

El Niño

Being a single parent my mom sent me to my grandparent's house in Harlingen Texas, for the summer. I looked forward to spending the summer with my grandparents and sister. The first time I traveled alone, I was ten-years-old. It was an adventure, exciting, and I was a little scared traveling alone. The seven hours trip, from San Antonio to Harlingen felt like an eternity for me. On my second trip, alone I was eleven, and I felt grown-up. I was no longer nervous traveling alone.

What really bothered me was that people still called Niño. *Niño* sounded too babyish, and I was not a baby anymore. I was determined to show them that I was no longer a *Niño*. I was a *muchacho* or *hoven*, which means a young man.

My grandparents lived several miles from Harlingen, a place we called the *Colonia*, which means the neighborhood. The *Colonia* did not have paved roads and if it rained; the mud made it difficult for the cars and trucks to go in and out.

One of my grandparent's neighbors had a large family, and they used to go as a family to work in the cotton fields, to pick cotton. In the early 1960s, people picked cotton by hand. I wanted to earn some money and show everyone I was not a *Niño*. Earning money like the grown-ups would prove to everyone that I was a *muchacho*, not a *Niño*. I asked my grandparent's permission if I could work the fields with the neighbors. My grandparents gave me permission so every day I got up at 5:00, in the morning, and go with the family. We would walk down the road about half a mile and wait for a large truck to pick us up. The truck was high; it had wooden panels around it, and it could carry several families without a problem.

Picking cotton was hard work. I couldn't drag or carry a normal size cotton bag. All of us kids used a smaller sixty-pound bag. On the truck ride back home, I always fell asleep exhausted. Grandma told me I did not have to go anymore, but I refused to quit. I wanted to earn money but more importantly, I wanted to prove I was not a *Niño* anymore.

One day, my life changed. Until this day, the memory is still fresh in my mind as if it was yesterday. We arrived at a large cotton field and jumped off the truck. Two other trucks had arrived with more people and we

were soon in the field picking cotton. We had been working that field for several days and we were getting to the end. It was a hot day; well actually, every day was hot. As I worked, I could hear people making conversation, others were whistling, and others sang songs to make the time go by faster. When my cotton bag was full, I dragged it most of the way to the end of the field. When I was close I would pick up my bag on my shoulders and carry it to the contractor standing next to a large cotton trailer. He would weigh the bag and empty it into the trailer. He looked for my name on his clipboard and added the weight. At the end of the week, he contractor summed up the numbers and pay me according to the pounds of cotton I picked. I had finished weighing my bag and was returning to the field with my empty sack ready to continue the work. At the moment I heard screams coming from all over the field.

Men, women, and children were screaming. They shouted, "¡La Migra, La Migra, La Migra!"

Mexicans called the Immigration officers "La Migra". I saw fear and panic, in the eyes, of one of the adults that ran past me. I was eleven-years-old didn't know any better and figured if the adults were frightened then I surely had to be also. People were running in all directions and I started to run also. The tree line was as a hundred yards away and I ran for it. I heard thumping sounds behind me and turned to see what it was. There were men on horseback coming from the opposite end of the cotton field. We were all caught in the open; the men on horseback herded us like cattle, and in a few minutes, and they had us bunched up at the opposite end of the field.

I was afraid and did not know what was going to happen. A large bus came up the dusty dirt road and stopped next to where we were. The immigration officers made us stand in a line so we could board the bus. Before boarding, we had to empty our pockets and were asked all kinds of questions. I could not see my neighbors and I felt so alone and helpless. I was standing close to the back of the line and in front of me was a big man. His face and his eyes frightened me; he looked so scared. I asked him what was going to happen to us. He said that he was going to be deported to Mexico because he did not have any documents. I told him that I did not want to be deported to Mexico and that I had done nothing wrong. He told me that I would be all right because I had a green card and that I would not be taken away. I felt a relief and then as quick I felt a panic thought out my entire body. My green card was in my lunch box under a tree at the opposite end of the cotton field. I had no way of

proving to *La Migra* that I had a green card. My grandmother had advised me to always carry the green card, but I had left it in my lunchbox. I could hear children crying and could see their mothers trying to comfort them. The officers on horseback kept a close eye on everyone. My English was pretty good and I should have tried to talk to the immigration officers and explain my situation, but I did not. I looked up and saw the dark figure of the officer on horseback against the bright summer sky. I could not make out his face because the sun was so bright. I was standing close to the end of the line. The officer that was closest to me dismounted from the horse and at that moment, I made the decision to make a run for it. I figured that if I could make it to my lunchbox everything would be all right. I could show them my green card and I would not be deported to Mexico. When the immigration officer that was closest to me turned away to talk to another officer, I bolted out of the line and ran. My heart was pounding against my chest and I ran as fast as my scared legs could carry me.

I heard people yelling at me in Spanish, "Run, don't let them get you."

I looked up and the tree line was so far away, but I knew that I had to reach it. The cotton plants slapped against my chest and legs as I ran through them. It felt like I was being whipped. Many thoughts raced through my mind. I thought of my grandparents, my sister, and of my mother back in San Antonio. Fear clouded my judgment and thought I would never see my family again if I didn't make it to my lunchbox. I heard thunder behind me. The ground shook and I realized that it was the pounding of the horse's hooves against the ground. *La Migra* was getting closer and I still had a long ways to go. I gathered as much strength as I could, to run faster, but the thunder behind me was getting closer and closer. I then felt the hot humid blast, from the horse's nostrils, behind my neck.

Several days later, I remember that I struggled, in pain, to open my eyes. My face was swollen and one of my eyes was swollen shut. I focused my good eye and saw my grandmother's teary-eyed face, she looked so sad. I could not move and it hurt to breathe. My grandmother reached out her hand and told me to open my mouth. I found it difficult to open my lips. She pushed a pill between my lips and gave me water. The neighbor, a man in his late fifties, came over to see how I was doing. He felt relief to see the leafless body he had return come to life. I have no recollection what happened other than my body hurt everywhere. The neighbor said I fell under the horse.

The heartless contractor worked the field hands, for a week or more, and then call immigration, to pick them up. The contractor pocketed the money from all the illegals picked up. I never was paid for my work, but I was alive and I would see my mother again. It took weeks to recuperate and before I knew it, summer ended. I found myself on a bus heading back to San Antonio to begin another school year. After that summer, people stopped calling me *Niño*.

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