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The trio had the look of travelers who had been on the road much too long. The old man in particular seemed on his last legs.

I was in the front passenger's seat of the Border Patrol truck when the officer at the wheel spotted them a block from the bridge. "Southbounds. I guess you boys aren't interested in them."

Since we were interviewing any undocumented aliens he apprehended, I wondered why he had bothered pointing them out.

"You mean they're not illegal?"

"They're wet, all right. At least till they cross back over."

"So you could catch them if you wanted to?"

"If I wanted to. But look at them, especially the old one. If I opened the back door they'd fight to see who gets in first. It's like bagging a bird someone else wounded and taking credit for the kill."

Mando stared at the three men for a telltale clue. "They look like shoppers to me." He looked even harder for some apparent motive. "Besides, why are they going back?"

"Depends. A death in the family. Or things don't turn out the way they expected. You'd be amazed at how many guys figure they'll become millionaires in America. And not just the youngsters. Veterans, too – the kind that if you looked into their souls you'd only see used Chiclets and chicken wire." He added with

GENARO GONZALEZ

# On the Other Side

grudging respect, "But they keep coming back until they can't." Suddenly they saw us and froze like terrified jackrabbits.

"Come on," muttered the patrolman. "Just git!"

Finally, they did, with the younger ones trying to shield the old man. But this one must have sensed he looked like the least likely suspect, so he took the lead.

Mando and I followed them across the bridge purely out of curiosity, since our interview didn't address undocumented workers who crossed on their own. Once on the other side, we thought we had lost them in the weekend crowd when they resurfaced outside a restaurant.

"Come on, *tío*," the younger man urged, "it's our treat."

"It's too expensive."

"You said you couldn't wait for a real Mexican restaurant."

"All I see inside are *gringos* and other *turistas*."

"Well, we've been on the other side long enough to qualify on both counts."

The waiter at the door did little to encourage them, perhaps suspecting they would be poor tippers or, even worse, scare away the clientele. Suddenly the older nephew and I locked glances. Greeting me like an old friend, he invited us to join them.

"Our uncle's having second thoughts," he said. "Thinks the place is for *americanos* only."

Mando quickly picked up the bluff. "It's a sad day when a *mexicano* isn't comfortable eating in his own country."

The dare did it for the old man, and the waiter, intimidated by our tape recorder,

ushered us to a table far from the other Americans. There we made small talk, keeping alive the fiction of our friendship until he left our side.

"So," said the older nephew after some overdue introductions, "do you work for the *migra*? Not that it matters any more . . ."

"We're doing life course interviews," said Mando.

"Life course?" said the old man. "Well, you've come to the right man. I've just about –"

"So you're working?" interrupted the older nephew.

We nodded and the old man gave our response some thought. "Working, eh?"

Well, I hope you boys have permits to work in Mexico."

His serious tone, along with the realization that the tables were suddenly turned, left me clutching at straws.

"Actually we're college students."

He smiled, as though apologizing for my discomfort, then patted his nephews on the shoulders.

"See, that's what you should have gotten back there. An education like these boys. Instead you left behind the best years of your lives."

"Who said anything about leaving anything behind?" said his younger nephew. He stared at the tape recorder, then asked whether I intended to turn it on. I did so, out of courtesy, since he wanted to talk, and there were a few more awkward seconds of silence.

"So," I asked, "where are you from?"

"Depends on which 'from' you're talking about," he said. He let me sit with a baffled look for a moment, then added, "In your country, we're from Houston. But if it's Mexico you're talking about . . . they call us *'los leones de Sabinal.'*"

His brother corrected him: "Come on, they only called us that in Houston."

In truth, neither resembled a lion. The older brother had the scrawny toughness of beef jerky, while the younger one was just as wiry but with a sizable beer belly. It gave him an incongruous appearance, like news photos of emaciated children with bloated bellies.

Oddly enough, it was the old man who had a leonine air: despite his gentle manners, his large, gnarled hands could almost pass for paws, and his streaked, untamed mane hinted at a once-menacing manhood. Even his subdued gestures suggested a self-confident assurance of his place in the animal kingdom, a body that had gone through life without having to throw its weight around. But now his eyes were dull and decrepit with the everyday defeats of domestication.

The younger nephew must have read my thoughts or else realized he was too slight to wear a lion skin convincingly. "Back in Sabinal they actually called *tío* the lion."

The old man dismissed the honor with a weak wave of his hand. "Back in Sabinal any kid old enough to get a hard-on thinks he's a mountain lion."

"Sabinal," said Mando, making a mental note. "Is that a town, a village?"

"It's more of a ranch," said the older nephew. "It's close to Perros Prietos. Know where that is?"

Mando shook his head. "Is that close



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to Ciudad Victoria? Or to Monterrey?"

"Monterrey?" said the old man.

"Where the hell is that?"

Because of his tired eyes, it took us a while to realize he was teasing. "When you're in Sabinal," he explained, "Monterrey might as well be on the moon."

"In that case Houston must be on another planet."

"If a man's going to travel," said the younger man, "he might as well go to other worlds." It sounded like something he might have heard his uncle say.

"Let's get back to this life thing," said the old man. "Where should I start? The beginning, or the end?"

His older nephew shifted in his seat as if he were uncomfortable. "Well, since we don't know much about how we'll end . . ."

"I know how," the old man told us matter-of-factly, "and I even have a pretty good guess when." He shook his head as if apologizing once more. "I suppose one starts at the beginning, though. When my oldest sister was left to raise these boys on her own, I . . . you see, I never married, and I loved these boys like they were my own. Like they say, when God won't give you sons the devil gives you nephews. Anyway, I worked up and down the Texas border. One time I even ended up in California."

"How was it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It was another experience. The *mexicanos* there don't know much Spanish, or if they do they're not

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talking. Many don't even like to be called *mexicano*. You'd think with all those places with Spanish names – San this or Santa that – you'd think the language would rub off somehow."

"And the *gringos*?"

"*Gringos* are *gringos* wherever you go. No, I take it back. They seemed a bit nicer than the ones in Texas."

Mando had his own theory about it. "It's that Texas . . ." He didn't know the Spanish word for "drawl" – for all I know there isn't one – "that Texas accent. You can't use it without sounding like an arrogant idiot."

"I wouldn't know," said the old man. "They all sound the same to me. Anyway, I came back to the Texas border. It's odd, in a way. There's not as many Mexican celebrations like you have in California, but it felt more like home. I worked like a beast of burden, sending money home so my sister could give these two an education. And for what?" He stared at his younger nephew with a mixture of disappointment and admira-

tion, the ambivalence of fathers whose children follow their footsteps down the same dead end. "No sooner did Tacho turn sixteen than he joined me on the other side."

"Who could resist all those dollars? Besides, I got to see the world." He rattled off the names of a few theme parks he had visited along the way. "Actually, mama was worried about *tío*'s health, so she sent me to check up on him. When I insisted on going up to Houston, he went along to look after me."

The older nephew added, "So then mama sent me up to bring both of them back."

"I would have brought him back in time," the younger one protested, then winked at us. "But I got sidetracked along the way."

"You would have brought him back," agreed his brother, "but not in time." "I'm going back as soon as *tío* gets better. There's this *americana* . . . Not a *chicana*, mind you. A real *gringa*. Blonde, blue eyes, the works!"

"If I were you I wouldn't be bragging."  
"You're just envious. Ask *tío* what he thought of her."

The old man's evasive glance suggested the delicate matter had come up before. "I've never been an expert on beauty, boys. I'm like most men. I only like what I like."

"Anyway," the younger nephew said in his defense, "it's a good thing we were in Houston when *tío* got too sick to work. They put him in this hospital where only rich people go."

"They were experimenting on him. You should've seen him. All bundled up . . ."

". . . tubes going in and out every which way."

The old man tried his best to squeeze some humor from the scenario they were painting. "I looked like an astronaut. I

ning out like we were heroes. "The *turistas* are in town! We started handing out dollars like they were autographs, buying Cokes and *chicharrones* for the kids. Then, for just a second or two, I caught sight of this old man standing away from the crowd. He couldn't have been older than I am now, but he seemed ancient at the time. Anyway, he was staring at us, or at least I thought he was, and I sneaked back to the bus in shame. Afterwards, back home, I started realizing I was living a lie. But it was too late. The other young men said, 'Ah, you just don't want to share all those blondies.' And they began to leave for the other side."

"So did you, *tío*."

"I went back because I was already an outsider at home. Or maybe my home began to change. This last time all I saw were pickups with Texas plates. Soon even our dogs will turn undocumented. We'll be lucky to call it Perro Prieto. Still, I can put up with all that. What I can't stand is those dumpy *mexicanos* with twenty-gallon hats."

"It's the *vaquero* culture," said his younger nephew.

"I grew up when there were still *vaque-*

*ros*, and those aren't real cowboys. Not Mexican cowboys, at least."

"Times change," mumbled the young man. "Like you said, you started it all. You were the first one who left for Texas. And if you're an outsider, so is most of Perros Prietos."

"I suppose I can't really blame them. The first time I went back home I must have been a sight to see. And I left for the same reasons this new generation leaves. You see, when you boys ask *mexicanos* why they cross as illegals, you're going to get the official story. I needed to feed my family, I wanted to better myself. And while that's true, sometimes that's not the whole story. The young men especially."

His younger nephew interrupted, "You were young once."

He nodded and corrected himself: "Some of us also do it for the adventure, for the excitement of beating the *gringos* at their own game. Even if you're caught you still have stories to tell your children. There's nothing demeaning about that, is there? What's better for the spirit than adventure?"

He started gesticulating and got carried away, suddenly bringing back his arms to his sides. "I'm still recovering from those rounds with the doctors. If you're poor and *prieto* you're just a guinea pig. They stick you with whatever they can get their hands on, trying to come up with a cure for the rich."

"You don't have anything a *curandera*

can't cure," his older nephew insisted. But his words lacked conviction, as if his uncle's pessimism were contagious.

His brother, though, was either more innocent or a better actor: "Look at him. He's got all his teeth, more hair than any one head deserves, and eyes that can spot a *culito* at two hundred meters."

"I might spot one, but after that I'm like those dogs that freeze on the spot and just point."

"That's normal for your age, *tío*," said the older nephew. "I'll get there one day too. Right now you're malnourished. Mama will have a stack of tortillas this high when you get home."

"They'll just stay there and get stale," said the old man.

The younger man grew impatient with his pessimism. "We're all going to die anyway. At least let's hope we die in Mexico."

Mando, trying to second-guess him, gave the comment his own twist. "That's the thing about dying in Mexico. It's direct and dramatic. My father's got family down here, and every now and then we'll get a call or a telegram: another one down."

I added my own ideas on the matter. "That's because you don't hear from your family until some relative hangs up his Nikes. For all you know he was bedridden for months."

The younger brother, though, took Mando's side. "No, it's like we say here. *La vida no vale nada*. You're having a beer at a cantina, when *pas!* some guy plants a bullet between your eyes. Or you kneel on the sidewalk to tie your shoe when *pum!* some truck driver with a hangover misses the curb, taking you and five others."

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to go back to Texas," said their uncle. "My disease is too boring for these parts."

The younger man tapped his head. "Your disease is up here, *tío*. A month's worth of *menudo* and you'll be drinking like the old days."

"So that some other drunk can plant a bullet in my brain."

"Well," he said, "there're worse ways to go."

"If I could drink to that, I would."

"I still say *tío* should have stayed on the other side. Pretty soon those *gringos* will discover the secret of youth."

"They already have," said the older nephew. "They get people like us to do their hard work."

"Maybe that's why the women still look good at forty."

"You mean like that *gringa* you were seeing?"

"What about her? She looked half her age."

"Really? Then she must have been pushing eighty."

The old man started to arbitrate, then abruptly excused himself from the table, leaving both brothers trading nervous glances. When the seconds turned to minutes, the older one suddenly said – to us and yet to no one in particular – "He's

dying, you know."

This time the other one did not bother to dispute him. He was about to go make sure everything was all right when his uncle returned and took his seat without a word.

He said nothing for a while, tracing the wet ring of his bottle of mineral water, then turned to me. "Look here. A man starts out here." He traced the circle until he came back to the beginning. "And ends up here. What does it mean?"

I've never enjoyed riddles, especially the sort that older, less educated people ask, since the motive is usually a pretext to point out my ignorance. So I figured that the best way to answer a riddle was to talk in circles.

"What do you mean, 'What does it mean?'"

"Maybe I've come full circle. Or maybe I only ran around in circles. Which one is it?"

"I'll let you know when I get there."

For once he seemed genuinely amused and smiled at his nephews to show he expected no less from a college student. "Good answer. Because by then I won't be around."

He turned in the direction of our tape recorder, as though realizing that it was only a matter of time before that was all that would remain of him.

"Let's return to the start of that circle, then. When I first heard about the other side, I wanted desperately to go. I'd been told that life was good there. But I was also scared to cross that border. Scared of the unknown. Sad to leave my loved ones. It's a little like . . . this other thing . . . only you don't come back from death." He sat quietly, struggling with the silence until he brought back his smile. "Unless the devil decides to deport you."

By the time we stepped outside the evening star was out, and I remarked that the norther forecast for later that night was already in the air. "Bad weather always arrives ahead of time," he said, then shivered with the radiance that winter gives to fragile life. His older nephew quickly searched in his bag for something warm.

"It's all right. Soon we'll be in high country, so I'd better get used to the cold. Let's see if I still know the way."

It was hard to imagine that traveling south would take you to a cold place. He started to use the river as a reference point, but remembering that it wound at odd angles, he searched instead for a smudge of sunlight. Finding it, he put it to his right, then looked at me with a smile that was at once tired and tranquil.

"I know where I am now," he said. "I'm going south. I'm going home." ■

# On

told the boys, get me out of here before they shoot me to the moon."

"No matter," said the younger nephew. "When we get home you'll have some *caldo de res*. Not the stuff they serve here." He picked up our empty salsa bowl and caught a nearby waiter's attention – no mean feat, since this one was staring hard at a table of Anglos as though trying to coerce them telepathically to leave a large tip.

"I'll bet you were hungry for Mexican food," I said.

"Shit, no," said the younger nephew. He said it in English and so spontaneously

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that it must have been the first phrase he learned in the U.S. "I never saw so many Mexican restaurants as when I went to Houston. Or so many dollars, eh, *tío*?"

"I'd already had my share. At first you compare yourself to your relatives and friends you left behind in Mexico. By that metric stick, you're practically rich. I remember my first year or two, every time I'd send money home I'd also mail my check stubs so everyone could see how much I made. Of course, most of what I kept went for the bare necessities. Even after I was deported the first time, I kept living in a fantasy world. The immigration bus taking us home stopped at this town where half the schoolchildren came run-