

Junior's Dream

An illustration of a young boy and a young girl sitting on a green grassy field, flying kites. The boy, wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, is sitting cross-legged and holding a string. The girl, wearing a pink shirt and blue jeans, is sitting next to him, also holding a string. Two kites, one red and one yellow, are flying in the blue sky. The background shows rolling green hills under a clear sky.

Rodolfo
Alvarado

"A straightforward, touching account."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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**Rodolfo
Alvarado**



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For my mom, wife and children

“ . . . Full opportunity for children’s play is the first thing democracy will provide when it shall have truly been established.”

—Joseph Lee
Father of the Playground Movement

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CHAPTER ONE

Northward Bound

On the Saturday evening before my *familia* drove to the cotton fields of West Texas, everyone had a job to do. My sisters, Lala (Eulalia) and Esmeralda, helped my mother pack our suitcases, and my brothers, Juan Daniel and Oscar, helped her pack everything else. It was my job to wash La Blanca. She was a 1951 Chrysler Town & Country station wagon Uncle José sold my father in 1959. She had a few rust spots, here and there, but she was dependable and fast. By the time I was done with her, she shined like new.

Before the sun came up the next morning, everything we needed for the trip was loaded on top of La Blanca, covered with a tarp and tied down. My brothers and sisters rode in the back. Since I was the oldest, I got to ride in the front with Papá and Mamá.

Before we left, Mamá always prayed for us to have a safe journey. This time, to everyone's surprise, once Papá started La Blanca, she turned on the radio. She had never

turned on the radio before we were on the highway. But this time, she turned it on right away and even turned it up louder. I think she did this to make Espy feel special.

Espy was my littlest sister. Her real name was Esmeralda, but we called her Espy because, when she was a baby, she wanted Mamá to hold her all the time.

“Esmeralda,” Mamá would joke, “you’re like an *espina*, a thorn always sticking to me.”

This was the first year Espy would be joining us picking cotton. In the years before she turned eight, she had stayed with my grandparents Daniel and Cruz, just as my brothers and sisters and I had before we turned eight.

* * *

It usually only took seven hours to drive from our home in Piedras Negras, Mexico, to the cotton fields of West Texas, but now that all of my younger siblings were traveling with us, it took an hour longer, since we had to stop again and again so that each of them could use the restroom. To be honest, I didn’t really mind.

Ever since I was a little boy, I loved listening to Spanish music while we drove down the highway. So the longer it took, the better. The rhythm of the music always seemed to match the hum of the car’s engine. I listened no matter what the words to the songs were. The

cumbias put me in the mood to dance and the *corridos* made me sit back and think about life. But my favorite part of the trip was when the young ones fell asleep and I pretended to be asleep too. It was then that Mamá turned off the radio, and Papá checked the rearview mirror and whispered, “*Mira*. Look.”

Thinking we were asleep, Mamá did what she always did: she looked at me and then turned and looked at my brothers and sisters, saying, “Our babies, they’re growing up too fast.”

As always, Papá agreed and then squeezed my mother’s hand. Then they’d face the road ahead together.

After this, I normally drifted off to sleep and didn’t wake up until we stopped at a gas station to use the restroom. As my siblings climbed out of La Blanca, moaning about this and that, Mamá told them to hurry and to wash their hands with soap. Then, she started looking up and down the highway with a worried expression on her face.

Most of the cars and trucks passing by were loaded with farmworkers. Some of them slowed and pulled into the gas station, to get gas or to wait their turn to use the restrooms. But that didn’t matter to Mamá. She kept a lookout just the same. When the young ones came out of the restroom and asked if they could buy a Coke or walk around for a few minutes, she told them



that instead of thinking about spending money or taking a walk, they should be helping her keep an eye out for the Border Patrol.

The mere mention of La Migra—that's what we called the Border Patrol—was enough to scare any kid. Those two words coming out of your mother's mouth were enough to make you start praying with all your might that the Border Patrol wasn't coming down the highway.

From the time I made my first trip to visit relatives in the United States, my parents had always warned me about La Migra: "Your aunt and uncle have permission to live in the USA, but we do not."

"So," Papá would then say, "if we are ever stopped by La Migra, do not say a word. Let me and your mother do the talking. If they ask you a question, you say, '*No hablo inglés.*'"

"You understand?" Mamá asked. "*¿Entiendes?*"

I answered, "Yes."

My brothers and sisters learned the same lesson by heart.

For a long time I wondered why my parents asked us to lie about not knowing English. We'd learned how to read and to speak English in school and we'd gotten even better from visiting our cousins who lived up north. It wasn't until I asked my cousins about it that I under-

stood why we had to pretend. They said if I told the Border Patrol I spoke English, they'd have me translate for my parents certain questions.

"Questions?" I asked them. "What kind of questions?"

"Like where you live," they said, "or where you were born, or if you have a green card."

"A green card? What's that?"

"It's a card that says you have permission to be in the United States."

"And what happens if you don't have a green card?"

"They'll put you and your family in jail."

"In jail?"

"In jail," they answered, "for a long, long time."

I'd never asked my parents about it. But as we all got back into La Blanca and pulled out onto the highway, I could tell by the relief on Mamá's face that what my cousins had said was true.