

guts of the wood-shingle dwelling; the woman never cleaned it. They take the woman away, never to come back.

It turns out she had been babysitting three small children when, for an unknown reason, the kids' parents never came back for them. The woman ran out of food. One day, trash collectors find three children in a playpen next to the morning garbage.

Angry voices close in on the woman's house after her removal. A few kids throw rocks at the windows, the glass falling like raindrops skewing down a marble wall. Somebody pours gasoline on the splintered porch. Somebody tosses a twirled newspaper lit at the top. Next door, the glow washes across faces as we observe the house crackle and tumble in a craze of flames.

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The Mexicans who came to live in the San Gabriel Valley worked the fields, the railroads or in the encroaching industry which soon dotted the valley. Their barrios had names like *El Jardín* (the garden), *Monte Flores* (mountain flowers), *Canta Ranas* (singing frogs — named for the watery inhabitants of a local swamp), *Bolen* (a Spanish corruption of Baldwin Park), or *La Puente* (the bridge).

Las Lomas was an old barrio whose main rivals were to the west, in East Los Angeles, or the north in another barrio called *Sangra*.

Sangra was a corruption of San Gabriel, an incorporated city built around one of the Spanish Missions founded by Father Junípero Serra in the 1700s. A major Indian village, *Yang Na*, was once situated here. Later when the railroads linked many of the missions, they brought in Mexican laborers who became the first barrio residents.

It didn't take long for middle-income Anglos, primarily fleeing L.A.'s inner-city as it filled up with people of color, to move in and around these barrios and create the first suburbs. New tracts of homes suddenly appeared on previously empty space or by displacing the barrios. In later years, large

numbers of Asians from Japan, Korea and Taiwan also moved into the area. Sections of Monterey Park and even San Gabriel became known as Little Japans or Chinatowns. It wasn't hard to find an unpaved road cluttered with shacks on one block while a row of stucco townhouses graced another.

The barrios which weren't incorporated, including *Las Lomas*, became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion which the local media, generally controlled by suburban whites, labeled havens of crime.

For years, nobody ventured into *Las Lomas* unless they had to be there. Buses refused to provide residents there any service. Sheriff's deputies entered it with full firepower and ample backup, hardly ever alone.

One of the county's most devastating increases in gang activity centered on *Las Lomas*.

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We didn't call ourselves gangs. We called ourselves clubs or *clicas*. In the back lot of the local elementary school, about a year after Tino's death, five of us gathered in the grass and created a club — "Thee Impersonations," the "Thee" being an old English usage that other clubs would adopt because it made everything sound classier, nobler, *badder*. It was something to belong to — something that was ours. We weren't in boy scouts, in sports teams or camping groups. Thee Impersonations is how we wove something out of the threads of nothing.

"We all taking a pledge," Miguel Robles said. "A pledge to be for each other. To stand up for the *clica*. Thee Impersonations will never let you down. Don't ever let Thee Impersonations down."

Miguel was 11 years old like the rest of us. Dark, curly-haired and good-looking, he was also sharp in running, baseball and schoolwork — and a leader. Miguel was not prone to loudness or needless talking, but we knew he was the best among us. We made him president of our club.

Thee Impersonations was born of necessity. It started one day at the school during lunch break. A few of us guys were standing around talking to some girls — girls we were beginning to see as women. They had makeup and short skirts. They had teased hair and menstruations. They grew breasts. They were no longer Yolanda, Guadalupe or Marfa — they were Yoli, Lupe and Mari.

Some of the boys were still in grass-stained jeans with knee patches and had only begun getting uncontrollable hard-ons. The girls flowered over the summer, and it looked near impossible for some of us to catch up.

Older dudes from junior high school, or even some who didn't go to school, would come to the school and give us chilled looks as they scoped out the young women.

That day, a caravan of low-scraping cars slow-dragged in front of the school. A crew of mean-looking *vatos* piled out, armed with chains, bats, metal pipes and zip guns.

"Thee Mystics rule," one of them yelled from the other side of the school fence.

Thee Mystics were a tough up-and-coming group. They fired their rigged .22s at the school and broke a couple of windows with stones. They rammed through the gate and front entrances. Several not-so-swift dudes who stood in their way got beat. Even teachers ran for cover. Terror filled everyone's eyes.

I froze as the head-stomping came dangerously my way. But I was also intrigued. I wanted this power. I wanted to be able to bring a whole school to its knees and even make teachers squirm. All my school life until then had been poised against me: telling me what to be, what to say, how to say it. I was a broken boy, shy and fearful. I wanted what Thee Mystics had; I wanted the power to hurt somebody.

Police sirens broke the spell. Dudes scattered in all directions. But Thee Mystics had done their damage. They had left their mark on the school — and on me.

Miguel and the rest of us started Thee Impersonations because we needed protection. There were other clubs popping up all over,

many challenging anybody who wasn't into anything. All of a sudden every dude had to claim a clique.

Some of these clubs included Thee Ravens, The Superiors, Latin Legions, Thee Imitations, Los Santos and Chug-a-lug (a curious mix of Anglo and Mexican dudes). These were the "Southside" clubs (for South San Gabriel). The biggest on the Southside then were Thee Illusions and their allies: Thee Mystics.

Over in San Gabriel, other cliques were formed such as Thee Regents, The Chancellors, Little Gents, The Intruders and Little Jesters.

Most of the clubs began quite innocently. Maybe they were a team of guys for friendly football. Sometimes they were set up for trips to the beach or the mountains. But some became more organized. They obtained jackets, with their own colors, and identification cards. Later a few of the cliques became car clubs, who invested what little they had in bouncing lowriders, street-wise "shorts," splashed with colors, which cruised the main drags of local barrios or the main cruising spot we called *the boulevard*: Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles.

Then also some of the clubs metamorphosed into something more unpredictable, more encompassing. Something more deadly.

Junior high school became the turning point.

After grammar school, I ended up going to Richard Garvey Intermediate School. My father had gotten a job as a "laboratory technician" at a Los Angeles community college. So we moved into a larger, two-bedroom place in territory which stood between the two major barrios: *Las Lomas* and *Sangra*. This meant I had to go to Garvey.

In the mid-1960s, the students at Garvey had some of the worst academic scores in the state. Most of the time, there were no pencils or paper. Books were discards from other suburban schools where the well-off students turned up. The kids who lived in the Hills found their way into Garvey. And for half of them, the school

was the end of the line: It had more than a 50-percent dropout rate among Mexicans before they even got to high school.

There were only a couple of Impersonations who made it there. Miguel Robles and the others ended up in another school. Garvey was Illusions and Mystics territory. I was on my own.

Again the first thing I noticed were some of the girls. The ones from the Hills weren't just blossoming women, though; they were already hardened, sophisticated. Some of them called themselves *cholas*. They had long, teased hair, often peroxidized black or red. They had heavy makeup, skirts which hugged their behinds, and they were all the time fighting, including with guys. The *cholas* laughed a lot and knew how to open up to every situation. They talked back, talked loud and talked tough. And they knew how to dance.

A few East L.A. people who moved into the Hills brought the East L.A. style with them. There were federally-subsidized housing projects not far from here called Maravilla. It was so-named in the 1920s when Los Angeles city officials rebuilt the downtown area and got rid of the Mexicans in the inner core by offering land on the far outreaches of town for a dollar. When the Mexicans got wind of this they exclaimed "¡Qué Maravilla!" — what a marvel! — and the name took.

My first love at 12 years old was a girl from Maravilla named Elena, a *chola*, who came to Garvey all *prendida*. She didn't just know how to kiss, but how to take my hand through sections of her body and teach a pre-teen something of his own budding sexuality.

At Garvey, the dudes began to sport cholo attire: the baggy starched pants and suspenders over white T-shirts, the flannel shirts clipped only from the top button, the bandannas and small brim hats. It was hip. It was different. And it was what the *cholas* liked.

This is what I remember of junior high: *Cholas* who walked up the stairs in their tight skirts, revealing everything, and looked down at us, smiling at their power. Bloody Kotexes on the hallway floor. Gang graffiti on every available space of wall. Fires which flared from restroom trash bins. Fights every

day, including after school on the alley off Jackson Avenue. Dudes who sold and took drugs, mostly downers and *yesca*, but sometimes heroin which a couple of dudes shot up in the boys' room while their "homeys" kept a lookout.

Yet most of the Mexican girls weren't *cholas*; their families still had strong reins on many of them. Mexicans were mostly traditional and Catholic. Fathers, mothers or older brothers would drop off these girls and come get them after school so no perceived harm would come their way.

One of them was Socorro, from Mexico, who was straight and proper, and tried to stop me from being a *cholo*. I asked her to become my girlfriend when word got around she liked me and Elena had left me for Ratón, a down dude from the Hills.

"They're trash," Socorro would often say in Spanish about the *cholillos*. "If you keep hanging out with them, you can say goodbye to me forever."

I liked her, but we didn't last too long as a couple. I didn't want to be straight and proper. My next girlfriend was Marina, a girl from Lomas who had one of the highest, peroxidized teases on her head with blonde streaks that accentuated her dark face.

It was at Marina's urging that I obtained my first tattoo. A dude named Angel charged \$5 for an hour's work beneath the school's bleachers. They were crude, unadorned, hand-etchings. Angel used sewing needles, sterilized by placing them over a match flame. He then tied a tight wound of sewing thread on the end. Enough of the needle's point stuck out to penetrate below the skin. Angel dipped the needle into a bottle of black India ink, allowing the thread to soak it up. Then he punctured the skin with quick up and down motions, filling the tiny holes with ink from the thread.

I got the tattoo on my upper right arm. It was an outline of a cross beneath the words "Mi Vida Loca."

We drove teachers nuts at Garvey. A number of them were sent home with nervous breakdowns. We went through three teachers and five substitutes in my home room my first year at the school.