

Walking with Grandfather

My grandfather understood English but spoke only Spanish. I understood Spanish but spoke only English. We walked together and never spoke a word. It was my first experience with a comfortable silence.

BY WINTER PROSAPIO

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My grandfather and I walked in silence together down the road, the only sounds coming from our feet. The earth was cracked and curling like a three-day-old sunburn that peels back across your nose and shoulders to reveal a fresh and tender layer of self.

My stained and thin tennies broke off the tips of each curl. His heavy farm boots turned the waves of dry earth into a fine powder. Our feet ate the earth, leaving a trail of crumbs in our wake.

Sometimes I'd stop and pick up a thin curl from the road as we walked, trying to save its gentle sweep from the ravages of our feet, the wind, the passing car. But my hands were too hungry, too impatient with what the sun and earth had worked in delicate harmony to shape into a shallow, curving clay bowl. Bit by bit, it would crumble apart in a dusty rain.

He'd wait for me, silently, as I gathered another curl to carry down the road, leaving behind a single, flat square of hard-packed earth. On his left were the thin trees he had planted in neat rows, their nursery tags waving in the dry, hot wind. On his right were the ankle-high cotton plants that on other farmers' fields he as a young man would have picked. Now he did the hiring—huge tractors would come in a few months to pull the soft cotton free of the long rows of scratchy plants.

My grandfather understood English but spoke only Spanish. I understood Spanish but spoke only English. During our walks we were both free of the chatter of the house, the laughter, the intense energy of our family. We walked together and never spoke a word. It was my first experience with a comfortable silence. Every other silence I'd known as a child was uneasy and off-balance, usually filled quickly with a question, an apology or laughter.

I'd hurry out to meet him on the road, always running a step behind at first, having lingered over a book or toy. He always greeted me with a smile, and we began our walk. Dusk would be slipping rosy fingers over the rows of growing cotton; the first bright stars would pierce the darkening sky.

Our walks were what I remembered when I held his hand 12 years later, when the trees on his farm had grown into an orchard, his nicotine-stained fingers still looked as if he had spent the day fixing something—though he'd been ill for years. He smiled through the tube that rested on his upper lip like a bridle, the hiss of oxygen mixing with the clinking of knitting needles and constant murmurs of the



family. I had no words in that white room, no words at the funeral when my grandmother held onto his coffin, pleading with him not to leave her. I still have no words for the pain that lingers like a dusty Texas sunset.

But I remember that road so clearly that I think if I shut my eyes, I could close this notebook and get there just in time.

In the mornings, after a night's steady downpour, the road between the orchard and cotton field would become a thick, muddy ribbon, slick as bacon grease. All the curls would be completely gone, every sweep smoothed down as if the earth had changed clothes while we were sleeping.

And then we would walk, my grandfather and I, in the comfortable silence of twilight and each other, the earth shifting and sliding under our feet. We'd need no words.

Winter Prosapio is a Hill Country writer and humor columnist. She is served by the Pedernales Electric Cooperative and enjoys long walks with her two daughters and husband.