Chapter Four

"Oh, you'll get over it . . . eventually."
— La Payasa de Lomas

"Hey Louie, get up!"

Gloria's voice swept across the small room. Through sleep-drenched eyes, I barely made out the outline of my sister's body, framed by a clutter of boxes, clothes and opened dresser drawers. Unable to move out of the way, I felt a shoe bounce off my head. Gloria ran out of the room in fits of laughter. Another morning after.

It appeared to be a special morning with a sort of pleasing compassion. The tree leaves against the window glimmered green with veins of chlorophyll blood. Birds chortled in the branches, sounding like laughter. Sunlight oozed through window blinds.

The room, the size of a jail cell, was separated from the rest of the garage by unfinished sheets of wallboard. On every section of wall space were murals painted in acryllic and spray-paint, with fiery colors and images of *vatos locos*, three-dimensional crosses and serpents writhing through dripping syringes. Various scribblings covered the door and table tops.

I arose from a bed of old blankets on the floor, bumped a toe on the bottom of the dresser and almost stepped into a pail of piss. Somehow, I made it outside, greeted by the moist dawn air.

Limping toward the back porch, the smell of *huevos estrellados* (two grade double-As, looking at you) cleared the tangle of thoughts which lingered from the night's turmoil of dreams. I made it across the back yard to my mother's house and entered through a wrought iron door.

"Sorry about the shoe, bro," Gloria said as she glanced up from the dining table with a grin. "Couldn't help myself."

"Just like I won't help myself when I shoot you in the head, *pinche*," I replied.

"Is that any way to talk to your favorite sister?"

"No, that's the way I talk to my pain-in-the-booty, so-called sister."

Mama leaned over the stove, preparing corn tortillas to go with the eggs.

"*Hablen en español*," she said. "*Ya saben que no entiendo inglés.*"

Mama kept telling us this. And we kept talking in English.

The night before I was in combat with myself, against a dark side, poised for destruction, with death about to tap my shoulder. I tried to commit suicide. I had come home in a stupor from pills, liquor and from sniffing aerosol can spray. I had slithered into the house around 3 a.m. and made it to the bathroom. Everyone else slept. Leaning on a wash basin, I looked into the mirror and stared into a face of weariness, of who-cares, of blood-shot eyes, prickly whiskers poking out of the chin, an unruly mustache below a pimpled nose, a face that much as I tried could not be washed away.

I staggered out of the house and crossed into a backyard with lemon trees and decayed avocados on the ground, and a tiled ramada with hanging vines. I entered my room in the garage, grabbed the pail I used to pee in, and filled it with water from a faucet on a rusted outdoor pipe. I planned to thrust my arm into the water after I cut an artery (I didn't want any blood on the floor — even at this moment I feared Mama cursing about the mess).

I pressed my street-scarred and tattooed body against the wall and held a razor to my wrist. Closed my eyes. Hummed a song — I don't know what song. But I couldn't do it.

Prior to this I had been exiled to the garage for months. My mother had thrown me out of the house and afterwards the garage became the compromise between coming back and the street. She was just too tired: pulling me out of jail cells, of

getting reports from school about the fights I'd been in, of expecting a call from a hospital or morgue.

One day, I made 100 bucks working a weekend on the graveyard shift at one of the docks in the warehouse district. I took it home and placed it on the dining table in front of my mother. But Mama stood up, took the $100 and threw it in my face. Dollar bills, fives and 20s fluttered around me like green-and-black birds.

"¡*Hipócrita*! You can't buy my love," she yelled in Spanish. "You can't show respect with this money. I don't want it — I don't want anything from you!"

That night I slept in the "fields." The next evening Yuk Yuk took me in, but after three days his mother demanded I leave. I then took a bus to downtown L.A. and walked the streets of Spanish Broadway — what the Mexicans called *El Centro* — assaulted by the lights of the movie marquees, the sleaze bars and liquor stores. I spent about 75 cents in an all-night movie house, which featured continuous showings of three or four movies. There I slept with the winos and the other homeless, and woke up to ushers throwing us out at daybreak.

The sunlight invaded my eyes, forcing me to squint. Office girls whisked by on their way to work, their fragrance awakening my senses, and then my loins. Iron enclosures were thrown open as brick-and-stone stores began selling clothes freshly sewed from the nearby garment plants, as well as appliances and food items. The traffic up my nose.

This part of Broadway, from First Street to Olympic Boulevard, was where the Latino people shopped, roamed, explored. *Norteños* and *salsas* blared out of stereo shops and open-air fruit stands rippled with the breakneck bargaining and accompanying hand gestures of the Spanish tongue. On weekends, that stretch of Broadway must have had a million people or so.

On other nights, I stayed with homegirls who knew I needed a place to crash, crawling through windows left slightly opened for me. Also in abandoned cars. By the railroad tracks. Finally, I came home and negotiated an arrangement with Mama.

She laid down the rules: I couldn't set foot in the house unless I had her permission. And I could stay in the garage room, which barely held blankets, some drawers and a card table. It had no toilet, no closet space, no heating. At night, when the desert temperatures fell to almost freezing, I could use a small electric heating device which would only keep me from becoming a block of ice.

I accepted.

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I began high school a *loco*, with a heavy Pendleton shirt, sagging khaki pants, ironed to perfection, and shoes shined and heated like at boot camp.

Mark Keppel High School was a Depression-era structure with a brick and art-deco facade and small, army-type bungalows in back. Friction filled its hallways. The Anglo and Asian upper-class students from Monterey Park and Alhambra attended the school. They were tracked into the "A" classes; they were in the school clubs; they were the varsity team members and letter men. They were the pep squads and cheerleaders.

But the school also took in the people from the Hills and surrounding community who somehow made it past junior high. They were mostly Mexican, in the "C" track (what were called the "stupid" classes), and who made up the rosters of the wood, print and auto shops. Only a few of these students participated in school government, in sports, or in the various clubs.

The school had two principal languages. Two skin tones and two cultures. It revolved around class differences. The white and Asian kids (except for "barrio" whites and the handful of Hawaiians, Filipinos and Samoans who ended up with the Mexicans) were from professional, two-car households with watered lawns and trimmed trees. The laboring class, the sons and daughters of service workers, janitors and factory hands, lived in and around the Hills (or a section of Monterey Park called "Poor Side").

The school separated these two groups by levels of education: The professional-class kids were provided with college-preparatory classes; the blue-collar students were pushed into "industrial arts."

The Mexicans assembled beneath the big, gnarled tree on the front lawn next to the gym and shop area. The well-off students usually had cars and hung out in the parking lot or the cafeteria. Those who were in between or indifferent couldn't help but get caught in the crossfire.

By the time I went to Keppel, I had become introspective and quiet. I wanted to be untouchable: Nobody could get to me. I walked the halls facing straight ahead, a saunter in my step, only slightly and consciously glancing to the sides.

Keppel had a rowdy reputation among San Gabriel Valley schools. Fights all the time. I believe it related to the ingrained system of tracking and subdivisions. The teachers and administrators were overwhelmingly Anglo and whether they were aware of it or not, favored the white students.

If you came from the Hills, you were labeled from the start. I'd walk into the counselor's office for whatever reason and looks of disdain greeted me — one meant for a criminal, alien, to be feared. Already a thug. It was harder to defy this expectation than just accept it and fall into the trappings. It was a jacket I could try to take off, but they kept putting it back on. The first hint of trouble and the preconceptions proved true. So why not be proud? Why not be an outlaw? Why not make it our own?

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I often lay back in my garage room, listening to scratchy records of Willie Bobo, Thee Midniters, War, and Miles Davis. Sometimes oldies; the "Eastside Sound" revues, old Stax and Atlantic rhythm & blues: Wilson Pickett, Rufus Thomas, Solomon Burke and The Drifters. And of course, Motown.

For the most part, the Mexicans in and around Los Angeles were economically and socially closest to blacks. As soon as we

understood English, it was usually the Black English we first tried to master. Later in the youth authority camps and prisons, blacks used Mexican slang and the *cholo* style; Mexicans imitated the Southside swagger and style — although this didn't mean at times we didn't war with one another, such being the state of affairs at the bottom. For Chicanos this influence lay particularly deep in music: Mexican rhythms syncopated with blues and ghetto beats.

My brother Joe once played bass in a band of mostly black musicians called "Taboos Children." Although only 17, Joe played with the band in bars and after-hours clubs in South Central Los Angeles. They had one original song, a local club hit called "Young Lovers." The other Chicano in the band was a San Gabriel guitarist named José Palmas who had these magical fingers and could play anything from Wes Montgomery to Jeff Beck to Delta Blues to raunchy *norteñas*.

I myself picked up a saxophone, a used brass tenor. I saved the money over the years, dollar by dollar, from whatever Mama would let me keep from the jobs I held. I managed a couple of lessons at a local music shop to learn the fingering, scales and some basic chords. But I tried to learn to play the saxophone by listening to records.

A few times I went with Joe and Palmas to see Taboos Children perform in some bar or dance hall, paying strict attention to the sax player. I got stinking drunk once, throwing up in the car to an eight-track guitar slice of Hendrix, and recall cruising down Hollywood Boulevard and taking a piss in the middle of the block with traffic lined up on both sides of me.

Mama later blamed Joe for making me an alcoholic.

When I finally mastered about two or three saxophone riffs, such as those like "Sad Girl" which the East L.A. band Thee Midniters made popular, I started jamming with a couple of local garage bands.

The Animal Tribe also had a band which went through several changes according to the currents in the music scene. First it was called Thee Occasions which mirrored what Thee Midniters were doing in the early to mid-60s. Then when the

music started taking a blues turn, it became the Coyote Blue Hemp Boogie Band and Joaquín López learned to play a mean harmonica, as penetrating as any original blues man. Later still, the band became Agua Caliente (Hot Water) when Latino-rock fusion like Santana, El Chicano and Malo permeated the airwaves in the early '70s.

The saxophone meant everything to me. When I needed time to myself, I locked the room and played it. I didn't really know how, but I envisioned myself offering melodies which screeched of back roads and wet sidewalks and Spanish Broadway night stalkers. I felt like I had this brass throat, moaning like Billy Holiday, shrieking like James Brown. Colors swirled around me. Faces. Notes. A rhapsody pressed out from a sultry furnace somewhere inside — a cacophony of crippled cries.

One day, Joe knocked on the door. I stopped bellowing on the sax, put the instrument down and peered out the window. He looked angry. For years, this look would prompt a flow of blood from the pit of my stomach. It meant I would be accused, abused, pushed around, and ordered to do something to make up for some perceived wrong.

But I was 14 already. I had grown stronger. I had been in many fights. I opened the door.

"What you want Joe?"

"You took some of my records, and I want them back."

"Don't worry — I was going to return them."

"Listen, don't take anything from me unless you ask me. Understand?"

"No you listen, you come and take my things all the time. You're always picking up my stuff and walking out. You want me to ask you, then you better ask me!"

"Fuck you!"

"No — fuck you!"

I never told Joe this before. His nostrils flared and his face flushed with red. He pushed himself into the room and stared into my eyes as I returned the look without flinching. For a

second, he looked like he didn't know what to do. He couldn't just slap me down like we were kids. But he couldn't be challenged that way either. He had to do something.

Joe turned toward the saxophone on the bundle of blankets, and in two shakes, stomped on it — his boots crushing in sections of brass.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Stop, or I'll...!"

Joe stopped.

"You'll what?"

I looked at the saxophone as it lay beaten, bent. Then this fury quivered through every vein, flamed through the skin, stormed out my eyes. Everything became a flash of lights. I pounced on Joe, swinging away, punching and gouging. Years of rage erupted out of me. Joe fought back, but I kept at him, like a panther. He was getting the better of me, but I wouldn't let up — flailing away at his head and body.

My sister Ana heard the bodies slammed into the wall, the dull thuds of fists on a face, and rushed to get Mom and Dad.

When our parents came in, Joe was on top of me, mostly trying to protect himself. My dad held Joe by the chest and pulled him off. I jumped to my feet, balled fists ready to continue firing. Joe looked exhausted and shamed. I'm sure he never expected this of me — or perhaps he always wondered about that dreaded day when I would stand up to him.

Dad let go of his grip. Joe shoved him aside, almost knocking him down, and ran out the room. He didn't return home for three days.

All I could think about was my saxophone; I couldn't afford to fix or replace it. All I could think about were the lost melodies.

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The San Gabriel Mission held an annual "Fiesta Days" celebration to honor the Spanish-Mexican heritage of the area. There were parades, speeches, carnival rides, directed for the most part at the Anglos who commemorated a past they were

never a part of, as if the Mexicans were long dead and mummified, while in the present they'd rather spit on a Mexican than give him the time of day.

During the daytime the *gabachos* put on phony *sombreros*, rode rhinestone-garished horses, and applauded one Hat Dance after another. But at first hints of nightfall, they skulked back to their walled estates in San Marino or Pasadena, to Spanish-style mansions and the melancholy of manicured lawns.

At night, the fiesta belonged to the Mexicans.

The Sangra barrio surrounded the Mission. But the dudes from Lomas often showed up, prepared for anything. Families also arrived, by the carload.

One summer during the "Fiesta Days," Chicharrón and I hitchhiked to the edge of the Sangra neighborhood. Instead of crossing through it, we meandered over to the railroad tracks and walked the wood ties to the Mission. We slipped past some Sangra Diablos loitering at the entrance to the carnival by sprinting through the cemetery next to the Mission church and scaling an old stone wall.

Once inside, we strolled among mothers with carriages, lovers holding hands, and children darting past while the colored lights of the Ferris wheel, "the hammer," and miniature roller coaster flickered across our faces.

Then I met Viviana.

She stood in line for the Ferris wheel, looking like delicate earthenware, glazed in honey. Endless, silky hair framed her face, hair as black as those in velvet paintings people sold at swap meets. Lashes like paint brushes encircled her eyes, which were immense and bursting with brown. I wanted to climb into them.

"*Trucha*, homes, what do you call them?" Chicharrón remarked after he spotted Viviana and another *ruca* standing next to her.

"It looks like heaven's missing a couple of angels," I declared, echoing a popular song by the Tavares Brothers.

We elbowed our way through the line of people, closer to the girls. Once behind them, Chicharrón turned on his charm and started a conversation.

"Hey babes, what do ya say?"

Well, it wasn't much, but the girl next to Viviana lit up and pursued it. Viviana appeared distant, subdued. I felt like leaving. I didn't deserve to breathe the same air as her. The thought of her looking at me and saying "Ugh!" was killing me.

"What's your name, *ésa*?" Chicharrón asked.

"I'm Eva, and this is Viviana."

Viviana pushed Eva slightly with her arm when she said this. Eva smiled.

As we waited in line, Chicharrón and Eva talked and talked. I could hear Eva rambling: "Me and this *vato*, eh, we've been seeing each other, eh, but it's no big thing, you know? He wants to get married and all that, but I don't want no part of that *pedo*, eh. I don't want to be tied down, you know..."

Chicharrón rapidly lost interest. I managed only slices of sentences with Viviana before our turn came to get on the Ferris wheel. So there we were, Viviana and I, stepping onto a carriage and sitting down together. I didn't know what to say. The carriage moved upward. We remained at the top for a spell and Viviana moved close to me. My heart felt like it had been stuffed into my ears. Then the Ferris wheel spun and Viviana placed her arm around mine and snuggled up, closing her eyes and smiling. I didn't want to breathe for fear she would let go.

"*Hijole*...I think I lost my breakfast," I finally said.

She laughed.

"There goes lunch," I continued and she squealed with abandon.

I wasn't funny, but she made me feel like I could've said anything and she would consider it brilliantly clever. The carnival noises, the colored tents and streams of light, the faces of the people on the ground, first clear and distinctive, then distant and dull, all this surged toward us. I wanted to rotate there forever, chuckling and clutching with Viviana. I didn't want

the ride to end because on the ground, I didn't think she would be so generous.

But it did end. We emerged from the carriage and I felt clumsy toward her again. By then Eva's yapping was long gone, although leaving a trail of "ehs" like a far-off echo in my head. I couldn't find Chicharrón, so Viviana and I took a walk through the midway where hawkers challenged passersby to try their luck at the coin tosses, rifle shoots and dart throws.

"You want a stuffed animal, *ésa*?" I asked.

"*Orale*, whatever," she said coolly, in a way that suggested she knew exactly what she was doing.

We went through several games, losing a small fortune, before I hit pay dirt at the baseball toss. Viviana selected a panda bear and I wondered if I could have bought a real one with all the money I threw away.

We walked some more, not many words between us, but I sensed Viviana felt safe with me. I think she wanted to hang out. I thrust my hands into my pockets, then let them hang awkwardly, feeling like two-ton steel beams. Soon Viviana pushed her arms around mine — probably in empathy with my plight — and I eased.

By the midnight hour, summer winds slipped softly through the carnival grounds. The odor of tacos, cotton candy and *churros* saturated the air, along with tension.

Lomas and Sangra soldiers began to congregate in different sections of the enclosed area. Sangra dudes, in particular, moved in large numbers from the entrance area to the other side of the cemetery. A scattering of Lomas dudes pushed through the crowd from the other end, each crew heading toward a collision on the midway. By then papas gathered their small children and mamas yelled out for their older sons and daughters to go home. Police officers, some in uniform and others in plainclothes with walkie talkies, walked two abreast down the aisles of booths. The terror-struck rushed to their cars.

"You know where I'm from?" I asked Viviana.

"*Simón*," Viviana said. "I knew all the time. I know all the Sangra dudes — my brothers are Diablos. You and the other *vato* I'd never seen before. Besides, Lomas dudes look a certain way."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the dudes from Sangra look like the old days, you know: small hats, long coats, baggy pants. But you guys from Lomas look like summer — white T-shirts, starched Levis with royal cuffs and bandannas. I kinda like that."

"I don't care about this Sangra and Lomas stuff," she continued. "Why this war? Aren't we the same? I don't care about *de dónde eres* — where you from? My brothers do, they're all-the-way gangster lean. What I care about is the kind of person you are."

As we talked, in front of us appeared five girls with blazing red peroxided hair. They were *cholas* from Sangra. The hair color served as their mark. These girls were known to start many of the fights which their homeboys inevitably had to finish. They were led by Cokie and Dina.

They looked agitated, talked loud — as if they could taste the coming battle, able to sniff the blood in the air.

"Hey Viviana," one of them said. "*¿Qué hubo?*"

The others quieted down as we walked past, looking at me hard — knowing I wasn't from the neighborhood, but not sure where I came from.

"Let's get out of here," I said while taking Viviana's hand and leading her toward the kiddie rides. Already the place swelled with activity; even the carnival hands sensed the impending storm: They gathered their stuffed toys and closed their booths.

"Where we going?" Viviana asked.

"I don't know," I said, looking around. "How about up there?"

I pointed to the rooftop on the Mission school building. I also felt something tug at me, the feeling I should be with my homeboys, that I should be marching with them tonight. But I wanted to be with Viviana, away from the war cries, the

bloodshed, away from the adrenalin pumping up our speech and walk.

"Be serious, I can't go up there."

"Sure you can."

I moved some trash cans and wood crates beneath a fire escape. I ascended a couple of steel rungs and then grabbed Viviana's hand, her other hand grasping the stuffed bear. Together we climbed three flights to the roof. Jumping over the roof's edge, I reached down and pulled her over. Long wavy black hair fell across her face. Something warm moved inside me as I fingered the tousled strands.

"Don't look down," I said.

"Why not?" Viviana retorted. "I ain't scared. I've worked with my dad and brothers fixing houses. I'm used to it."

I placed my arm around her waist and directed her toward the roof's edge.

"Well, we've come this far, now what are you going to do with me?" Viviana inquired.

"You mean before or after I suck your blood."

Again she laughed. And me, the one who can't tell a joke!

"See all the people," I said. "I like looking at them this way. You see things about people you wouldn't see if you were there with them. Like a God?"

"Man, you're crazy," Viviana said.

"Yeah, that's true."

Soon we spotted a flurry of activity at the far end of the church yard. Several dudes had surrounded a *vato* whom I recognized as Enano from Lomas. Chava, in a small brim hat and leaning on a cane, led the group. One of them swung a steel-studded belt in his hand. I knew him as Turtleman from Sangra.

"Hey, I gotta go," I told Viviana.

"No, don't Louie," she said while pressing me to her. "Don't go, stay here with me."

I felt a tightening of muscle and beads of sweat forming on my forehead, the way I usually got before fights. Viviana

dropped the panda bear and stroked my head and back, loosening the tightness, and moved her hands up my chest.

"Don't go down there. It's not your fight. They're always going at it. Don't be a part of that tonight. I'm from Sangra. You're from Lomas. So what? *¿Me quieres?*"

I saw the dudes from Sangra move closer to Enano, the girls with the red hair laughing nearby.

"I can't let my homeboy duke it out without me," I said. "I can't let him down, man."

I moved away from Viviana. But from the other side of the carnival, I saw about 15 Lomas dudes — armed with sticks, chains and bumper jacks — rushing to Enano's aid. Chicharrón was among them, his shirt adorned with blood stains. No doubt, he had already gotten into some *guantes* with Sangra.

"It's started," I shouted.

People ran in all directions. Screams pierced the night. Shouts of "Lomas Rifa" and "Sangra Controla" bellowed as *vatos* clashed in senseless fury.

"Don't go *prieto*," Viviana repeated as she turned my head toward her. "Stay with me."

I felt torn. There I was, a *vato* from Lomas staring into the eyes of a Sangra girl. This made me a traitor. But at the same time, all I could think about was her touch, her scent — those eyes.

Viviana stroked my face with a fingertip. *Voices heightened below. Footsteps cracked on cement.* I nuzzled my face against Viviana's; her lips parted and the eyes closed. *Bottles crashed. Trash cans tumbled over.* Viviana breathed into my mouth and I licked her lips lightly with my tongue. *Sounds of shooting. Strained shouts.* She placed her hand against the back of my head as we kissed, and reached deep inside my mouth as a sweet burning crawled over me. *Sirens wailed in the distance. A child cried.*

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José Palmas strums at a six-string as fluid fingers move across its neck like a warm wind across one's brow. Every note sweating. Palmas often practices on his porch, swaying by an old eaten-up tree; sometimes his brother Bobby accompanies him on a conga and Joe on bass. He sits in for local bands who call out his name from the stage. Blues, jazz or a *huapango* — he can play almost anything. One Christmas, Palmas, Bobby, Joe and I jam in my room, whiskey bottles at our sides, and record it on a hand-held tape recorder. We call it "Latin Christmas '69."

The Palmas brothers are Joe's best friends, even as Joe continues to do well in high school as a gymnast who practices karate, and turns in homework and thumps a bass on weekends.

There comes a time, however, when Palmas fails to venture too far beyond his rickety porch. He stops showing up for gigs. Sometimes he sits alone in his room, the guitar on a corner of an unmade bed.

The last I heard, he plays only when the heroin in his body gives him a booking.

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At Mark Keppel High School there was an annual observance: the battle between the Mexicans and Anglos. We called it "The Tradition." It usually started soon after the new school year. When I became a sophomore, the spark which set it off occurred during a football game between Mark Keppel's Aztecs and a predominantly white school called Edgewood. Bus loads of whites from Edgewood came to Aztec Field to see their boys play. A few of us from Lomas decided to crash the game.

When I arrived at Keppel that evening, the football field was lit up; the bleachers were covered with people on both sides. Almost all of them were white, including those on Keppel's side. My homeboys were loitering in the parking area. They were Enano, Santos, Midnight (the only black guy in the gang: One night the homeboys found him AWOL from the army, homeless and sleeping in the fields. The next day they initiated him into the 'hood and he's stayed ever since.), Carlitos,

Baba and Lencho; some of the homegirls included Payasa, Trudy and Chata. We shared a bottle of T-Bird.

Dressed-up, prim students from Edgewood walked past. We called out to them.

"Hey, got any change *lambe*?" Santos queried.

"What's your name baby?" Lencho asked one of the girls.

"¡*Chúpame*!" Baba added.

They looked scared, walked around us. One guy got huffy: "Hey, can't you see we came to see a game? I'm sure you have something better to do."

"As a matter of fact," Santos said, "we don't, so come over here and hand us your money — you butt-on-the-back, paddy motherfucker."

They started to run, but we surrounded them and forced them to fork over some bills. As they ran off, Lencho kicked one of them in the ass.

Nothing would have come of any of this. We were bored. Everyone else soon watched the game, the cheering and roaring — something we weren't a part of.

"Let's squint to the Hills," Santos suggested.

We turned and walked down Hellman Avenue. Suddenly a Monterey Park police car drove by and stopped. Two uniformed officers rushed out.

"Hold it right there," one of them ordered.

This became a routine with us. Whenever the people from the Hills made it down to Monterey Park, San Gabriel or Alhambra, the police departments in those communities made it a habit to roust us out.

We placed our arms on a chain-link fence and spread our legs. One officer searched us while another radioed in. They asked for identification. Where did we just come from? Where were we going? The regular.

Carlitos questioned why we were being stopped and searched.

"We didn't do anything. We just walking, man."

One police officer told him to shut up. But Carlitos kept on.

"Why are we always being harassed?"

The police didn't want to hear it. Before long, an officer struck Carlitos with a baton on his knee. He buckled and fell. We turned around but the other officer pulled his gun out on us. Two more cops arrived. One of them put a choke hold on Carlitos as the other struck his legs. Payasa yelled out: "Leave him alone — he ain't doing nothing, man!"

Carlitos looked like he lost his breath. His face turned blue as the officer behind him put pressure on his neck.

"He can't breathe!" Trudy yelled "You're killing him!"

They knocked Carlitos to the ground and held onto his head. He looked bad — slobbering from the mouth, his pupils turned up. More officers came. Carlitos was out cold. The paramedics arrived, but the police refused to let them do anything. They left Carlitos lying in the street. By that time more Lomas people had arrived, including some older ones who had come to watch the game. Anger flowered among the crowd as word spread about what had happened. A bottle struck one of the police cars. Then another. And another.

Things soon exploded. More cops came but they too were pelted. A major confrontation erupted just above where the two high schools were playing their game, oblivious to what was going on. Soon the police pulled out. The ambulance took Carlitos and sped off, but not before receiving a barrage of rocks, bottles and debris. We assumed more police and firepower were coming. The only path out was toward the football field.

Santos led the way. A car with a local resident drove by. Santos picked up a trash can and threw it in front of the grill — it rolled beneath the car, slowing it down. Then people threw rocks, smashing windows. Whoever drove the car pulled it out and took off, dragging the trash can bunched up under the car, sparks flying everywhere.

We pushed our way through the entrance, some tore down part of the fence surrounding the field. We pulled white guys from out of the stands. Some of them tried to fight back. Even older men, probably war vets and construction workers, got into it but we thumped on them as well.

The game continued for a few more plays before the realization set in a battle was raging out of control in the stands. We rushed into the grandstand, smacking people around. The rage from seeing Carlitos being choked and the cops pushing us around had been building up for years. Spectators tried to flee, a number of cars were smashed. The crowd with us grew larger. More homeboys were involved, ready for *pleito*.

I removed my belt and walked down the street with Santos, Lencho and Midnight, who had experience with racial violence among Blacks, Whites, and Latinos from his time in Army boot camp. Skirmishes popped up in the middle of the streets, in alleys and on front lawns. Whites got together and attacked as well. They found isolated groupings of Mexicans and pounced on them.

At first we avoided jumping on the Asians, even if they were with the Anglos and had lettered jackets and were members of the teams. Maybe the whites didn't care for them either, but at least they had their money, status and grades. But one Asian guy got into our face. It wasn't so much he thought he was white. It was more in defense of what was "right." It was wrong to jump on innocent people. It was wrong to focus on the color of skin. It was wrong to throw rocks at cars, police and homes.

"You can't do this," the Asian guy clamored. "We didn't do anything to you!"

Five guys jumped on him.

A group of whites from Edgewood came by our way. We confronted them in the street in front of the school. Everybody started throwing blows. I held on to one guy's shirt, tight, and punched him repeatedly in the face. He tried to kick and hit and block my hands, but I just held on, pulling him to the ground while hitting.

Some other guys jumped on me, but I continued clutching this guy's shirt and watching my fists beat his face, making deep cuts and welts. They tried to pull me off, and I even felt some blows, but I wouldn't let go.

Assistance came from various police departments. Streets were blocked off to keep the disturbance from moving to the main business section on Garvey Avenue. One white guy found himself surrounded by a large group of us. I felt sorry for him for some strange reason. I walked up to him.

"Get the fuck out of here — now!"

"Fuck you beaner," he responded and hit me square on the jaw. I fell back onto the asphalt. I looked up and saw a swell of guys on him.

"Get off him," I yelled.

Then I rushed up and struck the guy. He fell back too, but got up and ran through the crowd.

The Mexicans moved toward Garvey Park, armed with hand-held weapons as we pushed ourselves out of the flat land area toward the Hills. I found myself walking with Payasa, Trudy and Chata to get them home. As we turned down one desolate street, a car pulled up. I swung my belt, ready to strike. It turned out to be Mexicans.

"*¿Qué pues, compa?*" one of them greeted.

"Shit, I almost went after you guys."

I didn't recognize them, but they offered to take the girls home. Just then the white guy who I struck earlier showed up in a car and pulled out a gun.

"Hey, you fuckin' spic," he said. "Come get some of this!"

I looked at the barrel of the gun. His taut finger encircling the trigger. The flash of his blue eyes and his clenched teeth.

"Go ahead, *puto*," I said. "But make sure you kill me, or I'll come after you."

The white guy looked at me, and then the others, who just stood around not knowing what to expect. The tension lasted for a long minute. But his threat was a bluff; he put the gun down and took off.

Although I didn't really know her, Chata gave me a wet, desperate kiss, as if it were our last moment on earth. We had to go in opposite directions. I lived past the tunnel and they were going up into the hills. She wished me luck and went with the dudes in the car. I found myself alone in hostile terrain.

The night blazed with car fires, and the whirling lamps of police and fire vehicles. The Sheriff's department blocked off all entrances to the Hills, stopping people and cars before allowing them to go in or out.

I continued toward home on the other side of the San Bernardino Freeway, where I would be safe.

Suddenly a jeep came screeching down the road, its headlights blinding me as it approached. It went past me, then stopped. I saw about 10 guys crammed inside. White guys. With baseballs bats. *¡Qué desmadre!* I was going to get it good!

The jeep turned back and came at me. I took off. I heard yelps and hollers, like cowboys do on TV shows, as the vehicle closed in. I propelled my legs through several yards, leapt over fences and hid next to some trash cans in an alley. I heard the peeling of rubber and the yelling as the jeep circled around to locate me. It entered the alley and I ran again. Somehow I made it over to the underground tunnel which led into my neighborhood: Various colored markings located its entrance. The jeep came up to its mouth. I could see the headlights beam through the darkness. After a few moments, it turned around and sped off. This was one Mexican scalp these cowboys wouldn't get.

The next Monday at school the fights continued. The Tradition for that year had started. Mexicans roamed the hallways, beating on any white guy they could see. Girls got into it too, ripping the blouses of the prim and proper "society" girls and wreaking havoc in the gym area. Parents came to pull their kids out of school.

Some whites gathered in the parking lot behind the school and began an offensive. The fighting would last for two or three weeks, tapering off for the rest of the year with only isolated incidents. But during the heat of the Tradition, classes were canceled. Police brought in. Ambulances summoned.

The whites in school brought in dudes from out of the area. They were tall, wide with long blonde hair. Two carloads

cruised by where the Mexicans assembled by the gnarled tree. Santos, Chicharrón and Tiburón were there to challenge them. The white dudes got out of their cars, armed with bats. But it didn't stop the homeboys from Lomas. I saw them attack the dudes while I looked out the window of a classroom. I rushed out with a few others, even though the class was still in session.

As one white guy swung his bat to strike Santos, Chicharrón came from behind and hit him over the head with a tire iron. Lencho and Wilo also showed up and went blow to blow with the others. I jumped on one guy. Soon the police came. As usual, they went after the Mexicans. The white dudes got into their cars and split without any trouble. But the rest of us were pulled to the ground, hands forced behind our backs. Guns pointed at our heads.

School officials had the police take us to the office. The police left after they had resumed some order. Santos and Tiburón, who were drop-outs, were dragged to the police station. Those of us still in school were expelled. This was fine with me. I hated school. And I loved fighting.

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

I worked as a bus boy in a Mexican restaurant in San Gabriel when I was 15 years old. My hours were in the evening until closing, which kept me up until 2 a.m. most nights. The father of a former Southside Boy managed the restaurant, which is how I got the job. It was kicking, hard work. Sometimes I'd be practically asleep while walking the dining areas — but we had to keep moving. We carried thick plastic trays heaped with dirty dishes, cleaned up tables, poured water into glasses, provided extra coffee — and took abuse from the well-to-do people who came there.

"Hey boy, clean up this mess."

"Hey boy, how about some more water."

"Hey boy, this steak is too well done."

Hey Boy became my new name.

The clientele arrived in suits and evening dresses. They ordered the margaritas, considered the best in "aalllll Caliiforniaaa." They ordered and ordered. Even before dinner arrived, they were already pushed back against the chairs, ties undone and stupefied.

Before the night finished, white-haired women tried to do Spanish fan dances on the dining floor as businessmen called everyone "pancho," holding dollar bills in our faces for more service.

We had our ways of getting back. The usual: putting snot and piss in their food before it got to their tables or "accidentally" spilling ice cold water on their laps or backs.

"So sorry, *señor*. How clumsy of me. A thousand pardons."

But there were some fringe benefits. These people would order the best steaks, lobsters, and Mexican specialties and leave almost everything when they left. We stuffed the food in bags and later had feasts. Every once in a while I took home cooked lobsters and two-inch thick prime ribs!

My best friends were the waitresses and waiters. One waiter, a gay dude from Mexico, actually protected us younger guys from the cooks who ordered us around. I always thought it was because he wanted to get to me, but even so I must say he never raised this issue. One time he let us borrow his X-rated 16-millimeter films. After work, the bus boys got together for a marathon viewing of his films while dropping pills and chasing them with tequila.

The waitresses were cool and understanding, considering they had to endure even more abuse since they were women — dressed in peasant blouses which had been plunged down to reveal their shoulders and short *poblana* skirts with ruffles. They helped make sure I didn't get cheated on the tips, something the waiters were less inclined to do.

But the most interesting part of the job involved the raids. Almost everyone who worked in the restaurant was an undocumented immigrant. Every so often, the immigration authorities assaulted the place. They would close doors and pull out badges.

"This is the United States Border Patrol," they'd yell. "Nobody move...*nadie se mueve*."

Cooks flew out of kitchen windows.

They tried to pull me into their detention vans, but I carried a food-stained and slightly torn copy of my birth certificate in my pocket. It saved me from being deported, although there were times I thought it wouldn't matter and I'd have to call home from Tijuana.

After about a week, the ones they threw across the border were back at work.

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

Not going to school meant a lot of free time. Sniffing became my favorite way to waste it. I stole cans of anything that could give a buzz: carbono, clear plastic, paint or gasoline. Sometimes I'd mix it up in a concoction and pour it on a rag or in a paper bag we sniffed from.

Behind the school, on the fields, inside the tunnel, at Marrano Beach and alongside the concrete banks of the San Gabriel River: I sniffed. Once I even climbed on top of a back hoe at a construction site, removed the lid off the gas tank and inhaled until somebody checked out the noise and chased me away.

Spray was dangerous; it literally ate your brain. But it was also a great escape. The world became like jello, like clay, something which could be molded and shaped. Sounds became louder, clearer — pulsating. Bodies removed themselves from bodies, floating with the sun. I sought it so desperately. I didn't want to be this thing of bone and skin. With spray I became water.

Once I sniffed with Chicharrón and Yuk Yuk behind the "Boys" Market in San Gabriel. I don't remember the trip, but they told me I suddenly stood up and proceeded to repeatedly bang my head against a wall. Pieces of hair and skin scraped on the brick. Chicharrón walked me home; refused to give me any more spray.

While on spray I yelled. I laughed. I clawed at the evening sky. I felt like a cracked egg. But I wouldn't stop.

Then another time Baba, Wilo and I gathered in the makeshift hideout we had alongside the Alhambra Wash, next to the drive-in. We sat ourselves down on the dirt, some blankets and rags nearby to lie on. We covered the entrance with banana leaves and wood planks. There were several cans of clear plastic — what we called *la ce pe* — around us. We each had paper bags and sprayed into them — and I had already dropped some pills and downed a fifth of Wild Turkey. I then placed the bag over my mouth and nose, sealed it tightly with both hands, and breathed deeply.

A radio nearby played some Led Zeppelin or Cream or some other guitar-ripping licks. Soon the sounds rose in pitch. The thumping of bass felt like a heartbeat in the sky, followed by an echo of metal-grating tones. I became flesh with a dream. The infested walls of the wash turned to mud; the trickle of water a vast river. The homeboys and I looked like something out of Huckleberry Finn or Tom Sawyer. With stick fishing poles. The sparkle of water below us. Fish fidgeting below the sheen.

Dew fell off low branches as if it were breast milk. Birds shot out of the tropical trees which appeared across from us. Perhaps this trip had been the pages of a book, something I read as a child. Or saw on TV. Regardless, I was transported away from what was really there — yet it felt soothing. Not like the oil stains we sat in. Not like the factory air that surrounded us. Not this plastic death in a can.

I didn't want it to end. As the effect wore thin, I grabbed the spray and bag, and resumed the ritual. Baba and Wilo weren't far behind me.

Then everything faded away — the dew, the water, the birds. I became a cartoon, twirling through a tunnel, womb-like and satiated with sounds and lines and darkness. I found myself drifting toward a glare of lights. My family called me over: Seni, Mama, Papa, Tía Chucha, Tío Kiko, Pancho — everybody. I wanted to be there, to know this perpetual dreaming, this din of

exquisite screams — to have this mother comfort surging through me.

The world fell into dust piles around me. Images of the past pitched by: my brother tossing me off rooftops, my mother's hearty laughter, my father's thin and tired face, the homeboys with scarred smiles and the women with exotic eyes and cunts which were the churches I worshipped in. Everything crashed. Everything throbbed. I only knew: I had to get to the light, that wondrous beacon stuffed with sweet promise: Of peace. Untroubled. The end of fear. *Don't close the door, Mama. I'm scared. It's okay, m'ijo. There's no monsters. We'll be here. Don't be scared.*

No more monsters. Come to the light. I felt I would be safe there — finally. To the light. The light.

Suddenly everything around me exploded. An intense blackness enveloped me. A deep stillness. Nothing. Absolute. No thinking. No feeling. A hole.

Then an electrified hum sank its teeth into my brain. Hands surrounded me, pulled at me, back to the dust of our makeshift hideaway.

A face appeared above me. It leaned down and breathed into me. Images of leaves, crates, stained blankets came into view. Wilo pulled back and looked into my eyes. A haze covered everything. I felt dizzy. And pissed off.

"Give me the bag, man."

"No way," Baba said. "You died Chin — you stopped breathing and died."

I tried to get up, but fell back to the ground. A kind of grief overwhelmed me. I was no longer this dream. I was me again. I wished I did die.

"You don't understand," I yelled to the homeboys. "I have to go back."

I crept toward a paper bag but Baba kicked it out of my reach. Later I found myself stepping down a street. Baba and Wilo had pointed me in the direction of home and I kept going. I hated being there. I didn't know what to do. God, I wanted that

light, this whore of a sun to blind me, to entice me to burn — to be sculptured marble in craftier hands.

⚜ ⚜ ⚜

Wilo's sister Payasa liked me and told him. She was okay, I guess, a real *loca* when it came to the 'hood. She had the high teased hair, the short tight skirts, the "raccoon" style makeup and boisterous presence. I ended up going with her. Mostly for Wilo's sake at first.

After I got expelled from school, Payasa and I spent time together during the day since she refused to go to classes herself. We'd walk to Garvey Park. She would hand me some *colies* which I'd drop and soon start to sway, talk incoherently and act stupid.

"Oh, you'll get over it," Payasa said. "Eventually."

She always said that.

After a time, whenever a car crashed, a couple argued or somebody tripped and fell, we'd look at each other and say at the same time: "Oh, you'll get over it...eventually."

When Wilo and I sniffed aerosol spray, sometimes Payasa joined us.

"Why do you let your sister do this?" I asked.

"That's her," Wilo shrugged. "I can't stop her."

Payasa was always high. The higher she got, the more bold she became. One time we were sniffing in the tunnel beneath the freeway. I started tripping: Snakes crawled from the sides, as well as melted faces and bolts of lights and a shower of shapes. She brushed up to me and pulled off her blouse. Erect nipples confronted me on firm breasts. I kissed them. She laughed and pulled me away.

"Oh, you'll get over it," she said. "Eventually."

I was too fucked up to care.

One time in the park she said she wanted to take her pants and underwear off.

"Right here? Right now?...in front of everybody?"

"Yeah, why not?" she responded. "You dare me."

"Sure — I dare you."

She did.

Sniffing took the best out of her. Sometimes I'd walk through the tunnel and she would be there, alone, with a bag of spray, all scuffed up, her eyes glassy.

Payasa became a *loca* because of her older brothers. They were Lomas *veteranos*, older gangsters. Because Wilo and Payasa were younger, they picked on them a lot; beating them to make them stronger.

Payasa fought all the time at school. Whenever she lost, her older brothers would slice her tongue with a razor. She wasn't ever supposed to lose. This made her meaner, crazier — unpredictable.

As a girlfriend Payasa was fun, but she couldn't be intimate unless she was on reds, spray or snort.

I had to break with her. I loved the spray and shit but Payasa became too much like the walking dead. So I told her I didn't want to see her anymore. She didn't say anything, just turned around and left. I faintly said to myself, "Oh, you'll get over it...eventually."

She was later found in a daze, her arms with numerous deep cuts all the way to her elbows. Nobody would let me see her after she was taken to a rehabilitation hospital for teenage addicts. Wilo suggested I let it go.

"That's Payasa, man," Wilo said, and shrugged his shoulders.

† † †

I sank against the wall, my naked back splattered with grit. A razor glistened in my hand. A pail of water sat next to me. The room was stuffed to the top with junk I had accumulated, including stolen stereos and car radios which Yuk Yuk had stashed there for safekeeping.

The blade touched the skin and each time this song became louder in my head, a song which wouldn't let up, as the melody resonated through me and the emptiness inside compressed into

itself. Soon I filled up with a sense of being, of worth, with a clarity that I belonged here on this earth, at this time. Somehow, some way, it all had meaning. *I* made sense. There in the garage. Alone but alive. I barely made it. I almost got to the light. And somehow I knew the light wasn't all the great feeling, hope and desire I thought at the time it would be. I stumbled upon the blackness; I had dared to cross the light, to enter the other side, beyond the barrier, into the shadow. But I had been yanked back just in time. Wilo and Baba for some reason were able to respond fast as I lay unconscious, unbreathing, there by the wash.

I put the blade down, peed into the water and fell asleep.

In my mother's kitchen, I tried to recall the song of the night before, the one which stopped me from wasting myself, that said it was all right, but I couldn't. I walked up to Mama. She refused to turn around and face me, although she knew I was there.

"Can I stay here and eat this morning?" I asked her in Spanish.

She turned around, hard eyes encircled by wrinkled skin. Then a smile filled her face and she became like a young woman again.

"Of course, *m'ijo*," she said as she turned back to the stove to toss over a tortilla. "When you're ready to visit, with respect to our house, you can come to eat."

I kissed her on the neck.

I went to the dining table where Gloria sat, stuffing her mouth with food. I pulled out a chair and looked down at a plate resting on a tablecloth.

"Hey — do these eggs have anything to do with me?"