

# THE DISPLACED

*a novel*



*Rodrigo Ribera d'Ebre*

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*To my wife and children*



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# **PART I**





# ONE

## MIKEY

June 18, 1999

This is my About page: I have sausage fingers. They're so bloated that I once went to the doctor because I had gotten into a fight and my left knuckles had two teeth marks because they went into the opponent's mouth. The doctor took one look at my right hand and said, "Whoa, your hand is so swollen, we need to get that down."

I said, "It's the other hand, doc."

I have a bubble butt. I can never get my belt to adjust at a comfortable level, so I wear my jeans a little low. Not like sagging or anything, but enough so that my belt doesn't cut into my stomach and heighten my ass. I have a slight gut, and partial man boobs. Maybe because I have two X chromosomes, like women. My father did always call me a girl, or a faggot, or a bitch. I have bad breath, maybe related to gingivitis or my lack of flossing, or my engorged gums. I have depression.

Sometimes I don't want to get out of bed. I've had suicidal thoughts about this. I used to cry myself to sleep in high school, but just like during winters. My facial profile sucks. My pudgy nose is a little wide and sits above my puffy lips. I have a Napoleon complex. 5'8" is average in Latin America, Asia, the

Middle East or some parts of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. But I'm American, and I'm from one of the vainest cities in the world: Los Angeles. Short people are not taken as seriously as tall people. We have to rely on other advanced skills. Hence Adolf Hitler, Martin Scorsese and Maradona. And my skin tone is like sand. Sure, there's black power and brown pride movements, I'm just not part of those. I get looked at a certain way sometimes . . . by white people. It's a wild-eyed look, like they have ownership over me because they're the "master" race, and like I should continue skipping along my merry way, just happy enough to be strolling along the streets of Anytown, USA. Lucky that I'm even in this country. I get the look mostly when I jog. I hate jogging, but I do it to help with my fat deposits. It's tedious, but I don't want to spend the money at a gym or with a personal trainer. But white people are more likely to give me a nod, a greeting or head gesture on the jog. But when they dismiss me, it cuts deep, because I need their approval. Black people always greet me, though, they're the friendliest on the road. And visible Latinos, like me . . . they usually ignore me. It means nothing coming from them, we are nobodies in this great experiment called America.



I just graduated from UCLA, so a party is in order. When my parents were together, they threw parties on the regular . . . to celebrate victories. This one is for the haters.

I call a bunch of people, some from the scene, others from school. I want it to be packed. I want them to know what I did. It's not easy being from the hood and getting a degree. Almost didn't graduate though, because this professor, Koch, accused me of plagiarism in my last semester. In this class about War and Media. She said I didn't cite outside sources. I said they were my own words, my own ideas. She didn't believe me, she had that wild-eyed look, and she was tall. A transplant from the South. Prob-

bly not used to people like me thinking critically. I never called her doctor either, like I did the other professors. She didn't earn it. We had to get a whole committee involved . . . to investigate my previous work. I guess I should've been flattered. I wasn't. I even cried a few times, not sobbing or anything, just watery eyes. But the committee had my back, specifically Professor Kunioka PhD, and Professor Andranovich PhD. Koch was forced to apologize in front of the whole department. She turned all crimson, or whatever. Victory.

I tell my friend Rick from down the street to call a few punkish garage bands—they agree to perform. They'll bring their own people too, hopefully they have a following. And girls, that's important.

July 10, 1999

My mom is out of town this weekend. I get two kegs from Bill's on Slauson and a bunch of cheap wine bottles. If people want other drinks, they can bring their own. Not going to waste money on other people, like last time. I'm still working part-time in customer service, nothing important. I can't do that much longer. I have a bachelor's in Political Science now. I'm supposed to be somebody. I wanted to run for office when I started college—city council or the house of representatives—but now I hate politics at that level. No real radical politician can make any formative change in this country, though, not with the electoral college, consensus-building or a bicameral system. I'm registered as a socialist. I'll probably end up on a blacklist somewhere. Had to give up the band too, have to grow up someday. Nowadays, I just want to work in civil service, like all those people in the Russian novels I read. A bureaucrat is enough, for now.

I'm unsure what to wear. I settle on a torn jean jacket, a New Order T-shirt from the "Movement" album, black Levi's and black Jack Purcell sneakers. I always wear these shoes with black

laces 'cause they look less dirty when they're dirty. Plus, there's a lot of gangsters around here that wear white Converse, but with white laces. Never black. Black is neutral—punk rock. I don't want to get mistaken . . . for one of those *cholos*. Especially in this neighborhood. Never have though, because I keep my hair long.

I'm in the driveway, scanning and greeting people. So far so good. The partygoers have like a college-radio, thrift-store type vibe. Like they came out of Penny Lane Records. There's girls, and they're drinking. My friend, Stan Corona, is spinning Northern Soul records—oldies, but midtempo. The type nobody really knows. Nobody listens to this music, not really, but people like it when they hear it, because they think they recognize the sound. That's what we like about it. It's not played out, it's not popular, it's not on the radio. It's our own scene.

Stan's legs are both sleeved up—Posada *calacas* and all that—and he has a 45-rpm adapter tattooed on his forearm, and on his wrist that faceless character with a weird eye and a derby hat from “A Clockwork Orange.” He's the only non-gangster I know that has that many tattoos. He wants to put a cactus on his forehead, like we say in Spanish, *Tienes el nopal en la frente*. Sometimes I get nervous when I'm with him on the streets. Like we're gonna get jumped or shot, and he has his head shaved down to a 1-clip with mutton chops as sideburns, like those British skinheads.

I'm posted up at a corner in my backyard with Rick. He's telling me about his ROTC program at UCLA. Getting ready for military service. Another way out of the hood. I spot another neighbor walking through the side entrance, Ruben Beltran . . . some tall-ass fool, and his nickname is Lurch. A Culver City gang member. He dances his way into my yard, arms winged, knuckles almost glued together, and he walks toward me looking in all directions. Red plastic cup in his hand with beer foam pouring

out. He takes a sip. I don't like that he's here. Makes my chest thud, like a crow flapping its wings.

He says, "Damn, dog, that song's fuckin' hard!"

I say, "Joan Baker. . . . 'Everybody's Talking.'"

He doesn't know the song. I look at Rick on the side, he gives me that look, like the party's over.

Lurch shakes my hand, pats me on the back and says, "What's up." He gives a head gesture to Rick. Lurch shifts his head back toward the side entrance. A flood of his homies is there: sporty-looking dudes with red Cincinnati Reds hats or red bandanas hanging over their shoulders. They have a few hood rats with them with wet-looking hair and skanky clothes, like small shorts and low-cut blouses. Some of those girls chew bubble gum and look at everyone with attitude. My friends and acquaintances try hard not to stare at them.



My guests start leaving, and it becomes a gangster party. Stan keeps spinning Northern Soul records, and these fools throw up C hand signs and yell out their neighborhood loud as fuck. I swerve around the kegs and head toward my house. I gotta call the cops. In secret though.

But Lurch pulls me to the side and says, "Ay, Mikey, trip out on this shit, dog. I seen this fool the other day, right. Some skinny white boy in tight jeans and he had a bunch of tattoos. He had a big-ass beard, too, like some old fuckin' man or something. You know somebody like that? I mean, you know a lot of weird looking people."

"I don't think so. I don't know anybody with a beard," I say. I take a drink from a plastic cup.

Lurch says, "He had a black military hat, too, with a star in the middle. Like a goddamn communist. That dude that was here

earlier . . . your homie Rick from down the street, he's into military stuff, ¿*qué no?*?"

I reply, "Yeah, he just joined the Air Force. He has a cousin too, Robert, a skater that used to tag . . . he's in the Navy. But he doesn't have a beard. I'll ask around, see what's up."

I move a little closer to my back door. I want these fools to leave.

Lurch keeps talking. "I figured you might know him, because he had long hair like you. Thought he might be one of your new-wave homies. He looked sick, though . . . so like maybe he escaped from a half-way house, you know? Or he went AWOL, or he was like a homeless bum, you know what I mean? I didn't like him. Something didn't feel right about that *vato*. *Tú sabes.*"

"Yeah, I don't know. I'll ask . . ."

We're interrupted by Lurch's homie, Raven. Beer is overflowing from his plastic cup and pouring onto his hands as he staggers toward us.

He says, "Damn, Mikey Boy, why do all your friends look like a bunch of white people? Where'd they go anyway? You don't even look Mexican either, dog, with your fuckin' hairstyle and your clothes 'n shit."

He lets out a sharp-pitched laugh and pounds Lurch's fist. They smile and laugh. I want to ask what Mexicans are supposed to look like. Like them? Like *cholos*? Or like *paisas*—recent immigrants without papers? Matter of fact, Raven's not even Mexican, he's Guatemalan. I glance all over the place, then lodge my eyes on Lurch.

I say to Raven, "White people definitely think I'm Mexican." I purse my lips and pat Lurch on the shoulder.

I know I look different . . . I'm post-punk, and Lurch and Raven are pretty-boy gangsters. Lurch has short, slicked-back hair with a clean fade on the sides, and clean shaven. He's a light-skinned giant with green eyes, 6'5", and drives a Beamer. I wonder if they think that's some white people shit. Raven is dark-

skinned with braces, and he sports a magnum mustache. His head is always shaved, but he wears a ballcap on the regular. And he's wearing a red, white and blue Nautica windbreaker. I wonder if he's aware that his maritime patriotic outfit is white.

Raven says, "But your hair, the way you talk, you're just . . . white-washed, like a fuckin' . . ."

Consecutive gun shots—*clack, clack, clack, clack*. They sound close.

I freeze up. My breath leaps out of me, heavy and rapid. I drop my plastic cup, beer splashes on my shoes. Partygoers duck and some run into my backyard through the driveway. Other people run toward the street, like Lurch and Raven. They're both reaching down into their waistbands. I see people getting pushed, and some girl falls on the driveway and someone tramples over her. Other people hide behind trash cans and my mom's Cadillac. I spot big curly hair and some red baseball caps just a tad higher than the car's hood line. I run inside the house with my head ducked and lock the back and the front doors. Nobody's inside. Good. Don't want those fools in here either, stealing shit or fuckin' in my mom's room. I peek through the curtain in the living room and I see two guys in ski masks sticking out of an '86 Oldsmobile, letting out some more shots—*dakka, dakka, dakka*. I see quick flashes of light and I hear a car window shatter.

Cross my fingers that it isn't my Jeep Wagoneer. I observe a body splayed out on the sidewalk.

Can't tell who it is.

Right there on my porch, I see this girl, Paulina, stuck between my mom's plants and the railing. Her boyfriend is that fool Raven, but he's not there. I open the door, just a little, while the bullets keep drumming.

She screams, "Help, help me, please!"

I lift her up with one hand and pull her toward me. I don't even know where I got that strength from. A bullet whizzes right by us and hits the stucco right next to the address. I fall back, she



falls on top of me. She's crying and she's scared, and she throws herself into my arms. Her breasts are rubbing all over my chest, and she doesn't stop hugging me. Her body trembles, and it's soft and warm pressed up against me. Good thing I have a breath mint in my mouth.

I grab her by both cheeks with the palms of my hands, while her dirty blonde hair slithers between my fingers. I say, "It's okay, it's okay. You're okay."

"Where's Danny? Have you seen him?" She's referring to Raven.

I say, "I saw him running down the street or something. He should be back for you, you'll see."

"You're so sweet," she says. "But he's not that kind of boyfriend." She giggles.

She looks up at me with her emerald-green eyes, and the tears just hail out of her and she mashes her face into mine. I can taste her salty sweat. She has like a million freckles all over her pale cheeks, and she smells like coconut. She looks so fuckin' cute and fragile. I swear to God I have this semi-long one, and we just stay like that in that position, like a couple making up after a fight. I want to stick my tongue down her throat and graze all her tears away. I move my arm a little, and it slides right between her tits. She doesn't say a goddamn thing. She holds my hand, and it shakes. Oh man it's the best, the closest I've ever been to these types of girls.



When that Oldsmobile speeds off, I lift Paulina by the arm and take her out the back door. Some Culver City boys are right there, plotting inaudibly. There are dozens of red plastic cups distributed all over the dead grass—I have to clean this shit up. Paulina runs toward her friends and doesn't even say goodbye. Doesn't look back at her hero. She dashes through the driveway toward the street and vanishes. I bet you if she and I walked down

the street together, hand-in-hand, people—white people—would think I was a somebody.

Stan's my only friend amongst the gangsters. We make eye contact while he's packing his records. He shoots me this weird glance, curious but like I fucked up. Shit, like he's never fucked up before. He pulled a gun once at some party in Gardena. He was all high. Almost got us all killed.

Lurch intercepts me before I get to Stan. He's slightly out of breath and his Reebok Classics look showery and have like dirt smudges or damp grass stains.

He says, "You all right, homie?"

I tell him I'm fine and ask if anyone from Culver City got shot.

"Uh, just some dude got shot in the leg . . . and Raven got shot in the stomach."

"What the fuck," I say. "We were just talking to him. Is it serious? Who was it . . . who shot up my goddamn house?" What I'm really thinking is: I hope that motherfucker dies. Maybe Paulina and I could start something.

Lurch says he doesn't know who it was. He offers to help me clean up. He feels bad about what happened.

"Lurch, man . . . you think I can go with you guys to get pay-back?"

He laughs at me because I pound a fist into my palm and brush my hair to the side. He can't picture me putting in work. He laughs even harder when I ask him for a strap, and he looks around like he has an audience.

He puts his arm up to my chest and says, "Calm down, tough guy. They shot one of ours, but we'll kill two of theirs. Straight up."

## TWO

# LURCH

July 15, 1999

I was born in West Los and I'ma die in West Los. You think I give a fuck that my neighbor's house got shot up, or that Raven got shot? I mean, I care that the homie got blasted, don't get me wrong. I'm just glad it wasn't me. That'll give him a rite of passage, like going to the joint. People won't think he's a punk anymore. Plus, me and Paulina had something back in the day, before he hooked up with her. I'ma tap that ass real quick, while he's in the hospital. Watch. For old time's sake. Shit, I was the one that even gave him permission to hook up with her. I introduced them. She invited me to her pad one day, and she had a friend, and I invited him over. And next thing you know, *bam*, he's calling her like . . . every day. Got her number on the side. Telling her not to tell me 'n shit. But she did, and I asked her if she liked him, at least a little, and she thought he was funny and charming and all that. I could see that she was into him, but she was sneaky about it. She's a player . . . a playette. And when I asked him about her, he acted weird like he was sprung or something. All stupid 'n shit. So, I said fuck it and gave him the green light and he was all like *gracias*. So, what I'm basically saying is that I fucked her first, and I backed off when they got together . . . but when he did

some time in County, I fucked her again. Now that he's in the hospital, I have the right to fuck her some more, ¿*qué no?*



But like I was saying, people around here get lit up all the time. It don't change anything. I've been shot twice in the stomach by Venice, and once in the back by the Shorelines, in '96. And we killed like ten of those fools, so whatever. Everybody has to die sometime. You can't pick and choose when. You just do. That's how things are in West Los, home of the Mar Vista Gardens Housing Projects. We run the four corners. Not Venice or Santa Monica . . . or Sotel, we do: the Culver City 13 gang. The Little Locos clique—straight up. All day every day, since 1954, when the government tried to keep Mexicans from going anywhere. When they had signs: No Dogs, No Negroes, No Mexicans. Right there at the corner of Ballona Creek, the 405 freeway and Culver City. The only projects in the West Side. Not like Pico Aliso or *Maravilla* or some other housing projects in East Los or South Central that have like a hundred gangs inside. It's just us up in this piece, like Harbor City or Dogtown. I was busted with some of those fools. They run their program the way we run ours.

That's how it is inside the projects. A hood within a hood. And I don't even live there, I live a few blocks away. But I'm always in there, though. I love the projects. Got that shit tattooed all over my back. It's like a fortress, though. You could only drive in through Allin Street off of Inglewood Boulevard, and there's a kiosk with one unarmed rotating guard, a gate and traffic spikes. It's perfect for combat. Hard to catch someone slipping in there.

This one time, in 1988, a Venice boy called Loner mashed through the barrier gate. It was a suicide mission straight up because there's no way out. At the end of the projects are cul-de-sacs, and all the streets lead to like 20-foot high wrought-iron gated fences. There's no way to climb the bars, not even if you're a cop. That fool Loner made it to the rec center in a blue Chevy

El Camino, wearing a blue bandana over his forehead and his arm sticking out the window with a pistol. I recognized that he was an enemy from like a thousand feet away, and I shot that fool—*poomb, poomb, poomb, poomb, poomb*. I got busted for that like a few days later when I got pulled over and I still had the gun on me. I should've tossed it but forgot. The DA dropped it down from murder to self-defense. My attorney said I was protecting myself. Never trust a public defender, always get a lawyer. Especially if you're being charged with murder. That's why I always have like fifty grand stashed. I only did four years for that—from like 88-92. My first 187.



Nobody else wants to be around the projects, the gangs, the beat-up apartments, the section-8 folks, the crackheads and smokers or the police department. Nobody. Except us, the Culver City gang. We love it, more than our own fuckin' lives. That's why we risk our lives on the streets daily, for the neighborhood.

For people like Mikey and them, there's no nightlife here like in West Hollywood or Santa Monica or whatever. No cool bars, bookstores, galleries, record shops, art centers or any of that shit. Things they like to do. Just burglar bars all over the goddamn place, and seagulls and pigeons flying everywhere—all over parking lots and alleys, fighting for crumbs like the rest of us poor folks.

And for sure nobody around here wants to be on Slauson Avenue, this dark ass street where we shot out the street lights. It's a leafy street, and could be all nice and normal, but things aren't normal in Culver City. Slauson is filled with trash, beer bottles, aluminum cans, used food and candy wrappers—drunk *paisas* posted up or staggering over, dogs bashing their heads into wooden fences, gardener pick-up trucks with tools flanked by plywood, old ass cars that fire up like they're missing a carburetor and of course flamed up Culver City boys. You don't wanna

fuck with us, for real, in our clean white sneakers and red Cincinnati Reds ballcaps. The wetbacks and gangsters, we have that street locked down. You can't even use it as a short-cut. Never. Don't even try. Stay in your own goddamn neighborhood.

## THREE

# MIKEY

July 19, 1999

I got my diploma in the mail. It's written in calligraphy and my name pops out in golden lights: Michael Bustamante. It's inside a black leatherette cover. Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. I hang it next to a picture my mom blew up of me in my cap and gown. What this means to me is getting out of the hood. That's all people talk about around here anyway. Even the gangsters say it, but they leave in body bags or on that County Jail bus. I want to go to DC. In college, I wanted to run for the house of representatives and move to Sacramento or something, but now I'm just interested in a federal, state, county or city job. I want to come back to this region and run for city council . . . run the 11<sup>th</sup> District. Hopefully my PTSD is gone by the time I get back, and maybe I can move to Pacific Palisades or somewhere within the district boundary, so it'll still count.

My mom and I are at the kitchen table.

"I sent that picture of you to all my sisters, you look so handsome. My beautiful, handsome boy," she says. She gets up, hugs me and kisses me all over my head.

"Okay, okay, that's enough, okay." I push her off me, but I like it and I smile.

“Everyone’s counting on you to do something special. You’re our only hope,” she says. “I told all of them that you’re going to be a senator someday. *El senador*. You’re my pride and joy.”

“Oh, please don’t say that. That’s not what I want to do anymore.”

“What do you mean?” she says. “You always talked about that before. You’re like my shining star, like my little diamond. I have to polish you.”

She rubs my head and laughs.

“One day I’m gonna make you real proud, *’amá*. I’m trying, I swear. I have that job interview tomorrow for the city of Santa Monica. Let’s see how it goes.”

She gets up from the chair again. “I’m already proud of you, *m’ijo*. You’ll get the job, you’ll see. They’re lucky to have you. Who wouldn’t want you?” She kisses my forehead and dashes through the door. “*Nos vemos, eh.*”

I’ve thought about getting her out of here and getting a nice cottage or craftsman home somewhere in Pasadena, surrounded by greenery and birds. But not ghetto birds or pigeons or crows like the ones around here. I mean real birds, like bluejays or cardinals and hummingbirds.



I see Stan Corona with his skateboard on Braddock Drive. He’s posted up on Berryman Avenue taking pictures of the ground. Right there by the fire hydrant and the red curb, and the no parking sign. He’s subtle, like he’s tying the black laces on his Jack Purcell’s. I pull my Jeep Wagoneer over behind a Ford Expedition and hop out and ask him what he’s doing.

He adjusts the lens on his camera, looks over his shoulder and down the street. He says, “You ever notice these cement carvings?”

“Not really. I mean. . . . I’ve seen them like in front of my house. Why?”



He says, "I'm like a crackhead following them all over the place. Like I'm looking for some dope to put in my crack pipe. They're just these old tags done by gangsters from way back when. When the cement was wet. Check this one out."

I walk over the yellow grass on the sidewalk and inch around a broken beer bottle.

He squats and points at the letters. As he looks up at me, he says, "See that? It says El Johnny, Randy, Jimmy Boy and Frog '72. Pretty gnarly, right? These cement carvings are like hieroglyphics. They're like history."

I trip out. Stan's always on some avant-garde artsy type shit.

A brown '79 Ford F-Series pick-up rolls up on us going west-bound. It's lifted and has big tires, like an off-roading type. There's two dudes in the front seat and one in the cargo area. They stop in the middle of the street, and the dude in the back says, "Where you *vatos* from? *Aquí para Dieciocho.*" He mad-dogs us hard.

I lift my hands and say, "We don't bang, man. We're not from anywhere. We just live around here."

"They call me Pelón . . . 18<sup>th</sup> Street. Tiny *Malditos*. Remember that, rankers," he says as he surveys Stan head-to-toe.

Luckily, Stan is wearing pants and a long-sleeved shirt and you can't see his tattoos. But his head's shaved. Fuckin' Stan.

My heart rattles inside my chest plate before it leaps outside of me and rubbers down the boulevard. These fools are gonna kill me someday. Stan keeps his head tilted downward. Pelón shoots us a smug look and laughs as they drive off. I can see his head is shaved down to a zero clip and he has a black Champion sweatshirt. I can't see the rest of his body, but I think he was wearing some shrink-to-fits.

Both my hands tremble and I tell Stan to get in the Jeep so I can give him a ride. Stan scoops up his skateboard. His head hangs low. We remain quiet for a while.

When I turn right on Inglewood Boulevard, Stan says, “I haven’t wanted to come back to your house since that one night, man. I didn’t want to say anything before, but after I left, the Culver City boys followed me. I was going to my sister’s house in Lennox, so I jumped on the freeway. I’m lucky I drive a fast car, dude, because I turned off the lights and hit the gas. I boned the fuck out.”

I say, “What? Are you fuckin’ joking? Who was it? You know the car?”

“That SS Monte Carlo. The navy blue one,” he says.

“So that’s it. You’re not going to come to my house anymore? I’ll talk to Lurch about it, don’t even trip. That’s Stranger’s. He’ll get this all sorted out. I’m sure it was a mistake.”

Stan tells me it’s too dangerous to keep living here. I can tell he’s still nervous, his eyes bouncing all over the place. He glimpses at a Culver City boy near the gas station and nods. He says he’s taking off to Rhode Island, to live around the greenery and snow, because his girlfriend, Sarah, got into Brown, in some graduate architecture program. She’s from there actually. And her dad’s there too. He invites me to go with him. I actually think about it. Me and my mom, in Rhode Island. Wouldn’t that be something.

**July 20, 1999**

My mom gave me a prayer candle to burn and ask for help from Saint Cajetan, the patron saint of job seekers. I had never heard of him until last night. I placed the candle on a mantle near the TV, but the glass broke and I freaked out. I ran to the kitchen and got a glass of water and tossed it at the flame and it rose to the ceiling. Then I ran into the bathroom and got a wet towel and covered the flame. I almost burned the goddamn house down. My body was shivering for almost thirty minutes. Maybe that’s a bad omen. Guess we’ll find out later.

Sometimes when I'm in the bathroom, I lift my shirt up to my throat and look at my stomach. I suck my gut in and I don't feel that fat . . . until I take my shirt off and just stare at my body. At my little boobs and their shape like a snow slope. What I would give to have these stupid lumps removed. Good thing we ended the band too. Imagine if I'd have to be on stage and take off my shirt or something, in a crowd! I sit on the toilet. I developed irritable bowel syndrome in my last semester, and an ulcer or gastritis or something. My side always hurts, and I constantly have to shit, piss or fart. It's disgusting. It's because of stress and anxiety, they said, like now. I'm worried about the interview, there was no way to prepare for it. I reread some of my essays to sharpen up on vocabulary, but other than that, it's all about how I do in person. It's for an entry-level position in the Housing and Economic Development Department.



I'm there fifteen minutes early. I've always been told to arrive at least fifteen minutes before. Chelsea boots, polyester Levi's, tucked in long-sleeved shirt and a black tie. Maybe I should've worn the gold one, or the blue one. I wonder if this one's too morbid. What if my pants are too tight, or my hair too messy? Do I look indie or rock n' roll, or like a Colombian drug dealer?

Goddamn, what was I thinking. I should've bought slacks. Fuck. The receptionist escorts me to a room. Thought I caught that wild-eye look from her, but I can't be certain. Fuckin' white people, they play the game well.

There's a panel across from me when I walk in—what the fuck? I sit down and greet the man and two women. All white. I knew it.

The man speaks. "Well, let me just tell you a little about what the job entails. It starts as an unpaid internship, for a few months."

My mind goes blank. *Unpaid internship?* That's for nobodies.

He continues. “Working with myself and my colleagues here on various administrative tasks, including creating spreadsheets, assessing budgets, um . . . developing and retaining job opportunities for our residents. . . . Oh . . . and reaching out to some of our more disenfranchised residents through a process of targeted activities and programs to assist in housing opportunities. You speak Spanish, right?”

“Yes, I’m bilingual,” I say, but keep thinking about the unpaid thing.

They must have noticed that I made a face or something because one of the women says, “I know the whole unpaid internship isn’t an ideal place to start, given that you’ve already graduated, but most of our employees started this way . . . interning while still in school and transitioning into full-time paid work upon graduation. We’re just learning about you now, but we like your background and we definitely want to use your skills and abilities to help with these housing issues. It says here in your resume that you’re interested in getting a master’s in urban planning, is that correct?”

“Yes, I’ve looked into the programs at my alma mater, but I’m also looking into USC and Cal Poly Pomona, but I really need something quicker, before the student loans kick in.”

The man makes a face, like he doesn’t like what I said.

The other woman says, “Well, the city of Santa Monica pays for the master’s degree, especially in a department like urban planning, so . . .”

The man cuts her off, “Well, Mr. Bustamante, do you have any questions for us?”

I get up and say, “No, thank you very much for contacting me. I look forward to hearing from you. This is an opportunity that I’ve been looking forward to for a while. I’ve always loved Santa Monica. My dad used to work here. I used to come here as a kid all the time. So, to be employed here, it would be a great way of participating in my civic duty.”

They nod their heads and smile and make these faces like I have to bow down or something.



Stan rolls up to my yard. He's with this white dude I don't recognize and says, "This is my friend, Mark Stahl. He's from Nebraska. He's your new neighbor, bro. He spins at KXLU after me, and he's in the film program at UCLA."

I say, "That's awesome, nice to meet you. So, you're in the film program, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm writing a screenplay about Joy Division," Mark says. "It's called *Control*."

"Are you fuckin' kidding me? Check this out," I say. The three of us smirk and smile.

I pull down my shirt from the neck and show him "Dead Souls" in handwriting across my chest. Then he shows me the word "Substance" tattooed on his arm. I tell him that I went to UCLA too.

"That's great," he says, "we're going to be neighbors! I just bought that house down the street. Come over anytime you want, I can show you my record collection."

"Which one?"

"The one with the orange door. The white one."

"Oh yeah, with that cool, horizontal wooden fence."

Mark nods.

Stan says, "Yo, Mikey, how'd that job interview go today?"

"It was all right I guess, but it's an unpaid internship, so . . . I don't know. I need money, you know? I quit my job, so . . ."

Mark jumps in, "I think I might know . . ."

We're interrupted by sharp whistling. It's Lurch, and he's walking toward us. Stan and Mark start looking all over the place. They don't know what to do with their hands.