

# Seek

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OUTSIDE dusk had fallen, and the fireflies danced to the crickets' scraping music. Most of the neighborhood children had gathered at the house next door for a final game of hide and seek. Their shrill squeals and giggles quieted as one of the older boys started the game to choose the "ghost". "Eenie, meenie, minie, moe . . ."

Joel lay numbly on his bed, listening to the children's chant. Weariness weighted his body, draining him of all energy, preventing him from even closing the window to shut out the chant. The cool sheet against his backbone and another across his chest aided sleep little as his blistered toes throbbed protestingly at the slight pressure of the crisp muslin. Twitching eyes, too tired to keep open but too dry to close, stared unfocusing at one corner of the ceiling, waiting for total darkness to relieve their straining.

"Judy's it! We'll count to a hundred," declared the older boy. Settling sounds as the children sat on the wooden porch to count. "One, two, three . . ."

The curtains stirred slightly as their voices drifted into the stifling room. Listening, Joel wished for a moment to again be a child, with freedom to play, and shout, and with no job to weigh him down. That's all it was really—a job, not an occupation. There was little future for an untrained field hand in a tree nursery like Ferrel's. Especially not for someone like him—a loser. Out of a job for seven months, one year of college loans to pay off, and now long hours, low pay, at a backbreaking job that would last only as long as the humid summer months.

". . . thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, . . ."

Thirty-three, thirty-four, . . . How many trees had he planted today? Close to forty. Ten hours of seedlings. On his knees he'd dig the holes, put in water and fertilizer, take the six-inch seedling and pack it in firmly, water it,

and move on to the next. Always bent, always with the sweat rolling down his back, sun sapping his strength. Nearby the Mexican migrants did as he did, each concentrating on his own assigned square of land.

"... forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, ..."

How old was Jose? He'd worked summers for Ferrel's for close to forty years, so he claimed. And he still wasn't enough money ahead to get his wife a house of her own. Every summer Jose would get a new work visa and bring his entire family north. He and his children who were old enough (any of them over eight were "old enough") spent all day every day in the fields. At the end of summer he'd load his kids and another new baby into their rickety station wagon and go down to Texas for the season there. Shuttling through life from one migrant camp to another. Jose invited Joel to join him. They got along okay; maybe if he couldn't find work for the winter, he'd go to Texas with Jose.

"... eighty-eight, eighty-nine ..."

The job wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the heat. The thermometer had read seventy degrees at six this morning, and had climbed to ninety by ten-thirty. Even the salt tablets the foreman passed around hadn't helped enough. He'd get laid off even before summer's end if he didn't toughen up.

"... ninety-nine, a hundred. Here we come ready or not! Thudding footsteps on the porch. Judy's shriek, "Hah, I got you, Larry! You're it!" And the others' jubilant "Free!" "Free!" "Free!"

Free. To be a free man. Longing for the freedom that had somehow slipped away. Could he ever regain it?

"Peggy, Judy, Larry. It's time to come in." A freshening breeze brought the words clearly through the window. "Jeffrey, John, Janet. It's bedtime."

A babyish treble floated through the window, "Good-night birds, good-night moon, good-night trees."

Good-night trees. Joel's eyes closed at last as the cool north wind blew the last light words across the room.