

THE
CIRCUIT

stories

from the

life of a

migrant

child

Francisco Jiménez

University of
New Mexico Press
Albuquerque

Under the Wire

"*La frontera*" is a word I often heard when I was a child living in *El Rancho Blanco*, a small village nestled on barren, dry hills several miles north of Guadalajara, Mexico. I heard it for the first time back in the late 1940s when Papá and Mamá told me and Roberto, my older brother, that someday we would take a long trip north, cross *la frontera*, enter California, and leave our poverty behind.

I did not know exactly what California was either, but Papá's eyes sparkled whenever he talked about it with Mamá and his friends. "Once we cross *la frontera*, we'll make a good living in California," he would say, standing up straight and sticking out his chest.

Roberto, who is four years older than I, became excited every time Papá talked about the trip to California. He didn't like living in *El Rancho Blanco*, especially after visiting our older cousin, Fito, in Guadalajara.

Fito had left *El Rancho Blanco*. He was working in a tequila factory and living in a two-bedroom

house that had electricity and a water well. He told Roberto that he, Fito, didn't have to get up at four in the morning anymore, like my brother, to milk the five cows by hand and carry the milk in a large aluminum can on horse for several miles to the nearest road where a truck would transport it to town to sell. He didn't have to go to the river for water, sleep on dirt floors, or use candles for light.

From then on, about the only thing Roberto liked about living in *El Rancho Blanco* was hunting for chicken eggs and attending church on Sundays.

I liked looking for eggs and going to Mass too. But what I enjoyed most was listening to stories. In the evenings, after supper, Papá's brother, *tío* Mauricio, and his family came over to visit. We sat around a fire built with dry cow chips and told stories while shaking out grain from ears of corn.

On one such evening Papá made the announcement: We were going to make the long-awaited trip across *la frontera* to California. Days later we packed our belongings in a suitcase and took the bus to Guadalajara to catch the train. Papá bought tickets on a second-class train, *Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México*. I had never seen a train before. It looked like

metal huts on wheels strung together. We climbed in and took our seats. I stood to look out the window. As the train started to move, it jerked and made a loud clattering sound, like hundreds of milk cans crashing. I got scared and lost my balance. Papá caught me and told me to sit. I swung my legs, following the rhythm of the train. Roberto sat across from me, next to Mamá. He had a big grin on his face.

We traveled for two days and nights. During the night, we didn't get much sleep. The wooden seats were hard, and the train made loud noises, blowing its whistle and grinding its breaks. At the first train stop I asked Papá, "Is this California?"

"No *mi'jo*, we're not there yet," he answered, patiently. "We have many more hours to go."

Noting that Papá had closed his eyes, I turned to Roberto and asked, "What's California like?"

"I don't know," he answered, "but Fito told me that people there sweep money off the streets."

"Where did Fito get that idea?" Papá said, opening his eyes and laughing.

"From Cantinflas," Roberto said, assuredly. "He said Cantinflas said it in a movie."

"Cantinflas was joking," Papá responded, chuckling. "But it's true that life is better there."

"I hope so," Mamá said. Then, putting her arm around Roberto, she added softly, "*Dios lo quiera.*"

The train slowed down. I looked out the window and saw we were entering another town. "Is this it?" I asked.

"*¡Otra vez la burra al trigo!*" Papá said, frowning and rolling his eyes. "I'll tell you when we get there!"

"Be patient, Panchito," Mamá said, smiling. "We'll get there soon."

When the train stopped in Mexicali, Papá told us to get off. "We're almost there," he said, looking at me. We left the station. Papá carried our dark brown suitcase. We followed behind him until we reached a barbed wire fence. According to Papá, this was *la frontera*. He pointed out that across the gray wire barricade was California, that famous place I had heard so much about. On both sides of the fence were armed guards dressed in green uniforms. Papá called them *la migra*, and explained that we had to cross the fence to the other side without being seen by them.

Late that night, we walked for several miles away from town. Papá, who led the way, paused, looked

all around to make sure no one could see us, and headed toward the fence. We walked along the wire wall until Papá spotted a small hole underneath the fence. Papá got on his knees and, with his hands, made the opening larger. We all crawled through like snakes. A few minutes later, we were picked up by a woman whom Papá had contacted in Mexicali. She had promised to pick us up in her car and drive us, for a fee, to a place where we would find work.

The woman drove all night, and at dawn we reached a tent labor camp on the outskirts of Guadalupe, a small town on the coast. She stopped the car by the side of a narrow road, near the camp.

"This is the place I told you about," she said wearily. "Here you'll find work picking strawberries."

Papá unloaded the suitcase from the trunk, took out his wallet, and paid the woman. "We have only seven dollars left," he said, biting his lower lip. After the woman drove away, we walked to the camp, following a dirt path lined on both sides by eucalyptus trees. Mamá held me by the hand very tightly. At the camp, Mamá and Papá were told that the foreman had left for the day.

We spent that night underneath the eucalyptus

trees. We gathered leaves from the trees, which smelled like sweet gum, and piled them to lie on. Roberto and I slept between Papá and Mamá.

The following morning, I woke to the sound of a train whistle. For a split second I thought we were still on the train on our way to California. Spewing black smoke, it passed behind the camp, traveling much faster than the train we had taken from Guadalajara. As I followed it with my eyes, I heard a stranger's voice behind me. It was that of a woman who had stopped by to help. Her name was Lupe Gordillo; she was from the nearby camp. She brought us a few groceries and introduced us to the camp foreman, who spoke Spanish. He loaned us an army tent, which we pitched with his help. "You're lucky," he said, "this is the last tent we have."

"When can we start work?" Papá asked, rubbing his hands.

"In two weeks," the foreman answered.

"That can't be!" Papá exclaimed, shaking his head. "We were told we'd find work right away."

"I am sorry, the strawberries won't be ready to pick until then," the foreman responded, shrugging his shoulders and walking away.

After a long silence, Mamá said, "We'll manage, *viejo*. Once work starts, we'll be fine."

Roberto was quiet. He had a sad look in his eyes.

During the next two weeks, Mamá cooked outside on a makeshift stove using rocks and a *comal* Doña Lupe had given her. We ate wild *verdolagas* and rabbit and birds, which Papá hunted with a rifle he borrowed from a neighbor.

To pass the time, Roberto and I watched the trains go by behind the labor camp. We crawled underneath a barbed wire fence to get a closer look at them as they passed by several times a day.

Our favorite train came by every day at noon. It had a distinct whistle. We heard it coming from miles away. Roberto and I called it the "Noon Train." Often, we would get there early and play on the railroad tracks while we waited for it. We ran straddling the rails or walked on them as fast as we could to see how far we could go without falling off. We also sat on the rails to feel them vibrate as the train approached. As days went by, we could recognize the conductor from afar. He slowed the train every time it went by and waved at us with his gray and white striped cap. We waved back.

One Sunday, Roberto and I crossed the fence earlier than usual to wait for the Noon Train. Roberto didn't feel like playing, so we sat on one of the rails, arms wrapped around our legs, foreheads on our knees. "I wonder where the train comes from," I said. "Do you know, Roberto?"

"I have been wondering too," he answered, slowly lifting his head. "I think it comes from California."

"California!" I exclaimed. "This is California!"

"I am not so sure," he said. "Remember what . . ."

The familiar Noon Train whistle interrupted him. We stepped off the rail and moved a few feet away from the tracks. The conductor slowed the train to a crawl, waved, and gently dropped a large brown bag in front of us as he went by. We picked it up and looked inside. It was full of oranges, apples, and candy.

"See, it does come from California!" Roberto exclaimed. We ran alongside the train, waving at the conductor. The train sped up and soon left us behind. We followed the rear of the train with our eyes until it got smaller and smaller and disappeared.

Soledad

That cold, early morning, Papá parked the *Carchita*, our old jalopy, at one end of the cotton field. He, Mamá, and Roberto, my older brother, climbed out and headed toward the other end where the picking started. As usual, they left me alone in the car to take care of Trampita, my little brother, who was six months old. I hated being left by myself with him while they went off to pick cotton.

As they walked further into the field, I climbed onto the roof of the car, stood on tiptoes, and watched them until I could no longer tell them apart from the other pickers. Once I lost sight of them, I felt pain in my chest, that same pain I always felt whenever they left Trampita and me alone. Sobbing, I climbed into the car and wrapped my arms around Trampita, who slept in the back seat. He woke up crying and shivering from the cold. I covered him with a small blanket and gave him his bottle of milk. He calmed down and went back to sleep.

After several long hours, I climbed onto the roof

of the car again to see if Papá, Mamá, and Roberto were on their way back for lunch. I looked as far away as I could, without blinking, hoping to spot them. When I finally saw them, my heart started racing. I jumped off the car, fell to the ground, got up, and ran to meet them. I almost knocked Roberto off his feet when I jumped on him.

After checking on Trampita, Mamá and Papá spread a green army blanket on the ground behind the *Carcachita* where we all sat to eat. Mamá reached into a large grocery bag and pulled out the tacos she had prepared for us at dawn that morning. Papá ate quickly because he did not want to lose time from work. Roberto and I ate slowly, trying to make time last a bit longer. Holding him in her left arm, Mamá nursed Trampita while she ate with her right hand. She then laid him on the back seat of the car, changed his diaper, and kissed him gently on his forehead as he closed his eyes and fell asleep. Papá got up, folded the blanket, and placed it back inside the trunk of the car. He then picked up his empty cotton sack and flipped it over his left shoulder. This was the signal for Roberto and Mamá that it was time to go back to work.

I climbed onto the roof of the *Carcachita* again and watched them disappear into the sea of cotton. My eyes began to cloud up. I climbed off the car and, leaning against the back tire, I sat and thought, "If I learn to pick cotton, Papá will let me go with him, Mamá, and Roberto, and I won't be left alone anymore!"

After checking on Trampita to make sure he was still asleep, I quietly walked over to the row nearest the car and picked cotton for the first time.

It was not as easy as I thought. I tried to pick with both hands, just like Roberto, but could only pick one cotton boll at a time. I held the cotton shells steady from underneath with my left hand while I picked the bolls with my right hand and piled them on the ground. The shells' sharp prongs scratched my hands like cat's claws and, sometimes, dug into the corner of my fingernails and made them bleed. I had trouble reaching the cotton bolls at the very top of the tall plants, so I leaned against the plants and pushed them over with my body until they touched the ground. I then stood on them while I stooped over and picked the cotton bolls. I had to step off to the side quickly because the plants sprang back like

a bow, whipping me in the face if I did not move fast enough.

At the end of the day, I was tired and disappointed. I had not picked as much cotton as I had wanted to. The pile was only about two feet high. Then I remembered Papá saying that we got paid three cents a pound, so I mixed dirt clods in with the cotton to make it weigh more.

At dusk, Papá, Mamá, and Roberto finally returned. I was about to tell them my surprise when Mamá interrupted me. "How is Trampita?" she asked, going straight to the car to check on him. When she opened the car door and saw him, she was angry. I had been so busy learning to pick cotton that I had forgotten all about him. Tired from crying, he had fallen asleep after soiling himself and dropping and breaking the bottle of milk. "I told you to take care of Trampita!" Mamá shouted.

"But look what I did," I said, proudly pointing to my pile of cotton.

Mamá glanced at the pile, shook her head in anger, and began cleaning Trampita. Papá looked at my cotton, grinned slightly, and asked Roberto to help him collect it. His grin quickly turned into a

frown when he discovered the dirt clods. He separated them from the cotton, pointing them out one by one as he tossed them on the ground. "You should be ashamed of yourself. We could be fired for this," he said. "Besides, your job is to take care of Trampita. Is that clear?" he continued, placing both hands on his belt buckle.

"*Sí, Papá,*" I answered timidly. I was hurt and confused. Seeking comfort, I walked over to Roberto and whispered to him, "Someday, I will get to go pick cotton with you, Papá, and Mamá. Then I won't be left alone." Roberto put his arm around me and nodded his head.