

Bird in a Cage: Maria Reyes



from On the Record Curriculum

1 The court officer stepped into the lobby and called her name. *Here we go*, Maria thought. She followed the officer inside and walked the lonely center aisle to the witness stand.

2 The previous spring, Maria had been jumped by several members of a rival gang. She and her best homeboy, Paco, had tracked them down, and Paco had shot one of them. It was payback, the oldest rule of gang life.

3 A member of the rival gang had been arrested for the murder, and now he was on trial. Maria and Paco had been subpoenaed as witnesses, and they both planned to testify that the innocent defendant had been the shooter.

4 When Maria was seated in the witness stand, she looked around the courtroom. One side was filled with her homies, the members of her gang. They had pledged their lives to protect each other. The members of the rival gang, who sat on the other side of the courtroom, had made the same pledge to their fellow members.

5 As Maria scanned the courtroom, she made eye contact with an African American woman. The woman had tears on her face and a young daughter on her lap. Could she be—?

6 Maria was in court to testify that an innocent guy was guilty of murder, and here was his mother. Maria tried to push the image from her head. She had a job to do. She was there to fulfill the code of her family and the gang—protect your own. But she couldn't help seeing her own mother in the woman's sad face, and herself as a little girl.

7 *Protect your own.* It was that simple.

8 Maria looked over at Paco. She noticed he didn't look nervous at all. He was completely positive that she would lie to protect him even if it meant sending an innocent man to prison. Her whole gang expected her to identify the rival gang member as the shooter.

9 She could hear her father's advice ringing in her head. He had grown up in the gang and remained loyal, even in prison. He had already told her she needed to lie for Paco.

10 But recently Maria had felt her loyalty shaken. New ideas were taking root, planted by new friendships at school and the books her English teacher kept assigning. Maria had begun asking herself questions: *Does it have to be this way—hating and fighting and shooting and dying? Could there be something better? Could I choose something better?*

11 But if she told the truth, she knew she might pay a terrible price. If she named Paco as the murderer, her own gang would probably turn on her. They might even kill her.

12 Maria tried to act cool as the lawyers began laying down questions. "Why did those guys attack you? Where were you on the night of the shooting? Who were you with? Maria answered each one. Her gaze shifted between the two sides of the courtroom.

- 13 The questions pushed Maria toward the point of no return. Should she uphold the code of the gang? Or should she speak the truth and deal with the consequences?
- 14 Lives—including her own—hung in the balance.
- 15 For Maria, joining the gang was never really a choice. Gang life was part of her world, from her earliest memories on. She had been born in East Los Angeles, a tough neighborhood with a deep history of poverty and crime. East L.A. was a gritty, ragged place. Swirls of gang graffiti layered bridges and walls. Steel bars and metal gates sealed off houses and shops from break-ins. Broken beer bottles sparkled in the gutters, and weeds overran empty lots.
- 16 But Maria didn't know anything different. East L.A. was home.
- 17 Her dad and grandfather were *veteranos*—veterans in their Latino gang. Her dad had once dreamed of being a boxer, but most dreams died in East L.A. Her mother was a great cook and a hard worker, but she never got past second grade.
- 18 For her fifth birthday, Maria had hoped for a mountain bike. Instead she opened a box to find a pair of shiny red boxing gloves and a note from her dad: "Life is tough. When it knocks you down, I want you to get up swinging." Maria took his words to heart.
- 19 Shortly after that birthday, her family visited her grandparents' house. Her mother tried to catch Maria to braid her hair, maybe even put a dress on the little tomboy. Maria escaped by climbing the tree in the front yard, out of her mom's reach.
- 20 She was still hiding in the tree when she heard sirens closing in. Her older cousin was coming up the street. She liked him a lot. He was tall and strong and told her bedtime stories. As he approached the house, Maria heard five shots. Her cousin fell to the concrete, shot by police for reasons that never became clear. He died shortly after, another victim of gang life in East L.A.
- 21 Maria was still in grade school when the violence hit even closer to home. Her father was arrested for a gang-related crime he didn't commit. The judge sentenced him to ten years in a maximum-security prison.
- 22 Overnight, Maria's mother was left alone to raise three young kids. She worked three jobs, day and night. She cleaned the homes of rich people, scrubbed toilets at big hotels, and sewed fancy clothes in sweatshop factories. Even so, she struggled to pay the bills and keep food on the table. "We don't have the luxury of crying," Maria remembered her grandfather saying. "Because people like us, if we started, we'd be crying for a lifetime."
- 23 Maria wasn't much for crying, anyway. Whatever sadness or despair she felt quickly turned to anger. She would fight with anyone, no matter the punishment. In fourth grade, she was expelled from a school for punching a teacher.
- 24 Maria was short, but by age 11 she had proven she was plenty tough. She was sitting on the porch one summer evening when a member of her father's gang walked up. "Do it now?" he asked her.
- 25 Maria nodded. She wasn't scared. She didn't even feel excited. Joining the gang was just the next step in growing up, and it was time to get it done. She was about to get "jumped in"—endure a major beating to earn her place in the gang.

26 Gang members gathered in an alley across the street from Maria's house. For the first round, a group of older girls circled around her. Maria knew she wasn't supposed to fight back. That was the custom. But when someone slugged her in the nose, her instincts kicked in. She threw a punch.

27 She had broken the rules. The leader added extra time to the first-round beating.

28 For round two, gang members formed two facing lines—ten *cholos* on the right, ten *chicas* on the left. Maria's mission was to pass between them. This time she could return the punches and kicks. But she had to be standing at the end.

29 She strode into the human tunnel. She ducked and battled while taking blow after blow. She fell near the end and someone stomped on her leg. She fought her way to her feet and stumbled to the finish.

30 To Maria, the ten-minute ordeal felt like it had taken two hours. Her nose was broken. One of her eyes was swelling shut. At the hospital, doctors found she had a broken arm and leg. But the pain was worth it—she was now a warrior like her dad. She belonged to the gang, and the gang belonged to her.