

THE "HILLS"

It was 1973 and the height of the gang wars in Southern California. My name is Anthony Roberto Garza, I live in the "Hills" as everyone calls it. Los Lomas was the name of the gang in our barrio, which actually means the hills in Spanish. I was born and raised in the Hills. I was constantly getting pressure from everyone to join, especially from my best friends Rafael (aka Joker, because he is always doing something funny) and Joey (aka Gumby). I was fifteen and hadn't joined Lomas yet. Rafa,(that's what I called him), and I lived next door to each other our whole lives, we were like brothers. Like brothers we did not always agree on things. Rafa and Joey joined Lomas when they turned 12, they liked the prestige and protection that came from being from Lomas, I on the other hand was not interested or impressed with the gangster lifestyle. Living in the barrio I had seen way too many tragedies and injustices to want to be a part of that life. Too many enemies, the cops, the teachers, the other gangs, in our case it was Sangra. Sangra, which means blood in Spanish, was the gang on the other side of the tracks, literally, which was Lomas's arch enemy. They had been in war off and on for decades. Sangra kills someone from Lomas, Lomas kills someone Sangra, on and on it goes. It has been pretty calm lately, no killings. But you never know, shit could start at any time, nothing was ever certain in the barrios . No, that was not for me. I was going to be a journalist and travel all over the world. I needed to fly and be free. I had dreams to travel the world. I was not going to be a generational homeboy from Lomas, as is the fate of many. The Hills had a way of swallowing up whole families. No way, never. Over my dead body was I going to let that be my fate! The "Hills" would not have me. All that being said I still liked hanging out and with Rafa and Joey, they were my friends, they were all I knew. I was careful and didn't go with them when they were out doing gang shit, tagging, jumping people, things like that.

Tonight was a wedding. Gato (cat) one of the veteranos (older homeboy) was getting married. Rafa, Joey and I were going to go and party. Even though I wasn't officially in Lomas I was generally accepted by most of the homeboys since they all had known me my whole life, plus they also believed I would eventually join their ranks.

The wedding was going to be at the American Legion in Monterey Park which was a city between Lomas and Sangra. It was kind of neutral territory, most of the time. Standard dress code was starched creased khakis and an equally starched Pendleton shirt. I particularly liked wearing greens because it would accentuate my hazel green eyes and the hynas (girls) would always fawn all over me, I wasn't a bad looking guy. Tonight I was hoping for the attention of one hyna in particular, Alyssa. She was a small petite girl with a beautiful light brown complexion and honey brown eyes, her straight long black hair falling all the way down to her tiny waist. I thought she was beautiful. We have flirted before but have never really been together. I was hoping that tonight would be the night.

We arrived at the wedding reception around 10:00 when the party was in full swing. Everything looked pretty cool, people were dancing to both Mexican and English songs, mostly oldies. I spotted Alissa and noticed she was standing alone. Her friends were on the dance floor dancing. This was my lucky night. I walked over to her. "How are you doing? Having fun?" She looked up at me with her flirty honey brown eyes. "Not yet." "Why not?" I ask. "Well, I was

waiting for you”, she replied with a half smile. “ Ok then let’s dance. ” I said it as more of a statement than a question. I was lucky a slow song was now playing. I took her hand and led her onto the dance floor. Slowly I put my arms around her tiny waist and drew her close to me as we started to move in perfect unison to the music. At that moment in time, life seemed perfect. I didn’t want it to end. Just as I was really starting to believe that tonight was the night, I heard a loud sound, it sounded like gunshots! Everyone started to scream and scramble. I immediately started to panic, “ Where is Rafa, where is Joey? ” I yelled. She looked at me horrified and scared “I don’t know, but we have to get out of here someone is shooting!” She grabbed me by

my hand pulled me to follow her out the back door but I yanked it free. “You go with your friends out the back, I have to go find my friends, I can’t just leave them.” “Please” she pleaded as she looked up at me with tears in her eyes. It was almost as if she knew something I didn’t. I should have listened. I gave her a look that told her I just couldn’t go with her, I then turned and ran the other way.

I ran to the front of the building, and what I saw was chaos. Two cars with four guys in each had already passed by once and shot at the guys that were standing in front of the hall. By now there were a couple of guys shooting back. To my horror I saw the cars were making a u turn to come back! I frantically looked for Rafa and Joey repeatedly yelling at no one in particular “Anyone see Joker and Gumby?” , “ Anyone see Joker and Gumby?” I had this dreadful sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I felt like I was going to burst out crying. Finally I heard someone yell, “someone got shot around the corner!” Somehow I instinctively knew. Everything was happening so fast now, I didn’t have time to think of my safety or the consequences. I ran as fast as I could around the corner. There was Rafa and Joey lying on the sidewalk. I ran over to them and Joey was crying over Rafa. Rafa, my friend, my brother was laying there, dead. Joey was hit but not dead. When he saw me he looked up at me with a look of such sorrow and sadness then he passed out. I fell to the ground on the sidewalk, I wanted to check and find out how hurt Joey was. Just then I looked up and I saw the car coming around the corner, without thinking I picked up the gun in Joey’s hand and pointed it at the passing car that had just killed my closest friend and possibly my other friend, and fired it. The car almost immediately swerved and crashed into a light post across the street. I don’t know what would’ve happened if the cops had not showed up in droves at that precise moment. The rest of the night was a blur.

1974

Months later Sitting in the courtroom waiting to hear my fate, I looked over and saw my family. My mother was devastated, I will never forget the look on her face, it broke my heart, my father couldn’t even look at me.

What had I done? When I think back to that night, I wonder, did I shoot that gun out of fear for my life, or was it anger because they had just killed my beloved childhood friend and I wanted revenge? Which was it? Was I even sorry I did it? I don’t know. What I do know is this, I have to live with what I have done. I killed another human being, he was also someone’s son, brother and boyfriend. What kind of man am I ? In that one moment I lost my freedom and my dreams. I wish it had been me that died that night.

Interrupting my thoughts the judge spoke, "Anthony Roberto Garza you are hereby reprimanded to the California State Youth Authority till you reach the age of 25 for the voluntary manslaughter of Ernest Ortega Ramirez." The judge looked straight at me "Do you have anything to say?" I shook my head no. What could I say? Should I say I was sorry, to the parents of the man I killed? That seemed kind of empty to me. There was nothing for me to say.

"Please escort Mr. Garza to the holding cell."

That night when I reached my destination and the cell door closed I was alone with my thoughts in my new "home". I realized the "Hills" had won, they had claimed me. I thought I could beat that fate and fly. I was wrong. I am from LOS LOMAS.

YVONNE GARCIA ZAHER