

To Live and Die in E.V.

Cop cars block Washington Park when you get home.

You crane your head to see what's up, but can't. Too many cops, too much history. Walk into your house, see your mom in the living room. Salúdala, tell her school was all right, that you went to a friend's house after. Hope she doesn't notice your toxic scent or wandering gaze. Ask what happened at the park. She just got home from work—in other people's homes, cleaning other people's messes—so she doesn't know. She asks what you mean. Paint the scene for her. “Ve tú,” you say. “See for yourself.”

She sighs with all the years she's lived in this land, stands from her chair, and walks outside to investigate—her sore feet caressed by chanclas purchased in a mercado in a distant place and life. She stopped telling your old man, “Viejo, let's get out of El Valle,” because they've cycled too many times through the same half-hearted back-and-forths and inescapable truths. Besides, everyone says, the hood isn't as bad as it used to be.

In the front yard, your mom doesn't see much, but she waves across the street at Raquelle, your boy Josiah's mom, who waves back and shrugs. Her eyes widen when the ambulance screams past.

Raquelle babysat a lot of the kids in the neighborhood, including you, when y'all were little. Back then, it was her and her only son, Josiah. Y'all would lay on your stomachs and watch TV while Raquelle sat in the kitchen, waiting for the phone to ring and bring news of another denied parole. She'd mourn, again, a life that wouldn't stop ending; then, she'd send Josiah and the other kids outside to play Power Rangers or Ninja Turtles or any game where they—y'all—could fight one another without the need of winners and losers.

Josiah grew, and Raquelle found new men but none stuck around for very long. Still, Josiah grew and learned no one could tell him nothing. He got long and fast and confident enough to take on anyone—one-on-one—on the basketball courts in Washington Park. He'd clown any defenders his age or a year or two older who tried him.

Josiah-in-your-eye-uh, we called him: great on his own, pretty good with teammates.

Your cousin Sergio, lanky and stubborn and a sore loser, wanted a piece

of him.

“Ey Josiah,” Sergio said, after he played solid D but still got scored on. “You got almost as many buckets as step-daddies.”

Josiah shoved him with a “Fuck you say, bitch?” and had to be held back. Then everyone shouted: about daddies and stepdaddies and mommas and mamás and sisters and cousins until the wrong person yelled nigga or wetback and fists detonated.

“Why the fuck you always doin’ this, asshole?” Another of your cousins yelled at Sergio afterwards when the cops were called and everyone had retreated to their houses complaining about *those people* and their ways.

Sergio laughed because he had nothing else. His dad had been deported earlier that year and his mom had stopped going to work because she feared she was next. Your parents and other aunts and uncles were supporting them. Sergio even stopped showing up to classes at Desertwood High so he could help, too. He started by giving half his check to his mom and using the other half for escape—processed, bagged, bought in alleys. After not too long, though, he wasn’t giving his mom half, and she—suddenly a foreigner dependent on the mercy of a citizen—didn’t know how to ask for more.

“Man,” Sergio said after your tía told y’all that the cops had left the park and you sat in the living room. “You fuckin’ putos don’t know shit about bein’ for real afraid.” He laughed until chemical coughing consumed him.

Y’all sat there, puffed lips, swollen eyes, sweat-stenched, shaking your heads, until he said, “Somebody call up Frybread. See if he’s at home right now. See if he’s got the hookup.”

Somebody did and he was.

His real name is Juan and he lives on the Salt River Rez, north of the hood. People from the hood go and kick it there because it’s like freedom, but like fake freedom—like knock-off, store-brand shit you can buy on the cheap.

Juan and some other Pima dudes used to come ball in Washington Park. Back when y’all were still too young to understand territory and loss. Elbows and knees flew all over the post, but for them, because they were Indian, the play was called dirty. So, after some shit-talking, some shoving, and another brawl broken up by cops, they stopped coming altogether.

Some of you went to them, instead. Playing ball, at first, then smoking, drinking, crushing, snorting, and shooting, after. Time passed different on the rez. In the hood, you forgot you were in a desert; forgot you were surviving where no one was supposed to. You thought your survival stood for

your strength. Then one of Juan's uncles brought up the White man and said, "Survival ain't shit but trading buckets, never catching up. Ain't a game you can ever win." He killed a beer and walked outside to smoke. Left y'all sitting in emptiness.

Walking back in your hood, you head towards your house and think about white people. The ones in school, the ones in office, the ones in uniform. They put Juan on a rez, and told him it was Manifest Destiny. They raided the landscaping company where your tío worked and deported him, leaving your tía to figure shit out. They put Raquelle's man in chains and tortured him with a freedom he'd never be pure enough to earn. They harassed and threatened and warred and turned up the heat on all y'all until nothing was left but for Sergio and Josiah to break each other open in a park where kids play.

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