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Mr. Clean
&
the Barrio

DAVID BUENO-HILL

- UNEDITED EDITION -



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Chapter 1

Jacobo

The boys had come in just as he was going to wash his hands. There were three of them with baldheads and baggy pants. One was fat and tall, one was his own height, about 5'9", and the last one was *chaparro* with big shoulders and hands like frying pans.

He walked toward a sink, but the big one stepped in the way.

"Excuse me," Jacob said.

"Nah, *Homes*. There's no excuse for you," the *torta* replied.

He was fat; so fat that the extra skin on his face weighed down his forehead and made it look like his eyes were half closed. He looked like a fat Asian guy. He looked at the small one with his disproportioned

hands and small head. Then his eyes met the one that was his own height.

"These are our sinks. Each time you turn on the water it costs a dollar foo'. Pay up or stay dirty," he said to Jacob with his hand out.

Jacob had been in fights before back on the Westside of L.A. He fought mostly black kids who didn't think he was down because *he* wasn't black. He wasn't a typical Mexican kid and the black kids picked on him. This was different. He didn't know why they were doing this. To them, he just looked like an easy target, a school boy.

"Why are you guys messing with me?" Jacob asked.

"Because we can, *ése*. Now pay up or get out," the one that was his own height said.

Jacob tried to reach around the Fat One to get to the sink but he screamed, "Pay attention," so loud that it made Jacob jump back.

"What's wrong with you? Don't you listen? Pay or leave," the Fat One said angrily. He walked up on him and now

Jacob's back was against one of the stall doors.

"Fine. I'll just leave," he said, while keeping eye contact.

He knew that when his back was turned they'd jump him. He took a step to the side and saw that Little Big Hands was now by the napkins. He walked towards the door and swung at the little buff one.

Before he knew what had happened, he felt a soft hand push him from behind. His head hit the metal napkin box and he got socked hard on the side of his head a few times. He was dazed. Two hands grabbed his short-sleeved plaid button-up shirt and swung him to the ground.

Jacob screamed, "Get off! You don't know me!"

"We don't need to know you, *Homes*," he heard one of them say as he felt a giant foot slam into his stomach.

He folded over and turned on his side in pain. Then he felt them kick him in the back. The hits didn't hurt because his adrenaline had kicked in, but he felt them moving his body and he got angry. He swung his fists and felt someone's face. He

got stomped out harder. He swung at the legs kicking him. He couldn't tell if it was doing any good.

He tried to get up. He felt the weight of the Fat One throw him back down like a child. Now the Fat One was sitting on his chest and slapping him while the other two laughed. His hands were buried at his sides. He struggled and squirmed, but the *torta* weighed too much. He felt his face getting red. He felt like he was going to cry, but he hadn't cried since he was ten-years-old.

When Jacob was ten, he tried to shank his uncle with a kitchen knife. They were playing "operation".

Tío Juan put his hand over Jacob's mouth and told him it was the anesthetic that would help numb the pain for his operation. It was fun, but that day *Tío* held his hand over Jacob's mouth and nose too long. His lungs were going to pop, his eyes were turning red, and he tried to scream but nothing could get *Tío* off of him. *Tío* laughed.

Finally, Jacob's mother came in and playfully slapped her brother Juan on the shoulder and said, "*Dejalo en paz Juanito.*"

He got up and Jacob ran to the kitchen passed the shocked adults. He came back an instant later. He ran toward *Tío* with *Abuela's pollo* knife and *Tío* ran.

He ran around the living room table and they both stopped and stared at each other. When Jacob tried to jump over the table, *Tío* ran for the bathroom. It was his only hope. Jacob was right behind him.

He paused in a frightened way when his mother screamed, "Jacob!" but he saw *Tío* closing the bathroom door and he threw the knife inside the bathroom just before the door closed.

Tears started falling from his eyes from frustration and anger, not from fear or sadness. He banged on the door screaming, "I'm going to kill you! I hate you!"

He could hear *Tío* laughing behind the door and it only made him madder. That is how Jacob felt right now.

Jacob looked over and saw that the white metal napkin box was busted. The lid was on the ground, a weapon. He thought

of *Tío* and how he tried to stab him. He thought of how the knife made a difference, made him afraid. He wished his mother would tap the Fat One on the shoulder.

"Get the hell off of him, Cesar! Now!" he heard a grown man say.

The Fat One jumped up. Jacob heard walkie-talkie static.

"I need some back-up in the boy's restroom by the gym. We've got another fight. Over," the man said into his walkie-talkie.

Jacob didn't move. He just stared at the metal lid.

"Are you all right, son?" the man asked.

"I'm okay," he said, while taking the buff black guy's hand to help him up.

"You all must think you're pretty tough, huh?" he asked them.

"Look at me boy, pay attention!" he screamed at the Fat One who seemed afraid now. "Three on one? Does that make you a man? It makes you a damn coward if you ask me. When are you going to learn this isn't going to get you anywhere in life? Jumping boys in the restroom doesn't make you a man. You need to get to class and

stop all of this nonsense. You need to focus on the future. This is some bull!" he finished as another man came into the restroom.

"You alright in here?" the new man asked.

The black guard walked past Jacob and just as he did, Jacob pretended to be tying his shoe. With the two men talking, Cesar and the other two laughed for a second and made a joke at Jacob's expense.

He had the lid behind his back now and before they knew it, Jacob was beating Cesar bloody near the urinals. The first blow struck his nose sideways. Then he hit the top of his head with a corner. He got three good hits in with the metal lid before the big black foo' pulled him off of Cesar.

"God damnit son! Take it easy!" Jacob was pulled up into the air with a bear hug from behind and found himself in the hallway outside of the restroom.

"If I let you go are you going to behave yourself?" the man asked.

"Yes Sir," Jacob replied, trying to take a breath.

The guard released Jacob from his lion's grip and chuckled. He looked at Jacob and smiled.

He said, "I've been waiting for someone to do that to Cesar for three years."

Jacob didn't know what to say. He was confused. Was he in trouble or not? Then he wondered what would happen after school. The boys were obviously in a gang. Would they do a drive-by on him? He saw Melody walk by with a pass in her hand. He tried to fix his shirt and his hair but she hardly looked at him. He was embarrassed that he looked so bad in front of the girl that he liked.

"What's your name, son?"

"Jacob."

"I'm Dean Waterton. You can just call me Waterton, everybody does."

"Nice to meet you ... Waterton."

"The pleasure is all mine, all mine," Waterton said and he let out another laugh.

Jacob smiled.

After they got down, Waterton made all of the boys shake hands like they make kids do after little league. Cesar was okay. His nose was busted, but he was too

embarrassed to make a big deal about it. He suspended all of them for two days. They waited in the Dean's Office until their mothers came to pick them up or until the bell rang to end school, whichever came first.

Jacob tried to fix his pant leg to make it hang just right over his shoes, until Jose, the one that was his own height, decided to quietly sneak over and sit next to him. This made Jacob nervous, but he was pretty sure that Jose wouldn't do anything to him in the Dean's Office.

"Where you from, *Homes?*" Jose asked him.

"Nowhere. I'm not in a gang," Jacob replied.

"I know you don't bang, foo'," he said and his two buddies laughed. "I mean, where did you go to school before this?"

"L.A. High."

"You know Little Spooky?"

"Nah."

"Mousy?"

"Nah."

"Big *Loco?*"

"Nope."

“What did you do there, *Homes*?”

“Mostly just played ball and kept to myself.”

Jacob still couldn't tell if Jose was being cool now or just questioning an enemy.

He leaned in and said, “We didn't really mean nothin' by it, *Homes*. We were just messing around. Now that you broke the homie's nose, we're going to have to cap you, *ése*,” he said, while pointing his finger at him like it was a gun and pulling the trigger. Then he calmly sat back with his crew.

Chapter 2

Trigger

It seemed like he was born from the shrapnel of the Devil's hand grenade and landed in a *barrio* in Perris where *Maravilla* owned six square miles of territory. They did whatever they wanted. His parents were the older fools in the 'hood. Trigger was raised bangin'. After his *clica* started

getting locked-up and killed, Trigger did a couple of drive-bys to make himself feel better. The main foo' that used to look out for him got him a job working on the docks in Long Beach. He told Trigger that it was only for a while, while the heat died down.

While he was away his gang went too crazy. They stopped listening to the *éses* in jail and *La M* ordered a green light on any *Maravilla* members. They weren't safe anywhere, but Trigger didn't care. Death was always a heartbeat away for a gangsta. He still represented his 'hood with pride, but he was far from where he grew up. He was thirteen doing the work of grown men.

He never complained and he was never late. His job wasn't like school. There were no racist teachers sending him to the Dean's Office. No one would bag on his clothes.

And no one complained about how mean their *padres* were or even worse, about how great their *padres* were. He didn't know which he hated more. When kids would complain he wanted to smash their faces with a metal chair leg for not

appreciating the fact that they even had parents.

When kids would talk about going to Six Flags with their parents or going to the fair with their parents, he wanted to stretch them across the top of a fence and pull their legs until their back tore open and they fell, leaving pieces of skin stuck to the top of the wires. Some kids in the *barrio* could draw, some could write, but for Trigger, violence was art.

Thoughts like these and a desire to be "*el gallo mas gallo*" led him where he always knew he would end up. He went to jail for knocking a kid out on the school bus and then throwing him through the emergency exit in the back. The foo' stepped on his Reebok Cortez.

In jail, he worked out all the time, but now he had grown lazy and a comfortable amount of skin had accumulated around his muscles. This made him look more swole, and older than he really was. In jail he never asked to be in protective custody.

He had knocked out a couple of guys twice his size that had tried to exercise the rights of the green light. He got lucky in

those fights and he knew it. After they realized that he could be of use to them he was asked to join the Mexican Mafia, *La M.*

He didn't want to follow orders, but luck don't last forever. Joining was the only way out of there alive. After he killed a *mayate* he was a lifetime member of the most feared gang in the system. The only thing he didn't know for sure was what would happen when he killed a member of *this* Mafia.

He found out two months after he joined. He was only eighteen and he was in prison with men who had been in jail longer than he had been alive. One day, in the showers, Spider, a member from back in the seventies, kicked his legs out from under him and jumped on his back. He was bigger than Trigger, and heavier.

They were both slippery and Trigger managed to turn around. Spider put all of his weight on his stomach and Trigger could feel his chance to use the razorblade in his mouth slipping away.

"Okay, okay *Homes*. I knew this was coming. Let me turn back over. You can have it," Trigger said.

"That's better, *ése*. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone, *Homes*. It will be our little secret," Spider whispered in his ear.

It made Trigger sick to pretend, but it was his only chance. Just as Spider backed up, Trigger turned with the razorblade between his fingertips and sliced his stomach open. Spider grabbed Trigger's hand. With his abs bleeding and ripped, he wasn't as strong and Trigger pushed him on his side. He sliced open Spider's arm as he tried to protect himself.

"Relax, *Homes*. I was just kidding," Spider said desperately.

Even if he was kidding, Trigger wasn't.

He got through his flailing arms and sliced open one of his eyes. A piece of the bloody eyelid fell onto the cold white tiles. Spider's hands covered his *ojo* leaving his neck open. Trigger cut it so deep that he let go of the razor and left it hidden in the cut.

Trigger stood up and walked back over to the shower. He put his hand on the wall and let the water wash the *muerte* off of him.

The shower had emptied when Spider made his move, which means that everyone

knew what was going to happen. Even the guard had closed the door after they all had left. Trigger realized this now, after he was clean.

He calmly grabbed a dry towel and walked out through the doors. He looked at the guard whose expression showed that he was surprised Trigger was walking out and not Spider. Trigger put one finger up to his lip and said, "Shhh."

He was a legend. Trigger had won the fight and now he gained the respect of the *veteranos*. He found out later that some of the real *jefes* had known that Spider was getting too old and that they wanted to give Trigger a chance to prove himself. Even in his greatest victory he was nothing more than a puppet and he knew it. Trigger hated jail for this reason and he vowed that if he ever got out he would never go back.

No one knew how he did it, just like no one knew where he had come from. He had a hidden trigger and a phantom pistol on him at all times. The guard never told anyone that Trigger had done it. He told the warden that someone put a towel over his head and held him down for five

minutes. The prison went into lockdown, but a week later it was business as usual. Trigger was a real killer now, not a kid doing drive-bys high off of 'shrooms.

A killer must kill and Trigger did. It was easy to look at a junkie who wouldn't pay or a whiteboy who hated Mexicans and see those children from school that he hated. He killed and killed and never got caught. Finally, he was released and moved in with an *ex-chola* from his new neighborhood. She was working and going to community college while trying to raise a six-year-old boy.

Now, Trigger was 23-years-old, but in gang life he might as well have been forty. Even though he was from *Maravilla*, a gang that had been given a "green light" ten years ago all the kids in the neighborhood respected him. He was a true *vato*. He had tattoos of guns and clowns all over his body. Brown Pride could be seen from a block away arching across his stomach and the rest were all naked Mexican girls wearing *sombreros*. His favorite tattoo was of a grenade. Written around it were the words, "They'll never take me alive."

When he got out of jail two years ago, he had a six pack and twenty inch arms, a long dark goatee, and a look that could make a cop jump back in his car.

Trigger watched over the gangstas in the 'hood and made sure that whoever he had working for him would never snitch on him. Half of them were illegal, who were they going to tell? They were kids who had nothing to live for. Their parents didn't care. Their *maestros* were glad that they weren't in class and no one gave them the respect that Trigger gave them. They were given simple jobs that they could understand like holding a *cohete* for a man selling crack or delivering a backpack full of cocaine to an address downtown. He even printed out maps for them from the Internet.

A boy had moved into the small apartment building where Trigger lived, a teenager and his mother. Huntington Park was a hot spot for Latinos moving up in California. The only reason his mom even got the apartment was because the old tenant got deported. He was illegal.

They moved in a little over two weeks ago. The boy couldn't have been more than sixteen, but he was the man of the house. The mother worked two jobs, day and night to provide for her boy. He was a good boy, not a gangsta, but you could tell that he wasn't a punk either.

Trigger sat back and collected the money from the kids who looked up to him. It was much easier than the days when he worked on the docks. He became friendly with the mother without ever saying a word to her. He'd make sure no one touched her car while she slept or got too loud. He said 'what's up' to the boy, but the boy never said 'what's up' to him. He just nodded out of respect.

Trigger knew it took more strength to go to school everyday than to wake up late and sell drugs. He knew that respecting your mother and living for her took more power than disrespecting her while living from her. The *vatos* that looked up to him and worked for him were weak and he would make them strong, but *this* boy was already strong.

Trigger's old lady was cooking some *huevos rancheros*. She had just finished heating the grease to put the egg and red peppers in. He couldn't resist. He snuck up on her and yelled 'Ey!' from behind. Some grease jumped from the pan and burned her and she was crazy furious.

She punched and kicked at him and finally said, "*Quedate afuera.*"

Her son laughed and gave Trigger a high-five.

Trigger was done having his fun. He opened the door and saw that the boy was walking across the walkway to his apartment. They stared each other for a moment. And for a moment they were caught in the other's eye. The boy's eye was busted and so was his lip. He kept walking down the white walkway with the strips of black sandpaper tape.

"What happened to you, *Homes?*" Trigger asked as he fired up a smoke.

The boy fumbled with his keys. He was thinking about what his mom would say when she got home from work.

"Okay. You don't have to talk to me," Trigger continued as he inhaled the gray dust of the cancer stick and blew out a big cloud as he said, "but maybe I can help."

He thought that maybe this old *cholo* could help.

"I got into a fight."

"Where?"

"At my school."

"You don't talk Spanish, ey, *Homes?*"

"Not really."

"Were they *éses?*"

"I guess."

Trigger laughed at this guess, "Were they bald headed Mexicans or not, foo'?"

"Yes," he said, feeling dumb and finally finding the right key.

"Then they were *éses*. How many?"

"How do you know there was more than one?"

"Because they don't grow the *bolas* to come at you by themselves until their much, much older."

He thought of the day he killed Spider and looked away from the boy's strong, yet innocent face.

"Three."

"I bet at least one of them looks worse than you, ey, *Homes?*" Trigger said before he began coughing on his cigarette.

He might have been 23 but he had been smoking for ten years and his lungs had taken a tornado of damage. Some nights he woke up coughing so bad that blood came out when he spit.

The boy smiled, thinking of Cesar's bloody nose, but he quickly stopped smiling because he didn't want the older *vato* to think that he was laughing at him coughing.

"It's okay, *Homes*, you can laugh. A grown man being a slave to a little white stick like this is pretty funny. Do you smoke?"

"No," the boy replied.

"Then don't let me ever see you with a cigarette in your hand or I'll appear like *Chupacabras* and drag you into the sky."

"You won't."

Trigger respected his short answers. He was right about this one. This one could lead an army into certain death and have them chant his name as Satan opened up the gates of Hell to let them in.

"I'll tell you what, *Homes*," Trigger started, as he stroked his goatee and took one more hit of his *cigarillo*, before he flicked it over the handrail. It exploded into a spark as it hit the side of the next building.

"I'll find out who jumped you. I can make them squash the beef if you agree to fight them one-on-one."

"How will you find out?"

Trigger shook his head. Trigger didn't need to do a Google search to find out information in his 'hood.

"I'll ask the questions from now on *chavala*. What's your name?"

"Jacob."

"What's your real name?"

"Jacobo."

"That's what I thought. Well, Jacobo, I'll find out. Don't worry about that, just tell me what you know about them."

"One is called Cesar. He's the fat-faced one that started it. Jose is my size. I don't know their last names. They go to HP High. I don't know what grade they're in. The other one is small, short, but he's kind of buff."

"I know who they are kid. You really messed up," Trigger said, before he squinted his eyes like he could see the future.

"I didn't do anything. I didn't mess up; they messed me up."

"It doesn't matter. You fought back and hurt one of them. Jose is a real *locote*. They call him Lil' Crazy. His brother, Big Crazy, is doing fifteen years for a triple homicide," he said *homicide* really slowly and then stared into the boy's eyes before he continued, "and those were only the three that the cops knew about, *Homes*."

Trigger continued, "Lil'Crazy is just waiting for an excuse to 187 someone. It looks like he just found a clean one."

Trigger could only tell Jacobo what he knew. Lil' Crazy *had* killed before, but his brother taught him how to be a true gangsta and he didn't tell anyone what they didn't need to know, especially Trigger. Even his homeboys were in the dark about some of the worst things he did.

Jacob walked over a few steps.

"When we were in the office, he said he had to get me and he pointed his hand at

me like it was a gun and pulled the trigger," Jacob said.

"You're lucky it was just his finger. The cops never did find all of Big Crazy's guns. I'm sure Lil' Crazy has them somewhere."

"Are you sure you can help me?"

Trigger ignored the stupid question and kept talking.

"Cesar is a big dumbass. If he wasn't so big, he wouldn't have survived this long in the *barrio*. They call him ChuChu, like a Mexican freight train. The last member of Lil' Crazy's little click is Tiny Boxer. He has hands like *cocos* and shoulders like pistons. If he socks you you'll feel it. You'll feel it today, *mañana*, and the next day.

"And you are Jacobo. Your father is God knows where and your mother is left to raise you in the 'hood. She didn't talk to you in Spanish because she didn't want you to be in ESL like she was. You wants to make her proud of you, but things keep happening to you that make you lose your temper. Maybe that's why you moved here, maybe not. You're a smart kid, book smart and street smart, but this time you lost your temper and it could be the last thing you

ever lose. You're lucky that you met me, Jacobo. I might be the Devil's stepson but today I'm your guardian angel."

"Do they work for you?"

Trigger shot him a mean stare and said, "Nobody works for me, *Homes*. Don't you ever let me hear you say that again. I just get respect that's all. They'll listen to me if I tell them something. Nobody works for me. You got that, kid?"

"Yes, Sir," Jacob said, not wanting to offend the only man that could help him.

Jacob had seen the gangstas in the neighborhood come to Trigger's for only a few minutes and leave. He wasn't a *burro*. He knew that Trigger was running dope in the *barrio*, but he understood why Trigger was denying it.

"Don't call me Sir, *Homes*. Just call me Trigger."

"I'm only helping you because I see your mamá struggling to do right by you working two *jales*. Half of these kids out here, their mother's don't give a crap about them. Your mom is special. She loves you."

"Why don't you have that trick cook you lunch if you love her so much," a

female voice said from inside of Trigger's apartment.

"Shut up, *vieja*. Nobody asked you. Are the *huevos* done yet or what?"

"Whenever you're ready to eat, *jefe*," the voice said sarcastically.

"Don't pay her any mind."

Jacob looked mad because the woman disrespected his *jefita*.

"If you want, I'll give her a *puntaso* for you." Trigger stopped and punched the air. He laughed and Jacob did too.

"Just keep doing what you're doing. Go to school. Do your homework. Don't say anything to your mother about me or about us talking. I'll let you know soon what's going down. Okay?"

"Yeah, thanks a lot, Trigger. I really owe you one."

"Wait until it's all over. You won't feel like you owe me anything," Trigger said as he disappeared into his apartment.

Chapter 3

Lolieh

29

He had seen his friend get his face shot off by a drunken gangsta for no reason that he could recall. The man stumbled towards them with a gun in his hand, which wasn't an unusual sight at all.

With a bottle of Red Stripe in his other hand, he walked up to the group of boys and said, "Eenie Meanie Minie Moe," in his natural Jamaican accent and simply pulled the trigger where the gun stopped.

Lolieh ran home and didn't look back. He ran hard and fast through grass and trees, passed shells of cars, and through buildings with no roofs and walls with no buildings. A boy running for his life, he had heard a second shot and a third but the sight of his friend's face being pulled apart by the bullet in an instant, set his instincts ablaze.

Run.

Jumping over a short wooden gate, with no paint, he fell and cut his knee. He got up, even though he was exhausted and kept running. There were no thoughts in

his mind. His spirit had taken over, the spirit of a boy who only knew spirit.

Finally, he reached his home, a one bedroom house near a park. One in a sparse collection of ram shackled glorified shacks that held the inhabitants of this town. Without it's lush beaches and the expensive oceanfront resorts, Jamaica would be Belize, a place full of dirt roads where poverty is the main attraction, little historical significance, and no crushes of visitors.

His mother was drinking with the rest of her family when Lolieh came running through the narrow beaten door and into her arms spilling the rum in her cup.

"Boy! Watch what cher doin," she said, surprised.

Her hand pulled him by the neck so that she could look at his face. She was drunk, but not so drunk as to forget what a dangerous country she occupied and her eyes wanted to look over her only son to be sure he was safe. His eyes were blank and full of fear, disappearing into comfort and his mother's harsh handling of him, let him know he was safe in her strong grasp.

“Don’t choo have any manners, Lolieh? Apologize to yer mudder,” his uncle said.

But he didn’t apologize. He just stared at her. A tear found its way to his eye from the surface of his soul. She understood that they must leave. She feared for his safety. She would find a way to go where the tourists came from so that he would have the opportunities to one day be like them.

“Apologize boy,” his uncle screamed in a rage.

“Sit yer ass down, ponk. I’ll tell my own boy when to apologize,” she yelled at her brother and he jumped back in sudden inexplicable fear. “Go to the other room, boy and let the grown-ups have dey fun,” she said, with a smile to her son who understood.

He went to the room, where the other children were and sat down, holding his knees.

“What’s wrong?” his cousin asked.

“Roger is dead.”

“What happened?” she asked.

Lolieh didn’t answer. He hated himself for crying. He looked away from her and she began playing with a wooden doll. She

pretended to comb its hair. This made Lolieh smile. It always did. He thought of a time when his imagination would allow him to be a superhero in a skyscraper, when he was just a poor boy in a tree. Then he thought of the last time a tear had escaped from under his eyelid.

He was walking up from the park and he saw his father walking away. He called for him. His father didn't turn around. He yelled louder out of excitement and joy. His father ignored him. Lolieh ran until he had caught up with him and he pushed his butt from behind. His father kneeled down and looked at his five-year-old son. He grabbed his arm to steady him and looked at his young eyes very seriously.

He said, "Lolieh. I love ya boy, but I won't be around so much no more."

"Where you going Daddy?" Lolieh asked.

"Somewhere where yer mudder ain't. Da woman driving me mad."

"Don't go daddy. Don't go."

"Don't cry, boy. You can call me whenever you want okay?"

"No, Daddy. Don't go, Daddy," and he began to cry.

"Go cry to yer mudder or I'll give you a reason to cry," he said as he took off his belt and snapped it.

"I love you, Daddy," he said, running into his father's leg. Then he felt the belt hit his back and he fell without knowing why. The pain blinded him and when he finally gained his eyesight back his father was gone.

Even though Lolieh was five, he understood. Many of his friends lived with their mothers only. He was lucky to have had a father for this long. The truth was that she had caught him cheating again and as far as he was concerned she had no right to slap him and carry on like she did.

He would simply move back to his family's part of the island and not deal with her craziness. Lolieh was his sixth child. He tried not to give him much thought even though he didn't want to have to say, "goodbye" in this way.

He had named him on a whim after watching a kung fu movie that dazzled his imagination. The hero of the film was

named Lo Lee. He was happy to have another son and he stayed as long as he could. There was little love between him and Lolieh's mother, but there was much understanding. They both understood the corner of the world in which they lived, the hopelessness and the reality.

He watched him grow from a baby that needed his neck supported when he fed, to a boy that climbed trees, and asked questions about the sky and the stars.

These first few years were enough for him, really. Soon enough he would begin to drink and smoke ganja. He pictured Lolieh getting into his first fight and his first time kissing an island girl under a tree. Then would come the age when he would notice the tourists with plastic money and expensive sunglasses. He would ask his father why they had these things and he didn't. Innocence would pass like sand in the wind and even though his father could not admit it to himself, he knew he did not have the answers to the questions that Lolieh would one day ask.

It's better for a boy to find these things out on his own, he thought. He doesn't need me

telling him about the world, discovery is the fruit of life.

He told himself many things, but none comforted him as much as the feeling of a dark-skinned beauty under him and a stomach full of Jamaican rum.

Lolieh spent many nights in the corner of the kid's room, holding his knees and watching his little cousins play. Many more nights after Lolieh witnessed the death of Roger, he and his mother left for New York. She had a working Visa and a girlfriend named Tamika, who said she could stay with her while she got on her feet. They had known each other when they were girls, but hadn't seen each other since Tamika left ten years ago.

When Lolieh arrived in New York, he was awestruck. He had never seen so many people before. They were rushing and speaking into their large cell phones. Some had briefcases and suits, others wore big clothing and carried radios. The females were strange to him. Women weren't warm like they were in Jamaica. The women here scowled and gave the impression that they

did not want to be bothered by anyone or anything.

However, he liked his mother's friend very much. Tamika gave him sweet food and soda until he burst. He was far from memories he couldn't let go of and finally in a place he didn't think about leaving. He went to school for a while and got into some fights. The kids there were like the adults, mean-faced and insensitive. He made some friends and it felt good to be around some other Jamaicans, but when he was alone Puerto Ricans were menacing and white kids his age looked devilish. Even the black Americans, or as they preferred to be called, African-Americans, reminded him of murderers roaming free in his homeland.

He knew that wherever he was, he would not be one hundred percent safe, but America was much safer than Jamaica at any rate. He spent most of his time in school and went straight home after the final bell rang. Tamika would watch him and when she was gone he was left alone with her daughter, a fourteen-year-old girl who wished she were twenty.

She would watch music videos and imitate the dances when her mother was not around. Now, she had an audience of one. Lolieh liked to watch her. Even at eleven-years-old he was not a virgin. He knew what her dancing meant in some primeval way. He waited for the chance to get closer to her. They watched TV and played video games. He was tall for his age and she wasn't. Three years separated them in age but he was an inch taller.

Games of hitting and play fighting soon turned to kissing and petting.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied.

"It feels like your doing something," she said.

"Let me touch it," he replied.

"Okay, but don't go inside."

He unbuttoned her pants and in all of his excitement he didn't hear Tamika's keys opening the door. Neither of them heard the knob turn, he in a moment of youthful satisfaction and her in a blur of maturity. Her mother's instinct told Tamika that a home occupied by children should not be so quiet. She thought to herself as she

opened the door that they must be doing something wrong.

Her mother came in and saw him with his hand in her pants. She slapped him in the back of the head. When he did not cry she pushed him down. He didn't know what to say. The girl, in fear, began to say that she told him to stop. Lolieh was a boy who didn't like to explain things or talk very much at all, and he just looked at her in a way that made the little girl feel her own betrayal.

She told him to get out. He did not know where to go so he hung out in front of the twenty-story apartment building waiting for his mother. It was getting cold and his mother finally showed up. She was walking from the train station but when she saw her boy out in the cold, wearing only a T-shirt, she felt her blood turn to summer.

"What are you doing out here? Yer gonna catch a cold, boy?"

"Nothing."

"Whatcha mean nothing? Why aren't you upstairs in Tamika's apartment?"

"She hit me."

"What fer?"

"Nothing."

"C'mon here, boy," she said and grabbed his arm, while marching up to Tamika's apartment.

She was tired from working. She was upset because her only son was standing out in the cold. She wanted to know what happened. She stormed to Tamika's door and knocked. Tamika opened.

"Why you hit my boy?" she asked as politely as she could, considering how she was feeling.

"Don't be coming over here asking me why this and why that, ask him."

"I'm asked him. Now I'm asking you. Why you hit my boy?"

"I walked in and found him on top of my little girl."

"What they doing?" Lolieh's mother asked, while looking at him.

"He had his hand in her pants. She said stop and he didn't."

"She's lying, Momma. She never said stop." Lolieh said.

Lolieh's mother believed her son. She looked at Tamika's face and realized that

here in America things are different. In Jamaica, kids experimented with sex at a young age. She herself lost her virginity when she was thirteen, so Tamika's fourteen-year-old daughter was practically a woman. She understood this difference, but she thought back to when she first saw Lolieh standing in the cold and she got angry.

"Yer girl almost fifteen. You trow my boy out in the cold fa that? You sorry ass mudder that's what you are. Pussy blood clot." Lolieh's mother screamed.

Tamika swung at her, but before her hand hit Lolieh's mother's face, she ducked. She tackled her into her own house and grabbed her head with one hand and punched her in the face with the other. Tamika's daughter tried to stop her, but Lolieh grabbed her arms and held her still.

The two mother's began rolling around. Tamika ripped out one of Lolieh's mother's earrings and she did the same back to Tamika. They clawed at each other and kicked at each other. Tamika grabbed a pan from the stove and Lolieh's mother grabbed a knife sharpener. The pan was

swung and the sharpener disarmed Tamika by landing on her wrist. Lolieh's mom hit her with the butt of the sharpener and she went down. She was breathing but the fight was out of her. She looked up and told them both to get out in a low defeated tone.

Once outside, Lolieh's mother held him by one hand and started to beat him with her left hand because the right was sore. She spanked him and slapped him, but he didn't cry. She forgot her right hand was sore and spanked him and slapped him with that hand until she remembered. He winced in pain and tried to move around so that she couldn't get any clean hits, but he did not cry. Finally, she stopped.

"You just like yer fadder. Try to hump anything that moves. Can't keep yer snake in its cage," she said exhaustedly.

"You whipped her ass momma," Lolieh said, losing his Jamaican accent a little since he had been in New York.

"I know I did. I can't have my boy out in da cold. Let's go get our things. We're going someplace more like home, someplace warm."

Chapter 4

Friends

“Take out a piece of paper and copy the rules down class,” the old white teacher said. “Your first assignment is to come back tomorrow with the rules signed by your parents.”

One boy took out a sheet of paper and tore off a piece. He showed it to a boy sitting next to him and he smiled. Realizing that this was funny, he held it up to the entire class and said, “Look Miss, I took out a *piece* of paper.”

The class began to laugh and the teacher sensed that she must make an example out of the boy.

“Go stand in the corner, now,” she yelled at him.

The class was quiet now, as she displayed a mean look and made sure she would not lose control of these young people. She took her job seriously and she would be as hard as she needed to be in

order to make sure her students get a fine education.

One boy smiled and shook his head, thinking to himself how foolish that boy was for doing that on the first day.

"You. What is your name?" the teacher asked.

The boy, who had a dark complexion, looked at her and stopped smiling.

"What is your name? Tell me now."

He just looked at her with a sorry look on his face, but she had already begun a tirade and she wasn't going to calm down now.

"Okay, maybe your mother can tell me your name. Would you like me to call her?"

"No."

"Then tell me your name."

"Lolieh Taylor."

"Well Lolieh Taylor, you just got your first week of detention."

She sat down and began writing furiously like a woman possessed. Her hair moved very little, but her facial expressions made her look like she was watching a remarkable play on the inside of her glasses that only she could see. There were

moments of great emotion and some of pure action. When she finished, she handed it to Lolieh and walked back to the front of the class.

“I am fair, but I am also firm. You will copy the rules today and I expect you to follow them. Do not talk while I am talking. Stay in your seats.”

She continued rattling off the ten rules of her class and the frightened class copied the board as she spoke in vicious tones. Lolieh sat there. This was his fourth class of the day and sometime or another he had lost his only two pencils. A boy next to him was busy copying, when he noticed that Lolieh wasn't writing. He dug in his backpack for an extra pencil to give the black kid so that he wouldn't get yelled at again and given another week of detention. Even though he was light skinned and Spanish, he felt bad for the quiet boy and wanted to help.

He slyly passed the pencil over onto Lolieh's desk and Lolieh, with a surprised and shocked look, took it in his hand. No stranger had ever gone out of their way for him before and he didn't know what to do.

He said, "Thank you," when the teacher turned around.

The Spanish boy said, "No problem," but he was too slow and as the teacher turned to face the class, she saw his mouth moving and his eyes *not* facing front.

"What is your name?"

"Jacob."

"Well, Lolieh, it looks like you have company for your detention. Both of you will report here after school, if you know what's good for you. We'll call your parents and put you to work until you never make a peep in this class again."

The boys dared not to look at each other because they were afraid of getting punished even more. A week of detention with this mean lady was enough to keep them quiet the entire semester.

The first day they washed her chalkboards and her white boards with soap and water. When detention was over they both lied and said that their mothers would pick them up. She waited for a while as they mocked expectation and then she told them that she would definitely meet their mothers tomorrow.

"Is your mom coming?" Jacob asked.

Lolieh shook his head, signifying that she wasn't.

"Mine either."

Lolieh smiled.

"Which way do you live?" Jacob asked.

Lolieh pointed west, towards La Brea.

"Me too," Jacob replied and they began walking down Wilshire side by side, each carrying a heavy load of books in their cheap plastic backpacks.

"What time does your mom get home?" Jacob asked.

Lolieh held up one open hand and one finger meaning six o'clock.

"My mom gets home at six too," Jacob said, "do you live with your dad?"

Lolieh looked down at the ground as they waited for the light to change from a red hand to a little white man. He started picking at a half torn sticker on the pole.

"Me neither," Jacob replied to Lolieh's clear answer.

They crossed in silence and walked in silence until they got to La Brea kicking cans, paper cups, and rocks that looked entertaining.

"I'm taking the 212," Jacob said.

"Me too," Lolieh replied.

Jacob didn't notice that Lolieh hadn't said a word. In his twelve-year-old mind, they had been having a great conversation the whole way to the bus stop and it continued, until they got on the bus. Jacob followed Lolieh to the back where the seats went around the sides and the rear making an open square. There were no seats next to each other and they were forced to sit across from one another.

Some older kids came on the bus at the next stop. Jacob thought that they must be fifteen or sixteen. He liked their style of baggy pants and big shirts. They looked cool and he watched them to see what cool kids did. He didn't care that they were black. Lolieh was checking out a girl sitting next to him and trying to look like he was staring at the floor.

The two boys noticed Jacob mad-dogging them.

"What are you looking at, you ugly little midget?" one of the boys asked.

He was only a few inches taller than Jacob and Jacob was embarrassed for being

caught watching them and scared because there were two of them.

"Nothing," Jacob said weakly.

"Are you saying that I'm nothing, 'cause I know you were looking at me?"

"I wasn't looking at nothing," Jacob said, now getting angry. He no longer looked up to them. He hated them like he hated *Tío* for going to jail. He thought they were stupid and that they would go to jail too one day.

"Watch your tone when you talk to me, little kid," one said back to Jacob.

Jacob jumped up and pushed him. The courage left the boy's eyes and he no longer pretended to be tough in front of his friend. He had fallen on his butt because Lolieh had stuck his leg out as he stumbled back. Jacob realized his stop was coming and he jumped on the kid while he was down. He socked his face one good time, then the boy's arms came up to block his punches. His baggy pants made it even more difficult for him to stand back up, especially with this ugly little midget swinging at him with all his might.

When the kid's friend tried to get Jacob off of him, Lolieh came over and swung his heavy backpack into his head, knocking him back on the floor. When one man got up to stop them, another stopped him saying, "Leave them be. Dem boys getting what they deserve."

The back doors opened and Lolieh pulled Jacob off of the bus, leaving the two older boys embarrassed and bruised. The older boys started cussing at them once the bus took off and they were safe.

Chapter 5

Opened the Door

Two days of watching his back had made him tired. Friday night he went to sleep early and missed wrestling for the first time in 6 months. When he woke up his mother was awake watching TV. He plopped down on the couch next to her and they spent some time together until she had

to go to work. He spent the rest of Saturday playing video games. He was almost done with his new racing game.

He ended up playing all night and fell asleep just before his mother got home. He was happy to sleep in on Sunday without church. It was almost two o'clock.

His mom was working a double and she wouldn't be home until late at night. He woke up to his wall of posters. Eazy-E and Cypress Hill looked down at him and The Game appeared to be staring right at him asking, "Are you ready?"

He didn't turn on the TV or the radio. He just lied in bed, thinking of his life for over an hour. He thought of Melody, of his mom, and of his best friend and what he might be doing right now, *maybe the same thing*. He knew Lolieh wouldn't call him since he didn't really like to talk anyway. Just as Jacob decided to hit him up, he heard a knock at the front door.

He didn't want to answer it, but he knew he should. He thought it could only be one person, since he didn't have any homies around there. The person who would have the news he was been waiting

for. He got up and put on a pair of jeans. He walked to the door barefoot and shirtless wiping the *mocos* from the corner of his eyes.

"C'mon *Homes*, I know you're in there."

Jacob opened the wooden door, but left the black metal door closed.

"Hey Trigger," Jacob said.

"Jacobo! Rise and shine foo!"

Jacob smiled and laughed in a tired way. Trigger was wearing a white wifebeater which made him look even bigger than he was. His tattoos climbed all over his arms and under the white undershirt. Trigger looked through the door from over his locs which sat in the middle of his nose.

He thought of how he might look to Trigger: a kid who hadn't seen much of a hard life at all, no tattoos, a flat chest with no muscles and the smallest hint of an apple in his bicep.

"What's up?" Jacob asked.

"I've got good news and I've got bad news, which one do you want to hear first?"

"The good news."

"Homes, you don't want to hear either through this metal *puerta*. Let me in foo', I'm on your side remember?" Trigger said.

He felt awkward for a moment, like he disrespected Trigger in some way by leaving the door closed, but the truth was he was just tired and not thinking straight. Of course he knew that Trigger was his only way back to his normal life.

He opened the door for him, finally.

"This is a nice place. You keep it clean, ey."

"Yeah, your apartment probably looks just like this one."

"Except that the *tele* is over there and my computer is over there. It's *sucio* too foo', *mi jaina no vale*."

"Do you want some cereal?" Jacob asked, realizing that he was hungry.

"No thanks. My old lady is making me lunch right now."

"Must be nice," Jacob said.

"That's all she's good for, foo'. I'm looking for a new lady right now, but don't tell her I said that."

"I won't," Jacob said as he poured a giant bowl of Cocoa Bits. They were

supposed to be just as good as the name brand version. But they lacked the chocolate flavor that the little white elves provided, so he poured in some chocolate syrup to give them the flavor he craved.

"I spoke to Lil' Crazy."

Jacob's heart skipped a beat. The next sentence out of Trigger's mouth could change his life forever. He put the milk and the chocolate syrup back in the fridge.

"He said that he'd squash the beef if you met him for a one-on-one."

"That's it?"

"You wanted the good news first, right?"

Jacob nodded his head yes as he took a big bite of Cocoa Bits, drenched in chocolate syrup and prepared for the bad news.

"The bad news is he wants it to be in Templeton Alley," Trigger paused, to make sure Jacob was looking at him then he said, "around five o'clock."

Jacob looked at the clock on the microwave and saw that it was a quarter after three. This could be his last meal, he thought.

He should have made himself some eggs.

Chapter 6

Alley Food

Trigger and Jacob arrived at the mouth of the alley on foot, since their pad was only a few blocks away. No one was there.

“Where are they?” Jacob asked.

“*Calmaté guey*. They’ll be here. They’re probably just drinking and getting high.”

They stood for a second and then walked slowly down the alley towards Gage. Jacob’s stomach was tied in knots and the extra chocolate syrup he poured over his cereal wasn’t helping. It was a hot day in August and while the rest of America was on vacation Jacob and the other guys had school Monday due to the track system.

Overcrowded schools were forced to stay open year round to deal with higher population numbers than any school could handle. The nearby middle school, Henry T. Gage, had over four thousand kids enrolled. It was the largest middle school in the country. It was because of the heavy immigration into Huntington Park, which was declared a safe haven a while ago.

Paisas came there one way or another and had kids. The *chamacos* were American citizens by birth, but their parents were still illegal. As long as they had an address and a phone number, they could attend public school. Most of the families were caring and their only crime was not being able to help their children with their homework. Then there were families like Lil' Crazy's.

They offered no guidance and no discipline. Their kids failed in school and they never showed up to parent conferences. When they were diagnosed with learning disorders they never met with the school psychologist. The kids don't care because their parents don't care. They ended up being kicked from one school to the next. Parents blamed the

schools. Schools blamed the parents. Meanwhile, kids like Lil' Crazy never learned to be responsible for themselves or their actions. Whatever they did was someone else's fault, so why shouldn't they do whatever they wanted: rob, shoot, shank, and murder?

Before Trigger and Jacob reached the middle of the alley in their walk, which seemed a mile to Jacob, they heard the sounds of Lil' Rob beating from a small car filled with six young gangstas. The driver had his hat pulled close over his eyes and a pair of locs on. ChuChu was in the front next to him and four baldheads could be seen wobbling around the small back seat.

The driver stopped the car fifteen feet from where the two unlikely partners stood; a convicted felon and a sixteen-year-old kid with a 3.0 GPA.

The car doors opened and a cloud of smoke exited into a gust of wind, blowing the smell of chronic down the alley's throat. The driver ducked his head down, putting out a roach in the ashtray and then bounced out of his seat.

"Oralé, Trigger."

“*Que ondas Crazy?*” Trigger replied.

“Same old same old,” Lil’Crazy said, with his head tilted back and his chest sticking out.

“You remember Jacobo?”

“Jacobo? We just been calling him Mr. Clean. He’ll throw down if he can’t wash his hands, *Homes*. It’s no big deal what happened, but business is business. You were gonna get wet-up before Trigger told me you guys were homies.”

“I’m just here to squash the beef,” Jacob said.

“That’s cool, foo’, me too. I just brought these *payasos* along for the show.” Lil’ Crazy threw his head to the side, showing that he was referring to the crew of *pelons* who were standing by the car, intimidated by Trigger’s presence.

Everyone there knew what he was capable of, everyone but Jacob. Good parents were afraid of what would happen to their little seedlings when a tornado made of broken glass named Trigger surrounded their little *chamacos*.

“You ready to get down?” Jacob asked, full of impatience and wanting to show

strength. He just wanted to get this over with so he could get on with his life. This would be over soon and he could go back to playing his Play Station, maybe even see what Lolieh's doing later.

"*Chalé*, foo'. It'll be a quick lick," Lil' Crazy turned to his homies and said, "Damn, I never saw nobody so anxious to catch a beat down."

They laughed and ChuChu was looking like a fat shaved gorilla with a steak dangling just outside his grasp. ChuChu had never been hit so hard in his life and he wasn't looking forward to having it happen again. In order to show that he had the biggest balls in the crew, Crazy decided to fight Jacob in ChuChu's place.

He began to take off his shirt but decided to keep it on. He thought he looked bigger in it, more gangsta. He did take off his chain and he handed it over to Tiny Boxer, along with his cell phone and his locs. He kept the hat on and pulled it down over his eyes. He had planned it this way so that later he could brag that he kicked Jacob's ass and never even took his

hat off. Besides, he didn't really like the way he looked without it.

"This is it right. After we fight, it's over between us?" Jacob asked Trigger.

"After this you two will be like family," Trigger said with a grin.

Jacob sensed something bad going down, but he couldn't think of what it could be. The worst thing that could happen is that they all jump him. Then they'd be done with him and even though he would look like a punk, they would move on to an easier target at school. He knew that if he won, Crazy would probably want revenge. Jacob's plan was to let Lil' Crazy hit him a few times and then made it as even as possible after that, so that they would both keep their respect.

Lil' Crazy stepped back toward Trigger and Jacob with his crew behind him. Trigger took a step back and took out a cigarette and a Zippo lighter. He opened the top and then snapped his fingers near the wheel, making a flame appear on the wick like magic. He leaned back on the tall graffiti wall of the alley. He took his

sunglasses off and prepared to see what his little homie, Jacobo was made of.

"You ready, foo'?" Lil' Crazy asked.

Jacob saw that the tongue of his sneaker was sticking out from under his jeans. He crouched down to tuck it in.

"Look at Mr. Clean, *vatos*," Crazy said to make his crew laugh.

Jacobo looked back at Trigger who nodded his head as he let out a cloud of disease from the middle of his messy goatee.

"Let's do this," Jacob said, ignoring the joke and feeling the adrenaline rush through his heart, making his chest feel like armor.

The crew of teens started cursing and cheering. ChuChu's voice boomed over the rest. Lil' Crazy put his head down and his hands up. His extra-large white T-shirt hung loosely over his shoulders. He was bouncing up and down as he moved his feet to circle around Jacob. He stared down the kid in the plaid shirt and creased jeans.

"C'mon fools, before *la migra* comes and ships you all back to *Mexico*," Trigger shouted.

Jacob looked at Trigger for a second and then realized he was getting hit in the face by Crazy's fists. He moved back, but Crazy kept coming. He ducked to avoid the punches, but then he felt them on the back of his head. He reached out and grabbed Crazy's beige baggy Dickies. He pulled them toward him and Crazy fell on the ground.

Before Crazy knew it, he was the one getting socked in the face. Jacob was sitting on his chest and letting his temper go. He knocked off Crazy's hat as he swung from his shoulders down to the sides of Crazy's head. Crazy bucked up his stomach and made Jacob lose his balance for a second. He put one leg up and kept one knee down close to Crazy's side. His arms flung out and his hands opened to keep his balance.

Crazy's fist landed on his throat and Jacob lost his balance. Crazy got up. With a crazy look across his smooth face, he tackled the already falling Jacob. The crowd got closer and louder, but neither fighter could hear. They were really getting down and Trigger felt that he was right to choose Jacob.

While Jacob tried to catch his breath, his head was hit more times than a Spongebob piñata. He finally reached out and squeezed his thumb in Crazy's eye.

"AHHHH!" he screamed.

They both stood up and tried to take the other back down. They wrestled and swung at each other's body. They both felt tired and their punches were slow and weak. Crazy's back was against a fence and Jacob drew his head back and head-butted him in the eye. He put Crazy in a headlock and looked at Trigger. Crazy's body was limp, barely standing and Jacob felt like he had won. Trigger didn't look at him. Trigger looked at ChuChu and winked.

Jacob felt a hit like a brick at the back of his head. He let Crazy go so that he could protect his head. He didn't have time to think. His head hurt. His arms were tired. He was out of breath and it seemed like a hundred homies were hitting him at once. He covered his head with his arms. He kicked at one of them and his foot landed in their chest, but another one grabbed his leg and threw him down.

Feet were stomping at his ribs and head. When he moved his hand to cover his body he was hit in the face. When he tried to cover his face he felt a lightning bolt hit his ribs. Finally, it was over. He rolled over and thought he saw ChuChu dancing. Then he saw ChuChu flying.

God help me, he thought as he realized ChuChu *was* flying, and he was going to land on him.

Darkness.

Chapter 7

No Matter What

Jacob's eyes slowly opened and he realized he was in a car. He was in their car, riding in the backseat. Trigger was sitting next to him. Lil' Crazy was driving. Tiny was on his other side and ChuChu's fathead was blocking his view out of half of the windshield as he rode up front. He

didn't know it but the other two had gotten dropped off while he was still knocked out.

He felt betrayed. He felt beaten. He had given control of his destiny to Trigger, who was nothing but a thug that couldn't be trusted.

Is that what having a dad is like?

The music was so loud that no one could hear each other and his head was starting to hurt.

"What happened?" he groaned to Trigger.

"You wanted help *Homes*, so I helped you. You're part of the *clica* now, Mr. Clean. Your mother is still your mother, but we're your family *Homes*."

"You said, the beef would be squashed," he said to Trigger.

"It is *Homes*. This was the only way. You broke the homie's nose, Mr. Clean. If you didn't join they would have had all the rights to bust on you, foo'."

"I want to go home," he said to Trigger, wishing he would stop calling him Mr. Clean.

“You’ll get home, *ése*. Don’t worry. We just have one stop to make first. You’ll have fun this time, I swear.”

A little while later they arrived at their destination which was more like no destination. There were about a hundred cars filled with homies. Guys and girls swarmed together in a mass of headlights, clean paint-jobs, and hydraulics. Some cars in the cruise ship made of steel and fiberglass were dressed in tuxedos: stickers covering the entire door with blue flames, neon light kits that made them look like they were floating on a star, and windows tinted so black that it looked they were being driven by a shadow.

Other cars had put on a shiny new pair of hubcaps and a fresh white sticker for the back window; no matter what anyone was driving they were all part of something bigger. These teens got together on Sunday nights and looked for deserted intersections to hold huge tailgating parties. During these street shows, cars would compete to see who could do doughnuts for the longest time, leave the most tire marks on the asphalt, and other cool stunts.

Mr. Clean had never seen anything like it. The sea of lights made him feel like he was swimming in the sun. The *pisto* was kicking in too. Since he didn't drink very often it didn't take long for him to forget the events of the day to focus on the orgy of gasoline and rubber. He didn't realize the force of the 12" speakers in the back, until the crew of five made it to the moving party of bad *ranflas*.

His heart beat out of his shirt and he could feel the gel in his hair getting rocked loose from the power of the beat, violently entering his skull from the trunk.

"Hey, Clean. Relax and have a good time. You're *clica* now so what you do represents us. And if anyone asks you where you're from, you say *Último Trece*. Always represent the *barrio* no matter what."

Before Clean could reply, Trigger was gone. He had opened the door of the little four door and disappeared into the ocean of vibrating cars like a sand crab being dropped on a wet beach.

"Don't worry, *Homes*. We'll see that foo' again. He just went to find the big dogs,"

Tiny Boxer said and started barking, which caused the other two passengers to join in.

"Filthy animals!" Mr. Clean said, feeling a moment of brotherhood as he barked with them.

ChuChu lit a blunt and passed it to Lil' Crazy as they slowly followed the mass of cars headed in no particular direction. Crazy passed it to Jacob who didn't want to hit it, but did anyway. He thought how funny life was, a day ago he would have been ready to run for his life if he saw Lil' Crazy's crew, but now they were sharing their weed with him.

Mr. Clean had only smoked a few times with Lolieh. He was the ganja king and always had weed even if he complained about how brown and dirty it was. Clean never got too high or drunk. Lolieh would say it was in his blood and Clean thought the same must be true about him. He pictured Aztec warriors passing the peace pipe around and drinking beer from the skull of their enemies. Their high tolerance for alcohol and *motá* must have been passed down from generation to generation.

All of a sudden the cars stopped and everyone shut off their headlights and began to get out. Jacob was a bit slow and was the last one out of the car.

"C'mon slowpoke, we're gonna miss the show," Crazy said.

"I'm coming, man," Mr. Clean said, slightly intoxicated from the beer and *motá*.

He could hear the crowd marching down the street. It was late and he wasn't thinking about what his mother would say when he got home, but he was very excited to be out and doing things he had only seen in the movies.

The crowd finally stopped and he squeezed to the front to see what was happening. A cherry red Mustang was spinning on its front tires, while white smoke shot out from around the back tires. It stopped and pulled over to the side where a small group surrounded it to drool over the engine as the driver popped the hood. It was a 2005, beefy and sleek with a lot of blue wiring and chrome parts under the hood. Jacob preferred the 5.0 models of the 90's and didn't pay it much mind when it pulled over.

Next, was a Chevy. A bright yellow 1986 Camaro pulled into the center of the crowd and a black kid with a fifth of liquor hidden in a brown paper bag popped out from the passenger window. He got halfway out and sat on the door with his hands on top of the roof with his legs still inside the car. He tapped the brown bag on the hood twice and held on with the other hand. The car started to spin around and the crazy passenger filled his mouth with liquor and then sprayed fluid from his mouth, hitting some of the crowd in front with his whiskey. They all applauded and cheered, even Mr. Clean.

When that car was done another entered the center. This time it was a black Acura Legend with black rims and dark tinted windows.

A tinted ghost, Clean thought.

He had read *LowRider Magazine* and *Car and Driver* since he was ten. He recognized all of the cars there and could even identify the year and trim of most of them. Some of them had a lot of the original factory lettering and model names stripped off to make them look cleaner, and it worked. He

would have been proud to drive around in any of the cars that came to get down that night.

The Acura was still for a while until the crowd started booing. Then the back tires began spinning out of control. The tail began to spin, slowly covering the crowd of *pelons*, black gangsters, and Asian psychos in a mist of awful smelling tire smoke. They seemed to love it and made them go even more wild than before.

Mr. Clean began to cough and he looked around for any of the three fools he had come with, but he didn't see them anywhere. He was lost. How would he get home? What would he tell his mother? He walked away from the crowd to the sidewalk and bent over to try and catch his breath. He didn't feel like throwing up but he was dizzy. He put his hands on his knees and stared at the cement to try and get a grip on himself.

"Hey foo', you all right?" someone asked him.

"I'm good," he responded.

"You don't look good. Let me help you," the voice said. Then he began pulling

Mr. Clean over near an iron gate. Clean felt a hand go in his back pocket.

“Get off me, foo!” Mr. Clean yelled and pushed the *ése* away. He was a cholo wearing huge Dickies and a polo shirt with large stripes.

“Where you from, *ése*?” the *cholo* asked as he lowered his sunglasses to show the stripes shaved into his eyebrow and the angry stare penetrating Mr. Clean’s eyes.

He remembered what Trigger said, “This *Último*, foo’,” he said, feeling himself grow a foot taller.

“U 13 killer, *Homes*,” the cholo said, and reached into his pocket.

Mr. Clean knew what that meant, stop the hand from coming out. He grabbed his arm from the elbow and held it in the pocket. With his other hand he punched the *cholo* so hard that he broke his sunglasses. He kept punching and before he knew it the *cholo* was on the ground.

Clean pulled the *cholo*’s hand out of his pocket. He was holding an unfolded pocketknife. Next, he was falling and he didn’t know why. His head hit the iron gate of the house he was standing in front

of. A hand grabbed his hair and bashed his face into the gate again. Then it let go.

He swung wildly behind him, but didn't hit anything. Then he focused his eyes and saw ChuChu running with the guy who must have hit him. He must have charged him and picked him up in mid-run Mr. Clean thought. Then the guy got smashed into the 'hood of a Scion TC. Tiny was boxing with two *vatos*, but that didn't last as Lil' Crazy came from behind and kicked one of them in the *papitas* so hard that his baggy pants lifted off the ground. He dropped instantly.

Tiny knocked the other one out and then one that ran at him out of nowhere. The crowd saw what was happening and began to cheer them on, forgetting about the illegal car show behind them. Someone came to grab Lil' Crazy and Mr. Clean ran over to wrap his arm around his throat. He let go of Crazy and tried to get Clean's arm off of his neck. While he struggled, Crazy hit him five times in the stomach.

"Let him go, foo'. C'mon," Crazy said.

He grabbed Clean and dove into the crowd. He whistled for the others and they

ran to their car. When inside, Lil' Crazy started the engine and drove over a median to race down the street and away from the mob of bystanders.

Mr. Clean looked at Crazy's hand and saw blood glistening under the light from the streetlamps that he was racing under.

Chapter 8

Fun

Lil' Crazy saw him looking at his hand and took it off of the wheel. He wiped it on the seat and then turned up the music. It was an old Eazy-E song. The short dull rhymes gave Jacob plenty of time to think about what happened.

It made him think of his *Tío* that he tried to stab five years ago in a fit of rage. What would the police have thought when they saw his small hand covered in blood back then? Now the cops would definitely throw the four of them down on the ground without a second thought and beat

them with their clubs. The nurses in juvie would find bruises and broken bones.

If he hadn't claimed his 'hood he was sure that the outcome would have been the same. The *cholo* would have wanted to shank him. But he had claimed his 'hood and they all came from the shadows to help him.

It wasn't all bad, but he definitely missed his carefree days of hanging out with Lolieh. He decided that being in this gang was a mistake. The boys here were heartless, but he did admire their brotherhood. He admired the way they all stepped in and put their lives on the line to help the other, even him. Crazy chose his friends well.

They finally got back to Huntington Park. They were on a street not far from any of their pads. Tiny told him to get out and he did. The other two followed and they all started walking away from the car toward Miles.

"You know, it wasn't our idea to put you on the 'hood today, Mr. Clean," Crazy said to Jacob as Tiny and ChuChu walked behind them.

"It wasn't?" Clean asked.

"Nah, I just wanted to smoke you. Trigger said that you were a down ass foo'. He said he wanted you to roll with us. He even gave us some forties and *motá* to smoke before we got to the alley."

Clean paused for a second, letting it all sink in. Even Lil' Crazy was just a puppet.

"Thanks for having my back anyway. It was fun."

"It was fun? *Éste guey*, you don't look crazy foo', but you're *loco*."

Chapter 9

Last Weekend

Seeing his best friend for the first time in two weeks was like seeing the outside world after being locked in jail for years. He was getting off of the bus and Lolieh was walking toward the bus stop to meet him. He was wearing baggy black jeans and a white shirt. His hair was in two braids, each appearing from under his hat

and stretching down his back, passing his shoulders.

He wasn't a banger. He was just a down foo' like Jacob used to be before he became Mr. Clean.

"Damn, foo'. It's good to see you, man."

"You too J," Lolieh replied and Jacob thought how good it was *not* to be called Mr. Clean.

"You hungry man?"

"I could eat," Lolieh said smiling, happy to see his friend.

"I've been thinking of Roscoe's Chicken since I left."

"Okay," Lolieh replied.

"How's your mom?" Jacob asked.

"Cool."

"School?"

"Same," Lolieh said.

"Yeah?" Jacob said, wishing anything was the same in his life.

"You?" Lolieh asked.

"Man, where do I begin?"

Lolieh could tell he was in for a good story. Jacob always told his tales so vividly. He talked with his hands and always got so excited. Lolieh wouldn't change anything

about himself. He was perfectly content with who he was and where he was, almost to a fault. He did admire the clear way that Jacob talked and he sometimes wondered what his life would be like if he had been able to express himself more clearly.

Even on the phone there was something peeking from behind the short conversation of where and when to meet up. Neither of them liked talking on the phone, unless they were talking to a chick. Then they could stay on the phone for hours. To each other the conversation usually ended in one of them saying they couldn't hang out or that they could hang out and after locations and times were set the conversation was over.

All that needed to be said would be said in person, man to man. The two walked and Jacob told the whole story to the one 'foo' he could be perfectly honest with. Lolieh listened with a smile as Jacob told him how he fought the three gang members in the bathroom and lost, but saved face when he cracked the big one with the metal napkin holder. He laughed, knowing the rage that could overtake Jacob

and because the thought of bleeding bullies was funny to him.

"You should have seen that foo'. He didn't know what hit him."

"Damn."

"Yeah, the security guard was loving it too. He said he was waiting for someone to stand up to those fools for years. I wasn't on a mission, but you know how I get. I ain't no punk, Lo."

"Nah, you not," Lolieh replied honestly and with pride at the fact that his best friend was tough but at the same time goodhearted. There was some connection between Jacob's righteousness and the evil that made him hate his life in Jamaica.

Lolieh wore Jamaica shirts and had Jamaica trinkets all over his house, though he didn't really want to go back there at all. It is the romantic idea of the place where people are born that never leaves them. The ugly reality that drove them from their country doesn't seem as real once they are in the fast food and supermarket spattered streets of American cities. Mexicans, Jamaicans, it's true for all immigrants.

Jacob went on.

“After school, this mean-ass-looking gangsta who lives in my new building was like, all trying to talk to me. He was saying that he wanted to help me and that those fools would be trying to kill me, for sure. I was like, damn. What could I do? I didn’t make it this far without thinking a little bit. I figured, what’s the worst that could happen, right?”

“Right,” Lolieh said, being drawn in and wanting Jacob to go on.

“So, I just have to fight a fair one with the main foo', the Jose guy, whose gang name is Lil' Crazy. What a stupid name? He's not *really* crazy he's just a little crazy.”

Lolieh laughs in agreement. He noticed that Jacob started saying, "foo' " a lot.

“What’s yo’ name?” Lolieh asked.

“Mr. Clean.”

“Like the bald dude from the soap?”

“Yeah,” Jacob said and put his head down.

Lolieh laughed even harder.

“I know it’s stupid too. I’m the only guy that’s not bald.” Jacob said and he started laughing too.

“So, anyway, I hadn’t seen the mean gangsta foo’ for days. His name is Trigger. Then Saturday he just shows up at my door, saying that the fight was in a few hours. I’m making my wannabe chocolate pebbles and I’m like, that sucks.”

The waitress came with their food and they began eating. Jacob took a quick bite of everything on his plate and continued the story while chewing his food. Lolieh took a few huge bites and chewed up his mouthful of chicken and waffles, while he listened.

“So, whatever, we get to the alley and start fighting. We’ve learned a lot of moves, fighting chumps ever since that first bus ride together and this guy was a pretty good match for me. We messed each other up real good. You could see my face is still kinda jacked-up from it. Well ...” Jacob paused, trying to find the right words to tell what happened next.

It is always hard for a man to admit he was defeated or outsmarted. It’s worse for a teenage boy. Most will lie or leave out the truth and let it eat them alive until they are running from something they can’t even

remember. Besides, he had never lied to Lolieh. Real homies don't lie to each other.

"They jumped me, man. They jumped the hell out of me and when I woke up it was nighttime. I was in a car and Trigger was sitting right next to me smiling and saying how I had got put on their gang and that it was the only way to save my life. I didn't know if he was lying or not but it didn't feel right. I felt like an idiot. It turns out Trigger had planned the whole thing. I guess he's not so bad, Lil' Crazy *was* gonna wet me."

He stopped talking and stared at the ice cubes floating in his water. Lolieh was quiet. This was serious. For once, Jacob was quiet.

"Damn, man," Lolieh said.

It was all he could say and it was all he needed to say. He was angry and if Jacob would have asked for his help, Lolieh would have done anything he could to help him. Even kill. Jacob would never ask for anyone's help especially Lolieh, and especially if it meant putting him in danger.

"Then they said we were going somewhere and I didn't know if I was

gonna die or do a drive-by or what." Jacob looked out of the window and he smiled.

"We went to a bad-ass car show, foo'. Like in the movies where guys block up the streets and cars are doing doughnuts and all types of craziness is going on. There was an old Camaro and a Mustang. Oh, I forgot we were getting faded in the car and the smoke from the cars was making me feel sick foo'. I had lost the Lil' Crazy guy and the others in the crowd then I felt some chump going in my pockets. We had some words and he reached into his pocket and I grabbed his hand. I didn't want to get shot or stabbed. We were fighting and I was winning and then I got jumped again."

"Man, that's a terrible weekend J," Lolieh said, before he started laughing.

"You're telling me," Jacob said, before he started laughing.

And that is just what Jacob needed. To see his best friend smile so that he could see that things weren't as bad as he thought.

Life is a comedy and a tragedy, he thought.

He would just have to take the good with the bad and count his blessings everyday.

“So are you gonna claim their 'hood?” Lolieh asked. It was a tough question.

“I guess. Trigger said that that was the first rule. I mean, maybe not always, but when I’m around there I have to, right?”

“I guess,” Lolieh said, realizing how serious things were. The two would laugh at bangers that died over claiming a street that they didn’t even own.

“It’ll only be until I graduate then I’ll go away to college and become a famous car designer or a pilot and that’ll be it. It’ll be over.”

As he said those words he could taste a lie. Blood in, blood out is what they say, isn’t it? Lolieh knew it too and didn’t hold it against him. It was Jacob’s best plan to believe what he said and Lolieh knew that his friend thought he was telling the truth.

This seemed like a good time to take a leak. Lolieh got up and walked to the bathroom without saying a word. He didn’t have to. Jacob looked around at all the

black faces eating at Roscoe's. Some were busy talking and didn't even care that he was there. Some were looking at him like he didn't belong. The truth was he didn't belong there or anywhere. He was always an outsider, around blacks, around Mexicans, and definitely around white people.

Even his father didn't want him.

Chapter 10

Respect

Jacob went into his room after church. His mom didn't work Sunday and he had figured out that Trigger only came around when his mother was at work. He decided to kick back with his mom and spend the day as a son, not as a gangster.

He walked out of his room and Jimmy Hendrix was playing.

*There must be some kind of way out of here
Said the Joker to the Thief.*

Jacob thought that Jimmy was right. There must be a way out, but how?

He watched TV with his mom. He hardly got to see her during the week and their Sunday together was nice. It made him feel like he was eight-years-old again just eating popcorn and watching movies on the couch while he and his mom laughed at the same parts.

She had noticed some changes in her Jacobito since they had moved. He was nervous in their new building and he was always looking out of the window. He was going to sleep later and he even changed how he dressed. The weekend before, when he came home so late and beat up, was the real turning point.

She began to wish they hadn't moved at all. She wished that Jacob had a dad that he could look up to. She even wished she had taught him Spanish. She missed her brother too. She thought back to that night that Jacob scared her with his rage. A tear began to form in her eyes, but she didn't want to ruin her day with her son.

The next day he went to school like he always did. He started noticing things like the way people looked at him and treated him, even his *maestros*.

If an assignment was due and he didn't do it they didn't ask him why or threaten to call his mother. They would just walk passed with their hand out giving him the opportunity to turn it in, but expecting him not to. He didn't mind. He knew he must look so hopeless to them, but they didn't know he was smart. They didn't know his dreams and plans for the future. They only saw Mr. Clean.

He would let them think what they wanted as he did what he had to. He still turned in most of his assignments and he stayed quiet in class being careful not to disrespect his teachers. His new friends never did any work and hardly even showed up to school at all. He was still an individual even though he was part of something bigger.

Even Waterton changed. He started ignoring Mr. Clean when he would say 'hi' to him. He didn't even want to look at Mr. Clean.

It was fourth period. The last class before lunch was History. The teacher had gotten off-topic and began explaining to the class the truth about the Mexican-American war. He was from El Salvador but he always studied, especially about history. He wanted to share something beneficial to his student's identity and self-concept. He wanted to do it even though it wasn't something that would show up on the big state tests.

"The Spanish, people from Spain, were like the English that came to what is now the United States of America. The Spaniards conquered the Aztecs and all native people of Central and South America. They used guns at first, but later they attacked their faith.

"They told them that their gods were false and there was only one true God, Jesus Christ. They told them that they would be saved from any wrongdoing that they did if they would just become Christians. All they had to do was join a mission where they would learn all the details about their new religion."

“So that’s good right. The Spanish came to save their souls?” a Christian boy sitting in the front row asked.

“Yeah right, foo’, they just wanted slaves,” a girl with her eyebrows painted on to her forehead said.

“Well, this is something that is up to your own opinions. The Spaniards might have just wanted slaves but the priests in the missions just wanted to save the souls of the *savage* Indians who really were already quite civilized.”

“They weren’t like scalping each other and doing crazy dances all the time?” Mr. Clean asked curiously.

He had always pictured these dark-haired-painted-maniacs riding horses and keeping a bag of scalps in their backpacks as they searched for more scalps.

“Well, they were, but in a very organized way. See, they were mostly hunter-gatherers. They learned to be farmers from the Europeans when they first landed on Plymouth Rock. Farmers have to rotate crops. They can’t stay and plant in the same place forever or have their animals graze in the same place so they

move. The Native Americans had strict boundaries drawn up for each tribe. The main reason for scalping or any war was other tribes or renegades not respecting these boundaries."

"Like *barrios*, mister?"

"Exactly," Mr. Faltasueno said.

Mr. Clean thought that he used to be a renegade and now he had clearly chosen a territory, but really a territory had chosen him. He didn't know the boundaries and maybe one day, without warning he would be scalped.

"Getting back to what I was saying, the missions ... The missions converted the Native Americans to believe in Jesus Christ. How do you think the Native Americans felt when they were told that they couldn't sleep in the same bed as their wives?"

"Damn, mister, not even with your own wife? That's messed up. Nah. I wouldn't have that," a boy called out.

"Exactly. So who helped the fathers keep control? Well, the Spanish had camps of soldiers set out in what they called *presidios*. The *presidios* were set high on a hill where the soldiers could see the

missions and make sure everything was okay.

“Don’t get me wrong. The Native Americans were dying at a rapid rate from the diseases the Spaniards brought over. And the Spaniards *were* taking over the land so there wasn’t much farming left for the Native Americans. Not to mention the violent deaths that many met at resisting. You tell me who would win, a gang with knives or a gang with spears.”

The class laughed as he threw an invisible spear and then got blasted full of holes.

“Let’s end on that note. Remember it is your time to stand up for your rights and your freedom. I know a lot of you are thinking about walking out tomorrow. Make sure that if you do, it’s for the right reasons, not just because you want to miss class.”

Some kids laughed and gave each other high fives. The walkout was to protest unjust immigration bills aimed at Latino immigrants. Jacob didn’t hear any of it. He was too busy thinking of where he fit into the mission scenario.

Mr. Clean didn't think of himself as a renegade anymore. He felt like a Native American. He had been fooled into thinking that he would be saved. Then all of a sudden he was being forced to follow these rules that he didn't really believe in. Sure the missions kept the Native Americans alive, but at what cost? Freedom.

He wasn't free anymore. He had to eat lunch where they ate lunch. He had to go where they went after school. None of this bothered him until Mr. Faltasueno's story. And now he waited to listen to find out what actually did happen to the Native Americans that joined the missions so that he could find out what would happen to him.

The bell rang, ending fourth period and beginning lunch.

"We'll finish this strange but true tale at the beginning of class tomorrow," Mr. Faltasueno said to a class already half empty.

"What happened mister?"

"Well, you'll just have to wait until tomorrow to find out," he replied to Mr. Clean.

"Mr. F can I do an essay about how what you were talking about relates to modern day Chicanos?" Melody asked her teacher.

"Sure Melody, but can it wait until tomorrow when I finish my lecture?"

"Why? I can just find out how it ends by doing some research on the internet," she said and then strolled out of class.

"Hey Mel, why are trying to do extra-credit? You know you have an A already," Mr. Clean said as he chased her out of class.

"Mr. F is like the only teacher that really cares about us. Did you hear what he was saying about the immigration rally downtown?"

"No. I didn't start paying attention until he got to the scalpings," Jacob said and then laughed.

"Not funny. What happened to you, Jacobo? You changed a lot these last two weeks."

"Like how?" Jacob knew but he wanted to hear it so that he would know that she pays attention to him.

"Like how you dress and act and your creepy friends. I heard you ripped a door off of one of the stalls in the bathroom and broke one of their noses with it. Now what, you're a *cholo*?"

"Ha. That's funny. Don't believe everything you hear Mel. A smart girl like you should know that."

She looked hurt. He didn't mean anything by it. He was just trying to save face, to not be so embarrassed by what she said.

"Well, smart and pretty," he said.

She was very pretty and Clean had a lot of respect for her. She mostly hung around the nerds, but she had a beauty mark on her cheek that was sexy, and the way her hair was always pulled back made her eyes sparkle like chrome spinners. Her nose was thin, like the rest of her, and she never wore any make-up. She wasn't trying to be older or sexier than she really was. She knew whom she was and where she was

going in life and nothing could make her be untrue to herself.

That was her most attractive quality of all.

"Shut up. You shouldn't say things that aren't true. A boy who used to be smart like you should know that," she said, getting him back.

"Oh, so now I'm dumb, huh? You calling me dumb?" Clean said, laughing and pointing to himself with his thumbs and making a stupid face.

"I didn't say that, you did," Melody said, trying not to laugh.

"Who got a higher score on the last math test?"

"Who has a better grade in Mr. F's class?" Melody replied.

"That's because you're in love with him," Jacob said, making kissie-faces.

"Stop. I don't love him."

"Mr. F, can I write an essay about how much I love you?" Jacob said, trying not to laugh, but busting up anyway.

Melody looked at him seriously. She didn't see Mr. Clean. She saw Jacobo.

"That's the Jacob I haven't seen in weeks. Where did he go?"

She touched his hand. He felt a spark shoot through his heart.

Jacob stopped and looked into her eyes. She was concerned and for the first time he realized that he might love her.

"Mel, c'mon we're gonna be last in the lunch line."

Her friends swept her away and Jacob was left standing there wondering what would happen to the Native Americans.

Chapter 11

Back Pocket

Mr. Clean had tried to catch up with Melody after school but she wasn't where she normally was. He decided to ask for her number tomorrow so that they could talk and get to know each other, away from the clicks and little groups of high school. He wanted a place where she

wouldn't be a nerd and he wouldn't be a banger.

After his mother left for work Lil' Crazy showed up at his pad. It was already dark. He guessed that Trigger told him where he lived.

"Clean! Hey Sr. Limpiecito let me in, foo'."

"What's up Crazy?" Jacob said. Crazy folded a map printed from the internet and put it into his back pocket.

"Damn! Trigger was right; your pad is clean. Where were you at lunch and after school, *Homes?*"

"Just chilling. I was trying to talk to Melody, that smart chick. You know her?"

"Foo', she don't want you. I heard she got a boyfriend in college and she doing Mr. F after school."

"No way. Mr. F wouldn't do that."

"Maybe not, but she still ain't gonna give no *cholo* play, foo'. Look at yourself. You're a *locote* now, foo'," Crazy said as he pointed at the mirror and started throwing up his set at his and Mr. Clean's images reflected in the glass.

He pulled out a small black gat and placed it in Clean's hand then he said, "Lil' Crazy and Mr. Clean take over the *barrio*, *Homes*."

"Where'd you get this, foo'?" Mr. Clean asked excitedly as he quickly put his hand on the trigger and pointed it at the mirror.

"Kick back foo', the real question is where are we going to break it in?" Crazy said with a spark in his eye.

Jacob had a pretty bad temper and he did always want to kill someone deep down inside, mostly his father. The reality began to set in about what that really meant. He held the strap and looked at the reflection of Lil' Crazy and his partner Mr. Clean in the mirror of his mother's living room.

"Damn, foo'. Don't tell me you're not down. I know you thought about capping a foo' before," Crazy said as he took the gun from Mr. Clean who was letting his hand drop to his side slowly.

"You just pull the slide back and let them have it with the *veinte cinco*. Bam, Bam, Bam. Bam foo's, what?" Lil' Crazy

said as he shot imaginary enemies all over Mr. Clean's apartment.

Mr. Clean laughed and then Lil' Crazy pulled out a fifth of Jose Cuervo and sat on the couch like a man who had just gotten off from a hard day's work. Lil' Crazy loved being a gangster. Breaking in and testing the new *vatos* was natural to him. It was the one thing he was really good at, bangin'.

"You got some shot glasses, *ése?*" he asked Clean as he pushed the gun under the couch. Clean wondered why he didn't just tuck it back into the waist of his pants, but then thought that it might be uncomfortable to sit with.

"Yeah, let me get 'em."

Jacob opened the kitchen cabinet where the glasses were and pulled out two shot glasses that his mother had kept from their trips to Mexico. He got a page from Lolieh with the code that meant he had some girls. He was probably the only kid in the world that still had a pager. He ignored the page since Lil' Crazy was already at his pad.

The two began to drink and get faded. After a few shots it was like Lil' Crazy and

Mr. Clean were real homies. After their fight in the alley everyone had respect for him. It was the best fight any of them had ever seen. They both showed their skill and they both gained more respect after that day. There were times that Lil' Crazy would say a joke that only Mr. Clean understood. Clean wondered what his little click was like before. Was Lil' Crazy just crazy out of boredom from hanging around two *burros* all day?

They finished the bottle and went outside so that Lil' Crazy could smoke a cigarette.

"You want one?" he asked his friend.

Mr. Clean thought about what Trigger had told him and he said, "Nah, I'm good."

"You'll drink some straight up tequila like a OG, but you won't have a little *cigarillo*? I don't get you, *Homes*," Lil' Crazy said with a little slur.

"I don't get myself sometimes," Mr. Clean said and the two laughed as Crazy lit up.

"Let's take a walk," Lil' Crazy said.

Clean followed him and saw him looking at the cars on his block, between puffs.

"That Mustang on the corner is clean, foo'," he said to Crazy.

"Which one?"

"It has dual exhaust, a scoop cut into the hood, full tints, and I don't even want to think about what's under the hood. He has to have Cold Air Intake and a souped-up fuel injection system," Jacob said.

Before he knew it, Lil'Crazy had busted out the back window with the butt of his gun and opened the door. He was under the steering wheel. Then he heard that sweet engine start up. He was amazed. It was his favorite car on the block, a true 5.0 hooked up all around. *A firme ranfla.*

"Get that stupid look off your face and get in," Crazy said.

Chapter 12

Crazy Tonight

The more Jacob drank, the more he became Mr. Clean, the hard-drinking street fighter he had a reputation for being around his new neighborhood. He didn't look like a typical *cholo*. He *had* bought some bigger clothes, but he didn't feel comfortable in them and there was no way he was going to shave the top of his curly fade to be a true *pelon*.

The two drove to a destination only Lil' Crazy knew for sure. Mr. Clean knew the gun was on Lil' Crazy and that it was loaded. The idea of shooting it began to make *him* crazy. He thought of his *Tío* and the last time he cried. If he had a gun no one would have been able to stop him. He would have shot through the bathroom door and killed *Tío*. He was glad he wasn't strapped that night; he loved his *Tío*. He thought about *Tío* going to jail the next week. He never did get to see him to tell him that he still loved him. *Tío* was walking home from a bar and shanked a black foo' that jumped him.

Mr. Clean felt responsible, like maybe if he didn't get all *loco* and try to

stab him *Tío* would have been at his house drinking beers that night and not at some bar. Maybe if *Tío* had a gun he would have killed the black foo' and gotten life instead of 3 to 9. Maybe if Clean had a gun he wouldn't even need to be in this gang. Who would he need protection from when he had a clip full of flying devils waiting to kill for him?

"Where are we going, foo'?" Mr. Clean asked.

"To hell if we don't pray," Lil' Crazy answered.

"Ha. No, really?"

"We're going to a skating rink. We're gonna go meet some *jainas*. They like pretty boys like you, Clean."

"Which one?"

"World on Wheels," Lil' Crazy replied.

"Cool, let me call my homie and see if he can meet us. He had some girls too," Mr. Clean said.

"*Chalé tamale*," Crazy said.

"C'mon this foo' is cool," Clean said because he'd rather hang out with Lolieh than Lil' Crazy any day.

“What? One of your *mayate* homies from the Westside? It’s just Chicanos tonight, *Homes*,” Lil’ Crazy said with anger under his breath.

Jacob realized that he didn’t want to call Lolieh. He didn’t want him to have to deal with this *racista* he was driving with. It didn’t matter to Lil’ Crazy how many girls Lolieh had, he just didn’t want to be around him because he was black. Jacob always thought that racism was so stupid, but everywhere he went there were racist people.

How could anyone hate someone that they didn’t know? It made him angry. Then he thought about how much he hated his father and the fact that he didn’t know him at all. This was different. This was the type of stupidity that made blacks slaves and kept the Native Americans in missions. What did happen to the Indians?

The rest of the ride they were quiet as they sipped their forties. They were both feeling good and drunk when they got to the skating rink. They tossed their bottles outside of the window as they crept into the lot.

They got lucky and pulled into a spot right in front as another car was leaving. The place was packed. There were cars everywhere and the car that Mr. Clean showed up in was one of the baddest. He noticed that Lil' Crazy didn't lock the doors. Made sense, it wasn't like he had the keys. He checked himself out in the mirror before he got out and then brushed his shirt with his hand to make sure there weren't any *pelusas* on it.

People looked at them as they got out. It was respect like the guys at the car show had from the crowd. He could hear people whisper about the sound it made and the color. They strolled to the front door and soon they were inside.

"Do you see the girls?" Mr. Clean asked his partner for the night.

"Calmate guey, they'll be here."

"Let's get some fries or something I'm starving," Mr. Clean said as he stepped passed Lil' Crazy and towards the snack bar. He got in line and waited as he stared at the names of all of the foods he wished he could eat at once. He stuffed the whole pile of chili-cheese fries, nachos, and

hamburgers in his mouth until his cheeks looked like they were holding two basketballs.

"I'm gonna go take a leak foo'," Lil' Crazy said.

"Okay," Clean said back to him.

Mr. Clean felt better now. He could relax. He never did like Lil' Crazy but sometimes he could forget that. He noticed some cute black girls checking him out from a few feet away. They were wearing short shorts and clean white Vans that made their black skin look darker than it was. Their legs looked smooth and soft and he could picture his hand touching them. He looked up at their faces and saw them looking at him look at them. Then he looked away a little embarrassed and saw them laugh at him, but they still kept looking.

He thought he heard a loud noise come from the restroom, but he couldn't really hear much over the loud music. He touched the crease on his pants to make sure it was still straight. He looked over at the bathroom and saw a black foo' with dreads run out, looking scared. Clean

decided to go see what Lil' Crazy had done now so he left the line and walked over to the bathroom.

He opened the door slowly and saw Lil' Crazy swinging like crazy as a black foo' choked him. Crazy was up on the sink with his head against a broken mirror. Blood was flowing down his neck. The black foo' had his back to Mr. Clean. He had two braids coming down the side of his head from under his hat.

"Lo?" Mr. Clean said.

Lolieh turned around.

"J? What the hell you doing here?"

Mr. Clean couldn't answer. He saw Crazy reaching for his gun that was tucked into his sock.

"He's strapped Lo! Look out!"

But it was too late. Crazy had the gun out and Lolieh jumped off of him in fear. Lolieh remembered what bullets could do to a human face.

"You know this *mayate*, Mr. Clean? Is this the foo' you were gonna call?"

Lolieh stood by Mr. Clean as Lil' Crazy pointed the gun at both of them.

"Answer me, *Homes!*" Crazy screamed.

"Yeah, I know him."

"I guess it's time to see if you're really down for the *barrio, ése*. Who should I shoot first: you for not having my back or him for being a big dumb *negro*?"

They were both quiet. They didn't know what the right answer was. Neither wanted to die, but Crazy was ready for a one-eighty-seven.

"*Dígame!*"

Mr. Clean looked at Lolieh. His best friend was frightened and angry. He didn't want either of them to die. Crazy was sweating. He wanted to shoot so badly. Finally, Mr. Clean spoke.

"Me," he said and he closed his eyes just before a tear escaped. Mr. Clean waited for the shot.

The door swung open so fast that everybody jumped. Crazy let off three shots and hit the two security guards that had busted in. Lolieh tackled him to the ground. Mr. Clean grabbed the gun and pointed the barrel up.

"I'll kill you fools. *Último* gangster right here, *Homes!*" Lil' Crazy screamed as he fought them.

He tried to get free, but Lolieh was too heavy and Mr. Clean had both hands on the gun.

Lil' Crazy's head was at the bottom of a urinal. Mr. Clean started to get control of the gun and pointed it at Lil' Crazy.

"Ey, foo'. You can't do this. We're from the same *clica*, Mr. Clean," Lil' Crazy said.

"My name is Jacob."

Crazy fought more and then the gun went off. His eyes were wide open and the two best friends felt that he wasn't fighting anymore. Blood was coming out of his head and his face was leaking it from a black mushy hole in his cheek. They got off of him. Lolieh couldn't move. He just stared. Jacob ran to a toilet and threw up all the beer he had drunk. He flushed and then walked over to Crazy. He wiped off the barrel of the gun like he saw them do in the movies.

"C'mon, Lo," Jacob said.

He grabbed his friend's shirt and pulled him towards the door. Lolieh snapped out of it. The rink was going crazy. There was no security in sight. They don't get paid enough to die. People were running and

pushing towards the exits. Some thugs were looting the snack bar and tipping over the snack machines. The two friends joined the mob and began pushing their way out. Jacob saw a girl being trampled, but what could he do?

Hands pushed them from behind into the people in front of them. They were almost outside. It had all happened in a matter of minutes: the shots, Lil' Crazy's face exploding, Jacob throwing up. There were still people inside fighting and looting. They heard a siren far away.

"This way, Lo."

They ran to the Mustang that was parked close by and jumped in. Jacob reached under the wheel and felt for whatever Crazy did to start the car but he didn't know what he was doing.

"Hey! Hey!" Lolieh shouted as he opened the passenger door and got out.

The girls he had met were stuck in a line of cars trying to leave.

"C'mon J. I know dem."

Jacob followed him to the car.

"Can we ride wit' ya'll? Our car won't start." Lolieh asked the two girls.

The girls whispered for a second to each other. Jacob looked in the car. It was the two chicks that were checking him out from the line, before this whole thing started. They realized it too when they looked at him.

The driver said, "Hurry up and get in. Things are going crazy tonight."

Chapter 13

One Shot

The girls drove Lolieh home first because he was the closest. Then they took the long drive across town to Jacob's. He spent the whole time making small-talk with the girls, but mostly he thought of what to tell Trigger. Trigger must have known that Crazy came to get him. He seemed to know everything that happened in his building.

He got the passenger's phone number before he left and promised to buy them

both lunch next weekend for driving him all the way to Huntington Park.

He was still shook-up. They all were. The driver gave him a cigarette and said, "Here, J. This'll calm you down. See you next week."

Jacob said, "Thanks again. Later."

He walked up the steps to his apartment. His mother wasn't home and as he passed Trigger's house, he tried to light the cigarette. The door quickly opened and a hand grabbed Jacob by the shirt.

"What the hell did I tell you about those things?"

Jacob was too shocked to answer. Trigger opened the door all the way and with his other hand he took the cigarette and matches from Jacob and lit the cigarette himself.

Jacob grabbed his arm, but couldn't move it.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Trigger said.

"Get your hands off of me. You're not my dad," Jacob said.

Trigger had lit the cigarette and dropped the matches. He grabbed Jacob by both hands and spun him against the wall.

“Ése, you better understand how this works. *Hago lo que quiero cuando quiero* and you can't do nothin' to change that now. You respect me like I was your daddy or I'll beat you like I beat my *jaina*. Maybe I should get with your mom, Homes. Then you'll have to call me 'Daddy'. I could give her a massage after a long day at work. Make sure you knock first if the bedroom door is locked, *Homes*.”

The thought of Trigger being with his mom made Jacob sick to his stomach. Jacob was angry but he was learning that giving into his temper wasn't always the best thing. He realized then that his mother was in danger too. Their home wasn't safe for her anymore. What had he done by letting this monster into their lives? He had to do something tonight. He had one shot.

Jacob listened and heard Trigger's woman and her son crying inside. He smelt the liquor on Trigger's breath. It was horrible and it came from his goatee and came at him in waves. He even noticed it

spilled on his wife-beater along with some blood.

Jacob stopped fighting. He turned his head and coughed from the smoke spraying out of the sides of Trigger's teeth as the cigarette hung limp in the center of his mouth. Trigger let him go.

"Have you seen Crazy tonight? He was supposed to call me."

"Yeah."

"Did you guys do what I asked?"

"What did you ask us to do?"

"Did you do it or not?" Trigger said getting angry again.

"All we did was drink some Tequila. Then he left me in West L.A. I went inside a liquor store to buy some forties and when I came out he was gone. I had to call one of my homeboys to come get me. Is that what you asked him to do; leave me in a Crip neighborhood by myself?" Jacob answered, acting mad.

Trigger slapped him for disrespecting him and then said, "Ey, watch how you talk to me, *chavala*. You're only alive because I say you can live."

He wanted to cry. He felt trapped and helpless. If only he did have a father; a man who would stand up for the young boy's innocence, someone who could protect him, but he didn't. He had to get out on his own, not just for him but for his mother too.

"You bastard, I called the cops. You're not going to hit me or my son ever again. You're nothing. I hate you," his woman yelled from inside the apartment.

Trigger looked into his pad and then at Jacob and said, "I got home twenty minutes ago and she picked a fight with me. If she comes out, tell her when I get back I'm gonna kick her ass again for calling the *puercos* on me."

Trigger was bleeding from the back of his head and he had claw marks on his neck.

Trigger walked down the steps calmly. Jacob watched him walk away from the building. The door to his pad was still open and Jacob saw her peek out from the bathroom with the phone in her hand.

Jacob put his head in the door and whispered to her, "He's coming back up and he looks mad."

She ducked back in the bathroom and he could hear her sobbing.

Trigger was gone. He didn't want any part of the cops or a domestic violence charge that would put him away for a few more years. He would go to his sancha's pad and come back when she loved him again.

Jacob opened his door quickly. Everything was as he left it. The shot glasses still on the carpet near the couch and the empty bottle of Cuervo next to them. He moved the couch and saw the small gun still there. He quickly ran to the kitchen and got a napkin. He wiped it off like he had seen people do in the movies a thousand times. He grabbed the gun by the barrel and peeked outside of his door. He saw Trigger's door still open and no sign of the cops or Trigger anywhere.

His heart was racing, but he moved stealthily across the catwalk and looked into Trigger's apartment. The phone cord led into the bathroom. Jacob tiptoed in and

put the gun on top of the keyboard next to the computer in the living room.

He ran back out, being careful not to touch anything. He left the door slightly open and darted back into his own apartment where he turned off the lights and listened closely, lying down near the window.

Before long the cops arrived.

"Ma'am! This is the police. We got a call of a domestic disturbance. Your door is open, Ma'am. We are coming in. I repeat, this is the police."

"I'm in here, officer."

Jacob could hear her come out of the bathroom to meet the cops. He moved and listened through the wall that the two apartments shared.

"Is this your apartment?" the cop asked her.

"Yes, it's in my name and I don't want him coming back here."

"Ma'am, is this your firearm?"

"No! I've never seen that before in my life."

"Does it belong to your boyfriend?"

"I don't know. It's not mine."

"Has anyone been in your apartment besides you and your boyfriend tonight?"

"No."

"Well, if it's not his then we have to charge you with possession of a firearm since the apartment is in your name."

"You're not charging me with that. That has to be his gun. He always has some around. I'm sick of it. He has a grenade in the top of the closet in a shoebox. He's gonna kill me if he finds out I called."

She started crying again.

"Calm down, ma'am. Do you want to press charges?"

"Yeah, I have to, you know? For my boy."

"You're a smart woman. First, we're going to need to take your statement and some pictures of your face."

"Okay. Just keep him away from me."

She told them everything and Jacob listened from his apartment nervously. She said he had been out all night and that he came home smelling like liquor and

another woman. He beat her when she got angry at his lies.

“He hit me in front of my son, officer! In front of my son! When my boy started crying he slapped him too. I hit him in the back of the head with a candlestick and then he really let me have it,” she said.

She ran into the bathroom and before she went in the gun wasn't there. He must have put the gun there when she was in the bathroom. She remembered. He put something down before he hit her. Yes, she *had* seen the gun in his hand. She remembered now. She even told them the bar he hung out at and the address of his other woman. She followed him before and never forgot where his sancha lived.

Jacob heard them walking around.

“The shoebox in the closet is empty ma'am,” one of the officers said.

Chapter 14

Walkout

He got up in the morning and got ready for school. He brushed his teeth and put gel in his hair. He didn't wear the extra baggy Dickies or the wife beater. He put on a plaid shirt and a pair of blue jeans. He put an open lock in his pocket for protection.

He thought about Melody and the Indians. He thought about Lil' Crazy and how much he hated him. He thought he might go to jail. Would the cops even investigate? Every gangster in the world gets shot. How could they prove anything? The only witness would never talk to the cops. He barely even talked to his best friend.

Jacob knew Lil' Crazy and he hated him. He was a bully and a thief, a cheap gangster and a racist.

Jacob went to the kitchen and put his hand on a box of cereal. This could be his last meal, he thought. He decided to make huevos. He took his time, adding just the right amount of Tapatio and cheese. He put two Eggo's in the toaster and poured himself a glass of orange juice. He prayed to the Lord to keep him safe and he

thanked Him for the food he was about to eat.

He finished his food calmly and before he left, he opened his mother's door a crack and saw her sleeping. Her hair messed up, her make-up gone, and her feet sticking out from under the covers, she was on her side, hugging a pillow.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing, Mom. Nothing."

"Then close the door and go to school," she said angrily.

"Thank you, Mom," he said.

He watched her for one more moment. He wanted to say something more than just "thank you" but he couldn't get the words out.

"For what?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Close the damn door and go to school," she said, while throwing a pillow at him.

He quickly closed the door and started to leave. He was sure to lock the door behind him. As he passed by her bedroom window he heard her yell, "I love you," to him.

“Love you too. Bye, Mom,” he said as he hurried across the walkway passed Trigger’s pad and down the steps.

He felt tension as he walked. He thought he could be killed at any moment. ChuChu could come running at him from behind any bush and Trigger could be lurking in any car, ready to deliver Cali-style justice.

Jacob was a block from school when he saw Tiny.

“What’s up, Mr. Clean?” Tiny said.

“Nothing man, *que pasa*, Mufasa?” he said trying not to sound nervous.

“You want to hit this blunt before we go to class?” he said, pulling out a skinny cigar filled with weed.

“Nah. You seen Crazy?” Jacob asked. He didn’t want any suspicion from the other bangers when they found out what happened to Crazy.

“Nah, *Homes*. Not since yesterday morning,” Tiny said, lighting the little blunt.

“All right, foo'. I’ll see you inside.”

“Yeah,” he said, holding in a hit and sounding like a frog.

Jacob kept walking towards Huntington Park High. When he arrived, he went to his classes and expected Mr. F to tell him what happened to the Indians. Instead, he heard everyone talking about a rally. What rally? He remembered the immigration walkout to protest the new laws. His mind had been so busy with everything else that had been happening in the past few weeks that he totally forgot it was today.

He wondered what time and what period it would be. Would everyone really just walk out? What if the Native-Americans just walked out of the missions?

In class he sat quietly like he usually did. He heard people talking about their mothers and fathers being possibly deported. Someone said the laws would make illegal searches legal if you looked Mexican. A girl started crying because her 22-year-old boyfriend didn't have his papers. There were few absences. People came today with a purpose.

In the middle of third period he saw heads walking by the window and realized it had begun. The nerd in the front and a girl who always asked questions walked

out first to join the group. Then another student left, three more, the whole class was gone and Jacob left with them as Mr. F applauded. It almost looked like he was going to cry.

There were people everywhere and he was looking for Melody. They walked down the steps in front of the school and headed up Miles Ave towards Gage. They were screaming and some kids had signs. The teachers were in the windows watching and a few students could be seen behind them. The gates and doors were full of teens rushing to get out and join their peers on the street in a march against injustice.

It wasn't fair to single out Latinos when America was built on illegal immigration. Jacob didn't know what happened to the Indians but he knew what happened to the Chinese, the Irish, and worst of all the blacks.

They walked a block and passed the middle school where 12-year-olds were trying to jump the gates, and many did. They could see the classrooms mostly full of students watching them. The news

cameras came from high above the asphalt, and streets were closed off ahead of them. Thousands of young Latinos marching for a cause, it was like a brown tidal wave. Jacob was ashamed to be in a gang, but he was proud to be part of this.

He knew why the government wanted to keep Mexicans out of America. It was because of people like Lil' Crazy and Trigger. Jacob also thought of himself and his mother, Melody, and Mr. F.; good hard-working Mexicans who only wanted to uplift their people.

They marched up and down the city. They picked up more *gente* from other high schools in the area. When he finally found Melody they didn't say a word to each other. She just grabbed his hand and never let go as they marched and chanted for their people. They went downtown and walked right up to City Hall. People applauded them and others yelled.

When the marching was done, he had gotten Melody's number and told himself he'd call her the first chance he got.

He was standing at the corner of the street where his building was. He thought

of Trigger. Would he reach out and grab him as he passed his door? Is he in jail? He thought of his loving mother.

She would still be home. She might just be waking up. It would be good to see her face and to give her a hug. He wanted to tell her all about the march.

Jacob finally made it to his building where boxes of Trigger's things were on the curb. He walked up the steps. Trigger's girlfriend had her blinds open. He looked in and saw that she and her son were watching a police chase on TV. There was no sign of Trigger.

He made it to his door and opened it with his key. His mom was on the couch watching TV.

"Come here, Jacobo."

"What is it?"

"Isn't that our neighbor on the TV?" his mom said.

Jacob looked at the TV. It was Trigger's mug shot.

"Turn it up," his mom said.

"A violent chase ended minutes ago as this man, Oscar "Trigger" Gonzalez, found himself confronted with a police

barricade after a chase that lasted almost two hours. It began in front of this woman's house, the mistress of the notorious gang member. Police had been looking for him all night after he violently beat his girlfriend and her six-year-old son. You can see from this video here, taken from our heli-cam, that he did the sign of the cross before pulling the pin on a grenade. He then threw it at a police car. The man was then shot multiple times by officers as he tried to flee the scene firing two automatic weapons wildly at the police. Two cops are listed in critical condition. One is dead."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Bueno-Hill grew up in the ghettos of Queens, New York and Inglewood, California. David teaches English and ESL classes in Los Angeles. He lives in South L.A. with his son, Quazar, and loving wife who is expecting their second child. The author invites readers to visit his website: www.painispoetry.com

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