

Four

Miracle in Tent City

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 on a clothesline Papá made.

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.

“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 strange 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.”