

Smiley and the Laughing Girl

By Francine Rodriguez

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We love Rodriguez's honest, down to earth, totally unaffected style and her deep investment in her characters. The story falls under the classification of 'dirty realism' (with a feminist slant) but in the end it resists any kind of definition. All we can call it is 'good writing'.*

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Chavo got hit in the chest by gunfire from a passing car as he pulled up to a stop sign on Sunset, right near Alvarado. I guess he was going to get on the freeway to go to East LA. That's where his mother lives. His foot hit the accelerator hard, and his car headed straight through the intersection and hit a light pole head-on. The pole bent in half, went right through the windshield and smashed the glass. The sharp metal spike inside ended up cutting his body almost in half. That's what my mother told me when they called me away from the storeroom where I was stacking pallets with baby formula and disposable diapers. It was Friday, and I needed to work for eight hours at the WIC store to keep my aid for dependent children. I have my teenage daughter and two sons to raise.

I started crying, pulled off my apron, and hung it up in the employee's break room. I always knew that *MS 13* would come after him. That's how it goes here. Chavo and some of his homeboys jumped some guys from Mara Salvatrucha and beat them down pretty bad. I heard it was about somebody's old lady that belonged to 18th Street and stepped out with a guy from *MS 13*. They cut her up pretty bad cause she was just supposed to bait the guy and bring him to her

homies, not do it with him. They still had to throw down with the guys. Those must be the ones that shot him.

"Are you punching out for the day, Smiley?" Mrs. Riley, the boss, wanted to know. "Who's going to finish loading those shelves?"

I shrugged. It was her own fucking problem, I thought, tears running down my face. I wasn't really with Chavo anymore, not since I stopped running with the gang. I'm too old now, almost thirty, but they still call me Smiley, just like when I kicked it with the homies. I have a daughter, Laughing Girl. She's fourteen, and now the homeboys are looking at her. She told me she was ready to be jumped in. She laughed when she told me, daring me to say something because she knew I didn't like her running the street with those people.

Things are different now, and the home girls do more stuff in the gang than they used to. We used to hang around and do whatever errands the homies needed, like carrying their weed or getting them food or booze. Now some of those bitches are strapped and go on drive-bys. I hear they're up to give a beat-down to anybody, even a homeboy, and most of them at least carry a switchblade.

Out in the lot, I started up my old Impala. It's a classic, but I never fixed it up or anything. I got it from my stepfather. Lots of guys from other *cliques* stop and ask me about it. It used to get Chavo mad cause I was talking to guys that he said were enemies from *18th Street*. My stepfather never actually gave me the Impala, but when he got sent up, the car was just sitting there. My mom didn't drive, and she was too scared to try because she didn't have any papers. I tried to sell it a few times, but it seems we didn't have any title, and some numbers inside the

engine had been filed down. Nobody wanted to buy it. Anyway, my stepfather stabbed a guy inside, and then with his two other strikes, he ended up getting life. So, I guess I'm keeping it.

I drove home thinking about Chavo and all the things that had happened to me since I met him. My mind ran over them one after the other, like the first time he picked me up for a ride after I met him at a party that some homie from 18th Street had. They said later that he'd gone there to pick up on a young girl like he always did because he liked them young and I was up for it.

That night we'd smoked some weed, and it was pretty good. I was feeling proud and happy. Lots of little hood rats wanted him, and he was mine. Chavo was twenty-five when I got with him, ten years older than me. I trusted him and did everything he said. Being with him was being a part of *18th Street*, and that made you somebody where we lived.

We were riding around one night when he saw this car that looked like the one his brother had. Some guy from the Avenues was driving it. He thought it was stolen, so we followed it. When we got up close, he yelled something at the driver, and the driver turned around and gave us the finger. Chavo went crazy and pulled out a gun and began shooting at the car. When we turned a corner, a cop car was coming in our direction. Chavo told me to hold the wheel, stay behind the other guy, and aim to the right to force the other guy off the road. Chavo kept shooting, but only got off a couple of shots and none of them even got near the other car. The cops turned around and pulled us over. We were arrested, and I ended up in juvie, and not for running away from home like before.

When my mother finally visited me at the facility, I'd already been locked up for a while. When I saw her, I started crying. "I thought you would come sooner." I stepped toward her, hoping that she'd hug me, but she kept her arms at her sides and looked me up and down, shaking her head.

Then she started talking really fast in that whiney voice she has. "You know it's hard for me to get here. Nobody would drive me, so I had to take the damn bus. I got better things to do than visit criminals! I got other kids at home." She sat on one of the hard, plastic chairs, holding onto her beat-up old brown purse, and started to cry. "How can you do this to me? All the neighbors know you're in jail. I'm ashamed to go outside. You're just a *puta de calle*, just like the others. "

I was feeling pretty bad then. I missed being home, and Chavo hadn't come to see me, even though he was out on bail, waiting for trial. "Well, if you're ashamed, don't go outside. Besides, they said if you'd gotten me a good lawyer, I wouldn't be locked up!" I always talked back.

"You know I don't have money for a lawyer," she started yelling. The other people in the waiting room turned around to look at us. "I don't know why you want to be a *Chola* so bad," she snapped. "Going with that old gangster! He's too old for you. You're gonna get pregnant. Watch and see. Then you're out of the house!"

"Like I care," I told her, trying to be tough. "How come your boyfriend isn't too old for me then?"

"You shut your mouth. Why are you lying on him all the time?"

I'd hit home. The man I called my stepfather was really just her boyfriend, and he was a lot younger than her. My friends said he liked my mother because she always gave him money when

she got her welfare check, and he didn't have to work. He always licked his lips when he looked at me and rubbed up against me whenever I was around in that little apartment.

When I told my mother, she went crazy. "You're a stupid bitch! No way he'd want a skinny little thing like you! You're jealous cause you can't have him. All you can get is just some loser gangster."

One day when I was home alone because I'd ditched school, he came into the bathroom when I was taking a shower and locked the door behind him. When I heard him, I stepped out of the shower just as he started to unzip his pants. I grabbed the sixteen-ounce plastic bottle of shampoo and swung it at his head. I got him hard on the nose, and blood started squirting out and dripping onto the bathmat. I left him there like. I knew he lit into my mother real good because she kept asking what happened to his nose. I started staying away from home after that. It wasn't such a good place to be, anyway. I stayed with a few of the homegirls whose parents didn't care or weren't around much. I slept on couches or on their floors.

When I got out of juvie that time for driving the car with Chavo, I went to live with him and his family. He was still out on bail, still waiting to go to trial, and I was still going to school sometimes, mostly to meet my friends and ditch. I didn't have any money then for bus fare or lunch, or even eyeliner if I needed it. Chavo gave me a little money sometimes, when he could, like when he just sold some weed.

Finally, I got tired of school and just stopped going. It's just like Laughing Girl, now. She doesn't want to go either. I was lonely living there because Chavo's mother and sisters didn't like me. They wanted him to get back together with his old girlfriend, Marta. I guess he was seeing her

too, on the side, cause he finally told me to leave, and his sisters packed up my things in a flash. I'd run out of places to go, so I went back home. I hated it there. My mother went around a lot with a cut lip and black eyes. She would tell me to go to Hell if I said anything about it.

I was feeling really bad about Chavo dumping me, so I started going out with Ricardo right away. He wasn't as good-looking as Chavo, but he had a bad *cholo* reputation. They said he'd killed a few guys and gotten away with it. Ricardo or Sly Baby, like they called him, was in 18th Street too, and was super bossy and mean. Whenever we got together, he'd hit me for any little thing and make me wait on him for everything so he could just sit in one place.

I usually spent my days sleeping late and watching TV since there was nobody around to bother me. Then Ricardo would call me, so I would get dressed up and do my makeup and ride around with him going to parties to get high, smoking, doing coke, or drinking. Sometimes, I went with him when he went to get revenge on a rival gang. He kept saying that it was important to protect our territory and that the other gangs were always trying to take over our area. He carried a forty-five and showed me how to use it, one day, up in Griffith Park, before the orange sun went down and the park was almost empty. We shot at the trees, and I imagined that I was shooting at a real homeboy from the Avenues or even from Mara Salvatrucha.

One Friday night, Ricardo parked his car and told me to go into the liquor store with him. He told me to stand at the counter and talk to the clerk, a young white guy. He told me to flirt with him. Make him think he was getting some.

"What are you doing when I'm talking?" I wanted to know.

"Just shut the fuck up and do what I say," he answered.

I went up to the counter and pretended to look at the cheap candies. The clerk, who looked like a teenager with spikey blond hair, moved away from the register and smiled, looking at me. "Can I help you with something?" I smiled back and touched my mouth. Then I took my finger and trailed it down the front of my blouse. My blouse was cut low, and I was pretty much falling out of it. The clerk kept watching me, following my finger. I remember he had pretty blue eyes.

While we were standing there, I heard the sound of a loud crash in the back of the store, something falling and smashing, and the clerk's eyes moved away from me to follow it. He straightened up and yelled out, "What's going on back there?"

I turned around to see Ricardo walking toward the counter, pointing his gun right at the clerk. "No cameras set up back there," he said to me, smiling. Then he turned to the clerk, "Give me everything in that register or I'll fuck you up."

I stood there, listening to it all, but kept my mouth shut and just took the handful of cash that Ricardo handed me and stuffed it in my purse as we ran out to the car. But Ricardo was wrong. There was a camera. They showed the video in court, where we both got convicted of robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. When the judge sentenced me, I was sent to CIW, because I wasn't a juvenile anymore.

A couple of years later, I was out, older, but I guess not any smarter. I was staying with my homegirl, Mona, and trying to get hold of the rest of my homies and figure out what I was going to do next. Ricardo was still locked up. He was going to stay locked up for a long time.

I needed money, so I started asking around. Chavo was out on probation, and he was looking for some homegirls to push weed for him. So, I went to his house where his sisters still lived and

ignored their dirty looks while I talked to Chavo. He said he didn't trust me because I went with another guy, but he said if I wanted to sell for him and get my foot back in 18th Street, I needed to have sex with him and anybody else he picked. I didn't tell him yes or no. I just went back to his bedroom and let him do it. I figured maybe he wouldn't make me do it with other guys because he was so jealous.

I started selling weed and a little coke for him, usually around the high school, when the school day was over. He took all of the money for himself, only giving me a little to spend, but he kept me supplied with weed and coke, and I figured out how to sell some of that on the side for cash. I slept there a lot too when I didn't want to go home, and sometimes I helped myself to a few dollars that he didn't see. A lot of times, he had his homies meet in his house, and I watched from the bedroom while he gave them the money I brought in so they could buy guns.

I saw 18th Street was growing, with new members getting jumped in all the time. Chavo wanted to make sure they were all strapped, so he pushed hard on selling all the dope we could.

I wasn't the only girl selling for him. There were about three others, but we didn't like each other, because they all wanted to be his only girlfriend. I didn't care if I was or wasn't, because I'd been with him before. Besides, I was his top pusher, and so far, he didn't hit me or curse at me, the way he did with the other girls when they didn't sell enough or didn't do what he said. He usually wanted to have sex when I picked up my drugs to sell, and after when I brought back his money. After he was finished with sex, we'd smoke some dope or do a few lines, which was honestly what I waited for, because it was almost like he was a real boyfriend lying in bed with me watching television. I knew he had sex with the other girls too, but he spent more time with me and took me in his bedroom instead of doing it on the couch and telling others to watch. He only

made me have sex with another homie one time. The guy had some kind of "connections," that Chavo wanted, and he told me to give his homie a blow job and anything else he wanted. I did what he said and tried to pretend I was somewhere else until it was over.

I was selling for Chavo for a few months, trying to save up my money so I could get my own place and not have to live with my mother and her new boyfriend, who knocked her around more than the last one. Besides, she was spending her whole check buying smack from someone in Mara Salvatrucha and pretty much wasn't paying the rent anymore. I saw a notice to move out posted on the door.

So, on that day when I came to pick up my supply, Chavo told me to get in his car, because we were going somewhere. I knew better than to ask any questions. We drove over to Highland Park and pulled in behind a run-down stucco bungalow. In the back of the bungalow, there was a small garage that somebody was using as an apartment. Chavo had a key, and we walked into a tiny room jammed with trash. In the center was a large mattress with a few sheets wadded up in the center. Chavo told me to get undressed and then pushed me down on the mattress. When he was finished, he stood up and stretched, buckling his pants. "I feel good now," he told me.

"Ready to fuck someone up real good. Now I want you to do it with this guy that's coming in. You make him stay in that bed with you, till I come in and get you. I'll be right outside waiting. You got that? He's a dead man today!"

I started to cry then, scared and sorry for myself. Chavo stood over me, pushed my face into the mattress, and held it. "Look," he said, "You better do what I say if you know what's good for you." He pulled my hair hard, and then shoved me away.

Something went off in my head then, and I felt myself getting angry instead. I remembered the girls I'd been locked up with, saying they would stick a knife in any man who touched them. They were tough and hated almost everyone, but especially men. Now, I was beginning to understand why. I'd never thought this way before. Just this time, I told myself, I'll do what he says. Then I'm getting away from him and his homies.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and a big bald guy covered with tattoos came in. He looked me over and then walked around the small room, checking for something. When he saw there was nobody inside, he dropped his pants and climbed on top of me. He barely had time to push my legs apart when I heard two loud bangs, like firecrackers going off. The big guy cried out and then stopped moving. He lay on top of me so I couldn't move away. I started screaming, and Chavo and a couple of other guys came in. They pulled him off me while I laid there and screamed.

Chavo jerked me to my feet. "Get dressed; we got to get out of here."

I looked over at the bed and saw blood leaking out of the guy's body, pooling on the mattress and running down the sides of the bed. There was blood on my stomach and the tops of my legs. When I tried to wipe it off, Chavo smacked me in the face. "I said, get dressed. Don't touch anything else!"

We got back in Chavo's car. It was dark now, and quiet. I was shaking, remembering the heavy body on top of me. It was still warm when I left, and the blood was thick on the mattress. I'd never seen a dead body up so close, and I was scared, my heart still pounding and my legs

shaking. We drove in silence back to my house. I was still thinking about how I'd decided not to come back here anymore. Now I was sure.

"Is he dead?" I finally asked, seeing myself in big trouble.

Chavo laughed. "I hope so. He had it coming. Tried to be slick and suck up our territory. Nobody else sells here unless I let them. Should have stayed on his own side. But three bullets might not be enough for his fat ass."

I felt suddenly cold and nauseous, so I rolled down the window. Chavo pulled over to the curb, and I opened the door and threw up. Sitting back in the seat, I put my head on the headrest and let my tears run. "I don't want to go to jail again."

"What's wrong with you, bitch?" Chavo spat in my direction. "You're weak, that's all — just a weak sister. Not fit to be with 18th Street. You know what? I don't want to see you coming around no more. I don't trust you. You go home and take this with you. I don't want to see you or this ever again." He slapped the gun he'd just used into my hand. "There's four rounds left."

It was surprisingly heavy, but I didn't let it fall. "What do you want me to do with it?" I stared down at my hands, thinking that this gun in my hand had just killed someone.

"You stupid bitch! Little Girl!" He swore under his breath. "Hide it someplace where nobody will find it. You keep your mouth shut too, about what you saw today or you're next. I can't be tied to this. I'll go back and do another stretch."

I stared back at him and felt my fingers close around the gun, but I stayed quiet.

"Can you do what I tell you? Or I can get rid of you too. You know I'd do it!"

I just sat there, crying and shaking my head. It hurt having him tell me to go, even though I'd decided I was through with him before we left the body on the bed.

He stared at me for a moment, and I thought he even looked a little sad. "Look, *Mijita*," now his voice was lower, almost like the way he used to talk to me before he threw me out the first time. He held my face between his hands and pushed my hair back from my forehead. "I don't want any trouble, so you need to do what I say. We had some good times, didn't we? Anyway, I got a new girlfriend now, so you can't come over no more."

I thought he looked proud, bragging, like a little kid. "She just got outta Ironwood, and she's a hard case. Been around plenty. She'll always have my back. You know how it is."

He reached across me and opened the car door. "Don't forget," he pointed to the gun.

I stumbled out of the car and ran into the apartment, which had the "Notice To Pay Rent Or Quit," taped to the door. I tore it off and threw it on the table. Then I went into the tiny room that I claimed as a bedroom and stuck the gun in the bottom drawer under my bras and panties. They weren't enough to cover it, so I threw some clothes from another drawer on the top.

Over the next few weeks, everybody spread the word about how they'd found "Big Blue," dead, and they were looking for suspects. So far, nobody was talking, and I did what Chavo said and stayed away from him. The sheriff even knocked on our door one day, but I didn't open it. I guess they were going around the neighborhood trying to get information. Hiding the gun in the house seemed like a stupid idea. I couldn't sleep one night because I kept seeing the cops busting

in and finding the gun. I understood why Chavo didn't want to get locked up again. I turned over and over in my bed until it started to get light. While everybody else was still sleeping, I got up and put the gun in my backpack. I walked all the way to Echo Park, and then slowly around the lake, toward the center that I thought was the deepest. I walked by the usual homeless winos sleeping on the benches. For a while, I stood there and watched the mud hens hanging around the utility fountain that kept the lake filled with water. I held the gun in my hands, running my fingers over the smooth metal. Then I swung my arm back as if I was going to throw it. But somehow I couldn't let it go. Maybe because it was Chavo's or maybe for some other reason that I didn't know yet. I stood there looking at in the weak light shining on the lake from the boathouse. In the end, I put it the gun back in my backpack and zipped it up. I heard that one time they dredged the lake looking for bodies that they thought were dumped there, but all they found were a bunch of rusted weapons and empty bottles. Well, they wouldn't find this one.

After a while, people stopped talking so much about Chavo, but I was still scared they'd find out that I was there when he shot that guy. I could still feel the dead man's heavy body pinning me down on the mattress, and the wet sticky blood on my stomach and legs. I heard they'd questioned everybody he hung out with, but they never came back to me. Later they said he went back to jail because he violated his probation. I know he was locked up until last year for something else. They never found the gun he used, and of course, nobody talked. That's how it goes here.

I told myself I'd never be that stupid again, and I'd never let some guy use me like Chavo did. But with Chavo gone, I was kind of lost. I missed the attention, even if it was only lying on his bed and watching tv after he had sex with me. That was kind of like love, I thought. I wanted to

get back to selling dope, but I knew I had to stay away from 18th Street. So, I started hitting the parties and hanging out with some other homies from the Avenues. It didn't take long until I found out I was pregnant, but I really didn't know who the father was. Most of the time, I was high on the coke and weed we used when we partied. If you hung with these homies, you were expected to give it up whenever they wanted it. So, I did. I was so high all of the time that I never thought about how I'd told myself I'd never let a man use me again.

Then I had some bad luck. When I was seven months pregnant, with my big stomach popping out over the top of my sweatpants, I sold some smack to an under-age girl and her friends outside her middle school. She ended up overdosing because it wasn't cut enough, and her friends were able to identify me to the cops. Everybody remembers a pregnant drug dealer with stringy hair and dirty clothes, even a bunch of fourteen-year-olds, high out of their minds. But before they picked me up, I sold some coke to an undercover cop, who, I would have sworn was a dirty street biker.

So, there you go, I got sent up again. My surrender date was five days after Laughing Girl was born. I called her Laughing Girl, because she came out smiling, and smiled up at me the whole time until they took her away. On the day after she was born, a woman came into my room and said she was from Child Services. She let me hold my baby one last time before she took her. She told me Laughing Girl was going into foster care. I cried non-stop the next few days up until I checked into CIW for my second round. I knew better than to go in looking like a weak sister.

By the time I got out on parole, Laughing Girl didn't even know me. I heard her foster mother cried because she was praying I'd never get out and try to take her back. Laughing Girl cried too when I got her back. She wanted her foster mom, and I wasn't her. I guess we all cried together.

When I got out, I figured I'd spent enough of my life paying for my stupid mistakes, and I stopped hanging with anybody from 18th Street or the Avenues. I moved back with my mother, and I'm still there. We get along better now. She doesn't drink as much because she has bleeding ulcers. I finally got custody of Laughing Girl.

I heard Chavo did a long stretch and then was paroled. Chavo was always lucky. He got out early on his last stretch because they found that the DA hadn't turned over all the evidence to his lawyer. All the witnesses seemed to have disappeared too, so they didn't re-file charges again. His mother called every once in a while and checked in. Funny thing, she likes me, now that Chavo and I aren't together. I think she wishes Laughing Girl was his kid because she doesn't have any grandchildren.

So, here I am now, years passed, and so did a few more bad relationships. I have two more kids to raise by myself, and Laughing Girl looks like she wants to follow in my footsteps.

I didn't cry much at Chavo's funeral. Most of his family was there, even the ones he'd burned over the years. Enough tears were falling around me to make up for the ones I didn't have. I just closed my eyes and remembered everything that happened between us, our own story. It didn't hurt so much anymore. So much time had passed. I didn't even hate him. After the funeral, I went back to the house. Tonight, my mother will go out drinking with her friends, and I'll be alone with my two boys unless I can get Laughing Girl to stay in with me.

Lately, all she talks about is this guy from 18th Street, Armando. I heard he has two strikes, and he's only been out for a few months. She thinks she's in love with him.

Later after my mother went out and I put the boys to bed, I settled down in front of the tv.

Laughing Girl finally came home. She pushed the door in and staggered inside. It was almost ten o'clock. I could see she was drunk or high by the way she moved before I ever got a good look at her eyes. Giggling and holding onto the walls, she started toward the bedroom she shared with her brothers.

I yelled after her. "Don't make any noise they're sleeping. Why don't you come in here for a little while?"

"I gotta get ready," she slurred.

"Ready? Why?"

"Going out riding." She answered. "Mando's picking me up."

I got up and walked toward her. Even a few feet away, I picked up the heavy smell of alcohol and something stronger and more bitter, like the stuff they used to mix paint. No! I thought she didn't do that anymore since she went into the juvenile rehab program. I saw her a few years back, still in elementary school, sitting by the train tracks with her *cholo* friends, sniffing something they poured into a sock.

I stared at her wide glassy eyes that moved from side to side and didn't see. Her hair was matted and tangled, stiff and crunchy from the mousse that she poured on. Her eyeliner was smeared, and most of her penciled eyebrows had worn off.

I followed her to the bedroom, where she fell against the wall, trying to find the light switch. Muttering to herself, she stepped out of her tight black jeans and low-cut blouse that didn't

manage to cover her stomach and pulled out a dresser drawer. The drawer stuck, and she fell back on her butt, ending up on the floor swearing. The noise woke up my sons sleeping in a single bed. My younger one pulled the quilt over his head, trying to shut out the light and the noise.

I focused my eyes on the glare coming from the single bulb in the center of the ceiling. There was a fresh tattoo on her neck that hadn't been there the last time I'd seen her. I recognized the sign right away. And something else, a hickey, large and red, covering the space under her jawline. The hickey looked fresh. She hadn't been home in a couple of days.

"Where've you been?" I realized I hadn't seen her here for a few days. But I couldn't kid myself, she didn't come home some nights anyway. "Answer me! Where are you at night?"

Laughing Girl zipped up another pair of jeans and gave me a dirty look. "I told you before; I'm with my friends."

"You're staying with that Mando, aren't you? He's too old for you. He's just going to get you in trouble." Somehow the words seemed familiar as I said them.

She glared at me. "You don't know him. He loves me."

"He doesn't love you. He's just using you because you're young and stupid."

Laughing Girl whirled around and picked up her hand, bringing it toward my face. I stepped back, surprised.

She dropped her hands. "Leave me alone, okay? I hate it here, you and those dirty brats!" She brought her hands to her sides and walked back to the living room. "I need some money. You're supposed to give me money. That's what you get your welfare for."

"I don't have any money, I can barely pay the rent," I told her. "You can get yourself a job."

"Fuck no!" she yelled. "I'm so glad I have Mando. He said he'll give me anything I need, not to come back here. Tomorrow I'm taking my stuff and moving in with him."

"Go ahead and do it," I yelled back. "I'll report him to the cops. You're underage, and I'll call them on you too."

"You better not call anybody. Mando's friends will come after you, and your other damn kids. Grandma too."

We stood there looking at each other.

"Don't go out. Just stay here." I heard my voice begging her.

"You can't make me stay. I hate it here. I hate you." She slammed the door as hard as she could, making the walls shake. And then it was silent, except for the low hum of the television.

I sat down on the couch and stared at the wall. There would probably be quite a few "Mandos" in her life before she figured it out if she ever did. But right now, there was only this one, and I wanted him dead and gone right now. I'd seen the car he drove, and I knew more or less where he stayed. But all that could be figured out; I still knew a few homeboys from 18th Street and even a

couple from the Avenues. It was smart not to let go of your connections, even if you didn't hang with them anymore.

Chavo still owed me even if he was dead because he never paid his debt when he was alive. I'd kept my mouth shut and "held my mud," like the homies said. Maybe it was time to reach out to them and collect. Chavo's homeboys knew how to set up a rival with guns and drugs. They even did it for some unsolved murder that the cops had given up on a long time ago. They were willing to make that snitch call that was insurance that someone would get busted and sent away, especially if that someone was looking at three strikes. They still did it all the time. It was expected in the neighborhood.

I lit a cigarette and sat back. The problem was that if I asked the homeboys for their help now, to pay back Chavo's debt, I would end up owing them in the future, whenever they wanted, doing whatever they ordered. That's how it worked. Who knows what they would want me to do for them? I could end up back in prison or worse, end up dead. They might do away with my kids too if I didn't do what they said. No, I didn't want to owe them anything. I didn't want to owe anybody. I was done with that. I'd paid enough already. Chavo's debt didn't need payment.... not to me.

I went back to my small bedroom; the one I shared with Laughing Girl when she was around. I leaned all my weight against the heavy oak dresser and pushed it away from the wall. Behind the dresser, I'd dug out a piece of the linoleum that covered the floor. The space was about a foot wide, and the shoebox that I put the gun in fit just fine. The shoebox was covered with plywood, and in case anybody got that far, I'd nailed the piece of linoleum back over the space. I'd carried Mando's gun with me everywhere I'd lived so far, hiding it, just in case anybody came looking.

Just a week or so ago I figured I could finally get rid of it. So much time had passed by now. I just hadn't got around to it yet.

Under the bathroom cabinet was my rusty hammer; the one I used to nail a board over the broken part of the window in the bathroom and to hang my son's school pictures over the table in the kitchen. I bent down next to the dresser and used the claw side of the hammer to remove the nails holding the linoleum. It took me a long time, but I kept at it until I reached the shoe box.

Sitting back on my heels, I lifted out the gun and turned it over in my hands. There were enough bullets in the chamber. I unlocked the safety and examined it. It was just the way it was after Chavo used it and gave it to me.

When I was locked up pregnant, and doing my nickel, and later, on the day they took away my baby, Laughing Girl, I said there was no justice. No justice for people like us. Not unless we made it ourselves. There were a lot of things I couldn't do for my daughter, but I could do this thing right now, because I wanted something better for her, even if she didn't. But maybe she would someday.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I tell the stories of women who are marginalized in our society, and who are largely ignored in mainstream literature and cinema. I chose to focus my writing on Latina women from various walks of life and at different stages of their lives living in central Los Angeles. I too grew up in the neighborhood that I write about and have a personal identity and interest in the themes and the people who live there. I was fortunate enough to hear the stories of many of these women, which they graciously shared while I worked in the fields of law and psychology.*

The stories of these women's lives depict conflict in gender bias, experiences of exploitation, violence, and powerlessness, sometimes resulting in pain, and despair in their turbulent world. But these stories also tell of these women's celebration of life itself that empowers them and gives them the will to sustain in their turbulent world. These stories resonate on a deeply emotional level.

Smiley and Laughing Girl tells the story of a young mother who was formerly incarcerated as a pregnant teenager as she reminisces about the life she lead involved with local

gang members and sees her daughter following in her footsteps. She realizes there is only one way she knows to stop her daughter from repeating her mistakes. This story was inspired by the stories of several women who experienced the consequences of gang life as lived on the Eastside/Echo Park area of Los Angeles.

*My latest work, *A Woman's Story*, an anthology of short stories will be published in the spring of 2021, by Madville Publishers.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: See 'A Waste of Expectations'.