

Philosophy of the Freebaser

The announcement of Luis Villaraigosa's passing happens after the 12 o'clock lunch period. The date is December 13th, 1976. The small portion of the student body that either weren't playing hooky or that weren't stuck in the local drive-thru line were quickly corralled into the school commons where, alone, our school principal was seated on stage. He is a skinny, long-limbed man of sprawling stature, wearing a blue button-down shirt and black dress pants.

He sits with a slight lean, silently watching the students congregate at the foot of the stage. Wide-eyed he brings a hand to his chin and wipes his mouth as he shifts focus to the vinyl tiles at his feet, lightly bouncing his leg as he does so.

The muted inquisitive chirps and occasional burst of laughter from the hundreds of gathered students begin to die down as his visibly solemn disposition tips off many of the teens into an uncharacteristic silence. The behavior propagates until the room is nearly silent.

I was already here, as I usually spend my lunch periods in the commons anyway, either picking at my food or just staring out at the parking lot and watching the seniors carelessly flounder out of the lot in their rust buckets, cigarette smoke belching from their cracked windows. I usually sit up against the main stairwell, where I can quietly watch out of the large glass façade of the main entrance. This is also where I sometimes like to draw.

This time, my view is obscured by the mass of students, and I find myself seated in the very back of this impromptu bulletin, so I set my sketchbook down and stand to get a better view.

Eventually, our principal sits upright and begins to address the students. Our school's lack of any PA systems means that he's going to have to project his voice, at least somewhat. The time is 12:06.

“Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for making the time to join us for this important announcement.”

A pause hangs in the air, imbued with a light amusement at the minor incongruity that their presence wasn't exactly made of a conscious volition.

“I have some difficult news that I regrettably must share. One of our fellow students, Luis Ramon Villaraigosa, has passed away following an incident at his home over the weekend.”

This time, the room falls entirely silent. The gravity of the statement causes a sort of tonal whiplash, especially to the many students who were only half paying attention. I feel a pang of dread crawl down my body as the name unconsciously wades through the mosaic of every name from every class that I've been in, of which many I can barely even remember.

The principal continues, his eyes affixed to the stage, fists encircling his knees. “I understand that this news may be shocking for some. Our faculty were only made aware of this a few hours ago.”

Luis. M-mmmmath. No, no... Ms. Rodriguez, center right, back of the classroom...

He may have been in that social studies class from last semester? Yeah, I think I remember him now. He always had that huge grey bookbag on the floor next to his desk. The bulky textbooks made it look like it was full of bricks. I try to recall his face, or his build, or his demeanor, but nothing is built but fuzzy blobs.

“Those of you who knew him may or may not have been aware of recent, personal events that had been taking a toll on Luis, and his temperament. I understand that there was an altercation involving Luis and several other students some time ago that has been making the rounds.”

The reverent silence from earlier is supplanted by a rumbling murmur. I have no reason to talk; I almost certainly don't know anything about this incident, but it seems like everyone else does.

“For the sake of Luis’s family and those who were close to him, I ask that you please refrain from speaking on this incident any further.”

I feel a tap on my shoulder.

“Know anything about this, Adriana?” I turn and see my... current lab partner in science class, Marcela. Her eyes show a deep, but ultimately uninformed concern.

Why would she ask me? I don’t even know her that well. I shrug and turn back towards the principal.

“...we understand that you may feel you are unable to, but please do not leave the premises until the school day is over. Thank you.”

With that, the students begin to dissipate and mill about towards their fourth periods, although with a noticeable absence of the cacophony of standard-issue teenage raucous. It’s all... deeply unsettling. A glance at my wristwatch reveals that my hand is shaking. Christ, am I that shaken? I scratch my head, cracking a bit of a compensatory smile at how silly I feel.

I’m fully aware that these kinds of things happen, I’ve lived in Santa Ana my entire life.

I know this. I didn’t even know the kid.

The time is 12:09. In the wake of the crowd dissipation I find myself walking. I guess I’m headed towards *my* fourth period. We’re all a fair bit past the start of class, but, well, I don’t think that really matters. I pass by the main office, catching a glimpse through the hanging vertical blinds to what looks like business as usual. I’m just about to reach the classroom door when I see Marcela again. She’s standing at her locker, unmoving. She doesn’t see me.

...I’ve never really talked to her that much. Despite this, despite the novel tremors in my legs, I’m compelled to say something. I change course, away from the door and instead making my way towards her.

“Did you know him?”

Marcela is startled at my sudden appearance, but quickly composes herself. “Yeah. Not very well, but he was in my U.S. history group last semester. I went over to his place a couple of times for projects. I had to stop going.”

That last detail gives her pause, as if she might’ve regretted revealing that. I ask why.

“He, uh, just... had to stop. *Estaba peleando tanto con su papa.*¹ We just started going to my house instead.” Her face begins to scrunch up, in response I uncharacteristically attempt to comfort her as I put my arm around her shoulders. It doesn’t seem to be very effective.

“It’s just fucking crazy. I saw him on Friday. *Fue tu amigo?*²”

“Kind of. He was in my social studies.” A half-truth.

Marcela wipes her face with her sleeve, and picks up her backpack from off the ground, slinging it onto one arm. “I need to go to class now, but I’ll see you tomorrow for lab, right?”

I beam a small comforting smile. “Same as always. Remember to bring the book.” She smiles back.

She’s almost up and left before I am suddenly moved to override my tongue. “Wait, um, one more thing. Do you remember where he lived?”

Odd.

Marcela, mid-stride, without turning to look at me, answers my question,

“Uh, *Marina Creek Apartments*, on 7th. I don’t remember what unit it was.”

¹ “He was fighting a lot with his dad.”

² “Was he your friend?”

...before rounding the corner and disappearing from view, leaving me alone in the now silent hallway. She didn't question why I asked this, which was quite fortunate, as I didn't have an answer.

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Class was class. All you really need to do to get by is give a minor shit, and suddenly you'll soar above the majority of the student body. If you spend your days doing careless shit that no one's gonna remember then you'll probably have a hard time keeping up with the fervent pace of high school geometry.

I spent the rest of the day irritated. Classes were noticeably quieter, but a good number of kids continued to just joke around and slack off like nothing happened.

It was when I was in my last period, Physics, seated in the back and taking notes on projectile motion, that I started getting a little angry. I did some odd things today when I usually try to put myself out of reach of most of the bullshit that happens in this school, and now I can't stop thinking about this guy that I didn't even know. And now I do, but what *do* I know? I know he's dead, and I know that this isn't the first time this has happened.

We've had "announcements" like this before, we're all a bunch of nowhere kids with zero prospects, doing our best to shield ourselves from the brutish reality of poverty with whatever might take our minds off, so it's only a matter of time before the first overdose, drive-by, gang robbery, whatever. I work hard enough to where I shouldn't have to worry, that this is the plight of my colleagues who have simply not chosen to work as hard as me.

But I know. I'm fucking lying to myself. I know it takes three minutes to distill us into nothing, to snuff out a person into nicety and murmur. In death you have no advocate. Once they die, they just are; and what they are

is nothing. I know I'm extrapolating so much off of someone who cannot respond or clarify, just like everyone else.

I don't know shit. I don't *have* shit.

Ten before the bell, I pack up my stuff and leave. No one cares. I trudge out of the main doors, this time changing course, away from my house and instead towards 7th.

It's only about a ten minute walk from the school. Downhill and a couple of turns and straightaways, and you're there. It's a plain road, sun-bleached asphalt dotted with unsightly power lines abetting small single-family homes with stout chain-link fences sprouting from the dead grass.

Directly across from the relatively nice looking homes are an unending length of dilapidated apartment buildings, and the contrast of the two sides are immediately jarring; they almost seem at odds with each other. A quiet sort of war of attrition over increasingly diminishing returns.

I'm walking along the side of the road where the apartments are, and I'm not thinking about much of anything. I don't really want to. My eyes are downcast, idly scanning the rolling asphalt, my pupils bouncing from rock to pebble. But a few cursory glances to my left reveal to me that the side with the homes does in fact, have a sidewalk. I'm walking on the road. This road has only one sidewalk, and it's on that side.

And now I'm thinking again. Why is there only one sidewalk? Did the city planners not anticipate these residential developments, like defiant weeds and blades of grass shooting up from out of cracks in concrete, taking root here not out of volition but out of necessity?

...I kick a rock out of frustration. It soars a few feet, bounces a couple of times, and rests in the grass. It doesn't matter. Roads are what we

make of them. The blades scream “Yes, I am here”, so loudly that it tears at the eardrum, but there’s nothing here for them but brutish desiccation.

It’s only a few more minutes of slight agitation when I spot a sign for *Marina Creek*. I turn and peer into the parking lot, which feeds into a main road that bifurcates into several smaller roads, each feeding into small garages with load bearing beams supporting precariously perched apartments. The homes are furnished with floating walkways of steel black gothic fence and walls of yellowed sheetrock.

The lot is sparsely populated, save for a couple of junkers at the farther end of the lot which are positively filled with garbage, and I am again beside myself as I proceed to step into the complex, being carried by the sheer momentum of all of the little decisions that preceded this. I don’t have to go far before spotting the police tape.

One of the apartments has lines of yellow police tape taped across a visibly open front door. A police cruiser is parked out in front. It’s eerily quiet, with only the sound of wind and leaves rustling from the trees hanging over the outer fencing of the complex to complement the visage.

I approach the apartment. From the angle I’m standing at, I can’t see through the door at all. I consider walking up the stairs and poking my head in, but the mere idea of entering the home creates even more unease. I’m trying to get a better look through the door when it’s suddenly thrown open by a large man in work jeans and a wife beater lugging a nightstand in both arms. Definitely not a cop. I watch as he lumbers down the steps and towards a white truck parked near the cop car in one of the garages.

“Oye, no puedes estar aquí.”

I turn around towards the side opposite of the apartment to see a man in shorts and a dirtied white t-shirt, seated on his diminutive porch in a camping chair, drinking, and watching me.

³ “Hey, you can’t be here.”

*“Están trabajando. No deberías estar aquí.”*⁴

I guess I didn't spot him earlier.

“Do you know what happened?” I call out, raising my voice enough to carry over. He looks mildly annoyed by my lack of linguistic reciprocation, but I can't just speak Spanish very well. It takes him a moment to speak again.

“*Ven acá—aye...*”, he then motions with the beer in his hand for me to come to where he is. I oblige and walk up the stairs, he's sitting with a lean, watching me with a side eye as I approach his little slice of veranda.

“Know them?” He flicks his eyes towards what is almost certainly Luis's home.

“A little. Someone I go to school with. Luis.”

“I shouldn't be one to tell you this.” He continues to stare towards the apartment, and the name drop caused no reaction in his face, but he sets his beer down.

I hurriedly reassure. “No, no, please, I came to find out what happened.”

He's visibly uncomfortable.

“I know he died.”

Again the man side eyes me, watching my face, waiting another moment before responding.

“His father.”

I feel my blood run cold.

⁴ “They're working. You shouldn't be here.”

He continues. "I knew him. Work with him in construction sometimes. *Era drogadicto*. Drug addict. Freebase cocaine.⁵" That last line is slyly uttered with a noticeably American intonation.

"I help him get furniture for his house when he moved in. Needed... how you say? Crib, for baby, and drawers for bedroom. He work really hard, but get too much into drugs, I tell him he has family he needs to take care of, but he addicted."

He picks up his beer and takes a small swig. "One day I hear them yelling again. Is so loud I can hear from inside. I see him get into truck and drive away. He leave for three weeks." He holds up a number three on his hand. "I help during that time. Luis was very angry, *no hacia nada*."

It's starting to get dark, but I don't notice. He fiddles with the beer bottle as he continues.

"He come back two days ago. Hear screaming again, I think nothing. Then I hear, *balazos*. Gunshots. He come back with a gun. He come back to steal from Luis.

The words pass through me and I'm suddenly weightless. I'm shaking again.

"Luis probably try to fight his dad. He kill Luis and then he shoot himself. I hear crying and screaming from mom for long time, but too scared to go and look. Didn't know he was dead."

There's a silence.

"...Mom is missing too."

"What?" I almost startle myself by speaking.

"Eventually police come, and I go outside to talk to officer. Mom is not there. I don't know if she took truck or what happened. I didn't see.

⁵ "He was a drug addict."

Don't know where she go." He points at the moving truck. "They taking out all of their furniture. Detective come tomorrow."

I watch the mover running his circuit, like cellular automata.

I don't know what the fuck I was expecting.

"I'm sorry. You should go home now." He looks at me for a moment, then stands up, retrieves his folding chair, and enters his home, shutting the door behind him.

There is nothing but the wind and the sound of furniture shuffling as the setting sun blankets a harsh red-yellow radiance over the complex. I attempt to think of how I'm going to get home tonight, something I'll to have to do at some point, but it fizzles out. I look around at all of the shut windows with inert security grates, and I feel more unsafe than ever in my life. I'm left just staring at the door to where Luis used to live. There is nothing.

Partly inspired by my 2021 album "BASSHEAD"

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