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Eddie's life on the streets

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"IT'S LA VIDA LOCO — the crazy life," Eddie Reyes says, sitting in the dim light of the County Jail, old at 24.

His orange jumpsuit is open to the waist, showing the tattoos and scars that cover his body — each marking a passage in his life and illustrating a story that ends in prison or death.

He points to a drawing of a woman with long flowing hair that curls down his biceps into gang symbols and begins another story. Like all the others, it begins with fighting and cruising the streets of Watsonville.

As Eddie Reyes talks, his eyes change, becoming darker and more alive. The rhythm of his speech changes, his chin rises in a mad-dog pose and for a moment Eddie is back in the light, on the streets, cruising in a low rider, the music loud, and getting high. Strong and proud.

"Yeah me and Mike man, I remember one time," he says, with a laugh — and it is a laugh like tequila craziness in the night. But the laugh stops as it begins, and his eyes change again, becoming hooded in shadow.

"I was out three days and they killed him, killed my homeboy," Reyes said. "He used to come over to my house as a kid. I get out and three days later, he's dead."

Eddie is no longer in the light of

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memories, but back in the yellowed light of jail, in the stink of too many bodies, sitting in a locked room, with whitewash covering the scratches left by prisoners now long gone.

He begins a brief litany of those who have fallen.

"Most of my homeboys are all dead," he says. "When I was 17 I held my best friend in my arms as he died of an OD. Most of them have died."

Only 24, and Eddie Reyes is getting old. He's spent most of the last six years in jail or prison, and he is on his way back to prison now. He lasted eight weeks on parole, saw his girlfriend and family and then he got in a fight.

Now it's back to Tracy, Soledad or Folsom and eight more months in prison. "My family's really upset with me," Reyes said.

But Reyes doesn't seem to care. He's getting used to it. Prison came with the package, with the lifestyle — La Vida Loca.

"I wanted to go (to prison)," Reyes said. "I told myself I wanted that respect on the street, being able to say, 'I've been to the pen.'"

"But in prison, you just sit there rotting — it stinks. It smells like feet, armpit, butthole — it's a worse place than you can ever imagine. When I got there I sat and thought, 'So this is what I wanted to see so bad. This is the glory.'"

Reyes grew up in Watsonville, in Mesa Village near Pinto Lake.

Running with a gang was part of life — even his father's.

"I looked at my dad's photos, he had a little goatee and was all pachucoed out," Reyes said, describing a fashion from decades earlier.

Reyes started using drugs when he was 10, smoking marijuana and drinking. By 12 he was a wanna-be on his way up with the Northsiders, eager to prove himself.

"Hey, when I grew up it was at the elementary school," Reyes said. "We were all homeboys and the older guys were leading."

At 14, he "got involved with a stabbing," and left Watsonville for Santa Cruz.

"I did a few stabbings here in Santa Cruz, but I never got caught," he said. "But then the police found out who I was and they'd come after me every time something happened. Even at my home."

By the time Reyes was in high school, life was a non-stop party, broken by moments of thievery and extreme violence. It was simple. If somebody came into your turf or challenged you the fight was on — right away, and Reyes enjoyed the fighting.

"I beat up everybody I could," Reyes said. "It's like Christmas time, you give a little present, or get one — either you give or get a beating."

He supported himself by stealing and robbing — regularly driving to neighboring towns like Gilroy where he'd choose a neighborhood in a poor section, because the police response was slower than in a wealthy area.

"I'd take 10 or 14 stereos, steal a car and go home," he said.

Reyes kept gang ties in prison, and has gotten in trouble for it, being transferred from more than one institution due to gang activity. Where he once talked of street battles, now it is fights in the prison yard, with gunshots from guards.

Leaving the gang doesn't seem like an option. When he went to apply for a job a few weeks ago, a security guard took a look at his tattoos and ordered him off the property, before he could even get in the door.

"They don't give a guy like me a

I'll go for it. I know how to do."

Time on the outside has stopped for Reyes. When he gets out of prison, he feels like he is 18 years old and looks at the world the way it was when he was out.

But times have changed, and what once would lead to a fight is now often settled by gunfire.

"When I was coming up, it was all about chains, bats and knives — and everybody seeing who could give a good beating," Reyes said. "Nowdays nobody's got the guts to stab you in the stomach and look in your eyes and say, 'What's up with you now.' Now they shoot.

"But it's not that easy to pull a trigger. You have to have a lot of hatred to make you want to kill," he said.

Reyes doesn't see a life out of the gangs yet. It is still his identity — even though most of his gang friends have either died or left the gang life.