

EASTSIDE STORY

On the eastside of Los Angeles, City of Angels, *Los Estados Unidos*, Juan Mendoza bought a house and prayed to the Blessed Virgin that his family would be accepted. He was a successful man, owner of Mendoza Produce and The Mendoza Trucking Company, but he was fearful that he would find a place for his *niños* in a world of landscaped yards, swimming pools and cookie-cutter houses. This was east of East L.A. This was a promised land called the suburbs where children played in the middle of leafy streets and block parties included everyone who loved the opportunities this great nation would provide. It was the 1960s and anything was possible...

One afternoon, during the summer I turned seven, a football game broke out in my backyard. Both the Mendoza brothers, Jack and John, plus the sisters Muriel and Anna were there. Jack was the quickest halfback in the neighborhood. With more coordination than any of us kids, he made walking look like something most people should practice. Nobody invited them, they just came over. We had long passes skimming the lower branches of the trees, great catches at the 50-yard line, or what my family called the sprinkler, and high-pitched screams my older brothers found exciting.

Anna was cool and feral and the youngest of her clan. Her small white teeth fell out of her smile, and the fierceness of her brothers' protection said it all.

She had brown arms and loped around like an antelope and couldn't have cared less that there were rules to the game. Her brother John was the quarterback with his big hands and warrior face. He could toss a spiral to Jack who'd take it in stride or float a softy to Anna who would've had better luck catching a butterfly. Muriel played center. My brother Bart liked touching her, pushing her back, while my other brother Blaine preferred rushing John, chasing something only he could see. And then there was Jack, my new friend at school, juking me out of my shorts as he crashed into the camellia bushes for a touchdown.

I heard the garage door lift, the car drive in, and my dad walked out on the playing field. He was a regular Joe, never owned a briefcase, wore his hair in a crew cut and regretted that he'd voted for Goldwater. I doubt he'd ever seen so many Mexicans in one place before. He threw down his coat, sprinted right just as Jack made his cut, and intercepted John's pass at the azalea and turned it up field for a touchdown.

I was ecstatic. The Harringtons had just beaten the mighty Mendozas. I watched as they filed out through the gate, laughing a whole lot, but I had to think they were wondering about that ringer who crashed the game at the very last second. Anna turned back and waved to me with her tiny hand, or maybe she was just grasping at the wind.

John had big hands and a warrior face and would be the first to discover guns, though my brother Blaine wasn't far behind. Later when John ran with *Los Rio Vatos*, he was well-known in the neighborhoods for his fearlessness when

challenged. The Mendozas lived a block down the street from our house and every Fourth of July while my family played with sparklers and Piccolo Petes and Smokey Joes, they commandeered a traffic island in front of their house and launched sky rockets into the night sky and mildly threatened their nearest neighbors with an artillery barrage of firecrackers, cherry bombs and M-80s.

I remember Bart and Blaine laughing and tossing their sparklers as they ran off down the street when the first explosions boomed overhead. I took off in pursuit, but my mother grabbed me by the arm and said, "Not for you, Cy." I was the youngest and her good intentions were that I should be protected from the world beyond the gate where little boys grow up. Hazy smoke hung over the street intermittingly lit by the flaring rockets launched by the Mendozas, and later I would wonder if my brother Blaine saw such sights on a grander scale before he died in a jungle in Vietnam. Phosphorous flashes illuminated a wild scene of gypsy kids and drunken adults and the silhouettes of my two brothers as they disappeared into the divide between the Mendoza's home and ours.

Who would've guessed that Jack would remain a small little boy in a small little boy's body. When we were both seven, I was an awkward, spindly kid and Jack was lean and muscled and the quickest halfback in the neighborhood. Later, as all of us grew, Jack topped out at about five feet four, almost as if he were trapped in that little boy's body while the rest of us grew out of ours. As his prestige in sports faded due to his diminutive size, Jack began to withdraw and found that his true talent lay in stunting all growth indiscriminately, forsaking

schoolwork, social interaction or any form of productivity. By the time we entered high school—which Jack rarely attended—he had a *cholo* look, with baggy chinos and a shirt buttoned up to the neck. I'd see him around, standing on street corners with guys I didn't know, and when he saw me he'd just flick his cigarette ash and give me a chin nod, but no words were ever spoken.

Of course, the Mendoza family and mine would become forever intertwined because Bart and Muriel were sweethearts. Both were serious about school and life in general and found something in each other that elevated their union above the insecurities and growing pains so typical of their peers. They were sweethearts in junior high. They were sweethearts in high school. When they attended L.A. State, they drove to school together everyday and eventually married after their junior years when Muriel became pregnant. My oldest brother Bart would become a high school geometry teacher and a much-admired varsity football coach at a school on the farthest edges of the San Gabriel Valley. He had discovered profound similarities shared by tangents, co-tangents, isosceles triangles and the various offenses and defenses he designed for the boys he was nurturing in the classroom and on the field. Muriel taught Spanish to privileged white girls at an exclusive Catholic school, and had she not become a Harrington would have had the only Mexican surname among the students and faculty.

Naturally, my childhood infatuation with Anna was doomed before I even reached puberty because both families simply knew that Bart and Muriel would last forever. It was an unspoken rule that we could be playmates, certainly friends, but the reality was that Anna would someday become my sister-in-law,

and I suspected my parents had subconsciously decided that one Mexican in the family was enough.

My brother Blaine died in a jungle in Vietnam, and I think that John with his big hands and warrior face was partially responsible because he called Blaine a *gabacho* and a wannabe and wouldn't let him cruise with *Los Rio Vatos*. John drove a metal-flake blue '57 Chevy that rumbled a warning every time he came down our street. It was a low-rider for show out on the boulevard, and Blaine thought it was the coolest thing going seeing as he'd be taking turns behind the wheel of the family station wagon once he got his driver's license.

John was tough and dangerous and lived in a world where a lingering stare or misconstrued words were grounds for reprisal. He was quiet and shy and never had a reputation as a bully or someone who was looking to pick a fight. Everyone knew this, but they also knew that John wasn't afraid to let the fight come to him. Blaine found this exciting.

I remember sitting at the dinner table one night and my mother asking Blaine what he wanted for Christmas.

"A gun."

"Your father has never owned a gun in his life."

"He was in the army."

"And I haven't touched one since," said my dad. "Besides, I've never been hunting. Don't know the first thing about it."

"John has one. He showed it to me."

My dad gave my mom a look and said, "What the Mendozas do is none of our business. Stay away from John."

"They aren't hunters," said Bart.

"There won't be any guns in this house," said my mom as Blaine pushed the peas around on his plate.

Anna was a grade behind me, and by the time she entered high school I rarely saw her. I ached to belong to a social strata that always seemed to elude me because I lived beyond the boundaries of its geographical realm. These were the kids who lived by the country club, north of a main artery that delineated the size of your house and the quality of your clothes. The boys wore button down shirts and loafers and the girls wore sweaters revealing their proudly emerging breasts. Some of the girls had long, straight hair like folk singers, but most wore it up and stiff and for many years I was confused by the subtle erotic differences between perfume and hairspray. Fortunately, I was college material so all the right kids knew me because I shared their classrooms and could hold my own playing sports. Anna was neither a gifted student nor an aspiring social climber, and she all but disappeared into a student population that resembled a caste system allowing few opportunities for upward mobility. I would see her walking home from school with girls I didn't know and sometimes she'd wave, or maybe she was just grasping at the wind.

Arturo Galindo was the first boy at our high school to have long hair and wear wire-rimmed glasses. During our junior year he started an after-school *Chicano* Studies club supervised by a young history teacher named Maria Lopez. They studied the works of Mexican artists and poets, followed the struggles of the farm workers and had heated discussions about a mythical land named *Atzlán*. Studious as he was, Arturo's ticket to college would undoubtedly be football because he was a rugged linebacker already being recruited by a number of major universities. He was so good our varsity football coach even changed the rules for him. Back then, all the football players wore buzz cuts and when Arturo refused to cut his hair claiming that it was part of his warrior heritage from the blood of the Indians that inhabited his family tree, the head coach capitulated fearing that he'd lose the best linebacker in the league and maybe all of Southern California. Arturo might very well have become a big-time football star one day had he not suffered from a broken heart and a wound to his right foot that caused him to limp for the rest of his life.

Arturo lived in a mini *barrio* with Mexican markets, taco stands and lawnmower repair shops defining the borders. His cousins Hector and Salvador were the de facto rulers of the neighborhood because they were the toughest guys in the notorious *La Sangra*. In that part of town, no one sold dope without *La Sangra's* permission. When fights broke out among the locals, *La Sangra* settled them, meting out harsh punishment for the perpetrators. Their respect was total, but no one confused them with peacemakers.

Though Hector and Salvador ruled the neighborhood, they never pressured their cousin to join them. Arturo was one of their own and his status as a football player, a scholar and an activist made them proud, and they watched over him with a fierce loyalty that could only be described as a love for something they could never aspire to themselves.

I had no idea that Arturo Galindo and Anna Mendoza even knew each other until the day the squad cars and the ambulance screamed down our street and pulled up in front of the Mendoza house. Seeing all the activity, I ran down the street, and because the front door was wide open, walked right in to find Anna hysterical with tears while Arturo held her in his big linebacker arms. I was wild with fear that something might have happened to my brother Bart because he spent almost as much time in the Mendoza home as he did in ours, so I rushed past them and down the hall to the back bedroom. One of the cops grabbed me, but not before I saw Jack lying on the floor with a bloody syringe still stuck in his vein and his lips and chin covered in vomit and spit.

When the cop led me out, Arturo looked at me with moist eyes and patted Anna's heaving back as he said, "Go home, Cy, this is no place for you." Later that night I thought how strange it was to see Arturo Galindo, whose bad-ass cousins Hector and Salvador ran with *La Sangra*—the sworn enemies of John Mendoza and *Los Rio Vatos*—comforting Anna who neither looked at me nor acknowledged my presence. I thought about how grief can distort your face and squeeze out the tears but couldn't mask the beautiful girl Anna had become. And I thought about Jack, who at one time had been the quickest halfback in the

neighborhood, who had so much coordination he made walking look like something most people should practice, and how the only one he could never outrun was himself.

The social undercurrents of our school were changing with the times, though they often went unnoticed until certain events brought them into focus. Anna Mendoza would be the beneficiary of one such event. Every year each of the classes would nominate a girl to the court of the Spring Fling and one of these girls would be elected queen. Of course, this wasn't exactly a model of democracy because the disenfranchised kids wouldn't participate and the most popular girls were always nominated and eventually won. Our student body was approximately one-third Mexican, and though Anna was demure and uninvolved in most school activities, the Mexican students easily recognized her uncommon beauty and, with the power of an underground movement, successfully nominated her to represent her class. You didn't have to be a genius in political science to guess what happened. The usual suspects split the popular vote, while Anna won handily among the Mexican students and those who thought it was time someone from outside the most elite circles deserved to win.

Anna was simply radiant in a white dress that perfectly complemented her brown shoulders and thin neck and lush black hair, yet seemed slightly embarrassed by all the attention and the weight of the crown on her head. Her date was Arturo Galindo, who beamed at the sight of Anna's coronation, but seemed absurdly out of place wearing a ruffled shirt with a string tie, a western-

cut jacket that might have belonged to his father and trousers that covered the tops of his pointy-toed boots. My self absorption was such that I completely missed the significance of Arturo and assumed that Anna had been hard pressed to find an escort to a school function she normally wouldn't have attended. When the dancing started and all the kids were changing partners, I saw Anna standing alone next to the bandstand swaying to the music of a slow song.

“Will you dance with me?”

Without answering she took my hand and led me out onto the floor and, because it was a slow dance, reached her arm up around my neck and laid the side of her face on my chest, my chin resting against the top of her head. I noticed that got the attention of some of the kids, but that old confusion about perfume and hairspray kicked in and we glided around like no one else was there. When the music ended she smiled at me and said, “I knew you would be the first one, Cy.” I was puzzled by her comment and almost asked her what she meant, but that's when Tom Berriman cut in and said, “May I dance with the queen?”

As I watched Tom Berriman take his turn with her, and then a whole lot of other guys I called friends, it seemed perfectly natural that a boy with Tom's easy social grace would welcome the outsider queen to her new place within the hierarchy. And I also spotted Arturo Galindo, standing alone at the edge of the dance floor, silent, steadfast in his odd western getup, waiting like a chauffeur for the queen of the ball.

The same summer that Jack overdosed and a Marine came to our house to tell my mother that her son had died in a jungle in Vietnam, Tom Berriman became a part of my crowd, or, to put it more accurately, allowed me to become a part of his. Tom was well-liked because he genuinely seemed to like everyone in return. From the time he entered high school he was a natural politician, stopping to shake hands with all the guys, smiling at all the girls regardless of their plainness or beauty, and making small talk with the kids he barely even knew.

I'd had classes with Tom and knew him well enough, but he lived on the posh side of town and our paths rarely crossed outside of school. So it came as a slight surprise that summer when he started calling me up and inviting me to the beach with him and some of his buddies. Soon I found myself going to pool parties in lushly landscaped backyards and necking in the back seat of cars with a popular girl named Jan Dexter. It seemed odd that Tom liked to hang out at our modest house when he lived in a giant white colonial that vaguely resembled Mount Vernon, but that was just Tom, comfortable with anyone, his friendship genuine and as easy to grasp as a handshake. Or so I thought.

Like all schools, ours had numerous cliques and their boundaries were often defined by social clubs that weren't really fraternities or sororities, but in many ways operated as such. The boys clubs were loosely formed and contributed little to campus life or one's social standing. The girls clubs were a whole other deal entirely. When a freshman girl pledged a club her social rank

was clearly established and would remain her calling card from that moment on. The Pipers had long been the elite social club and destinies were fulfilled by a birthright of popularity, beauty, wealthy parents and various intangibles that only the members were privy to and understood.

Anna Mendoza had never been affiliated with any club for the simple reasons that she was an outsider and a Mexican. But a sea change had occurred by virtue of Anna's becoming queen of the Spring Fling, and The Pipers weren't about to let this rising star get snatched up by a rival club intent on competing with them. One evening while parked in front of the Dexter house, Jan pulled my hands from beneath her sweater and said, "We're going to ask Anna to join The Pipers."

"Come again?"

"The girls want to make Anna Mendoza a Piper."

I shook my head. "That's nonsense. She'd never do it."

"It would be good for us, show we're inclusive and stand for something."

"C'mon, Jan, are you all so conceited that you expect someone you've shunned to suddenly see you as a benefactor?"

"That's why they wanted me to ask you."

"I'm not getting into this."

"You know her better than any of us do."

"I think that's the point."

"It was Tom Berriman's idea."

I laughed and said, "Get off it. Tom Berriman couldn't give a shit who belongs to The Pipers," but as soon as I'd said it I knew I was wrong.

The day we buried Blaine was blazing hot and the smog made your eyes and lungs burn. The Mendozas and other friends and neighbors came over after the funeral and my mother served sandwiches and icy pitchers of lemonade and sweating cans of beer, and my father drank enough to keep his demons at bay at least for a few hours. As this sad little gathering wound down, Anna took me by the arm and said, "I've been asked to join The Pipers when school starts in the fall."

"Oh that's just swell."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"My brother just died."

"So did mine," said Anna. "There's enough grief to go around, Cy."

I looked into her dark eyes and I could see tiny fissures of hope and damage that I'd never noticed before. "I'm sorry. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to be sad anymore."

"I meant The Pipers."

"I told them I'd be honored."

The very next day Tom Berriman showed up at my house to pay his respect and offer condolences for our loss. Later Tom and I shot baskets in the driveway, but after a while he simply stopped and bounced the ball to me and said, "Let's go over to Anna's house and see if she's home."

I had seen this coming, but still it tore at my heart to forfeit my privileged position in Anna's life to a new crowd of kids who would only try to change her to fit their needs. And yet, Tom was a kind and decent fellow and it pleased me that he saw the tender sweetness and natural beauty of Anna just as I had back when she was a little girl, so I tossed the basketball over the fence and into the backyard and said, "Why not?"

As summer was ending and the football team reported to camp, Arturo Galindo came to practice with a heavy heart and a wildness in his eyes. Already known for his considerable skill as a linebacker, his tackles against the first-string offense were unusually vicious so the coaches advised him to hold back a little, fearing he would injure his own teammates. But Arturo seemed incapable of containing his anger and when fights broke out on the practice field the coaches withheld him from the scrimmages and told him to save it for the games. On Friday nights Arturo roamed the defensive backfield, recklessly flying into oncoming blockers and runners at full speed and on more than a few occasions knocking them unconscious. Some of the opposing coaches complained that Arturo was a dirty player, but all of it was quickly forgotten when Arturo landed on the first team all-state and received a scholarship offer to play football at UCLA.

That summer, Tom and I had been stopping by the Mendoza home on a regular basis. One day while we were sitting on Anna's front porch drinking sodas, Tom stood up and said, "Cy, we're going for a ride. See you later." By

the time school started in the fall, Tom Berriman would be squiring Anna to all the football games and dances and exclusive parties thrown by The Pipers.

While I watched my two friends drive off, John Mendoza's metal-flake blue '57 Chevy rumbled into the driveway. John didn't live at home anymore so I rarely saw him, and when I did he usually just nodded my way and went about his business. This time he got out of his car, watched Tom make the turn at the end of the street, and walked over to me.

"Tell your friend he better watch it," he said in a voice that sounded tired and sad.

"You don't like him dating Anna?"

"It's not me he needs to worry about," said John, and then he turned and went into the house.

Tom Berriman and Arturo Galindo came from different worlds and for the most part it wasn't difficult for them to avoid each other. Then, on a Friday night during Christmas break, fate conspired with jealousy to produce a confrontation that no one really wanted. Anna and Jan were preparing for The Piper's annual Christmas party on Saturday night, so Tom and I went to the movies and afterwards drove to Bob's Drive-In, a hangout favored by most of the kids at our school. Everyone went to Bob's because it had an enormous parking lot out back. Some of the kids brought six packs of beer with them and sometimes cans were passed from one window to the next.

Tom drove a convertible Mustang, and because the night was clear and mild, we had the top down as we sat in the lot behind Bob's. There were only two other cars in the lot, and just as we were getting ready to leave a beer can crashed into the back seat of Tom's car.

"What the fuck?" said Tom.

We both looked over at a black and white, lowered Impala with the back door open, and a moment later Arturo Galindo stepped out and leaned up against the side of the car.

Tom stared back and you could tell he was mad, but you could also see that he was thinking that there must be some rational way to handle the situation. A look of resignation passed over his face and he opened his door and said, "I'll be right back."

"Let it go, Tom."

"Stay here. This isn't about you, Cy."

"He's been drinking."

"Arturo's a good guy. I can talk to him." And with that Tom started across the parking lot toward Arturo just as Hector and Salvador Galindo climbed out of the Impala. Tom had his hand extended, as usual thinking that a handshake could solve just about anything, even the festering meanness resulting from a broken heart. Arturo punched him in the face and kicked him in the balls and when Tom hit the pavement Hector stomped him in the kidneys. I burst out of the Mustang and ran toward Tom, but I would be no match for the Galindo brothers that night. Salvador flicked me to the ground, kicked me over onto my

back and held me down with his foot. I laid there helplessly listening to Tom's grunts and moans while Arturo and Hector punched and kicked Tom, blood spraying from his nose and lips.

And that's when I heard a familiar rumble and a car pulled into the lot. Salvador stepped away from me, and Arturo and Hector joined him, leaving Tom crumpled on the ground in a pool of piss and blood.

John Mendoza slowly got out of his blue metal-flake '57 Chevy and, as I sat back up on my knees, I could see his warrior face and a shiny black gun in one of his big hands.

But the Galindos didn't back down. "You let your sister be this white boy's *puta*," said Hector.

"*Chinga tu madre*," said John as he slowly raised the gun and pointed it at Hector's face.

Arturo then stepped in front of his cousins and said, "He deserved it, John. Look what the *gabachos* have done to Anna, hanging around with her fancy friends, forgetting who she is. Soon they'll get bored with the poor little Mexican girl."

"Anna can do what she wants. Now get the fuck out of here."

"You're a pussy, John," said Salvador, "you ain't going to shoot nobody."

Arturo stepped in front of his cousins just as John lowered his gun toward the pavement and fired, the bullet hitting Arturo square in the top of his right foot.

Juan Mendoza died in his sleep at the age of ninety-three. He was sitting in his favorite chair where everyday he took his afternoon *siesta*, his head slightly tilted to one side, his hands neatly folded in his lap. It looked as though he'd simply gone to sleep.

Juan had seen his share of tragedy during his life. His son Jack, once the quickest halfback in the neighborhood had died with his arm tied off with a length of rubber tubing and a needle stuck in his vein. His other son John had been incarcerated in state prison for seven years after shooting his future brother-in-law in the right foot. Yet the small suburb Juan had moved his family to back in the 1960s had also provided his children with some brightness and success they might not have found elsewhere. After prison, John went to work for the family business, at first driving trucks and eventually becoming general manager. Now, at forty-seven, John was the president of The Mendoza Produce and Trucking Company. Juan's daughter Muriel had married her childhood sweetheart Bart, and the two of them were respected educators and had presented the old man with the three grandchildren he adored. And his daughter Anna was married to a criminal defense attorney with a big heart that once had been broken, who took on numerous *pro bono* cases for indigents who would otherwise languish within the California penal system

I always believed that John intended to miss, but missed so badly that he actually shot Arturo Galindo in the right foot. I could see it on John's face and in the sad way he watched the paramedics load Tom Berriman and Arturo Galindo into the ambulance.

At Juan Mendoza's funeral I was standing with Bart and Muriel beneath a giant sycamore, the sun dappling the leaves and the grass with a brightness that made your eyes hurt. When the ceremony ended, John Mendoza and Anna and Arturo Galindo passed me on the way to their car, and I watched as he placed his arms around Anna and Arturo, cupping their shoulders in his big hands. Arturo moved slowly with his now-familiar limp, and Anna turned to wave, or maybe she was just grasping at the wind.