

What's the difference?

*L.F. Valero**

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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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 —after 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

you couldn't breathe, just squeezing all the life out of you; it wasn't much use fighting it.

Each year it was the same, so much work for so little money. Too many kids to feed and clothe, and always new ones on the way. People exchanged bitter stories of being cheated by the boss and how the boss's wife sold cold sodas at three times their real price, and the ledgers at the grocery stores which seemed to magically inflate the amount due every payday. Too much beer, disappointment and frustration sometimes led to bloody fights among some of the men.

Every year there was sadness for people you would probably not see again, like the family of the dead girl. On the day of the party they packed their belongings into their battered station wagon and drove away. Everyone knew they wouldn't be back for the next harvest.

That evening on the ride home, Pop was driving and singing some Mexican songs, when Mom interrupted him: "*Mira José!*" She pointed to the driveway of one of the local ranchers. It was a long tree-lined road with some little columns at the entrance gate. On top of the columns were statues of sleeping Mexicans wearing big sombreros. Pop pulled over to the side of the road.

There was no one around and he and Mom got out of the truck; they didn't say a word. They walked over to the statues with a crowbar and a hammer from under the seat of the Ford, and then they smashed the statues to bits. It only took a minute.

When they got home they explained to the children why they had smashed those statues. "They think they can get away with saying that Mexicans are lazy and no-good people who take siestas all the time."

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 —what'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 ❧