

## Eleven

### Forced Out

I lived in constant fear for ten long years, from the time I was four until I was fourteen years old. It all started back in the late 1940s when Papá, Mamá, my older brother, Roberto, and I left El Rancho Blanco, a small village nestled on barren, dry hills several miles north of Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, and headed to California, hoping to leave our life of poverty behind.

I remember how excited I was making the trip on a second-class train, traveling north from Guadalajara to Mexicali. We traveled for two days and nights. When we arrived at the United States-Mexico border, Papá told us that we had to cross the barbed wire fence without being seen by la migra, the immigration officers dressed in green uniforms.

During the night, we dug a hole underneath the wire wall and wiggled like snakes under it to the other side. “If anyone asks you where you were born,” Papá said firmly, “tell them Colton, California. If la migra catches you, they’ll send you back to Mexico.”

We were picked up by a woman whom Papá had contacted in Mexicali. She drove us, for a fee, to a tent labor camp on the outskirts of Guadalupe, a small town on the coast.

From that day on, for the next ten years, while we traveled from place to place throughout California, following the crops and living in migrant labor camps, I feared being caught by the Border Patrol. As I got older, my fear of being deported grew.

I did not want to return to Mexico because I liked going to school, even though it was difficult for me, especially English class. I enjoyed learning, and I knew there was no school in El Rancho Blanco.

Every year Roberto and I missed months of school to help Papá and Mamá work in the fields. We struggled to make ends meet, especially during the winter, when work was scarce. Things got worse when Papá began to have back problems and had trouble picking crops.

Luckily, in the winter of 1957, Roberto found a part-time job working year-round as a janitor at Main Street Elementary School in Santa Maria, California. We settled in Bonetti Ranch, where we had lived in army barracks off and on for the past few years.

My brother's job and mine — thinning lettuce and picking carrots after school and on weekends — helped support our family. I was excited because we had finally settled in one place. We no longer had to move to Fresno at the end of every summer and miss school for two and a half months to pick grapes and cotton and live in army tents or old garages.

But what I feared most happened that same year. I was in my eighth-grade social studies class at El Camino Junior High

School in Santa Maria. I was getting ready to recite the preamble to the *Declaration of Independence*, which our class had to memorize. I had worked hard at memorizing it and felt confident. While I waited for class to start, I sat at my desk and recited it silently 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 unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

I was ready.

After the bell rang, Miss Ehlis, my English and social studies teacher, began to take roll. She was interrupted by a knock on the door. When she opened it, I saw the school principal and a man behind him. As soon as I saw the green uniform, I panicked. I felt like running, but my legs would not move. I trembled and could feel my heart pounding against my chest as though it too wanted to escape. My eyes blurred. Miss Ehlis and the officer walked up to me. “This is him,” she said softly, placing her right hand on my shoulder.

“Are you Francisco Jiménez?” he asked firmly. His deep voice echoed in my ears.

“Yes,” I responded, wiping my tears and looking down at his large, black shiny boots. At that point I wished I were someone else, someone with a different name. My teacher had a sad and pained look in her eyes.

I followed the immigration officer out of the classroom and into his car marked BORDER PATROL. I climbed in the front seat, and we drove down Broadway to Santa Maria High School to pick up Roberto, who was in his sophomore year. As cars passed by, I slid lower in the seat and kept my head down. The officer parked the car in front of the school and asked me to wait for him while he went inside the administration building.

Roberto following him. My brother's face was as white as a sheet. The officer asked me to climb into the back seat with Roberto.

“Nos agarraron, hermanito,” Roberto said, quivering and putting his arm around my shoulder.

“Yes, they caught us,” I repeated. I had never seen my brother so sad. Angry, I added in a whisper, “But it took them ten years.”

Roberto quickly directed my attention to the officer with a shift of his eyes and put his index finger to his lips, hushing me. The officer turned right on Main Street and headed toward Bonetti Ranch, passing familiar sites I figured I would never see again: Main Street Elementary School; Kress, the five-and-dime store; the Texaco gas station where we got our drinking water. I wondered if my friends at El Camino Junior High would miss me as much as I would miss them.

“Do you know who turned you in?” the officer asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“No,” Roberto answered. “It was one of your people,” he said, chuckling.

I could not imagine who it could have been. We never told anyone we were here illegally, not even our best friends. I looked at Roberto, hoping he knew the answer. My brother shrugged his shoulders. “Ask him who it was,” I whispered.

“No, you ask him,” he responded.

The officer, who wore large, dark green sunglasses, must have heard us, because he glanced at us through the rear-view mirror and said, “Sorry, can’t tell you his name.”

When we arrived at Bonetti Ranch, a Border Patrol van was parked in front of our house, which was one of many dilapidated army barracks that Bonetti, the owner of the ranch, bought after the Second World War and rented to farm workers. My whole family was outside, standing by the patrol car. Mamá was sobbing and caressing Rubén, my youngest brother, and Rorra, my little sister. They hung on to Mamá’s legs like two children who had just been found after being lost. Papá stood between my two younger brothers, Trampita and Torito. Both cried silently as Papá braced himself on their shoulders, trying to ease his back pain.

Roberto and I climbed out of the car and joined them. The immigration officers, who towered over everyone, searched the ranch for other undocumented residents, but found none. We were hauled into the Border Patrol van and driven to San Luis Obispo, the immigration headquarters.

There we were asked endless questions and given papers to sign. Since Papá did not know English and Mamá understood only a little, Roberto translated for them. Papá showed them his green card, which Ito, the Japanese sharecropper for whom we picked strawberries, had helped him get years before. Mamá showed birth certificates for Trampita, Torito, Rorra, and Rubén, who were born in the United States. Mamá, Roberto, and I did not have documentation; we were the only ones being forced to leave.

Mamá and Papá did not want to separate our family. They pleaded with the immigration officer in charge to allow us to stay a few more days so that we could leave the country together. The officer finally agreed and told us we could leave on a voluntary basis. He gave us three days to report to the U.S. immigration office at the border in Nogales, Arizona.

The next morning as we were getting ready for our trip back to Mexico, I went outside and watched the school bus pick up kids from the ranch. As it drove away, I felt empty inside and had a pain in my chest.

I went back inside to help pack. Papá and Mamá were sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by my brothers and sister, who listened quietly as my parents discussed our trip. Papá took out the metal box in which he kept our savings and counted it.

“We don’t have much, but we’ll have to live on the other side of the border with the little we have. Maybe it’ll last us until we fix our papers and come back legally,” he said.

“And with God’s help, we will!” Mamá said. “There’s no doubt.”

“I am not that sure, but we’ll try,”

Papá responded. I was happy to hear Papá and Mamá say this. I relished the thought of returning to Santa Maria, going back to school, and not fearing la migra anymore. I knew Roberto felt the same. He had a sparkle in his eyes and a big smile.

Papá and Mamá decided to cross the border in Nogales because they had heard that the immigration office there was not as busy as the one in Tijuana or Mexicali.

We packed a few belongings, stored the rest in our barrack, and left our Carcachita, our old jalopy, locked and parked in front. Joe and Espy, our next-door neighbors, drove us to the Greyhound bus station on North Broadway in Santa Maria. We bought our tickets to Nogales and boarded.

Papá and Rorra sat across the aisle from Roberto and me. Torito and Trampita sat in front of us. Roberto closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He puckered his lower lip and clenched his hands. I placed my left arm over his shoulder and looked out the window. The gray sky threatened rain. A boy about my age waved good-bye to a couple sitting behind us. He reminded me of Miguelito, my best friend in the third grade in Corcoran. I missed him for a long time after he and his family moved from the same labor camp we lived in.

We left Santa Maria Valley, passing by acres and acres of strawberry, artichoke, and alfalfa fields. We went through small towns and cities I had never heard of. Once we entered Arizona, the green fields and rolling hills gave way to desert plains and rugged mountains. I enjoyed watching jackrabbits leap suddenly from the cover of desert shrubs, land beside our speeding bus, and bolt back into the brush. Trampita and Torito played a game to see who spotted the most rabbits, but Papá had to stop it because they started quarreling. Torito accused Trampita of seeing double and Trampita claimed Torito did not know how to count.

We went by adobe houses with no front yards and unpaved streets. Papá said they reminded him of places in Mexico.

As we approached some foothills of large mountains, there were hundreds of cactuses. “Look, viejo,” Mamá said, pointing out the window. “Those nopales look like poor men stretching out their arms in prayer.”

“They look more like men in surrender,” Papá said.

“How about those two?” she said.

“Which ones?” Papá asked. “The two tangled together? They look like two people in shock.”

“No, viejo,” she countered. “They look like two people hugging each other.” Mamá continued pointing out other cactuses to Papá until he got tired and refused to respond.

We stopped at Tucson and continued on to Nogales. Distant mountains lined the route on either side for much of the way. They rose above for several thousand feet, looking like giant caterpillars crawling out of the ground.

That night the rain came down in sheets. Raindrops pelted the window, making it hard to fall asleep.

After traveling for about twenty hours, we arrived, exhausted, at the Nogales, Arizona, bus station in the morning. We picked up our belongings and headed to the immigration and customs office, where we reported in. We had made the deadline. We were then escorted on foot across the border to the Mexican side of Nogales. The twin cities were separated by a tall chain link fence. Grassland, mesquite, scattered low shrubs, and bare rocky soil surrounded both sides of the border. The sky was cloudless and the streets were bone-dry.

We walked the unpaved streets along the fence, looking for a place to stay. We ran into barefoot children in tattered clothes rummaging through waste bins. I felt a knot in my throat. They reminded me of when we were living in Corcoran and would go into town in the evenings looking for food in the trash behind grocery stores.

We finally found a cheap, rundown motel on Campillo Street, a few blocks from the border. As Papá and Mamá checked in, I looked around the cramped office. Through the dirty window, I could see part of the overpass bridging the two Nogaleses and the chain link fence separating the two cities.

On the corner of the dark yellow counter, which came up to my chin, was a pile of discolored motel brochures held in place by three small rocks. The shape and color of the stones fascinated me. They looked like gold nuggets. I picked one of them up to examine it closely, but Mamá slapped my hand and told me to put it back. When no one was looking, I snatched one and put it in my pocket.

The motel room was small, like the cabins we lived in at the cotton labor camps. We took the sagging mattress off the bed and placed it on the worn yellow linoleum floor so Papá and Mamá could sleep on it. The rest of us went to bed on the box spring.

That night I felt listless and had a hard time sleeping. I kept thinking about what I had done. The following morning, I went outside, holding the rock in my fist and wondering what to do. I thought of throwing it underneath the overpass, but I felt guilty and scared. I went back to the office and, pretending I was getting a brochure, put it back.

Every day after Mamá bought food for us from street vendors for our meals, she and Papá went to the immigration office to check on our petition for visas. Each time they went they were asked for more information. Papá sent a telegram to Fito, my cousin in Guadalajara, asking him to secure our birth certificates and to send them to us by mail.

Four days after they arrived, we were scheduled to take a medical examination. We were issued a one-day pass to cross the U.S. border and take the examination at St. Joseph's

Hospital, which was located a few blocks from the U.S. customs office.

We checked in at the front desk and sat in the waiting room to be called. The room's walls were light green and the white floors were spotless, just like the uniforms worn by the nurses and doctors. The receptionist came out and handed us a *Foreign Service, U.S. Medical Examination of Visa Applicants* form. Roberto helped Mamá read the form's long list of diseases and check *yes* or *no*.

After waiting for several hours, we were finally called in by the nurse, who collected the forms. I was asked to go first. She took me to a small room and handed my papers to the doctor, who glanced at them and asked me to strip to my shorts. I looked at the nurse, feeling as though my face were on fire.

“All clean, no lice,” she said after running a fine comb through my hair.

The doctor double-checked the list of diseases I had marked on the form earlier. “Amebiasis, gonorrhea, syphilis, trachoma?”

“No,” I responded.

“Tuberculosis?”

I recalled the bracero who everyone thought had tuberculosis. He picked strawberries with us one summer when we worked for Ito. We thought he had tuberculosis because he was skinny as a rail and often coughed blood. We called him *El Tubercul-*

*osis*. One day he got so sick at work that Ito took him back to the bracero camp. That was the last time we saw him.

“Tuberculosis?” the doctor repeated impatiently.

“No.”

“Ringworm?” he asked, turning my body around to check my back.

“I had it many years ago,” I said.

When I was in third grade, I noticed I had two red spots about the size of a quarter, one on the left side of my stomach and another on the back of my scalp. I showed them to Mamá and told her they itched. “The devil made these marks. That’s why they’re red,” she said, not blinking an eye. When she saw I was about to cry, she hugged me and said, “I am kidding, Panchito, es roña. I’ll take care of it.” She rubbed the red spots with garlic every day, and within a couple of weeks they were gone.

The strong smell not only got rid of the ringworm, but it also kept my schoolmates away. Whenever I came near them, they yelled, “You stink like a Mexican!” and sprinted away from me, holding their noses.

“Your back looks fine,” the doctor said. I felt an itch in my scalp, but I did not dare scratch it. “What about mental conditions: feeble-mindedness, insanity, psychopathic personality, epilepsy, narcotic drug addiction, chronic alcoholism?”

“No,” I said, not knowing what those words meant.

“What about physical defects?”

“None.” I figured he did not believe me, because he had me stretch out my arms and walk across the room. He then had me sit on the edge of the examination table, and he tapped my knees with a flat-nosed rubber hammer. My knee jerked so hard that I almost kicked him on the chin.

The nurse then checked my weight and height. “A hundred pounds and four feet eleven inches. You’re a bit small for your age,” she declared.

It was not the first time I was told that. My classmates at El Camino Junior High School, where I was the smallest kid, reminded me of it every time they chose teams to play basketball during recess.

“You can get dressed now,” she said. “We’re done.” Roberto went in next. When he came out his face was as red as a beet. He looked like he had been in a fight. His hair was messy and his shirt was half tucked in. He and I compared notes and laughed nervously when we got to the part of undressing in front of the nurse. “Qué vergüenza,” he said.

Mamá’s checkup took a lot longer than Roberto’s or mine. She did not say a word about it and Roberto and I did not ask.

After waiting for several days, we were notified that our petition for an immigrant visa had been approved. Papá, Mamá, Roberto, and I were beside ourselves when we got the news. We could not stop smiling. My younger brothers and sister did not understand what it all meant, but they jumped up and down on the stained mattress like grasshoppers.

“This calls for a special meal,” Mamá said. That evening she went out and bought enchiladas, rice, and beans.

After supper, Papá lay on the bed to rest his back. “I’ve been thinking about where we go from here,” he said, lighting up a cigarette. Back to Santa Maria, of course. Where else? I thought. Papá bit his lower lip and continued. “It’s the rainy season; there’s little work in the fields during this time, and my back is getting worse.” He paused, puffed on his cigarette, and went on, “The only sure thing is Roberto’s janitorial job. What if he goes back to Santa Maria and the rest of us go to Guadalajara and stay with my sister Chana? It’ll give me a chance to see a curandera about my back. In the spring, when I am cured, we can go back to Santa Maria and I can work in the fields again.”

My heart fell to my stomach. I did not want to miss more school. I wanted to tell Papá that I did not like his idea, but I did not say anything. Papá never allowed us to disagree with him. He said it was disrespectful.

“What if Panchito goes back with Roberto?” Mamá said. “That way he can help him at work and both can attend school.”

I knew Mamá had read my mind. She winked at me when she saw me smile.

“You’re a grown man, a real macho,” Papá said, directing his attention to my brother. “You can take care of Panchito. Verdad, mijo.” My brother grinned and nodded.

The thought of being apart from Papá, Mamá, and my brothers and sister saddened me, but the idea of missing school and not being with Roberto pained me even more. “I’ll go back with him, but I’ll miss you,” I said, holding back my tears.

“We’ll miss you too,” Mamá said, wiping her eyes. “I’ll send you money every month when I get paid,” Roberto said proudly.

“You’re a good son,” Papá said, motioning for Roberto to sit by his side on the bed.

“They’re all a blessing,” Mamá added, smiling at Roberto and me and hugging Rorra, Torito, and Trampita.

We decided to leave the hotel that evening to avoid paying for another night. I went with Mamá to the office to check out. I wanted to look at the rocks one more time. The clerk caught my eye and said, “Those are copper pyrite rocks.”

“They look like gold,” I replied.

“It’s fool’s gold.” He picked up the rock I had taken before and handed it to me. “Here, you can have this one. It’ll bring you good luck.”

I glanced at Mamá. She smiled and nodded.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the rock and placing it in my pocket.

*I'm glad I returned it and didn't throw it away, I thought.*

We finished packing and headed to the bus station on foot. It was starting to rain, so we hurried. Roberto, Papá, Trampita, and I carried the cardboard boxes. Mamá held Rorra by the hand. Torito and Rubén ran behind us, trying to keep up.

“Not so fast!” they cried out. “Wait for us!”

Armed guards stopped us at the border gate and asked us for documentation. Their green uniforms gave me the chills. Papá showed them our papers, and they let us cross to Nogales, Arizona.

We were dripping wet by the time we arrived at the bus station. Mamá went up to the counter and bought two one-way tickets to Santa Maria for Roberto and me and five tickets to Guadalajara for the rest of the family. We went to the restroom and dried ourselves with paper towels, then sat in silence on a wooden bench, waiting for the bus.

Torito and Trampita were fidgety. They jumped off the bench, ran to the pinball machine, and pushed each other, trying to pull on the handle. Papá made a sharp hissing sound like a rattlesnake to get their attention. He made this noise whenever he was annoyed with something we were doing. They did not hear him, so he hissed louder, but the loud-speaker announcing

departures and arrivals drowned it out. With a slight tilt of his head toward the pinball machine, Papá motioned for me to get Trampita and Torito. Papá gave them a stern look and told them to sit and be quiet.

I sat between Trampita and Torito and placed my arms around them. I felt sad, thinking how much I was going to miss them. I glanced at the clock on the wall and went outside to get fresh air. It was pouring rain. Looking up at the dark sky, I wished we were all going back to Santa Maria together. I heard an announcement over the loudspeaker, but I did not pay attention.

“Our bus is here, Panchito,” Roberto said, as he and the rest of my family approached me from behind. Roberto and I hugged Papá and Mamá and kissed our brothers and sister.

“Que Dios los bendiga,” Mamá said, giving us her blessing. Tears came to her eyes as she forced a smile.

Roberto and I climbed onto the bus. We took our seat, wiped the fog off the window, and waved. The rain pelted the bus with full force as it pulled away. Across the aisle, a little boy played horse on his father’s lap. He jumped up and down and repeatedly smacked the side of his legs, shouting, “Faster, faster!” I turned away, closed my eyes, and leaned on Roberto’s shoulder. I wept silently until I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the rain had disappeared. A strong wind whipped up dust, debris, and gravel and forced the bus to slow down to a snail’s pace. Once the wind died down, the bus pulled over at a rest stop next to an old gas station and market. Roberto

and I climbed down to stretch our legs. On the side of the station was a makeshift open stand braced by four posts. Hanging from one of the upper-right posts was a crate with a wooden crucifix on it. Roberto and I made the sign of the cross and bowed our heads. I prayed silently that my family would arrive safely in Guadalajara. We climbed back on the bus and continued our journey.

We finally arrived in Santa Maria in the early evening of the next day. We took a cab to Bonetti Ranch, where we were welcomed by a torrential downpour and a pack of bony stray dogs. The cab drove slowly, bumping up and down and swaying from side to side as it hit potholes full of water. It felt as though we were in a ship in the middle of a stormy sea. Our barrack was cold and lifeless. We placed our boxes on the floor and turned on the kitchen light.

“Well, here we are, Panchito,” Roberto said sadly. When he saw me choke up, he added, “Time will go by fast, you’ll see.”

“Not fast enough,” I said. We unpacked our boxes and went to bed. Neither one of us slept well that night.

.....