CHAPTER SIX

"There are choices you have to make not just once,
but every time they come up." — Chente

It starts with a dream. This dream creeps beyond others of sinuous ordeals, beyond demons throwing side-glances, beyond falling out of the bed and into an abyss of molten stone, beyond slipping in traffic and being unable to get up as headlights swim toward me. Then one night, a variation of the dream:

I'm in front of a house situated in a clearing among tall, moss-infested trees. The house is enormous, Gothic in style. I see myself walking toward it, leaves and branches lightly scraping the sides of my face.

I step up a creaky set of stairs with marble railings and emerge on a large empty porch. Through a walnut door, which opens without my assistance, I go through a dimly-lit hallway, the walls breathing. There are rooms on either side of me, but I venture on, ignoring them. I continue past a row of doors without doorknobs. Out of a smoky haze, another room comes into view. The door of this room opens, slowly, as I stand transfixed in front of it. The breathing walls now follow the cadence of a heartbeat.

I enter the room, a chill dampens the beads of sweat above my brow. In the center of the room is a baby's bassinet, washed in orange-red and draped in lace with ruffles along the edge, like something out of a Sears catalogue. I move toward the bassinet, deliberate, as if rehearsed. Lying there among the lace is my long-dead sister Lisa in a white baptism dress, her face in tranquil sleep like the way she looks in a picture my mother keeps in an old album.

This is where the dream usually ends, with Lisa in a death-bed of bliss.

But this time, the dream advances. This time I keep looking at the child. This time Lisa opens her eyes, so suddenly I jerk

back. Only blackness stares out of them. Then the baby's mouth opens and a horrendous scream fills the room, distant yet distinct. The scream echoes through the walls, the hallway, the doors. I wake up with my hands to my ears. I enter consciousness. But the scream does not stop. It isn't in my head. It comes from the next room, where my sister Gloria sleeps.

I get up from bed and stagger into Gloria's room; she is screaming in spurts and talking nonsense. I wake up Mama, who's in the living room asleep. Soon Dad is rushing about, looking for the car keys. Gloria is dangling in Mama's arms, fading in and out of delirium. My brother Joe and sister Ana are also up, Ana in tears.

"What's wrong with her?" she cries.

No one offers an answer.

My parents take Gloria to the hospital. I look out into the early morning dark as the car speeds off. A call later informs us Gloria had ruptured her appendix and the poison had begun to invade her body. The doctors say if she were brought in only minutes later, she'd be dead.

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Mama gazed out of the back porch window to the garage room where I spent days holed up as if in a prison of my own making.

She worried about me, although not really knowing what I was up to; to protect herself from being hurt, she stayed uninvolved. Yet almost daily she offered quips and comments about me not attending school.

Mama called on the former principal of my elementary school in South San Gabriel to talk to me. This was the same school where Mrs. Snelling performed seeming miracles for my brother. While Joe amounted to something, to Mama I turned out to be a smudge on this earth, with no goals, no interests except what got puked up from the streets.

Bespectacled and bow-tied, Mr. Rothro wore unpressed suits which hung on his tall, lean frame. Mama knocked and I invited them in. Mr. Rothro ducked under the doorway and

looked around, amazed at the magnificent disorder, the colors and scrawl on every wall, the fantastic use of the imagination for such a small room. Mama left and Mr. Rothro, unable to find a place to sit, stood around and provided an encouragement of words. Some very fine words.

"Luis, you've always struck me as an intelligent young man," Mr. Rothro said. "But your mother tells me you're wasting away your days. I'd like to see you back in school. If there's anything I can do—write a letter, make a phone call—perhaps you can return at a level worthy of your gifts."

I sat on a bed in front of an old Underwood typewriter with keys that repeatedly got stuck and a carbon ribbon that kept jumping off its latch. My father gave me the typewriter after I found it among boxes, books and personal items in the garage.

"What are you doing?" Mr. Rothro inquired.

"I'm writing a book," I said, matter-of-factly.

"You're what? May I see?"

I let him glimpse at the leaf of paper in the typewriter with barely visible type, full of x's where I crossed out errors as I worked. I didn't know how to type; I just punched the letters I needed with my index fingers. It took me forever to finish a page, but I kept at it in between my other activities. By then I actually had a quarter of a ream done.

"What's the book about, son?" Rothro asked.

"Just things . . . what I've seen, what I feel, about the people around me. You know—things."

"Interesting," Rothro said. "In fact, I believe you're probably doing better than most teenagers—even better, I'm afraid, than some who *are* going to school."

He smiled, said he had to go but if I needed his help, not to hesitate to call.

I acknowledged his goodby and watched him leave the room and walk up to the house, shaking his head. He wasn't the first to wonder about this enigma of a boy, who looked like he could choke the life out of you one minute and then recite a poem in another.

Prior to this, I tried to attend Continuation High School in Alhambra—later renamed Century High to remove the stigma of being the school for those who couldn't make it anywhere else. After the first day, they "let" me go. A few of us in Lomas fought outside with some dudes from 18th Street who were recruiting a section of their huge gang in the Alhambra area. But Continuation High School was the last stop. When you failed at Continuation, the only place left was the road.

Then my father came up with a plan; when he proposed it, I knew it arose out of frustration.

It consisted of me getting up every day at 4:30 a.m. and going with him to his job at Pierce Junior College in the San Fernando Valley—almost 40 miles away on the other side of Los Angeles. He would enroll me in Taft High School near the college. The school pulled in well-off white kids, a good number of whom were Jewish. My father felt they had the best education.

I didn't really care so I said sure, why not?

Thus we began our daily trek to a familiar and hostile place—the college was located near Reseda where the family once lived for almost a year. The risk for my father involved me finding out what he really did for a living. Dad told us he worked as a laboratory technician, how a special category had been created at Pierce College for him.

My father worked in the biology labs and maintained the science department's museum and weather station. But to me, he was an overblown janitor. Dad cleaned the cages of snakes, tarantulas, lizards and other animals used in the labs. He swept floors and wiped study tables; dusted and mopped the museum area. Dad managed some technical duties such as gathering the weather station reports, preparing work materials for students, and feeding and providing for the animals. Dad felt proud of his job—but he was only a janitor.

I don't know why this affected me. There's nothing wrong with being a janitor—and one as prestigious as my dad! But for years, I had this running fantasy of my scientist father in a laboratory carrying out vital experiments—the imagination of

a paltry kid who wanted so much to break away from the constraints of a society which expected my father to be a janitor or a laborer — when I wanted a father who transformed the world. I had watched too much TV.

One day I walked into the college's science department after school.

"Mr. Rodríguez, you have to be more careful with the placement of laboratory equipment," trembled a professor's stern voice.

"I unnerstan'...Sarry...I unnerstan'," Dad replied.

"I don't think you do, this is the second time in a month this equipment has not been placed properly."

I glanced over so as not to be seen. My dad looked like a lowly peasant, a man with a hat in his hand — apologetic. At home he was king, *el jefito* — the "word." But here my father turned into somebody else's push-around. Dad should have been equals with anyone, but with such bad English...

Oh my father, why don't you stand up to them? Why don't you be the man you are at home?

I turned away and kept on walking.

The opportunity for me to learn something new became an incentive for attending Taft High School. At Keppel and Continuation, I mainly had industrial arts classes. So I applied for classes which stirred a little curiosity: photography, advanced art, and literature. The first day of school, a Taft High School counselor called me into her office.

"I'm sorry, young man, but the classes you chose are filled up," she said.

"What do you mean? Isn't there any way I can get into any of them?"

"I don't believe so. Besides, your transcripts show you're not academically prepared for your choices. These classes are privileges, for those who have maintained the proper grades in the required courses. And I must add, you've obtained most of what credits you do have in industrial-related courses."

"I had to — that's all they'd give me," I said. "I just thought, maybe, I can do something else here. It seems like a good school and I want a chance to do something other than with my hands."

"It doesn't work that way," she replied. "I think you'll find our industrial arts subjects more suited to your needs."

I shifted in my seat and looked out the window.

"Whatever."

The classes she enrolled me in were print shop, auto shop and weight training. I did manage a basic English literature class. I walked past the photography sessions and stopped to glimpse the students going in and out, some with nice cameras, and I thought about how I couldn't afford those cameras anyway: *Who needs that stupid class?*

In print shop I worked the lead foundry for the mechanical Linotype typesetter. I received scars on my arms due to splashes of molten lead. In auto shop, I did a lot of tune-ups, oil changes and some transmission work. And I lifted weights and started to bulk up. The one value I had was being the only Mexican in school — people talked about it whenever I approached.

One day at lunch time, I passed a number of hefty dudes in lettered jackets. One of them said something. Maybe it had nothing to do with me. But I pounced on him anyway. Several teachers had to pull me off.

They designated me as violent and uncontrollable; they didn't know "what to do with me."

After school, I walked to Pierce College and waited for Dad to finish his work so we could go home, which usually went past dark. I spent many evenings in the library. But I found most books boring and unstimulating.

I picked up research and history books and went directly to the index and looked up "Mexican." If there were a few items under this topic, I read them; I read them all.

Every day I browsed, ventured into various sections of shelves; most of this struck me with little interest. One evening, I came across a crop of new books on a special shelf near the

front of the library. I picked one up, then two. The librarian looked at me through the side of her eye, as if she kept tabs on whoever perused those books.

They were primarily about the black experience, works coming out of the flames which engulfed many American cities in the 1960s. I discovered Claude Brown's *Manchild In The Promised Land*, Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul On Ice*, and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I found poetry by Don L. Lee and LeRoi Jones (now known as Haki R. Madhubuti and Amiri Baraka, respectively). And later a few books by Puerto Ricans and Chicanos: Victor Hernández Cruz's *Snaps* and Ricardo Sánchez's *Canto Y Grito: Mi Liberacion* were two of them. Here were books with a connection to me.

And then there was Piri Thomas, a Puerto Rican brother, *un camarada de aquellas*: His book *Down These Mean Streets* became a living Bible for me. I dog-eared it, wrote in it, copied whole passages so I wouldn't forget their texture, the passion, this searing work of a street dude and hype in Spanish Harlem — a barrio boy like me, on the other side of America.

I didn't last long at Taft High School. My only real friend was Edwin, a black dude who lived at the Pacific Boys Home. During lunch hour, we "worked" the neighborhood: breaking into the nearby fancy houses. Edwin eventually got popped stealing a car and ended up in youth camp.

There were a few Jewish lowriders I talked with in auto shop. We shared ideas about hydraulic lifts and pinstripe body designs. They even sported *cholo*-style clothes, slicked their hair back, and learned a few street songs and dances. But nobody else dealt with me.

One day I came in slightly late to my English Lit class and sat down; I placed a book on top of the desk. The teacher walked up to me and picked up the book.

"*American Me* by Beatrice Griffith," he said. "Where did you get this book?"

"It's a library book — it's about the *pachuco* experience in the 1940s."

"Sounds good, but the book you were to bring here today was Wordsworth's *Preludes*. That is your assignment, not *American Me*."

"This book is something I'd like to read. I can even do a report on it."

"Young man, you don't decide your assignments in this class. If you can't participate like the rest of us, I suggest you leave."

"Fine — who gives a fuck what I want!"

I stormed out of there. Needless to say, this was my last day in the English Lit class.

But the teachers' strike of 1970 was the real reason I stopped going to Taft. The strike lasted a couple of months. But when the teachers settled with the Los Angeles School Board, I stayed out; I felt the school district hadn't settled with me yet.

I ended up back in the streets. Somehow, though, it wasn't the same as before. A power pulsed in those books I learned to savor, in the magical hours I spent in the library — and it called me back to them.

Sometimes I roamed the street with nothing to do and ended up in a library. Later on my own I picked up Wordsworth, Poe, Emerson and Whitman. Chicharrón and the others noticed the difference. Chicharrón even called me the "businessman" because whenever he'd ask me about the books I carried, I would say: "Just taking care of business."

I also learned not to be angry with my father. I learned something about my father's love, which he never expressed in words, but instead, at great risk, he gave me the world of books — a gift for a lifetime.

* * *

I lay, sprawled on the bed. Jazz sounds emanated from a stereo player, saxes everywhere. Loud knocking picked up the beat. They were Chicharrón's knocks; I could tell.

"Get in here," I yelled, bothered for being bothered.

"What's up homes?" Chicharrón greeted. Somebody walked in behind him, some *lambe*, who tripped on the threshold.

"Who's the shadow?" I asked.

"This is Arnie," Chicharrón said. "Arnie, meet Chin."

Arnie stuck his hand out. I ignored it. I gave Chicharrón a look like "what gives here?" Chicharrón grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Arnie? What kind of name is that?"

"It stands for Arnulfo."

"*Qué jodida* — that's even worse."

I grabbed a bottle of Silver Satin wine and offered it to Arnie.

"Take a *trago*, man."

"What...what's a....I don't understand."

"What's the matter, don't you know anything?"

"I don't speak Spanish."

"It's mostly English, poop butt," I responded, then looked hard at Chicharrón. "Man, where did you find this dude?"

I handed Arnie the bottle. He took a swig, swallowed it as if it were a ball in his throat, then just about fell down on the floor.

"Whew, is that strong!" Arnie finally said through a shriveled face.

"Yea, it packs a punch."

"Hey homes," Chicharrón clipped in. "How about getting some *refín*?"

"You're all the time eating."

"I know and so what — let's make our squints."

I left the sounds on the stereo, and together we walked into the night. We made it to a big boulevard in Rosemead. Faces, gestures, street signs came and went. We infiltrated a packed sidewalk, winding through Christmas shoppers, above us multi-colored lights, in front of us a mall resounding in chorales. Suddenly neon, on top of a stuffed restaurant.

"This looks like the place," Chicharrón suggested.

We made our entrance. Waiters and busboys were dressed up in white shirts, black vests and bow ties; the counter girls

were in pleated, plaid skirts with ribbons on their hair. Arnie looked uncomfortable, but I got the feeling he always did.

A hostess approached and offered us a table.

"Hey, we must rate around here," Chicharrón said.

"Yeah, we rate all right," I said. "They'd like us to get through as fast as possible so we can get the hell out."

At our table, surrounded by family-type folk, I ordered the largest cheeseburger with fries and the biggest tastiest milk shake on the menu. Chicharrón, not to be outdone, asked for a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich, with all the trims, and a super-duper banana split. Arnie looked amazed at us, and ordered a tuna sandwich.

"Hey Arnie — *homeboy*," I responded with a furrowed brow. "You don't go to a fancy place like this and order a tuna sandwich. Go for the works, *ése*!"

Conceding, Arnie added a pie a la mode. I nodded approval. Once the food came, we got down to some heavy-duty chowing.

We rushed through the orders, then the time came to consider the bill. I looked at it, then moved my eyes toward Arnie.

Arnie looked at me, smiled, but — catching on — changed into a frown.

"Now, don't look at me," he said. "I, I didn't bring any money."

Not the right response.

"No money, what's with you man?" Chicharrón scolded.

"I thought you guys were inviting me. How was I supposed to know..."

"Forget it, dude," I said, already planning the next move. "Listen, it's no problem. We'll just take the long walk to the exit — and then run like your mother made you."

"What are you saying? Just walk out and not pay?" Arnie asked.

"Shhhh! You want to make an announcement or what?" I said. "Listen, I ain't got no *feria*, Chicharrón and you ain't got none. There's only one thing to do."

I motioned my head toward the door.

"¡*A la brava*! Understand?"

"Yeah, sure," Chicharrón agreed. "There's a lot of people in the place. There's a line at the cash register. It's a good time to *esqüintar*."

"I don't know about this you guys," Arnie protested. "I never done this before."

"It's no big deal, a piece of taco," I reassured him. "You guys just get up and walk out like nothin' is happenin'. I'll go to the head, to distract them, but we all can't go — that's a sure sign we're walking. I'll be right behind you."

"I don't know about this, you guys," Arnie repeated.

"Well, Arnie, you can stay here an' wash dishes, cuz we is jammin'."

I got up and shuffled cool-like to the restroom. Once inside, I combed my hair. Scraped at a hang nail. Checked out a blemish. Then I straightened up and pushed out the restroom doors, heading toward the exit. I didn't look around, just straight in front of me. People appeared too busy talking, eating and having a good time to notice a *cholo* make his way out the door.

Almost outside, I took in a deep breath, stepped onto the pavement and tried to walk away when two Frankensteins came up from behind and intervened. I went to hit one, but the other grabbed my arm and pulled me to the ground. A woman shrieked. I could see faded images of people who stopped to look on as we battled on the sidewalk. I punched and pulled, but the dudes held me there on the ground. As soon as I calmed, they lifted me up as if I were a trapped rat and dragged me through the restaurant. Some people were already on their feet, others stunned in their chairs, all looking at me in a hush. I felt like I should get applause.

The Frankensteins pushed me through a storage area behind the restaurant and into a small office. A partly-bald man with a loosened tie over a wrinkled white shirt sat there, looking tired.

"Go ahead, sit down," he told me, then turned to the Frankensteins. "Thank you. You did good."

The dudes gave me a last look, like maybe they should've broken my arm or something.

"Just called the police," the baldy said. "They'll be here any minute."

I sat there expressionless.

"What's your name, kid?"

I looked at him.

"What's *your* name — kid?" I answered.

Surprisingly, he laughed.

"The name is Kearney — Charles Kearney."

Kearney looked at me with some interest behind a pile of papers.

"May I ask why you did it?"

"I was hungry."

"Don't you have food at home?"

"Sometimes, but I don't live at home."

"You've been arrested before, I gather."

"Here and there — lightweight stuff."

"Well, what you did was wrong," Kearney explained. "It's against the law to order food, eat it and not pay for it. It's stealing!"

"I know."

He shuffled one pile of papers to another.

"How old are you?"

"Going on sixteen."

He shook his head.

"And you don't have a home to go to, huh?"

I crossed my right leg over my left, placed my arms across the legs, and looked straight at Kearney.

"Listen Mr. Kurley — or whatever your name is. I was hungry. I don't have no money. So I got something to eat. My moms works hard for the family. She don't like me doing this, and I know she feels bad 'cause she can't get enough for us. It's not her fault. She threw me out of the house for being an asshole. So I can't cry about it. I just have to make it on my own, do what I can to keep the pressure off moms and the family. You know what I'm talking about?"

"But stealing is against the law."

"I understand I did wrong. I'm not making excuses. You caught me, up and up. I'll go to jail."

I paused, looked around the place a little, then back at Kearney.

"Don't get me wrong, I don't like jail. They beat you in jail, but like I said: No excuses."

"What do you mean — they beat you in jail?"

"Yeah, man, the cops," I responded. "They beat on us all the time. Especially them sheriffs. They're the worst. They don't care if you're hungry, if you have a job or not, or anything about hurting your moms who works so hard. They want control over you, including over your life. That's a fact. That's the way of the neighborhood."

Kearney looked intently at me.

"I don't know about any of this, all I know is you did wrong. You stole from me. You have to pay something for it."

"I don't mind that. The problem is we end up paying more for the same thing than other people do. On this side of town, the cops don't beat up people. On this side of town, the cops don't stop you for no reason. They don't be hitting you in the head, trying to make you mad so you do something you'll regret later."

"I don't mind paying for my mistakes," I added. "But it seems like we're paying for everyone else's mistakes too. Sometimes we pay even when there's been no mistake. Just for being who we are, you know what I mean? Just for being Mexican. That's all the wrong I have to do."

Kearney mulled over my words in silence. Soon a sheriff's deputy entered the office. I recognized the ugly scar across his cheek. It belonged to Cowboy.

Kearney looked up at Cowboy, then at me. Cowboy recognized me too.

"What do we have here!" Cowboy exclaimed. "Chin, my man. Yeah, this is going to be fun — right Chin?"

"You know him?" Kearney asked me.

"Sure," I said with disgust. "He's one of those sheriffs I was telling you about."

"Listen, Mr. Kearney, don't let these punk kids con you into anything," Cowboy said. "If you ask me, they all need a swift kick in the behind."

Cowboy pulled out a note pad and prepared to ask Kearney questions. But Kearney did a most startling thing.

"It's okay, officer, I don't want to press charges."

Cowboy smiled and removed a pencil from his jacket.

"I know how it looks, but don't feel sorry for these clowns," Cowboy responded. "They'd just as soon shoot you as steal from you."

"I understand, but it's all right," Kearney persisted. "I don't want you to take him. I'll take care of this."

"Are you nuts?" Cowboy lost his patience. "This guy is bad news. I know him. He's been arrested so many times, his record could cover the floor."

Man, I thought, Cowboy wants me so bad he could taste it.

"No, officer, I'm sorry for having called you and making you come all the way down here," Kearney insisted. "But this is my final decision. I'm not going to let you take him."

Cowboy's face turned red, infuriated. He jammed the pencil back into his jacket and stuffed the note pad into his back pants pocket. He turned toward me, fire in his eyes and a tremble in his lip. Then, without a word, he swung around on his boots and left, slamming the door behind him.

What a relief! I already imagined the beating Cowboy had in store for me.

"Look kid," Kearney said. "I want you to get out of here. Don't misunderstand what I've done. I don't want to see you in my restaurant ever again, you hear?"

"That's fine with me — and thanks."

Kearney allowed me to leave out the back door. I cross-looked down the alley. I sensed Cowboy lurking around somewhere, waiting for me.

I sprinted up the alley.

"*Orale*, homes," a voice came at me from some bushes. I looked over and saw Chicharrón emerge through the branches with a piece of pipe in his hand.

"*Chingao*, am I glad to see you," I said. "You been here all this time?"

"Sure, man, I saw them get you," Chicharrón explained. "So I hid back here and then Cowboy parked and went inside. I figured as soon as he brought you out, I'd bash him over the head with this pipe. But he came out alone. What the hell happened?"

"You'll never believe it," I said. "I can hardly believe it myself. I'll tell you later."

Then I looked around for Arnie.

"What happened to the *lambe*."

"Arnie—that *puto!* As soon as I get the pipe and tell him what we're going to do, he babbles some nonsense about us being crazy and takes off running."

"No matter," I said. "Let's get out of here before Cowboy finds us."

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Chente entered the John Fabela Youth Center, the place dense with smoke, and the slow-talk and laughter of *vatos* and *rucas*. As director of the center's activities, Chente played administrator, father-figure, counselor and the law. But he had to do it through strength of character. With style. He knew these teenagers didn't respect imposed authority.

Chente opened up classes at the center such as martial arts, arts & crafts and photography. New government programs existed then for agencies like the Bienvenidos Community Center, which ran the youth center; Chente tapped into some of these funds to provide Lomas its first and only recreational facility.

Chente eyed me standing with Chata and Trudy, and came by.

"Luis, I'd like to ask you something."

"Go ahead dude."

"In my office, it's a little quieter."

I followed Chente to a small room with ancient metal files and a carved-up desk. I stood next to a window which overlooked the billiard-playing area.

"I got a job for you," he said. "It's part of the Neighborhood Youth Corps. We got funded for several slots. I'd like for you to have one of them."

"What do I have to do?"

"Well most of the jobs involve cleaning up parks, painting, carpentry and alley maintenance," he said. "I want you to run one of the crews. We'll be hiring next week, but you have to sign up. It's for families below the poverty level. What do you say?"

"Sure, you know I ain't working right now."

"There's one catch though," Chente said, looking intently at me. "I want you to consider going to school next semester — to Keppel."

"What for? I've had it with school. Anyway, they don't want me at Keppel."

"Listen, there's going to be some changes," Chente informed me. "Keppel is getting a new principal, Mr. Madison. He says he wants to meet with the students from Lomas. We're working on this now. Some of the community have already met with him and he's agreed to provide a Chicano Student Center, a full-time Youth Adviser and — get this — a school club for Chicano students."

"No! What a change, man."

"I'd like for you to go back and get involved. We need strong leaders. We need intelligent voices. We're going to make deep changes and you're one person who can help make them."

"Are you sure?"

"Believe me, I'm sure — what do you say?"

"I don't know, man. Let me think about it."

"Okay, all right. You have a whole summer still," Chente said, shaking my hand. "And don't forget to come back next week for the job."

By summer, I worked on an NYC crew. We took an old flatbed truck with wood planks on the sides to use on the various cleanup sites. We piled up the back of the truck with junk which had been dumped on the roadways, parks, empty lots, and abandoned buildings. From there we trekked over to the dump to unload it. We also hung wallboard, did light carpentry and some electrical, and helped build the new day-care and student dropout center next to the John Fabela Center.

Community projects popped up all over. The government brought out a number of teen programs and job placements. Activists came into Lomas with various ideas. They opened up a food co-op run by the Lomas mothers. They hired consultants, grant writers and fundraisers.

I became deeply involved at the center. On weekends, I woke up at 3 a.m. to go with some parents to the farmer's market in downtown L.A. and pick up crates of fruits and vegetables for the food co-op. During the week, I worked a regular day shift cleaning up the neighborhood. Then in the evenings, I hung around the youth center, often volunteering for various programs, including giving out bags of groceries for families without food.

One time a man named Daniel Fuentes came in to sign up dudes for amateur boxing. There were a number of tournaments opening up: the Junior Olympics, the Junior Golden Gloves, the Golden Gloves and Olympics. I decided to try boxing. Fuentes ran the boxing club out of his house in the Hills. We used the almost-collapsing auditorium of the elementary school just below Graves Avenue to work out. We ran laps around the school's play yard.

On the days we sparred, Fuentes piled up all the guys into his hand-painted black station wagon and had us ply the rings at the Main Street Gym in downtown L.A. or at a makeshift gym in a South El Monte warehouse.

Fuentes demanded so much of us. He knew he had mostly undisciplined, could-give-a-fuck street dudes to shape up. He had to make skilled boxers out of some difficult, raw material. But he had one thing in his favor: We had guts.

The first days of training, we tried to look like bad-ass dudes with our high fists and our bouncy stances. Fuentes had his son Steve go a couple of rounds with us. At 18, Steve was an experienced amateur, having won a few local titles with almost 100 fights under his belt. He didn't look like a homeboy. But when he got us in the ring, he tore us to pieces. We had no defenses. We had no combinations. We understood nothing about balance, footwork or even where to place our eyes when we fought.

"You guys think you're the toughest people around," Fuentes said. "Well, you wouldn't last a round in an amateur fight. But this is going to change."

Every evening we did our laps around the elementary school. On certain occasions, Fuentes dragged us to East L.A. College where we ran our butts off around a large track field. Fuentes taught us how to hit the heavy bags, use the speed bag and jump rope, and he helped build up our shoulders and chest areas.

"The power doesn't come from your arms," he said. "It comes from your shoulders. You put the force of your whole body into a punch. This way, you make every punch count."

Rubén Navarro — also known as The Maravilla Kid — was then a contender for the world's featherweight title. The Maravilla Kid became our sponsor. We were then known as the Maravilla Kid's United Teen Pugs.

The Maravilla Kid would pay a visit every other week or so. He drove up in a classic 1930s motorcar, all stocked and shiny. He emerged in a long wool coat, silk shirts and fedora hat. A lot of the dudes lit up at the sight of him. Sometimes a blonde woman sat beside the Kid as he watched us work out.

One day, I sparred with this dude we called Left Brain. The Maravilla Kid looked at us for a while, then got up and stopped us.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

We didn't have any words.

"Tell me, I want you to explain what you're doing."

"I'm trying to protect myself and wait for an opening," Left Brain offered.

"Protect yourself?"

Then the Maravilla Kid threw a slap from his left side and smacked Left Brain solid on his cheek. Everybody else stopped what they were doing. Left Brain stood there, embarrassed and hurt.

"I didn't see you protect yourself," The Kid said. "This is what happens when somebody really hits you. I want you guys to go at it for real. Not this paddy-cake shit. When you're in the ring, nobody is going to play paddy-cake with you."

The Kid turned toward me, a look of disdain on his face.

"And you, I want you to go at him like he just spit on your mother."

Whenever the Kid came, everything turned up a few notches. Sometimes Fuentes got frustrated. He had his own way of training. But the Kid wanted some trophies. He wanted our names to spell fear for the other amateur clubs. He wanted us to take the Golden Gloves and Olympic championships.

The competition between the various boxing clubs in and around L.A. was fierce, almost deadly. A lot rode on the boxing business for Chicanos. Fuentes argued long and hard with the Maravilla Kid about funds. We needed gloves, we needed bags, we needed so many things, but the Kid would only say "in time."

Soon I came home with the whites of my eyes glazed in red because of broken blood vessels; bruises and welts on my nose, cheeks and mouth. After a heavy night of working out, I'd still work the next day at my Neighborhood Youth Corps job, all beat up and sore.

I had a few fights for trophies with clubs from East L.A., Pomona, Azusa, the L.A. Harbor and South Central L.A. They consisted of three torturous rounds. We put so much into each round, so many blows and energy, that most of us practically died of exhaustion by the end of a bout.

My skills weren't very good. But I had what they called heart. I came to kill. I rushed up to my opponents and mowed them down. Not much of the sweet science, I must say. The Maravilla Kid didn't mind, as long as I won fights.

Fuentes asked me to try for the Junior Olympics tournament. I had bulked up to middleweight. The dudes in this division were harder-hitting but not so big they weren't able to move around and rouse up excitement. The competition proved stronger and better trained. Most of the boxers came from clubs with more money and prestige. The Maravilla Kid's United Teen Pugs were like everybody's sick stepchild. Because of our lack of resources, we had this added pressure to be better.

My big chance to make the top of the tournament came with a bout at the Lorena Street Gym in the basement of a church in East L.A. Fuentes worked to build up my confidence.

"This is your big break," Fuentes said. "If anyone can make it, you can."

In my enthusiasm, I invited my whole family to see me: My mother, my brother and sisters showed up for the match; the first time they had anything to do with me in months.

The place was packed with spectators. Clubs from all over L.A. came to box. Most of the clubs' fighters consisted of blacks or Latinos, boxing for us being the proverbial way out.

Fuentes and his assistant, this old pro named Winky, who had slurred speech and the cartilage removed from his nose from being battered so many years ago, gathered the Teen Pugs in the back of the gym for a pep talk. I sat there along with the others — in maroon boxer shorts, shoes, a towel around my shoulders, and Winky going through the ritual of wrapping tape around my hands to protect them from getting broken.

"This is a big fight for you guys," Fuentes said. "But I believe there's no better fighters in the world than those sitting right here. You've trained hard, considering the conditions we have to work under. But remember the one who wins is the one with the most *jaspia*. If you guys don't have this, I don't know who does."

Jaspia meant hunger and Fuentes often yelled it at us from the corner to remind us of our motivation.

Hector Sorillo came in, late as usual, with the arms of a pretty, light-skinned Chicana named Delfina around his shoulders. The club's best fighter and Steve's former stable mate, Hector obtained most of the trophies and glory. I believed Fuentes hated him because Hector threw his weight around, but the Kid praised him to the gods.

"Hector, you're looking too pretty," Fuentes said. "This is a fight. Get your gear on. You're good, but not that good."

Delfina sat next to me while I waited my turn to enter the ring. She had on a going-out lavender dress which crinkled when she moved; her light-brown hair piled up nice around her flawless face. I sat there relaxed, gloves on hands and sweat dripping on my lap.

"How you doing, Louie?" Delfina asked. She never talked to me before.

"Not too bad—I got my family out there."

"You nervous."

"All the time. But Fuentes thinks I'm going to do good here."

'What do you think?"

"I think I better think what Fuentes thinks."

Our team went about half and half with losses and victories. Hector and Steve won their bouts, and even Left Brain managed a victory. But the other dudes were losing. There were some great teams out there. Winky then came in, gestured to me and said: "You're next."

I stepped up to the ring. People were sitting on fold-up chairs scattered throughout every corner of the gym. As I climbed the ring, I saw my mom at ringside, Joe and my

sisters around her. I could tell she wasn't enjoying herself. But she came out for me and I felt I had to win this one for her.

Fuentes climbed up with me. The referees gave both fighters the rules. The rounds were three-minutes long. We had on safety helmets and mouthpieces. The judges were officials of the Junior Olympics tournament. The winner of this bout would move up to the next level of tournament, leading to finals at the famous Olympic Auditorium in downtown L.A. As everybody left the ring area but the fighters and referee, I heard Fuentes say: "¡*Jaspia*!"

The bell rang. My hands flew up. I rushed to the middle of the ring. *Aquí estoy* — come and get me! The other warrior came up to me. Despite the crowd's yelling and the countless faces turned toward us, I never felt more alone with another human being than in a boxing ring.

We rattled each other with blows. I came at him the way I usually did, throwing fists from all directions. I pushed the dude around the ring. He tried to get out of the way of the onslaught, dipping and pivoting. I followed his movement by looking straight at his chest, to tell which direction his arms were coming from.

Whenever I entered a boxing ring, I became obsessed. I threw so many blows, most people couldn't get out of the way. But this dude in front of me proved no sucker. He knew how to get away from many of the punches, gliding and slipping beneath my gloves. He threw only enough at me to keep himself in competition — a clever ruse. I needed to really box him, not just throw blows; otherwise I would find myself punched-out.

The first round ended. People were on their seats and clamoring for more. Fuentes gave me a smile and said: "You got him. He's yours."

I peeked over to my mother who just sat there, very still. My sisters whooped and hollered. My brother flashed a grin. I felt great. I must win; so many people depended on it.

The bell rang and I jumped up — ready for my last dance. I jabbed and jabbed.

"¡*Pégale, pégale*!" somebody yelled from my corner.

But halfway through the round, my arms became impediments. The weight of the gloves brought my hands below my waist. I wanted to yell as I used every ounce of strength to keep them up, but this took away from my ability to hit. My opponent's ruse worked: I tired.

There is no pain like being exhausted in the ring — except labor pains, but this explains what I mean. Professionals know this feeling in later rounds; it's as close to dying as one can get while alive. Every blow opens up something inside, tearing at your resolve while tearing up skin.

The weight of my gloves became intolerable. Amateurs wore heavier gloves than professionals, weighing eight ounces, but in the ring they might as well be anvils. I heard *pégale, pégale*, but I just couldn't. The dude in front of me backed up and jitterbugged. He threw clean shots — on my arms, my kidneys, through the safety helmet. I cringed with every blow I returned. *When is the bell going to ring?* Everything took forever. The hand motions, mouths and voices around me were all in an aggravating slow motion. *¡Jaspia, Jaspia!* I ducked and swayed. I backed up and felt a barrier of ropes push me back in. *Where the hell is this bell!*

Finally the bell exploded in sound, and the round ended before a merciful knockout. It ended and I wanted to go home. Suddenly regret overcame me. I knew then, the dude had me. I went back to my corner, barely able to sit down. Fuentes showed concern but only said *jaspia*. I did not look over to my family.

After a minute's rest, another bell signaled the coming agony of the last and third round. This is the one where you're supposed to give it all you've got. *Lo chingaré*. I rushed out as in the first round. I let the excitement of the yells and screams around me pull the strength to give my opponent the best blows I had. I pushed him around the ring again. It looked good for me. In a glimpse, I saw Fuentes and Winky with their arms in the air, shouting in delight. Then out of nowhere, like a hammer, a fist struck me square in the nose. I flew back, and down on one

knee. Blood came out in globs from my nose, a sign it was fractured.

The referee pushed the dude back. I heard my opponent say: "*¡Ya estuvo, ése!*"

I made it to my feet. The referee asked me something. I just nodded. Everything looked fuzzy in front of me. The referee looked hard at me and asked me something again. I only remembered an incoherent whisper. Then the referee went over to the other dude and raised up his arm in triumph. Not even an eight count. I stood there, a hero of disgust, a fallen warrior. Fuentes came up to me and untied my gloves.

"You did good. We'll get him next time."

Winky brought a towel and crammed a section of it up my nose.

"It's got to be looked at, Dan," he said to Fuentes.

I saw Delfina peering at me from behind Hector, who stood all showered and smug in his clothes. It looked like Delfina tried to tell me something with her eyes, something to ease the loss.

My eyes crossed over several rows of faces to the direction of my family. They were all on their feet. My sisters had their hands up to their mouths. Joe looked awkward, like he didn't know whether to congratulate me for trying or to give his condolences. And Mama — I could see Mama had been crying.

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Jorge's Junk Yard on Garvey Avenue shone like a metal-and-glass city beneath the sun's afternoon radiance; automobile carcasses piled on top of one another, all symmetrical and sloping as if rusty mountain ranges galloping through a desert plain. We curled our fingers through a section of mesh fence and stared at the steel, paint and rubber wreckage of a 1969 Chevrolet sedan.

The day before, Yuk Yuk and Daddio had chug-a-lugged several pints of tequila, as in the old country where men of leather tamed the wilds of land and animal only to be enslaved

by the maguey's juice, fueled by the residue of herbs, the ferment of harvests — quenching a deeper thirst.

Later the sky brought down a stinging rain, and Yuk Yuk and Daddio stole a car and then strolled into a convenience store on San Gabriel Boulevard. But something went wrong. There was shooting. They ran out the glass doors, climbed into the car and took off toward the Pomona Freeway — sheriff's units and a helicopter gave chase as Yuk Yuk pushed the *ranfla* some 120 miles per hour on a down slope and failed to make the upturn. According to the medical examiner, the sedan rolled over so many times that Yuk Yuk and Daddio "practically disintegrated" before the car lodged near an abandoned warehouse, across from a hobo's nest with spiritless bodies loitering by the railroad tracks.

The next day people visited the wrecking yard, taking turns examining the jagged monument to our homeboys and paying their respects before the car's remains are removed and crumpled into a rectangular object, to be feed for a blast furnace somewhere; the steam of their being becoming water, becoming what is expelled from our breaths, becoming what keeps us alive.

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I sat among learners and teachers in our fourth or fifth study session — I had already lost track — with a group Chente called "the collective."

I came once just to check it out, perhaps to get Chente off my back. But after the first time, I kept coming. The group studied politics, philosophy, economics — the dynamics of social revolution. There was something about the way Chente and the others made sense; the way they made dead things come alive — how they took what seemed obvious and proved the direct opposite. The words were a fascinating revelation for me. Another culture. I had never experienced anything like it. Here all perceptions were challenged. Here knowledge, this elusive

dove which had never before found a landing near my grasp, could be gently held — where it would not fly away.

The sessions also involved Sergio, his wife Ofelia, Octavio and Skin. They were activists and students. They were sons and daughters of factory hands, mechanics and truck drivers who lived in and around East Los Angeles. They met weekly in a house in the Hills where Sergio, who was studying to be a doctor, lived. We kept the location a secret; real names and places could not be uttered over the telephone.

From one of the readings came a statement which stayed in my mind: "*An invitation to abandon illusions about a situation, is an invitation to abandon a situation in need of illusions.*"

But on that particular day everything felt in disarray. I did not participate in my usual manner. The constant questioning, inquiries which entertained but also had something daring — or foolish — in the asking, failed to materialize. The others were there with me, but I was not with them. They sensed something was wrong.

The group delved into the social processes governing events in the world and the United States. But I looked strangely at the book in front of me as someone read a passage out loud. I only saw contorted faces on the pages. Between the lines of type, I saw mouths wailing and eyes filled with terror. I saw what I was living. And although I tried to participate, that night I only saw my homeboys and homegirls dying.

I laid my head back, distracted. The fascinating prose turned ethereal — the profundity lost on an empty field somewhere in the barrio.

"I think we should call it quits for tonight," Skin said, her eyes aimed at me. I looked down to a pattern on a rug which covered a section of hardwood floor and appeared to flow with rivers and birds and tropical scents.

Chairs were pushed back. Coffee cups gathered. Dishes clanged in the kitchen.

I slowly stood up. Everything around me spun. Voices melted away. I plunged back into the sofa's softness. Ofelia's voice broke through a din in my head.

"Luis, what's the matter. You messed up or what?"

Yeah, I'm messed up. Good and messed up, in some cloud, a voyager on a misty ship, floating through the lamp shades, the pots of greenery by the sunlit window — through the forest of a woman's hair.

Others gathered around me, staring at me; waiting for me to say something. But my voice stayed in my head. I looked at Sergio's bearded face, at Ofelia's concerned eyes, at Chente — good ol' Chente, calm as ever — and Skin, with a flowery Indian blouse from Mexico which made her look like what I imagined a Mayan princess to be.

Warriors would die for you, Skin. They would climb steep mountains, swim vast seas and destroy armies for you, deity of sauntering, Goddess of aura and bloom.

But soon, I felt shame. I couldn't tell them what I had done. Why I felt like running and running, without ever stopping.

The others picked up their materials and left. But Chente stayed to walk me out. We went outside; the fresh air slapped me across the face.

"All right Luis," Chente demanded. "Tell me what's going on."

"It's nothing, homes."

"Then let me tell you," Chente said, his voice firm. "You're on something again. I've seen it many times. Only now there is no turning back for you."

"Listen, I know I did wrong. I didn't want to do it. But ever since Yuk Yuk and Daddio got killed, the rest of us have needed to get high. And Santos and Lencho came across some good shit — "

"Where were you?"

"In the fields, *ése* — I know, I know, I should never have gone there," I said. "But, it's my neighborhood, man. I'm there bulljiving, just passing the time. And they had a little bit of *la carga...*"

"¡*Hijo*!" Chente interrupted. "You said you'd stop taking dope to study with us. You know what it does: dulling your thinking, your actions. What are you going to do when it makes mincemeat out of your brains?"

"Don't get *escamao*," I replied. "I didn't take a lot — just took a taste, you know."

"Sometimes you need it," I added, looking into the distance. "Sometimes you can't always be on top of things, Chente. You ever think about that, *ése*?"

"Sure, Luis, I think about it all the time."

Chente turned away and walked toward the car parked in the alley. He gazed at the wood fences and brick walls with markings that have been there for 30 or 40 years. Names upon names. Nobody ever erased them. The graffiti stayed and every new generation just put their *placa* over the old.

Chente surveyed the walls, tired of what they represented: pain, a mark in this world, often death. He then turned toward me.

"I'm sure it feels good to get messed up once in a while," Chente said. "To let it all go. But the fight for a better life won't stop just because you aren't ready. What we're doing is not something you decide to do when you feel like it. Whether you're ready or not, this struggle will go on. You're a *vato loco*. For you the world is one big *chingaso* after another — and some good dope. But you have to make a choice now. Either the craziness and violence — or here, learning and preparing for a world in which none of this is necessary."

Chente reached for the keys in his pocket and opened the car door. Just before stepping inside, he threw me another look; I could see he didn't want to give up on me yet. But he always told me: People give up on themselves first.

"Luis, you don't have to study with us to make me happy or the collective proud of you," Chente explained. "There are a lot of people involved in your life now. When you win, we win; but when you go down, you go down alone."