

CHAPTER ONE

THE WONDER YEARS: GROWING UP POOR IN EAST LA

I was born in East Los Angeles on October 13, 1960. My parents were factory laborers. Growing up in the early 1960s was a very humble time, and the focus was just on working, trying to pay the bills, and putting bread on the table. We lived in a stuffy single-room bachelor apartment with one small bed and a chest of drawers that my mother used as a bed for me. Our stove was a hot plate and our entertainment consisted of either watching the big black hairy roaches climb the walls or my mother swatting flies with a rolled up newspaper.

I never truly came to know my father, who abandoned us when I was only three years old. The only legacy he left our family was a pile of bills and a couple of empty bottles of booze. In the end, the womanizing, drugs and alcohol would kill him at age 38.

My mother had a very rough time during my infancy. She worked at many different factories at night and then took on small jobs in the early mornings to make additional money. She tackled jobs on weekends, such as painting and cleaning people's houses; she even did some janitorial work scrubbing floors and toilets.

My mother worked as many hours as the factory would allow her, which sometimes meant a double shift of sixteen hours. The minimum wage back then was a measly \$1.25 per hour, and it was difficult for her to keep up with the finances let alone keep any food in the house, especially while my father was still around. As a drug addict and an alcoholic, he would steal things — pawn or sell whatever we had of any value to buy drugs — but because my mother loved him immensely, she tried keeping this dark

side of our lives a secret by putting up with my father's addictions. There is no explanation why love allows you to tolerate someone else's unacceptable behavior.

My mother did not know when she got married that my father was doing drugs. She was very young, naive and smitten with his good looks and smooth-talking ways. Two or three months went by before she figured out what was going on. Eventually, she found vials of heroin and needles, wrapped in plastic and hidden in the toilet tank and also taped behind the dresser. My mother was scared and too embarrassed to tell anyone about the heartache we were going through.

While pregnant with my little sister, my mother worked until she was about eight months along, hiding her stomach by wearing tight girdles and loose clothing. Back in those days, women were only allowed to legally work until they were five months pregnant, but my mother covered up her stomach as best she could and always found a means to make money. She took the bus to work or sometimes walked the long and dreadful five-mile, lonely one-way hike up and down those dark and dirty streets if she had to.

Before my little sister was born, we were kicked out of our apartment because we could not pay the rent. In having the baby, my mother had not been able to work, and my father, who was usually missing, was certainly not making up the difference. The landlord repossessed all of our belongings and put a deadbolt lock on the door. We were actually standing in the rain on the street with no money, soaked from head to toe with no place to go. My mother pleaded with the landlord, but he wasn't sympathetic to our cause and refused to listen to her problems.

It was then that my mother finally broke down and told my grandparents that we were literally homeless and broke with only the clothes on our back to our name. My mother had a lot of pride and never wanted to ask for help because that's how we were taught, but we had hit rock bottom.

We moved in with my grandparents and uncle, who lived in East L.A. on Gage Avenue near City Terrace in a very small, old, rented one bedroom home. I stayed in a musty, concrete, dark and unfinished basement, sleeping on a dirty, smelly mattress on the floor where I could hear the mousetraps snapping throughout the night.

At about five years old, I was up and down the neighborhood streets with my red wagon knocking on doors, collecting empty soda bottles and turning them in at grocery stores, where I was given refunds for the returned merchandise. This was how I helped the family make money, which I then gave to my mother to buy food and whatever else we needed. We were all somewhat undernourished, but we were, without question, very close and despite our struggles, Mom never allowed us, as a family, to be separated.

During the first five years of my life my father was constantly in and out of jail, all the while continuing to womanize and squander away money on heroin and alcohol. My mother, though, continued to work the evening shifts while my little sister and I stayed with Grandpa and Grandma.

I recall my mother taking us shopping at thrift stores and getting many hand-me-downs from my older cousins. We always looked like we dressed mismatched, but we had clothes on our backs and shoes on our feet, even though we had holes in the soles.

My mother was bound and determined that we would not live the lifestyle we had been born into. She said, “One day, no matter what sacrifice I need to make, we are all going to get out of this misery.”

My extended family, although all mostly from California, did not live in East L.A. They did not have the bad run my mother did and maybe simply made better choices. When we saw them, everyone seemed close and nobody looked down at us or said anything stupid. That’s why I always looked forward to the occasional Sunday afternoon at the park, visiting and playing games with my uncles, aunts and cousins. Among family, I could hold my head up and not feel lesser or belittled, as opposed to most other times while out in the public sector.

My mother was a very beautiful woman and a very clean person. She made sure that as long as we had soap and water, we were always very clean regardless of what we wore. Even today, my appearance and my home are immaculate.

As a child, I stood in line at the store with my mother as she paid for our groceries with food stamps. People looked at us and pointed their fingers, as if to say we were losers. I was just thankful that we had food, and I guess back then I was not embarrassed because I was probably too young to know any better.

In those days, we had no shower, only a tub, and no such thing as a washer or dryer. We washed and rinsed our clothes by hand and then hung them outside on a clothesline. Breakfast usually consisted of puffed wheat cereal or oatmeal and sometimes scrambled eggs with chorizo or fried bologna. Lunch and dinner were usually Spam or beans with handmade flour tortillas and salsa. I still have strong memories of my mother diluting the milk with water in several containers so that we would have enough to go around —

especially for my little sister. We ate lots of beans and tortillas for dinner. Fried beans, smashed beans, beans with chili, beans with *carne* (meat), beans boiled in a pot, beans with bacon, beans with weenies, bean juice, beans, beans and more beans! My mother also knew at least a dozen ways to cook Spam. I recall anxiously looking forward to the smell on Sunday mornings because we would sometimes have homemade menudo (tripe soup).

I remember being the only kid looking in the window of the local candy store, standing there with my mouth wide open while other children were buying and eating candy bars. Going to restaurants never happened either, but occasionally we walked several blocks down the street and hit one of the corner taco stands. I tell people all the time that we were so poor growing up, if someone broke into our house to rob us, we would have robbed him. I'm not kidding!