

Headed North

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“This land of milk and honey, where can I find it without it costing me my life?” – Anonymous

“When the *coyote* and his helper dragged us out from the false bottom of the U-Haul truck, our shirts drenched with sweat, our pants filled with urine and *mierda* reeked. But not one of us, admitted to have caused the stench,” said Refugio. “The rancid odor in the vehicle, along with the heat, gave off an intolerable putrid pong. I’ll never forget that smell.”

“How long did you guys ride in that *troca*?” I asked.

“I don’t know for sure. We were packed in there like sardines, but when those damn scoundrels pulled us out not all the men who came to *El Norte* survived the ordeal. Four out of ten were dead. The heat in the vehicle ate their brains.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Didn’t the *coyotes* do anything to help you guys?”

“No. The four dead men suffocated in that false bottom. They puked on themselves, and without enough room to turn and spit out the vomit, they swallowed and choked themselves. Those *coyotes*, the two-faced parasites, threw the bodies onto the ground as they pull the rest of the men out. I walked over to take one last glance. Flies entered and exited their noses and opened mouths. They were already doing their job,” said Refugio. He lowered his head and hid his shame-filled face, as if in blame.

“The rest of us stood there, like a picket fence, shoulder to shoulder, tied together by a trance around the dead corpses,” Refugio said.

“Did anyone tell you how hot the false bottom of the U-Haul *troca* got?”

“It reached a temperature of 190 degrees, maybe higher,” said Refugio. “When we got out of that oven, we could see the surrounding lights of a small town not far in the distance. We were told it was El Cajón.”

“That’s just up from Mexicali in Baja California, and Calexico on the States side. Right?” I asked. “I remember hearing that in the early 1800s, when the Spaniards settled the region, the Roman Catholic Church sold plots of land, called *ranchos*. These were later bought by the *Californios*, rich Spaniards, and the Rancho Santa Mónica settlements were established. Later the name was changed to El Cajón – meaning the box.” I said.

An indescribable smirk crossed Refugio’s mouth as he shyly covered it. An inward laugh tried to surface and escape, but I submerged it. *How ironic*, I thought, *minutes ago Refugio told me he was in a death box, and now he’s saying he stood not far from a city called, El Cajón – from box to Box*. Now if that don’t take all.

Refugio continued. “We stood like a picket fence not far from a large red barn. Next to it was a canal flowing full to its banks with murky water. The first man broke our link and walked toward the canal. The rest of us fell in line and followed like sheep. We walked in, clothes and all, and started to bathe ourselves. We talked to each other without making any sense and cleaned up in the brown colored water. Some of us drank the water. We haven’t had any – from Mexico to *El Norte*,” said Refugio.

“As the men washed up, a few of the more outspoken spewed their own conversations. A man from Salamanca spoke first. ‘What a freekin’ job those *putos* did on us in that oven.’

“They screwed us without even a kiss, *esos bueys*,” said a guy from Puebla.

A youngster from Valparaíso continued, “That’s for sure, those *pendejos*.”

“Those *pinche vatos* didn’t let us out to piss or take a dump,” complained the older man from Guerrero. The man from México City and his companion wanted to kill the damn *coyotes*.

“We should have cut off their *cojones* and fed them to those scoundrels,” they grumbled.

We all know the *coyotes* make a living off of the unfortunate men and women who pay them for their trip up north. The truth is the *coyotes* use the people they cross over to the United States—*El Norte*—as mules, drug carriers, or sex slaves. Whatever other money-making businesses they have going for themselves,” Refugio said.

“What the *coyotes* don’t like is the loss of any profit or inconveniences caused by their ‘packages,’ such as the four dead men, right?” I asked.

“Hell yeah. Like the bodies that laid in plentiful sunshine until the *coyotes* loaded them into the truck box. The corpses were handled like sacks of *frijol*, yet none of us said a single word. Watched in silence. I still hear their screaming in my ears. That amplified sound is still deafening,” said Refugio.

“Could you tell which of the men or how many of them were yelling to get out?” I asked.

“No. But upon looking at the bodies, it became obvious. Those with torn finger nails definitely wanted out. They tore at the top of the coffin and tried to make a hole for extra air to breathe. The air in the false bottom was so heavy and humid that our lungs begged for a little cool air to feed them, to alleviate the hurt. We felt we were dying,” Refugio said.

“You’re damn right, *compa*. When a person is afraid to die, being closed in, they’ll do anything to get out or give up their life trying. Fear becomes a source of phenomenal strength, and they will claw

until their fingernails are completely torn away.” I said.

“I chose a different road to follow,” said Refugio. “I focused and slowed things down—concentrated. I talked to myself, played music in my head, watched silent movies in my mind, and calmed my fear of suffocation. I did what I had to, to survive. When the clawing and screaming subsided, soft moaning and groaning sounds remained, but only for a short while. Then there was nothing,” said Refugio.

“The ordeal brought back memories of when I used a mask in the silver mines of Puebla. At first, el *patrón* gave us the gas masks to practice using them in case of any poison gases leaking into the mines to kill us. That experience helped manage my fear of running out of oxygen inside that inferno—the U-Haul, the truck that served as a coffin for those four men.

The shitty part of all the practice was that the mines closed in our home state shortly afterwards. That’s when we decided to come to *El Norte* looking for jobs. During the long trip, none of us thought our lives were in any danger,” Refugio said.

“We finished up bathing and sat in the shade of the old barn, where we’d wait for at least a week or so. We’d be without food or water, unless the *coyotes* felt a little compassion. We hoped they’d bring some. If not, we’d do without. If we were lucky, a family member might show up to take us out of that hell hole, if not, we were screwed,” said Refugio.

“Did that happen for any of the men—for you?” I asked.

“Yeah. Some of the men were picked up by friends or family members who showed up,” said Refugio.

“Did most of you guys expect a job, a place to live? Did you have plans as to how far north you wanted to go? Some of you must have had a job lined up, right?” I asked.

“Yes and no.” he answered. “If your expectant employer was waiting for you, willing to give you a job, even if you didn’t have a social security card or a fake work number, you were in the minority. Most of the time, the *coyotes* made all the arrangements for you and your future *patrón*. The bad thing being that luxury cost you more money than you could pay.

If anyone found out you had the means to pay for those services, you could consider yourself damn lucky if you weren’t killed for the money. I hoped I’d be lucky. An uncle of mine lived in California, but I wasn’t sure he had been notified about my arrival. Chances were he knew where I could get a job too,” said Refugio. “If not, I had a friend in Wyoming that could help me find work. Several men from my home state had gone there. There was a lot of work in construction, farming, and ranching. Besides it’s considered a sanctuary state. The *Migra* doesn’t do round-ups there like in those warmer states. But we knew it wouldn’t be easy for all of us.”

“How long did you expect to stay at that barn? Every minute you and the others stayed, there was one hell of a chance you guys would get caught, and sent back to Mexico, right?” I asked.

“Hell yeah, we all knew that, but there wasn’t much we could do to help ourselves. The big barn where we hide had a closed door with a few large plastic windows. It was an oven that made our hiding unbearable, but all of us were told to remain hidden – inside the barn,” said Refugio.

“*Ay carbon*, I bet the stench of shit and piss from the animals, along with the heat in that building,

was as bad as being stuck in the U-Haul, right?” I asked.

“*Simon primo*,” said Refugio. “But at least we were able to breathe air, even if it was hot, horrible, and humid. In the barn, the heat nauseated us and there was an urge in most of us to puke. Our biggest problem was dehydration. No one had eaten or drank anything. Nothing came up from our empty stomachs. But the motions and the familiar sounds of vomiting accompanied by the action gave us all the same inclination. Some of the men started to pass out, others were having convulsions.”

“What did you do?” I asked. “Did you pass out along with the rest of the guys?”

“No. But I got anxious and figured I’d suffer the same symptoms. So, I walked out of the old red furnace to keep what little saliva I swallowed from coming back up. Hearing most of the men barf gave me the same feeling. Within a few seconds, I was called back by some of the guys who realized I had stepped out and didn’t want any trouble with the *coyote*.

A guy from Irapuato shouted ‘*¡Oye pendejo, métete carbón!*’

‘*¿Qué quieres que nos jodan?*’ said the guy from Morelia.

The old man from México City yelled, ‘*¡Oye buey! Get your ass in here.*’

Entering the old red barn, I saw a car headed towards us. I warned the others but none of them moved. We were all dog-tired from heat, thirst, and starvation.

When the men stepped out of the car, we recognized their suits and badges. It was the *Migra* – men from the Border Patrol. But in our condition, what a welcomed sight. They served us bottled water. As I drank, a realization focused

in my mind; *Maybe it had been the coyote who turned us in.* Losing the money we paid out for his service, somehow didn't matter at the time. No one stopped to think...*'Those sumbitch coyotes, just robbed us of the five thousand bucks, we paid them for the cost of our trip here to the United States.'*" said Refugio.

"That's a hell of a lot of money, but I've heard that sometimes up to ten thousand dollars are paid for the services," I said.

"The shitty part of what you just said is many times it's the *coyotes* who sell us out. Then they promise to help us come back into the States again. The only thing is no one can prove that, so it's another five to ten thousand bucks if you want another try to reach *El Norte*.

But being out of the fiery coffin, out of danger, and still alive was something we could all appreciate – something we cherished," said Refugio.