SAMPLE CHAPTER

Hard Love

Sample Chapter — Chapter 4, “The Wedding”

by Ray Lopez

And so it Goes . . . the Great Lopez California Migration continues. My brother Steve flies out in August 1981 and stays with us for a month until his first wife, Bobbie, arrives in September after driving cross-country. It’s a very romantic story. Our families have been close friends since we were kids. Mom and Barbara (Bobbie’s mom) met when they worked together on the Commack Volunteer Ambulance Corp. Bobbie has a younger sister, Lori, and a younger brother, Chuck. The three are separated by a few years. We used to hang out all the time at each other’s homes. Bobbie and Lori have always loved Steve and would spend the entire time chasing him around the house. Bobbie and Steve move into a one-room apartment at Calle las Bollas, in an old Spanish-style building near the beach a few blocks away. The sink is in the middle of the living room. The other residents are mostly Marines, which worries me a bit.

After a couple of months, they move into the four-unit building at 1002 Buena Vista. We live in apartment A, and they are in D on the upper level. Bobbie and Steve both get jobs at McDonald’s in San Clemente. She is quickly promoted to assistant manager and supervises Steve for three months, which inspires him to seek employment elsewhere. He gets a job on the maintenance/landscaping crew at the Dana Point Marina, where he works for about a year before finding his first engineering job. Bobbie leaves McDonald’s and works as a special education teaching assistant in the San Clemente school system. Our next-door neighbor from Commack, Vinny St. Pierre, moves to San Clemente in ’82. Bobbie and Steve eventually get married on the bluff overlooking the Dana Point Marina on July 24, 1982. Afterward, the reception is held at a house where Vinny is living, overlooking a canyon. I carry in the keg. Uncle George moves from New York City to L.A. in December 1983. We all followed my sister Teresa and our friends, Denise and Mark, who caravanned cross-country in June of ’y9. We all live in San Clemente but for Denise and Mark, who live in Dana Point in a trailer park just up the coast.

And we’re doing it. Paula is industrious. That first year, she starts attending Saddleback Community College in Mission Viejo while working two jobs. She waitresses at Howard Johnson’s in San Clemente, then the Jolly Roger at Dana Point Harbor. She finds her “peeps” teaching three-year-olds at an affiuent preschool in Laguna Niguel. She tutors kids for a woman who runs a home-based special education program. She does the bills, cooks the food, does the laundry, cleans the apartment, and makes breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I think we’re free, living with the ocean breeze, and don’t see that Paula is really sad and disconnected. Estranged from her

mother, she self medicates with weed and alcohol, and I'm blind to the burden of the traditional role upon her life.

She's also my training partner at the gym, and we make love at least twice a day, sometimes in exciting places like the beach. This inspires me to write . . .

T.V. Moonlight

Cool silver
T.V. moonlight loves you
on the soft old couch.
Your flesh glows like
a
fresh
snow
slope.
My tongue
skis
down.
from areola
into
the light brown forest.

We get drunk together and smoke a little weed with Larry, our good neighbor and friend from across the street.

He is a surfer dude, a skilled carpenter from Huntington Beach. He is a sportsman. He surfs, skis, dives for lobsters at night, goes spearfishing in the ocean for tuna, and goes four-wheeling in the desert in his Toyota truck. He also lifts at the San Clemente Health Club. He's about 5' 10," weighs around 200 pounds, and has bushy blond hair and a thick mustache. He's barrel-chested and benches 325. He's the embodiment of the Southern California man. One winter day he starts out surfing at sunrise, goes four-wheeling in the desert on his way to Big Bear Lake, snow skis at Big Bear, and makes it back to end his day as it began— surfing— this time at sunset. California is amazing. We call him "Larry Larry," a name initiated by Uncle George who very much appreciated Larry.

We have our own little beach community on Buena Vista. We look out for each other, party together, and help each other out. Sometime in '82, Paula and I buy our new Toyota Tercel, a standard five-speed. Larry Larry is also a car guy who can do anything, like rebuild an engine. I know little to nothing. I want to change the oil one day, and Larry and Steve volunteer to oversee the project from a distance. They park themselves outside apartment D with a 12-pack of Michelob and give me the thumbs up. I get under the car, place the oil pan

under the tank, unscrew the lid and drain it. It looks a little too clear to me, but I get the thumbs up from my supervisors when I question the viscosity. I finish the job and feel satisfied. That night driving to a poetry reading in Mission Viejo, the car sounds like a jet engine when I shift into fifth gear. It turns out that I drained the transmission fluid and added four quarts of oil. What's the cost of naïve ambition? What's the cost of a rebuilt transmission?

Paula is the kindest, smartest, most beautiful person I know. She's amazing. I'm madly in love with her and want to get married, badly. My romantic warrior spirit has not yet fully matured, and so one day while soaking in some affectionate bliss, I say, "Hey, why don't we get married?" and she says, "We can't get married! We're not even engaged." So we get engaged. I spend a whopping $60 on a ring with a diamond chip. Our wedding doesn't cost much more.

We decide to offer our marriage as a gift to the Lord, marrying on the beach in San Clemente on December 25, 1981. I would not recommend this date for those newly engaged as the memory and celebration of your anniversary gets lost in the season. We write our own vows. I come up with a rhyme scheme and somehow get in a reference to the zoo and our favorite animals. In addition to her vows, Paula also writes a short sermon on love to be read by the pastor. She is taking a philosophy course at the time. She writes about the power of love and starts talking about "Victor Frankel, a man who was forced to live in Nazi concentration camps as a child, forced to march in the snow from one camp to another; this is a man who could talk of love. . ." I convince her that her vows would have some of our guests suffering and wondering about her sanity, and we do a little editing. Paula designs the invitations, which say: "I can only find freedom in the ropes that bind me to you." I wonder if people are going to think we might be into a little bondage. My parents don't come because Paula's parents won't be there. She's been disowned by her mother, Gloria, who's still not talking to her. A week before the wedding, she calls Paula and tells her that if she marries on Christmas, she will ruin that day for the rest of Gloria's life. I don't really think much about this, about the pain and anguish in Paula's heart. I just think about us. I just want to get married.

Our guest list includes: Teresa and Brad; Bobbie and Steve; Larry Larry; Mack, my supervisor from Los Pinos, with his wife and daughter; Phil, a counselor from the camp, with Chris, one of the youthful wards of the state; Tommy, a beach bum from San Clemente just released from Los Pinos; Bruce, another counselor; and Mark and Denise, who know an ordained minister who works full-time as a rodeo clown. I get ready at our apartment in the company of Steve, Mark, and Tommy. Meanwhile, Paula is with my sister at her place.

I'm wearing a white shirt with white slacks from a local consignment shop on Del Mar. Paula finds the perfect wedding "gown" at the Santa Ana Flea Market for $13. Our wedding site is on the beach about halfway between 204 and the pier. We pick low tide because there are large rocks near the shore that Paula and I love to wade out to. The men and I head off to the wedding, down the stairs to the beach and toward the pier. We're walking, four men, side-by-side, Steve on my right, Mark on my left, and Tommy next to Mark. We're

marching in the sand, stride-by-stride, when Steve starts whistling the tune from one of our favorite movies, The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly , and Mark declares that we are “the good, the bad, and the married.”

We arrive at the spot. Our guests are arriving. There’s a parking lot right there and a bluff on either side. For some reason unknown, Brad drops Paula off at the top of the bluff, and she has to scale down the steep hill. I see her up above, standing straight and tall, her golden hair artfully braided in a Baby’s Breath wreath. She descends, gracefully, carefully placing each step. Still, I’m afraid she might lose her footing and fall. She makes it unscathed yet a little out of breath. She looks like a medieval princess bride. Our guests surround us, and the rodeo clown starts the ceremony. There are joggers running and families walking by, pausing to see the wedding on Christmas Day on the beach. We exchange vows and sing a duet, “With You I’m Born Again” by Billy Preston and Syreeta. “

Come show me your kindness. In your arms I know I’ll find this. . . I was half not whole, in step with none, reaching through this world in need of one. . .

We are pronounced husband and wife and turn to walk into the ocean. But I’m stuck for a moment; I look down to see that my feet are buried in the sand up to my ankles. We stand on the rocks and watch the waves. The reception is on the patio at our apartment. We have wine and beer and our guests bring food. Paula cooks her first turkey in the oven in a brown paper bag, but in the imbibing we forget about it and find it the next morning still in the paper bag, still in the oven. Bobbie and Steve bring the cake, and I end up wearing most of it on my face when we cut the first slice for Paula to serve. We dance and drink and eat as the night goes on, but I know Paula is sad because no one in her family is here. I am tempted and go on a coke run with Tommy. Not a great way to begin my husbandry, and a low moment in my professional career. We come up empty. The entire wedding costs us 240 bucks. And we are married. And so it goes. And a sonnet now and then helps stir our romance.

THE BEAUTY OF YOUR EYES

If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
such verse would sing the essence of my love.
These lines in time would reach eternal skies
of dawn's first rays of light to stars above.
If I could write the wonders of your mind
No book could ever bind the depth of thought.
I'd search and reach and grasp what I could find
And hold in close the knowledge that was caught.
If I could write the music of your praise,
God's worshipers would have a holy song,
to learn and sing and dance through all our days,
for peace and joy to rain and make us strong.
If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
such verse would I first see each time I rise.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)