

# George

**G**ARFIELD HIGH SCHOOL IN 1947 seemed to be a place where every ethnic group was represented in large, rowdy swaths. Among all the different groups, there were the black kids, the Jewish kids, the white kids, and the Filipino kids.

But of all the groups that were vying for dominance, the most feared by far, were the Mexican kids, led by the most menacing guy any of us had ever seen. Caesar Montoya was as thick as a phone booth with gigantic, bulging muscles, a mean scowl, short, cropped hair and dark sunglasses. You just looked at him wrong and he would spin out and make your life miserable. I was scared to death of him—everybody was. Caesar and his straight-faced gang would do a slow roll through the halls, making getting from class to class largely a process of staying out of their way and never being seen. I would see guys being pushed up against lockers or thrown into trash cans all the time. I just hoped and prayed that I wouldn't be next.

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I was a skinny, white sophomore who had met a stunning beauty at my church youth group. Selena Gallegos was a captivating, rail thin, light-skinned, Mexican curly-head that seemed to be talked about everywhere you went. At the church youth group, everyone would be carrying on a normal conversation until she walked in the room, and suddenly, everyone, whether they were looking at her nor not, was aware that Selena was there. Or was that just me?

Little did I know that because she was the most stunning girl most of us had ever seen, it was dangerous for any of us too get too close. I was unaware of that at first. When I told a couple of my friends that I began dating her, they looked at me with fear in their eyes. As soon as the news of my courtship of Selena would hit the Mexican gang, my friends would warn me, I would have to run for my life.

“You fool,” they would say. “You, a white guy dating one of theirs? You’d have to be crazy to think you’re going to get away with it.”



To visit her, I would have to walk all the way to her house in the Mexican neighborhood about five miles away. One late afternoon after visiting her, I was walking home when all of a sudden, I see a brown '39 Chevy with about five Spanish-looking fellows inside. They were cruising down the street in the same way they cruised the halls: mean and slow. As I crossed the street, they passed right behind me.

Suddenly I hear something like, “Hey, there he is!”—as if not only did they know who I was, but where I had just been.

So the car zips down the street and skids into a U-turn to come back and find me. I take off like a bolt running my flimsy white tennis shoes down that sidewalk as fast as they could go. I turned the corner to the right and just kept running not having any idea where they were. I turned right down an ally and began running toward the street where they first saw me—that’s where, I figured, they would suspect me the least.

When I came to the street, I decided I would dash across it. I flew to the other side of the street and wouldn’t you know it, they were stopped at that corner still looking around. They saw me, jumped out of the car and came running!

They were calling out my name as well as few other choice words and now I was really running for my life. I came to the next street and decided to turn



left. I bolted down that street hoping there was a policeman or somebody who could help me.

Suddenly, a light blue '42 Ford pulls up next to me as I'm running and about to pass out. "Need a ride?" I hear a voice say. I look over and it's Caesar Montoya driving by himself and brandishing a rather sincere look on his face. I didn't even know he knew who I was.

Panting heavily, I looked in his car as if it might have been a trick. I was completely confused but had no time to think it through. "Yeah, sure," I said, trying to act cool while being unable to breathe. Did he have any idea that his friends were running me down just around the corner? Did he not know about Selena?



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I jumped in his car and he moved his Ford slowly down the road. "C'mon man, step on it!" I said under my breath.

We basically said nothing to each other all the way to my house. I jumped out and said, "OK, well thanks a lot."

"No problem," he said, like he was the world's nicest guy. Then he took off.

I walked into the house, sat down and said to myself, "What just happened?"