

SAD GIRLS

That fall, the earthquake changed the town as she knew it, forever. All the brick buildings crumbled down in uptown. Most of the chimneys caved in around the rest of the town, too. Not that anyone ever used them to warm themselves by a fireplace in southern California. She'd grown up there—a squint eyed girl, the sun blinding against the sidewalks. Well, nearly there, below the boulevard, actually, and she dreamed one day of living in one of those old Craftsman houses with old oaks cracking the foundations of the front porch and built-in bookcases inside. She wanted something one hundred years old or more, and a tub with clawed feet.

For a time, it had really been the perfect age—before the big quake. There were small businesses owned by moms and pops, crazy John Birches and hippies alike. The town birthed a strange mix of British-loving mod girls and punk boys, mod boys and punk girls, Mexican and white, white and Mexican. She'd buy a card from a woman whose card shop let the employees walk around barefoot showing off their toe rings. The bookstore still carried books on witchcraft then, back when the former, silent-picture theater still showed porn

on a big screen in the afternoons and white men emerged from it wearing their baseball caps very low on their heads. Walking up the avenue late at night, a pedestrian had to dodge possums, rats, and water bugs—all walking to nowhere in particular and all avoiding the light. She took a ballet class, though she knew she was too fat to be there and, from the glances that the other girls gave, that this might be true. Her feet were too wobbly to hold her. Like many sad girls with unspeakable past lives everywhere from up and down the 605 Freeway, she lived with her grandparents and no one—not school officials nor friends of the family—would ask her why.

This sad girl was still underage when her grandmother took her to Uptown for margaritas on their lunch hour. They sat together and never discussed anything too unpleasant and made plans to go to the beach on their days off. They lived too far inland for no good reason, really, except that back East relatives had chimed in once in the 1950s to say that they'd better live inland because you never know when one good earthquake would separate the land and the beach cities would move halfway to San Francisco.

They talked past vacations, camping trips, and Disneyland visits whenever New York relatives came out to visit. Her future, according to her grandmother, should be whatever would make her happy. It was rosy sentiment, and vague, and this sad girl could not imagine anything yet that could fit that description. She was grateful to her grandmother for her lack of prying or interrogations. Could she borrow the car later to go to the herb store to buy candles and stuff to do spells? Catch a martial arts flick at the Hadley and prop her feet up on the seat in front of her so that she did not disturb the path of the rats towards the spilled Cokes rows in front of her? *Yes*. Grandma always said *yes*.

By the time of the big earthquake, people were already moving away from the brick-and-mortar buildings in the area and leaving

the Uptown for long strip malls of sameness along the boulevard, stuck between car dealerships and banks. Still, it wasn't until the mounds of rubble that took up so many corners were hauled away leaving empty lots, that sad girls and Mexi-goths and the white skater boys with their bald heads and minute tufts of hair at the top truly could descend and squat claim.

Maybe other girls found ways to entertain themselves: house parties and football players, Turnbull-Canyon-Road-make-out sessions where it was rumored devil-worshippers in the canyon would impound their boyfriends' mini-trucks and force them into mansions for random deviances. There must have been dances, too. Ice cream and pinball at Farrell's at the Whitwood. A long family dinner at Clearman's in red vinyl booths that stuck to everyone's thighs in summer. This was the wholesome stuff of kids with specific futures, whose fathers made sure they had internships in the summer, not retail jobs. Sad girls did not have fathers who lived with them, or had ever lived with them.

Sad girls in general, and this sad girl in particular, had tiny goals: make it to eighteen alive, not pregnant and not addicted to anything but music in minor keys. Sad girls were poised for junior college. There was a college in the town for students from faraway places who would soon learn that the beach, Hollywood, and Disneyland were all longer trips than the brochures had led them to believe, students from places that had more obvious seasons, places that could get cold. Sad girls were white. Sad girls were Mexican. Sad girls were half-and-half. Their commonality was a thin, blue cry beneath their dark, eyelinered eyes.

No meeting took place. No decree. No certainty but the earthquake, which did its job of collapsing chimneys and getting some more-recent Midwesterners to pack up. Earthquakes are a quick drama, and the damage reminds non-Californians of the palaces

they could better afford in the tornadoed Midwest, in the hurricaned South.

Once upon a time, Uptown was young mothers with strollers, a Blue Chip Stamp office, a bakery, a dairy, a ballet studio, a camera shop. Now it was rubble and tired of possibilities. The skaters provided a soundtrack of scraping wheels on concrete, the occasional tumble, and sinister laughter. The sign in front of the Quaker Bank lost its “r”.

At school, this sad girl could not understand how to answer questions like “How are you?” or discern what “Have a good one!” might mean. But in the rubble and fallout of after the earthquake she felt comforted. Alive. This was as close to a warzone as she could get and still have a warm, canopied bed at night. The city did not hurry on the repairs. One dust-and-gravel year birthed another, and then another, until the time before the earthquake became a dream, an imagination. She imagined the ballet lessons in the brick studio with the wall-to-wall mirrors, but could no longer be certain it had ever existed at all.

Sad girls from everywhere in southeastern Los Angeles County seemed to have found this ground-zero of nothing to stalk and haunt and want. Perhaps there was some sort of sonic disturbance or frequency that only sad girls could hear. They nodded silently to each other, admiring and coveting each other’s lunchbox purses, mod skirts, and little-girl barrettes on smooth, jet-black hair. If sad girls had been cars, the cops would have noticed them and set up roadblocks so the girls couldn’t cruise up and down the street like they did. Sitting with a half-empty sketchbooks and zines to print up, they’d buy slices of pizza and sit in the homeless park or the benches by the darkened entrance to the drugstore. By the five-year anniversary of the earthquake, there seemed to be perhaps seventy of them, perhaps taking shifts, circling like ravens or ghosts.

Sad girls talked little and kept it to nods or *excuse me* if they passed too closely in thrift or vintage store dressing rooms. Having grown up with other people's loud lives, this was a decibel they could manage.

Each business left in the Uptown district seemed to have its own patron sad girl that frequented a particular shop the most. That particular sad girl's zines were distributed there. If it was a thrift or vintage shop, that particular sad girl had first dibs on anything cool from the forties or fifties on its racks. The laws of this dynamic were not spoken, but felt. This world had a symmetry.

Each zine, of course, spoke the voice of the sad girl writing her unedited madness. In them they'd write about the boys who noticed them but went for girls that talked, or girls whose eyes they could see. They'd write cryptically about their uncles, their mothers' boyfriends, their stepfathers, and about how no one believed them (the one time they spoke). They'd write about rain and cobblestone and moving to England to become Robert Smith's one true love. They'd write about how long you could get RIT dye to last and at what point of faded a black-green dress should be redyed black or thrown out. They'd listen to X and write poems in big longhand curls of Exene script.

On weekends they'd convince older cousins to drive them to swap meets in Santa Ana, Orange, and Long Beach to find typewriters and old cameras. They'd take jobs or date probably-gay Mexi-goth boys who worked at places with copiers. (Mexi-goths are almost the male equivalent of a sad girl. The same dark clothes, the same quiet cynicism, the same British music collection. The same longing to be in an Anne Rice novel. The certainty that if they'd been born on the other side of Los Angeles, they'd all have been discovered by now.)

Back at home, after a day of stalking the streets, the sad girls set up their altars. La Virgen candles, tiny packets of tiny items from the