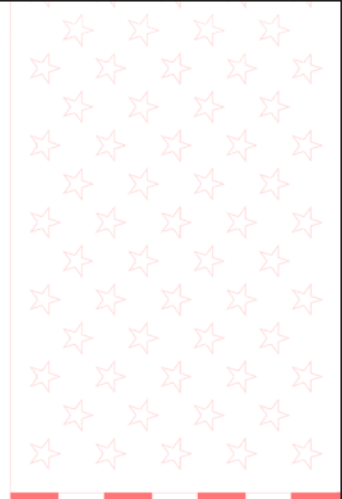




PART ONE



FIVE MONTHS AGO

OCTOBER 9

ST. LOUIS, MO

Dear Miss Escobedo,

I know our weekly journals are supposed to be about current events and things that matter in the world, but right now the only thing that matters to me is a girl. A girl I know is The One. A girl who acts like she doesn't give a shit about me when we both know she likes me back. So forgive me for addressing you directly. And for the bad language. And for turning an AP Gov assignment into a private diary. But here's the thing—

The Girl called me a do-nothing.

She looked me square in the eye and said that I don't care about the world and that's why I'm not good enough for her. That there's nothing that matters to me outside the bubble of my own life. That while people are out there protesting and fighting for causes they believe in—climate, health, education, inequality—I'm just another kid too busy surfing YouTube to care.

But she doesn't get me.

I do care.

I care that our tennis season is wrecked by dust storms that never used to happen.

I care that summers are so hot no one wants to ride bikes anymore.

I care that Dad has to run school shooter drills every week at practice.

I care that AI makes me question everything that is real.

I care that no one talks at lunch because we're all doom-scrolling on our phones.

I care that a Presidential election is happening with two old swamp trolls playing the greatest hits—states' rights, gay rights, gun rights, whatever rights will bribe your vote—rather than acknowledging our world is going to hell.

I care that the climate is fucked, the debt is fucked, the system is fucked, and politicians are so old and corrupt, they'll never fix anything because

they know they're gonna die before the shitstorm hits them in the face like the rest of us.

But you know what I care about most?

That in this world, being myself isn't good enough anymore.

Not if I want to get The Girl.

I need a *cause* too.

Alright, then.

She wants to hear what I'd fight for?

Here it is—

The right to wake up and know the sun is gonna rise and the sun is gonna set and everything is going to be okay. The right to live and dream and explore and make mistakes and howl at the moon without being reminded over and over that our futures are doomed. The right to ride my bike and fish with Dad and play in the snow and get lost in the woods without the woods, fish, snow vanishing year by year. The right to look a girl in the eyes and tell her I love her without having to save the world first. The right to be 17 years young. That's what I want. The right to BE YOUNG. Like everyone had once upon a time before old zombies in Washington trashed it all and left us the mess.

And you know what? If they won't give us that right, we should take it back. The way they took it from us. Starting at the top. We should write in the name of someone who will actually FIX things. Someone who can make life good again. Someone YOUNG. Someone who doesn't want to be a politician, who doesn't want to be famous, who will get shit done because they have nothing to lose. Someone like . . . me. Ha. There's a cause to get behind! But seriously—why not? Doesn't matter if the Constitution says the President has to be 35 years old. Being President can't be harder than being a teenager in this world. *Nothing* can be harder than being a teenager in this world.

So go ahead. Write me in. Yes, we won't win. Yes, we'll drain votes from a "viable" side. Yes, we'll piss everyone off. That's the *POINT* of being young! REVOLT! RISE UP! Vote this teenage do-nothing for President. And show a girl what she's missing along the way. Hoo-ah.

So if you're still reading this, Miss Escobedo . . .

That's my cause.

That's what I'd shout from the rooftops for everyone to hear.

Maybe *then* The Girl would hear me.

But how? How do you talk to the world when you have no power?

When you're just a young nobody trying to show he cares?

Well, hell . . .

Isn't that what YouTube is for?

BENTON 14 REZ

THE RIGHT TO BE YOUNG

Topic



WAKE UP AMERICA



WWW.REVOLTINGYOUTH.ORG

POP

STARS OUT FOR YOUNG



✓OTE
YOUNG

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OCTOBER 26

MILWAUKEE, WI

Dear Miss Escobedo,

I've been trying to find time to do my current events journal, but as you know, things are a weeeeeeee bit out of control right now—

That video is at 8.2 billion views, which is funny because I posted it to make a girl like me, and now everyone wants a piece of me . . . except The Girl it was for.

Until that post, I had two best friends and maybe a dozen other kids at school who could pick me out of a lineup, but suddenly the whole world knows who Benton Young is, from my favorite tennis player to the star of the new Iron Man movie to the grumpy traffic cop on Delmar, all spotted wearing “The Right to Be Young” on shirts and hats. In a couple weeks, I've gone from 144 followers to 96 million, our driveway stuffed with packages of free shit from brands trying to capitalize on my fame, everything from mountain bikes to tennis rackets to video game consoles to acne strips to prototype Air Jordans. (Dad sends all this back except the Jordans.) *Saturday Night Live* opens with a skit about Young Benton Young. Stencils of my face are vandalized onto courthouses. The President is asked about me at a state visit with the amused Indian Prime Minister. Congress starts calling my post a threat to national security. (In response, a remixed version spawns a viral Benton Dance.)

Truth is, writing this down for you, I realize how batshit bananas this all sounds. That I talked into camera to impress a girl and it blew up like a bottle rocket and now a bunch of people are going to vote for me for President of the United States.

At first, I ducked in like a turtle—stayed home from school, turned off my phone, and waited for it all to blow over. Just another viral joke. My gen's way to troll the old trolls in Washington. But now I poke my head out

of my shell and . . . *that's not what's happening*. I see the way people look at me. I see the way they invest in me, donations and bumper stickers and lawn signs and fiery manifestos that fill a million feeds. Like they were waiting for someone like me. Like they believe I can fix what's broken. After years of staking claim to a party, of trusting in the system, they're turning their back on Red and Blue, on Senator Skully and First Lady Mummer, both older than my grandparents, and instead putting faith in . . . a teenager.

A teenager with a black father, absent mother, unruly hair, and unpaid parking tickets. A teenager who isn't an activist or a do-gooder. A teenager who never did Student Council or Impact International or Model UN, whose grasp of politics is limited to AP Gov and late-night games of *World at War*. A teenager who can't even vote!

Why?

I'm no holy messenger. I can't parallel park. I wear discount boxers. I read old *Encyclopedia Brown* books for fun. I'm not special. I'm not hip. In real life, no one aspires to be me.

And yet, every day—more views, more comments, more messages. People are carrying the neon Nuke Colas that I drink. They're dyeing and crimping their hair into my curly, coppery mop. More kids are playing *tennis*. Like all of a sudden, I'm a one-man brand of cool.

I don't understand it.

But I can feel it, the way you hear a volcano roar before it blows.

Pundits are saying I'll get 1%. That the young are too unfocused, undisciplined, to deliver any more.

I think they got us wrong.

They don't know how angry we are.

Because if everyone young is feeling what I'm feeling . . . about growing up too fast . . . about never getting to *feel* young . . .

Then I'm betting on 4 or 5%.

Enough to throw a wrench into old Red and Blue.

Enough to teach the world to take us more seriously.

And maybe make a girl take me more seriously too.

Meanwhile, my two best friends, Freddy and Jax, could not be handling

this more differently. (You know Freddy Navarro . . . third period with me . . . slouched, grumpy, usually in a superhero T-shirt; Jax Berquist isn't in AP, but you've seen him around . . . red hair pulled up like a flame . . . all his shirts a little too tight . . . like a beefier version of that cartoon character Tintin.) Just FaceTimed with them on the way to the airport—

“Where you at, Ben Ten? Still in Kansas City?” Jax says.

“About to fly to Milwaukee. Did that fundraiser with the Chiefs last night. So damn cool. Raised a bunch of money for city youth programs, plus they made me a jersey. Now heading to the Wisconsin State Fair. They want me to encourage kids to go into farming. If we don't boost the number of young farmers by 40% in the next 10 years, we'll all be living on saltines and fake meat.”

“Not only does he pretend to be political to get a girl, now he's believing his own bullshit!” Freddy marvels, the gel off his black block of hair catching light. “First YouTube, next stop, OnlyFans.”

I spit out my Nuke soda.

“Thank God Freddy set his Insta to private, or we'd all be canceled,” Jax cracks, wearing a hat that says FIRST FRIEND OF THE UNITED STATES.

“I'm serious, Benny.” Freddy's scruffy cheeks fill the frame. “Whole point of social media is to sell shit or show your ass. And here you're using it to virtue signal a chick who's never gonna be into you. A chick who is *all* wrong for you. No wonder you broke America!”

“He didn't break anything,” says Jax, blinking baby blues. “No one likes Skully or Mummer. They're corrupt, business-as-usual politicians who are a thousand years old. Benny tapped into something the whole country is feeling. More than just us. There's a new challenge to pick a name for our party, and kids are doing it in Brazil and Poland and Thailand and all kinds of other places, like they want in on it too. The girl's another story. I'm with Freddy on that one. Definitely wrong for you, B.”

“Then you'll be happy to know that 'chick' is ignoring me,” I say.

“Didn't get the girl, but got the rest of the world instead,” Jax chimes.

“Stop brownnosing, you fop. Rest of the world doesn't mean shit to us. I want my best friend back. I want my Benny,” says Freddy. “So ride this

train to the end of the line and come home, B. Still have our last *World at War* game on pause—we can't let that damn volcano blow us up again. And for the record, I only set my Insta to private because people keep stalking my tag off Benny's photos and I don't want randos following me, unlike Jax who is *using* his best friend to get dudes and flashing his balls for likes!”

“I posted one shirtless pic and you won't let it go.” Jax sighs.

“You wore American flag Speedos and painted Benny's name on your abs!” Freddy retorts.

“It's called appealing to our generation to get *votes*,” Jax defends.

“It's called thirsting for gays,” says Freddy.

“Listen, I just got to the airport . . .” I lie, hanging up.

A new message pops up from Dad.

Voice note.

2 minutes and 22 seconds.

Oh God.

“You got to go back to school, Benton,” he spouts, taking a deep breath that I know means a rant, the kind he texts his players on the regular. “Tomorrow is two weeks since you've been in class. Your senior fall? When you should be raising your grades and playing your best tennis and writing your essays for Vanderbilt and Michigan and the rest of the schools we spent weeks touring? And here you are, skipping school to be . . . *famous*? Let me tell you a story about Jeremy Lin. Bench player for the New York Knicks. No one cared a lick about Jeremy Lin. Then for one month, Jeremy Lin gets hot. Eggs-on-a-sillet hot. So hot he's on every newspaper, every magazine, every billboard in Times Square. Linsanity, they called it. *Linsanity!* But then . . . Jeremy Lin starts missing shots. Hurts his knee. Too much pressure. Jeremy Lin goes cold. All those endorsements, all that Hollywood, all that loooove from the interwebs? Poof! A month of glory and where is he now? Counting the coin he saved and thankful for his education. Same goes for you, son. Being a meme candidate for President of the United States is not a thing. Hell, *I* won't even vote for you, because I don't want to waste my vote. And if your daddy won't vote for you, then you best keep those grades up and do your squats for tennis and call Grandma Jo on Sundays

because in a matter of days, whether you like it or not, you'll be back to real life, drowning in all the homework and college applications you were too *famous* to do."

Click.

Thanks, Dad.

Not that I can respond, since his phone doesn't accept audio messages, ensuring a one-way conversation. (There's a reason he's coached Rockport Prep to eight state finals.)

I know he's right, of course.

This is a Cinderella moment, and midnight is coming.

But isn't the point of being Cinderella to enjoy it while it lasts? Wouldn't Jeremy Lin still have shot his shot, knowing how it would end? School is meant to prepare you for the real world. And I'm having an impact in that real world, no matter how short-lived. Homework can wait. Except your assignments, of course—so here I am, punching keys, rat-a-tat-tat for you, Miss Escobedo, in between voter turnout drives with the pop group Sisyphus and hosting a flood relief telethon in Houston and judging the International Science Fair in Tucson and rope lines and rallies in state after state, not to mention the talk shows and photo shoots and interviews (*Teen Vogue*, *Rolling Stone*, *Men's Fitness*!?) and fancy dinners and galas with tech bros and young money funding TV ads in my name.

I text The Girl pics and clips from all of these.

I know she sees them.

She's the sole reason any of this is happening.

But she doesn't text or call back.

From what I can tell, she doesn't care at all.

So who's the Do-Nothing now?

FOR
THE

I WANT YOU

★ ★
★ WWW.REVOLTINGYOUTH.ORG ★