

THE CRACK CAFETERIA CHRONICLES

Written by

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EXT. COLLEGE CAMPUS - DAY

A GLOOMY afternoon. We see a SLOW PAN across the quad. There is no sign of life anywhere. The only sound is the wind howling.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

The quad was desolate. Students have retreated to their library cubicles in preparation for midterms. I was working too, but on a different animal.

INT. THE DAILY LEAF OFFICE - AFTERNOON

JOAQUIN LOWTHER, 21, senior in college and Editor in Chief of the Daily Leaf. He is a tall, slender black man. He is sitting at his desk within a small, cramped makeshift cubicle. His glasses are low on his nose, he's wearing a coffee stained hoodie and staring blankly at his computer.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

I wanted to say my fingers were hitting those keys like a bat out of hell, but they weren't. Goddamn it, I was stuck. We're set to print the paper in 48 hours and I was going nowhere, and slow.

KAREN, 20s, coeditor of the paper, approaches his desk.

KAREN

Hey, Joaquin! What's good with you?

JOAQUIN

Huh? Oh, sorry. I didn't see you.

KAREN

Yeah, I noticed. I'm guessing you haven't gotten another further in your investigation?

JOAQUIN

Nah. This is really killing me. I've never been this blocked before.

KAREN

You've got some time, I'm sure you'll come up with something. Also, there's a girl here to see you.

(laughing)

(MORE)

KAREN (CONT'D)
Probably another disgruntled one-
night stand.

JOAQUIN
Ha. Funny.

Joaquin returns to staring blankly at his computer screen. He feels a random gust of wind and looks up and sees

LENA SUFFY, 20, walking towards him. She is tall, curvaceous but slender young woman. Her skin is a deep brown and her afro stands tall.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)
And that's when I saw her. She
nearly knocked me straight out my
seat. Hair thick like molasses and
thighs th-...

LENA
Hi. You're Joaquin, right?

JOAQUIN
(nervously)
Uh, hey. Hi. Yeah, I'm Joaquin.

LENA
I'm Lena. I was told that you're
the person I should see. I heard
about the investigation you're
doing and I have some information
that might help you.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)
How she found out about my
investigation, I didn't care to
know.

JOAQUIN
Please, have a seat.

Lena sits on a stool across from Joaquin.

JOAQUIN
So, what do you know?

LENA
Well, I usually stay in the student
center pretty late studying.
(MORE)

LENA (CONT'D)

Last week I was literally the last person in there and when I was coming back from the bathroom, I saw one of the employees carrying like, three huge duffel bags into the back room. I mean I don't know, I thought it was kinda weird because the restaurant section closes at 7 and it was well past midnight. Why would anyone be back there? And when he saw me, he looked so freaked out, and pretty much took off running.

JOAQUIN

Hm. That does sound strange... but what makes you think that has anything to do with my investigation?

LENA

I mean, you're trying to figure out why the drug use on campus is steadily rising... and employees are doing suspicious shit after hours...then, I don't know? How could it not be related?

JOAQUIN

Touche. Smart and beautiful, that's refreshing.

LENA

Ugh, please.

JOAQUIN

What?

LENA

What, you're impressed that I have breasts and can also put two and two together?

JOAQUIN

(stunned)

N-no, no, I didn't mean it like that at all, it's just most girls I kn-

LENA

Stop right there. One, every girl is different. Every person is different.

(MORE)

LENA (CONT'D)

Secondly, don't try and compliment me while insulting other women in the same breath. You won't get a thank you.

JOAQUIN

Sorry. Got it.

LENA

Good. Anyway, I found the Facebook of the employee I'm talking about. His name is Pat Valvada. You should look into him. I would do it myself, but I have midterms to study for.

JOAQUIN

Absolutely, I'll check it out tonight.

Lena gets up but Joaquin grabs her hand as she is about to leave.

JOAQUIN

Wait.

(beat)

What I said before, that was dumb, and I know that. That's not me and I can prove it. Have lunch with me tomorrow.

LENA

I have class all day.

JOAQUIN

Okay, so then coffee in between? Please?

LENA

... Fine.

EXT. STUDENT CENTER - MIDNIGHT

Joaquin is outside the back door of the cafe. He removes two safety pins. He starts to pick at the lock.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

There comes a time when a journalist has to cross a few lines to get to the truth. Sometimes ethics has to take a backseat in the name of the greater good.

Joaquin looks next to the lock and sees that the door is opened with an ID swipe. He drops his head in annoyance.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

This was not one of those times.

Joaquin swipes his ID and opens the door with ease and enters the pitch black cafeteria. He uses the flashlight on his iPhone and scans the room for signs of anything suspicious.

After finding some strange slop labeled "Beef Surprise" Joaquin turns around to leave the room and trips over a large heap on the floor.

PAT VALVADA, 50s, an overweight and very hairy middle-aged man rises up from the heap.

PAT VALVADA

God damn shit! What in the hell..

(sees Joaquin)

Who are you? How did you get in here?

JOAQUIN

Its you! You're Pat Valvada!

PAT VALVADA

Yea dummy! I said who are YOU, not who am I.

JOAQUIN

Right. Uh, I'm Joaquin Lowther, and I'm the editor of the Daily Leaf.

PAT VALVADA

So you broke in here to wake me up and read me your GODDAMN RESUME?

JOAQUIN

Shit man, can you calm down? You're acting like I walked into your bedroom. You're in a sleeping bag in a freaking back room of the student center. Why don't you explain why you're in here?

PAT VALVADA

Sorry. I'm a little grumpy when I first wake up.

(beat)

Look kid, I'm just someone who's in a tough place right now and I've been crashing back here. I'm no damn bum.

JOAQUIN

I get it, man. I know all about being in a tough place. How long have you been staying back here?

PAT VALVADA

Uh, about a month and a half now. Ever since the Food Service budget got cut.

JOAQUIN

Budget cuts? Isn't the administration supposed to release documentation for any budget changes?

PAT VALVADA

Administration is supposed to do all kinds of shit, kid.

JOAQUIN

What do you mean by that?

PAT VALVADA

Take my advice. Get your degree, and get the hell on with your life. Don't go sticking your nose around where it doesn't belong.

JOAQUIN

Thanks, but that's not who I am. I owe this school everything. Without my journalism scholarship, I wouldn't be able to do what I love. And if there's something wrong happening here, I'm not just gonna turn my back on it. So please, could you help me out?

PAT VALVADA

(hesistantly)

Alright... but you didn't hear it from me. All I know is, someone at this school, somebody big, is using us as freakin' Kwik Stop for crack/cocaine.

JOAQUIN

But... who?

PAT VALVADA

The hell if I know! But what I do know, is the few of us who chose to stay out of it are the only ones who are feeling these 'budget cuts.'

JOAQUIN

Oh shit.. So this means...
(beat)
Administration?

PAT VALVADA

Bingo.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - EARLY MORNING

Joaquin carefully carries two cups of coffee from the counter to a small table in the corner of the cafe. He has spent more time on his appearance today, wearing a nice sweater with a freshly shaved face. He takes a seat and swipes through his phone as he waits.

Lena enters the shop and takes the seat across from Joaquin.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

It's been months since I thought about anything except this damn article. And now here was this woman sitting across from me, a beautiful distraction.

LENA

Hey.

JOAQUIN

Hi.

Lena takes a sip of her cup and suddenly looks up at him.

LENA

How'd you know what kind of coffee I like?

JOAQUIN

Wild guess.

Lena squints her eyes suspiciously.

JOAQUIN

I also may have stalked your
instagram and you always post this,
so I asked the guy which one it
was.

LENA

That's creepy.

JOAQUIN

Probably. But that's the beauty of
social media. My invasiveness can
be considered attractive.

Lena shakes her head and smiles.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

She smiled and I swear I almost got
down on one knee.

(beat)

Okay. I admit I might be
romanticizing this interaction. But
damn, there was just something
about her.

LENA

So anyway, did you check out my tip
yesterday?

JOAQUIN

Yeah, I did actually.

LENA

(eagerly)

And?

JOAQUIN

Well, it did turn out to be a lead,
just not in the direction we
thought.

LENA

What do you mean?

JOAQUIN

This guy doesn't have anything to
do with it. Those duffel bags were
him carrying clothes and blankets
into the back room, where he's been
living for over a month.

LENA

What? That's freaking crazy.

JOAQUIN

Right? But get this: he told me that the reason he's sleeping back there is because whoever *is* behind this, is cutting the salaries of the employees who won't participate. Can you believe that?

LENA

Wait hold on, Pat Valvada *told* you *all* of that?

Lena is frozen with shock. She stares blankly at him, then snaps out of it and grabs her phone.

JOAQUIN

What? What is it?

LENA

Uh, sorry. I gotta go.

JOAQUIN

Huh? But I thought your next class wasn't until 11.

LENA

It's not, but I uhm... I forgot to print out my homework.

JOAQUIN

Oh... well maybe I can go with y-

LENA

NO!

(laughs nervously)

I mean, no, thanks that's sweet but I have a bunch of other stops to make. But we'll do this another time!

Before he can respond, Lena is out the door.

JOAQUIN

Thanks...

INT. STUDENT CENTER - LATER THAT MORNING

Joaquin enters the busy cafe filled with students. He approaches a woman at one of the registers.

SANDY, late 50s, a voluptuous woman with long red fingernails, red lipstick and beach blonde hair. She has her arms crossed and resting on top of her enormous bust.

JOAQUIN

Hello, Miss. Do you know what time Pat Valvada is working today?

SANDY

Miss? It's been a long time since someone called me Miss... anyway Pat isn't coming in, but I'm sure I can help ya, sweetheart.

JOAQUIN

What? Why not? I thought he worked everyday.

SANDY

He does. But not anymore. He just quit about an hour ago.

(beat)

So, are you 18 yet?

JOAQUIN

Quit? Why the hell would he quit all of a sudden?

SANDY

Well shit, I don't know. Something about

(imitating Pat)

"It's for my safety, they'll kill me if I don't get out of here." You know, just the usual. I wouldn't sweat it. But... I sure am sweating you. You got a little girlfriend?

JOAQUIN

Thanks, I gotta go.

Joaquin dials a number on his phone and runs out of the cafe.

SANDY

Your generation with your damn snapgrams and Insta-tweers! Don't even know how to have a conversation. So damn rude!

A student approaches the register with a tray full of food.

STUDENT

Hey pretty lady, do you think I could pay for this here?

SANDY

Do you think you could wait a damn minute! Can't you see I'm busy? I swear you kids these days...

INT. RECORDS OFFICE - MIDDAY

Joaquin is sitting at on the front desk flirting with the student secretary. Her response is over the top, giggling and batting her eyelashes dramatically.

JOAQUIN

Well, it was a pleasure talking with you about finalizing toilet paper expenditures, uh-

Joaquin discreetly slips her ID badge into his pocket. Caught up in his smile, Mia fails to notice.

MIA

Mia. It's Mia.

JOAQUIN

(winking)

Mia.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

Come on, don't look at me like that. Remember when I was spouting off about crossing a few lines? The greater good, and all that? Well, this was actually one of those times.

Joaquin walks backwards out of the office continuing to smile at Mia. She giggles and twirls her hair in response. Joaquin hides around the corner until he hears her leave the room. He quickly hurries in and uses the stolen I.D to swipe into the back hallway.

He reaches a door with "Finance Records" written on the wall and enters. The room is filled with huge filing cabinets from wall to wall.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

Oh, fuck. They actually had hard files of all this stuff. What the hell am I suppose to do here? Find information... manually?

Joaquin lets out an exaggerated sigh and starts his search.

In a MONTAGE of shots, we see Joaquin flipping through the file cabinets. Vary between searching high and low, throwing files across the room. He flips through some disinterestedly and others with exclamation.

In the far back corner of the last filing cabinet, he pulls out a folder titled "2015-2016 Food Services Budget"

JOAQUIN

Yes!

Just as he is about to open it, his phone rings at the max volume. Joaquin drops the folder and reaches around in his pockets desperately trying to silence the phone. When he finds it, he sees that Lena is calling.

He rejects the call and sends her a text when he hears Mia around the corner

MIA (O.S.)

Hello? Is someone in there?

JOAQUIN

Fuck!

MIA (O.S.)

Who said that?

JOAQUIN

(whispering)

Fuck!

Joaquin puts the folder back, closes the cabinet, and slips out of the back door just as Mia is entering through the front.

Mia looks around and sees nothing. She walks to the filing cabinet Joaquin was just in and opens it. She pulls out the same folder.

Mia pulls out her phone and makes a call.

MIA

Hey. It's me.

(beat)

Yeah he's gone. You called just in time, he left without it.

(beat)

Are you sure? What if someone else starts asking around?

(beat)

Alright. I'll take care of it.

Mia closes the cabinet and leaves with the folder. Off screen, the SOUND OF A SHREDDER is heard.

INT. DAILY ORANGE OFFICE - EARLY EVENING

Joaquin sits at his desk, intently typing on his computer. He is deeply engrossed in his work when Karen approaches.

KAREN

Whatcha' working on so intensely?

JOAQUIN

(still typing)

My investigation. I'm making a lot of headway.

KAREN

Listen Joaquin, I've been needing to talk to you about that.

(beat)

I think you should change your topic.

JOAQUIN

What? What the hell are you talking about, Karen? We print TOMORROW! Why would I stop now?

KAREN

Things are just getting... out of hand.

Joaquin stares at her in disbelief.

JOAQUIN

What things? Just yesterday you were wishing me good luck! What's going on, Karen?

KAREN

Nothing! I'm just trying to graduate with my legacy intact. If you publish this, you're gonna piss a lot of people off.

JOAQUIN

The Karen I met in our first year COM class would be eager to do that.

KAREN

I know. But I have recommendation letters and job offers to secure.

(MORE)

KAREN (CONT'D)

So can you please just, drop this?
It's not worth it.

JOAQUIN

I'm sorry, but I just can't do
that.

KAREN

Well as coeditor, nothing gets
published without both of our
approval. And I won't sign off on
this.

JOAQUIN

Karen!

KAREN

Drop it, Joaquin! Let. It. Go.

Karen leaves Joaquin staring at his screen in disbelief.
After a beat, he grabs his jacket and runs out of the office.

INT. STUDENT CENTER - LATE NIGHT

Lena is sitting in her corner of the cafe sipping on an iced
coffee and looking at her computer. She has headphones in and
is nodding her head along to music.

Joaquin enters and takes the seat in front of her.

JOAQUIN

This really is your favorite study
spot, huh?

LENA

Yup. What are you doing here? I
thought you'd be up all night
finishing your piece.

JOAQUIN

Yeah, I might be holding off on
that.

LENA

(looks up at him)
What do you mean?

JOAQUIN

I mean, you know, it's tough. I'm
just at a standstill.

Lena gives a small triumphant smile and returns to looking at
her computer.

LENA

That's too bad. I was really hoping someone would get to the bottom of this.

Joaquin doesn't respond. He stares at Lena, giving her a sly smile.

LENA

Let me guess, you're about to give me a bunch of random compliments?

JOAQUIN

Yes, actually.

(beat)

I was going compliment you on being the most stunning...

LENA

Oh my god...
(rolling her eyes)
Alright, alright, you're too much.

JOAQUIN

Charming, funny, interesting, intelligent, witty, and..

JOAQUIN

... The most manipulative liar I have ever laid eyes on.

Lena chokes a bit on her drink.

LENA

E-excuse me? What did you just call me?

JOAQUIN

I know you heard me.

LENA

Now who the hell do you think you're talking to like that? You think because I'm a woman you can j-

JOAQUIN

OK, stop with that. Just because you took Gender Studies one semester doesn't mean you can just whip that out every time a guy says something you don't like.

Lena looks shocked and speechless.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

And the woman of the hour, for the first time since I had known her...
speechless

(MORE)

JOAQUIN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

(beat)

I gotta admit though, I hated to see her go down.

Joaquin pulls out the chair in front of her and sits down. He reaches over, takes her iced coffee, and takes a few sips.

Lena is still staring at him in disbelief.

JOAQUIN

You know, Lena. I really gotta give it to you. You're good, better than good--

LENA

Oh, fuck off with that smug little speech. You don't know shit.

JOAQUIN

I know that your little 'tip' was just a poorly thought out attempt to lead me away from the bigger picture.

(beat)

You.

LENA

I don't know what you're talking about.

Joaquin, quickly losing patience, yells:

JOAQUIN

YES. YOU. DO. Stop fucking LYING. Who do you think you're fooling? I've been around people like you all my life. People who tell you what you wanna hear to get what they want out of you. I know better than to let someone like you gain my trust that easily.

Dramatic, mysterious music begins to play, underscoring the scene.

JOAQUIN

I've been paying attention to you from the very beginning, Lena "Sufi."

DISSOLVE TO:

FLASHBACK - DAILY LEAF OFFICE

In a TINTED BLUE SCREEN, we see Lena walking towards Joaquin for the first time.

The DRAMATIC MUSIC continues throughout the flashbacks, CLOSE UPS of her smiling, laughing, and her eyes looking at Joaquin.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

The way you just waltzed into my office spouting off with information, because you just wanted to 'help.' Baby, you don't give a damn about anybody but yourself. And that's exactly why I made that little faux-sexist comment and asked you out. Then when I checked out your little tip about Pat Valvada, I fed you that information to prove what I already suspected...

FLASH TO:

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - EARLY MORNING

In TINTED BLUE, we see Lena run out of the coffee shop. This time, she goes around the corner and makes a call.

LENA

(whispering)

Hey. It didn't pan out.

(beat)

Look, I don't know, okay? But we have take care of this NOW. As in, right now. Before he gets a chance to follow up.

Lena shoves the phone in her pocket and quickly walks away from the shop.

We then see Joaquin step out from behind the post.

INT. STUDENT CENTER - NIGHT - PRESENT DAY

Joaquin arrogantly puts his hands behind his head and kicks his feet up on the table.

JOAQUIN

... That you were really behind this.

(MORE)

JOAQUIN (CONT'D)

Which I knew for certain once I learned Pat had been fired literally within 20 minutes of me telling you! I mean damn Lena, you could've given it a day.

Lena attempts to say something but Joaquin continues.

JOAQUIN

Oh, no you don't. I'm just getting to the best part.

(beat)

Anyway. So after that, I went to the Records Office, because I knew that's what you thought I would do.

FLASHBACK - INT. RECORDS OFFICE - MIDDAY

In the same TINTED BLUE, we replay his interaction with the secretary.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

And then when I saw the secretary was in your sorority, I knew I was on the right track. I made you think I was after the accounting records to distract you from getting the last piece to my puzzle.

After Mia walks out of the room with the file, Joaquin slips back through the door right before it closes. He goes back to the filing cabinet and removes another folder. He opens it, looks through the contents, and smiles.

INT. STUDENT CENTER - BACK TO PRESENT DAY

JOAQUIN

Your student file.

Lena's eyes widen in terror. The music stops suddenly.

LENA

No fucking way-

JOAQUIN

What did I just say about interrupting?

Lena looks contrite. The dramatic underscore continues.

JOAQUIN

Right, so, at this point I was wondering. There is no way a student would have the means to have an operation this deeply embedded in the University. So I had to think bigger. Who was behind this? Who were you trying so desperately to protect? And sure enough, what does your file reveal. Your real name. Lena J. Carrington.
(beat)
Daughter of the Chancellor.

The music comes to a triumphant finish. Lena stares at him poker-faced.

LENA

(shrugging)
Doesn't matter. This will never get out. Because the both of us know if it does, that degree you are so close to earning will be gone. Along with any chance you have to be a real journalist. How many times do people have to tell you to just let this go?

JOAQUIN

I thought you might say that. Luckily, the paper, with my exposé front and center, is currently being printed. And the authorities are on their way to your daddy's house.

Lena gets up and tries to leave.

JOAQUIN

And a few are on their way here too. Turns out the board of directors for the University weren't so happy about our Chancellor's little operation. Mostly because they weren't getting anything out of it, but whatever. The point is-- it's all over.
Goodbye Lena.

The police enter the cafe and head straight for Lena. They arrest her and take her into custody as she yells

LENA

(to the officer)

I swear I didn't know what my dad was doing, I had nothing to do with this! Please. No. No, no, no. You can't do this to me. PLEASE!

As Joaquin stares after Lena being forced into the backseat of the police car, Karen approaches him.

KAREN

Wow. You really pulled this off.

JOAQUIN

Yeah, I really did. Though if it were up to you, I would've "let it go" already.

KAREN

I'm sorry. I can't even believe I was so close to holding you back.

JOAQUIN

I can't believe it either. I remember freshman year you would say "I don't wanna be just a journalist. I wanna be a truth seeker."

KAREN

(laughs)

I was so corny.

JOAQUIN

You were. But you were also real.

KAREN

And I still am. You know me. I just lost sight of it for a minute.

(beat)

Give me another chance. Let's go out and celebrate! You just exposed a freaking under cover drug ring. Led by our CHANCELLOR. Come on. You're not about to just go home and eat ramen by yourself.

JOAQUIN

Alright, alright. But drinks are on you.

Karen squeals with excitement and gives Joaquin a huge hug.

KAREN

Deal!

The two exit the student center happily.

JOAQUIN (V.O.)

All in a day's work, right? In this world, the only two things a man can trust are his pen, and his gut. And I'll follow mine to the edge of this cruel world.

FADE TO BLACK.