

## **Eight**

### **Learning the Game**

I was in a bad mood. It was the last day of seventh grade before summer vacation. I had known the day was coming, but I had tried not to think about it because it made me sad. For my classmates, it was a happy day. During the afternoon, Miss Logan asked for volunteers to share what they were going to do during the summer; lots of hands went up. Some talked about going away on trips; others about summer camp. I folded my hands under the desk, lowered my head, and tried not to listen. After a while, I managed to tune out what they were saying and only heard faint voices coming from different parts of the room.

In the school bus on the way home, I took out my note pad and pencil from my shirt pocket and began figuring out how much time there was before I would start school again—from the middle of June until the first week of November, about four and a half months. Ten weeks picking strawberries in Santa Maria and another eight weeks harvesting grapes and cotton in Fresno. As I added the number of days, I started to get a headache. Looking out the window, I said to myself, “One hundred thirty-two more days after tomorrow.”

As soon as I arrived home, I took two of Papá's aspirins and lay down. I had just closed my eyes when I heard Carlos, our neighbor, shouting outside. "Come on, Panchito, we're starting the game."

The game was kick-the-can. I played it with Carlos and my younger brothers, Trampita, Torito, and Rubén, on school days when I had no homework, and on weekends when I was not too tired from working in the fields.

"Hurry, or else!" Carlos hollered impatiently.

I liked the game, but I did not enjoy playing with Carlos. He was older than I, and often reminded me of it, especially when I disagreed with him. If we wanted to play, we had to follow his rules. No one could play unless he said so. He wore tight jeans and a white T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show off his muscles. Under his right sleeve, he tucked a cigarette pack.

"Come on, Panchito!" Trampita yelled. "You're making us wait."

I went outside to play. I wanted to forget about the next 133 days.

"It's about time," Carlos said, giving me a light punch on the right shoulder. "You'll be the guard," he said, pointing at Rubén. "Trampita, you draw the circle. Torito, you get the can." As Carlos was giving orders, I saw Manuelito standing by one of the garbage cans. During

every game, he stood by himself on the sidelines because Carlos would not let him play. “Let Manuelito be the guard,” I said to Carlos.

“No way,” he responded annoyingly. “I already told you before, he can’t play. He’s too slow.”

“Come on, Carlos, let him play,” I insisted.

“No!” he shouted, giving me and Manuelito a dirty look.

“Go ahead and play, Panchito,” Manuelito said timidly. “I’ll stand here and watch.”

We started the game, and the more we played, the less I thought about my troubles. Even my headache went away. We played until dark.

The alarm clock went off early the next morning. I glanced at the window. It was still dark outside. I shut my eyes, trying to get one more minute of sleep, but Roberto, my older brother, jumped out of bed and pulled off the covers. “Time to get up!” he said. When I saw him putting on his work clothes, I remembered we were going to work, and not to school. My shoulders felt heavy.

On the way to the fields, Papá turned on the Carcachita’s headlights to see through the thick fog that blew in from the coast. It covered the valley every morning, like a large, gray sheet. Ito, the sharecropper, was waiting for us when we arrived. Then a black pickup truck

appeared. We could see it through the wall of fog, not far from where we parked. The driver stopped behind our Carcachita and, in perfect Spanish, ordered the passenger who rode in the bed of the truck to get off.

“Who’s that?” I asked Papá, pointing to the driver.

“Don’t point,” Papá said. “It’s bad manners. He’s Mr. Diaz, the contratista. He runs the bracero camp for Sheehey Berry Farms. The man with him is one of the braceros.”

In his broken Spanish, Ito introduced us to Gabriel, the man who accompanied the contratista.

Gabriel looked a few years older than Roberto. He wore a pair of loose, tan pants and a blue shirt. The shirt was faded. His straw hat was slightly tilted to the right, and he had long, dark sideburns that were trimmed and came down to the middle of his square jaw. His face was weather-beaten. The deep cracks in the back of his heels were as black as the soles of his guaraches.

Gabriel took off his hat and we shook hands. He seemed nervous. But he relaxed when we greeted him in Spanish.

After the contratista left, we marched in line to the end of the field, selected a row, and started to work. Gabriel ended up between Papá and me. Because it was Gabriel’s first time harvesting strawberries, Ito asked Papá to show him how to pick. “It’s easy, Don Gabriel,” Papá said. “The main thing is to make sure the strawberry is ripe and not

bruised or rotten. And when you get tired from squatting, you can pick on your knees.” Gabriel learned quickly by watching and following Papá.

At noon, Papá invited Gabriel to join us for lunch in our Carcachita. He sat next to me in the back seat while Roberto and Papá sat in the front. From his brown paper bag, he pulled out a Coke and three sandwiches: one of mayonnaise and two of jelly. “Not again! We get this same lunch from that Diaz every day,” he complain-ed. “I am really tired of this.”

“You can have one of my taquitos,” I said.

“Only if you take this jelly sandwich,” he responded, handing it to me. I looked at Papá’s face. When I saw him smile, I took it and thanked him.

“Do you have a family, Don Gabriel?” Papá asked.

“Yes, and I miss them a lot,” he answered. “Especially my three kids.”

“How old are they?” Papá asked.

“The oldest is five, the middle one is three, and the little one, a girl, is two.”

“And you, Don Pancho, how many do you have?”

“A handful,” Papá answered, grinning. “Five boys and a girl. All living at home.”

“You’re lucky. You get to see them every day,” Gabriel said. “I haven’t seen mine for months.” He continued as though thinking out loud. “I didn’t want to leave them, but I had no choice. We have to eat, you know. I send them a few dollars every month for food and things. I’d like to send them more, but after I pay Diaz for room and board and transportation, little is left.” Then, in an angry tone of voice, he added, “Díaz is a crook. He overcharges for everything. That sin vergüenza doesn’t know who he’s dealing with.”

At this point, we heard the honking of a car horn. It was Ito signaling us that it was time to go back to work. Our half-hour lunch break was over.

That evening, and for several days after, I was too tired to play outside when we got home from work. I went straight to bed after supper. But as I got more and more used to picking strawberries, I began to play kick-the-can again. The game was always the same. We played by Carlos’s rules and he refused to let Manuelito play.

Work was always the same, too. We picked from six o’clock in the morning until six in the afternoon. Even though the days were long, I looked forward to seeing Gabriel and having lunch with him every day. I enjoyed listening to him tell stories and talk about Mexico. He was

as proud of being from the state of Morelos as my father was about being from Jalisco.

One Sunday, near the end of the strawberry season, Ito sent me to work for a sharecropper who was sick and needed extra help that day. His field was next to Ito's. Gabriel was loaned out to the same farmer. As soon as I arrived, the contratista began giving me orders. "Listen, huerquito, I want you to hoe weeds. But first, give me and Gabriel a hand," he said. Gabriel and I climbed onto the bed of the truck and helped him unload a plow.

The contratista tied one end of a thick rope to it and, handing the other end to Gabriel, said, "Here, tie this around your waist. I want you to till the furrows."

"I can't do that," Gabriel said with a painful look in his face.

"What do you mean you can't?" responded the contratista, placing his hands on his hips.

"In my country, oxen pull plows, not men," Gabriel replied, tilting his hat back. "I am not an animal."

The contratista walked up to Gabriel and yelled in his face, "Well this isn't your country, idiot! You either do what I say or I'll have you fired!"

"Don't do that, please," Gabriel said. "I have a family to feed."

“I don’t give a damn about your family!” the contratista replied, grabbing Gabriel by the shirt collar and pushing him. Gabriel lost his balance and fell backward. As he hit the ground, the contratista kicked him in the side with the tip of his boot. Gabriel sprung up and, with both hands clenched, lunged at the contratista. White as a ghost, Diaz quickly jumped back. “Don’t be stupid . . . your family,” he stammered. Gabriel held back. His face was flushed with rage. Without taking his eyes off Gabriel, the contratista slid into his truck and sped off, leaving us in a cloud of dust.

I felt scared. I had not seen men fight before. My mouth felt dry and my hands and legs began to shake. Gabriel threw his hat on the ground and said angrily, “That Diaz is a coward. He thinks he’s a big man because he runs the bracero camp for the growers. He’s nothing but a leech! And now he tries to treat me like an animal. I’ve had it.” Then, picking up his hat and putting it on, he added, “He can cheat me out of my money. He can fire me. But he can’t force me to do what isn’t right. He can’t take away my dignity. That he can’t do!”

All day, while Gabriel and I hoed weeds, I kept thinking about what happened that morning. It made me angry and sad. Gabriel cursed as he hacked at the weeds.

When I got home from work that evening, I felt restless. I went outside to play kick-the-can. “Come on

guys, let's play!" Carlos yelled out, resting his right foot on the can.

I went up to Manuelito, who was sitting on the ground and leaning against one of the garbage cans. "You heard Carlos, let's play," I said loudly so that Carlos could hear me.

"He didn't mean me," Manuelito answered, slowly getting up.

"Yes, you too," I insisted.

"Is it true, Carlos?" Manuelito asked.

"No way!" Carlos shouted.

Manuelito put his hands in his pockets and walked away.

"If Manuelito doesn't play, I won't either," I said. As soon as I said it, my heart started pounding. My knees felt weak. Carlos came right up to me. He had fire in his eyes. "Manuelito doesn't play!" he yelled.

He stuck his right foot behind my feet and pushed me. I fell flat on my back. My brothers rushed over to help me up. "You can push me around, but you can't force me to play!" I yelled back, dusting off my clothes and walking away. Trampita, Torito, Rubén, and Manuelito followed me to the front of our barrack.

Carlos stood alone inside the circle in the dirt, looking at the can and glancing at us once in a while. After a few moments, he cocked his head back, spat on the ground, and swaggered toward us, saying, “OK, Manuelito can play.”

Screaming with joy, Manuelito and my brothers jumped up and down like grasshoppers. I felt like celebrating, too, but I held back. I did not want Carlos to see how happy I was.

The following morning, when Ito told us that the contratista had gotten Gabriel fired and sent back to Mexico, I felt like someone had kicked me in the stomach. I could not concentrate on work. At times I found myself not moving at all. By the time I had picked one crate, Papá had picked two. He finished his row, started a second, and caught up to me.

“What’s the matter, Panchito?” he asked.

“You’re moving too slow. You need to speed it up.”

“I keep thinking about Gabriel,” I answered.

“What Díaz did was wrong, and someday he’ll pay for it, if not in this life, in the next one,” he said. “Gabriel did what he had to do.”

Papá pushed me along, handing me several handfuls of strawberries he picked from my row. With his help, I got through that long day.

When we got home from work, I did not want to play kick-the-can. I wanted to be alone, but my brothers would not let me. They followed me around, asking me to play.

I finally gave in when Manuelito came over and joined them. “Please, just one game,” he pleaded.

“OK, just one,” I answered.

We drew sticks to see who would play guard. Carlos was it. While he counted to twenty with his eyes closed, we ran and hid. I went behind a pepper tree that was next to the outhouse. When Carlos spotted me, he shouted, “I spy Panchito!” We both raced to the can. I got to it first and kicked it with all my might. It went up in the air and landed in one of the garbage cans. That was the last time I played the game.