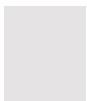
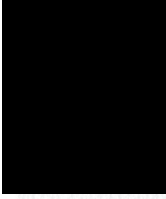


IGNACIO LOPEZ



Ignacio Lopez is a University of Pittsburgh undergraduate majoring in Studio Arts and Fiction Writing. He experiments with empathy and psychology in his writing to bring the reader closer to his characters to contrast the 'quick glance' generation of iPhone and laptop users. In his art, he mostly does large scale black and white pencil work of people, stores, cars, and anything that challenges him.

BEEHIVE

We had finished picking spring's potatoes, and Julio and I were out of a job for the season. The farmer paid us in the shed with cash because he didn't want any witnesses. Other farmers were telling on each other for hiring our kind. We looked for ads in the newspapers that had little to say, they didn't ask much at interviews and we got the game.

Hire me, I work, you pay me.

There was this one ad with a cartoon bee on it and a phone number. "Bee"? I asked Julio. *Si, "abeja."* Canning would have been nice but I was sure they did that in factories where they'd ask plenty of questions. Julio called either way, *what do we have to lose?* He answered in his nice thick English accent and shot me a sly smile: Don Juan asking about bees. He listened to someone on the other end, and with a curious glance hung up.

We do an interview and we get the job, he said.

Okay, what is it? I asked.

Are you allergic to bee stings?

The day was sunny and sweet. Julio and I were on the 71A to a bum town outside of Idaho. This was a normal routine for us in between seasons, long rides on buses with stares from sleepy travelers. It reminded me of Mexico, when I took my family to the market on Sundays. My daughter would fall asleep on my lap after a long bus ride home. Now it was just Julio and me. We could see the farm lands turn into meadows 'til finally we reached Bethal Road. We walked down Bethal and saw an old white house, like a cloud that had fallen from the sky with its seams undone. A sign reading *Uncle Earl's Beehive Emporium* stood in front of us as we crossed the lawn to the house. We headed straight for the front door and were welcomed by a strange little white man before we could even ring the bell. He squinted through his thick foggy glasses that made him look a bit *retardado*. When he realized why we were there, he finally spoke.

You here for the job? he said in a scratchy voice.

We nodded.

This isn't Rodney's Ranch, you understand, I don't pay for extra work and don't expect you to do any. Got it?

We nodded again.

You're hired.

We looked at each other, thinking this was too good to be true: no papers, no interviews. The Little Guy showed us around the house and to the back, into a large wooden shed where glass tanks stood with amber liquid shining in them.

This here's the honey mine, it's all the honey we collect for the season 'til they migrate out of here. I know it's not much, but you can't just squeeze everything out of the poor little suckers, they need some themselves.

He showed us back outside to where, at a distance, we could see little white cabinets scattered in a field. Before we left the honey mine, he stopped us and said,

You're going to need one of these.

He strapped on a large hat with a net over its brim and a white track suit.

I hope it's not a problem. It's a requirement for the job.

Before I could laugh, Julio hit me in the ribs.

It's good, Julio said and gave me nudge to agree with him.

The noise outside was incredibly loud and static. We walked to the nearest beehive cabinet in the fields, where bees were clamoring in and out of their hive. Then the Little Guy opened a shelf in one of its sides and pulled out a rack of honey combs.

This is it, what you'll be doing. You just use this here smoke pump to calm them and get the rack inside and drain it of honey. But be careful,

they know what's up. They don't like anyone going near their queen, am I right, boys?


I nodded, again going along with Julio.

After the first week and twelve bee stings, I had a dream of bees. Of people living in those white bee stacks, in their little golden hexagonal apartments. I thought I saw my wife, all dressed up at the entrance of one. Then a large haze came over me and woke me up. Julio's little girl stared at me, her little princess skirt chafing with the sound of bee wings.

Time to wake, Señor Vargas, she said and tapped my forehead with a plastic wand. Julio came in and told her not to disturb me.

Leave our guest alone, hija. I smiled at her.

My own daughter, María, would be around her age. She was with her mother in Mexico City, and both were praying I wouldn't be forced back via a federal jet plane and handcuffed. She would send letters to Julio's wife, the only legal resident in Julio's house, on how much my daughter missed me. How my wife missed me. About her problems, and toys she bought her, the neighbors, who's in prison, who jumped the border. I needed to read this. There were codes and other clues travelers told me to look for in letters. It wasn't good if your wife said she was doing, "fine," "okay," "all right." If there were only a few sentences, and only about the kids. All this came to read simply: I'm whoring or selling drugs. I planned on sending her a letter along with my pay via Western Union at the end of July. I'd ask her to buy María a princess costume and to send me a picture of her.



"After the first week and twelve bee stings, I had a dream of bees."

Halfway through the season, Julio and I noticed a few more of our kind on the bus. We asked where they were headed and they told us they were going out the same way, a few miles away from Bethal Road to Rodney's Ranch, which had beehives and other work. They had already been hired. We kept our chatting to a minimum, sharing our experiences with each other but never about work. We swam in gasoline in that bus – if anyone was dumb enough to ask about our jobs, or theirs,

they'd be throwing a match into the pool. You didn't ask about another man's current job, not when they were so close by; and not when they were your competition. You could end up in a very twisted game. Once

July was over we could be buddies, all of us looking for job.

"You could go the straight and narrow to make some slow cash or you could take the fast route."

A week later we came to work to find the little man crying in the shed, all the beehive cabinets smashed except for two. He held a matchbox with injured queens and some dead

ones. *El Ranchero*, he said, then screamed it at us. Julio and I faked our empathy. In Mexico we'd have already been killed. After clearing and fixing what we could, the little man took us inside the shed and asked us what we would do to make some extra pay. If we would do bad things. There had always been a choice for our type. You could go the straight and narrow to make some slow cash or you could take the fast route. I had been offered it before through sex and drugs. But I had a family, and so did Julio. Both routes would take us to jail, we'd seen it happen before. But without a job or cash my *princesa* wouldn't eat. The workers at the ranch knew this the first day we met on the bus. They saw food coming out of their families' mouths and into our own.

The next day we were all on the bus. All of us. The other Mexicans wouldn't look at us, everybody was too ashamed. I wondered which one was missing, whose friend was gone and halfway to Texas with a wad of cash *El Ranchero* had given him. Was it similar to the deal the Little Guy had cut with me? Julio couldn't believe it when he translated the plan to me, but promised me that his cousin could take me up in Wisconsin. I would have to start over, yes, but with eight grand in U.S. dollars my family would eat well for a year.

Vargas, come here.

The Little Guy took me aside and into the honey shed.

There are a few supplies here for you and a cot for the night. I'll drive you back to the city and pay you then, in the morning. Clear?

He put his hand on my shoulder as I studied the equipment. *Sí, señor.*

Good. It isn't easy to do this but I play fire with fire, I don't bullshit. I'm sure you boys don't either.

He left me inside with a canister of gasoline and a hatchet, a revolver between the cot and honey tanks. I had no real clue on how I would pull it off. I only had a few translated directions and one clear goal from the Little Guy: “*Burn.*” Julio wouldn’t talk to me the rest of the day. He knew he wouldn’t be seeing me anymore. Even if he could, he wouldn’t want to.

That night, after Julio left and the old man went to bed, I got ready. I walked in the dark trying not to trip over irrigation ditches ’til I finally saw the place. The property was surrounded by a fence of cattle wire and had to be twice as big as the Emporium. The lights shining inside didn’t show much, but there were people still up and awake. They were probably waiting for this. I went around the back, behind a barn and to the barely lit beehive field. I decided to pour the gasoline on the beehives and hoped not to wake them, my revolver ready in hand in case *El Ranchero* saw me.

As I lit a match, in between cabinets of quiet, sleeping bees, I saw my hand shake. The match struck along its box but fell below me, near the canister. *Mierda*, I breathed. I lit another and threw it on the hive and ran. In an instant the aura of fire engulfed me. It was quiet and beautiful ’til the buzz of startled bees became more pronounced. The crackle of wood burning and bees buzzing for help followed me as I ran past the house of *El Ranchero*. A pair of floodlights came on and caught me in their gaze. A man appeared on the porch with a gun. As I was pulling mine out I saw a little girl at the window, her silhouette causing me to pause. So young and unafraid. A bullet hit near my feet, and I picked up my pace into the darkness of the night. I ran quick, tripping once in a ditch and spraining my ankle. Getting back up, I turned around and saw the glow of the fire. My fire.

I laid on the cot unable to move, a bottle of old aspirin from the beehive suit trunk my only medicine. I waited for the day to come and was surprised when no sirens or police drove by the house. For a time I

passed out due to the pain and exhaustion, but in the cold break of day the Little Guy kicked my bed to awaken me.

Well done, my friend.

He helped me up from the cot and noticed my leg. He asked if I had gotten attacked.

No, señor.

He helped me inside and gave me a pack of ice and some medicine. The envelope of cash he gave me felt light. With eight grand, for what I had done, I should have been content. The envelope should have gleamed like silver dew on a leaf. It should have been more to me. Tears began to well up in my eyes.

This was the most money I had ever had in my life. It felt worthless.

