

The Essentials

by Guillermo Reyes

The town folk of Borderville declared the farmworkers essential while still illegal. The Council of Town Elders decided to show up in person on that Sunday morning in the spring of that mythical year of our elders, 2020. On their way to church, the elders arrived in their pick-up trucks (and one limo) with the mayor and a Protestant minister leading their flock to the fields of the Lord. They sought to pray for workers like my father and label them the “essentials” of Borderville. They looked eager to let the farmworkers know how much the town folk appreciated their labor. The mayor had also coerced his wife and maybe his mistress (no one could tell who that pretty lady in a bright orange dress and glittery lipstick was, but she was the one in the limo) to attend.

The workers always knew they were officially illegal, yet essential, and no declaration changed one damn thing in that regard. The town elders just needed to state the obvious before they went off to lock themselves up in quarantine. The ceremony was mostly for their benefit. Still, it led to a few alien sightings and biblical begats, so someone along the way felt some excitement during this ceremony. Most folks who survived the pandemic recalled these events in broken pieces of narrative and gave me a different spin on the tale. I know enough now to reconstruct the tale so many years later. My fact gathering must take into account what people saw and what they think they saw. It’s the only way to explain away a pregnancy. (That’ll be relevant when it comes to understanding my own birth in the year of the pandemic.)

Witnesses also remember a male officer wearing a “Police ICE” deep blue uniform accompanying the mayor. He of the deep shaved head reassured folks there would be no deportation raids while a virus ravaged the world. Even the mayor’s two sons and his daughter (college-age and on leave from school) accompanied him. The daughter checked out the young male workers and her glossy lips constantly smacked throughout the ceremony. She would reserve her words and her lips for my father, and he wasn’t one to brag about girls. Some girls liked that, his compliance and reticence. A quiet Romeo, I’ve been told, to those who knew him. Paco was his actual name and he was eighteen then.

Time has passed and I can lay claim to this legacy of people who worked the land and the others who owned it. They’re all my folks, except for the aliens from outer space. I’ll get to them soon enough. I’m sixteen now and I believe in such things as “aliens.” I’ve felt like one my entire life.

The year of *la pandemia* brought all these folks together in many different ways. What binds them to one another is the soil which remains fertile and, in many ways, as holy as the Guadalupe statue we light candles to as the morning dawns and as we resume harvesting the fruits of the bountiful land. We, the essentials. We feed the nation. We’re still here and ain’t going nowhere except back to the fields, though I might be going off to college, but that’s for later. Let us not digress.

This is America in the mid-21st century. At least I learned early as a child what a century meant, a chunk of time long enough to kill you yet nothing compared to eternity where we are all headed regardless of time. And what America meant to us, the people who got declared so essential

that we needed to work every time a virus haunted the fields of the Lord, is that the Land belongs to those who don't work it. It's happened now five times since 2020 'cause there's always a new virus and we's still so damn essential. The legal people still threaten to deport us, but they never do 'cause they need the harvest like fish need the water. They hide from the land and we always get to be "illegal" somehow even though we make it flourish. We even fertilize it when we die. Not my father who chose to fly into the stars.

It was during the harvest 2020 when some of the workers noticed it. Right above them on the lettuce field. My grandpa Ernesto went running and pointed it out to his son, Paco. It's the Monster Hornet, he shouted. *Vienen desde el Asia*/They comin' here from Asia! Paco used his hand to cover his eyes from the sun and he squinted. He noticed a mandarin-colored creature with wings fluttering and a brownish beak looking like it dripped venom. He looked twice to reassure himself and he finally noticed a light twinkling within its body.

"Por favor, dad!" He said always talking to grandpa with Spanglish and a California dude 'tude. "That's no hornet monster, Jeez, dad."

"Pero sí que lo es, mijo, vienen del Asia."

"That's just a *drone* in the shape of a hornet monster. The real thing is smaller and has no batteries in it and no camera snapping pictures of us working folk. That is man-made. The real thing is *vespa mandarinia*, and you bet scientists say it's on its way to mess with us, but it's not here yet. What's here is some government creature, spying on us."

Grandpa Ernesto took a second look and seemed upset to be getting punk'd so easy. Why were the farmers spying on their workers with drones now? Couldn't they see that the rich harvest was coming along and that, even during the pandemic, we were unlikely to starve?

"Por Dios!" Ernesto threw his arms up in frustration and then wiped sweat off his brow.

"God has nothin' to do with it, pops," said Paco. The boy waved at the winged drone and it buzzed away. It flew around the field as if broadcasting images on behalf of the people in quarantine to inspect the work from a distance. Everyone with an eye or a camera could see that the lettuces were huge and the second field of cabbages were no less productive that year. One of them cabbages grew the size of a meteor that three people needed to carry into a truck. A TV station would film it and broadcast it all over the country. It gave people hope, that giant cabbages still grew on the land of *la pinche pandemia*. It was that type of year when a giant cabbage made people happy and monster drones supervised our work.

The drone came back around that afternoon and hovered over Paco's head as if to take a second look. Paco could see the eyes on the drone batting eyelashes like a cooing young woman. The damn thing was now flirting with him. Or so he thought. It was the oddest experience for a young man whose parents had never let him out of their sights since he could remember. He was an innocent young man in regards to "the ladies." He was as untouched as a benevolent eighteen-year old boy who didn't smoke or drink or swear. So maybe the drone knew something intimate about him or could smell it from his virgin sweat. The drone was now nodding at him with its wings. It was sending him signals as in move, over here, the woods, over here, honeybunch. The drone was urging him to meet him in the woods for some sort of private session.

"Taking a break, pops," he shouted at Ernesto. "Voy por más agua."

“And bring me some, too, mijo.”

Paco walked into the woods and searched among its agave plants and teddy bear chollas and multiple varieties of cacti, including saguaros, that grew tall and imposing and stood for hundreds of years like ancient oracles. Mulga agacia trees also provided shade and a bit of privacy for sinners wishing to have some.

The hornet drone made a sound. It sat on the arm of a mulga agacia and exuded a strange sweet odor. It was luring him forward. He fought it, thinking of holy things, but the odor lulled him into a strange sensation and a bit of oblivion. This is how the Virgin of Guadalupe had appeared to the humble worker Juan Diego, an apparition in the hill of Tepeyac and it foretold holy events that would change the world and the faith of the Americas. Yes, that’s what it must be, he told himself, a holy apparition like Guadalupe. The hornet drone stretched out its wings and they enveloped him.

A few weeks later, Paco pulled his bags out of the closet ready to go. He had chosen that night because the virus threatened to destroy everything he held dear and he didn’t want to stick around to see any more of it. If the opportunity to flee presented itself, he would take it. Poor Amalia, Paco’s stepmother, was in the hospital fighting for her life, and Ernesto insisted on staying at the hospital while the nurses and doctors told him to go home, that nobody was allowed to see these infected patients or get near them, but grandpa was a stubborn old poke. There were hundreds of patients at the desert hospital by then, many of them essentials just like the Borderville workers. The virus was killing these folks, and the owners feared they might have to work the land themselves that year.

Paco needed to go regardless, to leave that way of life behind, and he knew exactly where he was headed. He was a young man, had aspirations like many others, to go live in a world where he wasn’t so essential. He’d be special in somebody’s life, and he’d be a good father and loving parent but he didn’t want to be on the front lines of a war that a virus was winning. He would have liked to have said goodbye to his stepmother, and prayed for her suffering to be over, but he also knew the hospital people didn’t welcome family so even a farewell was forbidden to the dying and the living alike. It was nearly midnight and he was finishing up his packing when he heard a knock. He thought it was them, the folk giving him a ride to escape this world of infestations.

He opened the door with great anticipation in his eyes, but it wasn’t his ride. It was that girl instead. The mayor’s daughter. She had been a freshman at UCLA but now was home in quarantine like all the other students. She’d been the one quietly checking out the boys at the “honor the essentials” ceremony almost two months before. There she was at his doorstep. He could tell she’d been drinking when she just smiled all funny and uninhibited. She wore a fluffy white robe and a towel on her head as if she had just taken a bath.

“A cold bath won’t cure what ails me,” she said. She invited herself in. She was carrying a bottle of bourbon with fancy labeling, prime time stuff that impresses eighteen-year old boys like Paco.

She noticed the luggage. “You goin’ somewhere, Paco?”

“Miss, you shouldn’t be here.”

“Where you goin’, come on? I have a right to know, my father owns this patch of land so he practically owns you. Lucky me.”

“It don’t matter, miss, you shouldn’t be here. You’re not even wearing a mask.”

She took off the towel and let her blond hair loose. “Well, I don’t intend to wear much of anything,” she said.

She then threw down her robe. She wore a fancy lace bra and a tight pair of *chonies* beneath.

“Or I could wear the panties on my face,” she added. “It might add some protection.”

“Miss, please,” he said. “Put the robe back on. I’ll get in trouble.”

“Come on, Paco,” she said. Her eyes glistened, a hint of a tear was coming on and she was pouting. “He’s not coming.”

“Who’s not coming?”

“My relief.”

She meant her boyfriend, a soccer player at UCLA, apparently an international student from Qatar. He had flown back home to finish his studies online now that classes couldn’t gather in person. He was in quarantine, and he wasn’t coming for her.

“His name’s Omar,” she said. “And he’s Arab and big and fast on the fields with a soccer ball. And my parents wouldn’t approve of him either.”

“Either?”

“They certainly wouldn’t approve of you, though you’ve become essential. I suppose that’s technically an improvement. You’re still deportable though, which makes you more dangerous. I like that in a man really, and you’re no longer a boy. You’ve become a man.”

He didn’t really notice that she was pouring the bourbon onto two tin cups that his parents lined up along with the dishes by the sink. He was hoping Pa would come back from the hospital. A couple of his nephews and nieces slept in a shed adjacent to theirs, but otherwise, he’d been alone until she showed up. She seemed to have done some snooping around. She surely knew he was alone and had targeted him.

“So you’re an essential worker,” she said, “and lovin’ sure is essential, Paco, to woman and man. That’s how the Lord made us. And you do remind me of Omar. You could easily substitute for him. You’ll do quite nicely.”

He didn’t really notice that he was now drinking along and she was sitting on his bed with him. He had put down his backpack. She kicked his suitcase out of the way aggressively. Then, she made herself comfortable on the bed.

“Have you ever been with a woman?” She asked.

“You know we’re not allowed to party in here.”

“Oh, come on, Omar, I mean, Paco,” she said correcting herself and laughing. “The other boys sneak into town to do heaven knows what. Don’t tell me you’re one of them good boys ---”

“Ma’m, you’re breaking quarantine, too.”

“Shut up, Paco. Lovin’ entails risk. There’s still HIV out there, not to mention good old syphilis. But human warmth is essential, too. If we don’t take risks, the species won’t survive either. Do the salmon quit swimming upstream just ‘cause 95% of them won’t make it?”

“Ninety-five per cent, really? Does that mean sex could be 95% deadly?”

“Well, I don’t really know the exact statistics of salmon survival, but it’s a good point still. We need to risk everything, Paco, and tonight I choose to risk everything with you. I declare your entire body essential to me.”

“Really?” He was feeling the bourbon course through his veins. He was beginning to forget everything, the pandemic, the harvest, stepmom being out there in the ICU on a ventilator, and Pops sleeping in the waiting room of the hospital though people were trying their best to evict him.

The young woman’s hand reached his stubbly face. The fingers slid down into his chest as she played with the buttons on his shirt. The lips met and the liquor in both their mouths was beginning to transmit from one to the other.

Her thick lips were unlike anything he had ever tasted, like sweet flavored booze, a touch of sugar on the alcohol, a recipe for something magic, something out of this world, even extraterrestrial.

But the buzz of a drone interfered.

“What was that?” She asked. She moved to the window.

“Ma’m, don’t go out there.”

“And don’t call me ma’m. I’m DeeDee. My parents went with Donna, a boring name, but it does remind people of the Ritchie Valens story. He was in love with Donna, of course, the girl of his dreams. But anyway, what was out there, dude? A drone at this time of night?”

She stuck her head out the window instead. She was staring at the sky. Something moved again and she saw wings flutter in the moonlight.

“Don’t be scared,” he said.

She turned around and gave him a knowing smile. “Oh-oh. They’re back,” she said.

“Back? Who?”

“Oh, darling, the aliens of Roswell.”

She was laughing now and he looked back at her, not amused.

“You’re not expecting them to be real, are you?” She asked. “Paco, please, I’m the one who’s real, darling. Bone and flesh real.”

“They’re taking me to a place without a deadly virus,” he said. “And I’d be able to work my own star, mine it for gold and other precious metals.”

The young woman placed her fingers on his cheek.

“Paco...there’s no place out there in the hemisphere that we can reach with the current technology.”

“The drone says there is and that use to be sci-fi. Now it’s real.”

“You’ve been misled, darling.”

“No, you’re the one trying to mislead me!”

He was gathering his things. She reached for one of his hands and stroked it and played with it until she succeeded in distracting him.

“Paco, darling, if the drones promised something they can’t deliver, then they’re playing with you. It’s a cruel game.”

“They didn’t believe Juan Diego either.”

“Juan who?”

“He saw the Virgin of Guadalupe and they told him to gather roses that were out of season and it would prove her miracle. I will prove it, too. It’ll be the miracle of outer space. It’s come to save us from this world.”

“Paco, fine, I believe you, darling!” She said. This time, she had tears in her eyes. He was surprised by her apparent sincerity. “I really need you to stay with me even for a little while, Paco. It’s been so lonely. You tell me what you need to do to prove that a miracle’s happened. I will believe you and I will honor you for it. I need you here on earth, sweetheart.”

Paco sat down and took another swig of the booze to get the words out there. It’s not as if he believed them himself, but he tried. He needed to believe it.

“Yeah, the aliens are abducting our illegals,” he said. “They need our labor.”

“Well, that’s rude of them. We need them here for our harvest. How else are we going to fill up the supermarkets across the USA without them?”

“That’s what I said. But they need us, too. I promised them to take a second look and to prove to me it’ll be a peaceful life out there without the virus. They promised we could mine the stars and return as millionaires practically. I said if they showed me, I would return to earth and bring the rest of the essential workers with me for a better life. I owe it to them to see it for myself and then spread the good news. There’s relief out there, miss and we could migrate out there, all of us. They promised they would prove it to me by showing it to me. Of course, they also told me not to talk to anyone about it, that it must remain a secret for now.”

“I get it,” she said. “Typical of them! They want you to believe this fantasy they drew up for you.”

“Not a fantasy!” Paco insisted. “They showed me pictures of happy workers from all over the galaxy making a good living out there. It’s a New World for essential workers.”

“Sure! They want you to think you’ll have better working conditions, fair wages, and access to alien chicks in their version of space. But come on.” This is where she exposed her shoulders to him again. “Will their bodies look like this? This is what the modern male of the homo

sapiens species responds to, don't deny it. I bet their females look like green ferrets. Are you going to mate with that? And what would your half-ferret children look like? Once you get there, you'll find out that they've lied to you about working conditions all along. You'll practically be a slave to them and when they work you to death, you won't have a body left. You'll wear yourself out and they'll throw your body out into the stars to become dust. You think you're the first they ever abducted. I bet there's thousands or millions. Why do you think the workers never come home to deliver the good news? Wouldn't that be deliverance?"

"They're happy there, that's why. But they didn't show me pictures of the ladies in space, that is true."

"See what I mean, Paco? And I bet they have sex-negative attitudes like my parents. Who needs to listen to them?"

"Look, I see my father getting burnt in the sunshine all day long," said Paco. "It's not like we're not living in some modern version of slavery."

"OK, once again," she exposed herself again. "Let's start from the top, I'm woman, you are man."

"That's enough! You're very pretty, miss, but it don't matter right now!" Said Paco. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life working my butt off so that people like you can rest safely during a pandemic watching Netflix all day. We still have to finish the harvest, and half our workers are infected, and some of them have died already like my stepmother who will probably die tonight."

"Thoughts and prayers, of course," she said.

"See? Keep your thoughts and prayers! We need change now."

"Yes, change sounds like a good thing," she said. "But I'm miserable right now without your touch, Paco." She climbed on top of him with all the force of her body.

"Stop! Stop!" He shouted. "All you people have to do is offer better wages and benefits."

"I'll show you what I'm authorized to offer you, you essential little worker!"

Then that's when it happened. He couldn't just call it his "first time." It became his second, then third, then fourth time, as if she'd been the special agent of the FBI who gave herself to him with all the power bestowed upon her by the United States government. It was a plan to keep the essential boys here functioning for lonely women like herself who felt abandoned during quarantine.

It was almost dawn when he woke up. She lay next to him, covered up by the sheets which never felt quite this smooth, or smelled quite this sweet. Her hand rested on his chest as if claiming him, possessing him. He got up practically in slow motion and followed the gentle chirping of the birds outside. He put on his socks slowly, then his underwear and pants and finally his shirt. He was ready to open the window. Just as he thought, it was there waiting for him. When the hornet opened its wings, a sweet magical turquoise glow emitted into the world as if eager to disseminate the colors of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The hornet wore her mantle as it gently fluttered its wings.

The eyes still cooed and led him forward into Guadalupe's fold of eternity. We have not seen him here on earth since.

Today, I have been designated an essential worker, too. My hands perform the same magic, of lifting the cabbages from the earth and throwing them on a basket. This is holy work. The land feeds the people, but only some of the people get this type of contact with mother earth. That is a form of privilege, I have learned. I don't get paid much for it, of course, but the Mexican family that adopted me treat me as one of their own. They tell me I was blessed, that I'm a special child and I'm tempted to believe it, though I'm now becoming a man, too, like my missing father and questioning the world in which we live in the same conditions as my father did. Ernesto died shortly after his wife did, as did my uncles and aunts. My mother died as well and gave birth even as her body got wrecked by the virus. I managed to survive it. The mayor, my other grandfather, refused to adopt me, but he allowed for a Go Fund Me campaign that has raised money for my future education. It's mostly other workers contributing, but the mayor's wife came to see me once and said she would also add some funds to my campaign through a third party.

"I just needed to see up close what my daughter's half illegal baby looked like," she said. "My husband told me to wave to you from a distance, but I needed to have one closer look 'cause I was curious how much you looked like her. You could almost pass for white, boy. Congratulations."

She called herself "grandma," but said to forget her name and her family because bi-racial children were forbidden in her family and in her very exclusive religion. Thanks to this fund, and anonymous contributors like Grandma's, I will get to attend college where my mother once enrolled.

"We lost her just as we were about to get the vaccine," Grandma said. "And someone on the internet told her pregnant women shouldn't get it anyway. But at least she gave birth to you before she passed away, and that's a blessing of some kind, though we could never treat you as an equal. You'll get an education at least. Make good moral choices in life, as the Lord would have wanted."

"Yes, ma'm."

Today, I look up into the skies and I know that Paco's out there working in that world of paradise that the aliens promised him. Yet, was my mother right? Were the aliens using up his labor as if he were just another slave in the galaxy? Will he return one day to earth to let us know what work conditions are really like up there? We all await his return like the Aztecs awaited the return of Quetzalcoatl. I firmly believe Quetzalcoatl will return as will my father. As will Guadalupe.

My adoptive parents migrate during the harvest and the rest of the year we live near the border in Mexico. They call me "el güerito" as a nick name. I don't mind. It just means the fair-skinned one. We are working through the latest pandemic, COVID- 101. We are the essential workers and we know that we serve a purpose in the scheme of things. Our services are appreciated by super market shoppers all across this land even if the government will never make us legal because legal folks complain about us and make a ruckus. They end up electing some angry old man to wag his finger at us. We're always at the bottom of the totem pole but we get declared

“essential” when the dominant people need to eat, which is just about every day except for their bulimic children who throw up their food to look thinner.

At night, I still stare at the vastness of the sky and wonder when he might return. Something waits for me up there and it could be him, my father, eager to reveal the secrets of the vast universe, the galaxy of ancient gods and goddesses. The drones have not been seen recently, but they will return dressed in the colors of *vespa mandarinia* and we will dream again of the magic within us.