

Ten

Moving Still

For days, when I got home from school, I found Papá lying flat and complaining about not being able to pick cotton because his back was killing him. He often talked about leaving Corcoran and going back to Santa Maria, but he kept changing his mind, hoping to get better. He constantly worried that we would not have enough money saved at the end of the cotton season to carry us over the winter months. It was already the end of December, and Roberto, my older brother, was the only one working. Mamá stayed home to take care of Papá, Rorra, and Rubén. My other two younger brothers, Torito and Trampita, went to school with me, and on weekends, when it did not rain, we went to work with Roberto. The only cotton left for us to harvest was la bola, the leftovers from the first picking, which paid one and a half cents a pound.

But one day when I got home, Papá did not complain about anything, not even his back. As soon as I entered the cabin, he strained to straighten up from the mattress that lay on the floor and exclaimed, “Mi’jo, are you all right?”

“Sí, Papá,” I responded, wondering why he looked so worried.

“Gracias a Dios,” he said. “La migra swept through the camp about an hour ago, and I didn’t know if the immigration officers searched your school too.”

Mamá must have noticed the fright in my eyes when I heard the word “migra” because she immediately came and hugged me.

That word evoked fear ever since the immigration raid in Tent City, a labor camp in Santa Maria where we sometimes lived. It was a Saturday, late afternoon. I was playing marbles with Trampita in front of our tent when I heard someone holler, “¡La migra! ¡La migra!” I looked over my shoulder and saw several vans screech to a halt, blocking the entrance to the camp. The vans’ doors flew open. Out dashed armed men dressed in green uniforms. They invaded the camp, moving through tents, searching for undocumented workers who ran into the wilderness behind the camp, trying to escape. Many, like Doña María, la curandera, were caught, herded, and hauled away in the Border Patrol vehicles. A few managed to get away. We were lucky. Mamá and Roberto had gone to town to buy groceries. Papá showed the officers his “green card” that Ito had helped him get, and they did not ask about Trampita or me.

When Roberto came home from work that evening, Papá and Mamá were relieved to see him. “You didn’t see la migra?” Papá asked.

“It came to our camp but missed us,” Mamá said, rubbing her hands together.

“It didn’t come to the field,” Roberto responded.

“So you didn’t go out with la migra,” Papá said jokingly, trying to ease the tension.

Roberto went along with Papá’s joke. “No, Papá, she’s not my type,” he answered.

We all laughed nervously.

When Papá stopped laughing and bit his lower lip, I knew what was coming. “You have to be careful,” he warned us, waving his index finger at Roberto and me. “You can’t tell a soul you were born in Mexico. You can’t trust anyone, not even your best friends. If they know, they can turn you in.” I had heard those words so many times, I had memorized them. “Now, where were you born, Panchito?” he asked in a firm tone, giving me a piercing look.

“Colton, California,” I answered. “Good, mi’jo,” he said.

Roberto then handed Papá the money he had earned that day.

Papá clenched his fists, looked away toward the wall, and said, “I am useless; I can’t work; I can’t feed my family; I can’t even protect you from la migra.”

“Don’t say that, Papá,” Roberto answered. “You know that’s not so.”

Papá glanced at Roberto, lowered his eyes, and asked me to bring him the small, silver metal box where he kept our savings. When I brought it, he sat up slightly, opened it, and counted the money inside. “If I work in Santa Maria, we might be able get through this winter with what we’ve saved,” he said worriedly. “But what if my back won’t let me?”

“Don’t worry, Papá,” Roberto responded. “Panchito and I can find work in Santa Maria thinning lettuce and topping carrots.”

Seeing this as a chance to persuade my father to leave Corcoran, and knowing I was anxious to return to Santa Maria, Mamá winked at me and said to Papá, “Roberto is right, viejo. Let’s leave. Besides, the immigration may come around again. It’s safer living in Santa Maria.”

After a long pause, Papá finally said, “You’re right. We’ll go back to Bonetti Ranch, tomorrow morning.”

Like swallows returning to Capistrano, we would return to our nest, Bonetti Ranch in Santa Maria, every year after the cotton season was over in Corcoran. The ranch became our temporary home. We had lived there in barracks eight months out of the year, from January through August, ever since Tent City, the farm labor camp, had been torn down. The ranch was located on East Main Street but had no address. Most of the residents were Mexican field laborers who were American

citizens or had immigrant visas like Papá. This made the ranch relatively safe from Border Patrol raids.

I was so excited about going back to Bonetti Ranch that I was the first one up the following morning. After we packed our belongings and loaded them into the car, we headed south to Santa Maria. I could hardly contain myself. Roberto and Trampita were excited too. I imagined this was how kids felt when they talked about going away on vacation. Papá could not drive because of his back pain, so Roberto drove. The trip took about five hours, but it seemed like five days to me. Sitting in the back seat, I opened the window and stuck my head out, looking for road signs saying SANTA MARIA. “Can’t you go faster?” I asked impatiently, poking Roberto in the back.

“Sure, if you want us to get a ticket,” he responded.

“That’s all we need,” Papá said, chuckling. “If that happens, we may just as well turn ourselves in to la migra.”

I immediately closed the window and sat back without saying a word.

After traveling for a couple of hours, Mamá suggested we stop to have lunch, which she had prepared that morning. I was hungry, but I did not want to waste time. “We can eat in the car,” I said, hoping my little sister and brothers would go along with my idea.

“What about Roberto? He can’t eat and drive,” Papá responded.

We stopped by the side of the road to eat. Papá slowly got out of the car, holding on to Roberto’s arm and mine. He lay on the ground and stretched his back. I gobbled my two-egg-and-chorizo tacos and, making sure Papá was not looking, signaled to Roberto to hurry. “Ya pues, Panchito,” he said, a bit annoyed. “I am almost finished.”

After lunch we continued our trip. The closer we got to Santa Maria, the more excited I became because I knew where we were going to live for the next several months. I especially looked forward to seeing some of my classmates in the eighth grade at El Camino Junior High. I had not seen them since last June when school ended. I wonder if they’ll remember me? I thought to myself.

As we drove by Nipomo, the last town before Santa Maria, my heart started pounding. And as soon as I saw the Santa Maria bridge, which marked the entrance to the city limits, I yelled out, “We’re here! We’re here!” Trampita and Torito also began to cheer and woke up Rubén, who had fallen asleep. Mamá looked at us and laughed.

“Se han vuelto locos,” Papá said, smiling and gesturing with his hand that we had gone crazy.

Once we crossed the cement bridge, which went over a dry riverbed for a quarter of a mile, I stretched my neck and tried to pinpoint the location of Bonetti Ranch. I knew it was near

where Tent City used to be, about a mile south of the city dump.

The highway became Broadway and went right through the center of the town. When we got to Main Street, Roberto turned left and drove east for about ten miles. Along the way, I kept pointing out places I recognized: Main Street School; Kress, the five-and-dime store; the Texaco gas station where we got our drinking water; and the hospital where Torito stayed when he got sick. We then crossed Suey Road, which marked the end of the city limits and the beginning of hundreds of acres of recently planted lettuce and carrots.

When we turned into Bonetti Ranch, I noticed nothing had changed from the year before. We were greeted by dozens of stray dogs. Roberto had to slow down the Carcachita to a crawl to avoid hitting them, and to dodge the deep potholes in the dirt path that circled the front of the barracks. A few of the dogs belonged to the residents, but most of them had no owners. They slept underneath the dwellings and ate whatever they found in the garbage. But they were never alone. They were plagued by hundreds of bloodthirsty fleas. I felt sorry for them and wondered if they were bothered by the fleas as much as I was when they invaded our bed at night.

The barracks were still the same. Mr. Bonetti, the owner, continued to ignore them. Looking like victims of a war, the dwellings had broken windows, parts of walls missing, and large holes in the roofs. Scattered throughout the ranch were old, rusty pieces of farm machinery. In the middle of the ranch was a large storehouse where Mr. Bonetti kept lumber,

boxes of nails, and other building supplies that he planned to use someday.

We rented and moved into the same barrack we had lived in the previous year. We covered the gaps between wallboards with paper, painted the inside, and covered the kitchen floor using paint and pieces of linoleum we found at the city dump. We had electricity. And even though we could not drink the water because it was oily and smelled like sulphur, we used it for bathing. We heated it in a pot on the stove and poured it into the large aluminum container that we used for a bathtub. To get drinking water, we took our five-gallon bottle and filled it at the Texaco gas station downtown. Along the front edge of our barrack, Roberto planted red, pink, and white geraniums. Around them, he built a fence and painted it, also using supplies from the city dump.

To the right of our house, a few yards away, stood three large empty oil barrels that served as garbage cans for the residents. Mr. Bonetti periodically burned the garbage and hauled the remains to the city dump in his truck. Behind our barrack was the outhouse that we shared with two other families. Sometimes, on rainy days, the earth underneath would shift and tilt the toilet to one side, making it difficult to balance inside. Mr. Bonetti nailed a rope to the side wall inside to give us something to hold on to.

The week after we arrived in Santa Maria, we enrolled in school. Roberto started the tenth grade at Santa Maria High School for the first time that year; Trampita and Torito resumed elementary school at Main Street School. At El

Camino Junior High, I continued the eighth grade, which I had started in Corcoran the first week of November, after the grape season was over. Rubén and Rorra were still too young for school. Mamá stayed home to take care of them.

Even though this was my first time in the eighth grade at El Camino, I did not feel too nervous. I remembered a few of the kids in my class because they had been in my seventh-grade class the year before. Some I hardly recognized. They had grown taller, especially the boys. I had stayed the same, four feet eleven inches. I was one of the smallest kids in the school.

I liked my two teachers. I had Mr. Milo for math and science in the mornings and Miss Ehlis for English, history, and social studies in the afternoons. In history, we concentrated on the U.S. government and the Constitution. I enjoyed Mr. Milo's class the most because I did better in math than in English. Every Thursday Mr. Milo gave us a math quiz, and the following day he arranged our desks according to how well we did on the test. The student with the highest score had the honor of sitting in the front seat, first row. Sharon Ito, the daughter of the Japanese sharecropper for whom we picked strawberries during the summer, and I alternated taking the first seat, although she sat in it more often than I did. I was glad we did not have the same seating arrangement for English!

As days went by, Papá's back did not get better, and neither did his mood. Mamá, Roberto, and I took turns massaging him with Vicks VapoRub. When he was not complaining

about not being able to work, he lay in bed, motionless, with an empty look in his eyes. He took a lot of aspirins, ate very little, and hardly slept during the night. During the day, when he was exhausted, he took short naps.

Early one evening, when Papá had dozed off, Mamá took Roberto and me aside. “I don’t think your Papá can work in the fields anymore,” she said, rubbing her hands on her apron. “What are we going to do?”

After a long pause, Roberto answered, “I’ve been thinking about getting a job in town. I am tired of working in the fields.”

“Yes, a job that is year-round,” Mamá said.

“That’s a good idea!” I said enthusiastically. “Then we won’t have to move to Fresno again.”

“Maybe Mr. Sims can help me,” Roberto said.

“Who’s Mr. Sims?” Mamá asked.

“He’s the principal of Main Street School,” I answered. “Remember? He gave me a green jacket.”

Trying to help her memory, Roberto added, “He also bought me a pair of shoes when he saw mine were worn out. I was in the sixth grade.”

“Ah, sí. Es muy buena gente,” Mamá said, finally recalling who he was.

Mr. Sims agreed to help Roberto find a part-time job in town. He told my brother he would let him know when he found something. Meanwhile, Roberto and I continued working, thinning lettuce and topping carrots, after school and on Saturdays and Sundays.

Several days later, Mr. Sims told Roberto that he had found a job for him. He set up an appointment for my brother to see the owner of the Buster Brown Shoe Store on Broadway that Saturday afternoon. Roberto, Mamá, and I were very excited.

Early Saturday morning, Roberto and I headed for work thinning lettuce. As he drove, Roberto could not stop talking about his new job at the shoe store. His appointment that afternoon seemed a long time away. To make the hours in the field go by faster, we decided to challenge ourselves. We marked a spot in our rows, about a third of the way in, to see if we could reach it without straightening up.

“Ready? Go!” Roberto said.

I stooped over and began thinning with my six-inch hoe. After about twenty minutes without rest I could no longer stand the pain in my back. I dropped to my knees and continued thinning without stopping. As soon as I reached the marked spot, I fell over. Roberto did too. “We did it,” I said out of breath. “But my back is killing me.” To ease the pain, I lay flat on my stomach in the furrow and Roberto pressed down on my back with his hands. I felt relief as my spine cracked.

“You’re getting old, Panchito. Let’s rest,” Roberto said, laughing. I chuckled between moans.

Roberto lay on his stomach next to me. I turned over on my back and looked up at the gray sky. The dark clouds threatened rain.

“I am tired of moving every year,” Roberto said, picking up small dirt clods and tossing them.

“Me too,” I said. Then, following a moving cloud with my eyes, I asked, “Do you ever wonder what we’ll be doing ten or twenty years from now? Or where we’ll be living?”

Looking around to make sure no one was listening, Roberto whispered, “If we don’t get deported . . .” Then he added confidently, “In Santa Maria, of course. I can’t imagine living anywhere else. What about you?”

Recalling the different labor camps we lived in, I answered, “I don’t want to live in Selma, Visalia, Bakersfield, or Corcoran.” After thinking about it for a while, I said, “I like Santa Maria. So if you decide to live here forever, I will too.”

Right after lunch, Roberto left work to clean up and keep his appointment. I continued working and thinking about Roberto’s new job. Every few minutes I straightened up to give my back a rest. “This is our chance to stay in Santa Maria all year and not move to Fresno to pick grapes and miss school,” I said to myself. The more I thought about the idea, the more excited I became. Perhaps Roberto will get me a job

at the shoe store too, I thought. “How about that, Buster Brown!” I said out loud, flipping the hoe in the air and catching it by the handle. Just as I finished my row, it started to rain. I ran for cover under a pepper tree and waited for Roberto.

When he returned to pick me up, his mood was darker than the sky. “What’s the matter?” I asked. “You didn’t get the job?”

Roberto shook his head. “No, I got the job,” he said. “But not working at the store.”

“Doing what then?” I asked impatiently.

“Cutting his lawn. Once a week,” Roberto answered sadly. His lips quivered.

“Oh, no!” I exclaimed, throwing my hoe on the ground in anger.

Roberto cleared his throat, wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve, and said, “I am going to see Mr. Sims after school on Monday. Maybe he can suggest something else.” He picked up my hoe and handed it to me. “Don’t lose faith, Panchito,” he said, putting his arm around me. “Things will work out.”

On Monday morning, my mind was not on school. I kept worrying about Papá and thinking about Roberto. “I hope he gets a job,” I thought. “But what if he doesn’t? No, he will,” I said to myself.

To make things worse, that afternoon Miss Ehliis gave our class an assignment I was not expecting. “I am passing out an important part of the Declaration of Independence that I want you to memorize,” she said, counting the number of sheets to hand out in each row. Her announcement evoked a series of moans and groans from the class. “Now, there is no need for that,” she said smiling. “The part I want you to know by heart is very short.” Once everyone had the sheet of paper, she read the first few lines to the class:

’“ We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. ’

You see, it’s not difficult. You can recite it to me independently or, for extra credit, in front of the class.”

We were to let her know our preference the following week. For me, there was only one choice – to recite it to her privately. I did not want to get in front of the class and risk being laughed at because of my Mexican pronunciation. I know I had a thick accent – not because I heard it myself – but because kids sometimes made fun at me when I spoke English. I could not take the chance of having this happen in front of the whole class, even though I wanted to get the extra credit.

That afternoon after school, I took the bus home. On the way, I tried to memorize the lines of the *Declaration of Independence*, but I had trouble concentrating. I kept wondering what Mr. Sims told Roberto. When I got home and saw the Carcachita, I knew Roberto was already there. I rushed in. Papá, Mamá, and Roberto were sitting at the kitchen table.

“What happened? Tell me!” I said excitedly.

“What do you think?” Roberto asked, trying to conceal his smile.

I glanced at Papá and Mamá. They were beaming.

“You got the job!” I cried out.

“Yes. Mr. Sims offered me the janitorial job at Main Street School,” he answered, grinning from ear to ear.

“It’s a year-round job,” Mamá said, looking at Papá.

Being careful with his back, Papá stood up slowly and hugged her gently. He then turned to Roberto and said, “Education pays off, mi’jo. I am proud of you. Too bad your Mamá and I didn’t have the opportunity to go to school.”

“But you’ve taught us a lot, Papá,” I answered. I had not seen Papá that happy for weeks.

After supper, I sat at the table to do my homework. I was so excited about Roberto's new job that it was difficult to focus. But I was determined to memorize the lines from the *Declaration of Independence* and recite them perfectly, without forgetting a single word. I took the text and broke it down, line by line. I looked up in the dictionary the words I did not know: *self-evident, endowed, inalienable, and pursuit*. I added them to the list of English words I kept in my new, black pocket note pad. I had gotten in the habit of writing down a different English word and its definition every day and memorizing it. After I looked up the meaning of the words, I wrote the entire text in my note pad in tiny letters:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

I went over the first line many times until I memorized it. My plan was to memorize at least one line a day so that I could recite it on Friday of the following week.

On Wednesday after school, Roberto drove to El Camino Junior High to pick me up so that I could help him clean Main Street School. It was starting to rain. When we arrived at the school, we headed down to the basement to the janitor's room to get the cleaning cart. It held a large cloth trash bag, a dust broom, a sponge, and toilet supplies.

As we entered the first classroom we were to clean, it brought back memories. It was the same room I had been in in the first grade, when I had Miss Scalapino. Everything looked the same except that the desks and chairs seemed a lot smaller. I

sat down at the teacher's desk, took out my note pad, and read the second and third lines I needed to memorize:

“They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

I went over to the cart, picked up the wet sponge, and began wiping the blackboard as I recited the lines in my head. Thunder and lightning interrupted my concentration. I looked out the window. It was pouring rain. Through the reflection on the windowpane, I could see Roberto behind me dust-mopping the floor.

By Friday, I had memorized the introductory lines to the *Declaration of Independence* and could recite them with relative ease. Only the word *inalienable* caused me problems. I had trouble saying it, so I broke it into syllables and repeated each sound slowly, followed by the whole word. On my way to school on the bus, I took out the black note pad from my shirt pocket, closed my eyes, and practiced saying “in-a-li-en-a-ble” silently to myself.

The kid sitting next to me gave me a puzzled look and asked, “Are you trying to say something?” His question took me by surprise.

“No,” I answered. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, you keep moving your lips.”

A bit embarrassed, I told him what I was doing. I don't think he believed me because he stared at the note pad I was holding in my hand, mumbled, and changed seats.

The school day started out just right. In the morning, Mr. Milo returned the math exams to the class and asked us to rearrange our seats according to our scores. I sat in the first seat in the first row. This was definitely a good sign. I even looked forward to my recitation in Miss Ehlis's class that afternoon.

At one o'clock, right after lunch, I was the first one in Miss Ehlis's classroom. I sat at my desk and went over the recitation in my mind one last time:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

I checked the text in my note pad to make sure I had not forgotten anything. It was perfect. Feeling confident, I placed the note pad inside the desk and waited for the class to start.

After the bell rang and everyone was seated, Miss Ehlis began to take roll. She was interrupted by a knock at the door. When she opened it, I could see Mr. Denevi, the principal, and a man standing behind him. The instant I saw the green uniform, I panicked. I wanted to run, but my legs would not move. I began to tremble and could feel my heart pounding against my chest as though it wanted to escape too. Miss Ehlis and the immigration officer walked up to me. Putting her

hand on my shoulder, and looking up at the officer, she said sadly, “This is him.” My eyes clouded. I stood up and followed the immigration officer out of the classroom and into his car marked “Border Patrol.”

I sat in the front seat as the officer drove down Broadway to Santa Maria High School to pick up Roberto.

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