



Small Towne Short Stories

Villa Park Orchards Packinghouse – Alyssa Duranty – Part III

"How was work?" Arturo can still hear his father ask.

"Hard," he said everyday after picking oranges for hours in groves around the Cypress Street Barrio he has called home since his parents moved from Mexico.

"Good," his father would say with a nod.

Arturo was constantly reminded of the struggle the Mexicans went through to be here. What they gave up, how hard they worked for what little they had.

His mind filled with memories of running through the citrus groves on summer days, picking as many oranges as he could carry in soiled shoulder bags. He can still feel the small, rusted scissors, the repetitive crunching in his palm. The tension, the sweat—all for small fruits that would depart the barrio to fancy homes his family and neighbors couldn't dream of owning.

Regardless of the tough times, it was their time.

But times changed. Soldiers returned. The land became more valuable for homes instead of trees. More and more neighbors packed, moved away.

"Where are they going?" Arturo would ask his father.

"North, with the trees and the work," his father said with a concerned look as he cleaned the dirt from the bottom of his boots.

Arturo fondly recalls the barrio decked out in vibrant crepe flowers during holiday fiestas and parades. Red, green and white in honor of the Mexican flag, and orange and yellow and pink. He hears the people cheering, children laughing and mariachis adorned in black and silver tassels wailing. The sweet and sour smell of the pan dulce sweet cakes and sweat mixes with fragrant orange blossom. Just as easily as Arturo conjures the memory, it recedes.

The sounds of fiestas and parades, the smell of cooking spices and shoeless children began disappearing from the streets.

Eventually Arturo's family left too. Packing old citrus boxes—the Sunkist stamp still legible on the sides—with their few fond possessions, but Arturo stayed behind.

Years went by and Arturo spent his days sitting in a small room at the top of the Santiago Orange Grower's Association (SOGA) Packinghouse. The windows overlooked the roof and street, where he and his friends would run from there houses to school or play kick ball, but now only are covered in dirt and dust from the constant construction. The buildings they called home now all destroyed and replaced.

"This is my neighborhood, my town!" He would shout at people, as an attempt to stop the Barrio from slowly developing and shedding its rural, Mexican identity.

Still no one heard him. His voice was lost amongst the constant construction sounds below.

"Over my dead body will you take this from me," he shouted again at the men in hard, plastic hats moving from plot to plot on Cypress Street.

Arturo continued to witness transformation. New buildings cropped up around the Packinghouse and the Packinghouse itself turned modern—new walls, new rooms, lighting tracks and even televisions. The memories Arturo worked so hard to preserve faded with each renovation.

He waited for the people, ready to confront them and protect the last piece of his hometown. But when hundreds of new people showed up on a hot August day, smiling and excited, he was more interested than angry.

"Could these be the friends I've been searching for," Arturo thought. It felt as though his old friends and family had been gone for a century.

"No, they couldn't," he thought again. "These people don't know me, they don't know the labor our families underwent to build these streets, to secure our part of the American dream."

"Their smiles are too big, eyes too wide, hopes too deep" he said looking at the new faces. "They obviously have never had their hands cracked and calloused from hours of hard labor only to make pennies."

The students ignored him, just as past residents ignored the Cypress Street Barrio families, as if they didn't exist. Arturo's hope for community was lost yet again.

That was until he heard his voice, or at least what sounded like his voice.

"Hi, my name is Alex," the tall, tanned boy with shaggy hair said to his new roommate.

The boy shocked Arturo. He was 19, Arturo's age when a tooth infection became more than just a bad smell, causing him to die in a house only blocks away from the Packinghouse. It is Arturo's last vivid memory.

"My grandfather lived on this street when he first immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico with my grandmother and a backpack full of clothes," Alex said to his new roommate.

"What was his name?" Arturo asked, but Alex ignored him. "Maybe I knew him, your family."

But Arturo refused to believe Alex's family could be from this neighborhood.

"He hasn't worked a hard day in his life," Arturo said snidely.

But Arturo felt a connection to the boy and followed him like a shadow instead of a spirit. Perhaps because they looked alike, or maybe because he was so desperate for a friend from the neighborhood.

"Goal!" Alex would yell from the University soccer field between classes. Arturo always wanted to play, but the other students never picked him.

"Thanks, mom," Alex would say to his mother visiting with homemade enchiladas during homecoming weekend.

"I miss my mother's enchiladas," Arturo would think, hoping Alex would offer him one, but of course he never did.

It was a new concept for Arturo to see students of different colors together under the same roof. Arturo and his sisters were forced to attend a small school on Cypress Street, segregated from the white children. They were told they couldn't play baseball together, but they would do it anyway.

Although Arturo felt connected to Alex, he looked down at the dirt on his hands and noticed Alex's were smooth, pristine.

"How could we be the same," Arturo wondered. "Does he know where he's living? What his grandfather helped build? What this place meant to us?"

As he followed Alex and lived with the students, he began to realize that this was no longer his home. This was not the segregated school where he studied, the block where he lived, the Packinghouse where he worked or the home where he died.

Alex graduated. More students come and go, but Arturo remains the same. He still wanders, reminisces. He gazes longingly at the old pictures of his family and his friends, which now adorn libraries and classrooms.

It's been 80 years since Arturo died from that tooth infection in his shack-like home, yet every day he reflects on how everything has changed. But now, Arturo looks forward to meeting new students on Cypress Street and listening to their stories, meeting their families, and learning about their dreams.

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Alyssa Duranty graduated as an English major with an emphasis in journalism from Chapman University after serving as an editor at The Panther Newspaper. An Orange County Press Club scholarship winner and member, she quickly excelled at The Orange County Register where she commonly writes breaking news and articles on public safety. Her writing has also been featured in The Los Angeles Register and The Press-Enterprise. She has also been a guest on KFWB radio. Her knowledge of Orange County, its perks and quirks, is always growing and evolving to uncover new stories and culture.

Santiago Orange Growers Sunkist Packing Plant, Orange, California, ca. 1945. Santiago Orange Growers Sunkist Packing Plant, located on North Cypress Street, Orange, California, between 1945-1946. Image shows corner view looking northwest of the two-story packing house which was the largest co-operative house in the nation. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.