

Tree Rings

by

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Chapter Two

Migrant Mother, 1936



Migrant Mother

photograph by
Dorothea Lange

Oh, beautiful for spacious skies for amber waves of grain. She heard the song, but can't remember where or when. It runs through her head juxtaposed to the cold land, shattered by freezing rain that denies the thousands who come here the chance to pick the peas that lured them as a meager source of income.

What do you do for a living? Pick peas. A pea picker? Yep.

The frigid breath of winter has dipped south and shriveled the small, green orbs leaving them useless to the man who owns the land and to those he intended to employ. Honest labor is hard to find and jobs are few.

“Why we here, Momma?” asks one of her 10 children.

“Cause that damn car broke down again, and your Pa ‘n Leroy is gone to town to see if they can’t get it fixed.”

“Jim ain’t my Pa,” the girl says with the finality that her mother should know better than to suggest that her second husband is the girl’s father. This one was her father’s favorite. She is not a timid girl, and did not take kindly when her mother remarried shortly after Cleo died of the TB. The girl knows the melodic letters, TB, but they mean nothing to her except that TB made her father spit blood. The mother remembers. She won’t argue with her daughter.

“You is pretty as a gem in the queen’s royal crown,” Cleo told his daughter as he coughed and wheezed through his final days, always managing a smile when his wife and children were near enough to observe his pale countenance, white as a freshly laundered sheet waving from a clothesline. To some, he appeared angelic. To others, he looked like Death.

The moment passes. “I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout just us, Momma. I’m talkin’ ‘bout all of us. Them, too.” The girl waves her hand at the migrant camp that surrounds their tent, then looks down at the baby her mother holds on her lap. “Why we here?”

The woman’s tired expression doesn’t change. “We here ‘cause the Mexicans ain’t.”

“Who’s the Mexicans?”

“Used to live here. They’s people from another country, south ‘o here, I think. They speak a different language from us.”

“What language, Momma?”

“I don’t quite know. Mexican. I think they speak Mexican.”

The girl thinks about that. “Why ain’t them Mexicans here no more?”

The mother has nothing to do but wait, so she is content to converse with her inquisitive daughter. “President sent ‘em back to Mexico.”

“Why the President do that?”

“So’s we can have the jobs.”

“Like pullin’ beets ‘n pickin’ lettuce?”

“Like pullin’ beets ‘n pickin’ lettuce. These poor folks come here to pick peas, but the freezin’ rain done killed the crop, so they ain’t no peas to pick.”

“Is that why we come? To pick peas?”

“No, child. We just passin’ through on our way to the lettuce fields when that damn car broke down.” She pulls the baby closer. “Glad that cold rain passed. Hope your Pa,” she slips again and corrects herself so her daughter won’t take offense, “Hope Jim ‘n Leroy get back soon, so’s these folks don’t beat us to the lettuce fields now that there ain’t no work here.”

Her daughter thinks about that, too. “Don’t appear that any are movin’ about ‘n preparin’ to leave. I believe I’m more worried ‘bout them Mexicans gettin’ the lettuce pickin’ work.”

Her mother smiles wearily. “No. That won’t happen. The President done sent ‘em back to Mexico like I told you.”

“And where’d you say that place is? Mexico?”

“South o’ here. Least that’s what I think.”

“Which way’s south?”

The mother nods her head. “That way ... I think.”

Her older sister and the other children approach the tent with a bucket. “Whatcha got, sister?” asks the girl.

The mother peers into the bucket. “Why ain’t that fine, honey! You got enough peas to make a good soup. It makes no never mind that they’s frozen ‘n all shriveled up. ‘N look here, a blackbird, one o’ them warblers with a red patch on his shoulder! Did he jump in that bucket all by hisself?”

“No, ma’am,” brother answers. “Me ‘n ‘nother kid was pract’cin’ bein’ ballplayers, just tossin’ a rock back ‘n forth. When that warbler lands on the fence, the kid says he don’t think I can hit ‘im. I showed that kid I could!”

“Well,” mother says, “he ain’t got much meat on his bones, but I ‘spect he’ll add a bit of flavor t’ them peas.”

“Hope it be better flavor than what that mouse added t’ the soup las’ week,” another brother comments with an elfish grin. Mother and the children laugh. It feels good to laugh, even on an empty stomach.

“It’s gettin’ late,” Mother says. The headlamps of passing cars dot the horizon of a sky the setting sun paints like a bouquet of roses. “Take this here baby, girl, and I’ll make us some black-eyed pea soup.”

“These ain’t black-eyed peas, Momma,” the older sister comments as she takes the baby.

“No, they ain’t, but that bird sure has black eyes!”

The mother is adept at many things. She is very good at making babies, better still at caring for them. She has, does and will continue to do whatever is necessary to provide for their needs and to secure a future despite how hopeless that endeavor may seem at times like this. She will not allow Desperation a foothold.

She builds a fire from sticks the children gather. She’s made a game of it, the stick gathering, that is. The child with the most sticks is crowned the King, or in this case, the Queen of Sticks for it is sister Viola – as sweet as the sound from an angel’s harp, Pa used to say – who collects the most.

The mother plucks and guts the small bird, a sloppy and smelly task made a bit easier because the father keeps the knife blades sharp and sells that skill to other residents of the many camps they’ve shared on their long journey from what was once Indian Territory in Oklahoma. The children hold their noses, but do not complain as the table is set.

The water boils. She adds the frozen peas – a full six cups, and nearly a seventh – and then the carcass.

“Let’s sing a song,” the older sister suggests and begins to hum to the baby. The others add the words. Viola’s voice is particularly pleasant, like the instrument for which she was named.

*Did you ever hear tell of Sweet Betsy from Pike,
Who crossed the wide mountains with her husband Ike,*

*Two yoke of cattle, a large yeller dog,
A tall Shanghai rooster, and a one-spotted hog.
Singin' too-ra-li-oo-ra-li-oo-ra-li-ay.*

The children know all the verses to the long song, but the 'black-eyed' pea soup is ready before they reach the final stanza when Betsy and Ike get divorced. The children don't like that part anyway.

Stars emerge in the clear blackness of the open sky. The aroma invites hungry young children from other campsites, children who have nothing to eat nor a fire to keep them warm. They wait like phantoms, barely visible at the point of the flickering firelight's farthest reach. They are patient and whisper the words as the mother says grace. "Thank you, Lord Jesus." No more needs to be said.

A waif steps forward. "Can I have a bite?" he dares to ask on behalf of the others at the edge of the light. He extends an empty, tin cup.

The mother smiles. "Sure you can. You others, too. There's enough for all of us, ain't that right children?"

Her brood nods without looking up from their plates.