

THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

J A D E A D I A

HYPERION

Los Angeles New York

Copyright © 2023 by Jade Adia

All rights reserved. Published by Disney • Hyperion,
an imprint of Buena Vista Books, Inc. No part of this
book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or by any information storage
or retrieval system, without written permission from
the publisher. For information address Disney • Hyperion,
77 West 66th Street, New York, New York 10023.

First Edition, March 2023

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

FAC-020093-23020

Printed in the United States of America

This book is set in [TK]

Designed by Zareen H. Johnson

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data [TK]

ISBN 978-1-368-08432-1

Reinforced binding

Visit www.HyperionTeens.com

*To Leslie, of course.
Every page, every time. It's all for you, Mom.*

*To all the Black kids raising a finger to the status quo.
Your fury and creativity are beautiful, and I cannot
wait to see what you do.*

DEAR READER,

I wrote this book while quarantined with my family during the summer of 2020. These were the months when we all witnessed an incredible outpouring of support for #BlackLivesMatter, but also so much pain. Writing felt like a way to cope with the anxiety of the moment while also creating a space for myself to imagine Black and brown teens thriving alongside their found family, falling in love, and being absolutely ridiculous.

Communities of color are the culture-bearers of many cities, yet we are currently facing the threat of displacement. My own home in South LA is one of such spaces undergoing tremendous change. It's home to West Coast hip-hop, braid shops, lowrider shows, and some of the best damn pupusas in the country. It's a sacred place where many people feel rooted because of their connections to neighbors, local businesses and loved ones that share the block. However, it's recently become a real estate "hot spot" where longtime residents are being pushed out. This story seeks to put names and faces to the human cost of gentrification without losing sight of the creativity of those resisting the tidal waves of erasure.

Believe it or not, this book is a comedy! A story that finds the silliness inherent within the absurdities of capitalism and asks: How can we grapple with the systemic racisms that shape our lives while still centering the excitement of being young and Black, the warmth of feeling held by your community, the euphoria of a first kiss at the weekly drum circle with the flavor of a mango paleta still lingering on your lips?

My dream for you, reader, is to walk away from this book reflecting on how change shapes our lives and our connections to one another. Thank you for coming along for this wild ride and opening yourself to all of the messiness and contradictions ahead.

With appreciation,

JADE

AIGHT, so I know how it looks—bad—but I can tell you for damn sure that we didn't do it. Everyone thinks the gang did it, which I guess makes sense given that gangs tend to have a reputation for stuff like this, but I know for a fact that it wasn't the gang because the gang is fake. I made it up.

Well, me, along with Zeke and Malachi. And we'd never kill anyone. That would defeat the whole purpose of it all. We invented the "gang" so that we could *live*. I know that might not make sense now, but it will soon.

I just need you to trust me on this: we did not kill that white man.

PART ONE

*“The rulers of this country have always considered
their property more important than our lives.”*

—ASSATA SHAKUR

ONE

“Swear to god if this happens again, I’m gunna scream.” I pull my forehead back from the glass and use my fist to wipe away the condensation.

“Yeah, I’ll walk straight to the mayor’s mansion, and he better be ready to catch these hands,” Zeke says. He forms two fists and throws a couple of fake punches in the air.

Malachi laughs, gripping the number on his classic Kobe jersey. “Bruh, you’re not gunna fight anyone.”

This much is obvious to me and anyone who knows Zeke. The boy once told me that he could never imagine himself fighting someone, unless it was in space and he had a lightsaber.

“Okay, *fine*,” Zeke relents. “But I will send a strongly worded email. And write a bad Yelp review.”

“I don’t think you can write Yelp reviews for the City of Los Angeles,” I mumble. It’s only July 1, but when I try to count up the number of mom-and-pop shops to bite it this summer alone, I give up after ten. Jugos Azteca was the last place in the neighborhood where you could still get a giant thirty-two-ounce Styrofoam cup of agua fresca at any hour for only \$2.

But now it’s gone too.

The global spice mart was the first to go. Some corporate stooges bought it last year and turned it into a boutique Pilates studio. And the Liquor Bank where we used to buy sour belts and chile mango pops? That was shut down for a health code violation, and now there's an artisan coffee shop where you can paint a ceramic mug while you wait. Last year, someone took over the fish fry restaurant next to that, and now there's a goddamn taco shop run by a couple of white boys, and their only salsa option is pico de gallo. *Pico-de-fucking-gallo*. Not a bottle of Valentina or Yucateco in sight. Not even any Tapatio or weak-ass Cholula. We went there once to see what the deal was, but between the three of us, we only had enough cash for one taco to split. When the corny dude brought it over to us, we asked for hot sauce and he gave us SRIRACHA. Fuck outta here with that ketchup shit. That would *never* have happened back in the day.

So yeah, things in South LA are changing, to say the least.

"We could walk on Western Avenue until we find the elote guy?" I suggest, more so as an excuse to get as far away as possible from this depressing-ass empty storefront than out of an actual craving for street corn.

"Rhea, it's too hot to walk. Like *Mad Max* slash *Dune* slash that *Star Trek* episode when Kirk fights that desert lizard level *hot*." Zeke uses the seam of his graphic tee to wipe a line of sweat from underneath his sheepdog haircut.

"Well, unless you magically learn to drive, I don't know what our other option is," I say. I'm usually the one good for thinking of the plan for the day, but between the heat and yet another spot biting the dust, I got nothing.

"When I get my permit, I'll be charging y'all for rides," Malachi says proudly.

“Boy, please.” I bop the back of his head. “As if you can even buy a car.” At fifteen, the three of us can barely afford snacks, let alone a whole-ass vehicle.

The sun kicks it up a notch. Trippy waves of gas rising from the steaming concrete do a little dance for me before melting away. Across the street, something catches my eye. *If this looks like what I think it does . . .* I fight the urge to gag.

“Wait, guys, hold up,” I say, holding a hand above my eyes to block out the sun.

For the past six months, the city’s been building this high-speed Metro rail to slice through our neighborhood. The construction site is almost always empty, but today, it looks like there’s a “special” new addition.

Cars honk as I dodge traffic, but I couldn’t care less. When I hit the other side of the street, I lace my fingers around the wire of the chain link fence to get a better look.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Zeke catches up and puts on his CNN newscaster voice to read the brand-new billboard staring at us. “*Kofa Park: Los Angeles’s Newest Up-and-Coming Hot Spot!*”

I roll my eyes. “Gimme your backpack,” I say to Malachi.

“Why?” He pulls the straps of his space-themed JanSport close to his chest.

“You don’t trust me?”

“Hell no!” He backs away all dramatic at first, but there’s a faint trace of a smile beneath it all. I lunge forward to snatch it but miss. He laughs and tosses me the backpack.

I snag a Sharpie from the front pocket. “Watch out for a security guard, aight?” I dig the rubber toes of my Converse into the gaps of the fence and climb over. My shoes hit the concrete with a sting.

The marker squeaks as I rub its felt tip against the Plexiglas. The future train stop shelter has two side panels, so I hit those real quick before focusing on the backside, which is the most important because this is what faces the street.

This is the shit that people see.

We've had bullshit billboards like this popping up all over South LA for the past couple of years, so normally I wouldn't have even noticed. But something about this particular one caught my eye:

All the people in the ads are white.

Well, at least they were until a minute ago.

I use the brown Sharpie to fill in one last face.

The guys hop the fence to join me on the forbidden side. Malachi with his long legs does so much easier than Zeke, who sort of half scrambles, half falls his way over.

The hood of the train stop structure casts a thin strip of futile shade covering only half of the metal bench, which by now has already absorbed hours' worth of summer heat, so it's way too hot to sit on. But that doesn't stop Zeke from trying. Twice.

"Rheaaaa," Zeke complains to me after burning his ass once again. He rubs the seat of his jeans. "Can you just let this go?"

"No." As a Black girl, I know how shit works: we're either hypervisible or invisible. I'm not gonna pretend that I personally don't fall in that second category, but I don't need a goddamn billboard rubbing it in my face. Let alone erasing the entire hood into obscurity along with me.

My hand cramps and I accidentally color outside of the line.

“I’m too young and too cute to get a rap for breaking and entering,” Zeke complains.

On the other side of the fence, a white twentysomething woman with a cat on a bedazzled leash crosses the street to avoid walking past us. She clutches her phone all dramatic, the panic button locked and loaded as if we’ve been lurking here waiting to mug her. She avoids my eye contact as I stare her down.

Apparently, we don’t look very young to her.

I ignore Zeke and keep coloring. He groans and grabs the cluster of neon-yellow caution tape from the floor, walking over to Malachi. Even while leaning against the fence, Malachi towers over Zeke, so Zeke has to rise up on his toes to wrap the “Do Not Enter” tape around Malachi’s neck. Zeke arranges the makeshift boa and smiles. “You look fabulous.”

“Y’all play too much,” Malachi says, hiding a smirk. He adjusts the caution tape scarf and takes the wave brush from the back pocket of his jeans, compulsively rubbing it across his head, fresh from the barber with a new fade. The new cut works for him. A little too well. I’ve seen the way that other girls have started to look at him this summer. He’s all height, glowing brown skin, and perfect teeth since the braces came off. Not like that’s any of *my* business—how other girls look at him, I mean. As his oldest friend, I try not to notice the changes. Plus, it’s not like I’ve glowed up in any way to match.

Zeke, Malachi, and I have been best friends since Pampers. Our moms became tight when they’d volunteer at our day care together. As we got older, that turned into waiting for us at the bus stop after school, which was always late because we’d mess with the driver so much that he’d have to pull over to yell at us to stay in our seats and shit. So our moms had

plenty of time to bond and gossip about the other parents. Eventually, the three of us became accustomed to impromptu playdates on the patch of grass at the street corner while our moms kept raising their gelled nails at us, telling us to chill out for “five more minutes.” And let me tell you, when Black and Latina moms get into full-on chisme mode, you know for damn sure that they ain’t gonna be just “five minutes.” So, Zeke, Malachi, and I leaned into our crew. We gradually transitioned from school friends, to bus friends, to friends-friends.

These days, my mom doesn’t hang out with the others anymore. Or anyone, really, except her newest husband. Even I didn’t make the cut. So Zeke and Malachi aren’t just my best friends, they’re my tethers—the ones who keep me from feeling like I could drift away at any moment without anyone noticing, the ones who make me feel at home in the world. Not like I’d ever straight up *tell* Zeke’s sentimental ass or Malachi’s smug self how much they mean to me, but whatever, they know. And the fact that they ride-or-die so hard with me, hopping a fence to watch my back, no questions asked, means it’s mutual.

“Incoming security guard.” Malachi tilts forward like he’s ready to bolt. Little diamond-shaped impressions run down his spine where he had been leaning against the fence. “You done yet?”

“Nah, hold on.” The guys hover over my shoulders, but I cover my work. “I said I’m not done yet.”

Malachi sucks his teeth. “C’mon, let us see.”

“It’s not finished.”

“Sis, relax,” Zeke says. He swats away my hand and takes a sharp inhale.

Malachi doubles over in laughter. “They look like they’re in blackface!”

“No, they don’t!” I protest. I take a step back but realize that they low-key do.

Not my best work.

“This somehow feels even more racist than the original ad,” Zeke cackles.

“Ay, yo, STOP!” On the opposite side of the track, a skinny security guard pulls up on some bootleg Mall Cop bullshit. He leans over the handlebars of his bicycle, but his helmet is slightly too big, so it sags to the side, making him look even younger than he is. I recognize him because he works the night shift at Wing Stop. It’s probably just in my head, but swear to god, I can smell the lemon pepper seasoning lingering on his uniform from over here.

“The penalties for a conviction of misdemeanor graffiti are up to 364 days in county jail, a \$1,000 fine, or both,” the guard shouts, tryna make his voice big. The dark skin of his chicken legs glisten with sweat and cocoa butter.

“And what’s the penalty for rockin’ shorts that tight on a Wednesday afternoon?” Malachi clowns as he hops the fence back to the street. I take the moment of distraction to add my final touch: I scratch out the “newest up-and-coming” part of the ad.

“You know what?” The skinny guard whips out his busted Android with a screen crack deeper than the San Andreas fault. “Names and addresses! I got y’all on tape!”

With that, Zeke and I catapult ourselves over the fence. I kick out a kink in my leg from the fall as we watch the goofy Mall Cop nigga round the corner, pedaling straight toward us.

Malachi's big brown eyes go wide as he claps in my face. "Yo, let's go, let's go, let's go!"

We sprint by the men in suits who hand out copies of the local paper every afternoon and the mural of the dark woman whose afro holds a spaceship above the words "Free Your Mind." A group of girls, maybe four or five years younger than us, Double Dutch in the empty parking lot where a woman selling tamales laughs with a customer who hangs out of their car window, delicately grasping a plastic bag steaming from the heat of the corn husks. I can smell the masa even after we dip into the alley, leaping over empty boxes of backwoods and lost wads of braiding hair from the salon above the black-and-gray-style tattoo parlor.

Our sprint slows to a jog, which slows to a walk. We emerge on the other end and lose the guard at last.

"Your bad attitude is gunna screw us all over," Malachi says between deep gasps for breath. "I'm cutting off your Sharpie supply, Rhea."

Recently, there's been something about the way he says my name that makes my stomach do a slow somersault. I clock the feeling but push it aside. "Whatever, bighead," I reply, knocking my sandal against his Jordans, but being careful not to scuff them up.

The heat catches up to us, so we practically crawl the final two blocks to Zeke's apartment, which is where we hang most of the time because his mom, Lupe, keeps the fridge stocked with hella snacks. Within minutes of piling inside, the three of us are arguing over who gets the last cheese-and-loroco pupusa when Lupe comes in.

She's crying.

"Ma?" Zeke asks softly, relinquishing the tiny bowl of curtido

that he had been threatening to withhold if we didn't share with him.

"Can you get this out of the way, please?" she asks me, pointing at a chair that we had knocked over earlier. I stand and move it to its proper place at the table so that she can move her wheelchair around our mess. We all stare at the open envelope and crinkled letter lying facedown in her lap, but none of us dare to ask about it. She shuts her bedroom door gently and Zeke sinks back down onto the carpet.

"What do you think that's about?" Zeke asks, clenching his hands together.

"I don't know." I tread carefully, because Zeke's one of those real sensitive, empathetic guys. He's the type who'll get choked up by those corny commercials where someone earns their degree from an online university and their kids try on the graduation cap. When things get dark for real, he can fall apart easily. I never really cry on my own, but with Zeke, his tears are annoyingly infectious. Once he gets started, it's Game Over for me—straight kryptonite. Unlike Zeke, though, I'd rather keep the feels to a minimum, so I throw myself into 'Operation: Zeke Cry Prevention' at all costs.

"Do you think it's health stuff?" Malachi asks cautiously. Zeke's mom has been some type of sick for practically our entire lives. A few years ago, though, her nervous system stopped working well, which made it hard for her to walk, until eventually, she couldn't walk at all. The doctors never figured out exactly what happened, but she's been able to manage with the chair and hasn't been to the hospital in over a year.

Lupe has one of those wild, uninhibited laughs that makes it easy to forget that she's often in pain.

“Nah, man. She was at the doctor last week and everything was chill. They spent most of the appointment talking about how the doc’s bratty son ruined his niece’s quince photo shoot.”

“How’d he ruin the photo shoot?” Malachi asks. I flick the side of his head to remind him to focus on the actual issue at hand.

From behind her closed door, Lupe calls out to us. “Why don’t you all go to Malachi’s house? I need a bit of space to work this afternoon.” Lupe is the part-time billing manager for a semiretired dentist, so she’s always contacting someone’s insurance or returning a patient’s phone call.

“Sure, no problem,” we reply in unison, though the chorus of our voices comes out more apprehensive than eager.

Malachi and I get up, but Zeke’s still glued to the floor. I reach out my hand. “Just give her a minute, it’s probably nothing,” I whisper. He grabs my wrist and I pull him up, careful not to knock over the collection of porcelain crosses on the bookshelf behind me.

Zeke locks the door behind us as Malachi and I attempt to see who can jump high enough to touch the hallway ceiling. I’m centimeters away from swiping the stucco above our heads when a familiar voice yells at us from down the hall.

“Cut that shit out!”

“Not this asshole again,” Malachi murmurs.

Right on cue, Vic comes waddling down the hall. He’s one of those short, pudgy white dudes who’s thicc with lower body curves honestly not unlike my grandma.

“Here comes the Evil Landlord and his signature body odor fragrance . . .” I say to the guys. We cackle, which only makes Vic more pissed.

“Hahaha laugh all you want, cretins. In thirty days, I’ll be the one laughing.” He haphazardly waves a scroll of paper at our faces like a fire extinguisher. “I’ll never have to see you three spilling Arizonas and stomping all over my units ever again.”

“ ‘Cause you’re gunna kill us?” I chime in with a devious grin.

“As much pleasure as that would give me, no. I won’t have to. Didn’t you hear the news?” He runs his french-fry-grease-soaked hands across his mouth and nods at Zeke. “Acne-ridden wannabe Carlos Vives over here is moving.” Vic makes his pale fingers into the shape of a gun and pretends to fire it at Zeke’s chest.

“What are you talking about? We’re not moving,” Zeke pipes back.

Oil mixed with sweat glistens above the self-satisfied grin smeared across Vic’s face. “Oh yeah? So, you’re saying that you personally have the money to afford the sixty percent increase in rent then?” A fly buzzes through the hallway, filling the silence that falls between us. Vic moves to swat it. He misses.

Look, I don’t know how much the rent is, but I got an A in math last year—a 60 percent increase is no joke.

“You see this?” Vic theatrically unrolls the scroll that he’s been wielding and reveals a set of blueprints. “The shithole that you’re standing in now—which was run into the ground by all of *your people*—will soon be renovated. Out with the old tenants, and in with the new ones.” I’ve seen enough changes on the block recently to know what he means. Read: millennials with tech jobs and hipsters with trust funds. “And this apartment complex”—he knocks on the wall—“is going to house them.”

“You can’t do that!” Zeke shouts. His voice cracks in a way that under different circumstances would have been fair game for ridicule. “We’re under rent control.”

“News flash: the rent control ordinance expired, kiddo. And I’ve already got an investor lined up. We’re expected to close the deal by the end of the month. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” Vic pushes past a stunned Zeke to start taping notices of eviction to each of the doors.

Nuh-uh, fuck that. First they close our shops, now they’re full-on tryna displace us? I throw my arm in front of the door that Vic is preparing to plaster. “Do you *really* think you can get away with this?” The rage that’s been building inside of me all afternoon, all summer, pops off. I knock the stack of eviction notices from his grimy hand. “Well, go ahead. Try it. I fucking *dare you*.” I get all up in Vic’s space, so close that I can feel his soggy fast-food breath soak the air between us. I lower my voice to a cold whisper. “Because guess what? When all this shit passes, we’ll be the ones left standing . . . not you.”

His beady eyes narrow. “Is that a *threat*?”

I cross my arms. “It’s the truth.”

Vic sneers and gathers the papers from the floor. “Thirty days. That’s all you got.”

“Is that a *challenge*?” I clap back.

I stare Vic down and he stares right back. No matter where Zeke moves, there’s no way he’d stay nearby—not with prices surging across the city. He could end up all the way out in the valley or even the Inland Empire, both of which are far as hell. Moving out there is practically like going out of state—we’d *never* see Zeke.

I break away to look over at Zeke, who’s glued to his door,

mist gathering over his eyes. I grab his wrist and pull him down the hallway with Malachi while the ghost of Vic's sick laughter bounces off the concrete walls against our backs. "Change is inevitable, kids. Better get used to it now."

The door slams and we're left standing outside, looking in.

"To Live and Die in LA . . ." Zeke says, eyes red. "That was the plan."

I clench my fists until the knuckles crack. Our crew is not falling apart. Not like this, not on my watch, not ever.

We have to stop him.

"It still is."