

Starvation Under the Orange Trees

by John Steinbeck

"Starvation Under the Orange Trees" was originally published in the *Monterey Trader*, April 15, 1938. In that year the Simon J. Lubin Society published it in pamphlet form as the eighth chapter of *Their Blood is Strong*.

1. The Spring is rich and green in California this year. In the fields the wild grass is ten inches high, and in the orchards and vineyards the grass is deep and nearly ready to be plowed under to enrich the soil. Already the flowers are starting to bloom. Very shortly one of the oil companies will be broadcasting the locations of the wild-flower masses. It is a beautiful spring.
2. There has been no war in California, no plague, no bombing of open towns and roads, no shelling of cities. It is a beautiful year. And thousands of families are starving in California. In the county seats the coroners are filling in "malnutrition" in the spaces left for "causes of death." For some reason, a coroner shrinks from writing "starvation" when a thin child is dead in a tent.
3. For it's in the tents you see along the roads and in the shacks built from dump heap material that the hunger is, and it isn't malnutrition. It is starvation. Malnutrition means you go without certain food essentials and take a long time to die, but starvation means no food at all. The green grass spreading right into the tent doorways and the orange trees are loaded. In the cotton fields, a few wisps of the old crop cling to the black stems. But the people who picked the cotton, and cut the peaches and apricots, who crawled all day in the rows of lettuce and beans are hungry. The men who harvested the crops of California, the women and girls who stood all day and half the night in the canneries, are starving.
4. It was so two years ago in Nipomo, it is so now, it will continue to be so until the rich produce of California can be grown and harvested on some other basis than that of stupidity and greed.
5. What is to be done about it? The Federal Government is trying to feed and give direct relief, but it is difficult to do quickly for there are forms to fill out, questions to ask, for fear someone who isn't actually starving may get something. The state relief organizations are trying to send those who haven't been in the state for a year back to the states they came from. The Associated Farmers, which presumes to speak for the farms of California and which is made up of such earth stained toilers as chain banks, public utilities, railroad companies and those huge corporations called land companies, this financial organization in the face of the crisis is conducting Americanism meetings and bawling about reds and foreign agitators. It has been invariably true in the past that when such a close knit financial group as the Associated Farmers becomes excited about our ancient liberties and foreign agitators, some one is about to lose something.
6. A wage cut has invariably followed such a campaign of pure Americanism. And of course any resentment of such a wage cut is set down as the work of foreign agitators. Anyway that is the Associated Farmers contribution to the hunger of the men and women who harvest their crops.
7. The small farmers, who do not belong to the Associated Farmers and cannot make the use of the slop chest, are helpless to do anything about it. The little store keepers at cross roads and in small towns have carried the accounts of the working people until they are near to bankruptcy.
8. And there are one thousand families in Tulare County, and two thousand families in Kings, fifteen hundred families in Kern, and so on. The families average three persons, by the way. With the exception of a little pea picking, there isn't going to be any work for nearly three months.
9. There is sickness in the tents, pneumonia and measles, tuberculosis. Measles in a tent, with no way to protect the eyes, means a child with weakened eyes for life. And there are varied diseases attributable to hunger, rickets and the beginning of pellagra.
10. The nurses in the county, and there aren't one-tenth enough of them, are working their heads off, doing a magnificent job and they can only begin to do the work. The corps includes nurses assigned by the federal and state public health services, school nurses and county health nurses, and a few nurses furnished by the Council of Women for Home Missions, a national church organization. I've seen them, red-eyed, weary from far too many hours, and seeming to make no impression in the illness about them.
11. It may be of interest to reiterate the reasons why these people are in the state and the reason they must go hungry. They are here because we need them. Before the white American migrants were here, it was the custom in California to

import great numbers of Mexicans, Filipinos, Japanese, to keep them segregated, to herd them about like animals, and, if there were any complaints, to deport or to imprison the leaders. This system of labor was a dream of heaven to such employers as those who now fear foreign agitators so much.

12. But then the dust and the tractors began displacing the sharecroppers of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas and Arkansas. Families who had lived for many years on the little "cropper lands" were dispossessed because the land was in the hands of the banks and finance companies, and because these owners found that one man with a tractor could do the work of ten sharecropper families.
13. Faced with the question of starving or moving, these dispossessed families came west. To a certain extent they were actuated by advertisements and hand bills distributed by labor contractors from California. It is to the advantage of the corporate farmer to have too much labor, for then wages can be cut. Then people who are hungry will fight each other for a job rather than the employer for a living wage.
14. It is possible to make money for food and gasoline for at least nine months of the year if you are quick on the get away, if your wife and children work in the fields. But then the dead three months strikes, and what can you do then? The migrant cannot save anything. It takes everything he can make to feed his family and buy gasoline to go to the next job. If you don't believe this, go out in the cotton fields next year. Work all day and see if you have made thirty-five cents. A good picker makes more, of course, but you can't.
15. The method of concentrating labor for one of the great crops is this. Handbills are distributed, advertisements are printed. You've seen them. Cotton pickers wanted in Bakersfield or Fresno or Imperial Valley. Then all the available migrants rush to the scene. They arrive with no money and little food. The reserve has been spent getting there.
16. If wages happen to drop a little, they must take them any way. The moment the crop is picked, the locals begin to try to get rid of the people who have harvested their crops. They want to run them out, move them on.
17. The county hospitals are closed to them. They are not eligible to relief. You must be eligible to eat. That particular locality is through with them until another crop comes in.
18. It will be remembered that two years ago some so-called agitators were tarred and feathered. The population of migrants left the locality just as the hops were ripe. Then the howling of the locals was terrible to hear. They even tried to get the army and the CCC ordered to pick their crops.
19. About the fifteenth of January the dead time sets in. There is no work. First the gasoline gives out. And without gasoline a man cannot go to a job even if he could get one. Then the food goes. And then in the rains, with insufficient food, the children develop colds because the ground in the tents is wet.
20. I talked to a man last week who lost two children in ten days with pneumonia. His face was hard and fierce and he didn't talk much.
21. I talked to a girl with a baby and offered her a cigaret. She took two puffs and vomited in the street. She was ashamed. She shouldn't have tried to smoke, she said, for she hadn't eaten for two days.
22. I heard a man whimpering that the baby was sucking but nothing came out of the breast. I heard a man explain very shyly that his little girl couldn't go to school because she was too weak to walk to school and besides the school lunches of the other children made her unhappy.
23. I heard a man tell in a monotone how he couldn't get a doctor while his oldest boy died of pneumonia but that a doctor came right away after it was dead. It is easy to get a doctor to look at a corpse, not so easy to get one for a live person. It is easy to get a body buried. A truck comes right out and takes it away. The state is much more interested in how you die than in how you live. The man who was telling about it had just found that out. He didn't want to believe it.
24. Next year the hunger will come again and the year after that and so on until we come out of this coma and realize that our agriculture for all its great produce is a failure.
25. If you buy a farm horse and only feed him when you work him, the horse will die. No one complains of the necessity of feeding the horse when he is not working. But we complain about feeding the men and women who work our lands. Is it possible that this state is so stupid, so vicious and so greedy that it cannot feed and clothe the men and women who help to make it the richest area in the world? Must the hunger become anger and the anger fury before anything will be done?

Released from an Oklahoma state prison after serving four years for a manslaughter conviction, Tom Joad makes his way back to his family's farm in Oklahoma. He meets Jim Casy, a former preacher who has given up his calling out of a belief that all life is holy—even the parts that are typically thought to be sinful—and that sacredness consists simply in endeavoring to be an equal among the people. Jim accompanies Tom to his home, only to find it—and all the surrounding farms—deserted. Muley Graves, an old neighbor, wanders by and tells the men that everyone has been “tractored” off the land. Most families, he says, including his own, have headed to California to look for work. The next morning, Tom and Jim set out for Tom's Uncle John's, where Muley assures them they will find the Joad clan. Upon arrival, Tom finds Ma and Pa Joad packing up the family's few possessions. Having seen handbills advertising fruit-picking jobs in California, they envision the trip to California as their only hope of getting their lives back on track.

The journey to California in a rickety used truck is long and arduous. Grampa Joad, a feisty old man who complains bitterly that he does not want to leave his land, dies on the road shortly after the family's departure. Dilapidated cars and trucks, loaded down with scrappy possessions, clog Highway 66: it seems the entire country is in flight to the Promised Land of California. The Joads meet Ivy and Sairy Wilson, a couple plagued with car trouble, and invite them to travel with the family. Sairy Wilson is sick and, near the California border, becomes unable to continue the journey.

As the Joads near California, they hear ominous rumors of a depleted job market. One migrant tells Pa that 20,000 people show up for every 800 jobs and that his own children have starved to death. Although the Joads press on, their first days in California prove tragic, as Granma Joad dies. The remaining family members move from one squalid camp to the next, looking in vain for work, struggling to find food, and trying desperately to hold their family together. Noah, the oldest of the Joad children, soon abandons the family, as does Connie, a young dreamer who is married to Tom's pregnant sister, Rose of Sharon.

The Joads meet with much hostility in California. The camps are overcrowded and full of starving migrants, who are often nasty to each other. The locals are fearful and angry at the flood of newcomers, whom they derisively label "Okies." Work is almost impossible to find or pays such a meager wage that a family's full day's work cannot buy a decent meal. Fearing an uprising, the large landowners do everything in their power to keep the migrants poor and dependent. While staying in a ramshackle camp known as a "Hooverville," Tom and several men get into a heated argument with a deputy sheriff over whether workers should organize into a union. When the argument turns violent, Jim Casy knocks the sheriff unconscious and is arrested. Police officers arrive and announce their intention to burn the Hooverville to the ground.

A government-run camp proves much more hospitable to the Joads, and the family soon finds many friends and a bit of work. However, one day, while working at a pipe-laying job, Tom learns that the police are planning to stage a riot in the camp, which will allow them to shut down the facilities. By alerting and organizing the men in the camp, Tom helps to defuse the danger. Still, as pleasant as life in the government camp is, the Joads cannot survive without steady work, and they have to move on. They find employment picking fruit, but soon learn that they are earning a decent wage only because they have been hired to break a workers' strike. Tom runs into Jim Casy who, after being released from jail, has begun organizing workers; in the process, Casy has made many enemies among the landowners. When the police hunt him down and kill him in Tom's presence, Tom retaliates and kills a police officer.

Tom goes into hiding, while the family moves into a boxcar on a cotton farm. One day, Ruthie, the youngest Joad daughter, reveals to a girl in the camp that her brother has killed two men and is hiding nearby. Fearing for his safety, Ma Joad finds Tom and sends him away. Tom heads off to fulfill Jim's task of organizing the migrant workers. The end of the cotton season means the end of work, and word sweeps across the land that there are no jobs to be had for three months. Rains set in and flood the land. Rose of Sharon gives

birth to a stillborn child, and Ma, desperate to get her family to safety from the floods, leads them to a dry barn not far away. Here, they find a young boy kneeling over his father, who is slowly starving to death. He has not eaten for days, giving whatever food he had to his son. Realizing that Rose of Sharon is now producing milk, Ma sends the others outside, so that her daughter can nurse the dying man.

In Oklahoma during the Great Depression, drought and dust storms—the Dust Bowl—have ruined farmers' crops and destroyed livelihoods already damaged by the failing economy. Tom Joad is a young man from a farming family who has just been paroled from prison, after serving four years on a homicide charge. As Tom returns home, he meets Jim Casy, an ex-preacher whom Tom knew as a child. Casy no longer preaches of virtue and sin, and instead holds the unity and equality of human spirit as his highest ideal. Together, Tom and Casy travel back to the Joad homestead, but discover that it has been abandoned. Muley Graves, a neighbor who has stayed behind, explains to the two men that the farming families have all been evicted by the landowners and the banks, who have repossessed their land and now use tractors to cultivate it. Muley tells the men that they can find Tom's family at the home of Uncle John, the brother of Tom's father, Pa Joad.

When Tom and Casy arrive at Uncle John's, they find the Joads loading up a car in preparation to leave for California. Pa Joad reveals that the family saw fruit-picking jobs advertised on handbills, and they are heading west to take advantage of these opportunities. Once on the road, the Joads befriend a migrant couple, Ivy and Sairy Wilson, and shortly thereafter, the cantankerous Grampa Joad dies of a stroke. The Wilsons travel with the Joads until the California border, where Sairy becomes too ill to continue. Noah, Tom's older brother, abandons the family at this border, choosing instead to subsist on his own.

On their way to California, the Joads receive disheartening reports about a lack of jobs and hostility towards "Okies" in California. Once the family arrives in the state, these rumors prove to be true, and their hardships continue. Granma Joad dies during the family's passage through the Mojave desert. The family is forced to inhabit a Hooverville, a squalid tent city (named after President Herbert Hoover) where migrants live at the whim of unscrupulous contractors and corrupt deputies. At this camp, Connie Rivers—the husband of Tom's pregnant sister, Rose of Sharon—abandons the Joads. When Tom and a friend from the Hooverville try to negotiate better wages from a contractor, they get into a tussle with a deputy. Tom flees and Casy willingly takes the blame for the fight; the preacher is arrested and taken into custody.

The Joads leave the Hooverville and find refuge at a more comfortable, government-run camp. Instead of a police presence, the camp is governed by a committee elected by the migrants themselves. At this camp, the Joads find some comfort and friendship, but only Tom can find work. One day, Tom discovers that the greedy Farmers' Association, working in tandem with corrupt deputies, plans to start a riot at an upcoming dance. This will give the deputies a pretense to destroy the camp, which will weaken the laborers' bargaining power. However, Tom and some other men discreetly pre-empt this attack, and the camp is saved.

The Joads are unable to survive on the income they receive at the camp. They leave to find work elsewhere, and come across a peach-picking compound, where they are brought in to work while other migrants are on strike outside the gates. Tom discovers that Casy is the one responsible for organizing the strike. Just after Tom reunites with Casy, police find them, and one of the officers kills Casy with a pickaxe in front of Tom. In response, Tom kills the officer, and goes into hiding.

The Joads leave to pick cotton and live out of a boxcar, while Tom hides in the wilderness nearby. The family has enough money to eat fairly well, and Tom's younger brother Al has gotten engaged to the daughter of their housemates, the Wainwrights. Suddenly, torrential rains come, and the Joads are forced to stay in the boxcar (as opposed to go to a hospital or

find a midwife) while Rose of Sharon gives birth. Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn, and the family flees to a nearby barn to escape the floods. There, they find a boy and his starving father. Ma Joad realizes that Rose of Sharon is lactating, and she gets the rest of the family to leave while Rose of Sharon breastfeeds the starving man.