

Yonquero

by Mike Pemberton

When it topped the crest of the hill, the diesel engine of the rusted semi seized like a fat man on a treadmill failing a stress test. Jesús jerked the wheel of the flat lining rig to the right, tapped the brakes, popped the clutch, and jammed the gear shift into neutral. The truck lurched to a halt on the gravel shoulder of the back country road. The mish mash of scrap iron and junk stacked in the trailer smashed together with a screech. The engine spit sparks through the slits of the grill. Jesús stomped on the gas. Shocked by the surge of fuel, the sputtering motor hesitated, almost died, then belched back to life, spewing black smoke out the vertical exhaust into the desert night.

Jesús hunched over the steering wheel and cocked his head to the left, straining to hear each chug of the pistons. Through the sole of his lizard-skinned cowboy boots he felt the ragged pulse of the engine.

“Andale, mamacita, andale,” Jesús whispered, patting the dashboard.

Jesús eased off the accelerator. The rage in the machine ebbed. The engine relaxed and sank into the rhythm of its natural idle. Jesús shoulders slumped as he took a deep breath. He released the stick, tipped back his straw cowboy hat and slouched into the frayed, cloth covered seat. With the unthinking reflex of a lifelong Catholic he crossed himself and brought the gold crucifix dangling around his neck to his lips.

Goddamn, Jesús thought. Goddamn that was close.

He had traveled too far for this old wreck to die on him now.

He pulled a cigarette from the pressed pocket of the short sleeved shirt his wife Ana had given him the day before. In her nightgown, her usually well-kept black hair in tangles, she presented it to him as he dressed in the dark. Ana made all his shirts herself, this one out of cotton broadcloth, bleached to a bone white.

“It will be filthy in a day,” he had chided her.

“Shhh, callate,” she said, putting her index finger to his lips. “You don’t clean them, vato.”

He smiled at the memory of his wife’s gentle rebuke. Ana always dressed him in a clean, starched shirt. Her husband may be a yonquero, a junkman, she would say, but he would not leave her house dirty.

Jesús’ tattooed hands trembled as he fired up the Marlboro prepared ‘a la mexicana’, laced with crack cocaine, and sucked the nasty shit into the deepest part of his soul, holding it in until it blew itself back out with a hacking gasp.

“Yonquero,” he said to himself, setting the smoldering cigarette in the ashtray.

Jesús leaned across to the passenger’s seat, pulled a bottle of El Presidente brandy from the top of a khaki backpack and broke the seal with a sharp twist, downing a shot with a quick tilt.

Taking another hit from the Marlboro and chasing it with a gulp of brandy, Jesus winced. The twin toxins speed-balled through his body and hit the wall at the base of his brain.

The jolt jarred Jesús. He squinted through the dust drenched windshield at the lights of the city which lay below him, trying to zero in on a single beam. The lights blurred, then popped into focus. Matamoros, Mexico, the drop off point for this load.

He was close. He should be glad. Instead Jesús coughed up a mix of smoke and phlegm and spat it out the rolled-down window of the cab toward Matamoros.

Jesús removed his hat and shook loose his long, sooty hair, letting it fall to his shoulders. His mind and vision clearing, Jesús stared at the distant glow of the town where he had been born.

As a boy, Jesús loved Matamoros. But that was when Matamoros was a smaller town catering to American tourists. That was before the maquiladoras, the factories, built by multinational corporations looking for cheap labor, spread like a creeping vine along the banks of the Rio Grande. Before the colonias, the ugly bloom of the maquiladoras vine, where sweat shop workers lived in squalor and died of despair. Before the fumes from the maquiladoras mingled with the smog and stench created by 500,000 peasants crowded into the colonias. The toxic mix formed a dun-colored cloud of perpetual pollution which hung over Matamoros like an unholy halo.

And it was before the trucks.

By the time Jesús was a teenager the maquiladoras were booming. Every day hundreds of semi trucks lined up south of the Rio Grande. Massive engines churned. Air brakes hissed. The trucks trundled forward a few feet at a time.

Jesús and his friends jumped on the running boards and begged for money. Sometimes the drivers consented. Most of the time they told the kids to get lost or ask them if they had a sister who wanted to make a fast buck.

But always the trucks advanced. Their eighteen wheels pawing at the asphalt, they panted through white hot exhausts, anxious to break free from the guarded starting gate manned by the border patrol. Keen to make their mad dash north to give the gringos the goods they craved.

Jesús knew he would never use the products of the maquiladoras. They were not being made for Mexicans. He was ignorant, he knew, but not estúpido. He swore he would never work in the maquiladoras. And he knew he did not have to. The truck drivers did not.

When he was sixteen, Jesús got a job at a junk yard. At seventeen he was driving. By the time he was twenty-five, he saved enough money to buy a used truck and moved to his grandmother's village south of Matamoros to start a junk business.

"Yonquero," the boys of the village jeered as they threw rocks at his crumbling rig. But Jesús did not care. Pinche niños, he thought, what did they know? We'll see if they escape the maquiladoras.

Not long after he moved to the village Jesús met and married Ana. She soon gave birth to the first of seven children. The junkyard business was good for a single man, even a married man, but it did not pay enough for a man with a wife and seven children.

But, if he was willing, there was other work for a man with a truck.

For crammed in the tires and the gas tanks, stashed into the roofs, or secreted in lubricated condoms swallowed by the drivers, the trucks, the workhorses of the maquiladoras, served dual masters. The narcotraficantes, the drug lords, used semis just like the multinational companies: to move goods north. And they based their shadowy version of maquiladoras, the ephemeral drug trade, in Matamoros for the same reason as the industrial tycoons. Low wages, lack of government interference, and the gringos insatiable appetite for their product.

The corporations, the narcotraficantes, the government, even yonqueros like Jesus, everyone made money. Everybody was happy.

As long as the trucks rolled.