



**ALWAYS  
RUNNING**

**La Vida Loca:  
Gang Days in L.A.**

**LUIS J. RODRÍGUEZ**



# Always Running

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## La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.

Luis J. Rodríguez



This work is dedicated to:

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Antonio Gutierrez

Carlos Mancillas

Eddie Lozano

Linda Treviño

John “Spook” Fabela

Marlene “Negra” Domínguez

Don “Sonny” López

Miguel Robles

Elías Avila

Richard “Porky” Sierra

Lenard “Gallo” Ocaña

Fernando “Caballo” Arredondo

Martin Alvarado

Fidel “Puppet” Hernandez

Marcelino “Daddio” Cabrera

David “Puppet” Alcon

Freddie Mendoza

David “Loco” Domínguez

Ricky Herrera

René Molinar

Al “Pache” Alvarez

Leonard “Lalo” Villaseñor

Ruben “Sharkie” Martínez

Daniel “Indio” Cabrera

and

Rodolfo “Sonny” Gómez

My life is a poem to their memory.

—Luis J. Rodríguez

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# ~~*The Long Run: New Introduction to Always Running*~~

“My task is to make you hear, to make you feel, and, above all, to make you see. That is all, and it is everything.”

—Joseph Conrad

WHAT'S HAPPENED IN THE more than ten years since *Always Running* first hit the bookstands? My son Ramiro, for whom I wrote the book, is serving a 28-year prison sentence for three counts of attempted murder. More of my homies from 30 years ago have died, including Rene Muñoz-Ledo, who wrote a family-produced book, “Forgiven,” about overcoming his gang and drug experiences before succumbing to cancer in 2004. The Chicago youth I started to work with right after the book's publication through Youth Struggling for Survival (YSS) continue to organize and thrive, although a few have been killed or imprisoned.

Good and bad things have occurred. But the good—young people changing their lives, the growth of organized urban peace efforts, the expansion of spiritual-based practices and the intensifying debate on how to address violence in this country—have far outweighed the bad.

I have gone to hundreds of public and private schools to speak. In Boston's Hyde Park, the most African American students there created a ballet and a rap song based on the book. In East Lansing Eastern High where black and Mexican youth had been warring, *Always Running* became the one thing they could unite on (a student there painted a mural in the school library with scenes from the book). In East L.A.'s Garfield High, Chicano students established an after-school study circle to become intellectually engaged and politically active based on what they learned from the book.

I've visited numerous prisons, juvenile detention centers, sober-living homes and rehabilitation centers. I've read my poems in the Maximum Security Yard at San Quentin Prison as prisoners talked, worked out with weights, played chess and jogged (oh, and quite a few stopped to listen). In one California prison, I saw a homeboy I had not seen in 30 years—all that time he'd been in prison. He told me, “Whatever you do, help the kids.” I've met court judges who made reading my book part of offenders' sentences.

I've addressed thousands of teachers, law enforcement personnel, social workers, community organizers, journalists, government officials, graduate students, writers and others in countless conferences, workshops, peace summits and forums.

I've appeared on major media programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Good Morning America*, CNN's *Talk Live*, *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, and other shows on BBC-London, CBS, SPAN, National Public Radio, Discovery's Health Network, Pacifica Radio, PBS-TV, Spanish

language TV and radio networks and more.

My work has taken me to Toronto, Montreal, Paris, London, Rome, Milan, Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Cologne, Munich, Heidelberg, southern Germany, Amsterdam, Groningen, Salzburg, Mexico City, Chihuahua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico.

For more than a decade, I've taken part in purification ceremonies in Native American and Native Mexican "sweat" lodges (called *inipis* or *temescallis*) with gang and other troubled youth as well as recovering adults; with longtime spiritual friends Luis Ruan, Frank Blázquez, and my wife Trini; and with elder medicine men like Anthony Lee of the Navajo Reservation.

This work is about the "long run," not just for today, for any possible accolades or to meet funding deadlines—but for the adequate and full protection, health and balance, as Native elders say, of our young people seven generations from now.

In spite of this, *Always Running* has become a lightning rod for certain right-wing groups who are trying to stop its use in schools because of the book's politics and graphic nature. According to the American Library Association, it is one of the 100 most censored books in the United States.

In Rockford, Illinois, I debated a prominent school board member lobbying to ban the book to a overflow audience of mostly book supporters. In San Jose, California, I wrote an opinion piece to counter the efforts there to remove the book from approved reading lists. In Chicago, I addressed the leaders of a group of 200 students who had walked out of their school to protest the removal of the book from the school library.

One strange incident occurred in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I was speaking at various schools and community events in the area. At one point, I tried to enter a school with *Always Running* in hand. School officials stopped me at the entrance saying I could come in, but my book could not—it had been banned in that school.

As I see it, the battle lines are between the idealized, superficial and insular-minded way of looking at the world (which many schools and mainstream culture impose on our children and the rest of us), and the actual conditions of our lives with all its multiplicity, struggle, shading and nuance. Most children recognize the hypocrisy of emphasizing a linear, clean and desexed past while they confront daily the muddy, uncertain and hybrid truths.

Sexuality, for example, is a natural part of human development. Books don't cause teenagers to become sexual—hormones do. Instead of providing understanding and badly needed guidance to teenagers when the hormones kick in, too often they are told "sex is wrong," that it shouldn't be addressed until they mature (instead of preparing them so they do mature), and that there's only one way of looking at sex and other disturbing topics like race, class and power (mostly by denying their existence). The truth is much more complex.

There is too much censorship of reality in the classroom. Whatever involves social discomfort, emotional depth or hard thinking is cut out. Language, behavior, ideas, ways of expression and

authentic imaginations—as well as books—have been censored. Everything is directed toward “normalcy,” the folding into the fast-paced, material- and status-oriented capitalist value system. As a result, much of the expanse and variety of the human condition is belittled or invalidated. Our humanity is sacrificed, little by little.

Despite this, *Always Running* continues to be requested and used. I’ve been told countless times that this is one of the few books nonreaders love to read. And that it is often the most stolen book in libraries and classrooms. I don’t condone this, although it usually happens in places where there are no bookstores or decent library facilities.

Yes, *Always Running* is hard-core. Yes, it’s graphic. It’s meant to be this way. You can’t tell the true story about real gang life without the graphic details. Many kids who love the book have also lived through similar experiences. Too many adults are naive or close-minded about what the children are going through.

The thing is, *Always Running* was a book that had to be written. It’s the first major account of the Chicano barrio gang experience from an actual participant (unlike the many sociological studies by social scientists). After more than 80 years of L.A. barrio warfare, thousands killed, several generations of gang families, parents who lost two or three sons, this story had to be told.

I can’t claim *Always Running* is representative of the vastly multifaceted Chicano gang life. I can only take responsibility for the truths I felt compelled to reveal, with the necessary changes in fact and names to protect the innocent *and* the guilty.

Like any good story, there are deep lessons, most of which I learned “the hard way.” My life on the streets involved stealing, shootings, stabbings, arrests, homelessness, drug use and overdoses. I’ve been beaten and shot at—although never hit—and I’ve beaten, stabbed and shot at others. I felt too far gone to be redeemed, to be any good to anyone or anything. I didn’t have plans for a future, for a career, or the dreams to take me there.

You’ll find all this and more in *Always Running*.

At the same time, you’ll also discover the transcendent account of a poet/artist who, with the help of a small, socially engaged core of community leaders and teachers, overcame his own deeply held pathologies to take on the great challenges of an oppressive and exploitative reality—and finding his own particular destiny with words, dedicated himself to making positive contributions in transforming that reality.

I went from victim to perpetrator to witness to revolutionary. More than 30 years later, I continue to do the vital work of helping create a healthy earth and a healthy society worthy of our gifts, our needs and our dreams (which is the ultimate struggle, the one fight really worth fighting).

I have a duty to take those lessons and experiences to as many people as will listen, to expand the conversation about why people join gangs, are violent, lose their imaginations and their hopes, and what we can do as creative and caring communities to truly see and address these ongoing and

deepening concerns.

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Censorship, repression and suppression simply don't work.

All-out creativity; poetic expression; access to life-giving resources; truly meaningful and respectful relationships; purposeful and life-affirming schooling and work (jobs and more jobs); decent health care; drug and psychiatric treatment as needed; and truly rehabilitative and initiatory practices are a few of the things that do work.

But the political will and narrowing economic resources, as well as the cultural values of our present time, have not fostered the growth or taken up the responsibility of healing a nation. Prisons and war seem to be the only way out for most poor and abandoned communities.

We have the technological means, we have the people, we have the ideas—we don't have the proper social organization.

No one can stand gangs. Everyone wants to get rid of them. But the solid and necessary work that will actually delve into the social, political, psychological, economic and spiritual basis for gang drug addictions, as well as domestic and street violence is not being done. To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, thousands are hacking at the branches of the problem; few are working at the root.

While it's true many organizations, churches, unions, neighborhood councils, native sweat lodges, circles, community centers, arts programs, poetry circles, hip-hop organizations and mentoring groups continue to transform lives among the most hard-core gang youth, there are still tens of thousands more young people, most not even in gangs, who are being abandoned, pushed aside, condemned to prison, drug addictions or early deaths.

Ramiro is one of the statistics, although he's not a number to me—he's my son. I have discussed extensively in writing, in the media, and in front of countless audiences *my* particular contribution to Ramiro's breakdown and eventual imprisonment. Essentially, I neglected Ramiro and my daughter Andrea, after their mom and I broke up. Years later, when they came to live with me in Chicago, they were resentful pissed-off teenagers. As one can imagine, I had a hard time trying to be the father figure they desperately needed. Even still, there are those who have made Ramiro's ordeal a focal point to attack me and my book.

How can I claim my book has changed lives when my own son is incarcerated? Doesn't that prove these kids aren't worthy of help?

My answer would be an emphatic no. As Ramiro's father, I had no choice but to step up to the plate, to become the father I should've been when they were younger. But I was also in the process of healing. After many failed tries, I finally took part in a recovery program and became sober after seven years of drug use and twenty years of drinking, a sobriety I have maintained for a dozen years since mid-1993.

Now I had no excuses. I could focus on my son's ordeals. I could be a better husband, friend



father and leader. *Always Running* contributed immensely to my personal healing. Writing about my violent gang life, the drug addictions, the rages and fears, proved to be risky and extremely difficult but deeply cathartic.

Eventually, I reconciled with Ramiro, now 30, even while he was imprisoned in various Illinois Department of Corrections facilities. I couldn't bail him out of the trouble he was in, but I wouldn't abandon him either. I've promised to stand by him and provide whatever assistance he needs to become strong and wise from this prison experience. He promised he would do well so he could get out in 14 years with good time—he wants to be a father to his three children and an active participant in the communities of imagination and hope we've been working toward. At great risk, he left the gang life. He's also been a teacher's aide, helping other prisoners.

Recently, Ramiro wrote: “When *Always Running* was first written, it opened my eyes to some of the things you have experienced, and some of the changes you have made in your life ... [T]hings that would have been a lot worse for me if you did not try to make an effort to help me escape from some of the craziness. ... I am grateful for you always being there for me. Even when we did not get along and our relationship was estranged, you still stayed a presence in my life. We accomplished a lot together, and one of those accomplishments was YSS ... it helped us to stay connected. [Ironically] my coming to prison is what helped us to become closer. We finally have a true father and son relationship. That should be a new message for fathers from your book: Don't wait until your son goes to prison to finally get to know him.”

I've learned a lot from Ramiro—it wasn't always me who did the teaching.

I've come a long way since *Always Running* first saw the light of day. But this journey would not have been possible without the immense patience, love and support of my wonderful family: my wife Trina, our two sons, Rubén, 17, and Luis, 11; my 28-year-old daughter, Andrea; and my grandchildren—Ricardo, Anastasia, Amanda Mae and Catalina.

Also I have to recognize my mother, Maria Estela: Despite years of not talking to each other, and a battle with cancer that she's overcome, we're now very close (my father, Alfonso, died in 1999 before *Always Running* came out). And my brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, and countless uncles, aunts and cousins (a few of them had problems when my book was first published but, in time, became my biggest fans).

I also have to thank Alexander Taylor, Judith Doyle and the board and staff at Curbstone Press of Willimantic, Connecticut, who first published *Always Running* and continue to support my work—well as the publishers and editors of Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster, who have kept the paperback version of *Always Running* in print (more than 20 printings as of this writing).

And I thank all the teachers, librarians, parents, students, law enforcement officers, judges, booksellers, writers, rehab counselors and community activists who have ensured my books remain on

the shelves, in the hands of young people, and have also helped in fighting the censorship attempt  
allowing new generations to enjoy and learn from this story.

I was not a good father or a good son, but I learned. I was not a good poet, but I never stopped writing. I couldn't put two words together when I spoke, but now no one can shut me up. I had a hard time dealing with my addictions, my rages, but somehow, some way, I overcame them.

The fact is I failed at everything I tried to do, but I kept working at it, failing some more, not giving up, so that eventually, at age 51, I've begun to center my life, get control over my destructive impulses, and become someone my wife, my kids, my grandchildren, and my community can learn from and respect.

If *Always Running* didn't help anybody, at least it brought miracles and magic into my life. It saved me. And this is good. Let me tell you. This is really good. Where I can appreciate the stillness of the morning instead of endure the screams in my head, where I don't have to lose myself to the slow suicide of drugs and alcohol, as I'd done for 27 years, where I can be thankful and humble before the world, before our immense tasks as revolutionary thinkers and doers, not just for the present, but for the Long Run, seven generations hence.

This is good, let me tell you. This is really good.

—Luis J. Rodríguez, Spring 2005

*THERE IS NO ABSOLUTE peril except for him who abandons himself; there is no complete death except for him who acquires a taste for dying.*

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—*Jacques Rivière*

# Preface to 1993 Edition

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“We have the right to lie, but not about the heart of the matter.”

—Antonin Artaud

LATE WINTER CHICAGO, EARLY 1991: The once-white snow which fell in December had turned into dark scum, mixed with ice-melting salt, car oil and decay. Icicles hung from rooftops and windowsills like the whiskers of old men.

For months, the bone-chilling “hawk” swooped down and forced everyone in the family to squeeze into a one-and-a-half bedroom apartment in a gray-stone, three-flat building in the Humboldt Park neighborhood.

Inside tensions built up like fever as we crammed around the TV set or kitchen table, the crowding made more intolerable because of heaps of paper, opened file drawers and shelves packed with books that garnered every section of empty space (a sort of writer’s torture chamber). The family included my third wife Trini; our child, Rubén Joaquín, born in 1988; and my 15-year-old son Ramiro (a 13-year-old daughter, Andrea, lived with her mother in East Los Angeles).

We hardly ventured outside. Few things were worth heaving on the layers of clothing and the coats, boots and gloves required to step out the door.

Ramiro had been placed on punishment, but not for an act of disobedience or the usual outbursts of teenage anxiety. Ramiro had been on a rapidly declining roller coaster ride into the world of street gang America, not unexpected for this neighborhood, once designated as one of the 10 poorest in the country and also known as one of the most gang-infested.

Humboldt Park is a predominantly Puerto Rican community with growing numbers of Mexican immigrants and uprooted blacks and sprinklings of Ukrainians and Poles from previous generations. But along with the greater West Town area it was considered a “changing neighborhood,” dotted here and there with rehabs, signs of gentrification and for many of us, imminent displacement.

Weeks before, Ramiro had received a 10 day suspension from Roberto Clemente High School, a beleaguered school with a good number of caring personnel, but one which was an epicenter of gang activity. The suspension came after a school fight which involved a war between “Insanes” and “Maniacs,” two factions of the “Folks” (“Folks” are those gangs allied with the Spanish Cobras and Gangster Disciples; the “People” are gangs tied to the Latin Kings and Vice Lords, symbolic of the complicated structures most inner-city gangs had come to establish). There was also an “S.O.S.”—“smash-on-sight”—contract issued on Ramiro. As a result I took him out of Clemente and enrolled him in another school. He lasted less than two weeks before school officials there kicked him out. Then I also had to pick him up from local jails following other fighting incidents—and once from

hospital where I watched a doctor put 11 stitches above his eye.

Following me, Ramiro was a second-generation gang member. My involvement was in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Los Angeles, the so-called gang capital of the country. My teen years were ones of drugs, shootings and beatings, and arrests. I was around when South Central Los Angeles gave birth to the Crips and Bloods. By the time I turned 18 years old, 25 of my friends had been killed by rival gangs, police, drugs, car crashes and suicides.

If I had barely survived all this—to emerge eventually as a journalist, publisher, critic, and poet—it appeared unlikely my own son would make it. I had to begin the long, intense struggle to save his life from the gathering storm of street violence sweeping the country—some 20 years after I sneaked out of my 'hood in the dark of night, hid out in an L.A. housing project, and removed myself from the death-fires of *La Vida Loca*.

*La Vida Loca* or The Crazy Life is what we called the barrio gang experience. This lifestyle originated with the Mexican *Pachuco* gangs of the 1930s and 1940s, and was later recreated with the *Cholos*. It became the main model and influence for outlaw bikers of the 1950s and 1960s, the L.A. punk/rock scene in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Crips and Bloods of the 1980s and early 1990s. *Alice* Leon Bing commented in her 1991 book *Do or Die* (HarperCollins): “It was the *cholo* homeboy who first walked the walk and talked the talk. It was the Mexican American *pachuco* who initiated the emblematic tattoos, the signing with hands, the writing of legends on walls.”

One evening that winter, after Ramiro had come in late following weeks of trouble at school, I gave him an ultimatum. Yelling burst back and forth between the walls of our Humboldt Park flat. Two-year-old Rubén, confused and afraid, hugged my leg as the shouting erupted. In moments, Ramiro ran out of the house, entering the cold Chicago night without a jacket. I went after him, although by my mid-thirties I had gained enough weight to slow me down considerably. Still I sprinted down the gangway which led to a debris-strewn alley, filled with furniture parts and overturned trash cans. I saw Ramiro's fleeing figure, his breath rising above him in quickly-dissipating clouds.

I followed him toward Augusta Boulevard, the main drag of the neighborhood. People yelled out of windows and doorways: “¿Qué pasa, hombre?” Others offered information on Ramiro's direction. A father or mother chasing some child down the street is not an unfamiliar sight around here.

A city like Chicago has so many places in which to hide. The gray and brown brick buildings seem to suck people in. Ramiro would make a turn and then vanish, only to pop up again. Appearing and disappearing. He flew over brick walls, scurried down another alley then veered into a building that swallowed him up and spit him out the other side.

I kept after Ramiro until, unexpectedly, I found him hiding in some bushes. He stepped out unaware I was to the side of him.

“Ramiro ... come home,” I gently implored, knowing if I pounced on him there would be little

hope he'd come back. He sped off again.

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"Leave me alone!" he yelled.

As I watched his escape, it was like looking back into a distant time, back to my own youth, when I ran and ran, when I jumped over peeling fences, fleeing *vatos locos*, the police or my own shadow and some drug-induced hysteria.

I saw Ramiro run off and then saw my body entering the mouth of darkness, my breath cutting through the frigid flesh of night; it was my voice cracking open the winter sky.

Ramiro was born just prior to my 21st birthday. I had been working in a steel mill in Los Angeles. His mother, Camila, not yet 19, was an East Los Angeles woman who grew up in one of East L.A.'s roughest barrios. Yet Camila and her five sisters, with the help of their mother, managed to stave off all attempts to pull them into the street life there—even having battles on their front porch with the *locos* who tried to recruit them.

The media likens Los Angeles to a "Beirut by the Beach." For 1991, police cited these statistics: 100,000 gang members, 800 gangs, nearly 600 young people killed. Parts of the city, particularly the public housing projects, have been called "ungovernable." These stats have been used to create hysteria against black and Latino youth. Police in L.A. have practically instituted martial law in the inner city. Michael Davis in his book *City of Quartz* (Verso Press, 1991) says that by 1990 the various law enforcement "operations" to destroy gangs (using helicopters, infra-red lights and made-over armored vehicles—not far behind what was used in 1991's "Desert Storm") detained or arrested 50,000 youth, in South Central alone.

"The Crazy Life" in my youth, although devastating, was only the beginning stages of what I believe is now a consistent and growing genocidal level of destruction predicated on the premise that these are marginalized youth with no jobs or future, and therefore expendable.

Camila's brothers weren't spared. One of them became active in a barrio gang, and later a heroin addict and a convict. Another brother got jumped and stabbed seven times—but survived. And an older half-brother was killed while trying to exact some revenge one night near the Mexican border.

Later, her nephews from an older sister got involved in the gangs and one of them was murdered outside his home at the age of 17 (but not before he fathered a baby).

When Ramiro was two years old, and his sister only 10 months, Camila and I broke up. About seven years later, I moved to Chicago. After being left behind, Ramiro failed miserably in school although he had been tested as a gifted child. He ran away from home a number of times. Once when he was about 10 years old he hopped a train from L.A. to Chicago, but police pulled him out of the boxcar before he passed the city limits. When he turned 13 years old, he came to stay with me. Because of what Camila and I had been through, we tried everything we could to keep him out of the "life," even after we divorced and lived a couple of thousands of miles apart. But often there was to

much against us.

In East L.A. and in schools like Chicago's Clemente were some of the nation's highest drop-out rates. Youth unemployment hovered around 75 percent in the most neglected areas. And what of those who did everything right, got all the good grades and followed the "rules"? Camila, for example, had been an A student at Garfield High School (site of the 1988 movie *Stand and Deliver*) and was active in school affairs. But after we married, she applied for work and was told she didn't know enough to get a basic 9 to 5 office job. She even had to go back to some classes to make up for the lack of schooling she received despite being one of the best students at Garfield! The fact the L.A. schools now give "warranties" only underscores the point.

With little productive to do, drug selling becomes a lucrative means of survival. A 10-year-old in Humboldt Park can make \$80-\$100 a day as a lookout for local dealers. The drug trade is business. It's capitalism: Cutthroat, profit-motivated and expedient. Also, the values which drive gangs are linked to the control of markets, in a way similar to what has created borders between nations. In communities with limited resources like Humboldt Park and East L.A., sophisticated survival structures evolve, including gangs, out of the bone and sinew tossed up by this environment.

After Ramiro ran away, he failed to return home for another two weeks. I was so angry at him for leaving, I bought locks to keep him out. I kept a vigil at home to catch him should he sneak in to eat. But then I remembered what I had been through. I recalled how many institutions and people had failed my son—and now he was expected to rise above all this! Soon I spent every night he was gone driving around the streets, talking to the "boys" in their street-corner domains, making daily calls to the police. I placed handwritten notes in the basement which said it was okay for him to come back. I left food for him to get to. Suddenly every teenage Latino male looked like Ramiro.

With the help of some of his friends, I finally found Ramiro in a rundown barrio hovel and convinced him to come home. He agreed to obtain help in getting through some deep emotional and psychological problems—stemming in large part from an unstable childhood, including abuse he had sustained as a kid from his stepfathers, one who was an alcoholic and another who regularly beat him. And I could not remove myself from being struck by the hammerhead of responsibility. A key factor was my relative lack of involvement in Ramiro's life as I became increasingly active in politics and writing.

Although the best way to deal with one's own children is to help construct the conditions that will ensure the free and healthy development of all, it's also true you can't be for all children if you can't be for your own.

By mid-1991, Ramiro had undergone a few months in a psychiatric hospital and various counseling and family sessions that also involved bringing his mother in from L.A. We implemented an educational and employment plan, worked out with school officials, teachers and social workers.

(everyone who had dealings with him had to be involved, to get them on “our side” so to speak). I also learned a parent cannot just turn over a child to a school, a court, or hospital without stepping in at various times to insure his or her best interests are being met. My aim was to help Ramiro get through his teen-age years with a sense of empowerment and esteem, with what I call complete literacy: The ability to participate competently and confidently in any level of society one chooses.

There is an aspect of suicide in young people whose options have been cut off. They stand on street corners, flashing hand signs, inviting the bullets. It’s either *la torcida* or death: A warrior’s path, when even self-preservation is not at stake. And if they murder, the victims are usually the ones who look like them, the ones closest to who they are—the mirror reflections. They murder and they’re killing themselves, over and over.

At the same time, individual efforts must be linked with social ones. I tried to get Ramiro to understand the systematic nature of what was happening in the street which in effect made choices for him before he was born. The thing is, no matter what one does individually, in this setting, the dangers keep lurking around every corner.

A couple of examples helped Ramiro see the point. Not long ago, a few of his friends were picked up by police, who drove them around in a squad car. The police took them to a rival gang’s neighborhood. There they forced Ramiro’s friends to spray paint over the graffiti with their own insignias—as rival gang members watched—and then left them there to find their way home. It’s an old police practice.

A second incident involved the shooting death of a Dragon, a Puerto Rican teenager named Efrain, who Ramiro knew. Soon after, we happened to drive through a Latin Kings’ territory. The words “Efrain Rots” had been emblazoned on a wall. That night, Ramiro sat alone, intensely quiet, in the backyard, thinking about this for a long time.

Things between us, for now, are being dealt with day by day. Although Ramiro has gained a much more viable perspective on his place in the world, there are choices he has to make “not just once, but every time they come up.”

Meanwhile I’ve pursued writing this book—after a 10-year lapse. The writing first began when I was 15, but the urgency of the present predicament demands it finally see the light of day. This work is an argument for the reorganization of American society—not where a few benefit at the expense of the many, but where everyone has access to decent health care, clothing, food and housing, based on need, not whether they can afford them. It’s an indictment against the use of deadly force which has been the principal means this society uses against those it cannot accommodate (as I write this, Rodney King’s beating by the LAPD continues to play itself out throughout the country. And the *Los Angeles Daily News* in late October 1991 reported that the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department had shot 57 people since the first of the year—about 80 percent were people of color, and a few were disabled or mentally ill; all of them were unarmed or shot in the back).



Criminality in this country is a class issue. Many of those warehoused in overcrowded prisons can be properly called “criminals of want,” those who’ve been deprived of the basic necessities of life and therefore forced into so-called criminal acts to survive. Many of them just don’t have the means to buy their “justice.” They are members of a social stratum which includes welfare mothers, housing project residents, immigrant families, the homeless and unemployed. This book is part of their story.

Although the work begins with my family’s trek from Mexico when I was a child and touches on our early years in Watts, it primarily covers the period from ages 12 until 18 when I became active in the Las Lomas barrio.

This work is not fiction, yet there are people I don’t want hurt by having their names and stories made public. I’ve changed names and synthesized events and circumstances in keeping with the integrity of a literary, dramatic work, as an artist does in striving for that rare instance when, as a critic once said, “something of beauty collides with something of truth.”

The more we know, the more we owe. This is a responsibility I take seriously. My hope in producing this work is that perhaps there’s a thread to be found, a pattern or connection, a seed of apprehension herein, which can be of some use, no matter how slight, in helping to end the rising casualty count for the Ramiros of this world, as more and more communities come under the death grip of what we called “The Crazy Life.”

July 1995

# Chapter One

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“Cry, child, for those without tears have a grief which never ends.”—Mexican saying

THIS MEMORY BEGINS WITH flight. A 1950s bondo-spackled Dodge surged through a driving rain veering around the potholes and upturned tracks of the abandoned Red Line trains on Alameda. Mama was in the front seat. My father was at the wheel. My brother *Rano* and I sat on one end of the back seat; my sisters *Pata* and *Cuca* on the other. There was a space between the boys and girls to keep them apart.

“*Amá, mira a Rano,*” a voice said for the tenth time from the back of the car. “He’s hitting me again.”

We fought all the time. My brother, especially, had it in for *La Pata*—thinking of Frankenstein. He called her “Anastein.” Her real name was Ana, but most of the time we went by the animal name. Dad gave us at birth. I am *Grillo*, which means cricket. *Rano* stands for “rana,” the frog. *La Pata* is the duck and *Cuca* is short for *cucaracha*: cockroach.

The car seats came apart in strands. I looked out at the passing cars which seemed like ghosts with headlights rushing past the streaks of water on the glass. I was nine years old. As the rain fell, my mother cursed in Spanish intermixed with pleas to saints and “*la Santísima Madre de Dios.*” She argued with my father. Dad didn’t curse or raise his voice. He just stated the way things were.

“I’ll never go back to Mexico,” he said. “I’d rather starve here. You want to stay with me, it has to be in Los Angeles. Otherwise, go.”

This incited my mother to greater fits.

We were on the way to the Union train station in downtown L.A. We had our few belongings stuffed into the trunk and underneath our feet. I gently held on to one of the comic books Mama bought to keep us entertained. I had on my Sunday best clothes with chewed gum stuck in a coat pocket. It could have been Easter, but it was a weeping November. I don’t remember for sure why we were leaving. I just knew it was a special day. There was no fear or concern on my part. We were always moving. I looked at the newness of the comic book and felt some exhilaration of its feel in my hand. Mama had never bought us comic books before. It had to be a special day.

For months we had been pushed from one house to another, just Mama and us children. Mom and Dad had split up prior to this. We stayed at the homes of women my mom called *comadres*, with streams of children of their own. Some nights we slept in a car or in the living rooms of people we didn’t know. There were no shelters for homeless families. My mother tried to get us settled somewhere but all indications pointed to our going back to the land of her birth, to her red earth, her Mexico.

The family consisted of my father Alfonso, my mom Maria Estela, my older brother, José Ren

and my younger sisters, Ana Virginia and Gloria Estela. I recall my father with his wavy hair and clean-shaven face, his correct, upright and stubborn demeanor, in contrast to my mother who was heavy-set with Native features and thick straight hair, often laughing heartily, her eyes narrowed to slits, and sometimes crying from a deep tomb-like place with a sound like swallowing mud.

As we got closer to the Union station, Los Angeles loomed low and large, a city of oceans of construction, a good place to get lost in. I, however, would learn to hide in imaginative worlds—books; in TV shows, where I picked up much of my English; in solitary play with mangled army men and crumpled toy trucks. I was so withdrawn it must have looked scary.

This is what I know: When I was two years old, our family left Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, for Los Angeles. My father was an educated man, unusual for our border town, a hunger city filled to the hills with cardboard hovels of former peasants, Indians and dusk-faced children. In those days, an educated man had to be careful about certain things—questioning authority, for example. Although the principal of a local high school, my father failed to succumb to the local chieftains who were linked to the national party which ruled Mexico, as one famous Latin American writer would later say, with “perfect dictatorship.”

When Dad first became principal, there were no funds due to the massive bureaucratic maze he had to get through to get them. The woman he lived with then was an artist who helped raise money for the school by staging exhibitions. My father used his own money to pay for supplies and at one point had the iron fence around the school torn down and sold for scrap.

One year, Dad received an offer for a six-month study program for foreign teachers in Bloomington, Indiana. He liked it so much, he renewed it three times. By then, my father had married his secretary, my mother, after the artist left him. They had their first child, José René.

By the time my father returned, his enemies had mapped out a means to remove him—being a high school principal is a powerful position in a place like Ciudad Juárez. My father faced a pile of criminal charges, including the alleged stealing of school funds. Police arrived at the small room in the *vecindad* where Mama and Dad lived and escorted him to the city jail.

For months my father fought the charges. While he was locked up, they fed him scraps of food from a rusted steel can. They denied him visitors—Mama had to climb a section of prison wall and pick up the 2-year-old José René so he could see his father. Finally, after a lengthy trial, my father was found innocent—but he no longer had his position as principal.

Dad became determined to escape to the United States. My mother, on the other hand, never wanted to leave Mexico; she did it to be with Dad.

Mama was one of two daughters in a family run by a heavy-drinking, wife-beating railroad worker and musician. My mother was the only one in her family to complete high school. Her two brothers, Kiko and Rodolfo, often crossed the border to find work and came back with stories of love

and brawls on the other side.

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Their grandmother was a Tarahumara Indian who once walked down from the mountainous area in the state of Chihuahua where her people lived in seclusion for centuries. The Spanish never conquered them. But their grandmother never returned to her people. She eventually gave birth to my grandmother, Ana Acosta.

Ana's first husband was a railroad worker during the Mexican Revolution; he lost his life when a tunnel exploded during a raid. They brought his remains in a shoebox-sized container. Ana was left alone with one son, while pregnant with a daughter. Lucita, the daughter, eventually died of convulsions at the age of four, and Manolo, the son, was later blinded after a bout with a deadly form of chicken pox which struck and killed many children in the area.

Later Ana married my grandfather, Mónico Jiménez, who like her first husband worked the railroads. At one point, Mónico quit the rails to play trumpet and sing for bands in various night clubs. Once he ended up in Los Angeles, but with another woman. In fact, Mónico had many other women. My grandmother often had to cross over to the railroad yards, crowded with prostitutes and where Mónico spent many nights singing, to bring him home.

When my parents married, Mama was 27; Dad almost 40. She had never known any other man. He already had four or five children from three or four other women. She was an emotionally charged border woman, full of fire, full of pain, full of giving love. He was a stoic, unfeeling, unmoved intellectual who did as he pleased as much as she did all she could to please him. This dichotomy of couple, this sun and moon, this *curandera* and biologist, dreamer and realist, fire woman and water man, molded me; these two sides created a life-long conflict in my breast.

By the time Dad had to leave Ciudad Juárez, my mother had borne three of his children, including myself, all in El Paso, on the American side (Gloria was born later in East L.A.'s General Hospital). This was done to help ease the transition from alien status to legal residency. There are stories of women who wait up to the ninth month and run across the border to have their babies, sometimes squatting and dropping them on the pavement as they hug the closest lamppost.

We ended up in Watts, a community primarily of black people except for *La Colonia*, often called the Mexican Quarter—the Mexican section and the oldest part of Watts.

Except for the housing projects, Watts was a ghetto where country and city mixed. The homes were mostly single-family units, made of wood or stucco. Open windows and doors served as air conditioners, a slight relief from the summer desert air. Chicken coops graced many a back yard along with broken auto parts. Roosters crowed the morning to birth and an occasional goat peered from behind weather-worn picket fences along with the millions of dogs which seemed to populate the neighborhood.

Watts fed into one of the largest industrial concentrations in the country, pulling from an almost endless sea of cheap labor; they came from Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Arkansas . . . from Chihuahua, Sonora, Sinaloa and Nayarit. If you moved there it was because the real estate concerns pushed you in this direction. For decades, L.A. was notorious for restrictive covenants—where some areas were off limits to “undesirables.”

Despite the competition for jobs and housing, we found common ground there, among the rolling mills, bucket shops and foundries. All day long we heard the pounding of forges and the air-whistles that signaled the shift changes in the factories, which practically lay in our backyards.

We moved to Watts at the behest of my oldest sister, really a half-sister, who was already married with two children of her own. Her family eventually joined us a few months later. Her name was Seni, a name my father invented (although rumor has it, it was an inversion of the name Inès, an old girlfriend of his). The name, however, has stayed in the family. Seni's first daughter was named Ana Seni and in later years, one of Ana Seni's daughters became Seni Bea.

When Seni was a child, my father often left her for long intervals with my grandmother Catita, whom she called Mama Piri. One family legend tells of a 9-year-old Seni answering the door during a pouring rain. A man, with soaked hat and coat, stood at the doorway. Seni yelled out: “Mama Piri! Mama Piri—there's a strange man at the door.”

“Don't worry, *m'ija*,” Catita said. “He's only your father.”

Seni lived in several rentals in Watts until she found a two-story on 111th Street near a block of factories. The place later got razed to build Locke High School. I stayed there a couple of summers sleeping in a cobweb-infested attic with exposed 2-by-4 studs. Rats and cockroaches roamed freely in that house: huge rats, huge cockroaches. Seni would place a chair at the bottom of the attic steps and she convinced me it could ward off the creatures. I believed it until one night I noticed the chair was gone. I ran down to tell Seni. But she yelled back in Spanish: “Go back to bed . . . that chair couldn't keep nothing away, and only a fool would believe it could.”

I was devastated.

Seni was my father's daughter from one of his earlier relationships; her mother died giving birth to her. My father was handsome and athletic as a young man. He was the pole-vaulting champion at one of the schools he attended. But his looks apparently got him into a lot of trouble. His father, Cristóbal, then a general in the Mexican army, once disowned him when Dad fell for a woman and neglected his studies in medical school. Dad quit school to be with the woman who would later become Seni's mother.

I also had two older half-brothers, Alberto and Mario, who lived in Mexico. Another half-sister, Lisa, died as an infant after she accidentally ate some *chicharrones* my father was forced to sell on the cobblestone streets in Mexico City after his father cut him off. My mother kept a sepia-colored black

and-white death photo of Lisa in a white lace baptism dress, looking like a doll, looking asleep, peaceful, as she lay in a tiny wood coffin. Our first exposure in America stays with me like a foul odor. It seemed a strange world, most of it spiteful to us, spitting and stepping on us, coughing us up us immigrants, as if we were phlegm stuck in the collective throat of this country. My father was mostly out of work. When he did have a job it was in construction, in factories such as Sinclair Paint or Standard Brands Dog Food, or pushing door-bells selling insurance, Bibles or pots and pans. My mother found work cleaning homes or in the garment industry. She knew the corner markets were ripping her off but she could only speak with her hands and in a choppy English.

Once my mother gathered up the children and we walked to Will Rogers Park. There were people everywhere. Mama looked around for a place we could rest. She spotted an empty spot on a park bench. But as soon as she sat down an American woman, with three kids of her own, came by.

“Hey, get out of there—that’s our seat.”

My mother understood but didn’t know how to answer back in English. So she tried in Spanish.

“Look spic, you can’t sit there!” the American woman yelled. “You don’t belong here. Understand? This is not your country!”

Mama quietly got our things and walked away, but I knew frustration and anger bristled within her because she was unable to talk, and when she did, no one would listen.

We never stopped crossing borders. The *Río Grande* (or *Río Bravo*, which is what the Mexicans call it, giving the name a power “Río Grande” just doesn’t have) was only the first of countless barriers set in our path.

We kept jumping hurdles, kept breaking from the constraints, kept evading the border guards on every new trek. It was a metaphor to fill our lives—that river, that first crossing, the mother of all crossings. The L.A. River, for example, became a new barrier, keeping the Mexicans in the neighborhoods over on the vast east side of the city for years, except for forays downtown. Schools provided other restrictions: Don’t speak Spanish, don’t be Mexican—you don’t belong. Railroad tracks divided us from communities where white people lived, such as South Gate and Lynwood across from Watts. We were invisible people in a city which thrived on glitter, big screens and big names, but this glamour contained none of our names, none of our faces.

The refrain “this is not your country” echoed for a lifetime.

Although we moved around the Watts area, the house on 105th Street near McKinley Avenue held my earliest memories, my earliest fears and questions. It was a small matchbox of a place. Next to it stood a tiny garage with holes through the walls and an unpainted barn-like quality. The weather battered it into a leaning shed. The back yard was a jungle. Vegetation appeared to grow down from the sky. There were banana trees, huge “sperm” weeds (named that because they stunk like semen when you cut them), foxtails and yellowed grass. An avocado tree grew in the middle of the yard and its roof

covered every bit of ground, tearing up cement walks while its branches scraped the bedroom windows. A sway of clothes on some lines filled the little bit of grassy area just behind the house.

My brother and I played often in our jungle, even pretending to be Tarzan (Rano mastered the Tarzan yell from the movies). The problem, however, was I usually ended up being the monkey who got thrown off the trees. In fact, I remember my brother as the most dangerous person alive. He seemed to be wracked with a scream which never let out. His face was dark with meanness, what my mother called *maldad*. He also took delight in seeing me writhe in pain, cry or cower, vulnerable to his own inflated sense of power. This hunger for cruelty included his ability to take my mom's most wicked whippings—without crying or wincing. He'd just sit there and stare at a wall, forcing Mama to resort to other implements of pain—but Rano would not show any emotion.

Yet in the streets, neighborhood kids often chased Rano from play or jumped him. Many times he came home mangled, his face swollen. Once somebody threw a rock at him which cut a gash across his forehead, leaving a scar Rano has to this day.

Another time a neighbor's kid smashed a metal bucket over Rano's head, slicing the skin over his skull and creating a horrifying scene with blood everywhere. My mother in her broken English could remedy few of the injustices, but she tried. When this one happened, she ran next door to confront the kid's mother.

The woman had been sitting on her porch and saw everything.

“¿*Qué pasó aquí?*” Mama asked.

“I don't know what you want,” the woman said. “All I know is your boy picked up that bucket and hit himself over the head—that's all I know.”

In school, they placed Rano in classes with retarded children because he didn't speak much English. They even held him back a year in the second grade.

For all this, Rano took his rage out on me. I recall hiding from him when he came around looking for a playmate. My mother actually forced me out of closets with a belt in her hand and made me play with him.

One day we were playing on the rooftop of our house.

“Grillo, come over here,” he said from the roof's edge. “Man, look at this on the ground.”

I should have known better, but I leaned over to see. Rano then pushed me and I struck the ground on my back with a loud thump and lost my breath, laying deathly still in suffocating agony, until I slowly gained it back.

Another time he made me the Indian to his cowboy, tossed a rope around my neck and pulled me around the yard. He stopped barely before it choked the life out of me. I had rope burns around my neck for a week.

His abuse even prompted neighborhood kids to get in on it. One older boy used to see how Rano tore into me. One day he peered over the fence separating his yard from ours.

“Hey, little dude ... yeah you. Come over here a minute,” he said. “I got something to show you”

This time I approached with caution. Little good that did me: I stepped into a loop of rope on the ground. He pulled on it and dragged me through the weeds and foxtails, up the splintery fence, and tied it down on his side. I hung upside down, kicking and yelling for what seemed like hours until somebody came and cut me down.

The house on 105th Street stayed cold. We couldn't always pay the gas or light bills. When we couldn't, we used candles. We cleaned up the dishes and the table where we ate without any light, whispering because that's what people do in the dark.

We took baths in cold water, and I remember wanting to run out of the bathroom as my mother murmured a shiver of words to comfort me:

“*Así es, así será,*” she explained as she dunked me into the frigid bath.

One night, my parents decided to take us to a restaurant since we had no heat to cook anything with. We drove around for awhile. On Avalon Boulevard we found one of those all-night, ham-eggs-&-coffee places. As we pulled up, I curled up in the seat.

“No, I don't want to go in,” I yelled.

“And why not?” my mother demanded. “*Por el amor de Dios,* aren't you hungry?”

I pointed a finger to a sign on the door. It read: “Come In. Cold Inside.”

Christmases came with barely a whimper. Once my parents bought a fake aluminum tree, placed some presents beneath it, and woke us up early to open them up. Most of the wrappings, though, had been haphazardly put together because Rano had sneaked into the living room in the middle of the night and torn them open to take a peek. The presents came from a church group which gave out gifts for the poor. It was our first Christmas. That day, I broke the plastic submarine, toy gun and metal car I received. I don't know why. I suppose in my mind it didn't seem right to have things that were in working order, unspent.

My mother worked on and off, primarily as a *costurera* or cleaning homes or taking care of other people's children. We sometimes went with her to the houses she cleaned. They were nice, American white-people homes. I remember one had a swimming pool and a fireplace and a thing called rugs. At Mama swept and scrubbed and vacuumed, we played in the corner, my sisters and I, afraid to touch anything. The odor of these houses was different, full of fragrances, sweet and nauseating. On 105th Street the smells were of fried lard, of beans and car fumes, of factory smoke and home-made bread out of backyard stills. There were chicken smells and goat smells in grassless yards filled with engine parts and wire and wood planks, cracked and sprinkled with rusty nails. These were the familiar aromas: the funky earth, animal and mechanical smells which were absent from the homes my mother cleaned.



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