

THE CHOLO TREE



"Boxed in by societal prejudices, a young Chicano struggles to find his identity."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

DANIEL CHACÓN

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Piñata Books are full of surprises!

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DEDICATION

This novel was the most difficult book for me to write, to continue to write, to enter into every day for about five years, after which I let it sit for another five years, and went back into it again. There were so many times I wanted to give up, not because I didn't love the character, but because the voice in my head kept saying, "Why are you writing about a cholo? Nobody wants to hear the story of a cholo!"

But I kept writing because the protagonist of the story kept asserting his voice, saying to me, "I'm not a cholo. I'm an artist."

I think he really believed what he was saying to me, and if this sounds strange, ask any fiction writer, the characters take on personalities of their own, and they surprise you.

The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges said if the writer isn't surprised about what happens in his fiction, neither will the reader be surprised.

My character, in *The Cholo Tree*, Victor, convinced me he wasn't a cholo, but I think he was convincing himself. Maybe there was something in him, some deep root that suggested he was a branch on this particular cultural tree.

And although I didn't set out to write about a cholo, I love this character, and just because people stereotype the urban Chicano doesn't mean I should stay away from writing about them with love and understanding.

So I dedicate this book to all the cholos in my life, the cholos I love and respect and the cholos that I only brushed against socially for a brief periods of time.

I especially dedicate this book to my two favorite cholos, my brother the poet Kenneth Robert Chacón and my cousin Andrew Calderon.

I love you guys.

You are my greatest dogs.

And to all the other cholos who maybe don't even know they're cholos, but everyone else thinks they are and everybody else pigeonholes them so that it becomes easier to act the way people expect them to.

To all the cholos in la Chicanada, with love.



PART ONE

MY FIRST DEATH

I died when I was fourteen years old.

Not many people could say that, but legally I was dead, and then the doctors said I somehow came back to life. I thought Jessica would ask me all kinds of questions, like did I see my father, or was Jesus there to greet me, or was there a great light that I was walking into. But all she did when she picked me up from the hospital was say, "Get in the car, *menso!*"

As she drove, she shoved her arm inside her big ol' purse and started searching for something. "Do you know what a stereotype you are?" she asked. "You're the existential Chicano."

She pulled out a package of Wrigley's Spearmint gum. She unwrapped a stick and put it in her mouth.

"I mean the Quinn Essential Chicano. That's what you are. It means you're typical. I took that Chicano literature class at City, and I'll tell you right now, your story is so old."

She said "so" as if it had two syllables.

"No one wants to hear it no more," she said. "Nobody cares about you no more."

"No more? How can you talk about existential Chicano in one sentence and then use double negatives in another?"

She gave me a mad-dog look. "Don't start on that."

She chewed her gum as if she were angry at it and wanted it to suffer. "Menso," she said. "My professor told us that Chicano literature isn't even called Chicano literature no more, and you know why? Because the rest of us don't give a damn about you *cholos*. You're a disgrace to our people. You take us back to when men beat women as if they were garbage."

"I'm not a cholo."

"Why don't you want to change your ways? Why don't you want to get better? I mean, *¡Ay Dios mío!* You almost died! No, you *did* die. They told me you were dead!"

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"I can't believe I trusted you. I'm the *mensa* for believing in you."

"I'm not a cholo," I repeated, more for me than for her, because I knew she wasn't listening to me. I started to wonder why so many adults thought I was a thug, which is what she had meant by "cholo."

Maybe it was my age. I was fourteen years old, and a lot of old people didn't trust teenagers. Maybe it was the way I walked. Maybe it was my Oakland Raiders T-shirt. Whatever it was, most adults, white or Mexican, assumed I was a gang member or that I was on the verge of becoming one. Whenever Equis and I went into malls, security followed us around, and sometimes city police stopped and frisked us against their cars.

I didn't go around looking for fights, and I didn't get drunk or do meth. I didn't go to cholo parties, and practically every kid on the (oh-so-stereotypical) East Side of

town where I lived dressed like I did. But not all of them were hassled about being in a gang.

I'm brown.

I mean, dark-chocolate brown.

I have a wide, Indian nose and bushy eyebrows. I was convinced that most adults were basically racist. Even the old Mexicans preferred the light-skinned Hispano over the *indio* Chicano, and I was as indio as they came.

One time a teacher told me if I ever wanted to be anyone in life, I had to get that chip off my shoulder.

"What chip?" I asked.

"The whole world isn't against you," she said.

"Against me?"

"You have nothing to rage against."

I had no idea what she was talking about. It's true I didn't care about school, because it was boring and I got bad grades. And maybe I did a few things I wasn't supposed to do, like smoke pot and sell a little on the side, but how does that make me an angry, young man?

Anyway, this particular teacher, a mousey woman, was Hispanic.

"It's not like there hasn't been progress for our people," she said. "If you know what I mean."

And no, I had no idea what she meant until later, when I realized she wasn't looking at some Hispanic boy who liked to draw; she was looking at a cholo.



One time in Social Studies, Mr. Beasley was having a discussion about the origins of street gangs. He said they were started for a good purpose, to provide protection for people in neighborhoods that cops didn't care about pro-