

## Move the Cemetery · *Manuel R. Garcia*

MOVE THE CEMETERY. It had seemed like such a natural and important thing when the people of Los Ricos first demanded it. The government was going to flood their ancient valley with a new dam, and their village was being sacrificed for the greater benefit of the whole country. In new shirts and sombreros bought specially for the occasion, the men had made the long trip to the capital to demand from the government, with a bravado they didn't really feel, "Move the cemetery, or we won't go." It had seemed a reasonable request from people that were being uprooted and moved to a new location miles away from their familiar hills. To the villagers' surprise, the officials readily agreed, "OK, we'll move it." Now that the workers had arrived and begun the project, everyone became a little uneasy. First of all, the workers had only brought simple digging tools and a flat-bed truck. No one had thought that the wooden boxes would be rotted. No one had expected to deal personally with the remains of the ex-citizens of Los Ricos.

The villagers resented the thought of having to be confronted with how much their former friends and relatives had changed. The workers thought it unlucky to be disturbing the spooky relics. The corpses themselves, with their exposed white jawbones and teeth, seemed to be grinning mischievously at the discomfort they created. Only Don Emilio, the oldest man in the village, was unperturbed as he came to watch the daily progress.

Don Emilio was old and his memory was very bad. Because he often couldn't remember where he was or what he was supposed to be doing, he was quiet much of the time and people thought him wise. As happens with old people, his memory often failed him about recent occurrences but the events of his youth stayed clear and precise in his mind. He could still see the promises shining in the eyes of the young girls he had known and feel the rock toughness in the body that had made other men give him room. Since he preferred the vital world of his memories to the slow moving, stiff jointed one of the present, he spent most of his time there. But the activity in the cemetery brought him out every day.

When they'd arrived in their truck a few days before, the village welcomed the three men and tried to make them comfortable. But, as the people became uneasy about the project, they became colder to them, finally avoiding them altogether. Now the people had begun to wear

crosses around their necks and to cross to the other side of the street whenever any of the three approached. The day before they were asked to leave the inn where they were staying (the only one in town). They had to move to an abandoned shack with no roof, outside of town. Fortunately, it hadn't rained but they had to cook their own meals, and between the three of them the only thing they knew how to prepare was beans.

They were simple men and could easily understand people's fears, but they didn't know how to deal with being outcasts. So, instead of working at a leisurely pace to prolong the job, as was their custom, they worked as hard and fast as they could. This pleased everyone except Don Emilio who, alone among the villagers, was fascinated by the work these men were doing. Each grave contained an old friend or relative. Each marker was the key to a special vault in his mind, and the workers were unlocking those vaults for him, one by one.

Like the two graves side by side without markers. Only he could remember the inscriptions on the wooden crosses, long disappeared. "Juan, April 12, 1915" and "Chato, April 13, 1915." During the brief time when they thought there was a fortune in silver in their valley, the village had filled with drifters, treasure seekers, and all manner of dangerous and interesting people. Two men came into town together one day. That night, in a drunken haze, they stabbed each other. One died that night, the other, the following day. Juan and Chato were all anyone knew about them but no one was sure which was which.

Don Emilio was the only one who enjoyed the proceedings as he sat silently on the stone fence enclosing the cemetery. The rest of the villagers were repulsed by what they saw. The rotting caskets had been the real start of the discontent. One of the workers went to nearby San Sebastian to find suitable boxes for the remains; he came back with every kind of receptacle he'd been able to find. Everyone envisioned the truck gradually being loaded with neat oblong caskets, perhaps a little dirty. But instead, the truck was filling up with odd-sized containers of all descriptions, including straw hampers and an old cardboard suitcase. People got uneasy about passing the truck and seeing the shinbone of a favorite aunt sticking out of a cardboard box, or the ribcage of a "compadre" between the slats of a wooden melon crate.

The three workmen weren't any happier about the situation.

"I tell you, I don't like it," said Efren, one of the workers, to his companions as they sat on a rock eating their lunch of cooked beans.

“Touching those old skeletons makes me sick. Some of them still have bits of stuff stuck to the bone.”

“The skeletons don’t bother me,” answered Juan, the youngest and cockiest. “A bunch of old bones can’t hurt you. But I get a very dark feeling just being in this cemetery. In fact, I think this whole town is creepy, like that old man watching us every day. Look at him sitting there. Why doesn’t he ever say anything?”

Luis, the third worker, added with an involuntary shudder, “This morning while I was working a whole family came to watch me. They were all dressed in black and cried the whole time. When I tried to talk to them they all held up their crosses. The old grandmother wouldn’t stop moaning. I don’t know who I was digging up, but they made me so nervous I broke two of the ribs with my shovel. You should have heard the old woman scream then, like a wounded cat.”

The three men worked on, interested only in finishing the job and leaving the village. They didn’t know or care about the small mysteries they uncovered. Like Carmen Flores’ baby: Carmen had been the daughter of Rigo, the village’s bad-tempered barber and drunk. She became pregnant and, although Rigo beat her unmercifully, she never let the baby’s father be known. Mother and child had both died in the same influenza epidemic; and they’d both been buried together. When the workers uncovered the graves, they found only Carmen. They didn’t stop to wonder about the baby, they merely threw Carmen’s bones and the marker into a cardboard box with a picture of fresh peaches on the side and put her on the truck. Only Don Emilio, watching from the fence, puzzled over the mystery.

They paid attention, though, when the crying grandmother came back with a friend, another old lady who had a rigid walk and fearless eyes. One behind the other, they marched around the cemetery walls twice, never taking their eyes from Luis, who’d so carelessly excavated someone’s ribs. Then they knelt and prayed for a long while. The men pretended not to pay attention but were especially flustered when they saw Don Emilio swing around off the stone wall and take up another position farther up the hill. When the praying was done, the women walked once more around the cemetery, buried something in the dirt, and left. The men rushed over and uncovered a live lizard buried a few inches deep. Juan heaved it as far away as he could.

After that the men became more hurried and careless in their work, mixing up markers and letting bones spill out of boxes. Don Emilio

found himself drawn to the truck. Slowly he began picking up odd bones and replacing them in boxes, not always the right ones. The occupants of the boxes had borne all of the indignities up to now quite patiently (not being able to do much else). But corpses, being extremely slow moving, don't like sudden changes and this mixing up of parts especially angered them.

*"Hey, old man, stop that! That's my foot, it doesn't belong over there."*

*"Someone tell him to do it right. Look at him, I can move faster than that."*

*"Ask him where they're taking us. I want to know what the soil is going to be like."*

*"I get jittery being packed so close together, I need more space."*

But Don Emilio heard nothing. He patiently replaced old bones as he saw fit. Finished, he returned to the stone wall, laboriously climbed on top of it, and continued to watch the steady procession of memories climb from the holes where they'd been trapped. Over the last few days he'd seen almost everyone who ever lived in Los Ricos. His mother passed by, small and gentle. She stopped and asked him if he was eating well. He saw his wife, too, but she didn't stop, which was just as well. She probably would have had something to complain about, so he just let her pass by.

Today they dug up Doña Lupe, his "comadre." He didn't see the wrinkled old prune that had been buried a few years past, wasted away from some unknown disease. He didn't see the toothless old lady, almost bald, saying her beads in church for countless hours, dressed perpetually in black for the scores of people she had to mourn. He saw, instead, the cherry-lipped wife of his old friend Raul. The round-thighed flirt with dancing skirts and flashing eyes who used to meet him down by the river.

The three men worked on, paying attention to nothing but the fact that the job was nearly done. The area around the truck became littered with old bones, wormy wood, and ancient bits of cloth and other strange foreign matter. They didn't care if the bones howled all the way to their second graves, but Don Emilio did. When the mess got too big he shuffled over and laboriously began to clean up. He found that he could recognize old friends in the wild disarray of bones. He stood for a while talking to a gold-toothed skull he held at arm's length. "Paco, my old friend, you never did learn how to play dominoes without changing the rules to gain an advantage." But, as he had no way of knowing to whom

most of the parts belonged, he merely made the confusion worse, sending the inhabitants of the truck into a panic.

*"My foot, find my foot, old man, I can't rest without my foot."*

*"There's someone else's leg in here with me. Get it away from me it makes me sick."*

*"Who's got my beautiful rosary? Give it back, I was buried with it. I looked so peaceful with it in my hands, like I was sleeping."*

*"Someone talk to the old fool. Tell him I can't stand this confusion anymore."*

If these things could have been heard full force, they would have sent a shiver of repulsion all through the valley, but the cries of the dead are very soft to human ears. Still, so great was their wailing, that the townspeople avoided the truck, which was almost full by now. The entire truck seemed to have life, to move with an almost imperceptible vibration. Some villagers who came near said they heard faint cries, as from a bucket of snails screaming in the night. Others said they heard a constant, muted rattle.

To everyone's relief (except Don Emilio's, who enjoyed his daily visits with the memories of old friends) the job was almost finished. There only remained one monument to move. It was the largest one in the cemetery, the only one carved out of marble. It had been ordered in the city and moved here by the Rosas family, at one time the richest people in the valley. All the members of the family were in it now, except Jorge who had simply disappeared one day. There probably would be no Rosas after him either, since he'd always been more interested in young boys and witchcraft than in women. Now the marker stood alone in a field full of holes. It was tall and wide with plenty of room for carving more names. In front of the marker lay a broad, flat surface, also marble, large enough to dance on. They began to dig, hoping to find the bodies under the platform. Soon they had dug a trench all around the monument, only to find the sides of what appeared to be one solid block of marble. A faint, but definite, odor had also begun to envelope the graveyard. It was the unmistakable smell of putrifying flesh. They dug the trench waist deep and still only encountered the sides of the huge stone. The odor was stronger now and the workmen had to put handkerchiefs over their noses. When the trench had reached the height of a man, the three of them conferred. Juan wanted to leave everything as it was and go. The other two had become curious about the tombstone and voted to stay. Luis was sent to nearby San Sebastian where there was a phone to call their superiors and ask for help.

At night no one went near the cemetery. It gave out a dark aura, an eerie stillness that reached the village and made people jump at twigs breaking in the dark. Don Emilio felt the aura too, but it seemed to call him. That night he found himself standing next to the flat-bed truck listening to an almost imperceptible sound, as of the faraway rattling of bones. It was somehow soothing to his joints and he closed his eyes to feel it better. His lips slowly stretched in a languid smile. The sound grew in intensity and gradually took on the simple rhythm of a primitive dance. The beating sound of the bones began to fill the valley, it made the ground vibrate. It filled the old man's ears, it rang in his head louder and louder, yet soothing, as if coming from within him. His body swayed and his feet shifted, just slightly, as he responded to the driving rhythm, somehow recalled from an ancient past. Through this ear-filling din, so immense that no thought was possible, came a tiny child's voice, almost imperceptible, yet somehow clear and distinct as a wind chime. It was sharp, quiet and sweet. It said, "*Emilio.*"

Don Emilio answered with his eyes still shut, "What?"

The voice again, a mere whisper, but precise. "*Help us, Emilio.*"

"What do you want me to do?"

"*We hurt, Emilio. We have been mixed up and confused. You must help us, Emilio, you are almost one of us.*"

Emilio heard the sweet, tiny voice because that's what he was allowed to hear. If he could have heard the bones really talking he might have been shocked. They were rude and loud and all talked at once.

"*It's about time he heard us. What's the matter with the old fool now? Tell him to open his eyes and help us.*"

"*I need my foot, it's in that box with the screeching old hag. Tell him to get it for me now, do you hear me? Tell him now.*"

"*He's not moving. I think he's dead. Make room, someone get him a box.*"

"What can I do?" asked Emilio.

"*Sort the bones out for us. We are all mixed together. You don't know the torture of having your bones mixed with someone else's.*" The voice that addressed Don Emilio belonged to a child who had died unborn. "*So many parts have fallen to the ground, Emilio. Please get them for us, and the trinkets that we've lost, they are all we have.*"

In the morning Luis came back from talking to the officials in the capital. "They won't help us. They say we've been here too long already. We're to finish the job and get back as soon as possible."

The three of them returned to the marker and stared down into the trench, scratching their heads, for a long time. The stench was stronger than ever and seemed to be growing.

“Keep digging, keep digging.” They turned to see Don Emilio yelling hoarsely from atop the truck. They ran over to where he was jumping up and down on the bed, looking more drawn and gaunt than before, waving a thigh bone over his head and yelling, “Keep digging, keep digging I tell you.”

“What are you talking about, old man?” Efren asked.

“Keep digging, get them out. There’s another under the tree.” He hadn’t stopped jumping or yelling although they were standing right next to him.

“Come on, get off the truck.” Efren reached for Don Emilio’s leg but the old man swung at him with the bone and hollered, “Get them out, get them out.”

Efren shrugged to the others. “He can’t hurt anything.” And they all returned to the trench, leaving Don Emilio rummaging through the boxes, transferring bones from one to another and yelling out, “Keep digging, get them out.”

Juan went to the only tree in the cemetery and began digging around the base as Don Emilio had said. Efren and Luis returned to the monument, determined to solve the mystery despite the acrid smell of rotting flesh. They jumped into the trench and resumed digging around the base of the marble slab. Don Emilio kept sorting bones like a madman, flinging them into this box and that. He seemed to get thinner and paler by the hour. His cheek bones protruded farther than they had before and cast shadows on the tightly drawn skin of his face. He kept up a steady conversation with a group of invisible voices, “Coming now. This one, where does it go?” as he tossed the bones about. At intervals he turned toward the working men and shouted, “Keep digging!”

About midday, Juan called to the others, “Fellows, come look, I’ve found another one under the tree.” They came and looked into the hole he had dug. There lay another corpse, totally entwined in the roots of a tree, which were like a huge snake, squeezing the life out of him. Luis reached down into the mass of roots and bones and pulled out a round bone, the size of an orange, encrusted with dirt. It was the skull of a small child. They all stared silently at it, each with his own thoughts. Finally, Juan broke the silence.

“I’ll get these bones into the truck and go help you. Let’s get this job finished and get out of here.”

Efren and Luis hurried back to the monument, glancing over at Don Emilio and shaking their heads in wonder. He was in a frenzy on the bed of the truck. Boxes were spread all over as he feverishly continued sorting bones. His hair was wild, his eyes were sunken and black, and the skin of his arms was stretched so tightly the outlines of the bones in his elbows and arms stood out plainly. He kept up a raspy chatter, as if speaking to himself. "Throw that one in here now. Good, that feels much better. Over here now, quickly, this little one, take it away." Then occasionally over his shoulder, "Dig, keep digging!"

They did. They jumped back into the trench and worked to the accompaniment of whirling shovels and flying dirt. The smell was almost unbearable and now there began a shrill sound like crickets on a still night. They were terrified but some force kept them at their task, almost against their wills.

Late in the afternoon, Juan uncovered the knotted end of a piece of rope. He dug further to uncover its source and found that it protruded from beneath the marble block. He yelled out, "Come look, the bottom, we've reached the bottom." They all gathered around and tried pulling on the rope but it wouldn't move. They kept digging to expose more of the bottom edge of the marble, straight and evenly cut. They kept trying the rope but could feel nothing on the other end. Finally, with half a man's length exposed along the bottom, Luis pulled again on the rope. A large, rectangular section of the marble slid noiselessly toward him. Along with it, like the roar of death, came the overwhelming stench of putrifying meat. All three of them retched immediately into the dirt, without even kneeling, mixing that stench with the other. But their curiosity, so long in building, moved them forward.

In the dull light from outside they saw a chamber. The marble block was hollow. The floor inside was totally hidden by the dead and dying remains of small animals. Most were skeletons whose flesh had rotted or been eaten. In the dim light, they created an uneven carpet of white bones, ankle deep. But the carpet was alive with color and sound, as everywhere atop the bones lay foxes, rats and rodents of all kinds, some dead, some half eaten and still dying. The animals still alive twisted feebly to escape and their cries joined together in a shrill chorus like the sound of a pig screeching. Throughout the crypt, like Roman columns waiting for a roof, stood white marble pedestals at regular intervals. Many had square metal boxes sitting on top, presumably the remains of Rosas family members. Most were still vacant, awaiting new arrivals.

As the men stumbled through the bones to retrieve the boxes, they became aware of grain sacks stacked against all the walls. All were torn open and surrounded by dead and dying rats, probably poisoned by the grain, setting in motion this perpetual animal sacrifice, continued through the flesh of its tainted victims. Carrying the boxes, the three men, their ashen faces frozen into pictures of horror, fled the ghastly tomb and hustled the boxes to the truck.

Don Emilio saw them coming as he lay in the bed of the truck, leaning against the boxes. The entire area was clean. He had picked up every bit of bone and cloth and put it in its proper box; all the containers were piled neatly, one on top of another. The men looked at his still form. There seemed to be no meat left on him at all, his skin was grey and his dull eyes were lost in the deep black sockets in his head, barely flickering as they followed the movement of the men. Through the tissue paper skin of his face the outline of each tooth could be easily seen. He tried to raise one hand feebly off the floor of the truck in a futile gesture. His cracked lips barely moved, but the voice that addressed the men was the soft clear voice of a young child. "Ah, you've got them out. About time, too. We were getting tired of waiting. Well, what are you staring at, idiots. Hurry, let's go. Everyone's tired and we all need our rest." His eyes closed.

It wasn't until they were well on their way down the mountain road that they smelled the rain in the approaching summer storm.