

I MIGHT
HAVE
SOME
HOPE
HERE

The
Caheri
Gutierrez
Story

by
James O'Brien



On November 20, 2008, Caheri Gutierrez was stopped at a traffic light in deep East Oakland when her life changed forever. What follows is a real story most people can't begin to comprehend and will hopefully never experience.

Caheri is living proof of the need for, and impact of, Youth ALIVE!. What happened to her is horrific, but it doesn't end with a broken girl lost in sadness and trauma. Two years after the incident, Caheri joined the Youth ALIVE! staff as the Teens on Target Violence Prevention Educator.

This is her story.

Oakland is one of the five most violent cities in the U.S., with a murder rate nearly four times the national average. Yet it is also a beacon of hope. Youth ALIVE! is a nationally recognized, Oakland-based nonprofit whose mission is to prevent violence and develop youth leadership in California communities. Our programs – Teens on Target anti-violence youth leadership and peer education, Caught in the Crossfire intervention with gunshot victims to break to the cycle of violence, and Khadafy Washington Project assistance to grieving families to reduce tensions following a homicide – have been replicated in dozens of communities across the country.

Our organization relies on the donations of individuals to help other youth like Caheri make positive life decisions, recover from violence, avoid re-injury, and be a part of the change necessary to make our streets safe for everyone. Please consider visiting www.YouthALIVE.org to make a donation. If you would prefer, please mail a check payable to Youth ALIVE! to 3300 Elm Street, Oakland, CA 94609. All donations are completely tax deductible. Your contribution will enable Youth ALIVE! to continue our life-saving work.

About the Author:

James O'Brien is a writer in Oakland. He is a long-time contributor to GQ and San Francisco Magazine, and the author of the blog, Ice City Almanac, where a version of "I Might Have Some Hope Here" first appeared.



preface

I'VE HEARD

I've heard Caheri Gutierrez describe her face as “deformed.” That's her prerogative, of course. Certainly its irregularities — after three surgeries limited to the right cheek and around her chin — are noticeable, although no more so than her extraordinary eyes. There is scarring and disproportion; there are isolated ripples and patches of raised skin. The 21-year-old claims she's lost her mojo with men because of the changes.

“Guys don't holla at me like they used to,” she says. Certainly it is not the face it used to be. But it is beautiful again. She's come a long way, but real healing has brought some of the greatest pain of all.

In November of 2008, at the Oakland, California, intersection of 98th Avenue and San Leandro Street, under the New Code of the West, which in no way prohibits or even frowns upon the shooting of unarmed people or women or children, or shooting someone in the back, or shooting a person and then running or driving away, Caheri Gutierrez had half her beautiful face blown off in a drive-by. She was 18. The bullet burst through the passenger-side window out of nowhere. It ripped through her jaw and cheek and stopped in the right arm of her friend driving the car. Gutierrez felt a shock, she says, but didn't know she'd been hit until she saw the driver's expression — he was looking at her — and the gory mess all over the dashboard. That's when she reached up to touch her face.

You need to understand something about that face, then and now. In modeling photographs taken in the year before the shooting, it confronts you with one of human history's miraculous hybrids, a



perverse yet sublime symbol of what we can accomplish, over centuries, if we work together: the big, dark, almond shaped meso-American eyes and wide, pre-Columbian cheek bones; the flared, triangular, European nose and black hair; the dark skin – burnt, Mexican; the full, downward, frowning mouth, pure, early 21st Century Oakland, California, USA.

If today it has sometimes a vulnerable, pensive, haunted expression, back then its expression was more of a prowl. In those old pictures, its attitude seems to pose a challenge that is both sexual and street. It is intimidating. All this, and the brashness of unambiguous beauty it exudes, express precisely the East Oakland that Gutierrez grew up in as the younger sister of a gang member (shot when he was 17) and the daughter of a single mother, an immigrant who works as a waitress and a cleaner of office buildings.

One person, one gun, one dark urge and one powerful bullet, and that face, with everything it represented – beauty, history, our time and place, a person's very identity – was gone, half-shredded like a cheap grocery bag.

part one: lights

WHEN I ASK HER

When I ask her to tell me about the night of the shooting, Caheri (pronounced “Carrie”) Gutierrez responds simply, almost cheerfully, “Sure.” She glances down at her hands a moment, says, “The day I got shot,” and it sounds like she’s announcing the title of an essay, like “What I Did on My Summer Vacation.”

She pauses a moment. We’re sitting across a table, in the dimly-lit, slightly dingy conference room of a violence prevention organization in Oakland. Gutierrez has attentive eyes, pitch dark, but there’s a glint, a pilot light. Her bright smiles tend to breakout in slow motion, her long, straight, dark hair frames a face that is oval except where a small part of the right chin is missing.

“That day, I went to school. Left school.”

She starts her story slowly, and all along, the pace of her telling fluctuates. A conscientious, perhaps even curious part of her seems willing to recall each detail, while another, more self-protective part sometimes slows the storytelling down. She is not theatrical, or even very emotional while she’s telling her story. She’s never maudlin or self-pitying. But neither is this the kind of trauma that recedes.

“I was home, um, was chilling with my friend, then I went to dinner. My mom cleans this office by the Oakland Airport, and I usually would take over, help her clean it when the office was closed, in the afternoons.

“It was like, 9:30, and I was like, ‘Shoot, I have to go clean.’ So I asked my best friend would she come along with me, and I asked one of my guy friends to give me a ride. We were on 98th, going toward the airport, just in the car, listening to music, and I was on the passenger side, he was driving and my best friend was in the back seat.

“We pulled up to the light on 98th and San Leandro. It was about 10 o’clock, just at the light, just looking, listening, and all of a sudden, I just feel shocks, like



Caheri Gutierrez at 13

shocked, really, really intense shocks.

“And I hear really lightly my best friend saying, ‘What is going on?’ And I didn’t know what to think. I was like, ‘What is going on?’

“For some reason, I thought a car had hit us from the back and caused it to shock me. And then I react, because the driver is saying, ‘I’m shot! I got shot!’ And I look toward him and his hand that he was driving with was shot and I was trying to say to him, ‘Oh my god, are you okay?’ And he looks at me.”

Gutierrez takes a pause, as if here a new chapter begins. Imagine a person feeling through a dark cupboard for the ingredients to a dish she dislikes profoundly. And the cupboard is full of spiders. But she has promised to make the dish for you and so, over and over again, she reaches in.

“And that’s when I touched my face. I didn’t feel anything, and I looked toward the dashboard and all of my gums, my teeth, everything was there. And I looked back and there was a big bullet hole from the backseat window and I was just like, ‘Oh my god.’”

She lets out a sigh.

“I was hit in the right jaw and it just exploded when it hit me, it exploded everything, and it came out of my mouth and exploded all of my teeth. And all of a sudden I just start feeling sleepy, so sleepy, oh my god I’ve never felt this sleepy before, and I couldn’t even keep my eyes open. I was like, ‘Oh, here it is, I’m leaving, this is it.’ I was really thinking ‘This is it.’

The driver was not badly wounded. He continued down 98th Avenue. By this time Gutierrez’ body was convulsing, her legs kicking.

“And we were now by the airport, and we saw two police cars parked, and my friend parked next to them and said, ‘My friend just got shot, please call an ambulance, we just were shot at.’ And they come into the car, my friend and my best friend left the car, and the police came into the car, and by this time I couldn’t talk because my throat was filled with blood, I couldn’t talk anymore.”

“And what I thought about was, I just hope my mom knows that I didn’t die in any pain, because I think it was so...”

She pauses, she reaches, she feels around for the words, but it is difficult for her to understand, to explain the lack of pain.

“It was so much that I didn’t feel any pain, and that’s crazy, you know, but I was just sleepy and I saw the freeway entrance and I kind of was like, ‘Can I go? Would I make it if we go on the freeway and take me to Highland Hospital?’ And I was like, ‘No.’ So I just closed my eyes, and I was just in the car like, ‘This is it.’

“And I don’t know, I just thought about my family. And I opened my eyes, and I was like, ‘No, don’t give up, don’t give up, just try to hold on. And they called the ambulance and they came a couple of moments before I was about to pass out, because all of the blood was choking me. I was

just kicking, and I couldn't talk. It was... just...yeah.

"I was holding onto my face the whole time. When the ambulance got there, they set me down and they said, 'What's your name?' And I wrote it down because I couldn't say anything. And in my mind I was just, like, 'Be positive, be positive, stay calm.'

"And I let go of my head and that's when everything just fell out, and I got nervous because on his radio the paramedic was like, 'Level 1, Level 1, Level 1 trauma...'

"I was conscious the whole time to the hospital, and I knew it was really serious when I came into the emergency room, and all of the nurses and doctors were just like..." Her eyes widen, she shakes her head, but there are no words.

"That's scary," I say, "when you know they're shook up, because they see everything there."

"Exactly! I was like, Goooooddannggg it."

Adrenaline was keeping her awake.

"I've never been in an ambulance. I'm going to a hospital now, I might have some hope here. 'So stay up.' The last thing I remember was they laid me down on the bed and I just saw bright lights, really white lights, and after that I closed my eyes. I don't want to see anything more, I don't want to feel anything. I closed my eyes and that was it."

part two: the deep

All Through

All through sprawling, Hispanic, African-American, Vietnamese, hipster, lively, industrial, violent East Oakland, as well as good food, colorful shops, busy parks and bustling avenues, there are streets of danger, blocks under the sway of the gun, free market drug corners, long prostitution strolls, and the blood of fresh homicide scenes. That's East Oakland.

But sometimes people here refer to parts of East Oakland as “Deep East Oakland.” Or “DEO.” Or just “The Deep.” When you say “deep” you mean to describe a thing that is remote, lowdown, a place from inside of which there is no easy escape route. If it were the mind it would be the subconscious. If it was water it would suffocate. From the perspective of Oakland’s white neighborhoods, it might as well be the bottom of the ocean.

Mostly, East Oakland, including Deep East Oakland, is made up of modest, detached houses whose styles span those of the last century. Much of Oakland is hilly, but The Deep is flat. An alternate term for it is “The Flats.”

Geographically, I think of it as starting around the San Antonio projects at 69th Avenue, stretching along the dank avenues of the 80s into the shadow of the Alameda County Coliseum, home of the Raiders and A’s, and then through the 90s and beneath the noisy coming and going jets of Oakland International Airport, and continuing east another ten blocks or so into the hundreds.

Depending on who is saying “deep east” or “the deep,” it can be a term of respect – “Yeah, the dude that started this company grew up on, like 82nd, deep East Oakland.” Or one of fear – “I had to make a delivery in deep East Oakland today. Man, I was nervous!”

When used by someone who lives there, it’s simple shorthand, a useful, unselfconscious combination of geographic explanation and self-characterization.

If you live in deep East Oakland, if you grew up in The Deep, then no matter how nice and stable a home your parents might have tried to create, once you stepped out the door, or beyond your front gate, everything was hard. Hard to feel safe. Hard to feel peace. Hard to concentrate.

Hard to learn. Hard to earn. It's a way of life, a neighborhood atmospherics.

"A lot of these kids, they live in constant trauma," says one person who works with young people in East Oakland, "every day is a trauma from the time they were small, so they've kind of normalized it, and kind of gone about their business, because they don't see it as abnormal."

Most of the people who grow up in Deep East Oakland manage these difficulties; they may never thrive, but neither do they fall. Others surrender. They join gangs or form turf groups; they ignore or drop out of school, take drugs, sell drugs, buy a gun, pull the trigger. Since 2007, on or within two blocks of 98th Avenue, where Gutierrez was shot, along just a four-mile stretch in vast East Oakland from the MacArthur Freeway to San Leandro Street, I count at least thirty killings. I'm sure that count is low. The names of just some of these thirty victims indicate a remarkable lack of discrimination between African-American and Latino: DeJohn L. Wade, Juan Guerra, Marcus Gill, Isabel Flores, Ayesha Thompson, Fernando Solano, Angel Rodriguez, Derrick Mixon, Rita Cortez, Cory Burts.

Born in Los Angeles but raised in various locations in The Deep, Caheri Gutierrez was recognized early as an academically gifted kid. A visionary second grade teacher at Hawthorne Elementary took her under his wing. David Silver would bring the smart little girl along to meet with his colleagues in education and take her to college campuses around the Bay Area. His big idea was that very young students, especially in under-siege places like East Oakland, should think about college, should aim for it from the time they enter elementary school. Constant awareness of its necessity and what it takes to get there would help create more-driven and better-prepared learners, all the way through school. It would especially aid smart kids like Caheri. Silver had an idea to found a school based on this principle, and so assembled a team of educators and parents to design it. There was one student on the team: ten-year old Caheri Gutierrez. By the time Think College Now, a school for 4th to 8th graders, opened its doors on 27th and East 14th in East Oakland, Gutierrez was too old to attend. She was finishing up at St. Anthony's, where she was a student leader, a bringer home of academic awards and a burgeoning volleyball star.

Sometimes it is easy to pick up the signs of a mother working hard to protect her kids. First, Gutierrez mother, a waitress at a Mexican restaurant, scraped together the money to send her to a parochial school. Then she managed to get the girl from East Oakland into a public high school across the estuary, in suburban Alameda, near the restaurant where she worked. Encinal High School promised a less perilous environment and stronger academics than Skyline High in Oakland. At Encinal, Gutierrez led the volleyball team to the Northern California finals. She was aiming for a full college ride on the strength of her athleticism and good grades.

It's hard to say what sidetracked her. It's hard to say what didn't. For one thing, Gutierrez says she couldn't handle the responsibility of off-campus lunch periods.



Bay Area Vixen photoshoot, 2007

“I just had too much freedom and I started partying a lot and I started smoking.” She started cutting class. Hanging around at home all day while her mother was out working.

Some of what sidetracked her – too much freedom, too much partying – could have happened to a kid in the suburbs, in one of California’s rural counties, in any big or small town. Some of it was strictly Oakland.

“I was kind of part of the whole Oakland thing. When you’re young and you’re in Oakland it’s a trend to be bad, it’s a trend to smoke, it’s a trend to, you know, just not care, I don’t know, it’s stupid. You want to be tough; you want to hang out in the streets. When I was in high school I would cut school, go home, hang out, just chill, smoke, I used to smoke a lot of pot, smoke, just chill. I was never violent but I would just, you know, chill out, not do much.”

Her rampant truancy led to poor grades, she started missing volleyball practices, and in her junior year, Gutierrez got kicked out of Encinal. She was sent to Dewey, an Oakland school for students at risk of not graduating on-time. She got kicked out of Dewey.

Her transformation was almost complete; she’d even become a Vixen.

The Vixens were a racially mixed collection of hot Bay Area party girls with a dream of modeling. Or models with a dream of being party girls. I can’t quite tell, but I’ve seen the pictures. The Vixens would host boozy events in clubland, publish on Myspace photo shoots of themselves in alluring outfits.

She’d tagged along with a friend to a Vixen shoot.

“When I was younger I was really into fashion and design and creativeness with hair,” says Gutierrez. “So I was really spunky, and my hair back then, it was a trend to dye your hair and I was

really good at it, I guess, and so my bangs were blue and purple and my outfits were really eccentric and cute, I guess. They said, ‘You’re really pretty,’ I guess, ‘would you like to be part of the Vixens?’ I was stoked. Everyone in the Bay knows about the Vixens, even in LA, and to be a part of that was like ‘Wow, I’m a Vixen.’” Suddenly the girl who used to get attention for her good grades and her athleticism was getting it for her looks. It was intoxicating. In Vixen photos, Gutierrez tends to look serious, possibly unapproachable, but she was very popular at the events. She was a party girl. She was also underage.

“I was getting attention for being pretty and having style. And I was like, ‘Oh my god, this is really fun.’ That was my lifestyle.”



BACK IN THOSE DAYS

Back in those days Gutierrez had done one very smart thing: she'd turned to that mentor from second grade for help and he'd come through. He convinced Dewey to let her back in. Gutierrez was a senior now, and she says she was determined to stick it out, to see school through to graduation. She knew she could do it.

She was partying, though, still drifting ever further away from her family, constantly fighting with her younger sister, becoming alienated from her brother, from her mother, who frequently kicked her out of their apartment on 82nd Avenue. One day, in another vicious fight with her sister, Gutierrez said, "I'm so done with all you guys. Family is just a fucking word. It doesn't mean anything."

She figures that was late October or early November 2008.

It was on the 20th of November, in one of life's most humdrum moments, absently drifting through the oblivion of a red light, 10 p.m., a little high, a passenger in a car on one of Oakland's bloodiest roadways, on her way to the office building she sometimes helped her mother clean, she was running very late, when someone in another car got the notion to pull the trigger, no one knows why, no one was ever caught, it could have been a gang initiation, it could have been utterly random, but the trigger was pulled, and the bullet changed everything and when she reached for her face a moment later, she found only its blasted and bloody remains. The bullet had ripped through her cheeks, left her toothless and jaw-less and deaf in one ear.

It would be a week before her awareness returned.

"I woke up remembering," she tells me. "I feel like I was woken right after, but I don't remember anything until after a week. I was intubated, I lost hearing from my right side, my face was paralyzed, I had no teeth."



Even before she remembers waking up, she'd been communicating. Writing, actually. In a medicated daze, with no jaw and a tracheotomy tube stabbed into her throat, she was incapable of speech. So she had a notepad. "I'd start writing and then I would go to sleep in the middle. *How are yyyyy....*"

Apparently, she'd been asking for her friends who'd been in the car with her, asking if she still had a nose, if she still had her right ear. Asking for her mother. Asking for a mirror.

The doctors had advised against giving her one.

"They said, 'No mirrors inside the room, don't let her see what she looks like.' They were afraid I was going to go into a depression, a deep depression."

Her mother handed her one anyway. A small makeup mirror. It had to happen sooner or later.

"I had tubes everywhere. This scar down on my jaw was up on my right cheek then. I had metal plates. The trach scar. Blood in my ear. Blood in my fingernails."

Living in the Transitional Care Unit, depressed by the dreary, lightless days of fall, this girl with the torn-up face, the girl who couldn't talk, or eat, whose long hair laced with her own blood had been bunched up in the emergency room and left to transform into a bloody dread on her pillow, that girl might have been spunky, but she was not pretty, she was no longer the self-assured Vixen in the pictures. That Caheri was lost. Gone. Dead.

"I just looked ugly."

But Gutierrez says what she felt when she looked in that mirror was not shock or even sadness.

"I knew I was not the same. I expected it. So when I saw myself, it was kind of like a relief, I was relieved. Because I finally got to see my face. And I knew that it wasn't going to be pretty. I wasn't scared."

You get the sense that Gutierrez's brain had been working all the time she was out, working,

trying to understand her predicament. And that now, finally seeing herself in the mirror was the proof she and her brain needed that she was alive. After a brush with death that comes out of nowhere, ourselves, even our maimed selves looking back at us from a little mirror, may well be our most comforting companion.

She was in the hospital for just under a month and all that time she kept the mirror nearby. She looked into it constantly. Everyone assumed it was the desperate shock of the disfigured beauty that drew her to that mirror.

That time would come. But Gutierrez says in the hospital her attachment to the mirror was about something much simpler, more



New Years Eve 2009, brace holding jaw in place

practical, something that gives you a small detail of her long, unpleasant hospital existence.

“You know what? People didn’t want me to look at the mirror because they thought I was judging myself, about how ugly I looked or something. But I would always have mucous coming out from the trach tube, and always was slobbering on myself, and I kept wanting to clean myself up because it felt uncomfortable. So that was it. Not obsessing. Yeah, for a moment, I would be like, ‘Wow, I don’t look the same,’ but I never took it that serious. I don’t know why.”

Still, her nurse grew concerned. Regardless of why she was attached to the image in the mirror, he said the mirror had to go.

“He was like, ‘Stop looking at that, you cannot have a mirror anymore. You need to worry about your education, forget about your face now. People only look at people because of their looks, but now you’re in a different situation.’”

But she insists, insists on insisting, ultimately with some persuasiveness, that when she looked at herself in the mirror at Highland Hospital, she was thinking about moving on, ready to begin a new life not defined by her beauty.

“I’m hella smart, I’m really smart, I’ve achieved a lot of things in my life, but my face, I really was like that part of my life was over, that partying, that modeling, that hanging out, that depending on my looks, that was over with. I just wanted to do something different.”

She was right about one thing: that part of her life was over. What she didn’t know, what no one had prepared her for, was that the long grueling fight for rebirth had hardly even begun.

part four: until we bleed

THE ONLY THING

The only thing more vulnerable to a bullet than the human body is the human mind. It can be more difficult to heal; often it bears the scars of a bullet wound far longer than the skin. No matter how many times or how emphatically you decline the invitation, a violent assault thrusts you into a psychic darkness; it insists you traverse that darkness in the aftermath of the event itself.

Of course, we are still learning about how soldiers suffer mentally from their wounds and the things they see, how their mental and emotional wounds manifest, and persist, long after the actual violence occurs. Victims of urban violence, many of whom find themselves thrown very quickly back into the same place, the street, the block, the house, where the violence happened, suffer from similar mental trauma. Sometimes it surfaces only as things settle down, as your body begins to heal. It's as if now, finally, you have the energy, the time, the mental leisure to think, to feel emotions, to comprehend the impact on yourself and those around you.

Gutierrez says she cried only a handful of times at the hospital, usually out of frustration with the pace of her physical healing. It wasn't until the day of her release, on the ride home, that finally the real tears came. And the fear. The dread of the streets. The fear of Oakland.

"I sat in the backseat. My mom and my sister were like, 'How is this going to be for her now? She's out on the street, we're in Oakland, still in Oakland.' We're in the slums, 85th Avenue, and it is hectic, it is ugly. And I think, 'Just be positive.' Because I always thought, every situation, 'Just be positive, that's only gonna help you.' So I'm in the car, and we get on the freeway, I hadn't seen this freeway in a month, and I just start crying. And I didn't even mean to cry.

"I'm bawling in the car because I'm so scared. I'm so



scared, and I felt like I was a different person, I was weaker, I just felt so scared, and my mom pulled over and they were like, 'Are you okay? What's going on? Do you need to go back to the hospital?' And I was just like, 'I don't know, I'm scared.'"

At least she was going home. There she would stay, as the waves of doubt, despair and loneliness came. Her jaw was attached to her face with an external, semi-circular wire brace. Of course, it made her self-conscious. She didn't like to go out. When she did go out in the car, she was too frightened to sit up. She hid in the back seat, under a blanket.

It helped that, for her family, years of disaffection had dissolved into a new found harmony in the wake of the shooting. Through most of the nights during her month-long stay at Oakland's Highland Hospital, Gutierrez' mother slept beside her. Often Gutierrez would wake to find her older brother asleep in a chair. He and her teenage sister were a near constant presence.

But even with Caheri home and slowly healing, times for the family were bad. Gutierrez mother was missing shifts at the restaurant to take care of her wounded daughter. There's not a lot of family-leave built into the service life. Waitresses don't get paid unless they work.

"We were poor and getting poorer," says Gutierrez.

Gutierrez' sister was too young to help; whatever big money some might think the gang life brings is a myth, and so her older brother was not contributing. Gutierrez herself had worked before the shooting, and the pressure began to build for her to go back to work. But it was too soon.

"It was really a gloomy time."

She began to see how her family was suffering.

"Because I was on meds," says Gutierrez, "I didn't feel any pain, you know, and my family are the ones who took it hardest, like my mom, when I ask her about it she just starts crying because she had to do so much, she had to see her daughter in that situation, she had to see me choke, she had to see me being not able to eat, lost 20 pounds, skinny, not able to walk."

When she had the brace holding her jaw in place removed, it should have been the start of a happier time. She could be less self-conscious out in the world. For the first time in months, she could sleep on her side.

But with the deeper sleep came the nightmares. Dreams of getting shot again. Killed this time. Unsettling images of her mother, alone, in a black lagoon.

"It was just so mysterious and scary, even in the daytime I couldn't be left alone. When my mom was cooking I'd be in the kitchen trying to stay awake, because I didn't want to go to sleep, and I would close my eyes and nod my head and it would just be a nightmare."



Self-portrait, mid 2009

Sometimes in the nightmares there was music, always the same song, one that was just hitting the airwaves that spring. “Until We Bleed,” by Kleerup, with Lykke Li, is actually kind of a pretty song. Simple, breathy, moody electro-pop. But there’s an eeriness to its lyrics. Here are some of the words:

*I'm naked/ I'm numb/ I'm stupid/ I'm staying
And if Cupid's got a gun/ then he's shootin...'
Lights black/ Heads bang/ You're my drug/ We live it
You're drunk, you need it/ Real love/ I'll give it...
So we're bound to linger on/ We drink the fatal drop
Then love until we bleed/ Then fall apart in parts...
Doors slam/ Lights black/ You're gone/ Come back
Stay gone/ Stay clean/ I need you to need me.*

It’s as if the bullet was talking to Gutierrez, saying, *I'm not done with you, not until you bleed just a little more.*

Summer was coming and so were new urges, seemingly healthy ones. She was telling herself it was time to act. *I can't live in fear forever.* The time was coming to take control, to fight her way back into life. But which life would it be?

part five: youth, alive

IT WAS LATE

It was late winter and the face of Caheri Gutierrez was healing, but a few short months after a bullet out of nowhere had shattered its bones and scattered her teeth and gums, her soul was roiling. This is where victims of violence find themselves, in a lonely place where no one around them knows how to help. The victim feels helpless and so do the victim's loved ones, coworkers, neighbors and friends. Many are afraid even to approach that dark place full of fear and confusion and anger where the victim exists.

Tammy Cloud makes a career out of it. Cloud is an Intervention Specialist in the Caught in the Crossfire program, out of an Oakland non-profit called Youth ALIVE! She provides emotional and practical support to young victims of the city's troubles. Many shootings and killings are retaliatory, and part of the job of Cloud and her Caught in the Crossfire colleagues is to try and diffuse that urge, to calm angry family members, or sometimes gang members already armed.

She had been assigned Gutierrez' case.

"I woke up one day," says Gutierrez, "and I was by myself, and I never liked to be by myself, and I see this woman, and I'm like, 'Who is she?' I couldn't talk, but she introduced herself to me. It was Tammy Cloud, my angel, my guardian angel."

"I remember coming into ICU and she was still unconscious then," says Cloud. "And I remember just looking in on her. And seeing that, it was tough to see her."

We're sitting around a table at the downscale Oakland offices of Youth ALIVE!. Cloud is in her late



Gutierrez with Youth ALIVE!'s Tammy Cloud

thirties, youthful. There's a perpetual playfulness in her full, pretty face. It belies her regular encounters with the wounded and the fearful.

Soon after Gutierrez re-gained consciousness, Cloud asked her what her plans were once she got out of the hospital, and what kind of help she might need. There is business to take care of, life to get back to, even for the grievously wounded, especially for the wounded.

For her part, Gutierrez insisted she was going to be just fine, thanks, she didn't think she'd be needing much help.

"I didn't think that it would hit me, all the feelings that I had, all the emotions," says Gutierrez.

"I knew it was gonna hit her hard," says Cloud. "Because of where her injuries were, what she was doing prior to her injuries, the rep she had in the community."

When I ask her how she already knew things about Gutierrez, Cloud says, "I just knew from hearing it, because Oakland's small and you start hearing stuff. And she walked around holding a mirror the whole time at the hospital, looking at herself. I could tell she was trying to make heads or tails of 'what am I going to look like now?' She's still gorgeous, but I knew she was thinking, 'I was this model and gorgeous, and everybody looked up to me for my looks, and now here I am, disfigured.' So I knew that was going to be very, very traumatic."

Gutierrez' healing was dragging, her spirits were low and her jaw was wired shut. But Cloud kept coming. She'd show up at the apartment in the morning. Caheri would be up, at the dining room table, in her pajamas, her mother in the kitchen preparing whatever Caheri could eat: liquid concoctions, hot chocolate, scrambled eggs.

Cloud had a plan. The first thing was to get a home school nurse to help with the recovery and to keep Gutierrez on track to graduate. The other important thing: therapy. Of course, Gutierrez said she didn't need therapy. She's sheepish about that claim now.

"I thought I was going to be cool, I didn't think I needed therapy." She sounds almost amused by how naive she was. "I thought that Tammy was thinking that I was crazy or something. And I was, but I just didn't know it."

Afraid to go out of the house, afraid to go to sleep for the nightmares waiting to greet her, and struggling with feelings of helplessness that many trauma victims suffer, she needed to prove to herself that everything was cool, that things could finally get back to normal.

The natural way, the quickest way to make things seem normal, was to start hanging with her friends again, to go where they went, and do what they did. Drink. Smoke. The booze, in combination with her pain meds, made her blackout.

And the weed was no longer any fun. It drove her too far inside her mind; it corralled all of her thoughts in among the horrors of her experience, increased her paranoia. Plagued by nightmares, self-

conscious about her face, fearful of the unknown, what she did not need was an increase in paranoia.

“Mentally, I crashed,” she says. “I just started realizing what had happened to me and how I was mad about the situation. My face is never going to look the same, that bullet hurt my family and set me back. It put my family and me into a really deep dark, dark time. I didn’t feel pain when it happened, but I felt my family’s pain, and that’s what hurt me a lot.”

Tammy Cloud says that, overall, Gutierrez had made steady progress, that the only time she’d become frustrated with her client was when she’d made certain poor personal decisions.

One day over lunch at a cafe in Oakland’s Temescal district, I ask Gutierrez what Cloud might be referring to and, with her usual honesty and openness, she gives me the litany. She started dating a guy she refers to now as a thug. “He was from Oakland,” she says. She let gawkers at her deformity hang around too much. “A lot of people just wanted to hang out with me just to see how I was looking, see what they can go tell other people about how I was living. Oakland’s pretty small.”

All during the long days and weeks of Gutierrez’ recuperation Cloud kept coming. She listened, chided, advised, helped take care of business. She took Gutierrez out in her car, took her to medical appointments, to physical therapy, she bought her food when there was no money.

“She was like a second brain,” says Gutierrez, and for a traumatized victim not always thinking clearly, an experienced second brain might be the most important service Cloud and Caught in the Crossfire provide. Depressed and exhausted, victims are bound to make mistakes, to make poor decisions, to neglect themselves and the business of life.

There were better urges fighting for life as well. Even before the brace around her jaw was gone, sometimes Gutierrez did go out into the world, always with family or close friends. There are pictures of her with her new teeth in, but the big brace still in place: she is dressed-up, ready to go, smiling brightly. In some she has very short hair.

She had had to cut away her prized long hair after the hospital. Unwashed, laced with blood and pressed against a hospital pillow for a



Speaking at Youth ALIVE!'s 20th Anniversary Celebration, 2011

month, it had turned into a dread. So off it came. Snip. She hated her short haircut. It was a man's haircut, she says. She's said this to me several times, in fact. Finally I say, "Short hair can look good on a woman." Yeah, she says, maybe on Rihanna, but not me. So she asked her mom to take her to a salon. The hair got some style. She got a manicure, had her eyebrows waxed. It had to feel good.

"It was one of the first times I felt I was a little bit free," she says, "that one of these layers just shed, when I said to myself 'I have to stop living in fear.'"

She finished her GED work even before her Encinal High class had finished their school year. With Cloud's help, she signed up for and started classes at Chabot College in Hayward. She started playing volleyball there. Her self-esteem began to climb. I'm ugly, I'm whatever, but I'm *THE* best volleyball player.

She had happy moments. She says the happiest were waking up at home and having her family around her.

"Before, I hated everyone in my family. After the incident, I was like, 'I'm so glad that I get to see this person's face.'" Their new closeness, no matter what might have inspired it, was pure joy for her. Today she says her sister is her best friend. Her brother? "That's my dawg, that's my baby, that's my dad, that's my man."

In the meantime, Tammy Cloud was starting to formulate an idea, one that just might be a lodestone, a magnet, toward a new normal better than the old normal. The two were becoming friends, becoming like family. Cloud was at the wedding of Gutierrez' mother. She and her family came around on holidays. Cloud says she had never developed such a close relationship with a client or her family before, but it just felt right. Sitting together with them now you can see the natural connection in the way they tell the story together, compare notes, the way Cloud remembers more vividly than Caheri does the deliciousness of the hot chocolate her mother made back in the days when her jaw was wired shut.



Gutierrez with Teens on Target (TNT) Peer Educators

Back then, Cloud had noticed something about her client and friend. "Something about the way she presented herself, her aura, her person," she tells me.

Of course, her story was a profound one. And, as slowly she emerged from the physical trauma, it was only becoming more powerful. Cloud thought hearing it, and meeting Caheri, might get the attention of young people – never easy – might make them think, might help prevent the same things that happened to Gutierrez from happening to them.

She mentioned the idea of speaking, of talking to some Oakland students.

"Yes," said Gutierrez. "I really, really would love to do that."

"I think I still had my imitation jaw. But at the same time, I knew that was one of the reasons why I really wanted to talk to them, to show them: 'Look, this is real, and this is intense and this can happen.'" Cloud had reached inside the whirl and

chaos of a traumatized soul to find its purest urge.

They continued to talk about the idea. Gutierrez continued to heal, continued to fight her way back into the perilous world.

When a job opened up at Youth ALIVE!, in a program called **Teens on Target (TNT)**, Cloud suggested Gutierrez apply. TNT identifies East Oakland high school students with leadership skills and helps them develop presentations on violence – domestic violence, dating violence, gangs and guns – on how to deal with it, how to avoid a life of it, even if you are surrounded by it, even if it is all you’ve ever known. They learn to tell their own stories, to explain what life is like in East Oakland, the good and the bad. They take these presentations to middle school kids around the city. It’s a municipal conversation, unpleasant perhaps, but necessary.

So Gutierrez sat with the hiring committee and, for the first time in front of a group, prepared to tell her story, but it didn’t come out.

“I didn’t even tell them what happened to me; I called it ‘my situation,’ like, ‘I want the students to learn from my situation.’”

Before she could be hired, she had to interview with the student board of TNT. Leave it to the kids to get to the heart of things.

“When I talked to the youth board, they asked me, ‘How can some of your experiences with violence help you be good at this job?’

Suddenly she found herself telling the story, blow-by-blow.

“And when I was telling them, I was shaking, and my voice was shaky, and I was nervous and getting hot.”

She was even more nervous when it came time to start the job.

“I was like, ‘I have scars, no one’s gonna want to listen to me,’ like they’re gonna make fun of me, they’re going to judge me.”

It was time to begin her new life with the old mask gone and the new one uncertainly in place, time to confront her loss in a whole new way.



Speaking to an Oakland youth group

part six: the vortex motel

A FEW MONTHS

A few months after the shooting, Gutierrez' family moved to Hayward, a suburb just south of Oakland. It was best to get out of town for now. But really there was no escaping it.

As part of her job at YouthALIVE!, Gutierrez would be speaking to students all over town. The organization's offices are in Oakland; the TNT students meet twice a week at Oakland's Castlemont High. One afternoon I looked up Castlemont's address: MacArthur Boulevard, at 86th Avenue. Every week, Gutierrez would have to make her way into The Deep.

That was not surprising. In Oakland, despite the freeways they've driven through, concrete monstrosities which isolate neighborhoods from one another, despite the seeming differences between various neighborhoods and people, despite the varieties in its character, the quiet lushness of the hills, the increasing glamor of its culinary scene, the racial segregation of neighborhoods and even the hostility among turf groups who rule mere blocks adjacent to one another, everything is connected. A man gets gunned down in West Oakland and you learn he had half a dozen close cousins in East Oakland. A man dies in Fruitvale and you find out he had worked for years in the Lower Bottom, everybody knows him over there. A police officer on the beat in Eastmont grew up in violent Campbell Village. A restaurateur at Jack London Square is from the Acorn and he's committed to hiring parolees from The Deep, committed to giving them a chance. Everything is connected. Sometimes it feels like every green freeway sign in Oakland is only a degree of separation from everywhere else in Oakland, and a reminder of a place you might not want to remember.

I think about this several times when I drive out to meet the students and to watch Gutierrez work with them. Just before you get to the schoolyard liveliness around Castlemont, there is a bleak and morbid section of MacArthur, about ten blocks long, from 73rd Avenue to 82nd Avenue. It has always struck me as the broken, unattended heart of The Deep, of Oakland, where eye-contact from your car with pedestrians seems inadvisable, seems always either a threat or an offer. In the early evenings there are plenty of people around, people disembarking from buses and heading home from

work, people with grocery bags, on their way home to make dinner, groups of kids full of the rush of the end of a long school day. But there are others, who seem stationed, who exude a vigilance that to an outsider, admittedly ignorant, feels menacing.

It seems a bitter street, unloved, left behind by, I won't call it progress, but by change. It is unhealthy as an old pack of cigarettes. In the middle of this mile-long passage is one of the dozens of motels and former motels that line what was once a busy, important, post-war thruway for newly car-happy Americans, what was once, in the days before our freeways, called a highway, Highway 50. An impressive number of these old motels still find a way to operate along MacArthur Boulevard. A few have vintage signage and bright flower beds and regularly get fresh paint jobs. Others stay open by catering to prostitutes and their customers, or by accepting the city's homeless vouchers. Some have been turned into apartment buildings.

In a purplish dusk the boulevard progresses: check cashing store, prayer temple, rehab center, mosque, motel, iron fences painted white, windows boarded up, all the boards tagged. Soon you come to what I always think of as The Vortex Motel. A sign high on the side of the stucco building reads "MacArthur Park Apartments." There's no park within view. Maybe in its days as a motel, back in the day of the blue highway, its grand-sounding name was a ploy to draw in for the night tired drivers from southern California.

Today, always someone is standing guard at the entrance to the ample parking lot for what was once a boxy, rectangular, three-story building running perpendicular to the boulevard. The parking lot dips down significantly from the entrance gate, and that seems appropriate: enter here and you have gone even lower, even deeper into The Deep, and good luck getting out.

Soon you pass 84th Avenue. 85th doesn't reach to MacArthur, but the apartment on 85th, where Gutierrez lived at the time of the shooting and all during her days of fear and confusion is just barely over a mile from here, just a mile from where she goes every week to work with the students from East Oakland, many of whom are the age she was when she was shot not far from here. Untraumatized, I feel tense and afraid here. A victim, how could she not? It hasn't been that long.

So I ask her one afternoon while she is on a break from speaking about domestic violence to students at Westlake Middle School. We meet for lunch at a nearby Whole Foods. We eat teriyaki bowls. She's been sick with a cold but is on the mend. To me, she looks a little thin, but overall seems physically strong. Her black hair is pulled tightly back, her eyelids touched with a quick, brief swoop of black eyeliner. The beautiful wounded face. The dark eyes. She's casual, in a stylish green knit hoodie and jeans. She has told me that she is again a bit of a fashion icon among a large group of friends and acquaintances.



With TNT Peer Educator Danika Anderson

I want to know, now that she is well into her new job, now that she's daily back in Oakland, all over Oakland, but especially going so regularly to Deep East Oakland, how she feels.

"Over there," she says, "I feel like I'm at home, I feel comfortable."

Sometimes she even finds herself driving up 98th. It is a violent street, but busy, a key artery at the eastern edge of the city. You can't avoid it forever.

"I just look at it historically," she says. "'That's where I was shot.' I love Oakland," she continues, and I hadn't even asked, "because it created a strong person, it's given me a lot of knowledge as far as the streets; it's a really good city if you surround yourself with the people that matter. If you live in Oakland, good, you'll be street smart, but if you go to school and you get a mentor and you play sports or something, you'll get to see the other things in life that matter."



Gutierrez with sister, Eli, 2011

part seven: the unexpected gift

i BELIEVED

I believed Gutierrez when she said she was no longer afraid of Oakland. But as the months went on, something seemed to be nagging at her. The upbeat and determined Caheri I'd gotten to know had begun showing signs of depression, signs of confusion about her life. Sometimes, if always temporarily, the mature confidence that had replaced her youthful cockiness would wither. One day, over lunch at a little pub near her office called Commonwealth, she seemed quieter than usual. Distracted. There were family problems, work pressures, but something else as well.

New people were coming into her life everyday, people who knew her story, who sometimes sought her advice, people who were willing to pay her to tell her story to youth groups and kids in trouble. It was exciting and challenging, and mostly she was pleased. But something kept pushing her back into occasional passages of despair and doubt. She hid them well. But if you paid attention you could see them. Sometimes they appeared as entries on her blog. Suddenly the fashion advice and survivor bravado would give way to suicidal ideations or rage. She would spend nights crying, hating her fate and her face.

And there were real setbacks occurring. Just as she was beginning to take college classes again, doctors told her there was an infection in her gums. It was a complication from her recent dental implants which had replaced the dentures which had replaced the teeth the bullet had deprived her of. They admitted her to Highland Hospital, dank and gritty Highland, where after the shooting she'd spent nearly a month intubated, drugged, speechless, looking at that toothless, shattered face in the mirror.

This time, in her hospital room, she texted friends, posted to her Twitter account, read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Sometimes she visited with the nurses and therapists who cared for her after the shooting. The day I visited her she'd received more bad news: the infection would prevent her even from wearing her old



Gutierrez with TNT Peer Educator Lashai Walker

bottom dentures for four months. For the next four months, this twenty-one-year-old single woman with a burgeoning public speaking career would be missing most of her bottom teeth.

A couple of weeks later, out of the hospital and back to work, without those lower teeth she looked to me more damaged than before. Still, I thought the light in her eyes was back in evidence. Her talk of school and work was as full of hopes and plans as ever. But it was peppered with traces of angst, with references to a new and intensified self-consciousness. We got to talking about her social life, her love for the lounge and a drink with friends.

“I have all these beautiful friends,” she said, “and they make me go out with them. I go, but I’d rather be at home under the blanket. And we go to these places and people look at them, like they used to look at me. Only now they look at me because I’m a freak, like ‘Why is she here?’”



With TNT Peer Educators Martre Hasley and Bobbie Miller

The fear she’d shed had been replaced by nostalgia, or worse, by grief for her lost face. All these new people coming into her life, at work, in social situations, knew nothing of the face that had once been the very mark of pure beauty and the focus of her identity. And she wanted them to know, was frustrated and hurt that they never would. In these moments of grief, it no longer mattered that the person she was now was so whole and vivid, that the person she was now was living life with heroic purpose. In those painful moments, it was the loss and the loss alone that mattered. No matter how positively she felt about her work, about the ambition and momentum once lost to the gun but regained in the last year, there were crucial things she was certain she’d never get back. Permanently gone was the belief that she was beautiful again, no matter if people might tell her she is.

“I know what I see in the mirror,” she told me once, in a disturbingly matter-of-fact way. “And I don’t see that.”

It was strange, and disappointing, to hear Gutierrez talk this way, but clearly this was the emotional reality that had been waiting for her all along, that awaits all victims of violence, no matter how much they might minimize it.

Often, Gutierrez talks about wanting to follow in the footsteps of Marilyn Harris, an Oaklander we both look up to. Harris lost her only son to the gun eleven years ago and has continued since then to step into the lives of the survivors of homicide victims here, to carry them through the confusion and mania of the immediate aftermath, and to help them begin to heal. She now does this work at Youth ALIVE!, through the **Khadafy Washington Project**, which bears her son's name. Many times I have watched Miss Marilyn walk with families of the killed. It's a walk which surely brings back



With TNT Program Manager Demetria Huntsman

the ready, urgent remembrances of her own grief. But that is a side of her she rarely reveals. She is a human symbol to these survivors that the whole city, the whole world is not sick and against them, that part of the city that took their loved one can still bring love.

In my time covering the aftermath of violence in Oakland I've met people who have found themselves, found out who they were, in their times of crisis and terror. Some of these former victims have even found their greatness. Many, like Harris and Gutierrez, have gone on to work to heal the city. This is the unexpected gift our troubles give us.


But Gutierrez' struggles are a good reminder that everything they do, everything they accomplish, every forward step is taken under the weight of their loss. For her, the time was near when she would be recruiting new high school students for the TNT program. She had been looking forward to attacking her second year on the job with confidence and new ideas and a new boss. Instead, the grieving had stolen her confidence. I wondered what would return it to her. "I don't know if I can do it," she said. "I don't want to scare the kids away."

When you meet the TNT students, and watch Gutierrez work with them, it's clear that, far from being "scared away" by her scars, they are drawn to her and her story. It is the kind of experience, the kind of story of pain and survival in Oakland that gives you authenticity, authority. There are places in Oakland where a scar, physical or emotional, speaks louder than a badge, louder than a college degree, louder than a pulpit. Tammy Cloud understands this. Gutierrez does, too.

Most of the kids in the TNT program are African American. With them Gutierrez shares growing up in East Oakland under a constant cloud of potential violence. With the students, she is as she has been with me, frank, honest, even brutally so. Recently she spoke to a group of Latino students.

I said 'Listen, this is a true story, and it could happen to you guys, and it hurt me soooo much, and it could happen to you, not just physically but mentally.'" She sounds inspired.

"I saw some little gang bangers and a lot of pretty girls," she tells me one day three years into her new life, "and I was really connected."

Telling the story and talking to the students about their lives and work seems to pull Gutierrez up from her grief. When she's working with them, the wounds on her face seem the farthest thing from her mind. It reminds me of one of the hopeful things I've learned on this beat: those victims I've met who have turned their pain to the healing of others, and to the healing of the city, always seem the most healed themselves. 



Mother and daughter, November 2011



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