

I Escaped a Violent Gang

#1 - What is a memoir?

A Memoir as Told to Cate Bailey

Sometimes a true story can be more powerful than the most creatively written one. This true tale may be one. When Ana was 11 years old, she joined a hard-core gang in Long Beach, California. Below, in her own words, is the dramatic story of how she got out. She asked that we not use her real name or the name of her gang because she still fears for her safety and the safety of her family.

NOTE: Due to the mature content of this real story, you may wish to only share it with older listeners.

Gang members don't snitch on each other. That is the motto I was raised on. My dad once went to jail for something he didn't do because he wouldn't turn in a "brother." So when I was called to the witness stand that fateful summer day, I was planning to lie.

Paco, my main man from our Latino gang, was on trial. I'd seen him shoot and kill a teenage boy. John, a member of a rival African-American gang, was also on trial. John was completely innocent. I was the only eyewitness, so what I said would determine which one went to jail.

The lawyer started asking me questions. I saw Paco sitting confidently at the defendant's table. He was calm because he was sure I would lie. I looked at John, and then John's mother. She was crying because it looked like her son was going to jail for a crime he didn't commit.

I started thinking about my mom and all the times she cried—when I got beat

up, when my brother was arrested, when my dad got stabbed and shot at. I forgot about gang rivalries and prejudice. John's mother's tears became my mother's tears. I just wanted my mom to stop crying.

My eyes got watery and something happened inside of me. It went against everything I'd ever been taught my whole life. I told the truth. I said, "Paco did it!"

That was in 1994, when I finally got out of the gang. I couldn't go back after testifying against Paco. I was 15. But my story starts way before then.

I was raised in gangs. My father was in a gang; my brother was in a gang; my uncles and cousins were in gangs. I didn't know anything else. I thought drive-bys, drug deals, and beatings were normal.

When I was 5 years old, I saw one of my uncles shot and killed by a member of a rival gang. It took me a while to understand what had happened. I'd seen many people get shot before, but they were always taken to the hospital and then

#2 - Copy this line & write your reaction to it.