

*Paul Alexander Bartlett*

## **Against the Wall**

Barda Muan was born in a house with five spoons, two forks, a knife, a *machete*, some clay pots, bowls and cups. By the time he was eighteen there were four more spoons, another knife and another *machete*.

Sitting at the rough pine table, Barda regarded his mother and father, a lighted candle stub between them. They had sat like this many times, but tonight there was no food on the table because there was nothing to eat in the house. Barda stared at the harsh, bearded face he knew so well. He stared at his mother's forlorn, bony face, her dishevelled hair. They were in their forties, each wrapped in a blanket. It was cold in the Chiapan mountains, at San Cristobal de las Casas.

In the other room, Consuelo was coughing; she was fourteen. Too sick to sit up, she leaned her head to the side of the mat; she was listening to every word. She was so hungry she chewed on her blanket; she was afraid, afraid that Barda was going to be sent away.

Their father spoke in a gut voice:

"You've got to go, Barda...you must...there's work in the oil fields. I know Pepe Uxman is a goddamn coyote...everyone knows that! But you have to go with him tomorrow." His fingers, thick and boney, clamped the edge of the table. He sighed, and the candle flame wavered.

"All right, I'll go," said Barda, ramming his fist inside his belt to lessen hunger pains; he consented although he felt it better to die of starvation than play into Pepe Uxman's hands—that grease faced, moustached faced, yellow faced coyote.

For days families in Alto Barrio had listened to Pepe's promises and argued among themselves, while mist sopped their houses, that humble section of San Cristobal, leaky roofs, cracked doors, cold and pain. In old laurel trees at the plaza blackbirds huddled together. Old cobbles formed spokes that led across the town into mist. Even the mist was old.

Early in the morning, the coyote's bus, smeared with grease and oil, carried fourteen young men out of the barrio's mist, down through barrancas, through angry mutterings, heat, curves, roaring gears, silence, down to sealevel Villahermosa. Seated by a cracked window that could not be lowered or raised, Barda stared. We're enroute to hell, he told himself.

At Villahermosa the bus swerved onto a sideroad, to the Reforma Camp, a hutment for two thousand men. Flared gas seared the cloud-cover. It was evening and mango trees were on fire, eucalyptus were on fire, bushes were on fire. The air trembled under the incessant crimson roar. The fourteen Chiapans piled out of the bus; the driver disappeared; the coyote disappeared.

The men bedded down in an abandoned shack — a cesspool oil slick outside their door. Exhausted and hungry, they sprawled together, tried to forget the jet roar and fight off cockroaches and mosquitoes.

For days, Barda dug ditches that drained waste oil into a sump. His boss, a lanky naval *jefe*, moved woodenly, his face riddled by time's termites. He spat contemptuously, fingered his pistol, and swore: "cabrones, chingados, scum, smalltown bastards!" Abruptly, he was transferred to another job and replaced by a young man, the image of a village gradeschool teacher. Almost at once, Chen favored the Chiapans. He was one himself. Hating the heat and muck, he showed his little gang where to shower—under a derrick, beside an orange relay pump—showed them how to sneak T-shirts out of the warehouse, showed them how to latch onto 6-packs.

"With luck, we'll scrounge mats to sleep on," he promised.

He found Barda a night job in a kitchen. The job meant leftover potatoes, leftover corn, leftover beans, leftover tortillas—and extra money. Maybe medicine would help Consuelo, Barda thought.

His first paycheck went to San Cristobal; then his second, his third, his fourth...but there was no response. Finally, he sent a telegram. Weeks later he received a note: *checks received*, with his father's scrawl. Barda read and reread those two words, then read them to Chen, who laughed.

"What did you expect, a letter?"

Barda began to horde his scullery cash; some of it went for a break in Villahermosa. Chen shrugged. From the camp it was an easy walk to the city, to the shady plaza, to the *malecon* with its benches. Along the tree-lined promenade there were no sulphur fumes, no jet roar. It was cool, sitting there, watching islands of hyacinths float seaward on the fast moving Grijalva. To Barda, the coffee colored river seemed immaculate after the camp. He paid a riverman a peso to paddle him across in his mahogany canoe. A Salubridad boat was moored on the

opposite bank, white and imposing. If I get sick, I'll go there, Barda told himself.

He eyed the ultra-modern neon banks, the upside down museum, the postoffice with onyx floor and onyx counters...he eyed the town girls. Someday. For consolation he bought a cold beer at a thatched booth. He believed he would forget selling fruit on buses, herding goats, washing cars, carting garbage. At a news stand he attempted to read headlines, and berated himself for his drop-out schooling. At the squat plaza church he stepped inside and the back of his mind said something about Jesus. Oil from his shoes spotted the tiles.

Walking across a large park, he came on five or six stone heads, Olmec heads, male, crude, defiant. The grey faces, like football players, as big as VW's, stared at him.

"To you bastards," he muttered, raising his beer can, disturbed that a giant head resembled his own.

At camp, the sulphur fumes gouged his nose and throat; noise closed in; sweat dripped from his elbows as he scraped dishes; he quarreled with one of the cooks. Fagged, lying in his hammock, swung between palo de rosa trees, he felt the burn-off was directly overhead. The hammock swayed, the heat swayed. Digging crumpled tortillas from his trouser pocket, he munched unhappily, unable to sleep. He wished himself in San Cristobal...maybe he could repair the roof...maybe papa could find steady work...if the priest or somebody would lend a goddamn helping hand...Maybe I should go to the United States...they say there's work there...money...

When Chen fell sick, knocked out by dysentery, Barda looked after him while the other Chiapans concealed his absence. Working in a group, they checked the inflow-outflow pipes of a relay complex. Heat warped the plastic pipes, warped their brains. When they could, they stole more 6-packs, stole cigarettes, stole time. They talked, talked desperately, hating each other, hating themselves.

A pair of crewmen died while working on a rig—their families went unnotified.

"Pemex funerals," jibed Chen. "I'll be next."

In his hammock, Barda remembered that he was nineteen. Today, yes today, was his birthday. He wondered why he had been born; he wondered if it was true that men in the United States had TV's and cars. He wondered how brave you have to be...

As he worked in hot rain, his face matched the oil-stained faces of the crew; his oil-smudged clothes matched their clothes. They wore the same red hard hats. Sameness, heat, thirst...hour after hour...

At Easter, almost half the work force left the Reforma — against orders. They left for neighboring villages and towns: Exten, Ulman,

Coba... Two more oilers had died. The workers were in no mood to be reasonable. Barda, carrying a paper sack, boarded the bus for San Cristobal.

As it rolled along, he regretted giving away his hammock, his plastic raincoat, his hat. Leaning against the window, he dozed. As the bus crawled upgrade, he became aware of the hill country, the free villages, the free fields, the rolling barrancas, the free laurel and oak, the birds. No sulphur. At a bus stop he bought fruit and cigarettes and shared them with a Mayan who sat next to him in the crowded bus. As it climbed the air grew cooler, thinner. Barda slept.

Late in the day the driver called out "San Cristobal," and the brakes squealed and clamped. Through a drizzle, Barda saw the familiar church, the familiar plaza, shops and signs. Clutching his sack he trudged the main street. Seeing a restaurant he had always wanted to patronize, he pushed open the double door and sat at a table next to a front window. He ordered a flan and cup of coffee. As he sat there, shivering from the altitude and the chill, he saw his father pass, wrapped in his ragged blanket. Barda got up, rubbed his hands over his grimy cheeks, then sat down again.

Sliding his cup to one side, he counted the money he had saved: every peso, toston and centavo. As he stuffed the cash into his pocket, he knew he never wanted to see his family again. He wanted no more threats, quarrels, lamentations. He would board the next bus and head for the United States. Paying for his flan and coffee, he muttered the only English word he knew: "Okay."

Oaxaca came first. He worked there as dishwasher in the Pension Frances. In Morelia he had another kitchen job. In Mazatlan he worked on a shrimp boat. At Villa Obregan he struggled in a corrugated hut until dysentery left him. Fear of sickness and fear of failure bit into him: better myself... better myself... not like papa.

On a moonlit night, he knelt behind greasewood bushes at the border. Two youngsters squatted beside him. They had been warned that guards were on constant patrol.

"A helicopter will appear and switch on a searchlight and snare you like a rabbit."

There were other warnings: a guy dies out there every week; hundreds are deported.

Barda and the kids hunched together by the river. A mile or so away streams of cars, vans, pickups, buses rolled along twenty lanes into the U.S. Day and night they crossed and recrossed the border.

The moonlit water was black, soundless, flat. Barda sensed its menace of pain, jail, thirst. Beyond the river the stars resembled faroff signals.

"Let's go...now...now!" Barda exclaimed.

He had travelled a long way; he was ready; why hadn't the kids crossed long ago? It was less than ten miles to Rosarita. One boy began to whimper: "How can I find my uncle in L.A.? It's a big city!" Barda grabbed the frail shoulder trembling against him.

"Shut up...go back home!"

He pushed the boy away and catlike moved forward, sliding down an embankment into the shallow water. There was no movement behind him, no sound. It was about twenty yards across.

Tijuana lights faded into a low wattage scab.

I'm in the U.S....I made it!

The fact shouted in his head. Other thoughts stumbled as he crawled toward a bush. His knees scraped against stones. He studied the sky. The moon was bright. Scuttling, Barda haunted an arroyo, using wall shadows for protection. To cross a clearing, he camouflaged himself with branches from a greasewood. As he crawled he saw someone, and lay still.

In a scooped-out hollow, he lizarded himself over rocks, into an Olmec cave. Curling himself against a wall he tried to plan: he would head for a town, walk on the sidewalks...find a place to buy cheap trousers and a shirt...change pesos for dollars...get something to eat...

He woke to see flames along the top of the arroyo, tall flames, bush flames—dense smoke. He thought he was back in Villhermosa, at the Reforma. Rushing out of his shelter he climbed the steep embankment, slipping, sliding. At the top he faced men in uniforms, men wearing firefighter helmets. They waved him aside. He began to run.

A moment later he was surrounded by officials in khaki, all of them armed. A Mexican yelled at Barda:

"Cool it! It's the border patrol! Stop where you are!"

An officer seized Barda and shoved him against the wall of a barn, next to other men.

"What are they trying to do—burn us alive!" Barda cried out.

"Naw...it's a brush fire...lots a brush fires in California," explained a moustached man in a broad brimmed hat, his eyes defiant.

"And what happens now?"

"We'll be sent back...back where we came from." The man jerked his head toward Mexico. "Tell 'em you're from Tijuana..."

Smoke filled the air. A fire truck rumbled up. A helicopter wheeled overhead. Smoke and fog swallowed the morning.

Slumped against the barn, Barda twisted a sprig of greasewood and watched a small snake crawl by, headed for the under beams of the barn. He tried to imagine himself inside the snake, just as his ancestors used to do. He could be braver inside. Calm. It became difficult to take

in what was happening: he didn't care what was happening. He was still dazed as he was loaded into a bus; someone kicked him; he was back in Mexico.

By midday he was in the Tijuana market, spooning *caldo* while standing beside a counter heaped with papaya, oranges, chayote, tomatoes. He was pleasantly aware of the jabber of sellers and buyers. Toward sundown he stretched out on the dry grass of a vacant lot until thirst sent him to a *cantina*. Over a bottle of Tecate, elbows on a table, bottle caps on the floor, flies bothering his face, he remembered the rumble of bus gears, kitchen jobs, shrimp boat job, sulphur fumes. He saw his father walking through the San Cristobal drizzle. Well, somewhere in Tijuana there was a friendly shack, a friendly cot. He needed a little time, and he would buy a wad of time with cigarettes and a cake of soap... tomorrow or the next day he would cross into the United States.

The moon was clouded over at his second crossing. He waded the river swiftly. He walked through bush country, walking steadily. He was not afraid. He walked, jogged, rested, until he reached a small seacoast town shortly before dawn.

"America," he mumbled.

Lying on the beach against someone's redwood fence he heard dogs barking angrily; he heard the pounding of the surf. So that was the ocean! And that was California sun. And those kids on bikes were *gringos*. And those were bikini women walking on the beach. He fell asleep watching children digging in the sand. When he woke, two men were tossing frisbies. They had yellow hair.

Following a sidewalk he came to a cafe and had a cup of coffee and a sweet roll. He wanted eggs and beans but he did not know how to order them. A church bell rang and the sound hurt his brain. A policeman, gunning his motorcycle, startled Barda and he almost ran. In a store with *Se Habla Espanol* on the window, he bought blue jeans and changed his pesos.

"Where can I catch a bus to San Diego?" he asked the cashier timidly.

"At the next corner," she said, pointing, amused that such a small voice came from such a big man. "It's a train...takes you right into the city."

A tandem train whisked him to San Diego; on the street a Mexican refugee urged him to go north, to Oxnard, to the lettuce fields there.

"There's always work around Oxnard," he said.

Stooping for hours in the Oxnard sun, Barda cut and loaded heads of lettuce, pitching them onto a tractor-trailer that crawled along endless rows. Hundreds of Mexicans worked the field, men, women,

and kids. Barda began to hope. Evenings, they sat around a small fire along the edge of the field, eating, exchanging worries, fears, dreams. Men said he was lucky because they usually paid the workers. How much? When? He did not want to ask. He asked to get away from the dirty shirts and trousers and sox; he wanted a place to wash, not an irrigation ditch. A kid showed him a pocket radio that played music.

"When you get some money I'll show you where you can buy one real cheap."

The weather turned bad, rainy and foggy. The work went on and on. Lettuce...who ate the stuff? Barda couldn't bear the taste — so bitter. Maybe he could get some of that cheese the government was giving away. Well, pay was regular. Yet it seemed to Barda that he loaded more and more truck-trailers every day. Under some giant eucalyptus trees, bordering the field on one side, he staked out a spot for himself. Thirty by sixty meters. And he had paid for it with lottery money. What a rotten joke!

Sticks and twigs burning underneath his *comal*, he fixed his meal each evening. Sometimes others joined him. He preferred to eat alone and then stretch out on his cardboard mat. Somewhere in the foliage above he could make out strength and courage.

One evening, after a patchy fog sunset, when it was warm, a girl fixed his supper: she had helped him throughout the day as they loaded extra loads. Margo was fifteen years old, from a cannery closed by the recession. She brought a couple of pans to the *comal* and fixed beans and stew and tortillas. She had a guitar and sang, singing in a tired voice: "Amor, amor, amor...no es posible...besamé, besamé..." Stars and food mixed well with the singing. Playing a favorite Chiapan song she almost dropped asleep. She was unaccustomed to working in the fields; at the cannery she had had a sitting job. Putting aside her guitar she patted Barda's cardboard bed and invited him to join her. They were amateurs at sex. Barda felt his Olmec body would crush her she was so small. Margo fondled him gently.

As they drowsed, someone screamed, and a man and a woman rushed through the half-dark, shouting:

"They're here...the police...la policia...quick...scram!"

Before they could put on their clothes, Barda and Margo faced flashlights and a spotlight. A siren wailed and blatted on a van. Workers were commanded by a bullhorn to leave the field and line up alongside a shed. His back against the wall, Barda waited as a man frisked him; Margo was sobbing next to him, trying to put on her sweater.

As the officer began frisking another man, Barda walked toward his bed and the red eye of his supper fire.

They won't miss me, he told himself. I'll pick up my sox, my cake of soap...towel and blanket.

The Red Cross worker found a plastic spoon and a plastic fork in his bloody pocket.