

## Six

### Cotton Sack

In the latter part of October, after the grape season was over, we left Mr. Jacobson's vineyards in Fresno and headed for Corcoran to pick cotton. As we drove down the narrow, two-lane road, we passed vineyard after vineyard. Stripped of their grapes, the vines were now draped in yellow, orange, and brown leaves. Within a couple of hours, the vineyards gave way to cotton fields. On both sides of the road we were surrounded by miles and miles of cotton plants. I knew that we were approaching Corcoran.

After stopping at three different cotton labor camps, we found one that gave us work and a one-room cabin to live in. It was one of several farm-worker dwellings lined up in a row.

That evening, after supper, Papá unfolded the sacks for picking cotton and laid them out in the middle of the floor to prepare them. I was surprised when I saw only three. I knew the twelve-foot-long one was Papá's, and that the ten-foot-long ones were Mamá's and Roberto's. "Where is mine?" I asked. "Don't I get one?"

"You are still too little to have your own," Papá answered.

“But last year I picked without a sack,” I replied, trying to hold back my tears.

Papá shook his head without saying another word. I knew from his silence that I should not insist on it.

Papá asked me to stretch out the middle of his sack while he sewed an extra piece of canvas onto the bottom to reinforce it. After finishing the last stitch, he tried it. He tied the sack around his waist, leaving the front opening between his thighs. Dragging the sack on the floor behind him, Papá stooped over, moving his hands up and down and around imaginary plants, pretending he was picking cotton. He looked like a kangaroo.

When he finished sewing Mamá’s sack, she tried it just like Papá. When she saw the ten-foot white canvas trailing on the floor behind her, she burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” asked Papá.

“This is the prettiest wedding dress I have ever seen,” she answered, holding her stomach to ease the pain from laughing so much. Giggling, Roberto and I looked at Papá, who was not amused.

As usual, when it was time for bed, Papá folded his cotton sack to use as a pillow. He placed it at the end of the wide mattress so he faced the wall, on which hung a small, faded picture of la Virgen de Guadalupe. He then poured himself a glass of water from a gallon bottle and placed it

on the floor near the bed, along with his aspirins, Camel cigarettes, and an empty, red Folger's coffee can, which we all used during the night when it was too cold to go to the outhouse. Roberto, Trampita, Torito, and I knelt in front of the Virgen de Guadalupe and said our prayers silently. Mamá wrapped Rorra, my newborn sister, in a baby blanket, laid her gently in a crate next to the mattress, and kissed her good night. She and Papá then slipped into bed on one end of the mattress; Roberto, Trampita, Torito, Rubén, and I crawled in on the other end. We snuggled against each other to keep warm. My parents had an advantage over the five of us because our legs did not reach the other end of the mattress. Their feet, however, did reach our end of the mattress, and sometimes I would wake up facing Mamá's and Papá's toes.

The pounding of the rain on the roof woke me several times during the night. Every time I opened my eyes, I saw the burning tip of Papá's cigarette glowing in the dark; other times I heard the rattle of his aspirin bottle. I did not mind the rain because it meant I could sleep in the next morning. The cotton would be too wet to pick. Because we got paid three cents a pound, most ranchers did not let us pick cotton when it was wet.

I woke up late. The rain had stopped and everyone except Rorra was already up. Papá, whose eyes were puffy and red, cursed the rain. He and Roberto wrapped the one-gallon water bottle with burlap and sewed it tightly to keep the bottle from breaking. Trampita and I sat on a box and watched Mamá make flour tortillas.

She used a twelve-inch lead pipe to roll the dough on a flat piece of board atop the wooden boxes that served as our dining table. As she pressed and rolled the dough, she kept turning it until it was perfectly round and about a quarter of an inch thick. Mamá then cooked the tortilla on a comal on one of the two burners of our small kerosene stove. She usually cooked a pot of beans on the other burner.

After we ate the freshly cooked tortillas and beans for breakfast, I helped Roberto wash the dishes in the aluminum tub, which Mamá also used for bathing Torito, Rubén, and Rorra and for washing clothes. And while Mamá mended Papá's shirt, he drove in our Carcachita to the nearest gas station to fill the one-gallon bottle with drinking water and to get more kerosene for the stove. When Papá returned, he smoked another cigarette, took two aspirins, and went to bed. Trampita and I sat on the mattress and played guessing games and then listened to Roberto's ghost stories. Mamá told us to be very quiet because Papá was not feeling well. "Remember, he does not like noise," she said.

For the next few days it rained off and on. By Friday, when the sun finally came out, Papá's aspirin bottle was empty and a pile of cigarette butts covered the floor by his side of the bed.

Like an alarm clock, the honking of the horn woke me with a start on Saturday morning. It was the contratista, the

labor contractor, who drove around in his beat-up red Ford truck, honking the horn to let us know that the cotton was dry and ready to pick. Leaning on the horn, and trying to avoid the potholes full of water, he drove up and down the muddy paths, slow as a snail, between rows and rows of perfectly aligned one-room cabins. After finishing the round, which took about twenty minutes, he started again just in case some had fallen back asleep or had not heard him the first time.

On days when I was not in school, the honking of the horn was for me like the final bell on the last day of school. It meant I had to go to work. But for Papá, who usually hated any kind of noise, this loud sound was a tonic. It perked him up.

By the time the contratista finished the second round, Mamá had made the lunches and Papá was warming up the Carcachita. We loaded the sacks, climbed in, and lined up the car behind the contratista's red pickup truck, waiting for him to lead us to the cotton field that was to be picked. Loaded with workers who did not own cars, the pickup sluggishly pulled out, followed by the caravan of old battered cars and trucks.

After driving for about five miles, the contratista pulled over to the side of the road and motioned us to park behind him. He got out and pointed to the cotton field. It stretched from the shoulder of the road as far as the eye could see. Papá, Mamá, Roberto, and I got out of the car. Trampita stayed behind to take care of Torito, Rubén, and

Rorra. We followed Papá, who walked over to the cotton plants to get a closer look. The other pickers did the same. Papá said it was a good crop.

The plants were about three feet tall, and partly hidden between their dry brown leaves were many cotton bolls. A few smaller plants had yellow and red flowers and green bulbs that looked like small avocados. Papá explained that the flowers would close and form hard green bulbs, which, in turn, would open to become cotton bolls. “But remember,” he said firmly, “cotton bolls are like roses. They are pretty but they can hurt you.”

“Yes, I know; the shell is like a cat’s claw,” I answered, remembering the numerous scratches I had gotten on my hands and wrists the year before.

After feeling the cotton to make sure it was completely dry, the contratista told us to start working. All the pickers, except me, had their own sacks and their own rows to harvest. I went a few yards ahead of Mamá and picked cotton from her row and piled it on the ground. When she reached the pile, she picked it up and put it in her sack. I then moved over to Papá’s row and did the same for him so that he and Mamá could move up their rows evenly. Roberto did not need my help. He was a faster picker than either Papá or Mamá. After picking for two long hours, Roberto helped Mamá make more room in her sack by lifting it upright and shaking it several times up and down, compacting the cotton to the bottom.

When Mamá's sack was too heavy to drag behind her, Roberto took it to the weigh station to be emptied. The station was at the end of the field, about a quarter of a mile ahead. With my help, he flipped the sack over his left shoulder and held it in place with his right hand. I walked behind him, lifting the back end to lighten the load. The front end grazed the sides of the furrow as we made our way to the station. He stopped to rest a few times, and to wipe the sweat from his brow with the red and blue handkerchief tied around his collar.

As we approached the weigh station, the contratista there said to Roberto, "You are really strong for such a little guy. How old are you?"

"Fourteen, almost fifteen," answered Roberto proudly and out of breath.

"No fooling," replied the contratista, adjusting the scale that hung from a tripod about three feet in front of the cotton trailer. After weighing Mamá's sack, the contratista jotted in a notebook "ninety pounds" after our last name, which he asked Roberto to spell. Teasingly he asked me, "Where is your sack, mocoso?"

I pretended not to hear him and quickly walked around to the side of the trailer, which was about the size of our cabin. Its frame was covered by chicken wire, and it had no roof. It looked like a large bird cage. I held the ladder steady for Roberto while he climbed it carrying the sack. When he got to the top, he carefully walked to the middle

of a plank that was laid across the trailer and emptied the cotton sack. Papá carried his own sack to the weigh station, but Roberto emptied it because Papá had a bad back.

At the end of the day, the contratista checked his notebook and handed my father eighteen dollars. “Not bad, six hundred pounds,” Papá said grinning. We could have done better if I had my own sack, I thought to myself.

By the middle of November, the cotton fields had been picked. The contratista informed Papá that we could stay in the cabin, which was owned by the company who owned the fields, until the end of the second picking, or *la bola*, as it was called in Spanish. *La bola* was messy and dirty. It involved harvesting everything left on the plants after the first picking, including cotton bulbs, shells, and leaves. The pay was one and a half cents per pound. The contratista told Papá that we could pick cotton for other ranchers until *la bola* would start, which was in two or three weeks.

For the next few days, when it did not rain, Papá, Mamá, and Roberto left the cabin early in the morning to look for work. They took Torito, Rubén, and Rorra with them. Trampita and I went to school and joined them in the fields on weekends and holidays.

At dawn on Thanksgiving Day, Papá, Roberto, and I drove in our *Carcachita* for miles, looking for cotton fields that were being picked. During that four-day weekend, I was determined to prove to Papá that I should get my own sack.

On both sides of the road we passed endless fields of harvested cotton plants. From their dry branches dangled cotton fibers left during the first picking. They were frozen from the cold. In the distance ahead of us, Papá spotted a white speck and a cloud of thick black smoke. “Allá,” he said cheerfully, pointing with his finger. He stepped on the gas. As we approached the cotton field, Papá slowed down and parked our sputtering Carcachita on the roadside, near the cotton trailer. A few feet from it, around a burning tire, stood several men and women trying to keep warm.

Papá asked the Mexican foreman for work. He told Papá we could start anytime we wanted, but he suggested waiting until it got warmer. He invited us to join the others around the fire. Papá did not want to waste time. He told Roberto and me we could wait, but he was going to pick. Seeing this as an opportunity to prove to Papá that I was grown-up enough for my own cotton sack, I followed him and Roberto into the field.

They each took a row. I went ahead about a quarter of the way into Papá’s row. I took my hands out of my pockets and started picking and piling the cotton in the furrow. Within seconds my toes were numb and I could hardly move my fingers. My hands were turning red and purple. I kept blowing on them, trying to keep warm. Then I felt the urge to relieve myself. I turned around to make sure no one was looking. The workers, warming themselves by the fire, were too far away to see me. I cupped my left hand and caught the warm, yellowish stream in it and

rubbed my hands together. Instantly, I felt fire as the salt stung the scratches on my skin. Then as the liquid quickly cooled, my hands felt like ice. I could not go on.

Frustrated and disappointed, I walked over to Papá. He straightened up and looked down at me. His eyes were red and watery from the cold. Before I said anything, he looked at Roberto, who bravely kept on picking, and told me to go over to the fire. I knew then I had not yet earned my own cotton sack.