

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Love Thy Neighbor

Ben Lummis was not in a mood to write this morning. He wanted to be outdoors, and, because he was an outdoor writer, being outdoors was as legitimate a part of his job as writing about having been outdoors was after he'd been there. His work had two stages, outdoor and indoor, and in the case of the story he was presently involved with, the outdoor stage was completed and the indoor one only beginning. If, instead of writing, he left the house and did what he really wanted to do today, the result would be that, coming home, he would have two stories that needed writing rather than one. Ben sighed, leaned forward over his desk, and placed his elbows in the polished corners of the manual office typewriter he used to compose the first drafts of his stories.

With the swamp cooler shut down and the windows up around the small adobe house, the cross-breeze through the screens came pleasantly cool, carrying the scent of the false orange trees beside the driveway and the odor of the crimson bougainvillea growing along the Spanish-style iron fence. Before the heat of late June and the start of the monsoon season in early July was a good time to be camped on the desert in a sidewall tent, flying his falcons and enjoying the company of his dogs. Ben covered his face with his hands like a man who has just received devastating news and sat absolutely still in his chair, waiting for his first sentence to come.

It was agony of a kind, like boring a tunnel into granite with his forehead. Five or seven minutes later, he took one hand away and, with the index finger, typed three words onto the rolled-in page. Then he picked up a stub pencil lying beside the machine and struck the words through with a single line. At the same moment, a car door slammed, and boisterous voices broke out in Spanish from beyond the front gate. Ben, looking, saw three Mexican men and, behind them, an ancient truck that had once been white but was now almost entirely black with dribbled tar. Ben pounded his knee with his fist and cursed. The roofers the landlord had promised to send from town had arrived, not more than three weeks late and only two after he'd forgotten

about their coming.

Two of the men swung the double iron gates open on the flagstone drive, and then the third got up on the truck seat again and backed in between the standing wings. It was a flatbed truck loaded with a furnace and cauldron, several wheelbarrows, and an arrangement of shovels and brooms, everything blackened and slightly misshapened by the heavy tar. As the truck rolled to a stop just short of the *portal*, the *jefe* turned away and started in the direction of the house. Ben met him at the front door, precisely as the bell chimed in the hallway.

The *jefe* was a plump, middle-aged Mexican, of average height and very cheerful looking with his broad face and full brown eyes, black hair combed over his balding brow, and long black mustaches hanging past the corners of his mouth. He had on a dark-blue snapbutton Western shirt under black canvas coveralls, stiff with tar, that struck Ben as uncomfortable dress for a man doing roofwork in southern New Mexico in June at any time past six or seven o'clock in the morning. The *jefe*, though, seemed enthusiastic about getting to work, grinning broadly as he introduced himself in excellent English as the contractor chosen by Century 21 to replace the portion of the roof that had blown away in a dust storm over the winter. Ben thanked the man and offered his assistance, should it be needed. Then he returned to his study and sat down again before the typewriter with his head in his hands. Before the dogs began an uproar from their run behind the house at the appearance of the Mexicans on the roof and the tearing sound of the old shingles coming off in strips and patches commenced, he'd finished writing the lead paragraph of his story and was beginning on the following one.

After two hours, Ben had finished a third of his quota of 3,000 words, the breeze through the open window behind his desk had ceased, and the air inside the house had become oppressively warm. He was on his way from his desk to the hall switch governing the swamp cooler when the doorbell rang again, and he observed through the screen door the bulky



shape of the Mexican boss darkly silhouetted against the midmorning glare. Half regretting his offer to help, Ben set the switch to the HIGH position and went on to the door. "Need anything?" he asked.

The man grinned more widely still and shook his head. "We're on lunch break," he explained. "Come have a beer with us!"

Ben didn't answer right away. Though the writing was going well, he worked without enthusiasm. Also, he'd reached a good stopping place from which to take up again in the next working session.

"Thanks," he told the boss. "I'd be happy to."

The two other men sat on the concrete apron against the house wall in the shade of the *portal* with a picnic cooler at their feet, drinking beer. They grinned and saluted Ben with the beers, while the boss reached a dripping cold can from the ice and handed it to him. His name was Adán Beltrán; the others, Pablo and Jesús, did not give their last names. Pablo was a small, bark-brown, wiry man with wild black hair going gray, gray mustaches, and a rough gray beard; Jesús was much younger, well-built and strong looking, with long raven-black hair and a smooth complexion. All three men were from Chihuahua City, though Adán rented a house in Las Cruces from which he operated his roofing business and where he boarded the help he brought up legally from Mexico. Though Adán's English was nearly perfect, Jesús and Pablo had only a few words, communicating mainly by hand signals accompanied by much grinning and winking. Surrounded by pieces of the ruined roof thrown down on the paving, the four men talked of the dog races and of bullfighting, until Adán looked at his watch and locked down the top of the cooler. "We have to go back to work, now," he

said regretfully, “but we will call you again at break time—yes?”

When, around one o’clock, Ben drove out to the highway for the mail, he continued along the road for a couple of miles to the mini-mart, where he purchased a case of beer. He brought the beer inside the house without the roofers seeing him do it, and when Adán Beltrán rang the bell promptly at 2:30, Ben lugged his own cooler outside and offered them a drink. Pablo stared as if he had seen something unnatural, Jesús squinted in disbelief, and even Adán looked taken aback.

“Go ahead and take one,” Ben urged them. “I drank yours this morning, didn’t I?”

Seated with their shoulder blades against the cool adobe, they drank the beer as the Organ Mountains turned pink in the light of advancing afternoon, mourning doves arrived to drink from the trickling fountain beneath the peach trees at the corner of the garden, and the heat continued to build steadily, layer after layer of it, until all the oxygen seemed pressed from the air.

“Amigo,” Adán told Ben, “you must come and visit me in Chihuahua. There is much to do in Chihuahua. I have a beautiful house and a beautiful wife who is also a wonderful cook. You will have all you want to eat and drink; we will go to all the races and to the bullfight! I will give you the keys to the city, and we will go up in the mountains together and drink beer to keep us cool in afternoon. I can show you how to find my house. You have something to write on? I will give you the directions now.”

Ben brought from the house a bullfight poster waiting to be framed. Adán Beltrán drew a tarry pencil from the pocket of his coveralls, turned the poster over on his knees, and began to sketch the route on the cardboard backing, jotting down the distance in kilometers between Juárez and El Porvenir; El Porvenir and Villa Ahumada; Villa Ahumada and El Sueco; El Sueco and El Sauz; El Sauz and Chihuahua City; and finally directions to his house on the west side of town, against the mountains. “It is very simple,” he concluded, “like driving to Albuquerque. You must come soon, *amigo!* I will even find you p-ssy, if you like.”

The roofing job took four days to complete. Every morning at 10:30, Ben joined Adán, Pablo, and Jesús for beer, and again at 2:30. Sometimes, instead of up under the *portal*, they would sit be-

neath the peach trees in the garden in front of the house or stroll in the shade of the pecan grove behind it, talking to the dogs through the chain-link fence and admiring the falcons in their huts opposite the pigeon coops, each perched with its head beneath its barred wing and one round yellow eye awake and staring blankly, like the ON light glowing from some inactive but potentially lethal machine. Ben promised to take the three men with him the next time he flew the birds over the desert, and Adán offered to make him a present of some pigeons from his own flock when he visited *Casa Beltrán* in Chihuahua City. They already had a tentative date set for around the middle of July, when Adán expected to be at home getting a fresh crew together for the return trip to the States.

The last day of the job, Adán curtailed the lunch hour sharply and worked his men straight through the afternoon break in order to be done by 4:30, when they had a celebration planned. Ben spent the day in his study with the swamp cooler on and the windows closed against the stench of hot tar, rewriting the final draft of his story and studying maps of the locale for his next trip into the field. Around 4:00, he suddenly became aware of a dinning silence after the furnace shut down, followed by the scrape of ladders and the rumble of barrows being lifted onto the bed of the truck. There was just time to change from flip-flops into cowboy boots, brush his hair, and retrieve his wallet from another pair of pants when the bell rang and Adán Beltrán was at the screen door, grinning thirstily. “*Hola, hombre!* We’re finished already. Time to head for the *taberna!*”

They took the truck to town, Ben and Pablo riding in the cab with Adán, Jesús behind them on the bed with his long hair blowing in the wind, making faces at them through the rear window. Adán followed U.S. 70 to the junction with I-25, drove crosstown to the Mexican quarter lying north of the cathedral church, and parked in a dirt lot behind a *cantina* with its back door standing open and *salsa* music coming through it. Everyone got out, and Adán told Ben to go on ahead with Jesús and Pablo while he secured the truck and equipment.

Inside the *cantina* the *salsa* music was so loud that it was difficult to have a conversation. Nearly all the patrons were men, and every one was Mexican: *vaquero* types wearing \$200 dollar hats and silver *concho* belts; *paisanos* with their

mended boots and crumpled straw hats; day laborers in sweat-stained tank tops and sneakers. Everyone looked at Ben as he entered; they kept on looking at him as he stepped up to the bar with Jesús and Pablo. As the barman set three bottles of beer on the wood, Adán joined them and asked him to bring a fourth. The man nodded in a surly way without answering and gave Ben a dirty look before going.

The *salsa* music played on as they drank, but the other patrons around them seemed to have quit talking. Ben felt uncomfortable and Adán seemed wary, standing rigid with his foot on the rail like a dog on point. They ordered another round, and this time the barman brought only three beers, setting them down before Adán, Pablo, and Jesús. When Ben reminded him in Spanish, the man at first ignored him, then drew the lower lid of his right eye down slowly with his finger and went away again.

“Hey,” Ben called after him, in English and loud enough to be heard above the *corrido* song playing on CD behind the bar, “my money’s as good as anyone else’s. I want some service here, and I want it now!”

The *vaquero* on the stool beside him was already lifting his right pant leg above the boot-top as Jesús and Pablo, their own knives drawn, stepped round on both sides of him.

“We need to leave,” Adán told Ben in a low, apologetic voice.

No one spoke until they were in the truck again and Adán raised his eyebrows at Ben.

“Let’s go back to my house and drink,” Ben suggested. “I have plenty of beer. Whiskey and tequila, too.”

They were crossing the East Mesa, at the place where Pat Garrett was shot in the back while relieving himself beside the road, when Adán spoke again.

“I am very sorry,” he said. “I do not know what to say. It is different always it seems when there’s a group.”

“I know it,” Ben told him. “It’s the same with our people, too.”

The new roof gleamed like gold in the evening sun as the truck drew up in front of the closed iron gates, scaring a flock of doves from the fountain into the branches of the peach trees.

“*Hombre,*” Adán asked, “you’re coming to Chihuahua to visit us next month—no?”

“Oh hell yes,” Ben agreed with him. “I’m going, Adán. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

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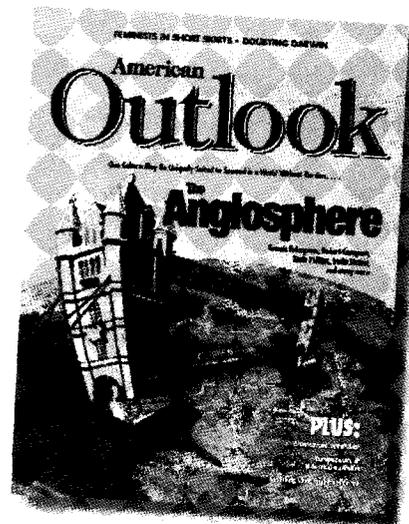
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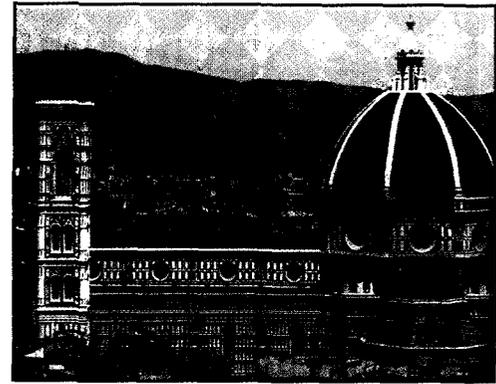
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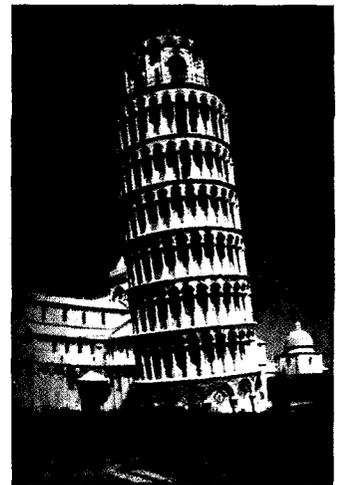
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