

It Calls You Back

AN ODYSSEY THROUGH LOVE,
ADDICTION, REVOLUTIONS,
AND HEALING

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great odds—I've had to open up to some painful truths in this book, but it all comes from a place of love and respect. Also apologies to all the homies, community members, family, and friends I had to avoid or cut short during this period, although I justify *not* writing for ceremonies, distress calls, suicide emergencies, interventions, or to just enjoy a quiet nonworking, peace-filled respite. And thanks to my agent, Susan Bergholz, and my editor, Sulay Hernandez, for believing in this work.

Chapter One

You'll be back."

These were the last words I heard as I walked away from the clanging locks and gates, the incessant yells and howls, of the downtown Los Angeles County Jail. A sheriff's deputy taunted me with these words after I bailed out from being held on "resisting arrest and assaulting police officers" charges. If convicted, I'd do a minimum of six years in the state penitentiary.

The year was 1973.

The charges stemmed from the police beating of a handcuffed young Mexican woman lying on her stomach on the parking lot of an after-hours club in Norwalk. Several deputies were striking and kicking her as she screamed for help. The few drunkards around sauntered away. I was high—on heroin, alcohol, pills; I used to like combining those damn things. I turned to walk away as well, but something in me wouldn't let me.

At eighteen years of age I felt tired, lost, after having been forced to move away from my neighborhood and a garage where I had lived in a small room with a piss bucket and bunk, and where I got high with street girls I called "squeezes."

I did something no true gangster would do—I tried to stop the beating. In the process the deputies jumped me. I wanted to fight back but I got laid out fast, flat onto the ground, Maced and handcuffed. Before being taken to the Norwalk sheriff's substation, while immobilized I

was driven around a few blocks as two deputies punched me. I yelled, "*Pinche chota*, fuck you . . . you'll never break me, man."

Or I thought I did. Maybe most of this was in my head. Either way, my words failed to break through.

At the time I was part of Las Lomas, a barrio gang in the San Gabriel Valley, in one of the poorest neighborhoods in L.A. County. In Las Lomas I had been a part of various cliques since age eleven. Although most of the time I spent with them involved hanging out, bored stiff, with nothing to do, I made myself available for drive-bys, armed robberies, hijackings.

I also did various mind-and-mood-altering drugs. As a preteen I first huffed on aerosol paint and clear-plastic spray, and then latched on to marijuana, downers, uppers, PCP, LSD, mescaline, and heroin, often chased with alcohol. I was an equal-opportunity drug user until heroin forced me to become more discriminating.

And yet, I managed to attend political meetings among Chicano activists in East L.A. and then a mixed group of revolutionaries in Watts and the Harbor Area. I learned to paint murals at seventeen after being acknowledged for the graffiti pieces I stylishly scrawled on L.A.-area walls. My world was opening up: I participated in antiwar rallies, school protests, and forums against police abuse and other injustices. I even returned to high school after dropping out, joining a Chicano student group, learning Mexika (so-called Aztec) dance, and writing my first essays and what some people called poems.

With all this behind me, I stood at a sharply defined crossroads in the county jail.

By then twenty-five of my friends—including so-called enemies—had been killed by gang rivals, police bullets, heroin overdoses, robbery calamities, and suicides (wasn't it all suicide?). I overdosed three times on drugs and inhalants in those years. I had also faced half a dozen gun assaults, including by machine-gun fire and at point-blank range, although, miraculously, I was never hit.

My problem was that the gang life and drugs as well as the political consciousness and artistic expression were pulling me in widely divergent directions. For some reason, politics and art appealed to me more than I thought they would. Yet, although organizers in the Chicano

movement tried to convince me to leave drugs and the gang, I didn't know how or if I could. I had turned my life and everything else I had over to the madness—my identity was so intertwined with La Vida Loca that any appeal to leave felt threatening.

"This is my barrio," I'd declare. "I'll die for Las Lomas—*y qué!*"

Once, a short time before my last arrest, during the funeral of one of my homies, a neighborhood girl warned how I'd end up the same way if I didn't stop what I was doing.

"I can hardly wait to have a funeral just like this," I told her with a far-off look. "To have the mothers crying, the homies and girls missing me, with all this love. That would be the best day of my life."

I wanted to die in a blaze of glory, for the barrio, manacled to those dark streets, those dirt roads, those scrap homes, the marked-up walls—but I wasn't dying. I got close, but every time I somehow escaped death's grasp, just to keep going at it again. La Vida Loca was a web and a lure. Dudes tattooed the spider in the web or the cross with the three rays over it signifying the Crazy Life (meaning you had to carry the cross of this life wherever you went—today this is represented by three dots in a triangle shape). You're caught. You can't let this go. I had to break the chains that pointed to three outcomes—*pinto*, *tecató*, or *muerto*: a prisoner, an addict, or dead. These were the three choices you inherited in *la locura*. The three things a *vato* could expect. The trinity. Three dots. No more responsibility. No more caring. All dreams gone.

At the county jail I shuffled through the booking routine: getting fingerprints taken; placing my clothes by my feet; getting checked for contraband/weapons as well as "marks," mostly hidden by tats or in hard-to-find places with scratches and bruises on my torso and face; taking a shower; then getting deloused with a white powder thrown at my naked flesh.

The next day a homie of mine walked up to me in the canteen. Known as Largo, he was dark, huge, with tattoos and bullet holes. Largo helped run things for the main Chicano prison organization in the jail and state prison system.

"*Carnal*, time to think about becoming a *soldado*," he said, eyeing

me as another soldier in the upper echelons of the barrio gang crime organization.

Street *vatos* were making their bones in jails and prisons and some were now calling shots for various cell blocks, yards, and eventually neighborhoods. All tattooed-down Mexican barrio gang members were probable recruits. In those days, however, not everyone was brought in or even wanted. No punks, no rats, no liars, no cowards, no *levas*, as we called them, were accepted. They didn't think I was any of these so Largo tried to bring me into the fold.

Also the high-level *pintos* didn't just ask someone to join. You had to prove yourself. When called upon you had to do things, even stab or kill, without question. You had to develop their trust that you were down over a long period of time. If you had doubts, if you had other ideas, if you hesitated, they didn't want you.

Largo hit me up to demonstrate my mettle. But for the first time I found myself personally conflicted, in a bind, as they say. I had paid my dues in the barrio, doing what Las Lomas expected of me. I accepted this and the barrio rules, which were summed up by the 1963 Sunny and the Sunliners song "Smile Now, Cry Later"—you can hurt me now, but you'll pay later. All affronts had to be accounted for. And if I damaged another dude or barrio, I would expect to be taken out as well.

Largo asked me what I was arrested for.

"Was it a *jale*—robbery, drive-by, burglary?"

"Chale, homes," I responded. "It was for fighting with *chotas*."

Largo looked at me like I had lost my mind. I told him the story of the Chicana being attacked by deputies and how they turned on me when I confronted them.

"Why the fuck didn't you let that *ruca* eat concrete?" Largo asked. "It was none of your business."

"That's where you're wrong, homegrown," I said. "I made it my business. I'm tired of the police, the racism, the unjust treatment. I took my stand so here I am."

Largo didn't know how to take this, so he let it slide . . . for now.

I made a crucial decision in jail. Because of my jones with heroin, there were dudes willing to set me up, *eres* and all. For some reason, I

said no. I wanted to get clean. I convinced them, and the same guys who were going to score for me now helped me through the first stages of my withdrawals. I didn't realize how bad things had gotten with *chiva* and me. These dudes served as lookouts, holding the deputies at bay, ignoring me when I hollered for a hit, when I pleaded for them to forget what I requested, while my insides twisted into knots and I withered in cold sweats, cramps, slivers of pain.

Next I had to address this issue of becoming a *soldado* in the joint. Fear had to be pushed down as far as possible—I'd confronted many a fool, regardless of how I felt. But I also had to consider all these dudes from hundreds of barrio gangs now uniting as Raza (the Mexican people) in the joints.

I yearned for another way to go—unity not for crime or the drug trade, but for real social and economic change. This derived from the political consciousness I had developed and actions I had taken, including the East L.A. school walkouts of 1968 and, more important, the 1970 Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War. My mentor in this work had been a Brown Beret and a founder of the United Mexican American Students (UMAS). Prior to this I had little imagination. The barrio, jails, drugs, and killings were the only concerns I knew and lived with.

"Largo, I don't want to go that way," I told him the next time my homie hit me up to do things like run contraband or stab somebody. Largo tried his best to bring down the hammer with words and veiled threats. At one point he said, more out of concern than as a warning, "If you don't, homie, I can't do nothing to protect you."

I responded, more to make a political stand than to be confrontational: "I'm not worried about what I have to do to be free. This includes from drugs. From 'the life.' *Simón*, I'm all for Raza unity, but this is something else. I don't want to be a part of this."

Largo didn't know what to say. I walked away expecting the worst. Part of me felt I'd signed my death warrant. Raza prisoners were harsh—they were the first to organize strategically for defense and protection, the first to establish the basic rules and methods of most prison gangs regardless of race. They became the most organized, largest, and most ruthless of all prison associations.

To let them know I was no *leva*, even during *las malías*, I stepped out of my cell, not threatening or acting hard. I made my way to the dayroom. I wasn't hiding out, nor was I challenging anyone or playing martyr. I was making clear my position without being a *pendejo* in the process. Largo came up to me as I watched TV, sweat beading on my forehead, itches under the skin.

"What are you going to do, homie?" he asked.

"I'm going to be a warrior for a new world, *carnal*," I responded as if my voice had been taken over by another person, sprouting a new tongue, energized by a new mind. "I don't want any more barrio warfare or early suicide that only hurts our communities and destroys our brothers and sisters. Everybody wants to die for the barrio—how about living for the barrio? I want to finally do something different."

In those days, the majority of Chicano leaders in prison were men of their word. They had *palabra*, which meant they could be trusted to do what they said they'd do. This meant they were the first to be heard, the first to be followed. And for a time these *pintos* were able to hear my words, my ideas, see the contours of a new life. What I said to Largo resonated, but I didn't know how long it would last.

My mentors in the movement wanted me out of jail as soon as possible. They feared political reprisals, not gang ones (although at the time, many such reprisals were linked). They obtained enough funds from the community to make my bail.

Following my release, I was allowed to get my property. On the way there, Largo and a couple of the *locotes* came up to me. For a second I thought this was how they'd get me, before I left, as an example to others who dared to remove themselves from the sturdy net of La Vida Loca.

Instead Largo gave me what I was seeking—a way out with dignity.

"We're going to give you a pass, *ese*, your walking papers," he declared. "Go ahead and be this revolutionary, this Chicano. Do some good for the people—some of us are too far gone to try. But maybe you can, homie. I know you've always been game for the barrio, always *firme*. But you also have something not many of us got. You've got smarts, *ese*. You read books. You already know *chiya* is not for you. Re-

member once in the neighborhood when I told you that? I know you've been making changes for some time. I've been watching you: the murals, the Chicano school clubs, all that *pedo*. This may not happen again, but for now you have a charge—help the *morros*, the youngsters. Stay out of this life. Don't go both ways. Getting this pass means you can never walk this way again, *me oyes*? If you come back to the county jail for any reason, if we see you inside these walls, you belong to us. *Entiendes, Mendes?*"

I understood. The blood in my veins understood. This was my first big break from the drug-and-crime matrix I had once been so eager to be entangled in. Yet as I walked out, without looking back, carrying what little I owned on my back and the words of my homie, it was the deputy's statement that rang in my ears.

"You'll be back."

These words, now a cliché, heard in movies and TV shows with actors walking away from pretend jails or prisons, were at the time a personal curse, with my name on it, meant to dishearten and disassemble, meant to hold one in the stasis of the criminal world. A big part of me believed I would be back.

The second break came from a judge whose name I don't remember and whose face I can't recall. Community members had organized a letter writing campaign on my behalf among former teachers, fellow organizers, as well as college professors and staff. When I got popped, I was attending California State College, Los Angeles, taking Chicano studies and broadcasting classes. I had no idea this effort would go anywhere.

When I next appeared in front of the judge, I had a pretty *jaina* at my side named Licha—the young woman who had been beaten the night of my arrest. I was looking at more time than she was because of my "assault." Deputies in the stands were clamoring for me to be thrown into the state pen. Yet the judge decided to turn us loose: We both got convicted for drunk-and-disorderly with time served. The deputies were upset. They wanted my hide. I wasn't sure I'd accept this arrangement. But I got those looks from the public defender, Licha, and supporters in the courtroom that said: Don't blow this.

I reluctantly accepted—and Licha and I were freed.

Once out I realized I had been given a chance to begin anew, something I was known previously to throw away. This time too many people had placed their confidence in me, even my homeboy in *la torcida*. For some reason, I matured, which was really an invitation to take life seriously. I needed this weight on me before I made any desperate moves toward drugs, violence, or a street reputation—I needed to finally learn to own my life.

Although I had hardworking Mexican migrant parents, my childhood and youth had been punctuated by an intense and hazardous street life. I was born on the border, in El Paso, Texas, to be exact, although I never lived there. My family resided on the other side, in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua—a city with good people, yet few resources.

Prior to my birth, my father had been arrested for allegedly stealing property from the school where he was principal. My mother told me my dad had no access to books or supplies for the students and had to sell the school's wrought-iron fence for funds. He spent six months in an open-air jail with no food except what my mother brought him, which he ate out of a rusty tin can.

Things also happened along the border that may not happen in other parts of the United States. One of my oldest half sister's newborn twins was believed stolen after being born in an El Paso fly-by-night clinic. There was an illegal trade in babies. My sister didn't know she had twins until years later when her daughter contracted a kidney infection that only twins get. My sister then put two and two together. She recalled that while she was still groggy from anesthesia, a nurse inadvertently asked about her "other" daughter, which doctors and staff later insisted was a mistake. This sounded odd, but at the time she didn't think much about it.

We moved to Los Angeles as refugees when I was two. My half sister first found a place in Watts/South Central L.A. with her husband and two daughters. Our family followed. Due to restricted covenants against people of color, Watts was one of the few neighborhoods we could move into. I entered a Watts-area elementary school at age six, speak-

ing only Spanish, pushed from classroom to classroom until a teacher finally accepted me. I spent that year in a corner playing with blocks, and I was scolded and even swatted whenever a Spanish word crept out of me in class or on the playground.

At seven, I began stealing from local stores and markets. At eight, teachers punished me for sticking pins into fellow students *y otras travesuras*—whatever violence or humiliations existed at home, I took it out against my classmates. When I was nine, the family moved to a two-bedroom apartment in the San Gabriel Valley near East L.A. There were eleven of us, with the kids sleeping on blankets in the living room, arguing and yelling all the time, until one family member stabbed another and the landlord threw us into the streets.

With the help of a poverty agency, six of us (Mom, Dad, an older brother, two younger sisters, and me) ended up in South San Gabriel, then part of L.A. County territory that no city claimed. Las Lomas, which means the Hills, was a part of the South San Gabriel barrio with dirt roads, wood-frame shacks, goats and chickens, and stripped cars, surrounded by the mostly better-off cities of Monterey Park, Rosemead, and Montebello.

My mother stayed at home, taking care of us kids. When she worked, it was in garment-industry sweatshops, including doing what was known as "piecework" with an industrial sewing machine wrangled into our small barrio home, rented out of her meager pay. She often labored into the wee hours, rattling the whole place each time her foot pushed on the pedal, her hair disheveled, eyes almost closed, stitching her life to scraps of cloth. I called this machine "the monster."

At ten, my best friend died after we broke into a local school to play ball and the police chased us. He climbed the roof, didn't see a skylight in the dark, and ran across, falling through the glass. That same year I ruptured the lining of my intestines doing rough backyard weight lifting with my brother and a cousin. After I was rushed to White Memorial Medical Center in Boyle Heights, the doctors there also circumcised me, giving me anesthesia for these surgeries. Two years later, I was experimenting with drugs, including *carga*.

At eleven, I witnessed a gang burst through my elementary school

chasing after some guys. They arrived in lowered cars and on bikes, with baggy pants and long shirts. Students and teachers ran. I got attracted to whatever power these dudes displayed. That's when I joined a gang. Besides the drug use, at twelve I drank and received my first tattoo. At thirteen I stole bikes, burglarized homes, fought in schools and on the streets—and was getting detained by police, landing in various local jails.

My dad eventually found a job as a laboratory custodian at a community college in the San Fernando Valley that allowed him to buy a house in San Gabriel. I ended up jumping in many *vatos* for Las Lomas to keep this section of San Gabriel out of the hands of our main rivals, La Sangra, a gang named after an old barrio situated around the Mission, north of there. As much as I could, I snuck out of my house to go a couple of miles south to the Hills and hang with the homies.

The rest of the family sort of settled in. My brother and sisters didn't get into crime, gangs, or drugs. My parents, like in many families, were often tired from work, unable to spend "quality time" with us, but they had their rules, their expectations. We were supposed to comply, without question. We weren't allowed to be "bad." But somebody fell through the cracks. It turned out to be me.

At fifteen I got jumped into the hard-core clique of Las Lomas, stabbing someone with a rusty screwdriver that first night. I also got expelled from high school. Soon after this my parents kicked me out of the house. My father declared, "You do what we say or get out." I got out.

I slept in discarded vehicles, in downtown streets with winos and heroin addicts, along church pews, squatting in empty buildings and sitting in all-night movie theaters when I wasn't sleeping on the sofas or in the backyards of homeboys or lover girls. I mugged tourists on Olvera Street and in Chinatown. I eventually returned home to live in a cell-like room in the garage with no running water. I put gang graffiti and murals on all the walls to make it my own.

At sixteen, I was placed in two adult facilities following my arrest during the Chicano Moratorium, what the media dubbed "the East L.A. riot." At one point, sheriff's deputies stowed me away on Murder-

ers' Row in the Hall of Justice jail, threatening to charge several of us *cholos* with the murder of three persons who died in the disturbances, including Rubén Salazar, a prominent Chicano journalist killed by deputies. They threw me into a cell with two killers (and next to the cell of mass murderer Charles Manson). That first night, my cell mates put a razor blade to my neck. I had to stand up to them, even if I was scared to death. They soon smiled, laughed. Afterward, we played cards all night long. I was eventually released with no charges.

After this, my interest in social justice spiked. I realized on Murderers' Row how easily I could be thrown away. If I woke up one morning with my throat cut, who'd care? So I sought teachers, mentors, activists. I returned to high school, catching up on lost units, leading student walkouts that resulted in the establishment of our own Chicano student center, Chicano studies classes, poetic theater pieces, and my short stint as "Joe Aztec," the school's mascot. I also stopped using heroin and other drugs for more than a year when I was around sixteen and seventeen. I don't know how exactly. But for that time I was appraised differently, finally seen as someone with intrinsic value. Unusual as this was, I felt recognized, significant. A whole community rose up to meet my passions and interests.

Just before I finished school, however, I unwound again, in a weird depression. I lost my bearings and went back to the heavy drugs as well as a more intense gang life. I took part in shootings and a firebombing. Then near the end of my seventeenth year, I got arrested for attempted murder after a shoot-out with bikers in which four people were injured. I was released after my homies intimidated all the witnesses.

Because of the pull I felt toward intelligent revolutionary activity, as well as the artistic pursuits I was dabbling in, my relationship to the gang changed again. One of my saving graces was a love of reading. When I first learned English, I turned to books. Even while I was in the gang or on the streets I spent hours in libraries.

Largo had approached me in the county jail because he knew I was a down homeboy, one of the first to rush into battle with fists, knives, or guns. But I also had this book thing. I didn't know it at the time but my

destiny was calling me, and a couple of adults, and some of the *vatos*, stone gangsters even, acknowledged this even when I didn't.

I received my diploma in the principal's office since it was too late to take part in the cap-and-gown ceremony. A different persona emerged: I wore my hair long, working out, wearing "normal" clothes instead of *cholo* attire. Going to Cal State L.A. was part of this turn.

But then I got arrested for the incident with the sheriff's deputies. After the judge's decision to give me a lesser charge and time served, I was forced to finally consider another trajectory for my life.

The thing was, my college days were over after my arrest. I missed too many classes and received a number of withdrawals and failures. I wasn't totally out of the woods yet.

Prior to my arrest, the *Los Angeles Times's Home* magazine published a letter on the murals I painted with thirteen gang members and other troubled youth. Next to this they featured a color photo of a section of wall we did at the side of a hardware store in Rosemead.

In the summer of 1972 we put up eight murals as part of the Bienvenidos Community Center, supported by the city of Rosemead and trained by Chicano muralists like Cecil Felix and Alicia Venegas. I took part in mural-making classes at the Goetz Art Studio in East L.A. and witnessed the creation of public art at the Estrada Courts Housing Projects. I painted a mural by myself at the Del Mar Public Library and several for the barrio's preschool, alternative school, and youth center.

This mural work happened when a youth organizer saw the intricate graffiti work I was doing with other homeboys. The lettering was precise, unique, cryptic. The drawings were well done and shaded, like the Chicano tattoos and airbrushed images on lowrider cars that were considered the best in the streets and joints. The murals I did included barrio scenes (lowriders, hypodermic needles, *cholos*), prequest motifs (Mexika and Mayan temples), and abstract images (such as mouths interspersed with raging faces). The biggest mural involved several panels portraying the then 125-year history of Chicanos in the United States.

One day my mother received a phone call from a professor at a

major Catholic university on L.A.'s Westside. When I finally got around to returning the call, the professor said he read the *Home* magazine piece and wanted to hire me to do a mural for the campus. He had paints, brushes, scaffolding, students to help, and was offering me \$1,000—this was big bucks in 1973.

I traveled to the university, which was in a well-off part of town I was not familiar with. The professor showed me around the campus. He pointed out a wide, clean, and empty wall. Then he took me to a storage area where canisters of acrylic paints as well as equipment were laid out, all at my disposal. I got interested but also overwhelmed. I doubted my skills and questioned whether I deserved this—I often thought good things shouldn't happen to me.

Regardless, I shook his hand and the professor seemed glad we had an agreement.

"You don't realize how honored I am," he declared.

I never painted that mural.

The professor called and called. I never returned his calls. He simply stopped trying to reach me. I was too plagued by self-doubt and deep into the drug world by then.

I left heroin soon after my last county jail experience. Despite those fierce pressures to end the withdrawals, I stayed on course away from family, from homies. I had relapses, complications, but I was nonetheless determined to break this powerful hold.

By then I had been convinced, with the help of others, that heroin and other illicit drugs were part of a systematic way to control the poor working-class communities of mostly blacks and Mexicans, but also poor whites, that began to rebel and organize in the 1960s. The old Chicano gangsters, known as *pachucos*, got hit hard with heroin after World War II when the U.S. government deserted the poppy fields they had set up in Mexico for the morphine required for wounded servicemen. African-American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods also got inundated. The Vietnam War brought in more addicts, more access to heroin. By the time I got into this, there were a few generations already addicted.

I was also filling in the emptiness of my life—which heroin and other drugs had done fairly well until then—with the art, stories, and poems bursting out of my depths, out of my active mind, out of my aches and sorrows. At eighteen, prior to my last arrest and still drowning in *carga*, I walked into my first poetry reading in Berkeley, California. I had won honorable mention in 1973's *Quinto Sol Chicano Literary Awards* for vignettes of street life I first wrote in jail called "Barrio Expressions." I was invited to the awards ceremony and given \$250, a lot of money for a thief and drug user. Later on stage I saw José Montoya, the Godfather of Chicano poetry; David Henderson, one of the country's leading African-American poets; and Pedro Pietri, the Nuyorican word meister. In turn they each stood up to read their works—I was held in a trance of images, stories, metaphors, and passionate feeling.

I had never heard poetry read before. I didn't even know what poems were. But that day their verses and politics called to me, more music than talk, more fevered shapes than sentences, more Che and Malcolm than Shakespeare—I was never the same after this. For the first time, I even imagined my own works on the shelves among those of other writers.

The best way to pull oneself out of a life of crime and drugs is to stop, as difficult as this may be. Being "conflicted" is an important part of the process, which also involves alignment of deep self and ego, the physical with the psychological, the emotional with the spiritual, the individual with the community. Profound knowledge and a therapeutic community were the best ways to pull street warriors like me away from these drugs, a grueling and lifelong struggle. For me, it also involved having a sense of history and political clarity.

I vowed never again to use illegal drugs or to go to jail for any criminal act, a thorny proposition compounded by the fact that, though I had a general vision of a just world, I had no skills or any idea about what I'd be or where I'd go.

Still, I often thought about that mural project at the Catholic university I had sabotaged. Who knows what other offers would have come

my way? Perhaps the mural experience was too tied to the combination of drugs and street life. I'm not sure. But when I stopped that life, especially the drugs, I also let go of the colors, the symbols, the shapes, the faces I sketched on paper or imagined in my mind.

I never again picked up a paintbrush.

Although I had stopped drinking by the beginning of the book tour, I felt that in Europe I could make an exception. This was a monster lapse. I began to down those dark German beers in large bottles. Man, could people drink in Germany. And I was right behind them.

The problem was my body had been craving the alcohol for some time. Feelers appeared to be reaching out from my skin, anticipating the drink. When an alcoholic lets go of drinking for a while and then gets back, the effect is often more potent—and potentially lethal.

At one point, in Salzburg, Austria, I drank about a dozen black beers. One person in our party kept count, worried about me. But I acted fairly normal, having conversations, laughing. This person didn't know I had already blacked out. Soon after I stepped away from where my friends were sitting and kept walking. I didn't look plastered, so no body was worried.

I was plastered out of my mind.

An Austrian wall held my shadow, my body stretched out on the ground along an ancient walkway. I had a hard time opening my eyes. Where was I? People maneuvered around me, talking in fugues I didn't recognize, one stepping over my legs. I felt as if I were dying. I hadn't felt this since I last ODed on heroin so many sidewalk slumbers ago.

I managed to rise up from this spot to face the somber street, to glimpse my mortality reclining against a lamppost. My friends were long gone. Sometime the night before I had wandered off from where we had gathered at an outdoor drinking joint.

This strange place, alien enough to break my hard-fought sobriety, pulled me into its steely grasp, harsh violin music between my ears, fooling the fool into believing again. I numbly went through my pants pockets. I found a card with the name and address of the Salzburg hotel I was staying at. I noticed a lone taxi parked up the street and showed the driver the card. I didn't say anything, but whatever expression he saw on me told him what he needed to know. He opened the door to the cab, made sure I didn't hurt myself getting in. Drove me to the hotel.

I paid the cab driver, and he pushed off as if all his nights were spent picking up shadows.

The next day, I found my friends. We packed and left to take a train to Berlin. On the way out of the hotel, I briefly excused myself from the others, walked to the public restroom in the lobby, and threw up as soon as I opened the door.

When I returned from Europe, I went back to the recovery program, detailing my experiences to men and women who readily understood my predicament, readily embraced my fears. But I also began to look at other ways to stay clean. Going to meetings all the time, although cathartic, didn't entirely work for me.

Yet for a long time to come, I still felt the painful pull to stop by the bars. For now the meetings were necessary. A few times I called a rehabilitation hospital that catered to struggling addicts. In my most torn-up states, I conversed with one of the staff, sometimes for almost an hour. She calmly listened and emphasized that she was there for me if I needed her. She asked me to come to the hospital a few times, which I planned to do but never did. I didn't know her name, but without her it would have been harder to make it. She provided a voice to strengthen my own "stop drinking" voice, the one I had to learn to use twenty-four hours a day.

Then, finally, I told Trini about my recovery—she didn't know about this. I went to meetings and was afraid to tell her. Afraid she'd see a weak person. Afraid she'd want to leave. When I told her, my tears flowed. I related how I snuck around to meetings like I snuck into bars. I didn't want her to see me desperate and then have her walk out. By rights, she should have.

But Trini didn't leave. She cried when I cried, not saying much, letting my outpouring tell the tale. Letting this say more than I could have in letters I wished I had written to all the mentors, to the former wives, to my kids, to confused lovers. Letters I wanted to compose every night of my life until I expired, letters about the brutal awakening this sobriety thrust on me.

Trini cried when I cried, as I sat on my office chair in front of my computer in our home that I could have destroyed, like other households, unless I opened up, tasted the salt of Trini's torment, and appreciated she would still be there, as she was then, sliding up to me and placing her arms around my shoulders, and me feeling so ashamed, so bone hungry, so liquefied soul, so blood-red sorry and damn near death-tired.

New York City-based photojournalist Donna DeCesare covered the civil war in El Salvador for four years. Soon after the peace accords of 1992—ending twelve years of fighting with seventy-five thousand people killed and more than a million refugees—Donna came across a heavily marked Salvadoran youth at a hospital. The young man was a recent deportee from Los Angeles and a member of an L.A.-based street gang.

The tattoos on his body were extensive, something Donna had not seen in El Salvador before. He had a large EIGHTEEN STREET on his back. He was also HIV-positive from sharing dirty tattoo needles. This dude didn't survive, but before he passed on he talked to Donna about the L.A. gang members who were now flooding El Salvador. Although there were different gangs, the main ones were La Mara Salvatrucha and La Eighteenth Street.

Donna contacted me in the middle of the book tour. She'd read my memoir and wanted the two of us to apply for a grant to document this phenomenon. The Center for Documentary Studies out of Duke University in North Carolina offered the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize, one of the best collaborative project grants in the country.

Making phone calls to go back and forth on the narrative, as well as sending faxes from different cities, Donna and I patched together what we had and submitted our proposal. Sometime during my travels, Donna called to inform me we had won that year's prize against some formidable competition.

Later in the summer of 1993, Donna and I went to Los Angeles, to the Pico-Union barrio, where by then Central Americans had been arriving as war and economic refugees for at least a dozen years. This is where Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and Eighteenth Street were born.

We also visited Central American neighborhoods in Westlake, MacArthur Park, Koreatown, South Central, and Hollywood. And we entered two prisons, including the Youth Training School in Chino, to speak with more Salvadoran gang youth.

Mara is a Central American term for any grouping of street corner youths, taken from the word for soldier ants. At first I misunderstood, thinking this word was tied to the Maravilla district of East L.A., with more than two dozen gangs since the 1920s that placed the word *mara* after their barrio name—such as El Hoyo Mara, La Rock Mara, Lopez Mara, and Marianna Mara. I was wrong. I had to be instructed about life and culture from El Salvador that at the time I had no clue about.

On the other hand, one thing that impacted me was how Chicano these young people had become. Although Salvadoran gang members are proud of being Guanacos (and Guatemalans of being Chapines), they were now part of the growing fraternity of La Vida Loca. Their stance, their style of clothing, and their tattoos were derived from the older and larger Chicano gangs. They even incorporated Chicano slang (*mara* notwithstanding), with words like *ese*, *vato*, *trucha*, *morro*, and *camal* entering their vocabulary.

Levels of trauma from war-torn and impoverished Central American countries met another level of trauma on L.A.'s streets.

Unfortunately, Salvadoran gangsters also adopted one of the terrible outcomes of Chicano-style gangs: highly organized and violent barrio warfare. Now enemies, MS and Eighteenth Street brought that warfare to El Salvador—and eventually to Guatemala, Honduras, and parts of Mexico.

This happened when federal authorities created a gang task force after the L.A. uprising that included the deportation of thousands of gang members. And by 1996, immigration law changed so that any