

Dead Man's Pockets

by Miguel Lasala

I was playing Gin Rummy with Tonio when the maid ran into the rancho kitchen. She'd just seen a man's severed head on the side of the road, fifty yards from the bridge.

"We must call the police at once," Tonio said as he stood up, "but first, let's go have a look."

I stopped in my tracks when the stench was detectable, but Tonio just held his nose and walked right up to it. With his free hand, he grabbed a stick off the ground then rolled the head over to get a look at the face. He waved for me to join him.

The face we found was badly bludgeoned and both eyes were swollen shut. Through the open mouth, part of the lifeless grey tongue was sticking out.

"I know this man," Tonio said while still pinching his nose, "and he owes me a lot of money."

That's when we heard a scream from further down the road. Soon an old man came running toward us.

"Hey, Victor, you old card shark, you're going to have a heart attack running like that. Stop here and tell us what happened."

But Victor kept his feet clomping heavily in his uneven stride. With his breath strained, he passed us without explanation.

Tonio and I looked at each other.

"I guess he found the rest of him down there."

"Let's call the police," I said.

"Good idea."

But we did not make the call. Instead, we continued on as I felt a sudden surge of dizzying anticipation and my stomach suddenly tightened at the thought of the headless body. I wanted to turn around, but was unable. Finally, I slowed my pace just as Tonio spotted an arm lying in the road up ahead. When he reached it, he poked at it with his stick.

"Don't touch anything," I said. "Let's go to the next house and ask to use a phone."

"Okay, but let's go this way."

We kept walking in the same direction as before, and now the mid-morning heat was growing more intense where the shadows from the trees didn't quite cover the sandy road. Around the next turn we found a small crowd gathering, and finally, at the sight of the mangled and headless body, Tonio couldn't contain himself. He pushed through the crowd, dropped to his knees, and started digging into the dead man's pockets.

"Don't look at me like that," Tonio said, looking up at the crowd, "this man owes me money."

A few protested.

"Stop messing around with the body, you crazy fool!"

Empty handed, Tonio stood up and reached for a thin man standing next to him. He dug into the man's pockets, but there was nothing there either. When the man got free from Tonio's grasp, he fell to the ground after losing his balance. At that, a rush of excitement erupted, and a woman with a red scarf picked up the stick that Tonio had dropped at his feet, and whacked him on the head.

"Hey, I'm a victim here," Tonio said. "You people are crazy. I'm going to go and call the police. They'll find the money and give it to me after I explain everything."

"You can't fool us," the woman with the red scarf said as she waved the stick in Tonio's face. "You and your friend back there must have killed this man last night by running him over with a truck. Then you cut him up with a machete because he owed you so much money. Isn't that right?"

Tonio didn't bother answering her. He just broke out running, just like Victor had done, only much faster.

