

"A slow-motion"

MY BLOOD

The Making of

THE BLOOD



By REYMONDO SANCHEZ

132

Down Brother

WHEN I ARRIVED at Kedzie and Armitage, Loco and about five other King brothers were standing on the corner. I forced on a happy face and greeted everyone with the usual handshake. I began asking for weed, liquor, anything that would help me escape reality. About a half hour later I was feeling the effects of marijuana and wine and was well on my way to getting completely wasted. Several brothers told me that Cubana had been asking for me. My face lit up when I heard that. To hell with Rosie, I thought. Cubana was just as beautiful and she was a Queen. I would be safe with her. However, I did not go looking for her. I sat there getting high. It was Saturday and I knew that sooner or later she would come to Kedzie and Armitage.

An hour passed and I was high as a kite. In my mind I killed Rosie over and over again. I became angry and uncontrollable. I was yelling obscenities at anybody who looked my way. King brothers looked at me and whispered things. They were not used to seeing me uncontrollably high. "What the fuck you looking at, shit," I yelled at them. They looked at me and did their best to ignore me. I threw a bottle of wine at a car because the passenger looked my way. I wanted to go gangbanging. I wanted to hurt someone, to make them feel the kind of pain I felt. A little blue Toyota with three guys who looked like gang members was stopped behind two other cars waiting for the light at Kedzie and Armitage to change. I yelled at the brothers, "Check these punks out," and walked toward the car. I walked up to the car and yelled, "What you all be about?" The passengers ignored me. I got closer. "King love, motherfuckers, what you all

be about, pussies," I yelled at them. They still ignored me. The light changed and they began moving forward. I picked up an empty beer bottle and threw it at them. I hit the passenger in the face. I could see blood gushing out of the side of his face as they sped away.

Immediately the Kings began mobilizing in case there was some kind of retaliation. There were Kings on all four corners of Kedzie and Armitage. All of them had some kind of weapon nearby. There were at least six guns hidden in different strategic points. I was standing by the wall where the King emblem was painted, a couple of feet from the clubhouse entrance. I could see dried pink paint on the sidewalk. The Gangsters had driven by and thrown baby food bottles filled with paint at the wall just a few days before. The emblem had already been retouched and pink paint lay only on the sidewalk.

The King emblem on Kedzie and Armitage was nothing fancy but it stood out big time. It was painted on the southwest corner of Kedzie and Armitage on a store wall. It was about ten feet high and twenty feet wide. It consisted of a black background with a five-point crown right in the center with the letter L on the left and a K on the right written in old English-style lettering with gold paint. I stood right in the center yelling like a madman. "I'm a King, amor de Rey, King love, King love, King love!" I was yelling at the top of my lungs. Loco came down from the clubhouse and stood next to me. "Hey, mi panita, calmate, vente vamos arriba" ("Hey, little partner, calm down, come on let's go upstairs"), Loco said. I spread my arms out like a cross against the wall and yelled, "Amor de Rey, hasta la muerte" ("King love until death"). I pounded my right fist upon my chest violently and then threw up the Kings' sign. "Amor," I heard several brothers yell my way as I walked off with Loco.

We went up to the clubhouse. I sat on a sofa, leaned back, and closed my eyes. I was hoping Morena would show up so she could give me a ride to Maria's place. I don't know how long I was waiting, but I decided I wanted to change into some street clothes. When they didn't show up, I decided to walk home. It would be a long walk, so I got up to ask Loco for a pistol just in case; but Loco was nowhere to be found. The whole clubhouse was empty. "Loco, Loco," I shouted as I knocked on doors. "In

here, come in here," I heard a voice say from way in the back. I walked toward the back of the apartment clubhouse and into the kitchen. As many times as I had been there I had never been to the back part of the apartment. In fact, the door leading to the kitchen was usually kept closed. "Aqui, brother, aqui" ("In here, brother, in here"). I heard the voice again, this time closer. I came to a door in the kitchen next to a refrigerator and tried to open it, but it was locked. I knocked and waited for an answer. "Esperate, bro" ("Wait, brother"), someone said. Several minutes passed and no one answered the door so I knocked again. Paco opened the door and said, "What's up, man? We're busy. Come back later." I heard Loco ask, "Who is it?" "It's Lil Loco," Paco answered. "Let the little brother in. I need to talk to him anyway," was Loco's response. Paco let me in and closed the door behind him. The room was big. It may have been the master bedroom. Until then I didn't even know that that room was there. It had a big table with eight chairs and a couple of couches. I stood at the entrance looking at those present and wondering what was going on and whether I wanted to stay or not. I was still fuming and daydreaming about Rosie. I just stood there until Paco yelled at me to close the door.

Loco, Lucky, and Tita, Loco's sister, sat at one end of the table. At the other end was an older white man counting money. Tita was like a bookkeeper for the Kings. She was counting cocaine and marijuana bags and then tossing them into their respective shopping bags. They would later be distributed to the Kings to sell on the streets. Loco noticed I was nervous and asked me what was up. I said, "That white boy is a narc." They all started laughing. Loco said, "Don't worry about him. That's Officer James, he's an honorary Latin King." Officer James was a big man, about six feet four inches tall, three hundred pounds, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a missing bottom front tooth. He said, "So you're Lil Loco. Boy, if those Cobras ever get their hands on you . . . I'm cool, little man. I don't bust Kings," Officer James said. At that moment he got up, stuck the money he was counting in his pocket, and got ready to leave. Loco escorted him to a door in the kitchen that led to the alley behind the building. They discussed some kind of deal for guns on the

would be delivered. "Just get the money ready," he said. Loco locked the door behind Officer James and came back into the room. He looked at me and asked, "What the hell were you screaming about out there? You made officer James nervous; he's our *chota*" (snitch), Paco said. "He's a fuckin' *hada*, man," I replied. "Yeah," Tita said, "only he works for the nation, not for the city." "Officer James gets paid to look out for us," Loco explained. "He tells us what his buddies are up to so we can avoid them." "He does a damn good job too. Maybe we should give him a raise," Paco said, and everybody laughed. It didn't make any sense to me.

"I got a surprise for you, little brother," Loco said. He went out of the room and came back with a shoebox. He sat next to me and handed me the box. Inside were two guns with two boxes of bullets. "Are these for me?" I asked. He said they were. "*Balla, bro, balla*" ("cool, man, cool"), I said as I grabbed one of the guns and looked it over. He told me that I should keep one stashed around Kedzie and Armitage and carry the other one with me. The guns were very shiny, a nickel-plated .25-caliber automatic and a chrome .38 special. I figured out how to load and unload the .38 special rather quickly. I had handled this type of gun before. It was exactly like the one I stole from Pedro. The .25 I just looked at, puzzled as to how to use it. I had seen and fired similar weapons before, but all I ever did was pull the trigger. Lucky asked me if I knew how to use an automatic. Loco answered for me, saying, "Of course he does, don't you, Lil Loco." I just sat there quiet, loading the .38, hoping they would teach me how to use the .25. The .25 was smaller, more compact, and easier to conceal, I thought to myself. Once I learned how to use it I could easily carry it around. Lucky picked up the .25 and showed me how to remove the clip. Now that I knew what a clip looked like, I noticed that there were two extra ones in the box. Lucky then showed me how to load the bullets into the clip. I took one of the clips from the box and began loading it just like Lucky was doing. It wasn't that easy at first; the spring inside the clip caught me by surprise and a bullet sprang straight up in the air. After I got the hang of loading the clip, Lucky taught me how to load it into the gun. He put the clip in the gun, then gave it to me and told me to take it out and then put it back in. That was easy. I did it about three times and then gave

the gun back to Lucky. He then pulled the chamber back and let me look inside over the top of the gun so I could see the bullet going into firing position.

Lucky took out the clip, pulled the chamber again, and the bullet flew out of the top of the gun. He put the gun and the clip on the table and said, "OK, it's your turn now." It wasn't so hard. I got it right the first time. Lucky took me out on the back porch and had me fire the gun up into the air so that I could see its action. I thought I was so cool. I couldn't wait to let Cubana see my gun. I even thought about taking it to school and using it on Rosie. Lucky was a good teacher. He taught me how to clean the guns and how to carry them so they wouldn't be noticed or fall out. He advised me to carry the .25 in my waistband and to put the loaded extra clips in my socks held to my leg with a rubber band. I did just what he told me to. I put the .38 in my pocket, the bullets in a bag, and began giving farewell salutes to Lucky and Loco. Loco walked with me to the door and gave me a paper bag with fifty nickel bags of marijuana inside. He told me to sell them and keep two dollars out of every bag I sold for myself. He advised me that I should stash the guns and the weed while I was hanging out in front on Kedzie and Armitage. The Kings and Queens would send customers my way once they knew I was selling nickels.

The gifts and trust I was being awarded were a show of appreciation for the acts of violence I had committed for the Kings. It was a show of total acceptance on the part of the junior and senior factions of the Latin Kings.

IT WAS RARE for a Peewee Latin King to receive the special treatment I was offered. I became a favorite choice of older Kings to take along on hits. As a result, the name Lil Loco became well known within King sections throughout the city. Unfortunately, it also became well known by rival gangs.

"You're a down brother. That's why they gave you those," Morena said when I told her about the guns. "They'll probably make you chief of the Peewees next," Morena said. I asked Morena to look out for me while I stashed my merchandise. Morena whistled and yelled, "Pongan

ojo, pongan ojo" ("Keep an eye out, keep an eye out"). I threw the bag of marijuana nickels in a garbage can that stood on the southeast corner of Kedzie and Armitage. It made it easy for me to grab the merchandise to sell and they weren't in plain sight so no one could take them. I hid the .38 at the trunk of a tree on the northwest side of Kedzie and Armitage about a quarter of a block up Kedzie. The Gangsters would usually show up around that area, so that was a good strategic point. I wrapped the .25 in a page of a newspaper and hid it under a parked car on Armitage on the inside of the front tire about two car lengths from the intersection.

Cubana and Morena hung out with me until I sold all the nickel bags. I couldn't believe how quickly they sold. When I turned in the money Loco offered to give me fifty more but I declined only because I wanted to go home and change clothes. He did, however, give me three bags for my own use. I picked up my guns and Morena gave me a ride to Maria's apartment. It was about 3:00 A.M. by this time, so I decided to stay home. Morena came upstairs to smoke some weed before she left, but we never got to smoke the weed—we rolled up the joints but fell asleep before we could smoke them.

A knock on the door woke me up Sunday morning. It was Sheena. I asked her to come in and excused myself to the bathroom. By the time I came out Morena had already introduced herself to Sheena and got the whole story about Rosie from her. Morena laughed at me, called me pussy whipped, then excused herself. Before she left Morena reminded me of the meeting and said she would pick me up. I went into the hallway with Morena and pleaded for her not to tell anybody about Rosie, especially not Cubana. All Morena said was, "I won't tell Cubana," as she walked down the stairs. That wasn't too reassuring. If she told the Kings, they were certain to call for a violation on me. I would just have to wait and see what happened.

I went back inside and sat down, trying hard not to make eye contact with Sheena. I couldn't avoid it. I sat there staring into Sheena's eyes, unable to say a word. I was nervous and very embarrassed. I wanted to smoke a joint so I could become the me that everyone else liked but I couldn't do it—not while Sheena was there. She finally broke

the silence and asked me if I was all right. I told her I was and proceeded to apologize to her for acting like a fool. She was such an angel. She said she understood and forgave me. She suggested that I quit gangbanging before it was too late.

God, I wish I had listened to her. I wish I were as brave as I thought I was and made the right decision to quit the Kings. I couldn't; I didn't. I was a coward hiding behind the influence of drugs and alcohol. I was too scared to face the world as the person I really was. Being a King gave me a role to play, friends, a lifestyle—everything I wanted. I couldn't walk away from the life.

Sheena's mother beeped the horn for her to come out. Sheena gave me a kiss on the cheek and walked out. As soon as the door closed behind her, I lit up a joint. I walked around the house and noticed I was alone. Maria had not been there all night. I sat on the sofa, watched television, smoked weed, thought about Rosie, about the Kings, and about the crimes I had participated in. I fell asleep and had the first of what would come to be a series of nightmares that invaded my sleep for a long time.

In this particular nightmare I kept seeing the bullet enter and exit the girl who was with the Chi-West the night we went to retrieve the Spanish Lord's sweater. Her blood splattered over and over again. I woke up sweating, nervous, scared of the world around me, scared of myself. I didn't even want to look out the window. I tried to go back to sleep, only to have the nightmare continue. I fought to stay awake, only to find myself afraid to keep my eyes open. It was broad daylight, the sun was shining through the windows, yet everything seemed gray and dismal to me. I rubbed my eyes, trying to focus my vision, but it didn't work. I began to see shapes in shadows and imagined someone or something was out there waiting to get me. I heard the door creak as it was opened and freaked out. It was the police coming to arrest me or a rival gang coming to kill me. But it was neither—it was Maria. I was so happy to see her. My vision suddenly cleared, everything became light, no danger existed whatsoever. My heart, which had been pounding, slowed down to normal. "Give me some of what you had, boy, I need to feel that

Maria had a friend with her. They both went into the kitchen. "¿Comó está Rosie?" ("How is Rosie?") Maria asked. I finally got up from the sofa and began straightening myself out. "I guess you were right about Rosie," Maria said. "You're not a *pendejo* after all." I kept quiet. I didn't want her to know I had been a *pendejo*. She never would have let me hear the end of it. It was better if she didn't know. "Come here, *papito* ("daddy"), I want you to meet my friend," Maria called out to me. Her friend was a short, stocky woman. She had long black hair and two gold front teeth. She also had a crown tattooed on her upper right arm. Her name was Sonia. "Call me Soni," she said. I asked her if she was a Queen. That was a mistake. She began preaching about when it meant something to be a Queen or a King. She went on about it not being right that the Puerto Ricans were killing each other but still had the nerve to call themselves Latin Kings and Queens. The more she talked, the deeper her Puerto Rican accent became. Finally she just spoke Spanish. "*Una raza dividida no sobrevive*" ("A race divided will not survive"), Soni said. "*Quien va a sembrar la semilla de nuestra cultura si estamos muertos?*" ("Who is going to plant the seed of our culture if we're all dead?") "*Calmate hija, no es para tanto*" ("Calm down, girl, it's not that serious"), Maria said. Soni took the beer Maria offered her and sat down.

"You know something," Soni began again in a calm voice, "it was once an honor to be a Latin King or Queen. We helped our people by fighting those that were victimizing us. We didn't rip our people off, didn't feed them poison. We did nothing to hurt our people's chances to succeed. What Maria did to you, she should be ashamed," Soni added as she turned toward Maria. "It's OK," I said. "I liked it, I want more," I defended Maria. "*Tu no sabes nada*" ("You don't know anything"), Soni said. "Maria abused you. You're a little boy. Because of what she did your life will never be normal." Maria was now crying. "I was drunk, I was drunk," Maria said. I walked out of the kitchen, went to the living room, and lit up a joint. I sat there thinking about the things Soni said. Deep down I agreed with everything, but I was too much of a coward to let my feelings be known.

I was fifteen. I was given guns so that I could kill and maim and drugs so that I could learn the profitable business of dealing. All these

things were happening at a time when I felt so much hatred for everything around me. Self-destruction was inevitable, but no one cared. I didn't care either. Soni's words were actually the only ones I had heard that made any kind of sense up to that point. Ironically, they were the ones I dismissed as bullshit the quickest.

Morena showed up to take me to the meeting. I reluctantly went with her. I really didn't want to go but I knew I had to. The consequences were too dangerous if I decided to quit the Kings. I asked her to stop somewhere and get some beer. She did. I drank it and felt better. At the meeting we went through the same routine. A prayer was said, the welcome of new members was announced, then on to the business at hand. Three new members would be initiated that day: two Juniors and a Peewee. It was announced that the guns and drugs that had been mentioned in a previous meeting had been purchased. Five thousand dollars was put aside to pay a lawyer for a brother named Weasel. Weasel was being charged with the death of the Gangster who was hit by the van. He didn't even take part in that incident! He was just the first King the police saw when they arrived on the scene. I was relieved.

That was basically the law of the street. It didn't matter if you did it or not; if you were part of the gang you were guilty until proven innocent. It was announced that those of us who had been given guns were personally responsible for them. I checked my waistband to make sure the .25 was still there. There was an announcement of a hit that was going to take place against a gang called the OAs. The Orchestra Albany was a small gang that hung out on Albany Street and Kedzie Boulevard. Apparently they had chased the brother of one of the Kings when he got off the subway train at Milwaukee. Those who would take part in the hit would be notified in due time.

Then I was offered the position of president of the Peewee Latin Kings of Kedzie and Armitage. A lot of murmuring broke out throughout the room when that announcement was made. Loco got up and said if anybody had a problem with me accepting that position they should say so. "He ain't been a King for that long," someone said. "He doesn't even hang out with us," said another. "Lil Loco is a down brother. He has earned the respect to ride with Juniors," Loco proclaimed. "That is why

we chose him for the position. It's up to you, Lil Loco," Loco said as he turned to me. "Whatever you decide will be respected by all." "I'll think about it," I said in a tough voice while I glanced across the room.

I thought about the advantages of being president of the Peewee Latin Kings. I would be a big honcho and the Peewees would have to obey my orders. I could accept the position just to shut the mouths of those who spoke against me. Cubana, I knew, would be very impressed. Getting sex partners would become just that much easier. On the other hand, I would have to hang out with the Peewees more often. That meant being a constant companion to guys who didn't want to follow my lead. I decided not to alienate my fellow Peewees and declined the offer. I would wait until the meeting was over and tell Loco of my decision. Loco, however, asked for my decision just before the meeting ended. "No," I said, "the brothers are right, I don't hang out with them." Nothing else was said, as if nobody was surprised by my decision. The meeting was adjourned.

After the meeting I went looking for Morena to get a ride back home. I felt exhausted and wanted to get some sleep. The Queens had not finished yet. I sat by myself on the sidewalk to the side of the Latin Kings' emblem. Finally Morena showed up with Blanca. Cubana was nowhere to be seen. When I asked Morena for her, all she said was "You'll see her soon enough. If you want a ride, come on." Morena, Blanca, and I got in the car, and we were on our way. Blanca was very quiet. She didn't say a word to me the whole way to Maria's apartment, even when I flirted with her. When we got to Maria's I asked her if she wanted to stay over. She said, "You're Cubana's man now," and turned away. I went upstairs and helped myself to some food. About a half hour later Cubana showed up with one of the new brothers who had been initiated that day. His name was Felipe. His nickname was Daffy, as in Daffy Duck. He didn't look like a duck but he did a good Daffy Duck impression.

Daffy was Cuban. He had olive skin and slicked-back black hair. He was tall and skinny and loved to fight. He trained at the Von Humboldt Park gym with other members of the park's boxing team. Daffy was a Junior Latin King. He was nineteen years old and obviously had nothing better to do with his life. I hugged Cubana and gave her a deep, passionate kiss. I wanted Daffy to realize that Cubana was my lady. I

shook Daffy's hand and demonstrated the fist upon the heart salute. I gave him a joint and told him to sit down. Cubana whispered in my ear that they needed to talk to me in private. Maria and Sonia were still there, but they were getting high snorting coke so they pretty much ignored us.

I led Cubana and Daffy into my room on the back porch and closed the door. Cubana and I sat on the bed and Daffy sat in the lone chair and began telling me why he was there. Loco had made the decision that Daffy was to make the hit on the OAs. I was to accompany him. The hit was to take place on Wednesday of the upcoming week. We were to decide how to carry out the mission and get it done by ourselves. I didn't like the idea, but since Cubana seemed highly excited by the fact that I, her boyfriend, was chosen for the hit, I sat there and acted macho. I told Daffy to meet me on the corner of Potomac and Claremont Streets at 5:00 P.M. the following Wednesday. I would let him know then how we were going to carry out the assigned mission. Daffy left. Cubana stayed behind. She said she wanted to spend the night.

I HAD REACHED the goal I so desired. I was looked to as a leader, not a follower. Not only was I chosen to be president of the Peewee Latin Kings, I was also entrusted to lead a Junior Latin King into battle. No one had ever empowered me with so much responsibility before. I had come a long way from the scared puppy who cowered at the thought of shooting another human being. No longer did I feel the necessity to run and hide under a bed. In my mind and heart I felt that I had done well. I had done what I had to do. All those around me thought the same.

Again I began having nightmares. The Chi-West girl appeared again, getting shot over and over. This time the Gaylords and the Gangster who got hit by the van appeared also. The girl would get shot, the Gaylord begged for mercy, the Gangster flew and bounced off cars. All three fell in a bloody mess. I would snap out of it only to fall right back to sleep and continue the whole thing all over again. "Please don't kill me, please don't kill me," the Gaylord pleaded as I snapped out of the nightmare for the last time. It was daylight Monday morning—time to smoke a joint and go to school.