

Two

SOLEDAD

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.