

Nine

To Have and to Hold

As usual, after the strawberry season was over in Santa Maria, Papá decided to move to the San Joaquin Valley in Central California to pick grapes. Like the year before, we had spent the summer months picking strawberries for Ito, the Japanese sharecropper. This time, however, we were not going to Fresno to harvest Mr. Sullivan's vineyards. Papá did not want us to live in Mr. Sullivan's old garage again. So we headed for Orosi, a small town a few miles southeast of Fresno. Papá had heard that a grape grower there, named Mr. Patrini, had nice places for farm workers to live.

We packed our belongings and left Santa Maria in September, the week school started. Papá drove. Mamá and Roberto sat in the front seat. My younger brothers, Trampita, Torito, and Rubén, and I sat in the back. Rorra, my little sister, slept on Mamá's lap. Everyone was quiet. The only noise came from passing cars and the droning of the Carcachita's motor. As we passed by Main Street School, I reached underneath the front seat and pulled out my penny collection, which I kept in a small, white cardboard box. I then felt my shirt pocket for my blue note pad. I took it out, placed it on the box, and held

them both tightly in my hands as I stared out the window, wondering what Orosi would be like.

After we had been traveling for a few miles, I put my note pad back in my shirt pocket, took the top off my coin box, and starting looking at my pennies. I divided them into two layers separated by cotton. On top were my two favorites: a 1910 Lincoln Head and an 1865 Indian Head.

The 1910 Lincoln Head penny had belonged to Papá, but he gave it to me. We were living in Delano, and every day after coming home from picking grapes, Papá took out his small metal box where he kept our savings and placed the day's earnings inside. One Sunday evening, when he emptied the box on the table to count the money, a penny rolled off and landed next to me. I picked it up and handed it to him.

“Do you know how old this coin is?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“It was made in 1910, the year I was born,” he said proudly.

“It's a very old penny!” Mamá said, chuckling as she cooked supper on our kerosene stove.

Papá glanced over at Mamá, laughed, and replied, “It's only a couple of years older than you, vieja.” Holding it in his hand, Papá continued, “The Revolution started that same year.”

“What revolution?” I asked.

“The Mexican Revolution,” he responded. “I don’t know the whole story,” he said apologetically. “I didn’t go to school, but what I do know I learned from listening to corridos and to your abuelita Estefanía. She told me that during that time, many of the rich hacendados treated the campesinos like slaves.”

“Did abuelito Hilario fight in the Revolution?” I asked.

“No, mi’jo. My father died six months after I was born. But your abuelita favored the Revolution, just like all poor people did. I also heard that many hacendados buried their money and jewels in the ground to hide them from the revolutionaries. Many of those treasures have never been found. But they say that yellowish red flames shoot out from underneath the ground where the treasure is buried, and that you can see the blazes from far away at night.” Then with a twinkle in his eyes, he added, “I don’t know if that’s true, but that’s what they say.”

Papá reached out, took my right hand, and placed the penny in it, saying, “You can have it. This way you’ll never forget the year I was born. And, if you keep on saving pennies, someday you’ll have your own treasure.”

I was so excited I almost forgot to thank Papá. I examined the penny closely. The year 1910 was worn. That is when I started collecting pennies. I liked the older ones best.

As we made our way up the San Luis Obispo grade, I placed the Lincoln Head penny back in the box and took out my 1865 Indian Head coin.

Carl had given it to me when I was in the fifth grade in Corcoran. He and I were good friends in school. And when we found out that we both collected coins, we became the best of friends. We made sure we got on each other's team when we played ball during recess, and we ate our lunch together every day.

One Friday after school, Carl invited me to his home to see his coin collection. As soon as the last bell rang, we ran to his house, which was only three blocks away. When I walked in, I was amazed. I had never been inside a house before. The rug under my feet felt like a sack full of cotton. The living room was warm and as big as the one-room cabin we lived in. The light was soft and soothing. Carl then showed me his room. He had his own bed and his own desk. From the closet, which was half full of clothes, he pulled out a cigar box and several dark blue folders.

"These are my pennies," he said, opening one of the folders. His coins were all neatly organized by year. My eyes and fingers went straight to the oldest. "That's an 1860 Indian Head," he said.

"I thought all pennies were Lincoln Heads," I said in surprise.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed, opening his cigar box. "See, I have lots of them."

“I’ll give you one of my Lincoln pennies for one of your Indian Heads,” I said.

Carl thought about it for a while and then said, “You don’t have to. I’ll give you one. Pick the one you want.”

“Thanks,” I said excitedly. I quickly went through the loose pennies in his box and picked one made in 1865. It was the oldest one I could find.

On the way back to school to catch my bus, Carl said, “When can I come to your house and see your collection?” His question took me by surprise. I never thought he would want to visit me at our home. And after seeing his house, I was not sure I wanted him to see where I lived. “Well . . . when?” he asked again, looking a bit confused because I did not answer him.

After thinking of possible excuses, I finally said, “I live too far. I’ll bring my collection to school. It’s not much, just a few Lincoln Head pennies.”

“That’s okay, I’d like to see it anyway,” he said.

I never got the chance to show Carl my collection. That weekend we moved to Five Points, and I never saw my friend again.

I placed the penny back in the box and closed it. I looked straight ahead through the windshield, between Papá and Mamá, to see how far we had traveled, and to look for road signs to Orosi.

“What does Orosi mean?” I asked Papá.

“I am not sure, mi’jo,” he responded. “But I have a feeling we’re going to like it there.”

I took out my note pad and wrote the word down, breaking it into two syllables. Oro-si. Oro meant “gold” in Spanish, and si meant either “yes” or “if.” Based on what Papá said, I figured it meant “yes” in this case.

I closed the note pad and held it in the palm of my hand. It was almost brand new when I found it in the city dump in Santa Maria. Now its blue soft covers were beginning to fade and its corners were frayed. As I smoothed them out with my fingers, I recalled when I first started to use it.

I was in Miss Martin’s sixth-grade class in Santa Maria. It was the end of January, and we had just returned from Fresno where I had started the sixth grade in Mr. Lema’s class in November. I was behind in English, Miss Martin’s favorite subject. Every day she would write a different English word on the blackboard and ask the class to look it up in our dictionaries as fast as we could. The student who found the word the quickest would get a point, and, at the end of the week, the one with the most points would get a gold star.

I never got a star or a point. It took me too long to find the words, and I did not know what many of them meant. So I got the idea of writing the words down in my note pad, along with their definitions, and memorizing them. I did this for the rest of the year. And after I left Miss Martin's class, I continued adding new words and their definitions to my note pad. I also wrote other things I needed to learn for school and things I wanted to know by heart, like spelling words, and math and grammar rules. I carried the note pad in my shirt pocket and, while I worked in the fields, memorized the information I had written in it. I took my librito with me wherever I went.

After traveling for about five hours, we arrived at our new home in Orosi. It was an old, two-story, yellow wooden house. It was located about fifteen miles outside the city limits. Mr. Patrini, the owner, told us that the house was seventy years old. We could not use the second level because the floors were unstable. The first floor had two rooms and a kitchen. Behind the house was a large barn and hundreds of vineyards.

It did not take long to unload our Carcachita and settle in. Papá, Mamá, and Rorra took one room; Roberto, Trampita, Torito, Rubén, and I moved into the other one. After my brothers and I had put away our few things, I sat on the floor and looked at my pennies. I wanted to make sure they were not rubbing against each other in the box before placing them underneath the mattress. When I looked up, Rorra was standing next to me.

“Can I have one?”

“One what?” I asked.

“A penny,” she answered.

“Not one of these,” I said. “These are special.”

She made a face and walked away, stomping her tiny feet.

That evening, before going to bed, I checked on my pennies again. I then took off my shirt and carefully hung it on a nail in the wall and made sure my note pad did not fall out the pocket. After our prayers, we slipped into bed. I had trouble falling asleep. I can’t believe we are living in a house, I thought to myself.

My little brothers must have been excited too because they started whispering and giggling. Roberto tried to quiet them down, but they would not stop. “Listen,” Roberto said in a loud whisper. “I hear La Llorona weeping upstairs.”

“I don’t hear anything. You’re just trying to scare us,” Trampita answered.

“No, I am not,” Roberto responded. “Just be quiet and you’ll hear her.” There was dead silence for the rest of the night.

The next day, before sunrise, Papá, Roberto, Trampita, and I went to pick grapes for Mr. Patrini. Mamá stayed home to take care of my little sister and brothers. I took my note pad with me. I wanted to learn some spelling rules while I

worked, but I couldn't. The angry, blistering sun did not let me. By ten o'clock my shirt was soaking wet. I wiped my hands on my pants and carefully removed the note pad from my shirt pocket and took it to the Carcachita and left it there. I did not want it to get dirty and wet. By the end of the day, my whole body was covered with dust from the vineyards. My arms and hands looked like they were made of clay. I scraped the muddy layer off them with the hooked knife I used for cutting grapes.

At sundown, when we got home, Mamá and Rorra drove to the store while Papá, Roberto, Trampita, and I stripped to our underwear and bathed in a trough that was behind the house. After we got dressed, I placed the note pad in the pocket of my clean shirt.

When Mamá returned, I helped her with the groceries. "Did you get any pennies in change?" I asked.

She looked in her purse and handed me one. It was made in 1939.

"Can I have it?"

"Of course, mi'jito," she answered.

I went to our room to add it to my collection. I took out my coin box from underneath the mattress and removed the top. The first layer of white cotton was bare. No, they have to be here, I thought to myself. I swiftly removed the cotton and checked the second layer. Nothing. My 1910 and 1865

pennies were gone! I rushed out of the room, shouting, “My pennies! Someone took them!”

When I got to the kitchen, Rorra ran and hid behind Mamá, who was standing by the stove preparing dinner. “Did you take my pennies?” I yelled at my sister. “If you did, give them to me!”

Holding on to Mamá’s leg with her left arm, Rorra extended her right hand and offered me two red gumballs. “I don’t want your gum, I want my two pennies,” I shouted. She dropped the gumballs and started whimpering.

“Calm down, Panchito,” Mamá said. Then looking down at my sister, she said, “Mi’ja, did you take Panchito’s pennies?” Rorra nodded sheepishly. “And what did you do with them?” Mamá continued. Rorra pointed to the gumballs on the floor. “Did you put the pennies in the gum machine at the store?” she asked.

When my sister nodded again, my heart dropped to my stomach. I felt my face on fire. Everything blurred. I stormed out of the house, slammed the door behind me, sat on the front stairs, and cried.

Seconds later, Mamá came out and sat beside me. “I know how disappointed you are, mi’jito, but your sister is only four years old,” she said tenderly. Then clearing her throat, she continued. “Let me tell you a story I heard when I was a little girl. Long ago there lived a very smart ant who saved her pennies for so many years that she became rich. Many

animals wanted to marry her, but they frightened her. The cat mewed too much, the parrot talked too much, and the dog barked too loud. A bull and a goat also scared her, but not a little brown mouse named El Ratoncito. He was quiet, intelligent, polite, and mannerly. They got married and lived happily for a very long time. But one day, when the ant was cooking a pot of beans, she fell in it and drowned, leaving El Ratoncito with a lot of pennies, but terribly sad and lonely. So you see, mi'jito, Rorra is more important than the pennies. Don't be so hard on your little sister.”

Mamá's story calmed me down a little, but I was still angry at Rorra. I took a deep breath and went back inside to our room. I sat on the mattress and pulled out my note pad from my shirt pocket. I turned to the page where I listed my pennies, and crossed out Lincoln Head, 1910, and Indian Head, 1865.

The following morning, before going to work, Mamá and I covered my note pad with waxed paper to keep it clean. I then marked the spelling rules I wanted to memorize that day. As I picked grapes, I went over them in my mind, looking at my notes only when I had to. This made the time go by faster.

On our way home from work, we stopped at a gas station to get kerosene for our stove. The attendant filled our five-gallon tank and placed it in the trunk of the Carcachita. When we arrived home, Papá gave Roberto the car keys and asked us to unload the tank and refill the stove with it. “Panchito, this does not smell like kerosene,” Roberto said as he took out the tank from the trunk. “It smells like gasoline. You'd better go tell Papá.”

I went inside and told Papá. He was nailing a wall board that had come loose in our room. “I am sure it’s fine, mi’jo. It’s probably cheap kerosene,” he answered as he continued hammering.

I took off my shirt, placed it on the mattress, and then went back outside. “Papá said it’s okay,” I told Roberto.

He shrugged his shoulders, picked up the tank, and carried it to the kitchen. Mamá was getting ready to cook dinner. She cleared the stove to make it easier for Roberto to refill it. The stove sat on a small table underneath a window that had plastic curtains. When Roberto was finished, Mamá placed the pot of beans on one of the burners. She then lit a match. As soon as she touched it to the burner, the stove burst into flames, setting the curtains on fire.

“¡ Ay, Dios mío!” Mamá exclaimed, pushing Roberto and me away from the stove. “Viejo, the kitchen is on fire,” she yelled. I was terrified. The plastic curtains curled up. Pieces of melted plastic fell to the floor, giving off dark smoke that smelled like burned rubber. Roberto picked up the dishpan full of soapy water and hurled it over the stove. It made the fire worse. Like thirsty tongues, the flames chased the water as it ran and spread on the floor.

“Get out,” Papá shouted as he rushed in the kitchen and saw the flames. “Out, out!” he repeated. Mamá, Roberto, and I ran to the front of the house. Trampita, Rubén, Rorra, and Torito were already outside. We all stood by the Carcachita. When I

saw Mamá sobbing, I felt more scared. A few moments later Papá came out coughing and clenching in his arms something wrapped in a blanket. His hair was singed. He placed the bundle on the ground and uncovered it.

The instant I saw the silver metal box, I thought of my note pad. “¡ Mi librito!” I screamed out, recalling that I had left it in my shirt on the mattress.

I dashed toward the house, but Roberto quickly caught up to me and grabbed me by the back of the T-shirt and yelled, “Are you crazy?”

“I have to save it!” I cried out, pulling away from him.

Papá hurried over and stood in front of me. “¡ Ya! ¡No seas tonto, Pancho!” he shouted angrily. His glare frightened me. I stopped struggling to get away. Roberto let go of me. I clenched my fists and tried to hold back my tears.

By the time the firemen came, the house had burned down completely. The dying flames looked like they were coming from under the ground.

Papá picked up our savings box, started walking toward the barn, and said wearily, “Let’s stay in the barn tonight. Tomorrow we’ll look for another place.”

Everyone followed him except me. I stayed behind.

“Come on, Panchito,” Mamá said. When she saw I was not moving, she came up to me and placed her arm around me. I burst out crying. Lifting my chin with her right hand and looking me straight in the eyes, Mamá said, “We’re safe and we have each other, gracias a Dios.”

“Yes, but what about my librito. It’s gone, just like my pennies,” I responded.

After a long pause she said, “Do you know what was in your librito?”

“Yes,” I answered, wondering why she asked.

“Well . . . if you know what was in your librito, then it’s not all lost.”

I heard Mamá’s words but did not understand what she meant until a few days later. We had moved to a labor camp also owned by Mr. Patrini and were picking grapes again. It was a scorching, hot day. My clothes were drenched in sweat. I crouched underneath the vines for shade, but the heat pierced right through. I recalled the fire and placed my right hand over my shirt pocket. It was empty. Feeling a lump in my throat, I started thinking about Carl, my pennies, the house. Then, for a long time, I thought about my librito and what Mamá said. I could see in my mind every word, every number, every rule, I had written in my note pad. I knew everything in it by heart. Mamá was right. It was not all lost.