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LOSING RAMIRO

For years, Chicago poet Luis Rodriguez struggled desperately to save his eldest son, Ramiro, from the perils of the streets. But Ramiro, caught between the force of his father's message and the allure of gang life, self-destructed anyway. Now he's in prison for attempted murder.

BROAD SHOULDERS SLUMPED BY SORROW, writer Luis Rodriguez strides to the rail where families stand as their beloved come before the judge in Room 600 of the Cook Criminal Courts building. Despite his stiff white shirt and somber black pants, Rodriguez's gray-flecked hair and deep-set eyes give him the air of an old wolf. Emblazoned on the loose skin between the thumb and index finger of his left hand is a *Pachuco* cross tattoo—the generic symbol of West Coast Mexican street gangs. Five years ago, Rodriguez published “Always Running,” a memoir of his Los Angeles gang experiences, written as a cautionary tale for his teenage son Ramiro—who had himself slipped deep into street life. The book catapulted Rodriguez, now 44, to literary renown. Building on its notoriety, Luis and Ramiro helped found an organization to aid kids in gangs.

Yet on this hot September morning, Ramiro, now 23, is pleading guilty to three counts of attempted murder. Ironically, gangs had nothing to do with the crime, a traffic altercation that spiraled into a guns-blazing cop chase. His wide back sheathed in a beige prison smock, his long black ponytail bound in sections by thick yellow bands, Ramiro goes through the ritual of copping a plea. He gets 28 years.

Earlier, Luis had asked adults who knew Ramiro's good works to attend the hearing that day, hoping their testimony might help his son. Few supporters expected Ramiro to walk free. But none was steeled for what came down that morning. As Ramiro's friends and family file from the courtroom, tears and gasps erupt.

In the hallway outside the courtroom, Luis, his eyes still dry, accepts their hugs and condolences. Siddius Harris—the tall black truck driver Ramiro shot—comes over to shake Luis's hand. “You didn't do it; you didn't tell him to do it,” he says. “I'm sorry. That day, I was just going home to see my daughters.” Harris's words trail off; he stops, then walks slowly toward the elevator bank. Ramiro's friends and family form a prayer circle. Finally crying, Luis voices his hope that Ramiro will wrench some good from prison. A brief quiet lingers in the courthouse hallway. Then the hands unclasp. As the circle splits into smaller clumps, the author Nelson Peery, a long-time friend of both Luis and Ramiro, points out that Ramiro got off pretty light, considering he shot at two pursuing officers. Several supporters nod their heads. It's a bad day when your eldest son gets 28 years and friends consider you lucky.

FOR TEN YEARS LUIS RODRIGUEZ fought to keep this day at bay. When Ramiro first moved in with his father at 13, Luis tried to keep him from joining a gang. After that failed, Luis struggled to make his son quit. Even as Ramiro continued swearing allegiance to street life, Luis and Ramiro helped form Youth Struggling for Survival, a group that works with active gangbangers and

other youths to create a support network for building better lives. Now Luis struggles for ways to help Ramiro weather prison.

Most families experience an emotional struggle when a son grows into manhood. Ramiro and Luis were no different. Like many other sons, Ramiro modeled himself largely on his own father. Sometimes Luis thinks that was the problem. "I embody a lot of good things-poetry and creativity and leadership that Ramiro carried," he says. "But he also carried the dark side of me-my rage, my tendency to stay aloof, my gangsterism. Ramiro idealized me, both good and bad, light and shadow."

Himself a father-of two daughters and a son by three women-Ramiro understands the burden of being a parent. "I used to be confused and angry at my parents, but having kids made me see things through their eyes," he says. "Still, growing up I didn't know whether to love my father or hate him. It was hard for me to be somewhere in between."

LUIS'S GANGSTER PERIOD PLAYED OUT IN THE San Gabriel Valley foothills of East Los Angeles. His parents were impoverished Mexican immigrants. Describing childhood in *Always Running*, he writes, "We were constant prey and the hunters soon became big blurs: the police, the gangs, the junkies.... We were always afraid." In 1965, when he was 11, a local gang, Thee Mystics, terrorized his elementary school, shooting out windows and ramming the school gates with their lowrider cars. That marked an epiphany. "I was a broken boy, shy and fearful," he recalls in his memoir. "I wanted what Thee Mystics had; I wanted the power to hurt somebody." At 12, he got his first tattoo, a cross outlined on his biceps, above the inscription *mi Vida Loca*, Spanish for "my crazy life."

His adolescence followed a downward spiral: juvenile arrests, early sex, a score of dead friends; pills, pot, and heroin; expulsion from high schools; petty thievery progressing to auto theft. Unable to control him, his mother exiled Luis to their garage.

At 17, he joined the "Locos," part of the huge gang Las Lomas. The price of initiation: a brutal beating, followed by orders to stab an innocent joy rider with a rusty screwdriver. Yet at the same time Luis had begun looking beyond gang life. He became a youth leader in L.A.'s nascent Chicano rights movement and wrote furiously-poems, journal entries, social-message skits. Despite his spotty academic record, he won admission to California State University, but dropped out at 18 after getting arrested on charges (trumped up, he maintains) of assaulting a police officer.

While serving several months of jail time, Luis resolved to help his gang friends lead different lives. It was a noble aim, but one that ended his Las Lomas ties. In a brutal warning to get lost, Topo—a Las Lomas leader who had initiated him into the Locos—unleashed a fusillade of bullets at him. "The homeboys tried to kill me, *vatos* whom I had known as brothers, with whom I had scurried down muddy streets," he writes. "I would have died for them."

LUIS SPENT THE NEXT SEVEN YEARS SURVIVING BY MANUAL labor-in steel mills, on construction sites, as a welder at a chemical refinery. Finally, he landed a job in a local weekly newspaper, then another job at a daily in San Bernardino, where he covered crime. Five years later, he moved to Chicago and spent six years in a succession of journalism jobs, the last of them at the radio station W7vIAQ-AM. But his real passion involved the city's

booming performance-poetry scene; eventually he started Tia Chucha Press, which has published 30 poetry titles over the last decade.

As a writer, Luis had finally forged his career; as a father, he was stagnating. He saw Ramiro and Andrea, his children by Camila Martinez, only sporadically. The two had married when Luis was 20 and Camila was 18. Both drank heavily; they argued often. After three years, the marriage foundered.

The results were disastrous, especially for Ramiro. Camila's second husband and, later, a boyfriend beat both her and her children. Ashamed, she hid what was happening from Luis. At age ten, Ramiro stowed away on a train, hoping to flee Los Angeles for Chicago, but was discovered before it left the railyard. "I didn't really know my dad," admits Ramiro, "but I thought with him was the safest place to be." He is speaking now by phone from the raucous prison yard at Menards Correctional Center in Southern Illinois. During our interviews, he at times seems introspective, digging deep to grasp his motivations. Moments later, though, Ramiro will sound removed; he could be retelling a movie plot, not his own life.

As Ramiro hit puberty, he began fighting with his mother. Once it turned physical. Finally, she sent him to live, with Luis, in Humboldt Park (Andrea remained in Los Angeles, later moving to Chicago with Camila in 1991.) It was a disorienting transition for Ramiro. In his father's home, Ramiro felt out of place; at Roberto Clemente High School, he became a recruitment target for local street gangs. "Joining a gang was never a big deal for me," he says. "I was just getting closer with my friends, not with my father."

Looking back, both men call that estrangement inevitable. "I think the street calls out to kids who have so much trauma in their lives," Luis explains. "Family, church, community life—all that doesn't make sense to them. Only the street is mad enough." Luis started having vivid nightmares of running through Humboldt Park streets. In the dreams, rain was falling, sidewalks were deserted. Recalling the nightmare, he once wrote, "I see a body lying on the street, face down on the wet asphalt. I run toward it, bend down and turn the body over, To my horror, it's the corpse of my 15-year-old son." Luis ardently pushed Ramiro to leave the gang behind. Today, Luis questions that tactic. "I was so much into his life—chasing him, jumping on him, holding his hand," he says. "Maybe it was too much me. I think he was resentful. For so long I wasn't in his life at all; then all of a sudden I was in his face."

GALLED AT SEEING RAMIRO FOLLOW IN HIS FOOTSTEPS, LUIS turned to words. Published in 1993, *Always Running*, subtitled *La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, scored a critical success. *The New York Times* named it among the year's notable books and Luis was showered with fellowships and awards. He spoke at schools, jails, youth centers. He appeared on *Oprah* and on *Good Morning America* with Ramiro—who was eloquent and forceful about his gang life—alongside him, bringing the memoir into harsh context. Even now, Ramiro cherishes his ten days on the book tour as a rare period of one-on-one time with his father—and as a brief respite from street life. "My dad tried to do some of the things I liked," recalls Ramiro. "We went to movies and arcades and comic book stores."

But Luis stayed on the tour for three more months; Ramiro returned to his gang. A year and a half later, in October 1994, Ramiro was arrested after a drive-by shooting in which he was the driver. His family bailed him out. In February 1995, while still awaiting further proceedings on the first charge, he was arrested

for his involvement in a similar shooting. He was convicted in the first incident and pleaded guilty in the second. But partly in response to testimonials from people his father assembled, Ramiro received only a suspended six-year sentence and four months in the Green County correctional "boot camp.,,

By all accounts, Ramiro thrived under the discipline of early-morning reveilles and work details. When he came out, he began serving three months of house arrest at the two-story Logan Square house that Luis shares with his third wife, Trinidad, and their sons Ruben, ten, and Luis Jacinto, four. But the father-and-son rapport, always tenuous, rapidly disintegrated. "I was writing like crazy, traveling all over the place," Luis recalls. "Ramiro would try to sneak in friends, sneak in drugs-just weed, nothing heavy-duty. But I had told him, 'No drugs in this house.' I had two little boys to worry about. I had Trini."

One night, Luis was awakened by the sound of his son arguing with his ex-girlfriend, the mother of Ramiro's eldest daughter. A shouting match began. "I just blew up," Luis recalls. "I had been holding in so much anger, trying to help him get through his problems. I thought he 'called me out,' so I reverted to some street stuff." The two men squared off. Hearing the shouting, Trinidad came downstairs as well. Ramiro grabbed a sharpened hedge trimmer, holding it swordlike at his side. The women jumped between the men, and the near fight dissipated into angry words.

After that, Ramiro and his father rarely spoke. Ramiro bounced between lodgings, then served out the remainder of his home confinement in his ex-girlfriend's apartment. Finally, he rented a dark one-bedroom apartment near Logan Square. The whole time, he made moves to leave street life. He worked as a janitor. He took classes at Chicago State University. He took an active role in Youth Struggling for Survival, even recruiting members of his own gang.

At the time, his gang, once 100 strong, was disintegrating. Many members joined other gangs. Others moved into safer lives. Only Ramiro and his best friend, Eric (not his real name), refused to let go. "Luis and I talked many times about Ramiro's allegiance," says Julie Aimen, who has served as Ramiro's lawyer since his first arrest as a juvenile. "He was pledging loyalty to a group that had died. But I think Ramiro needed to feel important."

Nonetheless, Ramiro seemed a new man. "He was his own person, living his own life," Luis says. "And I thought that was good. I figured it was better that I not get involved." But stressed by trying to balance work, school, and fatherhood, Ramiro had reverted to street life. Though he was working to help similarly desperate people in Youth Struggling for Survival, Ramiro considered himself a lost cause.

He isolated himself from his family. "I didn't want to have to explain myself to anyone," Ramiro recalls. "Maybe if I had just asked for help, I wouldn't be in prison. But I chose to close myself off." To Luis, this sequence echoes the sabotaged chances of his own youth. "Once I got a commission from Loyola Marymount College to do a huge mural," he recalls. "It meant several thousand dollars and running a big crew. And I just never showed up. I felt like I didn't deserve for anything good to happen to me."

For a few months Ramiro pulled off his odd double life. But he knew he was riding the razor's edge. "I had a premonition everything was going to collide," he remembers. "It was like my life was a string that was on fire. I just kept trying to hold on."

AS HAPPENS WITH MANY WRITERS, LUIS made time for work by walling off his family. Like his sister, Andrea, Ramiro resented that wall. Today, Luis sees his son's initial gang activity as a child's cry for attention. "He was never a heavy-duty gangbanger-never really deep into it," Luis says. "I think he just wanted to force me to be a real father."

The writing had always interfered. When Ramiro and Andrea, then young kids, went to live with Luis for a few months in San Bernardino, their father burned with frustration, almost counting the stanzas he was not composing. "After a while, I accepted how much time my dad spent writing," Ramiro says. "I thought it was the natural order."

It seems natural, too, to wonder whether any bound sheaf of papers is worth the loss of a son. But Luis says he never had any choice. In his 20s, after he landed a good job at a steel mill, he recalls, "I was 'satisfied,' but I felt the poetry dying within me. I'd actually start crying in the steel mills, with a hard hat on, watching the slag come into the ladles." To stop writing, he implies, would have been a walking death. And relations with Camila were so strained that visiting his children only provoked angry episodes. He felt trapped, a shoddy facade of a father.

To ease the pain, he drank. Once, during a binge, he slammed Ramiro, then four, against the wall. "It sobered me up the way he looked at me," Luis recalls. "Other people had abused him, but I never had done that before. He didn't get hurt, but there was a trust that was broken. We were never able to make that up." Five years ago, with Ramiro becoming an adult gang member, Rodriguez went sober. "My son needed me to be there for him," he explains. "But drinking made me a ghost. I would just sit in bars and hide."

ON JANUARY 24 1997, RAMIRO FACED a busy day. As he tells it, first he planned to go to his anthropology class at Chicago State. Then he would help a Humboldt Park friend move. That evening, a Youth Struggling for Survival weekend retreat was starting in Lake View.

He never made it. just before three o'clock that afternoon, two police officers arrested him in a West Side liquor store near the Rockwell Gardens housing projects. According to official documents, the few furious minutes leading up to the arrest started on the Roosevelt Road off ramp of the Dan Ryan Expressway, near the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. There, a car in which Ramiro was riding blocked the turn of a truck driven by Siddius Harris. Harsh words were exchanged. Ramiro jumped from the car and shot the truck driver once with a seniiautomatic.38 pistol.

Witnesses reported the crime immediately. Police alerted units in the area. Minutes later, Ramiro and his companion were spotted on the Eisenhower Expressway by undercover officers, who gave chase, headlights oscillating. The car in which Ramiro was riding lurched off the highway two miles west, the undercover car still trailing. During the course of the chase, testified officer Humberto Candelario to a grand jury, Ramiro fired shots at him and his partner.

The chase ended abruptly when the car carrying Ramiro careened into a cul-de-sac, striking a concrete barrier. Splitting paths, Ramiro and the driver fled on foot. In the parking lot of a liquor store, Candelario testified, Ramiro threw his gun under a car, where it was later recovered by police. Ramiro was arrested moments later inside the store. The driver was never caught.

WHEN RAMIRO NEVER SHOWED UP AT THE Youth Struggling for Survival retreat that night, Luis feared the worst. But it was not until nearly midnight that a friend delivered the awful news. "I was so angry at Ramiro, because boot camp had seemed like his big break," Luis recalls. "I was almost going to leave him there in jail. But I couldn't just let him twist in the wind. I was responsible, because Camila and I had this young boy, with all this great potential, and somehow we squandered it. He did not have to be this kind of a kid."

Luckily for Ramiro, Siddius Harris survived, even though the bullet had passed through his arm and into his chest. Ramiro was charged with three counts of attempted murder and myriad lesser infractions. (Ramiro never revealed the identity of his alleged accomplice to authorities.) At first, bail was set at \$250,000 (it was later increased to \$1.25 million); Luis could raise the sum he needed only by putting up his house as collateral. He didn't. "I wasn't sure that he wouldn't run," Luis explains. "I put myself in his shoes; at his age, I would have run."

Worse yet for Ramiro, exactly four months into this jail stay, he discovered that his on-and-off girlfriend, the mother of his eldest daughter, had become pregnant by a close friend. "I thought Ramiro was going to commit suicide," Luis says. "What he was going through was so sad, and so deep." Compounding the anguish for Luis, the friend had emerged as a leader within Youth Struggling for Survival. A sharp rift knifed through the organization. "Luis called and told me he couldn't believe what was happening," recalls Frank Chavez, a family friend who visited Ramiro weekly in jail. "He felt like he couldn't ask [the friend] to leave YSS—it would look like he was choosing Ramiro over the organization. But Ramiro wanted total loyalty from his father." Eventually, the issue died down; Ramiro had told his former gang allies to quash the matter. "That's how I knew I was really changing in jail," Ramiro says now. "Before, I would have snapped. But still, that betrayal destroyed me—I don't know if I could ever trust a girlfriend again, or have a 'homie for life' like him. He's dead me now."

WHEN RAMIRO AGREED TO HIS PLEA bargain, everyone present expected he could walk free in 2010, at age 35. (With time off for good behavior and credit for 19 months he had already spent in Cook County jail, he would have served half his sentence by then.) But in a surprising development, the Illinois Department of Corrections ruled him subject to the state's truth in sentencing law, which required that he serve at least 85 percent of his term. That made him ineligible for parole until approximately 2020.

Aimen has contested the state's ruling, but unless she wins out, Ramiro will be cell-bound until age 45, even if he maintains a perfect prison record. And that's no easy assumption. For one thing, the prison system teems with gangs. "Ramiro was involved with a gang, and he finally let it go, but I don't know what that means in jail," Luis says. "Do you get in more trouble for not being part of a gang? Or does the gang structure he was once part of still consider him a member?" For his part, Ramiro says he has seen some former gang comrades at Menard. That was heartening, he admits. But, he says with resolve, "I came in here alone. And I'll leave here alone."

Gangs or no gangs, prisons are petri dishes for frustration, places filled with men watching their early adulthood erode hour by mundane hour. Worse yet, a psychological profile prepared for Ramiro's presentencing report revealed chronic depression, severe flashbacks to childhood beatings, and a dissociative

disorder that makes him act on "automatic pilot" when he feels threatened. One of Luis's main goals has been trying to arrange for psychological help behind bars. "Ramiro's at a stage where he can reimprint his way of dealing with the world," he explains. "If he doesn't get the therapy, the chances of him going off get worse." The ruling by the Department of Corrections sorely tested Ramiro, but he did not lash out in anguish. "Before, I would have gone crazy," Ramiro says. "I'm not happy about it, but I'm not taking that 85 percent so bad."

IF RAMIRO SEEMS PLACID NOW ABOUT losing ten extra years, consider that he long fought to go to trial, which would almost surely have cost him six decades. To her clients, Aimen explains, pleading guilty often seems like the final blow; they would rather risk a longer sentence by going to trial, even if the case against them is damning. Aimen considers that suicide. Thus, when she could not persuade Ramiro to accept the plea bargain, she asked the judge to let Luis speak to his son.

From his own experience, Luis understood Ramiro's reluctance. "There's a certain kind of heroic stance to fighting the charge," he says. "And Ramiro has an idealized sense of what constitutes honor, distorted by the world he's lived in. Personally, I think it's too much time. But who cares what I think? It was the best we could have gotten under the circumstances." A month later, though, the difference between a 28-year sentence and life imprisonment still seems fairly abstract to Ramiro. "I come from a world where living to 21 is the maximum," he explains. "I can't imagine being even 35."

There was a time, too, when Luis could not see past tomorrow. In *Always Running*, he describes holding a razor to his wrist as a teenager, a pail of water at hand to stop the blood from spurting everywhere. He stopped just short. Later, his worst glue-sniffing experiences left him comatose; today, Luis considers those covert suicide attempts. "I have this sad sense that Ramiro doesn't care about himself," Luis says. "There's a part of him that wants to go down in a blaze of glory. Sometimes when people commit suicide, they feel it's the one powerful thing they can do."

Luis's deep understanding of his son's emotional states—the sense of worthlessness, the misdirected anger, and the misplaced loyalties—made each step in trying to save Ramiro excruciating. But during Ramiro's jail stint in Chicago, the men grew close for the first time; Ramiro says the glass wall of the visiting room served as a buffer, stripping away a machismo that had coursed through their conversations. As a parent, Ramiro says, he better grasps the turmoil Luis and Camila suffered when he himself was a child. For his part, Luis now knows that he cannot play the "savior dad," a superman who could overcome trauma, gangs, and mental illness. "I realized we're not going to rescue my son now," he recalls. "When he was younger, I thought it was possible. But he's 23 years old, and this is his personal ordeal."

With Ramiro 300 miles south—in a place so alien to him that cockroaches come as welcome reminders of home—Luis mulls his past decade, time spent trying to undo a trauma he in part inflicted. "I tried to save Ramiro, but he saved me," Luis says. "What's inside of me has blossomed. I became a better father, a better husband. I stopped drinking. I started YSS. But it's sad to me, too, because he's paying the price for being unable to do it for himself. I hoped to show him it could be done."