

*Always Running*  
by Luis J. Rodriguez

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.

---Jacques Riviere

I began high school a *loco*, with a heavy Pendleton shirt, sagging khaki pants, ironed to perfection, and shoes shined and heated like at boot camp.

Mark Keppel High School was a Depression-era structure with a brick and art-deco facade and small, army-type bungalows in back. Friction filled its hallways. The Anglo and Asian upper-class students from Monterey Park and Alhambra attended the school. They were tracked into the "A" classes; they were in the school clubs; they were the varsity team members and letter men. They were the pep squads and cheerleaders.

But the school also took in the people from the Hills and surrounding community who somehow made it past junior high. They were mostly Mexican, in the "C" track (what were called the "stupid" classes), and who made up the rosters of the wood, print and auto shops. Only a few of these students participated in school government, in sports, or in the various clubs.

The school had two principal languages. Two skin tones and two cultures. It revolved around class differences. The white and Asian kids (except for "barrio" whites and the handful of Hawaiians, Filipinos and Samoans who ended up with the Mexicans) were from professional, two-car households with watered lawns and trimmed trees. The laboring class, the sons and daughters of service workers, janitors and factory hands, lived in and around the Hills (or a section of Monterey Park called "Poor Side").

The school separated these two groups by levels of education: The professional-class kids were provided with college-preparatory classes; the blue-collar students were pushed into "industrial arts."

The Mexicans assembled beneath the big, gnarled tree on the front lawn next to the gym and shop area. The well-off students usually had cars and hung out in the parking lot or the cafeteria. Those who were in between or indifferent couldn't help but get caught in the crossfire.

By the time I went to Keppel, I had become introspective and quiet. I wanted to be untouchable: nobody could get to me. I walked the halls facing straight ahead, a saunter in my step, only slightly and consciously glancing to the sides. Keppel had a rowdy reputation among San Gabriel Valley schools. Fights all the time. I believe it related to the ingrained system of tracking and subdivisions. The teachers and administrators were overwhelmingly Anglo and whether they were aware of it or not, favored the white students.

If you came from the Hills, you were labeled from the start. I'd walk into the counselor's office for whatever reason and looks of disdain greeted me--one meant for a criminal, alien, to be feared. Already a thug. It was harder to defy this expectation than just accept it and fall into the trappings. It was a jacket I could try to take off, but they kept putting it back on. The first hint of trouble and the preconceptions proved true. So why not be proud? Why not be an outlaw? Why not make it our own?

\* \* \*

One evening dusk came early in South San Gabriel with wind and cold spinning to earth. People who had been sitting in porches or on metal chairs near fold-up tables topped with cards and beer bottles collected their things to go inside. Others put on sweaters or jackets. A storm gathered beyond the trees.

Tino and I strolled past the stucco and wood-frame homes of the neighborhood consisting mostly of Mexicans with a sprinkling of poor white families (usually from Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas). *Ranchera* music did battle with Country and Western songs as we continued toward the local elementary school, an oil-and-grime stained basketball under my arm.

We stopped in front of a chain-link fence which surrounded the school. An old brick building cast elongated shadows over a basketball court of concrete on the other side of the fence. Leaves and paper swirled in tiny tornadoes.

"Let's go over," Tino proposed.

I looked up and across the fence. A sign above us read: NO ONE ALLOWED AFTER 4:30 PM, BY ORDER OF THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT. Tino turned toward me, shrugged his shoulders and gave me a who-cares look.

"Help me up, man, then throw the ball over."

I cupped my hands and lifted Tino up while the boy scaled the fence, jumped over and landed on sneakered feet.

"Come on, Luis, let's go," Tino shouted from the other side.

I threw over the basketball; walked back a ways, then ran and jumped on the fence, only to fall back. Although we were both 10 years old, I cut a shorter shadow.

"Forget you man," Tino said. "I'm going to play without you."

"Wait!" I yelled, while walking further back. I crouched low to the ground, then took off, jumped up and placed torn sneakers in the steel mesh. I made it over with a big thud.

Wiping the grass and dirt from my pants, I casually walked up to the ball on the ground, picked it up, and continued past Tino toward the courts.

"Hey Tino, what are you waiting for?"

The gusts proved no obstacle for a half-court game of B-ball, even as dark clouds smothered the sky.

Boy voices interspersed with ball cracking on asphalt. Tino's lanky figure seemed to float across the court, as if he had wings under his thin arms. Just then, a black-and-white squad car cruised down the street. A searchlight sprayed across the school yard. The vehicle slowed to a halt. The light shone toward the courts and caught Tino in mid-flight of a lay-up.

The dribbling and laughter stopped.

"All right, this is the sheriff's," a voice commanded. Two deputies stood by the fence, batons and flashlights in hand.

"Let's get out of here," Tino responded.

"What do you mean?" I countered. "Why don't we just stay here?"

"You nuts! We trespassing, man," Tino replied. "When they get a hold of us, they going to beat the crap out of us."

"Are you sure?"

"I know, believe me, I know."

"So where do we go?"

By then one of the deputies shouted back: "You boys get over here by the fence--now!"

But Tino dropped the ball and ran. I heard the deputies yell for Tino to stop. One of them began climbing the fence. I decided to take off too.

It never stopped, this running. We were constant prey, and the hunters soon became big blurs: the police, the gangs, the junkies, the dudes on Garvey Boulevard who took our money, all smudged into one. Sometimes they were teachers who jumped on us Mexicans as if we were born with a hideous stain. We were always afraid. Always running.

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One day, my mother asked Rano and me to go to the grocery store. We decided to go across the railroad tracks into South Gate. In those days, South Gate was an Anglo neighborhood, filled with the families of workers from the auto plant and other nearby industry. Like Lynnwood or Huntington Park, it was forbidden territory for the people of Watts.

My brother insisted we go. I don't know what possessed him, but then I never did. It was useless to argue; he'd force me anyway. He was nine then, I was six. So without ceremony, we started over the tracks, climbing over discarded market carts and tore-up sofas, across Alameda Street, into South Gate: all-white, all-American.

We entered the first small corner grocery store we found. Everything was cool at first. We bought some bread, milk, soup cans and candy. We each walked out with a bag filled with food. We barely got a few feet, though, when five teenagers on bikes approached. We tried not to pay any attention and proceeded to our side of the tracks. But the youths pulled up in front of us. While two of them stood nearby on their bikes, three of them jumped off theirs and walked over to us.

"What do we got here?" one of the boys said. "Spies to order--maybe with some beans?"

He pushed me to the ground; the groceries splattered onto the asphalt. I felt melted gum and chips of broken beer bottle on my lips and cheek. Then somebody picked me up and held me while the two others seized my brother, tossed his groceries out, and pounded on him. They punched him in the face, in the stomach, then his face again, cutting his lip, causing him to vomit.

I remember the shrill, maddening laughter of one of the kids on a bike, this laughing like a raven's wail, a harsh wind's shriek, a laugh that I would hear in countless beatings thereafter. I watched the others take turns on my brother, this terror of a brother, and he doubled over, had blood and spew on his shirt, and tears down his face. I wanted to do something, but they held me and I just looked on, as every strike against Rano opened me up inside.

They finally let my brother go and he slid to the ground, like a rotten banana squeezed out of its peeling. They threw us back over the tracks. In the sunset I could see the Watts Towers, shimmers of 70,000 pieces of broken bottles, sea shells, ceramic and metal on spiraling points puncturing the heavens, which reflected back the rays of a falling sun. My brother and I then picked ourselves up, saw the teenagers take off, still laughing, still talking about those stupid greasers who dared to cross over to South Gate.

Up until then my brother had never shown any emotion to me other than disdain. He had never asked me anything, unless it was a demand, an expectation, an obligation to be his throwaway boy--doll. But for this once he looked at me, tears welled in his eyes, blood streamed from several cuts--lips and cheeks swollen.

"Swear--you got to swear--you'll never tell anybody how I cried," he said.

I suppose I did promise. It was his one last thing to hold onto, his rep as someone who could take a belt whipping, who could take a beating in the neighborhood and still go back risking more--it was this pathetic plea from the pavement I remember. I must have promised.

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"Race" Politics  
also by Luis J. Rodriguez

My brother and I  
--shopping for *la jefita*--  
decided to get the "good food"  
over on the other side  
of the tracks.

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We dared each other.  
Laughed a little.  
Thought about it.  
Said, what's the big deal.  
Thought about that.  
Decided we were men,  
not boys.  
Decided we should go wherever  
we damn wanted to.

Oh, my brother--now he was bad.  
Tough dude. Afraid of nothing.  
I was afraid of him.

So there we go,  
climbing over  
the iron and wood ties,  
over discarded sofas  
and bent-up market carts,  
over a weed-and-dirt road,  
into a place called South Gate  
--all white. All American.

We entered the forbidden  
narrow line of hate,  
imposed,  
transposed,  
supposed,  
a line of power/powerlessness  
full of meaning,  
meaning nothing--  
those lines that crisscross  
the abdomen of this land,  
that strangle you  
in your days, in your nights.  
When you dream.

There we were, two Mexicans,  
six and nine--from--Watts no less.  
Oh, this was plenty reason  
to hate us.

Plenty reason to run up behind us.  
Five teenagers on bikes.  
Plenty reason to knock  
the groceries out from our arms--  
a splattering heap of soup  
cans, bread and candy.

Plenty reason to hold me down  
on the hot asphalt; melted gum,  
and chips of broken  
beer bottle on my lips  
and cheek.

Plenty reason to get my brother  
by the throat, taking turns  
punching him in the face,  
cutting his lower lip,  
punching, him vomiting.  
Punching until swollen and dark blue  
he slid from their grasp  
like a rotten banana from its peeling.

When they had enough, they threw us back,  
dirty and lacerated;  
back to Watts, its towers shiny  
across the orange-red sky.

My brother then forced me  
to promise not to tell anybody  
how he cried.  
He forced me to swear to God,  
to Jesus Christ, to our long-dead  
Indian Grandmother--  
keepers of our meddling souls.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m99buegg8jk>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPgiy47t0OI> (Acoustical version)

*I Was Scared*  
by Rivers Cuomo

Listen to me,  
I've got to clear the air  
there is something I've held way down deep  
inside all these years  
you always were a friend  
you always trusted me

but now I must admit I was not trust worthy

I let you down  
I sold you out  
I turned away as you fell onto the ground

I was scared,  
and I was terrified  
and I was lost  
and so I shot away

and I don't know what I can do to make it up to you  
I can't turn back the clock  
I can't rewrite the book  
but if I could,  
the end would be happy  
you would be safe  
and I would be proud to look at you  
when I looked you in the face

I let you down  
I sold you out  
I turned away as you fell onto the ground

I was scared,  
and I was terrified

I was lost  
and so I shot away

Thought I loved you  
I was so afraid  
I could not think of anything to say  
though I loved you  
thought I trusted you  
though I needed you  
I was sooo afraid  
I was so afraid( I was so afraidddd)

and I promise  
that I'll never ever do

that thing i did that day when acted like a fool  
i might get my ass beat  
my throat slit and my fingers hacked  
but ill never miss another chance to watch my brothers back

I let you down  
I sold you out  
i turned away as you fell onto the ground

I was scared,  
and i was terrified  
and i was lost  
and so i shot away  
I let you down

I was scared,  
and i was terrified  
and i was lost  
and so i let you down.