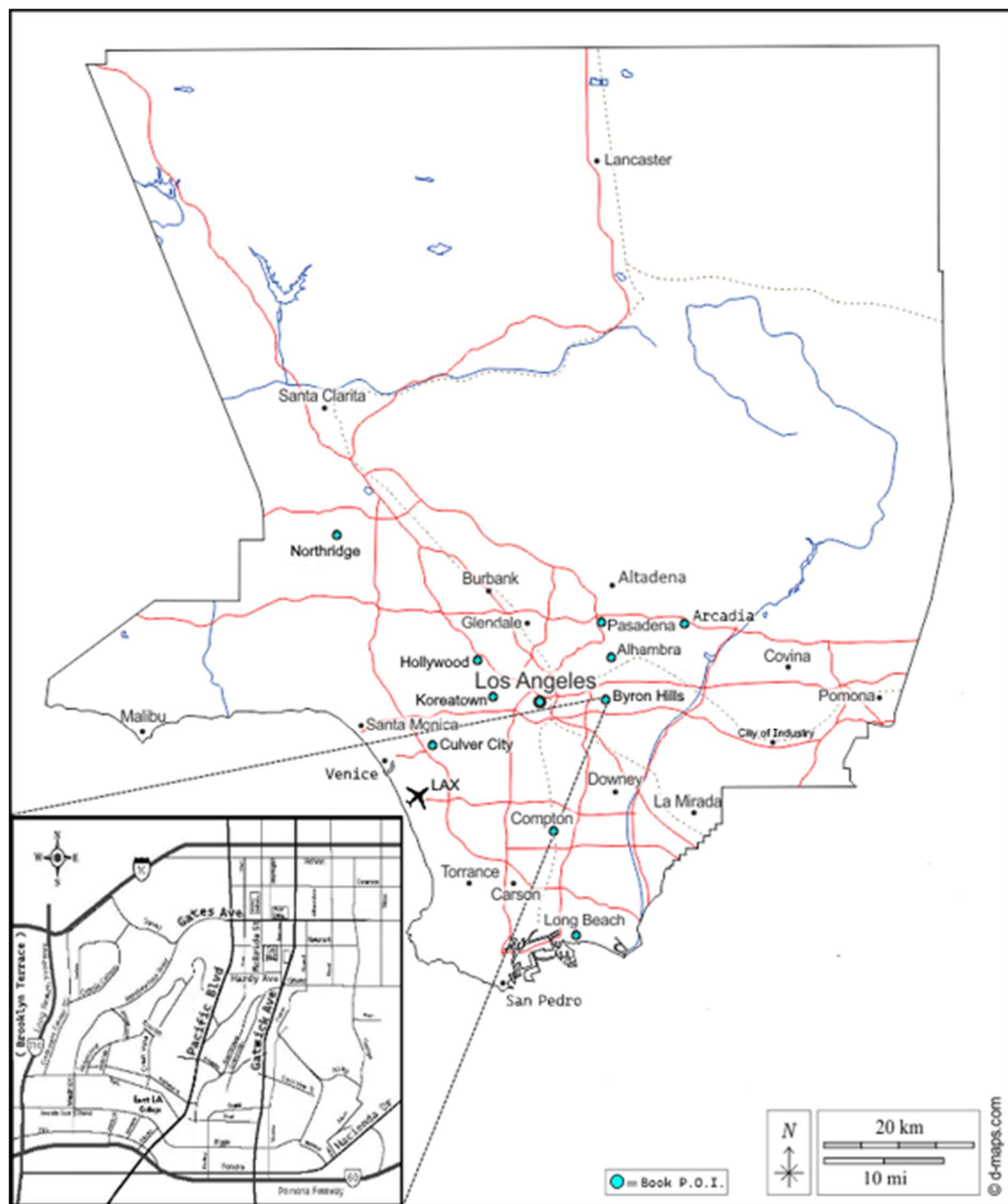
Introduction

Curb Children deals with a world that, in retrospect, doesn't feel real. We can attest that the events that inspired this novel happened, and we can promise that this is how we felt experiencing them, but this is a work of fiction. Most of the words in this book were written from 2009 to 2012, with many edits and redrafts in the years since. Some of the locations are real, some are fictionalized. Aqua is not a real person, but in a sense, she is almost a dozen real people who, sadly, passed too soon. Regardless, this book is a testament to what has grown dated—and what has endured—in our contemporary world since that long-ago summer of 2009.

Our story is about David Leandro “Leo” Rial-Alvarez, in the waning days of his adolescence, during the late 2000s. The people he comes across in increasingly intricate circles of friends and acquaintances, spread throughout the myriad youth subcultures of Los Angeles, California (like his childhood friends the Curb Children), are real personas—if strictly fictional characters. However, if you're in the underground long enough, or travel between scenes frequently, you know exactly who these people are. Even if they have different names, different characteristics, certain types of personalities tend to predominate within each unique subsection of the underground. Hopefully, this literary Venn diagram of fleeting, amorphous, youth-oriented vignettes captures enough of the very real impression they all left on us to give you a sense of what being there felt like.

If it gets a little esoteric sometimes, just know that those little details are for the people in these scenes who will probably be a bit more critical about how their hidden corners of the underground are presented. To the current and former countercultural youth: hopefully some of these songs and references will convince you of our experiences. We captured, as best we could, what the brilliant souls we came across at the time taught us, and how we've come to process it. It's a snapshot of pop culture the way we lived it in 2009—with the benefit of the years since.

—Carlos & Javier Avitia-Velazquez



Principal Characters

Family (parents)

- Frank Rial-Herrera, father
- Olivia Alvarez, mother

The Curb Children

- David Leandro “Leo/Rage” Rial-Alvarez
- Martin Desiderio “1337” Cortez-Lopez
- Jonathan “Johnny” Volkov
- Emmanuel “Eman/Lipz” Harcourt

Byron Hills Homies (local friends)

- Astair Lorraine Nakamura-Cawley
- “Nyx Styx”
- Robin Casey

Sly House (siblings)

- Damien Jefferson
- Julius “Red” Jefferson
- Tyson Jefferson
- Antonia Jefferson

Three Musketeers (met in '99 LA punk scene)

- Caleb Peter “Cable” Gallagher
- Damien
- Dmitri “Dima” Volkov

Atomic Records (owners)

- Cheech Gonzalez
- Marley Williams
- Lenin Anderson
- Rosanegra Bonnin
- Hendrix Davis
- Blair Rosewood

Silver’s Magnificent Bacchanal

- Lilakai “Aqua” (1992–2008)
- Matilda “Tillie” Murphy
- Rio Ceiden
- Cable

New Yorkers

- Jonas Phineas Harper, former teacher
- Pizza Punks
 - Cain Morris
 - Tennyson “Tenny” Espadas
 - Ruby Jimenez
- Unionheads
 - Morgan
 - Jamal
 - Newport
 - Zagreus “Zag”

- Nero
- Lataya
- Nebula
- Mystic
- Wormrot
- Sephiroth
- Jolene Goldeen
- Todd Jordan

Toxic Kandi Family (ravers)

- Matriarchs
 - Echo
 - Eargasm
- Chu siblings
 - Jason
 - Ponyboi
- “Fractal Light” Rave Kids
 - Red
 - Blu
 - Fuchsia
- Las Pendejas, Martínez sisters punk band
 - Noelia
 - Gabriela
 - Daniela
 - Lara
- Dreamcast Kidz
 - Tailz
 - Knucklez
 - Shadow
 - Break-Beat
 - Mew2
 - Tabz
- Osiris’s Crew, picaresque globetrotters
 - Osiris
 - Oya
 - Anansi
- Otaku Gang
 - Tokyo Drift
 - Brujo
 - Bruja
 - Ezra “Lupin” Kravitz
 - Kiki-Chan
 - Armen “Guardian” Malikian
- Zero Cool Crew
 - “Bonez” Estrada
 - Andrea Rizwan-Talbott
- Yeti Bitches
 - Disco
 - Bagz
 - Mojo
- Venganza 30-30 Crew, punk house friends
 - Tito
 - Iggy
 - Jesus

- Hando
- Milo
- Sokha

Prologue

David Leandro Rial-Alvarez
(aka Leo)
August 13, 2022 (Saturday)
A Gathering, Somewhere in the Sticks

The Southland really got to her.

If you're from Los Angeles, then you know what I mean. If you're not, then you probably wouldn't like it there anyway, unless you like driving. (No autonomous cars back in those days, and L.A.'s sparse semblance of a mass-transit system at the turn of the century didn't quite touch the Eastside, let alone Byron Hills, until sometime after most of this story.) But L.A. was, and is, the kind of place where half the city is always ready to go somewhere else—never really dropping an anchor, bags packed and ready to go to wherever the winds may blow—and the other half is constantly pissed about the so-called “plastic L.A. fakeness.” Because they don't need to fake anything to be *Angelinos*. They're already home.

Aqua landed somewhere in the middle. She always used to say she loved L.A., Hollywood, Eastlos, the SGV—you name it. She spent so much time walking around Byron Hills and working odd jobs, with Jolene Goldeen's old fake ID in tow, that I feel she got to know my part of Byron Hills better than I did, even though I grew up there. (And, years later, people certainly still seem to remember her a lot more than they remember me, even though she only lived in the area for not quite two years.) But I think she was also convinced somebody tipped the world over, and all the loose things and people just landed around Los Angeles eventually. Twelve million people, drawn by a dream or running from a nightmare. A gigantic ghost of a city, composed of thousands of liminal realities, each a space in which you could really disappear. Maybe that's why she called Los Angeles the real urban jungle. “At least in places like Chicago or New York, where you got a giant-ass downtown and wild weather,” she'd say whenever I mentioned my dreams of “real” big city living, “at least that anchors you somewhere, and you can share in some wacky camaraderie with somebody somewhere on some dense city street. Here? It's the City with a Thousand Faces, man: always nice out, everything is way somewhere else, and outside of downtown, you can get lost without a car, literally and figuratively. It's like some Twilight Zone shit that so many people live here—you can really only tell when there's like five massive parties happening all on the same night!”

Sunny? Temperate? Surf in the morning and snowboard in the evening? A party, kickback, or a punk show going on almost every day of the week? Hell, we even went camping a few times. The punks, ravers, Burners, Rainbow Family kids, and internet superheroes of Southern California sure knew, and know, how to party. What else could a curbed kid like Aqua ask for? Even back then, that place seemed to have it all—unless your options narrowed down to live or die.

How little we knew. Maybe that's why I've been haunted by fever dreams and nightmares, all these years. But don't worry, I won't waste your time with any of those as I

entertain you with a story; life's too short to spend it obsessed with our impending demise. What I'll share are the prescient fairy tales I tell myself now, which at worst will leave you deeply sad and distracted, missing people you've never met. Somewhat like real dreams, and with my real lucid dream totem to help it make sense. But it'll be intelligible, and a lot less fucked up, since I'll also share glimpses of the future I've lived in the days to come, so you know where all of this went, and where I am now.

The Winds of Fate picked up in the summer of 2008, when Lilakai—"Aqua"—died, but with some introduction, and the help of her own words, it makes more sense to set most of this story a year later, after my return flight to Los Angeles and wrapping up my freshman year at Manhattan University (political science and engineering, 2012). Perspective matters, after all, and those crucial first days in the summer of 2009 gave me all the pieces I still lacked to embark on my journey to adulthood. If only we could all be so fortunate.

19 June 1999

7:45 p.m. PDT (Saturday)

"*Cyka blyat!* Yeah, you, you fucking bitch!" Dima snarls at the middle-aged driver of the orange Volkswagen Beetle that swerved into the next lane to avoid colliding with his bicycle. "Come on, you fucking twerps," he yells at us from the other side of Pinecone Avenue, "*bystreye!* Quit falling behind!"

The Curb Children and I have been pedaling as hard as we can since we started trekking east on Hacienda Avenue three miles ago, toward Forest Narrows Park, but we still can't keep up because Dima is so much bigger than us. He's also a bit upset that one of his friends from the punk scene, Damien, couldn't get a ride up here from Long Beach to join us because he's "busy," but I don't get why that means he has to be harsher toward us. The long downhill slope into the San Gabriel Valley toward Pinecone Avenue helped us catch up a little, but not enough. Our biggest problem, other than being tired, is that we're all still eight (except for Martin, who turned nine in February); Dima, on the other hand, is thirteen and just hit his growth spurt, so he's been leaving us in the dust with ease. None of us—especially Johnny—wants to look weak in front of Dima though, so we reluctantly force ourselves to pedal across the street once there's a short break in traffic.

"*Me duele todo ...*" Martin groans between pedals.

"Shut up, dude," Johnny hisses between sharp breaths, "we're all hurting."

Dima's far ahead again, already turning a corner and gunning it down the narrow, vegetation-filled path bordered by a long wooden fence lining the back of people's houses on our left side, and the tall chain-link fence of the Forest Narrows Golf Course on the other. We do our best to follow him, but we're slowed down significantly by the thicket, garbage, and rough terrain clogging up this underutilized entrance to the Forest Narrows Park section of the sprawling Los Angeles bike trails.

"*Cuidado!*" I yell at Johnny, who's in the lead. "Watch out for that hill!"

He pumps his brakes to avoid going airborne and gives me a thumbs-up once he regains his footing. "Thanks, Leo! And it's *hill* not *heel!*"

I flush with embarrassment but make a mental note to correct how I pronounce those types of “i” words. Martin and I only recently learned English at St. Jude’s, and our Spanish accents are still pretty pronounced. Johnny and Eman have been helping us improve ever since we met them in Ms. Tanaka’s first-grade class three years ago. We’re both grateful for all their corrections, even if they do get exasperated with us sometimes from having to repeat themselves so often.

After what feels like forever, we emerge onto a rocky dirt path that leads up to the well-paved bike lanes of the Los Angeles Trails. Dima is already waiting at the top of the incline, clearly frustrated by our delay but begrudgingly forcing himself to be patient. It helps that his friend we’re meeting, a “crust punk” named Cable who supposedly got here by freight train from West Virginia, specifically asked to meet us so we could talk about “nerd shit” with him (as Dima affectionately calls anything to do with anime or comics). Dima’s friend is apparently also really into nerd shit, much to his annoyance and amusement.

“Christ, hurry up!” he calls out. “We’re gonna miss the funeral!”

The sun is starting to get low on the horizon, and we already know that Merry, one of Cable’s pet rats, will be given a “Viking funeral” at sunset. As winded as we are, we force ourselves to carry on. It gets a little easier once we’re on an actual bike path, but we’re almost ready to give up again regardless by the time we finally reach the grass-and-bamboo-filled island in the middle of the San Gabriel River that Dima’s been referring to as “Cable’s Cove” for about a month. The sky is very gold now, with hints of pink.

“I think I pulled a *musculo*,” Martin mumbles, sniffing.

“It’s *pull*, not *pool*,” Eman corrects him, “and you’ll be fine, you big baby! C’mon.”

Dima has already jumped off his bike and thrown it onto the island. He takes a few steps back to get a running start and jumps from the shore toward his bike. For a second, I fear we’ll have to do the same, but Dima disappears into the thicket and comes back with a long wooden plank. He sets it across the rocks before running back into the bamboo forest. We cross in single file, walking our bikes across as carefully as we can, and enter the forest as well. I can hear loud, angry punk rock music playing from up ahead. The forest opens up again abruptly, and we’re greeted by the sight of a deeply tanned teenager—about Dima’s size, but much skinnier and with a choppy, unevenly cut brown mullet instead of long blond hair—flicking a lit match onto a small wooden boat floating out into the river. In it is a light-brown rat with a white snout seemingly napping on a tenderly laid bed of bamboo twigs. The boat instantly erupts into spectacular flames as soon as the match hits, and we gaze in awe at the unforgettable spectacle.

“Oh, hey,” Cable croaks in a surprisingly raspy voice when he notices us, “you’re just in time for the show.” He tosses aside the reed stalk he was using to clean his teeth, grabs the cigarette tucked behind his ear, and lights the tip deftly. “Should be any minute—”

The now-charred mass abruptly explodes.

“*Fuck!*” Johnny yelps as we all jump back.

“Don’t swear, you little shit!” Dima snaps angrily. “You know Babushka Yana is gonna blame *me* for it!”

Johnny and Dima moved in with their grandmother (who’s “from *Kyiv* and *Moskva*”) shortly before Johnny started at St. Jude’s two years ago; their mom and dad had to go to a

special “rehabilitation” hospital recently, and now that Dima knows Russian and Johnny is learning quickly, they both think they’ll stay with her even after their parents come back.

“I learned it from you!” Johnny shoots back. “She should blame you!”

Dima glares. “Respect your elders, dipshit!”

Cable erupts in hoarse laughter. “Christ, Pippin and I just blew up one of our best friends, and y’all can’t watch yer tempers fer one second?”

We all look over at Cable as he turns around fully, bathed in pink-and-gold sunlight. Cradled in the bend of his left elbow, just below the “Infest” logo on his sleeveless shirt, is a white-and-black rat—Pippin. I gasp when I notice Cable’s eyes, which are lit up by the sun’s last rays; the left one, ringed by intricate lines, is electric blue, while the right one is bright green. He grins serenely, and I see that he’s missing two of his teeth, one of which has been replaced with a gold tooth. “Well, at least ya caught the grand finale. I know Merry would have wanted to go out with a bang! Lotsa sound n’ fury.” He chuckles and puts his cigarette to his lips again, closing his eyes pensively for a moment as he inhales. “Anyway! That’s called death, kids. ’S a shame ol’ drummer-fiend Damien couldn’t make it up here to see it, Juneteenth n’ all, but I’m glad y’all could. Say hello—there’s nothing you can do about it, and it’s coming to get each and every one of us eventually!” He lets out another hearty laugh, as if he’s just told the funniest joke in the world. A great cosmic joke.

Dima laughs along with Cable; we’re still speechless.

I’ve never heard an American with an accent before, and it’s unsettling. Cable’s voice reminds me of the rooster from the Looney Tunes cartoons, but rougher. Dima notices we aren’t about to speak up to introduce ourselves, so he points at us in turn: “Leo, Eman, Johnny, Martin.” He motions to Cable. “Cable.”

The four of us mutter a shy hello. Cable is dressed in punk-rock clothes, like Dima, but his clothes are significantly more patched and ragged. It seems like he’s sewn in a bunch of random pockets too. His left forearm is connected to his left eye by the same intricate lines that remind me of computer boards like on the show *Reboot*. (Dima told us the lines are permanent “tattoos” and that Cable did them himself.) His right arm is wrapped tightly by a bloodstained bandanna just below the elbow. He holds out a large, bony fist with “1-3-1-2” dots on the knuckles, and we each bump it with our own tiny fists in turn, like Dima taught us.

“So,” Cable cracks easily, “Dmitri here says y’all like comics, punk rock, and *Pokemon*?”

We nod timidly. Cable motions for us to follow him, and we trek along behind him back into the forest. We enter another clearing, in the middle of the island this time, and see a low fire pit ringed by random lawn furniture, with a ramshackle makeshift shack next to an old bike and empty shopping cart, all well concealed by an ancient, overhanging sycamore tree. The music is also louder here. After scanning the grounds for a few seconds, I spot the aged boombox blasting the punk music. Cable catches my eye and walks over to it, turning the volume way down. “Sorry, Merry loved Infest. Y’all ever heard of ’em?”

We shake our heads; Dima rolls his eyes. “Yes, you fucking have! This EP’s called *Slave*, and that was ‘Machismo.’ It’s a goddamn classic.”

Cable laughs. “No kiddin’? Raisin’ ’em cultured, I see! They seen *The Matrix* yet? Ya still gotta show ’em *Dark City* n’ *ExistenZ*, too! Better get on that shit before the world hits the gutter after Y2K, and all that dystopian cyberpunk stuff starts comin’ true.”

“Naaah, they’re rated R,” Dima answers with a chuckle, shrugging neutrally.

“Ha! So?” Cable grins again, walking over to the shack and habitually checking some of the many zip ties holding it together. “You didn’t cross me as the type to care ’bout that sorta shit when we smoked that spliff by the river the first time and threw caution to the wind for a few minutes.” The last words come out almost as a croon.

Dima blushes a deep red. “I just meant, like, not yet, man, fuck!”

“S’all good, comrade!” Cable looks back, his expression softened. “I just know my brother Ben, Lord rest his soul, woulda loved that fuck outta that shit, n’ y’all are definitely his type a folks! Need somebody else to shoot the shit with now—”

A loud *yip!* breaks out from somewhere inside the makeshift shack.

“Oh, shit! I didn’t tell the twerps about the puppies,” Dima exclaims, smacking his forehead. He turns to us. “Yeah, they’re pit bulls. Go look at ’em and pick one of the four.”

“Three,” Cable corrects him after quickly peering inside the shack. “Looks like one of ’em’s keepin’ Merry company on his journey after all. So it goes.”

“Ah, Christ—” Dima begins to stammer as he steps forward in vain to try to stop us, but we started running toward the shack as soon as we heard “pick one.”

Inside, the shack is crowded with trinkets along the walls, and a handmade patch-covered banner stating “Once A Punk, Always A Punk! Ben Fletcher Gallagher 1977–1998, 77//82” sits opposite the entrance, but the floor is surprisingly bare. There’s four chubby puppies nestled in one corner, surrounded by a new blanket. Three of them—gold, white with brown spots, and black with a white belly and nose—are squirming around, and one—silver and white—is lying flat and still. Cable scoops up the silver one and carries him away a distance. “Pick the ones y’all want,” he calls back at us. “I’ll take care of this guy real quick, bury him proper.”

The four of us are horrified by the sight of the dead puppy. Martin starts crying.

“What h-h-happened to the puppy?” Johnny asks with a shaky voice, clutching the Russian Orthodox cross around his neck that Babushka Yana gifted her two grandsons when they moved in with her. (Though Dima “lost” his and now wears an “Anarchy A” pendant he stole from Hot Topic instead.)

Dima steps inside the shack with us and shrugs. “Some make it, some don’t. We did our best, even took ’em to the vet three days ago, but their mom probably abandoned them for a reason.” He points at the remaining puppies. “There’s still three, though. Pick one, twerps.”

We let Martin decide for us, and he chooses the white-and-brown puppy, who has a fluffy coat rather than short hair, and is particularly chubby and energetic. Dima picks the black-and-white one, leaving the golden pit bull puppy for Cable.

“Whatcha gonna name ’em?” Dima asks us, unable to resist cracking a genuine smile at the sight of the squirming, yipping ball of fur in his hands.

“*Sansón!*” I blurt. “Like the Bible hero!”

We’d just covered the story in our religion class, and the four of us had liked the superhero elements Samson’s super strength gave his tale.

Dima snorts. “I’m naming mine Hercules then. Bet he’ll whoop your dog’s ass.”

“They’re not gonna fight; they’re brothers!” Eman chimes in.

“Yeah?” Dima punches Johnny playfully on the shoulder. “Doesn’t stop me and this kid from getting into it.”

“Hercules’ is also a girl pup, Dima!” Martin corrects innocently.

Dima blushes and rolls his eyes nonchalantly. “Fine—Xena, then!”

We put the puppies down and let them crawl around on the floor as we admire them until it gets too dark for us to see them well; then we scoop them back up. Cable comes back a short while after, without the puppy, and squats down to strike a piece of flint against stone to start a fire in the fire pit. Once he’s kindled a small but stable flame, he turns to face us. “So! Which one y’all leave for me?”

Dima points at the golden puppy Eman’s holding and Cable grins. “Wicked,” he cracks, “I’mma name him Bubbles.”

“Why *Bubbles*?” Dima asks with a snort. “Why not something *cool*, like Axel or Beast?”

Cable raises an eyebrow. “Cuz I like it. Why Dmitri? Why not something ’Merican, like Daniel or David?”

“My name’s David,” I interject, “and I’m not American; I’m from Canelas, Durango.”

Dima and Cable laugh.

“Were ya born in the States?” Cable asks.

I nod.

He leans over and tousles my hair. “Then you’re American, kiddo.” He points to the far end of the shack, where there’s a large old toolbox, a duffel bag, and a shopping bag full of zip ties. “You said y’all like comic books, right?”

I grin. “Yeah!”

“Good! ’Cause you’re like the X-Men, or any of them other superheroes for that matter: different, sure, but still part of this great country, and part of what keeps it great.” Cable winks and grins back at me before going over to the cluttered corner, coming back to the fire pit with the large toolbox. He opens it up, and in the flickering light from the fire, I see that there’s dozens of comics inside, along with three old books—*The Conquest of Bread*, *Living My Life*, and *A People’s History of the United States*—and a hole-punched and string-tied manuscript open to a page seemingly filled with gibberish: “Follow tire tracks 420 ft NW under RRU to S throat of YD. Some trns stop DT for clearance at INT Hinningman + 57th Av. Most roll thru at 15 NOTE: this is too fast for most to hop on the fly—”

“Oops,” Cable cracks with a chuckle as he scoops up the four texts, “y’all are a bit too young for this shit still, but we’ll get there. This last one’s for traveler eyes only, though. Maybe someday, if ya make enough bad decisions, kiddos!”

“Is that the Crew Change Guide?” Dima pipes up excitedly. “Does it tell ya where all the jungles are n’ shit? Lemme see that, yo!”

Cable smirks. “What’d I just say?”

Dima rolls his eyes, and Cable pats his shoulder sympathetically. The Curb Children and I pay them no heed, swarming the toolbox and yelling excitedly as we dig through the comic books. “Wow! He has all the ‘Death of Superman’ comics *and* ‘Crisis on Infinite Earths!’” Johnny yelps with glee as if he just found holy relics; Dima and Cable can’t help but laugh.

“Damn it, Cable, they’re never gonna get laid when they grow up if you encourage this nerd shit,” Dima cracks.

Cable shrugs. “Nah, man, this shit will be cool when they’re older—you’ll see!”

Dima rolls his eyes again but grins. “Hell nah, they’ll be weenies for life.”

“Guess you won’t like it if we play *Pokemon* right now, then!” Cable cracks back, reaching into his vest pocket and pulling out a battered purple Gameboy with *Pokemon Yellow* in it, along with a link cable. “Which of you trainers wanna battle me first?”

“Me!” Johnny yelps defiantly. “I’ll kick your fuckin’ ass!”

Dima facepalms. “Quit fucking swearing, man, fuck!”

Martin, Eman, and I crack up. Johnny loads up his *Pokemon Red* game and takes a seat by the fire on a lawn chair next to Cable; Samson, Xena, and Bubbles are soon sleeping soundly by their feet.

23 July 1999

6:00 p.m. (Friday)

“No-no-no-no!” Martin screams.

I’m on the ground, half-conscious and bleeding.

Martin asked me to tag along with him on one of his amateur entomology expeditions to the St. Jude’s back field after summer school, along McBride Street. Martin is too embarrassed to practice English much in front of other people, except Johnny and Eman, so we usually practice together while surveying the field. Today, for the better part of an hour and a half this sunny Friday afternoon, we searched for and catalogued different types of insects for Martin’s pre-labeled binder while playing around with a paper fortune teller—until some older white kids from Miramonte Middle School across the street bumped into us behind the baseball diamond. They usually mock us but otherwise leave us alone. This time, though, we were singing “John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt,” and for some reason, they had a serious problem with the way we were singing it. I’m pretty tough for an almost-nine-year-old, but I was no match against three thirteen-year-olds.

“If you don’t want me to cut your dick off, squeal like a pig, you spic,” the fattest of them says venomously, pressing the flat side of a dirty switchblade up against Martin’s crotch.

Martin can’t help but squeal between sobs. His pants are around his ankles, and the knife is rubbing mud onto his underwear, leaving stains that look like smears of poo. I can see the terror in his eyes, and I’m enraged that I’m helpless to do anything about it.

The two other kids are laughing.

“Yo, Ike, just fuck this little wetback up already! I gotta go meet with my bitch and get my rocks off,” the tallest of the group cracks, giggling and grabbing his crotch while gyrating like Michael Jackson.

The third kid, who’s a bit darker than the others and seems to have more of a chip against us because of it, mimics the crude gesture while facing Martin. “You want some of that, bitch boy? Little beaner bitch boy?”

“P-please don’t hurt me!” Martin begs, tears streaking the dirt on his cheeks. “*Por favor*, I just wanna go h-h-home.” His accent is even more pronounced in his panic.

“*English!*” The darker kid snarls.

“P-p-porfa-*what?*” The fat white kid mocks, “This is *America*, you fucking illeg—” His words are cut short by Cable’s dye-stained, tattooed fist connecting solidly with the side of his face, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Dima, sporting brand new black-and-red liberty spikes, follows close behind, tackling the tall kid, while the darker kid is taken down by a raging Johnny and Eman. After a flurry of screams, fists, kicks, and tumbles that barely register in my half-conscious mind, the only kid who isn’t knocked out cold is the fat one, since his weight makes him hardier. Cable and Dima are standing over him menacingly, like two invincible punk-rock warriors. Even though they’re only fourteen and thirteen respectively, Dima is much more muscular than the other kids, and Cable is much scrappier.

“Lift your fucking hands,” Dima barks.

The kid lifts them up hesitantly. Dima grabs them and presses them against the metal chain-link fence behind him, zip-tying them around the wrists.

“Well, we sure did John Brown proud!” Cable quips cheerily, nodding in approval at Dima’s work; then he leans in toward the kid. “My pals n’ I are gonna go now. Stay here in the dirt as long as ya like, ya hear? I’m sure yer pussy-ass baby-Nazi friends will come around soon and cut ya loose, anyway. But y’all won’t forget.” He looks at their passed-out bodies and spits on them. “And one for you too, darlin’. Bless yer heart.” He spits on the fat kid’s face, winks his electric-blue eye, and starts walking away, motioning for us to follow.

“Yooo, what the *fuck?*” Damien appears at the gate by the sidewalk, his little siblings Julius, Tyson, and Antonia a few steps behind.

They rush over to us. Damien, wearing his black fatigue-style punk-patched clothes, is also rocking a new hairstyle, like this New York artist “Basquiat” he says he admires a lot. He’s twelve, younger than both Cable and Dima, but is just as tall as them and seems to tower with his Doc Martens, broad shoulders, and soaring crown of four-pointed dreaded hair. (Julius, Tyson, and Antonia are still our size.)

“We split away for ten minutes to go buy some *Pokemon* n’ *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards, and y’all get into a brawl?” Damien chastises, looking with concern at Martin and me, then glancing over at the other knocked-out kids as he tries to piece things together. “What the fuck happened? Damn, man—Mama May ain’t gonna keep letting me take the bus up here with you twerps if she finds out about this!”

“Of course you’re friends with a bunch of ...” the fat white kid mutters venomously, the last word almost too quiet for us to hear—but we all do.

Damien’s face darkens immediately as the hurt spreads across his little siblings’ faces. “Oh ... now I get it.”

If I wasn’t struggling still, I’d get up to hug my friends, and my eyes fill up with tears seeing Tyson and Antonia’s eyes start to water, while Julius clenches his small, shaking fists and glares. Damien marches right up to the zip-tied kid and sucker punches him—hard—on the side of the head, knocking him out cold.

“Fuck you,” Damien spits.

“Amen. At least we ain’t class traitors,” Cable murmurs soberly. “You ain’t a real redneck.”

“Solidarity forever, bitch,” Dima agrees.

The three friends look at each other and nod in mutual love and appreciation, then Damien cracks his easy, brilliant grin and starts laughing heartily. “You motherfuckers! You *motherfuckers!* Damn—at least y’all let me get in the last punch, ha!”

Dima and Cable crack into equally broad grins, and the friends all rush in and start hugging and teasing each other, patting each other’s backs and shoulders roughly. Despite looking so different, you could easily mistake them for brothers from how close they are. (“This is totally them, huh?” Antonia told me last week, when we were sharing a Three Musketeers candy bar in Bartleby Park, by Byron Hills City Hall near Hardy Avenue further south on McBride Street, while our “older brothers” were teaching us all how to fly kites. “They’re like the Three Musketeers! ‘All for one, and one for all!’”)

Antonia and Tyson help me up, hugging and consoling me, as Julius, Eman, and Johnny help out Martin. Damien, begrudgingly, cuts the fat kid loose now that he’s passed out, leaving him slumped on the ground. Once we’re balanced and a bit more composed, we start trekking out.

“Anyway, y’all wanna go grab some food at one of our spots?” Cable asks jovially. “That’s what we were thinkin’ of doin’ when we went lookin’ for ya kiddos in the first place! Johnny n’ Eman told me n’ Dima we’d find y’all here. Sorry we took a while, bus got delayed. Won’t be helpin’ Candle Jack move into El Hoyo for ’nother two hours, at least that’s what Damien here said.”

Damien shrugs. “Sounds ’bout right! You were there too, fool!”

Dima snorts; Cable punches his shoulder.

“Either one!” I say with a grin. “I’m hungry!”

“Mr. Donut!” Johnny yelps. “Pleeease! They have *Street Fighter Threeee!*”

Antonia and Julius whoop in agreement, and Johnny grins broadly as the two siblings hug him from either side.

“Yeah, let’s go to Mr. Donut!” Eman chimes in, grinning like the rest of us. “No, wait—Sakura Sushi!”

“Oh my God, I love sushi!” Tyson cries happily, having tried it for the first time only a month ago, and immediately growing obsessed with all things Japanese. “*Unagi, hitotsu kudasai! Oishii desu!*” he pipes in a flawless accent.

“Where the *fuck* did you learn that?” Damien blurts in disbelief before covering his mouth from swearing in front of us little kids.

Not that it stopped him, Cable, or Dima from doing it constantly.

“Martin told me how to find it on the internet!” Tyson declares proudly as we all laugh, turning to Martin—and realizing he isn’t around us.

Dima slows down his pace. “What do you wanna eat, Martin?” he asks casually as he turns to face him.

Martin is lagging a few steps behind the rest of us, struggling to make his torn and sullied clothes look half-presentable. He’s staring at the ground with an empty gaze and doesn’t answer; I walk back and put my arm around him, as much to comfort him and pick up his pace as to support myself.

“Th-thank you for standing up for me,” he whispers in Spanish, fighting back tears and looking ashamed.

I pat him on the chest with my free hand. “*Somos hermanos, guey!* Brothers till the end.”

Damien steps toward us and rustles Martin's hair affectionately, beaming. "You're tough as nails, Marty McFly. Hell, titanium! You ain't even ten and just won your first brawl!"

"But you guys saved me," Martin mutters feebly.

"A lion without his pride is nothing. You're already one elite motherfucker; you just don't know it yet. You may not feel tough now, but that's all right. Just fake it till you make it. It's all about the mindset!"

Damien leans down and gives Martin a warm, genuine hug, whispering something confident into his ear, which seems to imbue some strength into Martin as he grins and stands up a little straighter.

"So whatcha wanna eat, Martin?" Cable juts in gently when Damien steps back, repeating Dima's earlier question. "We're all waitin' with bated breath, kiddo! Yer the man of the hour, the deciding vote."

"Um ... b-both?" Martin answers hesitantly, but his eyes quickly brighten. "They're right next to each other, so I thought, y'know, maybe we could get some sushi first, a-and then some doughnuts for dessert after?"

Damien, Cable, and Dima laugh.

"All right, all right—but I'm only buying you twerps one doughnut and a piece of sushi each!" Dima quips, leading us across Gates Avenue while he rummages through his vest's chest pocket. "You guys want a hit a' this, by the way?" Dima stops on the other side and holds out what looks like a long, rolled piece of tissue paper. He grins at our confused looks as Cable and Damien hold their tongues in amusement, then he laughs and lights the wad like a cigarette. "Nahh! Just kidding, you twerps are way too young for this still—I'll let somebody else corrupt ya!"

"I think that job falls to you, anyway," Damien corrects, grinning mischievously. "The curse of being a big bro, amirite!"

"Sorry, Dima," Cable concurs with a wink of his green eye.

Dima rolls his eyes and chuckles, inhaling a lungful of smoke from the papers. A moment later, he exhales a large cloud of thick, skunky smoke and passes the tissue roll to Damien, who does the same and then passes it to Cable.

"I think your cigarettes are rotten, Dima. They smell really funky," Eman comments innocently once we're enveloped by a pale gray haze.

The three punks burst out laughing again. Even though we're confused and beginning to cough from the growing cloud of smoke around us, we laugh too. Dima, Cable, and Damien's personalities are larger than life, and their actions today only solidify my admiration for them. I clasp my hands together and say a quick prayer to my favorite uncle, a punk rocker who died too young: *I wish you could have met them in real life, Tio Angel. Thank you for sending them to me, for everything you left for me. When I grow up, that's what I'm gonna be, a punk rocker. Like you and like them! Once a punk, always a punk.*

The three of them do most of the talking and wisecracking during the rest of our four-block walk west toward Pacific Avenue, but by the time we're on the last block, we're all in equally high spirits. Mr. Donut is pretty empty compared to Sakura Sushi, so we end up going there first. "Tubthumping" by Chumbawamba is playing on the radio inside. As soon as Dima and Damien give us all a couple of bucks for quarters, we're excited little kids again. Tyson and Antonia like the *Area 51* shooting game best, while Red is obsessed with

trying to beat the new *CarnEvil* game. Johnny and Eman run straight to the *Street Fighter III* arcade machine, so Martin and I head over to the *Marvel VS. Capcom* machine.

While we play, Damien sits at the table closest to us and listens to his Discman—I can hear Death’s “Rock-N-Roll Victim” blasting out—while scribbling lyrics into one of the pocket notebooks he also likes sketching in. Cable runs across the street to place our sushi order to go. (He washes dishes and mops for Sakura Sushi sometimes, so the staff there loves him, despite his shocking appearance.) Dima, meanwhile, goes up to the aqua-colored countertop in the center and orders some doughnuts and cheeseburgers from Tim, the gawky, pimple-covered cashier, to snack on before our sushi. After ringing Dima up, Tim hands over a receipt and an extra bag of donut holes for him to share with us. Tim goes to Sumner High School just south of my house. He’s two grades above Dima, even though he looks younger, and he likes us twerps because we keep him from getting “too bored” during his weekday-afternoon shifts. Sometimes, Dima also gives Tim cigarettes and vitamin pills in the back of the store when he comes to pick us up; Tim really likes those too.

“Oh my!” a man exclaims as the customer bell jingles above the door. “Are you boys all right?”

Johnny and I, winning on our respective arcade machines, are too ecstatic to pay attention, but Martin and Eman turn around and notice it’s an elderly couple speaking to us, and they know we have to be respectful.

“Are you all right?” the wife repeats.

“Yes ma’am,” Martin, Eman, Johnny and I chime in unison, after Martin and Eman tug on our sleeves.

Tyson, Antonia, and Julius look up nervously for a second, pretending not to notice the adults so they don’t have to awkwardly talk to them. Damien’s music is lower now, and he’s watching everything warily from the corner of his eye.

I give the old lady a thumbs-up. “We were ... playing capture the flag on a steep hill ... bad idea!” I force a chuckle, and the others follow my lead. Luckily, it seems my accent helps cover for the fact that I was making something up on the fly.

“Are you sure?” The old man still looks skeptical. “It looks like a little more than that.”

“Yes sir, I am.” I give him two thumbs up. “We lost and played a few too many rematches—cuz I’m a sore loser!”

The old man chuckles and shakes his head as I watch Damien behind him crack a huge, approving grin. He gives me a thumbs-up, which makes me swell with pride. “Well, you kids are lucky none of you rascals broke anything while horsing around!” The old husband puts his arm around his wife. “If I didn’t grow up playing rough myself out on the mean streets of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, I’d say a visit to the doctor was in order!”

I shake my head. “No, sir! Nothing doughnuts and video games can’t fix!” I smile as confidently as I can with my developing black eye and bloody mouth.

“We came here with my older brother, sir!” Johnny offers when they still seem reluctant to leave us alone, pointing Dima out to them by the counter, where he’s also watching the scene unfold.

He stares at them, arms folded and not smiling.

“He picked us up from the park!” Eman adds helpfully. “He made sure we called it a tie before we got hurt more! These are our friends too.” Eman points out Antonia, Julius,

and Tyson, who pipe a shy “hello” before immediately looking away, focusing on their video games, and a seated Damien, who nods politely and mutters a confident “How do you do?”

The couple looks unnerved by the sight of Dima and Damien because of their wild appearances, but they seem satisfied with Eman’s explanation, and they clearly notice the physical similarities between Johnny and Dima, and Damien and his siblings, looking back and forth between the groups several times. Finally, they nod in understanding.

“Well ... how about a few quarters, then?” The wife asks with a smile.

“Sure!” Eman yelps, flashing a cool, crooked grin just like Mr. Lenin Anderson, one of the groovy older hippies who works at the local record store, Atomic Records, near my house. “Thank you, ma’am!”

The couple laughs heartily as the wife rummages through her purse for a second, and she offers us five quarters. “It’s ain’t much, but I hope these serve you boys well!”

We thank them, and the couple ambles over to the counter to order just as Dima returns with a tray of food for our group. He sets it in front of Damien, who immediately starts splitting everything equitably for us little kids.

“Eat up whenever you’re ready, twerps!” Dima grins, clearly seeing all our excited, ravenous faces. “Just leave the three burgers there for me, Damien, n’ Cable so y’all can still eat some sushi too when he gets back—and speak of the devil!”

Cable waltzes in triumphantly, carrying two large plastic bags laden with containers of sushi. “Good Lord—you kiddos are having a feast in here!” he cracks. “Well, hope y’all have plenty a’ room, cuz the Sakura crew tossed us in some extra unagi and a free dragon roll!” He sets the food down on the corner of the table, on Dima and Damien’s side, then looks at Tyson, stopping him as he heads over to the food along with the rest of us with a polite, upheld palm and a wink of his blue eye. Straightening out, he reaches into his heavily patched denim vest and brings out an *Astro Boy* toy, which he cups in his hands and offers to Tyson with a small bow at the waist. “*Tsumaranai mono desu ga,*” he murmurs, in surprisingly good Japanese considering his normally heavy Southern accent. “Satoshi the head chef wanted ‘the kid who loves my family’s unagi recipe’ to have this! We all know who that is, kiddo!”

Tyson beams and starts crying tears of joy. He maintains his composure just long enough to return a respectful bow and pipe up “*Arigato!*” before snatching the toy out of Cable’s waiting hands, both of them grinning broadly.

We all cheer for Tyson and for the food, giving Damien, Dima, and Cable enthusiastic high-fives all around before scarfing down mouthfuls of burgers, fries, donuts, and sushi indiscriminately. A few minutes later, to the mutual shock and amusement of our “older brothers,” we’re all filled up and ready to rush back to our respective arcade machines for some new rounds. Johnny and I do rock-paper-scissors to figure out who gets to be player one and which game we’ll challenge each other on, while eight-bit theme music blares out from the arcade machines around us. The radio is playing “Semi-Charmed Life” by Third Eye Blind now.

“Boy, what I’d give to be their age again!” I hear the old husband comment nostalgically to his wife after Johnny wins both our rounds, and I’m now player two in *Street Fighter III*.

The couple is seated at a far table on the other side of the counter, patiently awaiting their order and clearly enjoying another pleasant, sunny California day in the ripe midst of their golden years.

“Right?” the old woman responds with a gentle, wistful sigh as the sky outside turns gold and pink. “Just a couple of children at the dawn of their salad days, ready to meet out by the curb and play games or have some adventures! Without a care in the world.”

Chapter 1:

California *Über Alles*

[Aqua Journal Entry #77]

Friday, October 20, 2006

This place called Byron Hills in SoCal

What is my life, man?? I don't even know what I'm supposed to do starting off like this, but damn I'm trying to be better!!

Being pimped out as a kid really fucked me up though. I don't remember much before being a "lot lizard" or child escort or whatever the fuck out in the Midwest. I know I'm from New Mexico originally, and that the bad shit started there. I remember the days were hot, the nights were cold, and there was a lot of yelling most of the time, except from a young guy who died early and a young woman who would sing to me. They called me Lilakai, instead of Pocahontas or whatever dumb racist shit, and I like to think they were my parents, cuz they kinda looked like me. They were Navajo, so I'm probably Navajo too. Who knows, though. All the other grownups around me were assholes. It's hard not to feel like it all started making me into an asshole too after a while. Shit only got worse once the woman disappeared and I got shipped up to Chicagoland. At least I started sneaking online, for whatever that's worth ...

Ha! But ol' Silver Murphy says thinking about that shit'll drive me crazy, and "it's better just to deal with the hand ya got n' try n' be better. Gotta have moxie." Hell, hearing that from a gnarly old Irish Traveler dude from Oklahoma who survived the Great Depression and killed fascists in WWII will get even someone like me to listen! Life in Silver's Carnival was definitely a good transition from whatever hell I was sold into as a kid, that's for sure. We were still on the road most of the time, but we had a home in Sleepy Hollow, and nobody told me when or how other people could touch me. And the Washington Cascades are pretty as hell!! West Camp 4 lyfe! I never got to see the Northern Lights from there like Tillie and Cable said you can on rare occasions, but it was still beautiful to live there, and maybe we'll still take that Alaska or Vermont trip to go "Aurora Borealis hunting" someday. Lol. Love it anyway. A lot of travelers, wooks, oogles, rainbow kids, and old deadheads passing through, sure, but we got rid of the bad ones quick. Sometimes I feel I should just go back already and retire on one of the carnie farms we got up in those hills ... but I feel I need to be out in the "real" world on my own terms before I can fall back on that kinda peace, y'know?? At least for a little bit ... Idk. I'm only 14, and everybody tells me I'm so smart. I can't just be here to suffer and die. People already treat me like I'm an adult. I wanna feel like one too. Is there even such a thing as being a real adult??? Hell, sometimes I still wonder why I was born into such a shitty life in the first place, if the "Winds of Fate" like Silver likes to yap about even exist. But whatever. I'll just "Keep on Truckin'," like all them old hippies n' deadheads like to say! What else can I do lmao...

Anyway, thanks Tillie, for helping me improve on my reading and writing. Best sister ever, yo!! She says I'm just a good student, "wicked smart and read fast as fuck, ya fucking da Vinci," but she's also an amazing teacher!!! Plus, my favorite outta the ninja turtles is Michelangelo, hehehe. Idk, everything was just emotions up in my head before, mostly bad ones. I don't even remember who taught me to read. Before the carnival, when I first escaped that Southside Chicago trap house two years ago and ended up in New York, I felt like an animal. There's no room for feelings when it's all about survival, just wise-cracks and threats. Maybe that's why people assume I'm a lot older. (That or my tattoos and "mature" features. Ha ha.) I feel myself slipping back into that old me sometimes after how things went down earlier this year. Tillie having Sleepy Hollow and the Carnival thrust onto her, even though she's still a kid ... Caleb trainhopping right outta Washington ... Silver getting sick ... Hell, he's probably dead by now, tbh. Rest in peace old man.

I hope Rio is holding up okay. I'm sure he's the one who took care of the actual burial, like he promised Silver he would by his campfire over a year ago. I wonder what that "secret mission" he gave him was about? Guess I'll have to wait to find out ... I shouldn't have run away. But I was feeling low as hell, and needed a change. Idk. I've never really had any kinda stability before, and having it all fall apart like that kinda fucked me up again ...

At least writing shit down helps keep me from going too crazy. I'm glad my brother Rio helped Tillie make me this journal hehe. Thanks, brotha!! Especially for not leaving me in the sticks of PA with those spunion oogles after I tried mugging ya for heroin money at the ol' Wayne County Fair! Those drugged out gutter punks ... We're the best, ain't we?! Lmao. Lord was I a bitch—and not even a bad bitch! Just a bitch-bitch. At least I traveled a lot?

Sigh ...

Maybe I overreacted trainhopping all the way down the West Coast. That shit was hard. And if I get caught, as soon as they realize I'm just an early bloomer, it's off the fucking system for me. Fuck that! But hey, I'm here in Los Angeles now, and somehow I feel I should be anyway?? I've only been here two weeks, but maaan does it feel like a lifetime already! I can see why Caleb always comes back. (Better make sure to just call him Cable down here, lol! Doesn't seem like anyone down here knows who "Caleb" is!!) I wasn't sure he would even be down here, tbh. But I had a feeling, like fate was drawing me here. Or maybe I just knew cuz Cable talks about his "comrades" Dima and Damien and these dweebs the "Curb Children" and "Sly House" a lot, and of course they're all from Los Angeles! So I had to see for myself I guess.

There's something magical about SoCal, ngl. And L.A. is something else. I can't quite explain it, but Los Angeles is just so different from Chicago, or New York, or New Orleans. DEFINITELY different from the Midwest and the Northwest! The days are always so sunny, the nights can lead you anywhere, and you can get away with so fucking much here. If you gotta friend with a car and gas money!! Feels like you can outrun anything out here, cruising down a freeway towards whatever warehouse or secret tunnel or hidden party spot in the beach, forest, or desert promises the night's adventures. And damn, those gold or pink sunsets ... I sometimes almost forget everything from before when we're all out chasing the party ...

Speaking of, I can't believe I've made so many friends so fast! Me. Wild. This place looks like a suburban purgatory like no other, realltalk, but living here is already feeling like some psychedelic fever dream I never wanna wake up from. I thought LA would be like in that book *Less Than Zero* that Tillie lent me once, but most people I've met aren't nearly as rich, and the rich people I've met aren't nearly as obnoxious. Then again, maybe I'm just hanging out with the outcasts and beautiful weirdos, ha. Like, I know punks aren't 'cool,' and neither are ravers. But whatever man, just the way I like it!!!

Everywhere else I've been, people rag on California like crazy, and sometimes I can kinda see why, but out here, nobody seems to think about anywhere else at ALL. Unless it's a weekend trip to Vegas, ha!!

Anyway, time to get ready for this next party lmao :) These "Toxic Kandi Family" kids go fuckin HAM, yo! It's like Party Monster or something, but in L.A. hehe. Of fucking course those Curb Children and Sly House kids would have some wild-ass local party crew down here ... And they ALL know Cable! Wtf!?! That Southern boy gets around. Where does he FIND these sorta people??? I think we've been out at least 3 nights a week hahaha.

But I don't really mind ...

16 August 2008

6:02 a.m. PDT (Saturday)

"Aqua, you fucking *bitch!*"

My eyes shoot open. I still feel high as hell. It takes me a moment to remember where I am: Southern California, at this kid Gecko's house in Riverside. It's dark, so I wait a minute for my eyes to adjust. I notice faint, swirling galaxy projections on the ceiling, coming from a projector that's clearly running out of battery. I admire the beautiful artificial cosmos for a second, then happen to glance down at my arms—and notice that both of them are covered in permanent marker doodles. Aqua's unmistakable J-shaped "personal sigil" evoking an abstract mountain scene is drawn prominently on my left forearm, inside of a sloppy heart outline just above the "Curb Children symbol" tattoo I share with my childhood friends Martin Cortez, Johnny Volkov, and Eman Harcourt. There's a message next to it: "when ya gonna get this, Leo?" I sigh. *Goddamn it, Aqua ... I'll get that tattoo eventually. I hope she didn't draw a dick on my face.*

I feel around my body to confirm I'm still wearing my party outfit: DIY patch-covered black punk pants, old studded belt, old denim punk vest, black Despise You band shirt cutoff, armloads of colorful kandi bracelets, my black Hawaiian puka shell necklace, and custom white Wolf Ears hood with colorful kandi sewn around the paws that one of my homies from TKF's Dreamcast Family crew, Tailz, gifted to me early on. *Good, at least I didn't lose anything this time.* I reach out from under the sleeping bag I'm using as a blanket and feel around the floor until I find my beat-up suede dancing shoes with burnished soles that glide like butter. I let myself relax a little more.

Everything is sore. I really pushed myself dancing so hard to DJ Hixxy's "I See the Light" at Teenage Crime last night—our banger warehouse rave at the downtown L.A. spot we call the Combine. Since last night was also my eighteenth birthday, the Toxic Kandi Family's "Mad Hatter" afterparty was insane, even for us. I ended up doing way more ketamine than I'm comfortable with just to knock out. I groan and close my eyes again. I have a feeling I'll still be struggling to form sober thoughts tonight on my redevye flight to New York City. *Fuck, I can't believe I got into Manhattan University ... Class of 2012. Here I come, college.*

Modest Mouse's "Trucker's Atlas" drones out on low volume from somewhere.

"*Bitch,*" Blu snarls again, banging loudly on the bathroom door at the end of a short, lit hallway, "I need to fucking pee! And I'm not wandering around this gaudy-ass McMansion to find another spot! We probably won't even make it to Sunken City until the afternoon now because of you! You better be fucking dead in there, cuz I'm gonna *kill* you!"

"Shut the fuck up, Blu!" Damien Jefferson, the head of the Sly House crew we've known since childhood—and one of the big brothers in our larger TKF crew—snaps angrily from where he's sprawled out on a purple leather wraparound couch in the far corner of Gecko's cavernous basement "man den." "Geez, homie, just go piss upstairs, or outside, holy shit! Or piss in yer pants! Ain't nobody tryna ragequit or PK tonight, so don't go putting those bad vibes out there!"

A few burnt-out bodies voice their agreement.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I open my eyes again. *Damn it, what's going on?* I get up, reaching into my pocket reflexively to check my cellphone. When the screen of my Razr2 stays black, I remember turning it off last night to avoid having to add any more people to my Plurlife, Myspace, Tumblr, AIM, or Facebook.

I grin.

Being internet- and rave-famous has its perks, such as underground DJs and party promoters putting you on their guestlists, and party spots and party favors getting a lot easier to find. But I could definitely do without the excessive amounts of attention we get online and at parties now—especially after our "Raving '20s" series of parties at the Hollywood Hills mansion we call the Regency gained some serious underground notoriety. *Fuckin' weird getting recognized IRL from random shit people saw online!* Last night, the only reason we even ran into Gecko in the first place is because he recognized Aqua and me from Aqua's drawing of her as a punk Sailor Neptune and me as a punk Sailor Uranus. This particular drawing spawned tens of thousands of reblogs across the Tumblrverse, and a lot of amusement and acclaim among raver netizens who saw us shuffling while dressed this way at Monster Massive last year. Particularly amused were my fellow TKFers, who know I'm a boy in real life. Gecko even admitted to me he initially thought I was a girl still when he first saw me, because of my long hair and androgynous "rocker kid" appearance. Staring at my black screen, thinking of the many other outlandish shenanigans our burgeoning internet notoriety has gotten us into, I start snickering to myself.

Another slew of curse words from Blu's direction snaps me out of my trance. I pocket my phone and head toward the source of the commotion, careful not to step on anyone. As I walk awkwardly through the crowded, carpeted floor, I recall the series of improbable events that led us here tonight: *Fucking Blu, such a sweet-talker! So confident and persistent, too—really gambled betting that Gecko was closet-bi, but here we are. That kid never stops chasing the party!*

I step on a puddle of something warm with a squish and instantly recoil. “What the hell?” I blurt, loud enough for people to shush me. “Sorry,” I mutter, peeling off my gross wet socks and tossing them aside.

A bunch of my equally wildly dressed friends are already gathered around Blu’s lanky, heaving frame in the deceptively wide bathroom hallway: Damien’s younger brother Red, our cosplayer/DJ friend Kiki-chan, Martin, the TKF matriarchs Echo and Eargasm, and the Chu brothers, Jason and Ponyboi. They’re whispering so loudly and angrily that they might as well be talking normally. As Blu tosses his Pokemon Trainer Blue shirt onto the wet ground in frustration, exposing his pale white torso filled with emo tattoos, Ponyboi spots me.

“What’s up, Leoncito?” he quips preemptively, using one of my more affectionate nicknames. “Aqua’s taking a bath.”

Ponyboi is still decked out in all his rainbow-colored ponybead kandi cuffs, with an equally colorful skin-tight tie-dye shirt wrapped around his lithe frame. Jason, who is slightly shorter but significantly more tanned and chiseled, is wearing the same tie-dye pattern as his baby brother, emphasizing the vast differences in their handsome appearances. Both of them are sporting the apocalyptic-looking gray goggles over their foreheads that they bought for Burning Man last year.

“She let the water spill out from the tub again,” Red clarifies, his untied dreadlocks spilling over his bony tattooed shoulders from underneath a Trainer Red cap. “Homegurl needa learn to take hot showers or somethin’, man. This is some bullshit. Twice in one weekend!”

“For real!” Eargasm agrees heatedly, sporting dreadlocks as thick as Red’s and more Industrial gear than Ponyboi has rave gear. “I hate being mad at her, but she almost ruined my MIDI controller this time, like goddamn.”

Echo, who’s wearing one of her old-fashioned pastel Lolita nightdresses, wraps her light-brown arms around Eargasm’s dark-brown exposed waist and gives her a playful peck on the cheek. “Oh, calm down, you grump! You were just talking about junking that old deck a few hours ago. It’s about time you let the old make way for the new!”

Eargasm rolls her eyes but lets her girlfriend hold her.

“*Ayóó áníínishní,*” I hear Echo whisper lovingly (in the Navajo language she sometimes shares with Aqua ever since guessing her likely heritage), causing Eargasm to grin.

Man, those two are so cute!

Someone sighs in frustration, and I snap back to reality. Not knowing what else to do, I push my long, dark bangs out of my eyes and walk up to knock on the bathroom door myself. “Hey dude—uh, you done in there?”

Blu snorts. “Don’t bother asking nicely, Rage. You know she’s basically dead to the world when she’s doing that sensory-deprivation shit.”

Rage is my rave name, and he’s right; Aqua likes to undress and pretend she’s in a sensory-deprivation chamber whenever she’s a certain kind of fucked up. Admittedly, it’s pretty cool to trip in the dark while getting some sick audiovisual hallucinations, but around half the time she does this, it also ends in overflowing bathtubs. Luckily, she’s stopped doing it so often after being with us in L.A. for over a year and a half. *Aqua doesn’t usually lock the door, though.*

Red suddenly pushes forward and jiggles the doorknob violently with a broad, dark-brown hand, banging on the door with the other. “Yo, Aqua, this ain’t cool!” He knocks heatedly for another minute, then turns to Kiki and sighs in frustration. “Girl, your homeboy Gecko is

gonna be *pissed!*” He looks down at the wet carpet, then at the steady stream of water flowing out from under the door. “Ya willing to lose this friendship?”

Kiki throws up her hands and shrugs, the kandi-covered red bow from her eponymous raver-infused *Kiki’s Delivery Service* cosplay still tucked neatly in her beautiful bobbed black hair. “Hey man, listen—I met that baka-boy on 4chan like three years ago in one of my /b/ camthreads. Just because he jacks off to me and has my DJ avatar as his phone’s background picture doesn’t mean I know him any better than y’all do. Last night was the first time I’ve ever even seen him IRL! Sides, he recognized Aqua and Leo-boy first, and I’m not the one who schmoozed and blew him into letting us all come over.” She chuckles, throwing a side glance at Blu, but he’s not paying attention.

“I think nightcore-loving gamer bro anon is a pretty cool guy,” Martin chimes in humorously, his dilated green eyes practically glowing against his sweaty brown skin, “Eh hosts tendies-filled afterpartays and doesn’t afraid of anything!”

A bunch of us chuckle stupidly at the meme references, including some of the people still “sleeping.”

“Fuck this,” Blu growls through gritted teeth, raising his foot. “*Aqua, I’m coming in! Everyone move!*” He kicks in the door decisively, storming inside.

“*Blu! Yadilah*, are you fucking crazy?” Echo yells, running in after him.

I immediately know something is wrong when Blu is silent for once.

“*What the fuck?*” Echo shrieks through a covered mouth.

We pile in behind her. The bathroom light flickers on. Blu is pulling Aqua’s limp, fully clothed body over the edge of the jacuzzi bathtub onto the wet tiled floor. Aqua’s black-and-white rat, Persephone, is huddled behind the toilet, soaking wet and shivering in shock.

“*Get some fucking help!*” Echo bellows as Red kneels down next to Blu and gives Aqua a few desperate CPR compressions.

I can tell it’s useless, though; water is streaming freely from her mouth and nose.

“*Get Gecko*,” Kiki seconds authoritatively to stir more people, already bolting for the stairs alongside a departing Echo. “Somebody get Gecko *now!* Or find a phone! I don’t have any cell service out here!”

“I’ll check if he’s outside!” Eargasm yelps as she rushes after them, a crowd forming at the front of the hallway in their wake.

“I’ll check the floors upstairs!” Jason informs the rest of us. He gives Ponyboi a quick but firm hug and motions for a now wide-awake Damien in the crowd—his Basquiat-styled hair now messily afroed—to follow.

Martin scoops up Perse, hugs her tight, and goes with them.

“Oh my God ...” Ponyboi whispers in horror, pushing back his bobbed white wig and clutching his short black hair underneath, “oh my God, oh my God, oh my God ...”

“Yo! This is *gnarly*—”

“Get back!” I bark at the approaching crew of cellphone-wielding “Myspace-famous” scene kids from one of Blu’s whoretrains, whom I knew we shouldn’t have let follow us tonight. (It’s clear they just want to snap a viral-worthy picture to post online—maybe even tag as “Diana Havok,” the moniker of the fake Myspace profile that grew infamous using photoshopped versions of Aqua’s pictures, forcing her onto social media to take back her image.) “I said get the *fuck* back!”

I stop the four skinny-jeaned kids in their tracks and force them back and out of the basement with threats and swears. When I return, Blu has pulled Aqua onto his lap, embracing her tightly as her head hangs back limply. Blu's long blond bangs obscure half his face. Red is hyperventilating, checking repeatedly for a pulse he knows isn't there. Next to her two lanky "big brothers," Aqua looks even younger than she already is. With her drenched, aqua-colored hair splayed across her beautiful brown face, she reminds me of a sleeping mermaid child.

Red begins to cry. "Not her ... oh man, not her ..."

"H-hey," Blu stammers, his snake-bit lips quivering as he struggles to speak, "w-wake up." His visible blue eye, ringed heavily by black eyeliner, shimmers with tears as he shakes her feebly. "I w-was just k-kidding, doofus ..."

Red pushes back Aqua's hair and cups her cheek tenderly. We all stare at her. Even with her piercings, scars, tattoos, and scissor-chopped bangs, she looks way too young for death. *You shouldn't be gone yet.*

"What do you mean someone's dead?" I hear Gecko scream upstairs.

"Gecko, please! We just need your help with at least a fucking phone—" Kiki begins, but she's cut off.

"Shut the fuck up, you slut! You and your faggot friends better get the fuck outta here right the fuck now!"

"Dude! Gecko! You can't talk to Kiki like that!" Damien interjects firmly, mediating like always. "Chill. Out. We gotta—"

"Get the fuck out! Get the fuck out!" Gecko begins shrieking instead. "*All of you grimy fucking ravers get the fuck out! Now!*"

"Are you for real?" Kiki sneers back. "Our friend might be dead! We need some goddamn help—"

"Fuck you, you stupid chink cum dumpster—"

"Yo! Get your hands off her!" Damien roars as a scuffle breaks out and more people start yelling.

"Please w-wake up," Blu whimpers before he begins to sob, his black eyeliner streaking in thick lines down his sharp cheekbones and angular jaw.

We don't even have to look at each other to know that we're no longer complete, nor will we ever be. This can't be happening. I hear more panicked voices rise behind me as chaos spreads throughout the rest of the vast house, but I'm paying attention only to Red and Blu, who are focused only on Aqua.

Please no... Please no ...

28 May 2009

9:45 a.m. EDT / 6:45 a.m. PDT (Thursday)

My cheeks are wet with tears, and the plane I'm on is still taxiing on the runway at LAX, queuing to approach the terminal. The balding, business-casual thirty-something sitting next to me is listening to "The Lonesome Crowded West" on a blue drugstore Discman. I cough to clear my throat as I grip the airplane seat in front of me with shaky, chalk-white hands. *I hate what this album makes me think of now. I miss you.*

Mr. Business Casual is staring at me; I get the feeling he knows he's somehow responsible for my reaction. Or just super creeped out.

"Can I help you?" I bark from behind long dark bangs, wiping away the trail of tears streaming down my face.

He continues to stare; I glare back into his gawking brown eyes.

The balding passenger looks me over, seems to judge I'm not worth the time, and looks away, flipping through his CD binder silently.

Badaud, I think reflexively, shaking my head. *That's what Astair would've called him. As opposed to the "wordly flâneur."* I sigh and check my vintage pocket watch, which she gave me, trying to think of something else. Apart from being a lifelong bookworm and self-taught polyglot—speaking French, Japanese, and Spanish, as well as English—Astair Lorraine Nakamura-Cawley is one of my oldest friends, right after the Curb Children. Martin and I first met her online almost nine years ago, in the Red Dragon Inn AOL Roleplay chatroom. At the time, and up until his mother's passing in the summer of 2006 from ovarian cancer, Martin had been developing this fantasy world called Altaberia since early childhood, and we were recruiting people for an RP set in it. Though Aqua later revived "Legends of Altaberia" and greatly expanded its lore—including adding a "battle mage" class to our mystical Jenin Order of sorcerers called the Mago-Rai, and a "witch rogue" class called the Travelers partly inspired by my punk-rock-playing wandering bard—most of the world's fundamentals still come from those early RP days. When Astair's parents divorced in the summer of 2004 and her father moved to Torrance, she moved from her house in Alhambra to her grandpa's old place in my hometown of Byron Hills with her mother, who's a nurse at the local hospital. Right before we both started at Almansor High that fall, Astair became my first—and later, on-and-off-again—girlfriend for the next four years.

In the past, our romantic breaks didn't seem to affect our friendship much, regardless of who initiated it, since we still talked regularly and hung out with Martin together anyway. When we broke up this last time, though, it was because I left for New York City—three weeks after I had stupidly proposed to her in a fit of passion, and months after initially telling everyone I was most likely going to UCLA. *I wonder what my friends think. I hope I see Astair ...* Needless to say, things have been strained between us ever since. *Damn it, stop thinking about her.* I rummage through the front pouch of my blue, punk-patched baja hoodie, pop the two oxycodone pills I stashed there into my mouth, and rest my eyelids for a second.

When I wake up again, the Oxys have started to kick in.

Nice!

I yawn, sinking lazily into my seat. The ringing of the Fasten Seatbelt sign finally turning off initiates the Zerg Rush of passengers unbuckling their seatbelts, grabbing their belongings, and shuffling toward the exit. Mr. Business Casual is already two rows ahead, bag over his head, trying to wrestle his way forward despite the throngs of fellow passengers attempting to do the same. Even with the cacophony around us, he's still speaking loud enough for me to make out what he's jabbering into his cellphone: "Sorry, ma'am, I'm still on the plane ... Yes, we were delayed ... No, it's not done ... By Monday, yes ... Oh, I'm sorry, my wife is calling ... Oh, well, she's pregnant and not used to me taking such long trips ... N-no ma'am, I-I'm very grateful for this opportunity ... Yes, ma'am, I'll call right back as soon as I'm in the terminal ..."

I yawn and fold my hands behind my head. The two aisle lines slow to a crawl, and I catch snippets of some of the other passengers' grievances: how mediocre and expensive the

snacks-for-purchase were, how cramped the airplane seating was, how frustrating they found the limited in-flight entertainment. I smirk. Aqua told me once, while recounting her own difficulties with traveling around penniless, how darkly amusing she found it that traversing the two-and-a-half-thousand miles separating the East and West Coasts has gone from the Manifest Destiny of Americans past to just another inconvenience for so many of us to bitch about. *Ha. I'll give you that one, Aqua.* I chuckle to myself.

When the aisles are almost empty, I stand up, grab my canvas backpack from the overhead compartment, and walk out into the terminal without any hassle.

Home, sweet home!

I stop for a moment in the middle of the concourse to look back at the Boeing 757 I just exited, feeling mellow and curious. *We can be literally anywhere on the planet in less than a day. That's fucking crazy—*

“This is ridiculous!” a stranger shrieks, ending my daydream before it began.

I turn to see a shorts-and-sandals-wearing tourist and his dull-eyed family standing by the desk of another gate. Mr. American Tourist proceeds to cuss out the gate attendant. Her crime: ruining his family’s Disneyland vacation by “making” them wait to get off their plane, thus missing their pick-up bus—as if she alone is somehow responsible for the delays at one of the world’s busiest airports. I shake my head amusedly. *The Donner Party would've loved to have that jackass along for the ride.*

I turn back and follow the signs directing me toward baggage claim, then take a detour to the men’s restroom to freshen up real quick. Inside, I hear the sounds of men doing their business, some more modestly than others. *It's funny how much time we waste hating on each other, feeling superior to other living things, when at the end of the day we all shit and piss just like all the other animals on this planet.* I snicker to myself as I head over to an open sink. After washing my hands, I take off my septum and ear piercings and finally stare at myself in the mirror.

Shit ... I'm a ghost.

For all that talk about New York City being the “Capital of the World,” one thing it will never have over Los Angeles is year-round yellow sunshine. My skin never quite gets as brown as Martin’s or my mom’s, but having some sort of sun-kissed complexion is practically a given when you live in Southern California. Right now, my skin looks chalk white—only partly due to my frequent nocturnal adventures in the City That Never Sleeps. *I never got this pale when I was partying down here in L.A.!* I trace a finger over the dark circles under my eyes and sigh. Falling asleep has never been easy for me, and ever since Aqua’s death last year, passing out from exhaustion is really the only way I get any shut-eye sober. Nothing seems to stop the dreams. “Whatever,” I mutter to myself, stashing my piercings in my hoodie’s front pouch and taking it off.

Underneath, I’m wearing maroon suspenders and a cream-yellow dress shirt. I look myself over again and grin, admiring my broader shoulders and slimmer waistline. *At least I've been lifting! Can't wait for everyone to see me.* I was already getting in pretty good shape toward the end of high school because I started going on runs with Martin, who was captain of the cross-country team at the time, and I definitely miss my slimmer, more androgynous figure. But I’ve received nothing but compliments since I started hitting the gym regularly, and a lot more glances than before, too. You definitely notice when people start noticing you in a no-nonsense

place like New York City. My “brolic Sailor Uranus” cosplay was also a massive hit at New York Comic-Con this year.

Satisfied, I roll up my sleeves and peel back the bandages on my right arm to admire my recently finished “Pizza Punks NYC” tattoo. It was a rite of passage for me to get it, marking my official acceptance into the nebulous Unionhead Family—the arcane collection of young outcasts and transients who hang around Union Square and call the crowded parks, dirty awnings, and cracked sidewalks of New York City home. To be sure, there are a bunch of other custom tattoos, representing all the different subcultures among the Unionheads, but the punks spotted me by Union Square first and know me best. I smile. *Maybe when I go back, I’ll get one of the other Unionhead tattoos, like the traditional punk one, or the Otaku or Raver ones. I know Lataya keeps telling me to get the “Dangerous Kitten Mafia” one too, so I can get into their “secret” parties.* For now, though, I’m still beaming with pride from getting this first one. The off-white “Pizza Punks” banner over the pizza crust, along with the “NYC” banner below the tip, look just as fresh as the bright-red pepperonis, even though they were inked a month apart. I decide to leave my tattoo unwrapped, hoping my neat appearance will subdue my parents’ expected reaction.

They haven’t been fans of any of my tattoos so far, of course. In fact, if it hadn’t been for Aqua showing up and Martin saying she was a *prima* transferring to an arts program at East Los Angeles College, right off Pacific Boulevard a mile and a half away from my house, to explain her sudden appearance, I don’t think they would have ever gotten used to tattoos at all. *I hope my parents don’t ask me about “Lily.”* As far as I know, they still think she’s an older cousin from Martin’s deceased mother’s side of the family—which is good enough for me. I chuckle, shaking my head. *Can’t believe they bought that.* Luckily, this lie was also bolstered by Martin’s normally self-centered dad, my fashionably ruthless Nino Arturo, when we visited him once in Pasadena. In an uncharacteristic act of selflessness, he backed our story up upon being asked. (Nino Art also didn’t ask for any clarification afterward, other than to see a picture of her and nodding approvingly. But this was more characteristic of his *laissez-faire* parenting approach and aestheticist worldview.) I smile for a second, remembering Aqua’s presence, but the warmth from her memories quickly fades. I sigh heavily. *Fuck. I miss you so much.* I’m assuming my parents think Aqua moved out and transferred to a regular college or something, considering she hasn’t been around for a year now. I close my eyes to clear my head. *Damn it, think of something else, man.*

After rubbing some water on my eyelids, I open my eyes and place my backpack on the counter, taking out my brush, blue waistcoat, black skinny tie, and maroon leather hair tie my grandmother, Mama Alma, gave to me back in 1997, just before she died. She was always a fan of my hair—which is thick, wavy, and dark brown—because it reminded her of hers when she was young. I brush my long layers of hair back, separating a small section at the top for bangs, and pull the heavy mass into a loose ponytail that (almost) obscures the purple-dyed layers around the nape of my neck. I tie my skinny tie and button up my waistcoat next. Nodding approvingly, I bend down to lace my black dress shoes tighter and dust off my trousers. Finally, after adjusting my pocket

watch to Pacific Daylight Time and tucking it into my waistcoat’s chest pocket, my Cowboy Bebop–inspired leisure suit is complete. *See ya, Space Cowboy!* I first wore this outfit to the Toxic Kandi Family’s Cowboy Bebop–themed party, the “Bebop Ball,” where we required everyone to dress “classy and jazzy.” The idea of dressing up for some over-the-top party

shenanigans proved irresistible, leading directly to our “Raving ’20s” series of parties, which were easily some of our most popular events—and profitable, according to Sly House, the TKFers who knew most about our finances. *God, I miss those days.* I point a finger gun at my reflection. “Bang,” I mutter under my breath, grinning broadly. *I’m back! Let’s do this, California!*

My positive mood lasts until I reach the first step of the escalator descending toward baggage claim. As I sink lower and lower, I begin thinking about just how long it’s been since I actually talked to anyone from Los Angeles regularly. *Damn, one fucking year.*

While in New York, I deactivated my Myspace and Plurlife, abandoned my Tumblr and AIM, and didn’t really check my Facebook or personal emails. Other than meeting with Martin and a few other TKFers for a long-planned Eurotrip starting from London over winter break, and exchanging the odd text message here and there, I’ve been largely out of touch since leaving last summer. I even started using an old Metro PCS phone for a time, to ditch my California area code. I always meant to reach out more, but there was just too much I wanted to leave behind. Before I realized it, 2008 was gone and 2009 was halfway through. My friends on both coasts already love ragging on me for being “spaced out in Leo-land” half the time, but even I know I definitely dropped the ball on this one. I like to say I think a lot about the book I’d like to write one day, but honestly, my mind just wanders.

Whatever, I was in school. I was hurting. I sigh and close my eyes, not even convincing myself. *Fuck... At least I thought about everyone a lot.* Slowly, my mind drifts to brighter memories from the past.

7 April 2007

4:20 p.m. PDT (Saturday)

“There you fucks are!” Dima hollers over cheers from our friend Tito’s team (and groans from my team—the Curb Children, plus Blu and Red). “Ey! Speaking of ‘escape from the city,’ how about you fools escape from this game room you set up in *my* room and join the party downstairs already? You mofos missed my band’s thrash set, and now y’all gonna miss all of Aqua’s ‘Solarpunk’ speech too!”

“Aight, aight, we smoked these foos anyway, *ese!*” Tito cracks at Dima.

We just finished playing a final, tie-breaking rematch of *Sonic Adventure 2 Battle* on Tito’s Gamecube, on the classic “City Escape” map, of course. Tito is hosting this month’s video game tournament at his parents’ apartment in Compton, but he decided to bring the Gamecube to El Hoyo’s fifteenth-anniversary house show today to wrap up last month’s tournament in style. I first met Tito and his crew at a South L.A. punk show Damien invited us to three years ago, on Juneteenth 2004, at the local D-beat-loving disrocker dis-squat Venganza 30-30. Tito, Iggy, and Jesus, along with their Cambodian friends Hando, Milo, and Sokha, built a full-sized firepit there and roasted a whole pig over it. To top that off, they also brought dozens of donuts from Milo’s family’s donut shop, Kheng’s Donuts, for dessert. Everything was delicious, and we’ve all been close homies ever since. I can’t even count how many times a month we meet up either here or at Venganza.

“Celebratory bowl?” Iggy offers, holding out her slender brown hand with a freshly packed bowl.

Eman snorts. “We ain’t got nothing to celebrate. But sure!”

“I’ll help ya out,” Red offers supportively.

“Me too!” Blu agrees, cheerily throwing his long white arms over Eman and Red’s shoulders. “Where Emmanuel and Julius go, I must follow!”

Johnny rolls his gray eyes and slicks back his thick blond pompadour impulsively. “Fucking fiends, mate. I think I’mma go check out downstairs with my bro, smell ya nerds later.”

“Hey! I’ll go with ya!” Martin chimes in, despite having more of a reason to celebrate than the rest of our team: as a bona fide video game aficionado, he crushed it as both Sonic and Shadow in every map we played. But it wasn’t enough to carry the rest of us, who are filthy casuals comparatively. Martin’s eyes, which normally stand out for being green, are already stoner red from secondhand smoke. “I could ... use some fresh air,” he adds after a brief delay.

“Word!” Dima whoops, his glycerin-stiffened black-and-red liberty spikes bouncing above his head as he moves. He looks at me with eyes as gray as Johnny’s, but with a gaze that’s a bit harsher and more discerning. “You comin’ too, lil’ lion twerp?”

“Huh?” I grin. “Sure!”

We exit Dima’s room, which I still remember belonging to another crust punk named Candle Jack—like the *Freakazoid* character, because of his goth vibe, low voice, and long, pale face—beforehand. “Subvert City” by Subhumans blares out into the hallway from behind one of the other doors, which has a giant Disclose poster on it declaring “D-Beat Raw Punk—Kawakami Forever,” in honor of the recently-deceased front man of the legendary underground Japanese d-beat band. As we walk, I take note of the storied layers of stickers and punk tags all along the walls of the narrow, dimly lit hallway. Most get replaced after a few months by the regular crowds of punks passing through the house’s many rooms and halls, but some of them have been here since the punk house’s founding in 1992, such as my Tio Angel’s “Cuervo” tag on the rooftop. Local lore goes that, back when the hillside former townhouse was still just a simple family residence overlooking the freeway, the son of the owners inherited the property after his parents were hit by a drunk driver—who was never caught, I later found out in the East L.A. Library’s newspaper archives. That son, Sid Sendejas (aka “Búho”) put his sorrow and rage into punk rock, transforming his old family home into a DIY haven for his diverse crew of local misfits, “Los Lost Boys,” which included the mother of my friends the Martinez sisters, the proud local artist and Chicana activist Señora Spex, and my mom’s queer punk baby brother, my Tio Angel. Candle Jack, who officially moved into the house in 1999, was the last resident to know all the original residents. But, since Búho still visits regularly from his new artist trailer out at Trantor Ranch, in Altadena’s side of the San Gabriel Mountains, and faithfully organizes the anniversary house show every year (dedicating 2007’s to a new Saffron Revolution-born Burmese punk band called The Rebel Riot), I don’t think he plans on closing El Hoyo anytime soon.

This Eastside punk house is notorious for hosting overcrowded backyard punk shows, and for having an open-door policy toward guests, drugs, and alcohol. But since it also runs the local Food Not Bombs chapter and maintains the large adjoining community food garden (and because wary eyes in Brooklyn Terrace, just west of Byron Hills, generally view “rocker” kids a bit more favorably than “gangster” kids if choosing a flavor of corrupted youth to deal with), El Hoyo and its ever-shifting cast of rowdy residents are largely accepted and left alone. For

reasons that still haven't been made entirely clear by either of the Volkov brothers, Dima abruptly moved out of their grandmother Babushka Yana's house in central Byron Hills at the start of this year and into El Hoyo. Luckily, he was already chilling here regularly by then and hit the jackpot scoring Candle Jack's single subdivided room instead of having to hot rack in bunk beds like in most of the other rooms.

I'm glad we get to come here a lot more now!

We turn a corner and descend a rickety set of stairs. Dima opens the door at the bottom, which has an old DIRT "Object Refuse Reject Abuse" poster on it. Our ears are immediately assaulted by blaring electric guitar, frenetic d-beat drumming—with a shirtless Damien expertly subbing for the drummer who failed to show—and harsh female vocals riling up a giant mosh pit threatening to overtake the cleared-out, soundproofed living room with a crimson United Farm Workers flag above the stage. There's no chance of hearing ourselves in here, and the basement is rarely any better, so we push our way around the edges of the crowd until we can reach the exit to the backyard. I stop for a second to admire the Los Angeles cityscape spreading out from the hillside below through a gap in the concrete wall, then follow after Dima, Martin, and Johnny. It's crowded outside too, as usual, but it's currently Open Mic hour and thus less noisy than inside. Aqua is standing on the soapbox on stage, her brown eyes gleaming like jewels in the sunlight as she bellows out the radical "Solarpunk" speech she prepared. ("Solarpunk" is this eco-conscious analog to "cyberpunk" that her and her punk carnie friends liked to dream about, according to Aqua and her carnival stories about "East Camp and West Camp.") Uncharacteristically for the El Hoyo crowd, almost everyone is hanging on to her words with rapt attention:

"... and that's what punk rock means to me, man. The Spirit of '77, and the Spirit of '82. 77/82.

Solarpunk or cyberpunk, the future is *punk!* And if you can't remember all that shit I just said, then the T-L-D-R is this: smoke pot, shoot guns, punch racist scum, fuck the Patriarchy, burn the Confederate flag, support queer and trans rights, buy local art, grow a fucking garden, abolish the police, amplify indigenous voices, dismantle capitalism, be punk, and be kind." She takes a gulp from the handle of vodka in her hand, cheeks flush with passion, and holds it up triumphantly as she finishes off: "Can't just let people live? Fuck around and find out!"

Everyone roars in approval. "77/82!" someone yells, and the chant is picked up in earnest by a good portion of the crowd.

We look at each other and grin.

"Damn—Aqua is fuckin' inspiring!" Martin yelps.

"No wonder that twerp's got friends everywhere!" Dima teases, echoing the sentiment. "Cable would be proud."

Aqua claims to hate it when Dima calls her "twerp," but she treats Dima—and Cable and Damien—like bona fide older brothers. I have a feeling she likes that Dima lumps her in with the rest of us Curb Children "twerps"—as if we've always had a fifth member to annoy him.

"Right?" I agree. "We're all lucky she's just an anarcho-commie Johnny Appleseed who wants to build farm communes, and not some psycho Charles Manson type!"

"77/82! Hell yeah!" Aqua yells back at the crowd, then she spots us in their midst. Her grin broadens. With her black combat boots, heavily patched punk clothes, aqua-colored hair, missing molar tooth, and intricate collection of tattoos, scars, and DIY piercings, she looks like a radical cyberpunk pirate in full crustlord regalia, ready to take on any dystopian future and win.

“And remember, y’all,” she continues, still looking in our direction, “expect nothing, and cherish everything. We’ll be gone before ya know it, kiddos, so choose your family well, keep ’em close, and stay gold.” She raises her fist. “Once a punk, always a punk! 77/82!”

“Hell yeah, homie!” Red whoops from near the screen door, with the rest of the tournament crew laughing and clapping beside him in admiration.

The El Hoyo punks outside cheer even louder, and another round of “77/82” chants roils through the crowd. I realize Aqua is making eye contact with me directly. I smile and mouth something to her before even realizing it. She winks, blushes as she mouths something back, and says the timeless protest phrase I’ve been coaching her to pronounce properly in Spanish in preparation for today: “*¡El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!*”

The people, united, will never be divided.

The crowd goes crazy, roaring with approval and immediately chanting it back: “*¡El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!*”

“*¡El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!*
“*El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido...*”

28 May 2009

7:45 a.m. PDT (Thursday)

“What the hell is ‘Pizza Punks NYC?’” my father roars in Spanish for what must be the dozenth time since he spotted me by the baggage carousels and immediately turning beet red. “What the hell made you think it was a *good idea* to tattoo yourself with ‘Pizza Punks NYC?’ Are you still talking to those punk-rock losers from that homeless rat den in Brooklyn Terrace? Don’t you *dare* tell me you’re hanging out with more trash curb children like those ‘friends’ you had here, back on the East Coast!”

Despite being bilingual, my parents only ever speak to me in Spanish.

Okay, Dad ...

“Francisco, *ya!* Enough!” my mother pleads. “What’s happened has happened! Enough! We’ll just have to accept what our son has done to himself and hope he can recover from all the damage he’s done to his future.”

Yeah. Okay. Right. I open my eyes and stare lazily out the window to keep my cool, watching a Redondo Beach-bound Green Line train zoom past on the 105’s freeway median. The traffic is moderate, but my father weaves smoothly between cars. It’s another glorious California day outside, hovering near the nineties. *Not gross and humid heat like in New York, either!* Despite my undying love for the City That Never Sleeps, I can’t help but swell with pride at being back in California. *Best fucking state in the Union, man. West Coast, Best Coast—*

My father abruptly snaps me back to reality by reaching back and yanking my earbuds right out of my phone and ears. A few lines of “California Über Alles” by Dead Kennedys blares out before I pause the song.

“Put your phone away and *listen to me* when I’m talking to you, *pendejo,*” my dad growls harshly. His fair skin is still red with rage, and his upper lip quivers with a suppressed snarl beneath his heavy blond mustache.

“*¡Francisco, ya, por favor!*” my mother repeats. “What are you trying to accomplish?”

My parents start arguing again. I drop my phone between my legs and slouch further down into the back seat of our midnight-blue Dodge Durango, tuning them out. *So much for a warm welcome.*

I knew my parents were going to give me some serious drama over my tattoo, but it's not like we haven't been through this before. The worst confrontation was in my junior year of high school, when Martin ordered a DIY kit off eBay and tattooed the "Curb Children" symbol we came up with in St. Jude's Elementary onto all our left wrists. They flew into hysterics again last spring, when I got the GPS coordinates of Los Angeles below my right pec, the printed letters "Aa"—for the Crass song "Big A, little a"—on the back of my right shoulder, and the Squatter's symbol on the back of my left shoulder. By last summer, when I got the "1-3-1-2" ACAB dots on my left knuckles to match Aqua's, I was sure they'd exhausted all the fucks they could give toward any future ink on my skin. *Guess I was wrong.*

I loosen my tie and unbutton my collar, letting myself relax more. *Not like it matters what they think.* What my parents fail to realize every time I get new ink is that it's my opinion of the piece that matters—not theirs.