

The Juan Ortega Story
For Adrian Martinez, Jr. (1936–2014)



The last time I saw my uncle alive was approximately 24 hours before I discovered him dead. I was in the chair at the barbershop getting my hair cut by my other uncle. He walked in. He didn't look well. He leaned on the old soda cooler near the entrance, about three feet from me. I asked him how he was doing. He told me that he was sick, that he had a bad cold he couldn't shake. And that the only reason he was out was because the guys there had a pool going for the upcoming Super Bowl game and he wanted in. With that, he dropped off his money, engaged in the leanest of small talk with a few random others, and split. He was there all of 10 minutes.

The next evening my mom called me. She said Eddie Boy isn't answering his phone. Said his neighbors are worried because they believe he's inside his apartment. She said they saw him go into his place. Said that they never saw him come out. She said he last spoke to one of them early that morning. Said he missed an appointment with this person later on in the afternoon. She said his car was in his parking space in the alley behind the building. Said my dad and my brother were already headed over there.

I followed them to his place. Coming from the opposite direction, we arrived there at about the same time. Between my mom's house, just west of Lincoln Blvd. in Venice, and my uncle's aforementioned barbershop on the edge of Culver City, it's about a one-mile stretch. A backstreet called *Zanja* functions as a loose artery connecting the two locations. In Spanish, *zanja* means a canal or ditch used for the distribution of water. Both Eddie Boy's place and mine lie in-between these two points, directly off this same street. A handful of raw minutes separate us all.



Deadbolt

1310 Venice Blvd. was penitentiary grey in color, a mid-century dingbat-type apartment at the time of Eddie Boy's death in 2014. The kind of place a young Ed Ruscha would have once pulled off the side of the road for and taken a snapshot of, to either fill a page in one of his mundane books or for source material for one of his equally cold yet strangely intimate graphite pencil drawings from that same period. Five years later, I drive by it and nothing about its exterior appearance has changed.

As we approached, we could see that a group of his neighbors were standing outside his apartment door, a working-class tableau of the elderly, of single parents, retirees, part-timers, and disability-driven drifters. We introduced ourselves to them and after being told a series of updates providing no real updates, waited until an off-site manager could come with a set of master keys that would ultimately allow us entry.

This one is nameless. Many of these apartments have themed names literally attached to them, written in large script across

the fronts of these mostly two-story buildings. A sculptural language constructed from half-century-old rusted sheet metal or rotted plywood screwed directly into their stucco walls. The Golden Mermaid, St. Tropez, The Bahamas, Riviera Palms, The Palms, Riviera Villa, The Aristocrat, Monroe Manor, The Galaxie, Royal Pacific, etc.

These were few and far between folks altogether hard-wired differently than the now neighborhood norm of people who would and could pay ten dollars for an "authentic street taco". Who have the mindset, derived from a very specific and impenetrable bubble of privilege, to take a plethora of Coachella bound selfies while temporarily stuck in someone else's zombie-state post-8-hour-plus-shift after work minimum wage rush hour crap car quarter tank of gas traffic, and who pay exorbitant, mortgage-like monthly rent, most likely funneled from a diarrhea-esque hush-hush out-of-state trust fund, for a shitty apartment a mere penny's toss from the crashing waves of the equally dirty and polluted Pacific.

Straight Life

About 40 minutes after we arrived, the apartment manager showed up. It was now night. A half-dozen or so random porch lights were turned on throughout the complex. Like candles in a vigil, they were the only sources of illumination. A skeleton crew of his closest neighbors remained with us. The manager unlocked the door and disappeared. My brother then opened it to reveal a void of total darkness. He called out his name to nothing. The three of us entered the space, stumbling around looking for a light switch. Everyone else stayed outside. Someone eventually found a lamp, exposing the room to maybe 40 watts worth of dim and dusty light. The traditional dingbat interior is small when it's empty. With a lifetime of accumulated stuff crammed into it, it made his place even smaller. It was claustrophobic and tomblike. We called out his name again. Nothing.

The apartment was rectangular in shape. The living room bled into the kitchen area. A small table butted up against the wall opposite the kitchen functioned as the dining room. Beyond that space you entered a short hallway with a bathroom to the left, built-in cabinetry and drawers to the right. A few steps later and you're inside the bedroom. We walked toward that bedroom and when we got to it, we were relieved to find that he wasn't in it. His bed was empty. There was a pile of used tissues the size and shape of a small Christmas tree right next to it. While walking back towards the living room, my brother glanced into the bathroom, and that's where he was. His body slumped unnaturally, face down on the floor, buried in nighttime shadow.

That persistent cold he had mentioned to me the day before was probably pneumonia. Or maybe a sudden heart attack ultimately took him. Eddie Boy had struggled with heroin addiction at different periods in his life. Growing up in Venice in the '50s, as a Chicano teenager deeply immersed not in rock 'n' roll, but in hardcore Los Angeles jazz culture, it was inevitable that he would travel down that jagged labyrinth of a road. He ended up in state prison for a few years in the early '60s. Then he had a long stretch of being clean. He worked as a bartender on the Westside all throughout the '60s and early '70s, from rough Venice Beach biker bar dives to classy Marina Del Rey suit and tie joints. He did construction work throughout the '70s and '80s. He fell back down the hole in the '90s. That lasted until he ended up doing some time in the LA County Jail for selling dope. The years after he got out seemed alright in terms of him not using. But I suspect it was a slow process, filled with peaks and valleys of both success and failure. The overall effects of aging probably kept him clean more than anything. With his lifestyle, death was always more near than far. His outlaw sensibility managed to elude it for quite some time though. A bandit on the run from himself. I remember him telling my brother a few years before he died: "If I would've known that I'd be living this long, I would've taken better care of myself."

It's flanked by gargantuan condominiums painted in various sickly pastel-colored hues from their own late '80s/early '90s origins. Now long faded by the relentlessness of the ever-present sun. The color schemes have remained, the times have changed. For whatever reason, this little grey box buried coffin-like in their dual shadows, this once hip modern dip into period architecture from the much more distant Kennedy Era, has survived.

In retrospect, I see these people as a microcosm of the old Venice, before this newest avalanche of big money smashed through the metaphorical front door and violently wiped away this blue-collar state and slate clean and altogether invisible. What existed here was an endangered species of locals in constant fear of the newfound hunter of imminent negative change, slowly encroaching upon them.



Postscript

A few weeks ago, I was back in the barber's chair. My uncle Phil, now in his 80's, is still cutting hair. 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of his shop. It stands today as a beloved institution within the community. With over a half-century in business behind him, he will soon be forced to close down. Developers have purchased the much-desired West Los Angeles chunk of land that his little storefront sits on. The barber shop, the tax guy, the donut shop, the dude that fixes vacuums (yet never really fixes them), and the 99-cent store across the parking lot are all slated for collective demolition before years end. I suspect one of those forever-in-vogue-in-LA phallic shaped glass covered condos with multi-level underground parking will quickly be erected to take their places. And with that, only memory will survive.

An old episode of the '50s era *Western Wagon Train* was on the TV while I was there. In it, the actor Dean Stockwell plays a teenage Mexican boy searching for a group of rogue cowboys responsible for the lynching of his father. Hell-bent on revenge, and equipped only with a thick broken accent and shiny brown makeup the consistency of shoe polish, crudely applied to both his face and hands, he moves lazily and lost through a faux Southwestern soundstage landscape of plastic foliage, papier-mâché trees, and Styrofoam rocks. Encountering every white person along the way with a stereotypically suspicious beady-eyed and shifty disposition, Stockwell's performance as Juan Ortega was altogether cardboard-like in its approach, devoid of complexity and rendered in the typical one-dimensionality that only Hollywood could conjure up as representative for such a culturally rich and beautiful people.

My haircut was finished before the show ended. As always, I paid him, we hugged one another goodbye and he told me that he loved me. I told him that I loved him too. I walked out of the shop into the parking lot. It was now dusk. Did he ever find his father's killers? Did he himself end up dangling from a real or fake tree under the harsh Los Angeles sun or studio klieg lights of a dark postwar America? Did he ever make it back home?

In the center lay a small courtyard of concrete. It was strewn with a few random metal folding chairs both open and closed, dirty ashtrays on front doorsteps, broken toys kicked to the perimeter, and a half dozen or so potted plants in desperate need of water.

A few had their doors and windows open, providing a somewhat chaotic soundtrack of various five o'clock evening news broad-

casts blaring from their respective TV sets, reports on everything from the aftermath of yet another nearby natural disaster to yet another seven days of (in an ultra-deep, hunky and oily, heavily spray-tanned and faux designer-suited weatherman voice or in an equally clichéd, skin tight and ripe, sultry delivery provided by any number of our local sexpot weathergirls in live television heat), "incredible SoCal weather".