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I Don't Belong Anywhere

I don't think I belong. I don't think I belong here or there. I'm not exactly sure anymore. I don't know what to teach my kids. Should I let them embrace their Mexican heritage or let them assimilate into the American culture that they are being raised in? It's difficult to live in a country where people view you and treat you as lesser. All because of our Mexican heritage. All because we don't have the same pale skin, sharp nose, and seemingly superior features that Americans have. Yet on the other hand, if I decide to take my family back to Mexico we'll be treated as "impure" Mexicans. Lesser Mexicans.

Back then, I didn't think it was going to be this hard when I came to what they called the land of dreams. People back home made it seem like America was the place where I could earn more money to provide for my family and live a good and peaceful life. But what they failed to tell me was the ugly side of the story.

1928. I had just come home from work that day. A long day of work. My wife was screaming at me again because I had not earned any income for the past few days despite working long hours. Mexico was falling apart. We were starving. ¹It's been years since we've had a good meal. On the way home, however, I heard rumors spreading around that this new

¹ Mexico... starving: According to the article, many Mexicans were experiencing an economic depression after the Mexican Revolution period ("Immigration... Mexican").

program was established between the United States and Mexico - the Bracero Program². I didn't really understand what it meant at first, but after talking to our neighbors I was intrigued with this new economic opportunity.

With a fresh sense of hope, I followed my neighbors the next day to get a Bracero contract at a collection point. It seems like I was walking the whole day and my legs were ready to fall off. I could have walked well over 25 kilometers before I reached the collection point, but it was worth it.³ Before I knew it, my family and I were on our way to San Antonio, Texas to get a chance to live life comfortably.

1930. It's been a few years since we've arrived here. We found a handful of people in the community from all parts of Mexico who came here under a Bracero contract. Some of them

² Bracero Program: According to the Mize, the Bracero Program was an agreement between the United States and Mexico to temporarily allow migrant workers in the country (Mize). The freedom to migrate to the U.S. resulted in a large population of Mexicans in the southwestern U.S.

³ I could have... worth it: Mexicans hoping to get a bracero contract would trek over long distances to get to a collection point where contracts were made. ("Opportunity or Exploitation: The Bracero Program"). They did so in hopes to work in the U.S.

even work in the same cotton farm⁴ as I do. It's not as glorious as I thought it would be. I'm only earning a little over \$2.75⁵ per hour for hours of back-breaking work under the scorching sun.

At the end of every working week, we decide to get together and talk about stories back home and life here in the land of prosperity. Sometimes when Eusebio⁶ brings his guitar, we all sing the *corrido*⁷ he had been working on.

“*Senores voy a cantarles este bonito corrido,*” he started, “*Ya me duelen las manos de tanto estirar capullo.*”

⁴ Cotton farm: The article states that by the late mid 1930s, Texas was a major producer of cotton. Two-thirds of cultivable lands in Texas was growing cotton (Robinson).

⁵ Mintz mentions that migrant workers earned roughly around \$2.00 - \$3.00 per hour. This was less than the average American income per hour (Mintz). The braceros were willing to accept jobs that most Americans despised because they needed money to send back their families in Mexico.

⁶ Eusebio: Referring to Eusebio Gonzalez, who composed the ballad “Perdon.” This song was popular among the *corrido* culture along the U.S.-Mexico border in the early 1930s (Dickey).

⁷ *Corrido*: According to the definition that refers to the mid 1900s, *corrido* translates to a ballad that was made by those living along the U.S.-Mexico border (Flores). *Corridos* were made by everyday laborers of Latino descent to describe the daily struggles of living in the United States.

“*Si nos alcanzan amigo, acabo yo no me apuro,*”⁸ we all joined in.

After the song was over, we all decided it was time to head home. We needed rest for a hellish week of work ahead. On the way home, I thought about Eusebio’s song. He was right. This was not the lifestyle that we had imagined when we signed a contract to get to this foreign land. Yes, I’m earning more money. I live in a better house and am eating more than I had been in Mexico. I live in a tight community with people who share the same experiences as me. But, outside of this community, I’m treated as lesser. We’re treated as lesser. At work, our boss treats us as if we don’t deserve to be here. He tells us to go back to where we came from and to stop taking jobs from Americans.⁹ There are some days where I wish I could just take my sickle and fight back, but I know it would be the end of my family if I do so. At school, my kids are also facing harassment from the other kids. Sometimes, they would even get into brawls so that the dean told them to get it together or they would get expelled. I wonder when it will end.

⁸ “*Senores voy... apuro*”: Roughly translates to “Men, I will sing you a beautiful *corrido*. My hands are already hurting from picking too much cotton. If they reach us friend, I will not hurry” (Dickey).

⁹ Taking jobs... Americans: According to the article, many Americans felt that many were unemployed because of the braceros and the bracero program. This caused a national outrage and many wanted to send them back to Mexico (“Immigration... Mexican”). These sentiments caused the U.S. government to deport Mexicans, even those who were U.S. citizens.

The next morning, Eusebio's wife brought us *El Espectador*¹⁰, a popular newspaper among the Bracero community. My wife and I love to read the featured works section of the newspaper, as it spotlights works from fellow Mexicans who know what we're going through. This particular poem by Luis Solorio caught my attention.

*"Quise herirte con arma de dos filos y el mismo acero se clavó en mi pecho," I started, "Por tan grande dolor mi pecho estalla, a no piense tener más ilusiones te defame como cualquier canalla."*¹¹

Solorio was right. Sometimes I did just want to take my fist and smash it into the face of an American who had insulted and degraded me. Sometimes I wanted them to experience the pain that they were constantly causing us. Although it would never amount to the pain they caused, I felt that I needed to get some type of revenge. However, my desire to provide for my family is more important than my desire to get revenge. Like Solorio, I knew what would happen

¹⁰ *El Espectador*: Translates to "The Spectator." It was a popular newspaper among the bracero and Latino communities. Usually, the newspaper contained literary works by the common folk, like this poem by Luis Solorio (Garcia).

¹¹ *"Quise... canalla"*: Roughly translates to "I wanted to hurt you with two-edged weapon and the same steel stuck in my chest. For such a great pain my chest explodes, I do not think to have more illusions I defame you like any scoundrel" (Garcia). This untitled poem by Luis Solorio describes his sentiment towards his boss. Although he clearly wants to hurt him with a "two-edged weapon," he knows that if he does so it will also hurt him in the long run.

if I decided to take justice into my own hands. I will be the one punished. I will be the one who will be blamed and I can't let that happen. I can't let my family down.

1947. News had spread that they were kicking us out. Little by little, we had watched our already small community of Braceros grow smaller as more and more of them get sent back to Mexico. A few of them traveled up to California to escape the repatriation¹². Some willingly went back to Mexico rather than face the racism they faced here. We were lucky our contract was still valid for a few more years.

A few months later, Eusebio came rushing through my door with heartbreaking news he read from *The Fresno Bee*.¹³ As I stood there in confusion, he limply handed the paper. The headlines read: "Crash Killing 32 is Laid to Plane Oil Leak."¹⁴ As I read the newspaper, I could

¹² Repatriation: The Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s until the 1960s, according to the INS, was both a locally and nationally supported movement to deport thousands of Mexican laborers ("INS Records for 1930s Mexican Repatriations"). This movement, based on evidence, was a result of hatred towards anyone of Mexican descent because Americans felt like they were stealing their jobs.

¹³ *The Fresno Bee*: A daily newspaper that reports on events happening in Fresno, California. This was one of the newspapers that extensively covered the crash at Los Gatos Canyon ("Woody Guthrie's Indelible Mark On American Culture").

¹⁴ "Crash Killing... Leak": The initial report of the crash in Los Gatos Canyon on the January 28th, 1948 paper of *The Fresno Bee*. The report mentioned the names of the crew, but did not state any names of the Mexican migrant workers that died in the crash ("Woody Guthrie's Indelible Mark On American Culture").

sense Eusebio shaking next to me. I could feel the full extremity of what had happened as I set the paper on the table.

Eusebio's wife left San Antonio not too long ago to escape from being sent back home to Mexico. Eusebio couldn't follow her up to California because of the strict contract he was under. Usually, she'd sent letters to update him on everything that was happening with her up in California. Just a few weeks ago, Eusebio stopped receiving letters and he feared the worst. She could have been caught by the authorities. She could have been ready to be sent home. She could have been on that plane. We weren't quite sure. The newspapers didn't tell us anything. No names except for the flight crew. Not a single name of a migrant worker was released.

A few days later, the current edition of *The Fresno Bee* was released. As I ran my finger along the list of names of the braceros killed in the crash, I stopped at a familiar name. Maria Santana Rodriguez.¹⁵ I ran to Eusebio's house to break the news, but when I got there I saw the same paper in my hands on his table. His eyes were full of tears, and his whole body was shaking. Moments later, his feeling of emptiness turned into anger. As he shot up from his chair, he started to curse at the world.

Why did it take for him this long to receive the news that she was gone? Why didn't they release her name in the initial report? Where is her body now? How can he see her? Why was this happening to him? He blamed himself. He should have gone with her to California. He

¹⁵ Maria Santana Rodriguez: One of the victims of the crash. Her name, along with the 27 other migrant workers, was released by a later copy of *The Fresno Bee* ("The People Behind Guthrie's 'Deportee' Verses").

should have escaped life here to be with her in California. But I told him that it wasn't his fault. He was so broken that he went back to Mexico.

While I was waiting at my boss's house to get my pay, I heard a song on their radio that caught my attention. The music wasn't anything particularly fascinating. In fact, I have a better voice than the guy singing the song. But what was interesting about this song was the words.

“Good-bye to my Juan, Goodbye Rosalita. Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria.”

I found myself walking towards the music. Right next to the radio, I was absorbing all the words that I was hearing.

“You won't have a name, when you ride the big airplane. All they will call you Will be ‘deportees.’”¹⁶

Then all of a sudden, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Startled, I jumped back to find that it was my boss's daughter who had tapped me.

She asked me if there was anything she could do to help me and I stated the reason why I was there that day. Still curious about the song, I asked her who sang it.

“Woody Guthrie”¹⁷ she replied.

¹⁶ “Good-bye to my... ‘deportees’”: Woody Guthrie's song titled “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos), which was released in 1948 (“The People Behind Guthrie's ‘Deportee’ Verses”). This song was in criticism to the newspapers and radios that denied recognition to the migrant workers who died in that plane crash.

¹⁷ Woody Guthrie: An American singer-songwriter who heavily influenced American traditional, political, and folk music. He was best known for writing “This Land is Your Land” (“Woody Guthrie”).

I didn't know who that was. I had never heard of him. After what seemed like an eternity of awkward silence, I attempted to make small talk. I asked her what she thought of the song. I expected her to be just like her ruthless father, but to my surprise, she was quite the opposite. I learned that she shared the same sentiment with Woody when she first read the papers. She told me she doesn't understand why her father treated people like me in such an inhumane way. She doesn't understand how people could have so much hatred in them to send away the exact people who are helping the American economy. Although our conversation was cut short when my boss called me into his office, the last thing I heard from her was her promise that she would never end up like her father.

As I was walking home with my income in hand, I thought about our short conversation. I didn't get how she could understand a person like me. Her father spats racism at me every day and I consider him and his kind as the enemy. That means she should be the enemy too, but why is a part of me saying that she's not? That she's not like her father and the rest who have constantly threatened and harassed me? Are there more like her in this country?

Then I remembered the song and the lyrics that have resonated with me to this day. I felt the pain of not knowing what happened to Eusebio's wife. I could only imagine what it could have been like for Eusebio, to lose the person who you cared for and loved the most. What was worse is that from early on, the newspapers didn't recognize those the braceros like me. We were nameless and not important to most of the people in this country. What was shocking to me then was that a white man was singing about us. Woody was singing about the "nameless" population. He, unlike most whites I've encountered, realized that we are people too. We had families and were working hard to keep them alive. I didn't know that people like my boss's daughter and Woody existed.

1950. I joined an organization called LULAC¹⁸ a few years ago that claimed to help not only braceros and *Tejanos*¹⁹ but any and all Latinos needing help. At first, I was widely accepted into this new community of people with the same background and experiences. When I told them that my contract was about to expire, they gladly took me in to help me with my problems. Every few weeks, I would meet with my consultant to oversee the process of attempting to extend my contract. Every time, I hoped that I would get the good news that I had been waiting for. Everyone was extraordinarily kind to me and it felt like I didn't even leave Mexico. Everything was going great.

That was until I was denied. My current contract still stands. I was ordered to leave America in three months, despite living here for nearly 30 years. It felt as if they had just used my hands to tend the cotton and just tossed me aside after I was considered useless. Like the country I had helped economically didn't give a second thought about tossing me out.

What was worse was experiencing the shift in the organization. We were supposed to be helping each other out like what brothers and sisters of the same nation do. After a while, I started noticing the polarization of the members. There were those with the pasty white skin and

¹⁸ LULAC: Still present today, LULAC was established in 1929 by Latinos in “attempts to advance the economic condition, educational attainment, political influence, housing, health and civil rights of the Hispanic population of the United States” (League of United American Citizens).

¹⁹*Tejano*: A Texan of Hispanic descent.

light eyes who claimed they were white.²⁰ They began to dress and talk like them. They began to deny their Mexican heritage. They began to separate themselves from us. They began to morph into the same exact people who I thought we were against.

I didn't know that this was possible. I had never imagined that my brothers and sisters would turn against me. We were supposed to be united to survive in this land. This is not the land of dreams, but rather the land where I realized the ugliness that exists in the world.

In three months we're supposed to return to Mexico. I don't know where to take my family. If we escape and stay here in America, my kids will experience the harsh reality of discrimination from the whites. Not only from white Americans but from the "white" Mexicans. I don't want them to experience the difficult and sometimes unbearable life that I experienced here. However, if I follow my contract and leave for Mexico I am uncertain of what will happen. So much has surely changed in the 30 years that we were gone. In fact, I had received letters from Eusebio, telling me that life is not much different from up here in Texas.²¹ So much has changed since he was gone that he cannot relate with his old neighbors and family members.

²⁰ There were those... white: Many Mexicans with a fairer complexion and American features tended to claim that they had no Mexican descent ("Immigration... Mexican"). They did this not only to protect themselves from discrimination from Americans, but also to feel superior to those who did not have the same features.

²¹I had received... Texas: Many Mexican laborers were reluctant to return back to Mexico because of the fear of feeling disconnected with the others who were left behind. Those who did return found themselves isolated and taunted from fellow Mexicans and were treated as "impure" ("Immigration... Mexican").

Shunned by his community for leaving, Eusebio explained that life is as hard here as it was there. No matter where I go, no matter where I live, there will always be a person, Mexican or American, who will make me feel like I'm lesser. My biggest mistake was coming to this country. Now I don't know where I belong and I don't know where to go.

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