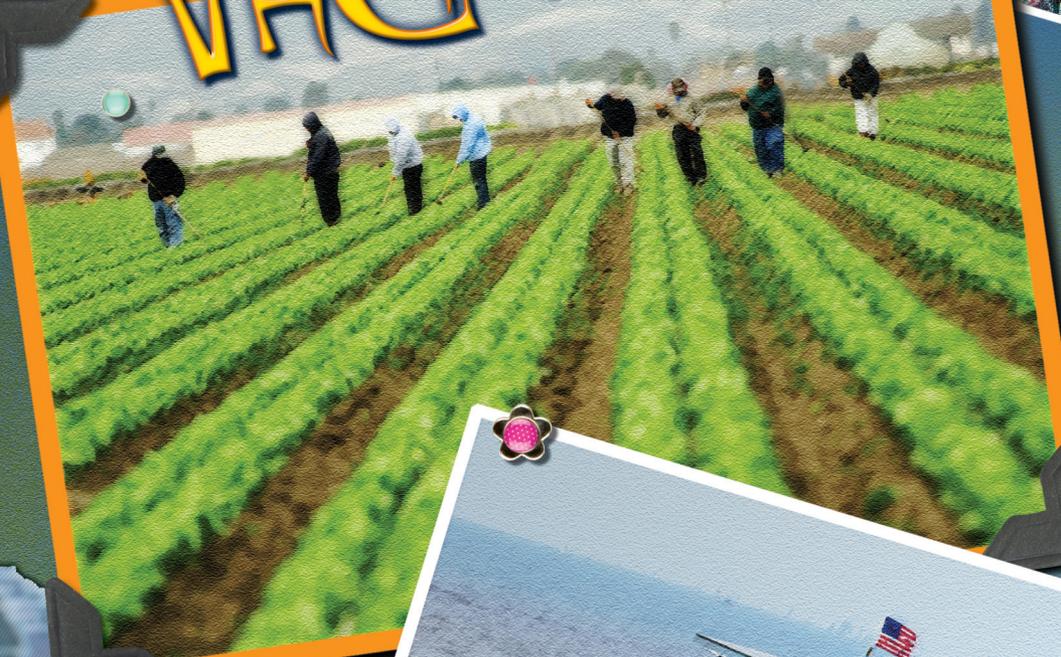


A SO-CALLED VACATION



Genaro González



A
SO-CALLED
VACATION

Genaro González

Dedication

Para mi padre y para mi padrastro (q.e.p.d.)



To my father and to my stepfather (R.I.P.)



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Summary: When their father insists that they lack “life experiences,” teenaged brothers Gabriel and Gustavo reluctantly agree to a family vacation in a California migrant camp, where the boys pick crops and learn about immigrant labor and prejudice within the Hispanic community.

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1

High school was not yet over for the year, but Gabriel was already chalking it up as the summer of their father's folly. For weeks his dad had been hinting that they should follow the local migrant families for farmwork in California. The fact that his three teenaged children had never set foot in a produce field did not deter him. If anything, he viewed it as an unfortunate gap in his children's life experiences.

The notion turned more tangible just days before classes ended. Gabriel was with his father at an auto parts store when they bumped into a customer from the garage where his father worked. Gabriel assumed they were not close since they eyed one another for a moment, then their greeting had the exaggerated enthusiasm of acquaintances running into each other in a place they never expected. The man knew almost no English and had been wandering around in search of an emergency road kit.

Gabriel disappeared but returned almost at once and handed him one. The man removed his hat to show he was grateful, then he extended his hand. When the man introduced himself, Gabriel's father listened carefully, then he turned the first name to a plausible nickname and called him that until they left the store.

As the man accompanied them to the parking lot he mentioned that his family was leaving for the West Coast

that very evening and that he preferred driving in the cool of night.

“Not that my truck’s air conditioner can’t handle the heat.” He pointed to a gleaming behemoth that barely fit in its parking space. Its chrome grill reminded Gabriel of the man’s upper gold bridge, and the truck’s customized, cast-iron bumper, that Mexicans called a *mata burros*, made Gabriel wonder how the man might look wearing braces.

His father could not help but examine the truck up close. “I don’t remember you ever bringing this in for us to work on. In fact, we haven’t seen you in quite a while.”

“Nothing on you guys at the shop, but it’s still under warranty. I take it straight to the dealer.”

Gabriel’s father looked at the truck with a mixture of admiration and envy. “I’ll bet it’s got more horsepower than a downtown parade.”

When the man draped his ropy arm over the massive hood as though posing for a snapshot, Gabriel concluded that he appeared out of his element. With a wide-brimmed hat that could not completely erase a permanent sun-squint, he would be more at home in a Mexican village, driving a team of oxen.

The man cradled the road kit carton. “It’s a long ways to the fields of Fresno, and I’ve seen brand-new trucks stranded on the highway.” He stuck out his hand. “Anyway, I’ve already spent too much time in this Texas heat, and time is money.”

Gabriel’s father, still admiring the truck, was in no hurry to end the conversation. “You’ve been going there how long now?”

“Going on six years. Remember my first old pickup? I thought the camper shell would peel off the second I hit sixty.”

Gabriel's father nodded. "The guys at the shop had to patch up your transmission just to get you there."

The man's laugh had the timbre of someone raised in wide-open spaces. "On the way back I just prayed it would all be downhill! I tell you, I could have used your skills back there."

"I don't remember us ever recharging your Freon, though."

"I didn't *have* air! But now I just crank up the unit to 'Hurricane.'" The man shook his head, either wondering how he could have managed without air conditioning or else incredulous that he was already living the American Dream. "I'm already thinking of trading it in for a new one this fall. God willing, of course." He silently made the sign of the cross. "We'll be getting back just as the new models are coming out."

"So we won't see you at the shop from now on. You'll be covered bumper to bumper."

"Don't worry. My older kids plan to get used cars. They're cheaper in California and better than the junk they sell here."

Gabriel thought he saw him glance in the direction of their van as he offered a final handshake. His father shook his head as he watched him leave, amazed at the man's good fortune. "It seems like yesterday that the guy swam across the river," he muttered. "Look at him now. And look at us."

"At least we're not wearing orange polyester slacks, Dad."

"We aren't driving an expensive, tricked-out truck either." He made sure the man had left the parking lot before he got into their van. "We were born here, and we're barely treading water."

"Maybe he has a large family."

“So? All the more mouths to feed.”

“And all the more hands for fieldwork. That’s why he’s doing okay.”

“More than okay.” As he touched the hot dashboard and steering wheel he repeated the man’s words: “‘Going on six years.’ That’s how long we’ve had this piece of junk. And we bought it already used.”

“Our van’s not that bad.” Gabriel tapped the plastic cover on the odometer. “Only two thousand miles.” Rather than ease the creases on his father’s forehead, the humor only tightened the lines.

“At least an odometer starts over.”

“So can people, Dad. And we don’t have to wait for the numbers to turn.”

No sooner had Gabriel said this than he realized the remark would only harden his father’s resolve to see the California trip through.

Fortunately the matter did not resurface until the last day of school. As Gabriel took his place at the table that morning, his father was already making a pitch to Gus, his older son and the most obstinate.

Gabriel tried his best to stay neutral, but for that very reason each sought his support. In truth, he agreed with his father that they were not doing that well. Looking around the kitchen that doubled as a dining room, it was obvious that the house had seen better times. For instance, although the roof leak had been repaired last year, the water stains on the ceiling were reminders that any cosmetic fix-ups had been put on hold.

It was the same story throughout the house. His father had bought it from an elderly Anglo couple the year Paula was born, when the boys were barely three and five. The neighborhood had once been an Anglo enclave, but by the time they moved in it was already

home to Latino families determined to better their lot but ill-equipped to make good on the dream.

In order to close the deal on the house, his father had assured the woman that he would maintain the large and lush garden, but through the years the commitment had eroded into weeds and bare spots, so that now the only flowers that bloomed were the ones that Paula planted and tended. His father had no shortage of excuses for his failure. He blamed the weather, for one, both the increasingly hot summers and the decreasingly benign winters. He also pointed out how the previous owners, retired and without children in the house, had the luxury to keep up a garden. He gave similar rationalizations for the cracked patio door, the dry rot in the fascia boards, and all the other pending repairs.

So when he argued, as he was doing now, that they could use extra income for home improvements, Gabriel saw his point yet questioned whether they were as bad off as his dad said. The school bus route through hard-core *colonias* and dilapidated barrios always put their own shortcomings in sobering perspective. And, contrary to his father's portrayal, the migrant workers living in those homes were not exactly rolling in clover.

"Those migrants have it made," he was telling his older son. "Just the other day Gabi and I bumped into one of them as he boarded his three-bedroom truck. Besides, if we did go up north I'd hardly work in the fields. Fixing their cars and trucks, that's where the real money is."

Gus had the taciturn look of someone who had been burned before. Finally he said, with an edge of disbelief, "So you'd fix cars in a migrant camp."

"In a camp, yes. They're almost like villages."

"So you'd be like a . . . village blacksmith." Gus twisted the phrasing to heighten its absurdity.

His sister Paula whispered in his ear, “And if you believe Dad, you can be the village idiot.”

“You’ve never been in those camps,” their father added, “so you don’t know. I could set up a makeshift auto shop. Just find me a shade tree and an assistant or two.” He fixed his gaze on his sons, who looked away.

Paula, who was packing snacks for an end-of-school party at her middle school, smoothed his hair, and plucked out an unruly gray one. “Dad, you work in a garage, with fans all over the place. And even then you’re short of breath. You’d die if you had to work outside, in the heat.”

“California summers aren’t like here.”

Their mother was not convinced either. “I doubt that any camp has enough cars to keep you busy.”

“I’ll visit nearby camps. I’ll work out of the van, like making house calls.”

“Won’t the crew leaders mind?” she asked.

“I’ll be doing them a favor. Their workers won’t have to take time off to go into town for repairs. I’ll be raking in the cash, so I might even give them a cut.”

“And what’ll we do?” Paula asked. “Count it?”

“A little fieldwork wouldn’t hurt.”

“I knew there was a catch,” Gabriel shook his head.

“With Dad there’s always a catch,” said Gus.

“On slow days I could join the rest of you in the fields. You like to work in our garden, Paulita. Think of an agricultural field as a huge garden.”

“Dad, I don’t like it *that* much. Besides, I can barely manage that small patch out front.”

“Of course, I’d have to camouflage my plan with stoop labor every now and then. A grower won’t let us live in his camp without doing a little exercise.”

Paula stared straight at him. “Especially after you mess up your back and have to stay behind and work on cars.”

He stared back, dumbfounded that she had read his thoughts, but he recovered with a nonchalant, “Naturally.”

“But, *amor*, what’s the closest our kids ever came to a produce field? Your childhood stories?”

Gus smiled, “Oh, right, the stories.” He exaggerated his father’s accent: “Once upon a time, when men were men . . .”

Gabriel joined in. “What about the boys? Weren’t there boys back then?”

Gus imitated their father’s dismissive hand gesture. “The work either killed them or made them men.”

Without realizing it, their father repeated the gesture. “Look at me. I didn’t die. All that work made me stronger.”

Gabriel almost added that if he had spent more time in school instead of the fields, they might be better off and not having this conversation. But that was the sort of low blow his own father might pull, so he held back.

“Besides, kids, who owns those fancy pickups I work on all day? Migrants! Pimpily-faced teenagers, at that!”

“Well, *mi amor*, they work hard for their money.”

“In the hot sun,” Gus added. “That’s why they have pimples.”

“I work hard, too. Yet my oldest kid rides a bus to school while some dropout kid drives a customized truck.”

The remark did not win over Gus, but it did silence him. Even their mother admitted, “He’ll be eighteen next month. He does need a car.”

Paula grabbed her school snacks and ran to the door. “He’ll need one this morning if we miss the bus! It’s the last day!”

Their father tried making one last point over the teenage commotion, but by then he only had an audience of one.

“*Mi vida*, they’ve already heard that speech a hundred times.”

“Maybe it’ll sink in on the hundred and first.”