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Pat Mora

## A Walk with My Father

Four days after my father died, he took a walk with me. We had last walked together three months before on a sunny, May morning. He had only been able to circle one block by then, his legs so weak after the steady fading away for two years of his body and mind, his slow disappearance.

On that last arm-in-arm walk we had stopped often to admire the flowers that flourish so effortlessly in California, luxurious hibiscus, imperious birds-of-paradise; blooms that require greenhouse care in the El Paso, the desert city that was once our home. Our special favorite had always been bougainvillea. "It grows even in alleys here," he said in years past. "*Ven*, come and see."

So we had stopped that May day to admire the orange, red, gold, and watermelon pink blooms festooning a modest white fence. "*Mira no mas*. Just look at that," he said, but his old delight was disappearing. Weariness was detaching him from this earth.

My father had little time to dwell on words. We've never been sure if he finished high school, and precise names of trees or fish or flowers were vague in his mind, interesting but unessential labeling for his savoring of nature's inventiveness.

The days between my father's death and the burial were pleasant on the surface, days of reminiscing with my mother and siblings, laughing to suppress the grief. Internally, I held my breath, fearing the inevitable moment beneath the pepper tree in the cemetery garden he and Mother had chosen. Mornings I'd slip out alone for a walk. At least, I thought I was alone.

One such day, I set off to see the ocean, hoping that the sight of that century-old repetition of waves would comfort me. En route, I discovered a weekly produce market, urban-style. I have reveled in fruit and vegetable markets of all shapes and sizes since I was small and went to markets with my family across the Rio Grande in Juárez.

As I approach the vendors this day calling out their morning greetings to one another, I think of the baskets of technicolor potatoes in Peru, of the gleaming candied fruits and vegetables in Mexico – green figs stuffed with coconut, rich brown sweet potatoes, oranges crusty with dried syrup. And I begin to hear my father's voice enjoying this meandering from stall to stall with me.

"¡Mira todos los chinitos!" he says, "Look at all the Chinese," as he studies the faces of Asian merchants busy bringing out their white, green, and purple vegetables. Like many Mexicans, my father is fond of the diminutive, *ito*, an ending he uses when observing any ethnic group including Whites. "Pobres güeritos," he might say, "Poor anglos," watching their awkward attempts to dance salsa music, their frequent inability to display emotions, his use of the diminutive conveying his general affection for most humans, his compassion at their antics, his awareness that every group has its difficulties.

"What are those?" I ask a vendor, pen in hand wanting us to hear the names of the Chinese produce, to find comfort in specificity, even if my father might be lost admiring the shapes or lines of leafy and gleaming vegetables.

"Chinese okra, white squash, bitter melon."

Bitter indeed, I think, bitter to contemplate life without the huge physical presence that had been my father, his six-foot, two-hundred-and-ten-pound incarnation on this earth that had vanished before our eyes; the mind that had been able to make sense of the country of his birth and the country of his life, that in the end lost its way in some internal labyrinth where we could not follow.

The concreteness, physicality, of the market flowers and produce provides a link to pleasures my father and I share. I hear the personal pride he takes in California's abundance.

"Mira no mas, honey," he says. "Just look at the size of those strawberries!" I roll limes, lemons, grapefruits, and oranges in my hands. We smell the syrupy peaches.

We marvel at the flower stalls and chuckle at the wealthy yuppies carrying home huge bouquets, "conspicuous consumption," to their carefully appointed apartments. He smiles and shakes his head as I press for the names of things, as I tell him, "They say the little orange suns are straw flowers; the trumpets, foxglove; those are caspia, stargazers, phlox, bells of Ireland."

We stop at the snapdragons, remembering the scrawny versions we watered in our backyard in Texas. My father had bought the piece of land that became our home in place of taking my mother on a honeymoon, a decision she frowned on. How often

each of the four children stood holding a hose through the years trying to tempt roses or larkspur or snapdragons to survive in that hard dirt below that glaring sun. My father remembers only successes. Perhaps he was always too busy working, grinding lenses day and night at his optical company, to consider just how difficult life was in that border town. Little flourished with ease, whether a plant or a business, particularly a business owned by a Mexican or Mexican American. "I have a map of Mexico on my face," he said to me late in his life, momentarily admitting the prejudice he had encountered.

We linger at the honeys – wildflower, orange blossom, sage, melon, star thistle, eucalyptus. "Let's get a bottle," he says. "Sometimes your mother gets a cough. Remember, just put a bit on the tip of your tongue, that or glycerine. You'll stop coughing." When I entered the room in which he died, there it was, a bottle of glycerine by his bed.

We leave the market for a bit and walk down to the ocean, another sight we both loved. Gone is the casual stroll along the palisades. Street people sleep on benches and under shrubs, reach out their smudged hands. The white statue of Santa Monica, hands folded, eyes closed, reminds me that my father's body has been wrapped in white, also so still, before the frame we knew was zipped into a shroud, all black.

We walk back to the market. The sun is bright, and more shoppers are arriving, women with shopping bags looking for bargains. I fumble in my purse for another pen. Since my father died, every pen I use runs out of ink. I want to write down the names, always the names, of the fresh herbs, names sweet on the tongue, lemon basil, baby dill, the green scents a counter to the concrete in which I live. He studies the cartons of sprouts and sunflower greens.

*"Para los conejos,"* he says laughing, rabbit food.

"What did I tell you?" my father says, walking toward a sign that says JOJOBA. My father always had what he called "million dollar ideas." He would read an article in a newspaper or magazine and decide how he, or we, could make a fortune. Not that any of us ever did. Another of his favorite phrases was "very scientific," and articles about jojoba through the years had combined scientific and financial possibilities for him. He had told any of us who'd sit and listen about the growing of jojoba, the oil that could be extracted, the money to be made. And now here it is, proof, a stand with jojoba seeds, products, brochures, and a woman

ready also to talk endlessly about this marvelous plant. I listen briefly to humor my father but am relieved that the saleswoman is oblivious of his enthusiasm.

"*Mira todos los mexicanitos,*" he says, noticing the faces that resemble his own, the sound of Spanish.

"*Buenos días,*" a woman calls out to us.

"*Buenos días,*" I answer for us both. "*¿Cómo está señora?*"

"*Trabajando para mantener esta familiota grande que tengo. Esto nunca se acaba,*" she says, stating what my father understood so well, the constant need to work to support a large family.

"*You did it, Daddy,*" I say, "supported the four of us, and Mother, grandmother and my aunt."

"No big deal," he says. "I liked it." And he begins examining the multicolored chiles, orange, green, yellow, red; the jalapeño, torito, serrano. He wants to buy some, knowing his purchases always drive my mother crazy. He laughs at his ability "to get her goat" after fifty-four years.

"I'll tell her that I'll show her how to cook," he says, and I laugh with him at my mother's predictable flaring at that phrase.

Our walk is sweet sorrow. The big man, that buffer between the world and me, has vanished. He was a gentle man who never lifted a hand except to help a person up, and yet who always talked of being ready to knock out any threat or intruder. As a boy, he sold newspapers and learned to sneak into boxing matches free by carrying his papers under one arm, saying "Press" casually when he walked by the ticket taker. What did they think of that dark-skinned boy out alone at night, sitting on his papers to be able to watch his gloved heroes.

He boxed a little when he was young, but his delight in watching "the fights" didn't end until his mind got lost in that labyrinth of words and memories. He admired the clever and powerful fighter and prided himself on being ever ready to take on anyone, even in his seventies. "Just let me at them," he would say of invisible muggers or thieves, and many a time my mother had to shake him awake since he was swinging punches in his dreams. He was a bull of a man, a gentle bull, but with a bull's heart.

I hear Spanish at another stand and my father follows me to eavesdrop. A couple in their late sixties, who could be my father's relatives from their facial features, are chatting with a couple from Spain, comparing growing seasons and harvests. The California grower boasts, "*Cinco cosechas al año,*" five harvests a year. We smile to hear the global aspect of his work with the soil.

*"Semillas de Amsterdam,"* he says with pride, the secret of the delicate carrots he sells, seeds from Amsterdam.

My father and I walk toward the apartment where he and my mother have lived for the last thirty years. Music is in the air, swirling up from a sax.

*"Fíjate, fíjate en el pie,"* my father says as always, insistently wanting me to notice something, this time the tapping of a black man's foot as he plays. My father always loved music, dancing, rhythm. We both hear the unsung phrase, "Don't come around much anymore," which says it all – my fear that his voice, my father's voice inside me, will also fade, that I will cease to hear his sound, his words, his faith in me and his admonishings, his urgings to me, *"fíjate, fíjate,"* notice, notice.