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TRAQUEROS

TREASURE ON THE TRACKS



by Jolene Gutiérrez

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Traqueros

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by

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Note to Reader: All of the characters in this story are imagined. These imaginary characters help us to understand an era in American History. In real life, although the story is written in English, the traqueros would have spoken Spanish as a first language.

1

Antonio the Traquero

“Antonio, swing the hammer like this. Mira.” My papi brings the long-handled spike maul around and down, hitting the spike hard and driving it into the wooden railroad tie.

I take the spike maul from him and try. I feel vibrations through my arms when the hammer head hits the metal spike, but I hold on tight and swing the maul again. The hot summer sun beats down on us, and I can feel a little mustache of sweat beading on my top lip already.

“Muy bien, mijo,” Papi says and ruffles my hair. I love when he tells me I’ve done a good job. It makes working in the heat worth it.

Some of my friends’ dads are gone—drafted to fight in World War II. I’m thankful my papi hasn’t been called to serve. Our family needs him, and he also has to make sure the railroad tracks in our area of Illinois are maintained. My papi is a traquero, a track worker, just like my abuelo.

spike maul: a large, heavy hammer used to drive in railroad spikes

railroad tie: a rectangular piece of material that lies flat beneath a train track for support

TRAQUEROS



“You’re eleven now, Antonio,” Papi says, “so, since school is out for the summer, I think you’re old enough to come work the tracks with me for a bit.”

Sometimes Papi leaves our boxcar community for weeks at a time, traveling the rails with his crew. I miss him when he leaves, but Mami usually keeps me so busy that I don’t have time to miss Papi too much.

Mami works just as hard as Papi. She does laundry and makes food for some of the unmarried men in our community. She speaks Spanish and English, so she also works as a translator, helping people who speak Spanish communicate with people who don’t. But she’s one person and can’t do everything, so when she says, “Antonio, we need water,” I carry bucket after bucket of water so that we can wash our clothes, our hair, and our bodies. We don’t have running water or electricity in our boxcar houses. We use outhouses for our bathrooms, bring water in when we need it, and split firewood or carry coal to fuel our stoves.

“Papi, what will Mami do if we both leave?”

“She might take the train and go visit your Aunt Lucía in Chicago while we make some money this summer,” Papi tells me.

boxcar: an enclosed train car, usually used for carrying freight

outhouses: small buildings separate from main houses with toilets inside

“If Mami goes to see Tía Lucía,” I say, “then I’ll go with you. I’ll be a traquero, too!”

Papi frowns. “Mijo, you know, you don’t *have* to be a traquero. You can do other things with the education you’re getting. Both your abuelo and I didn’t go to school much, so we didn’t have many choices as far as jobs go.”

“Why didn’t you or Abuelo go to school?”

“Your abuelo didn’t get a lot of schooling in Mexico, so he became a traquero when we moved to the United States. Then I did what he did. That was our path. But it’s different for you. You’re an American citizen. You speak English and Spanish. You’re learning all kinds of things—things that could lead you to all kinds of jobs.”

“But what’s wrong with being a traquero, Papi?”

“Nothing, mijo. It’s good, honest work, but it’s hard work. We’re outside, in the cold and in the heat. This work takes strength and can be dangerous. Men get injured. Some men die. I want you to see for yourself this summer, that’s all.”

“I know it’s hard work, but I get to hear you tell those stories about life on the tracks. I wish Abuelo could come with us. I love his ghost stories and the tales he tells about how things were before you left Mexico—before the revolution.”

The history and stories from Mexico are my favorites, but they're few and far between, probably because the memories are painful. I scrunch my eyebrows together as a thought emerges. "Maybe I'll be a history professor someday!"

Papi chuckles. "Professor Antonio Pérez. I like the sound of that. So keep studying! And if you like hearing stories about Mexico, you're in luck. Because so many American men are off fighting the war in Europe, more workers will be arriving from Mexico to help us. They'll have plenty of stories."

"Men from Mexico are coming here to work?" I ask.

"Sí, Antonio. Didn't you hear?" In a loud booming voice, gesticulating like a politician, Papi exclaims, "The whole country runs on trains, so we need to maintain the tracks!"

A train whistles in the distance. He grins. "That might be the braceros now!"

"Braceros?"

"Sí, like brazos!" Papi booms.

"Arms?" I ask.

"Sí! These are men who work with their arms, just like me." He flexes his muscles, smiling.

gesticulating: moving arms and hands for emphasis while speaking

politician: a person who actively participates in politics or government

“Like me, too,” I say, returning his smile as I make a show of flexing my own muscles.

“For now, Professor, for now. Let’s go say hello to the men!”

I watch as men spill from the train. Their clothes are rumpled, and their faces look tired.

“Bienvenidos!” Papi calls. “Welcome!”

A few of the men look in his direction. I notice more than one exchanging glances with each other, looking uncertain in their new surroundings.

One of the overseers, holding a clipboard, guides the men toward four new boxcars without wheels that have been placed at the edge of our boxcar colonia. When Abuelo was hired by the railroad company, he was promised a home made from an old boxcar as well as land for a garden. Since then, he’s added windows, a door, and front steps. Papi got his own boxcar when he married Mami, where we still live today.

I count the line of men: sixteen. Most of the men look about my papi’s age, but one of them looks like a boy, not much older than me.

overseers: people who supervise others

colonia: Spanish for colony

2

Sacrifices Made

As the men get settled in their boxcars, I rush to tell Mami about the new arrivals. She's hanging laundry on a clothesline when I run into our yard.

"The braceros from Mexico are here," I say.

She smiles at me. "Your papi told you about them, then?"

"Sí, and about working with them this summer while you're in Chicago," I say, unable to hide my excitement.

"I can't believe you're so happy that I'll be going away," Mami says, playfully nudging me.

"It's not that I'm *happy*. I just want to learn how to be a traquero, and you deserve a vacation," I say, nudging her back.

"I'm teasing, mijo," she says, rolling her eyes as she laughs. "So, the men have arrived?"

"Yes, sixteen of them. They're staying in the new boxcars."

“Hmm, they’ll probably need some help with laundry and cooking.” She pauses pinning clothes to the line to consider. “I want to get this laundry up. Why don’t you run and tell them they can hire me to wash their clothes or make their food if they need it? Laundry is five cents per pound, and I have tamales right now that I could sell them for twenty-five cents a dozen.”

As she turns back to her clothesline, I head off to deliver the message. When I arrive at the new boxcars, I see Papi talking with one of the men.

“Antonio, this is Señor García,” Papi tells me.

“Mucho gusto,” I say as I shake the man’s hand.

“Call me Marcos,” he says, smiling half-heartedly.

“Mucho gusto, Marcos. I have a message from my mami for you and your men.”

Marcos calls to the men, and they pour from the boxcars. A few minutes later, I’m rushing back to Mami with a bag of dirty laundry and tamale orders. Together, Mami and I prepare the food orders. As I leave to deliver tamales, Mami gets to work on the mountain of laundry.

Marcos is still talking to Papi when I return. When he sees me approaching, he eyes the bag I’m holding, stops talking, and inhales deeply.



“Smells like home,” Marcos says. “You wouldn’t believe the things they tried to feed us on the long train ride up here.”

“Like what?” I ask, wondering what would cause anyone to look at tamales the way Marcos is looking at these.

“Spoiled vegetables. Canned meats. Repugnante!”

Papi nods knowingly. “Sounds all too familiar. Did they spray you with chemicals at the border, too?”

Marcos looks down. “Sí, the doctors made us take our clothes off to examine us. They sprayed us with chemicals for killing insects. If it kills insects, how can it be good for us?”

repugnante: Spanish for disgusting

“They did the same to us when we came over,” Papi says. “That spray made it hard for me to smell or taste anything other than those chemicals for days. Maybe that’s why the food on the train tasted bad.”

“Maybe,” Marcos says, “but my nose isn’t having any trouble smelling your wife’s delicious food.”

Papi smiles. “Glad to hear it. Enjoy those, and get some rest. We’ll set out to repair the tracks day after tomorrow.”

As Papi and I walk away, I say quietly, “I didn’t know the journey here was like that.”

Papi nods and looks over his shoulder, back at the new arrivals. “Mijo, that’s not even the hardest part. Marcos tells me nearly all of them left families behind, wives and children.”

“Why would they travel so far away from their families?”

“You’re a smart boy. Think about it. Do you think they *want* to leave their families and the only home they’ve ever known?”

I shake my head no.

“No person would leave everything they love—their families, their communities, their homes—to come to an

unknown place unless they had to, for their safety or for money to help them survive.”

I think about the families these men have left behind in Mexico. I think about what their life will be like without their fathers or brothers or sons. I think about how lonely these men must feel. I wonder if I would ever be strong enough to make a sacrifice like that. I hope I never have to find out.

3

Breakfast Goodbyes

“**L**evántate, Antonio,” Mami says, ripping the covers off me. “Es tiempo. You need to eat breakfast before you and your papi head out. The food’s almost ready.”

Last night, Papi and I packed for a month on the tracks, and Mami packed for Chicago.

As I walk into the kitchen, Mami’s heating tortillas on her comal. She’s made eggs with chile salsa and beans for breakfast.

I glance at our bags piled in the corner. I’m nervous—maybe even a little scared—but I’m excited too. I’ve never been away from home or from Mami. It gets hot in our metal boxcar houses in the summer, though, so I’m looking forward to camping in the fresh night air.

“Go on, get a plate,” she tells me.

“I’m going to miss your cooking,” I say as I pile my plate high.

comal: Spanish for griddle; a flat griddle made of iron or clay



“Ay, miijo, I’m sure you will. Camp food isn’t the same.”

“Papi said they always send a cook with the workers when they go out on the tracks.”

Mami nods. “They do, but sometimes they’re not very good cooks. They’ll make things like soup so they’ll have lots of leftovers, and then they’ll serve it for days.

The summer heat can make food spoil more quickly, so smell it before eating. Your nose will tell you if it's safe. I don't want you getting sick."

I make a disgusted noise. "I need to sniff-test the food!?"

Mami laughs loudly and kisses me on the top of my head. "Mijo, I'm going to miss you! I packed some dried meat in Papi's bag for you two to snack on," she adds. "And I'll make you some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to take along, too."

"Can you make a lot of them? Like enough to last a month?" I ask, wondering what exactly I have gotten myself into.

"If I made you that many, you'd have to sniff-test the sandwiches, too!" Mami says, smiling. I watch her cut thick slices of bread and spread them with a layer of peanut butter before adding spoonfuls of her homemade mixed-fruit jam. She pats the top layer of bread into place and sighs. "Listen to what your papi tells you, and be respectful to your elders. Do the work they ask you to do, but be careful and don't get hurt." Mami rubs her temples. It's like she's trying to think of every important thing she'll ever need to tell me.

“I know, Mami! Don’t worry.”

Just then, Papi bursts through the door. “Listos, Antonio? You ready to go?”

Mami hands Papi a bag with our sandwiches. “Do you want more breakfast?” she asks.

“No, gracias,” Papi says, “but maybe some for my papi. He’s coming along with us because one of the men got sick.”

“Abuelo’s coming?” I ask. My abuelo is one of my favorite people. Abuelo isn’t like the grandfathers I’ve read about in books at school—grandfathers with white hair and stooped backs. Abuelo’s hair is thick and black, and his back is strong and straight. His arms are muscular from his years of track work. One of the best things about Abuelo is how he tells stories. His ghost stories are my favorite, even though they make it hard for me to go to sleep sometimes.

“Let me make some breakfast and sandwiches for him, and then you can leave,” Mami tells Papi. I wolf down the rest of my huevos con chile and frijoles while Mami prepares the food.

When it’s time to leave, I squeeze Mami tight and then walk away, not looking back. Papi puts his hand on my shoulder. “Ready for our adventure, Antonio?”

I nod.

“We’ll get your abuelo and go join the other men.”

As Abuelo steps from his boxcar house to join us, he ruffles my hair. “Ready to learn the value of hard work, Antonio?” he asks cheerfully.

I nod, smiling.

“Antonio’s already a pretty hard worker,” Papi says as he hands Abuelo his breakfast.

My abuelo takes a few bites of food and nods. “He is, but there’s hard work, and then there’s railroad work. He’ll learn.”

“That reminds me,” says Papi, “there’s a young man, Luis, who’s just a little older than you, Antonio. I’m going to train you together so you can work as a team.”

“Is he a bracero?”

“Sí, his papá died, so he’s trying to provide for his mamá and younger siblings. Even though he’s young, the recruiters let him join up because he’s healthy and strong.”

I think about how nervous I am. I can’t imagine traveling to a new country on my own.

recruiters: people who find others to sign up for a job or organization

4

Trekking the Tracks

“Ready to walk, mijo?” Papi asks. **R**Abuelo is the oldest, so he’ll ride in the train car with our supplies while the rest of us walk.

I nod. “How far, Papi?”

“About twelve miles to our campsite. The tracks there were damaged by flooding.”

We set off down the hot tracks, carrying our water and lunches.

As we’re walking, Papi spots Luis just ahead.

“Luis! Come meet my son, Antonio. You’re going to be working together.”

Luis shakes my hand and walks beside me along the tracks. Papi goes to talk with other men, leaving us to continue in silence.

“You’re sending money home to your mamá?” I ask.

Luis squints, studying me. Then he says, “Sí, and to my little sisters. Papá died, and we don’t have enough money.”

This is supposed to be the land of gold and opportunity, right?”

“I’ve never seen gold,” I admit. Not wanting to disappoint him, I add, “But you never know. We might find some. Treasure hunting on the tracks!”

Luis lets out a short laugh, but I get the sense he wasn’t joking about the land of gold and opportunity. We continue walking in silence.

I feel like one of us should say something. “So what’s your favorite subject in school?” I ask.

I immediately think I’ve picked the wrong question because Luis looks down before replying. “I was usually working with my parents, so I didn’t make it to school very often.”

“Do you know how to read or write?” I ask, and Luis shakes his head. “I can try to teach you a little, if you want.” Luis nods.

When we break for lunch, I find a stick and sit down next to him. I write letters in the dirt at his feet. “*L-u-i-s*,” I say. “These are the letters in your name.”

He stares at me briefly before taking the stick. “*L . . . u . . . i . . . s*,” he echoes, sounding them out as he copies the letters on his own.

Papi yells, “Five more miles to the site, men! Let’s head out.”

I make up a game for Luis and me to play while we walk. We take turns listing Spanish words that start with the letter *L*.

“*Luz*,” Luis says.

“In English, that’s an *L* word as well—*light*,” I tell him. “*Lechuga*,” I add, saying the word for lettuce.

“*Lechuza*,” Luis says, saying the word for owl.

“Owl in English,” I say. “But also *witch*. Abuelo has a story about a lechuza who was a bruja.”

“Will you tell it?” Luis asks.

“One night, when Abuelo was a boy,” I start, lowering my voice to sound more ominous, “he was coming back into the house from milking cows. He saw a large owl sitting in the tree, watching him. You know how owls’ heads turn as they watch you?”

Luis nods.

“This one did that. Her eyes never left him. He hurried to his house and shut the door quickly. The next morning, an old woman knocked at their door, asking for food. Abuelo said his mami offered the woman some tortillas, but when she reached out for them, her hand wasn’t a human hand . . . it was an owl’s talon!”

ominous: suggesting future danger or misfortune

Luis stares at me, eyes wide. "Then what?"

"That's it." I shrug. "I guess she took the tortillas and ate them?"

He laughs as we keep on walking.

A little over two hours later, Papi calls out, "OK, men, this is our campsite and worksite! The river's just over there," he says, pointing. "If you need water, boil it before drinking it."

Papi turns to the old man who's our camp cook. "If you need help hauling water, Luis and Antonio can go down to the river for you," he says. "Otherwise, boys, set up our tents, and I'll take the rest of the crew to get them started on repairs."

As we set up the tents, Luis says quietly, "I used to think everyone in America lived in mansions."

I laugh. "I've never even seen a mansion. It's boxcar houses for us traqueros and a tent if we're on the move," I say proudly. After a pause, I add, "Actually, this is my first time leaving home to work on the tracks, so it'll be my first time sleeping in a tent."

Luis smiles. "Me too, amigo."

In between tent assembly, we take turns hauling water for the cook.



“Gracias, chavo!” the cook says to me as I carry a bucket of water up from the river. “What’s your name?”

“Antonio, sir. ¿Y tú?”

“Javier,” he says. “Thank you for your help, Antonio. I remember when I was young and strong like you. I used to be one of the strongest traqueros. Now, I’m just an old man feeding younger men.”

“Muchas gracias for feeding us, Javier,” I say, hoping I won’t have to sniff-test his food.

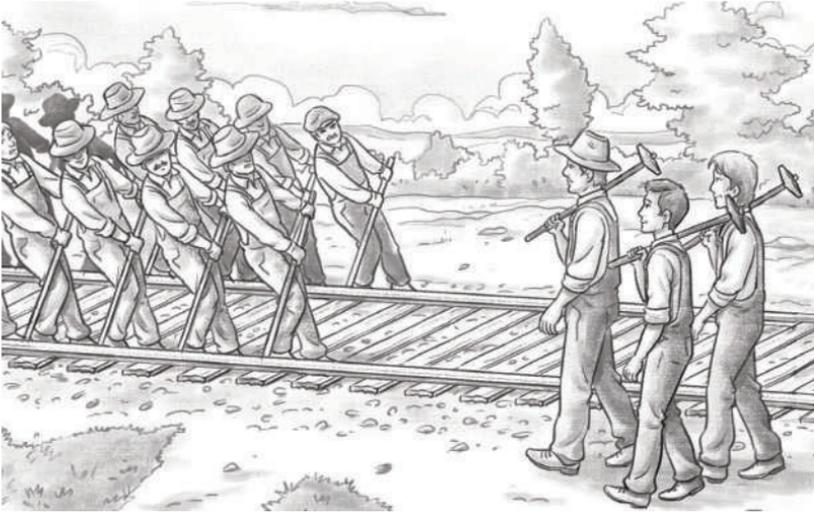
When Papi returns, he’s impressed with our fast work. “Good job with the tents, hombres! Come on, let me show you a few things on the tracks. Take these spike mauls.”

5

Working on the Railroad

Papi is holding three of the long-handled hammers he taught me to use back home. He hands one to me and one to Luis, keeping the last one for himself. As we follow him to the tracks, I see men with long metal bars shoving at the rails in unison.

“They’re aligning the track,” Papi explains. “Now, I want you to look for any railroad spikes that are missing or need to be hammered back down into the railroad ties. For the missing ones, take a new spike, carefully hammer



aligning: arranging in a straight line or other correct position

it to get it started, and then you can start swinging harder at it. For the loose spikes, they're already set and just need to be hammered down. As you're swinging your maul, you're going to miss sometimes and hit the track, but start slowly, focus, and try to aim for the spike. Let the weight of the hammer coming down do most of the work for you." He points at the rails. "Show me."

Luis aims and hits his spike again and again. "Muy bien, Luis," Papi says. "Your turn, Antonio, just like we've practiced."

I step up to the rails and see a spike poking up from the metal bracket holding it. I aim my spike maul at the spike and hit it, driving it a little way into the wooden railroad tie below.

"Bien, Antonio!" Papi calls. I aim again and wince as my spike maul hits the rail, bouncing off.

"Keep practicing!" Papi says. "You just have to keep at it, and you'll develop skill . . . and muscle," he says with a wink and a smile.

That night, we all settle around the campfire. My arms ache from hauling water and swinging the spike maul. At least Javier has made a delicious bean soup.

Most of the men head to their tents soon after eating.

Papi stands, stretches, and announces he's off to bed. "Why don't you stay in Luis's tent? Your abuelo and I will be in mine, and that'll give us a little more space."

I expect to find Luis fast asleep, but as I approach his tent carrying my bag, he steps out. "Want to go explore the riverbank?" he asks. I toss my bag in the tent and follow.

The moon is full and bright. Crickets chirp as we walk, and we can see fireflies sparking, blinking off and on along the river. I walk closer to the river's edge and see a shadow leap off a rock into the water.

"Frogs," I whisper to Luis, pointing at the ripples the shadow left in the surface of the water.

"*Rana*," Luis says, saying the Spanish word for frog.

We spell and write it in the dirt, *r-a-n-a*.

Luis takes his shoes and socks off and dips his feet in the river. "Ahhh, that feels good after all that walking."

"*Rio* means river," I tell him. "*R-i-o* in Spanish and *r-i-v-e-r* in English."

I take off my shoes and socks, placing them next to Luis's. We wade in the water at the edge of the river, watching and listening. We see frogs and turtles, but they

all slide into the water and glide away before we can get close enough to catch them.

As we come to a bend in the river, we hear a voice.

“Don’t tell them! This is *our* secret.”

Luis and I look at each other, our eyes wide. We sneak out of the water, up the riverbank, and into the trees lining the river. Nervous, I peek between the trees, looking out for owls that might be witches. I don’t see any. We stay hidden in the darkness, and the moon does the same, disappearing behind clouds.

A second voice says, “I would challenge any man who tries to take what’s ours.”

Luis and I tiptoe along, following the voices.

Another person answers, “Just let them try!”

What are these men talking about? Their words sound almost threatening. Fear creeps into my bones.

Just beyond the river bend, Luis and I see a few men huddled together.

“They wouldn’t do anything. They value their families, too, and they’ve made sacrifices, just like us.”

The clouds move away from the moon, and in the

bright moonlight, I see their faces. I recognize one of them as Marcos. His brows are furrowed. Is he angry? I can't tell.

Marcos tells the men, "We'll meet again tomorrow. Remember: This is our secret."

Luis pulls at my sleeve, pointing toward the camp. "Let's go," he whispers. "I'm not sure it's safe."

I follow Luis because I'm worried about that, too. Secrets and sacrifices? What were Marcos and the other men talking about? I keep glancing behind us as we walk, worried that the men will catch us. We go back for our shoes and socks that we left near the river, and when we finally make it back to our tent, Luis and I talk in hushed whispers.

"What were they talking about? Do you think they're up to something?" I ask.

Luis thinks for a moment. "I don't know," he finally says. "Maybe we should tell your papá?"

"He won't like that we snuck out of camp at night," I say. "And we need more evidence. Let's watch them tomorrow and see if we notice anything odd."

Luis agrees, and we settle in to sleep.

I have nightmares about Marcos. In my dreams, he's trying to sabotage our work. Our tools keep disappearing or breaking, and the rails are damaged and unpassable. The trains can't get north like they need to! I have to tell Papi!

I wake up with a jolt, the anxious thoughts still swirling in my head. If Marcos is trying to sabotage us, I need to find proof.

As I sit up, I see Luis staring at me in the faint morning light. He looks concerned. "You were thrashing and calling out. You kept saying 'Marcos' and 'sabotage.' Do you think we should go to your papá now?"

I shake my head no. "It was just a bad dream."

"Well, let's keep an eye on him," says Luis. "If he tries anything else, we'll catch him."

"Just like the Hardy Boys!" I say, excited about the prospect of a mystery.

Luis doesn't know what I mean, so I tell him about my favorite mystery books. "We'll be just like them—spying and looking for evidence!"

6

Spies and Secrets

The next day, Luis and I make sure to work near Marcos, listening for whispered plans and watching for suspicious acts.

At one point, Marcos sneaks off. Luis follows him, but he comes back quickly, his face red. “He was just going off to go to the bathroom,” he tells me. I can’t help but snicker as Luis turns an even brighter shade of red.

At lunch, we sit near Marcos and his friends, listening in on their conversations.

“Hard work,” Marcos says.

“It’s honest work,” one of his friends replies.

“Sure,” Marcos says. “But I’d take striking it rich over work like this any day.”

The men chuckle. “Well, this is the United States,” one says. “Don’t they say the streets are paved in golden bricks here?”

“We just need a few of those golden bricks,” Marcos says, laughing.

Luis elbows me in the side. “You hear that?” he whispers.

After lunch, I return to my spike maul to find the handle cracked. It’s just like my nightmare, but I don’t think Marcos has been near it. We stick as close as we can to Marcos for the rest of the afternoon, but we don’t catch him doing anything suspicious. Before we know it, the workday is done, and we have no solid evidence to prove any kind of sabotage.

That night, we’re all gathered around the campfire after eating day-old bean soup. Mami was right.

Abuelo tells everyone to lean in close—he’s going to tell the story of La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, a ghost who’s often seen by rivers.

“When I was a boy,” he began, “I had to cross a bridge over the river each time I traveled to or from town. One night, I heard a woman wailing down by the water.”

One of the men makes crying sounds, and a few of us chuckle nervously.

Abuelo ignores us and continues. “It was a dark night,

and she was sobbing into her hands, so I couldn't see her face to tell if I knew her. She had on a white dress that seemed to glow in the darkness."

I imagine a woman in a white dress. I shiver at the thought of her cries.

Abuelo continues his story. "I called to her, saying, 'Señora? Do you need help?' Almost instantly, her wails stopped. She looked up at me, but where her face should've been, I saw only a skull. Where her eyes should've been, I saw only darkness. And yet she was staring right at me."

I gasp.

Abuelo turns to me. His voice is urgent. "La Llorona! She was seeking her own children who were drowned so long ago. I feared she might try to drag me into the river and make me hers. My legs were shaking, but I reminded myself that I was on the bridge, and she was far below me at the river's edge. I still had a chance, but I would have to be quick. I took off running and didn't look back."

Satisfied that we're all on the edge of our seats, Abuelo continues. "I made it across the bridge, running faster than I'd ever run before. But just when I thought I'd gone far enough, I felt the bony grip of fingers . . ."

Something grabs my shoulder, and I jump.

“Got you!” Papi exclaims just behind me.

“You didn’t scare me, Papi!” I say loudly. It’s a lie, and I’m breathing hard.

Papi laughs. “I would never let La Llorona get you, mijo.”

Abuelo laughs too.

Marcos gives me a sympathetic look. “It’s true, Antonio. Your papá would do anything for you.”

I can tell that the men are observing the connection between Abuelo, Papi, and me. Abuelo can feel it too. He pauses, looks directly at Marcos, and softly says, “It’s a hard thing to leave one’s family behind.”

Marcos sighs. “Sí, Cenovio. It’s not easy. But a man will do anything to protect his family.”

Luis stares at me. I think he’s wondering what exactly that means. I am, too.

When the group starts to head to their tents, Luis whispers to me, “We need to see if Marcos leaves camp again.”

I have an idea—an idea that would make the Hardy Boys proud. “Let’s put some sticks on the path to the river. If anyone walks on them, we’ll hear a cracking noise, like an alarm!”

We gather brittle twigs and sticks and quickly sprinkle them along the path.

“Did you know deer or cattle probably created this path?” Luis asks me. I didn’t know that. “They have to get to the water, and they’ll usually take the same path over and over so it wears down until grass doesn’t grow anymore,” he explains.

“I haven’t seen any deer or cattle here,” I say.

“They probably smelled us and are keeping their distance. To them, we’re predators.”

I certainly don’t feel like a predator.

We go inside our tent to watch and wait. We peek out every now and then, keeping an eye on the path to the river. The sky is dark and filled with stars shining down at us. Camp grows quiet.

SNAP!

We hear twigs breaking and look out just in time to see Marcos and a few others sneaking away. Once they're no longer in sight, we sneak out of our tent and follow behind.

I hear one of the men singing:

¡Ay de mí! Llorona, Llorona,

Llorona, llévame al río.

It's a song about La Llorona. I've heard Mami sing it before. He's singing the part that asks La Llorona to take the singer of the song to the river. As we creep closer, I sink lower in the brush in case she's out there somewhere.

We follow the singer's voice, but I'm a little scared. Why does he keep singing to La Llorona? I watch for the glimmer of a ghostly woman. I listen for a splash of water to signal someone—or something—rising from the river. Nothing.

Instead, I see the men circle up in front of us. I hear Marcos say, "What treasures do you have, hombres?"

Luis whispers, "Treasure?" I see the gears in his mind turning, and then his eyes light up. "Do you think . . . gold?" He motions for us to crouch down near the trees so we won't be visible as we spy on the men.

As I'm moving to hide myself, I accidentally trip over a branch and stumble. Luis looks at me with big, panicked eyes.

"Is someone there?" I hear a man ask.

Luis hisses, "Run!"



7

Trapped

We crash through the trees, looking over our shoulders.

I don't see anyone following us, but I can hear shouts in the distance.

Luis pulls me to the side of the path and along the river where we looked for frogs the night before. We drop to the ground, quiet and still. My heart pounds.

Soon, we see Marcos and his friends coming down the path. I close my eyes and hold my breath.

"Do you think someone saw us?" one of the men asks.

I recognize Marcos's voice answering him. "I'm not sure. It could've been a deer going down to the river."

"I hope so," the man responds.

After they've passed us and the world is silent again, we creep up to the path. Once we're back in our tent, I feel better, but it still takes me a long time to fall asleep.

The next day, I struggle to keep up with Luis. We're shoveling rocks around the outside of the railroad ties to support them, and my arm muscles are exhausted.

As we work, Luis asks, "Do you think they really found treasure?"

I yawn and lean against my shovel. I pull a bandanna from my pocket to wipe away the sweat that's dripping down my face. "Do you think they'd keep doing work like this if they had treasure?"

Luis is quiet for a while. Then he says, "Well, maybe. You don't want to just quit a job—that's suspicious. So maybe they're hiding the treasure, and then they'll sell it when they get a chance."

"Sell it?" I ask.

"If it's gold or jewels or something like that, you can't just go spend it. You'd have to find someone to give you money for it."

Now I'm the one who's quiet. Luis has thought a lot about this treasure. He seems to read my mind, because he says, "A treasure like that could change my family's life."

bandanna: a large piece of cloth used as a handkerchief or tied around the head or neck

Treasure could change any of our lives. Still, I say, “Luis, we don’t have proof that there is treasure.”

“Well, we’ll just have to go back out there again tonight,” Luis says, and my heart races. I’m not sure I want to go back out in those dark woods, surrounded by shadows of weeping women and secretive men.

Once again, beneath the darkness of night, and after more bean soup leftovers that I give a careful sniff before reluctantly eating, everyone gathers around Abuelo for another campfire story. This one is about El Cucuy, a bogeyman who hides under kids’ beds and takes children who aren’t behaving. “They’ll see red eyes glowing from the darkness, and then—” he claps his hands together like Mami does when she makes tortillas—“those malcriados are gone, never heard from again.”

Abuelo’s story sends chills down my spine. With all the sneaking around that Luis and I are doing, I feel very much like I’m not behaving.

Luis tugs at my sleeve. “Let’s go,” he whispers.

“We’re tired from the long day, so we’re going to bed early,” Luis announces to the rest of the men.

bogeyman: an imaginary monster used to scare children

malcriados: Spanish for spoiled or badly behaved people, usually children

I could use the extra sleep, but I'm pretty sure that Luis doesn't really mean for us to go to sleep early. Sure enough, as we walk toward our tent, Luis says, "Let's circle around and head toward the river. We can get there before Marcos and his men do, and we'll see where they hid their treasure."

Once we arrive at our usual spying place near the river, we lie on the ground, farther back in the tree line where the shadows will camouflage us.

"We can hear them and see them from here, but hopefully we'll be hidden," Luis tells me.

We settle in for our stakeout.

"S, *stakeout*," I tell Luis. "It's an English word that means hiding out and watching."

"S, *secreto*," Luis says.

I smile. "The English word is *secret*."

"S, *silencio*," Luis tells me.

"*Silence* in English," I respond, laughing softly.

"S, *soñoliento*," Luis whispers.

"In inglés, *sleepy*," I say.

Crickets chirp. Wind blows. Water trickles over the rocky riverbed. . . .

The next thing I know, I'm being jarred awake by a deep rumbling, loud and bone-rattling.

For a moment, I don't know where I am. The first thing I notice is that I'm drenched in water. The sky around me is exploding in sudden, bright flashes. Lightning, I realize—the heavens are rumbling with thunder. Rain cascades down.

Then I remember: our stakeout! I must have fallen asleep!

That's when I hear a voice calling, "Antonio!"

Is it La Llorona?

"Antonio!"

No, the voice isn't female. El Cucuy? Goosebumps cover my arms as I scan the darkness for beady red eyes.

"ANTONIO!"

It's Luis! His voice is faint through the sounds of the storm, but I yell, "Keep calling, Luis! I'm coming!"

cascades: pours or flows downward like a waterfall

I follow the sound of Luis's voice and find him past the river bend where the men met. It looks like there's been a rockslide. His legs are covered in rocks—he's pinned!

"The river is rising," Luis cries. "I'm trapped!"

The rocks are huge. I try to move one and can't budge it.

"I can't move these rocks, Luis. I have to go for help," I tell him, unable to hide the panic in my voice.



“Take this with you,” Luis says, pulling a bag from under his shirt. “I’ve been trying to protect it. Tuck it in your shirt, keep it as dry as possible—and bring help!”

I don’t want to leave Luis alone, but going back to camp is my only option. I tuck the bag inside my shirt and assure Luis, “I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

I slip-run down the path back to camp, yelling the entire way. “Help! ¡Ayúdeme!”

Despite the late hour, men are wide awake and rushing out of their tents as I run into camp. I toss the bag to Javier the cook and ask him to keep it dry. Then I yell, to anyone who can hear me, “Luis is trapped under a rockslide, and the river is rising! Please, I need help!”

Men run down the trail with me. The rush of water is swirling around the rocks covering Luis’s legs, and I imagine I can hear La Llorona calling to us as the men work together to carefully move each rock.

Finally, Luis is free! Two men put their arms around him, half carrying, half dragging him back to camp.

8

Treasure and Truth

Luis is so coated in mud that we can't tell how badly he's hurt. Gently, the men help him struggle out of his overalls and then dump buckets of water on his legs until they're mostly clean.

Luis whispers to me shakily, "What do we say if they ask us why we were out there in a storm?"

"We have to tell the truth," I tell him.

Luis frowns. "But what if Marcos hears and is angry?"

I'm not sure what to say about that, but I tell Luis, "My papi will be there if Marcos gets really mad."

The storm has slowed to a gentle patter of raindrops when Papi begins his inspection of Luis. "Wiggle your toes," Papi tells him, and Luis does.

"That's a good sign," Papi says. He feels up and down Luis's legs. "I don't see any major cuts. Let's get some hot coffee into you and warm you back up. Then we'll see if you're able to walk."

Luis nods, and Abuelo brings blankets to wrap around him.

The rain has fully passed us by when the men get the campfire going again, and we all huddle around it, trying to dry off.

Javier passes a cup of coffee to Luis and offers some to the rest of us. I take a drink of the bitter, dark liquid. I need *something* to stop the shivering.

Papi helps Luis put weight on his legs and walk. “I don’t think anything’s broken,” Papi says. “You may have some nasty bruises, but you’ll heal.”

Luis has tears in his eyes when he says, “Thank you! I don’t know what I’d do if I were injured. I need to keep sending money home.”

Abuelo asks, “Boys, what happened? Why were you out by the river in the middle of the night? Did La Llorona call you?” He chuckles at his own joke, but I feel the blood drain from my face.

There was no ghostly woman calling us, but Luis and I were sneaking around, spying on people and thinking about stealing their treasure. How am I supposed to explain that?

Luis starts talking before I have a chance to get my thoughts together. "It's my fault."

Papi says, "No. Antonio was with you, so he's involved as well."

Luis pauses. I can see his eyes find Marcos in the circle of men around the campfire. He looks at me and says, "Antonio and I were walking by the river the first night, and we heard Marcos and some of the other men talking secretly."

"At first, we thought they might be trying to sabotage our work or something," I add, my voice shaking.

Marcos interrupts, "We are not saboteurs! We would never do such a thing!"

Papi puts his hand on Marcos's shoulder. "We know that, amigo, but we need to hear what the boys have to say."

Marcos nods but looks unhappy. I don't blame him.

"We watched them in camp and while they worked," Luis continues, clearly ashamed. "We wanted to make sure everyone was safe. So we followed them into the woods at night. Then we heard them talking about treasures. And I . . . I wanted to know if they'd found some." Luis hangs his head.

saboteurs: people who commit sabotage

“He’s not a thief,” I interject quickly. “He just wanted to know if there really was treasure. Earlier tonight, we went to the clearing by the river where we’d seen the men meet. We got there before them and hid on the ground. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, Luis was pinned by the rocks and calling for me.”

Luis looks sheepish. “The men arrived at their meeting place while Antonio was sleeping, so I went on my own, creeping closer to watch them. Before they left, they tucked a bundle into a pile of rocks. It had started raining, so I rushed to see what they had hidden. But when I tugged on the bag, the rocks shifted, knocking me over and burying my legs.”

Luis shivers, pulling the blankets more tightly around him. “The rain was pounding down. I tried to dig my way out, but the rocks were too heavy, and the mud was too slippery. I kept calling for Antonio, and finally, he found me.”

“I followed his voice to the rock pile, but I couldn’t get him out,” I say, “and the river was rising quickly!” I was still haunted by what could have happened. “He gave me the bag—” I look at Javier. “Do you still have that bag I gave you?”

Javier says, “Sí, I tucked it in one of my big metal storage bins.”

sheepish: embarrassed

“You have it?” Marcos asks, staring intensely between us and Javier. The other men crowd around as Javier pulls out the bag. He hands it to Abuelo.

“It’s good that this bag is oilskin. That kind of fabric will protect most things from water,” Abuelo says.

“Still, Luis had it inside his shirt to try to protect their treasure, and he told me to keep it dry,” I say.

Luis nods. “This kind of treasure doesn’t do well when it gets wet.”

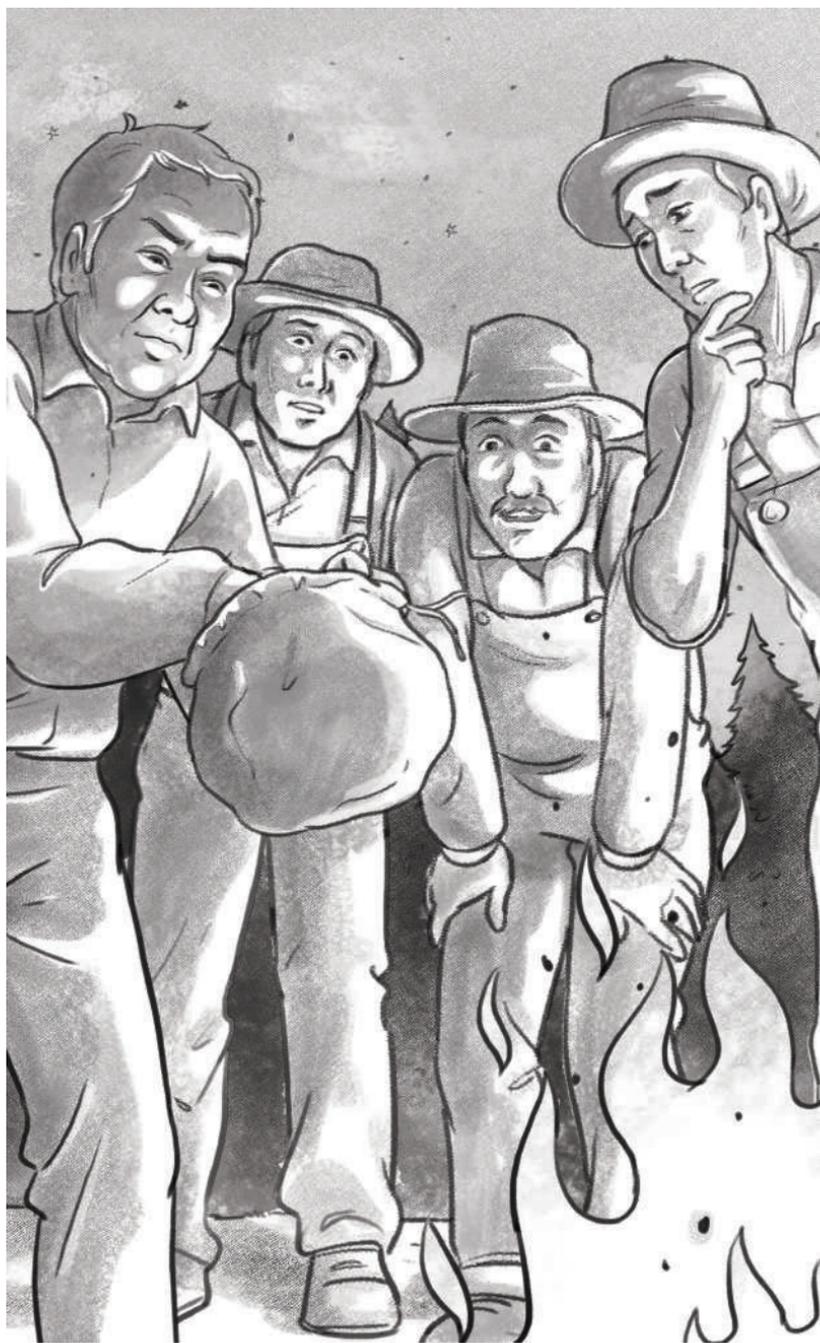
I look at him quizzically. I wonder what he means by that. Gold or silver or jewels would all be fine if they got wet. Then it hits me: paper money! The bag must be filled with dollar bills.

“Show us what’s inside the bag, Cenovio,” one of the workers says.

“You don’t all need to see it,” Marcos says, edging close to Abuelo. “I promise you, what’s in there will have no value to you!” Marcos and his friends close in around Abuelo.

But it’s too late. The rest of the men can’t contain their curiosity, and Abuelo is already reaching his hand into the bag.

oilskin: heavy cloth that has been treated with oil to make it waterproof



9

Sharing Stories

Abuelo pulls out a small bundle wrapped in cloth. “Es mío,” Marcos says, grabbing for the bundle. “Un momento,” Abuelo says. “Let’s show them what is more valuable than gold or silver or jewels to you and your men. Can you trust me?”

Marcos lowers his hand and sighs. “Está bien. I trust you. Go ahead.”

Abuelo carefully unwraps the cloth and holds up two pieces of paper: a letter and a photograph. The photograph shows Marcos sitting with a woman and two young children. “This is your treasure, amigo?”

Marcos nods. “Sí. A photograph of my family and a letter from my wife are all I have to get me through this time away from them.”

One of the other men steps forward. “My treasure is a small Bible and a photograph of my parents and grandparents.”

Another man calls out, “My treasure is a lock of my baby girl’s hair.”

Abuelo passes the bag to the men so they can retrieve their treasures. “Why did you feel the need to hide this from us?” he asks.

At first, no one responds.

“Coming here . . . the spoiled food, the medical examinations, the chemicals they sprayed on us—it didn’t exactly make us feel welcome,” one of Marco’s friends admits finally.

Another man adds, “And when my photograph of my family got ruined by the chemicals they sprayed us with, they didn’t seem to care.”

Marcos tucks his photograph and letter safely in his shirt pocket. “We decided to make sure that didn’t happen again. And we decided we could only really rely on each other.” He places his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “So we met together each night. We shared memories and stories. And we put our treasures in a secret place to keep them safe. It’s all we have of our families right now.”

Abuelo sighs deeply and nods. “When we fled the Mexican Revolution, I was fortunate to come with my wife and my son,” he says, pointing at Papi. “But even though I didn’t come alone, I left Mexico, my homeland. There are times when my heart still aches for home.”

“I never knew that, Abuelo,” I blurt out.

Abuelo looks at me. “I didn’t want my pain to become yours, Antonio, but when I left Mexico, it was like being torn apart. Land stolen, families killed. Friends, relatives, and neighbors were rising up and trying to fight back, but I just wanted to give my new family a chance at a better life. When I had an opportunity to get a job on the railroad here in Los Estados Unidos, I took it and brought my wife and my son—your papi. But I can’t say I never looked back. There are times when I wonder what it would have been like if we had managed to stay on our land with my parents. But that was not to be. So we came north and started a new life.”

I stare at Abuelo. I’ve never heard him say such things.

I knew they left because of the revolution, but I didn’t know there was more to the story. I’m scared to ask, but I force out my question: “Are your parents still in Mexico?”

Abuelo is silent for a moment. “I haven’t heard from them since we left. I mailed letters home, but my parents couldn’t read or write much.”

“So you don’t know what happened to them?” I ask, unable to understand how Abuelo could carry the pain of not knowing the fate of his parents.

“No, miijo. Wars like our Mexican Revolution destroy families. I’ve done my best to make peace with the fact that my parents are gone, and I’ve tried to give us all a

better life here in this new home.” Abuelo looks at Marcos and the other men. “If I had a photograph of my parents, I would have cherished it like each of your treasures. Like it was worth all the gold and silver in the world.”

“I’m sorry we spied on you,” I tell the men. “I’m sorry for all the trouble.”

Luis interrupts, “I should be the one apologizing.” He chokes up as emotion overwhelms him, but he forces himself to keep talking. “I thought maybe, if you did have something valuable—something like gold—you could be persuaded to share. Then I would really be able to help my family. But that’s no excuse for what I did. Lo siento.”

Marcos pats Luis on the shoulder. “All is forgiven, paisano. Where is your family from?”

“We’re from Teocaltiche in Jalisco.”

One of Marcos’s friends says, “My family is from Teocaltiche! We’re like cousins.”

Tears begin to trickle down Luis’s face.

“We’re all struggling with things we’re worried about, people we’re missing,” Abuelo says. “Now we know that we don’t need to feel alone. We’ll look after each other.”

For the rest of our nights on the tracks, we sit around the campfire, but instead of Abuelo telling ghost stories, he asks, “Would anyone like to tell a family story?”

We take turns learning about each other's families. The braceros who have mementos show them off proudly as they share their stories and histories.



Marcos tells us about going to the town plaza with his wife and children. “My wife, Aurelia, and I would dance while the mariachis played music in the gazebo. Our son, Andres, would run and jump, and our daughter, Liliana, would sing at the top of her lungs. Once, the mariachis invited her to sing with them. And sometimes, I would pick Andres up in one arm and Liliana up in the other and dance around, holding them both. Those were the best times!”

mariachis: musicians who play a genre of traditional Mexican music called mariachi music

gazebo: a small, open-sided outdoor structure with a roof

On another night, Javier the cook says, “I loved my abuela’s beans more than anything in the world. She put just the right amount of manteca in them! That lard gave them the best flavor, bacon-y and rich. I’ve been trying to replicate her recipe my entire life.”

I hide a smile. I’m sick of Javier’s bean soup, but I understand his obsession with beans now.

“Beans!” Abuelo says. “That reminds me of a story.”

We all laugh and settle in.

“When I was a boy, we ate beans for most meals. One morning, my mami said, ‘We have enough beans for breakfast, but get the new bag of dried beans from storage so I can start soaking them for our next meal.’ I found the bag, but it was open and tipped over, beans spilling all over the floor. When I scooped them up, it was obvious that about half of the beans were gone.”

“Mice?” one of the men asked.

Abuelo smiled. “You might think so, but no. There was a trail of dry beans leading to my bedroom. I followed it, picking up beans as I went. The bean trail led under my bed. I was afraid to look. Who knew what kind of monstruos might be under there? Instead, I said, ‘Bean thief, take your food and go.’ A little man—a duende, a kind of elf or goblin—crawled out from under my bed

with a little bag full of beans. 'My pouch has a hole,' he told me, 'so I can't take my food and go.'

Abuelo pauses, looking at each of us to be sure that we're listening. "One thing I knew is that duendes steal children, and here I was alone in my room with one. I didn't feel safe. So I did the only thing I could think of: I invited him to breakfast!"

Laughter ripples around the fire, and Abuelo continues, "My mami made him her best frijoles. While I heated tortillas on our comal for our guest, Mami sewed the hole in his pouch and filled it with dried beans."

"And did the duende steal you, Abuelo?" I ask.

Abuelo smiles. "Well, I'm here with you now, aren't I? He was grateful for our hospitality. For years after that, we would find little gifts in our storage closet. A jar of honey, a perfect mango, and sometimes, a few dried beans."

We all look at Abuelo, astonished. Then we burst out laughing. But I can tell most of us are inclined to believe him.

10

True Treasures

The repairs to the tracks take almost a month, and by the time we return to our boxcar community, we feel like family. I'm very grateful for my real family because now I know all the sacrifices my abuelo made so that we could be here.

"Mami!" I call when I burst through the door of our boxcar. It's already hot inside, but thankfully, the windows are wide open for fresh air. "How was Chicago? How is Tía Lucía?"

"Ay, Antonio, look at you! You have more muscles!" Mami hugs me. "Tía Lucía is doing well. She loves Chicago, but it's a bit too big and busy for me."

Mami ushers me to the kitchen table. "What do you want to eat? Do you want some bean soup?"

She laughs at the face I make.

"Sorry, but we ate a *lot* of bean soup," I tell her.

"I have tacos de papas almost ready. Would you like some?"

"Sí, por favor! I've missed your food!"

“Muy bien, mijo. How did things go on the tracks?” Mami assembles three tacos and places the plate in front of me.

I bite into the first taco—delicious!—and then talk with a full mouth. “I worked with the youngest bracero, Luis. He’s here because his papi died and he needs money to support his mami and sisters.”

Mami sucks in her breath. “Pobrecito. Were you a good friend to him?”

“I think so. We spent every day together, and I taught him some reading and writing. Oh, and we spied on the other braceros—”

Mami hits my arm with her dishcloth. “I’ve raised you better than that, Antonio Julián Pérez!”

“But we thought there was treasure—real treasure!” I protest, failing to dodge her dishcloth.

Now Mami’s interested. “*Real* treasure?”

“Well, it turned out it wasn’t gold or silver. The braceros *did* have treasures, but it was things that were only treasures to them: letters, photographs, and other mementos.”

Mami is wrapping tacos in paper, but she pauses. “When you thought the treasure was something like precious metals, did you think you might take some of that treasure?”

“Well, no. Not exactly.” I take another bite of my taco. “We thought we could ask the men to share it. Luis is very worried about providing for his family. He almost died trying to get the treasure.”

Mami gasps, and I try to calm her by saying, “He was trapped by a rockslide, but men from the camp rescued him. He’s fine.”

I expect a scolding, but instead, Mami hugs me. “Here! Finish eating and go sell some of these fried potato tacos to the braceros,” she says. “If you find Luis and he helps you sell, you can split the money. And if he likes doing that, he can help any time.”

“Gracias, Mami!”

I take the bag of tacos from her, and she says, “Give Luis a few tacos for free. He’s a growing boy, and he needs good food.”

I take the bag and race to the boxcar that Luis is sharing with some of the other braceros.

I throw open the door. “Hey, Luis, I have a bag of treasure!”

“Very funny, Antonio,” Luis says.

“Well, it’s a bag of my mami’s fried potato tacos. She sent a few for you to eat, and we can sell the rest and split the money.”

Luis stares at me. “En serio? Seriously?”

“Sí, I told her what happened, and she wants to help.”

“Gracias, amigo,” Luis says softly.

“We’re brothers,” I say.

Luis laughs. “I always wanted a brother, hermano!”



Afterword

In 1863, work began on the first transcontinental railroad in the United States. Now, railroads connect the United States of America from coast to coast, and they've been important to the development of this country.

Even today, track maintenance jobs include keeping tracks the correct distance apart and caring for the railroad ties. The ties must be level and straight, and if they aren't, dirt and ballast—usually gravel or crushed rocks—are filled in underneath until the ties are level. Damaged railroad ties and missing spikes are replaced.

Maintenance workers in the late 1800s frequently included immigrants from Ireland and China as well as Black Americans. In 1882, though, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese workers from immigrating to the United States for ten years. This led to a labor shortage in the railroad industry, and many Mexican and Mexican American men—and a small handful of women—took on those jobs.

Changes in Mexico in the early 1900s led to even more Mexican workers immigrating to the United States. In 1910, the Mexican Revolution began. The policies

transcontinental: going across a continent

immigrants: people who come to a new country to live

of Mexican president Porfirio Díaz favored wealthy landowners at the expense of working people, and many felt that they were living under a dictator. An uprising began, leading to a bloody civil war that lasted until 1920 and outbreaks of violence that continued into the 1930s. Scholars estimate that at least nine hundred thousand people died, likely more. Because of the dangers of staying in Mexico—countless families lost their land and in some cases their lives—many people chose to leave their home country.

To attract and keep traqueros, American railroad companies provided free housing—usually empty boxcars—and allowed workers to bring their families with them to live in the boxcars. While the housing varied depending on the railroad company, boxcars usually included a wood stove, with access to shared outdoor toilets and water pumps. The boxcars often had wooden floors, and some families were able to buy or build their own furniture. If a family lived in one place long enough, they might add rooms or porches to their boxcar and supplement their diets by growing a garden or keeping chickens.

Many Mexican people came to the United States during the Mexican Revolution. However, during the

dictator: a ruler who has absolute power and is often cruel

uprising: rebellion against those in power

Great Depression of the 1930s, American people were struggling to find jobs. To reduce some of the competition for jobs, the United States, with the help of the Mexican government, started deporting or “repatriating” people back to Mexico. Estimates of how many people were deported range from 350,000 to 2 million. More than half of the people deported are believed to have been United States citizens.

Then, in 1942, the U.S. government created the Bracero Program to address labor shortages that resulted from Americans leaving to fight in World War II. The Bracero Program allowed millions of Mexican men to enter the United States on temporary work permits so they could help in places like farms, mines, and railroads.

Getting approved for the Bracero Program was a long process. Thousands of men applied in the hopes of being given an enrollment card. If a man received an enrollment card, he had to go to a public bath to be sprayed with DDT or other insect-killing chemicals. Medical doctors examined applicants to make sure they were young and strong. The men also received vision tests, vaccinations, and psychological examinations. The Bracero Program

deporting: forcing to leave the country

repatriating: returning to one’s country of origin

enrollment: registration

vaccinations: substances that are introduced to people’s bodies so their immune systems can recognize and fight off diseases in the future

ran from 1942 to 1964, but the railroad worker portion of the program ended in 1945.

Working on the rails was dangerous. Despite the time and effort expended to make sure that only healthy men joined the Bracero Program, very little time or effort was spent on job training, which led to injuries and even death.

Because their jobs included lifting heavy railroad ties and the repetitive motion of swinging spike mauls and other equipment, the workers often endured back and neck injuries. Accidents also happened frequently on the rails, and many men were hit and killed by trains.

For the men who survived the hard work, there were other potential health problems. They were exposed to toxic chemicals in the wooden railroad ties and to other harmful materials like asbestos and heavy metals. Many also suffered from the psychological stress of being away from their families, working endlessly at a difficult job with no disability or injury pay and sometimes being cheated out of money by the railroads.

As part of their contracts, railroad companies were supposed to supply workers with certain things

asbestos: a group of fiber-like minerals that were once used for fireproofing and insulation but have since been found to cause serious lung diseases, including cancer

free of charge: a place to sleep, transportation to and from worksites, food, water, and fuel. However, some companies charged the men for food—whether they ate it or not. Housing was equally challenging. In one camp, Mexican workers reported that the railroad charged them one dollar per week for lodging but provided only straw bedding in exchange, while non-Mexican workers slept on cotton mattresses. In another, the men were forced to live in dirty shacks filled with lice, bedbugs, and other insects. An inspector at that camp called the sleeping quarters the worst he had ever seen and said they were “utterly unfit for human habitation.”

As part of the Bracero Program and as a way of making sure that railroad workers would return to Mexico, ten percent of the workers’ salaries were supposed to be deposited in Mexican savings accounts for them to collect when they went home. Upon their return home, though, the men found that the ten percent owed to them could be difficult to access.

Meet the Author



Jolene Gutiérrez grew up on a farm, surrounded by animals, plants, and history. Now, she lives with her family and a variety of animals in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. She is an award-winning neurodivergent teacher librarian who has been working with neurodivergent learners at Denver Academy since 1995. She teaches grades two through twelve, and her lessons focus on information literacy while exploring history, social justice, and social emotional learning. Jolene is a lifelong learner whose writing is informed by her goals of sharing little-known history and helping readers grow their compassion and understanding of others' stories.

She's a contributor to *If I Could Choose a Best Day: Poems of Possibility* and the author of *Unbreakable: A Japanese American Family in an American Incarceration Camp* (coauthored with Minoru Tonai), *Mamiachi and Me: My Mami's Mariachi Band* (coauthored with her son, Dakota), *The Ofrenda That We Built* (coauthored with her daughter, Shaian), *Too Much! An Overwhelming Day*, the *Stars of Latin Pop* series, *Bionic Beasts: Saving Animal Lives with Artificial Flippers, Legs, and Beaks*, and *Mac and Cheese and the Personal Space Invader*. Find her online at www.jolenegutierrez.com.

Meet the Illustrator



Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school, and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

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Core Knowledge® Adventures in History™

One summer, during the dark days of World War II, eleven-year-old Antonio becomes a traquero. He works alongside his father, grandfather, and other Mexican and Mexican American men building and repairing the railroad tracks that run across America. Antonio meets Luis, a fellow traquero not much older than himself who traveled from Mexico to work on the tracks. Alone and a long way from home, Luis is grateful to find a friend in Antonio. Suspecting there are hidden treasures stashed away in a secret location, the two boys become sleuths and set out to uncover them. What they discover turns out to be far more valuable than gold or precious gems.

These books are suitable for readers aged 8 and up.

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