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

the list of our names became a litany. We spray-painted our *placas* on the walls, followed by AT for Animal Tribe or SSG for South San Gabriel.

Everyone called me Chin because of my protruding jawbone. I had it tattooed on my ankle.

We sat around a small roasting pit Chicharrón made from branches and newspaper. Around us were ruins, remains of a home which had been condemned and later ravaged by fire. We assembled inside the old cement foundation with its scattered sections of brick and concrete walls splattered with markings and soot with rusted re-enforcing bars protruding from stone blocks.

We furnished the lot with beat-up couches and discarded sofas. Somebody hung plastic from a remaining cinder-block wall to a low branch so homeboys could sleep there — and miss most of any rain — when there was nowhere else to go. It was really a vacant lot but we called all such lots "the fields."

Even as we talked, there was Noodles, a wino and old *tecato*, crashed out on the sofa.

"Get up Noodles, time for some *refín*," Chicharrón exclaimed as he placed stolen hot dogs and buns on the fire. Wilo threw a dirt clod at the sofa and Noodles mumbled some incoherent words.

"*Orale*, leave the *vato* alone, *ése*," Little Man said.

But Noodles got up, spittle dripping from his mouth.

"Hey *ése*, Noodles is awake, and man is he pissed," Wilo said.

"How can you tell?" Chicharrón asked.

"When he moves fast and you can't understand what he's saying, then he's pissed," Wilo answered. "When he moves slow and you still can't understand what he's saying, he's all right."

Noodles staggered toward us, his arms flailing, as if boxing — huffing, puffing and dropping mucus from his nose.

"Get the hell out of here, *pinche*," Wilo said as he stood up and pushed the wino aside.

"You thinks youse are tuss dues...you ain't so tuss," Noodles said, throwing sloppy left hooks and uppercuts into the air.

Wilo placed his hand over Noodles' head, whose wiry body looked like a strand from a dirty mop. Wilo was also thin and slippery. The rest of us laughed and laughed at the two *flaquillos* goofing around.

"Ah leave the *vato* alone, homeboy," Clavo suggested. "Let's break out another bottle."

As we cooked, shared wine and told stories of *jainas* and the little conquests, of fights for honor, homeys and the 'hood, a gray Mercury sedan with its headlights turned off crept up the road. Wilo was the closest up the slope to the street. He looked over at the Mercury, then frowned.

"Anybody recognize the *ranfla*?" Wilo inquired.

"*Chale*," Chicharrón responded. "It looks too funky to be gang-bangers."

"Unless that's what they want it to look like."

Wilo moved up the slope from the field, followed by Clavo, Chicharrón and Little Man. Fernie stayed back with Noodles and me. Wilo and Clavo were the first ones to hit the street as the Mercury delayed a turn around a curve.

Clavo moved to one side of the Mercury, its occupants covered in darkness. He stretched out his arms and yelled out: "Here stand The Animal Tribe — ¡*y qué*!"

The Mercury stopped. A shadow stepped out of a bashed-in side door, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Another shadow pushed an automatic rifle out the side window.

"Sangra Diablos! ¡*Qué rifa*!" the dude with the shotgun yelled out. Then a blast snapped at the night air.

Wilo and Chicharrón fell back down the slope. Automatic gunfire followed them as they rolled in the dirt. The bullets skimmed off tree branches, knocked over trash cans and ricocheted off walls. Wilo ended up face-down; Chicharrón landed on his butt. Noodles knelt behind the sofa, whimpering. The cracking sounds stopped. The Mercury sped off, its tires throwing up dirt and pebbles behind it.

I could see the car speeding down another hill. I ran up the slope, slipping and sliding toward the road. On the street, Little Man kneeled over Clavo, who lay sprawled on the ground and trembling. Half of Clavo's face was shot full of pellets, countless black, steaming round holes; his eye dripping into the dirt.

Wilo and the others climbed up and rushed up to Little Man. Fernie began jumping up and down like he had been jolted with lightning, letting out *gritos*. I kept looking at Clavo's face, thinking something stupid like how he was such a dummy, always taking chances, all the time being "the dude." Then I squatted on the ground, closed my eyelid and let a tear stream down the side of my face.

Windows flung upwards. Doors were pushed aside. People bolted out of their homes. Mothers cursed in Spanish from behind weather-beaten picket fences.

As Clavo was taken to the hospital, Fernie talked about getting all the Tribe together, about meeting later that night, about guns and warfare and "*ya estuvo*" — that's it. A war, fought for generations between Lomas and Sangra, flared up again.

Later, as I walked down the hills on the way back home, sirens tore across the sky and a sheriff's helicopter hovered nearby, beaming a spotlight across shacks and brush, over every hole and crevice of the neighborhood.

I mounted a fence which wound around a dirt embankment, hoping to get out of the helicopter's sights. I looked over the other side and there overturned at the bottom of the gully, to be ravaged by scavengers for parts, to be another barrio monument, lay an ice cream truck.

* * *

A few years after our family moved to the L.A. area, other family members followed: cousins, aunts, uncles, grandmothers. Members of my mother's family in particular stayed with us

for various periods and some later found work and their own places to live. I remember my cousins Lilo, Rafas, Bune, Miguelito, Alfonso and La Maye — later Gloria, Ninfa and her Anglo husband (both of whom later died in an auto accident while on a highway in Arizona). Then Tío Kiko, his wife Agustina and their four children decided to stay and relocate to an apartment on Muscatel Street.

And there was Tía Chucha, the one everyone called crazy. Oh sure, she once ran out naked to catch a postman with a letter that didn't belong to us. I mean she had this annoying habit of boarding city buses and singing at the top of her voice — one bus driver even refused to go on until she got off. But crazy? To me, she was the wisp of the wind's freedom, a music-maker, who often wrote song lyrics, told stories and recited dirty jokes. She would come unexpected — and often uninvited — and burst into our home with a guitar across her back and a bag full of presents, including homemade colognes and perfumes that smelled something like rotting fish at the tuna cannery.

I secretly admired Tía Chucha, the most creative influence in my childhood, while others talked holier-than-thou about her irreverence, her eccentricities, as if the craziness didn't threaten to thunder out of any of us at one time or another.

But the first one of the family I remember coming to visit us in South San Gabriel was my cousin Pancho. I was about 10 years old, Rano was 13, when Pancho entered our lives.

In his late teens, Pancho was muscular, darkly handsome with fine features and tightly-woven hair. Pancho traveled throughout the country: working in Texas, staying in a Tucson flat with other immigrants, visiting girlfriends in Denver, or spending a night in an Oakland jail. Every time Pancho came, he recounted a new adventure, with a smile and dimple which softened his otherwise hard look.

Fiercely independent and loud, he yanked my brother and me into his world of James Brown, Jackie Wilson and Sam

Cooke, of barroom dances, Old English 800 Malt Liquor Beer and weight lifting. He seemed to have seen it all before his 20s.

"*Please, please, please...baby, please don't go*," he sang to a James Brown classic. On James' quicker-paced record cuts, Pancho would imitate the man's steps, forcing Rano and me to loosen our feet and try it. Pancho taught us soul, from the ruptured streets of Ciudad Juarez to every city ghetto he ended up in. He tutored us to the latest "hip" songs, the latest dance craze, the coolest what-to-say.

My mother and father tolerated Pancho, the son of my mother's only sister Chila, although I guessed they weren't too sure about what he was teaching us. But Rano and I were ecstatic whenever Pancho sauntered through the door. We tried to soak up Pancho's leanness, his half-smile and tight eyes that made him look so knowledgeable, unafraid and wary.

Right away he detected how skinny we were.

"You guys could be runned over by spaghetti," Pancho said.

One day Pancho came to the house with a set of weights. He coerced my brother and me to pump them day after day, eating loaves of bread for bulk and tons of eggs for protein. I strained and pulled and heaved and hauled the weights with my ten-year-old's body, until one day in school I felt a sharp pain below my abdomen. The nurse checked it out and then had me taken to a doctor for more exams. It turned out I had ruptured myself, the sac that held my bottom intestine had a slight rip and threatened to spill its contents, and my life along with it.

My parents took me to White Memorial Hospital in Boyle Heights where surgery had been scheduled to repair the rupture. While they were at it, they decided I should get circumcised.

In one of those peculiarities of life, the ritual circumcision was somehow overlooked at Saint Joseph's Maternity Hospital in El Paso where I was born. Being born to a non-citizen, I could see how. They threw the illegals over the border as soon as the babies emerged. Mama apparently thought of taking care of it later, but there wasn't much time — what with moving to L.A. and all. Just one of those things that got missed, I guess.

I could survive without the circumcision, of course, but I wasn't doing a good job of cleaning myself and had developed some sores. So the call was "off with the foreskin."

The hospital could have been a medieval castle, filled with shrieks, broken bodies, smells of illness and medicines and grim, cruel faces everywhere. At the children's ward, there were kids worse off than me, with horrific diseases, defects and traumas. The crying all night, the hurried staff, the worried parents — I thought maybe I had died and this was hell.

One night after the surgery, a pain crept up in my newly-rearranged member — a slow throbbing at first, soon it became intolerable. I hollered and evoked my mother's name. Nurses swaggered in, bothered and tired. They looked at the wounds, the stitched flesh below the abdomen — then my penis. A shadow seemed to cross their faces. They muttered something to themselves. Somehow the circumcision had gone wrong. What? I exclaimed. Isn't this a hospital? Weren't these trained doctors? *How difficult could a simple circumcision be!*

Later orderlies pushed my bed into a surgery room; someone gave me a local anesthesia with a shot to my penis that seemed to penetrate my spine. A doctor came and began to undo the stitches, then cut and pull. I could see everything. Blood sprayed onto the front of his white coat. *I'd never be a man now!*

Days later, I came home in a wheelchair, unable to move or even sit on a toilet. Eventually all would turn out okay, though, including my manhood. Pancho was there as Rano maneuvered the wheelchair up the steps and through the front screen door into the living room. Pancho flashed me a dimpled smile, called me a "dish rag," then shook my hand.

"Get better, *trapo*," Pancho said. "When you get rid of the machine, we're going dancing."

☥ ☥ ☥

Clavo healed pretty well after the shooting, but he lost an eye, and I'm sure his nerve. The pellets, some unable to be removed, left unsightly scars on the right side of his face. Chicharrón and Wilo sensed he wanted out. We understood his dilemma, yet we didn't want him to leave us. We couldn't be *los cuatro*. It wouldn't be the same. So the first real good weekend for Clavo, we decided to organize a trip to a "real" beach.

This didn't happen too often. Although L.A. hugged the Pacific coastline, the beaches were still many miles away for neighborhood people to get to. There were families then, in and around L.A., who never visited the beach. Most of the time the barrio people from around the San Gabriel Valley went to an area along the Río Hondo in Whittier Narrows. We called it *Marrano Beach*.

In the summer time, Marrano Beach got jam-packed with people and song. *Vatos locos* pulled their pant legs up and waded in the water. Children howled with laughter as they jumped in to play, surrounded by bamboo trees and swamp growth. There were concrete bridges, covered with scrawl, beneath which teenagers drank, got loaded, fought and often times made love. At night, people in various states of undress could be seen splashing around in the dark. And sometimes, a body would be found wedged in stones near the swamps or floating face down. The place stunk, which was why we called it what we did. But it belonged to the Chicanos and Mexicanos. It was the barrio beach. Ours.

This one time, to celebrate Clavo's coming back, we decided to go instead to what we recognized then as the *Gabacho* beaches, or white people's beaches. Why not? It was an important occasion.

Chicharrón, Wilo and I were in on this trip. We invited a few of the "homeys," including Black Dog, who was called that because he was so dark. We had qualms about inviting Black Dog as he was known to be trouble, but he had just bought a "bomb," a 1950s car cut low and sleek, and we needed the ride.

And we invited *rucas*. There were the Acuña sisters, Herminia and Santita — pretty and shapely girls who lived just

below the Hills. We invited Canica and La Smiley. And they brought Elaine Palacios and Corina Fuentes. We gathered at Garvey Park, two carloads full. We scored on cases of beer and some *grifa*. A few *colies*. Everything was ready — but no Clavo.

"Where's the dude, man," I asked.

"Wilo went to get him. They'll be here soon," Chicharrón said. But it was a lie. Clavo wasn't ready. I knew, somehow, he never would be.

As soon as Wilo came with his *jaina* Rita, sans Clavo, we decided to go.

We caravaned to Huntington Beach in Orange County — "whitebread" country — which was a straight drag south on the San Gabriel River Freeway, the 605, then a spell on Pacific Coast Highway. The sun bore down on our rides; we opened windows and drank and toked and laughed. Already the dudes without girls were scoping out who they would be with. I always did terribly when it came to this kind of thing. I liked Hermie Acuña, but I never let on. Yet I couldn't help but sneak a look at her cute face as she gazed out the window at the sights off the freeway. Hermie had lips like car bumpers, wide and swollen, but perfectly shaped, with thin creases. Looking at them conjured up a daydream of lips licking my mouth, whispering into my ear, becoming her lips. I fell into a dream of me and her, embracing, our mouths joined. She opened them slightly and my lips slowly mimicked hers — but suddenly a tractor-trailer rumbled by and I careened to backseat reality.

Crowds filled the beach area. Chicharrón knew of a place called "the coves," further down, less peopled and scenic, and he suggested we go there.

To get to it we had to park away from the beach and walk down several rocks and boulders. The water came up to the rocks, a sandy area nearby. Chicharrón buried several six-packs in shallow water to keep them cold. Black Dog began to roll reefer and pass it around. Wilo and Rita placed a blanket in the sand and lay down, beer and chips nearby. The rest of us decided to play a loose game of beach football.

The girls and guys split up into teams. We threw the ball around. A few of us got tackled. Then we threw the girls around, mostly into the water. None of us had bathing suits or trunks. We were just too cool. We had cutoffs, T-shirts, overalls, sandals and such. Some of the guys removed their shirts to reveal teen muscle, and maybe show off a tattoo or two. Chicharrón and Black Dog moved from one girl to the other, except Rita who adhered to Wilo like skin. They picked up the girls as if they were sacks of *masa harina* and threw them into the bursting waves.

Hermie got thrown in last, mainly because she kept running away and hiding in the rocks. I just watched. Chicharrón, Black Dog and this dude from Mexico named Félix crept up behind her, several-sized hands reached for her arms, her legs — I saw one hand hold up her butt. They took her to the ocean's frothy edge and threw her in, squealing and kicking. Hermie rose quickly — rivulets of water falling from her once-teased hair, her face a flood. Hermie's blouse clung to her body, revealing hard nipples through soaked bra and top. She feigned anger, while the others laughed and laughed. Her sister Santita, who had already been dunked, looked pleased.

Strangely, we were all alone there on that short stretch of beach. Black Dog got bold and brought out some mescaline. Félix took a hit and before long he was tripping, falling all over the sand and bumping his head on rocks and shit. Canica and Smiley took some hits too. Before long Black Dog maneuvered Canica over to a cave section of the coves and I knew what he was doing, copping feels and such.

Wilo and Rita lay back on the blanket and enjoyed the sun. The rest of the pairing happened by mid-day. Félix stood beside Santita, or I should say she held him up a lot. Chicharrón and Elaine were together, holding hands and sloppy kissing on top of some rocks. Corina and Hermie sat apart from everybody, as I did. Black Dog, however, left the cave area and took Smiley back there with him. I only guessed what was happening there with all that reefer, mescaline and partying with Canica and Smiley.

Corina sat down near me and started a conversation. She was the least good-looking of the girls who came that day, but she was good to talk to.

It was Hermie who I kept eyeing, whether I was alone or with Corina, as she tried to stay dry. The brownness of her nipples which had shown through her blouse earlier was lost from view as it dried.

By the afternoon, we spied a van of white dudes, looking like surfers, parked above the coves near our rides. They stared in our direction, dressed in sunny beach wear, noticeable by their blonde hair and eye shades. Chicharrón stood up to see them better.

"What's with the paddies, man?" he yelled out to me.

"*¿Qué sé yo?*" I responded. "Maybe waiting for a 'bitchin' wave'."

This was a tiny dig into the beach culture that Anglos had created in California. There were constant battles between the barrio people and the beach people, who were mostly whites or *engabachados* — Mexicans trying to pass as white, even when some were dark as night. As far as anyone could remember, it was "surfers" against "beaners."

The van didn't move, nor its occupants. Then after a few minutes, we heard shouting from the parking area.

"Fuck you, beaners!"

"Mexicans suck!"

Black Dog emerged from the cave, shirt off, muscles wet and rippling on mahogany-tinged skin. He looked at the white dudes, and then yelled back.

"*Putos*...come get some of this," as he squeezed his crotch. Félix livened up all of a sudden, and in accented speech he yelled out "modder fockers."

Chicharrón also got into it, shouting out "Animal Tribe" and "*¡Qué Viva South San Gabriel!*"

The white guys challenged us to come up there. It didn't take much to get us going. Chicharrón took off his belt, Black Dog picked up a bottle. Soon everyone followed behind them, even the girls.

"I don't like this," Corina said. "I don't like this at all."

"*Hĳole*, we can't go anywhere without some *pleito*," Hermie responded in disgust.

There were about six white dudes, and as we got closer, we saw they weren't teens but grown men.

"Come on greasers," one tall dude said. "Who wants to go first?"

"Fuck you," Black Dog shouted and then charged at them. But what should have been a good old ass-stomping, to talk about later, turned out to be something completely different.

The white dudes pulled out guns. Then one of them flashed a badge.

"Everyone line up. This is the Huntington Beach Police Department."

They were *chota*!

"*Puta madre*," Chicharrón said, as the cops turned him around and had him place his hands against the side of the van. Then the rest of us, even the girls, were forced to kneel and keep our hands on our heads. Corina started to sob, but I could tell she tried not to. Hermie looked scared as did Santita. Canica and Smiley swaggered and acted cool, but I knew the mescaline had a lot to do with it.

They separated the guys from the girls. After a quick search, the girls were allowed to stand by the side. But the guys were told to squat on the asphalt and not move. One of the cops radioed in some information. Another proceeded to harass us.

"Tough guys, eh? Gonna take us on. You don't look so tough now."

I went to move my leg over to another, more comfortable, position. But the cop yelled at me, his hand still palming a .38 revolver.

"Don't fuckin' move," he said, coming up to my face, eyeball to eyeball. "Did I give you permission to move? Don't do anything unless I say — you fuckin' greaser asshole!"

They had us squatting there for five, ten, then fifteen minutes. We couldn't stand up, kneel or sit. The circulation in my legs felt blocked. The muscles cramped and ached. But

we weren't supposed to do anything but squat. After several long minutes more, one of the cops started throwing sand in our faces.

"Hey!" we all yelled at once.

"Don't move, I said," the cop continued. "Don't understand English or what? I don't want to hear anything, don't want to see anyone lift a finger."

They were getting us to do something stupid in anger, an excuse to knock us around. One of the cops came up to the parking area with Wilo and Rita, who had been down below trying to keep quiet. They brought the beer cans.

"This is a violation," a cop said.

Then another cop turned around smiling. He had Black Dog's jacket and had found caps of mescaline and some joints.

"All right, now we got some felonies."

The cops were ecstatic. They had something good to book us for.

They dragged us handcuffed to the local jail, and took us into a small interrogation room. By now Corina cried. Black Dog talked back, acting up even as the cops poked blackjacks into his ribs. They separated him from the rest of us and took him first.

The police called our parents. Chicharrón's father said he'd take me home. After several hours, they finally released us. Only Black Dog didn't go home. The officers transported him to a juvenile facility. Besides the drugs they found, Black Dog had several prior arrests. It didn't look good for Black Dog.

I said goodby to Corina, and nodded a goodby to Hermie and Santita whose mother came in ranting about us troublemakers and how she'd never let the sisters go anywhere with us again. For a second, in the midst of her mother's squabbling and hands flying, I thought Hermie smiled at me.

☥ ☥ ☥

"You have to work, to help us out here," Mama said. "You're a big man now. There's got to be something you can do."

We had just moved to South San Gabriel. I was nine years old — a good working age, as far as my mother was concerned; she had picked cotton at the age of nine in South Texas. But looking for work at nine is not easy in a city. We weren't fruit pickers, which were often children as young as three. In a city, a child had to find people to work for — cleaning up for them, doing deliveries or tending lawns. I did a little bit of everything. Mowing lawns with Rano, picking up boxes and cleaning out people's garages. I even did housework like my mother had done when we were younger. I vacuumed, wiped windows, scrubbed floors on my knees and used tooth brushes to clean the edges. The homes I went to were in Alhambra, a mostly white area then with some homes sporting swimming pools. I learned how to vacuum the bottom of the pools, and how to use the pumps and the chemicals to keep them clean.

My brother also worked, finally landing a job as a newspaper boy. In those days, it meant delivering papers door-to-door on bikes. At the age of 12, I started working a paper route too. I found an old beat-up ten-speed and delivered around our neighborhood, tossing a local daily called The Post-Advocate. Every day after school, our crew manager dropped off bundles of unfolded newspapers and bags of rubber-bands. On rainy days we used plastic covers.

We had to fold all the papers, place the rubber bands or plastic over them and then stuff them into double cloth bags we draped over the handle bars. Our hands and faces got blackened with newsprint. We had a list of subscribers and we had to make sure they received their newspapers in or around their porches. This was the trick of the trade.

Fíjese: I got good at it. It was the first important accomplishment I remember as a child. I couldn't exactly talk with any coherency, or do sports, or show any talent for anything. But, man, I could deliver newspapers! I got so good, I built up a route system which at its peak included four different routes. I received awards. I won recognition in the Copley Newspaper magazine (Copley owned the Post-

Advocate then). The routes wound around city blocks for several miles and often took until after midnight to complete. On that old ten-speed, I pedaled through street, alley, boulevard and back road, past vicious dogs and hobo nests, past the *vatos* who chased me for my bike or change. But I made my deliveries, always on time. On the mark.

Selling the newspaper was the other trick. On weekends, the crew manager would take his den of newspaper boys and drop us off in various neighborhoods to sell subscriptions, what we called "starts." Mainly he had us cover the well-groomed suburban streets because he figured they were more likely to buy subscriptions. Man, I was lousy at it. Door after door slammed in my face. We had free gifts — pot holders, TV trays, things to hang on the wall. But where people had money, this had little effect. They usually received the bigger papers like the Los Angeles Times or the Herald-Examiner. The Herald-Examiner deliverers, in fact, often sneered at us because they took in more pay and the better clientele.

One day the crew manager, at a point of desperation, dropped me off in the Hills.

"Go up this road," he said, sounding unhopeful of my prospects. "I'll meet you down below in about an hour."

I climbed up a sidewalkless street and entered the foliage which shielded the shacks and houses on stilts and cars being worked on. I walked up a cluttered dirt driveway. Children played in and around a mud puddle without shoes. Mexican music burst out of a kitchen window. The porches were old, unpainted, sunken wood planks. I knocked on a torn-screen door nearly off its hinges. A round woman peered from inside. Instead of sofas or end tables, crates furnished her bare living room. There were palm-leaf crosses tacked on cracked sheet rock.

"*¿Qué traes tú?*" she inquired.

I didn't believe I'd sell any subscriptions — most of these people didn't even know English. But as soon as I talked about the free gifts, they signed up. So simple. Shack to shack. Off-hinged door after off-hinged door. I tried to explain they were required to pay a monthly fee. But here they were, watching *telenovelas* on

beat-up TV sets, those who had them, their children running around in rags and bare feet, and still they ordered the Post-Advocate for the free gifts. In time they'd never pay. They'd never be part of anyone's route. But I got the starts. I became the hero for the day. The crew manager patted my back and announced to everyone the record number of subscriptions I obtained.

The people of the Hills vindicated me.

Work took other turns. At age thirteen, I was hired at a car wash with my brother. We were the cleanup crew. We came to work in the evening after the undocumented guys finished washing cars and had gone home. Rano and I swept, mopped, and picked up around the small office, waiting area and parking lot. We picked up all the dirty rags and threw them into massive washing machines. Then near the end of the evening, we hooked up a monstrous hose and watered down the place. Rano, who was 16, actually washed cars during the day and learned to drive almost every make and model.

"You should have seen the Mustang I pulled out today," he said, excited.

"Oh, listen," he'd tap my arm. "Then there was this Firebird!"

I came along to help him in the evening to make more money for the family. Everything we made went to Mama — and we always needed more.

But soon after I started working there, I picked up a foot fungus. I often worked in sneakers and I couldn't help but get them soaked every night in the soap and water we used to hose down everything. Terrible flowery lesions sprang up on the soles of my feet and through my toes. I also had an ingrown toenail that produced a painful redness on my left toe, forcing me to place steaming hot towels on it every night to lower the swelling.

A foot doctor prescribed medication, but nothing lessened the sores. And surgery on my toe was out of the question. I couldn't even go to gym classes, which I missed for the rest of junior high.

One day, the sores worsened and I refused to get out of

bed. My mother dabbed ointments on them but they were of no use. Then Tío Kiko came over. He examined the sores, staring intently at the petals that seemed to be growing from my feet. Tío Kiko knew a little of the Mexican healing arts, the use of herbs and incantations from old Indian traditions used to treat most ailments. In desperation, Mama asked her brother for help.

"This will hurt you," Tío Kiko told me in Spanish. "But be brave. It will be over soon."

He pulled up a chair and directed my mother's hand.

They sliced each of the milky sores. Blood and pus streamed out. I screamed. I didn't believe in witchcraft or chants or herbs. I felt I would die. Tío Kiko had boiled water and put together some herbs he had brought from a *botánica.* Mama covered each open wound with leaves and concoctions as Tío Kiko prayed over my feet.

Was there a God for feet? Would the proper words be strung together to wake it from its sleep? Would the magic of the herbs, the spirit evoked, seep into the sores and bring the feet back to me? These were the questions.

Days passed. I lay in bed as the daily rituals worked their wonder. The sores started to disappear. Soon I hobbled around in slippers. Even the ingrown toenail slid back into a somewhat normal shape. Tío Kiko, this border priest, this master of snake and siren, did what the Anglo doctors could not. Who knows if it's real magic? There was another kind of magic which made me feel special, to look at my Indian-descended mother and uncle and believe in the power of civilizations long since written off, long since demeaned and trampled. Jesus Christ was a brown man. A Mexican Indian. A *curandero.* Not a stringy blond-haired, blue-eyed icon. He was like me, like my Tío Kiko. He lived in the earth, got drunk, inhabited the leaves and herbs, not a sanitized doctor's office — or a church of spires and colored glass and elaborate carvings. He lived in my feet, and with the proper calls and enticements, made them whole again. This is the Christ I wanted to believe in.

☥ ☥ ☥

Through the bars of a cell, I talk to a deputy as he sits behind an immense wood desk in the Temple City sheriff's station, the station responsible for Las Lomas. He's Chicano like me, but I know how much he hates everything I am, as if I represent all the scorn, venom and fear instilled in him since a child.

"We have a plan here," the *jura* says. "We detain every seven-year-old boy in your neighborhood."

"Detain them for what?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter. Curfew, loitering . . . whatever we can," he replies. "Then we keep their names. Keep track of them over the years. Soon we've picked them up for other things — stealing, fighting, mischief . . . "

"And that's how you get a hold of 'em," I continue for him.

"That's right — hey, you've got half a brain, huh?"

"It ain't hard to figure out that by the time some of the boys do something serious, they have a detention record a mile long and end up hard time — juvey or camp."

"You guys just don't know," he says with a smirk. "You just don't know what you're dealing with."

In the barrio, the police are just another gang. We even give them names. There's Cowboy, Big Red, Boffo and Maddog. They like those names. Sometimes they come up to us while we linger on a street corner and tell us Sangra called us *chavalas*, a loose term for girls. Other times, they approach dudes from Sangra and say Lomas is a tougher gang and Sangra is nothing. Shootings, assaults and skirmishes between the barrios are direct results of police activity. Even drug dealing. I know this. Everybody knows this.

☩ ☩ ☩

Yuk Yuk became one of *los cuatro* after Clavo disappeared. No one knew exactly what happened to Clavo. There were rumors his parents sent him to Mexico. Others said he was in a youth prison camp, although we couldn't substantiate this. Chicharrón, Wilo and I went to his house. Nobody there. For Rent signs everywhere.

He had already dropped out of school and left no forwarding address.

Yuk Yuk lived in the Hills, in one of the gullies. He had been a member of the Tribe for a couple of years, but spent most of that time in juvenile hall. He had two teardrops tattooed below his left eye, signifying two years lost in the hall. Sometimes the teardrops stood for the members of one's family fallen in street warfare or the number of people one had killed. Anyway it started off as a Chicano thing, like most of the street and *pinto* traditions, but later other dudes picked up on it.

Yuk Yuk's real name was Claudio Ponce. But he had this funny laugh, see, and this is why we called him Yuk Yuk. Barrio names usually came from the obvious. Chin came from my deformed jaw. Chicharrón because he had skin the color of Mexican pork rinds. Clavo because he was thin and hard, like nails, and Wilo because he was skinny as a pole. The girls had similar designations. In the Hills there were *rucas* called Seria (serious) or Chatter (because she talked too much). Sometimes the *placas* came from corruptions of real names: Chuy from Jesus, Chi Cho from Narciso, Nacho from Ignacio, Yogi from Olga, Beto from Roberto and Nando from Fernando.

And then there were names that were simply made up: Fuzzy, Toots and Baba.

Tribe members carefully placed as many names as could fit on a wall, a means to identify individuals, not just the group. More and more the lists would end with "Animal Tribe/Lomas." Lomas became increasingly prominent. There were dudes like Yuk Yuk coming out of juvey, the youth camps, or prisons who insisted Lomas, the barrio, be on every marking, on every wall.

Then there were dudes who didn't even claim the Tribe anymore. Just Lomas.

Yuk Yuk got us involved in organized stealing. Up until then, we stole here and there without much planning or thinking. At seven years old in Watts, I remember going into corner grocery stores every day after school and stuffing my Roy Rogers Lunch

Box with toys and candy. I took the loot home and hid it in the closet. Mama eventually found some, carved into my flesh with a leather belt, and made me return it. I remember throwing it over a bridge which crossed a sewer tunnel.

At 13 years old, a record shop owner caught me stealing records. Rano had stolen some records earlier and bragged about it. I decided to try it myself. I went back to the same store, a stupid thing to do, and stuffed a few 45s into my jacket. But a store guard stopped me as I walked out of the store, pulled the records out of the jacket and dragged me back in. My mother had to come get me.

Later various combinations of *los cuatro* stole food, vodka and beer from markets, and gas from service stations so we could cruise in Wilo's *carrucha*.

Once we decided to rip off the *gabachos* leaving a Kentucky Fried Chicken stand. Chicharrón, Wilo and I waited outside the joint. As some dude came out with a bucket or two, we ran up to him and snatched the buckets from his arms, then took off like we were ravaging coyotes on *yesca*, chicken parts flying everywhere.

Another time, after a night of heavy-duty drinking and partying, hunger called out to us. Wilo waited in the parking lot of a 24-hour market nearby, the car running and in gear. The rest of us scurried through the store and packed our pockets, coats, shirts and jackets with chips, baloney, soda cans, bread, and canned hams. Then bursting with merchandise, we walked out at the same time. It was harder to catch three of us than just one.

Clavo was still with us then. I managed to make it to Wilo's car. But one of the store employees ran up behind me and insisted I come back with him — they had spotted me stealing food. I discreetly placed the food under the car seats and walked back in. Of course, they had no evidence of stolen food and had to let me go. But the commotion around me allowed Clavo and Chicharrón to walk out with the items they took.

When I finally left the store, I saw Clavo running across the parking lot as store employees chased him. The *pendejo* couldn't find Wilo's car! Clavo ran down the street, through

some alley, dropping packages of lunch meat as his long legs loped over the asphalt, four or five store employees at his heels. Wilo came by and picked me up and then sped off.

Later we roamed the streets looking for Clavo. Sure enough he evaded his would-be captors and we found him hiding behind some trash cans in an alley — an opened can of tuna in his hand and a huge grin on his face.

But this was all lightweight.

Yuk Yuk introduced us to two key figures in the stealing business. One was Jandro Mares, a 30-year-old budding entrepreneur. Jandro owned a large Victorian-style home in Alhambra. He had a large driveway and a huge garage. He "commissioned" teenagers like us to steal certain cars he needed, on order, then drive them to his garage. He taught us how to strip them down in a matter of minutes. With *un chingo* of dudes, this was easy to do.

"*De volada*," as Yuk Yuk always said. Just do it without thinking; on impulse.

The other guy was Shed Cowager. He was a junk man who had a huge building on Garvey Boulevard full of metal, antique, and wood items. Shed usually sat in the back of the shop and you had to get through a long stretch of metal files, TVs, chairs and desks, and every hubcap known to humanity, to get to him. He didn't tell us what to do or not like Jandro. He was just a guy who bought bikes, TVs, stereos, cameras, guns — whatever we could bring to him — and paid us cash on delivery.

Yuk Yuk had us walk around the malls scanning for bikes, good bikes, ten-speeds mostly. Many of the *gabacho* kids used to lay them down without locks when they entered a store. We walked up cool, got on the bike, and then took off. Wilo or Yuk Yuk followed near us in a car as we rode the bicycles to Shed's business. The bikes were probably worth several hundred dollars. Shed gave us between $15 and $25 each.

Soon Yuk Yuk had us scoping out the good homes in Alhambra, some of which I cleaned when I was younger. He showed us how to find signs of nobody home. He also had us spot ways to enter them. For example, a lot of the homes had

louver windows in bedrooms, kitchens, or bathrooms, which were easy to remove from the outside.

We were told to take only things we could walk out with, such as money, jewelry and guns. For bigger jobs, we'd pull up in a VW van Yuk Yuk had borrowed and then we'd take bigger items like TVs, cameras and stereos. Before long, Yuk Yuk started to hijack trucks, mainly from warehouses or appliance stores, and then sell the electronic equipment in parking lots and drive-ins. The truck stops leading into L.A. were particularly lucrative. Yuk Yuk would pull a gun out on a driver, force him out of the truck, take his money, and if the truck was maneuverable enough, his keys too.

From there, armed robberies included the newly-sprouting convenience stores we called "shop and robs". If we worked in teams, somebody stayed in the car, another held a gun, and another walked the aisles loading up on whiskey and food.

Placing a gun to a man's head took some doing at first. We often took turns because Yuk Yuk didn't want any *lambiches* going with him. If you could pull a gun on someone, with only a heart pulse holding the trigger, than you can do just about anything, Yuk Yuk reasoned. *De volada.*

But to me, stealing and taking someone's life were two distinct capabilities. You can kill for a lot of reasons, or no reason at all, but killing for stealing didn't sit well with me. This was a problem. A big problem, Yuk Yuk pointed out.

"You better get used to it," Yuk Yuk would say. "Or you'll find yourself at the other end of a gun and be dead, like real quick."

I don't remember whose idea it was to rip off the drive-in. We usually sneaked in there through several holes we created in the corrugated steel fence alongside the Alhambra Wash, a concrete tributary of the Río Hondo which snaked through here. We built ourselves a makeshift hangout among the bushes and weeds that lined the fence, the hideaway for *los cuatro*. We used wood planks for a roof. We found old carpet and metal siding

to cover the ground and sides. We used banana leaves to cover the entrances. It wasn't easy to find.

One night, as we relaxed on an old sofa watching the drive-in movie, it was decided we would go in after the cars left and rob the concession stand. Many times we would break in there for food, but this time it was for the night's receipts.

"Chin, I want you to hold the *cuete*," Yuk Yuk said.

"¡*Chale, ése*!" I exclaimed. "I'm not up to it today. I don't feel good about it."

"What's this feel shit," Yuk Yuk said. "I'm not asking for a temperature."

Then he gave out his yuk yuk laugh.

I had on a long black trench coat. The others were in their *cholo* attire. We peeled back a section of fence and walked through. The march to the concession stand was sustained and arduous. I held the small caliber handgun in my hand through the long pockets of the trench coat. Sweat smeared on the handle.

Chicharrón walked in first, then signaled the rest of us to follow. The concession stand looked empty. Wilo walked up to the cash register and rang it up to check for money. Nothing. Yuk Yuk probed around while I stood there, wishing the night would end, hoping nobody would be there.

Then an older fat white-haired guy walked in from another room.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he said as we ransacked the stand.

I thrust out the gun and yelled, "Freeze, motherfucker!" It had so much conviction, I failed to recognize the voice.

Tension sizzled in the air. He stood there, just staring. I stood there, gun pointed in his direction. Yuk Yuk walked up to him and demanded money.

"It's in the safe," the man said. "You can't get to it."

"Fuck you!" Yuk Yuk exclaimed. "You can open the safe."

"No, I can't," the man continued. "The only one who can get to it is the owner. And there's no way he would be here tonight."

Yeah, let's leave, I thought. Before the police came. Before somebody with a bigger weapon than mine showed up.

"I don't believe you," Yuk Yuk said, and me thinking: Believe him, believe him.

Yuk Yuk yanked the man down on the floor, and walked into the adjacent room where presumably the safe was stashed.

I continued to point the gun down on the man as he lay on his belly like a beached whale. Then Yuk Yuk pushed open the door and ran out of the room. Gunfire blasted a hole in the wood, splinters sailing around us.

"Get the fuck out of here!" Yuk Yuk yelled.

I supposed I could have fired the gun, but I took off just behind Chicharrón and Wilo. Whoever it was who fired ran out of the concession stand and shot into the dark toward us. We bobbed and fobbed, zigged and zagged.

"Shoot at him," somebody said.

"What?" I responded in between breaths.

"Shoot at him," everybody chimed in unison.

I turned around and saw a shadow highlighted by a fluorescent lamp above his head. He continued to hold a gun in two hands. I aimed at him, but then he fired again and I swear the bullet brushed my eyebrow, that's how close it felt. Fuck it — I ran.

Unfortunately, we went in a direction away from the section of fence where we could exit from. Yuk Yuk looked lost for a moment, then began to climb. It's not easy to scale a corrugated steel fence. But Chicharrón and Wilo followed suit. I dropped the gun into my trench coat pocket and climbed also. Suddenly everything slowed down. I just couldn't do anything fast enough. The dude shooting at us appeared closer and fired another round.

"¡*Chingao*!" I yelled as a bullet struck the fence, resounding in a metal-echo peal next to my ear.

I tried to get over fast. I hoped I wouldn't lose my grip and fall back down. There's nowhere to position your sneakers when you climb corrugated steel. It was muscle and hustle all the way.

I reached the top. I could hear Chicharrón, Wilo and Yuk Yuk yelling at me, like a squad of cheerleaders.

"*Orale, ése,* you can do it!"

"Come on, Chin — jump, man, jump!"

I pulled myself over and then leapt, the trench coat like a huge cape fluttering around me. A bullet ripped through the air I had been occupying just seconds earlier. I encountered the ground, then took off like a desert rabbit. *De volada.*