

old home town of Alamos. He left the other six guns with his wife, with instructions to sell them one at a time if she needed to.

It was a common thing in Mexico for riders of the public buses to quite often have to get out and push the buses they were riding on, for, like most things in Mexico, the buses did not work very well, and they broke down just as often as not. But Pedro Lopez only had to push his buses half a dozen times before he got to Empalme.

Empalme was the west coast recruiting center for *braceros*—farm workers who wanted to get permits to go into the *Estados Unidos* and work—, that much Pedro Lopez knew. He also knew that he was supposed to have been screened first in Culiacán, but he knew the system of *mordida* which has made Mexico unique in the Western world, and he thought that he would save some money by going right to Empalme and bypassing the screening center in Culiacán.

He arrived in Empalme at dusk, too late to look up the recruiting center officials. He could smell Empalme even before he stepped off the open-windowed bus. The smell was a mixture of human shit, unwashed bodies, dirt and dust, and dank sea air, for Empalme was just a stone's throw from the ocean. A pall of dust hung in the air like a dirty, gray cloud which had attached itself to the ground, and thousands of would-be *braceros* mingled shoulder to shoulder in the dusty gloom, unique only in their sameness as a mass of humanity. Not very many of them wore shoes—, most wore *huaraches*. Most wore white shirts made from grain sacks, many wore faded jeans, and many wore white pants that were also made of grain sacks. All of them wore hats of some sort, some made of straw, some made of imitation felt, but all wide-brimmed.

There were so many Mexicans just standing or sitting around that the dirt streets were clogged with living bodies, from curb to curb if there had been any curbs—, and as Pedro Lopez swung his *morral* over his shoulder he noticed that many of his fellow Mexicans did not even have *morral*s, they were that poor.

He pushed his way through the throng of sweaty bodies, looking for a place to settle in for the night, unseen by unseeing eyes, for he was just a carbon copy of the thousands who stood around him. All along the edges of the street were makeshift tents made from abandoned cardboard boxes, and Pedro Lopez noticed that, depending on its size, each tent contained at least one Mexican, some of them lying down, some of them sitting, some of them cooking meager meals over fires built in the dirt, but all of them knowing that if at least one *compadre* was not left to guard the cardboard tent it would disappear in an instant.

Worst of all, except for the stench that permeated the air everywhere, were the flies—, huge black clouds of them that turned and churned above the cardboard tents, covered the tops of the tents, and buzzed lustily around

the meals that were being cooked—, kept off the food not by the human beings but only by the heat of the fire.

Pedro Lopez was appalled by what he saw. He was accustomed to poverty, but he had never seen anything like this anywhere in his country before. There were a lot of old men, and even men with arms and legs missing, but most of the Mexicans were younger, in their early twenties, and a lot of them still having not reached manhood yet. But they were congregated here, bound together by a common bond of hunger, pissing or shitting openly any place where there was a spot of dirt that wasn't occupied by another human being.

With nothing else to do until daylight anyway, Pedro Lopez walked and walked, and the more he saw the sadder he became. He became ashamed of his own country for allowing this to happen. He became ashamed of his own countrymen for allowing themselves to be reduced to being treated like the cattle he had herded when he had worked on the big *hacienda* as a *vaquero*. He became ashamed of himself for being a part of it.

But finally he said "*asi es la vida*" to himself and accepted it all. After all, it was what he had come to expect of his country anyway. Eventually, he ate, apprehensively, at one of the many temporary, thrown-together food stands which offered, as was expected, corn *tortillas*, *frijoles*, and *chiles*, and he battled the flies for his food as he stuffed it into his mouth. When he had filled his stomach he walked far enough out of the center of town so that he could find space to roll out his *morral*, and he finally found a spot in the dirt beside the tumbled walls of an abandoned adobe.

Along the way he had met a man named Hector Garza, who had no legs, and, away from the crowd, he and Garza shared the companionship of two men lost in unfamiliar surroundings. Garza's legs were cut off right below the hips, but, somewhere, he had acquired a pair of old roller skates, and he had fastened the wheels of each skate to each of the four corners of a two-foot-square slab of wood which he strapped himself to, and, like a water bug skipping across the surface of the water, he was able to propel himself along the ground by pushing himself with blocks of wood strapped to his hands with leather thongs, though he often bogged down in the soft dirt and he often found a piece of human shit sticking to his blocks of wood.

Pedro Lopez learned that Garza had lost his legs trying to jump a free ride on an ore train. Much to his surprise, Pedro also learned that Garza was also waiting to become a *bracero*.

"But you have no legs—," Pedro Lopez said. "How can you be a *bracero* and work in the field—?"

"I have strong arms—," Garza said proudly.

"But you have no legs—," Pedro Lopez said the obvious again.

Garza shrugged in acceptance. "*Asi es la vida*—," he said fatalistically.

"I have nowhere else to go anyway. Maybe someday the *Estados Unidos* will need so many *braceros* that they will even take me."

"Do you have money for the *mordida*—?" Pedro Lopez said, instinctively knowing that Garza did not.

"No—," Garza said sadly, "but perhaps someday there will be a great need for *braceros*—."

They lay propped up against the adobe wall, gazing up at the stars in the clean air that was so far above them. Pedro Lopez and Hector Garza both knew that Garza would never become a *bracero*, but Pedro Lopez said nothing, for hope was all that Hector Garza had.

The next morning, after a fitful night's sleep, Pedro Lopez awoke still shocked but no longer surprised at what he had seen in Empalme. Never, even in the poorest of towns, had he seen his countrymen living like such animals, and never in such crowded numbers.

Trying to ignore the stench and the visions of Empalme that would remain imprinted in his brain forever, he said goodbye to Garza and went straight to the headquarters of the *oficiales*, and, after fifteen minutes of trying to get someone to listen to him, he asked, "How soon can I get a permit to go to the *Estados Unidos* and work—?"

He was answered by a sneer and a laugh. "Two years—," the *oficial* said. "You wait in line behind all of them—," and, with a sweep of a grubby hand, the *oficial* indicated the masses which milled around everywhere outside, waiting and waiting.

Pedro Lopez was not surprised by the words of the dirty, dust-caked *oficial* with the equally dirty uniform, for Pedro Lopez was, after all, a Mexican, and not a young one at that, and he knew that *mordida* was the way of his country.

"Is there no way to go sooner—?" he persisted, having heard already that these *oficiales* were even more corrupt than usual.

The grubby *oficial* eyed Pedro Lopez like a butcher sizing up a side of beef. "You need seven hundred American dollars to get on the top of the list—," the *oficial* sneered. "That is the rule."

"Whose rule—?" Pedro Lopez wanted to know. "I thought the permits were free from our government—."

"Nothing is free in Mexico except death—," the *oficial* snickered. "The permits are free, *es verdad*—, but it costs seven hundred American dollars to buy a spot at the top of the list so that you can get your free permit. Otherwise you can wait with the others out there—."

"I understand," Pedro Lopez said, for Pedro Lopez understood *mordida* and the ways of his country. "Perhaps I will go to Mexico City and understand with someone who does not know about this—."

The *oficial* laughed. "Are you not a Mexican—?" he sneered. "Those