What's the difference?

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It happened at the end of the harvest season. The season that seemed to go on forever, with 4 a.m. wakenings by Mom, the groggy and hurried tortilla-making and packing of lunches for the whole family, then gulping down breakfast. The family of six would pile into Pop’s old truck, three kids in the back, Mom and Pop and the baby up front.

Adela dreaded these rides to work because it was always foggy and cold in the valley. But even though she dreamt of being able to sleep in like some kids she knew, she thought to herself that the stars and silent purple-black sky were so beautiful. Adela was twelve and the oldest. Riding along in the back of the Ford with her brother and sister, she would huddle with them close to the cab, trying to keep away from the cold rushing wind. Most of the time they would lie on the floor, under an old blanket, three little bodies scrunched together trying to get warm.

She didn’t know which she hated more — the bitter morning cold or working beneath the fruit trees before sunrise. It was so dark they used the truck’s headlights to work by, while hundreds of mosquitoes attacked them. (Not all romantic like those pictures she saw later about working in the countryside.)

Those days seemed never-ending. Maybe it was only a nightmare — day after day went by painfully melting into one long purple torture. She thought purple was the color that belonged to this season, purple sky in the morning that brightened to a clear amethyst, changing finally to blue. Then the color of the fruit itself, purple so deep it was nearly black, unripe fruit with greenish tinges of purple, and all of the shades in between: yellow-pink, pink-red, red-purple. These colors weren’t in the boxes of crayons she had seen, not even the one with sixty-four colors. But Adela promised herself that anyway she would make a painting of the fruit in the fields one day.

Picking plums hurt. Stooping and kneeling for hours on the rocky dirt clods, picking up the fruit, bruising and cutting knees and hands despite the home-made kneepads and cheap cotton gloves. Salty streams of sweat burning your eyes, while your mouth and throat went dry from the dust and the heat after the sun came out.

They worked all day in the orchards. On most days the temperature would reach over 100 degrees. Arms and backs aching from lugging the five-gallon cans of plums down the long rows to empty into huge wooden bins, Adela’s family worked until they had filled many of the huge boxes.

Near the end of every day, she would pick even faster, trying to reach that last bin, only to be confronted by yet another empty one. How many were filled that long summer?

The pickers didn’t even have a place to go to the bathroom, and this humiliated all the people who worked in the fields. They’d asked the boss for a portable toilet, but he said they just had to go relieve...

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Everyone knew they wouldn’t be back for the next harvest.
They themselves in the field. One time she
saw the owner of the orchard sitting
in his shiny new white truck
watching her through binoculars as
she peed behind a tree. Her gut filled
with embarrassment and bile. Plus
she was having her period and that
was hard enough to get used to; so
was having bad cramps while
working so hard. What she didn’t
need was that creepy boss watching.
But she already knew better than to
complain: it would just bring trouble
to her family.

Was it only a few weeks ago that
the girl in the neighboring row was
killed? Adela saw it happen and
wished it were nothing but a sad and
scary dream, but it was real, a girl
about her age lay on the ground. The
forklift driver had accidently dropped
a full bin of plums on top of her as she
knelt working. Adela thought she
looked like a plum that had been
stepped on, bruised and still, with a
little trickle of blood that came out of
her mouth. The driver said he was hurrying and didn’t see her working
there, then he ran away and never
came back. The boss said he was real
sorry, but on account of the family
being illegal, there wasn’t much he
could do—at all they didn’t want
to get deported, did they?

On the last day of the harvest,
after paychecks had been cashed and
the grocery store bill was settled,
there was a party down by the river
where the labor camp was. All the
grown-ups had beer. A few of the
men even had their guns stashed in
their waistbands. The kids had ice
cream and water pistols. Even
though it was a party, there was a
feeling of disappointment and anger.
If you could see that feeling, Adela
thought, it would be a long snake,
slithering around ankles, wrapping
itself around you and squeezing until

The next day, the local police
were asking all around about who
broke the statues. All the ranchers’
kids were talking about what
happened; some said that it was
probably troublemakers from that
United Farm Workers union, that’s
what their folks said. Adela laughed
inside knowing that they were scared
of the union, even though she didn’t
know exactly what it was, but she
knew it was supposed to protect the
people working in the fields, like her
family. The secret smiles on her
friends’ faces made her feel really
proud of her parents.

A few weeks later, she and her
family were visiting her aunt and
uncle. They lived in a nice house in a
bigger town, where her Tío Mateo
worked as a garbageman. Adela hated
these visits because she thought her
uncle and aunt were stuck up.

Then she saw it. They had a new
statue on their front lawn: a black man
in a servant’s uniform, holding a
lantern. It was one of those “on the old
plantation” kind of things.

She started to get a stomach ache,
remembering the way her uncle talked
bad about black people. She went to
the truck, got the hammer and went
and busted the statue into pieces. Little
bits of it stuck in her hair. Her cousins
started yelling at her when they saw
the broken statue: “We’re telling, ooh
you’re in big trouble now.”

She couldn’t figure it out.
Because what happened was Mom and
Pop got really mad at her and spanked
her in front of all her cousins and told
her to apologize. “I’m not sorry I
broke that statue—that’s the
difference between that and the
sleeping Mexicans?” she asked. All
Pop said was “Ay, pero m’hija it’s just
different.” She just couldn’t figure it
out. The stomach ache wouldn’t go
away for days.