

Joshua Citrak, Picture Me Rollin', sample chapters

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# Picture Me Rollin'

joshua citrak

## praise for *Picture Me Rollin'*

*Joshua Citrak so pitch perfectly captures America's rough streets for its newest generation – you'll feel like someone snooping from the shadows, awakened to a riveting reality that shouldn't exist for those so young. This is not the San Francisco the world usually sees. A remarkable, stunning accomplishment.*

-Scott James, Emmy-winning journalist and San Francisco columnist for *The New York Times*, and author of the bestselling Kemble Scott novels *SoMa* and *The Sower*

*Picture Me Rollin'* is a coming-of-age story about a twenty first century Holden Caulfield, and the literary debut of a West Coast Junot Diaz. It's not surprising that Joshua already has a cult following in San Francisco. It's a cult the rest of the world urgently needs to join.

-Raj Patel, New York Times Bestselling author of *The Value of Nothing*

*Imagine Ernest Hemingway and Don DeLillo doing a film commentary for Hoop Dreams, and you've got the flavor of Picture Me Rollin' — deceptively succinct insight into growing up male without guidance.*

-Teresa K. Miller, author of *Forever No Lo* and *sped*

*Picture Me Rollin'* is a close, powerful read of a San Francisco overlooked by literature: Western Addition kids coming of age in the vast shady margins between Pacific Heights one-percenters and born-too-late Haight hippie burnouts.

-Alison Bing BBC and Lonely Planet author

*Joshua Citrak writes from the soul. The perfectly observed scenes in Picture Me Rollin' are filled with fascinating characters, absorbing situations and a deep, abiding sense of humanity. With a few carefully chosen words he can show the complexity in the most hardened teenage rebel or deadbeat dad, and his knack for capturing the natural rhythms of dialogue make his work a joy to read, even as it breaks your heart.*

-Jeffrey Dinsmore, publisher *Awkward Press*, author of *I, An Actress: The Autobiography of Karen Jamey*

*Joshua Citrak's work is as raw and grit-filled as the urban streets of his childhood. Filled with the visual imagery of neorealist film, Picture Me Rollin' is as funny as it is trenchant. Even as his characters struggle to come of age in difficult circumstances, they never give up their humanity, nor their sense of hope.*

-Diane Weipert, screenwriter *Solo Dios Sabe*

## gettin' after it

After the game, while we waited for Lima Bean to finish up in the showers, me and Juan killed time by breaking into lockers. The rest of our team was long gone, having caught a ride home with their parents or with Coach and now that the locker room was completely empty, thieving seemed like the only thing to do. The two of us had already flooded one of the toilets, scratched graffiti into the mirrors and emptied out the paper towel dispenser all over the floor.

I worked my fingertips along the top edge of a locker door, peeled it back and held it until my knuckles went numb.

“Dude just needs to get over it and shower with the rest of us.” Juan said, fitting his hands into the gap near the latch and giving the door a hard yank. “It’s *annoying* always havin’ to wait ‘cause he’s gotta be the last one in. I mean, what does he think he is? Special?”

I knelt in front of the locker shoveling its contents out. “Sweat sock, stiff. Duffle bag, ripped. Notebook, algebra. PB&J —” I dangled a wrinkled Ziplock, “squished.”

“And he’s taking *forever*, too.” Juan picked up the sandwich, slammed it on the ground and stomped on the bag until it popped. “For what? It’s not like dude worked up a sweat *ridin’ pine*.”

I dabbed my finger in the oozed out jelly goo and wiped it on the combo lock. “Another bust.” We’d jimmied almost an entire row of these gym lockers and all we had to show for it was six crumpled dollars, a Seiko with a dead battery and half a pack of Marlboro Lights. “You know, you can be such a dickhead sometimes.”

“What?” Juan said. “You wanted eat that?” But he knew: There was a reason why Lima Bean never showered with the rest of the team, why we always had to wait. Not because he was a weirdo or insecure about his penis, but because Lima Bean didn’t want to show off what his father had once done to him with the buckle end of a belt. Most dads knew to enough to stop at a bruise, but not his. The dozen or so vicious, permanent, slug sized welts down Lima Bean’s back and legs would be the last thing he’d ever give to his son and he wanted to make them count. What Lima Bean had done to deserve such generosity, he never said.

Juan took a cigarette from the pack, lit it and then stuck the still burning match through the vent hole of a locker we hadn’t gotten to yet. We passed the smoke back and forth listening to the slap and pop of water echoing off the tile floor.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. But seriously,” Juan said, his voice elevating to a shout. “Dude better hurry up else *I’m gonna beat his ass too*.”

I slapped the cigarette out of his hand, picked it up and flicked it at his ear.

A few minutes later, Lima Bean walked out through a cloud of steam.

“Sorry, guys.” He was dressed except for his socks and sneaks. “Thanks for waiting.”

“Who says we were waitin’ on you, huh?” Juan looked at me, then at Lima Bean pushing his heels into his high tops. “Ah, just playin’, man. Don’t sweat it.”

We cut through the darkened gym and out towards the main exit. The game crowd — amped and noisy students — had spilled all the way down the staircase and out into the street where there’d just been a fight. The scene was hopping; bunches of kids milling around in the night, waiting for rides, chugging backwash rum out of plastic Coke bottles and squirting Binaca on their tongues.

“But I got in that one good punch.” A kid from 3rd period English was sitting on the curb holding a bloody tissue to his nose. “Like a hammer — *ka-blaow* — rocked his bitch ass with that one. Y’all saw it, right?”

From somewhere, there was a cymbal splash of a window breaking followed by the wail of a car alarm and then laughter.

“Yeah, yeah,” his friends said. “Can’t nobody talk shit ‘bout chew now.”

The three of us slipped into the crowd, saying what’s up to people we liked and eat a dick to those we didn’t, all the while keeping lookout for the sophomore who sold from his script of Adderall. There was enough locker loot for two pills apiece. We figured-eight through the crowd until it got thin; he wasn’t

anywhere. But under a street lamp, at the edge of school property, we did spot a gossip huddle of honeys in short skirts and our opponent's varsity jackets.

"Dibs on the redhead." I checked my fly on the sly, then put a little swag in my gait.

"I saw her first, moron. Now, step aside and see how it's done." Juan licked his finger, pasted it across his eyebrows. "How do I look?"

"Like a freakin' douche bag," I said.

On game days, all of us on the basketball team had to show up to school dressy in shirts and ties. Only, Juan always wore the clip-on kind because he didn't have a mom at home to tie a real one for him. Last year, she went to Mexico to take care of a sick relative and never came back.

I snapped the tie off his collar and swatted him in the face with it. "But, like what else is new?"

"Good one." Lima Bean gave me a dap, then assumed a thoughtful pose. "But to me, he looks way more like a butt pirate."

"Hey. For all I know *she* probably goes for that kinda thing," Juan grinned, hanging out his tongue and shaking his head so his cheeks flapped. "She's a dirty girl like that, uh huh."

We three all turned to stare, hoping for a strong updraft of wind, but all that happened was an SUV pulled up with a parent at the wheel. Her and her friends got in and were escorted far away from us.

Lima Bean said, "Man, they didn't even offer you a lift."

"They just took off and never looked back," I said.

"Shut up." Juan put his hands in his pockets, cut his eyes up and down Fillmore Street as if he were expecting the girls to flip a u-ey, swoop in and take us with them to wherever rich Marina kids went. We could only imagine, standing there, feeling the chill of the thick fog as it crept eastward across the rooftops muffling out the city and everything else we could set our sights to. "Bitches didn't even give me a chance to get my swerve on."

He bent over and farted in the direction the girls had gone, and then giggling, the three of us shuffled over to the MUNI stop to smoke cigarettes and spit on the sidewalk while we waited for the late night bus.

Lima Bean looked at his watch, traced his finger over the route schedule. "Guys, this could take awhile."

"Shit," Juan said, faking a yawn. "Same thing I say 'bout you after *every damn game*."

"*Man*." Lima Bean swiped at the air, shook his head. "Why do you always have to be like that?"

Juan jumped up and hung from the tubular metal frame of the bus shelter, did a few rapid pull-ups and fell back down to his feet. "Why do I gotta be like that? Huh. 'Cause I'm tired of you actin' all pussy. It's pissin' me off."

Lima Bean dropped his bag, stepped out into the street like he was watching for the bus. "Ok. Uh huh. Sure. Whatever."

"See? Pussy. There you go again."

I said, "Whattaya want him to do? You know he's embarrassed about it."

"I want him to start actin' normal. By hidin' like he does he's lettin' his asshole father still get the best of him."

"Oh —" Lima Bean snapped his fingers. "Sure. I should just get over it."

Juan took a drag of his cigarette, then chucked it into the street. "It happened a long time ago."

Lima Bean gazed over Juan's head, bit down on his teeth. "*These are on me for fucking forever.*" He yanked up his shirt exposing his side that even now still looked raw, like strips of meat that had been turned inside out by a clawed beast who'd gotten a free swipe at him. His voice cracked, "How'd you like to walk around with these hideous things? They're humiliating. What will people say?"

"Fuck people." Juan clasped his hand to the back of Lima Bean's neck.

"Anyone in the locker room says anything, we'll stomp 'em."

"Into the ground, " I agreed. "We got you."

Lima Bean swung his elbow to get Juan off him, and in one motion, spun toward the glass side wall of the bus shelter, wound up and gave it a tremendous karate kick. His body clenched, a tiny whimper escaped his lips and then he kicked it again. And again. And again. And again. And again.

Frozen lightning bolts began to splinter out in the glass where the four connecting brackets screwed in through the tube frame. Sensing its vulnerability, Juan joined in with an exaggerated round house. "Take that!"



The whole structure shuddered.

“Move,” I told them, backing up to get a running start at it. Balls out, leading with my shoulder, I launched my body at the slab of safety glass. When I hit, the partition flexed, the brackets sheared and then — POP — I was body surfing a wave of shattered glass down to the sidewalk.

Just then, our bus pulled up.

“Hey-hey-hey-hey-hey-hey-hey,” the driver shouted, accentuating each word with a blast from the horn.

I tumbled to a stop, staggered to my knees, jagged nuggets of bus shelter waterfalling off me.

“What the hell? You kids on drugs or somethin’?”

“No,” Lima Bean explained. “I mean, we’ve just been waiting a really long time.”

“Well, wait some more you little shits, you’re not getting on this bus. I got half a mind to call the cops, let them give you a ride downtown.”

Inside the bus, there was a lone passenger in a fast food uniform. A dirty apron was slung over his shoulder. He slouched in his seat, his forehead smudged into the window. He looked like he was sleeping or maybe he was just dead.

“C’mon, man, let us on,” Juan said.

“*No way.*”

Juan stared the driver right in the eye and kicked out the spider webs of glass that still clung to the corners of the frame. “How ‘bout now?”

“Now you’ll get it.” The doors slapped shut and the driver grabbed for his CB.

In a flash, Juan and Lima Bean sprinted off down the street. I scrambled to my feet, but couldn’t run anywhere until I’d knocked the glass out of my shoes.

“Hey, wait up,” I yelled, hop-scotching through the intersection. I heard the bus’s horn, felt its high-beams on my back. “Man down!”

But they were gone. And I didn’t find them until I had gotten all the way back to our neighborhood. They were out front of Loosey’s Liquors and Fine Deli on the corner of Fulton, bent over, pinching their knees and wheezing.

“My best friends.” I greeted them with a shove from the heel of my foot, toppling the two of them over.

I heard an irritated grunt and from the corner of my eye, saw a large figure move out from the shadows.

“Wha’s dis now? They only two reasons ta be runnin’ *that* hard an’ I know ya’ ain’t chasin’ pussy.” It was Old Lou, one of the O.G.’s from the block. The others — Fat Mack, Boo-Boo, Showtime — were there too, hanging out as usual under the cobweb choked fluorescent light of the liquor store’s awning. Old Lou wiped the soggy end of a blunt, hit it and passed it back to his crew. “You boys jus’ keep right on goin’. I know yo’ momma’s raised ya’ up with mo’ sense than ta’ bring the *po*-lice up in here while we *con*-ductin’ bizness.”

“You say it like this is your office or somethin’, Old Lou,” I said. “This is a public sidewalk.”

But I knew that wasn't a hundred percent true.

Our whole lives we'd seen these old dudes orbiting that corner, it was theirs and they were always there like the weather — playing checkers on the garbage cans, sipping liquor out of paper bags and masking dime sales with elaborate handshakes. Only Old Lou ever talked to us. He was cool. He played it straight and had our respect. The other O.G.'s? All they ever did was eye us from under the low brims of their ball caps.

"We just want to get a soda quick," Juan said.

"A'ight. Then ya' get ta steppin', shake a leg, walk it out. Whatever ya' gettin' after, do it somewheres else, hear?"

"Hey," Lima Bean asked, following me and Juan into the store. "I don't have any cash. You have enough to spot me for a soda, too?"

"Hell no," Juan said, trying to fight a smile from stiffening on his face. "Ah, just playin', man. If it wasn't for waitin' on you, we wouldn't have this in the first place." He waved the money we'd taken from the lockers. "How many times do I gotta say it? We got you."

"We got you, *right*," I said. "Except when we piss off a MUNI driver and he calls the cops and somebody gets ditched."

Lima Bean dug through the cooler to the cold cans way in the back. "Man, it's not like that."

"Yeah." Juan smiled, held out his fist and we three gave each other daps.

"We got you. But hey, ya' gotta keep up."

## Stingray

The motel was right off the exit in the shadow of the Route 80 sound wall in El Cerrito under the tallest Super 8 sign you'd ever seen. I mean, it must've been like a hundred feet, at least. The thing was all lit up and blinking, even though it was the middle of the day. I guessed that was to make extra sure you couldn't miss it, even if you wanted to.

Mom spiraled down the ramp, blew a yellow light and pulled up under the motel's drive-thru awning. Neither of us had said one word coming across the bridge. I had no idea what to expect.

I unbuckled my seatbelt. "Why couldn't Dad've come into the city?" I asked as I looked out across the parking lot for his car.

It'd been three years since I'd seen him. I didn't remember what the car looked like, but I had this sick feeling anyway that it wasn't there. That me and Mom were going to be driving back across the bridge together — the whole way her mumbling curses under the turned up radio and me having to sit there and fake like I wasn't bothered by anything at all.

“What a pit. Wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve got an hourly rate.” She reached over the seat and handed me my backpack. “Wash your hands if you touch anything.”

“Anything?”

“With *hot* water and soap.” Mom scooted towards me on the bench seat and hugged me tight. I felt her breath in my hair. “Remember, don’t stay up late. And you’re not allowed to watch any cable higher than channel 26. Ok?”

I nodded.

“Pick you up Sunday. Eleven sharp. Don’t make me wait.”

I opened the door, swung my legs out. “I’ll say hi to Dad for you.”

Mom gripped the shifter on the steering column and yanked it into drive. “Don’t make me wait.”

Dad was on the balcony that horseshoed around the motel, leaning out over the railing. He was wearing a v-neck t-shirt with stains the color of oranges under the arms and jeans he hadn’t finished buttoning. As I got out of the car, he called down something, but all I could hear was the highway. It was so close you could throw a rock and hit it.

I looked up at my father and kind of waved.

Walking across the parking lot and up the stairs I didn’t take my eyes off him, not for one step. It was just in case, so I would remember, so that I would know forever and each time I was in front of a mirror I wouldn’t have to guess which of my parts had come from him.

But Dad didn't need to notice those things. He was still staring out at the road in the direction Mom had gone.

"Huh. Wouldda figured she'd a come up here bitchin' 'bout money I *supposedly* owe."

"Why would Mom need money?" I asked. "She has a job. And on weekends she goes door to door for Avon."

"Kiddo," Dad smiled, noogied my head and knuckle-pulled my nose. "I've been tellin' her that *exact* same thing for years."

Dad jiggled the room key into the knob and shrugged the door open. He took my backpack and chucked it on the one bed that was still made. I just stood there, my hands fidgeting with my belt loops.

"Well, jeeze, you know, merry birthday, happy Christmas and all that." He gestured like he was letting a girl through a held open door. On the table near the window was a stack of unwrapped presents with the price stickers mostly gnawed off. "Guess maybe I might've missed one or two of 'em."

Picture boardgames, Matchbox cars, a bag of candy as big as my head.

"Hey, think fast." Dad palmed the Spalding Top Flite 1000 basketball off the table top and shovel passed it to me.

I trapped it against my chest, ran my fingers over the tacky pebbling, bounced it on the carpet, threw an imaginary swish at the ceiling.

"Nice form. You play?"

"No," I said. "They don't have a school team for 4th grade."

“Oh. Well, I did.” Dad swiped the ball back, twirled it onto his middle finger and got it spinning real fast, smacking it with his free hand whenever it slowed. I’d bet he could’ve kept it going forever. “But you probably knew that already, huh?”

I shook my head. “Were you like a Globe Trotter or something?”

“Shit.” He let the ball fall off his finger. “I played *real* basketball, not this fancy pants crap they play now. Fundamentals, team work, that’s what took *my* high school team to the Cal State Championship, where I got this —” Dad knelt to my level, lifted his bangs and put his face in mine. He smelled like White Owls and canned beer. “From some jack-wipe who threw a high elbow as we jostled for a rebound.”

He pointed above his eye, blue like mine. I didn’t see anything.

“Yup. After all these years, still got the scar. Needed fifteen stitches to close that bad boy up, but I wouldn’t let Coach take me out of the game,” he said proudly. “Had them Bandid me up during a timeout — the hospital could wait, this is the *championship* we’re talkin’ ‘bout — and went right back out there and sank *both* free throws.”

Suddenly, my arms were wrapped around his neck. He was so close.

“Ok, all right, sure,” Dad said, gently shucking me off him. “Hold on now, there’s one thing more.”

I followed him down to the parking lot to his beat up Pontiac. Dad undid the rope knot that held the trunk shut and hefted out a brand new blue and silver Schwinn Stingray.

He pushed it at me. “Ta-da!”

It was chrome everywhere with a banana seat, sparkly streamers hanging from the handle bar grips and a big, fat, slick rear tire perfect for skid outs.

“Whoa. Cool,” I said. “But, *training wheels*?”

“Hmm. Well, you are a little bit bigger than I thought you’d be. Shouldda known you’d take after your old man.”

Dad dug around in the trunk and found an old pair of plumber’s pliers to take off the kiddie wheels and raise the seat.

“Probably I should give you some lecture about safety and junk like that, but when you get back home your ma’ will do that anyway so there’s no point to me wasting my breath —” Dad put the wrench down and mimed like he was opening and closing a pickle jar. Then, he picked the wrench back up and started twisting the other way. “But there is one important thing I would like to explain to you,” he continued. “And that’s what you’ve got here. You know what this is, right?”

“Um,” I answered. Was this a trick question? “A bicycle?”

“Lemme tell you, kiddo. This here — is *freedom*. Freedom to go where you want. Do what you want. When you want. Nobody to depend on. Nobody to tell you no. Comprenez compadre?”



I bobbed my head.

“Nothin’s more important to a man than to be able to just get up and go.

Hell, you ain’t a man if you can’t. Get me?”

My eyes were blank, but my heart was right with him.

“Ok, then.” Dad flipped up the kickstand, looked the bike over with admiration even though the Stingray’s once brand new shiny lug nuts were all chewed on. “Well, whattaya waitin’ for — get on. Give it a spin.”

I did a pace lap of the parking lot, getting a feel for my ride. The next pass, getting up a lot of speed, I locked up the pedal brake and did an awesome fishtail skid right in front of Dad.

“Eh.” He so-soed with his hand. “Not bad.”

I looped back towards him, stood up on the pedals and kicked out the rear end. “Whattaya mean, not bad? That was killer!”

“Kiddo, you’re talkin’ to the skid out master.” He grabbed the seat and nudged me off. “Lemme give you a lesson on how it’s really done.”

Dad put his weight on the saddle and the tires bulged like balloons. He pushed off, propelling the bike forward with his feet because his knees were too tall even for the exaggerated monkey handle bars. He wobbled up and down the parking lot for fifteen minutes or longer, but could never get going fast enough to lay down even a little yip of rubber.

“Probably you’re just out of practice,” I told him.

“Rub it in, why dontcha?” he said, handing the bike back to me. His hair was stringy with sweat and his face red and flushed. It was then that I could see his scar, pale and translucent above his brow, like skin you’d rubbed all the blood out of. “Guess I’ll have to be satisfied livin’ my tire squealing days through you. Now, think you can manage carryin’ this thing up to the room?”

Inside, Dad stood in front of the AC letting the cold air billow up the front of his shirt while sipping foam off the top of a new beer.

“How about a game?” I asked, peeling the shrink wrap off The Game of Life.

“This one always depresses me,” he said, but grabbed a pillow and got down on the carpet next to me anyway. “I call the red car. That’s the hot-rod with a big V-8 that gets all the girls turnin’ their heads.”

“They all look the same to me,” I said.

He put a blue peg into the driver’s seat, made engine noises. “That’s not what I see.”

By the time I’d graduated from college and gotten married, Dad had stretched out horizontal and was pretty much asleep. I went one turn for him, he owed medical bills, but I didn’t make him pay.

After a while, I got bored just sitting there watching him snore, so I swiped the room key, grabbed my bike and bumped it down the stairs to the parking lot. But instead of doing dumb old loops, and without asking for permission, I bunny-hopped my Stingray over the curb and hit the dusky streets of

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El Cerrito pedaling away from the din of the highway, looking for any kind of freedom I could find.