CHAPTER SEVEN

"When the hanging's done and the embers at the burning stake are grayed and cold, the conquered bodies of martyrs become the unconquerable ideas."

— Nelson Peery

August 29, 1970: Tens of thousands gathered in East L.A.'s Belvedere Park to protest the Viet Nam War. The organizers placed flyers on lampposts and bus stops with the following statistics: 22 percent of the war's casualties came from Spanish-speaking communities — although this population made up less than six percent of the U.S. total!

The ensuing march and demonstration — called the Chicano Moratorium Against The War — became the largest anti-war rally ever held in a minority community.

I jumped on a bumpy bus from South San Gabriel and exited on Beverly Boulevard and Third Street, toward Belvedere Park. When I arrived, people carried signs denouncing the war, including a few which said "Chicano Power." The Brown Berets, both men and women, in military-style tan, fatigue clothing, marched in cadence on Third Street. A man with a bull horn shouted slogans: "No More War," "¡*Chale*! We Won't Go" and "¡*Qué Viva La Raza*!"

The slogans incited the crowd to chants. Signs and fists pierced the sky. Conga drum beats swirled around a grouping of people at one end of the park. I melded among the protesters, dressed in street attire and my favorite blue Pendleton shirt. When the marching started, I threw a fist into the air.

We advanced down Atlantic Boulevard, past stretches of furniture stores, used car lots and cemeteries. Store owners closed early, pulling across rusty iron enclosures. Young mothers with infants in strollers, factory hands, gang-bangers, a

newly-wed couple in wedding dress and tuxedo — young and old alike — strolled beside me.

We snaked around to Whittier Boulevard where people from the neighborhood joined in the march; some offered us water and food. Battles between police and young dudes flared up in alleys and side streets. Thrown bottles smashed the windshields of squad cars.

The protesters pulled into Laguna Park in the heart of the largest community of Mexicans outside of Mexico. A stage thundered with speeches, theater and song. Music permeated the air. I spotted Cuervo and Eight Ball from Lomas. They had reds and we dropped a few. There was a liquor store on the corner of Indiana and Whittier where we scored on some brew. But Cuervo and Eight Ball stole a case, forcing the store owner to close up shop. Soon a crowd gathered outside the store demanding to get in. Somebody banged on the glass door. Suddenly a shotgun pressed against my skull.

"Move or I'll blow your fuckin' head off," a sheriff's deputy ordered. I returned to the park, wandering through feet and bodies, coolers and blankets.

A line of deputies at the park's edge — armed with high-powered rifles, billy clubs and tear gas launchers — swaggered toward the crowd. They mowed down anybody in their path. A group of people held arms to stop the rioting police from getting to the families. I turned toward the throng of officers. One guy told me to go back: "We'll fight tomorrow."

But there were no more tomorrows for me. I had had enough at the hands of alien authority.

Come on, then, you helmeted, wall of state power. Come and try to blacken this grass, this shirt of colors, this festive park filled with infants and mothers and old men, surging forth in pride. Come and try to blacken it with your blazing batons, shotguns and tear gas canisters. I'm ready.

A deputy in a feverish tone shouted for me to move.

"*Chale*, this is my park."

Before I knew it, officers drove my face into the dirt; there was a throbbing in my head where a black jack had been swung. On the ground, drops of red slid over blades of green. The battle of Laguna Park had started.

Bodies scurried in all directions. Through the tear gas mist, I saw shadows of children crying, women yelling, and people lying on the grass, kicking and gouging as officers thrust black jacks into ribs and spines. Deputies pursued several people into the yards and living rooms of nearby homes. In a murderous frenzy, they pulled people out of back yards and porches, beating and arresting them.

A deputy pushed me into the back of a squad car. Somebody lay next to me, his hair oiled in blood. I didn't want to look in case his brains were coming out. I gave him a piece of my favorite shirt, soon to be soaked.

The first round of arrestees were crowded into a holding tank for hours in the East L.A. jail — the same jail where in a year's time, seven prisoners reportedly "committed suicide."

Later that night, we were piled into black, caged buses and taken to the Los Angeles County Jail, the largest in the country, then to juvenile hall and again to the county jail. At one point, officers sprayed mace into the windows of the bus while we sat chained to one another. Our eyes and skin burned as we yelled, but no one could hear us.

There were three other young dudes with me: another 16 year old, a 15 year old and his 13-year-old brother. In the county jail, deputies placed us in with adults — with murder, drug and rape suspects. We weren't old enough to be incarcerated there, but they didn't care about this. There was an uprising in East L.A. and we were part of it. One black guy recalled the Watts rebellion and shook our hands. I watched deputies come into the cells and beat up prisoners — breaking the arm of one guy.

At one point, the four of us juveniles were hauled to the Hall of Justice jail, known as the Glasshouse. The deputies threw

us into "murderers row," where hardcore offenders were awaiting trial or serving time. I had a cell next to Charles Manson.

They threw me in with a dude who had killed a teacher and another who had shot somebody in the Aliso Village housing projects. One of the dudes pressed a stashed blade to my neck. But I knew, no matter what, never show fear. I stood up to him, staring without blinking. Then he backed off. Soon we played cards, told jokes and stories.

That night, we heard the "East L.A. riot" — this is what the media was calling it! — had escalated throughout much of Whittier Boulevard. Stores were burned down and looted. Police had killed people. Fires flared in other Chicano communities such as Wilmington and Venice.

Then a radio reporter announced that sheriff's deputies had killed Chicano journalist Rubén Salazar. Salazar had been a lone voice in the existing media for the Mexican people in the United States (he was a former Los Angeles Times reporter and KMEX-TV news director). At word of his death, the tier exploded into an uproar. Inmates gave out *gritos* and cell bars rattled; mattresses were set on fire.

The next day, Manson, who stayed in an enclosed cell with only a small glass-and-bar opening to see him through, had to attend a hearing. Early that morning, guards woke up everybody and made us face the walls of our cells. Some protested. The dude next to me said it was at Manson's request.

"Fuck this," I said, but we were forced to comply.

At midday, they allowed us to roam the tier. I talked to inmates from the other cells, most of whom were black or Chicano. For the most part, the four of us young dudes from the unrest were treated with respect. When it was time for Manson to walk the tier, however, the guards made everyone else go back into their cells. Manson emerged from his enclosed box. He ranted and raved about "niggers and spics," about how whites should kill us all. The other inmates yelled back, threatened his life, but Manson knew the guards wouldn't let anyone get to him.

I disappeared in the criminal justice system. I was being held without a hearing. Whenever one was scheduled, my parents would show up and then the courts canceled it. Dad and Mom searched for me everywhere. They checked for my name in court records and arrest sheets. They fell into a maze of paperwork and bureaucrats. At least once, I was being pulled away in chains while my mom and dad sat confused in a hearing room. Days built up on days while they waited word about my release.

Finally in the middle of the night, a guard awakened me, pulled me out of the cell and led me down brightly-lit corridors. Through a thick-glassed window, I saw my mother's weary face.

They brought me out in my old clothes, caked with dirt and blood. Mama forced a smile.

"I ain't no criminal, ma," I reassured her.

"I know, *m'ijo*," she replied. "I know."

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The Watts Rebellion of 1965 changed forever the civil rights struggle in this country. The fires that swept through my old neighborhood that summer swept through me, cutting deep lines, as it swept through America, turning it toward its greatest fears and hardest questions; demarcating the long-glossed-over class and national differences which have historically divided the country.

A trajectory from Watts converged with the more-than-century-old fight of the Mexican people for their own freedoms to ripen into the Chicano Movement as manifested in East L.A.

And what a time it was to be in East L.A.!

In 1968 several thousand junior and high school students walked out of the Mexican east side schools to demand quality and accountable education. Students in schools throughout Los Angeles followed suit — in South Central, the Harbor, the West Side and San Fernando Valley.

A handful of us at Garvey School joined with the East L.A. school "Blowouts," as they were called, when we walked out of the school yard. Led by a girl named Norma and myself, our walkout turned out as a solidarity gesture. The students didn't have enough cognizance of the issues to carry it to the heights taken by those to the west of us. Still it became my first conscious political act — I was 13 years old — for which I received a day's suspension from school.

Around this time, Chicanos formed various defense organizations. The Brown Berets followed the example of the community-based Black Panthers. MEChA, the Chicano student association, had chapters in all the major campuses. La Raza Unida Party, founded in South Texas, became the arm of the movement's burgeoning political campaigns.

In prisons, where a disproportionate number of Chicano males ended up, *pinto* organizations and publications flowered into existence.

East L.A. also birthed artists, musicians and writers out of the wombs of conflict. Art centers sprouted up such as Mechicano, Goez Studios, Self-Help Graphics and Plaza de La Raza. East L.A. boasted more murals per square mile than any other place in the world. Residents of federally-subsidized housing projects — once designated as havens of crime, drugs and gang warfare — covered up the bland pastel walls with bold-colored, message-laden works of art.

Over the years, bands like El Chicano, Tierra, Los Lobos, Con Safos, Los Illegals and Califas carried forth the people's message through Latinized jazz-rock compositions, and later in punk and traditional *corrido* forms.

Publications arose such as *La Raza* which chronicled through photos and prose the ongoing developments in the movement. Also *Con Safos*, a *caló*-tinged street-oriented magazine (and a forerunner of later magazines such as *Lowrider*, *Q-Vo*, and *Firme*); *Regeneracion*, the rebirth of a publication founded during the Mexican Revolution by the Flores-Magon brothers; and *ChismeArte*, a literary and art publication.

A result and impetus of all this activity became the Chicano Moratorium Against the War. It was one of nine major disturbances in the barrio between 1970-72.

And for a time, for a most productive and wonderful time, gang violence stood at a standstill. For a time it appeared the internal warfare had given way to the struggle for land, language and liberty — when we had something more important to fight for.

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St. Anthony's Church sponsored a teen dance soon after my ordeal in the Los Angeles County jail system. I came, not knowing what to expect. The place swarmed with perfumed-and-preened young women, and dudes with plastered down hair and oven-heated shined shoes. The women danced with so much verve, so much music. Sometimes, I preferred standing on the sides to observe the stream and tide of their motion, their gyrations, the fusion of feet and fingers with the fever from some dark, tribal, ancestral homeland.

I noticed one woman with long, luxurious black hair, embracing cinnamon-colored skin, who danced as if she were outside by herself, in the rain or beneath a starry sky, just for me. She closed her eyes and let the band's beat press through her, fingering her flesh and sprouting in violent plumage across the dance floor.

Entranced, it took a while before I realized she was Viviana from Sangra.

Even though we had not seen each other for two years since we met during the Mission's Fiesta Days carnival, I felt compelled to confront her. Viviana turned slightly in my direction when I tapped her shoulder. Then after a few seconds' glance, she did a full body turn and looked straight into my face. She remembered. We both remembered — and it was as if no time at all had passed between us.

"You look and sound so different," Viviana later said, as

we held each other following a couple of slow dances and some kissing.

"I've been through some hard times lately—I was just in jail."

"Somehow, I could tell. Something about being in jail changes a dude's expression, his voice; how he feels to touch."

"You're still nice to talk to," I said.

We spent the rest of the evening catching up. Viviana had kept herself pretty much out of trouble. But her brothers were getting crazier and deadly. The three oldest were hardcore members of Los Diablos; one of them, called Coyote, became Chava's right-hand dude. As she talked, a sparkle from her eye reflected a light on the dance floor and it appeared to be a warning: I would fall for this woman; I would fall hard.

I rode a ten-speed bike late at night to visit Viviana. I tried to look nondescript, with an oil-stained coat over unpressed denim pants. I had to enter Sangra territory to see her. But I wouldn't let that stop me; Viviana was worth the risk.

Beneath the porch light of her house, Viviana and I talked, caressed and endured. One time Coyote came up the walkway.

"What's up, sis?" Coyote said as he shot me a look that could have cut glass, like a diamond.

"Nothing," she replied.

Coyote stopped at the steps. I didn't look away from his gaze. With weight and boxing training, I looked like I could hold my own. And I had the look from *la torcida*. He figured I had to be from somewhere.

"*¿De dónde eres, ése?*" he finally asked.

"Oh Eddie, let him be," Viviana intervened. "He's here with me—and I don't want no hassles from either of you, understand?"

"*¡Aquí para Sangra—y qué!*" Coyote/Eddie said before he entered the house. I was safe, for the time being.

"I hate this shit," Viviana said. "You're not the first dude who has to go through my brothers just so I can have a friend. But I'm sick and tired of it."

"Thanks for backing me," I said. "But this can't go on forever. Someday they're going to find out I'm from Lomas."

"I know," she said looking away, distressed.

Viviana taught me poetry. Not the words or forms of it. The feel of it: The soul-touch she gave me, the way her words clutched at some dark and secret place inside of me. She had a way of saying almost nothing but when she did speak, her words radiated with truth and power. I looked forward to the visits. I didn't even mind the dudes I had to go around or ride past in silence to get there. Or her brothers. For Viviana, I would have done anything.

One night we kissed and kissed, then found ourselves unable to stop. Until then, we did nothing more than fondle and linger in easy talk, but something snapped between us; this unseen barrier which often kept us at a distance, despite being so close there, appeared to break. Our inhibitions were freed and my hands groped her supple body as her tongue freshened the inside of my ear.

I gently pushed her down on the porch and she followed willingly, eagerly. Her rising rate of breathing gave way to moans and sighs and woman-sounds that culled forth a measure of something sweet and taut within me. My hand moved to the top of her pants, where a button had been loosened, and I pushed my hand through and found I could go all the way to the stem of her pleasure, to the silkiness of her vagina, while she squirmed and tightened and squeezed as I felt myself swimming, drowning, in the ocean of our lovemaking.

The moments dripped, then Viviana exploded in a rush of orgasms; I rocked next to her like a baby in a cradle. Suddenly the porch, the trees, the walkway and row of houses became intruders. An uncomfortableness crept around us. Viviana sat up, buttoned her blouse and pants, then placed her hands to her face and sobbed.

"What's the matter, baby?" I whispered.

"You have to leave," she said between her fingers.

"Why?"

"I can't explain, just leave — please."

"I don't see why. Let's just sit here and..."

"Louie, you don't understand nothing, do you?" she said, her attitude a sharp contrast to the moments before, almost as if those moments were just dust from dreams, which often appeared real, but only dust.

"All right, baby, all right, I'll go."

I stood up and pulled the bike up from the grass. I felt so dumb, unable to find words, some sentences which could ease the pain. Anything.

"I'll be back, Viviana," I mustered while on my way out. "Don't ever forget what happened here tonight."

She laid her head on her arms, which were on top of her knees, as she sat on the porch steps.

"Go, please — just go," were her last words.

Viviana failed to return my calls. Deep, hoarse voices answered the phone and said: "She's not here."

I wrote Viviana letters, but doubted the wisdom of sending them. At night, I woke up suddenly, after dreaming of her coming to me, embracing me and dancing, and when I sat up I struck the walls, grasped the pillow and cried out her name.

Some nights, I rode my bike to her house and stared from across the street. Windows darkened. Porch light out. I felt like running up the steps and banging at the screen door and yelling for her to come out, but I could never do this. I hoped she would slide open the curtain, feel me near her. That she would let me in.

Viviana never looked out that window; she never opened the door.

A month or so passed and I went to another dance at the El Monte Legion Stadium with my sisters, Shorty and Ana. As usual, the place was jam-packed with *vatos* and *rucas* from

barrios all over the San Gabriel Valley. Lowriders graced the rows of cars in the parking lot. Different gang members exchanged hand signs and spray-painted the names of all their homeboys on the walls.

This was a huge hall. I rambled around looking at the people, feeling like shit, but still open to make the most of the evening. Then my heart jumped. Viviana was there, at a seat, by herself. I walked fast to get to her, but before I did some dude came out of nowhere and offered her his hand to dance. She accepted. *Chingao*: I just missed her. My palms were wet. My tongue dry. I felt like there was an oven in my chest.

Then Viviana returned and this time I sat down next to her.

"Baby, how are you doing?" I said.

She turned her head, looked at me and smiled. God, it felt good. She acted coy, diffident, but alluring. There wasn't much to say. I leaned over and kissed her and she then placed her hand to the back of my neck and I felt her moan and squirm in her seat, taking me back to that night on her porch. We kissed a long time before she gently pulled me away.

"*Prieto*, I need to do something, will you wait here?" Viviana requested with her hands on my chest.

"Sure, I ain't going nowhere."

She got up from the seat, her hands brushed her dress over the curve of her hips, and then walked out. I felt so much relief. Love leapt out of my ears. Viviana, Viviana — how I prayed to every god known to man for this moment!

I sat there for an hour. Viviana didn't show. Others were being coupled already. Slow dance after slow dance caused me great anxiety. *Where was Viviana?* I looked around, but wouldn't leave the seat. It took me longer than most, but it finally hit me: She wasn't coming back.

I stepped away from that spot, walked through the sweat and cologne, through the stale smoke and wine breath. I made it to the exit. Then Viviana appeared, in a darkened corner, making out with another guy.

By the time I caught up with Shorty and Ana, I was wound up, bumping strangers, talking loud. Challenging everyone. A

dude would give me any kind of look and I pushed myself up on him.

"What you looking at, *puto*!"

"Louie, come on, let's go," Shorty said, pulling me away. "Forget it, man."

I told my sisters what happened with Viviana. I wanted to kill someone. To help lessen my anger, Shorty and Ana plotted to wait outside of the El Monte Legion for Viviana and jump her.

"We'll do it for you, bro', okay?" Shorty said.

At first I liked the idea. I stood outside by my sisters as the place closed up and crowds of teenagers streamed to the parking lot. But the sadness and anger which first overwhelmed me soon started to choke me. All I wanted to do was get the hell out of there.

"Forget it, man," I told my sisters. "I don't want anything to happen to Viviana. Let's go home."

It was over. Finally, over.

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Mr. Madison looked tense, sitting there in short-sleeved shirt and casual slacks. In front of him were about 20 teenagers from Lomas, lying around in a circle on the front yard of my homeboy Alex's house. Mr. Madison had been persuaded to meet with us about how to improve the conditions at Mark Keppel High School.

"As principal of your school, I plan to make this the best learning experience of your lives," he said. "But no one man or administrator can do anything unless you decide to put everything behind it."

He seemed to be open, willing to consider our ideas. Chente told me to give him the benefit of the doubt, but not to let him off the hook either. Chente didn't want us to be given the runaround or appeased without real educational advances. But he said the students had to play the leading role in insuring those advances were realized.

"I can't make any guarantees," Mr. Madison said to finish the meeting. "The wheels of progress turn slowly. But I will promise to do all I can. If you work with me, I'll work with you."

He got up and shook everybody's hand. The next school year, I was allowed to come back.

Chicanos made up almost 40 percent of the student body at Keppel, although it seemed like it was 80 percent. The dark faces under the tree on the lawn, the daily brawls among us, and police coming through the hallways made it seem like nobody but Chicanos attended the school.

The Anglo students plugged along among their own, isolated in the upper-floor classrooms. They were in the journalism club that put out the school newspaper, ironically called "The Aztec." They were in school government sessions making decisions about pep rallies, the annual Christmas party and the Prom. They made up the school teams, the cheerleading squads and most ironically, they were the school mascots: Joe and Josephine Aztec.

The mascots were always Anglo, cloaked in deerskin, Indian-like garb. They usually acted like clowns, tripping over each other during football games, while "rallying" the team to victory. Sometimes they did tumbling acts — nothing whatsoever to do with being Aztec.

The Chicanos started their own student club called To.H.M.A.S. — To Help Mexican American Students. The other high schools in the district also did the same: San Gabriel High School had M.A.S.O. — Mexican American Student Organization; and Alhambra High School had HUNTOS — which means "together."

My first few days back in school, I felt like an outsider again. There seemed to be more activity though. I saw some Chicanas dressed in pep squad gear and a few Chicanas were members of the journalism club. The strict demarcation between the whites and Mexicans in some areas appeared to be breaking down.

I spent a lot of time in between classes at the Chicano Student Center, which was an office and lounge space in a bungalow in the middle of the school, next to the lunch benches. Mrs. Baez was the Home-School Coordinator, a woman who lived in Rosemead's South Side, a mother of teenagers, and active in Chicano affairs; she was also on the board of the Bienvenidos Community Center. Mr. Pérez, the print shop teacher, was the club's adviser. Two college students were hired as part-time assistants: Blanca Glendon, a Chicana married to a black, and Carmela San Juan, who was part Mexicana and part Filipina.

ToHMAS meetings were held once a week. At the first meeting dues were paid, officers elected, issues of concern raised, and activities planned. The most significant of our activities then were the Cinco De Mayo festivities, including our own float in the annual observances, and efforts to raise funds, like holding dances.

At first the club concerned itself only with benign aspects of school life. But the barrio realities, and the long-standing issues of inequality and neglect, kept rearing their heads. During the meetings, I kept quiet in the corner, not volunteering for anything, until something, I didn't know what, would snag my attention.

"Mrs. Baez, come outside," a student shouted through the door of the Chicano Student Center. "There's a fight."

Mrs. Baez left the paperwork she was working on and quickly followed the student outside. Bam Bam and another student, Alfredo, were going at it in the courtyard. Before this, the school administration would have automatically suspended or expelled the students. Mrs. Baez now could intervene and try to work out the problems among the Chicanos before the school staff got involved. This meant a lot of gray hairs for Baez and her assistants.

I sat in the lounge area, my hair long and slicked back, with a couple of other students. Blanca opened the door and asked us to step out for a time so a student session could be held. Mrs. Baez brought in Bam Bam and Alfredo and had them sit. I

walked out and looked back through the window as an intense argument ensued between Bam Bam and Alfredo, with Blanca and Mrs. Baez trying to work out some solution. This is what they had to deal with every day.

The leading members of ToHMAS were mostly women, among them Esme, Cha Cha, Amelia, Yvonne, and Flora. A few dudes helped, such as Ysidro, Alex, Chuy and myself. But the women ran everything. It was through ToHMAS, and through the example of Mrs. Baez, Blanca and Carmela, that the women from Lomas found a place to address some long-standing grievances. Their leadership found shape and form through ToHMAS, as they took to heart the battle for their respect, and that of their people.

We dealt with two dominant aspects. One was something called Project Student, with Carmela as our sponsor, which targeted the physical deterioration of the school: Walls were cracked, stairwells in disrepair, and the freeway behind the school drowned out lessons from second-floor classrooms. In the summer, the air conditioning system rarely worked, making for long, sweltering days. In the winter, rain accumulated in buckets from roof leaks. Project Student, in fact, involved more than just Chicanos; whites and others also had to endure these conditions.

The other aspect involved the issue of dignity for the Chicano students.

"You don't mind if I don't call you Chin do you?" Mrs. Baez asked.

"*Chale*, what's up?"

"We'd like to propose you and Esme try out for Joe and Josephine Aztec."

I looked over at Esme and then back to Mrs. Baez.

"You're joking, right?"

"We're very serious," Esme said. "We're tired of them paddies — excuse me — but them Anglos putting down our culture. They make the mascots look like Pocahontas with tommy hawks and then prance around like fools."

"That's true, but what are our chances — I mean, how are we going to win when the Anglos do all the judging?"

"We plan to do an authentic Aztec dance, in authentic Aztec dress," Esme said. "If they deny us, then everyone will know how racist this school is."

"But I don't know any Aztec dances."

"We have somebody willing to teach you," Mrs. Baez said. "He's an instructor for a *folklórico* dance troupe at one of the colleges. You look Indian enough with your long hair. And I think it would help involve some of the hard-core Lomas students in what we're doing if you tried out."

"What do you say, Louie?" Esme asked.

They knew they had me. I accepted as a formality.

Esme and I went to East L.A. College and met with a Señor Franco, the *folklórico* dance instructor. He taught us some basic steps and helped us find the material and designs for our dancewear. To get it right, we dedicated hours of our evenings to rehearsal.

Esme choreographed the dance routine, based on Señor Franco's instruction. Our mothers created the costumes, and they were so strikingly beautiful, even Señor Franco was impressed. We added some non-Aztec touches too.

The rehearsals were secret. When the time neared for the tryouts, we walked into the activities office and signed up. A couple of the white students there gave us funny looks. Esme and I signed our names and then left.

The day of the tryouts, all contestants were to meet in the gym. Parents, teachers and students took up some of the bleachers. A row of judges, including some teachers and students, stayed near the performance area.

I entered the gym area in Aztec dress; I had on a leather top, arm bands and loin cloth, with a jaguar-imaged headgear propped on my head and bells strapped around my ankles. And I must have been a sight with tattoos on my arms and an earring. I saw a couple of rows of bleachers filled up with Chicanos; Mrs. Baez had organized the students to attend. As I

entered, they cheered and hollered. I considered getting out of there but Esme came up behind me and held my hand. We were both nervous.

Esme and I were the last ones to perform. We suffered through a number of tumbling acts and screwball routines. Then an announcer came on the speaker:

"Now we have the team of Esmeralda Falcón and Luis Rodríguez."

Silence saturated the gym area. I walked up solemn and straight, a wooden chair in one hand and a conga drum in the other, and sat down in the middle of the basketball court. I paused for 10 seconds, then began the beat. Esme came in slow, purposeful, with a turquoise sequined-and-feathered garment and multicolored headgear that arced around her head like a rainbow; she also had bells.

Esme could have been a priestess from Tenochtitlan, her face pure and brown, with slight make up that accented her already slanted, indigenous eyes. She danced around me, as if calling forth a spirit; the bells on her ankles swirling around the beat, in time with the rhythm of the drum. At one point, I arose and danced with her, in unison, round and round through various steps, leading up to the climax.

We had to be serious — no laughing, no smiling, in keeping with the integrity of the dance.

A murmur swept through the bleachers when Esme and I crossed our feet together and swung around and around, hooked by our ankles, going faster and faster, the force of our swirling keeping us locked, letting the motion pull and embrace us at the same time, like in a battle. When we finished, one of my knees fell to the floor as Esme stood above me, the victor.

A few seconds passed, then an uproar of applause and cheers burst out of the bleachers. None of the other contestants received the response we did. I even saw white students and some judges clapping. They had never seen anything like it.

Esme and I waited by Mrs. Baez as the judges mulled over their decision. Finally:

"The winners are — and the new Joe and Josephine Aztec mascots of Mark Keppel High School — Esmeralda Falcón and Luis Rod...."

The yells drowned out my last name. Esme shrieked, threw her arms around my neck and hugged me. Other ToHMAS supporters came over with smiles and handshakes. In other people's eyes, this may have been a small victory. But for the Chicanos at Mark Keppel High School, this meant another barrier had been torn down and an important aspect of our culture recognized. I surprised myself and felt warm inside. I tried to shake it off, but couldn't. A flush of pride soon covered my face. *We won!*

More Chicanos became involved in ToHMAS. We started our own *folklórico* group in which Carmen San Juan taught the students some basic Mexican and Flamenco dances. Esme and I started a *teatro* group, based on what the Teatro Campesino of Cesar Chávez's farm workers union were doing in rural California. Our *teatro* group, however, had an urban slant.

I wrote the three plays we performed. One involved a dramatic verse monologue of a Chicana about to be arrested by the cops. Another involved a one-act about being proud of our culture. But the most controversial one dealt with getting Lomas and Sangra to stop fighting each other.

This play began with someone from Sangra crossing out Lomas on a huge, piece of white paper pasted on a wall. Then the action moved toward a point when the dudes from both neighborhoods go at each other. The upshot is as the two barrios fight, local government officials are on the side determining the site of a new mall or where the next freeway will go while making plans to uproot the very land the dudes were killing each other for.

"Who wants to play the dude crossing out Lomas?" I asked. Nobody raised their hands.

"What's the matter, it's only a play."

"Hey, Louie, we ain't about to cross out the Hills," Chuy said. "I know what you're trying to say, but somebody might get hurt."

I decided to play this part; I had to stand by my play.

We presented the productions at a joint cultural event sponsored by ToHMAS, MASO and HUNTOS. That day, a large grouping of dudes from Lomas came by and sat in the back. They acknowledged me, but I had to go through with the play.

When we finished, a few dudes stormed out yelling "Lomas Rifa."

But for those who stayed, we discussed ending the warfare between the barrios. Then Esme's portrayal of the Chicana getting beaten by the cops, in rhymed verse, helped keep the spirits high.

The wheels of progress turned too slowly. While we kept up with ToHMAS activities, the school could not keep up with all the students' needs. Red tape and outright opposition stalled Project Student. Then one night a group of white kids broke into the school and spray-painted the walls surrounding the Chicano Student Center with stuff such as: *Mexicans Go Home! Greasers Stink! Remember The Alamo!*

Esme called a meeting to determine what should be done.

"We should draw up some demands," Amelia suggested.

"That's right. People are still prejudiced here," said Flora.

"Well, what do we ask for? They've given us a lot so far — what can we get that we don't have already?" Esme asked.

"I got an idea," I said. "Chente over at Bienvenidos took me to the East L.A. schools. After the 'Blowouts' they got more Chicano teachers and even Chicano studies. This is what we need. We should demand a Chicano studies class and a Chicano teacher."

"Maybe Mr. Pérez will teach it," Amelia said.

"Or even Mrs. Baez — it's a great idea. How many are for it?" Esme said. It was unanimous.

The next day we presented our plans to Mrs. Baez. I wrote up a statement with the heading: *We Demand Justice!* The statement called for the school to find the culprits who defaced the Chicano Student Center, for more Chicano teachers, and for a Chicano Studies class. But Mrs. Baez didn't like it.

"Why? If we don't do something the *gabachos* will try to roll back the little we've got," I said.

"I think it's too rash," Mrs. Baez implored. "You don't know the kind of trouble you can get into. I know Chente has introduced you to a lot of the East L.A. student leaders — but this is not Garfield High School! We are a minority in this school. We have to do things differently. We can't just act like anybody should give us anything."

"But the Chicanos in this school have been pushed around for too long," Esme said. "We're tired. Every time we try to better ourselves, we're told to wait, to hold on, that things will get better. But it never does! We have to do something — we have to do it now."

"I can't support this," Mrs. Baez said. "But you do what you feel you must."

"We can't do it without you," Flora said. "And you know it."

Then Flora walked out. Disappointment crossed over everyone's faces. Defeat seemed to set in. But Flora's actions gave me another idea: Why not have a school walkout like they did in East L.A.? Our demands would be for Chicano Studies, more Chicano teachers and the new classrooms, air conditioners and repairs needed as part of Project Student. It would be a walkout for our self-respect.

The word spread. Esme and the others made sure everyone talked to everyone else. Only the Chicanos were involved. I discussed with Chente what we planned to do. He wasn't sure a walkout was a good idea, but he was willing to help us out. He ran off mimeographed copies of our demands.

The next day, everyone went to school like normal. At 10 a.m., the students were to walk out of their classrooms and assemble in front of the school.

"Do you think they'll do it, Louie?" Esme asked, while on our way to classes that morning.

"I don't know. But we'll soon find out."

In my history class, I kept an eye on the clock. As soon as the hands struck the magical hour, I grabbed my books and then proceeded out the door.

"Rodríguez, where do you think you're going?" Mrs. Tuttle said, the one we called Mrs. Turtle and who treated us like we were in kindergarten. "Young man, come back here this instant!"

But I kept on walking. In the hallways, a number of students emerged out of their classes. Not a lot, but more than I had imagined. Books were dropped in the hallways. When I made it to the front steps of the school there were already 80 to 100 students converging there. Esme and the other ToHMAS members had made crudely-painted signs and gave them to the students. I grabbed a handful of the demands from a bag and passed them out. Some of the students came up and grabbed stacks of the leaflets to help get them to other students.

In a matter of minutes, we had some 300 people on the front lawn. Teachers, and those students still in classes, stuck their heads out of classroom windows. Mrs. Baez received a phone call from Mr. Madison.

"Did you know this was going to happen?" Mr. Madison said.

"No, I didn't know about a walkout. I discouraged them, however, from presenting their demands," Mrs. Baez explained.

"And you refused to inform me about this?" Mr. Madison yelled. "You're supposed to tell me what's going on — that's why we have you here."

"Oh, I wasn't aware of this," Mrs. Baez said, her voice also rising in anger. "I thought I was to be here for the students, so they can have someone to talk to and represent their interests. I didn't know I was supposed to be your eyes and ears."

"Mrs. Baez, come into my office right now — we're going to have to put a stop to this," Mr. Madison said and hung up.

When Mrs. Baez showed, Mr. Madison stood up, getting ready to do some more yelling. But Mrs. Baez interrupted him.

"Mr. Madison, you can stop right there. I am a grown woman and a mother. I am not one of your high school students. I refuse to have you talk to me in this disrespectful and condescending tone."

"Oh you too?" Mr. Madison said. "Everybody wants respect around here. What about respect for me and this institution! We have a school to run. I can't have the school board find out about this — I can't let some disgruntled students ruin it for everyone."

"I would suggest that you pay attention to these disgruntled students and stop worrying about what the school board will do," Mrs. Baez said. "You've promised these children some action. So far, all they've received is a lot of fine talk and smiling faces. I don't support their tactics. But I believe the worst thing to do now is to sweep this under the rug. I won't be a part of that."

Mr. Madison looked stunned. His Home-School Coordinator had turned the tables on him. But he knew whatever he thought of her, she was still his link to the students.

"Okay, we'll let them have their say."

Mr. Madison sat down and made a phone call to the Dean of Students, Mr. Walsh.

"We're calling an assembly," Mr. Madison said. "I want those students back into the school. And then we'll hear what they have to say. But we won't begin to talk unless they're inside the school building."

Mr. Walsh came out to the lawn. The students had been chanting: We Want Chicano Studies! We Want Justice! *¡Ya Basta!*

It took some doing, but Mr. Walsh convinced us to convene in the auditorium and discuss the issues.

"Bring in the whole school," I yelled. "You can't separate us. We want to speak to the whole school."

At first they refused. But finally, when it looked like the students weren't going to budge, Mr. Walsh agreed to let all the classes gather in the auditorium.

It was a session the likes of which Mark Keppel had never seen. Esme walked up to the stage and read out the demands. White students also stood up, some in tears, crying about why we were so angry.

"What have we done to you?" one blond-haired girl demanded to know.

Some Chicano students yelled back, about being neglected, treated like second-class citizens, about being denied access to school resources.

"This is not against whites," I said. "It's against a system that keeps us all under its thumb. By screwing us, the school is screwing you."

"It's your fault," said Stan, the student body president. "You Mexicans just don't want to get involved; you don't want to get ahead."

More yelling. More heated responses. It was difficult, but this had to happen. Everything had stayed bottled up for too long. Each group doing their own thing; complaining about the other group, but not reaching out. The tears, the yelling, the talk served as good medicine for all the students.

Even some hard-nosed dudes got up to say something; some of them had never spoken out in public before. Near the end, I stepped on the stage and made a speech.

"Chicanos only want what you want," I said. "We walk these halls together and yet we don't know anything about each other. We're scared of each other, we're ignorant of each other, and then we're surprised when people get up like this with so much hatred. It's for a reason. There's nothing wrong with *us*! We're not just making this up. Something drastic has to change, or there's going to be even more anger. More than you can imagine."

The result: Mr. Madison approved a new course, a class on Chicano history and culture, and he offered to provide a Chicano teacher for the class. Finally, he said the school would

put some meat behind Project Student; it became a school-backed initiative to present to the school board.

Esme and I hugged again. We had only just begun.

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Shorty's eyes fell; her voice cracked and tears blurred her vision.

"He's dead, mama," she said.

"*¿Quién?*" Mama asked. "*¿Quién se murió?*"

"Fernando — he killed himself last night!"

14-year-old Fernando Luna had been one of Shorty's best friends. He was a member of the Lomas Dukes, the younger set the United Sisters usually partied with. He called himself Gallo, which means rooster. His older brother was Lencho, who was more involved in the affairs of the Hills than Fernando would ever be. Fernando was one of those guys who tried hard to belong, to be as crazy and committed as anyone. But none of us were aware how lonely he was in midst of the crowd.

His mother, Toncha, was active in the Bienvenidos Food Co-op. But as a single mother, on welfare, with five boys to raise, Toncha's hands were full — and I'm sure through no fault of her own, Fernando's needs weren't always met.

Shorty had been seeing a few of Fernando's homeys, like Bosco and Conejo. And although she confided with Fernando many of her problems, they never became intimate. She saw him as a good friend; somebody she could talk to. Now it comes out: Fernando liked my sister very much.

The night before, Fernando had phoned late to talk with Shorty. Usually she was full of stories, jokes and concerns. But Shorty was in bed and tired; she gently suggested he call her back the next day.

"Or let's talk in school," she said. "We can get together at lunch."

"Sure, okay," Fernando responded; there was nothing unusual in his tone.

The next day, Toncha discovered Fernando's body swinging from a pole in the closet.

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"It's not enough to accuse, to wail and spit on the face of all oppression — this can be ignored," Skin said. "It takes a scientific approach to uncover the source of exploitation, to unravel society's delicate and intricate tapestry, stitched with the skin of our mothers, the bones of our ancestors, the blood of all who toil."

"This is why we can demand — with full moral authority — what has been stolen from us," Ofelia said.

"And this they cannot ignore," Skin added.

Another session with the collective, most of it held in an eloquent and educated Spanish I could not speak myself, yet I grasped everything being said.

The group aimed to train a corps of leaders. Unlike others in the Chicano Movement who strove to *enter* the American capitalist system, it prepared for a fundamental reorganization of society.

"It's also time you understood whites aren't the enemy," Chente said. "Take that 'tradition,' all that energy expended against each other — what a waste!"

Others with their own answers also converged on the barrio. Born-again Christians, many of whom were ex-cons and ex-junkies, preached salvation; I attended some of their testimonials. Democrats, Republicans, libertarians and nationalists also plied their wares. Some wanted our minds, some wanted our souls — some wanted warm bodies for polling booths.

But the collective didn't depend on powers of belief or stale promises. They were social scientists, all the time probing and summarizing.

"You don't have to be a genius to figure out what's in front of you," Chente said. "Yet this is the hardest thing to do

precisely because what we see is not always expressing what's beneath it."

"But all we know is *this* life," I questioned. "You can't change that!"

"Luis, change is what we're all about," Chente offered. "Change is constant, stagnation is relative. But change follows laws of development, a process that, if appreciated, sets the conditions by which people make their own history."

"What we're here to do is transform the way people have been accustomed to living," Sergio said. "The first step is removing the shackles on our minds."

The collective explained how workers of all colors and nationalities, linked by hunger and the same system of exploitation, have no country; their interests as a class respect no borders. To me, this was an unconquerable idea.

I also learned there was no shame in being a janitor or a garment worker; I never looked at Mama and Dad with disdain again.

So fundamental. So Christian. So American at times. Yet this conflict would be the most intense and prolonged of our lives.

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A party below the Hills swung with music, *ruquitas de aquellas* and anything to get high with. Suddenly, this dude Rudy rushed into the living room, breathing hard and sweating.

"Where's Santos and Toots?" he demanded.

"What the fuck you want?" Santos yelled from the kitchen.

"The *gabachos* on Marshall Street tried to jump me, man."

"Slow down — what happened?"

"I was walking my girl home when the bikers from the old gray house — you know the one before you get to the Church — anyway they come out of the house with chains and bats, call us fuckin' greasers and chase us down the street."

"I know who they are — they're in a bikers' club, the Sinisters," Toots said.

"Fuck 'em," Santos responded. "Let's get them white boys."

A caravan of three cars pulled out of the party toward Marshall Street on the other side of the freeway. I piled into a vehicle so packed — two dudes were stuffed into the trunk — I could hardly breathe the whole way up there.

The gray house had been known as a bikers' hangout for years. The grassless yard filled with automobile and motorcycle parts. Real poverty row.

When we arrived, dudes piled out of the cars and began to attack the white picket fence, tearing off sections of it and yelling out "Here Stand Las Lomas!" A rock smashed a window.

A long-haired, leather-and-denim clad dude stepped onto the porch, cradling a shotgun; he fired and Pokie received some of the pellets in his face, and he dropped to the street. Dudes began to run in all directions. Many jumped back into their cars. I ran off too, and came across Santos with a knife. He started poking me and a couple of others with it.

"You don't fuckin' run!" he yelled. "Lomas never runs!"

But in the confusion, there was nothing else to do. Toots and Cuervo picked up Pokie to take him to the hospital. I got into somebody's else car and we boogied back to the party.

Later at the party, Santos gathered all the dudes together and again shouted about the cowards we were. Puppet had heard what happened and called the house. But Puppet was pissed off we went after the bikers. He said nobody, but nobody, was to go back there.

Santos wasn't having it.

"Toots, Cuervo and I will go in one car," he said, displaying a handgun through his pant's belt.

"Chin, you get a couple of other dudes and come by five minutes after we do. Can you get a *cuete*?"

"*Simón*, I think so."

"*Orale*, then do it — and follow us over there."

I knocked on Roger Nelson's window. He opened it. Roger was a half-Mexican, half-white guy who I knew had weapons.

"What ya want Chin? It's 2:30 in the morning."

"I need a rifle, man, any one you got."

"What's going on?"

I explained the situation to him. Roger knew the Sinisters. In fact, they were long-time enemies. The Sinisters hated Mexicans. They also hated Roger because, although he looked white, he decided to cleave closer to his Mexican side and spent a lot of time with dudes from the Hills.

Roger handed me a Ruger Long .22 semi-automatic rifle with scope.

"Bring it back in the morning — I'll take care of it for you," he said.

I took a dude from the Imperials Car Club named Darío, who had a sharp, cherried-out Riviera. This was my first mistake. My second mistake was taking Conejo from the Dukes. He was my sister's ex, a 13 year old who was eager to go with me, so I figured it wouldn't hurt.

We were supposed to follow the old, beat-up car that Santos and the others were in. But by the time I got everything together, they were long gone. I told Darío to drive slowly down Marshall Street. As we approached the gray house, it looked like a tornado hit the place. The bikers were scrambling about outside; a couple of bodies were on the ground. Darío pulled up and I stuck the rifle out the side window.

"They're back!" a woman yelled.

The bikers rushed around, some jumped over trash cans and others tripped into the dwelling. I didn't know what to do. A massive biker dude stood nearby on the yard and looked at me while he tried to figure out his next move. But instead of running, he turned around, wound his arms over his head and bent over. Without thinking, I shot him — right in the ass!

"Take off, man, take off!" I yelled at Darío.

We sped off toward Del Mar Avenue, not far from my house. But we didn't get too far. Police cars came out of nowhere, from every direction. Darío stopped the car in the driveway of an apartment complex.

"Come out with your hands up!" a cop yelled.

We did as they ordered. I emerged from the car and perhaps ten .38 revolvers were pointed at my head. They told us to lie on the ground with our hands on our heads. I saw a cop reach into the back seat of the car and carefully remove the .22 rifle with his fingertips.

"I got it," he declared.

Conejo cried the whole time we were hauled to the San Gabriel jail house. I told Darío and Conejo not to say anything. After the booking rituals, we found out what happened.

The first car had come to the house on Marshall Street and opened fire on the bikers who were hanging around. Three bikers went down. Then a few minutes later, we came by in Darío's ride while the bikers were still figuring out who had gotten injured. Another biker down. The first car escaped.

The second car with three teenage male suspects was apprehended and a fired weapon confiscated.

Darío, Conejo and I were booked for assault with intent to commit murder.

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