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I was born one hot, polluted Los Angeles summer afternoon in an inglorious, scrap-metal yard surrounded by a six-foot chain-link fence. Despite their breeding—my parents came from a long line of premium-bred hunters (my dad was from the East Coast and mom from the West)—they were relegated to guard duty in a wilderness of concrete and metal in the industrial part of the San Fernando Valley north of Los Angeles. This was a different type of hunt country than either of them had known, one in which the bittersweet aroma of the hunt lingering in the air wasn't of fox, herringbone suits, or silk dresses. Fear was the only scent in the air in this country, where gangs ruled the land and the hunted were the hunters.

There were six us, five boys and me, born onto uncovered asphalt in 113-degree weather shaded by the crushed bumper of a rusted-out '72 Nova. The first few days were tough: the hot asphalt, groping, eyes still shut, to find the receptive belly of our beleaguered and half-starved mother, fighting with my brothers to get enough to eat (there were too many of us and not enough of mom), the sound of gunshots and racing car engines, the smell of diesel, and argumentative negotiations for parts. Mine, ours, was a rough beginning.

As we grew stronger and more capacitated with each passing day (a veritable miracle given our meager caloric allotments), we began to realize our ancestral

home—such as it was—was nothing more than an embattled war zone and we had to get street smart to survive the perils of our environment. Dad told us that a dog from across the street, some scar-faced pit, was shot just a week before we were born. More important than that, were his cautioning words. “Don’t let anyone close,” he demanded. “You don’t know who you can trust. People steal dogs like us—to fight rather than hunt.” That was the only parenting my father ever gave me, and for the rest of my life around him an unacknowledged history hung between us.

Dad, a huge German Shorthaired Pointer from a long line of Eastern-bred champions, had impeccable genes and intelligence. “A real beaut,” our human used to say in the odd moment one of his clients showed interest in us dogs. Mom told me Dad had a real life before—somewhere in a place called the Carolinas—where he hunted partridge, quail, and grouse alongside his human, a nice guy, but a bad card player. Dad’s life took a terrible left turn when his human wagered him in a poker game late one sultry summer night when whiskey, ego, and lack of ability compromised his human’s judgment. When the cards were laid, a full house trumped his human’s deuces, and in less than thirty-six hours, driving in an old Dodge with a new human possessed of a foul disposition, dad went from free, prime hunting stock to caged guard dog. Mom says, “He’s never been the same.”