Memoir

Always Running by Luis J. Rodriguez

One day, my mother asked Rano and me to go to the grocery store. We decided to go across the railroad tracks into South Gate. In those days, South Gate was an Anglo neighborhood, filled with the families of workers from the auto plant and other nearby industry. Like Lynnwood or Huntington Park, it was forbidden territory for the people of Watts.

My brother insisted we go. I don’t know what possessed him, but then I never did. It was useless to argue; he’d force me anyway. He was nine then, I was six. So without ceremony, we started over the tracks, climbing over discarded market carts and tore-up sofas, across Alameda Street, into South Gate: all-white, all-American.

We entered the first small corner grocery store we found. Everything was cool at first. We bought some bread, milk, soup cans and candy. We each walked out with a bag filled with food. We barely got a few feet, though, when five teenagers on bikes approached. We tried not to pay any attention and proceeded to our side of the tracks. But the youths pulled up in front of us. While two of them stood nearby on their bikes, three of them jumped off theirs and walked over to us.

“What do we got here?” one of the boys said. “Spics to order — maybe with some beans?”

He pushed me to the ground; the groceries splattered onto the asphalt. I felt melted gum and chips of broken beer bottle on my lips and cheek. Then somebody picked me up and held me while the two others seized my brother, tossed his groceries out, and pounded on him. They punched him in the face, in the stomach, then his face again, cutting his lip, causing him to vomit.

I remember the shrill, maddening laughter of one of the kids on a bike, this laughing like a raven’s wail, a harsh wind’s shriek, a laugh that I would hear in countless beatings thereafter. I watched the others take turns on my brother, this terror of a brother, and he doubled over, had blood and spew on his shirt, and tears down his face. I wanted to do something, but they held me and I just looked on, as every strike against Rano opened me up inside.

They finally let my brother go and he slid to the ground, like a rotten banana squeezed out of its peeling. They threw us back over the tracks. In the sunset I could see the Watts Towers, shimmers of 70,000 pieces of broken bottles, sea shells, ceramic and metal on spiraling points puncturing the heavens, which reflected back the rays of a falling sun. My brother and I then picked ourselves up, saw the teenagers take off, still laughing, still talking about those stupid greasers who dared to cross over to South Gate.

Up until then my brother had never shown any emotion to me other than disdain. He had never asked me anything, unless it was a demand, an expectation, an obligation to be his throwaway boy-doll. But for this once he looked at me, tears welled in his eyes, blood streamed from several cuts — lips and cheeks swollen.

“Swear — you got to swear — you’ll never tell anybody how I cried,” he said.

I suppose I did promise. It was his one last thing to hold onto, his rep as someone who could take a belt whipping, who could take a beating in the neighborhood and still go back risking more — it was this pathetic plea from the pavement I remember. I must have promised.

1 discarded: thrown away as useless
2 shrill: high-pitched and sharp
3 obligation: a duty
My brother and I
— shopping for la jefita —
decided to get the “good food”
over on the other side

5 of the tracks.
We dared each other.
Laughed a little.
Thought about it.
Said, what’s the big deal.

10 Thought about that.
Decided we were men,
not boys.
Decided we should go wherever
we damn wanted to.

15 Oh, my brother — now he was bad.
Tough dude. Afraid of nothing.
I was afraid of him.
So there we go,
climbing over

20 the iron and wood ties,
over discarded sofas
and bent-up market carts,
over a weed-and-dirt road,
into a place called South Gate

25 — all white. All American.
We entered the forbidden
narrow line of hate,
imposed,
transposed,

30 supposed,
a line of power/powerlessness
full of meaning,
meaning nothing —
those lines that crisscross

35 the abdomen of this land,
that strangle you
in your days, in your nights.
When you dream.
Now, choose the voice of one of the characters and practice answering interview questions. With your partner, role play how the interview might sound. First, one of you can ask questions while the other answers in the voice of one of the characters. The interviewee should try to maintain the voice of the character by keeping word choice, language, and culture in mind. Once all questions have been asked and answered, switch roles. Now the interviewee will answer in the voice of the other character.

Here are some possible questions to help you get started. Ask additional open-ended follow-up questions. Remember that good interview questions are open-ended – they cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”

Q: Can you tell me what happened today outside the grocery store?
A:

Q: Who would you say is mostly to blame for the incident and why?
A:

Q: Can you think of a way this incident could possibly end up having a positive outcome?
A:

Q: If you could go give any advice to the parties involved, what would it be and why?
A:

Q: If you could go back and change the incident, what would you do differently and why?
A:

Q: What did you learn from this incident?
A:

Give at least one example of your open-ended follow-up question(s).
Q:
A: