Eliseo

Eliseo Medina was stuck at home, watching reruns of I Love Lucy. You can't pick grapes with a broken leg, and there was not much else to do in Delano, California.

Life in the small San Joaquin Valley town was as monotonous as the flat landscape and as predictable as the streets that ran from west to east in alphabetical order. One-story bungalows and pastel-colored ranch houses barely broke the horizon, tapering off into miles of fields. There was only one clear boundary in Delano—the railroad tracks that split the town in two.

The serious teenager with the disarming smile lived two blocks west of the tracks, where the sidewalks stopped and the run-down housing started, and immigration agents knocked on doors in the middle of the night. Eliseo lived with his mother, two sisters, brother-in-law, niece and nephew at 418 Fremont Street, three generations in a two-bedroom frame house with a bathroom and shower out back. Behind the house on the alley they used as a shortcut to the candy store and People's Bar, where Eliseo learned to play pool. A mile the other direction was Fremont Elementary School, where Eliseo had landed in fourth grade, peaking only Spanish after two years on the streets of Tijuana. His intelligence and curiosity propelled him to success even in a school that
saw little value in educating Mexicans. He graduated from eighth grade with honors, then left school after guidance counselors explained that the Mexican students about to enter high school should all take shop classes.

The career options in Delano for a Mexican kid were simple: You could be a farmworker, or a foreman.

At age nineteen, Eliseo had been working in the fields full time for four years, summers and weekends for five years before that. He was skilled at trimming clusters of grapes, though so clumsy at spotting tomatoes when they were ready to pick (still green with just a hint of red) that people often thought him color-blind. He enjoyed the oranges best. He could find a shady, secluded perch inside a tree, where he could pick and eat at his own pace. He hated digging out potatoes, the way the rocks and roots and parched earth raked your fingertips. On those days he would wake up hoping for rain.

In the summer of 1965 rumblings of unrest broke the monotony of another season in the Delano fields. In the Coachella Valley vineyards almost three hundred miles to the southeast, Filipino farmworkers went on strike, Eliseo’s mother, Guadalupe, followed the strike with keen interest. She had been orphaned young, her parents killed in the Mexican Revolution, and she grew up with a passion for social justice. The Medinas talked about how the Filipinos were better organized than the Mexicans, and they wondered if the strike would succeed.

Table grapes ripen first in the Coachella desert, kicking off the California harvest. Those early spring grapes were a prized commodity, shipped across the country to consumers who paid top dollar for the first Thompson seedless of the year. The Coachella growers had a short season and couldn’t risk a lengthy strike. So they met the demands from the small Filipino workers’ union and upped wages to $1.40 an hour from $1.25. By August the Filipino workers had migrated north with the harvest, expecting the same wages for the same work in the San Joaquin Valley. But the Delano grape growers weren’t paying.

Rumors of an impending strike spread, expectation crackling in the dry, hot valley air. Though they toiled side by side in the vineyards, the Mexican and Filipino workers did not mix. Mexicans picked the grapes and Filipinos packed them, a job growers thought too difficult for Mexicans.

On the morning of September 8, the Mexicans found out when they showed up for work that the Filipinos had refused to leave their camps. Guadalupe Medina and her daughters burst in the house that afternoon with the announcement that jolted Eliseo away from I Love Lucy, his favorite television show: The strike had arrived in Delano.

Eliseo hopped out on crutches the next day to look at a picket line thrown up by the Filipino union. A few days later he watched a couple hundred Mexicans and white supporters march down Eleventh Avenue, waving red flags with a stylized black eagle and inviting workers to a Thursday night meeting. They urged bystanders to join their group, the National Farm Workers Association, which they did not even call a union yet for fear of scaring workers.

Eliseo was intrigued. He had always loved to read; as a child he had read cereal boxes when there was nothing else around. Lately he had become a faithful reader of El Malcriado, the ten-cent newspaper the Farm Workers Association published in Spanish and English. The name meant “the unruly child,” and the paper championed farmworkers, shamed labor contractors, and lampooned growers with biting cartoons and spirited satire. Eliseo followed with particular satisfaction the saga of Jimmy Hronis, a notorious labor contractor caught cheating sugar beet workers after El Malcriado revealed he had paid them only fifty cents an hour. The newspaper stories triggered a state investigation, a rare case of a powerful Anglo contractor forced to answer for mistreatment.

That power impressed Eliseo, his curiosity tempered by trepidation. He believed in taking important risks, but not unnecessary ones. (Though his caution sometimes backfired: He had broken his leg when a friend who was driving drunk refused to relinquish the wheel. Eliseo insisted on getting out to walk. His friend drove off, then looped back to give Eliseo a ride but accidentally sent him flying over the hood.)

That Thursday night, Eliseo went alone to the meeting in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. He squeezed into the back of the large hall next door to the sanctuary—even the second-story balcony in back was overflowing. The workers came because they had been cheated out of wages more times than they could count. They had worked in fields with no drinking water or bathrooms. They had been injured on the job, sprayed with pesticides, fired for being too slow, too old, or too outspoken. They were excluded from unemployment insurance and overtime, denied holidays, vacations, and health insurance. They endured the most backbreaking labor—with none of the basic protections and rights afforded almost all other workers in America.

A short, unimposing man rose to address the crowd. Eliseo had only read about Cesar Chavez. The teenager was disappointed by the leader's
unimpressive appearance. Then the soft-spoken thirty-eight-year-old began to speak. He talked about the harshness of the fields. His own family had been driven off their Arizona farm during the Depression. He spent his childhood in and out of dozens of schools and fields, sleeping in tents, cars, and hovels. He spoke with anger about how Mexicans were treated. He told the workers things could be different if they fought together.

Chavez had started his union in Delano because he had family there. He also chose Delano because grapevines, unlike vegetables, stay in the ground all year, a permanent backdrop for strikes and protests. Chavez was just as calculating in his choice of dates for this historic meeting. September 16, Mexican Independence Day. He used the holiday to drive home his revolutionary message. Think of the parallels to Mexican Independence, he told the workers in the church. They too struggled to overthrow oppressive rulers. The Mexican workers must decide, he said, whether to join the strike started by the Filipinos.

"Huelga, huelga, huelga," the crowd chanted, the Spanish word for strike, soon to be emblazoned on picket signs and seared in the collective memory of Delano. The meeting ended with traditional Mexican tributes to fire up the crowd. The leader called out a viva—"long live"—and the crowd chanted the slogan back. Viva la huelga. Viva Mexico. And viva Cesar Chavez.

Eliseo went home caught up in the fervor, enticed by the hope. He had spent too many Sundays camped outside the office of a labor contractor, wasting his one day off to collect his wages. He had seen his mother and sisters work without a single bathroom in the fields, forced to seek a shred of privacy by shielding one another. He had watched his father be fired because he could no longer keep up with the younger men in the fields.

The shy teenager from Zacatecas with a shock of dark hair tended to deliberate carefully before acting. Once he made a decision, Eliseo embraced the path with focused enthusiasm and a big, contagious grin. He went home after the meeting at the church and cracked open his piggy bank. He didn't know what a contract was, but he counted out ten dollars and fifty cents. The next day, he drove to the headquarters at 102 Albany Street, handed three months dues to Helen Chavez, and joined her husband's union.

Chris

The same day, Cesar Chavez placed a call to a young Presbyterian minister in Los Angeles. On the eve of a strike he was unprepared to wage, Chavez could count on only a few people for help. Chris Hartmire topped the list.

From a fifth-floor office on Olympic Boulevard, Chris ran the California Migrant Ministry, a largely ignored stepchild of the Council of Churches. For decades, the small Protestant ministry had offered spiritual counseling to farmworkers and toys to their children, visiting bleak migrant camps in a fleet of station wagons named "the Harvesters." Quietly, Chris had been engineering a radical shift in the ministry's approach. The catalyst for that change was the man now calling from Delano for help.

Cesar Chavez had been one of the first people Chris sought out in 1961, when the young pastor moved reluctantly to California. Chris had loved his job in New York, running a youth ministry in East Harlem. But when his wife was mugged in the elevator of their apartment building, their two-year-old in her arms, he knew they had to move. The offer to run the California Migrant Ministry seemed serendipitous, yet unappealing. Chris dreaded the tedium of an administrative job.

He made lists, in his neat script. "California: Assets." "California: Liabilities." Even after he accepted the job, his doubts persisted. "Never before have I felt so helpless and so small," he wrote church officials, explaining apologetically that he could not promise to stay more than two years. To himself he wrote: "Perhaps God arranged the pressure of events knowing that I was too timid to say yes under other circumstances. Perhaps this is His will for me at this time in history."

He drove cross-country with his wife, Jane, his best friend since seventh grade, better known by her nickname, Pudge. The Hartmires settled in the Los Angeles County suburb of Culver City. They came to appreciate a backyard for the kids and even, over time, to root for the Dodgers. The day Cesar Chavez outlined his vision of community organizing over lunch in an East Los Angeles café, Chris began to think his destiny was in California after all. He was captivated by the idea of a ministry that helped poor people organize themselves.

Chavez sketched out the work he did as director of the Community Service Organization (CSO), a grassroots group that organized citizenship classes, voter registration drives, and lobbying campaigns in poor Mexican neighborhoods across California. Chris met Fred Ross, the lanky founder of CSO, who had discovered Chavez and taught him how to organize. Then Chavez and Ross installed Chris in a dilapidated roominghouse in Stockton for a month, so the young minister could see for
himself how CSO taught Mexican Americans to take on the powerful institutions that denied them education, justice, and civil rights.

Even as Chris embraced the CSO model, Chavez was growing frustrated by its limitations. The CSO board refused to organize farmworkers. The CSO members, once empowered, increasingly voiced middle-class aspirations, more concerned with their own advancement than with helping the poor. Their attitude infuriated Chavez. Poor people were what he cared about, and farmworkers were the poor whom Chavez knew best. Chris was in the audience at the CSO convention in March 1962 when Chavez rose to announce his resignation. Chris couldn’t understand why people didn’t beg the leader to stay.

Chavez struck off on his own and founded the National Farm Workers Association. The Migrant Ministry loaned him a mimeograph machine. Chris’s aides drove Chavez to key appointments and handed him their credit cards when his money ran out. The Migrant Ministry hosted the Chavez family at the group’s bimonthly retreats. Gradually, Chris began to assign his staff to work as organizers. He rejected the ministry’s historic milk-and-cookies approach as “dishonest attempts to salve conscience while hanging onto an unjust social system which benefits ‘our kind of people’ at the expense of the poor.”

From his mother, Wayne C. Hartmire Jr. had learned to embrace the underdog. From his father, he had learned to love baseball. Chris grew up in a working-class family in a Philadelphia suburb, the middle child of an insecure mother and an emotionally absent father. Chris was short, as undistinguished at sports as he was outstanding at academics. He won a scholarship to Princeton and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in engineering, but decided science offered little opportunity to help others. After three years as a navy engineer, he entered the seminary. When he began to work with Chavez, Chris felt he had finally found his calling.

Chris found Chavez an irresistible force, a presence that belied his slight stature. Chavez was dark-complexioned with faintly Mexican Indian features, his dark hair parted on the left, slicked back or occasionally falling over his penetrating, perpetually tired eyes. He used those eyes when he wanted something, looking right at you, but otherwise he glanced down a lot. Sometimes a brief smile flashed across his face, or a mischievous grin. He dressed in work clothes, donning a shirt with a Nehru collar or embroidery for special occasions, never a tie. His speech, like his appearance, was unremarkable; his profound thoughts delivered in a flat voice, with run-on sentences often punctuated by “you know.” He was at his best in small groups, a good listener who left his audience convinced that their words mattered—even as he listened intently to make sure his points had gotten through.

Chris had an earnest, boyish innocence that made the minister seem much younger than his thirty-three years. Chavez needed that youthful sincerity. The Migrant Ministry had resources. And Chavez knew Chris would never say no. He was fast becoming a disciple, ready to risk it all for a cause he believed in. So the day after the crowd roared its approval in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Chavez summoned Chris to Delano to help turn the shouts of “huelga” into action.

That Friday, Chris drove 140 miles north from Los Angeles, over the Tejon Pass and down to the lush floor of the San Joaquin Valley, nothing but farmland on all sides. In Delano he mediated a meeting on Sunday between the Mexicans and the Filipinos at the Stardust Motel. The Farm Workers Association agreed to join the strike on Monday morning.

Chavez had been building his union slowly for three years. He had less than one hundred dollars in the treasury, a small credit union managed by his wife, and a death benefit program for the handful of members who paid $3 a month in dues. He didn’t believe his tiny union was ready for a strike. He had always said a union should strike only after organizing workers. But like many decisions that would follow, this one was made for him.

Chris helped Chavez and the Filipino union forge a tentative alliance and pledged support from the ministry: cash for gas and phones, food and rent money for strikers, and clergy to walk picket lines. Chris knew his early support earned him a position of trust. So with no sense of the consequences, no agonizing or making lists, almost overnight Chris turned the Protestant ministry into an adjunct of Cesar Chavez’s union.

Eliseo

“Este hogar es católico, no aceptamos propaganda protestante ni de otras sectas,” read the sign on Eliseo’s front door, a common warning on Delano’s west side. This is a Catholic home, we don’t accept propaganda from Protestants or other sects. Eliseo was not sure what to expect from Protestants and uncertain he had ever actually met one. Certainly not a Communist or a Jew. Wide-eyed, he watched in the fall of 1965 as they flocked to Delano—college dropouts, families, nuns, Communists, Protestants, Jews, long-haired guys, and Berkeley girls.

Help poured in as soon as the strike began, transforming the anonymous
farming town of twelve thousand people into the new cause célèbre. White civil rights activists casting about for another cause after the Mississippi Summer were drawn to the farmworkers’ struggle. Delano was only 250 miles from the University of California at Berkeley, where Jerry Rubin organized teach-ins against the Vietnam War and students burned their draft cards. Each Friday after the strike began, Delano’s population swelled with weekend volunteers from the Bay Area and food caravans that delivered provisions to the communal strike kitchen.

The only white people Eliseo had known before the strike were growers and teachers. Now the west side of Delano filled with more white people than he had ever seen. They lived among the Mexicans on the wrong side of the tracks and at night they drank beer and played pool at People’s Bar, around the corner from Eliseo’s home.

As alien as the out-of-towners were to Eliseo, the civil protests that drew them to Delano were even more foreign. And equally alluring. A few weeks into the strike, the teenager heard the union was paying people to picket. He went to inquire with his friend. The two walked uncertainly into Filipino Hall, a community center that served as strike headquarters. Follow me, an old man said, grabbing some of the big, round strike signs that looked like giant lollipops. They jumped into his car, and he deftly navigated through the acres of vines, taking them to the field of a company where workers were breaking the strike. Police cars followed close behind. Eliseo was sure he would be arrested, maybe even deported. His mother had waited almost two years in Tijuana until she could bring her children across the border legally. The memory of swearing to uphold the laws when he entered the country was still vivid.

The old man got out and stood beside a field, shouting at the workers in the vineyard and urging them to honor the strike. Some heeded the message and walked off the job. The police just observed. Eliseo’s fear dissolved into relief, then awe. In his world, there was only one way to protest working conditions: quit. The seductive power of this public challenge quickly overcame his fright. After that, Eliseo went out on the picket lines every day, even though the rumored payments never materialized.

Within weeks he became a picket captain. In the disorganized and understaffed union, eagerness quickly translated into greater responsibility. Each morning, Eliseo assembled his crew and received his assignment. The union called strikes at more than two dozen ranches spread over several hundred square miles. To select strategic locations to picket, volunteers with two-way radios drove around the fields each morning before dawn. They trailed crews to figure out where strikebreakers were working and radioed the information back to headquarters so coordinators could dispatch picket crews. Police followed the picketers, took pictures, and opened files. Just a few weeks into the strike the FBI opened a probe into “Communist Infiltration of the National Farm Workers Association.”

Eliseo led his crew each morning in a caravan of cars to the designated field. They stood in the road at the edge of a vineyard, about twenty strong, and exhorted workers to join the strike. Sometimes they used megaphones; usually they just shouted from the road or the tops of cars. Often the supervisor moved a crew out of earshot. That was a partial victory—vines that needed picking were left untouched, and ripe grapes quickly rot. Sometimes workers dropped their tools and walked out of the fields. They were welcomed with cheers.

As hard as Eliseo was fighting to coax workers out of the vineyards, Martin Zaninovich was fighting to keep them in. Zaninovich had grown up on the vineyard he now ran. He belonged to the second generation of one of the many interlocking Slav families that had settled in Delano in the 1930s. Grape growers from the island of Hvar off the coast of Croatia, they had picked Delano because the soil and climate nurtured the same grapes they had farmed back home. The Slavs owned the bulk of the seventy vineyards around Delano, all but two family-owned. Martin Zaninovich’s Jasmine Vineyards was a few hundred feet down the road from another Slav ranch, Dan Tudor and Sons, where Eliseo had picked grapes before he broke his leg. The Monday when the Mexicans joined the strike was the first time Zaninovich saw the red flag with the black eagle, alongside the round sign that said “Huelga.” He had no idea what the word meant.

Zaninovich's Delano was the peaceful “United Nations of the Valley” featured in Chamber of Commerce literature: Slav, Italian, and Armenian growers, an Asian-American school board president, a Mexican American police chief, and a stable workforce of comparatively well-paid farmworkers. Suddenly, hippies marched down Main Street. Students, religious liberals, and labor organizers lectured those who made their living off the land. Zaninovich saw them as ignorant, spoiled children of the middle class on a crusade to upend the economic and social order. They yelled threats and obscenities at workers who did not walk out on strike, workers whose lives the outsiders could not possibly comprehend.

The Delano growers had to recruit additional workers from Mexico to replace the strikers. But most of the workers stayed in the fields, out of
either necessity or fear. Many who had walked out soon returned to work. Forced to choose between the cause and the job, workers overwhelmingly picked the latter. After a few weeks Eliseo was one of the only farmworkers still on the picket lines. One day Eliseo even ran into his friend who had started picketing with him, working in a field. Astonished, Eliseo ran over to talk, but the police blocked the entrance to the vineyard, and his friend disappeared.

Eventually Eliseo, too, needed a paying job. He waited till the grape harvest ended and the fields were almost empty, to lessen the impact of his departure. Then he took a job at a nursery, away from the strike. The work seemed even more tedious than before. The highlight of his week was always the Friday night union meeting, timed so that weekend visitors could take part. Filipino Hall filled with the smells of fish soup and adobo, the warm camaraderie of shared struggle, and the spirited voices of all ages, joined in traditional songs of protest. Speakers told jokes to punctuate reports about the picket lines, food bank, garage, and health clinic. Chavez acknowledged setbacks, but always looked ahead to the next success. He understood the importance of giving people victories to hold on to. The Teatro Campesino drew laughter with improvised skits that mocked growers and esquirlones, scabs. Eliseo and his mother were among the contingent of faithful Delano supporters, but the audience, like the picket lines, had more students and volunteers than farm workers.

The Reverend Jim Drake often opened the meetings with a prayer and sometimes presided when Chavez was away. Drake worked for the Migrant Ministry, but his office was a desk built over a toilet in a bathroom of 102 Albany Street. A few months into the strike, a nurse from the Bay Area walked into the union headquarters for a weekend visit. Drake looked up and asked if she could type. Marion Moses nodded. He handed her a form letter to type and address to twenty-five supporters. Moses soon returned to Delano to volunteer for a week. She paid the fifty dollars’ rent on her San Francisco apartment for two more months but never went back. The first in her family to go past high school, Moses put her plan for premed studies on hold. She worked in a makeshift health clinic in a bedroom and slept on the floor of a nearby house for months before a bed opened up.

Doug Adair, a liberal Republican graduate student, had ended up in Delano because of a political argument with Moses on the Berkeley campus when she was recruiting volunteers. She had challenged him to see how farmworkers lived. The twenty-two-year-old Adair ended up pick-
supporters. When a farmworker began to read Jack London's "Definition of a Strikebreaker" out loud on a picket line, a deputy sheriff warned that voicing such seditious sentiments would lead to arrest. The Reverend David Havens of the Migrant Ministry took up the challenge. Havens was arrested minutes after he recited the withering passage that begins: "After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad and the vampire, he had some awful substance left with which he made a Strikebreaker."

Two days later Chris rounded up nine ministers to join a Demonstration of Christian Concern as they defied the latest police edict: shouting "huelga" was disturbing the peace. At 10:53 a.m., the sheriff's deputy turned on his tape recorder, and forty-four protesters chanted huelga with all their might. "These workers, we believe, have the right to organize a union just as other Americans," Chris declared. Each time the sheriffs used their radios to communicate, the demonstrators shouted louder to drown out the police. While television cameras whirred, all forty-four were charged with unlawful assembly and hauled off to jail.9 Chavez timed the protest to coincide with a speech he delivered at Berkeley. He announced the arrests, and students handed over thousands of dollars in lunch money to help.

Even a legal system stacked in favor of the growers was vindicating the farmworkers. "The court finds that there was no 'clear and present danger' involved in the present situation. No persons were about to riot nor was any form of civil disorder incipient," wrote the judge who dismissed charges against the Reverend Havens. "While the court does not think that the passage read from Jack London was in good taste under the circumstances, nonetheless the court must hold that no violation has occurred."10 The ensuing national attention spurred more donations, sympathetic coverage, and weekly visits from clergy. ("With collars," Chris stressed.) They walked the picket lines "as a reminder," Chris wrote, "to police, grower security guards, and growers that the rest of the world was watching."11

The more credibility Chris lent the movement, the more he became a target. Growers formed the bulwark of the local churches, and the backlash against Chris was swift and fierce. The Delano Ministerial Association denounced the Migrant Ministry's tactics as unethical. Protestant churches in the valley and the Episcopal diocese passed resolutions condemning the Migrant Ministry. Churches canceled contributions and urged the California Council of Churches to suspend funding for its errant offspring. The Council of California Growers devoted its October 4, 1965, newsletter to an attack on the Migrant Ministry for encouraging "class conflict and ferment." Outraged growers pointed out that the meddling clergy were not even Catholic.12

Hundreds turned out to castigate Chris at church meetings. When he and Chavez arrived at the Visalia Methodist Church to debate the head of the Farm Bureau, the church had already installed loudspeakers on the lawn to accommodate an overflow crowd—growers, their families, their friends, and the business people who depended on them. They're more angry at you than me, Chavez told Chris as they waded through the hostile audience.13

Chris scrambled to justify his own actions. "Christians should be willing to say by word and deed: 'The workers are important people who should be dealt with as equals.' That is what the Migrant Ministry and other churchmen are trying to say by their presence in Delano," Chris wrote. "So long as growers refuse to recognize independently organized workers then Christians must continue to help the workers be strong and press their employers to bargain."14

Martina Zaninovich was emerging as a leader of the Delano growers, though his vineyard was far from the largest. Growing up, he had one lesson drummed into him: the most important thing, no matter what, was to keep your workers in the field. Tend the vines and harvest the crop. Now he took pride in his ability to keep the vineyard operating despite the unrest. He and the other growers in the valley were harvesting the largest crop in history. Most of his regular workers had stayed. He had worried whether Mexicans would be able to replace the Filipinos as packers, but that turned out not to be a problem.

"There is no strike in Delano," Zaninovich kept telling people. But even if he was winning what he always referred to as "the so-called strike," he was losing the public relations war. Zaninovich turned his wrath on Chris, infuriated as the minister became the public face of religious leadership. "Religious hierarchies have elected to abdicate their positions as representatives of all churches by entering into the field as union organizers," Zaninovich fumed.15

In the spring of 1966, the strike passed the half-year mark as a new season began in the Delano vineyards. More strikers returned to work, and national attention faded. Then came the march to Sacramento. A devout Catholic, lacking support from his own church, Chavez set off during Lent on a religious march of penance, a twenty-five-day pilgrimage from Delano north to the state capital. "The farm workers feel that this is a
religious pilgrimage borne out of their cultural tradition, their suffering and their need to express their God-given worth," Chris wrote, urging supporters to join the march on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. "It is of crucial importance that the churches join them in this effort."

Steeped in Mexican traditions, the _peregrinación_ resonated with workers in the dozens of small farming communities along the spine of the San Joaquin Valley. They lined the roads to watch, they offered the marchers food and drink, they cheered as Chavez and a small group slowly, sometimes painfully, walked the three-hundred-mile route. Some days the march stretched out for a mile, workers who had never dreamed of such militant action silhouetted against the fields in the relentless sun, their flags casting shadows as they walked in ones and twos along Highway 99. They sang "Nosotros Venceremos" and shouted "Viva la huelga." Always at the front of the procession was the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most sacred cultural symbol for Mexicans. Catholic churches along the route had no choice but to open their doors to the penitents.

Chris was on the march the day a lawyer best known for his mobster clients tracked down Chavez. Sidney Korshak said he was authorized to negotiate a contract on behalf of Schenley, a large liquor company whose wine grape vineyard had been the union's most recent target. The fields were one small piece of Schenley's empire; the company would rather negotiate than risk bad publicity that could hurt its sales. Chris and Chavez broke off from the march and drove to Los Angeles to meet Korshak at his Beverly Hills mansion. Over cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, they discussed the terms of the recognition agreement. Jubilant, Chris drove Chavez back to northern California to join the end of the march.

Thousands rallied outside the capitol on Easter and cheered the Schenley victory. Chris rose to address the crowd. He thanked Chavez and those around him: "They have taught us new things about courage and honesty and hope. Most of all they have helped many of us see the world as it really is, in place of the pleasant world we imagine for our comfort's sake." He spoke of Jesus, resurrection, and the march as a beginning of new hope. Then the Protestant minister concluded with a quote from an atheist—Nobel Prize-winning author Albert Camus: "What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally."
CHAPTER 2
Showdown at DiGiorgio
June 1966

Eliseo

In the late spring of 1966, Eliseo walked into the union office looking for a job. He walked out with a calling.

Eliseo wanted to work picking wine grapes under the union's new contract at Schenley Vineyards. He persuaded two friends at the nursery to quit and figured they would pick up the fourth they needed to form a team. Then he went to see Dolores Huerta at the union headquarters. Eliseo had met her when he was a picket captain. He thought he could parlay the connection with a top union leader into a job at Schenley. Sure, she told him, but since the harvest hasn't started, help us out first for a month on the strike. So Eliseo signed on for the union's battle against the DiGiorgio Corporation, the largest grower in the Delano area. As Eliseo was leaving the union office, Chavez walked in. Huerta told him she had enlisted a new organizer, and the two men shook hands.

Eliseo joined a fight in progress on two fronts. Chavez was trying to leverage political and public pressure to force a union election among table grape workers at DiGiorgio, an agricultural conglomerate whose holdings included several large vineyards. At the same time Chavez faced a new adversary vying to represent farmworkers: the Teamsters.

The Teamsters were a corrupt, discredited union that had been thrown out of the AFL-CIO. That stigma only endeared them to the growers, who already had Teamster contracts in packing sheds and trucking operations. To the DiGiorgios, the accommodating Teamsters presented an attractive alternative to Chavez's militant movement. An alliance with the Teamsters would offer a union label with little sacrifice. So DiGiorgio invited the Teamsters to woo the workers in the fields, confident the rival union would not challenge management.

To spearhead the two-pronged struggle against DiGiorgio and the Teamsters, Chavez recruited his own mentor, Fred Ross, the man who had trained Chavez at the Community Service Organization, returned to help his protégé in a fight both men thought would make or break the young union. Ross became Eliseo's teacher.

The union's message resonated with DiGiorgio workers, just as it had for Eliseo when he first heard Chavez speak. But the bare-bones union faced significant hurdles. Just finding DiGiorgio workers presented the first challenge. Teamsters were ushered in to speak with workers on company time; Farm Workers Association organizers were run out of the vineyards and camps. The union scattered between thirty and two hundred pickets around the 4,400-acre DiGiorgio ranch, hoping to catch workers at 206 entrances along an eleven-mile boundary. Company trucks barred by the
strike lines, nipped picketers on the ankles, and sprayed them with sulfur dust.¹

Ross compensated for the difficulties by imposing a discipline that left nothing to chance. Eliseo learned to follow Ross’s exacting methods. He created an index card for every DiGiorgio worker who was eligible to vote. Each morning, organizers collected cards for the workers they were assigned to see. They tracked down their workers and made notations on the card. Each night, Ross sorted the cards into three piles before they were locked away: yes votes, no votes, and maybe. Early morning, midday, and evening, Ross met with Eliseo and the other rookie organizers. He grilled them about every interaction, what they said, the reception, the response. He drilled lessons into them. Count with your mind, not your heart, he would say.

Eliseo learned from his own interrogation, but he also listened closely to the experiences of others. He fine-tuned the message that Ross called the rap, the speech Eliseo used to sell the union and to counter blandishments from Teamsters and threats from the company foremen. Eliseo talked about higher wages, but also about dignity and respect, about the right to speak up. But you’re Mexican, he would say to a worker—how can you support the Teamsters? You must be with us. We have to stick together, that’s the way we will win. He talked about his own experiences in the fields. He emphasized results, the point that had sold him on the union. Look at the Schenley contract, where wages went up from $1.40 to $1.75, and workers received medical and life insurance and paid vacation. Look at Jimmy Hronis, the corrupt labor contractor whose case had first piqued Eliseo’s interest when he read El Malcriado. A year after the union forced an investigation, a judge had ordered Hronis to pay back wages to the beet workers he had cheated. That, Eliseo told the DiGiorgio workers, is what the union means.

**Chris**

Chris plunged into the intrigue of the DiGiorgio campaign, working as an organizer, masquerading as a minister.

His first mission was to crusade against the very thing the union wanted: an election. DiGiorgio unilaterally scheduled an election and decreed that only current employees could vote—excluding workers who had walked out on strike. With the contest rigged against him, Chavez obtained a court order to remove the union’s name from the ballot, leaving only the Teamsters. He urged workers to boycott the election in protest. On election day Chris led a group of observers from the Migrant Ministry, who watched DiGiorgio supervisors put crews on company buses, deliver them to the polling place, and pressure them to vote. Chris joined a line of protesters outside the small railroad depot adjacent to the DiGiorgio ranch. The picketers shouted as each bus rolled by, urging workers not to vote.

Chris knew one driver very well. He yelled and shook his fist when Joe Serda drove his workers to the polls. But the minister was confident they would not vote. Serda was a submarine—a loyal foreman by day, a union spy at night. He had first learned about the union when his daughter came home with bruises on her ankles, where the DiGiorgio trucks hit her while she was on the picket line. Serda went to Chavez and offered to help; Chavez told the foreman to stay right where he was. Chris often attended the late-night meetings at the union office where Serda filed his daily reports. He relayed any intelligence he could garner. He described Teamsters pulling up in Cadillacs and offering free food. He collected garbage from wastebaskets in the company office, torn-up notes that the union team spread out on a table and pieced back together, gleaning information that helped them preempt DiGiorgio’s strategic moves. When he drove his crew back from the polls, Serda watched workers embrace, tears in their eyes. They had challenged the company for the first time, by the simple act of refusing to vote.²

Between the submarines, the loyal Chavistas, and the threats from picketers, almost half the 732 DiGiorgio workers driven to the polls refused to vote. Within three days, Chris had turned the testimony of the clergy witnesses into a formal protest to the governor. Their report detailed the dishonest election: No neutral party monitored the vote. Nonfarmworkers cast ballots. Supervisors pressured workers to vote for the Teamsters. The next day Governor Edmund G. Brown met with Chris, Chavez, and a group of farmworkers. Brown agreed to appoint an arbitrator to investigate.

The following day Chavez ratcheted up the pressure. He pulled workers out on strike at a second vineyard owned by DiGiorgio, near San Diego. He summoned Chris and told him to bring as many clergy as possible. Chris could round up only one priest on such short notice, so the three met just outside the DiGiorgio property. Chavez planned to force a confrontation by accompanying strikers in to the labor camp to retrieve their possessions. Chris did not relish the impending showdown. But he
had no choice; he could not back down and maintain his self-respect—or the respect he craved from Chavez.

"When I arrived on the scene, the company had a barricade of trucks, security guards and dogs on the roadway between the camp and the entrance to the property," Chris wrote to church leaders a few days later. "Father Saldini and I offered to go with Cesar and the workers in order to help affirm their basic rights. The workers responded with enthusiasm. For most of them it was to be an entirely new and frightening experience. Our presence was in fact an important source of moral strength."

The group drove in around eight at night. A quarter-mile inside the Borrego Springs ranch, DiGiorgio supervisors made a citizens' arrest. For three hours, Chris sat captive with the others in a pickup truck the company used to transport farmworkers around the fields. Then sheriffs arrived. The trespassers were strip-searched, chained together in groups of three, and placed in police cars. When the eleven men arrived at the San Diego county jail at thirty a.m., they were strip-searched again. By four a.m. they had been booked on two charges of trespassing and placed in cells. Six hours later they posted bail and headed back to the strike.

Chris spread the word about the demeaning strip searches, triggered by the most minor offense. The saga demonstrated yet again the power of the growers—in collaboration with police.

A few weeks later Chris stood trial in a local courtroom, a legal confrontation that mirrored the social upheaval. The facts of the minor trespass incident were not in dispute. Workers testified they had been scared of the armed guards and dogs and had asked the union leaders to accompany them. When Chris took the stand, the judge admonished the witness in a tone so hostile that the defense moved for a mistrial. Prosecutors painted Chris and Chavez as radical communists manipulating the workers. The union lawyer objected to the prosecutor's use of the phrase "Karl Marx tactics" (overruled) and "henchmen" (sustained). The jury took less than two hours to acquit the workers and convict Chris, Chavez, and the priest. Each was fined $276 and placed on probation for two years.

Chris returned to Los Angeles and reverted to his more traditional roles. He resumed his daily appeals. He solicited food for the Delano strikers. He asked each church supporter to contribute fifteen dollars—so the children of strikers could return to school with new shoes. And Chris asked for volunteer drivers to transport workers to the polls on August 30. The governor had ordered a new election.

The union had won the right to a fair election; now Chavez had to win at the polls. Fred Ross stepped up his drills, and the pressure to deliver weighed heavily on Eliseo.

The election rules favored the union—as long as organizers could turn out their voters. Anyone who had been on the DiGiorgio payroll when the strike began almost a year earlier was eligible to vote, as was anyone who had worked at least fourteen days before the election. DiGiorgio had fired workers almost as fast as the union could win them over, homing in on any outspoken Chavista. So many of the union's sure votes no longer worked at the ranch.

Strikers had scattered as far away as Mexico. Organizers labored to track them down. The union sent a bus to Texas and guaranteed round-trip transportation, food, and lodging in Delano. Chris identified "dragnet areas" and asked contacts in Texas, California, and Oregon to go door to door in farmworker areas asking the following questions: did they work for DiGiorgio, if so for how long; where, at what job; what was their Social Security number, and would they come back to vote. "If they are afraid, then they should know that we will get police protection as needed."

On the ground in Delano, Eliseo concentrated on making the case. He handed out the "Mosquito Zumbador," the union's bilingual flyer where the cartoon character Mosquito buzzed about, spreading the news of the day. Eliseo carried summaries of the Schenley contract to show workers how favorable the terms were compared with recent Teamster pacts. He explained to workers what the election ballot looked like.

As the vote approached, the Mexican and Filipino unions merged under the auspices of the AFL-CIO. Bill Kircher, the AFL-CIO's director of organizing, had been one of the union's staunchest allies, in and out of Delano almost since the beginning. He explained the merger to workers at meetings, took votes, and posted the tallies on a blackboard he carried around. At the Friday night meeting on August 19, 1966, Kircher proposed a name for the new union—the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, or UFWOC (an acronym the younger workers found amusing). The members approved, 199 to 257. Eliseo questioned Kircher: Who are the organizers going to be? You are, Kircher said: farmworkers.

Two days later, Eliseo and another organizer drove through the DiGiorgio camps, a megaphone mounted on top of their car, inviting
workers to a union barbecue a week later to celebrate the birth of UFWOC. They had broadcast announcements through the main camp and were just leaving the women's camp, Eliseo at the wheel and his partner on the microphone, when the Teamsters pulled in. They surrounded Eliseo's car. First they heckled; then they reached in and punched. His friend tried to fend them off with the microphone while Eliseo stepped on the gas. He escaped with a badly bruised face and a swollen lip that needed several stitches. The union used the attack in its campaign literature. "Violence is a 'way of life' with the Teamsters! Now it has started in Delano," read the union leaflet. "Sunday is the Lord's day. It is a day of rest and peace for most people . . . but not for the Teamster organizers . . . . They smashed Eliseo in the face and cut his lower lip."

Eliseo celebrated at the barbecue by drinking beer—out of one side of his mouth.

Two days later a brigade of cars waited before dawn to take workers to cast votes in the first secret-ballot election held for American farmworkers. Volunteers from as far away as San Francisco and Los Angeles had responded to pleas from Chris to provide the armada that Fred Ross requested. Ross insisted that volunteers pick up every pro-union voter and drive them to the polls. The lesson Eliseo learned: Don't take anything for granted, or leave anything to chance. After the polls closed, the ballots were driven to San Francisco, where the count was to be supervised by the American Arbitration Association. Each side sent an observer to accompany the ballots; Joe Serda the submarine had surfaced and stood guard for the union. He took dexedrine to stay vigilant on the all-night trip up north.

In Delano, the organizers and workers gathered in Filipino Hall the next morning to await word. Eliseo was full of doubts. He thought about...
what he had done, what he hadn't done, what he might have done. A victory would be historic; a loss would mean they had let Chavez down. Eliseo looked at the union leader from afar with reverence bordering on hero worship. Eliseo was crestfallen when he saw Chavez drinking at a strategy session one night—breaking his own rules. But the transgression only momentarily tarnished the image.

On the morning of August 31, Filipino Hall was silent when the call from San Francisco finally came. Chavez stood in front of a microphone mounted on a stand almost as tall as he. A cigarette in his right hand, he read numbers off a small piece of paper in his left hand. He announced the results of the green ballots, from the small group of workers in the packing shed: Teamsters, 94; UFWOC, 43. And then the white ballots, the vote from the fields. Teamsters, 328. He paused dramatically. Eliseo's heart fell. UFWOC, 528. There was silence for a moment; then the crowd erupted. They lifted Chavez up and carried him around the room. People laughed, cried, hugged. Only twelve workers had voted for no union.

Years later, Chavez would say he had thought his union lacked sufficient credibility to survive had it lost the vote. Eliseo would say he never again experienced the pure joy of that moment of victory. For both men, the DiGiorgio election was proof that the power they talked about could actually produce results.