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."

"Wait!" I yelled, while walking further back. I crouched low to the ground, then took off, jumped up and placed torn sneakers in the steel mesh. I made it over with a big thud.

Wiping the grass and dirt from my pants, I casually walked up to the ball on the ground, picked it up, and continued past Tino toward the courts.

"Hey Tino, what are you waiting for?"

The gusts proved no obstacle for a half-court game of B-ball, even as dark clouds smothered the sky.

Boy voices interspersed with ball cracking on asphalt. Tino's lanky figure seemed to float across the court, as if he had wings under his thin arms. Just then, a black-and-white squad car cruised down the street. A searchlight sprayed across the school yard. The vehicle slowed to a halt. The light shone toward the courts and caught Tino in mid-flight of a lay-up.

The dribbling and laughter stopped.

"All right, this is the sheriff's," a voice commanded. Two deputies stood by the fence, batons and flashlights in hand.

"Let's get out of here," Tino responded.

"What do you mean?" I countered. "Why don't we just stay here?"

"You nuts! We trespassing, man," Tino replied. "When they get a hold of us, they going to beat the crap out of us."

"Are you sure?"

"I know, believe me, I know."

"So where do we go?"

By then one of the deputies shouted back: "You boys get over here by the fence — now!"

But Tino dropped the ball and ran. I heard the deputies yell for Tino to stop. One of them began climbing the fence. I decided to take off too.

It never stopped, this running. We were constant prey, and the hunters soon became big blurs: the police, the gangs, the junkies, the dudes on Garvey Boulevard who took our money, all smudged into one. Sometimes they were teachers who jumped on us Mexicans as if we were born with a hideous stain. We were always afraid. Always running.

Tino and I raced toward the dark boxes called classrooms. The rooms lay there, hauntingly still without the voices of children, the commands of irate teachers or the clapping sounds of books as they were closed. The rooms were empty, forbidden places at night. We scurried around the structures toward a courtyard filled with benches next to the cafeteria building.

Tino hopped on a bench, then pulled himself over a high fence. He walked a foot or two on top of it, stopped, and proceeded to climb over to the cafeteria's rooftop. I looked over my shoulder. The deputies weren't far behind, their guns drawn. I grabbed hold of the fence on the side of the cafeteria. I looked up and saw Tino's perspiring face over the roof's edge, his arm extended down toward me.

I tried to climb up, my feet dangling. But then a firm hand seized a foot and pulled at it.

"They got me!" I yelled.

Tino looked below. A deputy spied the boy and called out: "Get down here...you *greaser!*"

Tino straightened up and disappeared. I heard a flood of footsteps on the roof — then a crash. Soon an awful calm covered us.

"Tino!" I cried out.

A deputy restrained me as the other one climbed onto the roof. He stopped at a skylight, jagged edges on one of its sides. Shining a flashlight inside the building, the officer spotted Tino's misshapen body on the floor, sprinkled over with shards of glass.

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After the aborted trip to Mexico, a poverty agency helped our family find a rented place within our means: a square, one-bedroom clapboard house on La Presa Street in an unincorporated part of the county called South San Gabriel.

The living room served as sleeping quarters for my mom, sisters and dad. My brother and I had the only bedroom to ourselves, along with piles of stuffed boxes. On hot nights, Rano

and I slept outside under the openness of the desert sky. It was similar to Watts, but at least it was a home of our own again.

Incorporated towns like Monterey Park, Rosemead and Montebello surrounded South San Gabriel. The area was located in the San Gabriel Valley, which for years consisted of incipient industry, farmland and migrant camps until Los Angeles stretched out fingers of suburban sprawl to the furthest reaches of the valley.

There used to be a corn field not far away from our house on La Presa Street. I remember playing there with my friends. Once, though, a farmer came at us with a loaded shotgun while we swerved and pivoted out of his range through the stalks of corn.

By the early 1970s, this area was torn up and office buildings, and parking lots replaced the rows of stalks which once swayed free in the wind, which once held our imaginations afire with war play, clod-throwing contests, and majestic worlds of conquest. By then, with the farmlands and many of the Mexicans of Klingerman Street removed, the City of Rosemead annexed this part of South San Gabriel and it ceased being unwanted county territory.

Unincorporated county territory was generally where the poorest people lived, the old barrios, which for the most part didn't belong to any city because nobody wanted them.

Most of Watts and a large section of East Los Angeles were unincorporated county territory. Sometimes they had no sewage system or paved roads. They included hills, ravines and hollows. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department — known as the most brutal of the local law enforcement agencies — policed these areas.

In the mid-60s, South San Gabriel included both flat areas and what we called the Hills, or *Las Lomas*. The Hills were made up of tiny houses patched together by weathered wood, chicken wire and creaking porches that buckled and swayed like a boat on an open sea. Cadavers of rusted cars filled up yellowed yards. Torn sofas, broken lamps and threadless tires were strewn about in vacant lots. The roads turned and twisted every which way; they

were dusty, curbless streets that might have served as goat trails at one time. Coming down one of the dirt roads, you could encounter chickens, wild dogs or pigs. Some back yards held the wood-and-wire sheds of fighting cocks, or the copper pipings of a backyard still.

The Hills were unseen. Unvisited. Cars flew past north of here on the San Bernardino Freeway into Los Angeles, but most of the drivers never imagined such a place existed, a place you could have found in the Ozarks or the hills of Tijuana.

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

Bruja, Bruja.

Whispers of morning, whispers of night, children without faces tormenting with a word, descending like a torrent of leaves, like the blaze of dawn. A never-ending litany.

Bruja, Bruja.

The conspiracy of voices greets the old woman who lives in an almost toppled, unpainted house next door; her back yard dense with overgrown weeds.

They say she is a witch. The children hide in bushes or behind fences and taunt her as she lumbers outside to put out trash or water her grassless yard.

"*¡Bruja, Bruja!*"

They sling dirt clods at her feet, tease her to tears, dare her to strike away at this cancer of childhood that makes her last days alone in this clapboard cottage feel like the hell fires she herself condemns the voices to.

The old woman grabs a trash-can lid or a broom and pursues the children who scamper out of the way, laughing and jeering as she creaks in her bones.

One Halloween, the woman offers the neighborhood children cookies — but the talk is she made them with cyanide. Nobody eats the cookies, but soon all the cats in the neighborhood vanish, and nobody knows why.

One morning, uniformed men bust into the old woman's house. Sheriff's deputies pull her from out of the debris-strewn

guts of the wood-shingle dwelling; the woman never cleaned it. They take the woman away, never to come back.

It turns out she had been babysitting three small children when, for an unknown reason, the kids' parents never came back for them. The woman ran out of food. One day, trash collectors find three children in a playpen next to the morning garbage.

Angry voices close in on the woman's house after her removal. A few kids throw rocks at the windows, the glass falling like raindrops skewing down a marble wall. Somebody pours gasoline on the splintered porch. Somebody tosses a twirled newspaper lit at the top. Next door, the glow washes across faces as we observe the house crackle and tumble in a craze of flames.

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The Mexicans who came to live in the San Gabriel Valley worked the fields, the railroads or in the encroaching industry which soon dotted the valley. Their barrios had names like *El Jardín* (the garden), *Monte Flores* (mountain flowers), *Canta Ranas* (singing frogs — named for the watery inhabitants of a local swamp), *Bolen* (a Spanish corruption of Baldwin Park), or *La Puente* (the bridge).

Las Lomas was an old barrio whose main rivals were to the west, in East Los Angeles, or the north in another barrio called *Sangra*.

Sangra was a corruption of San Gabriel, an incorporated city built around one of the Spanish Missions founded by Father Junípero Serra in the 1700s. A major Indian village, Yang Na, was once situated here. Later when the railroads linked many of the missions, they brought in Mexican laborers who became the first barrio residents.

It didn't take long for middle-income Anglos, primarily fleeing L.A.'s inner-city as it filled up with people of color, to move in and around these barrios and create the first suburbs. New tracts of homes suddenly appeared on previously empty space or by displacing the barrios. In later years, large

numbers of Asians from Japan, Korea and Taiwan also moved into the area. Sections of Monterey Park and even San Gabriel became known as Little Japans or Chinatowns. It wasn't hard to find an unpaved road cluttered with shacks on one block while a row of stucco townhouses graced another.

The barrios which weren't incorporated, including Las Lomas,, became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion which the local media, generally controlled by suburban whites, labeled havens of crime.

For years, nobody ventured into Las Lomas unless they had to be there. Buses refused to provide residents there any service. Sheriff's deputies entered it with full firepower and ample backup, hardly ever alone.

One of the county's most devastating increases in gang activity centered on Las Lomas.

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We didn't call ourselves gangs. We called ourselves clubs or *clicas*. In the back lot of the local elementary school, about a year after Tino's death, five of us gathered in the grass and created a club — "Thee Impersonations," the "Thee" being an old English usage that other clubs would adopt because it made everything sound classier, nobler, *badder*. It was something to belong to — something that was ours. We weren't in boy scouts, in sports teams or camping groups. Thee Impersonations is how we wove something out of the threads of nothing.

"We all taking a pledge," Miguel Robles said. "A pledge to be for each other. To stand up for the *clica*. Thee Impersonations will never let you down. Don't ever let Thee Impersonations down."

Miguel was 11 years old like the rest of us. Dark, curly-haired and good-looking, he was also sharp in running, baseball and schoolwork — and a leader. Miguel was not prone to loudness or needless talking, but we knew he was the best among us. We made him president of our club.

Thee Impersonations was born of necessity. It started one day at the school during lunch break. A few of us guys were standing around talking to some girls — girls we were beginning to see as women. They had makeup and short skirts. They had teased hair and menstruations. They grew breasts. They were no longer Yolanda, Guadalupe or María — they were Yoli, Lupe and Mari.

Some of the boys were still in grass-stained jeans with knee patches and had only begun getting uncontrollable hard-ons. The girls flowered over the summer, and it looked near impossible for some of us to catch up.

Older dudes from junior high school, or even some who didn't go to school, would come to the school and give us chilled looks as they scoped out the young women.

That day, a caravan of low-scraping cars slow-dragged in front of the school. A crew of mean-looking *vatos* piled out, armed with chains, bats, metal pipes and zip guns.

"Thee Mystics rule," one of them yelled from the other side of the school fence.

Thee Mystics were a tough up-and-coming group. They fired their rigged .22s at the school and broke a couple of windows with stones. They rammed through the gate and front entrances. Several not-so-swift dudes who stood in their way got beat. Even teachers ran for cover. Terror filled everyone's eyes.

I froze as the head-stomping came dangerously my way. But I was also intrigued. I wanted this power. I wanted to be able to bring a whole school to its knees and even make teachers squirm. All my school life until then had been poised against me: telling me what to be, what to say, how to say it. I was a broken boy, shy and fearful. I wanted what Thee Mystics had; I wanted the power to hurt somebody.

Police sirens broke the spell. Dudes scattered in all directions. But Thee Mystics had done their damage. They had left their mark on the school — and on me.

Miguel and the rest of us started Thee Impersonations because we needed protection. There were other clubs popping up all over,

many challenging anybody who wasn't into anything. All of a sudden every dude had to claim a clique.

Some of these clubs included Thee Ravens, The Superiors, Latin Legions, Thee Imitations, Los Santos and Chug-a-lug (a curious mix of Anglo and Mexican dudes). These were the "Southside" clubs (for South San Gabriel). The biggest on the Southside then were Thee Illusions and their allies: Thee Mystics.

Over in San Gabriel, other cliques were formed such as Thee Regents, The Chancellors, Little Gents, The Intruders and Little Jesters.

Most of the clubs began quite innocently. Maybe they were a team of guys for friendly football. Sometimes they were set up for trips to the beach or the mountains. But some became more organized. They obtained jackets, with their own colors, and identification cards. Later a few of the cliques became car clubs, who invested what little they had in bouncing lowriders, street-wise "shorts," splashed with colors, which cruised the main drags of local barrios or the main cruising spot we called *the boulevard*: Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles.

Then also some of the clubs metamorphosed into something more unpredictable, more encompassing. Something more deadly.

Junior high school became the turning point.

After grammar school, I ended up going to Richard Garvey Intermediate School. My father had gotten a job as a "laboratory technician" at a Los Angeles community college. So we moved into a larger, two-bedroom place in territory which stood between the two major barrios: *Las Lomas* and *Sangra*. This meant I had to go to Garvey.

In the mid-1960s, the students at Garvey had some of the worst academic scores in the state. Most of the time, there were no pencils or paper. Books were discards from other suburban schools where the well-off students turned up. The kids who lived in the Hills found their way into Garvey. And for half of them, the school

was the end of the line: It had more than a 50-percent dropout rate among Mexicans before they even got to high school.

There were only a couple of Impersonations who made it there. Miguel Robles and the others ended up in another school. Garvey was Illusions and Mystics territory. I was on my own.

Again the first thing I noticed were some of the girls. The ones from the Hills weren't just blossoming women, though; they were already hardened, sophisticated. Some of them called themselves *cholas*. They had long, teased hair, often peroxided black or red. They had heavy makeup, skirts which hugged their behinds, and they were all the time fighting, including with guys. The cholas laughed a lot and knew how to open up to every situation. They talked back, talked loud and talked tough. And they knew how to dance.

A few East L.A. people who moved into the Hills brought the East L.A. style with them. There were federally-subsidized housing projects not far from here called Maravilla. It was so-named in the 1920s when Los Angeles city officials rebuilt the downtown area and got rid of the Mexicans in the inner core by offering land on the far outreaches of town for a dollar. When the Mexicans got wind of this they exclaimed "¡*Qué Maravilla*!" — what a marvel! — and the name took.

My first love at 12 years old was a girl from Maravilla named Elena, a chola, who came to Garvey all *prendida*. She didn't just know how to kiss, but how to take my hand through sections of her body and teach a pre-teen something of his own budding sexuality.

At Garvey, the dudes began to sport cholo attire: the baggy starched pants and suspenders over white T-shirts, the flannel shirts clipped only from the top button, the bandannas and small brim hats. It was hip. It was different. And it was what the cholas liked.

This is what I remember of junior high: Cholas who walked up the stairs in their tight skirts, revealing everything, and looked down at us, smiling at their power. Bloody Kotexes on the hallway floor. Gang graffiti on every available space of wall. Fires which flared from restroom trash bins. Fights every

day, including after school on the alley off Jackson Avenue. Dudes who sold and took drugs, mostly downers and *yesca*, but sometimes heroin which a couple of dudes shot up in the boys' room while their "homeys" kept a lookout.

Yet most of the Mexican girls weren't cholas; their families still had strong reins on many of them. Mexicans were mostly traditional and Catholic. Fathers, mothers or older brothers would drop off these girls and come get them after school so no perceived harm would come their way.

One of them was Socorro, from Mexico, who was straight and proper, and tried to stop me from being a cholo. I asked her to become my girlfriend when word got around she liked me and Elena had left me for Ratón, a down dude from the Hills.

"They're trash," Socorro would often say in Spanish about the *cholillos*. "If you keep hanging out with them, you can say goodby to me forever."

I liked her, but we didn't last too long as a couple. I didn't want to be straight and proper. My next girlfriend was Marina, a girl from Lomas who had one of the highest, peroxided teases on her head with blonde streaks that accentuated her dark face.

It was at Marina's urging that I obtained my first tattoo. A dude named Angel charged $5 for an hour's work beneath the school's bleachers. They were crude, unadorned, hand-etchings. Angel used sewing needles, sterilized by placing them over a match flame. He then tied a tight wound of sewing thread on the end. Enough of the needle's point stuck out to penetrate below the skin. Angel dipped the needle into a bottle of black India ink, allowing the thread to soak it up. Then he punctured the skin with quick up and down motions, filling the tiny holes with ink from the thread.

I got the tattoo on my upper right arm. It was an outline of a cross beneath the words "*Mi Vida Loca.*"

We drove teachers nuts at Garvey. A number of them were sent home with nervous breakdowns. We went through three teachers and five substitutes in my home room my first year at the school.

One of my teachers was a Cuban refugee named Mr. Enríquez. We made him wish he never left the island. He could hardly speak English. And when he spoke Spanish, it was a sure sign we were in trouble.

Every morning Mr. Enríquez entered the class and got bombarded with spit balls and jelly beans. Sometimes he'd turn around to write something on the chalk board and everyone would drop their books all at once.

Often you could find Mr. Enríquez with his head on his desk, cursing into folded arms.

Then there was the science teacher, Mrs. Krieger. She must have been 80 years old or more. It took her half the class period to walk up the stairs and down the hall to her classroom. By that time most of the class was gone. Once, as she creaked around to write something on the chalkboard, we threw her rain-stained, beat-up encyclopedias, which were as ancient as she was, out the windows. Then we threw out the desks and chairs. Before long, most of Mrs. Krieger's classroom was scattered across the front lawn — and she didn't realize it until a school official ran puffing up the stairs to investigate what the hell was going on.

There were many good teachers, but some of the others appeared to be misfits, such as the gym instructor who looked like a refugee from the Marines. He shouted commands even in normal conversation, was always dressed in shorts and never failed to have a stainless steel whistle hanging from his bull-neck. The shop teacher was Mr. Stone, who acted exactly as if he were carved out of a thick piece of gray granite. He dealt with us harshly, always on his guard. But one day we broke through his defenses.

The shop class was inside an old bungalow at the back of the school. The front door had "Las Lomas" spray-painted on the outside followed by the words *Con Safos*, the cholo term that signified nobody should mess with this — if they valued their life. Mr. Stone was inside showing our class how to cut a piece of wood on a rotary saw.

Then Elías, one of the *vatitos*, started a racket from the back of the room. Mr. Stone turned around to discipline him. But he forgot to turn off the saw. It sliced away at the board . . . then his finger. Man, what a mess! Mr. Stone turned a sickening pale color as soon as he realized what had happened.

"God damn it!" he yelled, "God damn it!" as his face wrinkled with every throb of pain.

An ambulance came and rushed Mr. Stone away. School officials shoved everyone else into another classroom until they could hold meetings to determine who to blame. But Elías and I sneaked out and returned to the wood shop bungalow. The door was still open. We foraged through the piles of sawdust and wood pieces and found Mr. Stone's finger. It looked purplish with dried blood and bone chips on one end. Elías carefully placed it inside an empty cigar box.

For weeks we kept the finger in Elías' locker. He'd bring it out to scare some of the girls and to show it off to incoming students until it shriveled away, like a dried sliver of old fruit.

☥ ☥ ☥

"You can't be in a fire and not get burned."

This was my father's response when he heard of the trouble I was getting into at school. He was a philosopher. He didn't get angry or hit me. That he left to my mother. He had these lines, these cuts of wisdom, phrases and syllables, which swept through me, sometimes even making sense. I had to deal with him at that level, with my brains. I had to justify in words, with ideas, all my actions — no matter how insane. Most of the time I couldn't.

Mama was heat. Mama was turned-around leather belts and wailing choruses of Mary-Mother-of-Jesus. She was the penetrating emotion that came at you through her eyes, the mother-guilt, the one who birthed me, who suffered through the contractions and diaper changes and all my small hurts and fears. For her, dealing with school trouble or risking my

life was nothing for discourse, nothing to debate. She went through all this hell and more to have me — I'd better do what she said!

Mama hated the *cholos*. They reminded her of the rowdies on the border who fought all the time, talked that *caló* slang, drank mescal, smoked marijuana and left scores of women with babies bursting out of their bodies.

To see me become like them made her sick, made her cringe and cry and curse. Mama reminded us how she'd seen so much alcoholism, so much weed-madness, and she prohibited anything with alcohol in the house, even beer. I later learned this rage came from how Mama's father treated her siblings and her mother, how in drunken rages he'd hit her mom and drag her through the house by the hair.

The school informed my parents I had been wreaking havoc with a number of other young boys. I was to be part of a special class of troublemakers. We would be isolated from the rest of the school population and forced to pick up trash and clean graffiti during the rest of the school year.

"Mrs. Rodríguez, your son is too smart for this," the vice-principal told Mama. "We think he's got a lot of potential. But his behavior is atrocious. There's no excuse. We're sad to inform you of our decision."

They also told her the next time I cut class or even made a feint toward trouble, I'd be expelled. After the phone call, my mom lay on her bed, shaking her head while sobbing in-between bursts of how God had cursed her for some sin, how I was the devil incarnate, a plague, testing her in this brief tenure on earth.

My dad's solution was to keep me home after school. Grounded. Yeah, sure. I was 13 years old already. Already tattooed. Already sexually involved. Already into drugs. In the middle of the night I snuck out through the window and worked my way to the Hills.

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At 16 years old, Rano turned out much better than me, much better than anyone could have envisioned during the time he was a foul-faced boy in Watts.

When we moved to South San Gabriel, a Mrs. Snelling took a liking to Rano. The teacher helped him skip grades to make up for the times he was pushed back in those classes with the retarded children.

Mrs. Snelling saw talent in Rano, a spark of actor during the school's thespian activities. She even had him play the lead in a class play. He also showed some facility with music. And he was good in sports.

He picked up the bass guitar and played for a number of garage bands. He was getting trophies in track-and-field events, in gymnastic meets and later in karate tournaments.

So when I was at Garvey, he was in high school being the good kid, the Mexican exception, the barrio success story — my supposed model. Soon he stopped being Rano or even José. One day he became Joe.

My brother and I were moving away from each other. Our tastes, our friends, our interests, were miles apart. Yet there were a few outstanding incidents I fondly remember in relationship to my brother, incidents which despite their displays of closeness failed to breach the distance which would later lie between us.

When I was nine, for example, my brother was my protector. He took on all the big dudes, the bullies on corners, the ones who believed themselves better than us. Being a good fighter transformed him overnight. He was somebody who some feared, some looked up to. Then he developed skills for racing and high-jumping. This led to running track and he did well, dusting all the competition.

I didn't own any talents. I was lousy in sports. I couldn't catch baseballs or footballs. And I constantly tripped when I ran or jumped. When kids picked players for basketball games, I was the last one they chose. The one time I inadvertently hit a home run during a game at school — I didn't

mean to do it — I ended up crying while running around the bases because I didn't know how else to react to the cheers, the excitement, directed at something I did. It just couldn't be me.

But Rano had enemies too. There were two Mexican kids who were jealous of him. They were his age, three years older than me. One was named Eddie Gómez, the other Ricky Corral. One time they cornered me outside the school.

"You José's brother," Eddie said.

I didn't say anything.

"Wha's the matter? Can't talk?"

"Oh, he can talk all right," Ricky chimed in. "He acting the *pendejo* because his brother thinks he so bad. Well, he ain't shit. He can't even run."

"Yea, José's just a *lambiche*, a kiss ass," Eddie responded. "They give him those ribbons and stuff because he cheats."

"That's not true," I finally answered. "My brother can beat anybody."

"Oh, you saying he can beat me," Eddie countered.

"Sure sounds like he said that," Ricky added.

"I'm only saying that when he wins those ribbons, *está derecho*," I said.

"It sounds to me like you saying he better than me," Eddie said.

"Is that what you saying, man?" Ricky demanded. "Com' on — is that what you saying?"

I turned around, and beneath my breath, mumbled something about how I didn't have time to argue with them. I shouldn't have done that.

"What'd you say?" Eddie said.

"I think he called you a punk," Ricky agitated.

"You call me a punk, man?" Eddie turned me around. I denied it.

"I heard him, dude. He say you are a punk-ass *puto*," Ricky continued to exhort.

The fist came at me so fast, I don't even recall how Eddie looked when he threw it. I found myself on the ground. Others

in the school had gathered around by then. When a few saw it was me, they knew it was going to be a slaughter.

I rose to my feet — my cheek had turned swollen and blue. I tried to hit Eddie, but he backed up real smooth and hit me again. Ricky egged him on, I could hear the excitement in his voice.

I lay on the ground, defeated. Teachers came and chased the boys out. But before Eddie and Ricky left they yelled back: "José ain't nothing, man. You ain't nothing."

Anger flowed through me, but also humiliation. It hurt so deep I didn't even feel the fracture in my jaw, the displacement which would later give me a disjointed, lopsided and protruding chin. It became my mark.

Later when I told Rano what happened, he looked at me and shook his head.

"You didn't have to defend me to those dudes," he said. "They're assholes. They ain't worth it."

I looked at him and told him something I never, ever told him again.

"I did it because I love you."

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

Along the spine of the night, through the shrubbery, on the coarse roads, past the peeling shacks, past the walls filled with the stylized writing that proclaimed our existence, past La India's shed where boys discovered the secret of thighs, in the din of whispers, past Berta's garden of herbs and midnight incantations, past the Japo's liquor store, past the empty lots scattered around the barrio we called "the fields," overlooking Nina's house, pretty Nina, who lavished our dreams, there you'd find the newest and strongest clique. There you'd find the Animal Tribe.

We lingered in the dust: Clavo, Wilo, Chicharrón and I. We walked through these streets in pairs with a rhythm, slow, like a *bolero*. I had on a T-shirt, cut off at the shoulders, with "The Animal Tribe" in old English lettering on the back written

in shoe polish and a long pair of county-jail pants, called "counties," over a couple of black Tijuana sandals.

Clavo, Wilo, Chicharrón and I. We picked up cigarettes at *la marqueta*. We strutted, like soldiers, and stopped for a while to look into the small, store-front church where Spanish-speaking holy rollers squirmed and shouted in their seats.

Clavo, Wilo, Chicharrón and I. We were *los cuatro del barrio*, the younger dudes, 13 and 14, who got swept up in the fast, tumultuous changes between the cliques and clubs in the area. The Animal Tribe was taking over everything: It did it through war, through a reputation, through the strong leadership of two key families: the López brothers and the Domínguezes.

The five López brothers got hooked up with the two Domínguez brothers and their four sisters. Lydia Domínguez ended up marrying Joaquín López, the Tribe's president, and this continued to pull the various groups into one, huge clique.

Thee Illusions and Mystics were gone. The other clubs also disappeared as The Animal Tribe consolidated them in as well. Even Thee Impersonations vanished; Miguel Robles joined the Tribe and later became one of its generals.

The Tribe, although based in the Hills, pulled in dudes from all over South San Gabriel, even from areas east of the Hills like Muscatel Street, Bartlett Street and Earle Avenue which had long-running feuds with Las Lomas.

Joaquín López was the leader, *el mero chingón*, as we'd say. Clavo, Wilo, Chicharrón and I were the peewees, the youngest set, who stood outside the Tribe meetings held in the fields or in the baseball diamond of Garvey Park, looking in until we could collect more experience and participate wholly with the others. Sometimes we were allowed to witness "the line." This is where new initiates were forced to run through two rows of Tribe members, absorbing a storm of fists and kicks. Inevitably, somebody used brass knuckles and some dude would end up with cracked ribs.

We tried being "the Southside Boys" for a short time while we were in Garvey school, getting brown-and-gold jackets and crashing parties and dances. But we got into trouble with dudes

from Sangra who objected to us embroidering the term "South Sangra" on the jackets.

"There's only one Sangra," Chava from the Sangra Diablos told us one night at a *quinceñera*. He had a small brim hat and leaned on a silver-inlaid, porcelain-tipped mahogany cane. He looked Asian, like Fuji in the movies.

Next to him were Tutti, Negro and Worm, with scars and tattoos on their arms and faces, and extra-baggy pants and muscled torsos. Then they chased us down a number of streets and alleys. It was the death of the Southside Boys.

Miguel got us banging with The Tribe. It was during a dance at Garvey Park. The gym was opened one weekend for the local teenagers. Lowrider cars filled the front parking lot and side streets. Girls from barrios all over converged on the bungalow-type gym. That night I noticed there weren't the usual knots here and there of different club members with their own unique jackets and colors. Only a few still carried proud their old club insignias, including the few of us in the Southside Boys.

"*¿Qué hubo, ése?*" Miguel greeted as he walked up to me. It had been about two years since we were partners in Thee Impersonations. But this time he had on a black jacket with gold lettering on the back that read: The Animal Tribe.

I introduced him to the remaining Southside Boys. Miguel was kind, courteous, and invited us into the dance for free: This was a Tribe party; we were his guests.

Inside, the place was almost pitch black and reeked of cigarette and marijuana smoke. Although no alcoholic beverages were allowed, I could see outlines of dudes and their girlfriends drinking from bottles of cheap wine they had sneaked in.

A local band played some mean sounds, one of a number of street bands which were popping up all over the valley and east side of the county.

"I heard about what happened to you guys at Lola's *quinceñera*," Miguel said. "The old *veteranos* from Sangra, you see, are forcing all the cliques over there to claim their barrio.

There's no more Regents or Chancellors or Little Gents. They in Sangra or they dead."

"So why they messing with us?" Wilo asked. "We ain't in their barrio."

"You ain't in Lomas either, man," Miguel said. "That's the problem. You guys live in between the two largest 'hoods. You got to figure out which one to claim or you're going to get fucked by both of them."

"What do you say we do, Miguel?" Chicharrón asked.

"There's the Tribe, man. It's the one that's taking over all the south side cliques."

"I don't know, I mean, we still don't live in the Hills," I replied. "We could still get jumped."

"I'm telling you there's no choice," Miguel continued. "You wanta live, you wanta breathe air, you got to be in the Tribe man. *De verotas, ése.*"

That night, we took off our "Southside Boys" jackets and met with Joaquín, his brothers Ernie and Gregorio, and a few other dudes and *rucas* from the Tribe. They were in the darkest part of the park, beyond the gym dance area. Some of them had containers with pills they called *colies* or *blancas* (*colies* was short for *coloradas*, which meant "reds" or downers; *blancas* stood for "whites," uppers).

Miguel talked to Joaquín and Ernie separately for a while about us coming in. Gregorio and the others stayed with us. I looked over to one side where I thought I heard a girl's muffled voice. There seemed to be a figure on top of somebody, going up and down on a body laid out on the ground, moaning with every motion.

Gregorio eyed me. Just staring. Finally he spoke: "She's being initiated into the Tribe."

Then he laughed.

CHAPTER THREE

"You *cholos* have great stories about climbing fences."
— a barrio boxing coach

The Hills blistered below a haze of sun and smog. Mothers with wet strands of hair across their foreheads flung wash up to dry on weathered lines. Sweat-drenched men lay on their backs in the gravel of alleys, beneath broken-down cars propped up on cinder blocks. *Charrangas* and *corridos* splashed out of open windows.

Suddenly from over a hill, an ice cream truck raced by with packs of children running beside it. A hurried version of "Old McDonald Had A Farm" chimed through a speaker bolted on the truck's roof. The truck stopped long enough for somebody to toss out dozens of sidewalk sundaes, tootie-fruities and half-and-half bars to the children who gathered around, thrusting up small, dirt-caked hands that blossomed open as their shrieks blended with laughter.

Then the truck's transmission gears growled as it continued up the slope, whipped around a corner and passed a few of us *vatos* assembled on a field off Toll Drive. We looked over toward the echoes of the burdensome chimes, the slip and boom of the clutch and rasp of gears as the ice cream truck entered the dead-end streets and curves of Las Lomas.

"*Orale, ése, ¿qué está pasando?*" a dude named Little Man asked while passing a bottle of Tokay wine to Clavo.

"It's Toots and the *gaba*, you know, Axel," Clavo replied. "They just stole an ice cream truck on Portrero Grande Drive."

"¡*Qué cábula*!" Little Man said. "They sure is crazy."

We continued to talk and drink until the day melted into night.

Little Man and one of the López brothers, Fernie, all Tribe, were there in the field with me and my *camaradas* Clavo, Chicharrón, and Wilo. The four of us were so often together that