

# *The Circuit*

## One

### Under the Wire

“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, in 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 any more, 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."

"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.”

“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.

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