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“This is all I got”: A Short Story

For gangbangers like me, there was only one thing that would press on our minds every day of the week, and that was whether or not we were going to live to see another day. You see, people think that we join gangs for fun, for the rush, to live a materialistic and glamorous life, to be able to say, “hey, look, I’m rolling with the Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings and anything in-between! Don’t mess with me, I’ll kill you! No hesitation.” But they don’t know what they’re talking about. *Nobody* joins a gang for “fun.” *Nobody* likes to kill–sell drugs just to pay to live another day. No. And if they do, they don’t know what it’s really like. For people like me, being in a gang is all we got.

We can’t afford to live, so we sell drugs to pay the bills. Some of us, though, get caught up in drinking, doing drugs, sleeping around, “having fun.” But the unspoken truth is that it’s not for fun. It’s to escape reality. It’s to hide the fact that we don’t have much else to live for, so we cope in the only ways we know how. Even though most of us are lonely, we’ve all learned our lesson by now: don’t get too close to the other gang members; for all you know, they could be dead by the next day. ‘Cause that’s the truth, isn’t it? In the life of a gangbanger, dying is just as easy as living.

I could be walking down the street—mid-day. I’m not even supposed to be outside for fear of what might happen if I even step foot outside of the house. But I had to. I couldn’t handle the gnawing hunger any longer. Walking out the dilapidated corner store, I hear “Ey vato!” I

tense my shoulders, half-way ducking down behind a beat up white car. I look over, almost dropping my meager bag of food to reach for the 22, always waiting, strapped under my belt. False alarm. It might have been two friends, brothers, whatever, meeting up. But I didn't know that. Even with the assurance that I wasn't going to die that day, the tension doesn't leave my body.

I don't go out much, but when I do, I'm petrified. Having Chino, Lil' Loco, Güero, and the other guys walking next to me doesn't make me feel safer. Because it's not safe. Nowhere is safe. We're all targets. Wearing the wrong colors gets you shot, walking down the wrong block gets you chased, and messing with the wrong person gets you killed.

I mean, one second you could be running back home, looking over your shoulder 'cause El Chico from down the block and his homies just got shot at. You look ahead, there's the cops. But they ain't doing nothing. They don't care. To them, we're just another case of vagrancy. Another nameless, faceless Mexican (*"or whatever they may be, at this point I don't care; they're just another gang member—just let me finish filing their case so I can go home now"*), shot and left for dead, or beat within an inch of their life.

But what else can I do? There's no jobs, I never finished high school, my own family don't want to talk to me any more, not after *Rafa*, my brother, was killed in an act of revenge (*I will never forgive myself for his death*).

This is all we got. This is all *I* got.

Description of Piece

For my creative project, I decided to write a short story. My short story does not follow a typical story structure. It is more of a narrative consisting of internal dialogue and brief scenes/plot points. My piece is also meant to be read in a poetic, almost disjointed way. It is meant to be perceived as a small portion of a larger narrative. I chose to write in this way in order to hopefully present a realistic illustration of what a gang member may be feeling while involved in inter-gang conflict and facing personal mental health issues.

I did not end up naming my main character. The only hints I gave toward their identity was that they were of Latin-American (most likely Mexican) descent and they were male. I purposely did this in order to emphasize that we could be reading this from the point of view of *any* gang member, no matter their age, location, or affiliation.

In this narrative, I wanted to highlight the structural challenges faced by people that may influence them to join a gang. Namely, poverty and lack of economic opportunity. While this is not the only reason for people joining a gang, I wanted to focus on this aspect for this story since many of the readings we have been analyzing have emphasized how financial need is a major contributing factor to gang membership (Alonso 2004, Swaner 2022).

I also heavily mentioned how the main character suffers from extreme fear of being targeted. While I am not an expert on mental health, I think that the amount of caution and paranoia that the main character experiences could potentially point to PTSD. I was especially intentional about including this detail because of Tom Wooten's article on survival strategies and isolation tactics among gang members, which I felt had lots of implications for the mental health status of gang members. Additionally, while not an academic source at all, I ended up reading some Reddit posts of current/former gang members who described the stress of being a gang member. Many posts illustrated how fear and paranoia is visceral for gang members and how it can control their lives to the point of feeling isolation and paranoia, which consequently leads to utilizing unhealthy coping mechanisms.

The Reddit posts indicated how many traumatized members may rely on drugs and alcohol to cope with the stress. While we did not get to read any articles that explicitly discussed the role of drugs and alcohol as coping strategies, I thought that this detail was extremely relevant and significant for the narrative that I wanted to present.

Additionally, I wanted to add in a detail of how law enforcement is perceived by gang members/people involved in gun violence. I specifically mentioned how oftentimes, cops do not particularly care about keeping communities safe from gun violence. I also added a small view of how cops may perceive victims of gun violence, especially victims who were involved in a gang. I wanted to add these details because of Wesely, Jennifer K. and Susan Dewey's article detailing homicide detectives' views on victims of gun violence and Swaner's article which also discussed how police were not trusted among gun-carrying young people due to police not responding to serious crime and acting in discriminate ways.

Overall, I wanted to use a short story to exhibit how a gang member may perceive their situation, especially in relation to joining a gang out of necessity, struggling with mental health issues, fighting to survive in high-tension areas, and often not having any other choice. I feel that humanizing and contextualizing the life of those involved in gangs or those who resort to criminal acts to survive is extremely important. While I am not great at fictional writing and I myself do not know what it is like to live the life of a gang member, I hope that my writing is able to convey the structural factors that engender crime/gang formation in urban settings. I also

hope to be able to convey the complex emotions experienced by those who live in these violent and complicated settings and humanize them.

References

Alonso, Alejandro A. 2004. "Racialized Identities and the Formation of Black Gangs in Los Angeles." *Urban Geography* 25(7): 658-674.

Swaner, Rachel. 2022. "'We Can't Get No Nine-to-Five': New York City Gang Membership as a Response to the Structural Violence of Everyday Life." *Critical Criminology* 30: 95-111.