

The Suerte de Mendigos Job
A Manny Williams Adenture
By Brett Beyer

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Ten years after the zombie apocalypse, the world is trying to put itself back together. The dead have been mourned, cities were burned and order was restored after a fashion. Store owners put their open signs up, the freeways opened back up, and the government began its processes all over again, despite everyone's best efforts. The world feels as if it has just survived a war. Some things have changed, however. A lot of technology failed, the world's economies crashed. No one quite feels safe on the streets, and the undead can still be found, straggling out from the wilderness or the slums of Manhattan, ready to begin anew the plague that threatened to finish humanity on the face of the earth. To answer the call, a new career path was opened to the soldiers who survived the apocalypse. They are classified under Zombie Exterminators but the world calls them Horsemen.

The Suerte de Mendigos Job

This is an audio transcription from the recording device of Manny Williams, found just outside of the city of Suerte de Mendigos in the burnt, bullet ridden remains of a long-distance bus due into Corpus Christi September 25th. Neither passenger nor driver were found on or around the premises of the bus. There was evidence of the jack-knifed truck, but it had long since been removed from the crime scene. The ticket office was able to confirm that the lone passenger of the bus was Emanuel E. Williams. The surveillance video footage is being reviewed to reinforce this statement.

The purpose of this transcription is to determine the disappearance of Mr. Williams and to assess the possibility that he is still alive, as other forms of communication have heretofore failed.

Begin Transmission.

****Sound of a bus engine. Soft talking in the background.****

MANNY: September 18th 5:17 p.m.

Identification: Emmanuel "Manny" E. Williams, License number A221369 Zombie Hunter, or as you boys in accounts payable like to refer to my job: Reaper. Sometimes I think you should stop romanticizing my job and get out for some fresh air. Go on a date or something. You do remember what girls are, right?

Expense report for the Suerte de Mendigos job, charge to the U.S. Government care of US Marshall Jesus Gonzales, the Southern States Coalition Border Patrol and the great state of Texas, sarcasm intended.

Expense account item one: \$1,500 travel expenses. These include train fare from New York, taxi expenses and bus fare from Corpus Christi. Apparently the thriving metropolis of Suerte de Mendigos wouldn't pony up the dough to get me anywhere above coach, so an extra \$100 seating charge for sitting next to a kid with more snot than common sense. And \$50 cleaning bill for my jacket. I don't think any amount of cash or soap will wash that experience from my mind, so I'll let the mental trauma slide. Also major train stations are in rare commodity for places where the population is less than my IQ. The bus isn't as crowded as the train, but the A/C is hit and miss and when the bus driver turns it on, something clanks around in the vents like it's one of the armadillos on the side of the road got caught inside and is trying to get out.

Like I said I came coach, but I really can't blame Suerte de Mendigos for that. That particular seat was benefitted me by Uncle Sam himself. This just shows that there is no senator or congressman who will stop at any expense to procure "The highest recommended specialist in Zombie Extraction on the east coast," or at least that's what it said on the request of services. Coming from anybody else, that phrase would come off as complimentary. Coming from the government, it means "Everybody else said no."

It's OK, really. I could use some time away from New York, and apparently I found it. This ain't just doing time away from the big city, it's practically solitary confinement. The landscape is flat, the colors all seem muted, and the only thing to see on the horizon is the line between the land and the sky. At least you could see Stiff coming from a mile away. Or, you know, civilization.

Speaking of which, I'm getting a creepy vibe off of the looks the bus driver is giving me, so I'll continue this oratory later.

MANNY: September 18th 8:30 p.m.

Groan. Next time I come to Texas, remind me to bring Manhattan.

Never mind. OK, I have checked into the Comfy Mill Motel, expense item number three: \$300 for the week. Either this is a really great deal, or I'm getting exactly what I'm paying for. By the looks of the room, I'm getting the latter. I'm foregoing the usual black-light sweep of the room, and adding expense item number four: \$20 for sheet set bought at the local box mart down the street.

I'm to meet with the Mayor tomorrow morning at 5:30 a.m. at a rundown grease hole down the street. The timing and the secrecy is strange. I wonder if this is typical for Texas. No early morning meetings in New York. Well, it is considered the city that never sleeps, so maybe there are those meetings, but if it never goes to bed, it isn't an early morning meeting, just a really, really late night meeting with doughnuts.

Regardless, I'm going to turn in early to make it in time for the super-secret spy club, and will be charging the city of Suerte de Mendigos \$2 per minute of sleep I would regularly be getting, not counting for time zone differential.

MANNY: September 19th 5:15 a.m.

Woke up early to make sure I would make it to the Agent Morning Person meeting. Didn't shower or use deodorant just to show spite for my comrades. I hope it's in a small meeting room. I walked down to the diner, which was only about a five minute walk from my room at the motel. It's a paradigm shock going from city streets that are never empty to a town that apparently turns saccadic overnight. I'm sure prior to the infestation, these streets would have been tranquil or zen-like, with only a blinking amber street light to punctuate the vague concept of civilization, but now it feels like a constant ambush in waiting. I've seen the stiffs stumbling in hordes to similar backdrops. It never quite leaves you.

I use the phrase ambush in reference towards actual people. Everyone knows that stiffs don't think. If the phrase "I think therefore I am" refers to actual human beings, "I eat your face off, therefore I'm a pain in the ass" is more of the zombie mantra.

The diner was dark except for a light in the kitchen. I knocked on the door and they appeared to be expecting me. They even set up a quick meal for me while I wait for my new associates. \$5.00 for a "Mexican Grill" and a bottomless cup of coffee. Breakfast was on the house, but I'm still charging for the early morning.

MANNY: September 19th 5:35 a.m.

I am now meeting with the mayor of Suerte de Mendigos, one Mayor José Gonzales, and US Marshal Jesus Gonzales. (Pause)

Jesus: No relation.

MANNY: I didn't say anything.

JESUS: I just thought I would save you the trouble. Gonzales is a very common name.

MANNY: As I was saying, both individuals have been notified that our conversation is being recorded, and have been shown my credentials. They have both been briefed on my clearance and have seen the letters of recommendation from the U.S. government, and both have witnessed to my office as it were. Do you agree to my terms of service, yes or no?

José: Si.

JESUS: Yes.

MANNY: Then we can begin business. José, I believe meeting at this atrocious hour was your idea, so I'll let you go first.

JESUS: Actually, Senor Williams, our appointment time was my idea.

MANNY: Duly noted.

JOSÉ: The problem started about three months ago.

MANNY: See? I wrote it down and everything.

JESUS: So I see.

MANNY: "Jesus wanted to meet at 5:30 a.m." Just there. In black and white. Just in case anybody was wondering.

JESUS: Yes, I see. By the way, my name is pronounced "Hay-Zeus"

MANNY: My mistake.

JOSÉ: Can you niños stop bickering for a few moments so we can go to work?

MANNY: I'm good if the Son of God is good.

JESUS: Let's continue. Burro.

MANNY: What was that?

JESUS: Nothing.

JOSÉ: As I was saying, this started few months ago. We have all the standard defense against what you call stiffes. We have motion detector, zombie squad, and we have the best trained border patrol all along the Southern Alliance.

MANNY: For the record: a zombie squad is a slang term for a group of local citizens under temporary employ of a city or state for wiping out stiffes. This is under code 19-116.b(i-iii).

JOSÉ: Si. Well, it has been years since we have had any regular activity. Now we are experiencing stragglers once, twice a week. Our detectors to the south are going off always. We have border patrol bring in heads to confirm their kills. Last week we outranked Houston for straggler reports. This is not something we are proud of.

MANNY: So why all the activity? Are there a lot of campers or noisy teens kicking up attention?

JOSÉ: No. We have strict regulations. No going out into the wilderness. Everything to the South is flatlands. There are one or two law breakers, but not enough to draw attention to this many zombies.

MANNY: And that is where they are coming from? From the South?

JOSÉ: Always.

MANNY: What's South of here?

JOSÉ: Just desert. There are water stations, the border fence, communication stations. Not much.

MANNY: Desert seems to be in no short supply around here.

José: You make fun.

MANNY: No, no, no. Well, a little bit. You have to understand where I'm coming from.

JOSÉ: I understand, Señor Williams. You think because we are small town we do not have big city problems, but believe me, we do. We used to be the capital of illegal immigration from Mexico. The lucky ones get deported.

MANNY: What about the unlucky ones?

JOSÉ: They get sent home, too. Most of the time in a box. The desert claims a lot of people.

We have a drug epidemic that forever is problem. Sometimes the border jumpers would come bearing drugs, so we put a stop to that. Then visitors would come with the drugs inside their bodies. It took us a long while to figure that out, but we did.

JESUS: We had that problem, too. People would have the drugs taped to an organ or intestine. Sometimes we found some with less intrusive, but very uncomfortable ways as well.

MANNY: Like what?

JESUS: I would tell you, but you would sit uncomfortable for week.

JOSÉ: They got away with it for long time, but we made a new welcoming committee. You met our drug-sniffing dogs when you came into town, no?

MANNY: Is that what they were? I thought it was a local ladies' book club that was really interested in the novella I was carrying in my pocket.

JOSÉ: All of this is because the cartels. The drug cartels in Mexico... Whew! El Diablo!

MANNY: Pretty bad, huh?

JOSÉ: Why do you think I come to United States? The drug cartels run everything in Mexico! They kidnap people off the street, kill for no reason. Extortion, rape, murder... They do it all. We want to keep our little Suerte de Mendigos safe from monsters such as those! Zombies are child's play in comparison. Drug cartels are not welcome in your country. So I come here to United States. I become citizen, and later I become mayor. I pull the bodies of the runners from the desert and send them back to Mexico and do my best with my little town.

What I try to tell you is this: even though we are not a big city, we still have plenty trouble. We even have prostitution. Of course, she puts her teeth in for visitors.

MANNY: You mentioned communication stations in the desert. What are they for?

JOSÉ: Does our choice in prostitutes make you uncomfortable?

MANNY: No, let's just get back on track. What are the communication stations for?

JESUS: I can cover that. They are for Check-ins, Mr. Williams. The border patrol use them all along the southern states in case they don't have coverage like in the desert. But mostly they are for a base of operations. Most of our border patrol travel between the stations like frogs from one lily pad to another. It gives them a place to call home. There are places to sleep and places to eat.

MANNY: Are they safe from zombie attacks?

JESUS: Safe enough. We've never had a stiff eat his way into one.

JOSÉ: Señor Williams, I have always wanted to know something about the zombies.

MANNY: What do you want to know, Mr. Gonzales.

JOSÉ: I am a little embarrassed to ask.

MANNY: I've heard 'em all, Mr. Gonzales.

JOSÉ: Why do the zombies... stiffs... always breath and moan when they are technically dead?

MANNY: Good question. There are several theories, but my personal belief is that some habits die hard. Technically, most of the organs that a convert has are superfluous. Lungs most of us are at least unconsciously aware of, especially asthmatics, right? Organs like the liver, spleen and kidneys are filters, but what would a zombie want with a spleen? Because they don't need them, they rarely miss them. That's why you can get crawlers with most of their bodies blown off, but they still keep coming. All a convert really needs is a spinal column, a brain and a mouth.

A moment of silence

MANNY: What was that?

JOSÉ: What was what?

MANNY: You two shared a look.

JOSÉ: It doesn't matter. Listen...

MANNY: I can leave you two alone if you'd like.

JOSÉ: Can you help us Señor Williams?

MANNY: So, you want me to find why the influx of stiffs that are congregating to your little town. I get that. Why the marshall?

JESUS: I'm your guide. The Tamaulipan Mezquital Desert can be a cruel mistress, amigo.

MANNY: Ah. That's just great. So, when do we leave?

JESUS: Midnight tonight.

MANNY: What's with you and the weird hours?

JESUS: The U.S. Government wants you to know you're on her clock, now. Oh, and while we're on the subject, I don't want you out of your motel room today. I will send provisions. Do you like pizza?

MANNY: What am I supposed to do in the mean time?

JESUS: Why don't you try catching up on your sleep?

September 18th 5:07 p.m.

MANNY: I remember why I stopped watching television. There's a mind-numbing parade of court-room television and talk shows that should have gone down with the collapse of society. I turned my attention to the window and the grand stage of Suerte de Mendigos' day life. This is the kind of small town where everybody probably knows everybody else. Take that for what it's worth.

It appears that the high school's equivalent to killing time after school has most of the student body heading over to an outdoor shooting range, which even has moving targets traveling on an electronic track. Texas always did better against the apocalypse than

many of their neighbors. Probably a combination of flat landscape and their refusal to adhere to gun control laws pushed into place ironically just before the infestation. It does make me wonder about why they need somebody like me to solve this issue. I'll try not to think too hard about it, lest they call me off and I don't get paid.

I do miss some of the honest street crime of the Big Apple. The only hookers here are a late 50-something mother and her mid-40-something daughter who have conveniently rented out the rooms on either side of mine. I try not to listen, but... just call me Lincoln Duncan.

I will admit that I would stand out in this crowd like a stiff with a head wound. Looks like everybody knows everybody else and develop a special kind of ignorance when they go to visit Fanny Mae and her little sister in these rooms next to mine. Not to mention the town dress code was created in a Marlboro commercial. In New York, I'm just another Fedora in a trench coat. Here, I'm the only guy without a cowboy hat.

MANNY: September 20th 12:15 a.m.

Marshal Jesus pulled into the parking lot ten minutes ago in a beat-up pickup with a dust and mud themed paint job. I don't know what he has planned, but if it includes Daisy Dukes, *Dueling Banjos* or that truck, he's going to need to pay me up front. Seriously, all that thing needs is naked lady mud flaps or a pair of plastic cahones hanging from the tail pipe to complete the image.

One thing is odd about our lawman out there. After pulling into the parking lot, he shut down his coughing, sputtering monstrosity, got out and casually walked to the other side of the parking lot. He quickly got into another car and sat in the darkness. He's still there. I can see him in the strobe light effect of the vacancy sign. He isn't with anybody, he isn't smoking, and he isn't playing with his phone. He just sits and watches. What he's watching for, I have no idea. I'm not one to tell a U.S. Marshall his business, but his behavior is what some might call erratic. Ah, here he comes.

I'm packing my doctor's bag, including the standard extraction kit. Flares, alcohol, my .38 special, shotgun with double-ought and solid slug rounds, flashlight and extra batteries. I assumed that if there were special provisions needed, I would have been alerted.

A knocking sound.

MANNY: Come in, Marshall.

Sound of door opening. Footsteps.

JESUS: You sounded pretty sure it was me. Are all city people so trusting?

MANNY: I saw you coming.

JESUS: Is that what you are wearing?

MANNY: You sound like my ex-wife.

JESUS: It will not work. Here. Try these on.

MANNY: Blue jeans? Is this a joke? I don't think I even own a pair of blue jeans.

JESUS: And you'll have to trade in your hat.

MANNY: Where are we going?

JESUS: Into the desert, amigo.

MANNY: Won't I want my hat in the desert?

JESUS: You will want a hat, just not that hat. You look like you are from the city.

MANNY: I am from the city.

JESUS: When you are in the city, it is O.K. to look like you are from the city. When you are in the desert, city people just look like easy targets.

MANNY: So what am I supposed to wear?

JESUS: A cowboy hat like everybody else.

MANNY: Don't I get a choice in this matter?

JESUS: I could bring you a sombrero if you prefer.

MANNY: No Thanks.

JESUS: Suit yourself.

MANNY: September 20th, ugh, 1:17 a.m.

Apparently the Texas Road and Highway Department have decided to opt for the more rustic feel of potholes over, say, actual roads.

JESUS: Sorry amigo. We are off the paved road now. I'm afraid you will have to explore our great state the way the rest of us do.

MANNY: With a ruptured spleen?

JESUS: It is not that bad.

MANNY: Tell that to my spleen. Are you actually trying to hit every pot hole?

JESUS: Not every one.

MANNY: Ugh!

JESUS: OK, that one I tried to hit.

MANNY: September 20th 9:47 a.m.

I've set my recorder for auto-record. If there are any sounds outside of natural ambiance, it should kick on for future study in case I don't survive this case.

We arrived at our "basecamp" shortly before dawn. It's an abandoned border patrol station and by the smell of it, our Marshall and Savior evicted a family of coyotes just before we got here. He says that it's perfectly safe, but I think he would have said that about sailing on the Titanic.

Marshal Sleeping Beauty elected to have me take first watch, letting me know it's my own fault I didn't get any sleep on the way here.

My only companions are a spotting scope, binoculars and about twenty million tons of sand. The scope is a Leopold! They can only put me up in the crappiest whore house in Texas, but they give god-boy a scope that costs more than my room cost for the whole week. Apparently we work for different governments.

My first priority is to watch for stragglers, and my second priority is to murder Jesus in his sleep.

JESUS: I heard that.

MANNY: That's great.

MANNY: September 20th 3:57 p.m.

I've been watching a dust cloud trailing up from the North for forty-five minutes. It's a single line of dust indicating a vehicle headed our direction. Probably the official State Vehicle: A pick-up truck covered in dirt.

MANNY: September 20th 4:13

Yep. A pick-up.

sound of a vehicle horn

JESUS: Ah, this will be our guide.

MANNY: I thought you were my guide.

JESUS: Sí. I am your guide, and he is my guide.

MANNY: Why do you need a guide?

JESUS: I don't know anything about the desert. How about you?

MANNY: And does your guide have a guide?

JESUS: Let's ask him. Hello! Mr. Timson I presume!

TIMSON: Yep. **spits**

MANNY: I see you're a local.

TIMSON: Now, how'd you guess that? **spits**

MANNY: Must be the local mannerisms. Tell me why you're here again?

JESUS: I have invited Mr. Timson to help us in our investigations and help us not to die, Mr. Williams.

MANNY: And what are the chances of dying, exactly?

TIMSON: You're a city slicker? I'm a little surprised you ain't dead already. But you just stick with lil' ol' Timmy and I'll see you through.

MANNY: Timmy?

TIMSON: Mr. Timson's my uncle's name. You call me Timmy. **spits**

JESUS: Listen, amigo. Mr. Timson knows this desert better than anyone. I advise you to listen to him and turn off your recorder. It makes some people nervous.

MANNY: Fine.

MANNY: September 20th 8:52 p.m.

Evening, Timmy.

TIMSON: Mr. Zombie Killer.

MANNY: You can call me Manny.

TIMSON: It's all good. ****spits****

MANNY: Do you have any idea of what's going on out here?

TIMSON: Like what? Lots goes on in the desert.

MANNY: I mean, why am I out here? Seems to me like you Texans can take care of yourselves and wouldn't need somebody of my expertise.

TIMSON: Couldn't tell you that, *hombre*. These out-of-state folks are always getting other out-of-state folks to take our jobs. ****spits****

MANNY: It's nothing personal. I was just called out on this gig.

TIMSON: I get it. It's just that you city slicker folk don't think we country bumpkins know a lick about real life because we never experienced the hustle and bustle of the big city. Well, I got somethin' to say about it. I saw some of them big cities back east. I don't want no part of 'em. You get folks all bunched up together, they stop thinkin' like folks. They start thinkin' that everybody needs to take care of them, and nobody can think *but* them. They stop breathin' fresh air and live off of that recycled stuff. No thanks. I'll take the life I can see, not dark alleys and walled up life.

MANNY: Listen, if I'm here, then you shouldn't be here. And if you're here, then I shouldn't be. But for some reason we're both getting paid to be here, so we might as well finish the job and be on our way. Smoke?

TIMSON: Sure.

MANNY: What I need to know is why this place is so dangerous. Why does my guide need a guide?

TIMSON: Can't tell you that. ****spits**** This place ain't safe for almost no one. You got to know the area. You can drive out here with 4-wheel drive, but the only folks really willing to do that are the border patrol and the Zombie Squad.

MANNY: Why is that?

TIMSON: Superstitions. What do you see out there, Manny?

MANNY: Sage brush, sand, cracked earth...

TIMSON: It's just too easy to see a rotted hand reach out of anywhere and grab you by the ankle. Plenty of hiding places out there for anyone who has a mind to hide.

MANNY: But stiffes don't hide. They've been known to go dormant until someone walks past, but they don't hide.

TIMSON: Exactly. And there's no life out there to speak of. No *human* life, anyway, so we don't have much call for zombies. Do you know why a zombie would come out this way?

MANNY: It doesn't make much sense. They go toward light and sound, but they don't wander, per se. Unless they think there's a meal at the end of the hallway, they won't go down it.

MANNY: September 21st 2:26 a.m.

I'm on night watch, using night vision goggles once again a gift from Jesus' generous Uncle Sam verses the Tight-wad old miser I deal with.

JESUS: Are you still awake, Mr. Williams?

MANNY: Mmmph.

Jesus: Of course you are. You have first watch.

I will be honest with you, Mr. Williams. When I saw your name, I assumed you were Latino.

MANNY: It's short for Emanuel.

JESUS: What, were you raised by the Amish?

MANNY: Were you raised by the Virgin Mary?

JESUS: Maybe it is time we put away the bickering and concentrate on the real enemy.

MANNY: We have an enemy now, do we?

JESUS: Oh, si, Mr. Williams. A very serious one. And for the record my mother's name was Maria, but I'm pretty sure she was no virgin. That's the kind of thing a mother would tell her boy.

Señor Williams, have you ever wondered why you would be called in on a job like this? Why would a town so obviously well equipped against an infestation pay so dearly to bring in an outsider? And above all, why would they bring you in on a job to work with someone like me?

MANNY: Ever since I got here.

JESUS: Smoke?

MANNY: I pack my own.

JESUS: Try one of mine.

MANNY: Say, this isn't half bad.

JESUS: It has actual tobacco.

MANNY: Oh, man! These are so much better than the government issue crap. Does it still kill off the infection?

JESUS: Si.

There are so many questions. We have suspected something going on for almost a year. Something very, very wrong.

Two weeks ago, 2 niños find a woman stumbling through the desert, heading straight for Suerte de Mendigos. She was half dead, starving and suffering greatly. Because of the blood, the boys on their four-wheelers think she was one of your stiffs. As you know, the law states that no unauthorized person is to come within 50 yards of the stiffs if reason allows, so boys being boys, they got as close as possible.

They discover her real condition and bring her to the hospital where I was visiting a colleague. Let me show you what we learned.

MANNY: A tablet! They gave you a tablet! I can't believe this!

JESUS: Quiet, please. You will wake Mr. Timson.

MANNY: Do you know what they gave me? This stupid tape recorder! I have to supply my own batteries and everything!

JESUS: I understand. Please, Mr. Williams, this is important. Just watch the video.

MANNY: Fine, but somebody's going to get an earful when I get home.

OK, the image is of a Hispanic woman, approximately 30-40 years old, a little the worse for wear. She's lying in what appears to be a hospital bed, oxygen mask and over a dozen tubes poking into her. The camera is fairly shakey and keeps going in and out of focus.

JESUS: Sorry. I am not a great photographer.

MANNY: You'd think with a tablet like that you would learn.

JESUS: Señor Williams...

MANNY: Anyway, she seems to be speaking Spanish. I don't understand what she's saying.

JESUS: This is Miss Mendoza. I never learned her first name. I can translate for you. After I calmed her down to enough to make sense, she made this statement.

"They took me off the streets. I was walking and they just took me. They put a rag over my mouth and I... I fell asleep.

"When I awoke, I was in a dark room, and I hurt. I hurt all over. A man came in and they had a... Sin Vida... A lifeless one strapped to a gurney and one of the men had a small box. I didn't want to know what was in the box. The box was horrible and dripped red. But the men were rough. They slapped me and told me to look.

"In the box were organs. Kidneys. They said the kidneys were mine and then they gave the box to the Lifeless One. The Lifeless One ate them! He ate part of me! I could see my organs smeared across his... bigotes... hair on his face. Facial hair. I tried to scream, but they covered my mouth until all the scream was out of me.

"I was so scared. The men said that they were going to feed me to the monster one bit at a time and left. I didn't know what to do.

"Then one of the men took pity on me. He came back and unstrapped me. He said that if I ran, he would try not to let the men know, but if they found out, they would release the monster to find me, so I needed to run. He said that there was a town to the north, Suerte de Mendigos. If I could reach there, I would be safe.

"I ran, even though I hurt. I ran as fast as I could. I did not have kidneys, so I was not well. I was not far away when the men must have learned of my escape because they let the Lifeless One go, and I had to get away."

Silence

MANNY: The video stops.

JESUS: The reason I wanted you, Senor Williams, is because I need to know about the stiffs they are using. You are highly recommended, and I need to know things about the stiffs that I do not understand.

Would the stiff chase a single target, Senor Williams? And if so, how long? Why would they track a solitary figure over miles of wasteland? Why would evil men feed a stiff a part of a person and then set the zombie after them?

MANNY: ***Exhales***

OK. During the war, there were rumors. Stories. One of our own, Brian, had lost a finger in a freak accident in Hagerstown. For weeks later, he said that he was being followed, that a stiff was trailing him. None of us took it seriously, of course. But we were attacked the next night, and we could swear there was one in a red sweater who seemed intent on Brian. We had to take it down, and then take it down again. It was eerie. It passed by a downed soldier to continue its conquest after Brian. After the battle, Brian never complained of being followed again. This is all speculation, of course. We never could prove that the creature had eaten Brian's finger in the first place.

JESUS: Of course not, Mr. Williams. But you think it *is* possible.

MANNY: Possible, but nothing has ever been confirmed. What happened to the woman?

JESUS: She died shortly after the video was taken. We performed an autopsy and found that her kidneys had indeed been removed. It was a sloppy process and was not done under sanitary conditions. She was not meant to survive.

The next day, the Zombie Squad came in with a trophy to prove their hunt was victorious: The head of a male convert. Without their knowledge, I tested the mouth and face of the zombie, and indeed we found the DNA of our victim. Now tell me, Mr. Williams, what can you make of the situation? We feel that there is more than just coincidence involved. We think there is something deeply evil transpiring.

MANNY: Is this why you wanted to keep me under wraps? You think the Zombie Squad is corrupted?

JESUS: And if they are corrupted, that means others may be, as well. We felt it was for your safety. This is much bigger than any of us, and we do not wish to put anyone at risk that doesn't need to be. We believe the men that held our dear señora captive were very bad men, and if they have informants in Suerte de Mendigos, and they see you, you could be in danger.

MANNY: I'm starting to regret my trip for sheets.

JESUS: What was that, Señor?

MANNY: I need to think about this.

JESUS: I will take the next watch. Sleep on it, Mr. Williams. Tell me what you think in the morning.

September 21st 11:06 a.m.

Couldn't sleep. The images of the woman bothered me. Why would anyone do something like that? The stiffs ain't what you would call "evil," but more like animal-like. They don't think or have motive. They just consume. To do what happened to that woman would take a conscience that had been beaten, mutilated and ripped away from humanity. True evil takes a mind, no matter how rotted it's become.

The idea that part of the victim had been fed to lead the stiff out in the desert makes some sense. Stiffs are drawn to blood, the smell of sweat and the sound of civilization. They would have no reason to enter the desert. The reason why someone would want them in the desert is a bit of a mystery. If they were using stiffs to attack another city, like weapons in a war would call for an army of stiffs, not one straggler at a time. It doesn't make any sense.

TIMSON: Gents, I think I got somethin'.

Sound of rushed footsteps

TIMSON: Color me silly, but that feller seems to have a hitch in his get-along.

MANNY: What do you see, Jesus?

JESUS: I think it is a zombie. Check it yourself, Mr. Williams. I am not trained for this.

MANNY: I'm looking through the spotting scope. There is an individual off in the distance. They stumble a lot like a stiff. There's blood on the shirt, and their face is pale. The person in question is Hispanic... Can we increase the power of this lense?

JESUS: Si, Senior. Like this.

MANNY: Thank you. Looking at the man... Negative. The individual is not a stiff. It looks like we may have another victim of your conspiracy, Jesus.

Jesus: How can you tell?

MANNY: Look at his face. He's in pain. He's sweating and panting. stiffs sometimes breath, but it's more out of habit than necessity. I'll get the truck and maybe we can get him back to town...

Jesus: No, Mr. Williams.

MANNY: What?

JESUS: He is not why we are out here, and he has not served his purpose.

MANNY: What are you talking about?

JESUS: If that man is the bait, we must let him play out his part.

MANNY: If we don't get out there, he's going to... He's down! We have to get out there!

JESUS: No. It is too late for our victim. Now, before you get too angry at me, I want you to not ask "Why?" but "What happens next?" Our victim will not have died in vain, and we may save many lives yet.

MANNY: How are we going to save more lives?

JESUS: Watch through your scope. Tell me when you see the zombie.

Silence

MANNY: I have a bead on it.

JESUS: Are you sure?

MANNY: I'm sure.

JESUS: Then we wait for one minute. Agents, be ready to move.

MANNY: Where did you get that radio from?

JESUS: Just watch.

MANNY: There's a single stiff moving in on its incumbent target. There is blood marring its shirt. It's already fed.

JESUS: Look to the left, amigo.

MANNY: There's a pick-up truck converging on the scene. It has one, two... looks like four men in the bed, and two in the front. One in the bed has a rifle, but he isn't using it, yet. The truck pulls up to within easy range of the zombie. The stiff isn't paying attention...

Gun shot

MANNY: The stiff is down.

JESUS: Keep watching. We don't have what we need, yet.

MANNY: The men are getting out of the truck. One is in a full surgeon's outfit. Looks like he has a machete. What is he doing? He's dissecting the stiff. He's digging into the body. The other men are surrounding the corpse with guns drawn. I can still see the surgeon. He's pulling parts of the Stiff out. It looks like he's taking out organs.

Jesus: Ladies and gentlemen, move in. Repeat, move in! Watch those weapons! Let's try not to make this a blood bath.

MANNY: Where did all those cops come from? They're coming from everywhere!

JESUS: They are marshals, not cops. There is a difference.

Timson: I told ya there was a million places to hide in the desert!

Shouting, chaos. Noise such as jostling, as if Manny is running with the recorder in tow.

MANNY: Guns are being taken away from the zombie squad, a pair of troopers are overlooking the fallen Mexican. The Zombie Squad are being cuffed and read their rights.

JESUS: Mr. Williams! Can you look over the zombie? I don't want any of my agents bitten!

MANNY: Right away! **Sound of jostling, possibly running**

The Stiff was male, Hispanic, five feet and some change, mid-twenties at time of conversion. It has been decapitated; head is resting three feet away. Its shirt has been cut open, exposing the

abdomen. Ribs are exposed, and the torso has been cut open. Not ripped or gnawed on, not like you usually see. My guess is it was done with the machete. There are signs of... looks like surgical tape. The Stiff is missing all major organs. Lungs, heart, stomach, intestines and the sweet breads have all been removed.

And there seems to be something left in the cavity. It's not an organ. It looks like a plastic bag.

JESUS: Don't touch that, Señor! I need to know what it is!

MANNY: May I extract it?

JESUS: Be careful, Señor. I do not want you to become infected.

MANNY: It's just above the rib cage, tucked in under the clavicle. Whoever put it in here was brave enough. They had to operate on this thing after it had been infected. Got it.

It's a clear plastic bag, seeming to contain a white block of some kind of dry substance.

JESUS: Unless I am mistaken, it is heroine.

MANNY: What?

JESUS: We have been speculating that Suerte de Mendigos has been the route of a new drug trafficking plot that we almost never caught.

Suerte de Mendigos has an almost fool-proof drug screening process. You heard Mayor Gonzales: Drug sniffing dogs and a police force with anti-drug training. They even have x-ray equipment they can use on moving vehicles. Every time drugs come in, Suerte de Mendigos adapts.

That is, until the drugs started flowing freely about a year after the great infestation war. We got the impression something new had entered the pool but we couldn't figure out how. We knew that it was coming from the border but we couldn't figure out how the drugs got here or the money got there.

Mayor Gonzales kept finding bodies out in the desert, dead from what seemed like natural causes. This happened all the time in the old days, so it wasn't anything new. He sent the bodies back. Originally, that's how we thought the drugs were coming through, but the dogs didn't detect anything, so he sent them back.

Of course, we looked the other way until Miss Mendoza showed up, and suddenly the whole situation made more sense. We should have looked closer at those bodies. Nobody performs an autopsy on an obvious natural death, especially when they're an illegal immigrant. We looked at the next victim and found the stitches. We diverted the corpse after it left here and found bundles of cash stashed in the space where organs should be. We sent him back anyway as not to arouse any suspicions.

Then the zombies started to show up. Just a hand-full at first. Then it became more and more common. I thought much on the fact. This is not my expertise, Señor Williams. I needed someone who knew what to

look for and what would make a zombie act out of character, if they can be said to have a character.

So I called for you. I will admit I wanted to invite another Latino because nobody looks at us too closely around here. But we take what we can get.

I need to know what happened with the zombie, Señor Williams.

MANNY: From what I can tell, this stiff must have been captured, tied down and operated on. They removed the unneeded portions here, here and here. If you look here, the body has been cut.

JESUS: How can you tell?

MANNY: When a zombie rots away, it's messy. These places have been cleanly removed. No remaining body parts anywhere. In fact, if you look closely, they sprayed down the inner cavity with some sort of a sealant. Probably to protect the drugs.

JESUS: So what I can understand is that this is an operation from the Mexican drug cartels. They grab two people to begin with: a victim off the street and a zombie. The cartel carves both of them up, and hollows them out. The zombie becomes the vessel for the drugs and the victim's organs are fed to the ghouls. The zombie has the taste of the victim, and will follow her anywhere. Is this correct, Señor?

MANNY: Keep going.

JESUS: In the case of Miss Mendoza, she got pointed to Suerte de Mendigos, but most of them died along the way. The Zombie Squad picks up the body of the human and kills the zombie. They have a surgeon on both ends, don't you see? The Squad extracts the drugs from the convert, inserts the payment in the human and what happens next?

MANNY: The stiff gets burned if the squad is following procedure, which makes sense. That way they get rid of the evidence. The body of the victim gets dumped in some place people would see it and gets returned to Mexico.

Jesus: And that's where the cartel step in, seize the body and extract their payment. **Jesus sighs**

I'm sorry you had to be part of this, Señor Williams, but without your last pieces of the puzzle, many more would become hopeless victims to these burros.

MANNY: September 24th, Let's call it 10:15 p.m.

I'm the only passenger on the first bus out of Suerte de Mendigos which makes me wonder why the bus decided to depart, but I'll just be grateful for small favors.

How do you sum up something of this magnitude? There was so much going on, it was hard to tell what all happened until it was over, and then you could only put together the pieces.

If it's true, and these guys are dealing directly with one of the Mexican drug cartels, that's nasty business I don't want any part of.

Sucking on a plague-filled rat would be more hygienic. The cartells have a tendency to pay off anybody living and apparently have no qualms usurping anybody dead as well.

So it's time to get out of town. Jesus wanted me to lay low in case there are any informants left in Suerte de Mendigos, which I totally understand. Nobody likes a party crasher, and the cartels like to keep the slate clean when they do get caught. The stories I've heard..

Hissing of bus breaks

MANNY: There seems to be a problem up ahead. A truck has jack-knifed in the middle of the road. Strange, it doesn't seem to even have its hazards on.

Hissing of bus door opening

MANNY: And there goes the bus driver out the door. Something tells me that this jack-knifed truck is not a coincidence.

And now the back door to the semi is opening to release several men with guns. By the sound of it, my little trip to get sheets drew more attention to me than anybody would have thought.

Ah, crap.

Sound of a window opening. Sound of gun fire.

End transcription.