

AMERICA
IS IN THE
HEART

A Personal History

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Macario came to town the following week and tried to give me another two dollars, my weekly allowance for room rent, food, and other necessities. I refused. I knew that I had to go away. I was angered at Macario's subservience to these people. What had happened to him? What happened to the young man who had opened such a treasure house of knowledge for me?

José came to my room and confided to me that he had to run away. It was another girl. My opportunity to escape the city presented itself.

"I am going to Imperial Valley where there is plenty of farm work," I said to my brother on the phone. "I will see you again when the season is over."

"Be strong, Carlos," he said.

I wanted to cry out to him. I could not tell him why I was running away. Not now. I could not bear to see him working for people who were less human and decent than he, and who believed, because they were in the position to command, that they could treat him as though he were a domestic animal. . . .

José and I went to the freight yards. I heard something shouting at the edge of my mind:

"I will never let them touch me with their filthy hands! I will never let them make a domestic animal out of me!"

"What are you crying about?" José asked me, the cold wind lashing his words away.

CHAPTER XIX

IT was now the year of the great hatred: the lives of Filipinos were cheaper than those of dogs. They were forcibly shoved off the streets when they showed resistance. The sentiment against them was accelerated by the marriage of a Filipino and a girl of the Caucasian race in Pasadena. The case was tried in court and many technicalities were brought in with it to degrade the lineage and character of the Filipino people.

Prior to the *Roldan vs. The United States* case, Filipinos were considered Mongolians. Since there is a law which forbids the marriage between members of the Mongolian and Caucasian races, those who hated Filipinos wanted them to be included in this discriminatory legislation. Anthropologists and other experts maintained that the Filipinos are not Mongolians, but members of the Malayan race. It was then a simple thing for the state legislature to pass a law forbidding marriage between members of the Malayan and Caucasian races. This action was followed by neighboring states until, when the war with Japan broke out in 1941, New Mexico was the nearest place to the Pacific Coast where Filipino soldiers could marry Caucasian women.

This was the condition in California when José and I arrived in San Diego. I was still unaware of the vast social implications of the discrimination against Filipinos, and my ignorance had innocently brought me to the attention of white Americans. In San Diego, where I tried to get a job, I was beaten upon several occasions by restaurant and hotel proprietors. I put the blame on certain Filipinos who had behaved badly in America, who had instigated hate and discontent among their friends and followers. This misconception was generated by a confused personal reaction to dynamic social forces, but my hunger for the truth had inevitably led me to take an historical attitude. I was to

understand and interpret this chaos from a collective point of view, because it was pervasive and universal.

From San Diego, José and I traveled by freight train to the south. We were told, when we reached the little desert town of Calipatria, that local whites were hunting Filipinos at night with shotguns. A countryman offered to take us in his loading truck to Brawley, but we decided it was too dangerous. We walked to Holville where we found a Japanese farmer who hired us to pick winter peas.

It was cold at night and when morning came the fog was so thick it was tangible. But it was a safe place and it was far from the surveillance of vigilantes. Then from nearby El Centro, the center of Filipino population in the Imperial Valley, news came that a Filipino labor organizer had been found dead in a ditch.

I wanted to leave Holville, but José insisted that we work through the season. I worked but made myself inconspicuous. At night I slept with a long knife under my pillow. My ears became sensitive to sounds and even my sense of smell was sharpened. I knew when rabbits were mating between the rows of peas. I knew when night birds were feasting in the melon patches.

One day a Filipino came to Holville with his American wife and their child. It was blazing noon and the child was hungry. The strangers went to a little restaurant and sat down at a table. When they were refused service, they stayed on, hoping for some consideration. But it was no use. Bewildered, they walked outside; suddenly the child began to cry with hunger. The Filipino went back to the restaurant and asked if he could buy a bottle of milk for his child.

"It is only for my baby," he said humbly. The proprietor came out from behind the counter. "For your baby?" he shouted.

"Yes, sir," said the Filipino. The proprietor pushed him violently outside. "If you say that again in my place, I'll bash in your head!" he shouted aloud so that he would attract attention. "You goddamn brown monkeys

have your nerve, marrying our women. Now get out of this town!"

"I love my wife and my child," said the Filipino desperately. "God damn you!" The white man struck the Filipino viciously between the eyes with his fist.

Years of degradation came into the Filipino's face. All the fears of his life were here—in the white hand against his face. Was there no place where he could escape? Crouching like a leopard, he hurtled his whole weight upon the white man, knocking him down instantly. He seized a stone the size of his fist and began smashing it into the man's face. Then the white men in the restaurant seized the small Filipino, beating him unconscious with pieces of wood and with their fists.

He lay inert on the road. When two deputy sheriffs came to take him away, he looked tearfully back at his wife and child.

I was about to go to bed when I heard unfamiliar noises outside. Quickly I reached for José's hand and whispered to him to dress. José followed me through the back door and down a narrow irrigation ditch. We crept on our bellies until we reached a wide field of tall peas, then we began running away from the town. We had not gone far when we saw our bunkhouse burning.

We walked all the cold, dark night toward Calexico. The next morning we met a Filipino driving a jalopy.

"Hop in, Pinosy!" he said. "I'm going to Bakersfield. I'm on my way to the vineyards."

I ran for the car, my heart singing with relief. In the car, José went to sleep at once.

"My name is Frank," said the driver. "It is getting hot in Imperial Valley, so I'm running away. I hope to find work in the grape fields."

It was the end of spring. Soon the grapevines would be loaded with fruit. The jalopy squeaked and groaned, and once when we were entering Los Angeles, it stalled for hours. Frank tinkered and cooed over it, as though the machine were a baby.

I wanted to find my brother Macario, but my companions

were in a hurry. In Riverside the jalopy stalled again. José ran to the nearest orange grove. In San Bernardino, where we had stopped to eat pears, José took the wheel and drove all through the night to Bakersfield.

We found a place on a large farm owned by a man named Arakelian. Hundreds of Filipinos were arriving from Salinas and Santa Maria, so we improvised makeshift beds under the trees. Japanese workers were also arriving from San Francisco, but they were housed in another section of the farm. I did not discover until some years afterward that this tactic was the only way in which the farmers could forestall any possible alliance between the Filipinos and the Japanese.

Some weeks after our work had begun rumors of trouble reached our camp. Then, on the other side of town, a Filipino labor camp was burned. My fellow workers could not explain it to me. I understood it to be a racial issue, because everywhere I went I saw white men attacking Filipinos. It was but natural for me to hate and fear the white man.

I was nailing some boards on a broken crate when Frank came running into the vineyard.

"Our camp is attacked by white men!" he said. "Let's run for our lives!"

"I'm going back to Los Angeles," José said.

"Let's go to Fresno," I insisted.

We jumped into Frank's jalopy and started down the dirt road toward the highway. In Fresno the old car skidded into a ditch, and when we had lifted it back to the highway, it would not run any more. Frank went to a garage and sold it. I told my companions that we could take the freight train to Stockton. I knew that the figs were about ready to be picked in Lodi.

We ran to the freight yards, only to discover that all the boxcars were loaded. I climbed to the top of a car that was full of crates and my companions followed me. The train was already moving when I saw four detectives with blackjacks climbing up the cars. I shouted to my companions to hide. I ran

to the trap door of an icebox, watching where the detectives were going.

José was running when they spotted him. He jumped to the other car and hid behind a trap door, but two more detectives came from the other end and grabbed him. José struggled violently and freed himself, rolling on his stomach away from his captors. On his feet again, he tried to jump to the car ahead, but his feet slipped and he fell, shouting to us for help. I saw his hands clawing frantically in the air before he disappeared.

I jumped out first. Frank followed me, falling upon the cinders almost simultaneously. Then we were running to José. I thought at first he was dead. One foot was cut off cleanly, but half of the other was still hanging. Frank lifted José and told him to tie my handkerchief around his foot. We carried him to the ditch.

"Fold his leg," Frank said, opening a knife.

"Right." I gripped the bleeding leg with all my might, but when Frank put the sharp blade on it, I turned my face away.

José jerked and moaned, then passed out. Frank chewed some tobacco and spread it on the stump to keep the blood from flowing. Then we ran to the highway and tried to hail a car, but the motorists looked at us with scorn and spat into the wind. Then an old man came along in a Ford truck and drove us to the county hospital, where a kind doctor and two nurses assured us that they would do their best for him.

Walking down the marble stairway of the hospital, I began to wonder at the paradox of America. José's tragedy was brought about by railroad detectives, yet he had done no harm of any consequence to the company. On the highway, again, motorists had refused to take a dying man. And yet in this hospital, among white people—Americans like those who had denied us—we had found refuge and tolerance. Why was America so kind and yet so cruel? Was there no way to simplifying things in this continent so that suffering would be minimized? Was there no common denominator on which we could all meet? I was angry and confused, and wondered if I would ever understand this paradox.

Macario had become more serious. When he talked, I noticed his old gentleness and the kind voice that had rung with sincerity at my sickbed in Binalonan. His words seized my imagination, so that years afterward I am able to write them almost word for word:

"He has fallen upon us to inspire a united front among our people," he said. "We must win the backward elements over to our camp; but we must also destroy that which is corrupt among ourselves. These are the fundamentals of our time; but these are also the realities that we must grasp in full.

"We must achieve articulation of social ideas, not only for some kind of economic security but also to help culture bloom as it should in our time. We are approaching what will be the greatest achievement of our generation: the discovery of a new vista of literature, that is, to speak to the people and to be understood by them.

"We must look for the mainspring of democracy, but we must also destroy false ideals. We must discover the origin of our freedom and write of it in broad national terms. We must interpret history in terms of liberty. We must advocate democratic ideas, and fight all forces that would abort our culture.

"This is the greatest responsibility of literature: to find in our struggle that which has a future. Literature is a living and growing thing. We must destroy that which is dying, because it does not die by itself.

"We in America understand the many imperfections of democracy and the malignant disease corroding its very heart. We must be united in the effort to make an America in which our people can find happiness. It is a great wrong that anyone in America, whether he be brown or white, should be illiterate or hungry or miserable.

"We must live in America where there is freedom for all regardless of color, station and beliefs. Great Americans worked with unselfish devotion toward one goal, that is, to use the power of the myriad peoples in the service of America's freedom. They made it their guiding principle. In this we are the same; we must also fight for an America where a man should be given

unconditional opportunities to cultivate his potentialities and to restore him to his rightful dignity.

"It is but fair to say that America is not a land of one race or one class of men. We are all Americans that have toiled and suffered and known oppression and defeat, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea picker. America is not bound by geographical latitudes. America is not merely a land or an institution. America is in the hearts of men that died for freedom; it is also in the eyes of men that are building a new world. America is a prophecy of a new society of men: of a system that knows no sorrow or strife or suffering. America is a warning to those who would try to falsify the ideals of freemen.

"America is also the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling on a tree. America is the illiterate immigrant who is ashamed that the world of books and intellectual opportunities is closed to him. We are all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy, that illiterate immigrant and that lynched black body. All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—*We are America!*

"The old world is dying, but a new world is being born. It generates inspiration from the chaos that bears upon us all. The false grandeur and security, the unfulfilled promises and illusory power, the number of the dead and those about to die, will charge the forces of our courage and determination. The old world will die so that the new world will be born with less sacrifice and agony on the living. . . ."