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Stolen Youth: A Co-Authored Memoir

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STOLEN YOUTH: A CO-AUTHORED MEMOIR

A Thesis

by

JENNILEE A. GARZA

Submitted to the Graduate School of
The University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2013

Major Subject: Creative Writing

STOLEN YOUTH: A CO-AUTHORED MEMOIR

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JENNILEE A. GARZA

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December 2013

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ABSTRACT

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This literary work of creative nonfiction qualifies under the literary genre of memoir, as a co-authored memoir. While the work incorporates the practices of both memoir and testimonio, the classification as a co-authored memoir recognizes a collaboration between the writer and the individual interviewed for this piece. “Stolen Youth: A Co-Authored Memoir” presents nine chapters and an epilogue, and is part of a larger creative work. The piece narrates the life of, Cirano “Cid” Lagunas, III, a dear friend who offered me the opportunity to convey his personal experiences through memoir. His memoir begins at the age of 12, following him through an adolescence influenced by physical and emotional abuse, gang and drug activity, abandonment and incarceration. Forced to become independent at a young age, he submerges himself in a lifestyle of criminal activity, and later finds the guidance and strength to survive and leave behind his stolen youth.

DEDICATION

Simple words will never encompass my immense gratitude for my dearest family members, friends and supporters. The completion of this creative work would not have come to fruition without the committed love and support of my mother, Rosa Garza, who never allowed me to give up and always encouraged me to push forward. My father, Ricardo Garza; sister, Jannette Osborne; grandmother, Florida Carrera; and all of my closest aunts, uncles and cousins - I am utterly grateful for the blessing that is my family. My friends and colleagues have also demonstrated an enormous amount of support. To Cirano “Cid” Lagunas, III, thank you for your willingness to go beyond your duties as my dear friend and share the personal experiences of your life, which became this co-authored memoir; this experience has been a profound pleasure. This creative work is dedicated to all of you for always believing in me and my potential.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Joseph Skinner, chair of my thesis committee; Dr. Marci McMahon, thesis committee member; and Dr. Laura Emma Perez, thesis committee member, for their erudite guidance and unyielding commitment toward the completion of this creative work. Their wealth of knowledge and demand for excellence yielded the finest work that I have yet to produce as a writer. I thank them for their keen interest in the development of my writing, for their heartfelt words of encouragement and for their belief in my potential.

I also extend my gratitude to Cirano “Cid” Lagunas, III, my dear friend and confidant, who proposed the idea of writing his inspiring story. His willingness to share his personal experiences on such an open forum provided me the opportunity to write the finest creative work of my career. He is an inspiration to me and this co-authored memoir led me to explore and surpass my limits as a writer.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

STOLEN YOUTH: A CO-AUTHORED MEMOIR

Four years ago, I met Cirano “Cid” Lagunas, III, the individual on whom this narrative is based. Over time, I learned a great deal about his life, which encouraged my immense admiration for his story of survival, independence, and his journey to find an identity and sense of belonging. Cid has always referred to himself as “a man of many stories,” which I found to be true as he continually shared anecdotes with me about his experiences of growing up in the ghetto neighborhoods of Fort Worth, TX. As our friendship flourished, I listened to him speak about the battles he faced both on the inner-city streets of southern Fort Worth and within his own home. His rise from that struggle captivated me, since I met him as a senior level engineer, clearly having cut his ties to the broken and criminal lifestyle that I had come to know as his past. As I stared at this clean-cut man who was ten years into his engineering career, I listened to his stories in fascination, both shocked by the outrageous events of his life and humbled as well, reminded of the fortunate life that I have lived. His practice of telling stories became a practice of reflection. When Cid approached me about the possibility of writing his story and transcribing a particular string of life events into a narrative form, I felt privileged to join him on the project. Between his enthralling tales and the skills that I offered as a writer, the work developed into a practice that I had never explored as a writer before, the co-authored memoir. Our collaboration allowed Cid to both question and find purpose behind his traumatizing and rough adolescence, the segment of his life that we chose to narrate in this piece.

On a few accounts, Cid mentioned that his friends had always told him that he should have his life story written and published. I couldn't have agreed more, as compelling as I found it myself. During the spring of 2013, we discussed the possibility of shaping my thesis around this idea, and writing his story as my final creative work as a graduate student. While I jumped at the opportunity and appreciated his willingness to share his story through my writing, I recognized that I had never taken on a project like this. While in graduate school, I strived to become a fiction writer. However, through my experience, I found that writing nonfiction better suited me. Although my writing found greater appreciation for reality than it did for fiction, I never found a personal story that inspired or compelled me enough to pursue it as a route for my thesis. Having captivating content available to me through Cid's experiences seemed like the perfect opportunity to challenge my skills in creative nonfiction and for the first time, write a co-authored memoir.

I heavily considered which specific genre within the realm of literature to qualify this creative work under. The piece clearly qualifies as a memoir; it is a personal and true account about the life of an adolescent gangster who only turns to such a lifestyle in order to survive a neighborhood submerged in criminal activity and an abusive home life. The memoir remains true to actual events and maintains its integrity and purpose, but it is written in a literary style that allows it take the role of a dramatic narrative, a memoir, not merely a straightforward autobiography. While this creative work qualifies as a memoir, there is another aspect of the project to consider: this memoir is not my memoir. With this in mind, I explored the genre of testimonio, by which a person shares his/her testimony with a writer who then transcribes and transforms it into a narrative form. I turned to The Introduction to The Latina Feminist Group's collection of testimonios in *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, which provides the

definition, “Testimonio is often seen as a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else, who then transcribes, edits, translates, and publishes the text elsewhere” (Acevedo et al. 13). The connection between Cid’s experiences and the purpose of the testimonio seemed clear; he too rose from repression at home and struggle on the streets, and lived to tell his story to me, the writer. However, both the memoir and the testimonio bear a greater weight on one individual contributor, rather than acknowledging an equalized contribution to the piece. The memoir honors the individual who experienced the story at hand and the same individual for transforming the said experience into one cohesive narrative. In a similar respect, the testimonio honors the individual who experienced the story at hand, but does not necessarily offer the same respect to the writer, who struggles behind the scenes to polish the testimonies into a moving and inspiring piece of work that comprises the pages of a published work. The testimonio honors the story as it is read in its final form and pays respect to the individual who survived the narrated experience. However, for this co-authored memoir, there existed a level of strenuous listening, interviewing, transcribing, comprehending and editing that took place throughout the duration of the project, which must be recognized as much as the story itself. With as much collaboration as became necessary in order to yield the polished version of *Stolen Youth: A Co-Authored Memoir*, it is pertinent to honor both Cid’s ownership over his experiences as well as the skill of envisioning and writing those raw experiences into a readable and literary piece of creative nonfiction.

The practice of writing memoir and testimonio has served many distinguished writers in transcribing and conveying personal experiences into riveting narratives, many of which influenced my writing style in this co-authored memoir. Luis Rodriguez’s *Always Running* is a

personal memoir that utilizes bold, literary techniques to narrate and recount the events of his life as a gang member in East Los Angeles. His method of shaping those experiences into a book-length narrative inspired my concept for Cid's memoir, only a section of which is featured in this thesis. Michelle Otero's *Malinche's Daughter*, invokes the practices of both testimonio and memoir to narrate the personal testimonies of women who have risen against the struggle of sexual assault in Oaxaca, Mexico and also exposes a personal confrontation with her own abusive past. Through her raw honesty, and the honesty of the women she writes about, Otero prevails in compiling a collection of moving and personal essays, each of which embodies a poetic and literary style of writing. *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonio*, a collection of testimonios assembled by The Latina Feminist Group, practices testimonio and engages themes of religious, ethnic, racial, sexual and national backgrounds among diverse women who all share their personal stories or testimonies. Through the act of telling their stories and having those testimonies transcribed into a narrative form, they find common ground in their journeys, and celebrate their rise against the struggle and oppression they have each faced in their own respect. By the end of *Stolen Youth: A Co-Authored Memoir*, I recognized Cid's personal triumph in confronting his past, making peace with it and allowing himself to emotionally cut those ties. As I move through texts that inspired mine and consider the genres of memoir and testimonio, I must also incorporate Marvelyn Brown's *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful, and (HIV) Positive*, which Courtney E. Martin co-authored. And finally, I must include Rigoberta Menchu's, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, originally transcribed and written by Elizabeth Burgos. Brown's book is a personal memoir that narrates her experiences as a young African American woman who finds out that she is HIV Positive and discusses the social struggles of living with the disease. Co-author, Courtney Martin has openly discussed her role as the co-author,

explaining both the challenge she felt by having to write in a voice or speak from a place so immensely different from her own life experiences, and she also discusses the moments in which Brown spoke so well of her own experiences, that she almost took an authorial voice herself. This dynamic and balance of co-authorship is a sensitive one to handle and both the interviewee and writer must willingly accept their responsibilities for such a project. When this agreement is not met conflict could arise, as it did for Rigoberta Menchu and Elizabeth Burgos, who completed the memoir, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. This memoir narrates the life of a young Guatemalan Quiche Indian woman who speaks about her personal experiences, the oppression of her Indian people and their way of life during the 36-year Civil War that ended in 1996. She speaks from oppression, from the fight for civil rights, and from a place of survival, after her mother, brother and father were all tortured and killed. Menchu spent twelve years in exile in Mexico and traveled to Europe during that time, where she met Elizabeth Burgos in Paris and their collaboration of interviewing, transcribing and writing commenced. It was much later, after the publication of the book, that turmoil erupted between the two and the professional relationship floundered, which I will discuss later. However, returning to all of the aforementioned publications, each one inherited the genre of either memoir, testimonio or both. In my experience with *Stolen Youth: A Co-Authored Memoir*, since the work exemplified facets from both practices and involved a significant amount of collaboration, the co-authored memoir, a genre that equally recognizes both collaborators, became the most appropriate genre to qualify the work under.

All of these publications stood out to me for the utter rawness and realness that is evident in the authors' writing and the entrancing stories that they tell. Their writing styles refuse to hold back, captivating the reader instantly and keeping them engaged through the end of the book.

Additionally, since memoir and testimonio provide avenues for this type of literary writing or creative nonfiction, these forms become the most enticing; as unbelievable as a story may sound, the reality of the events typically keeps the reader going, that and stimulating writing. While the testimonio offered the most practical methodology that seemed viable for this project, I decided against qualifying this work in that genre. As I've stated before, this work is a memoir, but it is not mine. This story belongs to someone else, and for that reason, to honor that this story is not mine; I chose to qualify it as a co-authored memoir, which respects both the writer and the person on whom it is based. Through research, I discovered works that employed the practice of co-authoring or co-writing someone else's story, and I found a pathway that I could pursue with this project.

While the idea of a co-authorship excited my interests as a writer and I thoroughly enjoyed the practice, I encountered obstacles that could have challenged the integrity of the work. This included issues of ethics and where the literary line is drawn between fiction and nonfiction. While Cid could delve into extreme detail about a major event, at times, he couldn't recall every minor detail or sometimes, what happened in between those events. Thus, I had to address the accuracy, or sometimes the inaccuracy, of Cid's memory. As the writer, I had to employ my best judgment in deciding how to fill holes in his memory to fill the pages of this cohesive narrative. Additionally, because of the sensitive content in this co-authored memoir, fictionalizing names or places became necessary in order to protect and respect the privacy of those individuals from which we did not obtain permission to include in this narrative. Once I had addressed these underlying issues and established a system that allowed me to draw the necessary lines to keep the piece both honest and reliable, the process also proved therapeutic

and rewarding for the interviewee. Listening to Cid reflect, find peace with his past, and view his experiences from the outside looking in, satisfied me as well.

In seeking a publication that could serve as an example for the creative project that I attempted to complete, I came across author Courtney E. Martin, who co-wrote, *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive* in 2008 with Marvelyn Brown. The publication narrates the life of Marvelyn Brown, an AIDS activist who discusses the struggles of contracting AIDS at the age of 19. She and Martin utilize a raw but humorous voice to convey her experiences to the reader. However, it was Martin's reflection on the writing process for this piece that truly inspired me. An essay written by Martin, *The Weight of Co-authorship*, published in *Publisher's Weekly*, first attracted me to the book. Martin discusses her struggles and fears in taking on the co-authorship, "What made the job even more harrowing was that I would be writing in the voice of a woman so unlike myself: black (I'm white); from a Southern, working class, single-parent household (I grew up in a two-parent, hippie home in Colorado Springs, Colo.); and street smart (I have an Ivy League degree, but have been known to leave my keys in my front door)" (Martin 2008). After reading her essay, I couldn't help but precisely identify with her apprehensions. Cid is a 32-year-old Hispanic male, who grew up on the ghetto streets of Fort Worth, involved himself in gang activity, and battled a broken home life. I am a 27-year-old Hispanic female who grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in the small town of Rio Grande City, TX, and my parents have shared a 35-year marriage. I felt challenged by the thought of channeling his voice and making the narrative not only sound honest, but real. However, the four year friendship that I have shared with Cid may have eased the process of knowing his voice, and thus knowing how to write in it. I've heard Cid tell his stories to our friends countless times, so placing my mindset in the setting and dialect of his experiences felt

almost second nature. Additionally part of a successful co-authorship, in my experience, lies in asking questions. If I felt unsure about the legitimacy of a setting or use of certain dialogue, one question directed at Cid always gave me the thumbs up or thumbs down to move forward. His guidance and our strong communication helped the piece become a valid and vivid depiction of his life. Although most of the content became available to me through the interviewing process, writing in a form that would give the memoir justice developed into yet another challenge.

When I consider examples of the riveting writing that I wanted to mimic or felt inspired by, Michelle Otero's *Malinche's Daughter* comes to mind. In her collection of essays that incorporates practices of memoir and testimonio, she captures the raw emotion of each experience that she narrates. Her attention to detail and the strong imagery that brings her writing to life not only captivates, but mesmerizes the reader. I strived to accomplish the same imagery and vivid detail in this co-authored memoir as Otero achieved in her publication, *Malinche's Daughter*. This work inspired my co-authored memoir in more ways than one. As previously noted, this experience served Cid as much as it did me, through its therapeutic benefits. As Lisa D. Chavez mentions in her Introduction to *Malinche's Daughter*, "It has become something off a cliché to talk of writing as therapy, as a way of healing. And certainly at times that idea has been used as an excuse for the sloppy, for the self-indulgent. And yet it is true that there is something deeply cathartic in telling stories, and there is something healing in talking about what we suffered and how we survived" (Otero 6). Only now, almost two decades after the time frame in which this co-authored memoir is set, has Cid been able to recognize the impact of his experiences on his life and himself. Having an overview of the sequence of his life experiences has given him greater peace with his past and the years of his innocent youth that were stolen.

To embark on this project, I needed to do more than merely recognize creative works that inspired mine; I considered how the practice of co-writing worked. I needed a methodology to successfully execute the creative work, and after I tackled it rather blindly at first, a method slowly unfolded almost independently. In crafting or co-writing someone else's story I employed interviewing skills, transcribing, and authorial judgment – knowing when to take the lead and when to stay out of the way. During the interviewing process, I kept my ear open for details, probing questions that yielded particular facts about how a place smelled or looked, in order to build a vivid setting for the reader. Through repeated audio recorded interviews, conducted both in person and via phone, I found myself asking specific questions that targeted the sensory details which could make for a vivid scene. It is also important to note that Cid liked tangents and digressed from the main storyline quite often during interviews. So as the guiding writer, it became my job to know which parts of his storytelling needed deeper thought and which parts could be overlooked. For example, chapter two in *Stolen Youth: A Co-Authored Memoir* details a scene in which Cid visits the baseball league president and is mesmerized by the cake that the president's wife bakes in the kitchen. While interviewing, he sounded excited over this experience, and although Cid never considered that this might serve as a significant scene, I argued that it did and requested further detail. In doing so, we achieved a vivid scene with strong sensory details. However, even more effective from this scene is the juxtaposition of Cid, a child from a broken home, standing in the middle of a charming home among a familial atmosphere that he will never experience with his own family. Additionally, in an effort to stay true to the narrative voice, I consistently requested Cid's review and feedback over the accuracy of the narrative. Asking questions such as, does the dialogue reflect your "homeboys" dialect? Did I accurately portray what your house looked and smelled like? Or even, what type of gun did you

always carry with you? Early on, it became necessary to have this back and forth exchange of information. As our collaboration progressed, I had to organize Cid's many thoughts and array of anecdotes into the flowing scenes and chapters that carried the narrative forward. This too plays an enormous role in establishing a successful working relationship that can yield an effective narrative. While the interviewee in a co-authored memoir knows his/her story, the writer must know the vision. With that said, at times I chose to keep quiet as Cid delved into his stories and went off on his numerous tangents. But, I did this knowing that from his ranting would arise some of the most riveting and significant details that truly brought the writing to life.

As the co-authored memoir continued to progress, I had to question my freedoms as a writer. In her essay, Martin notes, "I became not so much writer as architect. When Marvelyn wanted to skip over critical scenes, I encouraged her to put them in - emphasizing that the integrity of the whole was at stake" (Martin 2008). Through the interviewing process, I learned when to keep my mouth shut and when to pull more information. As the interviews became a narrative, my authorial judgment came into play and it became my job to not only pull information from every single anecdote, but to shape and form that information into a cohesive and flowing story. I have noted that Cid began to look at his life from the outside in. Our work became more than just telling stories, but understanding the impact of his experiences, which then guided the direction of the narrative and my decisions on which critical events of his life to include or exclude from the final piece.

While the form, tactic and methodology of co-authorship played an essential role in bringing this work to completion, other literary works also influenced the style in which I chose to frame the piece. Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running*, a personal memoir that narrates his experiences as a gang member in East Los Angeles, covered similar, and oftentimes the exact

themes that were covered in this co-authored memoir. In his Introduction, *The Long Run*, which introduces his publication, Rodriguez says, “Yes, *Always Running* is hard-core. Yes, it’s graphic. It’s meant to be this way. You can’t tell this true story about real gang life without the graphic details ... Censorship, repression and suppression simply don’t work (Rodriguez 14-15). Rodriguez strikes a point that appeared prevalent in my creative work. I asked Cid to dig deep into his memories for the most vivid and raw details that he could recall. Whether we discussed physical abuse or gang related activity, the story had to be raw. Returning to Lisa D. Chavez and her Introduction to Otero’s *Malinche’s Daughter*, “Otero does not offer us easy answers or happy endings, because there aren’t any. Instead, she honestly and bravely tells the stories of damage and loss, of injury and self-loathing – in each a hard kernel of hope and courage (Otero 6). Writers write to make the reader feel something. This can’t be achieved without vivid detail, which as a writer, is one of my stronger suits. Cid entrusted to me the responsibility of conveying his story to a wider audience. But without his agreement to honesty and openness as well as my commitment to convey that reality, the co-authored memoir would have failed. As the story became a real and nonfictional creative work, the question of the memoir’s integrity also came into question.

Rodriguez states in his Introduction, “I can only take responsibility for the truths I felt compelled to reveal, with the necessary changes in facts and names to protect the innocent *and* the guilty” (Rodriguez 14). Cid openly discussed his hesitation in sharing the authentic names of certain individuals involved in the gang related activity he discussed with me. Through ongoing conversations, we reached the decision that fictionalizing the names of characters would, in no way, compromise the integrity of the text. However, I continued to consider that when an individual reflects on his or her life, it is difficult to completely depend on one individual’s

memory to encompass all aspects of an experience. Cid could easily talk for days about one experience or another. But as the writer who transcribed these interviews into one cohesive narrative, I sometimes came across holes that needed to be filled in order to carry the narrative forward. In this respect, every chapter is centered on one or two major conflicts. Each of these major points in the narrative, which carry the plot forward are accurate portrayals of the major events in Cid's life. However, how he may have ended up in a particular setting or place, required a greater understanding of his everyday life. How did he pass the time? How did he travel across the city? Who did he usually surround himself with? What types of things did he discuss with his friends? These types of questions helped me gain an omniscient-like view over his life and over this character. These minor details and snippets from his memory came together to fill the holes in the narrative and essentially carried the co-authored memoir forward.

As I continued to probe these questions, and the line between fiction and nonfiction became blurry, I turned to the practice of testimonio as a guide as well. Referring back to the previously noted definition of testimonio, "Testimonio is often seen as a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else, who then transcribes, edits, translates, and publishes the text elsewhere" (Acevedo, et al 13). Cid clearly shared a story of struggle and repression, which I agreed to write it. However, in the testimonios shared in *Telling to Live*, how did these subjects and writers reach a decision regarding the nonfictional accuracy of their stories? "We also decided that decisions would be made collectively, through consensus. Through the give-and-take needed for collective work, we repeatedly analyzed our group dynamics, noting misperceptions and incorporating debates about differences into our work agenda constructively" (Acevedo, et al 11). I appreciate that The Latina Feminist Group chose to reanalyze their work and question

the misconceptions of their stories, as I'm sure they encountered many. The collaboration between Cid and me led to a final product that yes, utilized elements of fiction such as setting, proper use of dialogue, narrative form, imagery, and other literary techniques that could vividly convey his story. However, I utilized these elements to enhance content that already existed from the interview process, not content that originated in my imagination. Considering this point, other elements of fiction did not appear as prevalent in my writing, including characterization or character development. While I had to capture the essence of the characters in this co-authored memoir by utilizing the aforementioned fictional elements, the characters themselves and the decisions that they made did not originate from my mind, but from reality.

In questioning the lines between fiction and nonfiction, and maintaining the validity and integrity of a work, I must turn the personal narrative, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. This piece opens with the infamous lines, "My name is Rigoberta Menchu. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times, but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (Menchu 1). Although Menchu is widely respected as an advocate for Indian rights and she was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, she also earned renown for her story of survival narrated in this gripping publication. However, perhaps these opening lines were the first mistake that co-author, Elizabeth Burgos made in assisting Menchu write her testimonio. To declare one individual testimony as identifiable for all people of the same culture perhaps assumes too much, and may have been the reason for anthropologists like David

Stoll to challenge or re-examine the validity of the publication through his own studies. While Stoll received criticism for questioning such a well-respected woman, as she well-earned her respect, in terms of the publication, perhaps Burgos could have better guided Menchu to allow her testimony to speak for itself and her people, without having to make the blatant statement in the opening lines of the book. Although Burgos might have missed the mark on utilizing her best judgment to guide Menchu, she did employ a writing methodology for this work that I easily identified with based on my experience.

In the essay *The Story of a Testimonio* by Elizabeth Burgos and Robert Austin, Burgos notes, “Very quickly I realized that Rigoberta Menchui wanted to talk about her-self, to go beyond just an account of repression. I therefore opted in favor of delving deeply into her customs, her vision of the world (as much political as religious), and, above all, her identity” (Burgos 55, 56). Burgos shared an appreciation for Menchu’s experience, if she had not, she would not have taken the time to record and transcribe 26 hours of interviews. She dove into the deepest parts of Menchu’s identity and bold vision of the world, and she, like me, took the authorial judgment to architect the countless interviews into a narrative form. “To construct the book, I searched for themes, cut, and began to reassemble what one now does with the "cut" and "paste" operations on the computer. Having established the structure on the basis of the assembling of themes, I proceeded with the task of stringing things together, which consisted of looking for rare pearls: sentences or words deferred for later examination, lost in the middle of the debris that must be eliminated so that spoken language will continue to transmit a voice and at the same time be readable that is, something that is not boring, that reads like fiction.” (Burgos 55) I agree with Burgos’ tactic in constructing the final version of Menchu’s testimony. As mentioned earlier, the numerous interviews, thoughts, ideas and quotes from the interviewee

must be sorted and organized, yielding a more polished and flowing draft each time. Although this methodology led to a successful testimonio, a lack of communication and collaboration between Burgos and Menchu led to disagreement, misunderstanding and the downfall of their professional relationship.

“It should be noted that I alone have been reproached for appearing as the author of a testimonial book. The best exponents of the genre in Latin America-Miguel Barnet, Roque Dalton, Elena Poniatowska, Claribel Alegria, Margaret Randall, Gabriel García Márquez, and others-have been exempt from this reproach. Undoubtedly Rigoberta Menchú and her aficionados have their own reasons for wanting to exclude my name. None of these other authors, with the exception of Roque Dalton and his Miguel Mermol, put the actual name of the interviewee in the title: all opted for generic titles. Perhaps that was my mistake: if instead of giving it the name of Rigoberta Menchú I had opted for ‘Habla una India de Guatemala,’ history might have treated me differently (Burgos 61). I would agree with Burgos and argue that this was her second mistake in completing this creative work. A primary reason for avoiding the use of Cid’s name in the title of this memoir was to avoid confusion over the author of the piece. Again, the purpose of the title and classification of co-authorship was meant to honor the collaborative efforts of two people, the interviewee and the writer.

In her essay, Burgos continues to claim, “Then she spread the rumor that I had interviewed various indigenous people and synthesized the story into one, taking her as the sole persona. This version coincided with the appearance on the scene of the anthropologist David Stoll, who communicated to Rigoberta Menchú that he was undertaking research on her and that some aspects of her life did not coincide with what she herself had reported. At the same time she began to denounce anthropologists and to assert that she did not consider herself reflected in

the book whose author was Elizabeth Burgos, "because I did not have the right to say whether I liked the text or not, or whether it was true to the details of my life. Now my life is mine, for which I consider it opportune to say that that book is not mine" (Burgos 58). It's clear that the professional relationship, which requires a certain level of trust and confidence in each other, was not present between Menchu and Burgos. However, even if the professional relationship was lacking in these areas, qualifying this piece as a testimonio without appropriately crediting the two collaborators may have developed a confusion for both Menchu and Burgos as to how credit should be honored in such a collaboration as theirs; perhaps they never viewed it as a complete collaboration to begin with. Since equalized credit for the interviewee and the writer is not currently seen in the genres of memoir and testimonio, I chose to decide against qualifying my piece as either and felt that a co-authored memoir equally credited both Cid and I for our collaborated efforts.

This collaborative project rewarded Cid and me in many ways. As a writer, I explored a new genre of writing that I had never practiced before. As a working journalist and communications writer, I might say that my passion for telling other people's stories found its way into my creative practice. I have a great appreciation for the untold stories of profound people, the everyday people who fight all kinds of battles, like Cid. But often, these stories go untold and unnoticed because they belong to the everyday Joe. Only once in a while do we get the astounding opportunity to find out about these sometimes disheartening, or sometimes uplifting, tales of struggle and survival. I felt an even greater sense of achievement in observing the therapeutic effect that this collaborative work had on Cid Lagunas. He gained the opportunity to recognize the broken pieces of his life molding into this striking and truly moving creative work. This piece isn't just a story, it is his life; and for the first time, he has found a

greater appreciation than he has ever had for the sometimes merciless battles that he fought during his youth. At the end of it all, Cid said, “I’m glad that you saw the value in my past. I am truly blessed that I met you, you were meant to be the person to write it.” As a writer, no piece of work in my life has ever filled my heart with as much gratitude as this one. Perhaps as I continue to explore the co-authored memoir into my writing career, I will find my passion as a writer, bridging my desire for writing with my appreciation for the extraordinary stories that silently creep in our own backyards, the stories that are both overlooked and untold because the owners of those anecdotes don’t have the time or skill to write them effectively. This experience has served as a gift, helping Cid find the greatest value in his past, in his Stolen Youth.

CHAPTER I

OUT

I played ball three miles south of downtown Fort Worth, TX, where the rest of my neighborhood resonated with the sounds of spray cans rattling from taggers adorning the city. Or tires screeching against the pavement, after another drive-by perforated a gangster's single-family home. Sometimes the wailing of guys getting pounded in a back alley gang-bang reached my ear and police sirens rang as officers chased teenage vandals - my future homeboys. But before my homeboys, my friends weren't necessarily, "down for the hood." Before I vandalized, my art was mine. Before I ever shot a gun, my hands exuded power through the grip of a baseball bat. Before the Southside became my out, the game saved me for a while.

Hypnotized moths fluttered underneath the Saturday night lights of Echo Lake's baseball field. A humidity-induced sweat bead rolled down the side of my face while I covered Right Field, gloved and ungloved hands on my knees. I waited for my teammate, Mikey, to throw the next pitch and chewed on a large ball of Big League Chew that bulged from underneath my right cheek. We were up 9-7 during the last inning of the 1992 Southside Little League Championship series. A Giants' fan yelled, "Strike him out, kid!" over the softer shouts of the crowd. The bleachers next to the visitor's dugout sat fans that speckled the stands in red, white, and blue attire. With two outs to go, a pop fly launched over right field. The runner on second base sped to third. I took four steps back and reached my left-handed thrower's glove behind my head.

Spiraling against the cloudless nocturnal sky, the white baseball fell into my glove. Out. I dropped it into my left hand and hurled it over the second base cut-off man to third. The Rebels' runner slid into an outing tag from the third baseman, Frankie. I hollered, "Hell yea...my man," when the umpire circled his fat fist in the air. Frankie jogged through a cloud of red dirt settling over third base. I loped to meet him at the pitcher's mound. My legs felt like adrenaline-driven pedals that propelled my 80-pound body across the outfield in seconds. I cut through the crowd of my teammates flocking around the center of the field, saw Frankie and high-fived him so hard it stung.

"Dude, how'd you throw that ball so fast and so straight?" Frankie asked.

"I don't know, but thank God you caught it and got that guy out. Or else."

"That would've sucked!" he exclaimed. "Damn, check out my Dad."

I gazed at Frankie's father, who tugged at the New York Giants logo on his jersey and let his hairy stomach peek from underneath his shirt, which hung an inch over his belt line. He chanted alongside my teammates' parents who stood on the stands, calling out their MVP's by name as we all paraded toward the dugout. Bobby high-fived me, then dashed ahead. I felt a hand pat me on the back from Mikey, "Way to go, Cid." He strode up beside me and tossed the game-winning ball into my glove. I hated smiling, but an uncontrollable grin parted my lips and unveiled the chipped teeth protruding from my gums in several angles.

Coach Karnes' tan hands hailed us into the dugout. He twisted his baseball hat backwards, plumped his Reebok tennis-shoe on the wooden dugout bench and rested his elbow on his knee. I bent down to place my glove on the concrete, between my feet.

"Well boys, you played one hell of a season." Coach Karnes preached over our hyper whispers. "I'm proud of all of you. This was a damn good championship game."

My restless hands calmed themselves by clapping, which encouraged my teammates to join in high-pitched yells, some of their voices still a year shy of puberty.

“Hold on, hold on Cid?” Coach Karnes waved at me. I dropped my hands and stuffed them into my pockets.

“You did good, son. That was a good double play.”

“Uhhh, thank you,” I replied.

“And, Frankie?” Coach Karnes’ eyes wandered to my left.

“Yeah, coach?” Frankie asked.

“Last out of the championship game, how does it feel?”

“Well, better than losing!” Frankie replied and smirked. The team cheered with a couple of “hell yeah’s” and “fuck yeah’s.”

I shoved Frankie. “You jackass,” I snickered.

Coach Karnes struggled to keep a straight face while addressing us.

“All right,” he said while standing upright. “But win or lose, there’s value in both. When you win, you don’t flaunt a championship, you cherish it, right?” The smirk eluded his face. Most of my team members nodded like zombies or returned a blank stare.

“Be proud of yourselves,” Coach Karnes continued. “Mikey, Joe, and Stephen, you did great bringing in our players with those homeruns. Johnny and Rick, I couldn’t have asked for better pitchers. Your hard work paid off, guys. You all did great. Bring it in, Giants.”

We huddled together. My teammates’ olive and tan arms overlapped each other as we circled around and reached toward Coach Karnes’ massive hand. I could see the accumulated dirt gathered underneath the corners of everyone’s stubby fingernails. I felt Mikey and Frankie

breathing over each of my shoulders. I breathed with my mouth shut and inhaled sweat and body odor; even the sunset's heat left a scent on our skin.

“All right, boys ... Who are we?” Coach Karnes triggered our team chant.

“Giants!” we shouted.

My pulse accelerated and I felt my cheeks flush. The suffocating huddle dispersed and I took a more satisfying whiff of hot dogs and nachos emanating from the white, sheet-metal food truck that the Southside Little League President always parked behind the home side dugout.

Coach Karnes stole our attention one more time.

“Now, remember to meet back here on Monday evening for the Little League Championship trophy presentations and bar-be-cue. Come in your full uniforms for the picture.

And as promised, I will be taking you up to Arlington Stadium to watch the Rangers play against the Mariners, tomorrow. That's your second trophy, guys.”

I became immobile and speechless for a minute. I couldn't believe that I would spend my Sunday afternoon watching The Ryan Express pitch inside Arlington Stadium. Frankie nudged my shoulder while Coach Karnes yelled over my enthused teammates.

“Don't forget to meet at the practice field by 10:00 a.m. Bring your signed permission slips, even if your parent plans to chaperone,” Coach Karnes clarified.

Overjoyed by his promise, I took off running. I dashed away from the dugout and yelled in repetitive “wooo's” while taking my uniform shirt off. The sweat on my back and stomach chilled against the evening air. I pulled the shirt over my head and raced toward the picnic tables surrounding the field. My teammates' parents blurred in my peripheral vision while I sprinted by. I raced to the first table in my view before anyone, or myself, realized my next move. Staged on top of a pine-green picnic table, I continued to strip and pulled my baseball pants down to my

ankles. I slipped them off and unabashedly exposed my scrawny body in Fruit-of-the-Loom tighty-whities and calf-length socks.

I danced in front of Echo Lake where ducks swam on the murky water behind me. Besides the fish and algae, I sometimes saw police officers pull cars out of that lake. Once, they pulled out a decaying body that had been dumped in there for hiding.

My friends' mothers dropped their gossip-talking jaws for a second and watched with still eyelids while others covered their smirking mouths as I danced. The skill of stripping for entertainment developed early on. I saw Coaches Karnes race toward me, but the urge to sway my hips in the same circular motion as the baseball pants that I swung over my head persisted.

“Cid! What are you doing son? Get down!” he yelled. “Get your clothes back on.”

Mikey's mom, who watched from ten feet away, shouted, “Cid, I'm going to tell your mother.” She lived a couple of houses down from mine, so I knew she would if she got the chance. I dropped my pants by my feet and looked at Coach Karnes.

“Uhhh ... sorry Coach, I got really excited.”

“Excited? Son you ran around the park half naked. Are you practicing to be a stripper or something?”

Coach Karnes' hands reached out to grab me. I stepped aside, placed my hand on the table and jumped the rest of my body off it. My feet hit the ground and I threw my shirt back on with a grin on my face. I buttoned my baseball pants while listening to him.

“You alright, Cid?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Ok son, well I'll pick you up tomorrow for the game. Be ready by 9:30 a.m. Think you can get that permission slip signed?”

“Uhm, yeah.”

“Good, now get in the truck with your teammates and I’ll take you home. And stop taking your clothes off, will ya?”

“Sorry, coach.”

I ran toward Coach Karnes’ Ford F-150 where Frankie, Johnny, and Joe sat on the flatbed, all of them rose-faced from their boisterous laughter.

“Woooo, Woooo,” Frankie mocked.

“Dude, shut up,” I said.

I tried to withhold my laughter by squeezing my lips together and nodding my head.

“Oh man, I’m so crazy,” I said.

“No shit!” Frankie exclaimed, and we burst into hysterics.

Arlington Stadium welcomed me with a colossal poster of Nolan Ryan at the gate entrance. I ambled by it and stood as tall as his ankle while the rest of his photographed body loomed over me. I ended up sitting three rows up behind right field. Underneath the sun’s highest point that afternoon, I leaned back and lounged my leg on the seat in front of me. Baseball fans adorned in gray and blue filled the gray-chaired stadium seating. Almost every other sports buff revealed half shaded faces in baseball caps. I refused to wear mine, to avoid any taunting of my month-old haircut stuffed underneath it. Consequently, my cheeks stung from the blaring heat that scorched the skin of everyone in the stadium. Boys my age periodically marched up and down the lower and upper decks of the arena, carrying miniature blue ice chests while calling out, “water!” I chugged the free bottle of water that Coach Karnes bought each of

us after the first 10 minutes of the game. While taking my third bite of a ballpark frank, the Texas Rangers took the field and Nolan Ryan strolled onto the pitcher's mound.

“It's Nolan, man.” Mikey backhanded my arm.

I stuffed the remainder of my hotdog into my mouth and jammed the white paper wrapper into my jean pocket. I sat up straight to catch a better glimpse of the idol I had only seen on T.V. or traded on baseball cards. My blinking eyelids halted as I zoned in on one of the greatest baseball pitchers in history, number 34. I spent the next two hours examining his every pitch. In one flowing motion, Ryan anchored one leg, kicked the other outward, extended his right hand behind his head and then flung the baseball forward with ungodly strength. The ball shot straight from his hand, zoomed across the batter, and landed heavily into the catcher's glove. Every screaming fan, clap, whistle, fog horn, and every straw that scraped and slurped the remnants of watered-down fountain drinks hushed around me when “The Ryan Express” performed on the pitcher's mound. I ignored my burning skin and wished the afternoon sustained.

Coach Karnes always dropped four of us off at Johnny's house. We all lived in the same neighborhood near South Fort Worth Elementary and South Fort Worth Baptist Church, which sat a block apart from each other. I lived on Travis Street, across from the church that my mother never revisited after baptizing me. I meandered down my dim street, reached my parents' maroon brick home and pushed open the gate linked to our five-foot hurricane fence surrounding the yard. I glanced up at our gray roof shingles that crumbled at the edges. Acorns cracked underneath the sole of my shoe while strolling through the front yard, which I needed to clean and mow with my brother soon. Our 1940's house always welcomed me home with flakes of dry paint that rubbed onto my hand after touching our wooden screen door.

Haphazard stacks of newspapers and boxes of old 8-track tapes piled up against the wood-paneled walls of our living room. My footsteps echoed inside the empty house. After I showered and reviewed my spelling words for Monday's spelling test, I took a pillow and blanket from my siblings' room and made my bed on the living room floor. I sprawled my body over the blanket that covered the blue carpet, which my dad found thrown on the side of the road. My brother and I helped him cut and piece it together like a jigsaw puzzle until it covered most of the floor. I fell asleep inhaling the carpet's scent of cigarettes and dirt while waiting for my mom to arrive home with my brother and sisters.

I woke up when I heard the back patio door slam and bounce off the door frame. I heard an aluminum can crush and clang on the kitchen table. Sluggish stomps on the linoleum kitchen floor reverberated into the next room where I slept. The steps drew nearer, but they stopped. My back faced the kitchen and I refused to turn my head, so I stayed still and pretended sleep.

I heard my father speaking to my mother in their bedroom. "Is that faggot here?"

My mother mumbled too softly to decipher her response.

"I don't give a fuck what game he went to," my father yelled. "I didn't give him fucking permission."

His stomps resumed and grew manic as his 250-pound body charged at me.

"Didn't I tell you not to go to that fucking game?" he hollered.

I tightened my body. His imitation ostrich-skin boot struck my back. I rolled over and wheezed. He thrust his other boot into my ribs. I spun around on the carpet and used my pillow to block my body. His pointy boots scraped and bruised my skin with every kick. I knew that if I used the pillow for too long, his thrashing would never end, so I tossed it aside and blocked my

face with crossed arms. He took his first open shot, kicked my arms down with his heel, and then knocked his boot across my chin like he had just kicked a field goal. The skin on my chin, split. I tried to catch the bleeding, but he beat me to my face and smashed my eye with the sole of his boot. That final blow throbbed with more pain than the rest of my body. I held my eye shut and lay motionless while my chin dripped blood onto the carpet.

“Now, was the game worth it, you piece of shit?” he asked.

I didn't respond.

“You don't go anywhere without my fucking permission. You got that, motherfucker?”

I never looked at him in the eyes after he beat me. I stayed on the floor staring at the tips of his boots. He spit and let his thick saliva drop onto the floor. He smothered it into the carpet like a cigarette butt and walked into his bedroom with my mother.

My body ached when I stood up and dragged myself into the bathroom to wash my face. Our bathroom gleamed with white wood paneling on the walls, flaky white paint on the door frame, and a white clawfoot bathtub. The red blood dripped and streamed down our white bathroom sink. As I dried my face, I stared at my sunburned brown skin and bruising face in the mirror while thinking of a legitimate excuse to tell my teachers. *I wrestled with my brother. Yeah, that'll work*, I thought. My chin kept bleeding. I used toilet paper to soak it for a minute, and then I finally took a Band-Aid from the stock my mother stored underneath the sink and bandaged my skin. I walked back into the living room, fixed my bed on the floor and fell back to sleep inhaling the scent of cigarettes and dirt.

On Monday morning, I ambled down the halls of Rosemont Middle School. My lower back pained from the weight of my backpack, which hung over my shoulder as I walked into

Mrs. Willard's fourth period Physical Science class. Some of my classmates stared at my black eye and exposed chin that had scabbed. As soon as the bell rang, everyone charged toward the cafeteria like animals to form a single file line. Our backpacks bounced with every stride and I bumped a few classmates while I raced for the closest spot toward the front of the line. I forgot about the pain in my pursuit of warm food. Someone yelled out my name.

"Yo, Cid, you are the man!" Bernie Rodriguez shouted. He played center field on my team.

The chant caught me off guard, but it shaped a smile across my lips. He and some of my other classmates waved me down, so I jogged over to meet them.

"Championship MVP right here!" Bernie told the boys around him. "Dude, this guy threw the ball straight into Frankie's glove and we got the last out of the game! It was an epic throw."

My classmates shook my hand and patted me on the back. I tried not to twitch in pain and grinned when they let me cut in line.

"Dude, what happened to your face?" Bernie asked.

"Uh, nothing. I just wrestled with my bro." I turned my head while replying.

"So, are you going to play in the Pony League next year? You'll be thirteen, man."

"Hell yeah," I said. "I've never been good at anything. I think I could do a lot better next year, and maybe try out to be a pitcher."

"Badass," he replied.

The cafeteria line moved forward and Bernie handed me a blue tray. I focused on the hamburgers that the lunchroom lady sorted; my right eye still hurt. A popped blood vessel left a red mark on my eyeball that has never fully faded.

CHAPTER II

THIRTEEN

Spring wouldn't adorn Texas highways with bluebonnets for another month. Two weeks after I turned thirteen, I found my only birthday gift inside our black vertical mailbox propped up alongside our chain-linked fence. As I paced toward the front door, I sorted through envelopes of junk mail. The front gate clanged as it shut behind me. I stopped underneath one of the bare pecan trees; its skeletal branches extended over the yard. I pulled out a letter from a beige envelope addressed to me.

“Cirano,

This is to inform you that the next Southside Little League baseball season is coming up. Our records indicate that you will be 13 years of age and eligible to play in the Pony League. Submit your \$20 Enrollment Fee and Permission Slip to President Fred Sanchez by February 25. We look forward to having you for another season!

Sincerely,

Tom Rankin
League Coordinator

My eyes skimmed through the message and focused on the key words that intensified my excitement. The letter shook while in the clutch of my trembling hands; I couldn't wait to play in the Pony League. For the next three hours, I laid on my blanket spread over the living room floor and anxiously sketched a drawing of a dog on some extra sheets of paper that I had saved from school. When I heard my mother's two inch heels clicking against the wooden steps leading

up to our front door, my palms began to sweat. She walked in, her navy pencil skirt hung three inches over her knees and the veins on her feet bulged with every step she took toward her bedroom. Her job at Cash American Pawn World Headquarters usually brought her home in time to cook dinner, which she rarely did. I lowered the T.V. volume a few notches and repeatedly retraced the eyes of my lead-drawn Australian shepherd. I tried to formulate the right thing to say to her in my head as I heard the bustling emanating from her bedroom subside. I needed to steal her attention before my father arrived home, so I crept up to her white bedroom doorframe. I stared at her until she stopped moving.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Mom, can I borrow twenty dollars? I really want to play baseball this year.” I held out the form from the Southside Little League Association, which she ignored.

“Oh no, I don’t know about that. You got into some serious trouble last year.”

“He just got mad because he didn’t know I was going to that game. I just want to play baseball.” He always found a reason to beat me, the reason never mattered.

My mother held her hip and stared at me with pressed lips. Her long, black hair fell over her shoulders in loose curls. We hadn’t exchanged this many words in weeks. Our usual communication consisted of yelling or silence. I either got in trouble or we’d exchange distant glances as she passed by me in the hallway or living room.

“Look, I’m not gonna go out anywhere without asking for permission and I’ll make sure to let you know.” I pleaded with an open palm faced toward our popcorn ceiling while her glare persisted. “I just want to play baseball, mom!”

“Fine, let me get my paycheck next week, and I’ll give you the twenty.”

“Ok,” I said and left her bedroom. I returned to drawing on the living room floor. I would leave my mother alone again until payday.

Fred Sanchez lived four houses down the street from mine. He and his wife occupied a white brick house, trimmed in coffee-colored paint. I climbed up two concrete stairs and knocked on the screen door. Mrs. Sanchez answered, dressed in a pink plaid apron that looked two decades out of date. But, I wouldn't know what a 1990's apron should have looked like anyway; my mother didn't bake.

Mrs. Sanchez's auburn hair framed her face in thick waves. I inhaled the smell of baking cake mix when she opened the door.

“Hi there,” she said.

“Uh, hi. Is Mr. Sanchez here?” I asked.

“Well yes, let me get him.” She turned away and then turned to face me again. “You know what? Why don't you come in?”

I breathed in the aroma of heating eggs, milk and cake mix as I followed her through the living room. I wanted to tiptoe across their spotless oak wood floor, which reflected the light fixture from their white ceiling fan. My filthy house failed in comparison. As I approached the kitchen, I saw Mr. Sanchez seated at the kitchen table. His dark, burly hands gripped *The Dallas Morning News* sports section and his broad shoulders peeked from either side of the newspaper. He lowered the paper as it crinkled between his thick fingers and peeked over it as I stepped closer. I stopped two feet in front of him, holding my permission slip in a less assertive grip.

“Hey, Cid, how are you doing?”

“Hi sir, I'm good. Here, I've got my stuff.”

“You look like you’ve grown.” He took the permission slip I held out in front of me.

“How was your summer?” he asked.

“Well, I started to work out. I’m ready to play in the Pony League now.”

Over the summer, I worked on a newspaper route that the South Fort Worth Baptist Church minister had offered me. I used the money I earned to buy myself a few school supplies and a pair of K-Swiss tennis shoes. Between that and working out, I managed to build my scrawny body up to 110 pounds. At the fruitful age of thirteen, I wanted girls, freedom and the Pony League.

The invigorating smell of baked goods continued to overpower the air in the kitchen. Mr. Sanchez’s wife, Ellen, had pulled her cake from the oven and let it cool. She could have navigated her kitchen blindfolded, moving from counter, to sink, to stove and back again with ease.

“Yea, well you did good last year,” Mr. Sanchez continued. “You had a good win.”

I smiled and replied, “thanks, sir.” I glanced at his wife, who balanced a glass baking dish in the center of her mittened hand and covered the precious dessert with a flat plastic board. After one flip and a tender shake, she placed the cake back onto the counter, smacking an open palm over the top of the glass dish. Mr. Sanchez continued to talk about the upcoming baseball season while his wife tenderly lifted the glass and revealed a three-inch layer of cake, finished in a golden brown crust. In a delicate sawing motion, she leveled the top of it with a serrated bread knife.

Snapping me out of my memorization, Mr. Sanchez addressed me. “All right, Cid, well I’m going to put you on the Colorado Rockies. I’ll see you in a month for the first practice. Sound good?”

He stood up and his eyes stared down at me from three feet up. I shook his hand; it felt rough and calloused like mine, only much larger.

“Thank you, Mr. Sanchez,” I replied. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

I turned to exit the kitchen and felt Mr. Sanchez tower behind me.

“Oh, Cid!” Ellen’s sweet voice called out. “Here you go, son. Enjoy.”

A block of frostless yellow cake sitting in a nest of two napkins rested in her hands. I almost snatched it from her, but I restrained myself and opened my palm to receive the dessert. She must have felt my eyes gawking at her every move around the kitchen, because I couldn’t believe she had offered me a piece. Mr. Sanchez curled a crooked smile while I accepted the slice with a giant grin.

“Wow. Thank you,” I said to her.

“Of course.”

Mr. Sanchez walked me back through their living room. “All right Cid, see you in a few weeks.”

“Ok, sir. Thank you.”

I sauntered down my street and back to my house, consuming the sweet dessert. I devoured it in twenty seconds.

I had submitted my Pony League application, Mr. Sanchez had told me which team I would be playing for, he told me I looked bigger and I left his house with a slice of Mrs. Sanchez’s cake. I felt ecstatic that afternoon and imagined myself already playing on the red dirt and fresh cut grass that covered Echo Lake’s baseball fields.

With my first practice as a member of the Colorado Rockies only a month away, I looked forward to spending the next afternoon practicing by myself in the backyard. I arrived home from school and saw my dad sitting shirtless on the couch, watching T.V. with another Budweiser gripped in his hand. His eyes followed me as I set my backpack on the living room floor and went into my brother's room. I grabbed my baseball and glove from the corner of the closet. With the ball stuffed into my glove, I tucked the glove under my arm. I inched my way into the hallway, then darted past the living room and exited the house through the back door in the kitchen, hoping he hadn't seen me.

In the fresh February air, my dingy baseball spiraled and shrunk as I shot it closer to the sky with each powerful toss. It fell back toward me. Catch. Again. Over and over, I played catch by myself, envisioning a pop-fly hurling over right field and into my glove. I threw it as hard as I could each time. On my sixth pop-fly, I heard the screen door open from above the concrete steps.

My father's voice bellowed behind me. "What are you doing?"

"I'm practicing."

"For what?"

"For next season. I want to play baseball."

"You're not going to fucking play baseball!"

I stared at him and my mind went blank. Afraid to tell him about the twenty dollars I had already paid to Mr. Sanchez, I stood there with my glove on one hand and my baseball clutched in the other. I could feel the ball's red stitching dent into my skin, and I gripped it harder. He scowled at me, spit on the concrete, and then turned around to walk inside while I did nothing but stare at his bare back.

As I walked home after school on Thursday, my rattling nerves made it hard to breathe. I clenched my hands into fists and released them repeatedly while approaching the front porch. Sweat on my palms and in between my fingers made my hands clammy. I knew that my mother would arrive home from work before I needed to leave for practice with the Colorado Rockies. The living room bared emptiness when I walked in, but the sound of Spike T.V. echoed from my parents' bedroom. I went into my brother's room to pull my practice clothes from the pile of laundry I had washed and folded on Sunday. I counted the passing minutes as I dressed myself; I didn't want to face him in my practice baseball pants. I dragged my glove off the floor and forced my timid body toward the foot of my parents' bedroom door. I knew I had to tell him that I planned to go to practice, so I stood there, waiting for my dad to acknowledge me. He lolled in bed, in blue shorts and a white wife-beater, sipping on beer while waiting for my mother to come home from work.

“Dad?”

“What do you want?”

“I'm, uhm, I'm going to practice?”

“Practice? Practice for what?” His harsh tone frightened me.

“For baseball. I want to play and my team has practice today.”

“Didn't I fucking tell your ass that you're not going to play fucking baseball?”

My nerves developed a ball of tears that strained my throat.

“Ok, but um, I already paid for the season,” I said, my voice cracking.

Gripping his Budweiser, he sat up and looked like he wanted to tackle me to the floor.

“You fucking take your ass back there and ask for that money back, now!”

I didn't know what to say and had one thought running through my head: *This is going to be humiliating*. But I listened and turned away from his room, walked out of the house, opened the gate to our hurricane fence and heard the latch slam down behind me as I left. The ball of tears had surfaced to my eyes and I cried like a child.

I paced my every step and threw my hands in the air while releasing a frustrated yell.

"I'm not even a bad kid!"

As I drew closer to Mr. Sanchez's fresh-cut yard, I tried to compose myself. I shook my head back and forth, wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands and dried the dripping snot from my nose with the tail end of my t-shirt. My hands tightened into firm fists that gripped and released, repetitively. I sighed and held in a thousand tears still awaiting to surface. Three weak-sounding knocks beckoned Mrs. Sanchez to the door. Her sweet face welcomed me but her eyes saddened at the sight of mine.

"Oh, what's wrong, son? What's wrong? "

I looked at her once and then returned my gaze to the ground.

"Can I please just talk to Mr. Sanchez?"

"Yes, yes of course. Come in."

My steps dragged across the oak wood floor while I wiped my dampened eyelashes one more time. She led me into the kitchen, where I stood alone by the table as she walked out to call Mr. Sanchez from the back yard. The sunlight that penetrated their windowed sliding doors drowned the room in a yellow haze. It matched the yellow curtains hanging from the window above the sink. I whimpered as I watched Mrs. Sanchez call Mr. Sanchez away from his work. I saw him replacing a light bulb on the exterior wall of the white food-truck he always parked at Echo Lake. My teammates and I always salivated over the aroma of free hot dogs and nachos

toward the end of every game. I saw Mrs. Sanchez and him exchange words before he trudged his husky body toward the patio door. Anxiety overwhelmed me and I became light headed. I took a deep sigh when he walked in. Mrs. Sanchez disappeared into the living room.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Cid?” he asked.

“I, uhm.” The tight grip of tears around my throat didn’t allow me to speak. Again, I cried. I wiped my eyes with my t-shirt. Mr. Sanchez’s assertive demeanor crumbled before me as he bent down to pat my back.

“Ok, son, try to calm down and take a seat.”

I sat down, took a breath and whimpered for a few seconds.

“What’s wrong, Cid?”

“Well, my dad doesn’t want me playing baseball,” I said.

“He told you *what?*” He glared at me.

“Yea, he said he doesn’t want me to play baseball.” I lowered my head. “So, he sent me back here to get the money back that I paid you for the enrollment.”

Mrs. Sanchez returned to the kitchen. “That man is crazy!” She said. “There’s nothing wrong with playing baseball.”

Mr. Sanchez released a breath almost as heavy as him. “Well Cid, I don’t know what to tell you. Do you want me to talk to him?”

“No!” I replied. “He was really upset. You don’t know what he did to me last year for going to the game.”

“Look,” he continued. “I can give you the money back. That’s not a problem. And if you ever want to come back, just let me know.”

He took a brown leather wallet out from his back pocket and pulled out a dreadful twenty dollar bill. His hefty fingers held it out across the table. I lifted my eyes enough to see his nose and took the bill from him.

“Thank you,” I said. I stood up and he walked me out. I heard the front door close and lock behind me. I walked with lowered shoulders down the stone walkway that led to their front gate. As soon as I turned to walk back to my house, the sobbing commenced again. I could hardly breathe. I squeezed the bill and felt it almost rip between the grasp of my fingers. As my steps grew faster, I grew angrier and my tears receded with every house I passed.

I pushed the front gate of our house out of my way, barged inside and walked straight into my father’s room. I saw his crushed beer can thrown on the blue carpet. He lay in the same position I had left him in.

“Look, here’s the money.” I threw it at the bed and it landed by his leg.

“Why are you crying, princess?”

I heard the taunting word and felt a dry knot form in my throat. I wanted to scream and beat the shit out of him, but I nodded my head and walked away.

I sat on a concrete step leading down to the backyard for hours that evening. *I’m not even a bad kid that deserves to be fucking treated like this.* I repeated the thought in my head as the stars and moon became the only light in the sky. The air rustled small branches on the pecan trees in the backyard – I listened to it harmonize with the repetitive sounds of cicadas.

Night never looked so dead. I threw my glove onto the weeds that covered most of our yard. My dog, Oso, attacked and yanked it with his jagged teeth. His jaw clenched as he bit the leather and shook his head back and forth. I let him have it and walked back inside to draw. Before I fell asleep, I stared at the ceiling and thought about what my glove would look like in

the morning; each of the leather fingers shredded and torn, the black threads unstitched, the glove – shards of leather that no longer served a purpose. For the first time in my life, I made a decision for myself. I wouldn't care about anything.

CHAPTER III

INITIATION

The following day, I wandered down the streets of my neighborhood on my Schwinn bike. Swerving on and off the streets, I pedaled over weeds that sprouted from every break between the concrete slabs. Dogs conversed across yards and some barked from the street corners I sped past. While the 88 degree heat toasted my head, a cool air traveled through the roots of my hair, refreshing my scalp. When I turned onto Robin Street, I sat upright and pedaled without holding onto the handle bars. Halfway down the street, I saw Joe Gonzalez sitting on his front porch. A year older than me, he had a three year affiliation with a local Southside gang. His cousins and a few other family members were active too. Their gang was the second largest in Fort Worth and they typically only accepted Mexican-American members. I'm not sure why I asked him the question that I did, but it would make for one of the longest days of my life.

"Hey, man." I rode up to his fence, planted my leg on the ground and leaned over the gate.

"Yo, Cid. What's up, man?"

"Nothing, just chilling."

I let him walk toward me before making my formal request.

"Hey man, I wanna get down with the Southside gang," I said.

"What? But you don't even get in trouble!"

“I don’t give a fuck, man. I wanna join. I’m tired of getting jumped by these chumps from the hood.”

Every few weeks, a couple of neighborhood gangsters beat me up on my way home from school. I once had three Southside Crips jump me because they wanted my baseball cap. Their punches had nothing on my father’s, but as scrawny as I was, I could use the extra protection. So, if joining a gang was my only option for back-up, that’s exactly what I planned to do.

“All right, man. Well, let’s go over to Jose Vargas’ house, he lives two blocks down from here,” Joe G. said. I never liked Jose Vargas, he seemed like a shady guy because he always looked at everyone like he wanted to kick their ass. But, he would throw down for you in a heartbeat if you joined his gang.

I left my bike in Joe G.’s yard and walked alongside him for two blocks without saying much; I listened to him ramble about the gang life most of the way. When we arrived, Joe G. knocked on the screen door and Jose Vargas answered, dressed in a red flannel shirt that he buttoned up to his neck. His pale white skin stood out against his dull, black hair. Another gangster from the Southside, a guy named Dopey, stood behind him. His backwards cap matched his brown t-shirt, which hung just above his knees and revealed the baggy jeans bunched at his ankles. They stepped outside and talked to us in the yard.

“Hey, what’s up, man?” Jose asked.

Joe G. looked at me.

“Hey, man, I’m ready to get down with Two-Trece,” I said. Two-Trece or 213 dated back to the early 1980’s in Southside Fort Worth. By the time I turned thirteen, their gang had over 700 members, from preteen gangsters to older gangsters in their 30’s. Two-Trece had a

truce with one gang in our area, the Southside Bloods. Every other gang battled and rivaled against us.

“Oh, really?” Jose replied. Dopey stood by his side with a mischievous leer on his face.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Ok, man.” Jose replied. “Well, we’re all B.G.’s here, so we can’t initiate other B.G.’s. Plus, we have to do it in front of a witness.”

We were all just Baby Gangsters living the lives of crazy, grown men.

“Let’s go, man,” Dopey said.

Dopey, five years older than the rest of us, had three years in with Two-Trece. Jose called his brother-in-law’s house and gave him a heads up on my initiation. Dopey’s car, a 1983 Station Wagon, with more rust on it than you could find in a junk yard, took us on a fifteen minute ride through the Southside. I sat in the backseat, rubbing my thumb against the foam cushion that protruded from a rip in the fabric and thought about the years I had just shaved off my life. My anxiety and pounding heart triggered an image of me as a crazy gangster. But I had no doubts and I couldn’t turn back like a chump. I would do whatever it took to get in and stay in.

Jose’s brother-in-law had an 11-year run with Two-Trece, a true O.G.; an Old Gangster from the Southside. Dingy white paint trimmed the red brick walls of his single-family home. We walked under an awning of skeletal trees that cast a heavy shade over the front yard, dusk almost darkened to night underneath it. I stood behind the boys, waiting for the O.G. to step outside. A stalky, red-headed guy opened the door dressed in a blue flannel shirt, khakis and steel toed boots. Tattooed sleeves covered his pale skin and he stared at the one youngster he didn’t recognize: me.

“Hey, Güero,” Jose said. “He wants to join Two-Trece.” Jose pointed his thumb back at me.

Güero’s black beady eyes measured me up.

“How old are you?” Güero asked me.

“Thirteen,” I said.

He raised his eyebrows. “And you want to get down with a big man’s gang already?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s no turning back,” he continued while crossing his arms.

“I know.” I heard the shame in my voice.

“All right, go to the back and let me get my dogs.”

The guys led me around to the side of the house. Dopey pushed open the chain-linked gate that led to the backyard and I followed them in, behind Joe. G. Thirsty dirt covered the backyard. Piles of fallen acorns had sucked any moisture from the ground, leaving it grassless.

Tenacious weeds along the hurricane fence that encompassed this initiation arena sprouted the only signs of plant life. The boys cleared space in the center, moving plastic lawn chairs with cracked arms and legs off to the side. I saw excitement smear across their faces through rogue-like smirks and grins. Güero walked out from the back porch with his younger sister by his side. She held a brown wrist watch in her hand.

“All right, so you know the rules,” he announced. “Three minutes to get in and if you fall down, you gotta get back up and the time starts over. You’ll continue to get beat up until you stand up and last the full three minutes.”

His sister stood next to him, her crotch-length shorts exposed the cellulite dimpling on her inner thighs.

“She’s gonna time you,” Güero continued. “Joe, Jose and Dopey are gonna jump you in and I’m gonna watch.”

I took off my shirt, tightened my belt and tied my shoe laces. I moved toward the center of the circle that the guys casually formed. Their faces morphed into snarling masks, stuck in an emotionless state. They did what they had to do; I guess that’s what makes you a homeboy. While looking into their crazed eyes, *they’re not your friends*, repeated in my mind. Friends didn’t exist at the moment, that’s how these homeboys worked.

A street light towered from the corner of the yard, illuminating the yard in a yellow fog. I tucked my head down when I saw Jose swing his first punch. It came on quick, straight into my ribs; their unrelenting punches struck my ribs, back and face. I kept my head down and punched back in any direction. I saw their sneakers and steel toed boots ravaging the dirt as they took turns kicking my body. My face, back and ribs felt like a multi-leveled punching bag. I fell to my knees after what seemed like five minutes and hit the ground; the rest of my body followed gravity’s pull. I inhaled a cloud of dirt that rose from their merciless kicking. I turned to the side and got kicked in the nose by someone’s boot and felt the blood pour out like a faucet. I wiped the blood with my forearm, knelt on all fours, and slowly raised myself back up. My back pained as I hunched over with my head lowered. Continuing to punch blindly, I withstood the second round of beating.

“Time!” Güero’s sister yelled out.

The beating stopped. I looked up at Joe G. with a bloody smile on my face. He smirked and extended one arm over my shoulder.

“Good job, man,” he said.

Dopey and Jose each gave me an aggressive pat on the back.

“You’re in, man,” Dopey said.

Güero walked toward me and gave me a towel. He tilted his head back and said, “C’mon.” I followed him to the water faucet by the back door. I lowered the towel to wash my face and saw chaotic splotches of my blood smeared across it. The water only diluted the nonstop drip of blood from my nose and lower lip. I patted my face with the towel again and looked up at Güero.

“Welcome to the family,” he said.

He held out his hand, fingers tattooed with the numbers 213 in roman numerals. I shook his tight grip and said nothing. The rest of the guys vanished inside.

“Go inside,” Güero said. “I’ll be right back. Talk to the guys.”

The gangsters inside Güero’s house represented a mix of B.G.’s and O.G.’s: Joe G., B.G.; Jose Vargas, B.G.; Dopey, B.G.; Frankie V., O.G.; and Dickie, O.G. They stood there, a miniscule part of a massive and ruthless crew in Southside Forth Worth. They sat around the kitchen table, Budweisers in hand. Güero entered the kitchen holding a glass of bum wine. I acquired wine drinking and much more from these gangsters over time. From 14 to 36, this crew of troublemakers, criminals, weed smokers, drug users and killers became my new family, my homeboys. They became my protection and I, theirs; I was down for the hood. They discussed the rules of gang, our turf, rival gangs, gun fights and plans for the next drive-by. This part of the initiation almost overwhelmed me.

“Cid, come here. Get up!” Güero called me from the living room with a 12-gauge shotgun in his hand. The guys in the kitchen fell silent. I felt their eyes gawping at the back of my neck as I walked toward a 1980’s floral printed loveseat in the living room. I stood up straight in front of him.

“Now, you down with the family?” he asked. “Are you willing to die for this?”

He took a sip of beer while pointing the barrel of the gun at my stomach. His beady eyes never faltered while maintaining his nonchalant stare.

“Yeah,” I said.

His grip tightened around the trigger just before I saw sparks escape from the blast. The pressure from the gunshot flung my body onto the couch.

Oh, shit! I thought.

I stared at his sneering face as I flew back in shock. My hand reached down to my stomach. I cringed as my eyes followed.

Nothing. Clean. The only blood on my shirt had dried from my earlier beating. My eyes traveled back up to meet Güero’s in disbelief.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Now, I know you’re down.”

“Oh, shit!” The guys bellowed in an uproar from the kitchen. “Damn!” some of them yelled. They had never seen Güero do anything like that to a new B.G. They rushed up to me, Güero laughing to himself as he watched his family embrace their newest member. I shook their hands and welcomed their one-armed hugs. I looked at Güero through the gathering of crazy gangsters congregating around me. He nodded his head and beckoned me with his beady eyes.

“I’m gonna give you a nickname because I think you did really well today. I saw you fighting in the dark. So, I’m gonna name you Little Shadow, because like a shadow, you kept moving after every punch while the guys beat you up,” he said.

“Cool,” I replied.

“All right, well let’s go get you some beer and stuff. We’ll be right back.”

I jumped in the backseat of Dopey's car with Joe G. and Jose; Güero road in the front. The rest of the gang stayed behind while we stopped at Circle 7 to pick up a couple of MD2020's. During the ride, I listened to the guys talk about beating the fuck out of some rival gangsters at school. Some of these gang rivalries dated back years before I was born.

"We're gonna fuck them up for what they did, Güero," Jose said.

Güero nodded and kept his eyes peeled, always serious when we drove around the hood. The Fugees' version of *Killing me Softly* played in the background. Although I found the song pretty lame, these tough gangsters loved it and jammed out, until some insane gangster rap blasted through the speakers, then they went wild.

"We don't put up with traitors, Cid!" Guero yelled over the music while I took a sip of my drink. "Don't rat on your friends! We'll fucking kill traitors, beat the fuck out of them until they're in pain. That's what we do!"

"Hell yeah, man," I replied.

"And your guns, you've gotta get them on your own."

"Yeah, ok," I said.

I drank an MD2020, which tasted like spiked fruit punch. I watched the weak-lit street lights pass us by at every corner. Southside Fort Worth and Two-Trece became what I lived for; down for my hood. We drove around until we finished our drinks and then they took me home. I got off the car and approached the front passenger window.

"You're down now?" Güero asked with a stiff stare.

"No turning back, man," I said. I reached out my hand to shake his. He grabbed it so hard I felt my knuckles rub against each other.

"All right, see you around," he replied.

I entered my house thirty minutes after midnight. My father wasn't home yet and no one else saw me except for my brother, who didn't say anything as I walked straight to the bathroom. I took a shower before heading to my spot on the living room floor. The last of any dried blood on my face washed off with cold water, which soothed my lips and eyes.

I stared at the ceiling and thought about the entire day. Three things haunted me: First, I needed to make sure that other gangsters never knew where I lived. I didn't want a drive-by at my house that could hurt my parents or my brother and sisters. As much as I didn't care about them, I didn't want them getting shot over me and some gang. Second, I needed to get the right clothes to dress like the other members in Two-Trece. People needed to know who I ran with. Finally, I needed to get a hold of some guns. I made a new family among gangsters and I wanted the O.G.'s to take me seriously. If they saw a new B.G. strapped every day, they'd know this crazy kid was down for the hood.

CHAPTER IV

FINDING OUT

After three months as a B.G., threads dyed in red and brown stained every article of clothing hanging in my closet. Each morning, I laced up the bleached shoelaces on my white K-Swiss sneakers after slipping on my baggy Girbaud jeans, which featured front pockets deep enough to slide my double sawed-off shotgun into. My new wardrobe cost money. Every weekend, I worked my paper route around the neighborhood. I made honest money and dirty money. If the business of delivering newspapers ran slow, I delivered drugs and offered neighborhood thugs a good high instead. I would pedal down blocks to deliver an eight ball of cocaine, a couple of grams of weed, or some crystal meth for the O.G.'s, taking my fair cut of the money on each deal and watching my six every time I rode home.

One afternoon, after my paper route, I turned onto the corner of my street and saw Jose and Dopey standing on the sidewalk in front of my house. I sped up toward them. My tire screeched against the cracked pavement as I parked my bike parallel to them and I planted my foot on the ground.

“What’s up? What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Some shit is gonna go down later,” Dopey replied. “The O.G.’s want us at Echo Lake.”

“Yeah, ok,” I said. “What time?” I wiped the sweat beads accumulating on my upper lip with the collar of my red t-shirt.

“Ten,” Jose said. “You down?”

“Yeah, man, for sure. A brawl or what?”

“They didn’t say,” Dopey replied with raised eyebrows.

“Just be there, man,” Jose said.

“Yeah, all right.” I reached out and punched fists with each of them.

“Cid! Get your ass in here, boy!” My father hollered from the front porch. Dopey and Jose examined him. His beer belly protruded from underneath his wife beater, stained with old sweat at the chest, and his dark skin perspired as he glowered at me.

“Get in here,” he snarled. Like a lazy drunk, he lost his balance and stumbled back inside, letting our screen door slam against the wooden frame.

After my homeboys caught a glimpse of him, they stared at me, confused.

“Yo man, what up with your family, that’s your dad?” Dopey asked.

“What’s up? What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve seen your sisters and brother, man. You don’t look like any of them and you definitely don’t look like your dad either, bro. That’s weird, you don’t look nothing like them,” Dopey repeated.

“Yeah, man. You’ve never noticed?” Joe asked.

“Shut up, man. Get out of here,” I replied with a nervous laugh. I never felt comfortable around my so-called “family.” Listening to my homeboys made my nerves radiate with anxiety and I felt that dry knot in my throat again.

“All right, well, we’ll see you tonight?” Jose asked.

“Yeah, man. I’ll be at Echo later,” I said.

“All right, we’re out,” Dopey replied. They walked off with the back ends of their baggy jeans sweeping the concrete sidewalk after every stride.

I rolled my bike along the side of the house to the back yard. The sound of pecans crushing underneath the rubber tires crackled. I parked it against the back of the house and tied it up with a lock and chain that I stole from Eddy's Hardware on the North side of downtown Fort Worth, three weeks before.

That afternoon, my mother took my sisters to our aunt's house for their first hair cut in two years. So, the house remained empty for most of the day. Earlier, she had served us leftover fideo for breakfast, and my sisters played with it more than they ate it. Since it sat on the counter overnight, the orange soup thickened as it soaked the pasta strings floating in it.

My mother saw the girls swirling their tin spoons around the bowl. "Oh, you don't want to eat it?" she yelled. "My food isn't good enough for you?"

Lucy's eyes watered as she cringed at the sound of our mother's hollering. Audry, startled, let the stem of her spoon fall and clang on the rim of her glass bowl. She pushed her hands underneath her thighs and lowered her head. My mother charged toward them, her jaws clenched and eyebrows tensed.

"Come on! Eat it," she yelled. "Eat it!"

She grabbed the back of Audry's head first, pushing her face into the bowl. Audry wailed and grabbed the edge of the table. Her fingertips turned white as the skin pressed over her bitten fingernails. Lucy watched and wept. My brother and I kept eating, even though I became nauseated watching small air bubbles inflate in the thick juice.

My mother pulled her hand off Audry's greasy hair. My sister cried and stared her face toward the ceiling. She tried to catch her breath and gasped through relentless bawling. The tears

that streamed down her face cut through the orange grease and smashed pasta smeared on her cheeks. Strands of her hair clumped together and dripped with fideo juice.

Lucy's whimpers grew to wailing as my mother looked at her.

"What? You're next!" my mother turned her head and flipped her ponytail off her shoulder. She creased her thin eyebrows together as she glared at Lucy.

Lucy nodded her head and pleaded, "no!" Her pathetic frown and snot-dripping nostrils made me clench my teeth as I swallowed my last scoop of fideo. I watched my mother force her face into the bowl. As the youngest and most naïve, Lucy fought her more than Audry. She raised her head against my mother's aggressive hold, but my mother forced it down again and then pushed herself away from my baby sister. Lucy raised her face; her drenched brown bangs stuck to her forehead and drooped over her eyes. She whimpered and wiped her face with her t-shirt.

"What are you doing? Get up! Stop crying and go the bathroom, both of you." "Get out of here," my mother continued to holler at my brother and me while taking our bowls off the table.

"Now, I have to clean their damn faces and hair again," she muttered.

She must have grown tired of cleaning food out of their hair so often, so cutting it seemed appropriate.

After chaining my bike, I entered our house through the kitchen door. The dirty bowls from that morning sat stacked on the counter. My brother, Leo, snored on the couch in the living room; I heard my father doing the same from his bedroom. They snored alike, almost suffocating themselves and taking huge gasps after four consecutive snores. I looked and acted

nothing like my father. At the prime age of thirteen, I began to stretch, leaving my twelve-year-old brother far behind in height. Although lanky, my workouts began to form muscle on my arms and chest, and my shoulders became broad. My olive skin never tanned as dark as theirs did. I developed and matured in ways that didn't resemble anyone in my family.

My homeboys' comments echoed in my head. So, I crept into my parents' bedroom and knelt on the mustard yellow carpet. I opened the bottom drawer of their weathered oak wood dresser, which my father found near a garbage bin outside of an apartment complex in Southside. Lacking its rusted copper handle, I slipped my fingers under either side of the drawer and slid it open.

A beige photo album showcased its age in yellow stains that spread across its artificial leather binding. A golden trim framed a space for a featured photo on the outside cover, which still remained empty.

I placed the thick, eight by nine inch album on my lap, closed the drawer and snuck out of the room. My father snored through his drunken slumber. I sat in my brother's room and browsed through the first eight pages. Sporadic inserts of my sisters' school pictures filled every other page; I found a few of my brother's photos in there too. In the middle of the photo album, my mother kept all of our birth certificates inserted into the same photo pocket. I pulled out all four dingy forms and looked at my sisters' first. I stared at the identical forms: the early 1980's format didn't change within the three years between my sisters' births. The same blue Victorian border ran around the page, the same font filled the fields and they shared the same last name: Avalos. I took my brother's next, which didn't differ too much from my sisters', except for his last name. My mother gave him her maiden name: Fuente. I finally looked at my own birth certificate and read it for the first time. I looked at the faded black print that had diminished

every year it laid pressed against the plastic pages in the album. I knew I had a birth certificate; my mother had presented it at school for registration a few times, and then returned it to its memorable place in that photo album. But, for the first time, I read it and saw my real name.

For the past thirteen years, I knew my name as, Cirano “Cid” Fuente. But now, I owned the name Cirano Lagunas and finally learned where my first name, as odd and rare as it sounded, came from. I stared at my parents’ names, printed in the black ink that I couldn’t erase. My heart thumped and pounded in my chest as I read my mother’s name printed neatly beside my father’s. I shared a name with him, Cirano Lagunas, Jr. *Who the fuck was this guy?* I thought. The daunting question ran through my head, and the suffix in his name shocked me more than the mere fact that we shared names. *Jr.? So I’m the third?* I sat Indian style in my brother’s room, facing the open closet door and staring at four pieces of paper laying on the dirty brown carpet in front of me. My mother’s collection of family documents solidified my doubt. I didn’t belong to them the way I thought I did. I didn’t look like them, I didn’t act like them, I didn’t feel comfortable around them and I couldn’t depend on them. My brother and sisters were only half mine, now. I spent the past thirteen years living with a bastard who played the role of “dad.” I took his beatings like I deserved it. I let his words cut through my pride like a serrated knife through bread, sawing away at me with every jagged cut.

At that time, I communicated with my family about once a week, so I didn’t plan on asking my mother about this. I turned another page in the photo album and found one more document with information about my parents. Their ages, 15 and 17, were listed along with their occupations. Having her first child at the age of 15 seemed enough work for my mother, since she listed “No Occupation” underneath her name. But, Ciranos Lagunas, Jr. worked at Billy Bob’s Texas in Fort Worth, as a security guard. I knew about the place, along with every rodeo

fan in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Still the largest night club and concert venue with live bull riding in the United States, I wondered if he might still work there, even after thirteen years. Other than his race, I didn't find out anything else; at least I knew some Native American blood ran through my veins.

I sat and stared at the documents. I flipped the plastic pages of the photo album, seeking a picture of my father. I wondered about him and whether he wondered about me; whether he knew that I existed. And if I had real father, then why did my mother make me live with a prick that spent the last thirteen years beating me?

I heard my stepfather's sluggish stomps in the living room. I piled the birth certificates on top of one another and shoved them back into the plastic pocket where I found them. I stuffed my father's brief bio into another pocket a few pages later, where my mother would leave him, forgotten. She wouldn't mind where any remnants of his existence were shoved. A pile of my dirty laundry sat in the corner of the room, so I buried the photo album underneath it. I washed my own clothes, as we all did, so I knew no one would bother looking there. It took me a few years to learn how to wash. In elementary, I went to school smelling like a wet dog a few times, because I forgot to add laundry detergent, or because we just didn't have any.

When I walked back into the living room, I sat next to my half-brother on the couch and watched my stepfather stuff a leftover sandwich in his mouth. His eating habits mimicked his drinking. Mayonnaise trickled out from the corners of his mouth as he bit into the soggy bread. Although I hated watching him devour his food, that night I felt grateful. For the first time, I did not belong to him or his disgusting nature, and the next time he touched me would be his last.

I sat on the couch for the next two hours and observed the family that I felt awkward around. They couldn't dress me, feed me, defend me; they couldn't do anything I needed. My

brother and sisters followed our parents around, depending on them as children should. At least they got school clothes out of it; my stepfather bought Leo a pair of Nike's for the school year. The girls still wore dresses my mother sewed for them. But I bought my own K-Swiss sneakers with money I earned on the streets. Who took care of me? Nobody. No one gave a damn about what happened to me, except for myself and my homeboys.

I watched my sisters play and fight over the one Barbie they had while sitting on the dusty living room floor. My brother lay beside me on the couch. My mother and stepfather disappeared into their bedroom. I watched her follow him like an obedient wife, focused on his happiness more than her own children's. I sat in silence. That's how I behaved inside that house; nobody talked to me and I didn't talk to anyone. I felt weird, disconnected from my surroundings. For years, I never told any of them about what I found that afternoon.

When the sun set behind Fort Worth's downtown skyline, I took off to meet my homeboys at Echo Lake. The O.G.'s talked to me and another B.G. about their plans for a drive-by against the Southside Crips. I learned more about gang life every day, and about how far I would go to defend myself and my homeboys. These gangsters always had my back and as insane as they acted, I thought their crazy ideas would take me out of the game. But, even that surprised me.

The following morning, I walked out onto the porch and picked up a phonebook that the postman had dropped by our house about a month ago. I decided to look up my father's name and found Cirano Lagunas, Sr. My name stared back at me from the thin and weathered white pages. Reading "Sr." as a suffix to my name looked foreign. My history sat on my front porch and in the drawer of my mother's vanity for months, for years. I had no idea who I belonged to.

I thought I had found my family and a future with Two-Trece, but now, I wanted to know more. I memorized the phone number and on impulse, I called. A man answered and cleared his throat:

“Hello?” he said. His deep voice trembled and sounded weak with age.

By instinct, I knew that my grandfather spoke to me from the other end of the phone. Before Two-Trece, I walked home from school and dealt gangsters from other hoods beating me up every week. I’d get home with my face bruised and cut, but no one ever looked at me and said, “You don’t need that shit.” I took poundings on the streets and at home; the beatings were all the same. I yearned for someone in my family to say, “Hey, I’ve got your back.” That’s why I joined Two-Trece. No blood-related family member could protect me. But now, I had more. I felt hopeful; the emotion struck me for a second. A lineage of Lagunas men existed, but the thought scared me shitless.

“Hello?” he repeated.

I hung up.

Just as quickly as I wanted to know about these men, I dismissed that reality. I didn’t know what to say. I sought an identity and answers about my family. I had nobody in my life to depend on, except for my boys in Two-Trece, and I owed it to them to stay loyal to the hood. I couldn’t leave and become a traitor, so I stuck to my identity as a homeboy, as a gangster from Southside. For months I tried to forget his phone number, but it never worked.

CHAPTER V
BABY GANGSTERS

During the summer of 1994, my homeboy, Albert Granado, and I drove to Lacher Park. We planned on enjoying the view of preteen homegirls glistening under the sun's highest peak as their perky breasts hypnotized us from low cut shirts. Tight skirts and thigh-high shorts in the summer had me drooling over their thick tan thighs. I've always loved Hispanic women; even then, the curves of their precious bodies mesmerized me.

Lacher Park sat on the threshold between our territory and territory claimed by the Southside Bloods. They had a truce with our gang about when and where to mingle, and Lacher Park belonged to both of us. If you didn't stick to your side of the hood and an enemy gang member saw you, you could expect to rumble. Albert, a Blood, had his eye on a young girl from the hood, Ruby Red. So, we went out there to meet her and a few other girls from around Southside. Everyone called her Red because she loved the color; either that or because she would beat the shit out of any girl she brawled with, guaranteeing bloody noses or lips every time. She and four other girls sat on top of a weathered picnic table. They laughed and smoked, making it look like the sexiest thing a thirteen year old girl could do. Their maroon lipstick stained Camel cigarette stems.

Albert parked his '88 Cadillac in front of the picnic table. Red sat at the edge of the table, with her bare legs crossed and feet adorned in red high-top Nike's. I noticed her thin waist

peeking from her bare midriff top, and her chest, which looked like it belonged to an 18-year-old woman, burst from her V-neck t-shirt. She loved her chest almost as much as Albert did.

“Well, look who finally made it,” Red yelled.

Albert smiled while I nodded my head and got out of the car.

“Yeah, calm down, Red. I know you want me, but at least play hard to get!” Albert replied as he slammed the car door.

“You wish, culero!” she yelled back. Calling him an asshole in Spanish made the girls erupt in laughter. She puffed her cigarette and blew smoke into the air as we approached her.

“So, what’s up, guys?” Red asked.

“Nothing,” Albert replied. “Just chillin; came to see what kind of trouble you girls planned on getting yourselves into later.”

The girls always waited for Red to take the lead. She would answer for them, make plans for them and decide which drugs they should or shouldn’t try. They didn’t care that she ran their show, because she had their back and would throw down for them, no questions asked.

“Well, I heard Guero was having a party. What’s up, you all wanna take us?” she asked.

A perverted leer smeared across Albert’s face. He took three steps toward Red and reached for the cigarette she held between her delicate fingers, her wrist resting atop her knee. She sighed and sat upright as he pulled the intoxicating drug away from her and toward his own mouth. He took one puff, then flicked it onto the ground and dug it into the dirt with his boot. The smoke escaped through his nostrils as he raised his eyes to meet hers again.

“Maybe. I’ll talk to Guero and see what’s up,” Albert replied.

“Maybe?” Red said. “Maybe we’ll just find someone else to party with, then.”

“Oh, it’s like that, huh?” Albert turned and looked at me. “See man, these bitches ain’t got no loyalty.”

I shook my head in disappointment. “Nope,” I replied.

“Hey, we damn loyal to whoever’s loyal to us!” Red’s friend, Chikies, interjected.

Chikies looked about one hundred pounds heavier than Red, and about one hundred times more ruthless. Her cute nickname may have originated because of her fat cheeks, but girls from around Southside knew better than to look for a fight with Chikies.

“Yeah, all right,” I said.

Albert walked back toward his car. “Calm down, ya’ll,” he shouted back. “You all down to start the party right now? We’ll take you to Guero’s later.” He took two Zima bottles out of the car and looked at the girls, who responded with a few high-pitched yells and conceited laughs.

I smirked and laughed to myself.

“Hell yeah, we’re ready to start the party right now,” Ruby yelled.

Albert turned on the car and flipped the radio station over to 100.3, *Tha Jamzz*. He strolled back and set the bottle on the table, then reached into his back pocket and pulled out a silver flask.

“That’s for us, homie.” He passed it over to me.

He looked back at Red. “Ok. Drink up, mami,” he said while handing her a Zima.

I took a swig of whiskey and watched the girls indulge in what really tasted like spiked sprite. They passed the bottles around and took turns drinking from them, again, staining the rims with their lipstick. 2Pac’s *Of Americaz Most Wanted* blared in the background while the summer sun peeked through the leaves of the trees that canopied over us.

“So, what’s up, Cid? Why are you so quiet?” Chikies asked.

I nodded and took another swig. “I’m good. Just chilling, same as you.”

While Albert and Red got lost in their own haze of smoke and alcohol, I talked to the rest of the girls.

“You all ready for tonight? Guero’s parties are always good,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ve been there once,” Chikies replied.

“And you?” I asked the girl sitting next to Chikies.

She looked younger than the rest, but dressed just as racy. With her thigh-high ripped shorts and bare midriff white V-neck, her A-cup breasts tried to seduce me. Her thick lips sucked on an orange tootsie pop. A tight ponytail pulled her russet hair away from her face, leaving only her bangs curling over her forehead, landing just above her thin eyebrows.

“I haven’t seen you around these girls before. Where you from?” I asked.

“I’m from nearby,” she said with a coy smile.

“Oh yea? How close is nearby?” I took a vigorous swig of whiskey and walked two steps toward her. I hated ambiguous answers to direct questions and her smile put me on edge.

She cringed at first and then raised her chin in the air.

“Don’t worry about it, Cid,” she said.

I snapped a stern stare at her. “No, I will worry about it.”

“Yo, Cid. Calm down, she’s cool, man.” Chikies stood up and placed her fat hand on my chest. Albert heard the commotion building up and walked toward me. But before he had a chance to say anything, a ’92 Chevy pickup jolted through the parking lot and halted in front of us. Two guys sat in the front seat while another two glared at us from the bed of the truck. The driver rolled down the passenger window and yelled out at the girl I questioned.

“Becca! Get your ass in this truck, now. I told you to stay away from these ghetto asses,” he hollered.

“Fuck,” she whispered under her breath. “Shut up, Carlos. I’m coming!” she yelled back.

“Hey, what the fuck did you call us, pendejo?” Albert charged his 5’6” body toward the truck and I followed right behind him.

I felt my palms sweat and my face heat up. Everything in my peripheral faded away like tunnel vision. I focused on the lunatics who thought they could taunt gangsters and get away with it. They didn’t look like gangsters from the hood, just a few senseless fools.

“Stay away from my sister, bro!” The driver yelled at us again while Becca jumped into the front seat. He peeled off before she could slam the door shut.

“I’ll fuck you up, guey!” Albert shouted back.

The two guys who sat in the bed of the pickup stared at us, while Albert kept charging forward with his arms wide open, welcoming anything these guys planned to do. They looked a few years older than us. Dressed in t-shirts and polos, they didn’t sport any particular gang colors. We assumed they lived in the Southside, just didn’t belong to a gang.

I turned around and looked at Chikies. “Who the fuck are they, Chikies? I thought your girl was cool. Isn’t that what you said?”

“They just some fools from around Southside. They ain’t shit; they ain’t got nobody backing them up, all right?”

Albert walked back toward the picnic table, where the girls stood, stunned.

“What the fuck, Red? I told you to watch who you bring around. Random ass fucks starting shit with us because of one chic?” Albert looked at the rest of the girls. “Hey, you all better learn something about loyalty and stick to your hood.”

“Yeah, we got it,” Red said. Her hand clutched her hip.

“Good,” I said.

Less than ten minutes after those guys took off, tires screeching from the parking lot stole our attention again. The blue Chevy raced back toward us. Albert yelled at the girls.

“Get out of here!”

Chikies and Red panicked as they grabbed the other two girls and ran away from the parking lot.

I dug my hand into my front pocket to grip my shotgun while Albert ran over to the car to grab his. I sprinted toward his Cadillac and ducked behind it as the truck raced closer and the sound of its throttling engine grew louder.

“Fuck you, assholes!” I heard the same arrogant voice bellow from the truck. I sank down to cover my head until I knew I could get a good shot at them. I raised my shoulders and tucked my head further down, waiting for the first gunshots to hit Albert’s car. Instead, I heard delicate splats against the Cadillac. A white egg cracked in front of my feet, the yolk spread and fell through the cracked shell, leaking onto the dirt. I released the grip from my gun; I hadn’t even released the safety yet.

“These fools are egging your car, bro!” I yelled at Albert as I stood up and watched them peel off again while three guys yelled into the air and shot their middle finger at us from the bed of the truck. I saw Albert getting into the driver seat, so I rushed to get myself into the car before he left without me. The ignition revved and we peeled out after them.

“We’re gonna fuck ‘em up,” Albert said.

“Let’s go!” I replied.

The engine throttled underneath the blue hood, I felt the machine's vibration travel from the heels of my feet, through my calves and underneath my hamstrings. I took short, quick breaths as my heart thumped underneath my chest. Albert pressed on the gas pedal with such vigor that it pushed his back against his seat, forcing his body back a few inches. We followed the Chevy out of the parking lot and sped up to 76 mph, trailing only inches behind them. Albert drove his car onto oncoming traffic. I rolled down the window and yelled at all four guys.

"Pull over, asshole!" I shouted. "Motherfuckers, pull over!"

The driver sneered at me. His eyes switched focus between me and the road. The guys in the bed of the truck yelled back at me.

"Let's go!" One of them hollered. "You little pussy, wannabe gangsters!"

"Let's go!" I yelled.

Albert steered his boat-of-a-car closer to their vehicle, running them off the road and into the parking lot of a gas station. He cut off the driver and cornered the Chevy between the gas pumps and his Cadillac. Albert jammed the gear into park and we jumped out of the vehicle.

"You all fucked up!" Albert yelled.

He ran straight to the driver's side of the pickup and bypassed the three guys who jumped out from the bed of the truck. Before the driver could place two feet on the ground, Albert already had him gripped by the purple cotton collar of his shirt. He dragged the driver from his seat and slammed his back against the side of the truck. I saw Albert raise his fist and thrash it into the guy's face.

The guys in the bed of the truck ran straight toward me. I punched my fist into the chin of the first one that approached me. My arm thrust forward and before I could pull it back, the second guy rammed his shoulder into my waist and tackled me to the ground. My back smacked

the pavement. He threw a second punch at my face, which had grown used to the feeling over the years. To this day, I have a high tolerance for pain. The punches and kicks that those two guys chucked at my body felt almost dainty. I threw punches and kicks in every direction, keeping my head somewhat tucked, just like my initiation.

Two guys against four; I could hear Albert screaming in the background. “Get up, motherfucker!”

I opened my eyes for a second and looked at the faces of the two guys beating me up. Their eyes squinted and tensed with rage; I saw their skin perspire and wrinkle in between the eyebrows. Their punches jabbed my body, one after another. The sound of police sirens snapped me back into my thrashing reality. I threw one final punch at one guy and kicked the other off me. Everyone scattered, beaten and bloody we ran back to our vehicles.

Albert and I peeled out of the gas station before the others and floored it down Rosedale St., then took a sharp turn onto Oak Grove Ave.

“Fuck!” I said.

He turned onto an alley and parked the car.

“Calm down, man,” he said. “I think we’re good. I lost them.” Albert always knew how to keep his cool.

My adrenaline made me light headed. Everything felt like a dream, like I was high on weed and watched myself go through the entire experience. I could have gone out and done it all over again. For my first rumble I came out pretty unscathed, but I knew the rush would become an addiction.

CHAPTER VI

RIVALRY

The day before my first day of high school, I spent the afternoon with a few of the homeboys at Echo Lake. Jose Vargas, Albert Granado, Dopey and I escaped the final days of a scorching summer with a few MD2020's. Between the four us, we stole the small bottles by the dozen from local convenient stores. We each had one in hand and one in our pocket; I had one more tied underneath my belt, hiding under my long t-shirt. Jose and Dopey leaned against the hood of Albert's Cadillac. I stood alert while gulping the sweet bum wine. The cold liquid trickled down my throat, cooling me from the inside out.

"You ready for tomorrow, man?" Dopey asked.

"Hell yeah," I said.

"Hey Cid, man you better be ready to throw down," Jose said. "It'll get crazy tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know, man." I knew how to handle gang bangs and rumbles by then, but the following morning would bring chaos like I had never seen.

Beyond Jose's and Dopey's heads, I saw three men wandering past the baseball fields and toward us in the parking lot. I screwed the plastic top back onto my bottle and stuffed it into my back pocket. Albert did the same and looked down at Jose and Dopey.

"Hey, get rid of your shit, these guys are back," I said while nodding my head and directing my eyes behind them. They didn't bother looking back and stuffed the bottles underneath their belts. Dopey walked toward me and glanced behind him.

“Man, these guys don’t get enough of us,” Dopey said with a smirk.

“C.O.P.?” Jose asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

Jose snickered as the men approached us, one calm step after another. Roger walked two steps in front of the others; he helped run a program in the area called GI COP, the Gang Intervention Community Outreach Program. His burly shoulders towered over all of us at 6’4. He had his fair share of blank ink adorning his arms and neck. He spent his evenings and weekends visiting parks and neighborhoods throughout Southside Fort Worth, preaching to young kids like me about the “better paths” we had available. He tried hard to convince us that we could have a “better future,” but his futile efforts never changed a thing, not for me and my homeboys anyway. And his two lackeys, who didn’t sport a single trace of ink on their skin, didn’t help his case as they pretended to know about the battles that we faced in the hood every day. I had the word “South” tatted on my right arm. I did it on myself using a tattoo machine I made from a VCR motor, a fork, a button, a plug taken from an old alarm clock and a mechanical pencil. I don’t think these guys from GI COP could have understood the complication of my machine, much less, our lives.

“Boys, how are ya’ll doing?” Roger asked.

“We’re good, man,” Jose said.

“Still haven’t decided to come visit me at my center, huh?”

None of us replied.

“Man, I come here every week and see your same faces wearing those same colors,” he continued. “Just chilling and waiting for trouble to come find you, if you’re not out looking for it

yourselves. You gonna do this for the rest of your life? Fightin' over territory? You're fighting over a street, man. It ain't worth it."

He shot a stare my way.

"Hey, it's easy for you to say it. But you don't live here and you don't go through what we go through," I said. "Guys from other hoods break into our shit, into our homes, into our stores and they take whatever they want. You don't live in our hoods and you don't know what it's like to live here, every day."

"I've been through it. But, I got out and there's more to life than the streets," he said while pointing toward Fort Worth's downtown skyline.

"Yeah? Well right now, we've gotta fight to even have a life," I said.

Roger shook his head in frustration. "Well, if you ever change your mind and feel you need some help, you know where to find me."

He handed us his card and backed away. "Let's go, gentlemen," he said. As they strolled away in their khakis and navy polo shirts, Roger shouted back one more time, "Watch your back and stay safe, boys."

My homeboys tossed his card on the floor, but I tucked it into my back pocket.

"What? You plan to call him later?" Dopey asked me.

I shoved him and laughed. "Shut up, man. Let's go."

I took my bike from the pecan tree it leaned against and straddled it. "I'll see you all tomorrow."

Monday morning dawned, and like the start of every semester, open season on every gangster who walked the grounds of R.L. Paschal High School commenced. In the fall of 1994,

every gang member had returned from suspension, so the craving for a brawl weighed heavy on all of us. We didn't need a specific reason to fight. We fought to prove ourselves against our rivals, to set the tone for the rest of the year. That morning, I went to meet my homeboys at our spot outside the auditorium. Two –Trece had 700 members comprised of middle school boys, high school guys, and hundreds of O.G.'s. About 40 of our members went to my high school. Since Two-Trece had a truce with the Southside Bloods, the gang my boy Albert Granado suited up with, we hung out on the same side. The Blue Ragers, predominantly a Mexican gang, hung out by the cafeteria and had a truce with the Southside Crips. The Crips encompassed a lot of African American members; their gang competed with ours in size. In those days, everyone wanted to be a Crip or a Blood, and the war between these rivals existed far beyond our own hoods.

Mack, a crazy gangster from the Southside Bloods, always had his radio with him and blasted music from the steps of the auditorium. The familiar voice of Tupac left the static of Mack's stereo speakers and drowned the air in raw talent and truth.

From the cradle to the grave, life ain't never been easy,
Living in the ghetto.
Time's movin' fast
will I last another day?
So I pray and I lay with my A-K.
Did I sell my soul as a young kid?
All the things I did
Wishin' someone held me
but they never did.
I can't take it
will I make it to my older age?
Before I'm shot up or locked up in a fuckin' cage.
Lord help me, guide me, save me!
Cause that's the way that Daddy raised me
crazy.

Tupac's *Cradle to the Grave* bounced off the concrete walls of the buildings planted behind us, empowering every gangster to feel like they owned the world we played in. We stared each other down with a strange need to brawl and fight for pride, for purpose, for the hoods.

A huge war reverberated in the ghetto streets of America, and a prominent feud overtaking the hip hop music scene of the mid 1990's nurtured it. A battle between artists and fans from the East and West Coast hip hop scenes built major tensions between the Crips and the Bloods. As much as they played rap music, Radio DJ's reported on the rapper rivalry occurring between The Notorious B.I.G. from Bad Boy Records and 2Pac from Death Row Records.

Around the time I started high school, Bad Boy Records released a song from B.I.G., which almost brought the East Coast hip hop scene back to life. But, 2Pac decided to rival against B.I.G. and publicly accused him and Bad Boy CEO, Sean Combs, of attempting to rob and shoot him in 1994. After that, B.I.G. released, "Who Shot Ya?," and although Combs denied having anything to do with the shooting, 2Pac and his fans interpreted it as B.I.G.'s way of taunting him. So, 2Pac rapped on tracks like "Hit 'Em Up," and aimed threats at B.I.G., his label and anyone affiliated with Bad Boy Records. Even the media got in on it and called the rivalry a coastal rap war, which caused fans from both scenes to take a side.

This inharmonious war trickled down into the neighborhoods we lived in, among gangsters who chose to identify with either side. The media blew it up, heightening the intensity between gang rivals. From the mainstream to our main streets, the rivalry echoed everywhere and almost every gangster found themselves at the trigger or barrel end of a gun, fighting for a side. Tupac died in 1996 and B.I.G. followed in 1997. They both got shot, but no one ever found out who took either of them out of the game. They went to war and died at the end of it, like so many of my homeboys already had and others would.

As we stood on the steps of the auditorium and cafeteria, we listened to the anthem that Tupac rapped, truth leaking from every word. The beats and bass pounded within me as I waited for the first crazy guy to throw down. I didn't have a chance to see who threw the first punch, but eight guys at the bottom of the auditorium steps had already begun to brawl. A Blue Ragger hovered over a Southside Blood laying on his back, thrashing his face with closed fists. I saw blood from his lips and nose splatter onto the concrete. Guys grabbed each other by the oversized t-shirts we wore, dragged each other to the ground to bash heads against the concrete, kicked ribs and faces with the merciless tips of boots, and punched one another until one hit the floor, knocked out.

“Ha. Welcome back, motherfuckers! Let's go!” A member of Two-Trece shouted behind me before he shoved my shoulder to make his way down the steps.

I followed him and pulled the first Crip I saw off one of my homeboys.

A homeboy from Two-Trece shouted, “Fuck him up!”

The Crip tried to tackle me by pushing his shoulder into my stomach and wrapping his arms around my waist. I almost lost my balance, but another guy who barged through the crowd pushed me forward, allowing me to thrust my body against the Crip. I ripped his arms off me and took the first punch I could, forcing my arm forward and thrusting my fist against his chin. I punched him again, and again, until his eyes looked dazed and disoriented. I threw him on the floor and continued to punch in every direction.

A few security guards and teachers, the brave ones, got themselves lost in the chaos. Flocks of red, brown and blue moved back and forth like an angry mob in the middle of the quad. The guards' feeble attempts of bats and handcuffs couldn't break up the overpowering

collision of opposing sides in the hood. Only the gangsters who started their madness could finish it, everyone else just had to wait it out.

We fought, punched, kicked, bled, spit on each other and ached in pain, with no intention of stopping. But when we heard police sirens ringing, our crazy mob scattered.

I released my grip from the Blue Ragger I choked by the neck and took off running behind the cafeteria. Gangsters sprinted in every direction; some ran toward their cars and tried to leave campus, driving 50 mph through the parking lot. Others who didn't look too beat up, tried to sneak into their classes and sat in silence at the back. I just ran. Running from cops had become a regular sport for me. I left campus and headed toward Güero's house. He lived close by and I knew I could always find him at home that early in the morning. My first day of high school ended before it even started and Güero enjoyed hearing about the annual brawl.

I didn't get home until after eleven that night and found my stepfather passed out on the couch when I walked in through the front door. I had been trying my best to stay out of his way for months, making sure I came home on time and doing my chores, just to keep him from asking too many questions about my whereabouts after school. I didn't talk to anyone in that house anymore. Nobody cared; no one asked questions, so there was no need for answers. But that night, I couldn't avoid the confrontation.

His beer belly expanded outward, then shrunk back to its normal size with every thundering snore he took. I snuck across the living room, toward the bathroom, but any footstep in our house caused the floorboards to creak. My stepfather snored and grunted, awakening himself, startled. I paused and glanced at him.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he asked.

“With friends.”

“And who gave you permission, faggot?” He sat upright, his swollen eyes took heavy blinks and he wiped the drool off his chin with the back of his hand.

“Nobody,” I said.

“You’re damn right, nobody!” He stood up and dragged his drunken body toward me. “Who the fuck do you think you are?” I smelled stale beer on his breath as he stood over me. I glared back at him and clenched my jaw, almost nauseated by the stench.

“Pussy.” I felt a light splatter of spit hit my forehead just before he thrust his fist across my cheek. The side of my face went numb for a second, and then I felt my cheekbone throb in pain. He punched me so hard, I lost my balance. But as soon as I turned away from him, I slid my hand into my pocket and latched onto my 9MM handgun.

I shoved him with my shoulder, released the safety on my gun and pressed the barrel to his forehead.

Adrenaline trembled through my veins and shook the gun in my grip. I couldn’t believe I had a gun to the head of the prick that had made my life a living hell for thirteen years. There we stood. For once I controlled my world and I controlled him. “That’s the last time you fucking touch me!”

“Oh?” he said while grabbing the barrel of the gun and pressing it deeper into his skin. “You’re a big bad gangster now, huh, princess? You gonna shoot?” His eyes grew grim. “Do it.”

“Yeah, I’m not that helpless little kid anymore! That kid you like to beat, over and over again. You’re a piece of shit, man.”

I held the gun in place and looked into his arrogant eyes. I didn’t need to shoot him, I wouldn’t hurt my mother or my siblings that way; I just needed him to know that the scared little

kid he used to enjoy beating didn't exist anymore. So, I pulled the gun away from him and clicked the safety back on.

“Yeah, get the fuck out of my house,” he said.

I sighed and looked down at the man who stood two feet taller than me. “You'll never touch me again.”

CHAPTER VII
LIFE UNFOLDING

After I pulled a gun on my stepfather, my mother tried to forget that I existed by kicking me out of the house and signing my guardianship over to someone else. I spent the next six months living with a neighborhood friend, Tony Zapata, who lived three blocks away. We attended South Fort Worth Elementary together; his mom had given me a ride home from school a few times. I started high school with a new family, a new home, and a newfound freedom among my homeboys. Tony didn't want to join a gang, but at that time, the O.G.'s allowed guys to "claim" a gang, under certain circumstances such as mine. Since Tony ran with me, he had no choice but to claim Two-Trece. He didn't go through initiation and he never became an official member, but claiming Two-Trece meant that I had a brother who had my back, and that meant the world to me. If anything, claiming the gang provided him greater protection.

Fall in the Southside felt like war. Some of my homeboys felt like the burnt orange leaves that hit the dirty sidewalk. Drug deals and gang bangs either had us running from a jail sentence or a death sentence. In October, two of my boys took bullets to the head during a drive-by, and we lost our first homeboy since I had joined Two-Trece. A bullet grazed Joe G. along the side of his head while Skinney took a gunshot that shattered his skull. I have nine red spring flowers spread across a Japanese mural that I had tattooed on my arm almost two decades later. The flowers signify my tribute to the ones I've lost. Although I didn't know Skinney well, he was the

first one to go since I had joined and he reminded me of how quickly my life could have been taken. One of the flowers belongs to him and two other homeboys that we lost that year.

November introduced me to the vengeance of a drive-by. The O.G.'s planned to strike back against the Blue Ragger who took our homeboy from us. So, they sent me, Jose and Dopey to take care of it. On the third Friday night of the month, I rode in the back seat of Dopey's Station Wagon as he cruised down the dismal streets of Southside. My fingertips chilled as they extended out from underneath the thick sleeves of my heavy, brown leather jacket. With a grip on my 12-gauge shotgun, I ducked my head beneath the window. The yellow street lights flashed by and illuminated the double barreled tip pointing at the window. As we approached the house that belonged to the Blue Ragger who shot our boy dead three weeks ago, I watched Dopey slump into his seat and heard the engine hush to a hum. My palms perspired and my entire body trembled for a second while goose bumps traveled from my neck, down to my arms. I dried my hands on my jeans and gripped my gun again. I sought refuge beneath the window, keeping my head sunken from view, and watching only the stars glisten above the damaged rooftops that passed me by. Dopey turned and stared at me.

"You ready?"

"For Skinney, man," Jose said.

"Let's go," I said.

Jose rolled down his window and I followed. We pointed our barrels over the edge of the window. I peeked half of my head over to aim my shot and see the house that already looked in shambles. The white paint on the wood paneling had chipped away and some of the black screens on the windows looked torn at the corners.

“Kill the motherfuckers,” Dopey groaned.

I tightened my grip around the trigger and the pressure of my index finger released the first bullets I had ever shot at people. The gunfire echoed through the neighborhood. In five seconds, Jose and I pummeled the pitiful structure. Gunshots from the neighboring house struck Dopey’s car along the passenger side. Dopey slammed his Dock Martins on the gas pedal while the exchange of gunshots persisted. The tires screeched as he peeled out of the street. The gunshots persisted and an agonizing shriek from Jose cut through the gunfire.

“Fuck!” he yelled. “Motherfucker!”

Dopey sped through the street and took a sharp turn onto the next block. I gripped the front passenger seat as my body slid toward the center of the backseat. I saw Jose squeezing his left arm, just above the elbow. Blood gushed in between his fingers and streamed down his arm.

“Fuck, man. Hold on. You’re gonna be fine!” Dopey yelled while steering the vehicle onto block after block of streets and alleys; police sirens already rang in our pursuit. I slid my arms out of my jacket and ripped my shirt off.

“Here, man. Move your hand!” I rolled my shirt up and tied it around his arm to stop the bleeding as Jose continued to writhe in pain. My hands became covered in his blood as I put pressure over the deep puncture in his skin.

“Shit!” he yelled while stomping his foot.

Dopey managed to drive us away from the chaos we left behind and we headed straight to Guero’s house. The O.G.’s took Jose to the emergency room while I stayed behind to help Dopey clean up his car. Jose almost lost his arm, but he kept that along with a clean record, because we never got caught for that drive-by. I never knew what story the O.G.’s fed the doctors about how Jose got shot; I never asked.

That night, I told Tony about the drive-by and how everything went down. He called me crazy and said I should quit my shit while I still breathed, alive and free. I knew he had a point, but what else did I have other than my homeboys?

The following morning, I sat outside Tony's house and watched yellow and orange leaves shuffle across the yard from the soft gusts of a chill wind that swept them up. For a reason that I couldn't explain, I kept repeating the phone number that I couldn't forget in my head. Over and over, I couldn't stop thinking about my grandfather and the sound of his voice saying "Hello?" echoed in my mind. I walked inside to grab the cordless phone and stared at the grey buttons, while my thumb repeatedly hovered over the number, 817.335.4228. I considered the thought numerous times. What's the worst that could come of it? So, I walked back outside and dialed. I counted each of the three rings before a lady answered.

"Hello?"

"Uh. Hello, yeah, my name is Cirano Lagunas."

"Who's this? Cirano? What Cirano, Junior?"

"No, I'm Cirano Lagunas the third. I think Junior is my dad," I said. "Is Cirano Senior there?"

"Oh! Yes, let me get him real quick."

I waited for about twenty seconds and heard my own breathing echoing through the receiver. A man picked up the telephone.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"Cirano."

"What Cirano?" he asked again.

“Cirano Lagunas, sir, the third.” Silence took over the line, so I decided to mention the family name that most of my uncles, aunts and cousins called me. “Miji,” I said.

“Miji! Oh my God, I haven’t seen you in so long! Not since you were a baby and your mother took you away from us.”

Wow, I thought.

“Well, I’m here,” I said. “I just wanted to call you and tell you that I’m well and that I live in the Southside.”

“Oh, all right. Still living there, huh? Who you living with, son?”

“A friend of mine.”

“Well, how would you like come up here,” he said. “I always wondered where you were. After all this time, you’ve just been living on the Southside.”

“Yeah, it’s been ok,” I said.

“Yea, well your dad’s not here; he’s in prison. He’s been in prison for a very long time. We talk to him every now and then. Your dad was real crazy back in the day,” he said. “The last time I saw you, you were a baby.”

I couldn’t believe my own grandfather spoke to me from the other end of the phone, and he sounded interested in my life; even concerned. I never knew what that felt like.

“Well, I’d like to go up and visit you,” I said. “I mean if it’s not too much of a problem.”

“Yeah, yes of course. Just come up for Christmas, or whatever, just let me know.”

“Ok, I can do that. I’ll give you a call then.”

“All right, son. Take care. It’s good to hear from you.”

“Ok, thank you. Bye.”

The only blood-related father figure in my life had called me “son.” It felt unnatural and unreal. I needed some space and clarity, so I grabbed my black JanSport backpack that stored two spray paint bottles and three of my guns, and then headed for the bus stop two blocks away.

One dollar and fifty cents bought me a bus ticket to the North side of Fort Worth. I could transfer all day and return home with it. I left Tony behind, in case I got myself into any trouble. Walking around while dressed in red and brown in another hood always started up a little chaos. People always gave the kid dressed in baggy Girbaud jeans, an oversized brown t-shirt, and a big red hoodie, a second look. Sometimes, local gangsters would gesture gang signs at me before charging me, but I would take off running and get away every time.

After I arrived at the bus stop on the North side, I walked to a Circle 7 about four blocks away and bought an Orange Sunkist to keep myself hydrated while I tagged the back side of the building. I liked tagging, taking my sketches from the papers scattered on my living room floor, to the giant canvases of concrete walls behind business buildings. When I walked out of the store, I strolled past the two cars parked in the parking lot, then turned the corner and dashed behind the building. A green dumpster sat alone, centered along the beige back wall. Enclosed by a six foot concrete fence on each side of the building, hardly anyone could see me. So, I took out my bottle of red Krylon spray paint and began ornamenting the building in a giant “Two-Trece.” The smell of week-old trash started to nauseate me, so I reached for the dumpster’s plastic cover and dropped it down. As the sun set and the afternoon grew dim, the vibrant red paint dried into the concrete. I traded the red spray paint for the black spray can in my bag, so that I could shade and outline our gang name. The bottle rattled as I shook it in my hand before outlining the second half of my work. As the paint sprayed against the concrete, glistening against the dry red paint, I heard footsteps approaching from the side of the building. I stopped spraying and stashed

the bottle in my bag. I took two steps back to glance beyond the dumpster I hid behind, then I heard static originating from a walkie-talkie. I took off running around the other side of the building and toward the front of the store, where I saw a police car parked by the gas pumps.

I heard an officer yell out to his partner, “Around the front!”

I darted out of the parking lot, took a right, sprinted down the street and turned onto the first neighborhood alley I saw. Dogs barked and growled from behind backyard fences as the second officer ran after me. I sped down the block and took a left onto the next street. I saw an auto shop and ran behind it; towers of tires made for a maze behind the building. The officer followed me through it as I made it to the back. I climbed up and jumped over the hurricane fence barricading the back of the shop yard. He had more trouble than I did getting over it, which gave me extra time to gain some distance. I ran down another alley, jumped over a second fence and into someone’s back yard, so I tossed my backpack onto their roof. In the past, roofs proved a good hiding place; police officers always looked for stuff on the ground. I got rid of my hoodie too and threw it into their trashcan. I dashed through the front yard and took a right onto the street. I ran down for two blocks then found a park. I didn’t see the police officer anywhere, so I walked around the park for a few minutes, keeping my eyes peeled while catching my breath. The evening’s sunset cast pink sunrays behind a stretch of cirrus clouds. I stopped for a minute to observe the scene set behind the ghetto street in front of me. A chill breeze soothed me and swirled the leaves on the pavement.

I quenched my thirst with a water fountain in the center of park, and still hadn’t seen any cops. So, I wandered back down the street toward the house where I had tossed my bag. As I approached the house, I could see the dark lump sitting on the back corner of the roof. With the windows unlit and the street rather quiet, it seemed that no one had arrived home yet. I crept to

the backyard and used a white plastic chair to raise me high enough for a leap that would allow me to grab my bag. I swiped it off the roof, grabbed my red hoodie from the trash can, stuffed the foul thing in my bag, and took off walking to the next bus stop.

I took the bus route back to Southside, traveled through downtown Fort Worth and observed the streets grow dirtier as I neared my hood. The road home returned me to chaos. The dreary streets welcomed me with overflowing dumpsters, black trash bags piled by each one, stray dogs at every other corner, chipping paint on every other wood paneled house, hurricane fence encompassing every front yard, and then the gangsters: Crips, Bloods, Blue Ragers and Two-Trece. We walked with swagger like we owned the streets we hustled; and I suppose we did, according to our pockets full of guns, drugs and money.

CHAPTER VIII
MEETING BLOOD

I didn't make a trip to visit my grandfather until March, after I turned 14. He lived in Diamond Hill, on the northeast side of Fort Worth. I had never traveled that way before, so I decided to wait for Spring Break, when I could take some time to map out my bus route. I looked at a route map that I had taken during one of my visits to the bus stop for my tagging trips. By that time, my mother had taken me back into the house, but I knew better than to tell her, or anyone in that house, who I planned to visit that last Saturday morning before school started again. My mother had taken my sisters to the grocery store and my stepfather was still asleep. So, I headed to the bus stop at 10 a.m. for a trip that would lead me closer to home than I had ever been.

I took route seven from downtown Fort Worth to the corner of Schwartz Avenue and East Lawn. I walked down Schwartz, looking at the numbers on each house, looking for 3100 Schwartz Avenue. I passed a few wood paneled houses and noticed a red brick church on my left; the painted lines on the pavement in the parking lot had faded. Weeds sprouted through the cracks in the pavement and along the dirty concrete sidewalk. It reminded me of the church across from my mother's house, only more unkempt and dreary.

The house at the end of the street sat on a low hill. The yard sloped down toward the curb, where the sidewalk ended. I stood in the street and stared up at the front of the house. The number 3100 stared at me from the tin mailbox along with the words, "Lagunas Residence"

painted in black. Three trees hung heavy over the front yard, in front of a few bushes lined up along the bottom of the porch. The front door featured a small sign hanging from a thin, copper wire. I read the sign to myself: “No Peddlers Allowed.” It made me laugh.

I walked up the short hill, climbed three wooden stairs to the front door and knocked four times. An elderly lady dressed in a muumuu answered the door and stared at me.

“Hi,” I said. “My name is Cirano, I’m looking for Cirano? Senior?” I couldn’t help but chuckle at the ridiculous sounding request.

She looked confused. “You’re what?”

“Um, Cirano Sr.?” I asked again.

“Cirano? Well, he has a son named Cirano,” she replied.

“Yeah, Junior is my dad. They used to call me Miji.” I thought sharing my family name might help her understand my relation to the grandfather I sought.

“Miji? Oh my! Yes, you are one of us; Junior’s son. Hold on, let me go get him.”

Miji became my family name as a child. My aunts, uncles and cousins called me Miji, but I never knew where the name originated from. My grandfather’s second wife returned to the door.

“Miji. You know, you’re grandfather gave you that name. He always called you ‘mijito,’ and then he started calling you ‘Miji.’ That’s the only name you ever responded to when you were a little baby.”

By 11, I had decided that I didn’t want people calling me anything other than my name, “Cid.” Nicknames angered me. But, when my grandfather’s wife told me that he had dubbed me with that nickname, I never denied the name “Miji” again.

A 6'2 man approached the door. His thick curly hair resembled mine and it appeared that he didn't like to comb it, as it hung from underneath the red bandana that he had wrapped over it. Gold loop earrings covered his ears, at least fifteen rings on each ear from the lobe to the top. His uniform looked like a typical factory worker's uniform, a double pocket, long sleeve navy shirt tucked into his dark denim jeans. His shirt presented his name embroidered over the left pocket. I enjoyed reading our name off his chest. I looked up at him and made eye contact with my grandfather for the first time, observing his dark skin and the crow's feet, which creased around the corners of his eyes as he smiled.

"Hey! How you doing? Come in!" He shook my hand and pulled me inside. His arms didn't show any more hair than mine did, unlike my brother's and stepfather's.

"Oh boy, it's been a really long time. I haven't seen you! I haven't seen you since you were a baby. Man, I was so upset! Your mom just took you away from us."

I may have looked stunned as he surprised me with his quick honesty. He led me into the dining room, where we sat down at a round wooden table. A plastic table cover protected a white lace tablecloth, which draped off the sides of the table. I continued to observe him while rubbing the lace fabric underneath the table.

"From one night to the next, your mom was gone," he continued. "I don't know a lot of the other details. I just know something happened between your dad and your mom."

I nodded. "Oh, ok."

"I didn't even get to see you before she took you. All I had were your baby shoes. I was able to get those from your dad," he said. "So, where you been living?"

"The Southside."

"Oh, really? With your mother?"

“Yes.”

He stood up and pushed his chair underneath the table. “I’ve got something to show you. Wanna see?”

“Sure.” I stood up and followed him out of the house, to the backyard. His backyard reminded me of a junkyard.

“I like to collect things,” he said.

Old and broken washing machines, radios, sinks, hubcaps, and parts of cars were piled along the right side of his yard. The grass had grown dry underneath the heaps of random collections.

“Look, I separate all of the parts and then I sell them.” He led me past the piles of junk, to an area where he had assortments of copper, steel, aluminum and mounds of other disassembled parts. I liked his system of hustling and enjoyed sharing an afternoon in the backyard with my own grandfather.

“That’s really cool. You’ve got a lot of stuff back here,” I said.

“Yeah. Hey, man, I’ve got something for you.” He made his way toward a small, aluminum shed that stood at the back of the yard and returned holding a red shoebox.

“I’ve got this pair of shoes. It looks like you got a smaller shoe on. These are size twelve. What size are you?” he asked.

“About a ten.”

He chuckled while replying with uncertainty. “Ok, well these might fit you!”

He handed me the box and I found an authentic pair of old-school, high-top Nikes inside. In perfect, unworn condition, the black and lime green sneakers looked original and legit. I couldn’t believe he had these slick sneakers hidden among the sea of junk flooding his backyard.

“Wow, thank you.” I pulled one out and examined it in excitement. When I glanced down at the box, I noticed a thick twig laying at the bottom.

“What’s this stick for?” I asked, still grinning.

“Oh, well I was trying to stretch them, because I really liked them. But that was back in the day. They never quite fit. So, I held on to them and decided that I’d give them to somebody, someday.”

I felt honored to receive his gift and I put the shoes on. They felt a little big and didn’t represent my gang colors, but I didn’t care. I switched my old K-Swiss sneakers into the box and never saw those again. I don’t remember where they ended up; I might have tossed them out on my way home

My grandfather sighed as he watched me enjoy the gift.

“Man, I feel bad for you,” he said. Your dad just wasn’t a good father. The timing of his comment felt awkward, but I let him continue.

“Oh, really?” I asked in a solemn tone. I wanted to enjoy my sneakers.

“Yes, you know he was the leader of his gang and well, he was just always getting messed up. Your father would always go down to a creek down at the end of the neighborhood. He always went down there after school to sniff paint. Bottles of gold or silver spray paint, he sniffed them all and it would make him go crazy! He would come back all messed up and didn’t even know where he was. When he was on that crap, he would just snap, get pissed and take off. He always gave me problems. I don’t know how he’s made it alive for so long. And I don’t know what happened between him and your mother. But he got really upset one day and said he caught her cheating. I don’t know if that’s true. But, he went crazy and went after the guy and

ended up beating him almost to death. He's been in prison ever since. I'm sorry, but you deserved a better dad."

My grandfather stared at the ground for a minute and nodded his head in disappointment.

"Well, I'm ok," I said. "I've been all right."

"Let's go inside," he said. I followed him into the living area, where he pulled out a small, blue photo album from a chest of drawers cornered at the far end of the room. Rose colored curtains tinted the room in a pink light as the sunlight shone through. He opened the photo album and stood next to me. I watched him flip the plastic pages filled with sepia pictures of him, his brothers and other family members. They didn't look quite Mexican, dressed in chaps and small headdresses while holding rifles. My grandfather told me that he grew up on a Native American Reservation in Oklahoma and later worked as a ranch hand near a lake in Texas. The mystery behind the gold rings adorning his ears became clear to me.

A picture of my dad as a child showed up a few pages later. *Oh yeah, we're related*, I thought. We looked identical.

"This is your dad," he said. "Your dad was always saying, 'That's not my kid!'"

"One day, he came home and told me, 'Dad, this girl is saying that's my son. That's not my son!' I told him, 'Don't be a dumbass, that's your son! He looks just like you!' But your dad never wanted to believe it. He always denied you, saying, 'Nah, that's not my kid.'"

My grandfather's blunt honesty continued to surprise me. I listened to his stories and absorbed the truth about my shitty father.

"You know the top of your lip right there," he pointed to the distinct, upward curve at the center of my top lip. "Yeah, I have that too; so does your dad."

Our conversation continued for another hour underneath the low hanging mesquite trees in his front yard. He asked his wife to give me the information to contact my dad in prison.

“You should write him a letter, Miji,” he said.

“Yeah, ok.” I folded the paper and stuffed it into my back pocket.

“Well, we’re always here, you just call me if you need anything or want to come by. I work from three to twelve every day, and I’m off on Sundays.”

“Ok.” I nodded.

“You have family here, don’t ever think that you don’t. It was good to see you.” He smiled and exposed his yellow teeth while his crow’s feet creased at the corner of his eyes.

“You too,” I replied.

He reached out to embrace me and I hugged him back. He squeezed me rather tight with both arms, while I reached one arm over to pat his back.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Anytime, Mijito.”

I strolled down the hill and relished in the texture of my new sneakers as I walked back to the bus stop. I had to leave by 5 p.m. to get back to Southside. The sunlight burned my skin as it seeped through the window on my ride home. I thought about everything my grandfather and I had discussed. It felt amazing to finally know somebody that I could possibly depend on. I thought about the photos and my resemblance to my father’s side of the family. No wonder my friends always teased me about not looking like my siblings or dad; I had no relation to my stepfather! My grandfather looked entirely different than what I had imagined, but I looked like him.

As the bus neared my stop, I became angry with my mother. Why had she lied to me for so long? I felt betrayed by her; for fourteen years, she never once told me about my real father. She let some random man enter my life, beat me, abuse me; and she heard it happen night after night. A helpless mother listening from her bedroom, where she sat quiet and frightened to defend her son. And my father, a crazy and fucked up asshole, had spent my entire life locked up. How the hell did I get handed these fools for parents? Sometimes I felt like my mom did her best, other times, I never quite understood how she could give up on her son.

I could have taken a transfer from the downtown bus stop to Southside, but I chose to walk to my hood instead. I thought about how comforting it felt to know my grandfather, although I didn't feel as though we would grow too close. Nevertheless, I appreciated the time and gift he gave me. I figured I'd show off the new kicks, so I headed to Güero's house to visit my homeboys.

CHAPTER IX
LAST DEATH IN VAIN

Three weeks after I visited my grandfather, I got arrested for stealing two cars with my homeboy, Joe G. We didn't always get away with our lifestyle. As a minor, the judge offered me one of two choices: either move to Austin, TX with my maternal grandfather, or move to McAllen, TX with my maternal grandmother. I had four days to give him an answer, so I called my grandfather for his advice.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it's Cid.”

“Hey, Miji! How are you?”

“I'm ok. I got a problem, though.”

“What happened?”

“I got into some trouble. I stole a car and the judge told me I have to move.”

“Damnit, Miji. Ok. Where do you need to go?”

“With my other grandparents. Either with my mom's dad in Austin, or her mom in McAllen. I don't know where I should go.”

“Well, go down the Valley, it's calmer down there than it is in Austin. You gotta get away from all of this crap. You gotta do better for yourself, son.”

McAllen doesn't compare to Austin. It sits right along the U.S.-Mexico border in South Texas, in a region call the Rio Grande Valley. As an underdeveloped city, it doesn't offer as

many ghetto streets and alleys where I could myself into trouble. Two-Trece definitely didn't branch out that far south and I had no plans of joining any other crew.

"Yeah, I know. I just didn't know where I should I go. But, ok. I'll tell my mom."

"Ok, well I think it's better that you get away from here. You can't be doing this stuff anymore. I knew you were involved with a gang, I could tell from your tattoos. But you gotta get away. You're too smart to be in there. I don't want to see you locked up like your father. Call me if you need any help getting down there or call me when you're there, all right?"

"Yeah, ok. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just do better than what you been doing."

"Ok, thank you. I'll call you when I get down there."

"Ok, son. Bye."

He sounded disgruntled and I felt ashamed when I hung up the phone. *You're too smart to be in there.* His words echoed in my mind. I knew he spoke the truth. But finally having my own blood believe in me, changed me. I left the kitchen and approached my mother's bedroom to speak to her. I leaned against the doorframe and watched her fold my stepfather's clothes. Her slender back hunched over the bed as she worked. Her navy and white polka-dot dress hung just over her knees and her black hair draped over her shoulders as she hurried to get through the small pile.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"Well, I guess I figured out where to move. I'm can move with grandma in the Valley."

"Fine."

I stood at the doorway and waited for another response like a fool. She didn't care, as long as I didn't bring home any more trouble for her. So, I went into my brother's room and started packing my things. I fit everything into one duffle bag and my backpack.

During my last weekend in Southside, I called my boys to meet up with me, so that we could hang out at Echo Lake before I left. The scorching Texas heat had arrived well before summer that year. Relentless sunrays from a cloudless sky stung my skin as I leaned over the hurricane fence around my front yard. My red cotton shirt stuck to my back as I perspired while waiting for Joe G. and Albert to come by. Ten minutes later, Dopey drove up with Jose V. and he parked his Station Wagon along the sidewalk.

"What's up, bro?" Jose jogged up to me and reached for a handshake.

"Oh shit," Dopey shouted. "He's leaving!"

"No shit, man," Jose said. "So you're gone, huh?"

"Yeah, that's it. The judge is shipping me out, man," I said.

"Well damn, it's better than going to juvi," Dopey said.

"For real," I replied.

"Where's Joe G. at?" Jose asked. "That little asshole got caught too, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he did," I said. "I think he's gotta go to Houston with his dad. Not sure, man."

Albert, dressed in his usual long blue tee, turned the corner and walked toward us.

"It's about time, playa!" Jose shouted. "We been waiting on you all day!"

Albert laughed as he shouted back. "Yeah, yeah, yeah." He came straight toward me and embraced me. "You know what? I'm gonna miss you, man."

"All right, gay asses," Dopey joked.

"Shut up, fool!" Albert replied. "This man right here, shit, he's always had my back."

I smirked and thought about how much I would miss these crazy dudes. “It’s all good, man. Shit, you can’t keep Cid Lagunas away from his homeboys for too long!”

We all laughed and while I knew that I needed to get away from the hood, I wished that I didn’t have to leave my brothers.

“Well, it’s damn hot out here.” Albert said. “I need a drink!”

“Yeah,” Dopey said. “Let’s go get something before we head to Echo.”

“All right. Well, let’s walk. Let me walk my streets one more time, man.”

“And Joe G.?” Jose asked.

“He’ll find us,” I said.

A Circle 7 sat on a street corner, two blocks away from my house. We always took the main streets to get there and the alleyways to come back. Although we hadn’t stolen any MD2020’s this time, we took the alley back anyway. We joked and drank our cokes while walking down the unpaved, dirt road lined with green dumpsters, hurricane fence, and barking dogs. On our way back, about a block away from my house, I looked down toward the intersecting street in front of us and saw my sister run across with a cordless phone in her ear. She seemed panicked, which surprised me, so I yelled out to her.

“Audry!” I began to run and the boys followed behind me. “Yo, Audry!”

We approached the end of the alley and I saw her running down the street, in the direction of the convenient store that we had just left.

“Audry!” She finally turned and saw me. She ran toward me as the phone shook in her hand and she tried to catch her breath. Her eyes watered as the shocking words left her lips.

“Selena got shot.”

“What? Where?” I asked in disbelief. We all knew Selena’s older brother; another B.G., just like the rest of us. But he ran with the Bloods, like Albert. Selena sometimes played with my sisters on Saturday afternoons. Audry began weeping, so I shook her by the shoulders to snap her out of it. “Where, Audry?”

“In the front yard,” she cried.

Fuck, I thought. I squeezed her tight and kissed her on the forehead. “Go with Albert,” I said. Albert took her in his arms as I sprinted toward my house. Dopey and Jose followed close behind me. When I reached the edge of the street, I stared at my house from across the street and saw my brother kneeling over Selena’s feeble body. I stopped, shocked, and processed the scene.

“Holy shit, man,” Dopey said.

My brother tried to pick her up in his arms while continuing to kneel on the ground. I ran toward him and stared at her lifeless body in his arms. I fell to my knees, beside him.

“Leo, what happened?”

He couldn’t stop crying. I didn’t understand how this had happened. I took her precious body in my arms and watched her tiny, pale hand fall limp to the dead grass below. When I looked at her stomach, I lifted her shirt a little to see the bullet hole. The dark red blood spread across her white stomach. In my gut, I knew that the bullet hole matched the size of a gun that I hadn’t gotten rid of yet.

“Leo, what happened?” I asked again. I heard my sister weeping behind me as the ambulance and police sirens echoed through the neighborhood, blaring louder with each passing second. The sirens rang in a futile pursuit; minutes too late.

I held Selena in my arms, observed her closed eyes and peaceful face. Her head bent backwards as her dark brown hair hung over my knees. Leo continued to weep next to me. I knew he shot her, I just didn't understand how.

“What did you do, brother?”

Through a cracking voice he replied, “I didn't meant to. I swear. I tried to bring her out here.”

He continued to weep as we knelt beside each other, staring at her helpless body in my arms, our backs facing my friends who watched stunned from the sidewalk. The sirens alarmed behind us and two police officers approached us, armed with guns pointed toward each of our faces.

“Son, I need you to get up and let the paramedics take care of her.”

“Get up, put your hands up and get up slowly,” the other one commanded my brother.

I looked up at the olive-skinned officer whose squinted eyes hid underneath the shade of his black police hat. An EMS responder pulled Selena from my arms and laid her body on the ground as two other responders prepared to resuscitate her.

“Ok, get up and place your hands on your head,” the officer commanded.

A flock of armed officers spread throughout the yard, into the house, and to the backyard. As they reported to each other, the static of their walkie-talkies heightened the commotion already consuming the air by curious neighbors and bystanders. Joe G. had finally shown up and stood by Dopey and Jose, just as mesmerized by the scene. I yelled out to Albert while an officer handcuffed me and pushed my head down as he nudged into the backseat of a cop car.

“Hey, take care of my sister, man; until my mom gets home.”

“Yeah, all right,” he replied.

The officers shoved my brother into a separate cop car. As we drove away, I noticed the shattered living room window and the amount of glass that had landed on the lawn; almost as if the window had been shot out from inside the house. The officers took us downtown, where they questioned us separately, then transferred us to the county jail. I couldn't believe I had been thrown back in there, for something that I didn't even do. As it turned out, my brother found the 9mm handgun I had hidden in my black JanSport backpack. He didn't know how to handle it properly, released the safety, and shot it inside the house. The merciless bullet pierced straight through Selena, broke the window and landed in the front yard. He panicked and dragged her body outside to make it look like a drive-by. My brother got tried as an adult, went straight to jail and wouldn't see freedom for twelve years. As for me, the authorities traced the stolen gun back to me, so I got stuck in the juvenile detention center; I wouldn't see the Valley for another year.

For months, I dreamt the same dream about Selena while in juvi.

I would walk into the living room and see her sitting in the center of the couch, staring at me. Her mouth would move and she would speak, but I could never understand her. I knelt where I stood and pleaded with my hands clutched together.

"This was my fault. Please forgive me."

I dreamt this dream for five months and the last time I dreamt it, I finally understood the few words she spoke.

"Don't worry; it's not your fault. Don't worry; it's not your fault."

When I got released from the juvenile detention center, my mother picked me up and we drove home in silence. The yard looked like it hadn't been mowed in months. I found my

stepfather still sitting on the couch in his drunken stupor. The carpet still reeked of dirt and cigarettes. The refrigerator still lacked food. My sisters still had long and greasy hair. And the bags that I had packed a year ago hadn't moved from the corner of my brother's bedroom. Nothing had changed. Nothing would.

I walked downtown and headed straight to the bus stop, where I took a pamphlet of bus routes across Texas. I studied it while strolling through Southside. I knew I needed money to get down to the Valley, so I stopped by Guero's house. Dopey answered the door.

"Holy shit!" he exclaimed. "Damn, boy! Where you been?" I had never seen him so excited to see me. He grabbed me and embraced me.

"I'm out, dog. Finally!"

"Yo, Guero, come see who's here!"

Guero came to the door and took a step back in shock. "Cid! Come in, man." He glared at Dopey. "What are you doing leaving him out there like that?"

I laughed and stepped inside to find most of my boys there, including Joe G., Jose, and few other guys from Two-Trece. We talked about juvenile, my brother and how Selena's brother took the news when he found out. For two hours, I got caught up on the crazy life of these fools, these gangsters, my homeboys; and I felt home.

"So, what's up, man? You here to stay, or are you leaving?" Joe G. asked.

"Nah, man. I gotta go."

Guero broke the brief silence. "Well, you know you always got your homeboys, man. You're a good guy, Cid. You've always had our back and we got yours. Down for the hood, right?"

"Yeah, thank you, man."

I parted ways with my crew and asked to speak to Guero outside.

“Hey, I need a favor.”

“What you need, Cid?” he asked while reaching into his pocket, as if he already knew my request.

“Well, I gotta get down to the Valley on a bus. But I ain’t got no money right now.”

He pulled out a roll of twenties and handed me two-hundred dollars wrapped in a rubber band. I didn’t need that much.

“Damn. I’ll pay you back, man. You know I will.”

“No, you don’t owe me shit. You just go and do good for yourself.” He sighed and looked out at the ghetto street behind me. “I always knew you were smarter than most of these fools. I love my boys, you know that. But you, Cid, you’re just a survivor, man; no matter what the battle. Go do good.”

He held out his hand and I returned the handshake with a firm grip.

“See you around, man,” he said.

“I’ll be back,” I replied.

I’d always be a homeboy, but that Friday afternoon in May, I strolled down the streets of Southside for the last time as a gangster.

EPILOGUE

WEEKEND IN SOUTHSIDE

I knew the long Texas road from the seat of a Greyhound well. The 10-hour drive from McAllen to Fort Worth dealt me the state's loneliest highways to view from the passenger seat window, it was a scenic route. I had to make the trip, though. My grandfather wanted to see his oldest grandson after having graduated from high school at the age of 19. I was a year behind my peers; I thanked my days in the Southside for that. But, I earned the diploma and had been accepted to The University of Texas-Pan American, an extra surprise for my grandfather.

The Greyhound dropped me off at my old stop in downtown Fort Worth. I took Route 6 to my Uncle David's house, my mom's brother. He and his wife lived about three blocks away from my old house, but I had no intention of stopping there. I hadn't spoken to my mother in a year; I doubt she knew that I was even in town.

I strolled down the paved sidewalk from the bus stop to Uncle David's, everything around the hood looked the same. Except for the yellow speed bumps that had been added down each street. Stray dogs still wandered the blacktop roads, others barked from behind hurricane fences, weeds continued to sprout in between the broken slabs of concrete, and the July heat burned the pavement so intensely that I could see heat waves swaying above the street from blocks away. I walked past a group of high school kids gathered at a street corner, sporting the same baggy jeans that I used to wear. They sized me up from head to toe, took notice of my tattoos and then let me walk past them in silence.

When I arrived at my Uncle's house, he and his wife walked out to embrace me.

"Damn, son," he said. "You're real big now." My Uncle David stood half a foot over me as I stood by him, 200 lbs. and 5'9. I had been lifting weights for months and ran cross country. Like my father, I grew to have a brawny build.

"How are you, Miji?" my Aunt Sarah asked.

"Good, good. It was a long trip."

She sighed and took me by the arm. "Are you hungry?"

"Um, yeah. Thank you."

We spoke for hours over an early dinner and caught up over my graduation from Nikki Rowe High School. None of my family members attended, but I didn't mind. We talked about my acceptance into college and how proud they felt. They never mentioned my mother or my siblings; they focused on me, which I appreciated. The night ended early and they agreed to take me to see my grandfather the following Saturday morning.

His house hadn't changed at 3100 Schwartz Avenue in Diamond Hill. Even as I approached it from the street, I could already see his mounting junkyard, which had only grown in size over time. He opened the front the door and walked onto the porch before I even made it up the wooden stairs.

"Miji, I'm so glad you're here!"

I climbed up the stairs with a grin on my face. "Yeah, me too, grandpa." I wrapped both arms around him. I felt proud. For once, I could enter his home with good news; something that he too could be proud of.

“The high school graduate,” he said while grasping my shoulders and looking at me. “Damn, I’m proud of you. I told you. I told you, you needed to get out of here.” His eyes and lips creased in excitement. I noticed more grey hair curling over his pierced ears and a few age spots that had formed at the top of his forehead.

His wife joined us on the porch, greeted everyone and then invited us in. The visit was short. As we sat around the living room and joked about my grandfather’s collecting addiction, I stopped him for a second.

“Grandpa?”

“Yes, Miji?”

“I got some more good news. I got into college,” I said as I gestured toward the green UT Pan American shirt I had on.

He raised his eyebrows. “You already got in? You’re going?”

“Yes,” I said with a smile.

He pressed his lips together and nodded his head. “That’s real good, Miji,” he said while lifting his tearing eyes to mine and placing a hand around my shoulder. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you for everything,” I said.

Ten minutes later, we said our goodbyes and took off. I wouldn’t see my grandfather for another two years.

After we left, my uncle and aunt dropped me off at Güero’s house. I rang the doorbell for five minutes, but no one answered. So, I walked a few blocks down to Albert Granado’s. His mother told me that he had moved in with his family three houses down. He opened the door in

shock to find me on the other side of it. He looked exactly the same, still pimping his baggy jeans, sneakers and a long blue tee. He looked at me like he didn't recognize me.

"Yo, what's up man?" I asked while grinning.

"Cid?"

I laughed.

"Holy shit, man! Damn, get over here, bro!"

We hugged and burst into hysterics; I felt home standing next to that guy.

"Come in, man."

His two bedroom house featured white tiled floor throughout, pink walls in the living room and a yellow kitchen. His young, 16-year old wife had already given him two baby boys, ages two and four. He seemed happy.

"Let's go out to the back, Cid. Let's catch up, man." He kissed his wife and led me to the back yard, which featured a giant pile of dirt in the back corner. We cracked open a couple of Miller Lites.

"You look real different, Cid," he said. "Look at you. You don't comb your hair straight back anymore, you haven't got your Dickies on. You clean up real nice!" he joked.

"Yeah, man. It isn't like that down in the Valley. I had to clean up."

"And that shirt? You going to college?"

"Yeah, I got in," I said while crushing my empty Miller Lite and reaching for a second one from the small ice chest that his wife had put out for us.

"That's real good, bro," he said. "Hey, I'll be right back."

Albert walked back out with two 9MM handguns. "Here you go, bro."

"Whoa, who we shooting at?" I laughed as I took it.

He directed his eyes at the corner dirt pile and laughed.

“Oh, all right,” I said with a smirk.

We shot for fifteen minutes, reconnecting with the familiar sensation of a gun’s recoil in my grip.

“So what happened to everyone, man? I stopped by Güero’s and no one was home.”

“Yeah, Güero got caught up selling pills like Xanax and Ecstasy; he got thrown in jail for that about a month ago. You just missed him,” he said. “And Joe G., well we lost track of that fool after he started smoking crystal meth.”

I shot another bullet into the massive dirt pile and heard it thump. “Damn, that’s crazy. Hey, I noticed they added those speed bumps around the hood.”

“Yeah, the city did it to stop the drive-bys. You know Frankie and Jay both died last year during a drive-by against the Crips?”

“Oh, shit. No, I didn’t know, man. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well we all thought you died, bro. That’s the only way you get out of here anyway; you end up dead or in prison.

I stopped shooting and stared at him. “You all thought I died?”

He shot the stare back at me and lowered his gun. “Yeah, you disappeared. Nobody knew what happened to you after all that shit went down with your brother and Selena.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I’m sorry.”

“Shit, don’t be sorry,” he said. “Be happy that you’re out and you’re alive.” He raised his beer toward me and clanked it against mine.

We drank for hours into the night underneath a clear sky. The moon cast the only light above us on the back porch. An evening breeze cooled our perspiring bodies. We drank to the

Southside, to the homeboys and to the life that we survived. I was down for the hood, but God had other plans for my life. Southside Fort Worth remains a collection of chapters that will always claim where I come from, but never where I am going.

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