

It was the right thing to do and he was going to do it. He didn't care what his friends thought.

1. Make a Prediction: What is he going to do that is the "right thing to do?"

He hurried along the deserted street, carefully avoiding the hulk of a burned-out automobile. People like to steal cars and dump them along this side street next to the school. He'd even done it himself a few times. Back when he was really into the crazy life. No, he didn't care what his home

than be disrespected that way, he would fight him.

He felt his heart beat faster as a low rider turned from a side street and cruised slowly away from him. He knew the occupants of the car were checking him out. He was on foreign territory. He fought the impulse to slow his steps so he wouldn't catch up with the slow moving car which had almost come to a complete stop. But he didn't slow down. In fact, he started walking faster. He wouldn't punk out for nobody. That's the way he was. He'd learned a long time ago that his survival depended on not backing down. He wouldn't slow his pace to avoid catching up with the car even if there was nobody around to know he was being a punk. He'd know and that was enough. He

walked faster to show the *vatos* in

A Man of Honor

by Carlos Rivera

boys thought. He was going to marry Sherry. It was the right thing to do. But telling everybody about his decision was going to be tough. He might have to fight a couple of the *vatos* who'd try to disrespect him by disrespecting her. They had no respect for Sherry because she was one of the girls who hung around with his gang, making herself available for the weekend parties that never seemed to end.

2. Do you have an attitude about girls who hang around gangs? What is it? Explain.

Most gangsters had little respect for any of the girls who ran with them. They called them *jainas* and when they wanted to put them down--*putas*. That word didn't bother him. He knew Sherry was not that. But if one of his *vatos* forgot himself and called her that in front of him, well, rather

the car that he had heart.

The occupants of the car evidently decided not to challenge him and burned rubber, spinning off down the street, turning the corner with a screech of tires.

He breathed deeper, almost a sigh of relief at the sign that the car was no longer interested in him. Maybe they got better things to do, he thought, smiling to himself. He knew he did. He wouldn't be in this neighborhood if it wasn't for the principal of his school. He was an hour late one morning this week and had to make the time up by staying after school. So he'd missed his ride and had to walk. These white people that run the school don't understand. To them, this was just a street on the side of the school. But to him, it was a battlefield and he was behind enemy lines.

He finally reached the bus stop at the end of the street. He took a spot next to the

3. Make another prediction. What do you think is going to happen in the story. Be specific.

electrical pole that supported a huge transformer and waited for the bus. He tried to look inconspicuous, an almost impossible feat with the amount of traffic that sped by in a blurry haze. He didn't like feeling so exposed, but he had to wait, out there in the open, for the bus.

Telling his friends in the hood, guys he'd grown up with and known all his life, would be harder even than when he told his parents. His parents were so upset at the news they carried on about it almost all night long. It hit his mother especially hard, he discovered, because she was the one who had such *grande* plans for him. She wanted him to be the first Alvarado to graduate high school and maybe even go to college. But he was realistic about himself, if nothing else. He had given up on those kinds of dreams a long time ago. Maybe as far back as the first grade when he was put in the slow reading group and all the white kids were put in the fast group. That was the first time he recognized that life was not going to work out the way he wanted it to and demanded compromise. Like now. He didn't *want* to marry Sherry. But he would. What else was a man of honor to do?

4. Why was it so difficult for him to tell his parents that he was going to marry Sherry?

He had lost himself in his thoughts when suddenly he looked up and the dark low rider that had checked him out earlier was sitting at the bus stop, its motor loping in great bursts of power like an impatient, man-eating beast. A tinted front window slowly lowered and a serious looking *vato* looked him over and then up-nodded and asked the question he hoped would never be asked: "S'up, ese. Where you from? *Donde eres?*"

Sonny Alvarado recognized the boy as being a *loco vato* from the Diablos, a gang centered in Pacomia that was one of the many gangs his own hood, the *Vineland Boys*, was always at war with. The Diablo with the seri-

ous gaze was probably holding a gun in his hand, waiting for the wrong answer. Sonny also knew that all he had to do to avert trouble was to rank out. All he had to do was say he was from "nowhere." Just simply deny that he was a member of any gang. But just like he knew that he had to marry Sherry when she told him she was pregnant, he knew that he could not rank out by denying his gang affiliation. He was a man of honor.

"Vineland Boys, *pendejo*," he spat and took a pose, his chest out thrust, chin up and waited for the worst to come. Whatever happens happens. With men of honor, the death journey is always just beyond the horizon.

5. Will he be killed? What will happen? Make another prediction.

The Diablo smirked and raised a large 9mm automatic. He fanned the gun at Sonny as though it was too heavy to control and, just before he fired, Sonny saw that beyond the smirk was a glimmer of admiration in the boy's eyes at the bravery Sonny displayed by refusing to show fear.

The gun was aimed low and the bullet missed but put a hole in one leg of the oversized baggy khakis he was wearing. Now as a reflex, Sonny dove for cover, but the Diablo did not fire again. Instead, the black low rider spun off down the street, leaving Sonny sprawled on the sidewalk, covering his head.

He picked himself up, sweating profusely, slowly coming down from the rush of adrenaline that had just moments before pumped through his body, giving him the reflexes of a cat. He looked down the street but the low rider was nowhere in sight. He looked back at the stream of traffic. Nobody had even slowed down. That's how common gunshots were in this neighborhood.

He studied the bullet holes in his pants leg, a neat round hole where the bullet had penetrated and a slightly larger hole where it had exited. He thought about the pants being

his flesh. He knew the hole going out would not be so neat if it was his body the bullet was exiting. He had seen what a nine had done to one of his buddies. A large and lumpy, ugly scar of rent tissue remained where Jose had been shot in the back. Nobody liked to look at it but Jose was always taking his shirt off every chance he got. To him, it was a badge of honor.

6. Why was the wound a badge of honor? Explain.

Sonny took some deep breaths and tried to control his emotion. He knew he was coming down too fast from the adrenaline high and he was worried about crashing. He noticed his right hand was shaking uncontrollably.

He grabbed his hand to steady it and walked around and around in a circle, letting off his anger at the emotion he was feeling. Now, the full impact of his close brush with death was crashing in on him. He was suddenly frightened.

The clash of gears as the bus pulled up to its stop startled him. He recovered quickly and automatically reached into his pocket and pulled out his bus pass—actually, it wasn't his pass, but one he had snaked from one of the students at school. He never felt guilty about stealing things from other students—they did the same to him whenever the opportunity occurred. He remembered the time he learned this important law of the street. He was nine years old and his step-father—actually, it was his mother's boyfriend, but he liked to call him his stepfather—gave Sonny a brand new bicycle. He'd only been riding the bike for an hour when a large boy about twelve years old came up to him, yanked him off the bike and rode off on it without speaking a word. When he arrived at home in tears, his *stepfather* punished him for letting the 12 year old take the bike away from him without a fight. "You should've come home dead!" the step father

said, disgusted at the crying boy. Sonny didn't own a bike again until he was 13 when he jumped a ten year old on *his* brand new bicycle.

7. What do you feel about Sonny's attitude about stealing? Explain.

It was almost six o'clock when he arrived at the Vineland Avenue hang-out of his homies. It was not a designated meeting place, but just a section of the neighborhood where those in the gang kicked back, waiting for something to do, checking out the girls who cruised by, passing dope and gathering gossip, waiting for night to shroud the ugly harsh streets with a welcoming blanket of darkness. Pluto, Clown and the Animal were standing in a group together and high-signed Sonny as he walked up. The Animal was so tagged by the hood because of his ferocity in battle. He was considered a mad-man and earned his reputation by charging a carload of *vatos* during a battle, grabbing one of the enemy and biting a chunk of his ear off. This so startled the others in the gang they fled the scene without firing a shot. Clown was so called because he sat around drawing clowns—he was preoccupied with pictures of clowns, mostly sad clowns. Pluto had a habit of standing and peering down his nose with a stupid grin on his face. Sometimes *vatos* called their homeboy whatever came into their minds when they saw him for the first time—that was the tag and he lived with it. With Pluto, everybody was reminded of a big stupid dog they had seen on thousands of reruns on television cartoons. Sonny was tagged Whistler because of his almost unconscious habit of whistling to himself when he was preoccupied. Few of the gang called Sonny by his tag name, however. As a sign of respect, perhaps, he had always been Sonny.

"What's with you, man? How come you didn't party with us last night?"

"I had other things to do," said Sonny, a cloud of wariness covering his eyes.

"Yea, the dude's got other things to do," said Pluto with a big, dirty grin. Pluto somehow knew that Sonny had been intimate with Sherry.

Sonny let the insult pass. This was not the time to tell them. Not here in front of the others. With gangsters, there was the private person and the public one. The private one could be sensitive and caring. The public one had to display *machismo*, which translated into a hard facade of sarcastic and uncaring fatalism. He would wait until a more private moment.

8. What does the narrator mean when he says that gangsters had a public and private side? Explain.

"I was disrespected by a *vato* from Pacoima." he said, deciding that he would tell of the attack at the bus stop. Such a thing had to be paid back. That was another law of the street. If anybody found out that he hadn't paid back, he would be greatly disrespected by his own hood.

"Leave it to us!" said Pluto, almost unable to contain his delight. He had been bored and wondering what he was going to do that night.

It was after midnight and Pluto, Animal and Sonny were waiting in Pluto's Chevrolet Impala which was parked on a side street just off Van Nuys Boulevard where they could watch, unnoticed, a MacDonal'd's restaurant. That particular home of the Mac Burger was a spot where many of the Diablos hung out. The boys in the Impala were relaxed, their feet up, kicked back with the lyrics of a rap song playing so softly on the stereo only the boom of the heavy bass could be heard, rocking the car with its vibrations. They were hunters; it was in their blood. And like all good hunters, they were patient. They knew that sooner or later, the Diablo that attacked Sonny would show up. And when he did,

Sonny would have his retribution. "Don't get mad, get even" was a fact of life in the gangs.

Pluto took a hit from a marijuana cigarette. He passed the butt to Sonny who took it and passed it on to Animal. Sonny had been doing that a lot lately, passing up the dope. It was not that he disapproved or anything. He was just tired of getting high. It had gotten to the point where he seemed to be high more often than sober. That just didn't seem right to him. Maybe all the beatings he'd received from the nuns to teach him right and wrong were finally paying off. He doubted it. He was just tired of getting high. How do you explain it?

"What's with you, man," spat Pluto between deep sucks of the dope.

"I don't want to get high tonight, man."

"Got to stay alert for action, ese?" added Animal.

"I can get it on better with a little bud," smiled Pluto.

Animal agreed, smiled and took another hit.

Sonny suddenly decided that perhaps this was the time to tell them. He hoped the dope had mellowed and not turned them paranoid. He decided to proceed cautiously.

"I must be gittin' old, man. I'm slowing down, you know?"

"How's that, Sonny?" said Animal.

"I'm not so much the player anymore, you know?"

"We noticed that," smiled Pluto, upnodding at Animal. "You spending too much time with that slut, Sherry." He said it without malice. It was a throw away, a causal comment which reflected the attitude of young gangsters toward the girls who were used and passed around by them. They were sluts, ho's and bitches. He meant nothing by it. It was a statement of fact.

Sonny could feel the rage building behind his eyes. But he fought hard to control it. This was Pluto. They had been best friends since grade

9. What is going to happen? Will they find the boy and will Sonny kill him? Make your prediction.

school. They had fought only once in all those years and even that had started out as horsing around and had gotten serious only when one of them had hit the other a little too hard and the laughing stopped suddenly. They didn't do much damage to each other and had become even better friends afterward. Pluto had protected Sonny's back on many occasions. He would let the comment pass. But it hurt. It hurt badly. This would not be the night he would tell them about marrying Sherry.

"Let's jam, man," he said suddenly.

"What's up,?" asked Animal, surprised.

"He ain't coming. I don't want to stay here all night. Let's go," Sonny said forcefully.

"What's the big hurry, Sonny?" asked Pluto, also surprised. He had been prepared to stay the night if necessary.

"I said let's go, man!" Sonny barked, annoyed at the two, tired of the whole day. He wanted to be home, in the dark of his room in the garage, the only spot on earth where he felt safe.

10. Why is Sonny so anxious to leave all of a sudden? Explain.

"All right, all right," said Pluto, as he started the car, peering with surprise at Sonny. "It's all right, we'll leave, man. I just don't want anybody to think you ranked out."

"Anybody can think what he wants," said Sonny, staring angrily at Pluto.

"Wait a minute! Stop the car. Look at that!" Animal screeched as he pointed and Sonny and Pluto looked to the restaurant as a dark low rider glided up, turned into the parking lot, and stopped. Three *vatos*, including the one who shot at Sonny, got out of the car and swaggered into MacDonalds for their nightly Big Mac.

"That's him! That's the one, right ese?" asked Pluto.

"Sonny hesitated, then said, resignedly, "Yea, man, that's the one."

The three Diablo *vatos*, feeling their junk food high, exited from MacDonalds in a happy mood and headed for their low rider. Just as they reached the back of the car, Pluto's Impala drove slowly up to the three and pulled to a stop. The three gangsters stopped and looked puzzled at the car as Sonny leaned out holding a gun that the Animal had only moments before thrust into his hand.

11. What's going to happen? Make a prediction.

"Payback, *hombre*," said Sonny, as he leaned out and pointed the gun at the three Diablos. The Diablos stood dumbfounded, not moving, staring hypnotically at Sonny with the gun.

Sonny hesitated. Pluto, leaning over from the drivers side of the car, hissed in his ear. "Shoot, dude, shoot!"

Still Sonny hesitated.

"Don't wait, man, do it!" Pluto yelled.

But Sonny couldn't pull the trigger. He had his enemy directly in front of him, the gun pointed at him, all he had to do was squeeze. It was not as if he were a virgin at gun play. He had done it on several other occasions. But those times, he had pointed the gun in the general direction of the enemy and blasted away, never knowing for sure where his shots were going. He just shot into the dark with the others of his gang. Who hit who was never known.

This was different—as he pointed the gun at the *vato*, he knew the boy would die if he pulled the trigger. He wasn't sure he was ready for that. So he held his fire—maybe it was payback enough for the gangster to know that Sonny held his life in his hands—like some Indian tribe he'd studied about in continuation school—Indians that prided themselves on the fact that they could ride up to the enemy and touch them without killing or being killed. Touching *coup* it was called—that's it,

that's what he was doing. He was touching *coup* with these *vatos*.

The Diablo who had attacked him was sweating. He knew that he was dead if that was the choice Sonny would make. Fear slowly crept into the Diablo's eyes, but he, too, held his ground and, like Sonny before, did not run for cover or try to protect himself. Had he run, Sonny probably would have fired. As a reflex. But the *vato* stood his ground and Sonny made his decision. He lowered the muzzle of the gun and great relief broke out on the Diablos' faces and, as though this was a signal, all three of the gangsters broke for their car at the same time.

Animal reached over and grabbed the gun out of Sonny's hand and began blasting away at the escaping *vatos*. But it was too late, for they were at their car and behind it. The bullets plunked solidly into the metal of the low rider, leaving huge holes the size of golf balls.

In frustration, Animal yelled at Sonny: "Man, what was you tryin' to do?"

Sonny didn't answer as Pluto gunned the Impala and the three raced off to find the protection of their hood.

12. Why do you think Sonny did not kill the *vatos*? Was he a coward? Explain.

The Impala was parked on a side street off Vineland Boulevard. Animal was in front of the car pacing angrily. Pluto was composed, thoughtfully leaning against the side. Sonny was sitting on the fender.

"Man, you crazy. You should have blasted him. This was your payback, *hombre*! You let him punk you." Animal then began to swear in Spanish.

"Shut up, *estupido*," snapped Pluto.

Animal looked startled, but complied and stopped his swearing. Pluto studied Sonny. Then he said: "You haven't been yourself since you been tripping with that girl. It's that girl, Sherry, right *ese*. She's messed up your mind.

Sonny stared at Pluto for a moment.

They had been friends a long time. "We're going to be married," said Sonny, hesitantly.

"What...!" started Animal, but Pluto stuck his hand out and motioned Animal to be quiet.

"What, you knock the bitch up or something, *ese*?" asked Pluto, quietly.

Sonny could feel his heart beating faster, racing. He wanted to beat the leering, laughing expression off Pluto's face, but instead, he took a deep breath and said, "I'm going to forget you said that, *compa*. For old times."

Then he slid off the fender and started walking down the street without a look back. At first, he walked slowly, dejectedly. He knew he was leaving it all behind. All of it. All the comfort and support and brotherhood. But as he moved further and further away from his homeboys in the Impala, his pace began to pick up and the swagger and bounce in his step returned. He was walking away from it all, that's true. But he was also walking away from one life and *into* another. Maybe one with hope and a future. He would meet this new life just like he faced his survival in the street. With courage and style. Besides, he decided as he almost danced down the street and into his new life, it was getting more and more difficult to be a proper *loco vato* and still be a *man of honor*.

13. What is going to happen to Sonny? What is his life going to be like from now on? Describe what you think will happen to him.

VOCABULARY

- vatos*--dudes or guys
- jainas*--girl
- putas*--whore
- grande*--large or great
- ¿Dónde está?*--Where are you?
- loco vato*--crazy dude
- pendejo*--idiot
- machismo*--masculinity
- hombre*--man
- ese*--that
- estupido*--stupid
- compa*--friend