

**I**

## TORTILLA

### FLATS

We came to the bottom of the canyon of Alum Rock Park. There was a small booth where we had to pay 50 cents to be able to enter. We paid and made a left to the Tortilla Flats, driving a quarter of a mile farther.

As we drove into the flat area, I saw that it was a quarter of a city block parking area. It was hard dirt and gravel. Around the outside of the parking area, it was wooded with oak trees, with a few picnic tables and barbecue pits. Completely around the area were parked cars backed into the parking spaces. There were cool, low-rider cars and some older vehicles. There were even some psychedelic-painted cars and vans with hippies in them. There were young people, males and females, in all the cars or standing around them. They were listening to music, talking to one another, and drinking beer. The entire center portion was clear of cars. There were vehicles, but they were not parked. They were stopped while people talked to each other, and then they moved. The restrooms were located where we first drove into the parking area. When the young people used the restrooms, they stopped and talked to other people they knew.

Dennis asked, "Hey, where do you guys want to park?"

"I don't know," Phil answered. "Let's drive slow in front of the cars first to see who's here, and then we'll park."

"Sounds good to me, Phil."

We drove into the area slowly. As we drove in front of the cars, everyone in the car or standing would turn to see who we were. In the first two cars the people were inside. We really couldn't tell who they were.

In the next car, there were three girls standing next to it; one was sitting inside with the door open. In the next one a guy stepped out of his car as we passed; his shirt was unbuttoned. Dennis slowed to a stop. The

guy came to the window on the passenger side.

“Hey, Dennis, how’s it going, man?”

“Hey, man, what’s up? Where are the parties today?”

The guy laughed and said, as he looked around, “This is the party for today, man. Want a joint?”

“No, that’s OK, Danny. I don’t want to get busted with my partner. He just got out. He was locked up for a while. Thanks.”

“Órale, ese,” the guy greeted me.

“Hey, man. I’m Art Rodriguez.”

“Yeah, I remember you. You were one of the guys who killed them guys by Happy Hollow Park, right? I remember.”

Happy Hollow was on Keys Street. We had been in a fight, and 2 guys were killed three years previously. There were 11 guys on our side that night, three years ago, and about three times more of the guys whom we were fighting. However, no one ever knew who killed whom. No one told.

“Yeah, man, I was locked up for that.” I was never scared to say it. If anyone ever had a problem with it, I was always ready to go toe-to-toe with them.

“Yeah, ese, I was there at that party that night but left earlier. Hey, ese, I’m glad I left; or I might be getting out of jail, too,” the guy said as a joke.

I didn’t say anything, just nodded my head and took a drink of my beer. I didn’t think it was funny, just glad I was out of jail now and didn’t want to look back. During the three years I was locked up, I never thought about the damage and hurt we caused the families of the guys who were killed.

Dennis offered the guy a beer. He said they had a lot of beer in their car.

“I’ll talk to you in a while when you park, man. I’ll walk to your short.” A short was one of the terms we used when we were referring to a car.

“All right, Danny, take care, man.”

We started to move again. As we drove by the next few cars, we didn’t know anyone. A few cars down there were two guys. One had his foot on the bumper, and the other was listening really seriously to what the first one was saying. They both stopped talking and turned to look at us.

Dennis said to Phil, "Look, Phil. Look who's here."

Phil stared hard at them. The guy with his foot on his bumper lowered his foot and turned all the way around, staring at us. Dennis stopped the car, put it in neutral, and started to open his car door.

"I'm going to get him right now, man!"

"Cool down, Dennis," Phil said, "There'll be plenty of other times to finish the fight."

I knew they weren't friends. I put my beer on the floor, ready to get out of the car, wanting to back up Dennis. Dennis closed his door.

"Yeah, you're right, Phil. Next time."

I reached down for my beer. The two guys looked worried because they thought they had a fight on their hands. They stared at us as we left.

I thought, "I'm ready right now!" Right then I felt the urge to fight. I loved to fight, but I thought, "I better cool it right now. I'm out to have fun. I don't want to mess things up right away for myself."

As we passed, I asked, "Who was that? Did you have a fight with him?"

Phil answered, "Yeah, we did. At a party a few weeks ago, him and his friends got smart with us. We were just about to throw the first blow, but things got out of hand. The people who lived there asked us to leave right away. We told him that we would take care of him another time."

"I wanted to make that time right now," Dennis said. Phil laughed.

Dennis laughed, too, and continued, "We could have; but I think since this is Art's first time out with us, we should be careful. I don't want to take him back home and have his mother be mad with us for getting him all roughed up."

"No, don't worry about my mother. She won't say anything."

"I don't know," Dennis said. "I don't want to take any chances right now."

We drove past a few more cars. A little farther ahead were four young, pretty girls. When they saw Dennis' Impala, they waved and started to walk in our direction. Dennis stopped. Two girls went to Phil's side, and two went to Dennis' side.

"Dennis! Hey! How are you?"

"I'm good! How about you girls. How have all of you been? What's going on? Any parties today?"

"Not yet," the girl on Dennis' side answered. "It's too early still. Maybe later there will be. Someone here will tell us where they are. Are

you staying, Dennis; or are you just cruising by?"

"I don't know. It depends on what I can get from you!" Dennis replied as he laughed.

"What you can get from us? You mean what we can get from you!" the girls laughed. So did we.

She continued, "Do you have any beer?"

Dennis smiled and asked me for a beer. "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do." I passed him the beer, and he handed it to her.

"Thanks a lot, Dennis! You are so nice!"

"Want a beer?" Phil asked the girls on his side.

"Hey, yeah!" one of them answered.

Phil looked back at me and said, "Hey, Art, give me a beer for all the girls."

I took out three beers and passed them to Phil. "Here you go," he said.

One of the girls looked at me and asked, "Hey, who is that?"

Phil introduced me. "Art, this is Teresa; Ruby; and, on that side, Joann and Tracy. I would ask them to get in with us, but they are way too young. They sure don't look like it, but they really are."

"No we aren't!" Teresa exclaimed.

"Yeah, you are. How old are you, fourteen?" Phil asked.

Teresa looked embarrassed, "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Dennis answered and continued. "Now if their sisters were here, then we would take them for a ride."

"Yeah, she would go with you anytime."

I didn't say anything because I had been out of jail for only a week. I was shy around the girls.

Dennis said, "OK, girls, time for us to move on. Have fun."

All four girls, at the same time, moved away from the car and yelled out, "Bye!" One of them said, "Thanks!"

We pulled away from them.

There was a space between cars on the back side of the parking area. Dennis said, "We'll park here in the shade. We could drive all the way around and come back, but this parking space might be taken."

"That's cool," I replied.

Dennis backed his car, gunned his pipes, and turned off the engine. We sat in our car drinking our beer. We saw some guys on the other side start yelling at others in another car. I said, "Hey, man, there is going to

be a show for us in a little bit.”

A cop car came cruising slowly into the Flats. We noticed that about every ten minutes or so they would pass to make sure everyone was behaving. When the cop entered the Flats, everyone hid their beers or whatever they were drinking. The cop didn't stop to check out anyone. If they would have, in almost every car they would have found something for which to bust them. The drinking law in California was twenty-one years. The cops would take our beer or make us dump it.

From the other side I saw a hippie walking toward us. Dennis said, “There comes Johnny.”

So many things had changed over the time I was imprisoned. Before I went to jail, there were no hippies. Now I saw them all over town.

Phil answered, “Yeah, there he comes. I wonder what he has to offer us today.”

“What does he have?” I asked.

Dennis answered, “Hey Art, you remember Johnny Ramirez?”

“Yeah, I know Johnny.”

“That's him. He turned hippie.”

I couldn't believe it!

“That's Johnny?” I answered, shocked. Johnny used to be a loco. He was a tough guy, a fighter. The last time I saw him, he was going to get some guy for giving him a dirty look. He used to wear khakis pants and Pendleton shirts. Now he was a hippie, dressed in a long gown, with long hair, a headband, and sandals. This wasn't the same Johnny I knew.

“Yeah, man,” Phil commented. “A lot of our old friends have changed. They're hippies now. They live here and go and spend a few days on the road or at Haight Ashbury in San Francisco.”

“Oh, yeah? What's over there?”

“Man, Art, we have to take you there! It's really cool.”

Johnny approached our car, came to Dennis' window, and said, “Peace. How are you guys doing, groovy?”

“Hey, Johnny, how is the flower child today?”

“I'm happy, full of love and peace. Want some?”

Phil asked, “What do you have?”

“I have everything. LSD, Grass, STP—whatever you want. I have it on sale right now. I have White Lightning, and you know how good that is. You'll be hip to the world with this, man.”

“Hey, Art, you ever try White Lightning?”

“No, not yet. But I think I’ll pass on it right now.”

“Art Rodriguez, is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me Johnny. How you been? Looks like you changed, man.”

“Yeah, this is the life. We’re all together and all one, full of love. We want the world to be full of peace. Join us, Art. Free love and you’ll have peace.”

I laughed not knowing what to say. This wasn’t the same Johnny I knew in school. It seemed as if someone transferred into his body, and I was talking to someone else.

“I’m here, man. And I do have peace,” I said.

“When did you get out, Art?”

“Last week, man. Finally home!”

“You know what, Johnny,” Dennis said, “I think we’ll pass right now. We’re cool.”

“All right. If you change your mind, let me know. I’ll be over there with my brothers. Hey, when you leave, and if I don’t catch a ride yet, can you take me down to my pad?”

“Sure,” Dennis answered.

“OK, let me know when you leave. Peace,” Johnny said as he walked away and back to where his friends were parked.

At that time we saw the same guys on the other side of the Flats starting to really get angry with guys from a few cars away. One guy from the first car was standing in front of the vehicle as he yelled, cussed, and shook his fist at the other person. From the other car one of the persons stepped in front of his vehicle. His friends all followed and stood as if waiting for a fight to start.

There were two girls in the second car. From where we sat, it appeared as if they were upset and were telling their boyfriends to stay back and not to say anything in return. There were four guys standing in front of the second vehicle. One of them started walking fast toward the guy who was yelling.

I commented, “Looks like he’s not going to take it anymore.”

“Yeah, I would’ve gone after him when he first yelled, right away, man,” Dennis said.

“Me too,” Phil confirmed.

“Yeah, so would I. Well, that’s what drinking will do to you,” I commented and continued. “Beer makes you really brave, braver than you

already are!” Phil and Dennis laughed and agreed.

The three other guys from the second car, with beer bottles in their hands, were right behind their friend, ready to fight. The group of five persons from the first car also started walking toward the four guys to meet them.

“Hey, man, here they go!” I said, waiting for a good show.

The first guy from the second car approached the lead guy who was doing all the yelling. From 15 feet he threw his beer bottle hard and fast. The bottle hit the person he was aiming for on the forehead, and the victim’s head tilted back with the impact. He stopped and reached up, grabbing his head as if he were in a lot of pain.

“One down,” I said. Dennis and Phil didn’t say anything. They didn’t want to miss a second of the show we were having.

All the other guys from both sides threw their beers, some cans, and some bottles. Everyone started fighting. There was dust everywhere from the commotion all around them. We saw one guy jabbing in and out, in and out as he threw punches. The person he was jabbing stood and took the beating without hitting back. Two of the others from the first car were fighting with one guy who was dancing around in a large area, exchanging blows with the both of them. Two others were wrestling on the ground. By this time the girls were out of the vehicle and crying for them to stop. The first guy who was hit with the beer bottle recouped and started throwing blows at anyone in front of him. From where we sat, it appeared he even hit one of his own friends. It was crazy!

The fight lasted a minute-and-a-half, which is a long time when you are fighting. A police car drove into the Flats. The cop turned on his siren and flashing lights, even though he was only a few yards away.

When the people who were fighting heard the siren, all but the two owners of the cars and the girls took off running. The owners of the cars and the girls stayed to face the music. One of these guys was the person who first received the bottle to his forehead.

The cop stayed in his car for a few seconds as he radioed for help. A girl handed a cloth to the guy with the bleeding forehead to press against his wound. The cop stepped out of his police car and approached the girls and guys.

“Well, it’s over. You guys want to leave? In a little while there’s going to be a lot of cops here, and the fun will be over. They’ll probably want to interview everyone here. Should we go?” Dennis asked.

“Yeah, let’s go. We’ll cruise around and see what we find,” Phil answered.

“Yeah, that’s cool,” I answered. “If we stay here, they might take away our beer; and we don’t want that to happen.”

Dennis started his engine and gunned his pipes; so Johnny, our hippie friend, would know we were leaving. The cop turned around and looked at us. “Uh, oh, I think I got the wrong person’s attention.”

We pulled out of the parking space and drove to where Johnny was. He came out and approached the passenger side of our car. “Peace. You leaving already?”

“Yeah, we’re going to go, man. We don’t want to be here when all the cops come,” Dennis replied.

“I think I’ll stay. I’ll catch a ride from someone else later. Are you sure you don’t want any acid? I have good stuff!”

“No, man. Anyway, there are going to be too many cops here in a few minutes. OK, Johnny, we’ll see you later, man.”

“Peace,” Johnny said as he walked away.

Dennis turned his head to look at me and said, “Hey, Art, is there anything to cover the beer back there?”

“Yeah, there’s a coat or something back here on the floor.” I picked it up. It was a coat.

“Good, here is my beer.”

Phil handed me his beer also. Dennis insisted, “Cover all the beer under it, just in case that cop wants to stop us. We don’t want him to see the beer.”

“OK,” I replied as I covered our stash.

Once I was done, Dennis stepped on the gas and started moving slowly in the lowered, light brown 64 Impala. As we made our way to the exit of the Flats, the police officer turned, looked at us, and looked back at the people he was interviewing. The cop told all of them to stay right where they were. He took a few steps toward us and put his hand up, indicating for us to stop. Dennis stopped the car. We had a large audience because everyone at the Flats had their eyes on us. Some of them were probably also thinking of leaving.

“Where you boys going?” he asked, as his eyes scanned all of us and the interior of the car, including the covered beer on the back floor. I hoped the cop wouldn’t give us a bad time. I didn’t want to end up fighting with a cop and going back to jail.



“We’re leaving, Officer, going home,” Dennis replied.

“Did you see what happened here?”

“No, Officer, we didn’t.”

“What do you mean? You were parked across from here and had to see what was going on.”

“Officer, we didn’t see anything. What else can I say?”

“OK, you boys be careful; and don’t get into any trouble.” The cop knew we were no part of the fight and were not guilty of anything, even though he knew we were lying about seeing the fight.

We drove slowly out of the Flats. As we moved down the road, a cop car approached, flashing lights and siren sounding. As he went by our car, his brake lights illuminated.

Dennis’ Impala attracted a lot of attention because of its appearance. It was lowered with deep chrome rims and really looked cool. The cop was looking at us in his rear view mirror as he almost came to a full stop. He was talking on the radio. Then the brake lights went off, and he continued down the road.

As we went by the pay booth, we turned left, driving into the main part of the park. There was another cop racing down the road toward the Flats.

“Hey, man, I think something else must have happened down there. There’s too many cops for that little fight,” I said.

“No,” Phil answered. “They make a big thing out of nothing. That’s just the way they are.”

The main part of Alum Rock Park had a cool, running creek between the grassy section and the large parking lot. There were little bridges made of stone crossing over to the parking lot. We saw people with their coolers, boxes, and picnic baskets crossing over to spend the afternoon. We drove slowly. It brought back to mind many times we as a family spent our days at Alum Rock Park.