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Barefoot Heart

Stories of a Migrant Child

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Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe
TEMPE, ARIZONA

Chapter One

Al que madruga, Dios lo ayuda.

God helps the early riser.
(One of Apá's favorite dichos)

My whole childhood, I never had a bed. In the one-bedroom rancho where I was born, my apá suspended a wooden box from the exposed rafters in the ceiling. My amá made a blanket nest for me in the box. It hung free in the air over my parents' bed, within reach of both. If I cried, they would swing the box.

We moved to Tío Alfredo's house in town two years later when Apá left his job as a sharecropper on the McKinley farm. Tío invited us to come and live with him right after he built the house on my grandmother's property. So my parents, my five older siblings, and I settled into the two-bedroom house with my uncle. My brother Rudy and I shared a room with my parents. I slept on a little pallet on the floor, sort of in the hall that connected the two bedrooms, but still close to my parents' bed. They had a double bed and Rudy had a cot. My three sisters, Delia, Delmira, and Diamantina, slept in the other bedroom. Tío Alfredo and my brother Luis had beds in what would one day be the living room.

When the lights got turned off at night, it was such a small house that we could all hear each other saying good night.

"Hasta mañana, Apá."

"If God wills it, mija."

"Hasta mañana, Amá."

"Si Dios quiere."

We went around this way until we connected and were reassured our family was all right. Close and sweet and loving. Lucky me on my small pallet on the floor.

There was a bathroom in the house, but it had no plumbing or fixtures, so we used it as a closet. The outhouse was behind the dirt floor shack in the back yard that used to be my grandmother's house when she was still alive. My mother still scrupulously swept the dirt floor to leave it hard packed and neat in memory of her mother, who used to cook, iron, and sleep in that room.

In the back yard a huge mulberry tree dropped purple stains on the dirt below. In the front a Chinese loquat made juicy yellow plums. These were our growing-up fruits along with the red pomegranate jewels that grew in my Tía Nina's yard. Occasionally, a round cactus that Tía Nina had in her front yard sprouted pichilinges, tiny red fruits the size of a raisin. The taste was so distinctive and the fruit so rare that my siblings and I fought over who got the next one.

Tío Alfredo's house was situated directly between two cantinas. Excitement on either side of us: the click of the billiard balls, the throaty, smoke-filled laugh of the cantineras, and the occasional drunken brawl. Amá made me come in the house when a fight started. The music of my nursery days started just before the coming of night like an invocation. I sang "Gabino Barrera," "El Gavilán Pollero," and "Volver, Volver, Volver" along with the borrachos and the jukebox. Amalia Mendoza filled our back yard with Spanish, the trumpets and violins in the background.

In the spring of 1953 Apá interrupted our family life at Tío Alfredo's to take us to work in the beet fields of Minnesota. Since we had no car, we went in a troca encamisada with another family. The back of this huge truck was covered with dark red canvas. It looked like a tent sitting on the flatbed, except the sides were reinforced with wood. The man who owned the truck was nicknamed "El Indio" because his skin, like that of an Indian, was the same color as the canvas, a dark, strong red. I thought he must be very rich to own a huge truck like that. We, on the other hand, owned no car, no house, almost nothing.

He was rich in strong, hefty children, too. Three of them looked like him, with dark red skin and big, stocky bodies. The other two looked like their mother, "La Güera," with light, cream-colored skin, but still big and strong. One girl was my age and all the rest were older.

It was still dark when the truck arrived and parked under the light of the street lamp. El Indio didn't have to honk because my father had been pacing by the fence next to the street, waiting and calling out orders to everyone else.

"Hurry up! I don't want to keep him waiting . . . Put it all in a pile, right here . . . No! You can't take that! There's no room . . . Mujer! What are you doing? Get out here!"

My mother went to the outhouse one more time, wanting to put off as long as possible the embarrassment of peeing in the basin in the back of the truck.

Some of El Indio's kids peered out of the flap in the back and others got out. His wife graciously got out and went in the house to ask my mother if she could help. My mother was frantic. She was going to the other end of the world with six children and no way to get back for four or five months. She was leaving her brother's house where we had been living. It stood on her mother's property. She had to leave her brother, her sisters, and the grocer who would give her food on credit if she needed it. The last time she had been on the migrant circuit was when Delia and Delmira were toddlers. Now they were in high school and there were four more children, of which I was the youngest. The farthest she had ever been was Arizona to pick cotton. Minnesota was thirteen hundred miles away, and it would take days to get there in the big, lumbering truck. People told her to bring coats and warm clothes for the children. We didn't have any. That's why my father had put us in El Indio's hands, because we had nothing. Apá wanted a better life for us.

We piled our few bundles in a corner of the truck that they had left empty for us. Then my mother spread my grandmother's quilts on the floor for us to sit on. We said good-bye to my uncle under the light of the street lamp, the dirt under our feet smelling of damp and of last night's beer from the cantinas on either side

of Tío Alfredo's house. My mother cried when she said good-bye to him. He represented the life she had always known. She was leaving that now. Taking her children and herself to a place she knew nothing about.

My father, confident and full of hope and life, climbed into the front seat along with El Indio's oldest son, who also got to sit in front, of course. El Indio would drive until daylight and then his two oldest sons would help. I looked at my father through the tiny window that connected the cab to the back of the truck. His face was full and happy; he knew this would turn out well. My mother settled herself on the floor of the truck. She sat on a blanket with her back to the piles of clothes. She dried her tears and sighed a big sigh and tried to make conversation with El Indio's wife. I sat as close to my mother as I could, to feel her warmth. My brothers and sisters were all talking and laughing nervously with El Indio's kids. A lot of them were roughly the same age and knew each other at school. They hadn't really been friends there, but now they would be forced to be.

The truck lumbered off down the street. The engine roared and we had to get used to it because the deafening sound would be with us for days. The roar of the truck was awful, the close quarters weren't very nice, and everyone got tired of the hard floor and the bumpy ride, but the worst part of the trip was peeing. My teenage sisters died every time they just couldn't hold it any more and had to use the basin, which was up front, close to the cab of the truck, wedged in so it wouldn't spill. Everyone looked away and pretended not to hear when it was used.

We had no control over when the truck stopped. You could bang on the little window all you wanted, but if the truck was going full speed they would never hear. And they didn't want to stop just for going to the bathroom, anyway. El Indio was in a hurry to get there. Any stopping now would mean time lost, work not done, money not made. So our family was forbidden by my father even to attempt to knock on the window for a stop. "Either hold it or go in the basin." Those were our orders. They were doing us a big favor by taking us.

My sisters hated the peeing and my brother Luis hated the confinement. He sat as close as he could to the flap and always hit

the ground first any time we stopped. His muscles, aching to be used, made him run around the gas station. Once he was almost asleep when the truck stopped for a stop sign. He leaped off the floor and out of the truck. We all had to bang on the little window furiously and scream for the truck to stop. Luis ran up sheepishly and waited for the ladder to be lowered to get back in. My father was furious, but that was just the way Luis was.

I loved everything. The doll house, secret cavelike quality of the back of the truck. Everyone lying about on blankets and bundles. I could lay my head on my mother's lap any time I wanted and she never sent me away. In fact, she would draw me closer to her; there was nothing for her to do but cuddle me and talk to La Güera.

I sat next to Luis and looked out the flap. In the morning, the mist still hugged the ground like filmy cotton. It was cool outside, but I was safe and warm covered with a blanket sitting next to my big brother. Everything going by outside was new, and I was seeing it all from the safety of this canvas-covered cocoon that had all my family in it. And they had nowhere to go and nothing to do but be with me.

We ate the tacos my mother had brought, of flour tortillas with scrambled eggs and potatoes. She had made hard-boiled eggs, too. When we ran out, we had to buy bologna and white bread at the store. What a treat! The Rainbo white bread was a luxury my mother would never have thought of at home.

The third day was the longest. The bumps really hurt our sore bottoms and everything was tiresome. Rudy and Luis shouted at each other and almost came to blows. Luis even left his station at the flap to get away from him. The truck left the highway and started making lots of turns, working its way through the Minnesota countryside. We were getting close and now everyone wanted to be looking out the flap.

The sun was low on the horizon when we got there. The truck stopped at the edge of the migrant camp and El Indio told us to unload our belongings while he and my father went to see what was what. We used only one eye to unload; the other eye wanted to see where we would be for the next two or three months. We all tried to drink it in all at once. My mother only sighed.

The migrant camp was a group of five buildings. One small, two-story structure, one long row house, two tiny houses, and one medium-sized house shaped like a stop sign. These buildings formed an L. Across the dirt road from the migrant camp was a huge barn, open at one end, and a small toolshed next to that. Behind where we had parked was the farmer's meticulously landscaped house, with a huge lawn bordered with evergreens. We tried not to look at that; it was not for us. Our home would be one of the five buildings.

My father and El Indio came back with another man. He introduced himself as the mayordomo, the Mexican in charge. He told us that El Gringo would be back shortly and that, until then, we had to wait.

El Indio had brought us to work at this farm, but his family was to work at another farm. He was in a hurry to get there and get settled. So we said our good-byes and they left us. The mayordomo left us also to go tell the gringo that we were here. He was apparently out in the fields somewhere.

When our family was alone, we huddled closer to each other next to our bundles. It was early May. There was a light sprinkling of snow on the ground from a late snowfall. We stood there shivering. My father picked me up. It was the first time he had ever done this. "This will be our home for a while, mija." His voice was low and quiet. Gone was the confident bravado. Even he sounded afraid, there with our bundles in the dirt, thirteen hundred miles from anything familiar, with no car, and only the very little money he had borrowed from his brother.

I felt his fear seep into me from his unaccustomed closeness. I wanted to change the subject and I wanted an excuse to get down. I pointed to the barn and asked, "Do you think that's a store where they have candy?" Everybody laughed and the tension broke. "No, mija, there are no stores here for miles." I insisted that I wanted to see for myself. So he put me down and we walked over there with Rudy, Luis, and Diamantina.

It was almost totally dark when the mayordomo came back with the gringo. He welcomed us and told us that our house would be the one-room, stop-sign-shaped building. We had a place to be.

The stop-sign-shaped house had only one door, and windows all around. We walked in the door with bugged-out eyes. It was all one room, fairly large. The large wood stove in the middle dominated the room. My father went outside to get wood for it from the pile we had passed. There were two metal double beds and two canvas cots. I immediately figured out who would sleep where and knew that, as usual, I would sleep on the floor. I was used to it. Besides the beds, there was a small kitchen table and two chairs.

There was nothing else, not one other thing, in the room. This would be our home for the next two or three months. At my Tío Alfredo's house we had an icebox that took a block of ice in the bottom. Here there was no icebox, no bathroom, no chairs for us kids, nothing. My father didn't seem to notice. Beds, a stove, and a kitchen table were all he thought necessary for living. Without looking, we knew there would be an outhouse in the back. We sat on the bare mattresses, reluctant to unpack, as that would be acknowledging that we were staying. Amá sent Delia next door to borrow a broom. She couldn't proceed until she had swept.

By the time Apá had the fire going, it was completely dark outside. The windows were bare and the naked light bulb hanging in the middle of the room from a brown cord did little to dispel the gloom and scariness of the new place.

When my father had the fire crackling and putting out heat, he said "Ya, start unpacking." We looked around, thinking we had missed something. There were no dressers to unpack anything into. Later we would get wooden crates from the grocery store for this and for use as kitchen cabinets.

We said nothing, just did the best we could. We made the beds and cots and, for me, a pallet on the floor. On top of the mattresses, we first put what my mother called lonas. These were single layer patchwork quilts made out of old jeans and khaki pants. We hoped these would be an effective barrier between us and whatever was in those mattresses that sagged in the middle. I wanted to be between the two double beds, between my parents and my sisters, where I felt safe. My brothers were to sleep on the two cots. We put the clothes under the beds. We covered up the windows as best we could with sheets, shirts, and towels. The pots and pans went on the floor in a corner.

And then we went to bed. Exhausted, disoriented, and apprehensive of tomorrow as we were, we couldn't go to sleep. We went through our "hasta mañana" family ritual, just as we used to do every night in Texas, but that night, you could hear the fear and nervousness in everyone's voice. Maybe God had made a mistake bringing us here.

That night, even Apá, who usually started snoring immediately, stared at the ceiling for a while. The beds were unfamiliar, as was the room and the Minnesota countryside noises. The wood stove made the room warm, but we could hear the wind howling outside. We shivered in the blankets as it whistled through the poorly sealed windows.

Delmira tossed and turned. I knew she continued to worry silently. "What will I tell my friends when I get back to school?" she had said earlier as the shame washed over her again like cold water. "That I went to visit my uncle? A long vacation? Or only Apá worked in the fields; for us it was great! They'll know it's a lie. The truth? Ay, but how?"

We heard another carload of migrants arrive. We felt glad that we were already settled. With something to be glad about, we went to sleep.

In the new morning light, I heard Apá putting more wood in the stove. The coldness of the floor and the excitement of our new life made me jump out of my little makeshift bed on the floor. I went over to the stove to warm my hands, but while my front got warm, my back got cold, so I had to keep turning around and around. The wood stove was the heart of the room. We all gravitated to it first thing in the morning, making a circle around it. It was our place of solace, warmth, and family closeness.

I put on more clothes and went to the front door to see what the camp looked like in the new day. Apá woke Rudy up and told him to go to the well and get some water for washing up and for coffee. Apá had already been walking around and had found the well.

I asked if I could go and followed Rudy outside. We walked out of the bend in the L shape of the buildings. We walked through some tall weeds on a narrow, well-worn path. Rudy

worked the well while I practiced making little warm clouds with my breath in the chilly air. He filled our bucket from the well bucket. It looked clear and wonderful to me. On the way back to the house, we passed two other kids going to the well with a bucket. All of us kept our eyes down and walked way into the weeds to avoid brushing each other on the narrow path. We didn't trust anything here yet.

Amá had brought coffee from Texas. She boiled the grounds in a saucepan and poured a cup for my father. He had to wait for the grounds to settle to the bottom before he could drink it. We ate the leftover bread from the trip; there was nothing else.

After the coffee, my father went out to arrange for a trip to the grocery store. Close by, in Sabin, was the "company store." It was a small convenience store, and the gringo had arranged for the migrants to buy groceries there on credit. It was the only store in town. The bill would be settled at the end of the season. The migrants got paid only once, at the end of the season.

Amá and Apá went with a neighbor to get groceries at Sabin. They took Delia in case they needed an interpreter. We sat around the house trying to get used to the place.

While they were gone, the farmer's wife brought us two frozen chickens. She told my sisters that she always cleaned out her freezer and gave the food to the migrants when they arrived, then she stocked it with fresh food.

Delmira's face went hot with shame and anger when she heard this, but she bit her lip to keep from saying what she wanted to say. She didn't want to offend anyone on our first day there, so she just said, "Thank you," and cursed her in Spanish after she closed the door. She banged the chickens on the table and said she was going to pitch them before my parents got home, but we didn't let her.

While the adults were gone, the boys brought round, thick pieces of tree trunk from the woodpile to use as chairs. Diamantina and I made the beds.

They came home with the staples: coffee, sugar, twenty-five pounds of white flour in a patterned cloth sack, lard, baking powder, eggs, potatoes, dried pinto beans, vermicelli, onions, cumin, garlic, salt, and packages of Kool-Aid for the kids to drink. The

extras were a piece of bacon to flavor the beans and three quarts of milk. What we didn't drink that day would go on the window sill that the wind seemed to hit first, to keep it cool. There was never enough milk, so all my brothers and sisters had tiny teeth. My mother brought a small piece of candy for each of us kids and a black rope of licorice for herself.

We showed Amá and Apá the frozen chickens. Apá smiled from ear to ear and was now convinced that this was a good gringo that we were staying with. He felt welcomed and taken care of. We looked at Delmira, but she kept her eyes down and said nothing.

We ate our candy while Amá made lunch. A lady from the house next door came over to talk to my mother. She had been there many years, she said, and told us about the routine. We were starting to feel that we had arrived. We didn't know it then, but that stop-sign-shaped house would be our summer home in Minnesota for the next six years.

When my father had told us we were going to Minnesota with El Indio to work in thê beet fields, all the kids had different responses—all silent and internal—we never said anything. He was taking a bunch of children to Minnesota, but he didn't see it that way. My father knew nothing about children. He treated us all like adults, expecting adult responses from us. We were a team going to work.

Delia was in her first year of high school. It was the first of May. She would have to leave the new boy who smiled at her in a secret way in the hall. Her friend Chayo liked him, too. Would the new boy remember Delia when she came back in September or would Chayo have prevailed?

Delmira looked around her eighth-grade class, full of adolescent juices. She would miss her eighth-grade graduation. She didn't know how she could ever tell them that she was being taken out of school to go in the back of a canvas-covered truck to work in the fields. She knew their responses would be cruel. She decided to face the problem at the end of the summer. So she told no one—just walked out of school at the end of the day with a fake smile and said, "See you tomorrow!" and didn't return until September.

Luis, in the sixth grade and a boy, was not so mortified. So he bragged to his friends that he would be doing a man's job that summer. But in his heart of hearts he was afraid. He had worked in the peanut fields for years, but he suspected the beet fields would be much crueler and Apá a harder taskmaster.

Diamantina, in the fifth grade, was terrified. She worried about everything anyway, and she wanted to do well. Would they make her work all day? Would they make her go to a new school? Would there be gringos there? Or would it be a Mexican school for the migrants? She hoped so. She didn't like the gringos—they made her feel ashamed to wear her hand-me-down clothes. She bit her nails until they bled, and then she bit the inside of her lip. At night, she couldn't go to sleep for the pain at the ends of her fingers.

Rudy, in the fourth grade, didn't care about anything. He didn't care to tell anyone, but he didn't consider it an ugly secret either—he would just do what was needed. He was the one who responded best to my father's need to have all of us be adults, albeit short ones.

The gringo who owned the farm and the mayordomo came to see Apá the day after we got there to talk about the kids' schooling. All the school-age children at the migrant camp had to attend school until the end of the school year or the gringo would get in trouble.

This was a new development my father hadn't expected. But actually, he was glad. His dream was for all of us to finish high school and to have better lives than he had. So he told my mother to get everyone ready for school.

Amá, already overwhelmed with all the new challenges, exploded. "I didn't know they would have to go to school! You told me to pack light! We brought mostly work clothes! The girls only brought a couple of dresses to wear in case there was an occasional day off! How can you expect me to dress five children for a month in a gringo school when we didn't bring anything! I'll have to wash clothes daily after being in the fields all day! ¡Esto es el colmo!"

My father looked distressed as he always did when my mother yelled at him with a legitimate point. He mumbled something about having to make do and went outside to sharpen the hoes.

When he left, my mother started to cry. We watched, helpless. Delia said, "Amá, Delmira and I will wash the clothes when we get home from school—for everyone. It's only for a month. We can do it, Amá. You won't have to wash clothes at all."

Amá blew her nose into the handkerchief that she always carried in her pocket. "I don't know how that viejo could have brought us so far so unprepared."

The next morning, while Apá and Amá prepared to go to work, everyone except me prepared to go to school.

Since it was the first day of school, the parents watched from the doorways and waited until the bus came before they went to the fields. We went to the bus stop all bunched up, juntitos. In Texas we fought constantly, but here the fear and the morning cold made us loving manitos again. I went to the bus stop to wait with them.

Delia, Delmira, Luis, Diamantina, and Rudy stood there bunched up and nervous. They would be showing up at a strange school unannounced. They would have to register themselves, of course. My parents knew no English and nothing about papers.

The Minnesota farmland is as flat as a table—you can see for miles—all the way to the horizon. We went to the bus stop much too early. It was a freezing cold early May morning. The wind blew directly at us with nothing to stop it.

They weren't dressed for the weather. They were dressed for a warm Texas school day, the way they had always been. The cold air blew through Luis's shirt that had been washed a hundred times. The fear and dread of the unknown about the bus and the school made them even colder. Would they have to sit at the back of the bus because they were Mexican? Would they have to sit next to gringos in class? What would they say about our clothes? Vicious things probably.

Diamantina was the smallest and Rudy was the youngest. She was the first one to break. She was wearing little nylon socks with ancient patent leather shoes that had belonged to Delmira and they were still a little too big for her. The cold wind blew across the little hairs on her legs and made her get goose bumps all over. It would blow through her cotton dress like netting, lifting the hem. It blew all the way to the back of her heart, where the tears

were waiting. And they came out. The others rushed to comfort her, but they felt like crying too.

Rudy was the first one to see the bus, a yellow speck on the featureless horizon. They composed themselves. Delmira wiped Diamantina's cheeks with the underside hem of her dress. They swallowed their fear like a big, ugly pill. They had to be brave no matter what came next.

I stood there watching the bus drive away. My brothers and sisters would do what they had to; they always did. I felt forlorn and abandoned. We had been together, all of us, for days. When I turned around to go back to my parents, I saw a black Ford pull up next to the migrant camp. Three nuns in black habits got out. They were walking toward the stop-sign-shaped house, where my father was sharpening hoes on the front step. I ran to get there first.

I burst through the door and told my mother we had company. When she came out, they asked her how the children would be cared for while the parents worked in the fields. It was the first time my mother had been on the migrant circuit with six children. She said she didn't know.

They offered to take the littlest ones with them for the summer. It would cost only what they could pay—a dollar a week, they said. It was a charity the church offered for the migrants.

My mother felt she had no choice but to send me there. Leaving me at the edge of the field while they worked was dangerous, since the rows of beets were half a mile long and I was only three. My eleven-year-old sister, Diamantina, was too young to work. The child labor laws said you had to be twelve to work in the fields. So Diamantina would go with me and be schooled there. Rudy was also too young to work, but because he was Rudy and a male child, he didn't have to go to the nuns.

They took the two of us on Sunday. Apá borrowed a car and everyone went. Amá cried quietly and sighed despairingly all the way. Everyone else was silent. Apá drove faster than usual, wanting it to be over.

When we got there, he gave us each a quarter. He said they would come to visit us the next time it rained and the fields were unworkable, if he could borrow a car.

The school was huge, with an asphalt playground and a tall, wrought-iron fence surrounding everything. When it was time, Diamantina and I clutched the bars and pushed our faces through to say good-bye to my mother and father and to all the others. We were overwhelmed with abandonment and sadness. And it was still daytime.

When nighttime came, then I really knew what it was to feel abandoned. They took us to a really big room, a gymnasium, with long rows of cots. They looked like the long rows of sugar beets that we had just left. This was where all the children lay down together. Thanks to God, they gave me a cot next to my sister. I covered myself with the sheet while the tears leaked out. I didn't want to cry. I wanted to be strong, as my father liked for me to be, but the tears wouldn't obey me . . . and they kept wetting the small pillow.

"Diamantina," I said to my sister very quietly, "would you hold my hand? I'm afraid and I feel very sad. I want my mother . . . I don't want to be here."

"Shhh, be quiet. Don't be afraid. Give me your hand. I'll take care of you. Don't be afraid."

The nuns walked up and down the rows of cots. I didn't want them to see me cry. I didn't want them even to see me. I closed my eyes very hard to keep the tears in and to make my heart hard. But the lump in my throat wouldn't go away and I felt more alone and sad.

I squeezed my sister's hand tightly . . . it was my only link to the life that I had known up until that time. She squeezed it back. Then I felt less alone. And the lump in my throat got smaller. The tears dried on my cheeks and I dreamt.

I dreamt that it was a beautiful day with a blue sky and small cottony clouds. We were in a park and I was dressed in a beautiful yellow dress and patent leather shoes. My amá had me by the hand. She was laughing, her face full and happy. Close to us were my brothers and sisters with my father. Someone had said something funny and everyone was laughing, especially my apá. I felt so lucky to be at the center of this family, loved and comfortable.

We started to play on the playground equipment. I got on the slide. It was very tall. When I got to the top of it, I stopped.

Everyone looked small below me and I got scared. I didn't want to be a coward and go back down the ladder. And besides, there was a little boy behind me. I had to go. I went with all my fear and with my wild hair blowing behind me. When I got to the bottom, my sister Delmira caught me in her arms. Again I felt lucky and happy to have so many people who loved me.

The next morning, the nuns made us bow our heads and pray to thank God for breakfast. I prayed for rain.

During recess a vendor sold popsicles through the bars of the fence. They were five cents each. My sister took our quarters out of her sock and bought us each one. They were yellow and deliciously cool in the summer heat of the asphalt playground. The next day we only got one and shared, to conserve our money.

"Do you think they're coming back to get us?" I asked Diamantina as we took turns with the popsicle.

"Of course they are, silly!" she said. But then her eyes got a sad, faraway look.

I imagined them hoeing the beets and wondered if they were thinking about us as they hoed. Maybe Apá wished he had given us more quarters in case it didn't rain for awhile. Maybe Amá missed my laying my head on her lap after dinner when all the work was done. I missed it too. Her apron was soft from being washed a thousand times. It smelled like tortillas and dinner and soap. She rubbed my head with her fingers.

Maybe Amá felt like crying as she hoed, as I did at the school.

When Amá wrote a letter, I made Diamantina read it over and over. Especially the part that said "Your amá, who loves and appreciates you." She let me sleep with it under my pillow. I put it in my sock during the day. The sweat of the playground made it get wet and the letters blurred, but it didn't matter. I couldn't read, anyway.

One night, a clap of thunder woke me from a dead sleep. My eyes were round by the next flash of lightning.

I looked over and Diamantina was awake too. The thunder had awakened some of the little ones and they were crying. I had never been afraid of weather, even though my mother was. I loved the wildness of thunder, lightning, and driving rain. My wild nature reveled in it.

"Do you think they'll be here tomorrow?" I asked her.

"It may not be raining where they are. It might only be raining here," she answered.

That was a disappointing possibility.

When it continued to rain all night and into the morning, we started to feel hopeful. The rain stopped around mid-morning. We waited all day with our hearts in our throats. Every car that drove by took our full attention.

After dinner, neither of us spoke. Words wouldn't help, anyway. Our heads were swimming with disappointment. We were becoming older too fast. A part of our childhood was dying.

In bed, I stared at the high gymnasium ceiling. My eyes would fill and empty as the sad thoughts came in waves. Diamantina was crying too.

The next morning, I was in the play room, feeling terribly lonely. The three-story doll house, taller than I was, and the blocks didn't interest me at all. I looked at the nuns and ran out of the room, down the hall, out of the building, and across the asphalt school yard, the nuns screaming and chasing me.

I was determined and hell-bent to be with my sister since I couldn't be with my family. I struggled with the big church door and ran down the aisle, headlong into Diamantina, who was practicing for her first communion. I wrapped myself around her legs, sobbing now, and screaming. They came up to us out of breath. "She ran out. Not supposed to be here," they gasped. They tried to take my hand, but it just dug deeper into my sister's leg. Embarrassed, she tried to talk sense into me. Senseless, I couldn't listen, I just screamed louder. My little soul feeling as if it were going to fly apart. Pandemonium in front of the altar now, the priest coming out of the sacristy to see.

I couldn't tell them what was going on inside of me. How could I? Maybe if I screamed louder they would know. My wild screams would tell them. Diamantina could see. She saw into my eyes and knew.

And the conflict started for her. All these adults wanting us to make nice. And my screams and imploring eyes that I couldn't take off her, begging her to help me. She couldn't do it. She was too small and only eleven and my father had taught her too well to mind.

"What happened?" she asked. I just screamed and shook my head wildly. I couldn't say the words, not here, in front of all these people.

She hugged me and cried too, but quietly, despairingly.

"Shhh, ya. You have to go back with them," she said quietly.

"NOOOO! NOOOO!" I begged, but I knew I couldn't fight this crowd. They would do what they wanted to with me.

They peeled me off her, still screaming, but only hopeless screams now, knowing that there was no help for me.

She watched them carry me off, but I forgave her. She couldn't do more, I knew that.

Later, we found out that my father hadn't been able to borrow a car. Naturally, on the first rainy day off, all the migrants wanted to use their cars to go to town—to grocery shop, to buy supplies they had forgotten to bring with them, like work gloves and metal files to sharpen the hoes.

The whole family had wanted to visit us, but he couldn't make it work. His powerless feeling had made my father crazy. So he had talked to the mayordomo about helping him get a used car. It had become obvious to the mayordomo and to the gringo that our family was hard working and reliable. Together, Apá and the mayordomo went to the gringo and he agreed to advance my father the money for a used car if he promised to come back to this farm next year. Half the amount would be due this year and half the next. The money would be taken out of his paycheck at the end of the season.

The next time it rained, they arrived bright and early in a gray and white Chevy. It felt like Christmas. I could love the rain again even though it had disappointed me so badly last time. My brothers and sisters were glad to see us, thrilled to have a holiday, and ecstatic about our car. My father proudly drove us around town.

We stopped at a grocery store and got snacks for a picnic. We ate at a picnic table in the park with the grass glistening all around in the sunlight after the rain. I had never been happier.

When they left us later in the afternoon, it was not so sad. We would miss them. But now we knew they had missed us too. We had a car, whereas before we had nothing. Things were looking up.

The next day, at recess, I realized Apá had forgotten to give us quarters for popsicles. Diamantina said she had remembered,

but was afraid to ask him. We looked longingly at the other kids with popsicles.

When Diamantina opened the next letter from Amá, a dollar fell out. It said:

Diamantina and Elva, my daughters,

I think about you every day. My hope is that God will reunite us soon.

We forgot to give you money for the popsicles. On our way back, your father kept saying, "How could I have forgotten to give them money?"

Here everything is the same. The fields were very wet at first, but now they are almost dry.

My daughters, take care, each of the other.

Su mamá, que las quiere y las aprecia.

Olivia P. Treviño

Delmira had put two red ribbons for my braids in the envelope. I wore them every day, feeling beautiful and loved.

After leaving us with the nuns for three months, the whole family came to get us at the end of July. The beet thinning and weeding season was over. Beet topping and harvest season wouldn't start until mid-September. All the migrants packed up and went elsewhere to work for a month and a half. Apá said we would follow El Indio's truck to Wisconsin.

"We made a place up here for you," Delmira told me, indicating the ledge behind the back seat. They had put a sheet and a pillow up there. The ledge was the perfect size for me, the exact length of my body and a lot wider.

"Amá, do they have nuns in Wisconsin?" I asked when I was settled.

"Pos, quién sabe." She had never been to Wisconsin, just as she had never been to Minnesota, so how could I expect her to know?

"Yes, they do," Rudy said, looking up at me from the back seat. "We're going to leave you there. But don't worry, we'll pick you up next year when we come back."

I rapped him on the head with my knuckles as hard as I could, but he didn't care, since he had made everyone laugh.

"Apá, do I have to stay with the nuns in Wisconsin?"

"No sé hija, pronto veremos," he said. He wasn't really paying attention to me, since he was concentrating on staying on El Indio's tail. He didn't want to get lost on the way.

We were heading to the farm where El Indio's family had gone the previous year. He had warned us that Wisconsin was not like Minnesota in that nothing was certain there. If the fields were ready, then there would be work. If there were no fields ready to be picked, then either you went on to the next farm or you went to the lake and fished. Also, in Wisconsin, the season was short and there were no contracts with the migrants, so people went to different farms every year.

The farm we went to that first year had plenty of work, but no place for us to stay right away. The house where we could stay was rented and the occupants wouldn't be out for several days. The farmer really wanted his fields picked, though, so he said we could stay in the barn until the house became vacant.

The barn? Everyone looked at Apá, alarmed. The barn was for pigs and cows.

"Sí, bueno," he said. The barn was fine with him as long as there was work. The accommodations didn't matter; we were there to work and make money. No one could argue. But everyone, even Rudy this time, seemed upset and ashamed.

The barn was no longer used to house animals, but it was full of rusty old equipment. There were several old buggies, once drawn by horses, that we had to move out of the way before we had room to live there for a few days.

The work in Wisconsin was to pick green beans, cucumbers, and occasionally tomatoes. The cucumber fields were picked several times during a season. A machine sorted them by size, with the smallest ones paying the most. The rows were short, so our car was nearby. I kept watching for nuns, but none came. In Wisconsin, even Diamantina worked, as it didn't require much skill, just to get the fruit off the plant. All the kids were used to this kind of work. They had picked peanuts for years in Apá's sharecropper plot when we used to live at the McKinley farm. Being used to it didn't mean they liked it, though. In fact, they hated it more than the beet fields. In Minnesota, they worked standing up, touching only the hoe. Except for the days after a

rain, they could stay fairly clean. Not so in Wisconsin. To pick the green beans and cucumbers, you had to put your hands right into the plant, soaked with dew early in the morning. In half an hour, your work gloves and shirt were soaked up to the elbow. After they dried in the sun, the prickles from the plants started to make your skin itch. At first, people couldn't decide whether it was better to work bent over at the waist, and have the lower back hurt, or to squat down, and have the knees hurt. Most people started bent over at the waist, but after the first day or two they would go for knee pain instead. At least knee pain stayed localized. The back pain made you feel bad all over. My job was to bring the water bucket and dipper whenever Apá declared a break.

As promised, we stayed in the barn only for a few days. The house we moved into was a two-story farm house, probably at one time occupied by the owner. It was surrounded by fields and stood high on a knoll. On one side, the ground was fairly level. On the other side the ground fell away steeply. At the bottom of the hill was a golden, ripe wheat field. On the other side of the wheat field was a creek reputed to have lots of fish. Rudy was dying to fish it, but it wouldn't be for a while. El Indio's family got the upstairs and we moved into the ground floor. I was fascinated by the stairs, never having been in a two-story house. But Apá forbade me to go up there, as he wanted to ensure their family's privacy. So I would sneak halfway up and run down if I heard anyone coming. Rudy and I got bunk beds. He made me take the lower one, of course.

Even though the nuns never came, I still felt lonely and cut off from the family. Even Diamantina was part of them now. I spent long hours alone by the car.

That year the crops were plentiful and work was continuous, seven days a week for several weeks. Time passed quickly and by early September, we could feel a chill in the air and smell the coming of winter. The sycamores were already dropping their leaves. There came a day, finally, when there were no fields that were ready to be picked. The farmer wanted to wait two more days, and then do the final picking of the season.

Apá went into town to buy meat for a barbecue. He asked Luis to rake the leaves while he was gone. Rudy was finally to go

fishing at the creek on the other side of the wheat field. He promised to be back by noon. I watched him walk down the hill, since he had refused to take me. By the time he was at the far end of the field, he looked like a tiny black speck in the gold of the wheat. Amá and my sisters did the laundry early. By noon the sheets were flapping in the breeze over the green grass.

Delmira turned the radio on at the same time that Apá started the fire for the barbecue. Everyone happy, they congregated in the back yard. Apá, thrilled with our success and our prospects for the future, was the happiest I had ever seen him. Generosity and celebration were the order of the day. Meat on the grill, the radio playing, and no work for two days. All of them talking happily.

I went to the front porch alone. From there I could still hear them laughing together in the back yard. There, as with the nuns and later at the Wisconsin fields, I felt cut off from everyone. They were talking among themselves and I was alone, as usual.

Seeing the pile of leaves Luis had raked, I threw myself in the middle. Soft and crunchy at the same time. Light blue sky above me. Over the top of the house, I could see the smoke from the barbecue. This gave me an idea. I went into the kitchen where Amá had some matches for the gas stove. I was going to light just one leaf and have my own little fire . . . all mine, as they had theirs.

But I burned my fingers and let go of the leaf, still burning. It fell into the pile of leaves. Before I could move or think, I had a bonfire. Terrified for my life at the hands of my father, I ran inside and crawled into my bunk bed, crying with fear.

Pretty quickly, they saw the smoke and came running. With lots of shouts, they put it out. I thought my life would be over soon.

I could hear and feel them coming in the house, especially Apá. He didn't say anything for a minute, but I could feel him there by the bed, with the rest of the family standing behind him. I wouldn't open my eyes. "Did you light the leaves on fire?" he asked.

"Sí." The word was barely audible, even to me. I kept my eyes shut tightly.

"You shouldn't have done that." The tenderness in his voice surprised me so much that I almost opened my eyes. He had been feeling grand, and his generosity extended even to me. "You

could have burned down the house, and we could have gotten hurt. Do you understand?"

"Sí." He patted me awkwardly with his hand and left. The storm I had expected had passed, and the sun had come out. I opened one eye. Rudy was looking at me, angry and reproachful. I closed it quickly and turned to the wall.

Four days later we left for Texas. Many of the migrants, including El Indio's family, went back to Minnesota to work on "el tapeo," the beet topping and harvest. The Minnesota farmer wanted us to come back, but Apá insisted on getting his children back into their regular school. His dream was for all of us to graduate from high school. The kids wouldn't quite make the beginning of the school year, but they wouldn't miss by much. So he decided to forego the money that he could have made by staying another month.

Chapter Two

Más enseña la adversidad que diez años de universidad.

Adversity teaches more than ten years of university.

(Mexican dicho)

"Chaataaa . . . ¿Ya volvieron?" asked Rosendo, the vegetable vendor, even though he wouldn't have turned into our yard unless he already knew we were back. It was our first day back in Pearsall, but Rosendo had already found out we were in town from someone else on his route. White stubble covered his face as usual. Two huge baskets were suspended on a wooden yoke that went across his shoulders. When we came to the door, he bent over until the baskets were on the porch and then he rested the yoke on them.

"How did it go up there in Minnesota?" he asked.

"Pos como la pura fregada. But we made it back, thank God," Amá answered, already starting to sort through the tomatoes. She turned each one over to look at all sides.

"Did you hear that Celia's daughter had twins?" Rosendo gossiped like a woman. It was part of his job, since he talked to housewives all day.

"Of course not; how could I hear if we just got back?"

"Sí . . . they came out still in the sack. The midwife had to cut it open and take them out. But they came out fine. Now the girl has one on each breast."

"So is that girl married?"

"No. The father is from Mexico. When he found out she was gorda, he disappeared and no one has heard from him."