

Love Captures Former Gangster's Heart

"It was for a time completely perfect," Mondo says of his early childhood. His extended family lived together in a large home in Central America. "I always had cousins to play with, an aunt or uncle to give me a hug or tell me a joke. Every evening, we all were together for dinner." His father, a coffee plantation owner, would take him everywhere, play soccer with him and come to all his games. "He was my hero, he was everything to me."

That changed abruptly one night, when six-year-old Mondo saw a side to his father he didn't know existed. He woke to hear his dad yelling terrible things at his mom, Silvia, while kicking and beating her. His little eyes widened at what happened next. "He picked up a nearby broom and began hitting her over and over and over. My father – my hero, the man I had idolized, whose voice had always been a peaceful source of comfort to me – had exploded." What his dad said to his mom next broke his young heart. "I don't want them anymore," referring to Mondo and his slightly older sister, Laura. "Those words haunted and tortured me for years, to the point I said to myself, 'When I grow up, if I ever see him again, I'm going to kill him.'"

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Silvia knew her husband would eventually kill her, so she took the two children and escaped. With the help of relatives and kind strangers, they moved 12 times over the next year, all the while trying to immigrate to the United States. Born in L.A., Silvia was already a citizen; the kids, however, needed papers. After a year of constant upheaval, the approval was

finally granted, and a close friend paid for their flights to California.

The parking lot of their first apartment building is where eight-year-old Mondo first witnessed gang violence, as five gang members “corrected” another one by beating him to a pulp. “While I felt the fear, I also felt a rush of adrenaline and a sense of power.” Deeply wounded by his father’s rejection and the insecurity of recent years, he vowed that one day, he’d have that kind of power and no longer let others hurt him. Those gang members lived in his building and protected the other residents – for a fee from the managers. As often as he could, little Mondo hung around them in the parking lot. He thought they were cool and nice, not realizing they were grooming him to be one of them someday.

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A few years later, when Mondo was just 11, he was initiated into the gang through a beating that left him broken and bleeding, but respected. This gang was one of the largest and most violent in L.A., and it made young Mondo swell with pride to be affirmed by older males. “It promised to fill the holes in my soul while simultaneously pouring gasoline on the coals of anger and hate that were burning deep inside me.”

Through his teens, Mondo increasingly took on the identity and adopted the culture of the gang. He had guns pointed at his face, was stabbed multiple times, witnessed things he wouldn’t have dreamed of as a boy, and nearly lost his life. Though he enjoyed the respect and brotherhood of the other members, he knew deep down that they were all covering up hurt. “Behind the door we kept tightly closed, there was a broken little boy dealing with emotions, dealing with abandonment issues, dealing with pain, and wondering, ‘Who am I?’ We all knew we were damaged.” By the time he’d been in the gang for seven years, he started to question it all. “What used to be fun

wasn't fun anymore. Life became stagnant. Nothing seemed fulfilling. There was a struggle going on inside me." {eo}

To purchase Mondo's book, visit .

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