

Five

Christmas Gift

A few days before Christmas, Papá decided to move from the cotton labor camp in Corcoran and look for work elsewhere. We were one of the last families to leave because Papá felt obligated to stay until the rancher's cotton had been all picked, even though other farmers had better crops. Papá thought it was the right thing to do; after all, the rancher had let us live in his cabin free while we worked for him.

I did not mind too much moving for the third time that year. It rained most of the time we were there, and Papá, Mamá, and Roberto went days without work.

Sometimes, in the evenings, we went into town in our Carcachita to look for food in the trash behind grocery stores. We picked up fruits and vegetables that had been thrown away because they were partly spoiled. Mamá sliced off the rotten parts and made soup with the good vegetable pieces, mixing them with bones she bought at the butcher shop. She made up a story and told the butcher the bones were for the dog. The butcher must have known the bones were for us and not a dog because he left more and more pieces of meat on the bones each time Mamá went back.

As we were packing to leave Corcoran that December, a young couple came to our door. Papá invited them in. The man, in his early twenties, wore a blue, faded shirt and khaki pants. His wife, about the same age as he, was dressed in a simple brown cotton dress and a gray wool sweater worn at the elbows and buttoned in the front. Taking off his cap, the man said apologetically, “We’re sorry to bother you, but you know, with all this rain, and my wife expecting . . . well, we thought . . . perhaps you could help us out a little bit.” He reached into a paper bag he was carrying and pulled out a small wallet. “Perhaps you could give us fifty cents for this? Look, it’s pure leather; almost brand new,” he said, handing it to Papá.

Shaking his head, Papá replied sympathetically, “I am sorry. I wish I could, paisano, but we’re broke too.”

When I heard Papá say “we’re broke too,” I panicked. My hope for getting a ball of my own that Christmas faded—but only for a second. “It can’t be like last year,” I told myself.

My thoughts were interrupted by the man’s desperate insistence. “Please, how about twenty-five cents?” Before Papá could answer, the man quickly pulled out from the bag a white embroidered handkerchief, saying, “How about ten cents for this handkerchief? Please. My wife did the needlework on it.”

“I am very sorry,” Papá repeated.

“It’s beautiful,” Mamá said, gently placing her hand on the woman’s fragile shoulder. “Que Dios los bendiga,” she added.

Papá walked the couple out the door and accompanied them partway to the next cabin, where they continued trying to peddle their few possessions.

After we finished packing and loading our belongings in our Carcachita, Papá closed the door to the cabin and we headed north. We were leaving only three weeks after I had enrolled in the fourth grade for the first time that year. As we drove by the school, I saw some kids I knew on the play-ground. I imagined myself playing with them with the ball I would get for Christmas. I waved to them but they did not see me.

After stopping at several places and asking for work, we found a rancher who still had a few cotton fields to be picked. He offered us work and a tent to live in. It was one of many dark green tents lined up in rows. The labor camp looked like an army settlement.

We unloaded the Carcachita, placed some cardboard on the dirt floor, and laid our wide mattress on it. All of us – Papa, Mama, Roberto, Trampito, Torito, and Ruben, my baby brother – slept on the mattress to keep warm, especially during chilly nights when the freezing wind pierced the canvas walls of our new home.

As Christmas drew closer, the more anxious and excited I became. When December 24 finally arrived, time seemed to stand still. One more day to wait, I thought.

That evening, after supper, we all sat on the side of the mattress and listened to Mamá tell us the story about the birth of Jesus and the Three Wise Men who brought Him gifts. I only half listened. I wanted the evening to end quickly and for morning to come.

Finally, sleep overcame my brothers and we turned in for the night. We huddled together and covered ourselves with army blankets we had bought at a secondhand store. I could not sleep thinking about Christmas. Once in a while, Papá's words "but we're broke too" entered my mind, but I pushed them out with fantasies of playing with my very own ball.

Thinking we were all asleep, Mamá quietly slipped out of bed and lit the kerosene lamp. I covered my head with the blanket, and through a hole in it I watched her, trying to see what gifts she was going to wrap. But she sat behind some wooden crates that served as the table and blocked my view. I could see only her weatherworn face. The shadow cast by the dim light made the circles under her eyes look even darker. As she began to wrap the gifts, silent tears ran down her cheeks. I did not know why.

At dawn, my brothers and I scrambled to get the presents that had been placed next to our shoes. I picked mine up and nervously tore at the butcher-paper wrapping:

a bag of candy. Roberto, Trampita, and Torito looked sadly at me and at each other. They, too, had received a bag of candy. Searching for words to tell Mamá how I felt, I looked up at her. Her eyes were full of tears. Papá, who was sitting next to her on the mattress, lifted its corner and pulled out from underneath the white embroidered handkerchief. He tenderly handed it to Mamá, saying, “Feliz Navidad, vieja.”