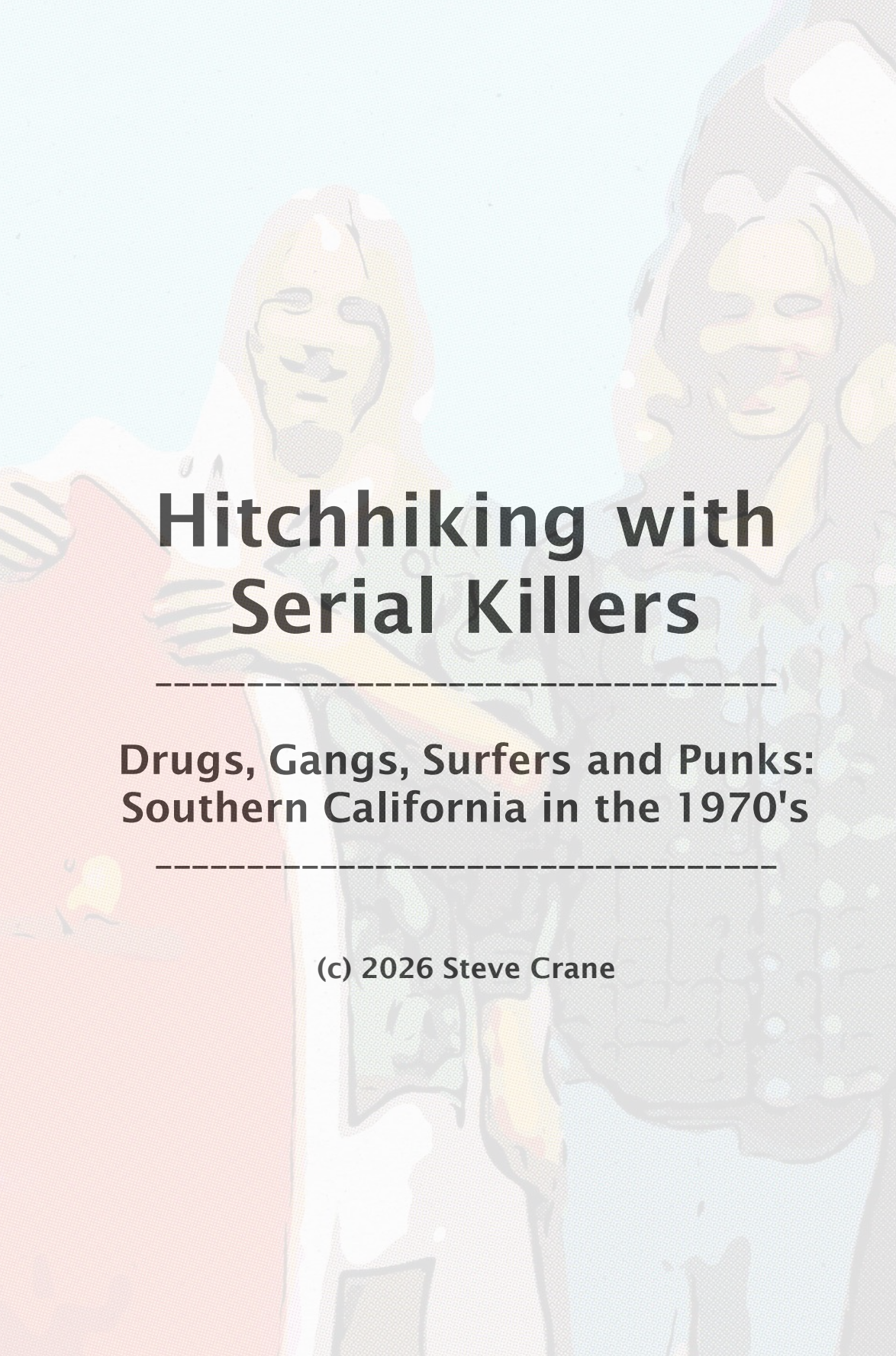




Hitchhiking with Serial Killers

**Drugs, Gangs, Surfers and Punks:
Southern California in the 1970's**

(c) 2026 Steve Crane

HITCHHIKING WITH SERIAL KILLERS

***DRUGS, GANGS, SURFERS AND PUNKS
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IN THE 1970'S***

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ISBN-

FOREWORD

A lot has been written about counter culture life in both the 1960's and 1980's, and most Los Angeles-based historical non-fiction focuses on the glamour of Hollywood.

“Hitchhikers” goes down a different path. It chronicles suburban LA life in the beach communities twenty-two miles south of Hollywood during the 1970's. This is the genesis of the “blank generation” as it navigates “Surfin’ USA’s” difficult, teenage years.

It follows two underprivileged teenagers who become drug dealers, encounter street gangs and escape serial killers while trying to grow up surrounded by chaos.

It is ultimately a story about survival; from gangs, abusive parents, violent cops and ultimately, a dark and violent drug culture.

But it's also a cautionary tale. No matter your intentions, life has a way of extracting vengeance for sins.

You always reap what you sow.

Steve Crane
June 2026

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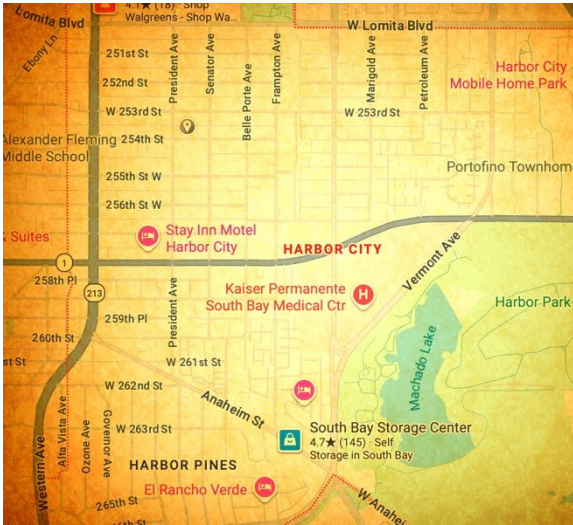
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-Preface-



Harbor City, California

In 1908, the City of Los Angeles acquired Harbor City along with a narrow, 5-mile-long strip of land to connect it to the large natural harbor to the south. But the waterfront cities of San Pedro and Wilmington stood in the way. When they balked at L.A.'s annexation offers, the big city's fathers threatened to create the L.A. harbor in Harbor City, which was just a short distance inland.

For that brief moment, Harbor City was a shining star among the Los Angeles suburbs. But it was not to be. Those cities quickly acquiesced to annexation, giving L.A. the seaport

that would generate untold billions of dollars in tax revenue, and be a major key to its future success.

Poor Harbor City was left landlocked. It had just been a bargaining chip, a patsy. While its residents could even smell the ocean on some nights, that sweet tax base was just outside of their reach. So, Harbor City became a low rent, bedroom community for port laborers and day workers. It never gentrified or modernized like its neighbors to the west.

Over time, as the old single-family homes in the old neighborhood gave way to cheap apartment buildings and government projects, its economy steadily deteriorated. One last, big attempt was made in 1965 to raise the area's living standard. A large residential community of larger 3- and 4-bedroom homes was built on the northeastern border. Formally known as Palo Del Amo Woods, this 800+ home development was known as "The Woods" by locals.

But by 1972, home values across town had plummeted. Harbor City had become a gritty and forlorn suburb of L.A. – and in some areas, the very definition of "mean streets." The eastern border had long been controlled by a Hispanic gang known as VHCR13. The southern border held the Normont Terrace projects, one of the most notorious ghettos in the city of Los Angeles. The T-Flats Hispanic gang controlled the northwestern border.

To make matters worse, the new black gangs known as the Crips, Pirus and Brims flooded in from South Central Los Angeles into Harbor City's Fleming Junior High and Narbonne High

schools by way of the forced busing initiative adopted by the LA Unified School District in 1971.

Just south of Narbonne High School, the twenty-one square block old neighborhood had previously stood as a testament to a period of post war optimism. It was filled with small single-family homes on mid-sized lots, with paved alleys behind each block.

What was once a well-kept, blue-collar neighborhood had seen better days by the early 70's. For every two or three homes that still showed pride of ownership there was one that had cars on blocks in the front driveway, overgrown weeds instead of lawns and graffiti on the garages. It bordered the gang controlled eastern border, which steadily moved westward. Gang activity and crime increased every year.

The larger homes built in the hills along the southwest border with San Pedro stood as the last vestige of optimism in town. This is where skilled port workers such as welders and crane operators and lower-level management personnel had settled. There was nothing fancy about this neighborhood, but it somehow resisted the rot that had set in to the north.

Harbor City's western neighbor, the city of Lomita, was a strip of mostly farmland, small ranches, and single-family homes until its incorporation as a city in 1964. It was staunchly conservative and blue collar, and the majority of its residents held onto Lomita's roots as a racist, "Sundown Town." It had no black and few Hispanic residents, and the streets were controlled by a multi-generational white gang of bikers and miscreants called the "Allbrook Boys" that notoriously fed a white supremacist prison gang.

To the south of Lomita was Harbor Hills, an idyllically named government housing project that was, in reality, a cluster of ugly gray cement block buildings which housed a white ghetto. Like Normont Terrace, the black projects to the east, it was not a place too many people wanted to visit after dark. Harbor Hills was a hotbed of winos, pimps and prostitutes, along with single welfare mothers and their many offspring.

The "Baby Boom" of the 50's and 60's had filled all of these neighborhoods with teenagers, and they all came together during the day at the same two schools – the 12- to 15-year-old kids at Fleming; and the 15- to 18-year-old kids at Narbonne.

The L.A. Harbor created a strong economy for the city of Los Angeles, but somehow that cashflow never found its way to any of the neighborhoods by the harbor. Wilmington and San Pedro were equally grim, and gang infested. But rents and real estate were cheap, so the area was densely populated with low-income residents. It was also well integrated - 65% Hispanic, 25% white and 10% black. Unlike the rest of L.A.'s South Bay suburbs, white people were a distinct minority.

The people that made the money from the harbor lived in the upscale communities of Palos Verdes, Rolling Hills and Torrance to the west. Those cities along with the beach cities of Redondo, Hermosa and Manhattan Beaches were also the bedroom communities that supported LA's giant defense industry. These cities ranged from high demographic middle class to extremely affluent, with the Palos Verdes and Rolling Hills areas being two of the wealthiest zip codes in the United States.

The demographic and economic disparity between these neighborhoods, just two miles apart, were as polarized as any in the country. But they were geographically intimate. The Harbor Hills housing projects were literally across the street from the entrance to the Palos Verdes Peninsula, with its multimillion-dollar equestrian estates.

Lomita bordered Torrance, the “All American City”, a large hub of commerce with a uniform grid of middle class to upscale single-family homes. Beyond Torrance were the glittering South Bay beaches popularized by the Beach Boys’ “Surfin’ USA” in the ‘60’s. Some of America’s most popular and beautiful beaches, they are just five miles from the nexus of the depressed harbor suburbs.

The area’s teenagers sometimes mixed together at parties during the school year, but mostly they all ended up together at the local beaches during the summer. Since most of those teenagers were strongly influenced by the counterculture of the times, they all more or less looked and dressed the same and listened to the same music. But the class distinctions were strong, and the disadvantaged kids of the harbor area rarely came into close contact with the richest kids from the peninsula or the beaches.

The South Bay beaches of Los Angeles had a distinct culture popularized in music, movies and television shows based on its ocean-based lifestyle and fashion. This culture and the distinct look associated with it were adopted by the harbor area’s white kids of the time.

Most popular was the stoned, surf and rock n roll look later personified by the movie “Fast Times at Ridgemont High.” Most every boy had long hair, and wore flannel shirts, surf t-shirts, Levi’s, and Van’s tennis shoes during the school year. During the summer it was swim trunks, tank tops and flip flops, or even bare feet. The girls had long hair and wore tight hip huggers, and midriff-baring tops to school. During the summer it was bikinis, sun dresses and flip flops. Their music was hard 70’s rock – Led Zeppelin, Alice Cooper, Black Sabbath, Pink Floyd and the like.

The Hispanic kids emulated their older brothers and sisters, and sometimes even their parents with their dress and hairstyles. The VHCR13 gang had its roots in the “Zoot Suit Riot” era of the mid 1940’s, so teenaged Harbor City members were second- or even third-generation gang bangers. They called themselves “Vatos,” but everyone else called them “Cholos.”

They mostly dressed in the traditional white “wife beater” undershirt, pressed Pendleton shirt, buttoned at the top; and tightly creased khaki pants. The boys generally slicked their hair straight back, and the girls usually teased their hair into a bouffant on the top, with razor blades often hidden in the long hair going down their backs. During the summer, the boys shaved their heads, and both sexes just cut the legs off their khakis. Nothing else changed. Their music was “Chicano” Rock and RnB by War, Malo and El Chicano; and curiously to everybody else, 50’s oldies music.

The black kids mostly lived in the Woods but were still a distinct minority in the area. But their numbers exploded at Fleming Junior High and Narbonne High Schools during the school year. They made a big impact on the schools’ student bodies by bringing inner city music and style into the suburbs.

Every morning a line of big yellow school buses would pull up to the two schools and black kids from the inner city would stream into the gates. They were supposed to be integrating a

more economically advantaged (white) neighborhood; but in reality, they found themselves walking into a racially charged Hispanic gang territory every morning.

Along with their giant afros, brightly colored clothing and platform shoes, many of them brought newly minted gang affiliations from the brand-new Crips, Brims and Pirus that had only recently formed in their own neighborhoods. Like their white and Hispanic counterparts, only a small percentage of these kids were gang affiliated or looking for anything but an education. But the kids that were, represented their gangs with fierce allegiance.

The black music of the time consisted of Soul/RnB from Al Green, James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, the O'Jays, Stevie Wonder and many others. Truth is, the musical tastes of all the teenagers were as integrated as their schools. The radio stations of the times played all of these styles of music, so the black and white kids listened to everything.

As a rule, the Hispanic gang kids kept to themselves, only mingling with the other cultures on the sports teams, the physical education field or in the classroom. Only a fraction of the Hispanic kids was gang affiliated, or acting as anything but typical teenagers. But their gangs were a glowering presence in both schools. While they may not have "run things," they certainly acted as if they did.

The black kids were far from being the only ones walking into a potential gang fight every morning at school. Hispanic gang members were equally intimidating to the white kids as well, because they felt as they "owned" the neighborhood. Although severely outnumbered, the white kids fought back a bit, often pushed by racist parents and aggressive older siblings. But the beefs between the black and Hispanic populations took on a much more serious tone.

This was the pre- "drive-by" era in Los Angeles before guns began to play such an overwhelming role in street justice. White-Hispanic violence was characterized by one on one or a small group of Hispanics "jumping" a couple white kids. But black-Hispanic violence was conducted mostly off campus and with reinforcements coming from both sides. It was the genesis of the street wars that the two sides hold against each other to this day.

Both schools were packed beyond capacity with these three tribes of kids, so each school could feel like a war zone on any given day. This was not lost on the school administrators or local law enforcement.

At the time, the LAPD was led by Chief Ed Davis, a notorious racist and bigot. "Big Ed" introduced many of the now-outlawed police tactics such as chokeholds and used the local schools and neighborhoods as pilot programs for what soon became the notorious CRASH anti-gang unit. Narbonne had a pistol-packing, undercover "School Narc" known as "Shaft" on the campus full-time, and LAPD raids were a common occurrence.

The politics of the time were, like today, extremely polarized. Progressive ideals had only been verbalized in public by the "younger generation" for a little over five years, and issues like racial equality and even women's rights were considered extremely radical by a majority of the country.

Long hair, big afros and modern music and dress were seen as "counterculture." If you were a white kid with hair over your ears, chances are you were considered a filthy hippie by the older generation. If you were a black kid, you were routinely called nigger, if you had an afro, you were

thought of as a Black Panther militant. If you were Hispanic looking any way at all, you were a wetback.

The kids were out on the streets in 1972, emulating their older brothers and sisters that grew up during the turbulent 60's. There were no longer love beads and peace signs, but there was long hair, crazy clothes, loud music and big attitude. And there were drugs; lots and lots of drugs.

Big Ed Davis and the LAPD loudly promised they would do something about these kids. And so, since there had been few police reforms by this time, the LAPD descended like a conquering army into the neighborhood. They patrolled the streets of Harbor City with numerous police cars, day and night, with each carrying two hard case cops. Armed and ready to kick ass, there were no limits placed on them by the government or society in general.

Anyone not having a regulation police-type, square haircut was fair game for harassment or even a beating. No young person; white, black, or Hispanic, had such a haircut.

Blood ran in the streets of Harbor City.

-PART ONE-

-Chapter One- Ain't Nothin' Said

Soundtrack – “Freddie’s Dead” by Curtis Mayfield



Ninth grade year had just begun this week, and Mike was already bored and restless in his second period English class. The first two months of the school year were always brutally hot in Los Angeles, with the devil Santa Ana winds blowing in from the east. It made everybody a little crazy, and Mike felt crazier than normal today.

He would be fourteen years old in two days and Mike didn't yet know what a hangover was. But his dry mouth and bloodshot eyes betrayed the three quarts of beer he'd consumed the night before. In this melancholy state he

could feel the sweat dripping down his back from the 100-degree heat in the classroom.

The air felt as thick as Vaseline in the small room, and the teacher blabbing the day's lesson at the front of the class became unintelligible. As his mind drifted away, he gazed out the window to the lawn and walkway at the front of the school, wishing he could fly away.

Just as he thought he might fall asleep, the damndest thing happened. The school's front doors opened, and two giant cops marched along on each side of a kid who was handcuffed.

Instead of looking beat down and intimidated, the kid was walking with his head held high like he was proud of himself.

Mike didn't know this kid. He'd seen him in the halls and could tell that he was new. His blond hair was scruffy, but pretty short. He was wearing poor kid, K-Mart jeans and an out of style, striped t-shirt. Not a nerd or a jock, but not really a surfer either. He was just another anonymous white kid who was bound to learn a tough lesson in the hallways or on the playground at some point soon.

But now that he was being frog marched out of the school by two L.A. County Sheriffs, this kid's stock just went way up. The fact that he wasn't crying or in any way upset, was almost bizarre. Mike thought that if it had been him, he might have pissed his pants by now.

The kid looked like he had a smile on his face, and when he looked up at the window of Mike's classroom right before they pushed him into the back of the patrol car, it felt like their eyes met for a second. Mike got a chill.

"Damn... that kid is badass," thought Mike, as the police car pulled away. "I gotta get to know that dude."

Steve had been sitting in his second period math class, sweating like a pig and dreaming about that cute little girl Terri who lived on his buddy Scotty Grayles' block. She had blond wavy hair, and was nicely developed, even though she was just a seventh grader.

He'd seen her in between classes and they both glanced at each other as they passed and then shyly looked away. He knew she liked him, because Scotty's sister had told him, despite promising Terri that she wouldn't say a word about it to anyone. Now she knew that he knew, and the tension between them excited him.

He had to figure out how to get some alone time with her and lost himself in fantasy. As was typical, he soon realized that he had pitched a tent in his jeans and his thoughts switched to how he was going get rid of his hardon before the class bell rang and he had to get up from his seat.

Then the class door abruptly opened, and a lady school administrator walked in, looked around and announced, "Steve Charles? Raise your hand. You need to come with me to the front office."

He had no idea why he was being summoned to the office. He was new to the school, and up to this moment had been completely anonymous. Although he had lived in the neighborhood since he was seven years old, he had never gone to the local schools.

His English mother had sent him to parochial schools his entire life, both to try to keep him off the street and because she never knew when or where she would have to move to escape Steve's father; her drunkenly abusive husband.

Steve knew the kids on his block, and a couple kids on the other side of town from his last parochial school. But that was the extent of his connection to the prison yard atmosphere of Fleming Jr. High.

At just thirteen years old, he was also fairly new to the bad kid routine that he had picked up during the last semester of eighth grade. Before then he had been a straight “A” student his entire life. Steve had been an extraordinarily gifted student who had decided to do everything he could to hide that fact. His reasoning was: Poindexter types were beaten up and abused, tough guys were respected. So, Steve did everything he could to act tough, despite never having been in a fight in his life.

Even though he smoked cigarettes, drank beer and wine and had even smoked weed a few times, he never really did anything *bad*. He had never been in any real trouble before and couldn’t imagine what he had done to be yanked out of class.

He felt his face redden and his pulse race and briefly considered trying to hide in the back of the class. Mr. Yee, his taciturn math teacher, wasted no time in pointing him out to the school official. He slowly got up, realized he was in an embarrassing position and quickly pressed his book against the front of his pants. As he walked up to the front of the class, it didn’t seem like anyone noticed, but some of the kids were oohing and ahing at his plight.

As he walked down the hallway, he asked the lady what he had done. She didn’t even look at him and was completely tight lipped. This felt really weird, but he still had no idea what was happening to him.

When he walked into the office, he was immediately grabbed by a large police officer. A second one put his hands behind his back and handcuffed him. The first one said, “Steve Charles, you are under arrest for the possession and sale of cocaine.”

Completely surprised, he blurted out, “Selling cocaine? What? I have never even seen cocaine!” As the two cops walked him down the hall and out the front door of the school, his head was spinning. He couldn’t comprehend just exactly what was happening to him. He had no idea about any cocaine. He figured that this was all a big mistake, and his Mum would settle things for him with the police.

But he was still scared to death and even felt a bit woozy. As he went down the school’s front steps, a bizarre thought struck him. Just a couple minutes ago he had been sitting at his desk with a raging hardon thinking about luscious Terri. He had been so worried about how he was going to get up and hide the bulge when the class bell rang.

Well, he didn’t have a hardon now! The thought actually made him giggle for a brief moment and he looked up and back at his classroom, wishing he could return to that moment.

This was a pivotal moment in young Steve’s life. The officers weren’t just local LA policemen, they were L.A. County Sheriffs, an organization that, at the time, was even more feared than the LAPD. While they drove, they hectorated him with accusations. “The kid you gave that dope to almost died,” said one cop. “You’ll be going to California Youth Authority until you’re 18 for this one.”

They took him to the Firestone Sheriff Station, which was a very old, notoriously rundown jail sitting in the middle of one of the roughest neighborhoods in Los Angeles, or in the entire country for that matter. It was in an extraordinarily seedy part of town, so bad that Steve felt

safer in the police car than he would have out on the street. The people he passed on the street seemed to be laughing at him.

The enormity of the situation hit him. He was sitting handcuffed in the back of a police car, going to an inner-city jail, and maybe off to prison! He started to cry, and this just made the cops that much happier and meaner. They harangued him for the entire 45-minute drive, demanding he confess. He cried himself into an asthma attack in that backseat. Not only could he not imagine what they were talking about, he couldn't have drawn enough breath to confess any way.

The booking officer could see that he was having difficulty breathing, but he still took mugshots and fingerprints before tossing him into a cell. He slowly regained his composure but was one scared little boy. After what seemed like hours, the jailer opened the door and said:

"Ok, kid, your mother's here, and boy is she a doozy!"

He could hear his mother before he even made it out into the lobby. Violet Charles was a small, red haired and freckled woman who had lived through the World War II blitz in London as a young girl. She spoke with a strong cockney accent and was as powerful as a hurricane.

There were two things she cared about in this world, her beloved son, Steve; and making life miserable for anyone who dared mess with him. She was the rock-solid anchor of Steve's world. Despite living with an abusive, alcoholic father who abandoned the family off and on throughout his life, Steve knew that he was loved.

"Mum" made sure of that. Her parenting style was a unique mixture of *uber* over-protective and Laissez Faire. She trusted Steve implicitly and gave him a wide berth in his daily activities without parental interference. She let Steve make his own mistakes but would then immediately be there to clean them up. She would then very forcefully instruct him on what he had done, why they were wrong (or stupid) and how not to do them again. He was her baby, yet strangely, she also treated him like an adult.

But in this instance, she was filled with rage. She made sure that every single Sheriff in that station house knew that (a) Steve was innocent, (b) they were morons to think anything otherwise, and most importantly, (c) she gave her blood oath right then and there that she would never stop fighting to right the wrongs perpetrated on her Steve. She was going after everyone's badge!

These cops had never seen anything like Mum, and they couldn't get Steve or her out of the lobby fast enough.

When they got into her car, she turned her ire on Steve. She screamed, "You were arrested! What have you been doing, young man!"

Steve who was exasperated and now doubly scared of a raging Mum said, "Mum, I didn't do anything, I have no idea why they did this to me!" She threw the booking papers at him and said, "Read it!"

It said that an unnamed informant had fingered Steve as the person who had given him a packet of white powder. That person had ingested some of it and had a bad reaction which was

witnessed by the informant's mother. She called the police, the powder was tested, and it was found to contain traces of cocaine, along with another unidentifiable ingredient.

"Oh shit," Steve thought to himself, "he must have been that Mexican kid we hung out with in the field behind Scotty's house last Saturday."

Before his first day at Fleming, Steve clung on to one friend in particular from his old parochial school. He lived a mile or so away on the other side of Harbor City, in "The Woods." Ron had always been kind of an asshole, teasing Steve mercilessly about everything from his bad teeth and his zits to his turnaround jump shot on the basketball court.

But Ron gave Steve access to his friends, which included Scotty Grayles and a handful of older, more sophisticated boys. Those guys had turned Steve on to smoking weed for the first time during the last semester of eighth grade. They would all meet out at an abandoned house in a big field, near their homes. The older kids would show up and share yellow paper rolled joints with the younger kids and regale them with stories of girls, rock concerts and surfing.

The last time they had all met out there was just before ninth grade started. Ron brought Steve and Scotty brought Mario, who was a Mexican kid he knew from school. Scotty, being a quasi-drug aficionado at 14, said he had this new drug called "Ca-neb-a-nol" that was supposedly pure THC, the chemical in weed that got you high.

It was in powder form, and he was going to share it with the older guys when he got there. He and Mario had gone in on it, and Mario held on to it as they walked to the smoke out spot.

When they got there, Ron looked in the window and was met by two Harbor Division LAPD officers with guns drawn at the older kids who were up against the wall.

"Freeze motherfuckers!" the cops yelled, as they burst out of the boarded-up house and pointed their guns at all four of the young kids.

After making them lie face down on the ground, searching them and generally scaring them into tears, the cops let the four kids go. They had done nothing wrong. But somehow, the cops missed the THC powder that Mario was holding.

Despite nearly wetting himself with fear, Steve recovered from this pretty quickly. He never told a soul, and didn't think too much about it again until a couple weeks later in that car ride home from Firestone Station.

Steve realized that Mario had taken the stuff and maybe had overdosed or something. When his mom caught him, she called the police. Instead of admitting to anything, Mario obviously dropped a dime on "Steve" as his supplier. And since, Scott *Grayles* (Scotty) and Steve *Charles* were such similar names, he pointed the finger at the *wrong* person.

As Steve had originally thought, and Mum had promised, nothing more came from this. Steve thought that the cops just didn't want to deal with Mum. She was unbelievably fearless to those cops. But in reality, there had been so little cocaine in the powder that it would not survive another test, so they could not bring charges. The rest of the powder could not be identified.

This left a lasting impression on Steve, and it gave him a reputation he didn't deserve, partly any way. While it was true that he had been a standup guy that didn't rat on his friend Scotty, he was certainly not any drug kingpin. It also led to a rarely used yet soon to be indelibly marked nickname that took him 20 years to live down and burn away, *Cocaine Charles*.

It was Steve's introduction to the LAPD and the criminal justice system. He saw, first hand, that the cops could do anything they wanted to you, and they enjoyed doing it. He now knew that you could be arrested for anything, whether you were guilty or not. Once you were arrested, it took moving heaven and earth to get you out of their control. It was an adult lesson for a very young boy.

He realized that the police, not the gangs, were the most violent, lawless and vicious people on the streets of Harbor City. He feared them more than anything he had ever known.

Alexander Fleming Jr. High was opened in 1925 in what is now Lomita as the junior and senior high school for the unincorporated area south of the city Los Angeles. It became Fleming Jr. High in 1957, when Narbonne High was built less than a mile to the northeast. It was built to accommodate a much smaller student body and strained to hold its 1972-era population.

Trailer bungalows had been dragged onto the north side of the grounds for use as classrooms for the overflow of kids. It had never been renovated, and there was no heat or air conditioning in any of the rooms. Its tan and brown façade was crumbling in places and playing fields mangy. All in all, it was a suitable location for a horror movie.

The Lomita Fair was held on the athletic field and playground at Fleming Jr. High every year on the first weekend of school. It was more like a low-rent carnival than anything one would expect in Los Angeles, complete with rickety rides and drunken carnies. It was the only thing the white kids who hung out on the western steps to the outdoor cafeteria area at snack time talked about that first week. Until the big arrest, anyway.

Speculation from the Snack Crew reached a fevered pitch.

"I heard he killed someone."

"No, I heard his father killed his mother, he went insane, and the cops took him to the mental hospital."

"No, way. He got busted for selling LSD."

Like every day at 10:00am, Mike drank his milk and ate his morning donut with that small gang of wannabe surfers and diehard stoners. Half of them were dumb fucks and the other half were good dudes that lived in his neighborhood up in The Hills area of Harbor City or in The Woods. This time, the dumb fucks were winning the conversation.

He interrupted the shit talk with "I don't know what he got busted for, but I saw that he had a smile on his face when they put him in the back of the car." He was met with more idiocy – "See, the dude is crazy!" "He was frying on acid!"

Just as they were about to go back to planning out how they were going to score beer on Friday night before the Fair, the new Fleming celebrity walked up the steps and said, "Hey,

where do I cash in my food ticket to get a chocolate milk?” Before Mike or anyone could say anything, the kid was met by a couple old neighborhood white kids, and they went off together to another part of the cafeteria.

All the white kids knew each other and had played Little League and Pop Warner football together since they were in elementary school. Still, there were separate cliques.

The kids that lived in the ghetto-adjacent, old neighborhood were more connected to the Lomita and Harbor Hills kids, and together they comprised the toughest of the white kids in school. Many had big brothers who went to Narbonne High and ran with the Allbrook Boys. Those were the guys that ran things on the street; the white side, anyway.

The kids where Mike lived, in the marginally better Hills neighborhood to the south, were more into surfing and school. They got in far less trouble than their compatriots to the north and didn't mix it up as much with the Mexican gangs. But they had no less of a thirst for drugs and alcohol, and in fact, probably had better drugs due to their slightly enhanced economic status.

Mike had spent a couple years as best friends with one of the toughest kids from the old neighborhood. His name was Mike Worth, and he was a throwback to another era. His attitude and look were almost like a greaser from the 50's, slicked hair and wife beater T-shirts. He also loved to fight -- especially with the Hispanic gang kids and the black kids from Normont Terrace. He sported a trademark big beak, the result of numerous broken noses from fights at the docks, or so he said, anyway.

Their friendship had not gone sour in any way; they just slowly lost their connection. That was a good thing for Mike, because by 1972, Worth was a serious juvenile delinquent, he no longer attended school at all. Rumors were that he now worked at the docks at 15 years old.

So, when Mike ran into the two old 'hood kids who had escorted the new celebrity away that morning, he casually asked them as many questions about him as he could. Turned out that the kid's name was Steve. He lived on 251st Street, a block or so away from Belle Porte Ave, which was known as “Lowrider Lane,” the line of demarcation white kids did not cross.

He had lived there for a pretty long time but had always gone to religious schools, and he was super smart. He used to get sick all the time, so he never hung out much. His mom was a crazy English lady that you did not want to mess with.

This new kid Steve was good friends with Worth, and to Mike's surprise, was also very close with Russell Handman. Russell was by that time already a legend in Harbor City. He had been held back in school twice and so was bigger and more mature than everyone else in his class. At 16 years old, he was by far the toughest white kid in their age group. He also had long brown hair and was drooled over by all the girls. Like Worth, he had also completely stopped attending school by the ninth grade.

His legend was largely formed by violence. Years before, Mike and his teammates had seen Russell being forced to fight at the Little League field by his father, who was big, rough, and drunk all the time. Russell was forced to square off with Leroy “*Pipe*” Johnson, the biggest, meanest black dude in school. Pipe was from Normont Terrace, and no one would dare look at him, let alone talk shit to him.

It was an epic battle that Russell was on the verge of losing twice. Each time that he stepped back, Russell's Dad yelled, "You better keep fighting boy, or your gonna get a worse ass beatin' from me!"

Russell was taking a horrible beating right out on the Little League field in front of the kids and parents, but no one dared say a word. They just watched as man-strength punches were thrown and landed by both boys. Mike remembered feeling sorry for him, and thought Russell should quit before he got seriously hurt. But obviously Russell was more afraid of his own father. With blood streaming out of his nose, he somehow found the strength to come back, windmilling hammer-like blows onto Pipe's face.

When Pipe figuratively cried "Uncle" and quit, Russell's father made him punch "*that fuckin' nigger*" in the face one more time, just for good measure. Every adult there that day was scared to death of Russell's father and every kid of Russell.

So, this new kid Steve had grown up in the tough part of town. He was friends with the two meanest juvenile delinquents in the neighborhood. He had just been walked out of school in handcuffs by the LA County Sheriffs.

"Holy shit, this has to be one bad motherfucker," thought Mike.

The Snack Crew always rushed to hang out at Fleming's north gate after the final school bell rang. This was where all the hottest girls left school to walk home, and if there was going to be a fight it would be here. The ice cream truck always pulled up after school and it became a drug marketplace, of sorts.

You could get almost anything there; except for maybe heroin. Every day there was Mexican weed for \$10 an ounce available, along with good Hash for \$10 a gram. Sometimes there were different brands of very potent LSD available, \$1 a hit. Often there were Reds and Quaaludes to stumble you around and Whites to keep you flying, all for \$1 a piece.

The ice cream truck blared songs by Alice Cooper, Pink Floyd and Curtis Mayfield. The kids who had drugs to sell from their big brothers hung on the sidelines, darting in to the crowd to make exchanges. The teachers assigned gate duty daydreamed while they waited to break up any fights that went off. The boys ogled the girls. The girls planned their Friday wardrobes, while ignoring the boys.

By the time Mike got there all the usual suspects from The Woods and The Hills were there, and then the new kid showed up with a couple of old 'hood dudes in tow. As thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys do, everyone started clowning around.

After the jokes and cutdowns subsided they got to business. They counted and committed to pool their money for beer, and then made specific plans for Friday night. It was decided that everyone would meet at the local Anchor Liquor Store at 6:30. Since it was in the old 'hood and since it was in his neighborhood, the new kid Steve would spot the beer. That being decided, each group made their separate ways home from school.

The air was hot and brown, and not one kid gave a thought to the present moment. After deciding where they were going to smoke their after-school joints, everyone had their minds on the weekend.

-Chapter Two- Nature of My Game

Soundtrack -- Sympathy for the Devil (Live) by the Rolling Stones



Anchor Liquor sat on the northeastern corner of Harbor City's main intersection. Western Avenue ran north and south, and Lomita Blvd, east and west. On the northwestern side of Western sat the gleaming and brightly lit Lucky Market grocery store. It was surrounded on two sides by a building from the 40's that would now be called a strip mall. It contained a burger stand, two secondhand clothing stores and for a while any way, a small record store.

But despite the amount of foot traffic, the shops in the strip mall were constantly closing; new ones

would take their place and then close themselves. The owner of the strip mall seemed not to care, as it was never painted or landscaped.

Anchor was itself part of a crumbling strip mall. Set back from Lomita Blvd and the one car deep parking lot was Anchor, then a tiny pizzeria, trophy shop and beer bar in succession stretching east along Lomita Blvd. After a larger parking lot, a stretch of battered, low-income apartment buildings continued east for two long city blocks on both sides of Lomita Blvd. As with the rest of the layout of the old 'hood, there was a paved alley running behind them.

The seven blocks of the old 'hood started with 251st Street, one block to the south. Fleming was five blocks further down Western and two blocks east, and Narbonne High was three blocks to the north. This was the center of the universe for the old 'hood Harbor City kids.

They had been going to Lucky's with their mothers or Anchor with their fathers since they were small. No one ever seemed to go into the trophy shop and pizzeria; but Anchor and the bar, known as Jeri-Jo's, did brisk business late into the night.

Sometimes on a Friday or Saturday night they would go hang out in the parking lot next to Jeri-Jo's just to watch the people coming in and out of it, and to thrill when a fistfight spilled out of its front door.

Once they saw a large, drunk lady come out of the apartments wearing a Mumu, hair in curlers, screaming for "that no good son-of-a-bitch." She staggered into Jeri-Jo's, yanked a skinny, greasy haired drunk off the bar stool and dragged him out. The kids howled as they screamed at and punched each other on their way back down the street. It was Barney and Wanda, a schoolmates' parents.

At any given time, there would be dock workers, gang members, bums, kids and drunks coming in and out of Anchor Liquor. It was a lively, if not dangerous area.

This is where the old 'hood crew met to spot beer on most Friday nights. "Spotting" involved the time-honored tradition of the oldest looking kid approaching the coolest looking guy with money in hand to offer the classic line:

"Hey, excuse me sir, but I left my driver's license at home. They won't sell to me. Would you mind buying me some beer?"

It was a big-time hit and miss proposition. Sometimes the spotter would get really lucky, like when a cool, long-haired guy would pull up to the store. They almost always went for it. But sometimes, luck would be against the kids and only pissed off dock workers or mean looking Cholos would pull up.

In those instances, the spotter had to be very careful who they approached. There were legends passed down from older brothers about the times that spotters had been snatched up, brought into Anchor Liquor and their parents had been called. Even worse yet, once someone who agreed to buy the beer took the spotter's money, went in, bought the beer and then laughed, got in their car and drove off with the beer!

Usually, the spotter would stand near the front of the door while everyone else stayed just down the parking near Jeri-Jo's. Positioning was critically important. You had to stand on the right of the doorway near the phone booth, just out of sight of Anchor's clerk. If the clerk saw the spotter they would come out and chase him off, with the real threat of physical violence.

The whole crew would then run like hell into the parking lot, down the alley and into the maze of apartment buildings. This was terrifying, especially the time when a big, mean drunk joined the chase from Jeri Jo's. But the worst part of sloppy positioning meant that the clerk was on high alert for the rest of the night.

That would mean no beer or wine for the kids, possibly for the whole weekend, and that was a tragedy. Booze enhanced a good weed high, and was super important to take the edge off at the end of an acid trip. It was a major part of a good weekend.

On leaner nights, which came frequently; Spanada, Tyrolia or Boone's Farm wine would be spotted and consumed, which often produced mass gastric explosions by the night's end. That was some rot gut shit, but they drank it any way -- the hell with the consequences.

Three separate neighborhoods of kids converged that evening: Scotty and Craig from The Woods; Mike, Johnny and Dave from The Hills; and Steve from the old 'hood. The Hills and Woods groups knew one another mostly by reputation and from Little League, but they were not really friends. The fact that they were all together that night was more about their getting caught up in that moment at the Fleming gate with the Snack Crew, than anything else.

So, the Woods and Hills kids were all very surprised and a bit intimidated when the new kid walked up to the parking space in front of Jeri Jo's with Russell *Fucking* Handman. Truth was, Russell could just take the money or the beer if he wanted, and there would not be one thing anyone could do about it. But there he was, with his hand out.

"Ok, I'm buying the beer. Hand over the money," he said.

No one said a word, and no one delayed either. Everyone just immediately reached into their pocket and handed him their wadded-up dollars. He said nothing, but turned and walked straight into the liquor store.

No one dared peer around the telephone booth to expose themselves to the clerk. Was he actually going to buy the beer? Would they sell to him? They all looked at Steve with varying degrees of apprehension. The Woods kids knew Steve, but they didn't know Russell. The Hills kids didn't know either of them. But they all sure as hell knew *of* Russell.

Mike thought to himself that if Russell walked off with the beer, the new kid was going to get an ass whipping next week at school, when Russell was not around to protect him.

But then Russell walked out with a smile and a case of beer in his hands. They all ran across Lomita Blvd. to the apartment building where their friend Rick lived. When they got to the courtyard, Russell said,

"Here you fuck heads go. I'll just take these two beers and see you at the Fair. I'm gonna get with Doris tonight!"

Before he could think better of it, Craig from the Hills blurted out,

"Hey! We didn't say you could have those!"

Shocked, Russell turned around and gave a death stare to the group,

"Are you saying I *can't* have these beers?"

He was met by absolute silence. No one would look him in the face. Then Steve stepped into the middle and said,

"Aw come on, Russ. Craig's just fucking around!"

The moment hung in the air like a June bug until Russell's face snapped from demonic to a big Cheshire Cat grin.

Which was immediately followed by a lot of guffawing and backslapping from the group –

"Yeah, ha-ha, he's just fucking with you..." "Have another one, man!"

"Yeah, fuck you guys, I'll take three next time," he said, and turned and walked off.

So, off the remaining kids went, 22 beers in hand, up the alley between Lomita and 251st to a vacant lot that ran uphill with a big tree at the end. Beers were popped, cigarettes lit and, eventually, a joint was passed around the group, followed by another and another.

The mood had quickly gone from apprehension to happy to fear to absolute jubilation. Everyone was laughing and talking over each other, and everyone teased Craig about popping off to Russell.

Craig was trying to act like he was being macho, but everyone knew that he just spoke without thinking. Every one piled on, until he came clean and admitted he fucked up.

“Steve, do you think Russell is really mad at me?”

“Nah, dude. He doesn’t care, he’s in too big a hurry to get to Doris’s house,” said Steve.

“You’re fucking crazy dude; did you see the look on his face?” said Dave. “That guy’s crazy. I’d watch my back if I were you!”

As the beer flowed and weed burned, everyone started getting more boisterous. The conversation jumped around between the boys’ normal primary topics of discussion – girls, surfing, scoring good dope, girls and, of course, music.

Every one of those kids was obsessed with rock music, and each was pretty knowledgeable about bands and albums. All had been to concerts and had strong opinions about what bands were good and which ones *sucked*. Johnny could actually play it, and very well for his age. But that somehow did not make him a bigger music expert than anyone else. They were all very opinionated.

“Who’s your favorite band?”

“Black Sabbath – “Fuck yeah, War Pigs!”

“Deep Purple” – “Smoke on the Water!”

“No, that song sucks, Space Truckin’ rules!”

“Alice Cooper” – “I’m 18!” – “I love that song!”

“The Rolling Stones!”

As soon as Mike said it, Steve started singing at the top of his lungs:

“Please allow me to introduce myself, I’m a man of wealth and taste.”

Johnny jumped in and pretty soon they were all trying to sing “Sympathy for the Devil.” It quickly devolved into laughter and arm punching, “DUDE, you are a terrible singer!” “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Then someone said, “Hey we gotta get to the Fair, we don’t want to miss all the babes!” and the kids drained the last beer, peed against the tree and then took off down the alley toward the Fair at Fleming.

Along the way they kept up a constant call and response of all their favorite songs. One kid would shout out the name of a song, and the rest would start singing it, until they petered out

when they didn't know the rest of the words. Then the next one would start up, and it went on over and over as they walked towards their school. It stopped when they got near the crowd at the Fair, and some parent looked at them and told them to "Pipe down!"

"Fuck that dude," Mike thought. These kids were having a truly memorable night. Something had just clicked with them all, and from that night on they would all become next to inseparable.

After they finished riding the Ferris Wheel, flirting with girls from their classes and staring down the "Lowrider" gang members, they all started peeling off for home, according to their individual curfews. The last two were Mike and Steve, neither of whom actually had a curfew.

"Hey dude, what's your phone number? I'll call you tomorrow," said Mike, "we gotta find a cool place where we can smoke out."

"It's 543-2075," said Steve, "and don't worry about that, I have the perfect place."
