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## UN BUEN OBRERO: A SHORT STORY\*

by Jose Yglesias

El Isleño drove the truck for *El Bien Publico* when I first started to work there. It was my first job. I was to help him deliver groceries and for working every afternoon and all day Saturday I was to get two and a half dollars a week. *El Bien Publico* was a cooperative grocery store and meat market. About thirty cigarmakers owned it collectively and took turns working as salesmen and at the cash register. Since it did not open until the afternoon on week days the system worked well. However, there was nothing impersonal about it. It was not a business concern. Everyone seemed to have a hand in everything; when the wives of members came to shop they moved about as if they were in a well-stocked kitchen of their own. That last bothered me. I was in high school and had absorbed some of the American mores. Ybor City, that section of Tampa where the Spaniards and Italians who worked in the cigar factories lived, made me impatient when it did not make me feel ashamed. It was an anomaly, an island of Latins in the South.

El Isleño was a member of the store but he got paid for his work as driver because he did it regularly. He was a large dark man and he moved slowly. I liked him a lot but I was also a little contemptuous of his ways. I certainly would not have wanted to meet any of my high school friends when I was with him. He could not speak English, and he seemed a little dirty to me. My high school friends, all of whom belonged to the part of Tampa that was not Ybor City, would not have said it but they would have thought him greasy. Perhaps they would have thought him peculiar. Since I was Spanish I always suspected that their lighthearted talk about Latins hid a contempt from which I just barely escaped. But then no one, I think, liked El Isleño very much.

He was called El Isleño because he came from the Canary Isles, and his temperament was not like that of other Spaniards. He seemed a sullen man. He, too, seemed ashamed of something. With me he was frank and even talkative, and I sometimes felt that I was his confidant. He never talked about his family in the store, and he never went by his home when I was with him. Yet once he volunteered, "My boy is sick."

"What's wrong with him?" I asked, remembering the five-year-old boy who came with him once to the store.

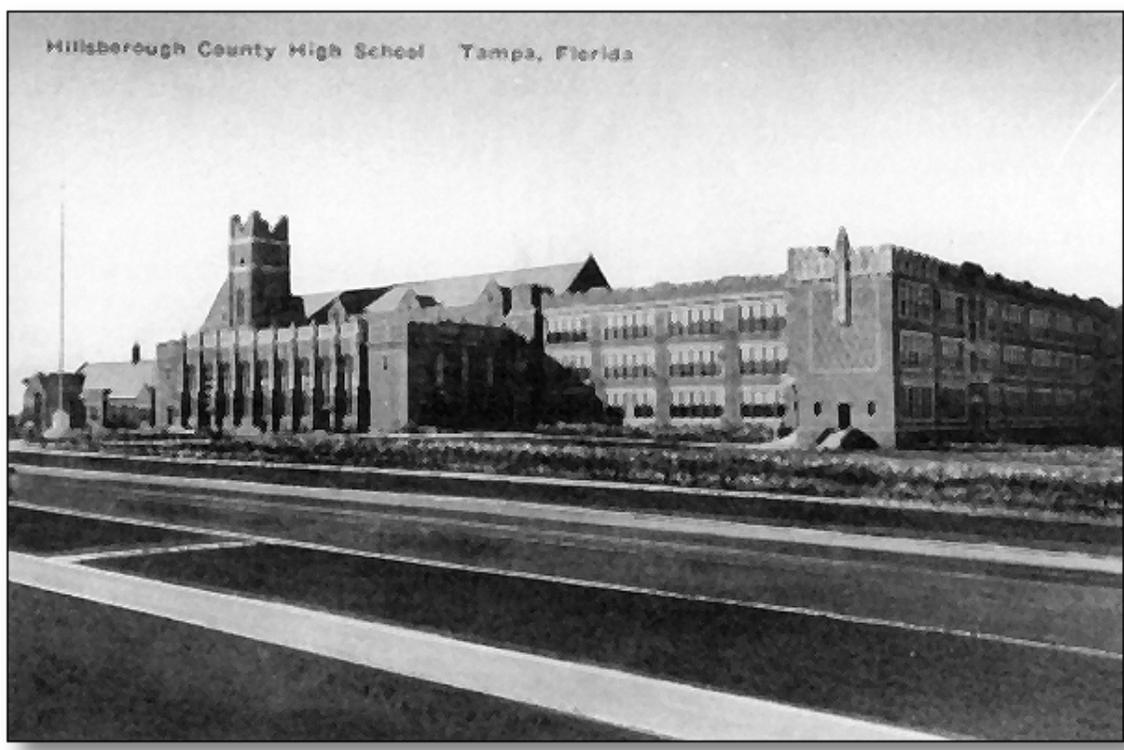
"Hemophilia."

I had seen a glamorous movie about a noble Russian family, and I was lost in wonder that in Ybor City one could find diseases of the great.

"The kings left us ignorance and poverty and disease," he said. "It keeps us weak."

He was always kind. He never was one who would ask me to do little errands that kept me on the run. Though the other members liked my industriousness they put my good intentions to a great test: perhaps it was thoughtlessness but there were a thousand little things that they did not hesitate to ask me to do because I always seemed so willing.

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**Hillsborough High School as it looked when Yglesias attended it in the 1930s.**

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

El Isleño would stop them. “He is my assistant and he isn’t going to run around doing what you fat asses can easily do.” Then when we were out in the truck he would say, “Don’t let them order you around. They don’t pay you enough. All day long they kowtow to the foremen and then they come here and want to play boss.” El Isleño did not like them much either.

I liked him, you see, because he said the things that I felt but could not say if I were to be polite as my mother had taught me, or successful in the manner that school, with the essays of Elbert Hubbard, had also instructed me. With El Isleño I felt a freedom that I had never felt with anyone. At home, how could I be free? I was too close to it to see anything but the contrast to the American life that my friends in school lived naturally. At school I always felt that I was different in a shameful way. It was true, I reflected, though I never said it, that I was beginning to think in English. But my name was always going to be undeniably Spanish. I wanted to be Spanish, but I didn’t want to be Ybor Cityish. And so I seemed always held in. but El Isleño was critical of both and so relieved me of my guilt concerning these ways of life that pulled me in what I thought were opposite directions. There was always home to go to after work and school the next day, but while we were in the delivery truck we were on ground.

El Isleño treated me as an equal because he let me argue with him. It was not the equality of the simple-minded who is older only in body, nor yet the conscious levelling of natural differences

that the well-meaning educated attempt with the young. He taunted me and ridiculed my opinions, but he took me seriously, for he wanted to teach me things. And he respected my intelligence: he knew I was a bright student in school and all Spaniards in Ybor City respect that.

He taught me how to drive the truck, and he walked me home the first time I got drunk. It was with him that I first began to feel like a man. To be a man in Ybor City meant for most that one had finally visited a whorehouse and could then join in the conversations of the men at the cafes and street corners.

One Saturday noon we were so busy that we were still out with the truck long past the time that we should have gone home for lunch. We passed a brewery and El Isleño asked me if I wanted some beer. We were both thirsty, and since the store bought beer from that particular brewery, we could go in any time and drink beer from the big, cooled barrels they kept for thirsty wholesale customers. We drank two large glasses and went back to the truck.

The bright hot sun seemed to dim and light up as we drove back. I looked at the people and the narrow, short streets of Ybor City, and I seemed not to recognize either. The streets seemed very long, the afternoon strange, and I could not remember what I was doing in the truck. I looked at El Isleño, and I felt very giddy, seeing him stolid and heavy at the wheel. I was glad I was not driving, and I kept quiet so that he would not know that two glasses of beer had so unsteadied me. The long journey ended abruptly. He let me off home instead of taking me to the store.

"I'll come by," he said, "to pick you up after I have lunch." I stood grinning at him until he drove away. Inside there were sandwiches my mother left for me. I ran to the bedroom to see how I looked in the mirror when I was drunk. My face was a little flushed and I laughed at the sight. Then I walked back to the kitchen very soberly, the thought that El Isleño might have noticed my face bracing me up a bit.

"What happened?" I asked, a little startled when he shook me as I lay on the porch swing. "What is it?" I looked at the clock on the factory tower two blocks away. I had slept three hours.

"You were asleep," he said, "I guess that the work and the beer helped." He had come to get me, but seeing me asleep he had worked all afternoon by himself.

"You should have awakened me!"

"That's all right. You had worked enough. I felt better after I had lunch myself. I didn't want to tell you, but the beer made me feel very strange. It gave me a kind of fatigue. That's why I drove so slowly."

That day we worked very well together. On Saturdays the store was open until midnight, and every time we were out with the truck El Isleño talked and argued with me. That evening he told me that he had known my father. "There were very few people in Tampa who remembered him. Once in a while a visitor who had known my family for a long time mentioned him. That would happen when I was called in to be exhibited to them. I was very tall for my age and I would stand awkwardly and listen to their comments about me.



**Jose Yglesias in high school at the time he worked delivering groceries.**

“He doesn’t look like Julian,” they would say, then add as if to remind me of someone I must not forget, “He was a good young man.” El Isleño said something else, “*El era un buen obrero.*” That meant not just that he was a good worker but that he was a union man. The “good” referred to his relationship with workers as a group.

Always before when I had been reminded of my father by other people it had been a sad thing, and although he said it with solemnity, there was something of grandeur in El Isleño’s tone.

The others reminded me that I had been left fatherless when I was three, that I had a great debt to pay my mother, and that when my father had left Ybor City to go to hospitals in Cuba there had been collections in the factories to pay his passage and expenses. That we had to accept charity was what their remembrance of my father meant to me. El Isleño made me feel proud of my father, and for the first time I was able to see him as a man, not as a wound or pitiful thing I carried in me.

“In those days,” El Isleño told me, “the cigarmakers were no so Americanized. In those days the manufacturers had respect for us. Now look at them. Look how glad they are to have San Martin, who is a foreman, in the cooperative.”

“But my uncle is a foreman, and he’s a good man. He’s very friendly and he doesn’t act like San Martin.

“Ha!” he exhaled ironically, “that is what you think because he is your uncle. He’s just as arrogant as the others. Don’t think he doesn’t like adulation, he is just as puffed up at the factory as the manufacturers.”

“That’s not true. It’s only the Italians who flatter him, but he doesn’t like it. They used to leave chickens on his porch because they thought that would help them keep their jobs but he stopped them.”

I was surprised by El Isleño. No one had ever said a bad thing about my uncle, and I had always felt proud that he was a foreman in a factory with the power to hire and fire cigarmakers. If I believed El Isleño, I could no longer feel good that he was a foreman, and, therefore, important in Ybor City. I would lose importance in my own eyes if I lost such belief. One knows a lot about vanity when one is young.

“All right, all right, he is better than the others,” El Isleño conceded. But he made me see the difference in behavior that existed among the cigarmakers in Ybor City. A foreman was always treated with friendliness wherever he went. The rough jibes that Spaniards cast at each other were never aimed at the two or three that came to *El Bien Publico*. When they came to the store they and their families, even their children, were never treated matter-of-factly. A stranger would not have noticed the difference, just as I, who had not known the life in the factories, was unaware of the subtle humiliation that was involved until El Isleño began to point out specific instances.

Why did no one say anything to Segunda when she walked through the store sampling vegetables and fruit? She was a greedy woman who covered her miserliness with banter and good humor. Before she arrived at the cash register with her purchases she usually had eaten a tomato, an apple, a banana; but that was never included in the bill she signed. Her husband was president of the cooperative but he did not really owe the dignified aura surrounding him to his position, nor to his dyspeptic manner. His brother had until about two years before been in general charge of one of the cigar factories. The brother was dead but an air of privilege still lingered about his family, and so Segunda could exercise her appetite with impunity.

When I was not out with the truck I helped the women with their groceries, weighed their purchases and carried their bags up to the desk where the cash register and adding machine were. Segunda liked to have me along with her when she came to buy. She knew my family and she always made me tell her about them while she devoured the green peppers and plums.

In Ybor City one was taught when very young to ask about the health and well-being of the family of whomever one met, and every encounter was ended by each asking the other to be remembered to their respective families. This was a fine point in good behavior, and with this solicitude Segunda hid her scavenging while I helped her shop. Besides, young people were not to correct adults. She felt safe with me. I told El Isleño about her and he simply nodded his head: he did not insist when he saw I was learning his lessons.

That Saturday night Segunda and I made our little tour of the store, she eating and asking me questions and complimenting me, I being weighed down with bags. There were a lot of people in

the store Saturday nights and she was safer from detection than at other times. It seemed to me that she looked at the potatoes longingly and was a little resentful that they could not be eaten there.

When we arrived at the desk, she had eaten more than usual. Her husband was on duty at the register that night, and he began to add up the items on a machine. The procedure was to get the slip signed by the purchasing member for totalling later into a weekly bill. Segunda's husband was a very meticulous man. He always paused after he had punched each separate item and asked, "What else?"

"Two pears," I said when he repeated the ritual for his wife. Segunda's perpetual grin vanished.

"But they were samples!" she expostulated when her husband shifted his questioning stare from me to her.

"Did you eat them?" he asked. She grimaced, and he punched the adding machine.

"One apple," I said again before he totalled the list. He punched the machine again.

"Two plums," I told him, a little clearer-voiced this time. Segunda hurrumphed as the machine figured them in.

"What else?" This time her husband looked at me. Several other members were also looking and I was too excited to remember the banana with which she had begun.

"Come," El Isleño said to me loudly. "We have four boxes to deliver." He had been standing by, and I realized in that brief moment, when the aftermath of what I had planned was on me and I was lost as to what to do next, that I had done this because of him and for him. And that he was coming to my rescue. It was if he were saying: you have done well, let me take over now.

We loaded the boxes of groceries in the truck quickly and in silence, but as soon as we drove away he smiled widely at me as I had never seen him smile before. Like a proud father. "They may fill your head with poison about Henry Ford at school," he said, "but you are going to be a good worker."