

CHAPTER FIVE

"It is the violent poetry of the times, written in the blood of the youth."

—Linda Mendoza, Chicana poet from South San Gabriel

The Animal Tribe practically died with the death of one of its last presidents: John Fabela.

Seventeen-year-old John—whose girlfriend was pregnant with his infant daughter—succumbed to a shotgun blast in his living room as his younger brother watched from beneath a bed in an adjacent room. About 13 members of the Sons of Soul car club, made up of recent Mexican immigrants living in East L.A., were rounded up by the police.

By then Joaquín Lopez was already in prison for a heroin beef. Many of the older Tribe members were also incarcerated or hardcore *tecatos*. As the Tribe's influence diminished, Lomas initiated Tribe members into the various sets based on age groupings: the Pequeños, Chicos, the Dukes and the Locos. Lomas was reorganizing and recruiting. No longer could one claim Lomas just by being there. Chicharrón invited me to get in.

"They beat on you for about three minutes—that's all," Chicharrón urged, "You get a busted lip. So what? It's worth it."

So later I decided to go to a party in the Hills, fully aware I would join a Lomas set. Like most barrio parties, it started without any hassle. *Vatos* and *rucas* filled every corner in the small house; some ventured outside, smoking or drinking. The house belonged to Nina, this extremely pretty girl whom everyone respected. Nina's mother shuffled in the kitchen, making tacos from large pots of meat and beans simmering on low flames.

The dudes were polite; dignified. *Señora* this, *Señora* that. You couldn't imagine how much danger hung on their every breath.

As the night wore on, the feel of the place transformed. The air was rife with anticipation. Talk became increasingly louder.

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Faces peeled into hardness. The music played oldies we all knew by heart, and *gritos* punctuated key verses. Fists smashed against the walls. Just as the food simmered to a boil, the room also bubbled and churned. Weed, pills and hard liquor passed from hand to hand. Outside, behind the house, a row of dudes shot up heroin. In the glow of the back porch light, they whispered a sea of shorn sentences.

A crew of older, mean-eyed *vatos* arrived and the younger guys stacked behind them. Nina's mother showed concern. She pulled Nina into the kitchen; I could see her talking severely to her daughter.

I didn't know these dudes. They were *veteranos* and looked up to by the homeys. They had just come out of the joint—mostly Tracy, Chino or Youth Training School, known as YTS, a prison for youth offenders. Chicharrón pressed his face close to my ear and told me their names: Ragman, Peaches, Natividad, Topo . . . and the small, muscular one with a mustache down the sides of his mouth was called Puppet.

I then recalled some of their reputations: Natividad, for example, had been shot five times and stabbed 40 times—and still lived! Peaches once used a machine gun against some dudes in a shoot-out. And Puppet had been convicted of murder at the age of 16.

"Who wants in?" Puppet later announced to a row of dark, teenaged male faces in front of him. Chicharrón whispered something in Puppet's ear. Puppet casually looked toward me. They designated me the first to get jumped.

Topo walked up to me. He was stout, dark and heavily tattooed. He placed his arm around me and then we marched toward the driveway. Chicharrón managed to yell: "Protect your head."

I assumed when I got to the driveway, a handful of dudes would encircle me, provide me a signal of sorts, and begin the initiation. Instead, without warning, Topo swung a calloused fist at my face. I went down fast. Then an onslaught of steel-toed shoes and heels rained on my body. I thought I would be able to swing and at least hit one or two—but no way! Then I

remembered Chicharrón's admonition. I pulled my arms over my head, covered it the best I could while the kicks seemed to stuff me beneath a parked car.

Finally the barrage stopped. But I didn't know exactly when. I felt hands pull me up. I looked back at everyone standing around the driveway. My right eye was almost closed. My lip felt like it stuck out a mile. My sides ached. But I had done well.

Hands came at me to congratulate. There were pats on the back. Chicharrón embraced me, causing me to wince. I was a Lomas loco now. Then a homegirl came up and gave me a big kiss on my inflamed lip; I wished I could have tasted it. Then other homegirls did the same. It didn't seem half-bad, this initiation. Later they invited me to pounce on the other dudes who were also jumped in, but I passed.

As the night wore on, Puppet, Ragman and Nat had the initiates pile into a pickup truck. I was already quite plastered but somehow still standing. Puppet drove the truck toward Sangra. Elation rasped in our throats.

"Fuck Sangra," one of the new dudes chimed in, and other voices followed the sentiment.

We came across a cherried-out 1952 DeSoto, with pinstripes and a metal-flake exterior. Puppet pulled the truck up to the side of it. There were four dudes inside drinking and listening to cassette tapes. We didn't know if they were Sangra or what. We followed Ragman as he approached the dudes. One of them emerged from the passenger side. He looked like a nice-enough fellow.

"Hey, we don't want no trouble," he said.

I knew they weren't Sangra. They looked like hard-working recreational lowriders out for a spin. But Ragman wouldn't have it. He punched the dude down. A couple of other guys came out of the car, and they too tried to salvage the night, tried to appeal for calm.

"Listen, man, how about a beer," one of them offered.

Nat grabbed his neck from behind and pulled him to the ground, then beat on him. Ragman looked at the other guys who were clearly scared.

"Who don' like it?" he demanded. "Who don' like it...you?"

Ragman hit another guy. By then the dudes in the truck had climbed out and bashed in the car, breaking windows and crunching in metal with tire irons and two-by-fours which had been piled in the back of the truck. One dude tried to run off, but somebody chased him down with a wine bottle and struck him on the head. The dude fell down and I saw the wine bottle keep coming down on him, as if it was supposed to break, but it wouldn't.

The driver of the DeSoto tried to pull out, but somebody threw a brick at his head. For a long time, I observed the beatings as if I were outside of everything, as if a moth of tainted wings floating over the steamed sidewalk. Then I felt a hand pull at my arm and I sluggishly turned toward it. Puppet looked squarely into my one opened eye. He had a rusty screwdriver in his other hand.

"Do it, man," he said. Simply that.

I clasped the screwdriver and walked up to the beaten driver in the seat whose head was bleeding. The dude looked at me through glazed eyes, horrified at my presence, at what I held in my hand, at this twisted, swollen face that came at him through the dark. *Do it!* were the last words I recalled before I plunged the screwdriver into flesh and bone, and the sky screamed.

Within a year, the local headlines' business boomed:

"Gang Violence: Teen Wars Bring Death To Two"

"Valley Teen Gangs Flourish"

"Three Wounded By School Intruders"

"Youth, 17, Murdered: Victim Shot In Chest"

"Five Hurt, Two Arrested In Rosemead Party Crash"

"Three Still Held In Gang Deaths"

"San Gabriel Teenager Shot In The Face"

other main dudes had decided I needed to help "take care of it."

"Orale, let me get ready."

I put on dark clothes and my trench coat. It became a habit for me to take the trench coat whenever I did jobs like this.

We climbed over fences behind the garage and emerged onto Ramona Avenue. A car was there already. I entered, sitting in between Pokie and Little Man's brother, Beto, who had been sitting, deathly still, in the car. Santos and Daddio sat up front.

"What we got to do?" I asked.

"Look under the seats," Santos casually suggested.

I looked down with my eyes, without moving, and could see the edges of bottles and some rags. Shit, I thought, they want to firebomb a house. This meant somebody's mother, little sister or brother could be hurt or killed. But this is how things had gotten by then. Everyone was fair game in barrio wars; people's families were being hit all the time.

We cruised toward Sangra. Santos knew the police would be extra heavy the night after a shooting. But if we didn't move in a timely manner the impression would be anyone could hit us, anytime.

"Where we going?" I asked.

"We're going to Chava's *cantón*."

This was heavy. We were going after Sangra's main warrior. Who knows how they found out where his family lived, because Chava had moved in with Dina somewhere else. But the idea was to make him pay dearly, going after his mother's house, and if need be, anybody who might have the misfortune of being there.

I felt edgy, my muscles straining, my leg striking a beat against the back of the seat. I didn't want to do this. But once you're asked to do a hit, you can't refuse, can't question or even offer an excuse. Since I was easily accessible in the garage, I became a good candidate for these undertakings.

We pulled up to a quiet, suburban-looking street. Chava's family actually lived outside the barrio, in a better part of San

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Many nights in the garage, while in the throes of sleep, I heard knocking and voices. They appeared to be woven into the dreams. But I'd wake up and realize it was no dream but Chicharrón or another homeboy or homegirl needing a place to crash, to party or just hang.

On such a night, I woke up to raps on the window. I yanked myself out of the blankets and opened the door. Santos, Daddio and Pokie, three of the Lomas crazies, were standing there.

"*Qué hubo, homes?*" I greeted.

"Chin, we need to do something tonight," Santos responded. "You with it man."

I already sensed what they meant. They wanted me to do a *jale*, a hit against Sangra. The night before Tutti from Los Diablos had gotten into a big argument with his long-time girlfriend, Cokie. In anger, Tutti drove up to Las Lomas and shot Little Man, killing him instantly. The police had already busted Tutti, but Lomas needed to exact some revenge. I knew the whole story. What I didn't know was Puppet, Ragman and the

Gabriel, pretty much like me. We parked down a ways and climbed up an embankment behind a row of houses.

Pokie brought up a bag filled with the bottles and rags. Daddio had cans of gasoline. We squatted in weeds behind a brick-fenced house with a back yard full of flowers and exotic plants, the way of many Mexican homes. A back porch had leisure chairs and gaily-painted rubber tires filled with soil and topped with purple, red and yellow petals.

It looked similar to my mother's back yard.

Santos poured gasoline into the bottles and stuffed the rags at the top, leaving a section hanging over. We each had a bottle. We were to toss them at the back porch, then run like hell to the car where Beto kept the engine running.

I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't stop. I felt trapped. I knew the only thing for me was to go through with it, and get out of there as fast as possible. I felt excitement. And an ache of grief.

A news account reported five people ran out of a house in San Gabriel after four molotov cocktails struck its back porch. Everybody got out safely, but the back of the house went up in flames and the rest of it sustained irreparable water damage from the fire hoses.

Little Man's death and the firebombing were part of a series of violent incidents between Lomas and Sangra which stretched back generations. Dudes had fathers and even grandfathers involved in the feud.

Of course, word got around about who did Chava's house. I don't know how this happened. But it soon involved my family.

By then my sister Gloria, 13 years old and a student at Garvey, looked up to me. To her, I was independent, in starched khaki pants, tattooed, with an earring in one ear before anybody did this kind of thing; always full of stories and good times. Her inexperienced mind soaked it all up.

Gloria joined a younger set of Lomas girls called United Sisters or US, and called herself Shorty. Sometimes I hung out with them, just for the kicks. I didn't see Shorty becoming a

crazy Lomas girl. I saw it only as something she would get over as she matured.

One night she attended a dance at the San Gabriel Mission sponsored by Thee Prophettes, another girl's club. I didn't go, so Shorty played it smooth, hanging with her homegirls. Cece and Huera from US.

Sure enough, Cokie and Dina showed up at the dance with a few Sangra girls. One of them was Spyder, who knew me from Garvey before she moved to Sangra and became one of the *locas*. When Spyder first noticed Shorty she felt a tug of recognition.

The Sangra girls gave everyone hard looks. US and Thee Prophettes kept cool, not wanting anything to undermine the benefit dance. Later that evening, though, Spyder figured out Shorty was my sister. I was "marked," meaning Sangra members were obligated to shoot Chin from Lomas. But a sister would do as well, Spyder reasoned.

Spyder relayed the information to Cokie and Dina. They had small caliber handguns. They discussed how they would corner Shorty and then let her have it, possibly in the girl's restroom.

Sometime later, my brother Joe received a phone call.

"Pick us up Joe," Shorty whispered in a frightened tone. "There's something happening here — and I'm scared."

Shorty told Joe to drive around the dance hall to a back entrance. Shorty, Cece and Huera planned to be there and get into the car. Timing was everything.

Joe didn't know what the problem might be. He got into his car and proceeded to do as Shorty asked.

He drove to the side of the dance hall where a door entrance was located, but Shorty and her friends weren't around. He waited. Suddenly the doors burst open. Shorty, Cece and Huera ran out, almost tripping as they held their heels in their hands.

"Joe, get the car going — hurry!"

"What the..."

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But Joe couldn't get the final words out. A volley of gunfire came toward him. My sister and her friends rushed into the car, piling on top of one another. Joe pressed the accelerator, forcing the car to peel across the asphalt. Shorty didn't quite get inside but she held on as the car sped off; Cokie and Dina stood in the entranceway, and, firing from the shoulder, continued to pump .22 bullets toward the car as it vanished into the fog-drenched distance.

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Sheriff's helicopters were a nightly annoyance. It could have been Vietnam, only we were the enemy. They hovered above the slopes and ravines, covering the ground with circles of lights. Deputies drove by often, pushing dudes against walls, detaining them and dispersing crowds of two or more. The homeboys shot out the few lampposts to keep the place in darkness. We hid in bushes, in basements and abandoned buildings. We were pushed underground. Codes, rules and honor became meaningless.

Rapes became a common circumstance in the Hills. They began as isolated incidents, then a way of life. Some believed this ritual started with outsiders, not from within the Hills. Others said it began with one guy who happened to be crazy, but the rest followed suit as the attacks signified a distorted sense of power. One dude was said to have raped 17 girls one summer.

Enano once pulled up in a four-door green Chevy as Chicharrón and I lolled around on Teresa Avenue. He climbed out of the car, opened the back door and invited us to "get in on this." A naked girl, passed out, lay in the back seat. A black patch of pubic hair stood out on a shock of white skin which looked as if she had been immersed in flour.

"Chale, homes," I responded. "I ain't with it."

Chicharrón nodded the same sentiment.