CHAPTER EIGHT

"They say of the poet and the madman we all have a little." — Sandra Cisneros

The cells babbled with the poignant tongues of despair licking the walls. Every now and then the air reverberated with *gritos*, the Mexican yell of a man who's drunk and angry, reaching as deep as he can to shout all his pain and glory to the world. Jail in the barrio is only a prelude; for many homeboys the walls would soon taste of San Quentin, Folsom and Soledad, the pathway through The Crazy Life.

From the age of 13 on, I ended up in cells like those of the San Gabriel jail house — places like Pomona, Temple City, East L.A., Monterey Park, East Lake's juvenile detention hall and the L.A. county jail system following the Moratorium. Sometimes the police just held me over three nights and then let me go at the start of the week to keep me off the street. But this time, at 17 years old, I faced a serious charge of attempted murder. This time Mama didn't come for me.

"*Ese malvado — deje que se pudra,*" Mama told the Spanish-speaking youth officer after hearing of my arrest.

The cell walls were filled with the warrior's art. Most of it declaring Sangra in the beautiful, swirling style of theirs. Smoked outlines of women's faces were burned onto the painted brick. There were love messages: *El Loco Con La Bárbara, P/V* (por vida) — and poetry:

Aquí estoy
En la calle sin jando.
Nadie sabe mi placa
Y a nadie le importa

Voy al chante de mi ruca
Pero se queda mirando

Le hablo con mi alma
*Pero la puerta se está cerrando.**

and:

En el bote del county
Con toda mi loca pasión
Puse tu placa en la celda
Y con ese pensamiento
*Estoy sufriendo mi desgracia.***

Pachuco blues. Somebody in another cell let out a soulified *grito* with the funk of burnt burritos, debris-strewn alleys and fervent love-making thrown into the mix. The holding blocks were made up of two cells and an area for inmates from the shared block to sit around. I gathered up toilet paper, soaked it in water, and rolled it to the size of handballs. When it hardened, I passed the time by throwing it against the wall.

A Sangra soldier named Night Owl sat in a cell next to me and threw challenges.

"Lomas ain't shit," Night Owl said. "I heard your homeboy crying — what are you, babies?"

"Fuck you," I answered. "You can say that behind thick walls, but I'll be out and I'll see you in the street."

Hours of this opened up into other discussions: about family life, about songs we liked — we even shared a few verses — and about women.

"You know Viviana?" I asked. "Her brothers are Coyote, Negro and Shark."

*Here I stand / in the street without money. / Nobody knows my name / and nobody cares.

I go to my woman's house / but she stands there just staring. / I speak to her with my soul / but the door is closing.

**In the county jail / with all my crazy passion, / I place your name on a cell wall / and with this thought / I suffer my disgrace.

"What you mean, do I know her?" Night Owl said. "Everybody knows her. They say she fucked around with some dude on her porch while her brothers were inside watching."

¡*Qué jodida*! It's me they were talking about! Then it struck me as very funny and I laughed.

"What are you laughing about?"

"Nothing, man — whatever happened to her?"

"She got knocked up — she's living with my homeboy Cyclone."

A pang of hurt, I shook my head, then changed the subject.

Darío, Conejo and I were scheduled to go to juvenile hall. Our parents refused to get us. It sounded like a conspiracy. Then I received a visitor.

"You messed up, Luis," Chente said.

"I know — Mama doesn't want anything to do with me."

"Can you blame her?"

"Not really. Did anyone die yet?"

"There was a dude in serious condition, but he's doing better. One woman lost a couple of fingers. I know why it happened, but why did you have to get involved?"

"I don't know. Something snapped inside of me. I have nothing against bikers. But these were older dudes, man. About 40 years old. They had no business fucking with us. I just couldn't let them get away with it."

"The center is trying to get you guys released. We talked to your parents and they're willing to work with us. We're doing all we can to help you. But you've got to stay cool. Don't rattle these bars, okay?"

Chente left. A day later an officer came and opened my cell.

"You're getting out. There's people waiting for you."

I could see my mom and dad with a couple of Bienvenidos staff members in the front desk area. I looked over where Night Owl was still holed up.

"Hey dude, here's for Sangra," and I stuck out my hand.

Night Owl looked at me for a second, then smirked, and shook my hand through the bars.

~~tried to cool the rising tempers. But there were those on both sides who didn't want peace.~~

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

As many of the *locos* as possible were to assemble in the basement of an old Victorian brick house — one of the few remaining in the barrio — where Puppet lived.

Groups first gathered in the various vacant lots: the one on Toll Drive, the Bailey Street fields and the ravine where Berne Street dead-ended. I went up Toll Drive towards a battalion of dudes with Pendleton shirts, buttoned from the top only, *vato*-style, and starched khaki or juvenile hall-issued pants we called "counties." They had an assortment of bandannas, hats and gloves: battle gear, even on a hot day.

When I reached the others, somebody passed me a bottle of muscatel wine. Others talked about the women they had been with, the rampaging they had done: smart, slick talk — our *totacho*.

"*Cáiga, ése*, how's the *ruca* I saw you with last night?

"*Más firmota, ése*, but she talk too much."

"*Orale*, what you do — talk back?"

They were about *locura*, the spirit of existence which meant the difference between living life to the fullest or wandering aimlessly upon the earth, taking up space, getting in the way. The *vatos* hated those without daring, those who failed to meet the challenge, the fear and exhilaration of this presence.

We moved toward Puppet's *cantón* and trickled down into the basement, out of view from the street. Outside, Puppet's sister Rachel walked Eight Ball around, who had overdosed on smack, so he wouldn't pass out.

I climbed into the basement. *Yesca* smoke infiltrated my eyes and nose. I barely saw the flicker of gazes through the haze. Whispers and the sleepy drawl of some hyped-up dude surrounded me. Fluorescent posters, crosses and the spray-painted names of homeboys covered the basement's walls and ceiling.

My eyes scanned around and then stopped. There before me lay the largest collection of weapons I had ever seen: shotguns, in different gauges; handguns from .22s to 9 millimeters; semi-automatic rifles with scopes, thirty-thirty and thirty-ought-sixes; and the automatics — 16s and all sort of subs. In a corner were several wood boxes piled up with hand grenades. Here was an inventory of the barrio arsenal, most of it stolen from military armories.

Dizzy from the scene — the laughter, the weaponry and blurred faces — I squeezed in between Enano and Bone.

Soon Puppet came down the steps with Fuzzy, confidence in their stride. Puppet and Fuzzy were the self-appointed lieutenants in the coming battles. They were accepted by an unspoken respect. Even Peaches, Ragman, Natividad or the maniac Valdez brothers accepted this.

Puppet looked around and spotted Chepo, a younger dude from the Dukes.

"No Dukes," Puppet declared.

"Hey, man, I just came to..."

"I said no Dukes," Puppet repeated.

Nobody disagreed. Chepo got up and left.

Puppet, dark and broad-shouldered in a short-sleeve knit shirt, squatted in the middle of the room. On his forearm was a tattoo of a peacock. On the inside of his other arm, a spider poised near a Mexican girl in a *sombrero*, caught in a web.

Next to him stood Fuzzy, a light-skinned dude with a rugged face, goatee, and short, almost nappy, hair on his head. He had his shirt off and "Las Lomas" tattooed in large old-English lettering across the wide of his back.

"*Orale*, homeboys, what are we going to do about Sangra?" Fuzzy asked the *vatos*. They responded with yelps and *gritos*.

"Fine, let's work out some tactics," Puppet said.

Everything became quiet; I could hear my heartbeat.

"We know the *chota* is expecting us to move. So we have to do it quick. Sangra won't know what hit 'em."

"They'll know it was the Hills, *ése*," Bone interjected.

"They'll know it's us. But they won't know exactly who," Puppet said. "The *chota* will come down hard, but we're going to make sure nobody gets popped. This means we got to take care of each other. And we have to be *trucha* for *dedos*."

Dedos meant fingers and is used to describe snitches. They were also called *ratas* — rats.

"*Guacha*, Toots and Ragman will carry the *cuetes*," Puppet explained. "I want Fuzzy and Nat to . . . "

"I have something to say," I called out.

Everybody turned to my direction.

"Have you thought about what Sangra is doing right now?" I said. "They're probably getting ready to hit us too. And we hit them and they hit us — when does it stop?"

Puppet gave me a look which signaled something unpleasant.

"Nobody says you have to do anything. Go on out there with Chepo then."

"We can't pretend a war with Sangra won't mean others won't die," I responded, knowing I couldn't back off. "That our brothers and sisters, or even our moms, won't get hurt."

"We're doing it for Santos and Indio," Fuzzy said. "Besides, you the dude painting murals over our *placas*. That's dead! We were talking about *dedos*. Where do you stand, *ése*?"

"You all know I'll take on anybody," I countered as I stood up. "They were my homeboys too. But think about it: They were killed by a speeding car, both of them shot right through the heart. Nobody yelled out nothing. Who's trained to do this? Not Sangra. I say the cops did this. I say they want us to go after Sangra when we were so close to coming together."

"We have to use our brains," I continued, talking to everyone. "We have to think about who's our real enemy. The dudes in Sangra are just like us, man."

Treacherous talk.

Then Puppet stood up.

"Only *pinche putos* would tell us to back off on Sangra, talking bullshit about uniting barrios."

"Listen, don't misunderstand . . . "

Just then a fist slammed against my mouth; a warm wet trickle slowly wound its way down my chin.

Puppet appeared ready to swing again but he looked surprised; he gave me one of his best blows, yet I didn't fall.

My measured reasoning turned to anger. I felt like throwing a blow of my own. But I looked around at the faces of my homeboys — at Chicharrón — and realized I was alone. Fuzzy gave me a large grin.

"Look, *puto*, you messin' with the Hills," Fuzzy said. "And nobody messes with us. Understand?"

No direct threats. All threats had to be carried out. This served as a warning. The uneasiness in the place could be cut with a blunt knife.

"All right! We got better things to do than waste our time with this *pedo*," Puppet declared. "So if it's all right with Chin over here, we move on Sangra tonight."

Puppet looked at everybody and there was approval. He looked at me and there was silence.

CHAPTER NINE

"You don't have solo rights to anything anymore, not even your crazy life."
— Letter to me from a Jewish teenager after a youth conference in 1972

A low, primered 1968 Impala idled in front of a beige-white, Spanish-style stucco house in a cleanly-lit section of San Gabriel. Music spilled out of open windows along with laughter and the talk of young people. A party! The car pulled into a spot near the house. Yo Yo and Hapo jumped out the front seat while Coyote clambered out of the back and looked around. The swirl of Santa Ana winds cooled the summer heat, clearing away the eye-burning smog which has smothered the valley for days. Chava stepped out from behind Coyote.

"Let's check out the *borlote*," he declared, and the four marched toward the pulsing beat.

They entered the front door without invitation and surveyed the scene. A row of girls sat around with beer cans and cigarettes in their hands. The intruders could not make out the handful of guys scattered among them; they looked cool, but not *barrio*.

Coyote eyed a pretty *ruca* by a coffee table topped with bowls of chips, salsa and onion dip. Yo Yo indicated he had to go to the head. Chava and Hapo shuffled through the kitchen and out the back door; outside, a few people danced near a carport lined with trash cans brimming with ice and beer.

"¡*Sangra Rifa*!" Hapo yelled, by impulse really, perhaps thinking it will keep the dudes at a distance. Chava looked annoyed at him, but it was too late.

Eight dudes stepped out of the darkness beneath the carport. Chava immediately recognized them: Eight Ball, Fuzzy, Enano, Topo, Lencho, Toots, Bone and Puppet — from the Hills!

Hapo backed into the house. Coyote and Yo Yo sensed something was wrong. Hapo looked at them, terrified.

"*Trucha* — run!"

"What?"

"I said run — it's Lomas!"

Coyote, Yo Yo and Hapo flew out the door toward the Impala. But Chava did not run, could not run; he stood alone in the back yard as the legion of shadows approached, yelling back, shadows which surrounded their prey and pounced in a deadly pantomime, steel blades penetrating flesh. Chava did not cry out.

He toppled to the ground, touched the wet sweet-smelling blades of grass, and it was these simple, slight odors, sensations and sounds which gripped his attention: the peal of chimes near the back door, moths colliding into a light bulb — a treble pressing out of woofers and tweeters from dual stereo speakers. Eight dudes, eight punctures into sides, the abdomen, the ribs. *No more, no more*!

But there was more.

Somebody picked up a rusted tire rim from the cluttered driveway, raised it high, and thrust it down on Chava's head.

"No more, please, no more!"

But this was not Chava's voice. Somehow his voice sounded only as an echo in a canyon inside his body. This was a woman's voice, Rita's voice, as she jumped over Chava's prone figure and pleaded with the shadows standing over him to stop.

The shadows backed off. Rita turned Chava's barely-breathing body onto its side and somebody nearby screamed, like the wailing inside a black dream, into all the screams ever screamed, as the grass blended into crimson from wounds in his body and his head, a soaked mass of hair, eyes and jawbone.

☥ ☥ ☥

Chicharrón pulled up in front of Mark Keppel High School.

"Hey, Chin — want to hear a joke?" he asked.

"Only if it's a good one."

"Knock, knock..."

"I said a good one."

With him was a year-old baby. Chicharrón and Shoshi weren't together anymore, but he held the legacy of their brief relationship in his arms. They named him Junior. Having a baby didn't seem to fit Chicharrón, but he looked proud as Junior took in the surroundings, full of unknowing.

I stood in front of the gnarled tree among students sitting in the grass, talking and relaxing in the sun. Chicharrón, as usual, started in on me.

"I see you still got them potato shoes."

Chicharrón poked fun at my brown shoes which I wore until the leather withered, looking like a spud. He also made fun of the fact I peed a lot, especially when I drank. He once handed me a picture he drew of me with a tiny piss sac and potato shoes — underneath he wrote: The Chinmunist.

In my senior year, I became ToHMAS president. The club had succeeded in obtaining a Chicano Studies class with a powerful and engaging teacher, Mr. Sosa. I also became the student council's Speaker of the House and a columnist for the school's newspaper, which the journalism teacher offered after he liked my response to an anti-Chicano editorial. I called the column "Pensamientos."

In one column I wrote: "It's important that Chicanos feel this is their school too. It's about time we became part of America." And once I did an article about how Lomas Dukes held a car wash to benefit an elementary school where the children had no money to buy milk or lunch. Somebody on the newspaper staff asked why the Dukes didn't use the money to clean the graffiti off the school walls. I told him: "It's a lot better to feed some hungry kids than to clean up your fuckin' walls, that's why!"

As we sat around, making the baby laugh, Cha Cha, a leading member of ToHMAS, came up behind me, a tremor in her voice.

"Louie, I need to talk with you."

"What's going on Cha Cha?"

"You know Mr. Humes, the history teacher, he just threw me out of his class for being late — but not before he called me a chola whore!"

"What?"

"It's true. I told him I had to take my little brother to the babysitter's because my moms is sick. But he got real mad and cursed me out — in front of the whole class!"

"Who does he think he is? Let's see about this."

I went into the school. A few of the students on the lawn, including Chicharrón and the baby, walked in behind me. I ran up the stairs to the second floor. Cha Cha pointed across the hallway to a classroom in session.

When I entered, Mr. Humes, with graying hair, short-sleeve striped shirt and tie, stood in front of the blackboard, addressing a scattered row of students.

"Young man, you have no business barging into my class like this, you better leave..."

"No, I won't leave. What's this about calling Cha Cha a chola whore."

"I don't have to answer to you!" Mr. Humes yelled. "I'm tired of this dictatorship of students we have here."

"Oh, I see — you want to be able to call somebody a whore and get away with it. That's over with, man. We refuse to take any more abuse."

"And I won't take this abuse," he countered. "I want you out of my class — now! If not, we'll see Mr. Madison about this."

"Well, you're just going to have to see Mr. Madison."

Mr. Humes stalked out the class. As he slammed the door, the students in the room and in the hallway broke into cheers. It was far from over.

Mr. Madison called Cha Cha and me into his office.

"You can't go around disrupting classes," he said. "This conduct has got to stop."

"Nobody should get away with what Mr. Humes called Cha Cha," I said.

"But there are other ways to resolve this. There are channels. There's me — why didn't you come to me first?"

"We're taking this into our own hands. We have no way to control the outcome if we don't. We just don't trust how anything gets resolved around here."

"But I have the authority, not you," said Mr. Madison. "I can't have students interrupting classes whenever they feel like it."

Then Cha Cha spoke: "Listen Mr. Madison, you've forgotten that Mr. Humes called me a whore. Who cares about us 'disrupting' a class. What are you going to do about Mr. Humes? It's my life here. It's the lives of others like me. What are you going to do?"

It was far from over. Other students found out what happened. Again the anger held inside boiled over. Somebody slashed Mr. Humes' car tires.

Later a group of Mexicans beat up some Anglos in the gym. This escalated to fights in the cafeteria and parking lot. Cha Cha's encounter served as the catalyst for that year's Tradition.

The student council called a special session. Daryl, the student president, proposed a "Communicators" group which would consist of leaders from among the Mexican and Anglo students. Mr. Madison approved the suggestion and provided a meeting place for the group. A list of 60 names were drawn up; I was on the list.

The Communicators were to stifle any rumors. Stop any fights. Resolve any differences. The Communicators wore red armbands. We were excused from classes and allowed to roam the hallways and talk with students. The fights ceased after two days as the Communicators walked up and down the school espousing calm.

On the third day, the 60-member group met in the auditorium to determine how to deal with disruptions. I proposed they take affirmative steps for people to talk out their problems, to address the inequities, and allow more power to fall into the hands of students. This led to a wild debate. As we argued the finer points, a teacher ran into the auditorium.

"They're at it again!" she yelled out, her hair disheveled. "They're fighting in the halls!"

"Okay, everyone," Daryl said. "We've got to go out there and stop this."

The Communicators poured out of the auditorium to where a knot of students gathered near a stairway. Screams and shouts greeted us. I saw one dude jump in crazy anger from the top of the stairs onto the crowd of students below.

I rushed up to the melee and tried to pull apart a couple of students on the ground. But as I got a hold of one guy, I looked up and a crumpled soda can filled with sand smashed against my mouth. The jagged edge and weight of the sand burst open my bottom lip; blood streamed out as if it were a waterfall. Others stopped fighting as I stood there in a daze. A student and a teacher grabbed my arm and escorted me to the nurse's office.

When we got there, a number of students were already sitting around with various injuries. The nurse looked at my mouth. The crumpled can had sliced the lip and chipped off a piece of tooth. She suggested I be taken to the medical clinic.

"You're from Keppel, right?" the doctor said as she came into the operating room where I lay holding soaked towels to my face.

"We've been getting a lot of you guys this past week," the doctor said. "Let's take a look."

I removed the towels. The doctor looked stern, but not alarmed.

"Ain't no big thing," she said. "We'll get you some stitches, and you'll be good as new."

I liked her already. She prepared the cat-gut while I lay back.

"I'm not using any anesthesia," she declared. "You seem like a tough dude. I'm sure you can take it."

I hated her guts. Yet I didn't say anything. I let her sew up the lip without any painkiller; I felt the needle enter in and out of skin, stitch after stitch. I didn't wince or complain. I just tightened my grip on the bedsides so the doctor wouldn't see.

After the doctor finished, she looked at me with a devious glint in her eye.

"I guess you could take it," she said. "Not even a whimper. Okay, tough guy — you can go home now."

But I didn't go home. I went back to the school with an immense gauze bandage on the lower lip. By then hundreds of students were gathered outside. It was an impromptu walkout following my injury. I walked up to the crowd which roared at the sight of me. Esme addressed them from the top of the front steps. I came up next to her, the gauze and the pain keeping me from smiling.

"Louie, can you say a few words?" Esme asked.

I took my time, but I managed.

"We've come a long way in this school. But something keeps coming up to show us we've got a long way to go. All I can say is, we can't stop fighting until the battle's won."

The students exploded in a frenzy of clapping. Inside the school doorways, I could see Mrs. Baez was pleased to see me asserting myself. But Mr. Madison, trying so hard to contain the controversy, looked tired.

Not long after this, the school fired Mr. Pérez. Mr. Pérez ran the print shop. It was the most popular class for Chicanos; many meetings were held there. He not only sponsored the ToHMAS club, he was also the school's best teacher. Mr. Pérez arranged field trips to downtown, the beach, even to Beverly Hills; he wanted us to see the world, see how others lived and know why we didn't live the same way. But teachers who helped students think were considered radical.

One day Mr. Pérez received a notice. The school claimed he was insubordinate and unresponsive to the students' needs — the exact opposite of the truth.

I walked into the Chicano Student Center. Esme's face covered with pain; Amelia, crying. Mrs. Baez held a phone in her hand, although not talking into it.

"This is it, man," I said. "I've had it with these people.

Another walkout, man, we're going out until they bring Pérez back."

"No, Luis, not this time," Mrs. Baez said, waving the phone at me. "You can't walk out every time something isn't to your liking. The school and Mr. Pérez need to work this out."

"That's just an excuse," Esme said. "They've wanted to get rid of Mr. Pérez for a long time. He's the only teacher willing to take chances, to challenge the way things are."

"Yeah, Mrs. Baez, I don't buy it," I said. "We're going out."

"Luis, don't forget you're a Communicator," Mrs. Baez said. "You're supposed to keep the peace."

"Not any more — I quit!"

This time, I worked the halls hard, telling as many students as I could about the pending walkout. This time, the school was prepared. For a year or so, Alex, who lived in the Hills, worked with Mr. Madison to diffuse any tension. The day of the proposed walkout, Mr. Madison had a talk with Alex, who then went around the school telling everyone the walkout was off.

Some students came up to me, confused. I began to see the plan: Mr. Madison wanted a tug-of-war between Alex and me — and he was betting on his stooge Alex. In fact, the walkout's strength had waned because of Alex's misinformation tactic. But still, Mr. Madison implemented Plan B.

I had designated 1 p.m., following the lunch period, for everyone to meet on the lawn. But just before the lunch break, the loudspeakers made an announcement: At 1 p.m. there was to be a special school-wide assembly at Aztec Stadium.

"They're doing this to stop the walkout," Esme said.

"I know, there's nothing we can do now," I said. "Let's see what Mr. Madison has in mind."

Hundreds of students assembled in the bleacher stands. I found a seat at the very top and sat down, my face a mask of indifference.

Mr. Madison made a long-winded speech about cooperation, about harmony and understanding; how certain elements were out to undermine all Mark Keppel High School stood for.

I sat there, feeling the flux and flow of power within me. I had called off the walkout, that much I had to do. But I also knew all this — the school assembly, the address to the student body, Alex's role — all of this was because of me!

I recalled when I first entered school in Watts, how I had been virtually written off, pushed into a corner with building blocks and treated like a pariah; how in Garvey I had been heaved out of classes and, later in high school, forced to drop out and labeled a failure!

Now I was somebody they couldn't dismiss — somebody who had to be heard.

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

"I finished reading all the work you gave me a while back — remember, your poems and stories," Mrs. Baez said.

"Yeah, sure — they're no good, right?"

"Luis, how can you say that! They're wonderful. We should get them published."

"Great — but how?"

"Well, I picked up a newspaper the other day where they announced a Chicano Literary Contest in Berkeley. It's from Quinto Sol Publications. Let's send them the work. But it has to be retyped — your typing is terrible."

"I know, I know...but who's going to retype it?"

"I'll find some help. I'm sure there are people willing to do something. What do you say?"

"I guess okay — I mean, it's worth a try."

About the same time, the California State College at Los Angeles offered me an Economic Opportunity Program Grant — despite my past school record, lack of credits and other mishaps. Chente, Mr. Pérez and Mrs. Baez teamed up to help me get accepted.

And a Loyola-Marymount University art professor asked me to paint a mural for the school; he offered some pay and student artists to work with.

My head spun with all the prospects.

But the kicker was when Mrs. Baez returned the newly-typed versions of my writing; I couldn't believe I had anything to do with it. The shape of the words, the forms and fragments of sentences and syllables, seemed alien, as if done by another's hand.

The fact was I didn't know anything about literature. I had fallen through the chasm between two languages. The Spanish had been beaten out of me in the early years of school — and I didn't learn English very well either.

This was the predicament of many Chicanos.

We could almost be called incommunicable, except we remained lucid; we got over what we felt, sensed and understood. Sometimes we rearranged words, created new meanings and structures — even a new vocabulary. Often our everyday talk blazed with poetry.

Our expressive powers were strong and vibrant. If this could be nurtured, if the language skills could be developed on top of this, we could learn to break through any communication barrier. We needed to obtain victories in language, built on an infrastructure of self-worth.

But we were often defeated from the start.

In my case, though I didn't know how to write or paint, I had a great need to conceive and imagine, so compelling, so encompassing, I had to do it even when I knew my works would be subject to ridicule, would be called stupid and naive. I just couldn't stop.

I had to learn how, though; I had to believe I could.

One day, I received a phone call. It was from Dr. Octavio Romano of Quinto Sol. I had been chosen as one of two honorary winners in their $1,000 literary contest. My award was $250, a paid plane trip — my first ever — to Berkeley, and a publishing contract.

At the news, I felt so alive, so intensely aware of my surroundings. After I hung up the phone, I raced out of the house in the rain and danced: an Aztec two-step, boogie-woogie, a *norteño* — it didn't matter, I danced.

Mama looked out at me and said I had gone crazy for sure. And I was crazy — like my Tía Chucha, who continued to create without recognition, despite being outcast from the family; crazy like the moon which jitterbugged in the night, crazy like the heartbeat which kept pumping its precious liquid when so much tried to stop it.

I won $250 — the most legitimate money I'd ever obtained in one chunk. I danced for the 'hood, I danced for the end of degradation, I danced for all the little people who ever tried to make it and were crushed.

Berkeley...my own book contract...250 bucks!

SKIP ⚜ ⚜ ⚜

I finally graduated from high school. Quite an achievement. I didn't attend the official ceremony and prom because I felt it had nothing to do with me.

ToHMAS had its own celebration where I received a certificate in appreciation of my activities of the previous two years. Mrs. Baez and Chente were among those present, both smiling with perhaps a sense of some accomplishment. They helped make me.

I gave Esme, Flora, Amelia, Chuy, Cha Cha and the others my sincerest hopes for the future. A few of them were continuing as Keppel students and planned to carry on the fight we had begun. Delfina was there and I walked up to her. She was to be next year's Josephine Aztec.

"Louie, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you," she said.

"I'm glad — I'm just sorry it didn't work out between us."

We hugged, and then I made the rounds embracing and shaking hands with the other students. When it came time for me to say a few words, I told the group: "I believe anything I've done, anybody can do — and do better. I'm no exception. Everyone here is a potential leader."

I managed to go to Mr. Madison's office and pick up my diploma. Mr. Madison handed it to me without a word and shook my hand, looking ambivalent. I felt he didn't hate me, but

CHAPTER TEN

"I glimpse in the distance certain roads, clearings silent in the morning after the night's demons have fled: the future, the ageless future, where there is always time to create." — Maurice Sachs

Alone at a bus stop in the first hours of a day, I wrapped myself in a long, black trench coat — no longer used for *jambas* or *jales*. "¡*Qué jodida*! — it's cold," I stammered out loud, to no one in particular. Trucks rumbled by and an occasional lowrider, sweet salsa sounds radiating from outside speakers; I jumped to the beat inside the trench coat as a breeze played havoc with my insides.

I reflected on writing and art, on class struggle, on family and a woman's touch — what mattered to me then.

I stopped attending Cal State after my release from jail; I'd been set back too far. Besides, I ran out of money. I now worked full-time on the graveyard shift of a paper factory. I also realized sitting in a classroom didn't work for me; it revived images of what I endured as a child and something within me blocked against it. I preferred my own inquiries, reading everything I could when I needed to.

The incidents of violence continued. A week before, a dude from Sangra strutted down Mission Boulevard when a carload approached and someone opened fire; the dude dropped to the ground and rolled over beside a mail box. But the car turned around and somebody stepped out with a shotgun and blasted him again; it was at such close range, the wadding from the shell embedded in his stomach.

I now looked on these matters with different eyes. I recalled when this first happened. Chente and I had been at his house, talking about the Hills and how I had to defend it, whatever the cost.

"That's exactly what the rulers of this country want you to do," Chente said. "Instead of directing your fury at the real source of the problem."

"But this is my 'hood — there's so much to be done here."

"There's much to be done everywhere. You need to broaden your experiences — find out what the rest of the world is all about."

"I understand, but I can't leave now; Lomas is everything, it's my family — it's my world."

Chente then placed a small globe in my hand and twirled it once.

"Okay, Luis, tell me: Where is Las Lomas on this globe?"

I gazed at the revolving sphere: the colors, the place names, the lines of mountain ridges and contours of islands and nations. I stopped the globe from its spin and found the United States. I turned it slightly to California, then cast down to a dot which claimed "Los Angeles." But there was no Lomas. No South San Gabriel.

"You see — Lomas is so tiny, nameless, it doesn't even warrant a dot," Chente explained. "The *vatos* defend a land which doesn't even belong to them. All the death — for what?"

I thought about the globe. Chente was right. A bigger world awaited me. But I also knew: Once you're in Las Lomas, you never get out — unless you're dead.

"Chente, I thank you for all you've done, but I can't leave," I said. "I have to try and reason with the homeboys, to stop the killings in my own way."

I spent a few nights pacing up and down the Hills, talking to the *vatos*; they listened and appeared as if maybe, just maybe, I made sense. When this happened, I wanted to stick it out. They would understand, I thought, if they were willing to learn, if they had the proper leadership.

One night in the fields, I stood among a line of dudes against a wall. Somebody passed around a Super Kool, a cigarette laced with "angel dust." Every one before me inhaled it; but when it came to me, I refused.

"Come on, *ése*, just a toke," said the guy in front of me.

"*Chale*, I don't go that way no more."

"Fuck it — you take it then," the guy said to someone next to me. But to our surprise he also refused. Then the next guy. And the next. Nobody wanted the Super Kool after me! As soon as somebody took a stand and turned it down, the others did the same.

I arrived at a point which alarmed even me, where I had no desire for the internal night, the buoyancy of letting go, the bliss of the void. I required more, a discipline as bulwark within which to hold all I valued, a shield against the onslaught.

I figured I could help the homeboys become warriors of a war worth fighting, convinced they would let go of the intoxications — even heroin — if they had something more meaningful in their lives; if only...

Just then, a 1955 Bel-Air came toward me. I recognized the car. It belonged to Enano. I looked closer at the occupants inside: Peaches, Topo, Enano and Fuzzy. Three of them had blue bandannas above fierce, dark faces. I smiled, gave them the Lomas hand sign. The bomb stopped in front of me.

Topo, the first one to initiate me into the 'hood, sat on the passenger side with a small-brim hat on his head. He looked straight at me, returned the smile, then picked up his hand to reveal a handgun.

My face flushed. For seconds, time stood still. For seconds, my mind raced, trying to figure out what was going on. Thoughts promenaded back and forth, telling me to drop down, to protect myself, at the same time denying everything in front of me.

Topo pulled the trigger and a familiar blast burst forth, sharp and furious. I fell in that instance, popping noises blasting about my ears.

I heard the car screech away while I crawled as fast as I could behind a brick wall. They would come back, I thought; if they knew I was alive, they would come back!

I leaned heavily against the wall, breathing hard and sweating *la gota gorda*. Through a window, I could see an illuminated painting of La Virgen de Guadalupe. Around me

were an array of trash cans. An alley cat emerged from the garbage — scared, as I was scared.

For a long time nothing transpired. Nobody came. The bomb did not return. There was just me, a mangy cat, a bench full of bullet holes and Mother Mary, perpetually smiling.

I slowly rose to my feet. None of the bullets had struck me. My eyes burned with fury, with sorrow. I wanted to yell, I wanted to cry — I didn't know what I wanted.

In thinking back, I realize if they'd wanted to kill me, they would have. These were warning shots, as if to say: "Next time you're dead!"

The homeboys tried to kill me, *vatos* whom I had known as brothers, with whom I scurried down muddy streets and slept next to in jail, with whom I partied and hung out in front of courthouses and the fields; they were dudes I fought for and with whom I shared a taste of *la carga*.

I would have died for them.

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

After San Pedro, I traveled to Chicago with Chente and a few others to attend a meeting with people from throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

The morning we arrived in the city, the skyline rose from the horizon, glittering in the sunlight, like an Emerald City, so magical and massive. Yet as we drove through it, Chicago struck me as dark and dirty, the brick buildings covered with black soot as the smoke and silt from steel mills, bucket shops and other industry slaughtered the sky and dusted the streets, alleys and gangways. Here was a city unlike any I had ever seen, another world, and it beckoned like books, like the passage to knowledge and the ripening spring of a new world; the city pulled me in, and although it would be another 12 years before I ended up there, it never let me go.

When I returned to Los Angeles, I moved to Boyle Heights and later to neighborhoods such as White Fence, Florence, South Pasa, La Colonia Watts and Gerahty Loma. I found work in foundries, refineries, steel mills and construction sites, which I would do for another seven years before pursuing the disciplines of journalism and literature.

I soon worked with community leaders who battled against police terror, labor issues, the rights of the undocumented, for tenant rights and decent education — they were welfare mothers, war veterans, trade union members, students and unemployed — a mixture of nationalities and colors, linked by an economic equality, a commonality of survival.

One day at the Aliso Village/Pico Gardens Housing Projects, where I organized among some of the most neglected youth in the city, I asked Camila Martínez to marry me.

In the summer of 1974, soon after I turned 20, Camila and I wed at the Guadalupe Church on Hazard Avenue: a traditional East L.A. wedding, complete with a lowrider caravan, fights and chair-throwing at the reception, and the bride and groom sneaking out in a beat-up bug for a honeymoon at a sleazy, crumbling motel where we ended up after running out of gas.

I began a new season of life. Intellect and body fused, I now yearned to contribute fully, embodied with conscious energy, to live a deliberate existence dedicated to a future humanity which might in complete freedom achieve the realization of its creative impulses, the totality of its potential faculties, without injustice, coercion, hunger and exploitation.

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

I'm at a *quinceñera* dance at the American Legion hall in San Gabriel, my cousin's, one of Tío Kiko's daughters. I'm older, married with a child, and dressed in plain shirt and pants, hair shortened, not much to show for what I'd been through only a short time earlier.

I step outside to take in some air. I lean against a parked sedan, looking at the stars which seem extraordinarily large and

bright this evening. Just then a short figure, wobbling, with a kind of limp, moves toward me. He has a blue beany cap over his head and a dark, hooded sweatshirt.

"You Chin....de Lomas," says the figure. I don't recognize him, not even the voice, which rasps as much as it slurs. No pangs of familiarity.

"I guess I am — but it's been a long time since anyone's called me that."

"You're going to die."

"What are you talking about?"

"You thought you killed me, but you didn't," the dude says, haltingly, measuring every word. "I took all your shanks...eight of them...right here."

The dude lifts up the sweatshirt. A ghastly number of scars traverse his torso. A plastic bag is strapped at his side, to hold his urine.

"You did this to me...look hard, you did this!"

"You got it wrong, Chava, it wasn't me."

"Sure — I've heard it all before. I know who did this...and you're going to pay."

From the sides emerge two other guys, healthy and strong, looking like street, although a lot younger than the both of us.

"Chava — listen," I say. "I heard about what happened that night. But I wasn't there. For some time now, I've been working my way out of that useless existence. Now I've found something to live for, bigger than you and me, bigger than Lomas and Sangra. You don't want me."

Chava gets closer, alcohol on his breath. I can see tears forming in his eyes.

"Lomas did this — somebody has to pay!" he yells while pulling off the beany cap, revealing a misshapen head with scattered slivers of hair. The scars on his body don't compare to those on his head and the side of his face; they're larger with indentations and purplish membranes.

"Look what you did to me. Somebody has to pay for this!" Chava repeats. He's so disturbed, I can see him pulling out a knife and stabbing me just to salve his pain. I look at the guys next to

me, and they strike me as too young and inexperienced to act. I keep talking.

"There's some things to fight for, some things to die for — but not this. Chava, you're alive. I feel for you, man, but you're alive. Don't waste the rest of your days with this hate. What's revenge? What can you get by getting to me? I'm the least of your enemies. It's time to let it go, it's time to go on with your life."

Chava begins to shudder, to utter something, a guttural sound rising to his throat, a hideous moan. I think he's trying to cry, but it's hard to tell. I don't know what to do, so I pull him close to me. He twists away, the dudes to the side look lost, not knowing their next move, unprepared for what follows. I again pull at Chava, and hold him. He breaks down, a flood of fermented rage seeping out of every pore.

"If I thought my life could cleanse you of the hurt, of the memory, I would open up my shirt and let you take it from me. But it won't — we're too much the same now, Chava. Let it all out, man...let it out."

I hold Chava as if he were cornmeal in my arms, then pity overwhelms me, this complicated affection which cuts across the clear-cut states of being we'd rather seek: Here's friend, here's enemy; here's sadness, here's happiness; here's right, here's wrong. Pity draws from all these opposing elements and courses through me like an uncooked stew, mixing and confusing the paradoxes, because now this man I once admired, if not revered, I once feared, if not hated, stands here, a fragment of the race, drunk, agonized, crushed, and I can't hate him any more; I can't see him as the manifestation of craziness and power he once possessed; he's a caricature, an apparition, but also more like me, capable of so much ache beneath the exterior of so much strength. Pity links us in a perverted way, transcending our veneers, joining us in our vulnerability, and at the same time distancing us from one another. I want to escape from Chava's tired, perplexed and tattered face, to run away from how something so beautiful, in its own way, can become so odious.

After an eternal minute, Chava pushes me away, wipes his face with a soiled sleeve, and then turns. The dudes next to us don't seem to know what to do but follow. I see Chava hobble

away, two confused teenagers at his side, and as he vanishes into a flicker of neon, I hear the final tempo of the crazy life leave my body, the last song before the dying, lapsing forever out of mind as Chava disappears, enveloped in flames breaking through the asphalt, wrested into the black heart of night.