

## The Baseball Glove · *Victor L. Martinez*

ONE SUMMER MY BROTHER LEONARDO, or “Nardo,” as we used to call him, flipped through more jobs than a thumb through a deck of cards. First he was a busboy, then a dishwasher, then a parking attendant, and finally a patty turner for a guy who never seemed to be in his hamburger stand more than ten minutes at a time (my mom believed he sold marijuana, or did some other illegal shamelessness). Nardo lost the first job for not showing up regularly enough, the other for showing up too regularly (the boss didn’t like him); and the last job lost him when the owner of the hamburger stand packed up unexpectedly and left for Canada with a whole month of his wages.

The job he misses most, though, was when he worked as a busboy for the Palm Lakes Golf and Catering Service. He says it was the only time he ever got to elbow with the rich people. The parties they catered served free daiquiris, cold beer, and hard drinks; and in some, like the one he got fired from, they passed out tickets for juicy prizes like motorcycles, TV sets, stereos and skis. This particular party had a six-piece band that once opened for Jimmy Durante, and a great huge dance floor so the “old fogies” (as my brother called them) could get drunk and make fools out of themselves. The way he tells it, you would think he was doing that man a favor working for him.

It turns out he and a guy named Randy took off their busboy jackets and began daring each other to get a ticket and ask a girl to dance. Hell, Nardo said, the guy bet he wouldn’t, and he bet would, and after a two dollar pledge he steered for the ticket lady.

“I could’ve hashed it around a bit, you know, Richard,” he told me, “I could’ve double and triple-dared the guy a couple of times over, then come up with a good excuse. But that ain’t my style.”

Instead he tapped the guy’s fingers real smooth and walked up to the ticket lady. She looked out from behind the large butcher-paper-covered table at the blotches of pasta sauce on his black uniform pants and white shirt, which were supposed to go smartly with the catering service’s light orange busboy jacket, but didn’t, and said, “Ah, what the hell,” and tore him out a tag.

Then, before the little voice nagging inside him could talk some sense,

he asked the nearest girl for a dance. She was close to his age and had about a million freckles and enough wire in her mouth to run a toy train over. They stumbled around the dance floor until the band mercifully ground to a halt. She looked down at his arm kinda shylike, and said, "You dance real nice."

Now my brother had what you could call a sixth sense. "*Es muy vivo*," as my grandmother used to say about kids born that way, and with Nardo it was pretty much a scary truth, 'cause he could duck trouble better than a boxer could duck a right cross. He made hairline escapes from whippings, scoldings, and unexpected baths, just by not being around when punishment came through the door. So I believed him when he said something ticklish crawled over his shoulder when across the dance floor, in front of the bandleader who was getting ready to read something over the mike, stood his boss, Mr. Baxter—and boy was he boiling.

Mr. Baxter owned the catering service, and sometimes, my brother said, the way he yelled at the busboys, it was like he owned them too. In any event, Mr. Baxter didn't say anything, just pointed to the door then at Nardo, then wrote a big imaginary X across his chest. And just like that, he was fired.

"Don't you ever get braces, Richard," he said, as if that were the lesson learned. I doubt being fired stopped Nardo's heart none; he didn't even collect his two bucks.

At first he refused to go to the fields (although my mother was insisting that my father was insisting); not because of pride, although he would have used that excuse at the beginning if he could have gotten away with it, but more so because he was as normal as anybody else who didn't like sweating out clods of dirt under a 105 degree sun.

That summer was a sure scorcher, maybe the worst in all the years our family lived in that desert, which Fresno would've been if the irrigation pumped in from the sierras were turned off. I could tell how searing it was by the dragged out way my mom's roses looked every morning after I watered them. The water didn't seem to hold, and the roses only sighed a moment before the sun sucked up even that little breather, and left the stems to sliver, curl up again and turn ashen.

Everyone else in the family was working, and it was hard to remain inconspicuous when my older sister Magda always returned home from the laundry slumped over from feeding bedsheets all day into a steam-presser.

I hustled fruit with my Uncle Louie who owned a '58 Ford pickup, and together we sold melons, apples, peaches, oranges, whatever was in season, from door to door. But Uncle Louie hurt his leg tripping over some tree roots, and it was all swollen blue and tender at the ankle. For a while there he couldn't walk at all except to hobble on one leg to the fridge, or lean over to change channels on our old black and white. He didn't go to the doctor 'cause he figured nothing was broke, so why pay good money to some old fart just to write something on a piece of official paper?

Anyway, the only one not working was my brother Nardo. But after a while, no one really expected anything from him. The honest truth of the matter was that he was just plain lazy. Whether one tried threats, scoldings, or even shaming — which my mother tried almost every other day — nothing worked. We all gave it a shot, but none more so than my father who isn't the most delicate of persuaders. He'd yell at him and stomp around the livingroom declaring to the walls what a good for nothing son he had, sometimes daring him as a man to get up off his ass. My dad wasn't good at English. Some words he just couldn't say right, like when saying "watch" he would say "wash," or "stupid" he would say in part Spanish, "estupid." But the way he said "ass," or "ounce," stretching the S and the C with a long lingering slowness, there was pure acid in the set of his teeth.

"If only Leonardo had just one ounce, one ounce . . .," my father would say usually with the tiniest measure of his thumb and forefinger, and a voice the size of our whole block.

After a while everybody just gave up on poor Nardo, including my dad, who just acted like he was empty space. Nardo for his part stayed home lifting weights, doing push-ups and sit-ups, and tenderly nursing any piddling little pimple that was worth a few hours of panic. He was a nut for health, and fanatic about his good looks. He must've combed his hair at least a hundred times a day in the mirror.

I wasn't like Nardo at all, and my father reminded me of it every time his name came up. I suppose 14 years of my mother's Bible preaching and not knowing what, besides work, was expected out of a Mexican, was enough to convince me that I wouldn't pass from this earth without putting in a lot of days. I was, of course, of my Uncle Louie's line of useful blood. All his life, no matter what the job, my Uncle Louie worked like a man trying to fill all his tomorrows with one full day's worth of nonstop

work. He didn't like sitting on the couch, didn't like TV one bit, and never laughed at Skelton or got sentimental over Andy of Mayberry. Mostly because he didn't understand them too well, but even if he did, they'd be just as strange.

The first chance my uncle got he started stumbling about the house, fixing sockets and floor trim, painting lower shelves and inserting the legs back into tables and chairs. He was a genius with tiles, and during that time he and my dad laid down the kitchen floor, which is still there even to this day.

But with Uncle Louie crippled, I was flat. I needed money worse than bad. Baseball season was beginning to put a grip on my fantasies, and there was an outfielder's mitt in the window of Scorlie's Sporting Goods that kept me dreaming downright dangerous Willie Mays diving catches. I decided to stir up Nardo to see if we couldn't go pick some chili peppers.

"You can buy some weights," I said a bit too enthusiastically, making him suspicious right off the bat.

He just looked up at me from the middle of a push-up.

"You think I'm lazy, huh?"

"No," I lied.

"Yeh, you do, you think I'm lazy," he said, breathing tight.

"I said no!"

"Yeh, you do," he countered almost reluctantly. "But that's awright if you think I'm lazy." He got up miserably and wiped his hands. "Everybody else does."

He started picking at a sliver in his palm.

"I'm not really lazy, you know. I been working."

He was biting for the sliver now, moving his elbow up and down like a wing, trying to get a better tooth on it.

"If you want I should go with you, I'll go, if that's what you want. But I'm telling you right now, if it gets too hot, I'm quitting."

With that miracle we woke up the next morning, borrowed my uncle's primered pick-up which Nardo knew how to drive, and got some cans from our Dad who was pretty cheery over me getting Nardo out of hibernation. He practically put a ribbon on the large brimmed hats from Mexico he gave us to wear to protect us from the sun. He wore them three summers ago, when him, my mom, and my sister Magda were racking it out in the fields. But ever since my Dad got a job as a translator for the

city, no one had to go to the fields. The little money he earned kept us safe, and he was proud of that.

When we arrived, the wind through the window of my uncle's pick-up was getting warm on our shirtsleeves. Already the sky was beginning to hollow out, the clouds rushing toward the rim of the horizon like even they knew the sun would soon be the center of a boiling pot. The foreman, who had on a pale yellow shirt with a black leather vest and cowboy boots curling way back almost to his ankles, refused at first to hire us, saying I was too young, that it was too late (most fieldworkers got up while it was still dark), and besides, all the rows had been taken hours ago. On top of that he said we looked too much like kids going out for a picnic, and laughed at the huge lunch bag bulging under my brother's arm.

Although he could fake disappointment better than anyone I knew, deep down I figured Leonardo wanted to give picking chilies a try. But a good excuse is a good excuse, and any excuse is better than quitting, so he didn't hesitate and hurriedly threw his can in the back of the pick-up. Unfortunately, there was a scrawny row close to the road no one wanted. The foreman must have thought it a huge joke giving us that row because he chuckled and called us over with a sneaky offer of his arm, as if to share a secret.

*"Vámonos muchachos, aquí hay un surco muy bueno que pueden pisar,"* he said pointing down at some limp branches.

The row had a coat of pesticide dust and exhaust fumes so thick you could rub fingerprints with it. The leaves were sparse and shriveled, dying for oxygen. The plants slanted as though trying to avoid the passing traffic of people and trucks.

My brother shrugged. With his luck gone, there was not much else to do. The foreman hung around awhile to make sure we knew which peppers to pick and which to leave for the next growing, not that it mattered in that row.

We had been picking for about an hour when the sun began scalding the backs of our hands, leaving a pocket of heat like a little animal crawling around between our shirts and skin. My fingers began to stiffen, it seemed forever before I reached the center of my can. My brother, on the other hand, topped his can before I did, patted the chilies down, and lifted it over his shoulder, setting his rock of an arm tight against his cheek.

"I'm gonna get my money and buy me a soda," he said, and strode off

over the rows toward the weighing area, carefully swishing his legs through the plants. I limped behind him straining with my half-filled can of lungless chili peppers.

The weighing area wasn't anything special, just a tripod with a scale hook hanging down from the center. People brought their cans and sagging burlap sacks and formed a line. After the scale pointer flipped and settled, heaving its weight, the peppers were dumped onto a table-bed. Slits between the slat-boards let the mixed in dirt and leaves sift through, while some older women and young girls, some with handkerchiefs masking their faces, stood along the sides kneading the chilies through the shoot at the end. When the sack filled, one of the foremen unhooked it from the nails and sewed up the opening. Then he'd stack it on a pile near a waiting truck whose driver lay asleep in the cab with his boots sticking out in the waves of heat.

Standing near the table was sheer hell. Dried leaves and the angry scent of fresh broken peppers made my eyes flare and water. No matter how hard I tried holding it, I kept coughing and choking like someone had stuffed a crushed ball of sandpaper down my throat. I wondered how the women were able to stand it, even with the handkerchiefs.

The only good thing about the weighing area, really, was that they paid right after they announced your load. This lured families and workers from Mexico needing quick cash for rent payments or emergency food, and people like me who had important baseball mitts to buy. It also brought business to a burrito truck behind the scales owned by the Labor Contractor. It sold everything from tacos, chilibeans, and egg burritos, to snow-cones and ice cream bars. The prices, though, made my brother mumble real loud.

"You know how much I paid for this!" he exclaimed more clearly when out of earshot of the foreman. "Eighty-five cents! Eighty-five cents for a damn soda! And it's one of those cheap jobs to top it off, no fizzle or nothing."

We picked steadily on, but by noon Nardo and I were exhausted and a good first base away from the nearest picker. Further up, under where the clouds looked like boiling white water on the lip of the horizon, there was a staggered string of men carrying two rows apiece.

"They're wetbacks," my brother said as explanation, "they pick like their goddamned lives depended on it."

I looked over at the Mexican working three rows next to ours and nodded agreement. The man used two cans, trading handfuls from one to the other. He went up two rows, then down another, greeting us occasionally on his return with a smile and a shy wave. To save time he placed sacks all along the rows, and every half hour or so he would pour a loaded can into the closest. Behind him, three sacks already lay fat and tightly sewn. We eyed him, my brother and I, fascinated by his quickness.

“Maybe that’s what we should do,” I suggested.

Nardo just shook his head. “Are you crazy,” he said with conviction, “It’ll take us the whole day just to fill one lousy sack.”

He was right. We didn’t pick very fast. We stopped too much, my brother to eye the girls passing nearby heading for the weigher, and me to watch the man and compare hands. His were wings in a blur of wonder, mine were stirring a pot of warm honey. He kept me mesmerized the whole morning with the way he shifted from plant to plant, his two knees out like a triangle, tilting first one way, then another. He was a whirlwind when gathering up his cans and empty sacks. He could’ve been a terrific short-stop, I thought, as I marveled at him. I almost forgot my own tiredness, although he never seemed to tire, never seemed to rise much above the plant but hid inside the quivering leaves until with one flickering toss, a rain of peppers would shower the air and drop into his can. I was eyeing him when my brother tapped me on the shoulder.

“Look what’s coming,” he said, pointing his chin at a van creeping up the road. Cars had been insulting us with dust and fumes all morning, so when I saw how careful the van approached, like a dog sneaking up on a bush, I knew something was wrong.

The van was green, a dim starved-for-light green like the leaves on our row. It had no markings. Its windows were open and the man behind the wheel had his head out searching for something in the rows.

Suddenly people began to stand up and stretch like they were peering over a wall. There was fast talking in Spanish and hurried commotion as fifty or so people all at once jumped up and started running. They didn’t even bother going through the furrows in scissor steps like my brother had done, but ran in waves, trampling over the plants and tipping over cans. Those who were the last to react brought up the rear. They steadied their hats, and their hurriedly snapped up coats thrashed in their hands.

I still didn’t know what was happening. My first impulse was to run,

but then I saw three more vans and a large labor bus pop out of a narrow road in the cornfield bordering ours, and I knew that the Immigration had come for the people.

No one had seen the other vans position themselves at points along the cornfield. The people just ran wildly in panic toward them as if their first instinct was to hide inside the stalks. The quicker ones got caught almost at once, their paths cut off by officers holding out their arms. They surrendered without a word. Others, the slower ones, veered off into the open spaces of the cordon and dove into the corn. Most were caught in the first sweep, except for the ones who ducked under the arms of the officers and made it down the road; but they, too, were quickly run down by another van and escorted inside.

The few who managed to hide in the field seemed to have gotten away, and we all cheered and waved our arms as if our side had won. Some of us jeered at the officers, my brother the loudest. Everyone quieted down, though, when some of the officers formed a line along the field and disappeared into the stalks. A while later, they came out dragging the shirt collars of those we thought had gotten away. Everybody sighed and said nothing.

The foreman, who had given us the scraggly row, went over to see what was going on. He took off in a huff saying “son-ova-beeches,” and a lot more. I thought he was going to cuss those Immigration guys off, but instead he stood by watching the officers corral the people before boarding them into the vans. I tried to find the Mexican on the row next to ours, but I couldn’t see him. I hoped he had gotten away.

The officer who looked in charge of the operation approached the foreman and said something we could not make out, but it sounded like a scolding. Then the foreman came back and knelt down by the watertank.

“Damn son-ova-beeches,” he said again, taking off his hat and raising dust as he slapped it against his pant leg. He poured himself some water, and glared over at the Immigration as they packed the people in and roared off in a growing cloud of dust. A crowd of us stood around covering our eyes, but none of us bothered to go back to work.

When the air cleared, a man appeared right at the spot where the vans had assembled. He was an older man with a white stubble beard and long mustache, a little darker in color than his chin. He tottered back nursing his right knee. At first I thought maybe he had gotten away, but then

someone recognized him and laughed out derisively.

“Hey Joe, you’re not a wetback. You’re a *bracero*.”

Joe came slowly over and took off his hat and covered his stomach like he’d been caught naked. He shrugged apologetically and said he couldn’t help it when everyone else began to run he got so scared and excited that he ran too. He looked down at his legs like they had betrayed him. He said the Immigration let him go as soon as they saw he had too much meat on his bones to be a wetback. Everyone laughed. Then his family, whose befuddled uncle he was, came over and led him away. My brother and I laughed too, but for some reason I thought he was the best man in the whole field.

Of the twenty or so people that were left, no one denied that they encouraged the Mexicans not to run. They said the Immigration usually doesn’t go inside the fields to check for green cards unless they have a good reason. If you acted like a citizen, sometimes you could fool them, they said. None of those ungratefals took them at their word, though, and for that they only had themselves to blame.

One of the listeners, a tall pimple-faced guy with blotched cheeks and the skin of a fig, only paler, shouted out, “*Pinche gavachos* don’t give a damn about harassing us. *Gavachos* do what they want to do.”

He walked away, not even waiting for a response, nor picking up any of his cans or equipment. Everybody watched as he slammed the door of his rusty Buick and drove away.

“I guess he came alone,” Leonardo said musingly, then more alert, “We can pick any row we want now.” He rubbed his eyes some more, even though the dust had died down.

“That guy’s crazy. Those people don’t live here, anyway.” He was a short guy, with tight bunched-in cheeks around his nose and pants that settled unevenly around his waist. When he walked one of his legs looked shorter than the other. He went over to one of the rows a Mexican had been picking on and lifted up a pair of old discarded shoes. They were caked with mud, scarred and furrowed like the faces of old men who have worked in the fields all their lives. He held them up at the tips of his fingers and away from his precious nose. The person who wore them probably took them off in the heat to stick his toes into the moist, irrigated soil. A chorus of laughter went up when he held them high, then fell when he dropped them back to earth. He rummaged some more down the row un-

til he found a sack filled with chili peppers.

“Hey, I’m going to keep these,” he declared, and dug his hand into the sack.

When everyone saw this they all began taking the other abandoned sacks. They claimed their right by how close their rows had been to the Mexicans beside them. The three sacks belonging to the man working on the rows next to ours were lying on their sides. My brother Nardo walked over and placed his hand on one of them. Two other guys came over and began to argue about who the others belonged to, but my brother was strong and tougher, and after some pushing and shoving they went away grumbling.

“Look Richard,” he said excitedly, spearing up his shirtsleeves. He lifted one sack up by its ears and pounded it on the ground to pack the chilies down its belly. “We got more here than it take us two days to pick,” he said. “Hey, you can even buy your baseball glove.”

I looked down at the sacks, then far in the distance where little clouds of dust were still rising where the vans had been pulling away, and wondered how long I would have to work to fill those sacks. The weariness of it stretched as wide as the horizon. I thought of the baseball glove, all clean and stiff and leather-smelling, and of myself on the cool green lawn of centerfield, like in a golf course. I don’t know why, but somehow I was already on the team at school, and people were looking at me. Not these people picking chilies or those sent away in those vans, but people I had yet to know, looking at me as I stood mightily in centerfield.

I could buy it now, the baseball glove, without another lick of work, not one ounce. But it no longer seemed worth a damn, anymore. Not a damn.