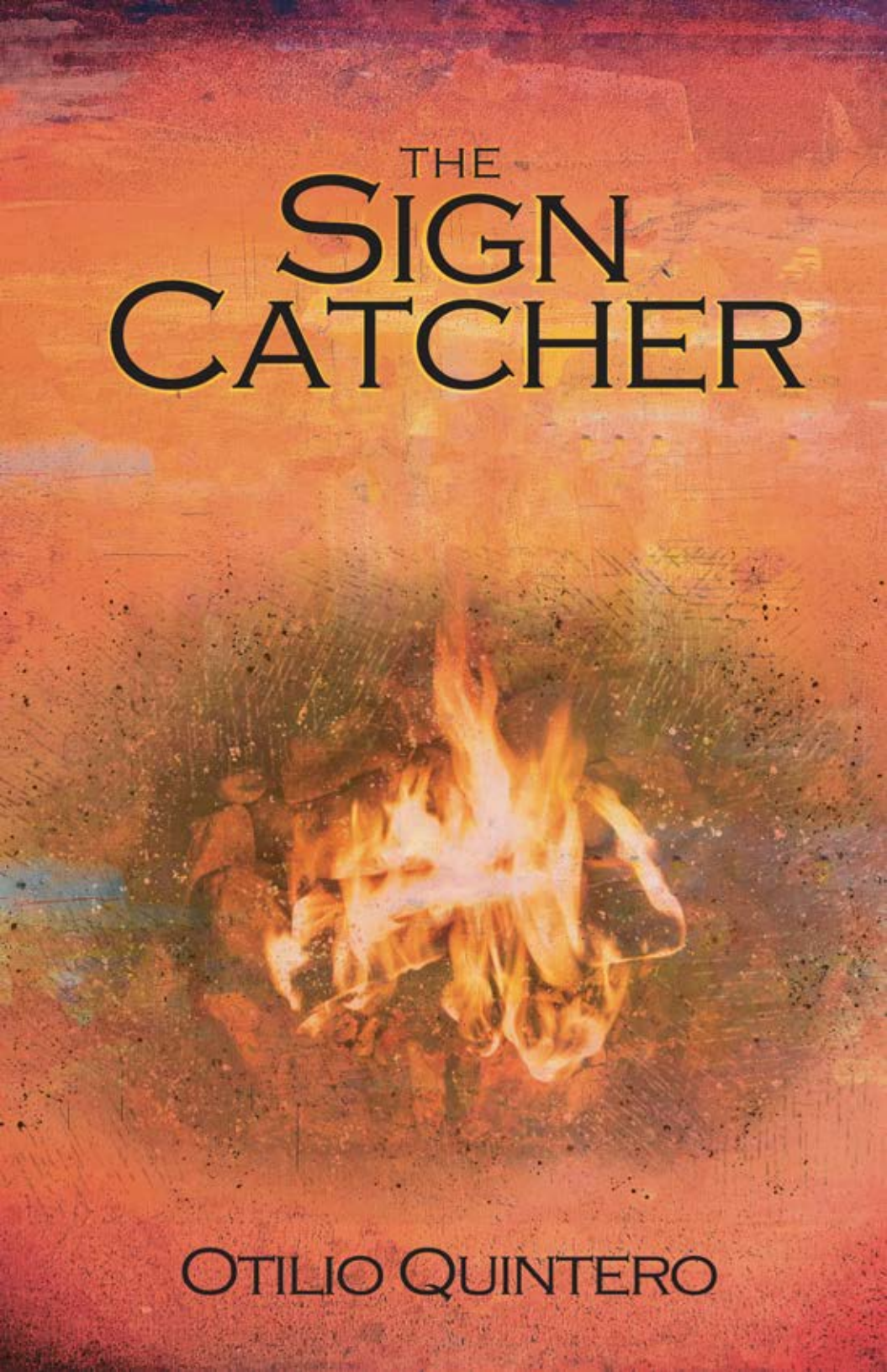
THE SIGN CATCHER



OTILIO QUINTERO

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THE SIGN CATCHER

WELCOME

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Creator/Creation for the blessings of this life. In each of the four directions I acknowledge those who came before us and those who shall come after us. After working for over twenty-five years in communities, juvenile detention centers and prisons in the United States and abroad, I draw strength from the hearts and experiences of the people I have worked with who have guided me in the development of my cultural, spiritual and non-violent principles. This is their story as much as it is mine.

Everything you are about to read is true. This includes the people, places and events that have shaped and brought this memoir to life. For you, the reader, I share a part of myself that is both historical and very personal. I have had the privilege to carry with me the many souls and spirits that have given life to this vessel. These stories and events illustrate and harness the power of faith and hopefully take you, the reader, from a place of darkness and despair to one of light and hope.

This memoir serves as a testament to the human spirit and how as a human species we are able to function and survive in the most deplorable and desperate conditions, yet live in a world with so much abundance.

It is my hope this book will compel you to question and consciously look at our interconnection with each other and the world we live in. In this memoir I will share with you the coincidences in my life that have taken me to the depths and the heights of the human experience, from the center of gang wars

and going to jail, to becoming a teacher and working with such leaders as César E. Chávez, Harry Belafonte, Dennis Banks, Tom Hayden—as well as with ambassadors and presidents from throughout Latin America.

In between all of this, finding and being taught by the Mayan Chol Indians serving as my guide and bridge in order to understand and connect the series of coincidences in this memoir.

As you begin this journey, you will start to bring to life the people, places and events that have impacted and saved the lives of so many but will only be remembered through each page you turn, as you become the Sign Catcher. . .

I was asked, "What is the meaning of the title, *The Sign Catcher?* The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word *sign* as "an object, quality, or event whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else."

It is a known fact that signs are a universal phenomenon that goes back to the beginning of time. There is a long history of humans using signs for social, cultural and religious purposes. We use these signs as compasses to guide and plan our lives, to know where to go and prepare for what is to come. Some people use these signs as a source of spiritual guidance and direction. Indigenous people understand signs as working and being in harmony with the flow and *web of life*.

Signs can present or manifest themselves in nature, animals, objects, people and places. Examples of these phenomena include a coincidence or twist of fate, a feeling or intuition or an occurrence of something impossible or out of the ordinary**.**

The second word of the title is of great significance. The word *catcher* is derived from the word *catch*, which means, "to grasp, capture or obtain." To accomplish this feat, it is necessary to connect to the world, places and people around oneself, as in the experiences documented in this memoir.

Every moment, the universe is in motion creating and sending us signs. Even ordinary events in our lives carry communications and messages; whether we are conscious of it or not, the universe is communicating and presenting itself to us. The question is, *Are we available to see and capture these signs?* Drawing on first-hand experience and native wisdom from different parts of the world, I will share with you my most recent experience:

Late in the afternoon on May 6, 2021, I was relaxing, having dinner while watching the local news. I happened to see a news report about a large group of condors (between 15-20) that had descended and occupied the house of a woman in Tehachapi, California. This immediately caught my attention due to the fact that condors are rare, almost extinct and I have a relationship with the feathered spirits. Over the next several days, I continued to see and hear news stories of this extraordinary occurrence and the now famous "Condor Lady." The story was being reported by national and international news stations and outlets, including *The New York Times* and the BBC.

Approximately a week had gone by since the initial occupation by the condors when my son Cesar called me. We talked about the usual things: home, life and the challenges of "getting back to normal." We started to end our conversation and say our goodbyes, when I felt I needed to say something to him. For some reason, I felt an urge to share the news story of the condors and the Condor Lady.

As I started to tell him the story, he abruptly interrupted me and said, "That's my mother-in-law! That's Seana's mom!"

I said, "You're kidding me, right?"

He answered, "No, it's true! This is crazy!"

Cesar went on talk about the condors and all the attention his mother-in-law had received. "It's been overwhelming!"

My daughter-in-law Seana Quintero had taken over all public relation duties for her mother because she was getting calls around the clock from news stations, government officials—even talk shows.

Cesar said, "She was receiving so much attention, Seana's mother was forced to keep her entry gate closed and locked because of reporters and onlookers."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I immediately hit him with a barrage of questions. I could not contain my excitement and wanted to know more about the incident.

After a volley of questions, some answered, some not, I asked, "Can I go visit your mother-in-law and see the condors?"

"Of course you can. But let me ask Seana. I'm sure it'll be okay."

I could not contain my excitement or my gratitude. I said, "Thank you, *m'ijo*. Thank you for making this wish come true."

"I know, Pop. I know what this means to you."

I thanked him again and said, "I love you, *m'ijo.*"

The next day, Seana called me and said she had spoken with her mother and received approval for my visit. I immediately thanked her and asked if I could drop by the following day. She agreed.

I drove to Tehachapi, arrived and was greeted by Seana's mother Cinda Mickols, who welcomed me with a warm hug and lemonade. We sat in her living room as she eagerly talked about the invasion of condors. We spent several hours talking about our experiences and relationship with the feathered spirits. She shared numerous stories, including some personal tragedies—she had lost her husband, mother and sister—yet she talked of finding hope and peace from her recent visitors. She called them her "angels."

We stood on the balcony of her house waiting for the return of the condors.

I looked around and asked, "Where are they?"

"After the twelfth or thirteenth day, they left. Now and then a few return around sunset. Sometimes they'll land on the roof of the house or in the tree. Now, we have to wait."

We both waited, hoping her angels would come and bless us with their visit. We stood waiting as the sunlight started to disappear, as well as my hopes of seeing the condors.

Suddenly, looking through her binoculars, Cinda pointed to the sky and shouted, "There's one!"

In the heavens I could see a giant shadow in the sky. As it circled around, I could see its giant wings with white feathers underneath. Cinda turned and said, "It's a condor, all right." She handed me the binoculars to confirm the sighting.

The bird continued to circle the house, each time flying lower and lower to the point where we didn't need the binoculars to see it and be in its presence. After what seemed like hours, the angel extended its wings and the wind slowly carried it away.

It was getting late, and I had a four-hour drive ahead of me. It was difficult to leave. I could feel the energy and presence those sacred beings had bestowed upon that place. Even Cinda radiated a sense of calm and peace.

Before I left, I asked, "What does this all mean?"

She smiled and said, "It's a sign."

Chapter I
CAMP SHOESHINE

"Honor the hands that harvest your crops."
—Dolores Huerta

Anybody Out There?

I stood on the tip of my toes, reached up and opened the mailbox. I looked inside with anticipation, hoping to find something there, but the metal box was empty. Maybe I had missed something. I stuck my hand in and searched, hoping to find a sign from the outside world. The box was still empty. With a loud sigh, I slowly closed the lid and stared at the mailbox; my portal to the outside world.

I turned around and slowly walked backed to the house with my dog Brownie at my side. The camp where I lived was called Brown's Ranch. It was located in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley. Many of the camps were given numbers or named after the landowners. The labor camps provided rudimentary housing units for families and individuals who migrated to work the fields.

In addition to the thousands of acres of fields of crops, Brown's Ranch consisted of four white houses, a barn and two large metal storage tanks. The main house was the boss' house. It was a large white house with all the modern amenities, in-

cluding two fireplaces, a beautiful backyard and a fascinating object called a doorbell. The other houses were small, dilapidated structures used by temporary workers and families passing through. Housing was included as part of our compensation in order to keep wages low.

Our house was one long narrow square box divided into rooms for my parents, four brothers, one sister and my dog. The kitchen had a small sink, a stove and a refrigerator. The sink was used for both washing dishes and bathing during the winter months. The stove was used for cooking and was our main source of heat. My mother and father had their own bedroom, as did my sister, being the only girl in the family. My brothers and I all shared one room, taking turns sleeping on the bed and the floor.

In order to get to the bathroom, you had to walk outside, down a long three-foot-wide sidewalk that led to a small concrete structure with an exposed doorway. Inside was a toilet on one side of a concrete wall and a shower stall on the other. The concrete structure had no electricity, which made its use difficult at night.

My father worked as a farm irrigator. He would start his day at five in the morning, when my mother would already have his lunch ready for him. My father would work a daily twelve-hour shift, irrigating hundreds of acres of farmland by directing the water flow in the ditches with only a shovel. This amounted to long hours of hard labor for only minimal pay.

To supplement our food supply, my father always maintained a garden where he grew chiles, carrots, radishes, cilantro and other vegetables and herbs. We also raised our own chickens and goats, which served as our primary sources for eggs and meat. My father would drive the whole family into town once a month to buy food and supplies. It was the highlight of our

month and we all looked forward to it. It was the only time we would interact with the outside world, other than at church.

We would all load into the old green Chevy pickup truck, ready for our thirty-mile trek to civilization. My father and mother would sit in the front seat, the rest of us in the back, full of excitement as we talked about what we would see and who we would meet. Mendota was a small feeder town for the various labor camps in the area. The town had a grocery and hardware store, a gas station, a restaurant and a bar. This was the big city to us, and I always wanted to see more of it. I would explore as much as I could with the limited time I had.

While my parents shopped for supplies, I would wander around town to as many places as I could, including the local bar. My parents always bought the same supplies: fifty pounds of beans, rice and flour. These were our main staples and the primary reason for going to town.

My father's low wages really crimped our family's budget. Store-bought meat, cheese, pastries and sweets were luxury items that we would rarely see, although my father would buy each of us a candy bar or a soda as our treat for the day and month. Sometimes my desire for treats would get me in trouble.

Once, I accidentally found a box of ex-lax chocolate laxatives my mother had hidden in the refrigerator. I was so desperate to have something sweet. I took the chocolate, snuck outside by the barn and ate the whole box. Needless to say, I spent the rest of the day running to and from the concrete building. After that incident, I never much cared for chocolate again.

Open for Business

Since the age of five I had been working with my parents, brothers and sister in the cotton fields one-two months every year. This gave me a bit of income to buy a treat for myself once in a while. I got used to this luxury and looked for any way to

continue my extravagant lifestyle. So, I came up with an idea of starting my own business.

My father owned a pair of black leather shoes. We were so poor that, I think, those were the only shoes he ever owned besides his work boots. He would always take out his little black bottle of shoe polish from his drawer and polish his shoes before church or our monthly trip to town. One day I asked if I could borrow his black shoe polish.

"Why?" he asked.

I hesitantly answered, "I want to shine my shoes."

My father had a confused look and said, "But your shoes are brown?"

"I know," I answered, "but I want to paint them black".

He reluctantly nodded his head up and down, handed me the bottle and said, "*¡Llévatelo!*"

I quickly put the plastic bottle in my pocket and walked away. I sat outside under a tree and began thinking, "I've got some shoe polish, but now I need a shoeshine box." So I went out to the barn and found several pieces of wood. I took them back to the house, proceeded to cut and nail the pieces of wood together and assembled what looked like a crude shoeshine box. I then cut a long piece of thin rubber from an old bicycle tire tube to serve as the handle for my shoeshine box. Once I had finished, I picked it up, inspected it and smiled with pride and joy. I had my shoe polish, shoeshine box, and was now open for business.

The one place I could reach any prospective clients was in Mendota, during our monthly visit. The day had finally arrived, and I put on the best pair of clothes I had. I put extra palm oil in my hair to make it as slick as possible. I combed it straight back, looked in the mirror and said to myself, "I look like a car salesman." We all climbed into the back of the truck. This time I took my shoeshine box with me.

Once we arrived into town, everyone quickly jumped out of the truck, except me. I felt excitement and fear. I asked myself, "What do I say? What do I do? What if nobody wants their shoes shined?" I gazed into my box and looked at my bottle of shoe polish. I then took a deep breath, jumped out of the truck with my shoeshine box and started looking down at people's shoes. After several minutes I noticed a well-dressed gentleman with black leather shoes.

With all the nerve I could muster, I approached the gentleman and in a forceful voice I said, "Excuse me, sir, it looks like your shoes need to be shined. I can take care of that for a quarter. How about it?"

The man stood for a moment with a serious look, studying me from head to toe. A smile slowly appeared as he said, "All right, my shoes could use some shine. Go ahead, but you better give it a good one."

I quickly dropped to my knees, rolled up his pants and said, "Yes, sir. You'll get the best shoeshine you ever had." I then reached into my box and pulled out the only bottle of shoe polish I had. I nervously started to apply the polish to his shoes. I could tell the gentleman noticed my empty box and limited inventory.

As I continued to polish his shoes he asked, "How long have you been doing this?"

"Oh, I've been doing this for a while."

I think the gentleman suspected that I was new to the business due to the empty shoeshine box. I pulled out an old rag from my box and started to vigorously rub and buff his shoes. I did such a good job, I could see my reflection in his bright shiny shoes. I have to admit, I even impressed myself. The gentleman thanked me for my work, handed me a quarter and thanked me again. As he walked away, all I could do was stare at the bright shiny quarter in my hand. I couldn't believe what had just happened. I was

so overwhelmed with joy that I started jumping up and down yelling as if I had just won the lottery. I immediately ran back to inform every one of my newfound fortune.

I continued operating my business and slowly built up my inventory of shoe polish. Within three months, my shoeshine box was filled with a complete set of shoe polish and supplies. I continued to operate my shoeshine business until we finally moved away, but I always kept my shoeshine box with me, just in case.

Eat or Strike

Farm work is seasonal work. There is a time to plant, a time to harvest and there are times where there is no work at all. That's mainly during the winter months. I could always see the signs of winter coming. It got colder, it rained and there was less work. Eventually, the field work would stop for three to four months during the winter. This was especially hard on the families working the fields. There was no unemployment insurance for farmworkers, and we had no other means of income. If you didn't work, you did not eat—plain and simple. Like most farmworkers, we spent the winter months in Mexico, because it was the only place we could afford to live.

For twelve years, we traveled and lived at my aunt's house for three to four months in the village of Agua Caliente de Gárate, located in the state of Sinaloa. Both of my parents were born and raised there. Every winter, we would pack up our belongings and make the three-day drive to Agua Caliente. It was a long and difficult drive due to the winter weather conditions and because my father was the only driver. Luckily, we had relatives who lived in different parts of Mexico, including Mexicali and Los Mochis. We would always stop along the way, visit and rest.

Once we arrived at Agua Caliente, it was a different life for me. Back home, I was seen and identified as a Mexican, even

though I was born in the United States. There, I was seen as a foreigner, a gringo from the North. I was caught between two worlds and didn't belong to either one.

Agua Caliente is a small rural village located in the mountains with some thousand inhabitants. It is called Agua Caliente because of the natural hot springs adjacent to the village. Living there was like traveling back in time. There were very few modern amenities, such as electricity, televisions and phones. All the houses were made of adobe brick with palm-thatched roofs. Cooking was done over an open fire fed by wood. Our toilet consisted of a small wooden structure leaning next to a tree behind the house. Most of the people lived off the land they owned and normally got around by horse, mule or bicycle. Even though we were poor, migrant farmworkers, we still had more than they did, or so I thought.

In Mexico, the village was recognized as an indigenous community inhabited by the Nahua Indians before it became Agua Caliente de Gárate in 1855. My mother and father's families have lived in the village as far back as anyone can remember.

The people in the village were nice and friendly, always ready with a cheerful greeting. I would spend my time working with my uncle Rubén, who also was my godfather. We would wake up early every morning, and he would pack his burro with supplies, including lunch. We would head to the hot springs for our morning bath and then hike to his plot of land. I would help him by harvesting and planting beans and corn. It was always quiet and peaceful, but I always felt out of place, especially during the holidays.

Christmas was the biggest and most important holiday of the year for me. There were Christmas trees, presents and, most importantly, Santa Claus. But in Agua Caliente, none of that existed. The culture and customs were very different from those of the United States. Don't get me wrong: Christmas was a very im-

portant holiday in Mexico, but it was primarily a religious celebration. Instead of Christmas trees and Santa Claus there was El Niño Dios (the Child of God). Instead of Santa Claus delivering toys, El Niño Dios would bring a gift to each girl and boy. The problem was that the gifts consisted only of a little bag of candy, some fruit and nuts. I guess I expected something more like a bat or a ball. I was always disappointed. But it was better than spending the cold winter months working the fields at Brown's Ranch.

I remember one year we did not travel to Mexico. It had been a difficult season of work for my father. He had been laid off for a time and had to look for work in other parts to make ends meet. As winter approached, he realized that he had been unable to save enough money for our trip to Mexico and back. We had no other option; we had to spend the winter in the United States.

My father finally was able to find some work and things improved. We celebrated Christmas in California, this time with a tree and presents underneath. I remember I couldn't wait to open my present. On Christmas morning, I awoke before sunrise to see what Santa Claus had brought me. I saw a box with red wrapping paper and a white bow and my name written on it. I opened the box quickly and pulled out a red plastic fire engine. I held it up with both of my hands and stared at it in awe. I was so happy and excited. It became my pride and joy for months, maybe for years.

My father had been working for another farmer, cutting and tying grape vines as the weather permitted. There would be days and weeks of rain, when my father was unable to work. There would be times when we ate mostly beans and rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner. When there was an opportunity, we all tried to work. Besides, I was now ten years old and of prime working age.

One day, my father gave us the news that the farmer he was working for was looking for workers to finish tying grape vines before the next rains. It was an opportunity for all of us to work and bring in much needed income. We had to dress for the cold weather, which meant plenty of sweaters or anything we could find to keep us warm. My mother got everything prepared for our lunches. My father made sure we all had a set of clippers to cut the vines and gloves to protect our hands. We all went to bed early, so that we would get up in the early morning, ready for our anticipated work day.

We headed out before sunrise. We had to travel a good twenty miles or so to get to the work site. As we approached, I could see a gauntlet of strikers, between 25 to 30 men and women at the entrance to the field waving red flags and yelling. On the opposite side was a line of about 10 to 15 Fresno County sheriff deputies in green uniforms with shields and batons protecting about twenty men who were working, cutting and wrapping vines. I could see the sheriff's deputies pushing and keeping the strikers from entering the field. It looked like two opposing armies in battle.

The strike was being organized by the United Farmworkers Union (UFW) due to low wages and inhumane working conditions. The UFW was founded and lead by the labor leaders César Chávez and Dolores Huerta.

My father slowly drove up and parked next to the row of cars at the entrance to the field. He sat silently observing the battle unfolding in front of us.

My mother turned to my father and asked, "What are we going to do?"

My father sat in silence, just looking out the window. I could tell he was weighing the consequences and thinking of what to do. He finally turned to my mother and said, "If we don't work, we don't eat. Let me see if there is a chance to get in."

I could tell my mother was worried. I could hear the concern in her voice as she said, "Be careful!"

My father got out of our truck, slowly shut the door behind him and gave us a smile. "Everything will be okay."

I could tell he was apprehensive as he hesitantly walked towards the strikers, deputies and workers. Several strikers with bullhorns were blasting their message and trying to convince the men working in the fields to join the strike. You could see and feel the intensity building between the strikers and deputies. I could see both groups yelling at each other, exchanging profanities, even punches. The men working in the field constantly looked over their shoulders in fear of someone breaking through the line and attacking them.

As my father approached the crowd, I could see men walking out of the field. One by one, they slowly started to walk down the rows of vines and exit to join the strikers, who then congratulated them and hugged each of them as if they were heroes. Soon, there were only four or five workers left in the field. I could see that the pressure from the strikers was having an effect on the workers as they huddled together to discuss what to do. Then, the final act unfolded. The last remaining workers walked out and joined the strike.

Everyone joyfully celebrated the victory, hugging and congratulating each other as the farm owner and the deputies stood silently with looks of distain and anger.

Then I heard one of the deputies make an announcement through his bullhorn, "You are on private property. If you do not disperse immediately and leave, you will be cited and arrested."

I could see some people start to panic. The workers who had gathered to celebrate were now running for their lives. Everyone knew that the deputies were there to protect the farmer and arrest strikers. Everyone started to run to his or her vehicle, including my father. Then, one of the leaders of the strike made

an announcement with his bullhorn that made all the workers stop in their tracks.

The voice announced, "The UFW office in Fresno is giving away bags of food. If you need food, you can come to our office!"

You could feel the weight lift from everyone, the fear on their faces replaced by smiles and laughter.

After talking with one of the strike leaders, my father got into our truck, started up the engine, turned to my mother with a smile and said, "I told you everything is going to be okay!"

He started the engine and we drove off to pick up some food at the UFW office.

The Experiment

My only other contact with the outside world was the elementary school I attended. This is where I would see and experience so many new things. Cantua Elementary was the feeder school for the surrounding camps. To get to school I had to ride the school bus for about an hour, because the bus had to pick up students at all the surrounding camps. Even riding on the bus was an adventure for me. I was able to meet and travel to the various camps with my classmates and friends.

On my first day of kindergarten, I was amazed by all the new things I saw, touched and encountered, including the indoor bathroom. The school was a world all to itself. I was able to interact with a whole new set of children and experience new things. I was able to eat different types of food, and plenty of it. They would serve milk, cookies and juices, and that was just the snacks. Then they served us bologna and cheese sandwiches, vegetables, fruit and milk. What a welcome change that was from my boring diet of beans and rice.

For entertainment, or as they called it "recess," my classmates and I would go to the playground before, during and after school. Recess was the highlight of the day. I was allowed to play

on an assortment of playground equipment with the other children. This became my sole purpose and reason for going to school. I didn't care so much for the education and learning. It was the new world that I had encountered and wanted to be a part of.

I continued this carefree life and things began to change. I was eleven years old and in the sixth grade when my teacher, Mr. Ballard, announced that the County of Fresno was sponsoring a science fair open to all elementary and high schools. "Is anyone interested in submitting a project and entering the Science Fair?" he asked.

The room was silent. No one moved or made a sound. Mr. Ballard tried to encourage his reluctant audience to volunteer. He asked, "Anyone?" Just when Mr. Ballard was about to give up and dismiss the class, from the back, I slowly raised my hand and nervously cleared my throat and said, "I'll do it. I'll volunteer."

Mr. Ballard gave me a big smile and said, "Great, we now have someone representing our school at the science fair. I know you will make the school proud."

The rest of my classmates turned in shock. I could see everyone was afraid or didn't believe they could compete, much less win.

As we filed out of the classroom, a group of my classmates waited and converged on me with a barrage of questions. "What project are you gonna do? How you gonna do it?"

Another of my classmates asked, "Why?"

I stood searching for words as my classmates gathered around, waiting for my response.

I finally was able to say, "I think I can win."

One of my classmates suddenly busted out laughing and loudly exclaimed, "He thinks he can win!"

The rest of my classmates started to comment on my futile effort to win and my pending failure. I was left trying to convince myself I could actually do it and win.

I was always fascinated with the stars. I would spend countless nights staring at the evening sky, looking at the show the stars would perform for me. The night sky was where I would go and travel even beyond the stars, where no man had gone before. I often thought about my travels into space and how I would get there. That's when I came up with the idea for my science project.

One night I was looking up at the stars and thought to myself, "If you could grow plants in space, how would you do it? Would the color of the light affect how they grow?" Growing up as a farmworker, I thought I knew everything there was to know about planting and raising crops. But what would it be like to do it in space?

I first acquired several seeds from a bean plant. The seeds all came from the same source, so that they would be the same genetically. I then assembled four large cardboard boxes with a light fixture inserted at the top of each one. These boxes served as miniature green houses and would be the basis for my experiment. I planted two bean seeds in each of the boxes, with a different color of light for each box.

For the first box I used plain light in an attempt to replicate natural sunlight. For the second I used a red bulb as the light source, and the third, yellow. Finally, for the fourth box I used a blue-colored light. After planting the seeds, I started to observe and record the effect the different lights had on each plant. Mr. Ballard showed me how to create a daily log and record everything I needed. I wrote down the day the plants sprouted, took daily measurements and made notes on the uniformity of each plant.

Upon completion of my experiment and based on the data results, I arrived at a very interesting conclusion. The bean plants

with the red colored light grew the fastest and were the tallest compared to the other plants. Therefore, I was able to find the answer to a question we would be confronting in the future and in space.

Mr. Ballard was proud of my idea and the effort and success of my experiment. He had me write an overview of my experiment findings and results in my logbook. I then pasted the information onto two large poster boards that would sit on each side of the table.

It was Friday afternoon when Mr. Ballard and I loaded the four grow boxes and poster boards into his car. We then drove an hour away to the city of Fresno. The fair was being held at the Fresno Convention Center. We arrived, parked in the front and Mr. Ballard went inside to inquire where we needed to setup. I waited several minutes before he returned and said we had to drive and unload in the back of the convention center. As we entered I was surrounded by hundreds of tables with models and displays as far as the eye could see. I couldn't believe a room that size existed. I looked around and observed the different and numerous experiments. I suddenly started to feel a sense of doubt, even hopelessness.

I turned to Mr. Ballard and said, "How I am supposed to compete against all of them? I don't stand a chance!"

Mr. Ballard put his hand on my shoulder and calmly said, "Don't worry, it's not what the others have made, it's what you were able to do. I know you are going to do great!"

I wanted to believe his words, but what I saw told me something different. I reluctantly loaded the boxes and poster boards onto a cart they provided to us. We were assigned a number and a table to place my experiment on. The table with our number was towards the back of the room. We unloaded and setup the boxes and poster boards, trying to make it look as professional

as possible. Before we walked away, I stood in front of the table and quietly said a prayer, hoping for a miracle.

A week went by, I was in class when the announcement came over the classroom speaker.

The principal announced, "The school wants to recognize and congratulate Otilio Quintero for his participation and award in the Fresno County science fair."

I couldn't believe what was coming out of the loudspeaker. Mr. Ballard stood up, congratulated me and asked me to come to the front of the class. As I stood next to Mr. Ballard, the class erupted in applause. Several minutes later the principal entered the classroom with an oval crystal glass trophy and a long thin leather case. He stood at the front of the class with Mr. Ballard and presented me with my award. The trophy was from the National Aeronautics Space Agency (NASA) for my experiment on food sustainability in space. The leather case contained an engineer's slide rule. I was overwhelmed with the attention and felt proud of what I had accomplished. For a moment, I felt I could be somebody important.

I had all the basic needs to be happy. I had family, peace and love. I didn't even realize that we were extremely poor. All I had to do was wait for the sun to rise so I could go out and play on my thousand-acre playground. I would run through the fields without a care in the world, playing hide and seek with my dog. This was my world, and I thought it would never end.

I had spent my whole life isolated from the rest of the world, sheltered, protected. I didn't know hate, malice or even violence. I had no problems, no worries, no enemies. I thought my only purpose in life was to play and have fun. It wasn't until we moved that I would start to realize that I was wrong.

Chapter II
THREE ROCKS

"Religion is for people who're afraid of going to hell.
Spirituality is for those who've already been there."
—Vine Deloria Jr.

The Move

One day my father came home excited with the news that would forever change my life and turn my world upside down. My father had applied for a new homeowner's program for farmworkers funded by the federal government. After waiting for several months, he was notified that his application was accepted and that we would all be working to help build our new home. This meant we would be moving to another part of the valley. My father broke the news to us and happily announced, "Our application was accepted, we're moving to Three Rocks!"

My first thought was the name of the place: "Three Rocks." The name sounded even more remote than where we were living. At first I was reluctant to move, but my curiosity to see a different part of the world and the fact that the bathroom would be located inside the house sealed the deal. I was about to venture out to a new part of the valley and was filled with excitement and emotion. I asked myself, "What will it be like?" I would soon find out.

Three Rocks is a housing project located forty-five miles west of Fresno, California, in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley. Three Rocks was also the hideout and home of the legendary hero and bandit Joaquín Murrieta. Growing up, I would listen to stories about Joaquín and felt I shared the same spirit, the same challenge as he did: to survive in the hellhole called Three Rocks.

Three Rocks was located in such a remote place that municipal services (police, fire, garbage, etc.) were non-existent. This was uncharted country, unknown to the coastal urban dwellers of California. The nearest police, fire and ambulance services were twenty miles away. In a sense we survived on our own. We had to create our own society, with our own rules to live and die by.

The Three Rocks housing project consisted of fifty houses arranged in a circle, which was enclosed by a six-foot chain-link fence. There was only one way in and out. The fence served as both a prison and a fortress. Surrounding the homes were miles and miles of fields and row crops extending to the horizon. The only other settlements in the area were the numerous and equally remote labor camps that dotted the valley floor. The camps served as the primary housing units for the hundreds of families and individuals who migrated to work the fields. The camps were made up of basic barracks and small, dilapidated houses that had little or no plumbing, heat or water.

The development of the Three Rocks housing project was a good concept, but was poorly planned, developed and managed. Once the houses were built, federal, state and local government agencies abandoned us. We were left on our own. To make matters worse, large sinkholes started to appear, exactly where some of the homes were built.

In order to reduce the cost of construction, it was our own farmworker families who were assigned to a contractor to supervise us as we built our own homes. This meant that my broth-

ers and I had to work after school and after working in the fields, during evenings and on weekends. It took almost two years to build our house. We eventually became tired and took shortcuts in the work the contractor had assigned us. My family discovered the results of the shortcuts after we moved in.

The "Feds" (the government housing agency) would ride through every once in a while and do drive-by inspections, or what they called "provisional management." The Feds also sent an army of V.I.S.T.A workers (Volunteers in Service to America) for two summers to help with the construction and development of Three Rocks. There were about fifty volunteers, mostly college students from the east coast and other parts of the country.

For the most part, they all had good hearts, but I always felt they treated us like some nomadic tribe from a third-world country. They were constantly explaining things to us, very slowly and in a loud manner. The more we claimed not to understand, the louder they seemed to get. Maybe they had volunteered to work in the Peace Corps in some distant exotic land, but for some reason failed to qualify and wound up in Three Rocks.

It took a little more than two years to construct the house. When move-in day finally arrived, the air was filled with excitement. We all gathered, boxed and loaded the few belongings we had onto the truck. We were all excited at the prospect of living in a new house, having a new beginning and a better way of life. We all had worked tirelessly, especially my brothers and I, for this dream to come true. We were ready to enjoy the fruits of our labor and move into our new home and become part of civilization.

After we had our last load up on the truck, my father yelled out to me, "*¿Ya aseguraste la puerta?*"