

# The Circuit

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Stories from the life of a migrant  
child

Francisco Jiménez

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To my parents and my seven sisters and brothers:

*Avelina/Rorra*

*Evangelina/Yerman*

*María Luisa/Licha*

*Roberto/Toto*

*José Francisco/Trampita*

*Juan Manuel/Torito*

*and Rubén/Carne Seca*

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# Acknowledgments

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There are many people who made this collection of short stories possible. I am indebted to my family whose lives are represented in this book. These stories are their stories as well as mine. These are also the stories of many migrant children of yesterday and today. I thank them all and ask their forgiveness for taking the liberty to write about them, knowing full well my limitations as a writer. Their courage, tenacity, and unwavering hope in the midst of adversity have been a constant inspiration to me.

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# Under the Wire

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"*La frontera*" is a word I often heard when I was a child living in *El Rancho Blanco*, a small village nestled on barren, dry hills several miles north of Guadalajara, Mexico. I heard it for the first time back in the late 1940s when Papá and Mamá told me and Roberto, my older brother, that someday we would take a long trip north, cross *la frontera*, enter California, and leave our poverty behind.

I did not know exactly what California was either, but Papá's eyes sparkled whenever he talked about it with Mamá and his friends. "Once we cross *la frontera*, we'll make a good living in California," he would say, standing up straight and sticking out his chest.

Roberto, who is four years older than I, became excited every time Papá talked about the trip to California. He didn't like living in *El Rancho Blanco*, especially after visiting our older cousin, Fito, Guadalajara.

Fito had left *El Rancho Blanco*. He was working in a tequila factory and living in a two-bedroom house that had electricity and a water well. He told Roberto that he, Fito, didn't have to get up at four in the morning anymore, like my brother, to milk the five cows by hand and carry the milk in a large aluminum can on horse for several miles to the nearest road, where a truck would transport it to town to sell. He didn't have to go to the river for water, sleep on dirt floors, or use candles for light.

From then on, about the only thing Roberto liked about living in *El Rancho Blanco* was hunting for chicken eggs and attending church on Sundays.

I liked looking for eggs and going to Mass too. But what I enjoyed most was listening to stories. In the evenings, after supper, Papá's brother, *tío* Mauricio, and his family came over to visit. We sat around a fire built with dry cow chips and told stories while shaking out grain from ears of corn.

On one such evening Papá made the announcement: We were going to make the long-awaited trip across *la frontera* to California. Days later we packed our belongings in a suitcase and took the bus to Guadalajara to catch the train. Papá bought tickets on a second-class train, *Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México*. I had never seen a train before. It looked like metal huts on wheels strung together. We climbed in and took our seats. I stood to look out the window. As the train started to move, it jerked and made a loud clattering sound, like hundreds of milk cans crashing. I got scared and lost my balance. Papá caught me and told me to sit. I swung my legs, following the rhythm of the train. Roberto sat across from me, next to Mamá. He had a big grin on his face.

We traveled for two days and nights. During the night, we didn't get much sleep. The wooden seats were hard, and the train made loud noises, blowing its whistle and grinding its brakes. At the first train stop I asked Papá, "Is this California?"

"No *mi'jo*, we're not there yet," he answered patiently. "We have many more hours to go."

Noting that Papá had closed his eyes, I turned to Roberto and asked, "What's California like?"

"I don't know," he answered, "but Fito told me that people there sweep money off the streets."

"Where did Fito get that idea?" Papá said, opening his eyes and laughing.



"From Cantinflas," Roberto said assuredly. "He said Cantinflas said it in a movie."

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"Cantinflas was joking," Papá responded, chuckling. "But it's true that life is better there."

"I hope so," Mamá said. Then, putting her arm around Roberto, she added softly, "*Dios lo quiera.*"

The train slowed down. I looked out the window and saw we were entering another town. "Is this it?" I asked.

"*¡Otra vez la burra al trigo!*" Papá said, frowning and rolling his eyes. "I'll tell you when we get there!"

"Be patient, Panchito," Mamá said, smiling. "We'll get there soon."

When the train stopped in Mexicali, Papá told us to get off. "We're almost there," he said, looking at me. We left the station. Papá carried our dark brown suitcase. We followed behind him until we reached a barbed wire fence. According to Papá, this was *la frontera*. He pointed out that across the gray wire barricade was California, that famous place I had heard so much about. On both sides of the fence were armed guards dressed in green uniforms. Papá called them *la migra*, and explained that we had to cross the fence to the other side without being seen by them.

Late that night, we walked for several miles away from town. Papá, who led the way, paused, looked all around to make sure no one could see us, and headed toward the fence. We walked along the wire wall until Papá spotted a small hole underneath the fence. Papá got on his knees and, with his hands, made the opening larger. We all crawled through like snakes. A few minutes later, we were picked up by a woman whom Papá had contacted in Mexicali. She had promised to pick us up in her car and drive us, for a fee, to a place where we would find work.

The woman drove all night, and at dawn we reached a tent labor camp on the outskirts of Guadalupe, a small town on the coast. She stopped the car by the side of a narrow road, near the camp.

"This is the place I told you about," she said wearily. "Here you'll find work picking strawberries."

Papá unloaded the suitcase from the trunk, took out his wallet, and paid the woman. "We have only seven dollars left," he said, biting his lower lip. After the woman drove away, we walked to the camp, following a dirt path lined on both sides by eucalyptus trees. Mamá held me by the hand very tightly. At the camp, Mamá and Papá were told that the foreman had left for the day.

We spent that night underneath the eucalyptus trees. We gathered leaves from the trees, which smelled like sweet gum, and piled them to lie on. Roberto and I slept between Papá and Mamá.

The following morning, I woke to the sound of a train whistle. For a split second I thought we were still on the train on our way to California. Spewing black smoke, it passed behind the camp, traveling much faster than the train we had taken from Guadalajara. As I followed it with my eyes, I heard a stranger's voice behind me. It was that of a woman who had stopped by to help. Her name was Lupe Gordillo; she was from the nearby camp. She brought us a few groceries and introduced us to the

camp foreman, who spoke Spanish. He loaned us an army tent, which we pitched with his help. "You're lucky," he said. "This is the last tent we have."

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"When can we start work?" Papá asked, rubbing his hands.

"In two weeks," the foreman answered.

"That can't be!" Papá exclaimed, shaking his head. "We were told we'd find work right away."

"I am sorry, the strawberries won't be ready to pick until then," the foreman responded, shrugging his shoulders and walking away.

After a long silence, Mamá said, "We'll manage, *viejo*. Once work starts, we'll be fine."

Roberto was quiet. He had a sad look in his eyes.

During the next two weeks, Mamá cooked outside on a makeshift stove using rocks and a *comal* Doña Lupe had given her. We ate wild *verdolagas* and rabbit and birds, which Papá hunted with a rifle he borrowed from a neighbor.

To pass the time, Roberto and I watched the trains go by behind the labor camp. We crawled underneath a barbed wire fence to get a closer look at them as they passed by several times a day.

Our favorite train came by every day at noon. It had a distinct whistle. We heard it coming from miles away. Roberto and I called it the Noon Train. Often, we would get there early and play on the railroad tracks while we waited for it. We ran straddling the rails or walked on them as fast as we could to see how far we could go without falling off. We also sat on the rails to feel them vibrate as the train approached. As days went by, we could recognize the conductor from afar. He slowed the train every time it went by and waved at us with his gray-and-white striped cap. We waved back.

One Sunday, Roberto and I crossed the fence earlier than usual to wait for the Noon Train. Roberto didn't feel like playing, so we sat on one of the rails, arms wrapped around our legs, foreheads on our knees. "I wonder where the train comes from," I said. "Do you know, Roberto?"

"I have been wondering too," he answered, slowly lifting his head. "I think it comes from California."

"California!" I exclaimed. "This is California!"

"I am not so sure," he said. "Remember what—"

The familiar Noon Train whistle interrupted him. We stepped off the rail and moved a few feet away from the tracks. The conductor slowed the train to a crawl, waved, and gently dropped a large brown bag in front of us as he went by. We picked it up and looked inside. It was full of oranges, apples, and candy.

"See, it does come from California!" Roberto exclaimed. We ran alongside the train, waving at the conductor. The train sped up and soon left us behind. We followed the rear of the train with our eyes until it got smaller and smaller and disappeared.



# Soledad

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That cold, early morning, Papá parked the *Carcachita*, our old jalopy, at one end of the cotton field. He, Mamá, and Roberto, my older brother, climbed out and headed toward the other end, where the picking started. As usual, they left me alone in the car to take care of Trampita, my little brother, who was six months old. I hated being left by myself with him while they went off to pick cotton.

As they walked farther into the field, I climbed onto the roof of the car, stood on tiptoe, and watched them until I could no longer tell them apart from the other pickers. Once I lost sight of them I felt pain in my chest, that same pain I always felt whenever they left Trampita and me alone. Sobbing, I climbed into the car and wrapped my arms around Trampita, who slept in the back seat. He woke up crying and shivering from the cold. I covered him with a small blanket and gave him his bottle of milk. He calmed down and went back to sleep.

After several long hours, I climbed onto the roof of the car again to see if Papá, Mamá, and Roberto were on their way back for lunch. I looked as far away as I could, without blinking, hoping to spot them. When I finally saw them, my heart started racing. I jumped off the car, fell to the ground, got up, and ran to meet them. I almost knocked Roberto off his feet when I jumped on him.

After checking on Trampita, Mamá and Papá spread a green army blanket on the ground behind the *Carcachita*, where we all sat to eat. Mamá reached into a large grocery bag and pulled out the tacos she had prepared for us at dawn that morning. Papá ate quickly because he did not want to lose time from work. Roberto and I ate slowly, trying to make time last a bit longer. Holding him in her left arm, Mamá nursed Trampita while she ate with her right hand. She then laid him on the back seat of the car, changed his diaper, and kissed him gently on his forehead as he closed his eyes and fell asleep. Papá got up, folded the blanket, and placed it back inside the trunk of the car. He then picked up his empty cotton sack and flipped it over his left shoulder. This was the signal for Roberto and Mamá that it was time to go back to work.

I climbed onto the roof of the *Carcachita* again and watched them disappear into the sea of cotton. My eyes began to cloud up. I climbed off the car and, leaning against the back tire, I sat and thought, "If I learn to pick cotton, Papá will let me go with him, Mamá, and Roberto, and I won't be left alone anymore!"

After checking on Trampita to make sure he was still asleep, I quietly walked over to the row nearest the car and picked cotton for the first time.

It was not as easy as I thought. I tried to pick with both hands, just like Roberto, but could only pick one cotton boll at a time. I held the cotton shells steady from underneath with my left hand while I picked the bolls with my right hand and piled them on the ground. The shells' sharp prongs scratched my hands like cat's claws and, sometimes, dug into the corner of my fingernails and made them bleed. I had trouble reaching the cotton bolls at the very top of the tall plants, so I leaned against the plants and pushed them over with my body until they touched the ground. I then stood on them while I stooped over and picked the cotton bolls. I had to step off to the side quickly because the plants sprang back like a bow, whipping me in the face if I did not move fast enough.

At the end of the day, I was tired and disappointed. I had not picked as much cotton as I had

wanted to. The pile was only about two feet high. Then I remembered Papá saying that we got paid three cents a pound, so I mixed dirt clods with the cotton to make it weigh more.

At dusk, Papá, Mamá, and Roberto finally returned. I was about to tell them my surprise when Mamá interrupted me. "How is Trampita?" she asked, going straight to the car to check on him. When she opened the car door and saw him, she was angry. I had been so busy learning to pick cotton that I had forgotten all about him. Tired from crying, he had fallen asleep after soiling himself and dropping and breaking the bottle of milk. "I told you to take care of Trampita!" Mamá shouted.

"But look what I did," I said, proudly pointing to my pile of cotton.

Mamá glanced at the pile, shook her head in anger, and began cleaning Trampita. Papá looked at my cotton, grinned slightly, and asked Roberto to help him collect it. His grin quickly turned into a frown when he discovered the dirt clods. He separated them from the cotton, pointing them out one by one as he tossed them on the ground. "You should be ashamed of yourself. We could be fired for this," he said. "Besides, your job is to take care of Trampita. Is that clear?" he continued, placing both hands on his belt buckle.

"Sí, *Papá*," I answered timidly. I was hurt and confused. Seeking comfort, I walked over to Roberto and whispered to him, "Someday, I will get to go pick cotton with you, Papá, and Mamá. Then I won't be left alone." Roberto put his arm around me and nodded his head.

# Inside Out

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"I remember being hit on the wrists with a twelve-inch ruler because I did not follow directions in class," Roberto answered in a mildly angry tone when I asked him about his first year of school. "But how could I?" he continued. "The teacher gave them in English."

"So what did you do?" I asked, rubbing my wrists.

"I always guessed what the teacher wanted me to do. And when she did not use the ruler on me, I knew I had guessed right," he responded. "Some of the kids made fun of me when I tried to say something in English and got it wrong," he went on. "I had to repeat first grade."

I wish I had not asked him, but he was the only one in the family, including Papá and Mamá, who had attended school. I walked away. I did not speak or understand English either, and I already felt anxious. Besides, I was excited about going to school for the first time that following Monday. It was late January and we had just returned, a week before, from Corcoran, where my family picked cotton. We settled in Tent City, a labor camp owned by Sheehey Strawberry Farms located about ten miles east of Santa Maria.

On our first day of school, Roberto and I got up early. I dressed in a pair of overalls, which I hated because they had suspenders, and a flannel checked shirt, which Mamá had bought at the Goodwill store. As I put on my cap, Roberto reminded me that it was bad manners to wear a hat indoors. I thought of leaving it at home so that I would not make the mistake of forgetting to take it off in class, but I decided to wear it. Papá always wore a cap, and I did not feel completely dressed for school without it.

On our way out to catch the school bus, Roberto and I said good-bye to Mamá. Papá had already left to look for work, either topping carrots or thinning lettuce. Mamá stayed home to take care of Trampita, and to rest because she was expecting another baby.

When the school bus arrived, Roberto and I climbed in and sat together. I took the window seat and, on the way, watched endless rows of lettuce and cauliflower whiz by. The furrows that came up the two-lane road looked like giant legs running alongside us. The bus made several stops to pick up kids and, with each stop, the noise inside got louder. Some kids were yelling at the top of their lungs. I did not know what they were saying. I was getting a headache. Roberto had his eyes closed and was frowning. I did not disturb him. I figured he was getting a headache too.

By the time we got to Main Street School, the bus was packed. The bus driver parked in front of the red brick building and opened the door. We all poured out. Roberto, who had attended the school the year before, accompanied me to the main office, where we met the principal, Mr. Sims, a tall, red-headed man with bushy eyebrows and hairy hands. He patiently listened to Roberto, who, using the little English he knew, managed to enroll me in the first grade.

Mr. Sims walked me to my classroom. I liked it as soon as I saw it because, unlike our tent, it had wooden floors, electric lights, and heat. It felt cozy. He introduced me to my teacher, Miss Scalapino, who smiled, repeating my name, "Francisco." It was the only word I understood the whole time she and the principal talked. They repeated it each time they glanced at me. After he left, she showed me

to my desk, which was at the end of the row of desks closest to the windows. There were no other kids in the room yet.

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I sat at my desk and ran my hand over its wooden top. It was full of scratches and dark, almost black, ink spots. I opened the top, and inside were a book, a box of crayons, a yellow ruler, a thick pencil, and a pair of scissors. To my left, under the windows, was a dark wooden counter the length of the room. On top of it, right next to my desk, was a caterpillar in a large jar. It looked just like the ones I had seen in the fields. It was yellowish green with black bands and it moved very slowly, without making any sound.

I was about to put my hand in the jar to touch the caterpillar when the bell rang. All the kids lined up outside the classroom door and then walked in quietly and took their seats. Some of them looked at me and giggled. Embarrassed and nervous, I looked at the caterpillar in the jar. I did this every time someone looked at me.

Miss Scalapino started speaking to the class and I did not understand a word she was saying. The more she spoke, the more anxious I became. By the end of the day, I was very tired of hearing Miss Scalapino talk because the sounds made no sense to me. I thought that perhaps by paying close attention, I would begin to understand, but I did not. I only got a headache, and that night, when I went to bed, I heard her voice in my head.

For days I got headaches from trying to listen, until I learned a way out. When my head began to hurt, I let my mind wander. Sometimes I imagined myself flying out of the classroom and over the fields where Papá worked and landing next to him and surprising him. But when I daydreamed, I continued to look at the teacher and pretend I was paying attention because Papá told me it was disrespectful not to pay attention, especially to grownups.

It was easier when Miss Scalapino read to the class from a book with illustrations because I made up my own stories, in Spanish, based on the pictures. She held the book with both hands above her head and walked around the classroom to make sure everyone got a chance to see the pictures, most of which were of animals. I enjoyed looking at them and making up stories, but I wished I understood what she was reading.

In time I learned some of my classmates' names. The one I heard the most and therefore learned first was Curtis. Curtis was the biggest, strongest, and most popular kid in the class. Everyone wanted to be his friend and to play with him. He was always chosen captain when the kids formed teams. Since I was the smallest kid in the class and did not know English, I was chosen last.

I preferred to hang around Arthur, one of the boys who knew a little Spanish. During recess, he and I played on the swings and I pretended to be a Mexican movie star, like Jorge Negrete or Pedro Infante, riding a horse and singing the *corridos* we often heard on the car radio. I sang them to Arthur as we swung back and forth, going as high as we could.

But when I spoke to Arthur in Spanish and Miss Scalapino heard me, she said "No!" with body and soul. Her head turned left and right a hundred times a second, and her index finger moved from side to side as fast as a windshield wiper on a rainy day. "English, English," she repeated. Arthur avoided me whenever she was around.

Often during recess I stayed with the caterpillar. Sometimes it was hard to spot him because he blended in with the green leaves and twigs. Every day I brought him leaves from the pepper and cypress trees that grew on the playground.

Just in front of the caterpillar, lying on top of the cabinet, was a picture book of caterpillars and butterflies. I went through it, page by page, studying all the pictures and running my fingers lightly over the caterpillars and the bright wings of the butterflies and the many patterns on them. I knew caterpillars turned into butterflies because Roberto had told me, but I wanted to know more. I was sure information was in the words written underneath each picture in large black letters. I tried to figure them out by looking at the pictures. I did this so many times that I could close my eyes and see the words, but I could not understand what they meant.

My favorite time in school was when we did art, which was every afternoon, after the teacher had read to us. Since I did not understand Miss Scalapino when she explained the art lessons, she let me do whatever I wanted. I drew all kinds of animals but mostly birds and butterflies. I sketched them in pencil and then colored them using every color in my crayon box. Miss Scalapino even tacked one of my drawings up on the board for everyone to see. After a couple of weeks it disappeared, and I did not know how to ask where it had gone.

One cold Thursday morning, during recess, I was the only kid on the playground without a jacket. Mr. Sims must have noticed I was shivering because that afternoon, after school, he took me to his office and pulled out a green jacket from a large cardboard box that was full of used clothes and toys. He handed it to me and gestured for me to try it on. It smelled like graham crackers. I put it on, but it was too big, so he rolled up the sleeves about two inches to make it fit. I took it home and showed it off to my parents. They smiled. I liked it because it was green and it hid my suspenders.

The next day I was on the playground wearing my new jacket and waiting for the first bell to ring when I saw Curtis coming at me like an angry bull. Aiming his head directly at me, and pulling his arms straight back with his hands clenched, he stomped up to me and started yelling. I did not understand him, but I knew it had something to do with the jacket because he began to pull on it, trying to take it off me. The next thing I knew he and I were on the ground wrestling. Kids circled us, could hear them yelling Curtis's name and something else. I knew I had no chance, but I stubbornly held on to my jacket. He pulled on one of the sleeves so hard that it ripped at the shoulder. He pulled on the right pocket and it ripped. Then Miss Scalapino's face appeared above. She pushed Curtis off of me and grabbed me by the back of the collar and picked me up off the ground. It took all the power I had not to cry.

On the way to the classroom Arthur told me that Curtis claimed the jacket was his, that he had lost it at the beginning of the year. He also said that the teacher told Curtis and me that we were being punished. We had to sit on the bench during recess for the rest of the week. I did not see the jacket again. Curtis got it but I never saw him wear it.

For the rest of the day, I could not even pretend I was paying attention to Miss Scalapino; I was so embarrassed. I laid my head on top of my desk and closed my eyes. I kept thinking about what had happened that morning. I wanted to fall asleep and wake up to find it was only a dream. The teacher called my name but I did not answer. I heard her walk up to me. I did not know what to expect. She gently shook me by the shoulders. Again, I did not respond. Miss Scalapino must have thought I was asleep because she left me alone, even when it was time for recess and everyone left the room.



Once the room was quiet, I slowly opened my eyes. I had had them closed for so long that the sunlight coming through the windows blinded me. I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hands and then looked to my left at the jar. I looked for the caterpillar but could not see it. Thinking it might be hidden, I put my hand in the jar and lightly stirred the leaves. To my surprise, the caterpillar had spun itself into a cocoon and had attached itself to a small twig. It looked like a tiny cotton bulb, just like Roberto had said it would. I gently stroked it with my index finger, picturing it asleep and peaceful.

At the end of the school day, Miss Scalapino gave me a note to take home to my parents. Papá and Mamá did not know how to read, but they did not have to. As soon as they saw my swollen upper lip and the scratches on my left cheek, they knew what the note said. When I told them what happened they were very upset but relieved that I did not disrespect the teacher.

For the next several days, going to school and facing Miss Scalapino was harder than ever. However, I slowly began to get over what happened that Friday. Once I got used to the routine in school and I picked up some English words, I felt more comfortable in class.

On Wednesday, May 23, a few days before the end of the school year, Miss Scalapino took me by surprise. After we were all sitting down and she had taken roll, she called for everyone's attention. I did not understand what she said, but I heard her say my name as she held up a blue ribbon. She then picked up my drawing of the butterfly that had disappeared weeks before and held it up for everyone to see. She walked up to me and handed me the drawing and the silk blue ribbon that had the number one printed on it in gold. I knew then I had received first prize for my drawing. I was so proud I felt like bursting out of my skin. My classmates, including Curtis, stretched their necks to see the ribbon.

That afternoon, during our free period, I went over to check on the caterpillar. I turned the jar around, trying to see the cocoon. It was beginning to crack open. I excitedly cried out, "Look, look," pointing to it. The whole class, like a swarm of bees, rushed over to the counter. Miss Scalapino took the jar and placed it on top of a desk in the middle of the classroom so everyone could see it. For the next several minutes we all stood there watching the butterfly emerge from its cocoon, in slow motion.

At the end of the day, just before the last bell, Miss Scalapino picked up the jar and took the class outside to the playground. She placed the jar on the ground and we all circled around her. I had a hard time seeing over the other kids, so Miss Scalapino called me and motioned for me to open the jar. I broke through the circle, knelt on the ground, and unscrewed the top. Like magic, the butterfly flew into the air, fluttering its wings up and down.

After school I waited in line for my bus in front of the playground. I proudly carried the blue ribbon in my right hand and the drawing in the other. Arthur and Curtis came up and stood behind me to wait for their bus. Curtis motioned for me to show him the drawing again. I held it up so he could see it.

"He really likes it, Francisco," Arthur said to me in Spanish.

"¿Cómo se dice 'es tuyo' en inglés?" I asked.

"It's yours," answered Arthur.

"It's yours," I repeated, handing the drawing to Curtis.

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# Miracle in Tent City

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We called it Tent City. Everybody called it Tent City, although it was neither a city nor a town. It was a farm worker labor camp owned by Sheehey Strawberry Farms.

Tent City had no address; it was simply known as rural Santa Maria. It was on Main Street, about ten miles east of the center of town. Half a mile east of it were hundreds of acres of strawberries cultivated by Japanese sharecroppers and harvested by people from the camp. Behind Tent City was dry wilderness, and a mile north of it was the city dump. Many of the residents in the camp were single men, most of whom, like us, had crossed the border illegally. There were a few single women and a few families, all Mexican.

Mamá was already expecting when we moved to Tent City from Corcoran at the end of January, after the cotton season was over. By May, when the strawberry harvest started, she was only a few weeks away from giving birth, so she did not join Papá in the fields picking strawberries for Ito. She could not bend over, and picking on her knees was too hard on her.

To make ends meet, Mamá cooked for twenty farm workers who lived in Tent City. She made their lunches and had supper ready for them when they returned from picking strawberries at the end of the day. She would get up at four o'clock every morning, seven days a week, to make the tortillas for both meals. On weekends and all during the summer, Roberto and I helped her. Once Papá left for work, Roberto rolled the tacos while I wrapped them in wax paper and put them in lunch bags. At eleven-thirty, Roberto carried the twenty lunches in a box and delivered them, on foot, to the workers who were given half an hour for lunch. When he returned, he and I washed dishes in a large aluminum tub. We then took care of our younger brother, Trampita, while Mamá took a nap. Around three o'clock she would start cooking dinner, which was served from six to seven. After supper, Roberto and I again cleaned the pots and washed dishes while Mamá fed Trampita. On Saturdays, she did all of the grocery shopping for the week. Because we did not have an icebox, Papá made one. Every three days, he went into town to buy a large block of ice, which he wrapped in burlap and placed inside a hole he dug in the ground by the entrance to our tent. The hole was twice as large as the block of ice, leaving room on all four sides and on top for things to be kept cold.

Even though Mamá was always tired from all the work she did, she made sure everything was ready for the new baby. She asked Papá to seal the base of the tent by piling extra dirt, about six inches high, all around it outside so that animals, especially snakes, could not crawl underneath during the night. When Papá had finished, Mamá pleaded with him to build a floor. He agreed, and every evening after he came home from work, he sent Roberto and me to the city dump to look for discarded lumber to build a floor inside our tent.

Our trip to the dump was always an adventure. We waited until dusk, after the dump caretaker left, before raiding for treasures because we had no money to buy them. When he went home in the evenings, the caretaker locked the more valuable items, such as used clothing, car parts, and broken lamps, in a makeshift shed. The larger pieces—mattresses, box springs, broken pieces of furniture—he left outside, leaning against the storehouse. Besides lumber, I collected books, hoping to read them once I learned how. My favorites were those with pictures.

Late one evening, thinking the caretaker had left, Roberto and I sneaked into the dump. The dump

keeper, who had hidden behind one of the mounds of rubbish, took us by surprise. He chased us, yelling and cursing in broken Spanish. We were scared and went home empty-handed that night, but we went back several more times until we got enough lumber to complete Mamá's floor. We also found pieces of linoleum and laid them over the wood to cover the holes and slivers. The different shapes and colors made the floor look like a quilt.

On one of our trips we found a large wooden box that became the crib for the new baby. Mamá took an old green army blanket, tore it in half, and lined the box with it. She made a little pillow with stuffing from an old mattress and cloth from a white flour sack.

Mamá also made sure the entrance to our tent was always closed to keep out the smoke and odor from the camp's garbage dump, located directly in front of our tent, twenty yards away. It was a large rectangular hole dug in the dirt, about six feet long by four feet wide and three feet deep. On windy days, the foul smell of the city dump competed with the stench of the Tent City dump. The older neighborhood kids killed snakes and threw them in the garbage hole when it was burning and watched them sizzle and squirm. I could not figure out why they twisted and turned in the fire after they were dead. It was as though the fire brought them back to life. Once Trampita got too close to the garbage hole and fell in. Roberto pulled him out. Luckily it was not burning. From then on, Papá did not let us play near it.

When the baby was finally born, Roberto, Trampita, and I were excited to see him, especially because we had worked so hard to get things ready for him. Papá and Mamá named him Juan Manuel but we all called him Torito, or little bull, because he weighed ten pounds at birth. He had a chubby, round face and curly brown hair. I thought the nickname Torito fitted him because he had a strong grip. I would put two of my fingers in his tiny hand, and when I tried pulling away, he would not let go and would kick with both feet. When Mamá nursed him, he closed his eyes and played with her hair. Whenever I changed his diaper, I made him laugh by tickling his stomach.

I liked playing with Torito because he was always cheerful, and because he helped me forget about the report card I got in early June, a few days before he was born. Miss Scalapino, my first-grade teacher, said I had to repeat her class because I did not know English.

About two months after he was born, Torito got sick. I knew there was something wrong with him when he cried off and on all during the night. The next morning when I tickled him he did not even smile. He looked pale. Mamá, who had not slept much that night either, touched his forehead.

"I think Torito has a fever," she said, a bit flustered. "Please look after him while Roberto and I prepare the lunches."

I touched my forehead and then Torito's to see if I could tell the difference. His felt a lot hotter. I then changed his soiled diaper. It smelled terrible. That afternoon, Mamá had to change him often. His thighs and bottom got as red as the back of Papá's sunburned neck. By the afternoon of the following day, the aluminum tub was almost filled with soiled diapers. To rinse them, I got water in a bucket from the faucet, which was located a few feet from the outhouse in the middle of the camp. Luckily, I did not have to wait in line too long. Only one woman, with two buckets, was ahead of me. Once she finished, I filled my bucket and carried it back to our tent. I poured the water in the diaper tub and rinsed the diapers with my right hand while I held my nose with my left. Mamá then heated water in a pot, poured it into another tub, washed the diapers on a washboard, and hung them up to dry outside of

a clothesline Papá made.

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Mamá bathed Torito in cold water several times a day, trying to bring his fever down, but it did not do any good. In the evenings we prayed for him in front of a faded picture of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, which was tied with string to the canvas wall above the mattress.

One night as we were praying, Torito got worse. He stiffened and clenched his arms and legs, and his eyes rolled back. Saliva dribbled from both sides of his mouth. His lips turned purple. He stopped breathing. Thinking he was dead, I started crying hysterically. Roberto and Mamá did too. Trampita got scared and began to whimper. Papá tried to pry open Torito's mouth but could not. His jaws were locked. Mamá picked him up from the box and held him tightly against her chest. "Please God, don't take him away, please," Mamá repeated over and over again. Torito slowly began to breathe. His arms and legs relaxed. I could see the brown color of his eyes again. We all sighed with relief, wiping our tears with the backs of our hands and crying and laughing at the same time.

No one slept well that night. Torito woke up crying several times. The next morning, Mamá's eyes were puffy and red. She took a lot longer than usual to make the tortillas and the lunches. After Papá left for work, and Roberto and I washed the dishes, Mamá kept her eyes glued on Torito. She gave him water and tried to nurse him, but she was not producing enough milk, so she prepared him a bottle. By the afternoon, she could hardly keep her head up. Roberto and I convinced her to take a nap while we took care of Torito.

Mamá had trouble falling asleep. When she finally did, Torito started crying. She jumped out of bed, picked him up in her arms, and rocked him, trying to calm him. Once he quieted down, she asked Roberto and me to clean the beans to cook for supper. "That's all we'll have tonight," she said apologetically, "*frijoles de la olla*. I hope the boarders won't mind."

"They won't," I responded, placing the bean pot on the kerosene stove.

That evening, after supper, Mamá laid Torito on the mattress to change him. When she pulled the front of the soiled diaper off and saw blood, she screamed at Papá, "*Viejo*, he is getting worse! Look, there's blood in his stool!"

Papá rushed over and knelt on the mattress next to Torito, who started to moan. He felt Torito's forehead and stomach. "He still has a fever," Papá said pensively. "His stomach feels hard. Maybe it's something he ate. If he doesn't get better soon, we'll have to take him to the hospital."

"But we don't have any money," Mamá responded, sobbing and looking sadly at Torito.

"We'll borrow, or ... something," Papá said, putting his right arm around Mamá's shoulder.

Papá was about to continue when Doña María, our next door neighbor, interrupted him. "Can I come in?" she asked, poking her head in the entrance to our tent.

Doña María was known in Tent City as *la curandera* because she had a gift for curing people using different herbs and chants. She was tall and slender and always wore black dresses that matched the color of her straight, long hair. Her skin was ruddy and pockmarked, and her eyes were deep set and light green. Tied around her waist was a small, purple velvet bag that jingled when she walked.

"Come in," Papá answered.

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"I've been hearing your baby cry," Doña María continued. "What's wrong with him?"

"We don't know," Mamá answered.

"Could it be the evil eye?" asked Doña María, holding the velvet bag in the palm of her left hand. "He is a very handsome child."

"*¿El mal de ojo?* No, I think it's his stomach. It's as hard as a rock. Feel it," Papá responded, bringing the kerosene lamp closer to Torito so she could get a better look at him.

Doña María gently rubbed Torito's stomach with her bony right hand. As soon as she pressed down on it, he groaned and started to cry. She turned him over on his stomach and with her left hand pulled up a fold of skin from his back and then released it. After doing this three times, she flipped him over on his back and asked Mamá to bring her three eggs. She cracked the eggs on his stomach and massaged him gently with them. "The eggs will draw out his sickness," she said confidently. Torito stopped crying. Mamá seemed relieved, but I was not. There was something about *la curandera* that made me nervous.

Moments after Doña María left, just as we were getting ready for bed, Torito started moaning. Then he suddenly stopped. There was dead silence. We all looked at each other and rushed to his side. He was as stiff as a board and had stopped breathing. His eyes were rolled back. Mamá started weeping. Like Roberto and Trampita, I cried too. I felt very scared. *Perhaps Doña María made him worse*, I thought.

Papá quickly picked up Torito, wrapped him in a blanket, and yelled, "*¡Vieja, vamos al hospital!*" He and Mamá ran out and took off in the *Carcachita*. Roberto, Trampita, and I stood there crying.

I thought I would never see Torito again. Frightened and confused I walked outside. It was pitch dark and quiet. I went behind our tent, knelt down on rocky ground, and prayed for Torito for a very long time, until my parents returned.

As soon as I heard the *Carcachita*, I got up from my knees and ran to the front of the tent to meet them. When I saw Mamá and Papá without Torito, I panicked. "Is he dead?" I cried out.

"No, Panchito; calm down," Papá answered. "We left him at the hospital."

"Is he going ... to die?" I stammered.

"No, he isn't," Mamá snapped. "God won't let him. You'll see," she added in a harsh tone. Her face was flushed and her dark eyes were full of tears. I was surprised and puzzled. Why would she be angry at me?

That night I had trouble sleeping, thinking about Torito. Mamá and Papá did not sleep either. I heard Mamá sobbing every time I woke up and saw Papá smoking one cigarette after another.

Early the next morning, Mamá said she was going to drive Papá to work. I thought it was strang

because Papá always took the car to go pick strawberries. Besides, it was only five-thirty. Papá did not have to be at work until seven, and it only took a few minutes to get there. "I'll be right back," Mamá said, looking at Roberto and me. "Be sure to take care of Trampita."

I followed my parents to the car and as Mamá was about to get in it, I asked, "Can we go see Torito when you get back?" Mamá closed the car door without answering and sped off. Roberto and I went back in the tent. We did not say a word to each other, but each of us knew what the other was thinking. We knelt side by side on the mattress, in front of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, and prayed silently.

I was worried and irritated by the time Mamá returned. It was around eleven. "Where were you?" I asked angrily. "I want to go see Torito."

"Only if God wills it," she said sadly, putting her arms around Roberto and me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Torito is very sick," she replied. "He has a rare disease that may be catching. That's why you can't see him."

"But you went to see him this morning, didn't you?" I responded, raising my voice. "That's why you took so long, right?"

"Sí, *mi'jo*," she answered, "but they won't let children in to see him. You can see him when he comes home."

"When is that?" Roberto and I asked at the same time.

"Soon, probably," she answered hesitantly.

I had a feeling Mamá was not telling us all she knew.

After preparing supper, Mamá went to pick up Papá from work. When they got home, Papá looked very upset and anxious. I waited for them to talk about Torito, but they did not say a word about him. And as soon as dinner was over, they left for the hospital. After Roberto and I cleaned the dishes, I went outside, behind our tent, and prayed on my knees again. But only for a little while. I hurried inside when I heard Doña María chanting next door.

When Papá and Mamá returned from the hospital, Mamá's arms were empty. Roberto and I looked at each other in disappointment. "Torito is a little better, but we can't bring him home until tomorrow," she said, teary-eyed and with a feigned smile. Then taking a deep breath, and looking at Roberto, Trampita, and me, she continued, "We have to pray to the *Santo Niño de Atocha* because—"

"Yes," Papá interrupted, taking out his wallet and pulling out a tattered holy card. "Your Mamá and I have made a promise to *el Santo Niño*." Then holding the card in the palm of his right hand and looking at it, he continued, "We'll pray to him every day, for a whole year, if Torito gets well."

Papá then took a pin from a small tin box where Mamá kept her sewing things and pinned the card to the canvas wall, above the mattress, next to the picture of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*.

On the holy card was a picture of the little Jesus of Atocha sitting on a high wooden chair. He wore sandals, a blue cloak, a short, brown cape, and a brimmed hat to match. In his right hand he carried a basket and in his left hand a wooden staff.

We all knelt in front of the *Santo Niño* to pray. Mamá always prayed to him whenever one of us got sick because she said the Holy Child Jesus took care of poor and sick people, especially children. The late hour and the repetition of the prayers made me sleepy.

That night I dreamed about the *Santo Niño de Atocha*. I was behind our tent, praying on my knees in front of the baby Jesus holy card. Suddenly the *Santo Niño* came alive. He stood up from his chair and floated in the air, carrying the basket. He glided to where I was and placed the basket at my feet and pointed to it. Out of the basket emerged hundreds of tiny white butterflies. They formed themselves into a pair of wings, lifting me and carrying me away over Tent City and setting me down next to my Torito, who lay in the middle of a lush-green alfalfa field. In the dream I awoke and looked at the prayer card. Torito was in it, sitting in the high chair, dressed as the *Santo Niño de Atocha*.

The next morning, when I told Mamá about my dream, she decided to make Torito an outfit, just like the one the *Santo Niño de Atocha* was wearing in the picture prayer card. Instead of taking a nap after she made the lunches, she started sewing a cloak using the fabric from one of her blue dresses. She finished it that evening, just in time to go get Torito from the hospital.

Later that night, when Mamá and Papá returned with Torito from the hospital, he was wearing the blue cloak Mamá had made him, but he did not look like the *Santo Niño* in the holy card. Torito was pale and skinny. He moaned when I tickled him. "Mamá, is Torito still sick?" I asked.

"Yes, *mi'jo*," she responded, "that's why we have to keep on praying."

"But didn't the doctor take care of him?"

Mamá turned her back to me and did not respond. I looked at Papá, who was pacing up and down wringing his hands. After a long moment of silence, he said, "Remember, we have to keep our promise and pray to *el Santo Niño* every day, for a whole year."

That night, and every night for an entire year, we all prayed to *el Santo Niño de Atocha* as we followed the crops from place to place. During that time, Mamá dressed Torito in the blue cloak and only took it off when it needed to be washed.

On August 17, the day we completed the promise to *el Santo Niño*, we all gathered around Torito who sat on Mamá's lap. His chubby, rosy cheeks made him look like a cherub.

"I have something to tell you," Mamá said teary-eyed as she took off his cloak. "When we took Torito to the hospital, the doctor told us my son would die because we had waited too long to take him there. He said it would take a miracle for him to live. I didn't want to believe him," she continued, gaining strength as she talked. "But he was right. It took a miracle."



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