

Oregon State University
Spring 2008



Prism

Napa Valley

The plantation stretched on for miles, dwindling into the distance. The field was a sea of bending backs and rolled-up sleeves. Truckloads of workers had poured into California for one reason—the grape harvest. The rusty orange glow of the setting sun framed the dark figures of the workers. Perspiration streaked their faces, drenched their shirt collars, and trickled down their backs. Dust coated everything and everyone, drying their eyes and catching in their parched throats. Callused hands gripped shears, tirelessly cutting the swollen bunches of purple grapes. Crate after crate was filled, and still they worked.

The field looked as it always did—backs bending, hands hurriedly working—but a quiet buzz of conversation filled the endless hacienda. The faces of the working men had an air of anticipation. The usual deflated and dogged grin of determination was gone, replaced with a nervous, almost hopeful expression. There was a whisper of defiance blossoming beneath the raging sun. There was talk of huelga, strike.

Francisco mumbled to himself as he cut a bunch of grapes. His hands felt numb and mechanical, just another tool for harvest. His arms were muscled from hard physical labor, and his naturally bronze Latino complexion was a dark earthy brown from years of working in the sun.

The gray-haired man working next to him did not seem to notice his son's agitation. His hard, cracked old hands rhythmically worked the shears, filling crate after crate. The old man narrowed his eyes, silently enduring the glare of the setting sun. There were

deep grooves around his mouth and eyes from years of wearing the same stern expression. Francisco tried to find some emotion in his father's weathered face but as far as his son could tell, he was totally focused on the task at hand. Francisco had known all his life that his father was a quiet man. But today, with all that was on the verge of happening, his silence was maddening.

"Papa," said Francisco, glancing over at the older man. "Papa, are you going to the meeting tonight?"

His father glanced up at his son, smoothing his thick gray hair out of his eyes, "No, hijo."

"But Papa, we are all going, tonight is the night." Francisco lowered his voice, "We are deciding on the strike."

His father nodded and continued harvesting the grapes. Francisco couldn't fathom his father with his sun-hardened skin and gnarled hands, working day after day. Without a break, without any hope of retirement, content to work like a dog for the white men.

Francisco stood with his hands idle at his sides trying to think of something to tell his father. Something that would make the old traditional man understand the necessity of change. "Don't you believe in the cause, Papa?" asked Francisco, busying his hands again with the grape vines.

"What cause, hijo?" asked his father in his deep rumbling voice.

"The cause of our people, higher wages, fewer hours, better houses, todo mejor!" finished his son, bursting into Spanish to make sure his father could understand.

"I work for my children," was his father's only reply.

Francisco tried to understand the old man, but he was unable to comprehend his complacency. He thought of his own wife and child, his wife Magda and Clara his two-year-old girl.

"Padre, is it possible that your people, tu gente, need you now more than your family needs one small paycheck? I love my child, but we must change the system, cambiar la sistema." Francisco translated himself as he spoke, hoping that his father's native language might drive the point home.

But his father simply kept working. Shaking his head, he repeated, "I work for my children." The sun was barely peaking over the distant hills. It was a brilliant red, the color of late summer strawberries. Francisco remembered working as a child on his hands and knees, picking strawberries by the caseload. Always trying to sneak a bite of one, he remembered the explosion of taste and the thrill of disobeying the jefe, boss.

As the last light faded out of the sky, the foreman blew his whistle. The workers loaded the crates of grapes onto the back of flatbed trucks and headed home to the shanties set up around the plantation. The road through the shanty town was dusty, and lined with weeds and litter. Plastic bags tumbled in the evening breeze. Mud-streaked children ran from house to house yelling to one another, mixing Spanish and English in one continuous string so that the two languages could never be untangled.

Francisco hurried through the streets toward his own home, where Magda would be waiting with his tortillas and beans. He watched his father turn and walk silently into the house that held Francisco's mother and six younger siblings, the youngest of whom was seven.

The men lingered in the road talking. The strike was on everyone's mind, hanging in the air, sending a thrill of excitement through the community. When Francisco reached home with its peeling paint, thin walls, and single-paned windows, he smiled and pulled open the screen door.

"Magda!" he cried, looking around the small space. Magda stood over a small stove. Her dark hair was tied back in a long braid, and she was still wearing the maid's uniform she wore to work. Steam rose from the pot of beans, dampening her hair and making her cheeks glow pink.

Clara lay sleeping on her cot. She was completely still, her soft brown face buried in her pillow.

"She got sick again today," said Magda as she ladled a helping of black beans onto Francisco's plate.

The room was sparsely furnished; there was a shaky table, four stick chairs, and Clara's bed which had been laid in the middle of the room. On the table was a short stack of thick homemade tortillas on a plate. The only separate part of the house was Magda and Francisco's bedroom.

"What happened?" asked Francisco, his breath suddenly tight.

"She lost her breath running with her amiga Maria. Then she started getting headaches. When I got home from cleaning the house of Senior Martin, I picked her

up from your mother's house—her face was palido. She was so weak I carried her home."

"Did Madre know what was wrong with her?" asked Francisco, sitting down at the table and reaching for a tortilla.

"No, but this is not the first time," said Magda. Her voice was shaking. "Tomorrow I am going to take Clara to the doctor."

As they spoke Clara sighed in her sleep and shifted. Her long dark eyelashes fluttered, but she did not wake up.

"Should I stay home from the meeting?" asked Francisco looking down at his daughter. Her black hair spread out around her, framing her beauty. Her round face looked peaceful and happy. Francisco had always thought she would grow up to be the most beautiful girl in California.

"No, Francisco, I want you to go to your meeting," said Magda. She dished herself a plate of beans and sat down next to her husband.

"But Magda," replied Francisco, taking his wife's brown hand and kissing it, "the huelga will happen without me, I am not neccisario. No estoy importante."

"Yes you are," said Magda, leaning her head into her husband's strong, warm shoulder, "I care about the strike as much as you do. I want a better life for my daughter."

That night the men met in a designated house to discuss the strike. The small dwelling was packed with men. They sat on the floor, lounged on the patio. The room was thick with cigar and cigarette smoke. Every time he saw a familiar face, Francisco

waved and shook hands. He was uplifted by the general sense of camaraderie and he even managed to forget his father's absence.

People got up to speak, the men who had organized the strike, outsiders, union leaders. Some of them dressed in dress shirts and ties, but most of them were fellow workers. After every speaker Francisco clapped and yelled in agreement. The many raised angry voices could be heard from outside, and the decision was unanimous—they would strike.

That night Francisco walked home with his arms around his friends reveling in their decision to fight. Only one more day of working, then no one would show up for the grape harvest. And the fruit would wither on the stalk.

Francisco could feel his heart pumping with a new resolve and determination as he went to work the next day. Soon he wouldn't be in the field; he would be outside the fence, holding a sign and shouting for his people's rights. That morning he didn't work next to his silent father, instead he worked with the other men. As they picked the grapes they whispered of a better future.

He dreamed of a future where Magda would have a real kitchen. He spoke of a future where his little girl could go to school, and she would never have to drop out to help support the family. He wanted a future that meant something. So he worked alongside the other dreamers, and they discussed the future.

"It will only be a few months of suffering," said Roberto, his hand full of grapes. "And then when we win there will be a lifetime of respect."

Another worker nodded, saying, "Some of the grey-heads do not understand. They are too old to see the necessity."

"Yes," agreed Francisco. "My padre thinks he is going to help his family by being an esquire, a scab—he cannot look ahead."

Roberto nodded knowingly. Roberto was the strongest man who worked the plantation. He stood a head taller than all the other men, and he was broad like an ox. The other men nodded agreement and kept working.

"'It will only be a few months of suffering' said Roberto. 'And then when we win there will be a lifetime of respect.'"

The sun caused rivulets of perspiration to trickle from their hair and run down their sun-hardened necks, but they did not even notice. They didn't notice the dust in their eyes and mouths, they didn't notice the ache in their bent backs, and they didn't notice the flies landing on their moist skin, because tomorrow they would strike.

Through the glare of the sinking sun, Francisco watched his father working nonstop, his back bent, his gray hair catching the sunlight. Francisco noticed how his father never straightened up. He just stayed bent over the grapes, monotonously working the shears and loading the grapes into crates. He never wiped the dust from his face, he never stood to stretch, and his hands never stopped moving. Francisco

kept watching his father, confused by the old man's determination, unable to understand him.

As the crimson sun sank in the distance, Francisco and the other workers meandered into town singing and laughing. That night the men stayed out late drinking and talking. They sat in a circle of rusting wrought iron chairs behind Roberto's home, drinking beer from a cooler. The glass felt cold in Francisco's hand, and the bitter elixir was a welcome change from the murky water that filled his canteen. His mind was filled with images of the bosses' anger when no one came to work the following day. How the overseers would scream at them, "Get to work," but they would simply keep shouting, "Huelga! Huelga! Libertad, Justicia! Huelga!"

With a half-empty beer bottle in his hand, one of the men gestured wildly, saying "I pity any esquire, damned scab that comes across my path!" The drunken men raised their glasses. A spirit of togetherness and mighty resolve had come over the group. And with the fuzziness of intoxication they felt a kind of youthful exhilaration they hadn't experienced since they first bent their backs to tend the fields for the whites. The future was open to them again.

"You know what we need!" cried Francisco, rising, "We need to make signs! Picket signs, demanding better pay!"

"And shorter hours!" yelled another man, lunging out of his chair and stumbling in his haste. The men laughed and kicked dust onto their drunken friend berating him.

Silently Roberto disappeared into his squat little house. He had to stoop to get through the small doorway. When he reemerged he was holding cardboard boxes.

"Here," called Roberto, gesturing, "we can make signs."

"We don't need boxes," said one of the men, laughing and taking a swig of his beer.

Roberto simply shook his head and started breaking down the boxes and tearing them apart into square pieces of cardboard. Soon his plan became clear to all the men and they began writing messages on them.

Francisco's sign read "Libertad!" in large red letters. By the time the signs were completed, a cool evening breeze was stirring up the dust and trash behind Roberto's house. The men started saying their goodbyes.

As Francisco was leaving, Roberto approached him. His hulking mass was somewhat intimidating. The huge man grabbed Francisco's shoulder, catching the attention of the other men who were standing up to leave.

Roberto paused, then said, "We are all brothers now." The workers all nodded silently. Then Roberto shook Francisco's hand and thanked him for his ingenious idea about the signs.

When Francisco finally stumbled home, holding his cardboard picket sign, Magda was waiting for him in the doorway. Her hair was hanging loose around her shoulders and her eyes were red from crying. The buzz of alcohol and excitement was extinguished the moment he saw Magda's tear-streaked face.

"I went to the doctor," was all she said.

Francisco nodded as he walked into the house. "What did he say?" he asked, dropping the cardboard onto the ground and taking a seat at the table.

Clara toddled up to her father and took his rough hand in her grasp. "Hola Papa, yo fue al doctor hoy."

"I know you saw the doctor, little one," replied Francisco, his eyes filling with tears.

"I feel fine, Papa," said Clara, smiling. "Nothing bad happened today. Es verdad."

Francisco looked up at his wife, and saw the tears running down her face. "The doctor said she's sick," Magda managed to croak through her tears. "He doesn't know what it is exactly, but he said she had something. Ella neccesita, she needs testing, in Los Angeles."

"How are we supposed to get to Los Angeles?" yelled Francisco, rising from the table. "Can't he do the tests here?"

Magda silently shook her head no, and the tears kept running down her face. "I will have to take her; el doctor said it has to be soon."

Francisco sat back down at the table and took both of Magda's hands in his own, "Magda, how do you expect me to pay for this, I go on strike tomorrow."

"How long?" was all she said in reply, "because the doctor said it was urgent, the tests son neccisarios"

That night Francisco held Magda in his arms, looking up at the warped boards of the ceiling. The rickety roof couldn't keep out the heat and dust

in summer, and it couldn't keep out the wind and the damp in winter. It was substandard—it wasn't what his family deserved, but it was what they had. They had the endless fields of California with their never-ending work, the rotating crops; the bending immigrant backs never ending. Francisco kissed his sleeping wife, telling himself she deserved better than the ramshackle housing set up during the grape harvest.

With the first sign of sunlight piercing over the horizon, Francisco got out of bed. His face was set in grim determination. Magda lay silently, wrapped in the blankets, watching him get dressed. He had circles under his eyes; he hadn't slept all night.

Without saying a word, he kissed his wife's forehead and walked out of the bedroom. Lying in her cot, his little girl slept soundly. The light came through the window and played on her pudgy cheek. Francisco picked his way through the room quietly so as not to wake her.

His eyes didn't linger on the picket sign; he simply walked past it and left the house. There was a stirring in the neighborhood. Men carrying cardboard signs massed outside the fences of the plantation. Angry shouts were ringing in the air, shouts of, "Libertad y Justicia!" But there was no stirring in Francisco's heart, and there were no dreams for the future.

The only thing on his mind was Clara, and the bus ride to Los Angeles, and the expense of the tests. His mind was full of memories of the first time Clara collapsed on the ground, unable to breathe. He

thought of her face looking up at him for the first time. He thought about her big brown eyes, those deep dark eyes that were going to make her the most beautiful girl on the hacienda.

Ahead of him, he saw his father, walking with his grey head bent. Francisco stayed silent, shadowing his father. He knew there were no words in English or Spanish that could say more than the son silently following his father into the fields. Together father and son forced their way through the picket line. They pressed past the colorful crowd, shouting, waving signs. The angry cries of, "Scab, Esquiron and Bastardos!" followed them onto the field.

Francisco could see Roberto towering over the crowd, yelling, "Francisco, what are you doing?" But the sight of his confused friend could not dissuade Francisco from forcing his way through the gate to the vines rooted in dry cracked soil.

Father and son locked eyes as they stepped onto the field. And there was no surprise in the old man's expression. The gray-haired man simply grabbed a pair of shears and bent to harvest the first bunch of swollen purple grapes. His old cracked hands rhythmically worked the shears. His son fell in behind him, his young strong hands rhythmically working the shears. Together they filled crate after crate. The screams from the picket line kept going like the continuous roar of a radio. But the scabs, los esquirones, the strike breakers, didn't let themselves feel shame. They all wanted to fight for their people, but they worked for their children.