

Winner of the Pura Belpré Award



PARROT IN THE OVEN

MI VIDA

a novel by

VICTOR MARTINEZ

Reader's
Guide
•INSIDE•

The Baseball Glove

That summer my brother, Bernardo, or “Nardo,” as we call him, flipped through more jobs than a thumb through a deck of cards. First he was a dishwasher, then a busboy, then a parking attendant and, finally, a patty turner for some guy who never seemed to be in his hamburger stand for more than ten minutes at a time. (Mom believed he sold marijuana, or did some other illegal shamelessness.) Nardo lost one job for not showing up regular enough, another for showing up too regular—the boss hated his guts. The last job lost him when the owner of the hamburger stand packed up unexpectedly and left for Canada.

The job Nardo misses most, though, was when he worked as a busboy for the Bonneville Lakes Golf and Catering Service. He says it was the only time he ever got to touch elbows with rich people. The parties they catered served free daiquiris, whisky drinks and cold beer, really cold, in big barrels choking with ice. At some parties, like the

one he got fired from, they passed out tickets for juicy prizes like motorcycles, TV sets, stereos and snow skis. The last party had a six-piece band and a great huge dance floor so the "old fogies," as my brother called them, could get sloshed and make fools of themselves.

As it turns out, he and a white guy named Randy took off their busboy jackets and began daring each other to get a ticket and ask a girl to dance. Randy bet Nardo wouldn't do it, and Nardo bet he would, and after a two-dollar pledge he steered for the ticket lady.

"I could've hashed it around a bit, you know, Manny," he said. "I could've double- and triple-dared the guy a couple of times over, then come up with a good excuse. But that ain't my style."

Instead he tapped Randy's fingers smooth as fur and walked up to the ticket lady. She peered out from behind the large butcher-paper-covered table at the blotches of pasta sauce on his black uniform pants and white shirt—which were supposed to go clean with the catering service's light-orange busboy jacket, but didn't—and said, "Ah, what the hell," and tore him out a tag.

Before the little voice nagging inside him could talk louder, Nardo asked the nearest girl for

a dance. She had about a million freckles and enough wire in her mouth to run a toy train over. They stumbled around the dance floor until the band mercifully ground to a halt. She looked down at his arm kind of shylike and said, "You dance real nice."

Now my brother had what you could call a sixth sense. "*Es muy vivo*," as my grandma used to say about a kid born that way, and with Nardo it was pretty much a scary truth. He could duck trouble better than a champion boxer could duck a right cross. He made hairline escapes from baths, belt whippings and scoldings just by not being around when punishment came through the door. So I believed him when he said something ticklish crawled over his shoulder, and when he turned around, there, across the dance floor, in front of the bandleader about to make an announcement over the microphone, was his boss, Mr. Baxter—and boy was he steamed!

Mr. Baxter owned the catering service, and sometimes, my brother said, the way he'd yell at the busboys, it was like he owned them, too. Mr. Baxter didn't say anything, just pointed to the door, then at Nardo, and scratched a big X across his chest. Just like that, he was fired.

Winner of the National Book Award
Boston Globe–Horn Book Fanfare Honor List
Publishers Weekly Best Book

Dad believed people were like money. You could be a thousand-dollar person or a hundred-dollar person—even a ten-, five-, or one-dollar person. Below that, everybody was just nickels and dimes. To my dad, we were pennies.

Fourteen-year-old Manny Hernandez wants to be more than just a penny. He wants to be a *vato firme*, the kind of guy people respect. But that's not easy when your father is abusive, your brother can't hold a job, and your mother scrubs the house as if she can wash her troubles away.

In Manny's neighborhood, the way to get respect is to be in a gang. But Manny's not sure that joining a gang is the solution. Because, after all, it's his life—and he wants to be the one to decide what happens to it.

“A brilliant, witty memoir of a Mexican-American adolescence.”
—*U.S. News & World Report*

“A rare and consummately believable portrait of barrio life.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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