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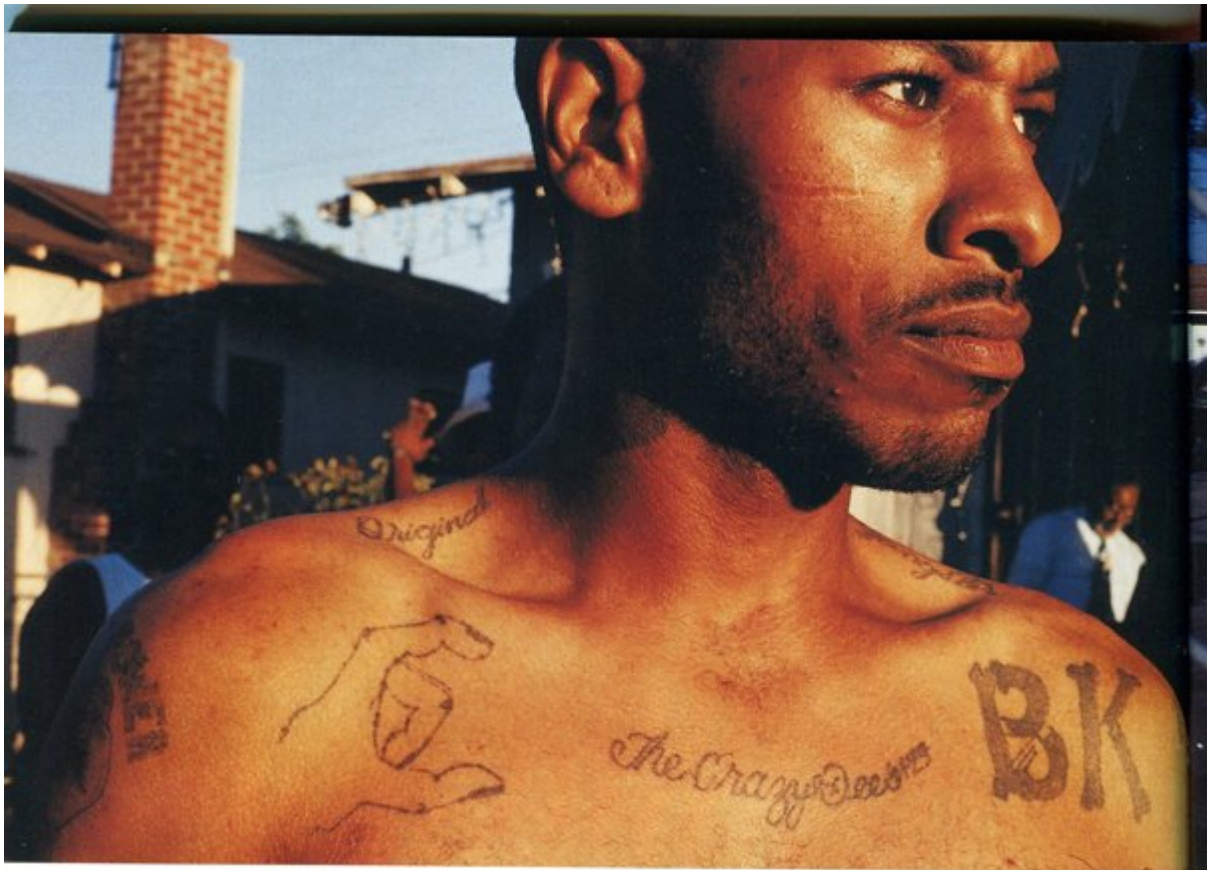
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RENEE ZELLWEGER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
WIRWICK SAINT



Esquire Magazine, February 2003. Article "Gangs of LA". Photos by Sam Faulkner



"BUSH? PRESIDENT BUSH?" The eyebrows leap. "Fuck him! Fuck the President! Bush ain't nothin' but a racist. He ain't for us. He don't mean us no good." Ghost takes a last drag on his cigarette and throws it to the ground. "I hope he drop dead."

Sitting at a picnic table in St Andrews Park, South Central LA, surrounded by members of the 800-strong Eight Tray Gangsta Crips, it is impossible to doubt the sincerity of this statement. Ghost raises an eyebrow. "You hearin' me?"

Silently, I hold up my notepad for him to inspect. "Bush racist. Fuck president" it says. "Good," he nods. Then he leans forward.

"We in a never-endin' struggle. All we tryin' to do is survive this mutha-fucka." He gestures towards the gang members around the table. "This my family and I love 'em. I gonna ride for 'em, cry for 'em. Die for 'em. I gonna kill for 'em. Whatever gonna be gonna be."

There follows a spontaneous outbreak of bizarre handshakes and a chorus of "Ma nigga!" I nod without looking up, scribbling frantically in my notepad. "Kill for 'em." I don't doubt it. I've seen the evidence.

It is 8 December 1997. Rhonda Foster is with her sons, Evan and Alec, in Darby Park, Inglewood, LA, to pick up a soccer trophy Evan has won. The sun is rapidly sinking. It's cold - or as cold as it ever gets in LA, anyway. The traffic has been bad and they have missed the prizegiving, so Rhonda straps the kids back into their child seats and apologises to Evan for not arriving earlier. "That's OK, Mom," he says.

Smiling, she starts the car, then looks up - to find three strangers staring into her windscreen. The men, Crips from the Rollin' 60s gang, are retelling for a killing that took place two hours earlier. Having failed

to locate any suitable victims, however, they have come here to take out someone wearing red - the colour of their arch enemies, the Bloods. Unable to find even that, they have now settled on the owner of the red car next to Rhonda's.

As the men draw assault weapons from their coats, Rhonda realises she had better act fast. Slipping into reverse, she hits the accelerator and the car jerks backwards. Then she stops - and turns around to make sure the children are OK. But they aren't.

In the time it has taken her to reverse, 75 rounds from a MAC-90 assault rifle have been fired. Fragments of one have grazed Alec's eyeball. Three have hit Evan square in the face.

Five years on, as she relates the story, Rhonda pauses to compose herself. "I stroked Evan's cheek and told him I was sorry that I didn't get him out of the way. The paramedic just said, 'He's in a better place, ma'am.' I said, 'You got that right.'"

Evan died wearing a Batman suit. He was seven. Rhonda smiles. "He always liked superheroes," she says.

BACK IN EIGHT TRAY TERRITORY, things are not going well. On my first night in LA I have recorded a couple of Bloods rapping into my microphone: "WeoffFUCKALLCRABS. ThisPDLBloodgangtiptopCK187 tuvenyonehundred-blood. KillincrabsBloodthatwhatwedo. Crabswannagetactive? Murderoussssssss."

Not having a clue what this means, I play it to one of Eight Tray's senior members. In order to appreciate his reaction, a brief translation is necessary. "PDL" - Pasadena Devil Lanes - is the name of this particular Blood set. "Crabs" are Crips and "TiptopCK" refers to PDL's penchant for



"WE IN A NEVER-ENDIN' STRUGGLE. ALL WE TRYIN' TO DO IS SURVIVE THIS MUTHAFUCKA. THIS MY FAMILY AND I LOVE 'EM. I GONNA RIDE FOR 'EM, CRY FOR 'EM, DIE FOR 'EM, I GONNA KILL FOR 'EM, WHATEVER GONNA BE GONNA BE"

Sign of the times Above, Crips homegirls stick up for their menfolk with the unifying "C" sign of the gang. Above left, an Eight Tray member shows off his tattoos including a C sign and BK for "Blood Killer". He was later convicted of a bank robbery, and is now serving a 20-year prison sentence

killing them (CK = Crip Killer). 187 is the police statute for "murder". "Crabs-wannagetactive?" is a challenge; "Fuckallcrabs" is pretty self-explanatory.

Hearing this stream of invective, the reaction of the Eight Tray involves a great deal of arm-waving. "Bull-muthafuckin'-SHIT! Any slob wanna come over her, fuckin' tell you - come here and say that fuckin' shit again we get in a major way. We all Slob killers. Any of the above. We anybody killers. Fuck it."

Whoops. Didn't mean to start a gang war. Say something. "You must really hate the Bloods, right?" I venture, but Little Ghost puts me straight: "No, no. Not all Crips get along and not all Bloods get along. We can't stand Sissies - and they're Crips. 60s, 90s, 40s, too. To be honest, you might find three or four other gangs that's cool with us. You might be able to find them. But for all in all, we don't give a fuck either way. We Eight Tray Gangsta. Fuck 'em."

In fact, more Crips are killed by other Crips than by Bloods, and while Crips and Bloods generally don't get along, under certain circumstances - such as in jail - the two unite against their common enemy: Messcans ("Mexicans", Hispanics). Everybody hates Messcans - and everybody knows that eventually them Messcans is gonna pay. G-Ride takes me to one side at a barbecue to whisper: "I say in the next two to three years it's coming. Black-Messcan war on the streets. Real war."

While race plays its role in gang culture, courtesy is more important. In South Central, respect has to be earned - and given. And if you don't give it to people who've earned it, you're going to end up in trouble.

Take the Rollin' 60s. At some point in the Eighties (no one can quite remember when) a 60s gang member was shot dead in Eight Tray

territory. The police took in the nearest Eight Tray for questioning. Without waiting to discover whether this guy was actually responsible for the shooting (he wasn't), the 60s broke into his house and shot his mother and little brother. The result was war.

"KILL ONE OF OURS and we'll kill one of yours" is a standard tenet for LA's gangs, but Eight Tray have honed it further. Preacher - one of Eight Tray's senior OGs ("Original Gangstas") - explains: "As soon as they finished shootin', we on them. Immediately. As soon as they finished, we get right back. They get one of ours, we get 'bout 10 of theirs. They one day - we every day. Every day - till we satisfied. They try again, we get 'bout 10 more. Till we satisfied."

Fifteen-odd years after it began, the conflict goes on, despite the fact that most of its participants aren't old enough to know why they're fighting. How many lives have been lost? Tens? Hundreds? No one keeps track.

Eight Tray members often pour the first sip of beer onto the ground in respect for fallen comrades. Some go further: Indian Girl is wearing a T-shirt with a mugshot on the back. Above it is the legend "TRAYS IN PEACE". "I just lost a homeboy," she says. "May 16th. He got out of jail that night and the next evening he got killed when they did a drive-by on us. I got shot in the butt. Ma nigga didn't make it." As night falls, our group begins to disperse. It's Saturday night and there's a party on the other side of town, but I have a previous engagement. With the enemy.

The LA Sheriff's Department patrols Compton, home to a number of gangs that delight in shooting each other: Compton Barrio T-Flats, Tree Top Pirus, Largo 36, Chicano Gangstas. The names often come from



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"A TRUCK PULLS UP AND SHOOTS THIS GUY THREE TIMES. THIRTY PEOPLE WATCHING. GUESS HOW MANY WITNESSES WE HAD? EVERYBODY WAS LIKE, 'OH, I WAS IN THE HOUSE.' NO WITNESSES. NONE. AMAZING"

Caught by the fuzz: Above, a gang suspect is arrested in the Compton area of South Central and opposite, bottom, police take note of a tattoo – a process which is used for identification and general intelligence gathering on gang activity. Opposite, top, a Saturday night riot in South Central requires some specialist equipment, and little effort is made to hide it

streets the gangs control, but sometimes no one knows the origin. There is not one member of Largo 36 who knows what "Largo 36" means.

Officers Ritchie Sanchez and Scottie Orr give us a tour of Compton, breaking off occasionally for brief exchanges with the locals ("Hey, kid – stop hittin' that dog with the golf club, will ya?"). "Why all the fighting?" I ask. "Petty stuff," answers Scott. "In the Seventies, when you had a disagreement, you either settled it, or you didn't hang around together any more. These guys, the first thing they do is they go out, get a gun and shoot each other. You interview them and it's like, 'Well, I didn't want him to kick my butt, so I shot him.'" Sanchez agrees: "Ninety per cent of the time it's about girlfriends. A lot of the time it's about disrespecting another gang. These guys pick the stupidest things to fight about."

Many of South Central's gang wars start out like kindergarten fights. Disrespecting someone's momma is a common cause of shoot-outs. Nicknames for enemy gangs – "Crabs", "Slobs", "Rice Crispies", "Sissies" – seldom rise above playground level. The difference is that here all the kids have guns. From as young as nine, gang members prove themselves by "putting in work for the set" to earn "stripes". This usually involves shooting people. Children too young to understand what they are doing are being given guns by children too young to understand what they are doing, to kill other children too young to understand what's happening.

When the police step in, no one wants to talk. Says Scott: "An ice-cream truck comes down the street. There's probably 30 people around this truck. Another truck pulls up – pick-up truck – and shoots this guy three times. Thirty people watching. Guess how many witnesses we had? Everybody was like, 'Oh, I was in the house, I heard the noise, I came

outside. I wasn't there.' So I'm like 'Well, how come you got ice cream all over your face?' No witnesses. None. Amazing."

We've just finished a pile of cheeseburgers when things start to happen: sirens, police cars, ambulances. Angel – a member of a gang that no one has even heard of – has shot Lolo, a drug addict, with an AK47. Lolo's friends have chased Angel back home, where he's handed the AK to his brother, Rudy, whose dog has just attacked someone else. Angel has now vanished. A hundred people crowd around to watch. But no one knows anything.

As Sanchez takes charge, fellow officers take the mickey out of their senior – but shorter – colleague. "Where does he get those shoes?" asks one. "Baby Gap," pipes back another. Everyone sniggers. "Jesus!" says a third. "My kid's got bigger feet than that – and he's 12!"

Then, as suddenly as it started, we're back in the car. Midnight. Time to go home. "I'm surprised that's the first one we've had," says Scott. "Nice warm night like this."

MEANWHILE, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN, the Eight Tray boys are having a little adventure of their own. On the way to the party, they are attacked by a pitbull. Automatically, the entire posse draws its weapons and shoots it dead. The next morning, talking about the incident back on Eight Tray turf, everyone is speaking at once: "The dog rushed the homie!"; "What y'all expect?"; "Everybody got heat"; "Cuz come out, like: 'Who shot ma muthafuckin' dog?'" Everyone cracks up.

One thing that everyone agrees on is that no one wants their kids to get involved with Eight Tray. Cherie-Dogg doesn't think they could



handle life on the streets the way she had to. "I been beat with bats, shot five times. I been hit with cars, seen people die. I seen people out here split open with a bullet. Been in drive-bys. Drove people in drive-bys. I seen it," she says. "I want my kids to have a better life than I had."

Unfortunately, not joining a gang doesn't guarantee that anything will be any better. That very same evening, Keelan King, 23 years old, meets up with a friend on the corner of Brynhurst and 63rd. Keelan, an aspiring rapper who has never gangbanged in his life, is supposed to be recording tracks at his cousin's house. Instead, he is shot in the neck by a complete stranger.

In a private room in Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Keelan's mother, Kathy, sits beside her son. Doctors have told her that he may have to learn to speak again. He will probably be paralysed. She doesn't care right now - she just wants him to wake up. "I know he's gonna be OK," she says, "Because I believe in Jesus. I just want him to open his eyes, say 'Momma.'" Keelan has been in a coma for five days now. She turns to him and begins to cry: "I love you. Hang in there."

As I leave the hospital, Kathy grabs my arm. "Yesterday one of the interns came up, said, 'How's your son doin?'" I said, "By the grace of God, he's hangin' in there." "Know what?" said the intern. "They just brought four more in."

THE GANGS ARE SURROGATE FAMILIES for kids whose parents are absent physically, emotionally or both. Eight Tray members are explicit in their support of one another. "For example," says Ghost, pointing at one of the homegirls, "That my sister. Not my biological sister but my sister. She

get a boyfriend and he teach her, we gonna fuck him up. Someone gonna find him in a ditch. This ain't no Mafia thing. It's just a big extra family."

It's not hard to see the attraction of gang life. Most of the children in this area have no fathers. There is no money. The schools are crap, and there's no one around to make sure they attend anyway. The place is flooded with firearms. Nobody ever makes it to college and it's widely perceived that there are no opportunities. Nobody ever breaks free. The attraction and glamour of an alternative family, whose members are willing to die for you, is strong.

Of course, there is another angle. It's one that Eight Tray are keen that I write about. We begin talking about race at a birthday party. Things hot up fast. Ghost: "My belief is, honestly, 75 per cent of the white people in this country don't give a fuck about blacks. They look at us like we second-class citizens, like we don't got no place being here. Don't get me wrong: I ain't saying all white people are bad. But the majority of them are. All they want us to do is go to jail."

Now gang members from all around start interrupting. Ray: "We don't want everything. We just want you to treat us fair. Treat me how you would treat your brother or your sister. How you would treat your loved one. Get to know me before you judge me." Another Eight Tray: "We seen as the lowest scumbuckets in the whole world! That's how they see us!" G-Ride pipes up: "A group of black men is a gang. But a group of white men is just a group."

Ghost, who by now has become a spokesman of sorts, sums up. "White society is made for blacks to fail. Made for us to wind up in the system. Police ain't gonna come here, stop no shootins. It's just another dead



"THE ONLY WAY THINGS IS GONNA CHANGE IS WAR. IN THE STREETS OF AMERICA. WORLD WAR THREE AIN'T GONNA BE IN AFGHANISTAN. IT'S GONNA BE RIGHT HERE. WE THE REAL AMERICAN SOLDIERS HERE NOW"

Territorial army Above, one Eight Tray member shows off his allegiance to their local hangout while watching a baseball game. Opposite, the threat of violence is rarely far away for Tiny Football (foreground) and friends, even when they're chilling out

gang member to them, another dead nigger. That's how they look at us. You either dead or you in jail. Preferably in jail, cos that job security."

Generations of discrimination have led to such a profound mistrust of White America that virtually all problems - drugs, guns, drive-bys - are blamed on the white "conspiracy". But there is no conspiracy. What there is, is an entire subsection of society, abandoned, ignored and uncared-for - shipwrecked, essentially, at the heart of the nation's second-largest city. No hope. No future. No one cares about Crips - until they shoot a white person.

They have a point. But then, look at them: most are tooled up. All are smoking dope. More than a few are dealers and the rest are card shysters, credit-card tricksters, car thieves, robbers and pimps. Why? They're unemployed. Ghost has applied numerous times to start up a small business but needs assistance. He can't get it. He has a criminal record. They all have criminal records. Because of this, jobs are hard to come by - and the Devil makes work for idle hands.

"I write out my business proposal just the way you want it. I show you my certificates in business, accounting, law, and you still tell me I can't get it? Fuck you. I gonna get it any way I can. If that involves sellin' dope, knockin' muthafucka on the head, goin' through his pockets to feed my family, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna feed my family cos my son ain't gonna go hungry. My son five years old. I'll be damned if he gonna go hungry." So they get into crime. They get caught. They go to prison. And the prospect of legitimate work recedes ever further. More proof, to them, of the existence of the white conspiracy.

And none of this disaffected group is allowed to vote. Ever. Felons

aren't, in the state of California. What happens when the stigmatised, marginalised members of society are stigmatised and marginalised even more? South Central is finding out the hard way.

"The only way things is gonna change," says Ansin, "is war. In the streets of America. World War Three ain't gonna be in Afghanistan. It's gonna be right here in our own backyard. We the real American soldiers here now. Look around you."

Is this inevitable? It seems so. "We oppressed. This all we got. White folk got us in prison in invisible gates. Right now, they got us like animals. They throwin' meat to us to feed us. But we ready to break out of the gates. We gonna break 'em down. We comin' OUT. That's why there's gangbangin'. Because we oppressed."

It's late and the tequila is long gone. Time to go. A final word, perhaps, for your esteemed President? The mighty Eight Tray responds. "Fuckin' yeah: from Eight Tray Gangsta to President Bush: it gonna be time for him to pay the piper for what him and his ancestors done to my muthafuckin' people. It might not come in my time - but it gonna come - for what him and his ancestors done to my people. They gonna pay the piper."

Ghost laughs. "Kiss my black ass!"

Contrary to expectation, Keelan King made a miraculous recovery and is now back home and walking, and learning to speak again. He remembers nothing of the shooting. The perpetrators have not been caught. Rhonda and Ruett Foster, Evan's parents, have set up a charity, the Evan Leigh Foster Foundation, dedicated to teaching imprisoned gang members to come to terms with their past, and to assist them in finding jobs on release