

From PLACAS: The Most Dangerous Tattoo (2012, 2014)
By Paul S. Flores

Setting: San Francisco Mission District, today.

ACT II, SCENE 11

TATTOO REMOVAL CLINIC, LASER ROOM

CLAUDIA

This, three dots on my hand...tres puntos. Yeah, it's the 13. But it's also the three places a gangster ends up. In the hospital, in prison, and in the grave. You can barely see it, and only another gangster knows what it means.

This one on my wrist, the Mexican flag. My mother and father both immigrated here from Jalisco. Just cause I'm guera, people think I'm not Mexican. It's like all Mexicans are supposed to look the same. So I got it to say, Well, we come in all shapes and colors, pa'que sepas. You know, like I had to prove myself a lot growing up.

This one on my arm used to say Sparky. I covered it up when Edgar was a baby. When I left la clika. Now it's supposed to look like some tribal design. I don't know what the fuck it is. You can't really bury the past, anyway. It's not like I stopped being Sparky. Not for the homegirls and the homeboys. Not for my enemies. Not for my mother. Not even for myself. I'll always be Sparky. Just like I'll always be a loca. I just don't call myself that no more.

This one on my chest, La Virgen de Guadalupe, outside a prison cell. You can see my father's face behind bars. He's praying. This is for my father, locked up since Edgar was in preschool. This one...it makes me cry. I love my father so much. He was the best man, pero porque he didn't have any papers, he couldn't get stable work for us... So he's doing twenty-five years in Lompop. He'll probably die there. I miss him.

CLAUDIA, EDGAR, and LIZ sit around PLACAS.

LIZ

Hola todos. Me llamo Liz. I'm the counselor here for tattoo removal. I've been working with Fausto for over a year now. I know it's not easy to come here for this. Pero, it's good to see you all. Como se sienten?

PLACAS

Bien.

CLAUDIA

Thanks for seeing us. My son Edgar has a tattoo he needs to get removed.

LIZ

Ah...sí. Y usted se llama Claudia, verdad?

CLAUDIA

That's me.

LIZ

Como estás, Edgar? You feeling better now?

EDGAR

What?

LIZ

You had something good happen, right? Your ankle monitor...

EDGAR

Oh, yeah.

PLACAS

Ese policia, man. We almost had to tear up the station before Orozco removed the monitor. Edgar's been off it for a couple weeks. So far, so good.

LIZ

Well, I think that's something to be happy about. A little more freedom—

EDGAR

Nah. It's a lot more bullshit. Ever since my dad—ever since dude came back, my life has gotten worse.

LIZ

Things are always changing, Edgar. It takes some time before we realize the effect. I know things look hard right now, but they could end up all good.

CLAUDIA

One thing at a time. Let's just get the tat off of him first, OK.

LIZ

Bueno...Has Fausto explained the process to you?

CLAUDIA

I'm familiar with it. Kinda.

LIZ

Edgar? You know why you're here?

EDGAR
Yeah.

LIZ
Why?

EDGAR
What my mom said. To burn the tat off me.

LIZ
How are you feeling about that?

CLAUDIA
He has no choice. He has to do it no matter what.

EDGAR
Are you gonna get yours removed, too, then?

CLAUDIA
We're not here about me, stupid. We're here about you.

LIZ
We're here for all of you. Como familia, verdad? In a minute, Fausto will receive treatment. He asked to have you in the laser room so you know exactly what it's like, Edgar.

EDGAR
Is it gonna hurt?

LIZ
Have you ever had a sunburn before?

EDGAR
Not really.

LIZ
That's OK. A lot of neighborhood kids don't get to the beach, even though it's only a couple miles away.

EDGAR
I been to the beach. I just don't take my shirt off.

CLAUDIA
He's embarrassed that he's a guero. But I did tell him not to take his shirt off, cuz he'll burn. He's needs spf50.

LIZ

Ahh. Well, the beach isn't very warm here, anyway. If you ever go to El Salvador, Edgar, you will see some of the most beautiful beaches. And it's so hot you can't keep your clothes on.

PLACAS

And you could eat huevos de tortuga...oh but—that's illegal.

EDGAR

Are you from El Salvador?

LIZ

I am. I was born there, and my parents brought me to San Francisco when I was about five years old.

EDGAR

Why did they brought you here? If it's so beautiful in El Salvador, why didn't you all just stay?

LIZ

Because there was a war, and my father was a doctor. He volunteered to help the campesinos when they got injured or sick. Some of the campesinos fought against the government. So the government wouldn't let my father work in the hospital.

EDGAR

What if I don't like tattoo removal? Can I stop?

LIZ

Sure.

CLAUDIA

No he can't. That tattoo will ruin his life. He's not stopping until it's gone.

LIZ

I mean, if it hurts too much we can stop until the next session. You'll be fine, Edgar. Kids your age have been getting treatment and they can handle it.

EDGAR

Man, if he can do it, then I can do it, too.

LIZ

All right. Well, before we bring the technician in, lets see how everyone is feeling. Is there anything you want to get off your chest? Does anyone want to talk about something difficult that has been going on? Or something exciting, maybe?

EDGAR

....

CLAUDIA

....

PLACAS

....

LIZ

All right, then. I'll start. I'm feeling excited today. One, because I have you all here, and I'm hopeful our time together is gonna turn out great. And second, I'm having my first ultrasound today.

CLAUDIA

You're pregnant?

LIZ

Yes. Isn't that amazing?

FAUSTO

Oh. Felicidades. Yo no sabía.

LIZ

I know. I wanted to wait to tell everyone until we had passed three months.

CLAUDIA

That's great. Is it your first?

LIZ

Yes.

CLAUDIA

I have a baby, too. Well, six months.

LIZ

Really? Fausto never mentioned you had another...

CLAUDIA

Fausto's not the... father. He's locked up. A little over a year. Right before Fausto got out.

LIZ

Where's the baby boy? Or is it a girl?

CLAUDIA

It's a girl.

FAUSTO

She's at my mother's house.

LIZ

Ahh. Ok. Wow. All right. Well, anyway. That's my check in. Who's next?

FAUSTO

...

CLAUDIA

...

EDGAR

...

LIZ

Fausto, since you are going through treatment, can you tell us how you're feeling about having your family in tattoo removal with you?

PLACAS

A little relieved. A little nervous.

LIZ

Why are you nervous?

PLACAS

Porque me siento ansioso. Como... even though we here, me entiendes, toda la familia para mejorar las cosas, me entiendes...pienso que no va haber resolución. Tattoo removal is just, you know...It's just a tat. There's still a lotta folks that got issues with us outside, me entiendes.

LIZ

Right. All three of you are from different hoods—rivals, even. It must be difficult for everyone's safety.

PLACAS

Yeah. Hollween's a trip.

CLAUDIA

We should have come sooner. It's my fault.

LIZ

Why do you feel like it's your fault, Claudia?

CLAUDIA

Because. I moved us to the wrong neighborhood, and didn't think... I was just trying to find a place to be with my kid away from...you know.

LIZ

I see what you mean. You were young when you had, Edgar.

CLAUDIA

I was seventeen and my mom was a bitch.

PLACAS

Yo andaba en la clika, tambien, en ese momento. I was thinking like a bicho, todavia. Not really knowing what I was doing.

LIZ

Have you thought of moving the family to another neighborhood, Claudia?

CLAUDIA

We talked about it. Edgar got all pissed and ran away.

PLACAS

He doesn't want to leave his friends.

LIZ

So Edgar? How are you feeling?

EDGAR

Like I don't wanna be here.

LIZ

Are you nervous?

EDGAR

No.

LIZ

Angry.

EDGAR

No. Not really. Except when he starts talking about moving me.

LIZ

Why does it bother you so much?

EDGAR

Because he was never was around before to help me make decisions, and now all the sudden I gotta move. They didn't move when they was bangin, you feel me. Why they

asking me to do something they couldn't do? Why don't they let me learn on my own? They don't want to listen to me, they just want to tell me I'm stupid.

CLAUDIA

You don't understand cuz you're not a mother, Edgar. I'm not gonna let you make decisions that will get you killed.

EDGAR

You ain't dead. You ain't locked up. You got in the hood. You got tattoos—

CLAUDIA

And I lost my family! Your father lost nine years in prison!

PLACAS

Thirteen if you count deportations.

LIZ

You think your parents made the right decision to bring you here, Edgar?

EDGAR

Huh?

LIZ

What about the decisions they made when they were your age? You think they were too young to understand the consequences?

EDGAR

Kinda. I mean, I guess.

LIZ

Do you feel comfortable around your father, Edgar?

EDGAR

It's like, I don't even know this vato, and he's all up in my mix. Tryin to tell me this and that. Nigga, I heard all that shit before!

CLAUDIA

You better talk right, Edgar. Or I swear I'll kick your ass right in front of the—

PLACAS

Tranquilo por favór.

LIZ

Edgar, how much do you know about your mom and dad's past?

EDGAR

Not much.

CLAUDIA

I don't like people to judge me about my past. So we don't talk about it.

LIZ

Thanks, Claudia. I was hoping Edgar would answer. Edgar? What do you know about how your mom and dad met?

EDGAR

I know they were banging in their hoods. They got together and had me, right?

LIZ

Ok. How do you feel about your dad being an immigrant?

EDGAR

It's like...fuck him, for real. I don't give a fuck.

PLACAS

Sometimes I have to remind myself this is my son. Porque this type of shit makes me want to beat his ass.

CLAUDIA

I should let you. You want your father to beat your ass in front of the therapist? Cuz I'll help him. You deserve it.

EDGAR

What? Both ya'll rivals to my hood...

LIZ

Are they your rivals?

EDGAR

Well, nah...I mean, I ain't no immigrant. I'm American. I'm from here. They both hang with smurfs. That ain't me.

PLACAS

Veze? Este bicho...He's brainwashed.

EDGAR

Shut up, fool. I don't even know what a bicho is.

CLAUDIA

A bicho.

PLACAS

A bicho.

CLAUDIA
You're a bicho.

PLACAS
A bicho's a kid.

EDGAR
I'm not a kid!

CLAUDIA
My father was an immigrant too!

LIZ
Ok. Hold on. I'm hearing that Edgar does not really feel stable and safe at home. Edgar where would a safe place be for you to go?

EDGAR
I don't know... Disneyland?

LIZ
Is home safe?

CLAUDIA
Of course home is safe. You're alive, aren't you? You ain't starving. You got a roof over your head. Who gave that to you? Me!

LIZ
We have to be patient and open to listening. Entienden? It sounds like Edgar doesn't know a lot about you both.

PLACAS
Yes.

LIZ
Fausto, can you tell your son something that he doesn't know about you that he should? Que le puede decir a tu hijo que debe saber para conocerte mejor?

FAUSTO
Que yo regrese de El Salvador para estar a su lado. Para ser su papa. Yo sabía que me iban a meter preso, pero lo hice de todos modos para el. Those nine years in prison, hijo, I only survived because I knew I had to come back to you.

LIZ
Did you understand that Edgar?

EDGAR
Yeah.

LIZ
He came back for you, see? Even though he knew he would go to prison if they caught him.

EDGAR
I thought it was cuz they was gonna kill him in El Salvador. You said they was chasing you every day, and you couldn't leave the house. You felt trapped, so you ran away.

PLACAS
Yeah. You get tired of running from people after a while, hijo. I wasn't running toward anything, until I realized I had you.

CLAUDIA
See, Edgar? Start listening, and stop being so stupid.

LIZ
Claudia, you have to stop abusing your son by calling him stupid.

CLAUDIA
I ain't abusing nobody! If my son is saying some stupid shit I got to put him in his place.

LIZ
Well, for the health of your family, please stop calling names.

CLAUDIA
What? Bitch, you don't know me!

LIZ
Don't call me a bitch.

CLAUDIA
You think you know better cause you went to college? Cuz your daddy was a doctor? Cuz you had books and shit up in your house? This is why I don't talk to bitches like you. You try to tell me how to be a mom. I love my children. I would kill for them. And I know what my family needs better than you do.

PLACAS
Claudia, no fue eso—

LIZ
Excuse me. I grew up in the Mission, too.

CLAUDIA

Well, you aint like me.

LIZ

I am like you. I was never in a gang. But I know exactly what it's like to walk these streets and feel scared. To lose your family. Puchica!

PLACAS

Maybe you should take it easy, Liz. You want some water?

LIZ

No. I want to say this. My parents are separated and, my sister is in a gang. So if you think I'm here to bullshit and blow smoke, well FUCK THAT!... I'm dealing with all that, OK? My sister has a tattoo on her chest that says Bugsy.

EDGAR

You know Buggy?

LIZ

She's my sister. Imagine that. And it kills me...

PLACAS

Liz, tranquila.

LIZ

...It kills me that I can't bring her back home.

PLACAS

Liz, estás bien? Necesitas algo?

LIZ

It must be my hormones...

CLAUDIA

...Or somethin'.

LIZ

I apologize, Claudia. I didn't mean to make you feel threatened. Edgar needs support. Instead of threatening, we have to find ways to support him, and each other. We can't continue calling each other names, and expect to help anyone.

TECHNICIAN (*Off Stage*)

Hey. We've got a line out there waiting for treatment.

LIZ

Right. OK...Are we OK?

CLAUDIA
All right.

LIZ
OK with everybody if we continue talking later?

CLAUDIA
Yeah.

EDGAR

....

PLACAS
Sí. Está bien.

LIZ
It's time to get Fausto's treatment started. Ready, Fausto?

PLACAS
Simón.

SCENE 12 LASER ROOM

*PLACAS takes his shirt off. Tattoos fully visible.
At the center of his body an izote and flower emerging between the letters M S.*

PLACAS
I dedicated this placa on my stomach to my brother Douglas. It's a flor de izote, the national flower of El Salvador. We came from the campo and we bloom like the izote flower coming out of razor sharp leaves. Like smiles rising from cries. Those tears made the smiles grow.

Some people eat the flor de izote. I don't know why someone would want to eat a flower. I've never tasted one. But I've seen many flowers get eaten. Caval. Pero losing a brother is the hardest thing to swallow.

When I got deported, I didn't know shit about El Salvador. I was twenty-one, hadn't been home in almost fourteen years. I was totally sold out on la clika. Shit, I thought I would be going on vacation. Spend time with Mama, hit the beach, eat some food, be a tourist,

n'shit. I knew I wouldn't be sticking around. Nel. My real life was la clika in San Pancho. Plus my ol'lady just had a baby. La verdad es que I was lost en mi propio país.

What freaked me out was when my brother Douglas showed up to the party with thirty chavalitos from the neighborhood. All of them mean mugging me when they saw my placazos. So I found an old a machete and started sharpening it. But when they heard I was Mara Salvatrucha, they wanted me to jump them all in so they could say a ranflero from Califas recognized their clika.

So I did it. I jumped in thirty mocosos. At first I did it by myself, one by one. Then each of the guys I fought helped me jump in the others. It took three days. My hands were all fucked up. My body ached. But me and Douglas started that clika in our colonia in El Salvador. I jumped my own brother in.

This placa is really about love. We tattoo our dead homeboys names to remember them always. That's Respect. This homeboy happened to be my brother who got left behind in the civil war while my other brother and I escaped to California. What the fuck did we escape to?

It might seem fun and exciting to be part of the hood in the beginning. A gangster's life looks like an adventure from the outside. Pero el camino es largo y duro. Yeah, there's love. Gangster love. A mangled love. In the end we have the names of our dead tattooed on our bodies. And the living...y nosotros, que? What about us?