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Mobile Workforce
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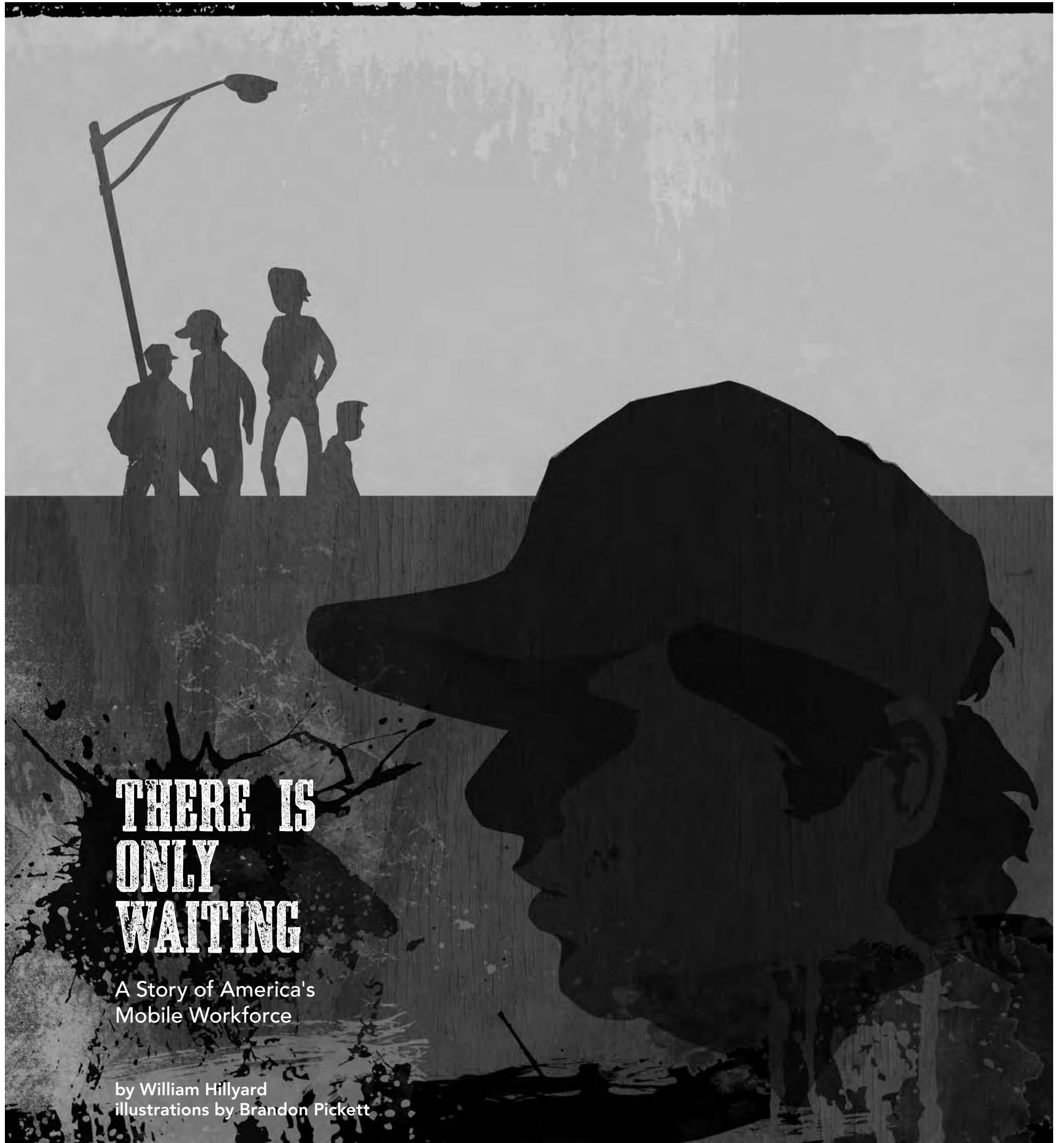


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FEATURESTORY



THERE IS ONLY WAITING

A Story of America's
Mobile Workforce

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WEDGED BETWEEN THE RAILROAD TRACKS AND busy El Toro Road, bound by auto repair shops and a lumberyard, near the now vacant nursery with the dead potted trees and rented security fence, Orange Avenue meets Jeronimo Road.

Along the sidewalk bordering Jeronimo, lean, lanky Edgar paces like a cat; he stalks the apex of the corner where the cars must slow to avoid the dip. There, those that slow too much, are too cautious, find Edgar in the split of a second sitting shotgun.

One man—too careful, too old perhaps—crept around the corner. Seeing that hesitant little car Edgar leapt at it grabbing the car's door handles—it was locked. Following Edgar, other men rushed the car. The man just sat there, wide-eyed, like cornered prey, while the men grasped at the doors, knocked on the windows. The bewildered driver did nothing. Five seconds, ten seconds passed. Edgar bent over the top of the others and cupped his hands to the windows, peering in at the man. Other drivers swerved to avoid the crowd. Then suddenly, out of a daze, the old man gunned his car and sped away.

This out-of-the-way corner is no different from so many other corners, really. It's no different from the spot in front of the Donut World in Dana Point, for example, or the roadside in Laguna Canyon, or the Home Depot in Santa Ana or the 260 other street corners and vacant lots and home store driveways in 140-odd other cities and towns and suburbs where every day, any day, nearly 117,600 men stand and wait.

Men like Mario, who talks to other men in hushed tones through silver-capped front teeth. Like Victor who leans with his back to traffic or gangly Edgar. Or, on that one day, José. They wait for homeowners and contractors, wives of lazy husbands, fathers of good-for-nothing sons, young couples moving. They wait for people to hire them,

people who just need that extra pair of hands, the strong back that ten dollars an hour and lunch and water and soda will get them. If you find yourself here, you find yourself in limbo, a sort of suspended animation. On this corner in Lake Forest, California, time has stopped, there is only waiting.

FOR YEARS THE CITY HAS BEEN TRYING TO PUSH THESE DAY laborers away, get them to move on, off the corner, out of town. The businessmen in the shopping center at the corner complain: The owner of Celebrity Cleaners claims they scare away his customers. People from the neighborhood won't stop at Mr. J's Liquor Store. The day laborers, they get drunk on the corner, they fight, they urinate in public. Mothers and children must walk past them on their way to school. Local residents write letters to public officials, complaining to any one who will listen, protesting the corner. They call it the Lake Forest Day Labor Site.

One resident had received a letter from a Santa Ana respiratory clinic telling her she had been exposed to tuberculosis by a co-worker, a bus boy. He was from Mexico, an "illegal alien." There she was, faced with the fear that she might have TB, and she had no medical insurance, but she sure as hell wasn't going to go to that Santa Ana respiratory clinic—she could get TB just sitting in the waiting room—so instead, she paid one hundred and fifty dollars for TB tests from her family doctor. Suddenly it dawned on her: Here she was, an American citizen with no medical insurance, paying full price for a TB test, and her co-worker, an illegal alien, got tested on her taxpayer dime.

That's why she got active, making phone calls, writing letters, addressing the city council. She owns a home here, just a mile down the road from the Lake Forest Day Labor Site. She's concerned that immigrants like the day laborers are dragging down the standard of living here, pushing us away from our core values. We have laws and the day

laborers aren't supposed to be here—they're illegal. What don't you understand about illegal? She doesn't buy that helpless and homeless nonsense. It's like survival of the fittest; not everyone is equal—some people will prosper, others will not. You know, that's just the way it is.

The city listened. Nowadays, Bob, with his wire-rimmed shades and double-action Smith and Wesson, patrols the property while cops cruise the corner every few minutes, sometimes watching from the vacant nursery with the dead potted trees and rented security fence, or from the alley across the street. The curbs are now bright red along Orange Avenue. Shiny new signposts holding "No Stopping Any Time" signs prop up the bored bodies of the men who stand there on the sidewalk and wait. You can stand on the sidewalk—the sidewalk is public property, you have the fundamental right to solicit work just like a business can advertise a sale or a Girl Scout can sell cookies. These are rights protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution.

You can't go on the shopping center property itself, though; the center is posted private property, and no person shall enter or remain upon posted private property without the permission, expressed or implied, of the owner, owner's agent, or lessee of such posted property or premises. That would be trespassing. So, Mario and Edgar, Victor and, that one day, José, lean against the "No Stopping Any Time" signs, or sit, knees bent, on the freshly painted red curbs and wait. They watch the oncoming traffic and they wait.

ROUNDING THE CORNER OF JERONIMO AND ORANGE, A blonde chick hangs out the window of a black Mercedes, flips the bird at the listless men, then sinks back into the car self-satisfied. Mario's amber eyes, peering through a permanent squint against the sun, follow the car down the street. His sun-blonded mustache disappears into his clean-shaven, suntanned face. He cracks a silver-tooth smile.

Her crumpled tissue paper face is stern.
“Do you speak English?” she crackles at the first to reach her car. “I pay my boys eight dollars an hour, if you do a good job, I’ll give you ten. Who wants to work?”

Then, turning his back to the receding Mercedes, again he waits.

From the parking lot behind the liquor store, Bob leans against the hood of his small security truck watching a man chase a car onto the shopping center property. His arms folded across his blue uniform jacket, he muzzles a silver coffee mug. Bob ran that guy off a couple of times already and figures he needs to go talk to him again. He pushes himself off the truck and starts across the parking lot. “Hey, you speak English?” he asks. The man, backpedaling toward the sidewalk, nods, though his perplexed look contradicts his vague answer. Others, watching, drift slowly away from the store onto the public sidewalk. “You have to stay on the sidewalk, you can’t stand on this property, it’s private property.” Bob gestures to the sidewalk, tracing the property boundary with his hands.

Bob has the face of a man accustomed to the sun; his silver hair with a clean military cut stays well clear of his ears. Because of Bob, each of the tenants of the shopping center pays an additional \$700 a month in rent. To the owner of Celebrity Cleaners that’s money well spent. He has worked for two years to have the day laborers controlled, complaining to the center management to have them removed. Sure, he understands why they are there, that they have to work, have to eat. But business is business. The owner of Celebrity Cleaners knew that if he could get rid of the day laborers, he could make a lot of money. Since Bob has been on duty his business has tripled.

Bob’s just doing his job. Don’t think he’s prejudiced against Hispanics or anything; heck, he married one, Moo Moo Garcia, together thirty-two years next month. He’s not here to harass the day laborers; they can stand on the sidewalk—that’s public property—but management hired him to enforce LFMC 11.24.030, Private Property No Trespassing, to keep the day laborers off the premises. He’s got a job to do, that’s why he’s here.

That’s what he was doing that one day, the day the white Ford truck pulling a black trailer turned off Orange into the driveway of the shopping center and stopped in front of Mr. J’s Liquor Store, remaining on shopping center property, business premises, without permission, express or implied, from the owner, owner’s agent, nor lessee. That day the driver of the white truck held up two fingers. That one day Edgar and José sprang at the truck and it looked like they would get work.

DOWN THE STREET, SLOUCHING BACK AGAINST THE FLAT bed of a truck, Victor draws the remains of a cigarette, half smoked, out of the pocket of his dirty black sweatshirt. He puts the stub to his lips and, bumming a light, puffs the smoke, slowly breathing it out through the baleen of the thin mustache that curls over his upper lip. The smoke rises like steam from under the bill of his washed out blue cap. He leans with his back to the road, facing away from passing cars and possible employers, his hands slung in the pockets of his sweatshirt.

For now, today is kinda slow, like every day. But then, maybe someone will pull up and you got work. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a job for two days, three days. Victor got picked up a week ago last Saturday. A real nice lady pulled up to him and said, Victor, I hear you’re a good worker, Victor. She gave him a job moving some boxes, a couple of hours, plus lunch and water and sodas.

From Victor’s smooth face, a small stand of stiff whiskers grows: black ones, gray ones—solitary hairs, each three inches long or more, kinked and curly like tiny balls of bailing wire. He takes another drag of his cigarette, pinches off the smoldering end, and slides it back into his pocket.

A BICYCLE RATTLES UP THE SIDEWALK, TOWARD THE LIQUOR store, no seat, no tires, bare metal rims on concrete. A moment later the scene reverses as the rider heads back down the street balancing a tray of Cup O’ Noodles.

From the liquor store, Edgar bounds to the sidewalk, waving a single lottery ticket from his gangly arm. You can enter the property to use the store—even when Bob’s here—and to drink your drink, eat your noodles. You can remain upon the posted private property, then; you have permission, expressed or implied, of the owner, owner’s agent, or lessee.

Other men collect around Edgar as he returns; one digs a coin from his pocket and with it, Edgar scratches the lottery card cradled in the palm of his hand. His smile broadens as the others push in close, interpreting the results, analyzing. Beardless, Edgar has the face of a boy, mahogany-brown; a stubby tail threads down the back of his spiky black hair. He lifts his sunglasses to examine the ticket once again and with an about face returns to the store.

A withered man, head swimming in a wide brimmed blue golf hat, guides his small SUV into the driveway of the shopping center, stopping at the red curb by the No Stopping sign. His wife, her sparse white hair stacked in large, loose

curls, opens the door. She holds up one crooked finger. Men bolt, scrambling, elbowing past one another; in no time, the old woman is submerged in two dozen eager men. Her crumpled tissue paper face is stern. “Do you speak English?” she crackles at the first to reach her car. “I pay my boys eight dollars an hour, if you do a good job, I’ll give you ten. Who wants to work?” One guy, the one who understood her maybe, raises his hand. “This man will do it,” she announces, directing the winner to the back seat, “Do you speak English?” she confirms before slamming the door. The next moment, the frail man eases the car into reverse and slowly backs into the street. Mario sinks back to the sidewalk and waits.

Silver-tooth Mario was standing right there, and God knows, he needs the work. He had a job, steady work in construction, but three months ago the building boom ended, the work stopped coming, and he ended up here on the corner. He gets work some days. Worked four days last week, made \$400 dollars toward his \$1,050 rent. But then there’s the other bills, the lights, the gas. And the food. His wife and son. So far this week, he’s made fifty bucks, worked only one-half of one day, and it’s Friday again. The end of another week.

ESTÁ CABRÓN, TÍO. TIMES ARE BAD. MARIO NEVER REALLY wanted to come to America in the first place. But his brother lived here and his brother’s friend needed to bring her daughter into the country. The girl was only 14 and you know how dangerous it is for a young girl to cross, so the friend convinced Mario to accompany her. She would pay for everything: the flight from Orizaba to Tijuana and the coyote to get them across the border.

Mario’s father had a business in Orizaba, a little tienda that sells house wares on credit to the people in the neighborhood. Mario figured he’d go into that business, work with his father, build his own house for himself and his family. Instead he found himself packed into a van with twenty-some other guys and forced to wait at the border for six days until the coyotes determined it was safe to cross. He’s been here twelve years.

THAT ONE DAY, BOB WAS LEANING AGAINST HIS SMALL security truck when the white Ford truck with the black trailer pulled past and stopped there in front of Mr. J’s Liquor Store. He watched as Edgar and José dashed onto the

property, without permission, expressed or implied, and jumped in it. Bob pushed himself up and stepped toward the Ford. He was going to warn the guy, to let him know that this was private property, cutting across the property like that is trespassing. He was going to tell the driver of the white Ford that he could be arrested. But the Ford sped away, out of the driveway, making an illegal left turn onto Jeronimo. Bob had the police on speed dial. In an instant he was talking to dispatch; they patched him through to the sheriff's cruiser. He followed the Ford out onto Jeronimo, watching as it stopped at the light, and by radio guided the deputy right up to it. On came the cruiser's flashing red and blue lights. When the signal turned green, the cop pulled the white Ford truck with the black trailer to the side of the road.

No one wanted to eat it, to touch it, to mess it up. People eat with their eyes, you know. That was before he broke his head. He fell on a treadmill at the gym, crushed his skull, spent a year in the hospital, seventy-seven days in a coma. When he emerged his second wife had left, his life was gone.

LANKY EDGAR WAS THE FIRST TO GET OUT OF THE WHITE Ford truck with the black trailer that day, the first to be handcuffed. Pushed into the back of the Sheriff's cruiser, he and José waited for the driver of the white Ford to get his ticket. They had violated LFMC 11.24.030, had entered posted private property without the permission, expressed or implied, of the owner, owner's agent, or lessee of that posted property or premises. Other cops came. Bob, as the owner's

to be processed. Finally, after eight hours, they released him. He took the bus home to his couch in the royal blue living room of the crowded trailer. Edgar had known better, he had been warned. He knew not to enter posted private property without the permission, expressed or implied, of the owner, owner's agent, or lessee. Edgar spent the next six days in jail.

El Toro, the bull, that is what Lake Forest used to be called back when this and all the area around here was Mexico. The town, which began as a stop on the Camino Real between San Diego and Los Angeles, has its origin as a Mexican land grant—the great rancho of Don José Serrano. It got its name from the old rancho's bulls. In 1842 this was all Mexico. By 1846 they had moved the border. Now, Lake Forest, a master-



Victor again removes his stub of cigarette from his pocket and wanders toward the corner looking for a light. He never imagined he'd be on the street looking for work; the first time he came to the corner he said oh my God and almost cried. Now he comes here every day. He lives close, he can walk from home, but sometimes he takes the bus. People see him ride the bus and say, Victor, are you rich, Victor? But he's not rich. Riding the bus saves his shoes; he pays two-fifty to ride the bus, but he doesn't wear out his shoes. Those heavy-soled black shoes are scuffed and cracking, but reminders of their old patent leather shine still remain.

Victor had a house of his own once with a pool. He remembers buying a bathing suit for his daughter Yessica; he was divorced, and she had come to visit him. He didn't even know she could swim. He was a chef then, classically trained at the culinary academy in San Francisco. He made sauces, béchamel, Marsala sauce—made with Marsala wine—buerre blanc. He carved tomato roses, ice sculptures, won awards. He worked for the best chef in Atlanta for almost a year. Victor, the food is beautiful, Victor, people would say to him.

agent, signed a private person's arrest form, a citizen's arrest. The driver of the white Ford got his citation and pulled away. José and Edgar went to jail.

José doesn't come to the corner any more. He had only come that once. He has another job during the week, yard work—mow, blow, and go—and just went to the corner that one day for some extra money, money to send home to his wife and kids in Mexico. He's saving money for his return home, to be with his family. His wife, she was sick; she lost some mental faculties, couldn't walk or talk—complications from the birth of their son. She spent three weeks in the hospital here, but remained sick. So a year ago he sent her home. She took the kids, back to Teloloapan; her family could take better care of her there. José hasn't seen them since. He now rents a couch in the royal blue painted living room of a crowded trailer. There are nine other people living there; he doesn't know any of them.

José spent that one day, the day the cops pulled him from the white Ford truck with the black trailer, in jail. He sat there, on a worn wooden bench, nothing to eat, waiting

planned community created by Occidental Petroleum Land & Development Corporation, with its artificial lake and imported trees, its ticky-tacky tract homes, franchised fast food and chain stores, is America.

AT THIS OUT OF THE WAY CORNER, WHERE ORANGE AVENUE meets Jeronimo Road, in front of Mr. J's Liquor Store, across from the now vacant nursery with the dead potted trees and rented security fence, the men still lean against the "No Stopping Any Time" signs, or sit, knees bent, on the freshly painted red curbs. The cops cruise, Bob patrols, the owner of the Celebrity Cleaners complains, local residents write letters, make phone calls, and address the city council protesting the Lake Forest Day Laborer Site. Mario and Edgar, Victor, and, that one day, José—they watch the oncoming traffic and they wait. •