DAVID

David was the oldest of 13 children. He had none of his own. He could be very funny and very crude and even mean, but in the end he was an awkward truthteller. That is he lied and exaggerated no more than the rest of us, but he knew what was real even when it embarrassed him.

He was Mexican, or Mexican-American or American-Mexican. A big guy—he said 250 pounds, but I never believed it until the day I did. He was left-handed. These last two facts were important to one morning.

I had been painting white apartments white for about five years. I was about 59. David was maybe in his mid-40s. He bossed the garden crew at the apartments where we worked in Napa, California. I was third man on the maintenance crew with two older white guys who knew way more than I did.

We all took breaks together, celebrated birthdays and sometimes went out to lunch together. The two Ladies were with us too, also Mexican, rounded bodies, smooth skin, quick to smile at the idiocy of management and very good reliable workers. They cleaned the mirrors and sinks and toilets and windows after I repainted vacated apartment and we had fixed up bathtubs, sinks, toilets, floors, windows and doors.

David´s crew took care of the grounds, cutting grass, trimming trees, watering, and planting new stuff. It was a big place in, 128 units

David was a center of it all, full of loud foul and funny stories during our 10 a.m. breaks. I bought the donuts when I started. I had wheedled my way into the job after 13 years of reading state tax law in a corporation and then two years of making serious outdoor hats in my girlfriend´s garage

David´s crew was all Mexican, mostly young guys. Some stayed for years others moved on quickly. He took pretty good care of them as much as he could. When Antonio´s social security card came up as false after a few years, there wasn´t much he could do. The kid had just knocked up his girlfriend too. Somehow he managed to stay in town working under the table. The Ladies knew what he was doing and helped some when the baby came.

About that time Oscar brought his big family up from Guanajuato and the crew resolidified. Oscar was about 50 with 10 kids. The whole family knew it was too many. One of middle sons who joined the crew said. “Our family has too many kids. We know it. What can we do?” He was the one that told us why Oscar brought them all north. The family had gotten into a fight with an even bigger clan, and it got too dangerous to stay.

David was clear on this too. “There´s no police down there,” he said. “Not unless it´s your cousin or you have paid them.” His family relied on inside contacts. “If one of us broke down on the road, we call my uncle, the policeman, right away so he gets there first. You can lose everything. That´s why we´re here. It´s safer.”

Oscar knew I was kind of a fake maintenance man. We were older than the others. He was expert at cutting branches into pieces that fit perfectly into a small space, and he could wrangle reluctant hoses into ultra neat coils. “Listo, Jeffrey,” he always said. “Ready?” when some vague new task should be starting. He was always ready for whatever came next even if it was just waiting around or doing almost nothing at all. He always seemed occupied.

David married an Australian woman. He had a long hilarious story about cooking a Thanksgiving dinner for his visiting mother and father-in-law. I think he tried to deep fry the turkey. The kitchen blew up. There was a small fire. The sink clogged. “It´s like this,” he told the Aussies. “It´s tricky.”

The crew were not always gentlemen. They would cat call and make animal noises sometimes when girls in shorts walked by across the street or tried to sunbath. There wasn´t much of this kind of traffic, however. David was oddly very good at animal noises. He could do pigs and cattle and horses and donkeys. He especially good at mules. I asked him about it.

“Yeah, it was my first sex. They are great. You should try it. They sound like this when you are in,” and he did the mule noise again.

Was he joking? Was it just a gross-out story he loved to tell gringos? I couldn´t tell. But something in his face told me it was true and dared me to be disgusted. There was some shame too, a little bit of fear he pushed aside. But I had asked, and he wasn´t going to make it pretty or false for me.

I felt better about him watching those emotions flash across his face. It was hard but true. He was tough enough to know who we was then and who he had been.

Hell, I washed dishes a posh restaurant in Boulder with a weird little old guy from Wyoming who said it was best to put the sheep´s back legs inside your boots so they didn´t move around much. Was he telling the truth? I couldn´t see how else he was ever going to get sex. What kind of story was it? Nobody was sure.

David kind of liked the other maintenance guys, Roger and Mick. They had their own stories. Roger was a good looking guy, smart—he rekeyed locks and even reset big gas mains once. He was our Jude, always picking the wrong woman, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Always got caught out. He had been a San Francisco rookie cop when he pulled over a drunk who had a loaded handgun under the seat. Turned out the guy was head of the Board of Supervisors, his public persona was the far-liberal city sophisticate who condemned no one.

Roger´s sergeant gave him a choice. Change his report or turn in his uniform. He had been in maintenance ever since.

Mick was a natural craftsman. We lots of time together in the crawl space under apartments. I watched him take a quick measurement and cut a six-inch plastic waste pipe that perfectly linked sewer and toilet. I always had goofy bent connections after many careful measuring. He made hobby horses. He was a better painter than I. He could trouble shoot electrics. He had five kids and chubby wife. One of the kids had disappeared himself forever.

Mick had every reason to hate me, but he could only manage it part time. We got paid the same. We both knew it was unfair. I was hired by the clueless bustling manager who liked that I had worked for a builder. She didn´t notice that I lasted only three weeks. I was too old and didn´t really know shit.

I earned $15 an hour, the same as I had in the corporate world, and the same as Mick. We started with full health insurance that got tempered by copays later. The big difference was vacation. A week the first year and then one day each year added. I had 40 days of paid time off at the corporation, and we played basketball at lunch.

After five years, maybe I had an attitude. I had spent a lifetime trying to stay employed, 10 years at two universities with one degree, two years in the Army, perfect attendance at the corporation one year. It had been shutting down the last seven years I was there.

One day I am painting a white apartament white for the umpteenth time. David comes by to rake out the small patio units came with. He slides the glass patio door open to plug in his boombox which were allowed. It is the loud Mexican Rancho shit, which I usually like, lots of yells and hoots, and yes some animal sounds. Is is best in small chunks with tequila.

But not this morning. I unplug his boombox.and slide the door closed.

“What´s the matter you don´t like my music?” David asks pissed off.

“Not today. Not loud. Not this shit.”

He slide the door open and goes to replug the box. I stand in the way.

OK, there is going to be trouble. I am half ready for it. I am a head taller but 10 or 15 years older and, if he is to be believed, 65 pounds lighter.

The son of bitch hits me in the nose with his Left Hand. Left Hand? That can´t be right I am thinking as the blood flows. I never paid that kind of attention to David. So, wrestle a boxer, box a wrestler. I go for his legs and get my arms around them. They are fucking tree trunks. He likely does weigh 250.

He tries to widen his leg base, but I am already pushing and pulling them back and forth and it is TIMBER as he goes down like a sack of cement. He is surprised lying next to me on the floor. I go to smash his face with my right fist used as a hammer, but he is very quick for a big man and dodges it.

We scramble to get up separately and do. He gets arms around my waist. I have a shot to knee him in the face, but can´t quite get the leg swing going with his grip. I am too old and have lost my breath. “David,” I say. “Stop.” And we do. I am bleeding still, but it is over. I get a rag from somewhere. He stalks off.

I am sure he is thinking he will be fired because I will tell the boss he punched me and have the blood to prove it. I imagine he is thinking what to tell his wife and how he can find another job where he is boss and that pays as much as his 10 years of raises.

I´m not going to say shit. Hell, I probably deserved it. David and I are partners in crime sort of. Management knows nothing. That´s the way it goes. David must be relieved. He says nothing. Nor do I. Turns out I am the first one fired.

I call in sick the day before a vacation to England. I am terminated on my return for running sick time and vacation together or some such bullshit.

OK,sure, I had been written up once a few months earlier for reading the newspaper in a bathtub I was re-chaulking.

My partner knows something is up when I meet her at the airport on her return from the UK. “Fired?” she asks, knowing the answer. It was the third time since corporate days. She has lost a few jobs herself. What a woman.

I get another job in two weeks, a much better one as it turned out with a low-income housing project run by a church. My new boss is a very competent huge black woman, Sarah, who is actually glad to have me. With my experience I am the top guy on a crew for three separate complexes. No more fucking painting, a commute 10 miles shorter, the same pay, much more vacation, and they even supply work boots along with pants and shirts. At Christmas there is a company-paid casino party on a ferry boat cruising around San Francisco Bay.

A few months later I am driving through the Sonoma, the town where David lives, surrounded by undocumented Mexicans. I spot him, get out of the car, and give him a big hug. “Ever since I got fired, my life has gotten better,“ I tell him. He returns a big abrazos and laughs.

“I got your job,” he says, the third maintenance man. “It didn´t work out though. I´m back on the garden crew.” It might have been installing air-conditioners that did him in, I am thinking. But who cares he will tell Roger and Mick and Oscar he saw me. Maybe they will rethink the shit vacation they get. Maybe not.