

El Peleonero

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Alan McMann was a tough white kid at Sharp Elementary School in Pacoima, California in the late 50's. Pacoima then was a poor, mostly white working class neighborhood in the Northeast portion of the San Fernando Valley. I was frightened by Alan. He was a freckled white kid who had a loud, aggressive way about him that intimidated me. He wore dirty, blue jean pants and a worn blue jean cowboy jacket that fastened with brass buttons at the waist. My mother warned me about kids like Alan.

"M'hijo, ten cuidado con los Okis. Son muy cochinos y peleoneros."

Sometimes when I was not cleaning our yard as I was supposed to, mom would say that people would think that our house was "una casa de Okis." Or sometimes I came home dirty after having played in the empty field next door. My mother scolded me, telling me with disappointment that I looked like I was from "una casa de Okis."

Alan was smaller than I was, but when he walked around he seemed bigger. He was like a little game rooster, walking around, waiting for somebody to look at him the wrong way, and ready to jump into any fight, no matter who started it. Alan struck fear in me and in other kids that were not popular or athletic. I avoided Alan and did not feel safe when he was around. Alan was a little bully.

I was very dark and small compared to the white kids in my school, whose pink, freckled skin seemed to turn red in the hot sun of the San Fernando Valley. My hair was thick, black and stood up on end despite my efforts to grease it down with gobs of pungent Three Flowers pomade. The sweet scent was overpowering and the pomade seemed to melt and make my neck glisten in the hot summer sun. I tried to flatten my hair down by wearing on my head an old pair of women's nylons that had been cut and tied to the size of a skull cap. I wore the nylon cap over my head as I slept every night. In the morning my hair was flattened down against my scalp, but it was still thick and straight. I made my hair lie flat against my scalp, but it had not lost its straightness and it appeared like sharpened, pointed cactus thorns, treacherously waiting to stick and prick unsuspecting hands. I combed my hair straight back, and some of the kids called me wolf man because of the way my hair looked.

The surfer look was big in Southern California, and all of the white kids wanted this look, with their tight white Levi pants, short sleeve paisley shirts, and slightly long blond or bleached hair that was combed to the right and slightly over their faces, carelessly covering their eyes. This was the look that you needed to belong to the "in crowd." I had the tight white Levi pants and the short sleeve paisley shirts, but I could not have the slightly long blond or bleached hair. The next best thing for me to do was to comb my own thick, severely straight black hair to the side, as I tried to have "the look."

After being picked by Alan once again, I sent for a self-defense kit by mail order with

money that my dad had paid me for helping him cut the plastic cover off the copper wires he brought home from work and later sold the metal recyclers. The ad for the self defense kit was in the Superman Marvel comic books and guaranteed that whoever used this kit would never be bullied again. I ordered this Judo kit with the order form I tore off the comic book cover.

Every day I checked the mailbox and was disappointed at seeing an empty mailbox without the long awaited kit. But I eagerly wanted this wonderful kit that would one day free me from being bullied by Alan, and I dreamed of the strong person that I would become with the help of this kit.

The kit finally arrived after a month of waiting, and I eagerly read through all of the instructions and the descriptions of the possible self-defense situations and the moves that would help me become a confident and self-assured he-man.

My younger brother, Ramon, served as my assistant and "dummy" who faithfully and cheerfully responded to my instructions and put me in the necessary choke holds and waist-level bear hug positions described in the book. He allowed me to flip him over or trip him as I imagined doing to the Alan McMann if he one day tried to do these same things to me.

Ramon's little body landed on our front yard with a loud thud again and again. He raised himself each time, dusted the dirt and dry grass off his white, now soiled, T-shirt, and eagerly agreed to my next request to try another choke hold, or this time to grab me from behind, maybe a chest level hold this time so that I could try an overhead flip. At last I felt that I was ready to defend my honor on the Sharp Avenue School playground and once and for all declare my freedom from Alan McMann and all bullies like him forever.

The day came, and I was standing by the jungle gym in the sandbox at school by the library. Alan walked over to the sandbox and yelled out to me "Hey 'Wan' com'ere!" expecting that I would do as he said right away. But I had already decided that I was not going to do what he said. When I didn't come over, he got a twisted look on his face and walked over to me, quickly wrapping his arms around me in the position described in my self-defense book on page twelve, illustration number 32. Alan was behind me and his arms were wrapped around my waist in an arm lock as Ramon and I had practiced so many times in our front yard. In my mind I quickly went step by step through the overhead throw release. Alan's little bully body flew over my head and he landed with the familiar thud that I had already heard so many different times in the front yard at home, and his astonished freckled face looked up at me, wondering what had happened. I also was surprised at what I had done. My look of surprise slowly revealed a little bit of fear of what Alan might do to me now. Alan saw this look in my face and slowly got up, telling me "Hey Wan, don't do that again!"

Alan dusted the sand from his Levi pants, and walked away. My fear turned into a feeling of relief that Alan did not try to hurt me.

Then he turned around and said, "Wan, how did you do that?" "Can you show me?"

"Sure, Alan. Put your arms around me like you did and I will show you how I flipped you." Just don't pick on me any more, OK?

"OK," Alan said. "I'm sorry that I have been mean to you. "Now show me how to do that."

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