the Shot caller

the Shot caller

A LATINO GANGBANGER'S MIRACULOUS ESCAPE
FROM A LIFE OF VIOLENCE TO A NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Casey Diaz

with MIKE YORKEY

EMANATE
BOOKS

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Emanate Books, an imprint of Thomas Nelson. Emanate Books and Thomas Nelson are registered trademarks of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

ISBN 978-0-7852-2452-5 (eBook)
ISBN 978-0-7852-2438-9 (TP)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018962473

Printed in the United States of America

19 20 21 22 23 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Sana

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Nicky Cruz

When I read about the life of Casey Diaz, I see so much of my own life.

Growing up as a young boy in Puerto Rico, my family was poor and my parents practiced witchcraft. My father sold out to the devil; my mother sold out to the devil. Me and my brothers and sisters were all subjected to this kind of life. We were cursed.

I became so angry, they sent me to New York City at fifteen to go live with my older brother. I had to fend for myself in a tough, big city.

Casey Diaz was brought to America in a similar way. His parents came from Central America, and he grew up poor on the streets of Los Angeles. He, too, had to quickly learn how to be tough in a big city. Casey had to quickly earn respect in the streets.

Like me, Casey wanted to become the greatest, most violent gang leader he could be. It was a way of gaining a reputation as someone to be feared. He became a leader's leader and he commanded the respect he thought he deserved.

I understand those feelings. When I was in my teens, I was like a wild animal on the streets of New York, so when David Wilkerson came to me in New York and told me about Jesus, me and my friends tried our best to humiliate him and scare him off. But he kept coming. This man had the nerve and the love to penetrate a war zone and tell me about a Jesus I had never heard of.

Even when I threatened to cut him into a thousand pieces, Wilkerson said to me, "Nicky, even if you cut me into a thousand pieces, every one of those pieces will cry out, 'Jesus loves you!'" This man placed himself in the middle of my mess and brought me into the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

I started to wake up and realize Jesus loves Nicky Cruz. Me. I finally surrendered. I fell down crying like a baby, in front of my gang, in front of my friends. I didn't care anymore. I needed to be loved. I was free.

That little boy inside of me—that boy from Puerto Rico who was so hurt—he came alive for the first time. I surrendered all and exchanged my weapons for a Bible. I ate it up. I went to Bible school.

Casey has also experienced the miraculous love of Jesus. What you will read in these pages is a story about a tough young man who lost his way, and the story of a loving God who never forgot Casey, no matter where he was. The Holy Spirit broke through to both of us and gave us new life.

I don't deserve the life I now have. I don't deserve the family and ministry I have been given.

Like the apostle Paul said:

> He considered me faithful and trustworthy, putting me into service [for this ministry], even though I was formerly a blasphemer [of our Lord] and a persecutor [of His church] and a shameful and outrageous and violent aggressor [toward believers]. Yet I

> was shown mercy because I acted out of ignorance in unbelief.
> (1 Timothy 1:12–13 AMP)

God has shown Casey mercy, and it is a beautiful thing. He was ignorant and so was I.

I know you will be inspired by Casey's story. I hope you, too, will surrender to the love of Jesus Christ.

A Note from Casey

What you are about to read is 100 percent true.

Some names have been changed to respect the privacy of individuals mentioned within this book.

Please be aware that I do not seek to glorify or excuse any of the poor choices I made in the past. Instead, my intent is to shine a light on my life as an example of God's redeeming love.

chapter one

IN THE YARD

My cell door swung wide open.

A pot-bellied California correctional officer stood there, jangling a set of keys. "One hour, Diaz," he announced.

Exercise time. For the next sixty minutes, I would be allowed to leave my cell at New Folsom State Prison—where two thousand of California's worst-of-the-worst criminals were locked up—to get some fresh air in the prison yard. I could lift dumbbells, do some chin-ups, or toss a well-worn basketball at the loosest rim west of the Mississippi. Or I could hang out and shoot the breeze with prisoners who were part of my cluster of cells that opened to an indoor communal area inside the prison.

I stood next to my "gate"—that's what we called cell doors in prison—frozen like a statue.

"You coming or going?" the prison guard asked.

On this, my first day with the main prison population, I knew I was supposed to gather the gang leaders together in the exercise yard and share a specific message with them.

"I'm going," I said to the prison guard.

So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours, starting with being transferred from the Security Housing Unit (SHU) inside New Folsom into the general prison population. After three years of solitary confinement—where contact with other humans was severely restricted and generally limited to a mute guard escorting me to the showers or an exercise area—I was now allowed to interact with fellow prisoners in my new surroundings.

This was a big deal since the California prison system knew I was a gang leader from the barrios of downtown LA. The warden was acutely aware that I wasn't someone to trifle with—inside or outside prison walls. I had stabbed people. I had stolen property—from cars to cash to drugs. I had ordered others to take out rival gang members or punks who double-crossed us. I had street cred in spades.

Now I feared the tables had been turned after leaving the solitary confinement found in the SHU, which is pronounced *shoe*. Now that I was part of the general prison population, it was me looking over my shoulder, wary of who was approaching my space.

Dressed in prison-issued blue jeans and a white T-shirt that hung on my five-foot, eight-inch frame that weighed 175 pounds, I fell in with prisoners from our unit of cells as we walked toward the exit leading to an outdoor exercise yard that was as big as a football field. The late-morning sun was comfortable on a spring day in Folsom, approximately twenty miles northeast of Sacramento, the state capital.

I wasn't interested in exercising, because my stomach was tied up in knots. I had a bad feeling about what could happen to me. Yet despite my unsettled equilibrium, I felt an assurance in my heart that I was doing the right thing.

As I was walking out, a half dozen guys materialized out of nowhere and came alongside me. They were Latinos, like me, and definitely in my space. I recognized them as leaders of rival gangs, mostly from Hispanic neighborhoods near downtown Los

Angeles—Pico-Union, Rampart District, MacArthur Park, and South-Central. At one time, we fought bitterly over the same turf, but once we were incarcerated, the distinctions between various Latino gangs vanished. The way things worked in prison, it was the Latinos versus the whites versus the blacks. You stuck with your kind. For protection. To stay alive. And settle scores.

On my way to the yard, they asked how I was doing. From their facial expressions, I could tell they were surprised I had been released from solitary. Prisoners were rarely transferred from the SHU into the main prison population, especially for someone with my status in the gang world.

A tall, skinny dude drew closer. I recognized him from previous prison stints in the LA area. Bullet was his name, and he was clearly the alpha male in the group.

"What's crackin'?" he asked.

"Not much," I replied. "But I have something to tell you and the guys."

I led them to a concrete picnic table, where I sat down on the tabletop while the gang leaders gathered around me. They were a bunch of tough-looking dudes. Many sported an array of tattoos declaring their allegiance to MS-13, 18th Street, and Florencia 13.

Bullet looked over his shoulder. Satisfied no guards could overhear us, he squared his shoulders and faced me.

"So, what is it you want to tell us?" he asked.

Bullet probably expected me to say I wanted to settle a score with another gang member at New Folsom, acquire drugs, or contact someone on the outside. Instead, I gathered myself, knowing what I would say next meant these gang leaders would issue a "green light" on me, meaning I would be killed by another gang member in the very near future.

A murder inside prison walls or outside in the exercise yard was often swift and always brutal. The most popular way of killing

someone was jabbing a shank into someone's neck and slicing the jugular vein.

Shanks were crude homemade knives made from scraps of metal, melted plastic, or a piece of wood sharpened like a knife. You could also make a shank from a toothbrush by working the shaft against a piece of metal or a concrete wall until it became a deadly weapon with a sharp point. The bottom of the shank would be tightly wrapped with cloth as a handle, and in the hands of prisoners, they could be used for stabbing another prisoner. They were surprisingly lethal.

The other favored form of killing was strangulation. Prisoners took strands of cloth from boxers, bed sheets, or socks and wove them together until they a became strong, thin rope. While a couple of heavy guys held you down, a third assassin wrapped the handmade cord tightly around your neck and yanked until your oxygen supply was completely cut off. I'd seen such brutal force applied that prisoners were garroted or even beheaded.

Nonetheless, I made eye contact with Bullet and several of the other gang leaders, aware that what I was about to tell them was tantamount to signing my own death warrant.

But I also knew what God wanted me to say.

chapter two

AN IMMIGRANT SON

I can't remember when I came to the United States of America.

That's because I was about two years old when my mom carried me through the border crossing at Calexico, a hardscrabble border town in the middle of California's Sonoran Desert.

The year was 1974. My parents, Rommel Diaz and Rosa Rivas, were not married but were joined together in a common purpose: fleeing their native country of El Salvador for a better life in America, where the streets were paved with gold.

At least, that's the story I heard growing up. For sure, civil war was brewing in El Salvador in the early 1970s, a compact Central America country 140 miles long and 60 miles wide. Since the early 1930s, El Salvador had been ruled by the military with support from the country's landed elite. Known as a coffee republic, 2 percent of the population owned 60 percent of the land. Fourteen families were said to run the country.

When political unrest soared in the early 1970s, secretive death squads comprised of armed paramilitary soldiers—known in Spanish

as Escuadrón de la Meurte or "Squadron of Death"—conducted unsanctioned killings or forced disappearances of political opponents, often in the dead of night.

My father had personal experience with the domestic death squads. When he was an eight-year-old boy, in the late 1950s, a band of masked soldiers burst into my grandparents' home one evening with shouts, tipping over furniture and creating a scene. Then they calmly executed my grandfather and my grandmother—who pled for their lives—in front of my father.

That frightening memory always stayed with him. When widespread dissent swelled among the common people in the early 1970s, my parents talked about seeking political asylum in the United States. My mother's sister, Isabelle, wanted to accompany them.

But then my mother became pregnant with me. She felt a prolonged trip via trains and buses would be too difficult. Isabelle still wanted to go, however. After receiving the necessary papers to enter the United States, she made the long trek to Los Angeles, a 2,296-mile journey.

My parents stayed behind in San Salvador, the country's capital, until I was born on November 13, 1972. When their papers to immigrate to the United States finally came through, I was somewhere between eighteen months and two years old. They boarded a train to Mexico City and took a series of bus rides north until we arrived at Mexicali. Their paperwork was in order when they walked across the border and entered the sister city of Calexico. They paid five dollars for their Social Security cards and were told they would eventually receive their green cards.

My parents made their way to Los Angeles and moved to an immigrant neighborhood close to downtown and a pocket of streets known as Koreatown, even though more than 50 percent of the residents were Latino. Our threadbare apartment was located at 9th and Kenmore.

My parents never married, even after they came to Los Angeles. I don't know what their goal was in terms of having a family or building

for a future. They lived day to day, part of the mañana philosophy that has seeped into the Latino mind-set: *If something doesn't get done today, there's always tomorrow.*

My mother insisted that I learn English, believing there would be much more opportunity ahead for me if I could speak English fluently. Kids learn quickly on the street, so it wasn't long before I was speaking *Inglés* better than my mother and father. Today, I still speak English much better than Spanish.

My father, hardened by losing his parents in such a brutal manner, was a harsh man. As I grew older and started school, I became aware that he harbored a complete hatred for me. I didn't know what I'd ever done to him, but I distinctly remember sitting at the kitchen table one time when I was six or so. He grabbed me tightly by the shoulders and shook me, saying, "Don't ever call me Papá! I hate you!"

Not only can I recall this incident clearly, but I can still smell the aroma of stale alcohol on his breath. Shaken to my core, I honored his wishes: I never called him Papá—the Spanish equivalent of "Dad"—in my entire life.

When my father wasn't telling me how much he hated me and what a worthless piece of @#$% I was, he would physically assault my mother—sometimes after one of their frequent arguments or sometimes for no reason at all. He'd grab her by the hair and beat the crap out of her. He'd smack her face on furniture or tables and punch her on her back and shoulders. Mom always had a lot of bruises and suffered greatly from the pummelings by my father.

She couldn't fight back. My mother was just a wisp of a woman—five feet, one inch, no more than a hundred pounds. My father was bigger at five feet, seven inches, so while he wasn't physically imposing, he still had a significant height and weight advantage that he viciously used against my mother.

When my father wasn't beating up my mother, they argued about money. My father was a bricklayer but worked only when he felt like

showing up at the job. He sold marijuana and other drugs to make a few bucks, but Mom was the main breadwinner—or at least the parent who could be counted on to put food on the table. She toiled as a seamstress at one of LA's notorious downtown sweat shops, sometimes working at two different clothing factories for twelve, fourteen hours a day when money was tight.

Whether my mother worked one or two shifts, I was left alone at home. When my father wasn't working, which was often, he planted himself at a nearby bar, where he drank *cerveza* like spring water. After he got drunk on Coors and Budweiser long-necks—he liked American beer—he'd come home, see me in the living room playing with my toys, and then give me a good whack for no apparent reason.

I tried to exact revenge when I was eight years old. We were in our tiny apartment one night when I found him passed out on the living room floor, lying next to one of those metal, accordion-like heaters hooked up to a gas line. He'd obviously had one too many.

This was my chance to do a number on him. His head was pretty close to the wall heater. I figured that if I opened up the gas valve and let him breathe in the noxious fumes, he'd either get really, really sick or never wake up. Then he wouldn't hit me anytime he felt like it.

First, I had to get his head closer to the gas heater. He was only a few feet away, but if I pushed or dragged his body closer, then he might wake up from his stupor and give me a beating that I'd never forget.

I decided to take that chance. I managed to maneuver my dead-to-the-world father under the gas line. I opened the spigot and let him breathe in the gas while I stepped back and observed what I hoped would be his last breaths. A few minutes passed, but his chest was still rising and lowering.

My mom unexpectedly got home from work. The smell of gas filled the living room, so it took her only two seconds to figure out what was going on.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Her eyes were as big as saucers.

"I don't want him to hurt you anymore. I'll take the blame."

My mother didn't say a thing. She immediately ran to my father's side and shut off the gas valve.

My father never knew how close he came to dying.

I don't know how to really explain this, but I knew at that moment—at eight years old—that I was capable of taking someone's life. Not only was I capable, but it would have been easy for me to do. My father had regularly and ruthlessly beat me up for years, so I had no trouble justifying why he should die. The way I rationalized the situation, life would be better with him out of the picture. The fact that the man lying on the floor was my father didn't even enter into my calculation.

I couldn't understand why my mother didn't take the chance to kill my father. He was the one who made her life so miserable. How many times was she going to allow him to thrash her? Because my father's temper was so volatile, I made sure I spent as much time as I could away from our dingy apartment.

✦ ✦ ✦

Shortly after the gas-line incident, I remember coming home just before dark. We lived on the third floor of our apartment building, which meant there was an elevator, but I preferred to run up the stairs since I was a bundle of energy. We lived in the corner unit at the top of the landing.

At twilight on this particular evening, I reached the top of the stairs and was stunned to see drips of blood leading to our front door. Then I saw a bloody palm print on the front door itself. I knew it was Mom's blood. My father had punched and beaten her again—perhaps within an inch of her life, or worse.

Why hadn't anyone called the police? Mom must have been screaming. She must have been begging my father to stop hitting her. Didn't anyone care?

I carefully opened the front door to our apartment, not knowing what I would find. My heart was beating wildly.

I saw my father first. He was laid out on the dirty carpet, fast sleep. I stepped past him and peeked into the apartment's only bedroom.

"Mom, you there?"

I heard nothing. Then I looked and saw Mom's legs sticking out of the small closet off to the side of the room. I took a few steps for a closer look. She was in a fetal position, holding herself close. Her arms were black and blue, and her hands were bloody. There was crimson blood smeared all over the closet walls.

"Mom, are you okay?"

I didn't receive an answer.

I was so young, I didn't know what to do. I lowered myself and got down next to my mother. I wanted to be close to her. I wanted to protect her, keep her safe in case my father came back to do more damage with his fists of fury. He never returned. When I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, I fell asleep.

I don't remember what happened in the morning. That memory is blocked from my consciousness. But I do remember thinking, *Man, this is not normal. There's no way this could be normal.*

✦ ✦ ✦

I had friends at school who laughed and had fun on the schoolyard during recess. I didn't know what joy was. My childhood world was gripped by fear, measured with worry, and surrounded by anxiety. Everywhere I turned, the adults in my life seemed to have it out for me. I remember this one teacher who brought three dozen packages of Thomas English muffins to class one Friday morning and proceeded to hand them out to each student. When she approached my desk, she glanced at me and kept right on walking.

I raised my hand. "Teacher, I didn't get any English muffins," I said. Surely, she had overlooked me.

The teacher, carrying the armload of packages, stopped and met my gaze. "You don't get one," she said coldly. She then continued her delivery round, giving every student a package containing a half dozen Thomas English muffins.

"Wait—what did I do?" I asked as she walked away.

She never looked back.

I was suddenly aware that everyone was looking at me, and I had never felt so alone in my life. I thought I must be a really horrible kid not to get any English muffins like they did.

Another disturbing incident is forever etched in my memory. One evening, while I was sleeping on the living room couch—where I always slept—my father made a huge ruckus as he stormed into our apartment from another night of drinking. The way he was swearing and bumping into stuff told me that he was on another one of his alcohol-fueled binges. He barged into the bedroom, where my mom was sleeping. I listened to cross words and mean things being said. The next thing I heard was *thwack-thwack-thwack* and a body slamming against a wall.

I hopped off the couch, dressed in briefs and a T-shirt. When I stepped into their bedroom, I saw my father standing over my mother with fist raised. Mom was lying on the floor, clearly in pain.

"Run," my mother whispered through cracked lips. "Run. Go get help."

I wanted to alleviate her pain. I wanted her to be safe.

"Okay, Mom. I will."

At eight years old, I didn't really know how to "go get help." But I knew enough to realize that any sort of assistance would have to come from outside the four thin walls of our apartment.

I opened the front door and sprinted down three flights of stairs

to 9th Street, still wearing my T-shirt and briefs. I felt the cold of the midwinter evening and wondered if I had done the right thing by leaving a relatively warm apartment. I sat down on a nearby curb and pulled my T-shirt over my knees for warmth. Then I wrapped my arms around my torso.

Tears formed streaks on my cheeks. Life really sucked. I felt sorry for my mom, and I felt sorry for myself. I knew nobody should be treated this way.

I huddled curbside for the longest time; at least, that's what it felt like to me. Only a couple of cars passed by in the middle of the night, but the drivers totally ignored the sight of a half-dressed kid sitting on the edge of a sidewalk, bawling his eyes out.

Then two cops in a black-and-white Los Angeles Police Department cruiser happened to pass by. The cop riding on the passenger side aimed a bright white light at me while the cruiser rolled to a quick stop. They parked. The cop driving the car got out first, hitching up his pants as he made his way toward me.

"What are you doing out here?" the LAPD field officer asked. "Something wrong?"

"My mom got hit by my dad, and my mom told me to run. So I'm out here."

"You know where you live?"

"Sure. Around the corner."

"Can you take us there?"

I led them to the apartment complex on foot. The cops didn't waste any time. They stormed through the front door with the lead cop marching straight to the bedroom, loaded for bear. He flipped on the light, saw streaks of blood on the walls, and my mother curled up in the closet. My startled father, rubbing his eyes, had been sleeping in the bed.

The cop grabbed my father by the arm and dragged him out to the living room—my dad's feet never touching the ground. The next thing

my father knew, the cop slammed him against a wall and began raining punches on his body.

"You like hitting women?" the cop asked. "Well, how do you like this?"

A series of punches to the kidneys stifled any sort of response from my father. He yelped in pain from blow after blow.

"You still like hitting women?" the cop continued. "Then you're not going to like this."

Another set of body blows smothered my father's midsection.

More cops and a paramedic unit arrived. My father was handcuffed and pushed onto the couch while emergency personnel tended to my battered mother. They insisted on taking my mother to a nearby hospital, but she would not leave the apartment. They bandaged her up as best as they could and placed her back in bed.

My father was arrested and spent the night in jail. He was released in the morning, and when he walked up the stairway to our apartment, I was stunned.

Shouldn't this guy be sitting in jail?

I don't know why my father was released so quickly. Things were calm for a few days, but then my father returned to his old ways of beating Mom. The assaults weren't as violent, meaning that he stopped short of drawing blood, but I'm sure they hurt all the same.

I knew there was nothing I could do to stop my father, who had received merely a slap on the wrist from the court system.

I just had to wait until I got older to exact justice.

✦ ✦ ✦

It was around this time that my father started dealing drugs on the street—mainly marijuana and cocaine. I had found baggies of pot in one of his clothes drawers, so I wasn't surprised when Mom told me that he had been arrested for dealing. I didn't mind at all that he

got arrested. When that happened, I figured I was guaranteed several days of peace until he was released on bail. But all this turmoil created upheaval. Life really stank. I hated who I was and where I lived.

My grandmother—my mother's mother—came for an extended visit from the old country. I loved my grandma. She was kind to me. She loved to cook a popular El Salvadoran dish called *pupusa*, which was made up of thick corn tortillas filled with anything from meats to cheeses to refried beans and pork rinds.

One time while my *abuela* was making her famous *pupusa*, I found a lighter in the living room. I'd seen lighters before, but I was Curious George that night. I wanted to see if I could start a fire with the lighter. Don't ask me why or what got into me, but that's what I wanted to do.

Something told me it wouldn't be a good idea to light something on fire in the living room, so I tiptoed into my parents' bedroom. Nobody noticed I closed the door. What could I light on fire? I know . . . one of my father's old T-shirts. He'd never miss it. I put the lighter to the T-shirt, and to my great surprise, it burst into flames so quickly that I had to toss it away, in case I burned myself.

The burning T-shirt landed next to the curtains covering the only window. The sheer curtains, made of fading cotton lace, quickly caught fire. I had no idea what to do. I certainly didn't want to tell my mother or grandmother that the curtains were on fire. The only bright spot was that my father wasn't there. He would've *killed* me for setting his curtains on fire.

When flames had engulfed the curtains and became a bigger blaze, I slipped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind me. My mother and grandmother were busy preparing dinner in the kitchen and didn't notice me or smell smoke. I decided to act as nonchalantly as possible. I turned on the TV and plopped myself down on the couch to watch some cartoons.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my grandmother leave the

kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. She had to use the facilities. The bathroom was right next to my parents' bedroom.

She must have sensed something or smelled smoke. Grandma touched the doorknob to the bedroom and immediately recoiled because the handle was so hot.

"Fire! Fire!" she screamed.

Things happened pretty quickly after that. My mother picked up the phone and dialed 911 while my grandmother grabbed me and her purse and hustled me out of the apartment. My mother, as panicked as I had ever seen her, grabbed her belongings and ran out after us.

After descending three flights of stairs among other panicked residents, I looked up at our corner unit. I could see flames licking the windowsill and black smoke rising to the sky. My shock and awe were broken by the sounds of fire engines and sirens splitting the sky.

I don't remember how many apartment units, including ours, burned up that day. It may have been two or three. While the fire crews were mopping up, an important-looking man in a blue uniform asked me if I had seen anything.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "There were some kids playing outside our window. They were messing around with matches."

"Do you remember what kids they were?" asked the investigator.

"No, I never saw them before."

I wasn't bothered after that, although all these years later, I wonder why the fireman believed me. Anyone could tell that the fire started *inside* the unit.

We had to move, of course. I truly don't remember where we lived right after the fire.

I don't like to think about those days.

chapter three

STEALING AWAY

The reason why I don't remember much about where we lived after the fire is because we must have moved to an apartment close to 9th and Kenmore. I do remember moving a couple of times before my parents settled into a two-bedroom apartment at 9th and New Hampshire, three blocks away from my old home.

No matter where we lived, my world didn't extend beyond a few blocks in any direction. I would soon learn, however, that there was a whole different way of growing up just a matter of miles from our neighborhood.

Here's what happened: I was in the third grade at Hoover Elementary when Miss Gardner, my teacher, announced, "Class, I have exciting news. Each one of you is going to have a pen pal."

A pen pal? I had no idea what that meant. Nor was I aware that Miss Gardner had arranged for a third-grade class in a much wealthier part of Los Angeles—Santa Monica—to exchange letters with us.

"You're going to have a great time writing your special pen pal," Miss Gardner said. "It's like having a conversation with a friend, but it's on paper."

"But what are we supposed to write about, Teacher?" one of the kids in my class asked.

"Anything you want," she replied. "That's the great thing about having a pen pal. You can write about anything you choose. You can share your thoughts, your dreams, and even your secrets with your pen pal."

I couldn't think of anything to say. What was I going to tell a complete stranger about myself? I didn't get it.

"Here's a sheet of paper you can write on." Miss Gardner started passing out blank sheets of paper to the class. "Write as much as you want."

Yeah, right.

I knew I had to scribble something, although my cursive was atrocious. At least, that's what Miss Gardner was always telling me. I tapped my pencil on the piece of paper. The best I could come up with was this: "My name is Darwin. How are you?"

Darwin was my legal name. I have no idea why my parents named me after Charles Darwin—the nineteenth-century British naturalist best known for his theory of evolution. Latino parents sometimes love to name their children after a famous personality, but why they chose Darwin was and remains a mystery to me.

No one in the schoolyard called me Darwin, though. Early in my third-grade year, I suddenly decided during recess—on the spur of the moment—that I didn't like my first name anymore.

"I don't want anybody calling me Darwin," I said to a bunch of my classmates. "I want you to call me Casey."

Casey? Where did that name come from?

To this day, I don't know. I pulled the name out of thin air. Nobody in our family was named Casey. Maybe I heard the name mentioned on a TV show. Maybe I had read the baseball poem "Casey at the Bat" in school. All I know is that the name Casey quickly took

hold and anyone who knows me—including my parents and close family—calls me Casey.

Within a week of writing my pen pal, I received a nice reply from a boy named Brett. He talked about how he liked to go to the beach. I had never been to the coast, although we lived less than fifteen miles from the Pacific Ocean, so I couldn't imagine what playing in the sand and surf was like. We exchanged letters back and forth throughout the school year, never writing more than a line or two.

In the late spring, Miss Gardner told us she had some exciting news to share. "Class, you're going to get the chance to meet the boy or girl you've been writing to all school year. We're going to go on a field trip to meet your special pen pal, so have one of your parents sign the permission slip."

Miss Gardner walked up and down the class rows, handing each student a field trip form and a sheet of instructions. "Make sure you get your permission slips signed by a parent or guardian. We have some fun activities planned, including flying a kite. Be sure to bring one with you."

I didn't have a kite, and I knew we weren't going to buy one. My parents were broke—although the term *poor* would be more correct. If it was a choice between eating dinner or buying a kite, then we were going to eat dinner.

On the morning of the big field trip, the bus ride to Santa Monica was a revelation. I couldn't see much along the freeway, but once we turned onto the off-ramp, I couldn't believe how green and lush everything was. The manicured bungalows and stately houses were beautiful—well maintained, freshly painted, and inviting. None of them had bars on the windows.

I looked around the bus. Every jaw had dropped. The silence was deafening. Reality hit everyone at the same time: *we had just found out how poor we were.*

The private school was surrounded by belts of green grass and dotted with towering palm trees. We were led off the bus to a main hallway inside the school. The linoleum floor glistened. No trash anywhere. Tidy lockers.

We were escorted into a third-grade classroom to meet our pen pals. Dressed in crisp uniforms—white, button-down dress shirts and beige pants for the boys and plaid skirts for the girls—the preppy students were standing to greet us. All the kids were white. I didn't see one Latino or black student.

Their teacher called for attention. "Class, it's time for you to meet your pen pals," she announced. Names were called, and I was introduced to Brett. He had wavy brown hair and seemed nice enough. We were given a couple of projects to do and then escorted to the cafeteria, where a hot lunch was waiting for us. We were fed all the pizza we wanted, which was cool.

After lunch, the students were told to fetch their kites and meet in the playground behind the school. I was the only student without a kite. Once again, I felt left out. My family couldn't afford a kite, which left me feeling bummed.

I hurried out to the playground, hoping no one would notice that I didn't have a kite in my hand. The acre of green grass took my breath away. The vividness of the emerald green lawn, ringed by the mature trees, dense vegetation, and large homes beyond the perimeter of the playground, was astonishing.

"Where's your kite?"

I turned around. Brett was holding a kite and a ball of string in his hands.

"I forgot mine." I hoped that he would believe my lame excuse.

"Then you can help me fly mine," he said.

I didn't see how that was possible, but I mumbled thanks anyway.

The teachers directed the students to spread out and stand in a line to launch our kites all at the same time. "On the count of three,

everyone run together," said Brett's teacher. "Remember, hold your kite above your head so the wind can catch it."

The students fanned out from one end of the field to the other. With arms raised, Brett's teacher began the countdown.

"Three . . . two . . . one. *Run!*"

Every kid started sprinting, holding their kites aloft. I didn't make a move. I couldn't. I didn't have a kite. It was obvious to me as well as everyone else that I didn't belong on that grassy field. I watched as more than fifty kids attempted to get their kites up in the air.

None of the teachers noticed that I was the only one left behind. Not one person made a move toward me; it was like I was invisible.

Only a few successfully launched their kites, so for the next half hour, kids kept trying to get their kites aloft using the westerly breezes. I moped around the field, counting the minutes until our departure back to the inner city. As far as I was concerned, we couldn't leave Santa Monica fast enough. When I got on the bus, I made sure I got a window seat so I didn't have to talk to anybody.

As we motored out of the parking lot and onto the surface streets of a well-kept, wealthy neighborhood, I became lost in thoughts of isolation. If I needed any confirmation that my life really sucked, this was it.

✦ ✦ ✦

Third grade wasn't a total loss.

That's because Mike Rodriguez became my best friend. He was the only white kid in an elementary school that was probably 60 percent Latino and 40 percent black.

Actually, Mike wasn't Caucasian. He just looked white because of his fair skin and blond hair. Even though he appeared to be "full white," his dad was Mexican American, but I didn't care about that. Like my father, his dad was never around, which is another reason we

gravitated toward each other. But Mike's dad had a good excuse for not being in the picture: he was in prison.

Without male tethers in our lives, we naturally fell in with each other. Our bond deepened when we started stealing stuff together. Shoplifting. Snatching items off shelves. Jacking anything that wasn't nailed down.

I didn't think it was wrong to steal. I easily justified my behavior. Since I didn't have anything—which wasn't fair—how could stealing be bad?

Mike and I started with shoplifting snacks and drinks from a nearby 7-Eleven and liquor stores in the neighborhood. We'd put bags of potato chips and cans of soda pop inside our backpacks in the back of the store—at a time before surveillance cameras were widespread. Then we'd go to the front and buy a pack of Wrigley gum so the clerk didn't get suspicious of our presence inside the store. We were surprised how our scam always worked.

One time, Miss Gardner told us to bring snacks for a class party just before spring break. Mike and I agreed that a bag of Lay's Potato Chips and a can of A&W root beer wouldn't do it. Before school one morning, we scoped out the local 7-Eleven and waited until a bunch of customers walked in to buy their morning coffee and doughnuts, which would keep the clerk busy at the cash register.

We snuck inside and eased our way to the back of the snack aisle, wearing our school backpacks. Mike knelt down, and I opened his backpack and stuffed it with small bags of Fritos, tortilla chips, and corn nuts. I added a few candy bars for good measure. Then it was my turn to kneel while Mike opened my backpack and filled it with loot.

This time we didn't bother buying a pack of gum. We slithered past the line of customers and hustled outside. As soon as we were out of sight, Mike and I cracked up, laughing at how good we were as a team of thieves.

When we arrived at Hoover Elementary, we opened up our

bulging backpacks, and man, we were the guys. Our classmates must have thought, *Their parents must be well off. Look at all that stuff!*

Mike and I kept our mouths shut. We weren't about to blab about where we got our snacks and goodies.

✦ ✦ ✦

What was life like when we weren't in school?

Keep in mind that my neighborhood of 9th and New Hampshire was my reality in my elementary school years, so that's all I knew.

There weren't any parks nearby, so we played baseball in the streets and touch football in vacant lots. The rest of the time we hung out with friends and talked, swapped funny stories, and generally messed around like the little kids we were. When we got bored or hungry, we'd go steal something to eat at a convenience store. I still can't believe everything we got away with.

Just as there was violence in my home, there was an undercurrent of violence on the streets. I was still in third grade when I witnessed my first kidnapping. Mike and I were walking down the street late one afternoon when we heard a Chevy sedan slam on its brakes half a block behind us. A black guy hopped out and ran toward a Korean schoolgirl walking by herself. She looked a couple of years older than us.

Everything happened so fast: in one fell swoop, he grabbed and swept her into the driver's side of the front seat. A brutal shove kept her down. Then the Chevy roared to life with the black guy behind the wheel. As he passed by, he made eye contact with me.

I involuntarily shivered. For a fleeting second, I thought he was going to slam on his brakes and grab me, but he kept on driving.

And that was it. I never found out what happened to the little girl.

A month or two later, I was hanging around the 7-Eleven when another black guy in a similar-looking Chevy four-door sedan screeched to a halt across the street. He got out and seized a boy who

looked to be in junior high. I was mesmerized by a replay of what I had witnessed earlier: a screeching car, a snatched child, and a quick getaway.

Although my young mind couldn't understand why this was happening or what the fate was of these kids on the street, I knew it was scary. *Should I say anything to my parents or my teacher?*

I dismissed the thought. My father wouldn't care, my mother wouldn't know what to do, and it was too risky mentioning something to my teacher.

✦ ✦ ✦

A couple of months later, I was hanging out in the back of our apartment building, on the third floor. I sat on the metal fire escape stairway that overlooked an alleyway, allowing my legs to dangle in the late-afternoon sun after school.

I saw three guys, all Latinos, walking through the alley. Nothing unusual about that. They wore tight jeans and black leather jackets, typical dress for the MS-13—Mara Salvatrucha—gang members at the time. With their long hair and heavy metal stoner look, they sure appeared to be tough guys.

A black Toyota Camry—with custom rims and wide tires—pulled into the alley and crept past them. Then the four-door sedan turned into our apartment carport and took an empty parking space.

The driver stepped out of the car and walked toward the three men. Suddenly, the guy reached into his waistband and pulled out a handgun. He raised his right arm and started firing.

Blam, blam . . . blam, blam.

The first two men slumped and fell to the ground, holding their stomachs. Actually, one screamed when he got hit—a blood-curdling scream. But his shrieks were short-lived. He went mute within seconds, and both bodies lay perfectly still. Something told me they were dead.

All this happened in an instant.

From my third-story perch, I watched the double murder unfold. For some reason I didn't freeze, nor did I flinch when the rounds of bullets went off. Although I was out in the open, I didn't think about hightailing it for safety. Instead, I was transfixed at what I was witnessing—like watching an action movie.

The third man knew he was next. He looked left and right for cover—and darted for the carport underneath me. The assassin quickly reloaded his handgun and raised his weapon to fire.

I overheard the man pleading for his life. "Don't kill me! Mom! Mom, I need you!"

There was no mercy. The shooter fired off two shots, and the pleading stopped.

The assassin never looked in my direction as he put his gun back into his waistband and walked quickly to his car. His steps were sure and confident. The Camry started up, and he was gone.

How did observing a gangland execution when I was so young impact me? I think the biggest lesson I learned was that life is cheap and could end at any time.

✦ ✦ ✦

So this was my environment as I entered fourth grade and turned ten years old. I was witnessing gang activity, kidnappings, and killings. Cars chasing cars with loud music blaring. Gang members hanging out on street corners, smoking cigarettes or puffing on a joint and passing it on to the next guy.

And then there was the graffiti that proliferated like wild ivy on a wall. Gang members used graffiti to mark their territory or turf or to declare their allegiance to the gang. Gang members from MS-13, 18th Street, and the Rockwood Street Locos would cross out each other's tags and write their own name, which was an indication that another

feud could turn deadly. If there was a down arrow next to a gang name painted in a different color, something was going to happen.

My best buddy Mike and I liked hanging out with Randy Arroyo, who was our age. Randy had a brother five years older than me named Pedro. He was in high school and naturally, a ten-year-old kid is going to look up to a fifteen-year-old teetering on the ledge between kid and young adult.

Pedro noticed that I was interested in what he did—or who he was becoming. Or maybe he sensed the hole in my heart from not having the security of a father who loved me. Or maybe he liked being asked questions about what it was like being part of a gang.

One night, we were over at the Sanchez house. No parents were around, so we could say whatever we wanted. "What's this gang stuff all about?" I asked. "How does it work?"

Pedro shot up out of the couch. A smile creased his face as he paced the living room. "It's cool, man. We stick together, and it's like a family. We protect each other. We have parties, and there are girls. It's all good."

"How do you join?" I asked.

"You get jumped in."

"Jumped in? What's that?"

"Well, we choose a few guys to jump you. You know—kick you, sock you around a bit—to see if you can take it. We count to thirteen and then we stop. If you can go the distance, you're in."

Thirteen seconds? That didn't sound too long. How much could it hurt if people kick you for thirteen seconds?

Pedro was my hero. Even though he was too young to have a driver's license, I watched him drive around in nice cars—cars that everyone knew were stolen—like he was a conqueror. He and his buddies were always laughing, appearing not to have a care in the world. I imagined him being part of some amazing adventures as a gang member.

✦ ✦ ✦

When I turned eleven, I knew I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself. I wanted to be accepted, to be told that I belonged. Those really were my feelings as a fifth-grader.

I'll never forget the day I asked Pedro if I could jump in to his gang, which was called the Rockwood Street Locos, one of the hundreds of gangs in South-Central Los Angeles.

"You're a little young," he said. "I'll have to get back to you."

I didn't know about the unwritten age "requirements" at the time—that gangs like their new members to be fifteen or sixteen years old, although they did take in kids as young as twelve because when they got arrested and sent to Juvenile Hall, they were released quickly and back on the streets. All I knew was that I wanted to have what Pedro had—a family that protected him and cared for him.

The next day Pedro drove up in a nice car while I was hanging out on a street corner. The passenger side window rolled down, and Pedro leaned over to have a word.

"Hey, Casey. Good news. You're in. Hop in."

That's all I needed to hear. I was taken to a random house, where a trio of Rockwood members were waiting—Rabbit, Shadow, and Bunny. The next thing I knew, I was thrown to the ground and four guys started stomping on me. A couple of them punched me in my shoulders and neck. I closed my eyes, grimaced, and told myself not to say anything as I got pummeled. And then just as quickly as it started, the beating stopped.

"You okay?" Rabbit was the first to extend a hand to lift me off the floor.

I knew I was going to be black and blue in a few places in the morning, but I wasn't about to admit weakness.

"Sure. I'm okay," I managed.

Stern looks turned to smiles, soul-brother handshakes, and hugs.

I had passed an important rite of passage. This was the first inkling of camaraderie I had ever felt—a sense that I belonged to something greater than myself. They wouldn't have asked me to join Rockwood Street if they didn't *want* me to be part of their gang.

But I would also learn that was just the beginning. I would have to pass another initiation test far different—and more difficult—than getting beat up for thirteen seconds.

✦ ✦ ✦

Rabbit took me under his wing and became my mentor to gang life.

There was a lot I had to learn, which came through tagging along with Rabbit, who became like a big brother to me. He was sixteen, a year older than Pedro, but much wiser in the ways of the streets. I quickly discovered that he was one of the most popular guys in Rockwood—and would later learn that he was one of the most violent.

First, there were the parties where I was introduced to drinking alcohol and took my first hits of marijuana. Keep in mind that I was still eleven years old, so I was incredibly young. At that "tweener" age, I was done with being a kid. I wanted to be a teenager and act like a teenager.

I stayed up late and drove around a lot and tagged mason-stone walls with large *R*s and *W*s—Rockwood's gang symbols. Then we stole a few cars, a process that taught me the rudiments of hot-wiring an automobile. All in all, typical gangbanging stuff.

One evening, Rabbit asked me to join him on a nighttime outing. I had no problem saying yes. He was the boss.

Rabbit picked me up in a stolen Toyota. We drove for a while and entered an unfamiliar part of downtown LA.

"This is 18th Street turf," Rabbit said as storefronts and apartment buildings flashed by.

Rabbit schooled me on the lay of the land. In this part of LA,

18th Street contended for territory with MS-13, Avenues, Harpys Dead End, Easy Riders, and Rockwood, to name a few of the more prominent gangs in my part of downtown Los Angeles.

"If an 18th Street gang leader tells you to do something, or if you don't show proper respect to another gang member, for sure you're beaten by the rest of the gang," Rabbit said. "They kill habitual offenders execution style."

Eighteenth Street gangbangers were easy to identify, he added. Many wore Lakers and Dodgers jerseys with the number 18 on the back. Symbols like XV3, XVIII, and X8 were also used.

Rabbit suddenly turned into an alley like he knew where he was going. Then he gunned the engine and raced through the alley at a high clip, gripping the steering wheel tighter as we drove deeper into 18th Street territory. The speed we were traveling at scared me. I thought we might crash at any moment or another car would back out and cause a nasty wreck. (Of course, I wasn't wearing a seatbelt—that was for sissies.)

"There's a score to settle," he said ominously.

I gulped. My heart was already pumping at double rate because I thought we would surely crash and I would die.

"A dude named Pedro. He doesn't know what's coming," Rabbit said.

Eventually, we slowed down . . . and cruised a couple of alleys. That's when Rabbit spotted his mark.

"That's him."

I noticed a tall figure walking ahead of us. How Rabbit knew that was the person he was looking for, I didn't know, but he was sure he had found him.

We pulled over. In a flash, Rabbit rushed him. I was on his heels. We had the element of surprise on our side.

Rabbit tackled him to the ground, then quickly got to his feet first and aimed a kick to Pedro's abdomen. The blow found one of his kidneys, which prompted a scream.

Rabbit waved his arm. It was my turn. I gave Pedro my swiftest kick to his back. Then Rabbit leaned over and punched him in the head. I followed suit. Several blows rendered Pedro mute. He curled up in a ball, hands over his head to protect himself.

"That's for Rockwood!" Rabbit screamed. "You're never going to mess with the Locos again!"

I took up the chant as well. "Yeah, that's for Rockwood!" I yelled in a high-pitched voice since I had yet to start puberty.

We rained blow after blow upon the gang member, who was crying and begging for mercy.

Then Rabbit reached into his back pocket for a screwdriver—a typical flat-blade hand tool made of tough steel to resist bending.

What I witnessed next is something I will never forget. Rabbit thrust the screwdriver into the soft midsection of the beaten-down gang member. Not once or twice . . . but three times.

Witnessing this violence didn't bother me that much. I knew enough about gangbanging and that gang members got snuffed all the time. We had lost a few in our ranks already. I felt no mercy for Pedro, who writhed in agony. He wasn't dead, but he certainly wasn't going anywhere.

Rabbit looked at me. Once we made eye contact, he tossed me the screwdriver.

"You try it," he said.

I hesitated for a moment. After all, I was eleven years old.

"What are you waiting for?" Rabbit asked. "Just do it."

A shot of adrenaline swept through my veins. Retightening my grip on the screwdriver, I leaned over and let him have it in his back. But the screwdriver didn't pierce his skin.

"Try again. This time in his stomach. Just do it harder," Rabbit coached. "Go right into him."

With all the strength I could summon, I plunged the screwdriver into his soft underbelly. Sure enough, the blade entered into his gut

like a knife into a stick of butter. I pushed until the shaft was halfway inside his body. The screwdriver didn't go all the way in, but I knew it was inside his guts because I felt a weird vibration in my hand.

And then I pulled out the screwdriver, covered in blood and white junk.

"Let's jam," Rabbit said.

We left the Hoover gang member bleeding in the street.

I don't know if he lived or not. Frankly, I didn't care. The important thing is that I had done what Rabbit asked.

"You have a future with us." Rabbit had a satisfied look as he veered into the night traffic.

That was all he had to say to receive my complete allegiance to him and Rockwood.