

Cansado

I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, shaking me out of my deep sleep. I glanced up at the clock. My hazy eyes blinked as I squinted to read my little white clock. The second hand ticked as the clock read 3:00 a.m.

“Ramon, come and help me with the mattresses,” a gruff voice ordered.

I got up without a word and threw on my sweatpants. Drawing the t-shirt over my head, I took in a huge gulp of Sebewaing air. I shook my younger brothers, Juan and Junior, and told them to get ready.

The door swung shut behind me as we walked out of our little house. We all hopped into the old green truck and Juan slammed its heavy, rust filled doors. My dad sipped on a bottle of Pepsi as he drove. He silently handed it to me. A few peanuts floated on the top of the glass bottle, adding a nice salty taste to my lips, just before the sugar seeped in.

The hum of the truck’s old engine rattled and thoughts of Texas danced in my mind. I missed my grandmother. I closed my eyes and could see her sitting by my grandfather. She was smoking on her cigarette, flicking the ashes off into a pile in her hand. My grandpa’s violin rang in my ears. He would be sitting next to grandma, scratching a tune in her cloud of smoke. His quiet eyes would dance with his tune, as he tapped his giant feet to the beat. His serious face would falter only for his music. His love was the notes that floated to his large ears, making his heart beat with the rhythm.

It was only a short drive from our shack down the muddy path to the old red barn where we kept the mattresses. I snapped out of my dream of New Braunfels, and of my grandparents back in Texas. Dad left the engine of the truck running. If he turned it off,

there was no telling when it could be started up again.

We stepped out of the truck and quietly swung the doors shut. Two men stood next to the splintered door of the old barn. One looked about forty, the age of my father. The other was older, with gray hair and a wrinkled face. I glanced over and saw a rusty van with the shadow of heads in the windows. A tiny old woman stepped out from the passenger side of the van and joined a younger woman who was leaning on the bumper. The young woman's long black hair was speckled with gray and her dark eyes stared into the night's sky. She drew her attention to us as we approached.

"Hola. ¿Cómo están?" said dad, asking the men how they were doing.

"Bien," the younger man answered back.

"How many do you need?" my father asked him.

"There are ten of us. My mother and father, two of my brothers, one sister, and my wife and three girls. Oh, and one on the way," he said as he gestured to his wife, the woman leaning on the bumper. She held her round belly and lowered her eyes respectfully.

"Four mattresses should be enough for you then," my father answered, not waiting for another reply. "We would have set your family up here in the camp with the other workers, but the shacks are filled. There is an old farmer about a mile down the road that has agreed to take you in. You can sleep in the old barn behind his house, as long as you work in his fields first, before moving on to your other jobs. All of the animals have been removed and are now in his new barn, so you won't have to fight for space. Do you have any questions?" dad asked. The man just shook his head.

Dad swung open the door to the barn and Juan, Junior, and I stepped in. The

musty smell of old mattresses filled the air. We quickly chose the four mattresses at the top of the pile that was staggered on the dirty wooden floor of the barn, dragging them one by one to the side of the truck. The men helped us throw them in and I slammed the back of the truck closed. The men headed back to their van and the women joined them.

“They are from New Braunfels too,” dad said as we climbed back into the truck. The smell of diesel floated to my nostrils just as Juan closed the door.

“What are their names?” I questioned, wishing that I was back in my hometown. My brothers sat in silence next to me. I glanced up in the rear view mirror. The van’s headlights glowed behind us as the family followed us off the muddy path to the gravel road that led to the farmer’s house.

“The old man’s name is Parra. Juan and Marta Parra, I think,” my father answered as we pulled into the farmer’s driveway. We all jumped out of the truck and pulled the mattresses off the back, dragging them behind the house and into the old barn. The farmer had left hay down, which covered the uneven wooden floor. It crunched under our feet as we dropped the mattresses inside.

We pulled away and left the family in their new home. The men waved as we turned from the farmer’s house, back to the gravel road. The darkness was still lingering when we pulled up onto the dirt patch next to our little gray house. Mom was up with Margarita, my baby sister. We could hear her fussing when we came through the door. My brothers headed for the mattress at the front of the house as my father and I went in to greet my mother.

“*La mano, mamá,*” I said and kissed her forehead. She smiled up at me and continued to rock Margie. Mom’s dark eyes looked tired and her head felt hot. I stepped

into the kitchen and rinsed a glass. I filled it with water and brought it back to her.

“*Gracias, mijo,*” she whispered. Margie was starting to quiet down when her one-year-old eyes saw my father walk in the door.

“Margarita, what’s wrong?” dad asked as he scooped Margie up. She clung onto his thick fingers and settled into his warm arms. “*Amada, tengo hambre,*” dad said as my mother went to the kitchen and began heating a tortilla for him. “Go to sleep, Ramon,” he ordered.

I nodded in agreement and headed to the mattress near the front of the house, where my brothers were settling in. The heat of the night still lingered and I undressed. Wrapped in a sheet, I laid down next to my brothers. I wound my clock and set it on the floor next to me. The hands read 4:30 a.m. as I closed my eyes. Sleep came quickly and I drifted off, thinking of New Braunfels and the Texas heat.

* * *

I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, shaking me out of my deep sleep. I glanced up at the little white clock that was resting on the floor. My hazy eyes blinked as the clock’s second hand ticked 6:00 a.m.

“Ramon, come on. It’s time to leave,” a gruff voice ordered.

I got up without a word and threw on my sweatpants. Drawing the t-shirt over my head, I took in a huge gulp of crisp, summer air. I shook my brothers, Juan and Junior, and told them to get ready. My dad’s heavy footsteps echoed in the quiet hallway. As I walked to the kitchen, the smell of *chorizo* and tortillas filled my nostrils. My older sister Helen was in the kitchen with my mom, who was already standing over the stove.

“*Amada, tengo hambre,*” my dad said as he sat down at the kitchen table. Without a word, my mother put a large plate in front of him. She placed a tortilla directly on the

burner, pinching it with her fingers and flipping it quickly to warm the other side. She set a cup of black coffee in front of him and scooped in three lumps of sugar. The hot *chorizo* steamed as she spooned it onto his plate. Dad smelled the tortilla first and then tore it, dipping the piece in the beans before wrapping it around the greasy *chorizo* and shoving it into his hungry mouth.

My brothers and I sat down with my father and Helen began to help my mother. She got out more tortillas to warm and set plates in front of us. My mother piled beans onto my plate and handed me a hot tortilla. I inhaled its scent of flour and dough before tearing a piece of it off. The beans tasted salty and the grease of the *chorizo* ran down my fingers.

My older sister Sofia, and my younger sister Gloria came into the kitchen. They glanced over to make sure that my father's plate was full before they reached to make a plate of their own. When Juan and Junior finished, my sisters took their places at the table. My mother and Helen ate standing up, making sure that we had enough to eat. I glanced up to look at my mother while she was eating. Her eyes still looked tired from being up with Margie. Her nostrils flared as she took a deep breath and rested her backside against the countertop. Her tiny feet were bare and seemed puffy. She was wearing a torn house dress that my grandmother had given her a few years back. Its red trim had faded to a muted pink and there were yellow stains on each of the front pockets. I wondered just what she looked like when she was young. I bet she had the same looks as Sofia. Their cropped hair fell the same way onto the tops of their shoulders. Mom's was streaked with white now, looking dirty compared to Sofia's jet black hair.

Soon, my father announced that it was time to go. Helen cleared the plates and put

the food away as my mother sprayed off the dishes in the sink. I threw the last bite of tortilla into my mouth and started for the back room to get my shoes.

“Helen, you have to stay here with Margie today,” my dad told her as I was heading out of the room. “Some of the other kids from the new family might be over too. Make sure that you keep your eye on them and have dinner ready when we get home.” Helen nodded as she finished up the dishes.

We were working in a field about five miles from our camp that day. As the hum of the engine shook the truck slightly, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I thought of my grandmother back in Texas and how my cousins and I would tease her. We would poke at her and run away laughing, knowing that she couldn't see us. Her blind eyes would search while she swung her arm out to smack us. Sometimes she used her old fly swatter to ward us off. She would grumble a little, and keep on puffing on her cigarette. I felt bad now for giving her such a hard time.

The old truck's tires dug into the muddy path that led back to the spot where dad would leave the truck, under a large oak tree. Knowing that this was going to be an all day job, he cut the engine and we climbed out.

“Make sure you get all of the weeds in one spot before you move on,” dad ordered us. He reached into the back of the truck and pulled out the hoes. We each grabbed one and got to work. I walked off into the field and began to dig into the wet earth. My shoes sank into the ground a little, leaving a trail behind me. The dew on the field made it slightly easier to cut into. We would have to work quickly before the noon sunshine burned the moisture off of the field.

Sofia's dark black hair was tied tightly behind her head and a few strands hung

down in front of her eyes when she bent to plunge the hoe into the ground. Her jeans were ripped at the knee, and her blue cotton shirt had a grease stain on the front of it from the *chorizo* that we had eaten for breakfast. Gloria and mom tied their hair back with old handkerchiefs, just like Sofia's, and walked together to the end of a row of beans. They bent low and began hoeing quietly.

Dad was wearing his old black boots, laced high above his ankles. His dirty brown pants donned a few holes from wear and the hems were loose, hanging down over his laces. His white shirt had become yellow with sweat earlier this summer and it hung open at the top because two buttons were missing. The white t-shirt underneath had a few visible blotches of oil on it from when he worked on the truck last week.

We worked steadily for hours. Row by row we hoed as the sweat rolled down our cheeks. The sun beat down upon us and Gloria and Sofia were becoming weary of the heat. Mom could see it in their eyes when they looked up at her.

“Call Wesso,” mom said. “Wesso will make the wind come.”

“Wesso, Wesso, Wesso, Wesso,” we all called. My dad looked up at mom and smiled. She had taught us that when we were hot, all we had to do was call Wesso and the wind would blow. I lifted my head and rested my hand on the hoe for a second, waiting for my dad to join in. “Wesso, Wesso, Wesso, Wesso,” we called again, just as a slight breeze swept over us.

* * *

I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, shaking me out of my deep sleep. I glanced up at the clock. My hazy eyes blinked as I squinted to read the little alarm clock beside the bed. The glowing numbers said 5:42 a.m.

“Ramon, it’s time,” a worried voice mumbled.

I got up without a word and threw on my sweatpants. Drawing the t-shirt over my head, I took in a huge gulp of Bay City air. I flicked on the lights in our bedroom and I looked over to my wife, Debbie, just as she was attempting to slip on her socks. I could see that her large tummy was giving her some trouble, so I knelt down on the cold, hardwood floor to help her. She put her small hands on her white belly and the shine of her tiny gold wedding band danced in the glow of the dim light that illuminated from the ceiling. She slipped into her stretchy blue maternity dress and slid on her shoes. I grabbed the bag that she had packed that was resting next to our dresser.

Taking one last look at her belly, I smiled at her and helped her out into the living room. Her jacket proved to be a challenge for her, so I slipped it on her shoulders and scooted her out the door and into the car. The green Nova sputtered a little before her engine began to purr.

“Jive Talkin’,” by the Bee Gees played on the radio as we headed to the hospital. Debbie’s breathing seemed rushed and I worried that we wouldn’t make it in time. The twenty minutes that it took to get to the hospital seemed to pass slowly and when we pulled into the emergency entrance, there was a nurse waiting on the inside of the glass doors. I waved at her for help and she stepped outside. I threw open the car door and slammed it behind me. Debbie had already started to open her door and I helped her get to her feet.

“My wife is in labor,” I yelled to the nurse. She ran back inside and got a wheelchair. “It is going to be fine, Deb. We made it,” I said looking down at my wife’s worried face.

The labor seemed to pass by slowly and it dragged out through the morning. We may have jumped the gun a little, thinking that the baby would come quickly.

“Don’t worry about it,” the nurse told us. “The first baby usually takes a long time. Just relax. Would you like some water?” she asked Debbie, as we settled her down in the bed of the hospital room.

“I’m fine,” Debbie said.

Through the morning and into the early afternoon, I watched Debbie, making sure that she fell asleep before I did. I kissed her forehead and it felt cold. I reached over to the end of the bed and threw a blanket over her. I tucked it around her shoulders and under her feet. Her face relaxed as she rested.

When 3:00 p.m. passed and there were still no signs of our baby, the doctors decided to induce labor. I held Deb’s hand while her contractions became more intense. I didn’t know that a woman could have such strength. She gripped my hand tightly as the doctor told her to push. The delivery room seemed like a blur. As I held on to her hand, I thought about how much our lives were going to change. When I heard his first little breath, everything else fell silent.

“It’s a boy,” the doctor exclaimed.

“Do you hear that! It’s a boy Deb,” I sang out.

Eight pounds, four ounces and twenty inches long. Alan, our son.

* * *

I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, shaking me out of my deep sleep. I glanced up at the clock. My hazy eyes blinked as I squinted to read the little alarm clock beside the bed. The glowing numbers said 10:45 p.m.

“Ramon, it’s time to go to work,” a soft voice whispered.

I got up without a word and threw on my sweatpants. Drawing the t-shirt over my head, I took in a huge gulp of Auburn air. I descended the stairs and walked into the kitchen. I could see my daughter, Christina, sitting half asleep in the family room chair. Debbie, was settling back in on the couch after waking me up. Their favorite show was just ending. One of them would always run upstairs on the commercial to wake me up for work.

My son, Justin, was in the other room watching wrestling. All of the lights were off in the room and the glow of the TV left shadows on the wall as the show went to a commercial. I passed him as I went to get my shoes on. I sat down for a moment to tie the laces. Then shaking off my fatigue, I walked back to the family room to say goodbye.

“I love you,” I said, bending down and kissing Debbie on the forehead. She felt hot, so I stepped back into the kitchen and poured her a glass of water. When I brought it back for her, she sat up a little and took a sip.

“Thanks, love you too,” Debbie said softly. She yawned and put her head back down on the couch, getting ready for the eleven o’clock news to begin.

“I’m stopping at Alan’s tomorrow after work to see if he needs anymore help moving things in. He said something about replacing a window in the upstairs of his house,” I said. She just nodded her head, letting it rest against the large flowered pillow that was squashed against the arm of the couch.

Christina smiled at me as I came over to the chair to say goodbye. “Love ya’ dad,” she said after kissing my cheek.

Justin yelled goodbye from the other room when I went back to the kitchen to

grab my keys. “See ya’ later,” I called back to him, just before closing the door. The thick summer air felt warm as I walked to my old van. The light blue finish was polka dotted with rust and the back bumper was almost dragging on the ground on the left side. But, it got me back and forth to work. I shut the door and started the engine, rolling down the window so that the stale air in the van could escape.

I sipped on a bottle of Pepsi as headed to work at Dow. A few peanuts floated on the top of the plastic bottle, adding a nice salty taste to my lips, just before the sugar seeped in. The hum of the van’s old engine rattled and thoughts of the migrant fields danced in my mind. I missed my father. I could see him helping a new family getting their mattresses and settling down into their home. He would always make sure that every family felt welcome. I could see him in the kitchen, sitting at the table, smelling the warm tortillas that my mom made for him. I could see him with Margie, my baby sister, while she held on to him in the middle of the night. I could hear his voice saying Wesso with us in the hot open fields.

“Wesso, Wesso, Wesso, Wesso,” I called out the window. “Wesso, Wesso, Wesso, Wesso,” I called again. The wind blew and cooled my face.