

CHILD

BY KELVIN MARTINEZ

I have always compared myself to one of those baby sea turtles that has to crawl in the sand and into the ocean. And it's not an easy journey. It's all too often tragic. The sea turtle gets picked up by a seagull. A person steps on it. A crab eats its. The sand gets in its eyes. It is set up for defeat. Despite all those challenges, I've somehow made it into the ocean as if by a divine blessing. I'm in the waves now. But what about all the kids who don't make it into the ocean? Why me?

This story is in memory of the sea turtles who did not finish the journey alongside me. And it is also for the next generation of sea turtles who I hope to welcome into the waves.

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I was barely in the sixth grade the first time I was introduced to the concept of a gang. I was walking back from elementary school one day and my friend, who had a mingo, asked me, "Do you know what a Norteño is?" "No," I replied.

I was quickly educated as best as a sixth grader could be of a prison gang. All I understood from what my homeboy told me was that we liked the number 14 and wore red, which was already my favorite color because of the red Power Ranger. Our enemies wore blue and represented the number 13. I wasn't aware that kids killed over these gangs or spent decades inside of prison walls for these two gangs. All I knew was that Crips were our homies because of an alliance formed in the California Youth Authority. My friend was a bully but not even close to my dad who was an alcoholic madman who once busted my nose and was arrested. I was barely in the third grade when that occurred.

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When I was fifteen, I found myself in an 18-month Rite of Passage facility—a residential program for children who are wards of the state. My friend, Little Dreamer, and I decided we were going to run away at the soonest opportunity. Two white boys who had already attempted to runaway would join us. And one day, after lunch, we did. We ran towards the mountains while staff members chased us in their truck. When the truck got close, we hid in a ditch thirty feet from the road. We waited until we no longer heard the truck's engine. As we waited, I caught my second wind. I winked at Little Dreamer and then bounced up. The Homies got up, and off we went sprinting. In the back of my mind, I thought of mountain lions and bears. As I ran, I saw bones of what looked like Bambi's relatives. I picked up the pace at the front of the pack. One of the white boys dropped his water bottle. I stopped because he reached for it as it rolled down a hill. I handed him mine and yanked him back, yelling at him to not lose my bottle and to keep up. Eventually, we reached a creek with fresh water, we sat, and we rested for a good ten minutes. I asked the two white boys how much longer they estimated we had to go.

“Until the sun sets,” they said, “If we speed up, we will have sunlight.”

We all jumped up and continued our mission. I noticed a broken branch, thinking to myself, it might come in handy. So, I picked it up and ran with it. Thirty minutes after our rest, as we were going up yet another mountain, I noticed the staff at least a hundred yards away, outside the truck pointing in our direction. I started yelling. I noticed a horseshoe lying next to my foot. I passed it around for the boys to rub as if it was a lamp with a genie in it. Afterwards, I tossed it.

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I remember sitting with my friend Daisy many years ago. We were surrounded by piles of DVDs, CDs, and jewelry.

“Daisy, those DVDs and CDS—how did you come up on 'em?” I asked.

“I hit a lick!”

“You hit a what?”

“I went into someone’s home and took all I could get my hands on.”

Now, I’ve been inside a house uninvited before but never to steal. Once in West Sacramento, my football coach allowed the team to celebrate a victory at his house. His house was so beautiful I was amazed. For some reason when I was younger, I would draw blueprints of a house. I would draw where my bed would be. My toys. My clothes and my dog. I never had a chance to live out these daydreams. So, for whatever reason, I walked to Southport, a city of wealthy houses in the outskirts of West Sacramento to enter my coach’s backyard, open his sliding glass door, enter his home, look inside his garage, and walk around his living room. I saw the game console we played to celebrate our victory, but my intentions were never to steal. I was amazed and in awe of what my shattered home lacked in comparison to my coach’s. I left his home through the front door.

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I was in class when I was called to the principal’s office. Two white detectives were seated where the principal should have been. I knew they were police officers, but they were dressed differently. No uniforms.

“We’re Sacramento County Detectives investigating a residential burglary.”

“What’s that?” I questioned them, but I must have looked as guilty as I felt.

Instead of denying my criminal activity, I admitted to the crime just for the simple fact of going to juvie a.k.a. Juvenile Hall. Never were my Miranda rights read nor were my mom or dad made aware of their child being questioned by detectives. As I walked off campus, my middle school sweetheart Mariela followed me out of class. I should have felt some type of sad emotion. Instead, I felt proud. I felt as if I accomplished an objective. As I lowered my head into the back of the undercover vehicle, I witnessed sadness in Mariela’s eyes. I was driven to an office after what felt like an eternity. Once again, I was placed in the back of the undercover car and driven to my new residence: 95601 Kiefer Blvd.

During the drive, I did not shed a single tear. I talked to myself saying, “I won’t cry.” When we got to the facility, I was overwhelmed by the smell of grease and deodorant permeating the hallway’s dry air. I can still smell it. Immediately, my fingerprints were taken. My mugshot was taken. I was then given a wristband which I couldn’t remove. I was allowed to shower and given juvie attire and a pair of shoes. For some odd reason, I was also instructed to spread my ass and cough. After this routine, which would soon become second nature, I entered the nurse’s station. She checked my blood pressure and asked, “How are you doing? Are you okay?” I attempted not to cry, but my voice betrayed me. A tear was shed.

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I am thirty-three years old. After years of growing up in the gang and criminal legal system, I am just now reintegrating into society. Sometimes, I wish I could go back in time and talk to my younger self. I wish I could prepare the little boy for all the pain he would face.

