CHAPTER ONE

"Cry, child, for those without tears have a grief which never ends." — Mexican saying

This memory begins with flight. A 1950s bondo-spackled Dodge surged through a driving rain, veering around the potholes and upturned tracks of the abandoned Red Line trains on Alameda. Mama was in the front seat. My father was at the wheel. My brother *Rano* and I sat on one end of the back seat; my sisters *Pata* and *Cuca* on the other. There was a space between the boys and girls to keep us apart.

"*Amá, mira a Rano*," a voice said for the tenth time from the back of the car. "He's hitting me again."

We fought all the time. My brother, especially, had it in for *La Pata* — thinking of Frankenstein, he called her "Anastein." Her real name was Ana, but most of the time we went by the animal names Dad gave us at birth. I am *Grillo*, which means cricket. *Rano* stands for "rana," the frog. *La Pata* is the duck and *Cuca* is short for *cucaracha*: cockroach.

The car seats came apart in strands. I looked out at the passing cars which seemed like ghosts with headlights rushing past the streaks of water on the glass. I was nine years old. As the rain fell, my mother cursed in Spanish intermixed with pleas to saints and "*la Santísima Madre de Dios*." She argued with my father. Dad didn't curse or raise his voice. He just stated the way things were.

"I'll never go back to Mexico," he said. "I'd rather starve here. You want to stay with me, it has to be in Los Angeles. Otherwise, go."

This incited my mother to greater fits.

We were on the way to the Union train station in downtown L.A. We had our few belongings stuffed into the trunk and underneath our feet. I gently held on to one of the comic books Mama bought to keep us entertained. I had on my Sunday best

clothes with chewed gum stuck in a coat pocket. It could have been Easter, but it was a weeping November. I don't remember for sure why we were leaving. I just knew it was a special day. There was no fear or concern on my part. We were always moving. I looked at the newness of the comic book and felt some exhilaration of its feel in my hand. Mama had never bought us comic books before. It had to be a special day.

For months we had been pushed from one house to another, just Mama and us children. Mom and Dad had split up prior to this. We stayed at the homes of women my mom called *comadres*, with streams of children of their own. Some nights we slept in a car or in the living rooms of people we didn't know. There were no shelters for homeless families. My mother tried to get us settled somewhere but all indications pointed to our going back to the land of her birth, to her red earth, her Mexico.

The family consisted of my father Alfonso, my mom María Estela, my older brother, José René, and my younger sisters, Ana Virginia and Gloria Estela. I recall my father with his wavy hair and clean-shaven face, his correct, upright and stubborn demeanor, in contrast to my mother who was heavy-set with Native features and thick straight hair, often laughing heartily, her eyes narrowed to slits, and sometimes crying from a deep tomb-like place with a sound like swallowing mud.

As we got closer to the Union station, Los Angeles loomed low and large, a city of odd construction, a good place to get lost in. I, however, would learn to hide in imaginative worlds — in books; in TV shows, where I picked up much of my English; in solitary play with mangled army men and crumpled toy trucks. I was so withdrawn it must have looked scary.

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This is what I know: When I was two years old, our family left Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, for Los Angeles. My father was an educated man, unusual for our border town, a hunger city filled to the hills with cardboard hovels of former peasants, Indians

and dusk-faced children. In those days, an educated man had to be careful about certain things — questioning authority, for example. Although the principal of a local high school, my father failed to succumb to the local chieftains who were linked to the national party which ruled Mexico, as one famous Latin American writer would later say, with a "perfect dictatorship."

When Dad first became principal, there were no funds due to the massive bureaucratic maze he had to get through to get them. The woman he lived with then was an artist who helped raise money for the school by staging exhibitions. My father used his own money to pay for supplies and at one point had the iron fence around the school torn down and sold for scrap.

One year, Dad received an offer for a six-month study program for foreign teachers in Bloomington, Indiana. He liked it so much, he renewed it three times. By then, my father had married his secretary, my mother, after the artist left him. They had their first child, José René.

By the time my father returned, his enemies had mapped out a means to remove him — being a high school principal is a powerful position in a place like Ciudad Juarez. My father faced a pile of criminal charges, including the alleged stealing of school funds. Police arrived at the small room in the *vecindad* where Mama and Dad lived and escorted him to the city jail.

For months my father fought the charges. While he was locked up, they fed him scraps of food in a rusted steel can. They denied him visitors — Mama had to climb a section of prison wall and pick up 2-year-old José René so he could see his father. Finally, after a lengthy trial, my father was found innocent — but he no longer had his position as principal.

Dad became determined to escape to the United States. My mother, on the other hand, never wanted to leave Mexico; she did it to be with Dad.

Mama was one of two daughters in a family run by a heavy-drinking, wife-beating railroad worker and musician. My mother was the only one in her family to complete high school. Her brothers, Kiko and Rodolfo, often crossed the border to find work

and came back with stories of love and brawls on the other side.

Their grandmother was a Tarahumara Indian who once walked down from the mountainous area in the state of Chihuahua where her people lived in seclusion for centuries. The Spanish never conquered them. But their grandmother never returned to her people. She eventually gave birth to my grandmother, Ana Acosta.

Ana's first husband was a railroad worker during the Mexican Revolution; he lost his life when a tunnel exploded during a raid. They brought his remains in a shoebox-sized container. Ana was left alone with one son, while pregnant with a daughter. Lucita, the daughter, eventually died of convulsions at the age of four, and Manolo, the son, was later blinded after a bout with a deadly form of chicken pox which struck and killed many children in the area.

Later Ana married my grandfather, Mónico Jiménez, who like her first husband worked the railroads. At one point, Mónico quit the rails to play trumpet and sing for bands in various night clubs. Once he ended up in Los Angeles, but with another woman. In fact, Mónico had many other women. My grandmother often had to cross over to the railroad yards, crowded with prostitutes and where Mónico spent many nights singing, to bring him home.

BREAK 1

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When my parents married, Mama was 27; Dad almost 40. She had never known any other man. He already had four or five children from three or four other women. She was an emotionally charged, border woman, full of fire, full of pain, full of giving love. He was a stoic, unfeeling, unmoved intellectual who did as he pleased as much as she did all she could to please him. This dichotomous couple, this sun and moon, this *curandera* and biologist, dreamer and realist, fire woman and water man, molded me; these two sides created a life-long conflict in my breast.

By the time Dad had to leave Ciudad Juarez, my mother had borne three of his children, including myself, all in El Paso, on the American side (Gloria was born later in East L.A.'s

General Hospital). This was done to help ease the transition from alien status to legal residency. There are stories of women who wait up to the ninth month and run across the border to have their babies, sometimes squatting and dropping them on the pavement as they hug the closest lamppost.

We ended up in Watts, a community primarily of black people except for *La Colonia*, often called The Quarter — the Mexican section and the oldest part of Watts.

Except for the housing projects, Watts was a ghetto where country and city mixed. The homes were mostly single-family units, made of wood or stucco. Open windows and doors served as air conditioners, a slight relief from the summer desert air. Chicken coops graced many a back yard along with broken auto parts. Roosters crowed the morning to birth and an occasional goat peered from weather-worn picket fences along with the millions of dogs which seemed to populate the neighborhood.

Watts fed into one of the largest industrial concentrations in the country, pulling from an almost endless sea of cheap labor; they came from Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Arkansas . . . from Chihuahua, Sonora, Sinaloa and Nayarit. If you moved there it was because the real estate concerns pushed you in this direction. For decades, L.A. was notorious for restrictive covenants — where some areas were off limits to "undesirables."

Despite the competition for jobs and housing, we found common ground there, among the rolling mills, bucket shops and foundries. All day long we heard the pounding of forges and the air-whistles that signaled the shift changes in the factories which practically lay in our backyards.

We moved to Watts at the behest of my oldest sister, really a half-sister, who was already married with two children of her own. Her family eventually joined us a few months later. Her name was Seni, a name my father invented (although rumor has it, it was an inversion of the name Inés, an old girlfriend of his). The name, however, has stayed in the family. Seni's first

daughter was named Ana Seni and in later years, one of Ana Seni's daughters became Seni Bea.

When Seni was a child, my father often left her for long intervals with my grandmother Catita, whom she called Mama Piri. One family legend tells of a 9-year-old Seni answering the door during a pouring rain. A man, with soaked hat and coat, stood at the doorway. Seni yelled out: "Mama Piri, Mama Piri — there's a strange man at the door."

"Don't worry, *m'ija*," Catita said. "He's only your father."

Seni lived in several rentals in Watts until she found a two-story on 111th Street near a block of factories. The place later got razed to build Locke High School. I stayed there a couple of summers, sleeping in a cobweb-infested attic with exposed 2-by-4 studs. Rats and cockroaches roamed freely in that house: huge rats, huge cockroaches. Seni would place a chair at the bottom of the attic steps and she convinced me it could ward off the creatures. I believed it until one night I noticed the chair was gone. I ran down to tell Seni. But she yelled back in Spanish: "Go back to bed...that chair couldn't keep nothing away, and only a fool would believe it could."

I was devastated.

Seni was my father's daughter from one of his earlier relationships; her mother died giving birth to her. My father was handsome and athletic as a young man. He was the pole-vaulting champion at one of the schools he attended. But his looks apparently got him into a lot of trouble. His father Cristóbal, then a general in the Mexican army, once disowned him when Dad fell for a woman and neglected his studies in medical school. Dad quit school to be with the woman who would later become Seni's mother.

I also had two older half-brothers, Alberto and Mario, who lived in Mexico. Another half-sister, Lisa, died as an infant after she accidently ate some *chicharrones* my father was forced to sell on cobblestone streets in Mexico City after his father cut him off. My mother kept a sepia-colored black-and-white death photo of Lisa in a white lace baptism dress, looking like a doll, looking asleep, so peaceful, as she lay in a tiny wood coffin.

Our first exposure in America stays with me like a foul odor. It seemed a strange world, most of it spiteful to us, spitting and stepping on us, coughing us up, us immigrants, as if we were phlegm stuck in the collective throat of this country. My father was mostly out of work. When he did have a job it was in construction, in factories such as Sinclair Paints or Standard Brands Dog Food, or pushing door-bells selling insurance, Bibles or pots and pans. My mother found work cleaning homes or in the garment industry. She knew the corner markets were ripping her off but she could only speak with her hands and in a choppy English.

Once my mother gathered up the children and we walked to Will Rogers Park. There were people everywhere. Mama looked around for a place we could rest. She spotted an empty spot on a park bench. But as soon as she sat down an American woman, with three kids of her own, came by.

"Hey, get out of there — that's our seat."

My mother understood but didn't know how to answer back in English. So she tried in Spanish.

"Look spic, you can't sit there!" the American woman yelled. "You don't belong here! Understand? This is not your country!"

Mama quietly got our things and walked away, but I knew frustration and anger bristled within her because she was unable to talk, and when she did, no one would listen.

We never stopped crossing borders. The *Río Grande* (or *Río Bravo*, which is what the Mexicans call it, giving the name a power "Río Grande" just doesn't have) was only the first of countless barriers set in our path.

We kept jumping hurdles, kept breaking from the constraints, kept evading the border guards of every new trek. It was a metaphor to fill our lives — that river, that first crossing, the mother of all crossings. The L.A. River, for example, became a new barrier, keeping the Mexicans in their neighborhoods over on the vast east side of the city for years, except for forays downtown. Schools provided other restrictions:

Don't speak Spanish, don't be Mexican — you don't belong. Railroad tracks divided us from communities where white people lived, such as South Gate and Lynwood across from Watts. We were invisible people in a city which thrived on glitter, big screens and big names, but this glamour contained none of our names, none of our faces.

The refrain "this is not your country" echoed for a lifetime.

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Although we moved around the Watts area, the house on 105th Street near McKinley Avenue held my earliest memories, my earliest fears and questions. It was a small matchbox of a place. Next to it stood a tiny garage with holes through the walls and an unpainted barn-like quality. The weather battered it into a leaning shed. The back yard was a jungle. Vegetation appeared to grow down from the sky. There were banana trees, huge "sperm" weeds (named that because they stunk like semen when you cut them), foxtails and yellowed grass. An avocado tree grew in the middle of the yard and its roots covered every bit of ground, tearing up cement walks while its branches scraped the bedroom windows. A sway of clothes on some lines filled the little bit of grassy area just behind the house.

My brother and I played often in our jungle, even pretending to be Tarzan (Rano mastered the Tarzan yell from the movies). The problem, however, was I usually ended up being the monkey who got thrown off the trees. In fact, I remember my brother as the most dangerous person alive. He seemed to be wracked with a scream which never let out. His face was dark with meanness, what my mother called *maldad*. He also took delight in seeing me writhe in pain, cry or cower, vulnerable to his own inflated sense of power. This hunger for cruelty included his ability to take my mom's most wicked whippings — without crying or wincing. He'd just sit there and stare at a wall, forcing Mama to resort to other implements of pain — but Rano would not show any emotion.

Yet in the streets, neighborhood kids often chased Rano from play or jumped him. Many times he came home mangled, his face swollen. Once somebody threw a rock at him which cut a gash across his forehead, leaving a scar Rano has to this day.

Another time a neighbor's kid smashed a metal bucket over Rano's head, slicing the skin over his skull and creating a horrifying scene with blood everywhere. My mother in her broken English could remedy few of the injustices, but she tried. When this one happened, she ran next door to confront that kid's mother.

The woman had been sitting on her porch and saw everything.

"*¿Qué pasó aquí?*" Mama asked.

"I don't know what you want," the woman said. "All I know is your boy picked up that bucket and hit himself over the head — that's all I know."

In school, they placed Rano in classes with retarded children because he didn't speak much English. They even held him back a year in the second grade.

For all this, Rano took his rage out on me. I recall hiding from him when he came around looking for a playmate. My mother actually forced me out of closets with a belt in her hand and made me play with him.

One day we were playing on the rooftop of our house.

"Grillo, come over here," he said from the roof's edge. "Man, look at this on the ground."

I should have known better, but I leaned over to see. Rano then pushed me and I struck the ground on my back with a loud thump and lost my breath, laying deathly still in suffocating agony, until I slowly gained it back.

Another time he made me the Indian to his cowboy, tossed a rope around my neck and pulled me around the yard. He stopped barely before it choked the life out of me. I had rope burns around my neck for a week.

His abuse even prompted neighborhood kids to get in on it. One older boy used to see how Rano tore into me. One day he peered over the fence separating his yard from ours.

"Hey, little dude...yeah you. Come over here a minute," he said. "I got something to show you."

This time I approached with caution. Little good that did me: I stepped into a loop of rope on the ground. He pulled on it and dragged me through the weeds and foxtails, up the splintery fence, and tied it down on his side. I hung upside down, kicking and yelling for what seemed like hours until somebody came and cut me down.

The house on 105th Street stayed cold. We couldn't always pay the gas or light bills. When we couldn't, we used candles. We cleaned up the dishes and the table where we ate without any light, whispering because that's what people do in the dark.

We took baths in cold water, and I remember wanting to run out of the bathroom as my mother murmured a shiver of words to comfort me:

"*Así es, así será*," she explained as she dunked me into the frigid bath.

One night, my parents decided to take us to a restaurant since we had no heat to cook anything with. We drove around for awhile. On Avalon Boulevard we found one of those all-night, ham-eggs-&-coffee places. As we pulled up, I curled up in the seat.

"No, I don't want to go in," I yelled.

"And why not?" my mother demanded. "*Por el amor de Dios*, aren't you hungry?"

I pointed a finger to a sign on the door. It read: "Come In. Cold Inside."

Christmases came with barely a whimper. Once my parents bought a fake aluminum tree, placed some presents beneath it, and woke us up early to open them up. Most of the wrappings, though, had been haphazardly put together because Rano had sneaked into the living room in the middle of the night and torn them open to take a peek. The presents came from a church group which gave out gifts for the poor. It was our first Christmas. That day, I broke the plastic submarine, toy gun and

metal car I received. I don't know why. I suppose in my mind it didn't seem right to have things that were in working order, unspent.

My mother worked on and off, primarily as a *costurera* or cleaning homes or taking care of other people's children. We sometimes went with her to the houses she cleaned. They were nice, American, white-people homes. I remember one had a swimming pool and a fireplace and a thing called rugs. As Mama swept and scrubbed and vacuumed, we played in the corner, my sisters and I, afraid to touch anything. The odor of these houses was different, full of fragrances, sweet and nauseating. On 105th Street the smells were of fried lard, of beans and car fumes, of factory smoke and home-made brew out of backyard stills. There were chicken smells and goat smells in grassless yards filled with engine parts and wire and wood planks, cracked and sprinkled with rusty nails. These were the familiar aromas: the funky earth, animal and mechanical smells which were absent from the homes my mother cleaned.

Mama always seemed to be sick. For one thing, she was overweight and suffered from a form of diabetes. She had thyroid problems, bad nerves and high blood pressure. She was still young then in Watts, in her thirties, but she had all these ailments. She didn't even have teeth; they rotted away many years before. This made her look much older until later when she finally obtained false ones. Despite this she worked all the time, chased after my brother with a belt or a board, and held up the family when almost everything else came apart.

BREAK 2 * * *

Heavy blue veins streak across my mother's legs, some of them bunched up into dark lumps at her ankles. Mama periodically bleeds them to relieve the pain. She carefully cuts the engorged veins with a razor and drains them into a porcelain-like metal pail called a *tina*. I'm small and all I remember are dreams of blood, me drowning in a red sea, blood on sheets, on the walls,

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splashing against the white pail in streams out of my mother's ankle. But they aren't dreams. It is Mama bleeding — into day, into night. Bleeding a birth of memory: my mother, my blood, by the side of the bed, me on the covers, and her slicing into a black vein and filling the pail into some dark, forbidden red nightmare which never stops coming, never stops pouring, this memory of Mama and blood and Watts.

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One day, my mother asked Rano and me to go to the grocery store. We decided to go across the railroad tracks into South Gate. In those days, South Gate was an Anglo neighborhood, filled with the families of workers from the auto plant and other nearby industry. Like Lynwood or Huntington Park, it was forbidden territory for the people of Watts.

My brother insisted we go. I don't know what possessed him, but then I never did. It was useless to argue; he'd force me anyway. He was nine then, I was six. So without ceremony, we started over the tracks, climbing over discarded market carts and tore-up sofas, across Alameda Street, into South Gate: all-white, all-American.

We entered the first small corner grocery store we found. Everything was cool at first. We bought some bread, milk, soup cans and candy. We each walked out with a bag filled with food. We barely got a few feet, though, when five teenagers on bikes approached. We tried not to pay attention and proceeded to our side of the tracks. But the youths pulled up in front of us. While two of them stood nearby on their bikes, three of them jumped off theirs and walked over to us.

"What do we got here?" one of the boys said. "Spics to order — maybe with some beans?"

He pushed me to the ground; the groceries splattered onto the asphalt. I felt melted gum and chips of broken beer bottle on my lips and cheek. Then somebody picked me up and held me while the others seized my brother, tossed his groceries out,

and pounded on him. They punched him in the face, in the stomach, then his face again, cutting his lip, causing him to vomit.

I remember the shrill, maddening laughter of one of the kids on a bike, this laughing like a raven's wail, a harsh wind's shriek, a laugh that I would hear in countless beatings thereafter. I watched the others take turns on my brother, this terror of a brother, and he doubled over, had blood and spew on his shirt, and tears down his face. I wanted to do something, but they held me and I just looked on, as every strike against Rano opened me up inside.

They finally let my brother go and he slid to the ground, like a rotten banana squeezed out of its peeling. They threw us back over the tracks. In the sunset I could see the Watts Towers, shimmers of 70,000 pieces of broken bottles, sea shells, ceramic and metal on spiraling points puncturing the heavens, which reflected back the rays of a falling sun. My brother and I then picked ourselves up, saw the teenagers take off, still laughing, still talking about those stupid greasers who dared to cross over to South Gate.

Up until then my brother had never shown any emotion to me other than disdain. He had never asked me anything, unless it was a demand, an expectation, an obligation to be his throwaway boy-doll. But for this once he looked at me, tears welled in his eyes, blood streamed from several cuts — lips and cheeks swollen.

"Swear — you got to swear — you'll never tell anybody how I cried," he said.

I suppose I did promise. It was his one last thing to hang onto, his rep as someone who could take a belt whipping, who could take a beating in the neighborhood and still go back risking more — it was this pathetic plea from the pavement I remember. I must have promised.

BREAK 3

It was a warm September day when my mother pulled me out of bed, handed me a pair of pants and a shirt, a piece of burnt toast and dragged me by the arm toward 109th Street School. We approached a huge, dusty brick building with the school's

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name carved in ancient English lettering across the entrance. Mama hauled me up a row of steps and through two large doors.

First day of school.

I was six years old, never having gone to kindergarten because Mama wanted me to wait until La Pata became old enough to enter school. Mama filled out some papers. A school monitor directed us to a classroom where Mama dropped me off and left to join some parents who gathered in the main hall.

The first day of school said a lot about my scholastic life to come. I was taken to a teacher who didn't know what to do with me. She complained about not having any room, about kids who didn't even speak the language. And how was she supposed to teach anything under these conditions! Although I didn't speak English, I understood a large part of what she was saying. I knew I wasn't wanted. She put me in an old creaky chair near the door. As soon as I could, I sneaked out to find my mother.

I found Rano's class with the mentally disabled children instead and decided to stay there for a while. Actually it was fun; they treated me like I was everyone's little brother. But the teacher finally told a student to take me to the main hall.

After some more paperwork, I was taken to another class. This time the teacher appeared nicer, but distracted. She got the word about my language problem.

"Okay, why don't you sit here in the back of the class," she said. "Play with some blocks until we figure out how to get you more involved."

It took her most of that year to figure this out. I just stayed in the back of the class, building blocks. It got so every morning I would put my lunch and coat away, and walk to my corner where I stayed the whole day long. It forced me to be more withdrawn. It got so bad, I didn't even tell anybody when I had to go the bathroom. I did it in my pants. Soon I stunk back there in the corner and the rest of the kids screamed out a chorus of "P.U.!" resulting in my being sent to the office or back home.

In those days there was no way to integrate the non-English speaking children. So they just made it a crime to speak anything but English. If a Spanish word sneaked out in the playground, kids were often sent to the office to get swatted or to get detention. Teachers complained that maybe the children were saying bad things about them. An assumption of guilt was enough to get one punished.

A day came when I finally built up the courage to tell the teacher I had to go to the bathroom. I didn't quite say all the words, but she got the message and promptly excused me so I didn't do it while I was trying to explain. I ran to the bathroom and peed and felt good about not having that wetness trickle down my pants leg. But suddenly several bells went on and off. I hesitantly stepped out of the bathroom and saw throngs of children leave their classes. I had no idea what was happening. I went to my classroom and it stood empty. I looked into other classrooms and found nothing. Nobody. I didn't know what to do. I really thought everyone had gone home. I didn't bother to look at the playground where the whole school had been assembled for the fire drill. I just went home. It got to be a regular thing there for a while, me coming home early until I learned the ins and outs of school life.

Not speaking well makes for such embarrassing moments. I hardly asked questions. I just didn't want to be misunderstood. Many Spanish-speaking kids mangled things up; they would say things like "where the beer and cantaloupe roam" instead of "where the deer and antelope roam."

That's the way it was with me. I mixed up all the words. Screwed up all the songs.

Eventually I did make friends. My brother often brought home a one-armed Mexican kid named Jaime. Sometimes we all hung out together. Jaime lost his arm when he was a toddler. Somehow he managed to get the arm stuck in the wringer of one of those old washing machines which pulled the clothes through two rollers. It tore his arm off at the socket. But later he made

up for it with soccer feet and even won a couple of fights with his one good arm.

And then there was Earl. I didn't really know him until one day when we lined up following recess, he pulled the *trenzas* of a Mexican girl in our class named Gabriela. We all liked Gabriela. But she was also quiet, like me. So Earl pulled on her braids, the girl wailed, turned around and saw me standing there. Just then the teacher ran out of the classroom. Gabriela pointed in my direction. The one who never says anything. Because of this, I suffered through an hour's detention, fuming in my seat the whole time.

Later that evening, Earl came to my sister's house where we were visiting. Seni answered the door and looked askance at him.

"What do you want?"

"I want to know if the boy upstairs can play?"

"I don't know, I don't think so."

"Tell him I got some marbles. If it's okay, I'd like him to play with me."

"I don't know, I don't think so."

I looked down from the attic window and saw the tall, thin boy in striped shirt and blue jeans. Under an arm was a coffee can. Inside the can, marbles rattled whenever Earl moved.

But going through Seni was becoming a chore. Earl looked past her to a large, round woman in a print dress: My mom. She looked at the boy and then yelled up the stairs in Spanish.

"Go and play, Grillo," she said. "You stay in the attic all the time. Go and play. Be like other boys. *¡Ya!*"

Earl waited patiently as the Rodríguez household quaked and quavered trying to get me downstairs and into the yard. Finally, I came down. Earl smiled broadly and offered me the can of marbles.

"This is for taking the rap today, man."

I looked hard at him, still a little peeved, then reached out for the can and held the best marble collection I had ever seen. I made a friend.

Desert winds swept past the TV antennas and peeling fences, welcome breezes on sweltering dry summer days when people came out to sit on their porches, or beneath a tree in dirt yards, or to fix cars in the street.

But on those days the perils came out too — you could see it in the faces of street warriors, in the play of children, too innocent to know what lurked about, but often the first to fall during a gang war or family scuffle.

103rd Street was particularly hard. It was the main drag in Watts, where most of the businesses were located, and it was usually crowded with people, including dudes who took whatever small change one might have in their pocket.

On days like that Rano, Jaime, Earl and I ventured out to the "third," as 103rd Street was called, or by the factories and railroad tracks playing dirt war with other kids. Other times we played on the rooftop and told stories.

"Did you ever hear the one about the half-man?" Earl asked.

"The what?" Jaime replied. "What's a half-man?"

"Well, he's a dude who got cut in half at the railroad tracks over there by Dogtown."

"Yeah, go on."

"So now he haunts the streets, half of him one place, the other half in another place — and he eats kids."

"Man, that's sick," Rano said. "But I got one for you. It's about *el pie*."

"What the hell is that?"

"*Pie* means foot in Spanish...and that's all it is! One big foot, walking around."

Gusts of winds swirled around the avocado tree branches as the moonlight cast uncanny shadows near where we related our tales.

"And you heard about *La Llorona*, right?" Rano continued.

"Oh, yeah, sure..."

"She's an old Mexican lady —"

"You mean Mrs. Alvarez?"

We laughed.

"Nah, this lady once got all her children and cut them up into tiny pieces."

"And..."

"And then she went all over the neighborhood, sprinkling bits of their bodies everywhere."

"And then..."

"So then God saw what she did and cursed her to walk the world, looking for her children — weeping — for all eternity. That's why she's called *La Llorona*, the weeping woman. And you know what, she picks up other kids to make up for the ones she's killed."

The leaves rustled, giving out an eerie sound. All of us jumped up, including Rano. Before anyone could say good night, we stumbled over one another, trying to get out of there, climbed off the roof, and ran through bedsheets and dresses hanging on a line, dashing like mad as we made our way home.

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We changed houses often because of evictions. My dad constantly tried to get better work; he tried so many things. Although he was trained as a teacher, graduated with a degree in biology and had published Spanish textbooks in Mexico, in Los Angeles everyone failed to recognize his credentials. In Los Angeles, he was often no more than a laborer.

One day a miracle happened. My dad obtained a substitute teaching job in the San Fernando Valley, at Taft High School in Woodland Hills, teaching Spanish to well-off white children.

My dad must have thought we had struck oil or something. He bought a house in Reseda. In those days, this made us the only Mexican family around. It was a big house. It had three bedrooms, which meant the boys could have their own room, the girls theirs and my parents could be alone. It had two baths, a large, grassy yard and an upstanding, stucco garage.

I went to a school on Shirley Avenue which actually had books. I remember being chased back home a lot by the Anglo kids. But we were so glad to be in Reseda, so glad to be away from South Central Los Angeles.

Even my brother enjoyed success in this new environment. He became the best fighter in the school, all that he went through in Watts finally amounting to something. The big white kids tried to pick on him, and he fought back, hammered their faces with quick hands, in street style, after which nobody wanted to mess with him. Soon the bullies stopped chasing me home when they found out I was José's brother.

My dad went nuts in Reseda. He bought new furniture, a new TV, and he had the gall to throw away the old black & white box we had in Watts. He bought a new car. He was like a starving man in a candy store, partaking of everything, touching whatever he couldn't eat. He sat on a mountain of debt. But his attitude was "who cares?" We were Americans now. We were on our way to having a little bit of that dream. He was even doing it as a teacher, what he was trained for. Oh what a time it was for my father!

My mother, I could tell, was uncomfortable with the whole set-up. She shied away from the neighbors. The other mothers around here were good-looking, fit and well-built. My pudgy mom looked dark, Indian and foreign, no matter what money could buy. Except she got her false teeth. It seemed Mama was just there to pick up the pieces when my father's house of cards fell. She knew it would.

When it happened, it happened fast, decisively. It turned out Taft High School hired my father to teach Spanish on a temporary basis. Apparently the white kids couldn't understand him because of his accent. He wrote letters to the school board proposing new methods of teaching Spanish to American children so he could keep working. They turned them down, and Taft High School let him go.

We weren't in Reseda very long, less than a school year. Then the furniture store trucks pulled into the driveway to take back the new sofas, the washing machine, the refrigerator — even the TV. A "For Sale" sign jabbed into the front lawn. The new car had been repossessed. We pulled out of Reseda in an old beat-up Dodge. Sad faces on our neighbors were our

farewell. I supposed they realized we weren't so bad for being Mexican. We were going back to an old friend — *pobreza.*

We moved in with Seni, her husband, and their two daughters. They were then occupying an apartment just outside East Los Angeles. Seni's girls were about the same age as me, my brother and sisters, although we were their uncles and aunts. They also had nicknames. Ana Seni was called *Pimpos*, which doesn't mean anything I know of. But Rano called her "Beanhead" and that took. Aidé was called *La Banana* because as a baby she had shades of blonde hair. They later had another daughter named Beca, also *güerita.*

Like most Latinos, we had a mixture of blood. My half-brother Alberto looked Caribbean. His mother came from Veracruz on the Caribbean side of Mexico which has the touch of Africa. The rest of us had different shades of Spanish white to Indian brown.

Uprooted again, we stuffed our things in a garage. The adults occupied the only two bedrooms. The children slept on makeshift bedding in the living room. My grandmother Catita also stayed with us. There were eleven of us crushed into that place. I remember the constant fighting. My dad was dumped on for not finding work. Seni accused her husband of having affairs with other women. Mama often stood outside alone, crying, or in the garage next to all our things piled on top of each other.

Rano and I sought refuge in the street.

One night, we came home late after having stocked up on licorice and bubble gum. We walked past police cars and an ambulance. Colored lights whirled across the tense faces of neighbors who stood on patches of grass and driveway. I pushed through low voices and entered the house: Blood was splattered on a far wall.

Moments before, Seni had been brushing Pimpos' hair when, who knows why, she pulled at the long sections. The girl's screams brought in my sister's husband. An argument ensued. Vicious words. Accusations.

Seni then plucked a fingernail file from the bathroom sink. She flashed it in front of my brother-in-law's face. He grabbed for her hand. The nail file plunged into his arm. Mom and Dad rushed in, ramming my sister against the wall; nail file crashed steely bright onto the linoleum floor.

Soon after the incident, the landlord evicted us all. This was when my mother and father broke up. And so we began that car ride to the train station, on the way back to Mexico, leaving L.A., perhaps never to come back.

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We pull into a parking lot at the Union station. It's like a point of no return. My father is still making his stand. Mama looks exhausted. We continue to sit in our seats, quiet now as Dad maneuvers into an empty space. Then we work our way out of the car, straightening our coats, gathering up boxes and taped-over paper bags: our "luggage." Up to this juncture, it's been like being in a storm — so much instability, of dreams achieved and then shattered, of a silence within the walls of my body, of being turned on, beaten, belittled and pushed aside; forgotten and unimportant. I have no position on the issue before us. To stay in L.A. To go. What does it matter? I've been a red hot ball, bouncing around from here to there. Anyone can bounce me. Mama. Dad. Rano. Schools. Streets. I'm a ball. Whatever.

We are inside the vast cavern of the station. Pews of swirled wood are filled with people. We sit with our bags near us, and string tied from the bags to our wrists so nobody can take them without taking us too. My father turns to us, says a faint goodby, then begins to walk away. No hugs. He doesn't even look at us.

"Poncho."

The name echoes through the waiting area.

"Poncho."

He turns. Stares at my mother. The wet of tears covers her face. Mama then says she can't go. She will stay with him. In

L.A. I don't think she's happy about this. But what can a single mother of four children do in Mexico? A woman, sick all the time, with factory work for skills in a land where work is mainly with the soil. What good is it except to starve.

"*Está bien*," Dad says as he nears my mother. "We will make it, *mujer*. I know it. But we have to be patient. We have to believe."

Mama turns to us and announces we are not leaving. I'm just a ball. Bouncing outside. Bouncing inside. Whatever.

CHAPTER TWO

"If you ain't from no barrio, then you ain't born."
— a 10-year-old boy from South San Gabriel

One evening dusk came early in South San Gabriel, with wind and cold spinning to earth. People who had been sitting on porches or on metal chairs near fold-up tables topped with cards and beer bottles collected their things to go inside. Others put on sweaters or jackets. A storm gathered beyond the trees.

Tino and I strolled past the stucco and wood-frame homes of the neighborhood consisting mostly of Mexicans with a sprinkling of poor white families (usually from Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas). *Ranchera* music did battle with Country & Western songs as we continued toward the local elementary school, an oil-and-grime stained basketball under my arm.

We stopped in front of a chain-link fence which surrounded the school. An old brick building cast elongated shadows over a basketball court of concrete on the other side of the fence. Leaves and paper swirled in tiny tornadoes.

"Let's go over," Tino proposed.

I looked up and across the fence. A sign above us read: NO ONE ALLOWED AFTER 4:30 PM, BY ORDER OF THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT. Tino turned toward me, shrugged his shoulders and gave me a who-cares look.

"Help me up, man, then throw the ball over."

I cupped my hands and lifted Tino up while the boy scaled the fence, jumped over and landed on sneakered feet.

"Come on, Luis, let's go," Tino shouted from the other side.

I threw over the basketball, walked back a ways, then ran and jumped on the fence, only to fall back. Although we were both 10 years old, I cut a shorter shadow.

"Forget you, man," Tino said. "I'm going to play without you."