

Bracero

The sun was scorching the air and the mild breeze brought the sour smell of the garbage dump just below. A blue tarp, attached to the only trees, gave an unhealthy drowned look to the faces of the people beneath it. At one end of the rectangular shade, a table decorated with hand woven shawls of rainbow colors. A well-worn leather covered book lay on the table beside an upright bronze crucifix.

Mass was over, but the people stayed, unwilling to leave the weekly gathering that relieved the sameness of their weekdays. The younger women, in white blouses and dark skirts, stood silent in the sun. They watched a blackened pot of earth-colored beans cook on an improvised grill made of metal gathered from the dump. Two old women slapped tortillas round and baked them on the open fire. The men stood under the shade and talked.

Opposite the half-circle of bronzed men, all wearing straw cowboy hats with jeans and polished boots, stood two who were different. They were taller, pale, and their damp t-shirts showed that the heat was foreign to them. One had been their friend for several years, the other was a stranger.

“¿Y su hijo?” their friend asked one of the bashful men. “I haven’t seen your son at Mass for a couple of weeks now. You tell him to come and see me.”

“He has gone north, Padre.” He paused, shyly, not wanting to be rudely curious but speaking for all the people who wanted to know. “Who is the American who is with you this morning?” he continued

“He is with us for a few days. He came because he wants to meet all of you,” the priest answered. “I have told him he must talk to your father.”

An old man moved forward. He was slightly stooped but still gave the impression of strength. His face was furrowed like the fields he had harvested. His clothes were old but well-mended and clean. His eyes retained the memory of the shine they had many years ago.

“I am pleased to meet you,” he said, holding his rough hand out to the visitor. His English was pleasantly accented. “I am José, and these are all my family.” His free hand swept proudly around the group.

“You speak English very well. Where did you learn it?” the visitor asked.

“I was in your country for some years. I worked on the farms of California and Arizona when I was younger. But please, will you join us for some food and we will talk.”

He called to one of the old women and asked her to bring tortillas with beans for the priest and the guest. One of the older children came, carrying a bottle of water for them to share. The three sat under the tree, on the dust, and ate.

“These beans are good,” the visitor said. “Please thank the women for me.”

“You must eat more, that is the best way to show your thanks,” José said.

“Did you like the United States?” the visitor asked.

“Oh, yes. The work was good. The land there is so fertile. I saw some cities. I would have liked to have stayed.”

“Why did you come back? Was it because of your family?” He offered a cigarette but it was refused. He put the pack away, reluctant to smoke alone.

“I came back because I had to. The United States government said they didn’t need Mexicans to do the work anymore. They put all of us on trains and sent us away. I was worried because my family needed the money I made. There was no work for me here and I had young children. Well, if the government says you have to go, then you go.”

The visitor was silent.

“My sons, they went to the north, too,” José continued. “They worked on the farms. They saved money and came back here. They bought some land and we all worked together. It is better when you work on your own land.”

“Well, I thought you lived here, in town. I didn’t know you owned a farm,” the visitor said. He was glad that this old man lived somewhere away from the smell and the crime of this dust-blown town.

“Oh, no. We live right over there.” José pointed to a ramshackle house of old boards and flattened coffee tins across the empty land. “One summer, the water we needed to grow our plants didn’t flow anymore. When my sons went to the government to ask about it, they said that the water was needed in Texas. So we left the farm and came here. Now my grandsons and granddaughters work in the north. They send us what they can. They are good children.”

“Would you like to visit the United States again?” the visitor asked.

“Me? I am too old to work now. I will stay here, I think.” He lowered his head and stared at the parched dirt at his feet.

“Not to work, just to see it again.”

“No, no. I am too old. Now it is my grandchildren’s time to see the north. I can remember it. I remember cool mountains. I remember running streams. I can remember.”

They had finished eating. The priest said that he had to go. There was another Mass to celebrate. The three stood up together.

“Thank you for sharing your food with me,” the visitor said. “You were not treated as kindly by us.”

The old man took the visitor’s soft hand and held it firmly between his.

“You have never done anything to me,” José said, seeing the sadness. “No. It is not you or your people. It is the way things are. Why should I be angry? Everything is as God wills.”

The visitor and the priest walked to their car, heads bowed to the sun. Flies buzzed in the shimmering air, looking for any food that had been carelessly left over but found none.