

Everyone knew the sound of Esteban's car horn when it rounded into the camps in the evening, a two-toned horn, a low note followed by a high note, piping through the light dry breeze that cooled the darkening valley after another hundred-degree workday. He'd had the horn installed on his '28 Dodge so that the pickers would know he had arrived, know it was time to drink, to enjoy, to forget. At twilight, he drove down rutted lanes, along irrigation ditches, to where staggered lines of earth-hued tents and rude structures of cardboard and packing crates huddled together amid the vast fields of California cotton. He parked near weigh stations and sheds, set up a barrel of Jackass brandy that he sold for a nickel a glass, laid out bottles of wine for sale in unmarked green bottles, and the back bumper of his car became the center for a gathering of the sun-darkened men who had spent the week working through the fields with a cotton sack tied around their necks. They came and drank and built an open fire as the sky reddened in the west, reddened over a plain of drained lakebed

and scraped tule marsh as flat and vast as the sea. Then the women came out, who had also been dragging ten-foot-long sacks through the fields, and children began to play on the edges of the flickering light. They marked as they could the end of another day in the cotton, a long harvest that might sustain them until the beginning of lettuce picking farther south.

Esteban leaned back against the bumper of his car as the poor celebrations gathered, grew, faded, not drinking himself but smiling and joking with the men who did. He wore a knife on his belt, a six-inch blade, the horn handle visible above the leather sheath, and even as he smiled his eyes were watchful, and he stuffed the money he collected into a leather pouch he wore around his neck. The following night, he would visit another camp, and the night after another, gathering in the stray coins left from the cotton tickets cashed in at stores in town.

At Camp Olvido, on a Thursday in early October, Esteban sounded his horn and parked beside the one permanent structure, a stable for oxen in times past. Rain had come through mid-week, and the tents were bowed more deeply, and the cardboard huts had that wavy brittle look of having been soaked then baked in the sun. They would not last

through December. Esteban opened his trunk and set up his barrel, but nobody immediately came forward. He looked down the lines of tents and saw several black-haired children peek around the canvas at him then disappear. He reached in the open car window, blew the two-toned horn once more.

An old man emerged from the stable dressed in overalls and a blue workshirt, his white hair encircling his head like a tonsured friar's. He walked to the Dodge and planted himself before Esteban, his hands strong and clenched and his mouth drawn with the bitterness of years working under the sun.

Do you believe that God put us on the earth to suffer?

Esteban didn't know the man. He had seen him in Camp Olvido before but had never sold him brandy or wine.

No. I don't.

You sell lies. He pointed with his chin at the barrel standing up in the trunk. You sell the feeling that the world is kind, not alien to us.

I sell what the people want to buy.

Then you disappear with their coins, money that could buy bread for a child. Like *zopilote*, picking the bones from wolf kill.

Who is the wolf?

You know the wolf. You know the wolf very well.

Now a few men approached the car, though not with the normal smiles of greeting and anticipation. One man, tall and wearing a red bandana around his neck, took the old man by the arm and guided him away from Esteban.

Come with me. He looked at Esteban over his shoulder, asking him to be understanding toward an old man.

Esteban used a tin dipper to fill cups from the barrel and handed them to the men standing around him.

The first *copa* is on me.

Gracias. Gracias.

When all had a cup and had taken some quiet sips, Esteban pursed his lips toward the black doorway of the stable, where the old man had returned.

What is happening?

The men looked down, ashamed, reluctant to speak of their helplessness.

There is a child, one said.

What child?

A child stalked by death. A bright child. The only grandchild of the old one.

How many years?

Chiquito. The man held his hand down and crooked his finger upwards to show how tall the child was. Three years, no more.

And the old one blames me for this? What do I have to do with this sadness?

Esteban looked at each man, but none would meet his eyes.

What does this have to do with me?

Nothing. Nothing at all.

The man with the red handkerchief returned, and he held out a cup to be filled.

One nickel.

Of course.

The small group of men who drank remained quiet and somber, some leaving after one cup, others shuffling in. Two young men, Policarpo and Nivardo Del Río, brothers from Chihuahua, hovered close to Esteban. They were unmarried, and they had always been open in their admiration of Esteban, asking him questions about his car, about distilling brandy, about making wine, about living in town. Esteban noticed them staying near, even though they had run out of money, as though waiting for a moment to talk to Esteban alone, but he put them off. After an hour, the sun was down,

and no small fire of celebration brightened the cleared space, and Esteban bunged the barrel with a cork stopper and wooden mallet, then slammed the car trunk shut.

Buenas noches, he said. *Buenas noches a todos*.

In the darkness, the stable glowed dimly. It was an old structure, long unpainted, and the boards between the posts had warped and shrunk and cast out their rusty nails, and from the gaps between them leaked the meager light of a kerosene lamp. Esteban walked to the grained and splintering boards and leaned in to peer through an open crack. He saw a woman in one of the four stalls, sitting on a lumpy tick mattress on the dirt with a shawl about her shoulders. In her lap she cradled the sickened child like a bundle of sticks, arms and legs harrowed by hunger and dysentery. She held a soaked rag in her hand, and she was trying to drip water into the child's open mouth, but the child turned his head left and right and pedaled his legs, and from the kerosene lamp at the woman's knee, strange insect-like shadows played against the uneven walls. Behind the woman, the child's father stood with a hand on her shoulder. His face was thin and long-jawed, with a long horsey moustache covering his teeth, and his eyes were black and mad. About them gathered other women and, leaning over from the ad-

joining stall, the old man and the man with the red handkerchief around his neck. All watched as though watching with hope might itself be healing.

Esteban walked to the doorless entryway of the stable, stepped inside. The smell of burning kerosene, penetrating and noxious, could not mask the smell of the thin watery shits the child expelled, or of the shit-soaked rags the women took from the mother when she unwound them from the child's legs to rinse them in an irrigation ditch, replaced with other rags until they too were fouled. The ceiling of the stable was low, and even with the breeze let in by the gaps in the siding, the air was thick and fetid.

Esteban went to where the woman sat with the child and bowed his head to her, not from pity or awe but merely in recognition of a suffering he had seen before. The woman took no note of him, inclined only to her son. Esteban withdrew to the side of the man with the red handkerchief.

What is his name?

Manuel.

And the parents?

Isidro and Helena. I am her brother.

How many days?

Seven. And yet the child lives.

Esteban looked at the thinning boy, thinning as though already turning into spirit, and did not express his thoughts.

If we could get him to our home, there is a woman who could cure this, a great *curandera*.

Where is home?

Milagro Park.

Esteban knew of Milagro Park. It was a cluster of houses carved into a hillside near the mouth of a ravine outside of Los Angeles. The houses were brick with good tin roofs, linked by a winding dirt road and footpaths, and the street-car line reached the foot of the hill so that those lucky enough to be on at the brick factory could ride to work. Many of the houses had electricity, and the hillside sometimes glowed in the evening. For the workers chasing pay-days from harvest to harvest, it was the promise of some stability, some sense of continuance, that led them to say when they saw the glowing hillside, *¡Qué milagro!* What a miracle.

He also knew the family could not leave Camp Olvido to go there. The *enganchista*, the labor contractor who had brought them to the camp, would not let anyone leave until the third picking was completed. He would find that they were in debt for their food and shelter, and only by remaining until the end of harvest and picking bollies, the half-

opened bolls that were as much sharp-edged waste as they were fiber, could they earn a bonus and be free.

Esteban knew all this. In the dark, he took out his billfold and drew out a five-dollar bill, a calculated gift, an offering to buy the camp's good will on his next visit.

He stepped forward and kneeled in front of the woman so that he could look up to her, meet her eyes. She regarded him for a moment, distantly, then turned her gaze back to her child. Isidro, the child's father, watched him with eyes black and full, deep-set within his skull.

He laid the bill down before them.

A gift, he said.

For what? Isidro asked.

Medicine, perhaps. Perhaps a doctor.

Or a priest, Isidro said.

As Esteban left, he heard the old man's voice croaking after him.

What you want, you cannot buy. You cannot buy what you want.